

Laughing at Men
Masculinities in Contemporary Sitcoms

By Sarah Maki



Introduction

The situation comedy, or the "sitcom," is an established part of daily television. Prime time is rife with them; some are considered classics (All in the Family, The Cosby Show, Cheers), and others are quoted long after they are off the air (Friends, Seinfeld, Will and Grace). Because of its common use and established role, the word 'sitcom' assumes a definition— many scholars allow the term to define itself without constructing the genre to develop a "map" of how the narratives and characters have developed over the years into what they are on contemporary television. The study of these character developments, specifically the development of masculinities within sitcoms is the purpose of this study.

There is a relevancy to this study of the portrayal of masculinities in this society that struggles with defining masculinities (and consequently male sexualities) every day. The recent media and political discussions surrounding the definitions of "marriage" and "family" create opportunities for prime-time television series to address these issues in a way that may challenge the dominant ideologies of Americans – what a "man" is, who a man "should" be with, what a man "should" do. The sitcom is successful because its characters and episode subjects are rooted in the social, cultural, and political discourse of its time – it not only reflects American ideology but also works to shape that ideology. Its audiences are allowed to laugh at the challenging or uncomfortable situations regarding masculinities because they take place within the context of comedy. These comedic moments often coincide with the widely and fiercely debated role of masculinity in America.

For the purposes of this study an analytical comparison of masculinities between How I met Your Mother and Modern Family initially felt like an arbitrary choice; the first follows a group of friends who live in the city and the second follows three families who live in suburbia. It is the unexpected similarities in the development of the wide range of male characters in each show acted as the determining factors. How I Met Your Mother includes bachelors and "bromances"; Modern Family includes men on their second wife and homosexual relationships; and both shows include married men with families. Because both shows comically present men in traditional gender roles and men challenging these roles, this analysis aims to determine if these characters maintain, challenge, or ambiguously debate the traditional masculine, heteronormative roles.

The Sitcoms

How I Met Your Mother first aired on CBS in September of 2005, and since then has established itself as a sitcom of recognizable characters and catchphrases [i.e. Barney Stinson's "Legen-wait for it-dary!" or "Suit up!"]. The series has been running for eight seasons, but I will only work with the first seven. The three male characters of the series are Ted Mosby (Josh Radnor), Marshall Erikson (Jason Segal), and Barney Stinson (Neil Patrick Harris). The two female leads are Lily Aldrin (Alyson Hannigan) and Robin Scherbatsky (Cobie Smulders). The series focuses on an older Ted, in the year 2030, telling his children the story of how he met their mother; this includes, but is not limited to, his romantic relationships, his business ventures, his friendships, and his adventures. Since its debut, the series has been nominated for two Golden Globe awards and won a Primetime Emmy in 2012, as well as eight other wins and fifty nominations[i]. The show is produced by 20th Century Fox Television and in the 2011-2012 season television viewer statistics, ranked 45th with the total viewership being 9.673 million[ii].

Modern Family debuted on ABC in September of 2009, and since then the show has become a popular family sitcom. Presented in mockumentary[1] style, the show follows the storylines of three very different families living in suburbia. One family is "traditional"; Claire Dunphy (Julie Bowen) is married to Phil Dunphy (Ty Burrell) and they have three children, twin girls Haley and Alex (Sarah Hyland and Ariel Winter) and son Luke (Nolan Gould). The second family is interracial; an older man, Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill) is now married to a Latina woman, Gloria Delgado-Pritchett (Sofia Vergara) and she brought into the marriage one son, Manny (Rico Rodriguez). Claire is Jay's grown daughter by his first marriage. Jay's other child, Mitchell Pritchett (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) is gay and committed to partner Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet) and they have recently adopted a Vietnamese baby, Lily (Aubrey Anderson-Emmons). The series follows the relationships within and between the three families. Since its premiere, the series has won one Golden Globe (2012) and received another fifty awards and 101 nominations. The show is produced by 20th Century Fox Television and in the 2011-2012 season television viewer statistics, ranked 17th with the total viewership being 12.93 million.[iii]

Literature Review

As an introduction to the situation comedy, Jane Feuer's article "Genre Study and Television" (1992) serves as an in-depth analysis of both genre and character development. Feuer refers to the work of television scholars to offer three differing insights into the sitcom genre: David Grote, Horace Newcomb, and David Marc. Grote presents a negative definition of the sitcom – it is the most basic genre on television that is both conservative and static in its form. Newcomb reiterates the basic structure of the sitcom, citing the simple and reassuring nature of the problem/solution formula for its audience. David Marc interprets sitcoms as having the subversive potential of a social critique with the ability to challenge social norms. In his book *Comic Visions* (1997) Marc developed a formula for the situation comedy and how it confronts social norms; each episode features a familiar status quo, a ritual error made and then a ritual lesson learned that returns the family to that familiar status quo. By steeping each episode in familiar social or cultural contexts, audiences can relate to and find the humor in the "crises" of each episode. Within this context of a general "formula" for the situation comedy, in his book *Television Style* (2010) Jeremy G. Butler wrote that the majority of sitcoms are limited to recurring interior and in-studio exterior sets; characters spend a substantial amount of time in a living room, dining room, or kitchen. These sets emphasize situations in the home and workplace and encourage dialogue rather than action. These applied guidelines create the structure for the sitcom.

In the article "Sitcoms" (1987), Ronald Berman alleges that "good comedy has a way of breaking away from ideology." Berman discusses the challenges that arise with a willingness and opportunity to critique and address social problems; create a show that is too socially forward-thinking and the networks lose interest, too conservative and there is the risk of losing a thinking audience. He suggests that comedy as a genre corresponds to the actual world rather than to the ideal world, which is echoed in the application of hegemonic masculinity to real men; the ideal is not necessarily achievable or applicable to actual men or to the men in sitcoms.

In Robert Hanke's article "The 'Mock-Macho' Situation Comedy: Hegemonic Masculinity and its Reiteration" (1998) he describes one of the stock characters in a sitcom,

the “mock-macho” man. Hanke charts the development of the “macho” male character who is comedic because of a previously established concept of masculinity; these characters attempt to attain a certain masculinity and fail to do so. He identifies these sitcoms and characters by the jokes that are written (and at whose expense they are written), their correspondence to “true life,” and what kind of masculinity they identify with: the “Wild Man” or the “New Father”. The “Wild Man” is hyper-masculine (81); he is created in the clichéd model of a modern cavemen. The “New Father” is assertive in his paternal responsibilities within the structure of clichéd masculinity; he prefers sports to the arts and encourages “natural” aggression (i.e. roughhousing, wrestling, etc.), particularly if he has sons. Hanke argues that because these characters foreground the question of what the definition of a “man” is, their parodic discourse of masculinity acknowledges the precariousness of hegemonic masculinity (88).

Father characters in television, be they new fathers or father experts, are discussed in Erica Sharrer’s article “From Wise to Foolish: The Portrayal of the Sitcom Father, 1950s-1990s” (2001). Sharrer’s hypothesis is rooted in the notion that men who are taking on traditionally female roles in the sitcom have become “fair game” for light-hearted humor and this is particularly pronounced in working class television family households. The modern sitcom about these families is expected to offer foolish portrayals of fathers; Mark Crispin Miller, in his article “Prime Time: Deride and Conquer” (1987) concurs with this idea, mapping the development of the sitcom father from its original state as a patriarchal figure who was not considered a laughing matter to this “fool dad” who originates from the disappearance of the patriarchal emphasis in society. Both Miller and Sharrer relate these character developments to the social system of the era because television reproduces the larger ideologies of society. The characters that sitcoms show their audiences’ are rooted in the world around them and with whom they are already familiar.

Continuing the scholarly discussion of inadequate male characters is David Buchbinder in his article “Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinities in Recent Film and Television.” Buchbinder (2008) applies the characteristics that have been reserved for the construction of Jewish Masculinity to the incompetent male character present in television. The “Schlemiel”

character struggles to meet gender norms; despite efforts to achieve the desired masculinity, he may be clumsy, awkward, or physically lacking. Buchbinder summarizes this character concisely as the “incompetently masculine male”, a man who tries to meet the norms of culture and fails. His discussion of the growing anxiety around masculinity applies Judith Butler’s notion of performativity to the development of masculinities in television characters. Inadequate male characters in a comical context, or such as the male characters discussed by Miller, Hanke, or Sharrer, allow audiences to relax in the portrayal of characters they can relate to or who are exaggerated.

Sitcoms and their male characters, according to Diana Miller in her article “Masculinity in Popular Sitcoms, 1955-1960 and 2000-2005” (2011), rely “on stock characters and stock humor”(144) that create basic formulas and coding systems for identifying their masculinities. The uncertainty surrounding masculinity in the latter half of the twentieth century, the context for contemporary sitcoms, has added the “hen-pecked husband,” the “childish man,” and the “metrosexual man” to the ongoing list of stock characters. The “hen-pecked husband” is “fearfully respectful” of his wife; popular characters like Ray Barone of *Everybody Loves Raymond* and Hal of *Malcolm in the Middle* are mindful of their poor decision making because they fear punishment, belittling, or anger from their wives. The “childish man” refuses to function as an adult; he may reject marriage, avoid responsibility within the family life, and/or behave like an overgrown child. The “metrosexual man” promotes an urban, polished masculinity that equates manhood with personal care, fashionable clothes, and other luxuries often associated with femininity.

As masculinity develops and the male character-type changes they are categorized into three co-existing types of men by Tim Edwards in his article “Sex, booze, and fags: masculinity, style, and men’s magazines.” Edward (2003) created the “Old Man”, the “New Man”, and the “New Lad”. The “Old Man” is defined through the ideal of marriage or promiscuity and he pursues a standard career (138); the character Ross Gellar of *Friends* is created within this form with his established career as an archeologist and his multiple marriages throughout the series. The “New Man” has a career with fluidity and is caring, loving, with an ambiguous sexuality; written within this category is character Chandler Bing (*Friends*) – he has an unidentified

corporate job, changes careers, and is occasionally mistaken for being gay[2]. The “New Lad” is created as a man of one-night stands whose career is unimportant and he is not defined through financial independence (138); the character of Joey Tribbiani (*Friends*) epitomizes Edward’s “New Lad” – a womanizer with an unstable acting career. Male characters are created within, but not confined to, the structures of these archetypes.

These archetypes result from the development of masculinity over time because the characters are products of their social and cultural environment. The career emphasis of a male sitcom character is rooted in the traditional role of a man in the home. In Jessie Bernard’s article “The Good-Provider Role” (1981), she outlines the place of men in the home as the “providers.” Bernard wrote that a serious cost of the inherent good-provider role was the identification of maleness within the work site, specifically in success within the career (207). Success in this good-provider role comes to define masculinity itself; the role became a competition among men. The good provider needed to be smart, strong, and capable in the workplace if he was going to be considered a man.

Theoretical Approach

Masculinity theory is necessary to understanding development of the male character in sitcoms. In his study *Cultures of Masculinity* (2006)[iv] Tim Edwards refers to a three-phase or ‘wave’ model of critical studies of masculinity. The first phase or wave refers to the development of the sex role paradigm in the 1970s to apply more direct questions to the concept of masculinity. These studies sought to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of masculinity and its reliance on socialization, sex role learning and social control (2). This primary sex role paradigm was the most dominant set of masculinities exerting influence and control - hegemonic masculinity. The second phase, developed in the 1980s out of immense criticism for the first wave, and is concerned with the power struggle within gender and society. The third phase of studies of masculinity defines gender in terms of normativity, performativity, and sexuality.

Hegemonic masculinity is explained by Mike Donaldson as the pattern of practice that allows men’s dominance over women to continue. These patterns create the ideal man and in a contemporary society men still position themselves in relation to it. Donaldson refers to Patricia

Sexton's suggestion that "male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body." [v] These concepts of masculinity are framed within a heteronormative concept of gender, which is based on the dichotomization of sex (biological) rather than gender (cultural) and subsequently naturalizes the body. Because the heteronormative ideal is "logically" rooted in the biological notion of reproduction, heterosexuality and homophobia are the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity. The conformity of men to the demands of this masculinity rewards homophobic behavior in the form of social support and reduced anxiety about their own manliness [vi].

Connell and Messerschmidt reformulate Donaldson's original conception of hegemonic masculinity. Their analysis includes male and female gender categories within the concept of masculinity; they recognize that masculinity is not limited to the biological definition of man, but is a configuration of practice that is accomplished in social action. [vii] Their reformulation also concludes that the notion of hegemonic masculinity as it is constructed does not correspond closely to the lives of actual men. The hegemonic ideal is not necessarily achievable or applicable to actual men or to the male characters in sitcoms. Connell and Messerschmidt argue that "masculinity" does not represent a certain type of man, but instead represents a way that men position themselves through discursive practices; men can strategically adopt or distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity.

This idea of performance and the maintenance of masculinity are rooted in the work of Judith Butler. Butler dislikes identity categories; she recognizes them as limiting "guidelines" for expected behavior. These identity categories create a compulsory heterosexuality [viii]; society is obligated to perform the heteronormative expectation because social norms and behaviors derive from it. Butler refers to the phenomena of drag to explain her idea of the abstract gender performance; she alleges that every person is in their own, socially acceptable normative version of drag every day. The hegemonic heteronormative ideology exposes itself through repetitive performances every day and the performance has to be repeated daily because it is constantly being challenged. The manly man has to be manly every day for fear that, should his behavior change, he would face criticism or accusations of not falling within

the heteronormative identity category. Her theories demand that we recognize the ambiguity of sexual identity and of the performances enacted daily by everyone to maintain his or her sexual identity [ix].

Constructed masculinities do not correspond with the lives of actual men, or characters. Instead Sharon Bird's models express the fantasy, the desire, and the ideals of masculinity that men hold themselves to. Bird's theory of homosociality references the nonsexual attractions held by men (or women, but for the sake of this study men will be the sole focus of discussion) for other men. Bird argues that "homosocial interaction, among heterosexual men, contributes to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity norms by supporting means associated with identities that fit hegemonic ideals while suppressing meanings associated with nonhegemonic masculinity identities." [x] There are meanings that are crucial to this perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity: emotional detachment, competitiveness, and sexual objectification of women. Although these understandings characterize hegemonic masculinity, an individual person does not necessarily internalize them; they are about how men behave, not necessarily what men believe.

Methods

The focus of this study will be an analysis of seasons one through seven of *How I Met Your Mother* and seasons one through three of *Modern Family* to create a broad commentary and then focus on the masculinities of the characters in specific scenes from these episodes. The broad commentary will allow for the analysis of the character development within the situation comedy genre. I will examine how the lead male characters are defined by their female counterparts (looking for love, close friendship with a female, and marriage), the relationships between the male characters (love interests, "bromances."), and how their masculinity is defined by the series.

My analysis of the television series will be rooted in Feurer's three approaches to genre [xi] – the aesthetic, the ritual, and the ideological. The aesthetic approach views the sitcom as a conventional genre and it defines it in "terms of a system of conventions that permit artistic expression" and then determines if the series discussed, fulfilled, or transcended the generic characteristics. The ritual approach views genre as an exchange between the audience and the industry

– a cultural relationship. This analysis discusses how the genre, or the series within the genre, maintains the social order and adapts to cultural changes to remain relevant. The ideological approach sees genre as an instrument of control. This analysis would review how the genre or series reproduces the dominant ideologies of a capitalist system. Approaching these sitcoms from these three angles will create an in-depth analysis of these series as examples of the sitcom genre.

I will investigate how each character conforms to, deviates from, and/or challenges these "standard" male characters found in sitcoms. To analyze the characters I will examine the narratives and mis-en-scène of the episodes with attention to setting, lighting, costume, and behavior of the characters [xii]. These details create the effect of comic exaggeration, understated beauty, and realism – the mis-en-scène helps to codify and emphasize details that develop throughout each narrative.

Analysis: The men of *How I Met Your Mother*

The comedy in *How I Met Your Mother* is rooted in real-life, real-world situations to which an audience can relate: dating, marriage, friendships, and careers. These familiar situations are the epitome of why a sitcom is successful and what makes a sitcom a 'situational comedy.' These moments of comedy that an audience can relate to happen within the recurring sets that Jeremy Butler mentioned; the majority of the show is filmed in Ted/Marshall/Lily/Robin's apartment(s) (specifically the living room with little time being spent in the kitchen or bedrooms), the bar McClaran's that the characters frequent, the streets of New York, or an office building. Just as Butler suggested, the series' emphasis on dialogue between the characters rather than action or great movement solidifies *How I Met Your Mother's* structure as a sitcom. The development of the masculinities of characters Barney, Ted, and Marshall are all found within the structure of the show's sitcom genre.

Suit up!

Barney Stinson is, by Diana Miller's definition, a metrosexual man. He confidently recognizes his personal interest in his appearance and his own narcissistic confidence; his laughably ostentatious behavior negates any negativity the audience may have towards a character so callously

self-invested and judgmental of others whose standards for appearance do not match his own. He encourages other men to take pride in their appearance and confidently approaches the notion of judging other men based on their appearance without hesitation. In a homosocial situation defined by the accepted standards of heteronormativity and masculinity, if a man judges another man solely based on his appearance, more specifically his fashion sense and level of physical attraction, he would likely be ostracized. Alternatively it would be seen as a point of competition—who looks better, and, by that standard of appearance, who gets more girls.

The emphasis of Barney's character on exploits with women gratifies Bird's means of masculinity perpetuation—the blatant sexual objectification of women. His lack of interest in developing legitimate relationships with any of the women he sleeps with maintains his promiscuous sexual identity; his heterosexuality is made obvious. An important marker of Barney's sexual objectification of women is his "Playbook." The Playbook is a collection of characters and pick-up lines that Barney uses over the course of the series to successfully get woman after woman into his bed, or himself into theirs. The plays include everything from "The One Week to live" to "The Olympian." [xiii] An amusing character quirk, this book immediately marginalizes women. Women are to be used as objects and "played" with until Barney is satisfied; the women Barney uses his plays on are not expected to call his bluff or turn him down because they should not have the mental capacity to question his character's claims. This contributes not only to his hegemonic masculinity as defined by his dominance over women, but it also promotes competition. Barney tracks the statistics of various plays, determining their success rate. Barney is making plays and running numbers to achieve the maximum amount of promiscuity that he can and treating relationships like we would treat a competitive sport.

While his sexual identity with women is perpetuated in his Playbook, his identity in homosocial situations is maintained by his "Bro Code." The "Bro Code" is a book/blog written by Barney that are guidelines to outline the acceptable behavior in particular situations as well as the behaviors that will result in being ostracized or the questioning of sexual identity; these guidelines tend to align with Bird's characterizations of masculinity (emotional detachment, competitiveness, and/or sexual objectification of women),

for example:

Article 1: Bro's before ho's. The bond between two men is stronger than the bond between a man and a woman because, on average, men are stronger than women. That's just science.

Article 25: A Bro doesn't let another Bro get a tattoo, particularly a tattoo of a girl's name. The average relationship between a man and a woman lasts 83 days. The relationship between man and his skin lasts a life time and must be nurtured because the skin is the largest and second most important organ a man has.

Article 77: Bros don't cuddle. [xiv]

The man who adheres to the Bro Code dominates women and establishes his dominance in homosocial situations. This man is confident enough in his masculinity and sexual identity to develop close enough relationships with other men to consider them 'bros.' Barney is fervent in his dedication to the rules of the Bro Code.

His masculinity established and unwavering, Barney is hesitant to alter his patterns of behavior in any way. One of Barney's primary qualities is his avid disgust towards any serious relationship, particularly those headed towards matrimony, until Robin. Barney and Robin have a one night-night stand (after she and Ted have broken up), which temporarily decimates his relationship with Ted because he broke Article 150 of his very own code, "No sex with your bro's ex. It is never, EVER permissible for a bro to sleep with his bro's ex. Violating this code is worse than killing a bro." Barney, unaccustomed to enjoying the company of a woman with whom he is emotionally close finds himself developing feelings for her. This realization arises during the season three finale, but no relationship is pursued until season five. Barney feels a social compulsion, as Butler would theorize, to maintain the masculinity that he has been "performing" for so many years. He cannot handle his sudden urge to conform to heteronormative behavior and he does not want to risk the loss of his status as a "playboy" by entering into a monogamous relationship. This reluctance to enter into a relationship allows him to maintain the masculinity that he has established within his own specific guidelines. Following Barney's attempt to have a "normal" relationship is an episode that exaggerates Barney's (and Robin's) unhappiness in their relationship together. The increasingly overweight and unhappy Barney that is created from his participation in a monogamous relationship completes the

maintenance of his masculine identity as the anti-relationship, promiscuous man.

The Barney character is at once a representation of Miller's "childish man," Edward's "New Lad" and "New Man." Barney's aversion to commitment within any romantic relationship and his continued participation in certain activities develop his childish masculinity; he rejects marriage in its entirety and is frequently trying to harass one of his friends to play laser tag with him, a game intended for children. Barney as the "childish man" correlates to his identity as a "New Lad;" although he is financially independent, his series of one-night stands and resolution to live the "legendary[3]" life coincide with the concise philosophy of this "New Lad:" get drunk and get girls. It is Barney's metrosexuality that adds the "New Man" to his list of character attributes; this "New Man" created some anxiety because it left room to question a man's sexuality due to his narcissistic focus on appearance and self-maintenance,[xv] definitive qualities of Barney. Because Barney cannot achieve the entire hegemonic ideal (Connell and Messerschmidt note that this is impossible) he positions himself as closely to the ideal as possible through these character behavioral practices.

Have ya met Ted?

Ted Mosby is an optimistic romantic striving to find the love of his life to whom he can get married and start raising a family. Because the narrative is told from the year 2030 and he is already married, with children, the audience is privy to the ultimate end of the series: yes, Ted finally finds a woman to marry. The inclusion of Ted's eventual heterosexual nuptials from the pilot episode of the series automatically establishes the sexuality of his character leaving little room for an audience to seriously question it. With his sexuality established, Ted's character has the opportunity to engage in romantic antics that would not be associated with the men who align themselves with the hegemonic ideal. When Ted and Robin go on their first date, Ted tells her he loves her[4]. Ted wears the same Halloween costume each year for his apartment complex's rooftop party in the hopes that the "slutty pumpkin" will recognize him because he lost her phone number after they made a connection four years ago[5]. When Ted is trying to romance his dermatologist he grows a mustache, reads a self-help book, and then plans the perfect first "two-minute" date for them to share

in her busy schedule[6]. His ostentatious acts of romance are essential to establishing Ted's heterosexuality; they establish his masculinity and sexuality similarly to the notion that Barney establishes his via promiscuity. Barney's promiscuity defines his character in the same way that Ted's serial dating defines his. In the first seven seasons of the series, Ted has five serious relationships (not including the mother, who has yet to be introduced), has a dating relationship with six women, goes on at least one date with sixteen women, and casually sleeps with three women (that the audience is made aware of; others are briefly mentioned but never confirmed); Ted is entirely uncomfortable being single. Where Barney defines his masculinity and sexual identity in the number of sexual encounters he has, Ted's masculinity is rooted in his search for the perfect woman. With each girlfriend, Ted reestablishes his heterosexuality, his masculinity, and his heteronormativity; each man is obviously heterosexual because of his relationships with women although Ted's is more rooted in the socially established heteronormative ideal.

Bernard having established the correlation between masculinity and a man's ability to fulfill the "Good-Provider" role via his career, Ted's successful career as an architect is inherently masculine. His building design could influence the skyline of New York, he is creating something from nothing, and he is creating large, vaguely phallic skyscrapers. He, for all intents and purposes, is constructing giant penises, the very body part that participates in the act of reproduction in which heteronormative ideology is rooted. In doing so he helps to cement his own masculinity. The masculine and virile appeal of his career is only further confirmed when Barney, masquerading as Ted, uses the line, "Ted Mosby, Architect", to pick up women. The abundant success that Barney achieves solidifies the masculinity (and hetero-sexual appeal) of his career. The relevancy of his career does not end with its sex appeal, but continues with the influence his career has on his role as a future "Good Provider" for his family. The importance of this future role for Ted is obvious in the twentieth episode of the fifth season, "Home Wreckers", when Ted buys a house after he watches his mom get married a second time before he has been married once. During this episode Ted is single, without any prospects for marriage, but his fervent desire to provide a home for the family he does not have yet emphasizes the importance of being a "Good Provider." As Bird suggested, Ted's ability to be strong, smart, and capable in the workplace defines him as a man in both his career and his home.

Lawyered!

Marshall's heterosexuality is as obvious as Ted's from the beginning of the series. Marshall's engagement and eventual marriage to Lily not only establishes Marshall's sexuality but also roots the series in stable heteronormativity; the situations the couple experiences are representative of the socially constructed norm of a healthy and stable heterosexual relationship (and the very relationship Ted hopes to attain some day).

Marshall's role in his relationship provides stability for his masculinity rooted in hegemonic masculinity's notion of the ideal man. Lily is a kindergarten teacher with a modest income and Marshall's employment as a corporate lawyer allows him to provide the primary income for the two. This position perpetuates the alpha-male ideal: the man has the economic power over the woman. Marshall is the epitome of Bernard's "Good-Provider" role, even willing to continue to work at a corporation that he cannot morally stomach so he can support Lily and their future child[7]. In "Natural History", season six episode eight, Marshall informs Lily that he has been offered a five-year contract with the corporation that he has been working for (Goliath National Bank) and that he has every intention of signing the contract even if environmental law is what Marshall would really like to pursue. Lily is offended by the five-year contract because the man she married wanted to save the environment and she believes that he is selling out for money. Marshall, on the defensive, says that it is the financially secure career that he thinks he should have to properly provide for his growing family. Notably, Marshall's dominance is limited to his monetary value: while his career supports his family his character is still reminiscent of Miller's "hen-pecked husband". Marshall has been avoiding telling Lily about the contract because he knew that she would be disappointed, so each time she has asked him about when he plans on leaving Goliath National Bank he has answered in made-up legal-sounding jargon to avoid having the conversation. Marshall fears making Lily angry and is/was careful to avoid the argument until it was absolutely necessary, but while he is reminiscent of the fearfully respectful sitcom husband, Marshall is more willingly devoted than miserably married.

An optimistic gentle giant standing at six foot four inches, Marshall's size initially could become a point of Donaldson's biological male-dominance, but his demeanor negates

from this biological "manliness;" it is his relationship with his family that assists in the solidification of his masculine identity. Marshall is an inherently kind person who was raised in Minnesota with two older brothers. The "small" kid in the family, it is assumed that Marshall endured the aggression that occurs between male siblings[8]. But it is not until the tenth episode of season four that it is revealed how aggressive Marshall can be, entitled "The Fight," this episode centers on the masculinity and sex appeal of men fighting. After Ted and Barney are both given credit by their bartender, Doug, for helping win a fight that neither of them participated in, neither man admits the truth because they would risk losing women's sudden interest in them (i.e. Robin overtly flirting with and hitting on each of them) and admit that it would reduce their masculinity. Marshall is skeptical that his two friends actually took part in the fight, but they stick to their story up until the moment they are sued by the man Doug knocked out. The pending lawsuit requires Ted and Barney to approach Lawyer Marshall for help. Marshall informs the two men that they need to admit that they did nothing in the fight or they would face legal repercussions. After agreeing to legally admit that they were not involved in the fight, Doug becomes the sole person named in the lawsuit. Doug's response to becoming the only prosecuted man is to fight Ted and Barney. Once Ted has been knocked out and Barney has run away, it is Marshall who steps forward and knocks Doug out. Afterwards it is revealed that he and his brothers would spend nights aggressively participating in their own version of a fight club when their parents would go away. Robin, whose sexual interests in Barney and Ted waned as soon as it was revealed they had not fought, is suddenly interested in Marshall. Even though he is consistently with Lily, Robin's attraction re-establishes the sex appeal of fighting. This particular episode broadens Marshall's masculine identity; having established himself as a relatively harmless character, this episode revealed the "Wild Man" part of Marshall.

Analysis: The men of Modern Family

The subjects that the families and different episodes deal with as the series progresses, and how they are dealt with, are reminiscent of David Marc's sitcom formula; the men (and their families) face a conflict that an audience can relate to and they, comically, resolve their problems all within thirty-minute time slots. The men handle family pets, proper-child rearing, birthday parties, emotional support for children,

and a host of other matters that men, and particularly fathers, may be able to identify with. *Modern Family* is undoubtedly a sitcom.

The "cool dad"

Phil Dunphy is first and foremost a family man: he is happily married and the father to three children, each of whom define him and firmly establish his heterosexuality. Phil is a member of a traditional nuclear family: in the home there is a father, a mother, and children[xvi]. This creates a presence for the heteronormative ideal family within a series whose title suggests that it is going to challenge this ideal. Despite the establishment of Phil's obvious heterosexuality via his family from the pilot episode of the series, he continues to re-affirm his sexuality throughout the series by being clearly interested in Jay's wife Gloria and reacting to other attractive women he comes across in the same way. Phil's interactions with women other than his wife are the epitome of Buchbinder's "Schlemiel;" he is awkward and eager. His fumbling with attractive women at once challenges his masculinity and re-establishes his sexuality.

Phil's father role is the pivotal point of his character development; his attempts to maintain his status as a "cool dad" and his role in childcare often end in him being represented as Miller's "Fool Dad." In the series premiere after he gives his oldest daughter permission to wear a skirt that Claire had already told her was too short for school, Phil says to the camera, "I'm a cool dad. That's my thang. I'm hip, I surf the web, I text. LOL; laugh out loud. OMG; oh my god. WTF; why the face." The ridiculousness of this moment introduces Phil as the father-figure to laugh at; the episodes where Phil struggles with parenting continue to re-establish him in that role. In the twenty-second episode of season two, Phil and Claire argue over their separate roles in child-rearing. Claire accuses Phil of treating parenting as a novel and fun distraction[xvii], which subsequently allows him to be the "fun" parent. When the two decide to switch roles for the day, Phil creates a mockery of the original patriarchal figure in sitcoms; he becomes exaggeratedly authoritative when he makes his two daughters clean the bathroom, going so far as to deny them lunch. His afternoon of parenting is deemed wildly ineffective when Claire comes home and it is Phil that gets scolded for not feeding the girls lunch instead of the girls getting scolded for not cleaning their bathroom. Phil's inability to parent the girls reinforces

gender roles within the home and re-establishes his role as the "Fool Dad."

The development of Phil's character as a "Fool Dad" and a "Schlemiel" creates the perfect environment for the sensitive father figure. As he struggles to perform within the structure of ideal masculinity, Phil develops his own sense of what being a "man" is. In his role as a sensitive father, Phil maintains his masculinity by struggling to articulate his true feelings or refusing to acknowledge that he is having an emotional reaction. In season one, episode six, it is the first day back at school for three children and Phil projects his melancholy at his children being another year older onto Claire. Having an emotional reaction to this is acceptable for a mother and a woman, not for Phil. Phil first tries to use his role as the good-provider to take care of his wife and as she refuses each of his attempts he becomes increasingly frustrated with his inability to properly take care of his wife, which challenges his sense of masculinity. This frustration with his own sense of masculinity culminates with a road race between Phil and Claire. Claire participates in half-marathons and runs several miles each day and Phil does not work out (another poke at his masculinity). Claire is anticipating an easy win but as they run she realizes that this is how Phil is coping with his reaction to the kids' first day of school and she lets him win, telling the camera that "He needed the win more than [she] did that day". Phil's restored sense of masculinity is not negated by the audience's knowledge that Claire let him win; because he "won" it back in a physical competition, Phil's character is obviously rooted in the social norms of masculinity. Phil never acknowledged that he was feeling emotional and he never admitted this "weakness." He can be a sensitive father figure because the way that he re-establishes his masculinity derives from the cultural norms of what a "man" is and how he should behave.

"It sounds better in Spanish!"

Jay Pritchett is the established patriarch of his modern family: he is the grandfather and the wise, retired man. Jay is introduced during the premiere sitting next to his exceptionally beautiful Colombian wife, an immediate establishment of his heterosexuality and male virility. Jay is what Edwards would call an "Old Man": he is married and financially secure and sexual ambiguity or homosexuality makes him uncomfortable. Jay's sense of masculinity derives

from Sexton's definition of what the male norms are: courage, aggression, and technological skill[xviii]. Jay's homosexual son repeatedly provokes instinctual reactions from Jay because his idea of masculinity is firmly rooted in hegemonic masculinity which reinforces homophobia. Jay's role as the "Old Man" also develops his role as the "Mock Macho" man: Jay is trying to maintain a sense of what being a man was defined as "in his day" in a modern era. His struggles to adjust to his "modern family" and to maintain a sense of the hyper-masculine, heteronormativity that he idolizes are what make his character comedic.

Jay's adjustment to accepting homosexuality and deterring his homophobia are present during the thirteenth episode of season one, "Fifteen Percent," when Jay introduces Cameron to his golfing buddies as Mitchell's "friend". Mitchell is offended by this careful avoidance of identifying Cameron as his partner because he feels that his father has never been particularly comfortable with the fact that his son is gay. Mitchell confronts Jay and the conversation results in Mitchell implying that he thinks Jay's friend Shorty is gay, referencing his own "gaydar" and Shorty's sense of fashion as explanation. Once this idea is in Jay's head, he begins to look for clues of his friend's sexuality; Gloria tells him that Shorty is the only one of his friends to never have hit on her which confirms his suspicions. Jay decides to have a conversation with Shorty about it when the two men go golfing. Jay struggles to bring the topic up as the two men play their game until Shorty tries to assist him with his alignment which makes Jay uncomfortable and he ends the game. As the two men are having a post-game drink Jay confronts him and, trying to be supportive as possible, tells Shorty that Jay will be there as his friend no matter what, offering his services to do anything he can in his time of need. Shorty misinterprets the gesture as an offer of money because he was struggling with paying back a loan; he was never struggling with his sexuality. As Jay scrambles to explain the miscommunication Shorty is immediately defensive and offended; Jay has just questioned his sexuality, and by implying that he was a homosexual has questioned his masculinity as well. Because Mitchell planted that seed of doubt in his father's head, Jay had to recognize that men who deviate from his definition of acceptable male behavior make him anxious; he is Edward's "Old Man" character.

As a man whose own obvious heterosexuality is established from the series premiere, the significant age difference

between Jay and Gloria only enhances the unwavering sense of masculinity surrounding Jay. Frequently dressed in clothes suitable for his age, khakis and loose button downs, it is assumed that Jay either has a lot to offer Gloria financially or sexually; the audience can assume that his performance is satisfactory in both departments after the pilot episode. Gloria is discussing her ex-husband with the camera and she says, "My first husband: very handsome but too crazy. It seem like all we did was fight and make love. Fight and make love. Fight and make love." This establishes Gloria's sexual drive, which subsequently implies that Jay is now the man in her life fulfilling her needs. This, in turn, helps to establish his masculinity within the biological sphere that Donaldson attributed to the hegemonic ideal.

"No slapping your own butt."

Mitchell Pritchett is a lawyer, a father, a son, and in love with his partner Cameron. Mitchell's homosexuality is prevalent and relevant from the beginning: it dictates how he reacts to threats of his masculinity and how he reacts to the issue of homosexuality in social settings. Mitchell is not a flamboyant gay man (unless Lady Gaga is involved[9]) and he is often uncomfortable with his partner's flamboyance because he recognizes it challenges heteronormative definitions of masculinity. There is a hyper-sensitivity to Mitchell's character because he struggles with his roles as a "man" and as a "gay man," which, when defined by social and cultural norms, are entirely different. Mitchell behaves as if displaying any behavior that is not considered masculine will undermine his various attempts to establish his hegemonic masculinity. But because hegemonic masculinity is rooted in heteronormativity, which is in turn built upon homophobia (a subject that Mitchell is particularly sensitive to) Mitchell struggles with establishing his masculinity within his sexuality.

Aware of his father's homophobia accompanied by a desire to bond with his father, Mitchell makes multiple efforts to impress his father with feats of "manliness" that he believes will challenge the image his father has of him. When Cameron and Jay bond over their love of football[10], a sport that Mitchell knows nothing about, he makes an effort to memorize statistics to impress his father (and his partner). Mitchell's inability to participate in the conversation after the players he has memorized are taken out of the game diminishes his attempts at establishing masculinity within

society's or his father's terms. This is only perpetuated when Mitchell and Cameron decide to build Lily a playhouse in their backyard and it is revealed the Mitchell is incapable of using tools without becoming a danger to those around him. When Cameron enlists Jay's help and the two conspire to give Mitchell painfully simple tasks, Mitchell's masculine pride is wounded and, in an attempt to prove that he is a capable man, he puts the roof on the playhouse by himself and locks himself inside the castle. Mitchell has to admit to himself that he is not the "manly man" that he aspires to be.

Regardless of his inability to establish the hegemonic masculinity in its ideal, Mitchell is the "Good Provider" for his family: Cameron is unemployed and with baby Lily in the house it is left to Mitchell to earn an income for the family. Although, despite his financial independence, Mitchell still identifies with the "New Man": he is loving, caring, and his open homosexuality does make some other men nervous about their own sexuality or the sexuality of others. As a father, Mitchell makes the same mistakes that new parents make: he becomes irrationally concerned after Lily hits her head on the wall and struggles to adjust to travel time with the baby in tow. When Cameron suggests to Mitchell that they adopt a second baby, a baby boy, Mitchell struggles with the thought of having to raise a boy because he is gay[11]. Mitchell, as usual, is concerned that his own masculinity (or lack thereof) might hinder the chance of any son he may have to be a "normal" boy. During a family trip to a Dude Ranch in Wyoming, Mitchell attempts to find his "inner masculinity" to reassure himself that if he raises a son, his son will be raised the "right way": he tries shooting guns but to no avail. The juvenile exploding of a birdhouse with his nephew is what reestablished Mitchell's confidence in his own ability to raise a son. Mitchell's identification with Miller's "childish man" in this episode establishes a sense of masculinity that, even if not always present in his behavior, positions him closer to hegemonic masculinity.

"No. Pink loves me."

As his partner, Cameron Tucker is the other half to Mitchell's character: he is flamboyant, loud, and entirely confident in his homosexuality. Cameron does not struggle to define himself by the standard of hegemonic masculinity; he does whatever pleases him without fearing any challenges to his masculine identity. This makes Cameron an enigma: he loves football and is hardware and handyman capable,

identifying characteristics of a man who aligns himself with hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, he loves to dress his daughter up as a pop icon for photo shoots and has created an elaborate and ornate scrapbook for her. Cameron is the ultimate challenge to heteronormative ideology because, even with brief moments of masculinity that fall within the established structure, he does not adopt all of the discursive practices of hegemonic masculinity.

In comparison to the kinds of characteristics that culturally identify a man as masculine, Cameron's daily attire and gestures are all stereotypical of a gay man – the pink shirts, the floral shirts, the "limp wrist," and his flair for the dramatic. When he exhibits masculine behaviors, does this establish his traditional masculinity or does he challenge the hegemonic ideals of masculinity? Because femininity has not been defined in this analysis, I will not claim that Cameron behaves effeminately, but that he does not fulfill the masculine ideal. Neither Donaldson nor Connell and Messerschmidt would identify Cameron as positioning his masculinity with the hegemonic ideal.

Close male relationships in both *How I Met Your Mother* and *Modern Family*

The Bro Code created on *How I Met Your Mother* is applicable to a variety of male character relationships on various television series including *Modern Family*. The condensed collection of rules and guidelines for men to follow in Bird's homosocial situations and in their relationships with each other creates an outline for how a character can attempt to achieve the hegemonic ideal. The Bro Code is a tangible representation how men position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity; it demonstrates which social practices distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity and which reinforce it. This Bro Code is what differentiates men in "bromances" from men in homosexual relationships.

Analysis: *How I Met Your Mother*, "My best friend needs me!"

Under the guiding structure of The Bro Code, Barney, Ted, and Marshall have developed their relationship into a contemporary friendship called a "bromance." The "bromance" is a socially established term used to define particularly close male relationships that appear to mimic homosexual relationships[xix]. These "bromances" are

affectionate, sometimes homoerotic, and emotional, but never homosexual. The previously established masculinities of the three characters create an environment for their relationships to be affectionate and emotional, if necessary, because their sexuality is unwavering throughout the series.

The season three finale centers on the relationship between Ted and Stella, his girlfriend throughout season three, but equally important is the subplot involving the relationship between Barney and Ted. To reintroduce the context of this subplot, after Ted and Robin ended their relationship at the end of season two, Robin and Barney slept together for the first time; Barney was in direct violation of the Bro Code article referring to sleeping with a "bro's ex." This violation inundates Barney with guilt, and he confesses to Ted in "The Goat."^[xx] This breach in trust results in a "break-up" between Barney and Ted that lasts until this season three finale.

Lily makes the executive decision to call Barney for Ted after he has been in the car accident; she disregards their "break-up" because she reminds Ted that he would want to know if the situations were reversed. Upon receiving the phone call Barney immediately excuses himself from a business meeting and sprints to the hospital, accompanied by dramatic music. The music, and his sprinting, both abruptly end when Barney is hit by a bus as he prepares to cross the street to enter the hospital where he is then admitted to the hospital as a patient, and in far worse condition than Ted (who suffered minor injuries).

Concerned, just as Lily said he would be, Ted finds himself in the room with Barney, who has broken almost every bone in his body. At their bedside reunion Barney initially will not admit that he sprinted to the hospital because of Ted's accident and his own concern, claiming instead that he "was on this side of town." Actively participating in this emotional avoidance, Barney implies that his accident will make for an excellent "play" with ladies. At this point in the episode, the importance of Ted to Barney is evident and Ted decides it is time for him to reciprocate those feelings, regardless of the Bro Code violations:

Ted: Barney, you...you could have died.
Barney: I'm sorry I broke the bro code.
Ted: No, I'm...I'm sorry.
Barney: Ted, can we be friends again?

Ted: Barney, come on. We're more than friends.
Barney: [tearfully] You're my brother Ted.
Ted: [crying] You're my brother Barney.
Barney: [crying] Did you hear that Marshall? We're brothers now.
Ted: Marshall's my brother, too.
Marshall: [crying] We're all brothers! [xxi]

In light of life threatening circumstances, this emotional reaction not only adds humor to a serious situation, but it also momentarily highlights the relationship between Ted and Barney as well as all three men. These men are close enough emotionally to cry for each other and reconcile despite a violation of the Bro Code that is "worse than death." The men refer to each other as brothers and maintain their masculinity in a situation where emotions and affection are, and should be, acceptable. The tearful scene is still kept brief because Ted, as the narrator, says, "It got pretty mushy and embarrassing after that. Let's skip ahead;" the emotion is acceptable because of the circumstances, but that does not make it acceptable for the episode to linger on the tearful declarations of "bro love" for each other. This display of emotion is still a violation of the hegemonic norms of masculinity.

Analysis: Modern Family, Cam and Mitchell

The comedy found within Cameron and Mitchell as the homosexual family in Modern Family is not limited to the quirks and characteristics that make them different, but there is also humor in the moments when they are behaving as the heteronormatively masculine man would behave. These moments are funny because the characters are straying from what the audience would consider "homonormative" behavior. As discussed earlier, Cam is an avid football fan who was on a team during his college career. Cam is fulfilling a masculine norm and behaving as a "mock-macho" character: his behavior as a football fan is exaggerated so that it becomes a mockery of the typical sports-obsessed, heterosexual fan. His behavior as a stock male character has more comical value because he is gay.

Cameron and Mitchell also find themselves in situations where they "act straight." When their characters deviate from the "homonormative," they fulfill a masculine ideal that may be unexpected for a homosexual man; when the men try "acting straight" they attempt to achieve some masculine or heteronormative ideal in an attempt to fit in or conceal

their sexuality. In the second episode of the first season, right after they have adopted Lily, they sign up for a play group and Mitchell asks Cam to control his gay behavior because Mitchell is concerned about their reception from the other parents. Cam's struggle with controlling his behavior is most comically obvious when it is time for the dance circle and Mitchell tells him to "dance straight" and Cam blatantly hates every second of it. Mitchell is trying to encourage behavior that coincides with the heteronormative ideal to dispel the possibility of rejection from their parenting peers. The conclusion of this episode reveals that there is another gay couple in the play group already and Mitchell gives Cam the freedom to dance as flamboyantly as he chooses, which he does not hesitate to do.

This family's juxtaposition to two more traditional families strengthens the ambiguity of the male sitcom characters' relationship to the heteronormative ideal. The audience gets to simultaneously see Cam and Mitchell, Phil and Claire, and Jay and Gloria struggle with their parenting. The documentation of these struggles creates a discourse on the show about same-sex parenting and different-sex parenting, how they are different and how they are similar. What makes those moments with Cam and Mitchell funny is their relationship with the heteronormative ideal; adopting it, distancing themselves from it, or aligning themselves with it. If they experience a situation that any parents, gay or straight, could experience (i.e. Lily gets a bump on her head), the audience relaxes; there is nothing unique or different about this experience and they can laugh comfortably because a heteronormative family would experience this parenting panic, too. If Cam and Mitchell find themselves in a situation that a heterosexual couple might not be familiar with (i.e. they are the only gay couple in a toddler class), an audience can laugh because the situation is different from the heteronormative situation but not so wildly different that they cannot relate: new parents are still going to be uncomfortable the first time they find themselves in a classroom comparing the achievements of their child to another.

Conclusions

In both How I Met Your Mother and Modern Family, the characters are not limited to roles delineated in previous studies. Their masculinities are hybrids of the character qualities that are representative of multiple character-types.

Each character fulfills certain attributes of multiple categories, creating characters with depth. The male characters on these two shows are ambiguous, simultaneously perpetuating the status quo and challenging it. They are representative of a society with an ever-changing definition of what a “man” is and how his masculinity is defined. Real men, just like our favorite sitcom characters, are held to a hegemonic ideal that does not exist. Characters such as Barney or Phil are funny because their struggles with and attempts to achieve an ideal masculinity are also experienced by real men. Sitcoms create a comfortable parody of Butler’s notion of performativity: in the narratives, actors undertake daily “performances” of masculinity that derive from the fear of questioned masculinity or ambiguous sexual identity. These fears create relationships like the ‘bromance’ and cue laughter when situations deviate from the heteronormative hegemonic masculinity.

The bromantic relationships and behaviors in *How I Met Your Mother* are visible and relevant, but rarely the sole focus of an episode. Showing the bromance as an undercurrent or subplot for the show allows the audience to comfortably laugh at the situations that may straddle the dividing line between heterosexual and homosexual. When the men deviate from the heteronormative ideal, a laugh track cues the audience to relax and recognize the comedic quality of men engaging in behavior that digresses from Bird’s homosocial guidelines, the Bro Code, or normative masculine behavior. Not only does the laugh track cue the audience to relax, but the previously established masculinities of the male characters leave little room for doubt; the audience has nothing to be nervous about.

Homosexual characters make audiences nervous because they do not follow the same rules as Bird’s guidelines of homosocial behavior (and are sometimes considered incapable of homosocial relationships). When they are shown within a heteronormative setting their application of Butler’s performativity is altered because their masculinity is already challenged by their sexuality, and they do not hold themselves to the hegemonic ideal, regardless of whether it is biologically or culturally established. The presence of a homosexual couple, particularly a homosexual family, in *Modern Family* presents the sitcom audience with a concept that is still relatively new to television and its mere existence is a challenge to the standard heteronormative ideology. However, on the other hand, Mitchell, Cameron, and Lily

share the storylines with two straight, nuclear families and their obvious deviation from this norm is what is funny. When Cam is creating an ostentatious scrapbook for Lily or having a mural of himself and Mitchell painted on newly adopted Lily’s wall, or when Mitchell is obsessing over how to attend a Lady Gaga concert or over-dramatically trying to fight off a pigeon that found its way inside the house, these behaviors are funny to an audience because they are different from what “most men” would do, but not so different that they make an audience uncomfortable. When these moments are funny to an audience, are they funny because the show has created a new norm that Cam and Mitchell are held to because they are gay? Or do we laugh because they are a nontraditional family surrounded by traditional families?

Both Berman and Marc theorize that sitcoms can critique social standards and challenge social norms; however Newcomb and Grote argue that sitcoms are static perpetrators of the social context they are situated within. What this cultural study aimed to do was examine how the television situation comedy is “produced within, inserted into, and operated in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power.”[xxii] The contemporary sitcom carefully challenges heteronormativity with its introduction of bromances and homosexual families and simultaneously perpetuates the heteronormative ideal by creating laughter where characters deviate from the norm. Barney, Ted, Marshall, Phil, Jay, Mitchell, and Cameron are all held to impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity and when they fail to achieve the ideal, audiences find them laughable. When these men overcompensate for their (and our) masculinity insecurities, audience members laugh even harder. These men are the exaggerated representations of real-life men to whom audience members can relate; and even when they deviate from the “norms,” the characters are careful to align themselves with familiar heteronormative behaviors.

I find the ambiguity of television sitcoms frustrating because audiences today want a show that challenges the “old” heteronormative sitcoms and the ever-increasing presence of homosexuality creates opportunities for bromances and homosexual families to be featured on the small screen. However, what are these shows challenging if characters and relationships are funny because they do not line up with the heteronormative ideal? Their mere presence may

be a challenge to the heteronormative, but is part of why they are amusing because the audience is laughing at them through a heteronormative lens? Can the sitcom transform the heteronormative ideal? This frustrating ambiguity does not originate in the sitcom but from the culture’s definitions of masculinity. Today’s society is struggling to determine what a “man” truly is; the minimizing of the biological definition of gender roles and the difficulty in defining hegemonic masculinity in multi-sexuality society creates a space for masculinity to be ambiguous. As noted by Feuer, sitcoms reflect changes in society; my research here suggests the same. Masculinities in sitcoms develop simultaneously with masculinities in the real world. Today they are amusingly ambiguous because today, in society, there is no true definition of masculinity.

NOTES

[1]The ‘mockumentary’ style is seen in contemporary television shows such as *The Office*, *Arrested Development*, and *Parks and Recreation*.

The style uses cinematography elements of documentary films such as interviews, jumpy camera work, high resolution media, etc. Brett Mills and Ethan Thompson have both offered the term “comedy verite” as a label for this style of sitcom (Jeremy G. Butler, *Television Style* 214). This “comedy verite” branches away from the classic cinema verite style documentary because it includes talking heads, the filmmaker is not only observing the events that happen around them, but have an obvious physical presence within the set and interact with the actors via interviews, etc

[2]*Friends*, season one, episode eight; “The One Where Nana Dies Twice”. November 10, 1994.

[3]“Legendary” is a recurring catchphrase of Barney’s; it epitomizes his character’s desires to live life with frequent adventures, sex with attractive women, and being well-dressed at all times.

[4]*How I Met Your Mother*, season one, episode one. September 19, 2005.

[5]*How I Met Your Mother*, season one, episode six. October 24, 2005.

[6]*How I Met Your Mother*, season three, episode thirteen. March 24, 2008.

[7]*How I Met Your Mother*, season 6 episode 8. November 8, 2010.

[8]In episode nine of season one Marshall and Lily travel to Minnesota to spend Thanksgiving with Marshall’s family. While they are there Marshall participates in an aggressive game of bask-ice-ball (a game invented by the Erikson’s that combines basketball and ice hockey) and it becomes generally understood that the family is used

to the "normal" boy aggression.

[9]Modern Family, season 2, episode 22.
May 11, 2011.

[10]Modern Family, season 1 episode 9.
November 25, 2009.

[11]Modern Family, season 3, episode 1.
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