



11th International LAB Meeting - Spring Session 2008

European Ph.D. on
Social Representations and Communication
At the Multimedia LAB & Research Center, Rome-Italy

Social Representations in Action and Construction
in Media and Society

"Identity and Social Representations:
Cultural and Mythical Dimensions"

From 26th April - 4th May 2008

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Key Lectures

European Ph.D

on Social Representations and Communication

International Lab Meeting Series 2005-2008

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Purpose

- Describe representation of class
- Remarkably consistent
- Over 5 decades and 300 sitcoms
- Prime-time broadcast network tv

Why tv situation comedies

- Broadcast nets have largest audiences
60% household any night; even today
25%
- Sitcom most common genre every season
10-20 shows every week for decades
- Large audiences – often high ratings
- Roots in radio (Amos & Andy etc) and in
vaudeville comedy sketches

What are sitcoms

- Half-hour series with continuing characters
- Built on weekly comic problem situation which controls and overwhelms character
- Resolved by end of episode to re-establish stasis
- My focus, domestic sitcoms about families
choice of class is open.

First finding: frequency

- Working class very under-represented, about 10% of sitcoms, 60% of population
- Concentrated in 1950s, 70s, 90s
- Yet high % of working class series are successful

Types of representation

Type 1: Super-parents

- Innocent child gets into situation, parents help resolve
- Models of parenting; parents in sync
- Almost entirely upper middle class families – managers or professionals
- Very many such shows through all decades
- *Father Knows Best, Brady Bunch; Cosby*



1950s: Father Knows Best

Father is successful
insurance salesman

1970s Brady Bunch
Father is architect,
Family have maid



Type 2: Adult fool, woman

- Very few series
- Wife is fool – “ditzy blonde stereotype
- Husband sensible, no small children
- All middle class series
- *I Love Lucy; Green Acres;*

1950s: I Love Lucy

Husband is band leader



Type 3: Working Class Buffoon

- Almost all working class series
- Man is fool; causes own problem
- Contrast to wife and kids:
 - wife is sensible
 - children outsmart/don't respect dad
- *Honeymooners; Flintstones; All in the Family; The Simpsons*
- Even in short-lived w.c. shows



1950s: Life of Riley
Father is factory riveter

Is this about class or sex?

- Super-parents all middle class
- Wife as fool reconfirms sex status, preserves husband's class status
- Man as fool reverses sex status, confirms class status

Persistent

- Despite changes in society
- During 1960s turmoil, super-parents
- *Brady Bunch, My Three Sons*
- Post-modernist 1980s
- *Cosby Show, Family Ties*
- Working class buffoon each decade –
Ralph, Fred, Archie, Homer, King (both)

1950s: The honeymooners

Husband is bus driver



1960s: The Flintstones
Father is quarry worker



1970s: All in the Family

Father is loading dock worker



1990s: The Simpsons

Father is power plant worker



2000: King of the Hill

Father is propane salesman



King of Queens Husband is UPS driver



Breakwell

“Social Representations and Social Identity”.

Papers on Social Representations 1993

2(3): 1-20.

1. Production, differentiation and function

- a. “ownership/producers of a representation”
- b. “likely to be generated over great periods of time..from many different sources”
- c. “intergroup power differentials”
- d. “require a historical analysis of use of representations”
- e. “stereotypes serve social justification, differentiation”

2. Targets

- “target of the representation”
- “the power representation has to create an identity”
- “defines the boundaries of group identity”
- “effects may be long-term consequences, not immediately apparent”

3. Salience, 4. Relations

- “how significant or salient for the group”
- “networking of social representations”