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**THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY IN THE TV SERIES
“THE SIMPSONS”**

A Pro Gradu Thesis

by

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HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA
ENGLANNIN KIELEN LAITOS

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Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää millaisena amerikkalainen ydinperhe kuvataan The Simpsons -piirrossarjassa. Päämateriaalina käytettiin kaikkia Suomessa vuoden 1998 loppuun mennessä esitettyjä sarjan jaksoja, joista tutkimukseen valittiin tarkoituksenmukaiset jaksot, yhteensä 105 kappaletta. Taustamateriaali koostuu sosiologisesta perhekirjallisuudesta sekä populaarikulttuuria ja televisiota käsittelevästä kirjallisuudesta, joiden lisäksi käytettiin Internet-lähteistä saatuja haastatteluja ja lehtiartikkeleita. Tutkimuksessa keskitytään ydinperheen roolien, ihmissuhteiden ja rituaalien analysointiin. Tutkielma vastaa seuraaviin kysymyksiin: 1) Ovatko Simpsons-perheen isän ja äidin roolit perinteisiä? 2) Mitkä ovat vanhempien tehtävät perheen emotionaalisen hyvinvoinnin osalla? 3) Esiintyvätkö ja toteutuvatko roolit ja ihmissuhteet myös amerikkalaiselle perheelle tyypillisissä rituaaleissa? Koska tutkimuskohteena on sosio-kulttuurinen ilmiö, on tutkimus luonteeltaan laadullinen ja pääosin kuvaileva.

The Simpsons on amerikkalainen piirrossarja, jonka luoja Matt Groening halusi kuvaavan perusamerikkalaista ydinperhettä niin hyvin kuin huonoinenkin puolinen. Yhteiskuntatietoinen ja ironinen sarja sai ensiesityksensä vuonna 1989 ja on ollut suurmenestys siitä lähtien, leviten ympäri maailmaa. Perheeseen kuuluvat isä Homer, äiti Marge sekä lapset Bart, Lisa ja Maggie.

Tutkimuksen analyysi pohjautui perinteisiin amerikkalaisiin ydinperheteorioihin, joissa eriteltiin perheen jäsenten roolit sekä ihmissuhteet jäsenten välillä. Lisäksi tarkasteltiin Simpsonien perherituaaleja, joista edellämainittujen roolien ja ihmissuhteiden tulisi ilmetä. Yleensä ottaen tulokset osoittivat Simpsonien olevan perinteinen amerikkalainen ydinperhe, jossa esimerkiksi äidillä on keskeinen rooli perheen emotionaalisen tasapainon kannalta. Silti myös selkeitä poikkeuksia esiintyi, erityisesti ydinperheen rooleissa. Vaikka poikkeamilla onkin populaarikulttuurille ominainen koominen funktio, katsotaan niiden olevan myös kritiikkiä ydinperheen heikkouksia kohtaan. Tämä kritiikki on osa meneillään olevaa yleistä keskustelua muuttuvista arvoista Yhdysvalloissa. Lopulta sarja kuitenkin tukee ydinperheajatusta amerikkalaisena idyllinä, joka selviytyy lukuisista vaikeuksista huolimatta.

Asiasanat: American nuclear family. traditional roles, relationships and rituals in the family. popular culture. television cartoons.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie need little introduction as they are familiar to us all television viewers. "The Simpsons" is the longest-running prime-time animated series in television history and they are the family that other television families are compared to. In 1997, the series dethroned "The Flintstones" for the historic mark of having the most episodes produced for an animated prime-time series, and the end is nowhere near in sight. (The Official Simpsons Site 1997.) Not only has the Simpsons won numerous awards and received critical acclaim, but it has also won over the hearts of millions of viewers to the extent that, for example, Homer has his own fan club. The Simpsons has changed the way that animation and comedies in general are perceived by the audience and the television industry, thus becoming a permanent feature in popular culture worldwide.

The Simpsons has been called "probably the most realistically surreal cartoon series ever" (Tucker1993:48) because it constantly succeeds in recognizing historical and current events, and various forms of art and entertainment and mixing them into the storylines of the Simpsons' life. However, the show is not only about funny jokes and silly antics but it also communicates serious messages that concern real everyday life, such as family, society and the environment. These topics are presented in a satirical and humorous way without sacrificing their importance for the sake of humor. This aspect, in addition to high quality of production, has made the show more appealing to adults than children, which in turn has increased the commercial value and potential of the show ~~unprecedented for television cartoons. According to David Silverman, an~~ animation producer and writer, the show is not intended for children, although they are more than welcome to watch it. He adds that the Simpsons is aimed at the

same audience that watches American situation comedies like *Cheers* and *Taxi and Friends*, because he does not see cartoons as a children's medium (A BBC interview with David Silverman 1997).

Cartoonist Matt Groening created *The Simpson* family in about 15 minutes while waiting in the foyer to meet a future *Simpsons* producer, James L. Brooks. Before turning into a full-fledged television show, the *Simpsons* appeared as a bumper, which is a regular pre-show act, in the Tracey Ullman show. (The Official *Simpsons* Site 1997.) A colorful and fascinating family, the *Simpsons* reside in the town of Springfield. Homer works at the local nuclear power plant while Marge is the loving wife and mother who runs the household. Bart is a ten-year-old fourth-grader who is the menace of the town. Lisa, the total opposite of Bart, is an intelligent jazz saxophone-playing eight-year-old, wise beyond her years. Finally, there is a toddler called Maggie who manages to convey a wide range of emotions via pacifier sucks. In an interview for the BBC (1997) Groening has revealed that their personalities are deeply rooted in traditional American cornball sitcoms with a touch of influence from his family and friends. Groening wanted the *Simpsons* to be every family "only more so," and thus created this immortal nuclear family that almost everybody in America can relate to. He considers the *Simpsons* a mental health service to the viewers because they can compare themselves to the *Simpsons* with a sigh of relief "we're glad we aren't that bad!"

In a BBC interview (1997), David Silverman discusses how the *Simpsons* are supposed to showcase the American nuclear family and way of life in an ironic and critical fashion, taking swipes at stupidity and hypocrisy on the way. It is a mix of reality and fiction, although Silverman says in his interview that "there's more truth in the *Simpsons* and the way it portrays human beings and life in our country, probably globally."

This approach outlined by Silverman allows us to study and is also the reason why we want to study exactly how the American nuclear family's roles, relationships and rituals are depicted in the *Simpsons*. Although the *Simpsons* is a post-modern television cartoon series – with the characters' self-ironic and self-aware comments and observations, for example – we argue that the family

values presented in it are quite traditional and could often be considered even old-fashioned. We will analyze the episodes from the first eight production seasons of the show which are appropriate for our purposes. The analysis is based on the sociological background material on the American family, especially family theories. We will also take into account the Simpsons, as a family situation comedy, being a part of the American popular and television culture.

2 CONTEXT

The focus on the Simpsons in this study will be as a nuclear family in the American contemporary context. Since the Simpsons is a television cartoon series of a fictional but functional family, it is a part of today's popular culture, especially the television phenomenon known as the family situation comedy (referred to as sitcom from here on) genre. The functionality stems from the series's production team's intention and aim to depict similar issues and situations in the Simpsons that an actual American family could experience (Hietala 1992:89, Galdieri 1997, Kaufman 1989:108). The Simpsons are fully fictional because they are cartoon characters in a television series, but the writers of the show see this only as a benefit in depicting a "real-like" family (Galdieri 1997).

The class concern comes up in most social studies, but in our case it is not a central issue because the Simpsons, as a nuclear family, are a prototype of a middle-class, perhaps even a lower middle-class family. According to Leslie (1976:266), members of other social classes tend to lean towards the prototype of middle-class as well. Also, one of popular culture's main ideas is to produce "commodities and pleasures" for the masses, which in this case the middle-class represents the majority of (Fiske 1989, Hietala 1992).

Since the family is a part of society, the members within the family have special attributes and dimensions in their interaction that are culture-specific. In section 2.2 we take a closer look at the nuclear family in the United

States and concentrate on the roles, relationships and rituals within it. We will also present the main ideas and concepts of two major family theories, namely those of Parsons and Litwak. Popular culture will be dealt with in the next section, with particular attention to its specific characteristics, as well as television and sitcoms. In the case of television, we concentrate on its role in the society and especially its function as a cultural agent. In sitcoms, which are one of the major forms of broadcast comedy (Neale and Krutnik 1990:6, 178), our focus will be on family sitcoms and how families function in them. Then, in section 2.4, we will examine the object of our study, the Simpsons, its creation, the show and its topics, and the Simpson family itself. At the end of the context section we will deal in detail with our methodology, which is based on theoretical family literature, goals and hypothesis of our study, as well as some restrictions that apply.

2.1 Background Literature and Sources

Here we will present the central background literature used in the theoretical and practical parts of our study. We will begin with the literature that deals with family and its theoretical and sociological aspects. Then we move on to the books on popular culture and television. Last, we will present our material on the Simpsons, which also includes material found on the Internet.

The main topics of Gerald R. Leslie's *The Family in Social Context* (1976) include the modern family, sociology of the family, and marriage and the family. He covers also both cross-cultural and historical aspects, as well as the life cycle of contemporary American families and their functioning in the society. In addition, he discusses different family theories and also criticizes and compares them. This book gives a fine general view of the family institution for our purposes in that it deals with American families in various situations. It also takes the different theoretical aspects into account, but in the light of today's standards and reality, parts of it are outdated and some of the facts presented no longer apply, for example, what Leslie considers the division

of labor to be “today.”

Family Relations: Challenges for the Future (1993), edited by Timothy H. Brubaker, examines the various changes that American families have already experienced and will probably experience in future. The book is divided into three parts: part one takes an overall look at the changing family perspectives, such as challenges to the American families and gender role change in the families. Part two views the challenges in more detail, focusing on such issues as the transition in marriage, support in parent-child relationships, work and family relationships, marital disruption, abuse in the family and recovering from crisis situations. The last part deals with family interventions, for instance, marital therapy in the 21st century, as well as state and federal initiatives in developing family policies. The issues discussed are still valid and part of the everyday life of a modern family. It also goes further into detail than, for instance, Leslie’s book. The downside is that it mainly concentrates on the negative sides of the American family life and does not deal with issues that do not cause problems.

J. E. Goldthorpe, in *Family Life in Western Societies: A Historical Sociology of Family Relationships in Britain and North America* (1987), offers a historical perspective on family life primarily in Britain and the United States, but with comparative reference to other western countries as well as to eastern Europe. The author discusses such issues as family life in the past, sociological models of the 1950s (but also criticisms and critics of these models), mental illness in the family and age-mate and adolescent socialization. In addition, he deals with women in employment, careers and couples, social class and family life, family life among ethnic minorities and also marital breakdown and divorce. For our purposes, the book gives a clear and detailed account of the traditional sociological family models and their critics.

Family life (1985) by Graham Allan combines recent feminist interpretations of domestic life with the traditional issues of family sociology. Particularly concerned with the impact that domestic roles have both inside and outside the home, the book examines how the organization of these roles is influenced by the wider social and economic contexts in which families

function. A big part of examining the influence involves finding out how the division of tasks and responsibilities between the spouses within the home shapes the division and inequalities between genders that occur outside the home. This book offers more information on family theories and an insight into the role of women in families.

Family Diversity and Well-being (1994) by Alan C. Acock and David H. Demo takes a closer look at family structure, relationships inside the family and the well-being of both the adult and child members of the family unit. The book deals with such introductory material as traditional American family and recent changes, major developments in family relations and prevalent family structures. Other issues include theoretical perspectives linking family structure, relations and well-being, and identifying the various family types and socioeconomic characteristics of these families. The remainder of the book discusses relationship issues from various angles, such as parent-child and marital relations. This book contains a wealth of current material for the roles and relationships parts of our study.

In *Understanding Pop Culture* (1989) John Fiske outlines a theory of popular culture in capitalist societies and he also gives critical readings of previous theories of popular culture, while making a clear distinction between popular and mass culture. He emphasizes that his interpretations of popular culture in English speaking countries present a European point of view. Fiske describes the context, and lists different principles and conditions in which popular culture exists in today's societies. He also concentrates on popular culture's power relations with its consumers and how popular "texts" reflect various social dimensions, such as race, gender and class. He maintains that people from different societies can create their own meanings and messages from the same products created by the popular culture. For our study, this book serves as the fundamental basis for a concept of popular culture. We also feel that our shared European point of view helps us to understand Fiske's interpretations of American popular culture better.

Popular Film and Television Comedy (1990) by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik offers theoretical background for handling different issues concerning

comical television series. Sections on sitcoms and families in them are useful for our purposes because they concentrate on such issues as unity of family and how individuals interact within the family. Another point of interest is the definition Neale and Krutnik offer on the agenda of television. They argue that by allowing television to “sneak a peek” inside a family, it tries to steer the viewers in the same direction when it comes to cultural acceptance and norms. On a more technical side, they discuss the development of storyline in sitcoms, quality and its significance, as well as the importance of attention to sounds and details.

Veijo Hietala's *Teeveen merkit* (1990) deals with the language, the signs and the codes that are used in different kinds of television programs. Hietala begins by explaining television's role as a cultural institution as well as the nature of television programming and also how the viewers form the meanings for what they see according to their own experiences. For our purposes, the section about the television series, especially situation comedies, included useful information. Situation comedy is purely a product of television culture and has many typical features of the television institution. For instance, as the movies aim for the larger-than-life uniqueness, the sitcoms are consciously set at the same every-day level and environment as their audiences. Although a cartoon sitcom, this applies to the Simpsons, too.

The Simpsons: A Complete Guide To Our Favorite Family (1997), edited by Ray Richmond and Antonia Coffman, has been compiled to collect all conceivable Simpsons trivia into a book (for example, did you know that Bart always has nine spikes of hair?). It is based on original scripts, storyboards and designs to make sure that the facts are straight, down to the last detail. In addition to the original material, the reader is assured by Matt Groening himself that each episode was checked “over and over and over again” by seventeen people to insure that nothing had missed. It includes background stories of all cast members and storylines of all episodes from the first eight production seasons, which are exactly the same episodes that have been shown in Finland to date. The most useful and practical pieces of information that the book offers to this study are the official titles of each episode and the

possibility to check quotations and dialogues. Otherwise, it serves as a reference book concerning all information about the episodes included in our study.

In addition to these books, we also used some Internet sources on the Simpsons. The Official Simpsons Site provided us with information on the show and its creator, Matt Groening. We also used interviews of some central people behind the series conducted by the BBC. Moreover, we used Internet versions of articles from Time, Entertainment Weekly and People Weekly because they were more readily available than their paper versions. LISA, List of Inquiries and Substantive Answers, is a list of information on everything related to the entire Simpsons show and is updated monthly. The information from the list included in our study has been taken from such reliable sources as personal interviews and has been verified in other sources as well. This also applies to other factual Internet information we have used and we chose the Internet sites with discretion, leaving out, for instance, the so called fan sites.

2.2 The Family As Institution

According to Encyclopedia Americana (International edition 1996 part 11:2) the 'family' is a social institution that "refers to a group of persons related by birth or marriage (usually parents and their children) who reside in the same household." The nuclear family is generally considered to be the norm in western industrial societies (Allan 1985:167). Murdock (1949 as quoted by Leslie 1976:15) went even further in an out-dated claim that not only is the family institution universal, but also a specific form of the family - the nuclear family - is almost "a cultural universal." Leslie (1976:15) specifies Murdock's claim in that it applies to the American society, where family and nuclear family are considered nearly synonymous and where the nuclear family forms the basic residential unit, not universally. Both of these claims have been strongly criticized lately because of recent economical, political and social changes in the United States, which have challenged the ways families have

traditionally functioned. For example, there is more variation due to multicultural influences, a higher rate of divorces and an increase in single-parenthood, but these are challenges which the family institution is responding to. (E.g. Acock and Demo 1994:1-11, Brubaker 1993:3-12.) A sign of the importance of the family in the American society is that it still holds a central place in the American national identity (May 1997:28).

A definition of the nuclear family by Leslie (1976:15) describes it as a unit consisting of “two adults of opposite sex, living in a socially approved sex relationship and their own or adopted children”. Elliot (1986:6) takes a different approach and defines it as a “unit consisting of spouses and their dependent children” where the concept of spouses is not as restricted as in Leslie’s definition and could include two adults of the same sex. The former traditional definition is more acceptable to the majority of the people, although the liberal aspects of the latter are also accepted today. Leslie’s traditional points of view can also be seen in the functions he sets for the nuclear family: It is the unit of reproduction, common residence, economic cooperation, has the responsibility of socializing the children and provides for the sex needs of the married adult members of the society (1976:19).

2.2.1 Parsons’s and Litwak’s Family Theories

There are a number of sociological theories concerning western families and their place and function in the surrounding society and here we will deal with two of them, which complement each other well. Perhaps the most influential sociological family theory was developed by Talcott Parsons in the 1950's, to which Eugene Litwak has later contributed additions.

While Parsons concedes that the family no longer performs some of the functions it used to, family life is nevertheless not becoming disorganized, as has been argued. Instead, it is in a process of differentiation and specialization. Differentiation means that more non-kinship units (for example, schools and churches) have become more involved in family life. According to Parsons,

this has not resulted in the loss of importance of the nuclear family, but rather lead to the specialization of the family's function in the society. (Allan 1985:6-7, Brubaker 1993:99). The society has come to rely on the family to perform "a small number of crucial functions, specifically those relating to the generation and maintenance of human personality." The nuclear family has two main functions in producing personalities, where the primary socialization prepares the children to function competently in the society and the commitment to and incorporation of marriage and parenthood stabilize their adult personalities, which in turn supports their children's emotional well-being. In order to perform adequately, the nuclear family has to be internally differentiated by having specialized and distinct roles for the two parents. The husband has to provide for the family and be in charge of decision-making while the wife has to take care of and support the emotional well-being of the family. (Allan 1985:7-8, Brubaker 1993:100, Elder 1980:26-28, Goldthorpe 1987:58, 61-62, Leslie 1976:259.)

One of the most misunderstood ideas in Parsons' theory is the differentiated family type in the modern industrialized society, which he has named "the structurally isolated conjugal family" (also called isolated nuclear family). This family type consist of co-residing married couple with or without dependent children. (Allan 1985:8, Elder 1980:27-28, Goldthorpe 1987:60, Leslie 1976:257,259.) In that case, the nuclear family in Parsons' terms is a structurally isolated conjugal family with children. The common misunderstanding stems from Parsons' ambiguous use of the term "structural isolation" that has lead people to believe that the nuclear family is socially isolated. Parsons meant by structural isolation that the nuclear family unit is always more important than other kinship so that the obligations to the nuclear family are stronger. This is true even after the nuclear family has "dissolved" (that is, after the dependent children have left the unit), although the obligations are weaker than before. This misconception prevailed even though Parsons had on many occasions emphasized that "the nuclear family cannot be a closed system." (Allan 1985:8-9, Elder 1980:27-28, Goldthorpe 1987:60-61.) According to Allan (1985:8-9) and Goldthorpe (1987:61), Parsons finds two

major benefits in the structurally isolated conjugal family and it having only one main income earner, which no longer is necessarily the case. The first benefit is that there is room for occupational mobility and, secondly, the different values of family and economic systems will not interfere with each other. Parsons further claims that “the isolated nuclear family is found most extensively among white, urban, middle-class Americans” (Leslie 1976:259).

Litwak set out to contradict Parsons’s theory of the isolated conjugal family but on retrospect wound up complementing it by specifying the relationship between the family and the societal institutions. According to Litwak, the form of the family in contemporary society lies somewhere between the isolated conjugal family and the extended family in its traditional sense. Litwak suggests that there is more support and interaction between the nuclear family and the extended kin than Parsons claimed, even though the structure of households is usually nuclear or conjugal rather than extended, and they are autonomous. To emphasize this difference, he called this form of family “the modified extended family,” which consists of the nuclear family and closest members of the non-conjugal kin. The non-conjugal members may vary from one case to another, depending on the closeness of the ties between the members of the family. The societal institutions are public organizations that operate outside the family, such as schools, churches and hospitals. (Allan 1985:9-10, Elder 1980:28, Goldthorpe 1987:73-75.)

The role of the modified extended family in the socialization process is to take care of the individual’s personal needs and emotional development, while the societal institutions handle standard and more or less predictable contingencies (for example, education and the care of the elderly). Because the institutions cannot respond to all individualistic needs, Litwak has made a difference between particularistic and universalistic needs. In order for the universalistic needs to be satisfied, the societal institutions require the support from modified extended families in taking care of the particularistic needs. (Allan 1985:10-12, Goldthorpe 1987:73-75.) To sum up, these two forms of social organizations, the family and the societal institutions complement each other in dividing the reciprocal roles of the socialization process. Litwak also

emphasized the mother's role as the person maintaining the interaction. This complementary interaction shows, as Parsons has argued, that the family is not becoming functionless. (Allan 1985:24, Goldthorpe 1987:73-75.)

2.2.2 Roles, Relationships and Rituals

The roles, relationships and rituals within the family are of great importance in performing the two main societal functions mentioned above, socialization and support of emotional well-being. Even though the nuclear family as an institution has not changed much from the 1950's, the roles within the nuclear family have. Goldthorpe (1987:58) presents four basic roles within the nuclear family: husband / father, wife / mother, son / brother and daughter / sister. Out of these four roles, the parents' roles are viewed as the most important because they carry the greatest responsibilities in the family, that is, the socialization of the children, financial provision and marital life (Brubaker 1993:100, Goldthorpe 1987:58). May (1997:31) also points out that the society also expects the parents "to solve the nation's ills by instilling 'family values' in their children", meaning that the responsibilities are not limited only to the family itself. According to Brubaker (1993:100), these responsibilities form the core family roles for mothers and fathers: worker, parent and spouse. They also emphasize that these roles are interdependent and that a parent may have more than one role simultaneously. The dependent children of families have a more implicit role in contemporary industrial society, that is to say that they are viewed as objects of socialization and do not have as active societal roles as their parents. This should not be confused with the fact that some dependent children do work; not for the sake of the family but mainly for themselves.

Traditionally the father has been the breadwinner and decision-maker, while the mother has been the homemaker and the "emotional glue" in the family (Acock and Demo 1994:9, Brubaker 1993:10-11, 99, Goldthorpe 1987:57-58). This Parsonian division of roles basically meant that the father was the sole income earner and the mother stayed at home taking care of the

household, which resulted in her being economically dependent of her husband (Brubaker 1993:55, Allan 1985:21, 93). Parsons viewed the parents' separate occupational roles as a way to avoid jealousy and sense of inferiority concerning status within the family (Goldthorpe 1987:61). However, in the last few decades there has been a general move towards a more egalitarian division of household tasks. Nowadays most families have more than one income earner, but still the decision-maker and homemaker roles have remained. (Allan 1985:167, Brubaker 1993:10-11.) In everyday life this has meant that the father helps with housework and the mother with provision. The main reason for the mother to start working is simply the need for two salaries to maintain the middle class standard of living (Acock and Demo 1994:6, Brubaker 1993:99). This again has increased the workload for mothers because they often have to take care of the duties both at home and at work, causing overload and stress (Acock and Demo 1994:6-7, Allan 1985:91-92, Brubaker 1993:100). Meanwhile the father's workload has not increased in the same manner, only some of the responsibilities have changed. Because the mother has less time for her more traditional duties, some of them have been shifted over to universalistic institutions, as defined in Litwak's theory. The responsibility of parenting is shared, even though most of that burden falls to women. (Brubaker 1993:11, 99, May 1997:31.) But as May (1997:32) notes, motherhood is central in female identity and as such, a natural part of mother's life.

The relationships within the nuclear family can be roughly divided into three different levels: the relationships between the mother and the father, parents and children, and among siblings. Theoretically, the relationship between spouses can be observed on three dimensions which are all important for a successful relationship. Firstly, interaction, which includes communication and shared activities, secondly, quality and support, and thirdly strain and conflict. Issues concerning domestic division of labor and decision-making have also become central in defining the relationship between spouses ever since the traditional role of the mother has changed. (Acock and Demo 1994:92-98, Allan 1985:78, Brubaker 1993:111.) Underlining this relationship is a kind of equality and equilibrium, at least the attempt to achieve it, and its

success is crucial for properly functioning parent-child relationship and socialization of the children. (Allan 1985:92-99, Elder 1980:34.)

The relationship between parents and children is not so much based on a sense of equality. In a nuclear family, children are dependent on their parents, who are responsible for their upbringing. This responsibility includes parents acting as primary role models for their children. It also gives them authority over the children, which makes this relationship unequal when it comes to power (Elder 1980:12, Leslie 1976:280-284). Interaction between parents and children can be categorized into support, control and conflict. Support means time spent together and shared activities, physical affection and emotional support, while control includes rules of conduct, economical issues and chores. Conflict covers disagreement, strain, aggression and violence. Two most important factors in the interaction are frequency and quality. To sum up, the components of parental involvement in the relationship between parents and their children are responsibility, also financial, accessibility and both physical and emotional engagement (Acock and Demo 1994:119.)

Sibling relationships are important since most American children grow up with siblings, even though families are getting smaller today. While parents are not always directly involved in sibling interaction, the siblings can have a better relationship if the parents have an equal response to all of the children. On a concrete level, the relationship contains the aspects of rivalry, the other siblings being role models and objects of attachment. As in any relationship, there are both positive and negative sides to all of these aspects. The role model is usually an older sibling, who can take care of the younger, teach social competence and behavior (often unintentionally) and provide emotional security. However, the model given can also include bad behavior. Rivalry can also have different sides: competitiveness, jealousy or even resentment, which usually begins when a younger sibling is born. Finally, attachment occurs when siblings turn to each other for security, support and comfort. This could be a result of parents not spending enough time with their children. Still, family ties prevail in choosing objects of attachment, for example, in helping to solve problems. The three parts of sibling relationships take place in everyday

interaction, for example, play. (Shaffer 1994:465-466.)

Family rituals are “patterned social interaction that include a prescription of roles ... and ascription of meaning” (Fiese and Kline 1993:290). They are also connected to predictable times and places, and give the individual a sense of identity within the nuclear family (Bennett et al. 1988). These definitions of rituals mean that they are organized activities of the whole family that have their own specific meaning. Rituals reflect how the family members interact together and with the outside world (Reiss, 1981). Family rituals are important for the family’s well-being because, according to Fiese and Kline (1993:290-291), they promote feelings of belonging, sense of security, improve self-esteem and reduce anxiety. The interest in rituals has increased among the sociologists since rituals can foster change in the family and mark important transitions in traditions and customs (Fiese and Kline 1993:291).

Rituals differ from other family activities by having symbolic quality and affective meaning (Fiese and Kline 1993:291). Because of this status given to rituals, only certain people are expected to take part in them (Bennett et al. 1988). The special importance of rituals may also explain why some of them “span generations, linking practices and beliefs across generations” (Fiese and Kline 1993:291). According to Wolin and Bennett (1984 as quoted by Fiese and Kline 1993: 290-291), the central elements of the family rituals are where they take place and what behaviors are involved in performing them, that is, the settings and dimensions. They list three different types of rituals: patterned interactions, family traditions, family celebrations. Patterned interactions are most frequent but least consciously planned, like dinnertime, bedtime and weekend leisure activities. Family traditions are not culture-specific but still unique, such as birthdays, anniversaries and family reunions. Family celebrations include more culture-specific events than traditions, for example, national and religious holidays, weddings and Thanksgiving. Fiese and Kline (1993:291) distinguish eight different family ritual dimensions: occurrence (how often it takes place), roles (assignment of roles and duties), routine (regularity), attendance (whether participation is compulsory or not), affect (emotional investment), symbolic significance (meaning of the activity),

continuation (perseverance across generations) and deliberateness (advance preparation and planning). Fiese and Kline (Pierce 1996:250-251) also suggest that the degree of meaning and recurrence are important aspects of family rituals. Accordingly, they offer a four-way typology of family rituals: high/low degree of meaning and high/low incidence of routine. The models utilized in this study – concerning the roles, relationships and rituals, will be specified in section 2.5.

2.3 Popular Culture, Television and Family Sitcoms

Culture in the social sense is defined as “a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (Storey 1994:56). Popular culture is hard to define as such, instead, it can be said to have certain qualities it must fulfill. Popular culture is not consumption, it cannot be described in terms of buying and selling of commodities. It is the active process of “generating and circulating meanings and pleasures” for masses within a social system. (Fiske 1989:23.) Popular culture, in the end, is made by the people, not the culture industry (Fiske 1989:24, Hietala 1992:73).

Popular culture has to be relevant to the immediate social situation of the people and it must attempt to “appeal to common and deny social differences” (Fiske 1989:25, 28). Although the industry tries to manipulate the consumers, popularity is based on the fact that people with different backgrounds and in different contexts are able to give the products of popular culture their own specific meanings (Fiske 1989:6-7, Hietala 1992:73). Popular culture in industrialized societies is contradictory because on one hand it is industrialized, meaning that commodities are produced and distributed by profit motivated industry that follows only its own economic interests. On the other hand, it is of the people, and their interests and desires are not necessarily those of the industry. (Fiske 1989:5, 23.) In addition, the products of popular culture, unlike works of art, have their own qualities that are shared by all

media; they are standardized, conservative, mediocre, manipulated and stereotyped consumption products (Hietala 1992:68-69). Popular culture not only has to but is also aimed at producing commodities that are polysemic, that is, have multiple meanings and pleasures, and they have to be readily available, which is one of the reasons why television is so popular. (Fiske 1989:158.)

Television, in Fiske's (1987:1) opinion, can be seen as "a cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings" that serves the dominant interests in society. Watching television has become an important part of family life in western societies and it is a central part of spending leisure time (Soramäki 1990:64, 67). This is why television follows the cyclical rhythm of the nuclear family throughout the day and the year. For example, low summer seasons and prime time scheduling are direct results of the nuclear family's habits of watching television. (Hietala 1993:121.) The popularity of television has grown as the attitudes towards it have changed so that watching and enjoying television programs is not considered a sign of an uncivilized person or low intelligence anymore (Hietala 1990:51).

Historically, concepts of television's effect on its audience have changed quite a lot. Earlier this century the idea of mass society prevailed, where people were thought to be fragmented individuals who were subjects to powerful propaganda and accepted it as truth. The idea of reinforcing replaced this view, as it was found out that behavior is not so simple. Reinforcing was based on the idea that television showed its audience "preferred" aspects or "acceptable" behavior, which would eventually be taken into use. The problem of this theory was that television's message was still not always accepted as truth. This led to the next concept, where pre-existing beliefs formed the basis upon which people would build their understanding of media messages. Since not everything could be based on previous knowledge, the current view of the media, and television as a part of it, being able to tell "what to think *about* if not exactly what to think" became popular. (Philo 1990:2-8.) In spite of what television's role is, it seems that people do believe what they see on television and it can be used as a tool to promote various concepts and ideas. Therefore, Fiske (1987:19-20) prefers to talk about results of television's interaction with

its audience, rather than about the effect of television's message on its audience.

The overall effect of television goes further than its contents alone. As a medium, television tries to inscribe the viewer as a part of its own 'family,' and serves as a peeping hole to otherwise unattainable situations and locations. (Fiske 1989:157, Neale and Krutnik 1990:242.) Television tries to align the viewer with proper and acceptable norms and conventions of a particular cultural system which are drawn from common experience and cultural identity, thus in general reaffirming cultural identity, a community of interests and values that are opposed to those of the 'outside' (Neale and Krutnik 1990:242).

According to Neale and Krutnik (1990:6, 178, 242), sitcoms, which originated from newspaper cartoons, cinema series and particularly radio, share the same function and objective with television as a cultural agent.

Traditionally, sitcoms place themselves on the same everyday level with their viewers (Hietala 1990:61), which is typical of a product of popular culture. For example, viewers can relate to the problems in sitcoms and get a sense of relief by being able to laugh at them, because the problems do not seem impossible anymore (Hietala 1990:62, 1992:90). Another traditional aspect is the convention of the happy ending, also called 'the Hollywood happy end.' It sentimentally ritualizes the way that not only sitcoms, but also most of the other genres, end happily with all problems solved, the balance restored and status quo preserved. (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:29.)

Family sitcoms emphasize the group's unity and try to preserve the stability in the family by protecting the relationships, therefore strengthening nuclear family ideology. The same occurs also in sitcoms that present a family unit different from a traditional nuclear family because its ideology is the general frame that the viewer compares the "deviant" shows to. (Neale and Krutnik 1990:239-241.) Often the "deviance" is also used as a comic effect (Hietala 1990:62-63). According to Parsons (as quoted by Leslie 1976:259), "the isolated nuclear family is presented as the prototypical American family ... it is the family portrayed and admired through the mass media - television, the

movies, radio, and so on.” Neale and Krutnik (1990:239) add that both sitcoms and television in general reinforce the concept of nuclear family as “a model of stability and normality.” In the next section we will introduce a contemporary sitcom family called the Simpsons, starting off with the creation of the show.

2.4 The Simpsons

Matt Groening (born February 14th 1954) is the creator of The Simpsons and “Life in Hell” comics. He finished college intending to be a professional writer and moved to Los Angeles, where his new career had a rough start. The unexpected success of his “Life in Hell” comic strip attracted the attention of James L. Brooks of Gracie Films, who in 1985 invited Groening to develop an idea for a future project. Later, this idea became the animated Simpsons shorts shown during The Tracey Ullman Show, starting on April 19th 1987. The shorts became so popular that the Fox Network wanted to make them a show of their own. The Simpsons premiered as a series on December 17, 1989 in the 8PM prime-time time slot and regular broadcasts began on Sundays beginning January 14, 1990. (LISA 1998, Kaufman 1989:108)

A good indication of the high quality of the show and appreciation for it is the title “America’s first family of animation” and the amount of awards it has received (Galdieri 1997). What makes this feat even more significant is that all major areas of the production (script, music / sound and animation) have been nominated for various prizes and have eventually won. For example, out of 23 Emmy nominations (the Emmies being television’s Academy Awards equivalent) the Simpsons has won the prize ten times. (LISA 1998, The Official Simpsons Site 1997.) This is a considerable achievement since cartoons have traditionally been made on strict budgets and they were low priority when compared to full length feature movies. Also, technical improvements during the last decade or so have given the Simpsons better production possibilities. For example, the networks did not bother with the quality of sound because it could not have been reproduced with older home

television-sets anyway. (Neale and Krutnik 1990:108, 176-177.)

The Simpsons has a very large cast for a cartoon including characters from all walks of life, which adds to the series' credibility (Galdieri 1997, the Official Simpsons Site 1997). For instance, Homer's work buddies and "the guys" at Moe's Tavern, Bart and Lisa's friends and teachers at school (Bart has some enemies as well), the management at the nuclear power plant (Mr. Burns and Smithers), the police officers, Apu the Kwik-E-Mart manager and mayor "Diamond" Joe Quimby. However, in this study we will focus only on the Simpson family, which is the core of the series and all of the stories revolve around them.

The Simpsons live in Springfield, which is a fictional location. It was given the name because it is one of the most common city names in the United States and also the place where the television series "Father Knows Best" was set (an antithesis to the Simpsons, according to Groening). Groening has said that although Springfield is basically "anytown USA," it shares some features similar to towns in Oregon, where he grew up. (LISA 1998.) This anonymity stems from the intention to keep the series "all American" so that it could be situated almost anywhere in suburban America. In addition, the Simpsons are a typical American sitcom family, like the Honeymooners with children and the Flintstones in suburbia, with typical sitcom problems to deal with in every episode (Corliss 1994:77).

2.4.1 The Simpson Family

Matt Groening has named the Flintstones and its idea of a cartoon family unit as a predecessor and a model for the Simpsons. However, he was slightly frustrated by the Flintstones and wanted to create a different family setting, ~~which is why he prefers not to compare these shows directly to each other.~~

Groening started off with only five characters - Marge, Homer, Bart, Lisa and Maggie (for a picture, see APPENDIX 1)- and just decided to name them after his own family because he was in a hurry, waiting to pitch the idea to James L.

Brooks. (A BBC interview with Matt Groening 1997.) Although the characters were not the result of careful planning, the decision brought authenticity and credibility to them.

The Simpsons are a traditional nuclear family of five: Homer J. Simpson, the father; Marjorie Bouvier Simpson, the mother; Bartholomew Jo-Jo Simpson, the first born; Lisa Marie Simpson, the older daughter and Margaret Simpson, the youngest. In addition, the family has two pets, Santa's Little Helper, the family dog and Snowball II, the family cat. Groening describes the main concept behind the characters as follows:

The characters are simple and strong. They love each other and they hate each other. I avoided sentimentality. People who love each other also drive each other completely nuts. The Simpsons is every family only more so. (A BBC interview with Matt Groening 1997.)

The straightforward approach of the show helps people relate to the situations experienced by the Simpsons, almost everyone knows what family life is like. Although the characters are simple and not overtly sentimental, the show does nevertheless have typical American sentimental features, such as happy endings. In the series, the Simpsons function like a real family with the usual money problems, quarreling, family vacations and pesty relatives and neighbors. Also the last name, Simpson, suits the simplistic approach and is a natural choice for the family because it literally translates to "Son of a Simpleton" (LISA 1998, Kaufman 1989:108). They have been called "America's Ideal Family" (Corliss 1994:77), although the intention has been that they simply represent "the normal American family in all its beauty and all its horror," according to James L. Brooks (Kaufman 1989:108).

Homer married Marge soon after they had both finished high school, partly because she was pregnant with Bart. He found a job at the local nuclear power plant even though he was not qualified. At work he slacks off, causes accidents and eats donuts (preferably with "the purple stuff"). At home he likes to eat a lot, watch too much television and drink Duff beer. Between work and

home Homer often stops at Moe's Tavern for a beer or two and a chat with Moe and Barney, the local bar fly. From all this eating and drinking he is grossly over-weight and in terrible physical condition. Although he is thick-headed, stubborn and over-reacts easily, he is a dedicated family man who stands up for his family when need arises. He was named after Matt Groening's father and one of his own sons (LISA 1998). Marge often calls him "Homie" while Bart and Lisa call him "Homer" instead of "dad" or "father".

Marge is a homemaker and the problem-solver of the family, the more sensible parent. Despite Homer's attributes, she nevertheless loves him, although she has thrown him out of the house a couple of times. She is the one who disciplines the children, and Homer as well. Marge has also worked as a police officer, a pretzel salesperson and at the same nuclear power plant as Homer, but she has always gone back to the old routine at home. She got her name after Groening's own mother, Margaret, who was called Marge.

Bart is a mischievous ten-year-old, who does as he pleases. Very often, he gets on Homer's nerves (but also Marge's and Lisa's), causing Homer to choke him, yelling "why you little --". Bart does not do too well in school and he tends to be a problem student. In spite of being a trouble-maker, Marge calls him her "favorite lil' guy." Bart loves Santa's Little Helper, who obeys only Bart, if anybody at all. The name Bart is simply an anagram for "brat", although on several occasions Matt Groening has said that Bart is strongly influenced by both himself and his brother (LISA 1998, A BBC interview with Matt Groening 1997).

Lisa, unlike her brother, is intelligent, courteous and politically correct eight-year-old. She is an honor roll student and loves playing the blues on the saxophone. Within her family she is the misunderstood and underrated genius, who is often left in the shadow of her attention-craving brother. Lisa's character has gone through the biggest changes since the Tracey Ullman Show bumpers when she pretty much was a female version of Bart (A BBC interview with David Silverman 1997). Lisa's name originated from Matt Groening's younger sister (LISA 1998).

Maggie, the youngest child, sucks her pacifier and rarely speaks

anything but still is not just an object. After all, she was the one who shot Homer's employer Mr. Burns in a double feature episode. She expresses her feelings through the sound of the pacifier sucks which basically defines her character (A BBC interview with David Silverman 1997). Maggie was named after Matt Groening's youngest sister Margaret who is called Maggie (LISA 1998).

2.4.2 Topics of the Show

A common denominator in the production of the series is quality. Enormous amounts of time and effort are put into producing one single episode. The process begins with brainstorming about 20 ideas for episodes, out of which the required number are chosen to be developed further. Then each episode goes through different stages, for example, in animation and sound production. The whole process of completing an episode from start to finish usually takes six to eight months before it is aired. (LISA 1998.) The attention to various details in story line, animation and sound production, including voices and effects, is meticulous. For instance, the writers range from psychologists to nuclear physicists and they can benefit from each other's expertise (A BBC interview with Josh Weinstein and Bill Oakley 1997, executive producers and writers of the show). Another example of the effort invested are the actors, musicians and other celebrity guests who appear in almost every episode, such as all of the living members of the Beatles (Richmond and Coffman 1997).

The same high quality is also required of the topics in the series. Since the show is about the Simpsons, the central theme naturally is their family life. Although the show is designed to make people laugh, Groening and the rest of the team want to imply that family life, as complicated as it is, cannot be reduced to "a mere collection of wisecracks" (Tucker 1993:48). So far themes dealt with in the show have included marriage, work, school, politics, religion, money and wealth, values and so on; issues that are sometimes complicated (Hietala 1990:50-51). They are all parts of life that a real family would or could

experience but the series attempts to deal with them in a sarcastic and ironic way (Hietala 1992:89).

The family's very real ... so people really can relate to it, and even though it is a cartoon in a lot of ways, it's a lot more realistic. Another thing is that we always try to have the family characters relate on an emotional, serious level. (A BBC interview with Josh Weinstein and Bill Oakley 1997.)

This illustrates the attitude the writers have towards the Simpsons; even they consider the show as not just a fictional cartoon but also partly a real life documentary. According to Hietala (1993:141), there is a paradox in that series emphasizing their fictional nature are apparently taken more for real than non-fictional documentaries, because at least their fictional nature is real. This also partly accounts for the popularity of fictional series, such as the Simpsons, a realistic cartoon in Hietala's opinion (1993:141).

The writing has been the first priority in the making of the Simpsons, not so much the animation, which is partly a reason for the simplicity of the animation. In the opinion of Mike Scully, one of the principal writers of the series, "the nature of animation makes quality writing critical to the success of any animated show." He admits to taking pride in the show's capability and readiness to handle many current and controversial topics, including some "sacred cows" that have not been brought up before in cartoon sitcoms. Since the beginning, the show has given political and social commentary on such topics as atomic energy, secret societies, censorious parents groups, and Social Security. However, the issues are intentionally tinted and provocative to make people react but they are also looked at from different points of view. Scully considers this all a trademark of the show. (Galdieri 1997.)

The reason the topics have such a diversity and deal with sensitive or even offensive issues is that, according to the writers, the network has given them complete creative control, which is not the case with most American sitcoms. However, they do not abuse this rare opportunity. Everything on the show has been carefully planned and nothing ever happens without a good

reason. For example, in “Homer’s Phobia,” where homophobia is the main topic, neither the phobics’ nor the homosexuals’ way of life is deemed unacceptable or disapproved of. The episode puts across the message that both kinds of people exist and that there has to be room for all. The writers also noted that this kind of freedom, without a lot of committee thinking by the network and the production company, is common to all television shows that have “pushed the envelope” in the past, which is what they feel they are doing with the Simpsons. Attention and success have also helped them with the censors outside the network, as the writers have noticed that they have been given more freedom than some others. This situation is quite unique because the writers can express and carry out their ideas through the Simpsons according to their own judgement and sense of responsibility. (A BBC interview with Josh Weinstein and Bill Oakley 1997.)

The problems that the Simpsons face - as sitcom families in general - are fairly realistic problems of the traditional nuclear family (Hietala 1992:89). Although sitcoms are fictional, they deal with many central issues, the fears and hopes of an individual and attempt to solve them (Hietala 1990:50-51). The Simpsons as a sitcom most often follows the traditional “balance-imbalance-restoration of balance” -formula (Hietala 1992:89) and utilizes the universal Hollywood convention of happy ending (Neale and Krutnik 1990:29). Even though they have never become millionaires, the Simpsons are happy being who they are. Nevertheless, Mike Scully (Galdieri 1997) puts the ideology behind the writing in following words:

We like pointing out hypocrisies. We try to spread it around, and hopefully if people see all the shows they realize they're not being singled out. I guess when it applies to your particular belief it feels like it's targeted at you. But it's there for fun. All it's there for is to make people laugh, and if we make you think once in a while, then so be it.

2.5 Methodology

We start from the assumption that although the Simpsons is a contemporary sitcom cartoon, the family functions according to traditional values. The social family theories that we presented in section 2.2, formulated by Parsons and Litwak in the 1950s and 1960s respectively, represent the traditional aspects we want to study. By comparing the Simpson family to these theories we believe we can justifiably study the family's functions according to our hypothesis, since their theories are mainly concerned with white middle-class American nuclear families.

Our hypothesis of the Simpsons as a traditional American nuclear family consists of three main points. First, the roles of the parents are traditional: the father is the breadwinner and the decision-maker, whereas the mother is the emotional glue and homemaker, as defined in section 2.2. Secondly, the relationships within the nuclear family rely heavily on the mother's role as the emotional glue, not the father's. Thirdly, we expect to find the same characteristic roles and relationships in the rituals of a traditionally functioning American nuclear family.

In performing the nuclear family's main societal functions, that is, socialization and support of emotional well-being, the roles, relationships and rituals within the family are essential (Allan 1985:7, Goldthorpe 1987:73-74). Roles form the basis upon which the relationships are built, while relationships serve as a medium for practicing and developing social skills and emotional character. Moreover, rituals are everyday examples of family functions, which display the roles and relationships in the family in practice, and they are also important in observing changes in family life (Fiese and Kline 1993:290). Therefore, if the roles are traditional, one can assume that also the relationships as well as rituals function on a traditional basis.

Our primary material consists of all episodes of the show from the first eight production seasons, which comes to a total of 178 episodes. Episodes in which the Simpsons nuclear family is not in the central focus were not included in the analysis. Of those that were left, we did not select any particular episodes

to analyze in depth but searched all the episodes for instances specified by the family theoretical aspects. These aspects include role, relationship and ritual dimensions in families (which will be described in more detail later in this section), as presented in our background material. To help our analysis, we designed charts of all the dimensions where we could write down the information concerning the findings in each episode while viewing them. The charts (see APPENDIX 2) include the following information: the name of the episode, number of video cassette, time and a note-like description of each instance for easier future reference. After this we transcribed the notes from the charts into the computer and also omitted some of the findings from the core section of the study. We made the choices by including only the instances which best represent the dimensions as they occur in the Simpsons. In addition, the wealth of material allowed us to make these choices. We did not watch the episodes chronologically because the order is not an issue for us, as it is not for the show either: the characters do not age, seasonal changes are not followed and references to past episodes are very few and trivial.

In the end, we used 105 episodes in our study. However, the majority of these episodes contained more than one separate scene used in our analysis. In addition, a single scene or a whole episode may have offered results to several specific dimensions in roles, relationships or even rituals. We included quotes and descriptions, as well as the occasional transcription of the scenes and situations in the core section. We described each scene in detail the first time we analyzed it if we used it in more than one dimension analysis. The following times the scene examination took place from a different point of view, according to the dimension in question. The scene descriptions are minimal so that only the information the reader needs to correctly understand the example in its context is mentioned. These descriptions are either preceded or followed by a content analysis based on the dimensions' theoretical background. The theoretical aspects are briefly revised at the beginning of each chapter, while the main discussion on the results is in the Discussion and Conclusion chapter.

The dimensions studied are roles, relationships, and rituals in the Simpson family. We chose these dimensions because they are central in defining the character of an American nuclear family in general. Goldthorpe (1987:58) presents four basic roles within the nuclear family: husband/father, wife/mother, son/brother and daughter/sister (cf. pp. 16-17). We concentrate on the parents' roles as, from a sociological view, they carry the greatest responsibilities in the family, such as the socialization of the children, financial provision and marital life (Brubaker 1993:100, Goldthorpe 1987:58). The role dimensions we chose for the father were the decision-maker and the breadwinner, and for the mother emotional glue and homemaker, which can all be considered quite traditional. We also studied how the responsibility of parenting was shared between Homer and Marge in terms of, for example, different situations.

We inspect the relationship dimension on three different levels: the relationships between the mother and the father, parents and children, and among siblings (cf. pp. 17-19). The spouse relationship consists of three dimensions: interaction, quality / support, and strain / conflict, which are all important for a successful relationship (Acock and Demo 1994:92-98). We also examine the domestic division of labor and decision-making, which according to Allan (1985) are central in defining the relationship between spouses. The relationship between parents and children includes support, control, conflict, frequency and quality dimensions. Parents acting as primary role models for their children is also considered a part of this dimension (Acock and Demo 1994:118-119). The sibling relationship consists of rivalry, the other siblings acting as role models, and objects of attachment and support. In addition, both the positive and negative sides to all of these aspects are included, just as Shaffer (1994:465-467) points it out to be in reality.

The central elements of the family rituals (cf. pp. 19-20) are their settings and the behaviors involved in performing them. The settings include patterned interactions, family traditions and family celebrations. Then again, the behavioral dimensions comprise occurrence, roles, routine, attendance, emotional investment, symbolic significance, continuation and deliberateness.

(Fiese and Kline 1993:290-291.) We also noted the people attending the family rituals, since according to Bennett et al. (1988), only certain people can participate in them.

Although role, relationship and ritual dimensions are closely connected to each other in real life, we will deal with them separately for the sake of clarity. Dealing with them as an entity would not be possible from our theoretical point of view. In reality, the roles inadvertently influence the relationships within the family, just as the relationships can affect the rituals. The interconnectedness will show in the way that some situations may be analyzed in all three dimensions.

The family ideas and theories, presented in section 2.2, fit our study well because they have been conducted using mostly white middle-class families, such as the Simpsons, as subjects in the American cultural context (Acock and Demo 1994:92). For our study purposes, we do not view the term nuclear family and its functions as Parsons and Litwak did in their respective theories. Our view is rather a combination of both the Parsonian concept of the nuclear family and Litwakian idea of a modified extended family's functions in the society, which we call the "modified nuclear family." Thus, we want to combine Parsons's more narrow view of the nuclear family with Litwak's more up-to-date understanding of the main functions of such a family in the society. We do not want to use Litwak's modified extended family as such because it simply includes too many people for our study; we want a small, clear set of people to concentrate on. Then again, Parsons has defined the functions of a nuclear family too vaguely, which is why we chose to use Litwak's division of particularistic and universalistic needs. The two functions are, first of all, to take care of an individual's particularistic needs, and by doing so, support society's attempts to fulfill universalistic needs.

3 ROLES

In this chapter we examine the roles of the father and the mother in the Simpson family. The focus will be on Marge's role as the emotional glue in the family and the homemaker, as well as Homer's role as the breadwinner and the decision-maker, which are all traditional roles for the parents (Brubaker 1993:10-11, Goldthorpe 1987:57). In addition, we will study their roles in sharing the parenting and how they divide the work amongst themselves (Brubaker 1993:11, May 1997:31).

3.1 Marge

Marge has a very traditional role of a house wife: she stays at home taking care of the household and the children, while Homer goes out to work (Acock and Demo 1994:9). Being a housewife is an important part of her identity, as can be seen in the episode "You Only Move Twice" (3F23). Homer is offered a good job and the Simpsons move to Cyprus Creek, which is a town built by the Globex Corporation for its employees. Once they have settled, Homer starts to work, Bart and Lisa go to school, and Marge stays at home with Maggie. After a while, Marge starts to feel unneeded because everything in the house is automated, leaving her with nothing to do. For example, the oven is self-cleaning and Maggie's baby swinger ("Swing-a-majig") as well as the vacuuming are controlled automatically. With all the extra time on her hands, Marge does not know what to do and becomes bored, which ultimately leads to drinking wine in the middle of the day. As illustrated by this example, Marge seems to be dependent on the homemaker role and without it she feels lost.

"Homer Alone" (8F14) is another episode, where Marge's homemaker role is examined, especially how much work and stress it can involve, no matter how crucial the role is to her identity. The show starts off with Marge preparing breakfast for the rest of the family, who after having finished eating it leave her on her own to clean up the mess. She also has to run errands all over

the town with Maggie, which turns out to be very stressful. On the way home, Marge has a nervous breakdown when Maggie spills her bottle all over the car. She suddenly stops the car in the middle of a bridge and blocks all traffic, refusing to come out of the car until Homer shows up and tells her that he loves her and asks her nicely to come outside. Later in the night, Marge tells Homer that she needs to have a vacation on her own because she does not have any time for herself in the house. This is an indication of how much Homer and the children are counting on and demanding of Marge to take care of the household without even realizing the amount of much work it includes. Also their inconsiderate attitude towards helping her is quite clearly demonstrated. Such attitude is just what Acock and Demo (1994:90) describe: to husbands and other family members housework is often invisible, unnoticed and unappreciated. Before Marge can go on her vacation by herself, she has to convince Homer that she really needs it and will come back to her family.

Another example of overloading Marge with duties and its consequences takes place when everybody in the family, including Grampa Simpson, has caught “the dreaded Osaka flu” and Marge has to take care of them. She goes to Kwik-E-Mart to buy what the others have asked for and in the confusion she forgets to pay for a bottle of bourbon meant for Grampa. She is then arrested for shoplifting and sentenced to thirty days in jail. As Marge is about to be taken to jail, Homer says: “... I’m gonna miss your cooking and cleaning...” (9F20.) This, once again, shows Marge’s role as the homemaker and how her absence is going to affect the family. It is also one of the occasions when her role as the perfect mother and housekeeper is toned down, which emphasizes her human qualities.

Marge steps outside her traditional homemaker role not only by having a nervous breakdown and being arrested, but also by getting a job (for example, Brubaker 1993:10-11). In “The Springfield Connection” (2F21) Marge and Homer are on a walk and they run across a person swindling people with cards. His trick is exposed after Homer loses \$20 and the man runs off with the money. Marge, after nobody else would start chasing the criminal, eventually catches him by running him down and whacking him with a trash can lid. She

feels so excited that she starts looking for ways to experience the same thrill again, which she has never experienced as a homemaker, and enrolls in the Springfield Police Academy. Marge's new career poses a problem for Homer, who confesses:

“Marge, you being a cop makes you the man! Which makes me the woman – and I have no interest in that, besides occasionally wearing the underwear, which, as we discussed, is strictly a comfort thing.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:174).

Also Bart's view of his mother changes because of her new job: “Wow, Mom, I never pictured you as any kind of authority figure before” (Richmond and Coffman 1997:174). After a while, Marge notices that also other people's attitudes towards her have changed, she is no longer just the house wife but a police officer, even off-duty. The last straw for Marge is to realize how corrupt the other officers are that she resigns and returns to the role of a housewife, which seems most comfortable for her. Such role conflicts, especially concerning the Parsonian role of the single income earner, cause stressful situations at home and are often a reason why women stop working outside the family (Brubaker 1993:11, Goldthorpe 1987:61).

Another time when Marge starts working outside the house is because she has to help Homer financially (9F05), which is one of the main reasons for mothers to start working (Allan 1985:167, Brubaker 1993:11). The Simpsons' house is tilted and in need of a very expensive foundation repair. After Homer has tried and failed to fix it himself, because he cannot afford to hire a professional to do it, Marge offers to take a job at the nuclear power plant to cover the costs of the repair. Also this time Marge's working causes a problem for Homer:

“Marge, you're making a big mistake. I'm gonna see you all day at work, and all night at home. (Marge grunts disapprovingly) ... And that's good, but here's the bad part ... (Homer hesitating) ah-ah ... ah – look at that headline:

“Canada to Hold Referendum.” Sorry Marge, can’t talk now!”

He does not like the idea of Marge working in the same company because they already see each other at home so much and later, as she is promoted, Homer starts to feel inferior. He avoids admitting this to Marge by changing the subject in their conversation. Marge has ventured outside the family on other occasions as well: as an entrepreneur in the pretzel business (4F08), the Listen-Lady at the local church (4F18) and as an organizer of demonstrations against cartoon violence (7F09).

In “Marge on the Lam” (1F03) she sheds her traditional responsible homemaker image. She invites her neighbor Ruth Powers to go with her to the ballet because Homer has got stuck by his arms to two vending machines at work and cannot make it in time. The ladies have such a good time that they decide to go out again together. Next evening Ruth shows up in a fancy convertible and they go to town to have a good time. This leaves Homer in charge of the house and he decides to hire Lionel Hutz, a sleazy attorney who is willing to do anything for money, to babysit so that Homer can go out as well. Later on Marge and Ruth become fugitives of law because Ruth has stolen the car from her ex-husband and are chased by the police like the main characters in the popular movie *Thelma and Louise*.

Even after what happened in the previous examples, Marge’s importance to the Simpsons household is evident, which is demonstrated in “Itchy & Scratchy & Marge” (7F09). After Maggie hits Homer with a mallet, Marge becomes worried over the excessive violence portrayed in the Itchy & Scratchy cartoon series. She forbids Bart and Lisa from watching the show anymore and starts a campaign against cartoon violence. She gets so involved in arranging demonstrations that she does not have enough time, for example, to prepare the meals anymore and the family has to resort to TV-dinners. While the father’s absence from home has often little effect on the housework (Acock and Demo 1994:90), this example illustrates the mother’s importance.

Another instance of Marge’s importance as the emotional glue and homemaker can be found in the episode “Springfield (or, How I Learned to

Stop Worrying and Love Legalized Gambling)” (1F08). Springfield is in deep economic trouble and collectively the townspeople decide to build a casino to revive the economy. Marge develops a gambling problem and starts spending a lot of time at the casino, more than 75 hours in a row. All the while, Homer is incapable of taking care of the responsibilities at home; the house is a mess and there is nothing to eat. Homer realizes that he has to confront Marge about the gambling and Marge promises to straighten up but she cannot resist its temptation. While she is back at the casino again, Homer’s inability to run the house without Marge’s help is shown further: he wakes up the children in the middle of the night because he thinks that there might be “a boogeyman or boogeymen in the house.” As Marge comes home, she finds the children and Homer, armed with a shotgun, hiding behind the couch and sees bullet holes both in the walls as well as the door. However, she does not quit gambling until Homer goes to the casino to tell her how badly her broken promise to help Lisa with a pageant costume has affected her daughter.

The previous examples illustrate how Marge is the traditional mother who takes care of the household and how her absence affects not only the cleaning, shopping and other housework, but also the emotional balance of the family. When she steps out of the traditional role she becomes Homer’s rival; he feels threatened by Marge and the fact that she could be a better provider than he. Lucky for Homer, she always comes back to her homemaker role because the change has been for the worse. This could be, for instance, Homer having difficulties in accepting the new situation, the family’s inability to manage on their own or Marge’s disappointment with the change in her status from a housewife to a worker. The balancing between the traditional and untraditional aspects concerning Marge’s role seems to be a part of the social criticism that the show wants to convey about the American family life.

3.2 Homer

Homer is quite clearly labeled the traditional breadwinner of his family in the show, as fathers generally are also in the family theories (Acock and Demo 1994:9, Brubaker 1993:11). For example, in “Homer’s Odyssey” (7G03) he is fired from the nuclear plant because of “gross incompetence.” He is having trouble finding a new job and eventually tries to commit suicide because he does not want to be a burden for the family anymore. As the rest of the family finds out what Homer is up to, they rush to stop him and when they catch up with him, Marge says: “Homer, you’ve always been a good provider...” Also his employer, Mr. Burns, calls him directly a breadwinner and in the episode “Homer goes to College” (1F02) he tells Homer that the future of his family depends on him. This is a big responsibility for Homer and he does have some problems in fulfilling it at times.

Homer is in trouble as the breadwinner in “Homer vs. Patty and Selma” (2F14). He is late on the mortgage payments because he has lost a lot of money by investing poorly on the markets (he invested in pumpkins but did not sell them until after Halloween). He tries to pay off by taking another job as a chauffeur but doesn’t have a proper driver’s license. As Homer fails his test for the license, he turns to Marge’s twin sisters, Patty and Selma, who work at the Department of Motor Vehicles, as the last resort. They write him an IOU and lend Homer the money he needs. However, the sisters use the IOU as a way to blackmail Homer because he does not want to let Marge know about the money problems. The pride of being the provider for his family causes Homer to feel so humiliated by having to borrow money that he will do anything: he even stoops to rubbing their feet although he usually cannot tolerate them at all.

It is not unusual or problematic that Homer does not have much money because the real problem stems from his inability to fulfill his obligation to the family. Similarly, Homer fears that he will ruin his family’s Christmas because he has not been given a Christmas bonus and all the money is spent already. Also this time, he feels ashamed and does not tell anyone that he takes another job working as a Santa to get at least some money for the holidays. (7G08.)

These two examples seem to suggest that Homer takes his role as the breadwinner very seriously and considers it a central part of his identity, just as Marge with her homemaker role, because providing for one's family is one of the father's main functions in the family (Goldthorpe 1987:61). The pressures of the single provider are created by the everyday assumption that the traditional division of labor – having only one provider – is a natural arrangement rather than a socially required one (Allan 1985:17).

Making decisions, which is another defining part of the husband's role (Allan 1985:79-80), seems to cause some problems for Homer as well as providing. In the episode "Bart Gets an Elephant" (1F15), Bart wins an elephant in a radio contest. He has a choice between \$10,000 and an elephant, which is only supposed to be a "gag prize," but Bart insists on getting the animal. In a few days, it becomes obvious that the upkeep of Bart's elephant, Stampy, is too expensive and they have to get rid of it. They try selling it first but the only paying candidate is an ivory dealer. Everybody else but Homer would like to have Stampy placed in an animal refuge for free but Homer does not want to lose the money he would get from the dealer. Only after Stampy rescues Homer from drowning in a tarpit does the grateful Homer concede to giving the animal to the refuge. If Homer had been given the sole responsibility of making the decision, he would have based it on money and convenience, not on what would have been best for the animal.

Luckily Homer does not always make decisions on his own but in important cases he involves the whole family. For example, in "You Only Move Twice" (3F23) the Simpsons discuss together whether to move to Cypress Creek or not, because Homer has been offered a good job there. A similar situation takes place at the end of the episode, when Homer thinks that they should move back to Springfield, because the rest of the family is not happy living in Cypress Creek. Another decision about moving takes place in "Dancin' Homer" (7F05). Homer is doing a great job as the mascot for the Springfield Isotopes (a baseball team) and one night he is offered another job, this time as a mascot for the Capital City Capitals. He is not sure about accepting the offer and discusses it with the family. Homer is uncertain about

getting a leave of absence from his work and does not quite believe that he can replace the famous mascot, Capital City Goofball. The children are against moving because they would have to leave their friends behind. Then again, Marge is excited about moving and eventually talks Homer into it in spite of the children's opinion. After noticing that the audience does not appreciate Homer's antics and having moved back to Springfield, Homer admits that he made a mistake by listening to Marge without much afterthought; "I should've listened to my kids instead ..." It is a rare occasion that Marge gives bad advice to Homer because usually the situation is quite the opposite. Overall, these two examples deviate from the usual pattern where the husband is the sole decision-maker on such an important issue as moving (Allan 1985:82) since Homer relies on the rest of the family – not only his wife – to be a part in the decision-making.

On the other end of the scale, the only time when Homer has "put down his foot" and entirely ignored and disregarded Marge's opinion and advice is in the episode "Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment" (7F13). Homer has "hooked up" cable television for free and the family seems to be happy about it since they can now receive 68 new channels with something for everyone. Later, as Bart is caught watching an adult program and Lisa's conscience starts to bother her, Marge tries to talk Homer into getting rid of the cable:

Marge: "Maybe we should think about unhooking the cable."

Homer: "Unhook it?! But I love cable!"

Marge: "Well, then maybe you should pay for it."

Homer: "D'oh! Look, look... Marge, I can't afford it. When I can afford to pay for it, I will. But I can't, so I'm not going to."

Marge: "But Homer, I'm afraid that cable has become an evil presence in our home."

Homer: "Marge, I never put down my foot about anything..."

Marge (affirmatively): "No."

Homer: "... but I'm severely tempted to do it over this!"

Marge: "Oh, Homer..."

Homer: "Marge, I'm sorry, I think it's coming down..."

(Marge tries to protest)

Homer: "... It's coming down, my foot... that's it, Marge, it's coming down!
The cable stays, the foot has spoken!"

(Marge grunts disapprovingly as Homer stomps his foot.)

Homer resorts to "putting his foot down" because he does not want to listen to Marge's reasoning. He knows what he is doing is wrong but does not want to admit it yet, so he childishly blocks out everybody else's opinions. Only after the rest of the family has started to boycott the cable, does his conscience wake him up and force him into unhooking it.

As the previous example illustrates, Homer seems to be bad at making decisions on his own. When he decides to do something, it is usually for the worse. For instance, on their way to the amusement park Homer decides to take a shortcut when he gets frustrated with the map. He ends up ruining the car and makes everybody promise that the "shortcut" is never spoken of again. (2F01.) Another example of Homer making bad decisions is when he wants the family to do a camping trip with the Flanders, who are their neighbors (1F14). Homer usually cannot stand the sight of Ned Flanders because he is jealous of how well the Flanders family is doing financially and otherwise. But after having gone to a football game with Ned, Homer decides that they should become best friends. Homer starts to spend more and more time with Ned to the point where Marge complains that he is ignoring his own family. To remedy this, Homer plans the trip which turns out to be a disaster. First of all, the families do not get along: Bart gives the Flanders boys some candy, which they are not supposed to have because of sugar, and the Simpsons start a food fight at the picnic table. In addition, the Flanders's boat and car are demolished by Homer, which destroys the relationship Homer had with Ned.

Homer also has a habit of making rash decisions. In "Crepes of Wrath" (7G13) Bart decides to pull a prank on Principal Skinner by flushing a small explosive in the boys room, which causes a sudden overflow of water in the bathrooms. Unfortunately for Bart, the Principal's mother, who is visiting the

school that day, is making a use of the ladies room at the same time and is blown off the commode. On account of this prank, Principal Skinner pays a visit to the Simpsons and suggests that Bart be deported from Springfield. Marge is strongly opposed to this, while Homer thinks they should hear what the principal has to say and does not discard the idea at once. Then Skinner offers another option, which is to send Bart off to France as an exchange student. He adds that the program is usually for intelligent honor students, but he is willing to make an exception this time. When the time comes to make the decision, Homer is ready to send Bart to France immediately without even hearing what Bart has to say about the idea. Once again, Marge has to be the sensible one and let Bart be heard on the issue.

To be fair, Homer does also make some good decisions by himself. For example, in “There’s No Disgrace Like Home” (7G04), the Simpsons are not getting along with each other and Homer is spending the evening at Moe’s. He sees a family therapy commercial on television where doctor Marvin Monroe promises “double your money back” if the therapy is not successful and Homer decides that they should try it. He tells about his plan to the sceptical Marge, who eventually gives in. They do not have enough money for the therapy, so Homer decides to pawn the television. The degree of Homer’s dedication is evident from the fact that he is ready to sacrifice the television for his family’s happiness even though it is very dear to him and the others are against pawning it. The family’s happiness is restored as they come back from the therapy with twice the money and buy a new television.

In the series, Homer is clearly designated as the breadwinner and provider of his family. Although there are numerous problems, the family can work them out eventually, which is most likely influenced by the traditional Hollywood happy ending (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:15, 29). Homer is not the sole authority when it comes to making decisions in the family but uses a more democratic approach by often relying on the opinion of the rest of the family. This could be because he has a tendency to make bad decisions by himself, which even he has noticed. Since Homer has obviously poor self-control, Marge has a very important role in controlling his actions and decisions, as

well as “keeping things sensible” in the family. The fact that Homer needs Marge’s help in some of his duties can be understood as reinforcing the status or supporting the meaning of marriage, as well as the role of the mother.

3.3 Shared parenting

In the end, Homer and Marge are dedicated parents and devoted to their family. For them, the family comes first although they fail every now and then, just like normal parents do (Homer more than Marge). An example of this can be seen in the episode “Home Sweet Homediddly-dum-doodily” (3F01) as the Simpson children are taken into a foster home by the county welfare office. Prior to this, Homer has left his father in charge of the house as he takes Marge to a health spa. While in school, Bart’s teacher finds head lice on him and one of Lisa’s teeth falls out as she is called into the principal’s office for head lice inspection. As principal Skinner does not know or care to listen to the explanations for these possible signs of neglect and cannot get hold of either Homer or Marge, he reports the Simpsons to the county welfare office. When the inspectors arrive at the house, they find Grampa sleeping on the couch, Maggie drinking from the dog’s water bowl, dishes unwashed, dogs mating on the dining room table and stacks of 20 years old newspapers in the kitchen. This is enough evidence for the inspectors to send the children off to a foster home, the Flanders next door. Homer and Marge cannot understand why this has happened and take the decision to the court, where they are ordered to complete a class in child rearing in order to get their children back. Actually, all this was a series of misunderstandings: for instance, the lice came from a monkey Bart had played with, Lisa’s tooth was a baby tooth and the old newspapers were meant for Lisa’s school project. The whole episode shows how important the children really are to Marge and Homer, and they even take part in a humiliating child-rearing course in order to get the children back. In addition, the episode obviously criticizes the American welfare office and questions its

actions.

To counter this incident, a self-help guru named Brad Goodman has called Homer and Marge “good parents.” He comes to Springfield to hold his “Inner Child” seminar, which the Simpsons attend with the rest of the town. In the seminar Goodman asks Bart to join him on stage as an example of a child who does not hide his feelings. Goodman suggests that the audience should follow Bart’s example and do what they feel like. Then he invites both Homer and Marge on stage saying what “a good job” they have done on raising Bart, as the perfect example of the inner child. (1F05.) This is the first time an outsider compliments Homer and Marge on raising Bart, who usually is criticized by the school, neighbors and church.

There are quite a few signs of Homer not investing much or taking part in parenting, which is in accordance with May’s (1997:31) observation that most of the burden of parenting falls on women. For example, in “Homer Badman” (2F06) Lisa comments that television has been more involved in raising the children than Homer. The quality of Homer’s parenting is evaluated in “Bart’s Inner Child” (1F05) by Lisa. She tells Homer that his decision to get a trampoline “... almost makes up for years of shaky fathering.” In fact, it is Marge who always has to tell Homer that he is neglecting his duties as a father and make him “patch things up” with the children, for instance, when Homer goes out to a stag party and dances on top of a table with an exotic belly dancer (7G10). Unlucky for him, Bart, who happens to be eating at the same restaurant with the rest of the family, takes a picture of Homer dancing with the new spy camera. Next day at school, Bart makes a print of the picture and copies it to some of his friends. Eventually, the picture is spread around Springfield and Marge sees it on her aerobics class notice board. She confronts Homer as he comes home from work:

Marge (holding up a copy of the picture): “What is the meaning of this?!”

Homer (stammering): “I-it’s m-meaningless, Marge! Don’t even attempt to find meaning in it. There’s nothing between me and Princess Kashmir.”

Marge: “Princess who?!”

Since Homer cannot explain himself, Marge throws him out of the house. The next day after work Homer returns to apologize to Marge, who does not accept it because she knows that he is unaware of what he is supposed to apologize for. Marge has to tell Homer that, as a parent, he has given a bad role model for Bart by treating women as objects. Then she forces Homer to take Bart out to meet the exotic dancer and make him realize that she is not just a sexual object but “a real person with feelings.” This illustrates how Marge sometimes assumes the role of the traditional decision-maker, usually attributed to the husband.

Homer also has a hard time being sensitive to his children’s problems. In “Bart’s Girlfriend” (2F04) Marge wonders if something is wrong with Bart as he comes home looking depressed because he is having problems with his girlfriend. Homer has no idea of what is going on, not that there is even a problem in the first place. Later on, Marge has to talk to Homer about this because she feels that he “could be more involved in Bart’s activities.” One reason for Homer’s problems in parenting could not be the lack of experience but rather that he does not learn from it.

Marge does not always leave Homer on his own in parenting. For instance, in “Moaning Lisa” (7G06) they both try to cheer up a depressed Lisa after having failed trying to comfort her separately. Marge has good reasons to share the parenting with Homer; if Homer is left with all of the responsibilities, he usually fails to fulfill them, as can be seen in “Homer vs. the Eighteenth Amendment” (4F15). Bart is about to go to Moe’s Tavern for a beer and Homer, without any further consideration, decides to join him. However, Marge stops them as they are leaving because she is “tired of looking like the world’s worst mother.” Homer seems to be lacking the sense of responsibility that parents usually have and he instills this irresponsible attitude into Bart through his actions. Another example of Homer’s careless attitude is in “The Crepes of Wrath” (7G13) where he reacts to Bart’s prank at school as “that old gag” without any reprimand.

Although Homer seems to be a bad parent, he nevertheless tries hard. One instance of Homer's effort takes place in the episode "Secrets of a Successful Marriage" (1F20). Homer teaches at the Adult Education Center and invites his marriage class to observe the Simpsons having a dinner. He tries to act like a good father and asks Lisa and Bart what they have been doing that day. Homer's plans are spoiled as Lisa refuses to answer and Bart exposes Homer's bad parenting (for example, double-daring Bart and Milhouse to destroy mail) to the whole class. The attempt to look like a good father ends in Homer reaching over the table to choke Bart by the throat.

In "Lisa the Beauty Queen" (9F02) Homer actually succeeds in being a good father. This time Lisa gets depressed over a cartoon caricature drawn of her at the school carnival because she thinks she looks horrible. At the same carnival Homer wins a free ride on the Duff Blimp, a dream come true for him. However, when Homer cannot stop thinking of his depressed daughter, he comes up with the idea to enter Lisa in the Little Miss Springfield Pageant to cheer her up. To cover for the entrance fee, he has to sell the blimp ride he loves so much. Eventually Lisa participates in the pageant and is crowned Little Miss Springfield, and thanks to her father's sacrifice, her inferiority problem is solved, as in a typical Hollywood happy ending (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:15, 29).

Homer is quite unaware of the strain that housework involves, as husbands, according to Acock and Demo (1994:90), can be. He realizes it only when he is left alone to take care of the household and children without Marge's help. In "Life on the Fast Lane" Homer forgets Marge's birthday and in a panic buys her a bowling ball. Marge takes up bowling and starts spending evenings at the bowling alley, leaving Homer with the children. Marge enjoys being out so much that she starts bowling every night. Meanwhile at home, Homer realizes how hard it is to fill Marge's shoes and tries to tell her how much "he appreciates and needs her." Similarly, as Marge goes on a vacation by herself to get some time away from the family after her nervous breakdown (8F14), Homer finds out again how difficult it is to run the household. Lisa and Bart are picked up by Patty and Selma, but Maggie is left with Homer. He does

not know where his clean underwear is or how to use the pressure cooker, he staples Maggie's diapers, gives Maggie's 9 a.m. feeding almost three hours late, and finally loses her altogether.

The Simpsons's view on corporal punishment comes up in the episode "Two Bad Neighbors" (3F09), in which President Bush moves across the street from the Simpsons. Bart goes over for a visit but inadvertently gets on Mr. Bush's nerves. Bart makes a habit of visiting him and one day destroys the President's typed memoirs which makes George so angry that he gives Bart a spanking. When Bart returns home, he complains about this to Homer who gets mad at his neighbor for punishing his child like that. This starts a chain of events where Homer and George continue to take revenge on each other. While this neighborly war is going on, Marge is having a conversation with Mrs. Bush and explains that the reason why Homer got so mad to begin with was that they "don't believe in corporal punishment." This example suggests that Homer and Marge share the view of American middle-class families on physical punishment: instead of corporal punishment, they use parental rejection and withholding of love (Leslie 1976:283).

Even though Homer and Marge agree on not using corporal punishment, they sometimes disagree on whether Bart should be punished at all. For example, in "Bart the Genius" (7G02) Homer and Marge are called to the principal's office once again because Bart has painted a demeaning graffiti of principal Skinner in the school yard. On their way to the principal's office they talk about Bart and how to deal with him. Marge takes a softer approach by trying to understand his misdemeanors, while Homer thinks it is rubbish and "the boy" needs to be punished. When Bart does get punished, he is usually sent to his room, as in episodes "Bart vs. Thanksgiving" (7F07) and "Bart the Daredevil" (7F06). Although Homer does not believe in corporal punishment, he occasionally threatens his children with it into doing what he wants. This takes place, for instance, when the family is watching television and Bart and Lisa are sitting on the floor close to it (7F09). Homer tells the children to move further away from it or it will hurt their eyes, and when they disregard his command by saying "no it won't," Homer shakes his fist saying "yes it will!"

indicating that he will punch them unless they obey him.

Marge's and Homer's differences in parenting can be seen in "The Telltale Head" (7G07). It is Sunday morning and the family is getting ready to go to church. Once again Marge has to be the strict parent who checks that Bart will not take anything undesirable to church, such as a sling, and makes everyone hurry so that they will not be late while Homer watches football on television and does not really care what is going on. After the church, on their way home Bart notices that the local movie theater is showing *Space Mutants IV*, but Marge forbids him from seeing it because of excessive violence. Later on at home, Bart borrows five dollars from Homer who knows that Bart needs the money for the movie ticket and lets Bart go to see it even though Marge has just forbidden it. Homer's acting like this behind Marge's back sends mixed messages to the children and takes away some of Marge's authority. This example underlines a basic difference between the Simpsons and family theories in general: Homer is not the main authority figure, as would usually be expected of the father, instead, Marge carries most of this responsibility. By undermining Marge's authority Homer plays especially on Bart's sympathies, as the more authoritative of the parents is less liked (Goldthorpe 1987:57), trying to compensate for his poor parenting this way.

The episode "Lisa on Ice" (2F05) is a good example of how differently Homer and Marge approach treating their children equally. In school, Lisa is given a notice because she is about to fail physical education. Her teacher makes her join a little league team to make up for her poor grade and Lisa eventually winds up playing for a hockey team as the goalkeeper. So far, Bart has been Homer's favorite child, who rides in the front seat of the car, because Bart has played well for his hockey team. Now that Lisa has started playing for a different hockey team, Homer sets the two into a competitive situation: the one who would succeed better would be his "favorite child." This competition leads to Bart and Lisa's falling out and Marge has to step in and convince them that they are not playing for their parents' love:

Marge: "We love you both! You're not in competition with each other!"

Repeat: You are not in competition with each other!"

Homer (interrupting Marge): "Hey! Apu just called. This Friday Lisa's team is playing Bart's team. You're in direct competition. And don't go easy on each other just because you're brother and sister. I want to see you both fighting for your parents' love!"

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:157)

Marge has to do her best to convince the children that they are both just as important, whereas Homer does not even try to treat his children equally but he always favors one over the other. A good example of this takes place also when Homer buys Lisa a pony (8F06):

Bart: "Hey, how come Lisa gets a pony?"

Homer: "Because she stopped loving me."

Bart: "I don't love you either, so give me a moped."

Homer: "And I know you love me so you don't get squat."

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:70)

This is also a fine example of how Homer cannot think of anything else once he has got something into his head. This time he has upset Lisa so badly that she has renounced her love towards him, and even called him a baboon ("the smelliest and stupidest of all monkeys"), so everything Homer does is geared towards amending this situation. While it is applaudable that Homer tries to fix his mistakes, by favoring one sibling over another he perpetuates the negative rivalry between Bart and Lisa (Shaffer 1994:464).

There are differences also in approaching moral issues. The children are watching *Itchy and Scratchy* on television (7F09): the show is violent, as usual, and Maggie imitates what she has just seen and attacks Homer with a mallet, knocking him out. This draws Marge's attention to violence in cartoons and she starts a protest campaign against it. Homer ignores her intentionally and does not really see Marge's point of view, even though he has been attacked earlier. The difference is emphasized even more when Marge forbids the children to

watch cartoons anymore, while Homer continues watching and enjoying them as always, in spite of Marge's protests.

Even though Homer does not play a big role in raising the children, he is irreplaceable as the father. In "Homer's Barbershop Quartet" (9F21) he has to spend a lot of time away from home singing with the quartet *The Be Sharps*, who have suddenly become famous. While telling about Homer's success story, Marge openly admits that she could not compensate for his absence. One of her desperate attempts as a young mother was to replace Homer with a self-made dummy that only scared the children. Marge also commented that raising Bart, who was a very active child, without a proper father figure was very hard. As the examples where Homer is left alone with the children illustrate, also Marge is definitely important and irreplaceable for the Simpsons. This means that parenting is, and has to be shared and that both Homer and Marge are needed to do the job, because it does not seem to work otherwise. The importance of both parents participating in rearing the children lies in teaching the different social roles that men and women customarily play (Leslie 1976:17).

In spite of all the ups and downs, Homer and Marge are dedicated parents, who want nothing but the best for their children. However, there is a clear imbalance in sharing the responsibilities of parenting; Marge carries the bulk of it, mostly because she can take the responsibilities that come along. Homer doesn't take part in parenting as actively, but that can sometimes be also for the best because he cannot handle the responsibility as Marge can. Another problem in sharing the parenthood is in the mixed messages, as they do not share the same view on how to handle different situations, such as going to church, need of punishment and giving permissions. This makes especially Marge's part more difficult because she also has to fix Homer's mistakes which result from his stubbornness, childishness and recklessness. Homer being far from the perfect father illustrates the show's criticism towards the inequality in sharing the parental duties, thus overloading the mother.

4 SPOUSE RELATIONSHIPS

Here, we will examine the spouse relationships on three different dimensions: interaction, strain and conflict, as well as quality and support. According to Acock and Demo (1994:92), they are all central in defining the relationships between spouses. Interaction involves the shared activities of the couple and communication between them. Strain and conflict dimension consists of the negative aspects of the relationship, for example, arguments and fights. Finally, quality and support includes the spouses' positive actions that aim towards improving the relationship and helping each other in whenever needed. (Acock and Demo 1994:92-98.)

4.1 Interaction

Homer and Marge do not spend much time together, partly because if Homer is not working, he wants to have his rest and enjoy a beer at Moe's with "the guys." Marge is also tied down and busy at home, since Homer does not contribute much. Most of their mutual daily interaction is indirect and consists of exchanging necessary information to run the family, remaining rather impersonal, which is quite common among middle-class families (Acock and Demo 1994:93-94). However, there are some exceptions to this routine. In "Colonel Homer" (8F19) the parents choose their own movie they want to see while the children go to see another. Similarly, in "Itchy and Scratchy Land" (2F01) they let the children go their own way because they do not want to share the same rides at the amusement park. This way, Homer and Marge can have some time for themselves, which they desperately need, even though Marge has to take Maggie along with them.

Another instance of the couple spending time together is when Homer takes Marge out to dinner in (7G01). It begins with Marge feeling unappreciated and unloved by Homer, who leaves for work without even a kiss of goodbye. She is so frustrated that she calls Dr. Marvin Monroe's radio show

and shares her marital problems on the air:

Dr. Monroe: "Tell me about your husband, Marge."

Marge: "Well, when we were dating, he was sweeter and more romantic and 40 pounds thinner and he had hair and he ate with utensils..." (breaks down sobbing)

Dr. Monroe: "What was the last thing you said?"

(Marge, still sobbing)

Dr. Monroe: "Marge, it's what I call harsh reality time. Your husband sees you as nothing.

Marge: "Oh, okay. Well, thank you."

Dr. Monroe: "No, no, no, don't hang up the phone! The pig has made you into his mother. You are not the hot love object you deserve to be."

Marge: "Really?"

Dr. Monroe: "Marge, tonight the second he comes through that front door, you'll tell him you're fed up and if he doesn't start loving, you'll leave him."

Homer happens to hear the show at work and does not know what to do about the problem. Too scared to go home, he spends the evening at Moe's Tavern and asks Moe for advice, which simply is that he has to show that he still loves Marge, if he wants to keep her. When Homer finally has the courage to return home, the only words he manages to say are "Marge, I love you." Homer's honest expression of love calms Marge down and Homer, happy about getting off the hook, starts to plan their night out. Homer has to actually plan their time away from the children, because they cannot spontaneously leave without arranging, for example, the babysitter.

However, in "Homer Badman" (2F06) he has alternate motives for taking Marge out with him to the Candy Industry Trade Show: Homer wants Marge to be there because she can carry more candy with her "wiry muscles" ~~than either Bart or Lisa with their "puny little hands."~~ This shows that Homer can at times be self-centered, inconsiderate and ignorant of the quality interaction that Marge would prefer. He does not also seem to understand what role the mutual interaction should play in their relationship.

In the episode “Marge in Chains” (9F20) she is sentenced to 30 days in jail for stealing a bottle of bourbon from the Kwik-E-Mart. As Marge is about to be taken to jail from the court house Homer says to her: “I’m gonna miss not just the sex, but also how happy you make me feel every morning.” By saying this Homer indicates that their relationship is different from other cartoon couples because they admit to having sexual needs and also fulfill them. The sexual aspects of their relationship turn up in other episodes as well, for example, as Homer and Marge have pre-marital sex at the mini-golf track. In addition, they make love in a Capital City hotel after Homer has almost committed adultery with Mindy Simmons, a co-worker at the nuclear plant.

What we call ‘bed talk’ is central in everyday interaction between Homer and Marge, it is also the only regular form of interaction between them. When the two are about to go to sleep, they usually discuss various issues concerning their family life, such as solving problems and planning holidays. They do this late at night because it is the only time of the day when the children are not around and they can talk freely. Bed talk will be dealt with in more detail in section 7.1 as it is a part of family rituals as well.

4.2 Strain and conflict

Most of the strain between Homer and Marge is caused by Homer and his actions, mostly out of thoughtlessness and selfishness. For instance, in “Secrets of a Successful Marriage” (1F20) Homer is offered a job as a teacher of an adult education course on marriage. Marge gets mad at Homer as he reveals intimate and personal issues, for example, about their love life, because he does not know what else to do with the class. Marge wants Homer to respect her privacy and the confrontation ends in Marge’s threat “Don’t ever tell personal stuff about me again!!!” Homer cannot restrain himself and eventually Marge throws him out of the house. The situation is resolved only after Homer realizes he can give Marge something that nobody else can, which is “complete and utter dependency.”

In “Lisa’s Pony” (8F06) Marge and Homer argue over money after Homer has bought a pony for Lisa. Homer decides to buy the pony against Marge’s will after Lisa has told him that she does not love him anymore. In a week or two Marge can tell that the upkeep of the pony is too expensive for them and she wants Homer to either give up on beer or the pony. Because giving up on beer is not an option for Homer and he does not want to lose Lisa’s love again, he stubbornly decides to take another job at the Kwik-E-Mart. Only after he collapses from over exhaustion, Lisa realizes that she has to give up her pony because Homer is not about to quit his second job otherwise. This is how determined he is in proving Lisa his love, but also thick-headed as regards to Marge’s opinion.

Another example of the strain Homer can cause by stubbornly following his own will and not listening to his wife is in “El Viaje Misterioso De Nuestro Jomer (The Mysterious Voyage of Homer)” (3F24). Marge is afraid that if Homer finds out that “the annual Springfield Chili Cook-Off” is taking place that day, he will embarrass her like the year before by getting drunk and naked in public. She does not want Homer to participate in the Cook-Off but there is no changing his mind; he wants to taste how hot everybody’s chilies are. He takes out his special chili boots and tasting spoon and heads out to the Cook-Off with Marge. Sampling various chilies he dismisses them as bland and timid. However, when he eats a dish laced with potent Guatemalan peppers, made especially for Homer by police chief Wiggum, he begins to hallucinate. Homer goes on “a chili trip” and spends the night away from home in a drug-like state of mind, which makes Marge angry because she had been right about Homer once again.

Another example of how bad Homer’s decisions can be when he ignores Marge is in “Bart’s Inner Child” (1F05). Homer is reading a newspaper at breakfast and sees an advertisement for a free used trampoline. He gets very excited and wants to have it even though Marge is against it because she is tired of Homer bringing unusable rubbish home. She warns him of how dangerous it can be but Homer will not listen and he starts charging the neighborhood children a fee for using the trampoline. Only after numerous

injuries to the children, does Homer realize that he has to get rid of it before he is going to be sued.

Not only do Homer and Marge disagree on, for example, how money should be spent, but they also disagree on how to raise their son. In the episode “Bart The General” (7G05) Bart is beaten up by Nelson, the school bully. When he comes home and his parents notice what has happened, Homer and Marge argue over how to deal with the bully. Marge wants Bart to go straight to the principal but Homer is opposed to this:

Marge: “Well, Bart, I hope you’re going straight to the principal about this!”

Bart: “I guess I could do that.”

Homer: “What, and violate the code of the schoolyard? I’d rather Bart die!”

Marge: “What on earth are you talking about, Homer?”

Homer: “The code of the schoolyard, Marge! The rules that teach a boy to be a man! Let’s see; don’t tattle, always make fun of those different from you, never say anything unless you’re sure everyone feels exactly the same way you do.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:21)

They both have a point: Marge in that the bullying cannot continue and Homer in that telling the principal is not an answer to Bart’s problems with Nelson. Instead of handling the situation together with Marge, Homer decides to teach Bart a few dirty fighting tricks to teach the bully a lesson. Unluckily for Bart, he only gets beaten up once more thanks to his father’s advice.

Marge and Homer have had their arguments also over religion. For instance, in “Homer the Heretic” (9F01) he decides one cold winter Sunday morning that he does not want to go to church with the rest of the family. It takes some convincing before Marge lets him stay home and he enjoys his time alone in the house. When Marge comes home with the children, Homer tells her that he will not be going to church anymore and that he will start practicing his own religion. This is too much for Marge:

Marge: "Don't make me choose between my man and my God, because you just can't win."

Homer: "There you go again. Always taking someone else's side. Flanders ... the water department ... God ..."

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:94)

Homer and Marge do not actually solve this conflict but rather it is resolved as Homer realizes that his new religion does not fulfill his expectations.

According to Marge, one constant source of conflict or strain has always been the family vacations. In "Itchy & Scratchy Land" (2F01) the Simpsons are planning their next trip but Marge is reluctant to come along because their vacations have always turned out embarrassing. She agrees to go only after Homer, Bart and Lisa promise to behave themselves. As she could have guessed, the promise is broken pretty soon: both Homer and Bart are arrested and Marge has to pick them up from the amusement park's jail. What Marge tells Homer when she first sees him is a clear indication of her anger: "I have nothing to say to you."

Even though Homer makes many stupid decisions, he is even worse at listening to Marge and her advice. Homer causes a conflict between him and Marge as he decides to gain enough weight to be considered disabled and that way work from home (3F05). At first, he does not tell Marge about his plan, knowing that she would disagree with him strongly. Only after Marge asks him directly if he has "put on some weight" does Homer share his plan with her. As Homer has predicted, Marge is opposed to the idea and she calls it the most ridiculous plan ever. Still, it has no effect on Homer who continues with the plan. Sometimes he ignores Marge entirely: in "The Boy Who Knew Too Much" (1F19), they are in bed discussing what has happened during the day. After Homer has told his story and Marge is about to start telling hers, he puts on fake eye-glasses that make him look like he has his eyes open and starts to sleep, not showing any sign of interest towards Marge's story.

In the episode "The Streetcar Named Marge" (8F18) she is doing her housework and thinking of joining a local production of "A Streetcar Named

Desire.” She tells of her decision to Homer and the children but no one listens. When it is time to leave for the audition, Homer asks Marge where she is going, claiming she has not said a word about acting. Marge nevertheless gets the lead part but Homer is unsupportive of her new hobby and this leads to a conflict because Marge really feels strongly about having something to do by herself.

Homer: “I don’t care, okay? I can’t fake an interest in this and I’m an expert at faking an interest in your kooky projects.”

Marge (getting angry): “What kooky projects?”

Homer: “You know, the painting class, the First Aid course, that whole Lamaze thing.”

Marge: “Why didn’t you tell me you felt this way?”

Homer: “You know I would never do anything to hurt your feelings.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:93)

Homer’s final reply to Marge’s question truly shows how ignorant he is about Marge’s feelings. The way Homer casually starts off the dialogue also implies that he does not quite understand the seriousness of the discussion.

In “There’s No Disgrace Like Home” (7G04) Marge uncharacteristically causes strain between them. The family has been invited to a company picnic and Homer stresses that he wants everybody to be on their best behavior saying: “As far as anyone knows, we’re a nice, normal family.” The rest of the family goes off to enjoy the picnic while Marge is taking care of Maggie. After one of the other mothers at the party suggests to Marge that they leave their children in the playroom and have some punch on the patio, Marge has too much to drink and starts to sing while standing on the patio railing. When Homer sees his wife slightly intoxicated, he takes her with the rest of the family to the car and once they get there, Marge admits to Homer to feeling sick. At the same time, a textbook example of a very happy family walks by, highlighting the misery Homer is experiencing with his own family and especially Marge. This is actually the only time when Homer is justifiably mad

at her.

Both Homer and Marge have been close to committing adultery in the series. The first of Homer's two affairs was with a female co-worker, Mindy Simmons. She was hired because the power plant was raided by state official who gave Mr. Burns, the owner of the plant, a notice of his sexist hiring policies. Soon Homer finds out that he has a lot in common with her, like eating donuts, drinking beer, watching television and taking a nap before lunch, and he becomes infatuated with Mindy. Homer is uncomfortable with his feelings towards her and tries to put an end to it, because he wants to be faithful to his wife. However, Mr. Burns chooses Homer and Mindy to represent the nuclear power plant at the National Energy Convention in Capital City. Homer's faithfulness to Marge is put to a test as he is placed in neighboring rooms with Mindy at the hotel. In addition, the convention leaders choose them as the King and Queen of the convention and the couple is sent off to spend a romantic evening including a candle-lit dinner in a Chinese restaurant. In the end, Homer manages to resist the temptation and instead of cheating on Marge, he invites her to spend the night at the hotel with him. (1F07.)

The second time Homer is tempted by another woman is in "Colonel Homer" (8F19) where he wanders off to a far-away country and western bar because he feels that Marge has humiliated him publicly in a movie theater. In the bar he meets a singing waitress called Lurleen Lumpkin and he is so taken by her song's lyrics that he wants a recording of it. While she is recording the song at a booth in a mall, the attendant hears it and offers to have it played on the radio and the song, "Your Wife Don't Understand You But I Do," becomes a hit. Lurleen hires Homer as her manager and he spends so much time taking care of Lurleen's business that Marge becomes jealous. Marge's presumptions are justified as it turns out that Lurleen tries to seduce Homer on two occasions and even sings a song about it to him. When Homer finally realizes what Lurleen is after, he sells Lurleen's contract in a hurry for 50 dollars to the first music promoter he can find and goes back home to Marge. Although on both occasions Homer comes very close to cheating, he realizes that his love towards Marge is more important than the thrill of an affair. On the previous

occasion, Homer is fully aware of his infatuation towards Mindy, while with Lurleen he seems to be fairly naive about their relationship. Although the situation is quite different in this respect, Homer is capable of solving the problem on his own, just as he has to, since Marge's assistance would be out of place.

Marge comes close to having an affair with her bowling instructor, Jacques, after Homer has once again let her down by forgetting her birthday. In a panic, Homer buys a bowling ball as a gift for her, thinking that he can have it for himself. As it turns out, Marge, so mad at Homer's selfishness, decides to take up bowling and meets Jacques at Barney's Bowl-A-Rama. Jacques, the smooth womanizer, notices that Marge, who is bowling by herself, does not know anything about bowling and offers to give her bowling lessons. Marge accepts his offer and starts bowling every night and gradually becomes attracted to Jacques, who shows her the attention she never gets from Homer. When Marge and Jacques are having brunch together for the first time, he asks her to meet him at his apartment and Marge accepts. However, on her way to Jacques, Marge starts having second thoughts. She comes to a fork in the road where one road leads to Jacques and the other to the power plant where Homer is working. After some hesitation, she chooses the road to Homer, who is pleasantly surprised to see her and takes her to the car to make love with her. (7G11.) Although it is wrong to blame Homer for Marge's actions, he certainly contributed to Marge's frustration that eventually lead to this marital crisis.

Overwhelming majority of the strain in their relationship is caused by Homer and sometimes, even if it is Marge who causes Homer to get angry, it is usually out of Homer's own stupidity and inability to understand his wife. The conflict situations the couple experiences are actually very serious and they may concern almost anything from money to religion. In fact, they argue over similar issues as actual couples, as indicated by, for example, a study presented by Acock and Demo (1994:95,97). Although there are numerous conflicts and Homer and Marge argue over many different issues, there is always some kind of a positive resolution in the end (cf. the traditional Hollywood happy ending in cartoons and family sitcoms). Homer's negative contribution to their

relationship only strengthens and highlights Marge's importance for the family's functioning even further.

4.3 Quality and support

Homer and Marge have an imbalance in the quality and support they contribute to their relationship. Whereas Marge, as the emotional glue of the family, pays a lot of attention to both quality and support and tries to use them in improving their relationship (Brubaker 1993:99, Goldthorpe 1987:57), Homer hardly even recognizes their existence or importance. An example of Homer's attitude comes up in "Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(annoyed grunt)cious" (3G03): the family goes about their daily life and they start finding six-foot-long blue hair almost everywhere. Marge is worried about losing her hair and goes to see the family doctor, who diagnoses it as stress related. While the doctor recommends hiring a nanny to help Marge with the housekeeping, Homer offers her a quick fix: "I'll teach you to comb it over so that no one can tell." Not only is Homer thinking of nothing but saving a few dollars, he is also completely insensitive to his wife's poor condition and how to actually remedy the problem.

In the episode "Marge in Chains" (9F20) Homer tries to get Apu, the Kwik-E-Mart shopkeeper, to dismiss the charges against Marge, who was caught stealing a bottle of bourbon:

Homer: "Apu, I'd like you to drop the charges against my wife."

Apu: "No offense, Mr. Homer, but we're putting that bitch on ice!"

Homer: "Now, c'mon! I'm your best customer!"

Apu: "I'm sorry, Mr. Homer, but it is the policy of the Kwik-E-Mart and it's parent corporation Nordyne Defense Dynamics to prosecute shoplifters to the full extent of the law."

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:115)

When Apu refuses to dismiss the charges and Marge is sent to prison, Homer misses her and realizes how much he actually needs her everyday in so many ways. There is an apparent incongruity in how Homer feels about Marge and how he is not either ready or able to make the effort needed. As the previous dialogue shows, he half-heartedly tries to help Marge but gives up easily.

In “The Last Temptation of Homer” (1F07) he is feeling guilty for having Mindy, his co-worker at the plant, on his mind, which he seems to consider as bad as having an affair with her. When Homer comes home after a hard day at work, feeling happy about meeting his family and trying to get Mindy off his mind, he finds that Marge has a terrible cold and is feeling really bad. Additionally, Bart has some disgusting medical ointment in his hair, Lisa has burnt a panful of fishsticks and offers them as dinner, and the family dog has stolen food from Grampa. Thus, instead of the relaxing paradise he dreamt of, he arrives in the middle of the ordinary chaos. Once he sits down in front of the television to relax and Marge joins him, Homer turns off the television and suggests that they “have a little quality time together.” After a few failed attempts to find something to do together, they end up watching television. As usual, Homer takes the easy way out and demonstrates how little the quality of their relationship means to him.

In spite of all this, Homer has one of his character-saving moments at the end of episode “The Streetcar Named Marge” (8F18). Marge is playing the lead in a local musical production and after the play she gets mad at Homer as he seems to have slept through the show. She calms down as Homer explains that he had felt bad about how poorly Marge’s character was treated in the play. He also admits that it reminded him of his attitude towards her and her hobby. It is at times like this that Homer realizes his faults, is forgiven for all his mistakes and the happy family life may continue.

Perhaps the best example of what some quality time just between the two of them can do is when Bart and Lisa are sent off to spend the summer at Kamp Krusty (8F24). This leaves Homer and Marge almost on their own, only Maggie is left to take care of, and they can finally have time for each other doing what they have not done in a long time. While Bart and Lisa are away,

Homer loses plenty of weight, gets back some of his lost hair and surprises Marge by acting virile, “frisky” as Marge puts it. In a word, their relationship is flourishing.

Homer counts on Marge’s support in almost every situation. For example, when Homer drives a baby sitter home, he reaches for a candy stuck on the seat of her pants as she is getting out of the car. She interprets it as sexual harassment and creates an event out of it by involving the media. The situation gets so bad that there are news reporters watching the Simpson house 24 hours a day. After a while, Homer becomes irritated about the whole mess and one night before going to bed he asks Marge to help him out and “make it all better” as always before. Marge explains that she has tried reasoning with the accusers, but this time she cannot help Homer, who has counted on Marge’s help so much that he loses control (2F06):

Homer: “You mean, I’m on my own? I’ve never been on my own. Oh no! On own! On own! I need help. Oh, God help me! Help me, God!”
(Richmond and Coffman 1997:158)

Contrary to Homer, Marge supports her spouse in almost everything, even mundane issues. For example, an inanimate carbon rod is given the “Worker of the Week” medal instead of Homer, whose turn it would have been this time. When he comes back from work feeling cheated out of his prize and that nobody there respects him, Marge comforts him by telling that his family still respects him. Later in the episode, Homer is accepted to take part in the space program because the NASA scientists are looking for “a blue-collar slob” to improve ratings of space coverage. However, after almost having completed the training Homer starts to feel inadequate and loses his courage. In the middle of the night he calls Marge wanting to quit the program, but she calms him down and encourages him to continue. (1F13.)

Homer, crying over missed opportunities with Lisa from when she was a small child (8F06), sets an example of “the universal fact” that fathers are less involved in rearing young children (Goldthorpe 1987:57). He is ready to

give up on being a good father for Lisa thinking: “Maybe I should just cut my losses, give up on Lisa, and make a fresh start with Maggie” (Richmond and Coffman 1997:70). Marge does not accept this idea and tells Homer to start changing his ways and spend more time with her. Marge’s support for Homer often includes some directions and even orders because he is not capable of taking the initiative otherwise, he needs to be pushed in the right direction.

Homer also needs Marge’s support with his low self-esteem every now and then. For instance, he is worried about being a good enough son for his mother who unexpectedly shows up to mourn him. In reality, Homer has faked his death to skip some work duties and he is very surprised by his mother’s appearance because his father has told him that she had died a long time ago. Actually, his long-lost mother had to run away and hide underground because she participated in a raid on Mr. Burns’s germ laboratory in the 1960’s and the FBI has had a warrant out on her ever since. Homer is also worried about his mother leaving him again the same way she did before and does not really know how to behave around her. Marge has to comfort and reassure him that he should act naturally because his mother will accept and love him for who he is. (3F06.)

There are also times when Marge’s support, although given with best intentions, is not for the best. Homer walks into the bathroom in the morning and weighs himself. When the scale has settled, he cries out loud: “239 pounds?! I’m a blimp! Why are all the good things so tasty?” He makes the decision to start exercising every morning and when Marge walks in on him stretching in front of the mirror, she tells him not to strain himself and Homer stops immediately. Half a year later Homer weighs himself again and gets the same result but this time he calls himself “a whale.” Again, he decides to start exercising every morning but Marge tells him that he is alright in her opinion and calls him her “cuddly teddy bear.” (7G10.) Marge’s support puts an end to ~~Homer’s ideas of weight-loss again, which is not in his best interest health-~~wise. Anyone in Homer’s physical condition should consider exercise and a healthier diet, no matter how “cuddly” they are.

Occasionally, Marge's help has also had unfortunate results. When Homer gets a new co-worker called Frank Grimes, a hard-working employee, he turns Frank into his enemy almost instantly by eating Frank's special lunch, disturbing his working, using Frank's pencils and displaying poor work ethics. Nobody else seems to notice Homer's bad habits at work which disturb Frank very much. Once Homer realizes that Frank resents him, he invites him over for a dinner on the pretense of discussing an important work issue, trying to fix the problem with Frank. When he arrives and sees that Homer had lied to him, he gets mad for wasting precious time and storms away. After the incident, Homer is afraid to go to work because he does not know what to do. Marge suggests that Homer try "to be little more professional" because that could improve the relationship between him and Frank. However, as Homer tries to do this, Frank loses his mind and electrocutes himself. (4F19.)

On the surface, the quality of the relationship between Homer and Marge can sometimes seem as poor, for they seem to share no common interests and Homer especially appears quite indifferent to the fact that there should be any quality at all. Still, Homer is utterly dependent on Marge to help him with his problems, whereas his support for Marge is usually worth nothing. That is, if he even realizes that he should support her in some way in the first place. As in sharing the responsibilities of parenting, there is a considerable imbalance in the quality and support in their relationship. This could be attributed to Marge's strong emotional leadership in the family, which includes caring for "the others' feelings and the quality of group relations," as well as "maintaining the emotional balances" of all family members (Goldthorpe 1987:57-58). By bringing up differences between Homer and Marge, as well as the problems they experience and how they effect the family, the show – although fictional – seems to signal the reality of such problems in relationships, but also the fact that they can be overcome.

5 PARENT - CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

In this chapter, the parent - child relationships are examined in four categories: support, conflict and control, quality, and parents acting as role models.

Support includes, for instance, the shared activities and time spent together, whereas conflict and control deals with issues like obedience, handling disagreements and punishment. Quality dimension involves devotion to one's children and interest towards them and their actions. (Acock and Demo 1994:118-119.) Traditionally, the role models that the parents offer their children are divided according to gender: the mother is the primary role model for the daughters and the father to the sons (Leslie 1976:280-282).

5.1 Support

Most of the traditional and constructive support comes from Marge, stemming from her role as the emotional leader in the family (Brubaker 1993:99, Goldthorpe 1987:57-58), whereas Homer's support tends to be either confusing or negative. Although parental support and advice is usually given with the best of intentions, the child often disregards it at first hand, only to realize later that the advice had been valid. An example of this takes place as the family is leaving for a vacation (3F22) and both Bart and Lisa are allowed to invite a friend to come along. Lisa cannot think of anyone to ask because she feels that she does not have any friends. Marge supports her by telling that she is her friend, but Lisa is talking about having friends of her own age. Marge's advice to this is that she will make "plenty of friends, just be yourself." Lisa is not convinced by this and wants to change herself into someone more likeable. As it turns out, Lisa does get friends with her new identity but as her real "nerdy" nature is revealed, instead of losing them, they become even better friends.

Sometimes Lisa does not reject her mother's advice but interprets it to her own liking. In the episode "Duffless" (9F14) Lisa is working on a science fair project, which is growing a giant tomato. One day at school, she asks Bart

to hold on to the tomato while she goes to get something from her locker. While Lisa is gone, principal Skinner bends down in front of Bart to tie his shoelaces and Bart cannot resist the temptation of throwing the giant tomato at him. Lisa's science project destroyed, she asks her mother what to do since the science fair is only three days away. Marge comes up with a suggestion that Lisa have a hamster run through a maze, which Lisa turns into an idea of Bart running around in a maze. This evolves into a project where she humiliatingly compares her brother's intelligence to that of a hamster.

The following is an example of a typical situation where the daughter confides in her mother with personal problems – believing that her father might not understand or, as in Homer's case, care. A new girl, Allison Taylor, comes to Lisa's class and as it turns out, she is as good, or even better than Lisa in everything. Lisa feels threatened by her since she is no longer the smartest child in the class, but tries not to care about it. Only after she loses the competition for the first chair of saxophone in the school band to Allison, does she go to her mother for advice. Marge comforts Lisa and advises to become friends with Allison rather than to compete against her. (1F17.)

When it comes to emotional support, Lisa most often turns to her mother, not to her incompetent father. As Bart is sent to a military academy in "The Secret War of Lisa Simpson" (4F21), Lisa suddenly decides to stay there with Bart because she feels repressed in the Springfield elementary school. Because she is the only girl in the academy, the others discriminate against her and make her feel like an outcast. While Bart tries his best, it is Marge who comforts the lonely Lisa the most by sending her a consoling and encouraging tape recording.

Similarly, Marge gives emotional support to Bart as well. In "Bart Gets Famous" (1F11) he is on a field trip with his class in a cardboard box factory. The visit is so boring that Bart sneaks away to a filming studio next door, where the Krusty the Clown Show is taped. By a stroke of luck, he gets a job as a personal assistant to Krusty. Later on, Bart becomes the "I-didn't-do-it" -boy on Krusty's show when he accidentally destroys a stage set on the air and the audience loves it. In a few weeks Bart is bored with everybody, even his

teacher, wanting him to repeat the same line, “I-didn’t-do-it,” over and over again, as they do not care what else he has to say. Fed up, Bart locks himself in his room, refusing to come out and go to a taping of yet another show. Marge comes to his door, cheering him up by telling that he should not feel bad about what he is doing because he is “making people laugh which is a very difficult thing to do.”

Also Homer succeeds in giving Bart supportive advice. In the same episode, Bart tries to convince his class mates that he is a production team member of the show by showing his name in the credits on television. Unluckily for Bart, the text is illegibly small which is why his friends do not believe him and one of them, Nelson, punches Bart “for trying to take credit for other people’s work.” After Bart’s friends have left, Homer tells Bart that it does not make any difference what some fourth graders think since he is doing what he wants with his life, nothing else matters.

Although Marge’s support to their children is usually valid and constructive, Homer’s can be far from it. In “Lisa on Ice” (2F05) she is warned about failing physical education and her parents are concerned about the warning and they hope that she would try better. At the same time, Bart is given a pile of similar academic warnings to which Homer responds:

Homer: “I’m so proud you didn’t try to forge my name. How about a present, son?”

Bart: “Well, I could use a new pair of hockey skates.”

Homer: “Done and done!”

Lisa: “That’s not fair! Why is Bart getting a present and I’m getting chewed out?”

Homer: “Ah – the mysteries of life.”

Obviously, Homer has different expectations of Bart and Lisa which are clearly to Lisa’s disadvantage. Bart does not seem to mind the low expectations and exploits them to get, for example, presents. As the expectations towards Lisa are much higher, her good deeds go often unrewarded.

Another problem that Homer has with giving support is that he often has little idea of what is going on and what he should do about it. Lisa is feeling sad over nothing in particular which bothers Homer but he does not know how to deal with it. Lisa realizes this and responds to Homer's question of what is troubling her by saying, "never mind, you would not understand it anyway." (7G06.)

One of Homer's bad characteristics is also the negative support, the insensitive and uncaring remarks he gives his children. In "Boy-Scoutz N the Hood" (1F06) Bart and his friend, Milhouse, find money on the street and they spend it on "a Super Squishee made entirely of syrup." With their sense of reality altered by the high sugar content, they spend the rest of the night on the town. When Bart wakes up the next morning, much to his horror, he is wearing the Junior Camper uniform. He cannot remember joining the organization but cannot deny it either. Later, as Homer sees Bart in his room he calls Bart "the leader of the weiner patrol, boning up on his nerd lessons." Marge overhears him taunting Bart and tells Homer to be more supportive, but after she has gone, he continues picking on Bart.

Another example of negative support is in "Burns' Heir" (1F16). In this episode Mr. Burns, after nearly drowning in his bathtub, starts looking for an heir to his fortune. He auditions possible candidates, including Bart and Lisa, but finds no one he likes enough. Homer reveals his lack of tact as the family is leaving the audition:

Marge: "I think Bart and Lisa are a little upset right now. Isn't there something you'd like to say?"

Homer: "Yes, there sure is. Kids, you tried your best and you failed miserably. The lesson is: never try."

If Homer gives poor support on occasion, Marge is also capable of giving confusing support. In the episode "The Boy Who Knew Too Much" Bart, while cutting class, witnesses an accident which becomes a court case. He cannot directly tell what he has seen because then principal Skinner would send

him off to a conservative Christian military school for skipping school. Bart tries to solve this moral dilemma by asking his mother for advice, but Marge answers by telling a strange story of her uncle who “kept things to himself” and shot many people. Not satisfied with the answer that did not seem to make any sense at all, Bart asks her again. Then Marge tells Bart to listen to his heart and reveal what he knows about the accident.

Another instance where Marge gives unfitting support takes place in “Moaning Lisa.” Lisa has been feeling unhappy and Marge, following her own mother’s advice, tells Lisa what to do:

“It doesn’t matter how you feel inside, you know. It’s what shows up on the surface that counts. Take all your bad feelings and push them down, all the way down, past your knees, until you’re almost walking on them. And then you’ll fit in, and you’ll be invited to parties, and boys will like you... and happiness will follow.” (Richmond and Coffman 1997:22.)

However, after seeing how others take advantage of Lisa when she takes her advice, Marge takes back her words and tells, or rather orders Lisa to be herself, sad or not.

The parent-child relationships get a new angle whenever Homer is in serious trouble with Marge. In these situations he turns to his children for help and support, to Lisa in particular. One example takes place in “Secrets of Successful Marriage” (1F20) when Homer has been thrown out of the house. Marge is very annoyed because Homer fails to learn from his previous mistakes and keeps on revealing their intimate secrets during his marriage class. Homer cannot think of any other place to go but Bart’s tree house and sleeps there for the night. The next day, Lisa brings Homer some pudding to the tree house, as he could not join the rest of the family for dinner. Then, he asks Lisa to help him:

Homer: “ Lisa, you’re smart. Help me trick her into taking me back.”

Lisa: “Dad, you can’t trick someone into loving you. There’s a reason two

people come together and stay together. There's something they give each other that nobody else can give them. If you want to get Mom back, you just have to remember what you give her that nobody else can."

Homer: "I'll pay you \$40 if you think of it for me."

Lisa: "No!"

Homer: "Okay ... 30!"

Lisa (turning away): "Good luck, Dad."

For an eight-year-old, Lisa knows quite well how to be supportive in such a delicate situation. She seems know that she should help her father but not actually "do the right thing" for him.

Lisa also tries to support his father by talking some sense into his head. In the episode "Homer The Great" (2F09) he joins a secret society called the Stonecutters. In a few days, as they are about to throw him out of the society, they see Homer's birthmark that identifies him as their leader, "The Chosen One." This gives Homer a lot of power and he even considers himself the God. As Lisa hears about this, she warns him that getting every wish fulfilled will lead to an empty life, but Homer will not believe her. After a while and a number of fixed games of pool, poker and bowling, he starts to realize that Lisa was right. Homer feels isolated from others and that his happiness is fading because of his power as "The Chosen One." Lisa suggests that Homer should reach out and start helping other people with his power, which is exactly what he does. Even though it is the right decision, it only turns the other Stonecutters against Homer and they plan to kill him.

Bart does not usually give Homer any advice, maybe because he thinks he does not have anything to offer. However, there is an exception in "Life on the Fast Lane" (7G11). Marge has been bowling every night for some while and Homer has become worried over losing her. When Bart drags the reluctant Homer outside to play catch, he notices that something is wrong with Homer; he does not even say "ouch" when he is hit on the head with the ball. As Homer lies on the ground, Bart reminds him of a piece of advice Homer has told him earlier (which Homer does not remember having done at all):

Bart: "You once told me, that if something's bothering you and you're too damn stupid to know what to do, keep your fool mouth shut. At least that way you won't make things worse."

Homer: "Good advice!"

Even if Bart's advice does not help Homer in solving his problem (which is to be expected, considering he originally got the advice from Homer), he tries his best.

One example of support from both of the children is in "Homer's Night Out" (7G10). In that episode, Homer is in trouble with Marge because of a picture that Bart has taken of him dancing with an exotic dancer. Homer has spent the night with his friend Barney and has returned home to make up with Marge. He asks Bart and Lisa how their mother is doing and gets support (for example, Bart's "Go for it, Dad!") from them as he goes to the kitchen where Marge is waiting for him.

Once again, it is Marge who takes care of this relationship dimension within the family; Homer has to be told by Marge when to offer support to his children. Another difference is that Marge sees her mistakes and learns from them, whereas Homer necessarily does not. Occasionally though, he does have a piece of advice that actually makes sense, for example, in the episode "Bart Gets Famous" (1F11), which counts as one of Homer's character-saving moments. Untraditionally, the parent-child support in the Simpson family can be reverse as well. Especially Homer relies on Lisa's support on many occasions and issues, which is usually because Homer openly recognizes Lisa being smarter than he.

5.2 Conflict and control

The responsibility of handling conflict and control situations usually falls on Marge mainly because she is more at home with the children. This could

attributed to the finding that women feel they have more not only positive, but also negative experiences with their children than their husbands (Acock and Demo 1994:120). Controlling is an area of parent-child relationships in which Homer's careless and irresponsible nature is quite apparent. For example, in "Sideshow Bob Roberts" (2F02) Bart and Lisa are out playing with their friends. Marge interrupts their play because they have to leave for church while Homer does nothing to help her. In the same episode Marge destroys Bart's fire crackers by watering them and throwing them away without believing that Bart was supposed to be using them for a project in school. She is so used to Bart's mischievous doings that controlling him has become almost a second nature, whereas for Homer it takes a lot of effort. As Acock and Demo note, the wives are so accustomed to their roles that they can perform some of their duties simultaneously with other tasks at hand (1994:118-119).

Another example of Marge controlling her children is in "Summer of 4 ft. 2" (3F22). Bart wants to join Lisa and her new friends, who are having fun on the beach, because he is bored playing with Milhouse. Bart feels that Lisa has gotten her new friends by copying his manners and wants to teach her a lesson. Marge will not let Bart go and ruin Lisa's party, no matter how hard he tries, and tells him: "park your keister, meester [sic]" (Richmond and Coffman 1997:207). All the while, Homer is out on the town, which means that Marge is left alone to take care of their children. Even though she is the one to control the children, she does not usually express it as explicitly as in this example because most of the time she is obeyed before she has to raise her voice at all. According to Acock and Demo (1994:134), mothers, in general, prefer not resort to yelling at their children as a method of control, regardless of the children's age.

Problems arise when Homer takes part in controlling and sends mixed messages to his children. In the episode "Burns' Heir" (1F16) Bart has been chosen to inherit Mr. Burns's vast fortunes. Bart starts to spend more and more time with Mr. Burns but one afternoon he comes to have dinner with his biological family. At the dinner table, Bart starts throwing peas at Lisa and Marge tells him to stop, but he does not listen. Marge asks Homer to say

something and he tells Lisa to “stop being in the way of his rich brother’s peas.” Homer is clearly partial to Bart and contradicts Marge’s earlier command directly by controlling Lisa instead of his rich son, whom Homer wants to please and keep happy.

Homer does try his best but he still usually fails to be reasonable, as the episode “Itchy & Scratchy: the Movie” (9F03) shows. Homer and Marge go to a parent / teacher night to “share the guilt” with other parents and teachers, leaving Grampa to take care of the children. As they are leaving, Homer tells Bart and Lisa in advance how they will be awarded:

Homer: “If you’ve been good, you get pizza. But if you’ve been bad, you get ... mmm ... poison.”

Lisa: “What if one of us has been good and the other bad?”

Homer: “Then you get poison pizza.”

Lisa: “Da-ad! That’s not fair!”

At the school Bart’s teacher talks with Marge (Homer is with Lisa’s teacher) about his mischievous doings, such as hurting a fellow student with fireworks, and advices to set clearer rules for Bart and “sticking to them,” punishing him as needed. Marge takes this advice seriously but Homer does not. This is obviously clear from the way Bart is punished by Homer when he, for example, breaks Grampa’s dentures while playing around with them and tears the carpet in the living-room right in front of Homer. On both occasions, Marge has to make Homer be more strict with Bart and punish him, but Homer does not “make it stick.” Only after Bart was supposed to look after Maggie, who sneaks off to steal the family car, driving it through the town and crashing it into the Springfield Correctional Institute wall, does Homer get around to punishing him and will not let Bart or anybody talk him out of it. To give Bart the lesson of his life, Homer forbids him from seeing the new Itchy & Scratchy movie, which, in Lisa’s words, is the defining movie of their generation. Homer does not give in even when Lisa and Marge plead him to let Bart see the movie, saying he has already proved that he can punish Bart. Homer quite clearly over-

reacts to what Bart has done, as with the poison pizza, stubbornly keeps his head and still misses the whole point of punishing his son: he has now punished him not for his disobedience, but just to show that he can.

Another reason why Homer fails could be because he does not trust himself at all. This is evident in the dialogue that he has with Marge after Homer has tried to discipline Bart and failed:

Homer: "Bart, I forbid you to jump over that gorge."

Bart: "You can't."

Homer: "I can and do! Go to your room, Bart!"

Homer (after Bart has left the room): "He's got us, Marge. There's nothing we can do. He's as good as dead!"

Marge: "C'mon, Homer. A heart-to-heart talk with your son. You've got to try."

Homer: "Oh, that never works. He's a goner!"

Once again, Marge has to get involved and guide Homer. In this episode (7F06) Bart has started to imitate a famous daredevil and do dangerous stunts. Both Homer and Marge are worried that he will seriously hurt himself and want him to stop but he will not listen. Later, Homer admits that he is at a loss with what to do with his son: "I tried ordering you, I tried punishing you, and God help me, I even tried reasoning with you..." He now indirectly asks Bart how to deal with him. Homer's solution, which actually works, is to risk his own life and make Bart see what it feels like.

On the one hand, Marge expresses her attitude, a view shared by the majority of mothers in the United States (Acock and Demo 1994:132, 139), towards corporal punishment explicitly in the episode "Two Bad Neighbors" (3F09): "we don't believe in corporal punishment..." On the other hand, she clearly states that there is a need for discipline and rules, one has to be strict with children (4F18). Although Marge presents these as their shared values, Homer sometimes deviates from them. One example is in "Secrets of a Successful Marriage" (1F20) where Homer has invited his marriage class to

observe his family at dinner. At the fake dinner session Homer acts the proper father and casually asks Bart:

Homer: "And how's my little major leaguer? Catch any Junebugs today?"

Bart: "Well, me and Milhouse took some mail from a mail truck and threw it down the sewer."

Homer: "Son, I know you meant well, but that wasn't the right thing to do."

Bart: "What the hell are you talking about? You're the one who double-dared us."

Homer [reaching over the table to choke Bart]: "Why you little..."

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:145)

Lucky for Bart, Marge is there to step in and make Homer stop.

Another similar situation takes place after church, when Homer and Marge are questioning Bart about collection plate money that was stolen (2F04). Homer tells Bart that he will believe him if he can say it looking Homer straight in the eyes. When Bart answers him truthfully, Homer gets mad at him because he thinks Bart is lying and starts to choke him. Marge has to stop Homer once again and takes Bart's side believing what he says. On both occasions Homer suddenly loses his temper so badly that his first reaction is to grab Bart by the throat. This drastic reaction could be caused by Homer's childish nature so that he does not consider Bart as much as his son as an equal, which in turn makes it acceptable in his mind to resort to such behavior.

Disciplining seems to go a lot better when Homer and Marge do it together, in contrast to Homer stepping in and interrupting Marge. For instance, in the Thanksgiving episode (7F07) the whole family is about to enjoy the dinner with Grampa, Patty, Selma and Marge's mother. Lisa has been working really hard on a centerpiece which, in her opinion, displays "the trailblazing women who made our country great." When it is time to bring the turkey to the table, Bart and Lisa get into an argument over where to put the turkey and the centerpiece. In the struggle that follows, the centerpiece flies into the fireplace and burns up. Lisa runs upstairs sobbing and Homer and Marge send Bart off to

his room until he's "good and ready to apologize to Lisa."

Another example is in "The Secret War of Lisa Simpson" (4F21) where Bart pulls a prank at the police station. He places many bullhorns one after another and causes a sound wave explosion that destroys property across the town. As punishment, Bart is sent to a military school by Homer and Marge's common decision to learn some manners.

Most of the time only Bart has to be straightened out, as boys in general, since Lisa gets into trouble only occasionally, a trend supported by Acock and Demo (1994:128). In "Moaning Lisa" (7G06), the situation is reversed: Lisa is playing the saxophone in her room and Homer cannot concentrate on the video game he is playing with Bart because of the "infernal racket." Homer runs upstairs to put an end to it because he is losing all the games. When Lisa asks him if she could practice her fingering, he makes a compromise and does not make her stop all together.

Still, this is nothing compared to what Bart has done, for example, sawing off the head of a statue and fooling the whole town of Springfield that there is a small boy stuck in an old, deep well. This is why Lisa does not get into similar kind of trouble as Bart but there is an exception to this as well. In "Lisa the Vegetarian" (3F03) the family goes to a petting zoo where they see cute animals. Later at dinner, Lisa realizes that she cannot eat meat anymore. The others do not care about Lisa's newly-found conviction and she is frustrated by this. The conflict breaks out at Homer's barbeque party where he serves nothing but meat. Lisa brings gazpacho, ice cold tomato soup, as a vegetarian alternative but is laughed at by everybody and goes to her room. The last straw is when Homer accidentally flips a greasy hamburger patty on Lisa's face and she loses control. As Homer proudly presents his "roast suckling pig" to his guests, Lisa sends it rolling down the hill and it is ruined. Homer cannot forgive Lisa for this and the conflict escalates to the point where Lisa feels she can no longer live in the same house with her father.

Usually the use of discipline falls on Marge, while Homer characteristically makes bad decisions and cannot use it properly. Their interpersonal relationship and roles are reflected in controlling the children.

First of all, as in spouse relationships, Marge has to support Homer also in this area, since he does not trust himself enough, perhaps for a good reason. There is a similar imbalance in controlling the children as there is in shared parenting and in the quality and support of their spouse relationship: Homer over-reacts a lot of the time or does not react at all, leaving Marge with the responsibility again. As Bart is in trouble most of the time, it is peculiar that Homer as the father does not have a stronger authoritative role with him.

5.3 Quality

Most of the relationship quality situations concentrate on Homer and the children because Marge spends more time at home with the children as it is (cf. Acock and Demo 1994:131, Brubaker 1993:99); she does not have to patch up as much as Homer. The quality of Marge's relationship with the children is visible also in her roles as the emotional glue, problem solver and confidante.

Homer's attempts to improve the quality of his relationship with his children are often initiated by a crisis, as in "Saturdays of Thunder" (8F07). While at the hairdresser, Marge is shown a fatherhood test in a women's magazine by her sisters, who bet that Homer will fail it. Marge defends Homer by saying that he is a good father but she gives the test to him anyway, out of curiosity. Homer scores zero and becomes extremely worried about his relationship with Bart:

Homer: "Oh, my God! I don't know jack about my boy!

(Homer starts to sob as Marge, Patty and Selma stand around him.)

Homer: "I'm bad father!"

Selma: "You're also fat!"

Homer: "I'm also fat!"

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:71)

Homer calls the institution that has made the test and is taken there to sign up for therapy. After the session he starts to work on his relationship with Bart and actually finds a common interest, soapbox racing.

In “Life on the Fast Lane” (7G11) Homer admits to not having spent much time with his children by saying: “your mother always gets to be alone with you and now it’s my turn.” Now he has the chance because Marge has taken up bowling and left Homer to take care of the house, along with the children. Homer seems to consider time with them to be a privilege by using the expression “gets to be,” but he loses the opportunity because he concentrates on his own feelings and problems instead of working on his relationship with his children.

Homer’s concept of quality time with his children can be considered as slightly odd. One of the more normal activities has been playing a boxing video game with Bart in the episode “Moaning Lisa” (7G06). Even though it is only a video game, Homer gets upset because Bart keeps beating him in it and that way spoils some of the quality of their shared time and activities, although it does amuse Bart. In “Homer vs. the Eighteenth Amendment” (4F15) Homer starts to bootleg alcohol together with Bart as it has been banned in Springfield. He has no problems with his son participating in his criminal activities, on the contrary, he seems to enjoy the company. As these examples illustrate, Homer has an inherent ability to spoil shared moments with his children and he also has serious judgement problems which could be, once again, the result of his childish and irresponsible nature.

In addition, Homer rarely takes any interest in his children’s activities. One of the few occasions when he even bothers to ask what they have been up to is in “Whacking Day” (9F18). He wants to know what Bart and Lisa have learned at school but pays little attention to their answers. Another example of how Homer disregards what his children are doing is in episode “Saturdays of Thunder” (8F07). Bart is building a soapbox racer while Homer is having a beer and watching television. Bart comes into the livingroom and asks Homer about using power tools, who in turn answers his questions without paying much attention to them. He, for instance, advises Bart to just turn his head

while welding, safety glasses are not necessary. In the same episode Homer promises Marge to look after the kids while she goes out. Lisa overhears his promise and Homer asks her how much she heard of what he promised. Since Lisa has heard it all, he has to ask her what the “quickest, cheapest and easiest way” to take care of the children for the night would be; on Lisa’s suggestion they go out and rent a video. Here, Homer displays his indifference towards his children and also his short attention span, everything has to happen fast and with as little effort as possible. He clearly does not really invest time in his children – for example, by helping them with homework or working on a family project – which is generally considered essential to quality parental engagement (Acock and Demo 1994:119).

There are a few episodes where Homer’s and his children’s relationship is implicitly presented as poor. For example, in “There’s No Disgrace Like Home” (7G04) the family participates in a company picnic which takes place at Mr. Burns’s manor. Before joining the picnic, Homer gives his children some advice on how to behave:

Homer: “Okay, now look: my boss is gonna at this picnic, so I want you to show your father some love and or respect.”

Lisa: “Tough choice.”

Bart: “I’m picking respect.”

Homer does not even try to pretend what his relationship with his children is like, rather he suggests directly that Bart and Lisa fake it for the sake of his image in front of Mr. Burns, his employer.

Sometimes the situation is so bad that the child has to make the effort because Homer is not about to. For instance, when Lisa shows Homer a shoe box house she has just made, he is not interested in it at all because he is busy watching football on television. Then she goes to Marge, who immediately compliments her on the house without Lisa even prompting her to do so. Lisa asks her mother why Homer is not interested in what she does and Marge advises her to take the initiative this time and find something that she could do

together with Homer. (8F12.) Ironically, the shared activity they come up with is watching Sunday football on television, which means that Homer does not do anything he would not do otherwise and furthermore, he is using Lisa's intelligence in betting on the games they watch.

In Bart's case, it takes an official declaration of genius before Homer becomes interested in their relationship. Bart is sent to a special school after cheating on an intelligence test. When he notices that his father now cares more about their relationship, he does not want to stop the charade. Bart nevertheless runs into problems in school, as he cannot keep up with the real geniuses, and he has to confess that he is a cheat. When Homer finds out that he has been fooled by Bart, he gets really angry at him and chases him across the house yelling "why you little..." (7G02.)

In "Brother from the Same Planet" (9F12) Homer and Bart's relationship and trust in each other is put to a test. Homer forgets to pick up Bart from soccer practice, leaving Bart sitting in the rain for hours, and Bart is rightfully furious at him when he finally shows up. Homer makes the situation even worse by not admitting to his mistake and placing some of the blame on his son:

Homer: "I know you're mad at me right now, and I'm kinda mad too... I mean, we could sit here and try to figure out 'who forgot to pick up who' till the cows come home. But let's just say we're both wrong and that'll be that."
(Richmond and Coffman 1997:107)

Bart, angry at his father and wanting to have someone to rely on, goes to a non-profit organization called "Bigger Brothers," who offer companionship to "boys without positive role models." The feud gets out of hand as Bart paints an exaggerated picture of his father to Tom, his new Bigger Brother, and Homer tries to get even with Bart by finding his own Smaller Brother, called Pepi. Homer causes the whole mess because he does not stoop to apologizing to Bart, even though he should do so as the older, wiser and especially guilty party.

Homer also has a tendency to try to fix relationship issues with money, whereas parents normally spend money on their children's hobbies, health care etc. (Acock and Demo 1994:118). For example, in "There's No Disgrace Like Home" (7G04) Homer makes Bart kiss him in front Mr. Burns for money at the company picnic in order to improve his image. In "Lisa's Pony" (8F06) Homer fails to bring Lisa a new saxophone reed in time for her recital. Her playing sounds terrible and gets very depressed about it. Homer tries to make up for his mistake by buying her a huge portion of ice cream which costs \$88. Since this does not cheer Lisa up, he does what he always does and asks Marge for help. She suggests that Homer spend more time with her but after a while he is scared of becoming "a bit fruity" by doing "girly stuff" and decides to buy Lisa a pony instead. Homer could think of no other way to win back her love but by trying to buy it. He prefers not to be personally involved so he uses indirect ways like money instead. In the end, he has to take a second job to raise the needed money for the pony and thus gets involved. When Homer tells Lisa that she will get a pony, also Bart denounces his love to Homer and wants something to make up for it. Homer replies to this that he knows Bart loves him nevertheless and leaves Bart with nothing.

Homer's indifferent attitude seems to be easier for Bart to accept than it is for Lisa. In spite of all the problems and arguments, Bart still respects his father, even if he does not say it out loud. An instance of this is when Bart is "caught" respecting Homer in "Deep Space Homer" (1F13). In the episode Homer is selected to participate in the space program and as he tells the family the good news, Bart writes "HERO" on the back of Homer's head as a sign of silent respect.

A recurring theme in the quality of Homer's and his children's relationship is that he has little or no interest in what they are doing. He relies on Marge's help with his children also in this sense because, as he has said himself, she is "the sensible one" in the family (1F08). Homer also tries to do everything the easiest way with as little involvement as possible, for example, by using money instead of time and effort. Thus, he fits the common pattern of the 'technically present but functionally absent father' which has been

recognized as a wide-spread problem among two-parent families (Acock and Demo 1994: 142). Although Homer has a very short temper and sometimes acts very childish, the relationship between him and his children seems to work out well in the end, thanks to Hollywood tradition once more. Moreover, the show implies that one does not have to be a perfect father in order to succeed in parenting – even the “perfect father” in the show, Ned Flanders, fails sometimes.

5.4 Parents as role models

There is a traditional and old-fashioned division when it comes to parents acting as role models for their children in the Simpson family: Marge tries to convey a positive role model for Lisa in everything she does and says, and she expects Homer to give a similar role model for Bart (cf. Goldthorpe 1987:59). Still, being a good role model is very difficult for Homer since he is stubborn, ignorant and dim-witted, as earlier examples have already shown.

Homer’s ignorance is quite clearly displayed in the role model he provides for his children. For example, Homer shares his idea on the reason to participate in sports with Bart: “Son, when you participate in sporting events, it’s not whether you win or lose: it’s how drunk you get” (1F15). Homer also tells Bart not to drink beer because “it’s for Daddys and kids with fake I.D.’s” (3G01). Homer does not even consider telling Bart about the dangers of abusing alcohol or take into account how receptive Bart is to his influence. Even though Homer sets a bad example for Bart and gives him bad advice, it seems that Bart is well aware of what alcohol can do. This shows in the way Bart reacts to Homer’s explanation of a party where Homer had got very drunk and acted accordingly (7F20). Marge is angry at him for being such a bad role model and insists that Homer explain to Bart what he has done and why. As he starts explaining to Bart, supposing that his son does not understand why he had acted so strangely, Bart quickly replies: “Yes I do – you were wasted.”

Homer has shared his peculiar views on the opposite sex and sexuality on many occasions. In “Lisa the Beauty Queen” (9F02) Homer shares his knowledge about women with Bart:

“When it comes to compliments, women are ravenous, bloodsucking monsters, always wanting more, more, more! And if you give it to ‘em, you’ll get back plenty in return.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:95)

By getting back “plenty in return” Homer does not mean sex, as implied, but rather a slave who will work endlessly. Also Homer’s teaching about sexual harassment is fairly strange. When he is accused of sexually harassing their babysitter, he explains its meaning to Bart and Lisa (2F06):

Lisa: “Dad, I don’t understand. What is she saying you did?”

Homer: “Well, Lisa, remember that postcard that Grampa sent us from Florida of that alligator biting that woman’s bottom?”

Bart: “Oh, yeah. That was brilliant.”

Homer: “That’s right, we all thought it was hilarious. But it turns out we were wrong. That alligator was sexually harassing that woman.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:159)

Homer also has a habit of setting a bad example for Bart, for instance, when he reluctantly agrees to go to church (e.g. in 7G07 and 9F01). Also, as Homer finds out that Bart is having problems with a bully at school, instead of giving him sensible advice, Homer teaches him dirty fighting tricks (7G05). Homer also gives Bart a bad role model by swearing at the dinner table, which Bart picks up on immediately and starts mimicking him like a parrot (1F21).

Homer has a way to influence Bart indirectly through his actions as well. One example of this is in “Homer Goes to College” (1F02) where Homer fails an inspection at the nuclear power plant and has to pass physics 101 at a college in order to keep his job. When Homer takes the course and fails the test, his new nerdy friends change his grade on the computer from F to A+.

Homer is proud of having cheated his way out of the physics course but Lisa figures out how he did it, while Bart congratulates his father saying: “Way to go, Dad!” On another occasion Homer has a negative indirect influence on Bart by getting caught dancing with an exotic belly dancer (7G10) – as noted earlier in section 3.3. Marge feels that Homer, as the father, gives a bad role model to Bart by treating women as objects. Therefore, Marge forces Homer to explain his actions to Bart, and while trying to do this, he inconsiderately takes Bart to all the “sleazy nudey bars” in Springfield.

Once in a while, Homer tries to give personal advice to Lisa as well, but without much success. For instance, he tries to explain the difference between men and women in sports: “Lisa, if the Bible has taught us nothing else – and it hasn’t – it’s that girls should stick to girls’ sports, such as hot oil wrestling and foxy boxing and such and such” (2F05). Homer’s advice on work morale is just as dubious as his previous explanation of women’s role in sports. In the episode “The PTA Disbands” (2F19) he talks to Lisa about working and its ethics because she is worried about her school’s teachers being on strike. He tells Lisa: “... If you don’t like your job you don’t strike. You just go in every day and do it really half-assed. That’s the American way.” Homer also tries to advise Lisa on how to approve of killing snakes in “Whacking Day.” The episode is about a tradition in Springfield that includes chasing snakes to the center of the town and beating them to death with clubs, and Lisa is terrified and disgusted by it. Homer, trying to defend this tradition, tells Lisa that you “just squeeze your rage into a bitter little ball and release it at an appropriate time. Like that day I hit that referee with a whisky bottle. ‘Member that?” Lisa, the smarter of the two, knows better than to take Homer’s advice seriously and mostly shrugs them off with an uncomfortable “mmm, right Dad.”

Lisa obviously favors her mother’s advice and role model over her father’s, but on rare occasion Marge also provides a bad role model. In the episode “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” (1F12) Lisa is at first excited about the new Malibu Stacy barbie doll who speaks. As Lisa pulls the string on the doll, anxiously waiting to hear what it has to say, she is very disappointed to hear the doll say only vacuous and sexist phrases like “don’t ask me - I’m just a girl.”

She complains about this to her family, Marge tries to calm her down by saying “let’s forget all our troubles with a big bowl of strawberry ice cream.” Lisa, now even angrier, pulls the string on the doll which repeats Marge’s comment verbatim.

Homer’s role model for Bart, and for that matter Lisa, is quite bad. Not only are his actions irresponsible and irrational, but also his advice and ethics seem terrible. To balance this out, Marge has to act the responsible and rational parent with sound and ethical advice. Of course, the show emphasizes Homer’s deviant, negative characteristics for the sake of humor and simply because it is more interesting for the viewer that way (Hietala 1990:62-63).

6 SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter will deal with the sibling relationships in three categories: siblings as objects of attachment and support, sibling rivalry, as well as siblings as role models. Many of the positive aspects of sibling relationships are included in the first category, such as taking care of the younger, solving their problems and offering them security. Sibling rivalry, then again, consists of jealousy, resentment and spirit of competition, where the equality of the parents’ response towards the siblings has an important role. Finally, the central aspect of being a social role model is that it usually falls on the older siblings, because they choose adults as role models and pay little attention to the behavior of the younger, while the younger siblings often imitate the older and look up to them. (Shaffer 1994:464-467.)

6.1 Objects of attachment and support

Most of the sibling relationships concentrate around Bart and Lisa’s activities, because Maggie is usually too small to participate and is with Marge most of the time anyway. One exception to this is when Lisa sometimes takes care of

Maggie. In “Blood Feud” (7F22), for example, she tries to teach Maggie names of exotic animals, South American Indian tribes and so on. Another example of Maggie’s attachment to her siblings is in episode “Moaning Lisa” (7G06) when Bart and Lisa argue over whom Maggie loves best, and when she finally makes the decision, she chooses the television. This shows that Maggie is not so close to Bart and Lisa because she is most often taken care of by her mother.

One activity that Bart and Lisa always do together is watching the Krusty Show on television, and especially the Itchy & Scratchy feature cartoon. Sharing this activity with Bart is quite odd for Lisa, considering how violent the cartoon is. Lisa is usually very critical of what she, for example, consumes, supports, eats or watches on television. Connected to the Krusty Show is a character called Bob Terwilliger, who has been Bart’s nemesis ever since Bart spoiled his plans to frame Krusty the Clown for armed robbery (7G12). Bart could not believe that his idol had committed the crime he was accused of and was determined to prove Krusty’s innocence, but he knew he could not do it on his own. He turned to Lisa for help and had to confess to needing Lisa’s help in catching Bob because she is smarter than Bart. From then on, Lisa has always helped Bart when Bob has come back to have his revenge on Bart (2F02, 8F20, 3F08 and 9F22).

Solving the problems with Bob are not the only times Lisa has used her intelligence in helping Bart. In “Like Father Like Clown” (8F05) Bart finally gets his wish come true and Krusty the Clown comes to have dinner with the Simpsons. Both Bart and Lisa soon notice that Krusty is not his usual self and find out that he has problems with his father, who has disowned him for becoming a clown. Bart and Lisa decide to help Krusty get together with his father and make amends. Another time that Bart and Lisa have put their strength together to help Krusty is when his show is in trouble from the competition of a ventriloquist dummy called Gabbo and eventually is canceled (9F19). Bart and Lisa come to Krusty’s aid by destroying Gabbo’s reputation and thus, its career. They also advice Krusty to host a special celebrity show to re-launch his career and help by enrolling the celebrities needed.

In addition to the previous examples, most of the time Bart is the one asking Lisa for help or support. This goes against the general role division among siblings since it is usually the younger sibling, who is in need of help and support (Shaffer 1994:466). For instance, in “Bart Sells His Soul” (3F02) Bart and Milhouse argue over the existence of souls. To prove his point, Bart gladly sells his soul to Milhouse for five dollars and writes the deed on a piece of paper. After a while, Bart notices some changes in his life: the family pets start avoiding him and the Itchy & Scratchy Show does not make him laugh anymore like it used to. When he mentions this to Lisa, she tells him that according to a native American legend, laughter is the voice of the soul and that since he has sold it, he cannot laugh genuinely. Bart decides to get his soul back, whatever the cost, but lucky for him, Lisa is one step ahead of him and has bought the deed with her piggy bank savings.

In “Bart’s Girlfriend” (2F04) he falls in love with Jessica Lovejoy, the daughter of the local clergyman. Bart, new to love, is worried about the differences between himself and Jessica. For advice, he turns to Lisa, who gives him her honest opinion on their difference by calling Bart “the Devil’s cabana boy” and Jessica “a sweet, kind reverend’s daughter,” meaning that they are “too different from each other to get along.” When it turns out that Jessica is not the sweet girl she seemed to be as she steals the collection plate money and leaves Bart to take the blame, Lisa tells Bart that Jessica deserves to get caught and offers to help him. That Bart can openly go and ask his sister such a personal question is an illustration of the attachment that Bart and Lisa share. Moreover, Lisa actively looks out for his brother’s best interests as she notices that he is not fully capable of doing it himself.

Lisa does not always help Bart directly but gives him advice on how to deal with his dilemmas. For example, in “Sweet Seymour Skinner’s Baadasssss Song” (1F18) Bart takes his dog to school for show and tell. When the dog runs away and causes chaos, ~~principal Skinner is fired by the Superintendent.~~ Bart starts to feel sorry for Skinner, who has now joined the army. Lisa advises Bart to “make things the way they were before” in order to get some piece of mind. In a similar fashion she gives Bart advice in “Bart’s Inner Child” (1F05) as Bart

has an identity problem because everybody in Springfield has started to rebel like him:

Bart: "Lis, everyone in town is acting like me, so why does it suck?"

Lisa: "It's simple, Bart. You've defined yourself as a rebel. And in the absence of a repressive milieu, your societal niche has been co-opted."

Bart: "I see."

As the example shows, Lisa's advice can sometimes be too intelligent for Bart to understand. In the end, she simplifies her advice and suggests that a situation like this is a good chance to make a change for the better, like "a good-natured doormat."

Not only does Lisa give Bart advice but she also acts as Bart's conscience. For instance, in "The Boy Who Knew Too Much" (1F19) Bart has witnessed a scene that has led to a court case. He confesses to Lisa that he knows what really happened and could prove the innocence of the accused, but then principal Skinner would find out that he has played truant and send Bart to a Christian military school as punishment. With this on his mind, Bart cannot decide what he should do. Lisa, acting as Bart's conscience, convinces him that he can trust an impartial jury to find the accused innocent, even without his testimony.

So far only Lisa's support to Bart has been mentioned, but also Bart is capable of supporting his sister. In "Bart the General" (7G05) Lisa bakes some cup cakes for her teacher. Right after they get off the school bus, a bully comes and ruins Lisa's cup cakes by stamping on them. When Bart sees this, he stands up for Lisa and gets into a heap of trouble. Similarly, Bart supports his sister in the episode "The Secret War of Lisa Simpson" (4F21). As Bart is sent off to a military school, Lisa wants to enroll as well. Her stay does not turn out to be as easy as she has thought because she is the first girl student in the history of the school. This raises an issue among the other students who shun Lisa. She turns to Bart for support and company, and Bart promises that he will "stick by" her. Bart keeps his promise and secretly helps Lisa in practicing for the semester's

final test, which is crossing a 150 ft. high rope over thorn bushes. Later, when Lisa is doing the test, he finds the courage to publicly cheer her on.

In “Lisa the Beauty Queen” (9F02) she is getting ready for the pageant but is insecure about her looks. Worried about the contest, she turns to Bart:

Lisa: “But those other girls are prettier than me.”

Bart: “Lis, as your brother this is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to say: you’re not ugly.”

Bart is willing to help his sister with her self-esteem problem to the extent that he sacrifices some of his pride on the way. He also assists his sister in preparing for the beauty contest by teaching her how to walk elegantly on high heels and by giving her a tip on using petroleum jelly for “that frictionless smile.”

A fine example of their attachment to each other in spite of a terrible row occurs in “Bart vs. Thanksgiving” (7F07, cf. Shaffer 1994:465). Bart destroys the centerpiece that Lisa has made for the dinner table and is sent off to his room because he refuses to apologize to her. Bart feels that he has not done anything wrong and runs away to spend the day on the town with Santa’s Little Helper, the family dog. Homer and Marge report him missing to the police after seeing him on television with some homeless people. When Bart returns home late at night, he still is unsure of whether to apologize to Lisa or not. He climbs onto the roof to think it over and hears the concerned Lisa crying over her missing brother. Bart calls her up to the roof and after she has explained how he hurt her feeling, he realizes that he owes her an apology. Even after such an unfortunate chain of events, they both feel deeply enough for each other that Lisa cries, no matter how mean Bart has been, and his bone-headed attitude melts away at the sound of his sister’s sobbing.

Most of the time Lisa helps Bart out, by giving him advice on various issues, but their relationship is more balanced than that of their parents’. Judging by the amount of support, Bart and Lisa are quite close and affectionate towards each other. The following dialogue, which illustrates this,

is taken from a scene where Bart takes the blame for Lisa stealing all the teacher's editions of the schoolbooks (8F15):

Lisa: "Bart, why did you take the blame?"

Bart: "Cause I didn't want you to wreck your life. You got the brains and the talent to go as far as you want, no matter what anyone says. And when you do, I'll be right there to borrow money."

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:83)

As Shaffer (1994:465) points out, brothers and sisters "often do nice things for one another" in spite of the conflicts they may experience, adding that the positive aspects prevail. Sibling relationships are paradoxical in the sense that they can, on one hand, be very close and affectionate, but on the other hand, conflictual and volatile.

6.2 Rivalry

As in any sibling relationship, Bart and Lisa have their share of rivalry, which is a normal part of family life (Shaffer 1994:465), and it seems that Maggie is again too young to participate in it actively. Bart experiences sibling rivalry for the first time in "Lisa's First Word" (9F08), which starts even before Lisa is born due to Homer and Marge's increasing attention to her. Bart hates having to share the parents' attention with the new baby, which makes him think of ways to take advantage of the newcomer, for example, by blaming wall-drawings on her and using her as a bike ramp support. When Lisa is finally born, Bart's first words to her in the hospital are "I hate you," since she is now the center of attention. At the doctor's office, Lisa gets the last lollipop and Bart an injection, and even Patty and Selma do not care to listen to his new song, as they used to, because they are more interested in what Lisa is doing. This drives Bart to cut off Lisa's hair, as well as trying to mail her away and stuffing her through the Flanders's doggie door, just to get her out of his life.

After all these attempts fail, he decides to run away from home and says to Lisa that he, Homer and Marge were doing just fine, until she came along and “wrecked everything.” As Bart is going for the door, Lisa speaks her first word, “Bart.” This display of affection from his baby sister stops him from running away and he feels pride of being Lisa’s first word. This example follows closely the steps that Shaffer (1994:464) outlines about sibling rivalry: it starts as more attention is paid to the new baby, causing a feeling of insecurity in the first-born, which, in turn, can manifest itself as resentment or even animosity. These acts are attempts to protest and also recapture the parents’ love and attention.

Rivalry for attention has caused friction between Bart and Lisa also later on. Bart is used to getting the most of it and whenever Lisa is given more attention than Bart, he becomes jealous. In “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” (1F12) Lisa wants to develop a better barbie doll because, in her opinion, the new talking Malibu Stacy is a bad gender role model for girls. After having designed one with the original creator of Malibu Stacy, Stacy Lovell, Lisa is about to have it named after her and Bart cannot stand that Lisa is getting everybody’s attention and is jealous of her. He tries to divert attention to himself by making some demeaning name suggestions for the new doll (e.g. Stupid Lisa Garbage Face, Ugly Doris and Loudmouth Lisa) and by raising his voice, yelling out “look at me, look at me, I’m Bart!” while jumping all over the living room furniture. Unlucky for Bart, even this is not enough to shift attention away from Lisa to himself.

One more example of such rivalry takes place at the breakfast table in the episode “Sideshow Bob Roberts” (2F02). Lisa is making notes for her school project in local politics while listening to a political, extreme right-wing radio show. Marge notices what she is doing and tells her how pleased she is that Lisa has a chance to do so many projects and that she works so hard on them (even though Marge does not like her listening to such radio shows with “conflicting ideas”).

Lisa: "I'm doing a report on local politics for my school project."

Bart: "You think you're so big 'cause your class always gets to do projects. Well ... aah ... I'm doing a school project on ... (taking out a bag of fire crackers) fireworks!"

Marge (while destroying Bart's crackers): "Bart, I wish you wouldn't lie like that."

Again, Bart tries to grab the attention by making fun of Lisa's class working on so many projects and wants to be Lisa's equal by stating that also he is doing on a project for school, a fire works display. The result, however, is none better than in the previous example.

There are also times when Lisa is the more competitive one. In "Duffless" (9F14), both Bart and Lisa take part in a school science fair and naturally want to get the first prize. The rivalry starts off with Lisa trying to "mess with Bart's mind" while he is asleep. Bart dreams of winning the fair with a ray-gun which makes people dance uncontrollably. As it turns out, Lisa has fed Bart the idea of winning by whispering it into his ear with the intention of raising Bart's hopes. Lisa thinks that this way Bart, after having dreamt of it, would be twice as disappointed when she wins the first prize instead of him. Later on, the rivalry extends to Lisa's science project, where she uses Bart as a subject. She wants to humiliate Bart in public because he has destroyed her first project, which was a giant tomato. Now, she wants to study which of the two is smarter: Bart or a hamster?

Rivalry has also resulted in arguments in, for instance, "Life on the Fast Lane" (7G11). As Lisa and Bart are preparing a birthday breakfast for Marge, they start to compare their gifts and argue over which present Marge is going to like better. Occasionally they have come a step closer to actually fighting because of rivalry, as in "Bart vs. Thanksgiving" (7F07) – episode already dealt with in sections 5.1 and 6.1 as well. Lisa has spent hours working on a centerpiece for the dinner table, which, in Lisa's opinion, displays some of the underappreciated women in American history. She places her centerpiece on the only available spot on the crowded table. As Bart brings the turkey to the

table and sees that there is no room left for it, he tells Lisa to move the centerpiece or “lose it.” This starts a struggle which ends with the centerpiece being flown in the fireplace and burned. Once again, Bart wants to be the center of attention: his turkey deserves to be in the middle of the table, not Lisa’s centerpiece. Had their parents not stopped them in time, the incident could have escalated into an actual fight.

However, in the episode “Lisa on Ice” (2F05) the tension between Bart and Lisa gradually rises to the point where they do get physical and Marge has to stop them. This is because Bart is suddenly in competition with Lisa as she takes up ice-hockey after being warned about failing physical education. First of all, Bart has been Homer’s favorite child because he has done well in hockey but now that Lisa has started to succeed in it as well, the tension between the siblings increases as Homer begins to favor Lisa. Also, Bart is the top scorer of his team and Lisa plays the goal-keeper in her team. Finally, their teams play against each other in the season’s final which culminates in a last minute penalty shot that is to be taken by Bart. Homer’s active role in this case of rivalry comes up a few times as he provokes his children to “fight for their parents’ love,” which is exactly the opposite of what parents are supposed to do in a case of sibling rivalry (Shaffer 1994:464). A possible reason for placing the only physical fight between Bart and Lisa in the context of an ice-hockey episode could very well be to criticize the aggressive nature of the game. In the end, the siblings set aside their rivalry and make up, as it is customary in the Hollywood tradition (Neale and Krutnik 1990:5, 15, 29) and also for siblings in general (cf. Shaffer 1994:465).

Similarly, a potentially hostile situation is resolved in a positive way in “Summer of 4 ft. 2” (3F22) Lisa wants to change her image while on holiday and creates a new “cooler” identity for herself that helps her find new friends. She is having fun with them, and Bart, jealous of her, shows up with Lisa’s yearbook. He tries to ruin her friendship by revealing Lisa’s past as Ms. Perfect Attendance, Spelling Bee Queen, Head Buckaroo of the Grammar Rodeo and Teacher’s Pet. Next morning, at the breakfast table Bart admits that what he did was a bit rough, but reminds Lisa that it is important to be herself. Lisa gets

really mad at him, grabs Bart by the shirt and says: “I know exactly who I am. I’m the sister of a rotten, jealous, mean little sneak. You cost me my only friends! You ruined my life.” This unusual outburst happens after Marge has left the kitchen and stops immediately when she returns. The rivalry continues later that night at the carnival where, for example, Lisa shoots Bart with a water gun and Bart rams Lisa when they are driving bumper cars. In the end, the newly-found friends do not mind Lisa’s “nerdy” past but actually appreciate her knowledge, such as you should not drink sea water, and give her a going-away present (they cover Homer’s car with sea shells and write “Lisa rules” with them). Bart also makes up for his stunt by passing around her yearbook and getting all the friends’ signatures in it.

Whatever the problem between Bart and Lisa, they are usually solved in the traditional Hollywood way (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:15, 29). As Marge’s role as the emotional glue demands of her, she is the one who steps in between the fighters and calms things down as needed, maintaining her children’s relationship. Homer, then again, usually only makes things worse by provoking the siblings in his childish manner and does not help or support Marge in her job. Most of the rivalry between Bart and Lisa is on a verbal level, not so much physical, and the presented examples that would indicate otherwise are the only instances found in the 105 episodes studied.

6.3 Sibling role models

Generally, Lisa tries to be a good role model for her brother, whereas Bart usually gives more of a negative role model for her. Again, Maggie as the youngest child is not too involved in the events but there is at least one role model for her: television, which she already has identified as the object of her affection (cf. section 6.1). Moreover, in “Itchy & Scratchy & Marge” (7F09), she imitates what she has seen on television by hitting Homer on the head with a mallet, assimilating the role model television has presented directly.

As older siblings often act as teachers of social conduct, helping the younger siblings to adopt the assumed behavior and promoting their competence (Shaffer 1994:466), Bart teaches Lisa the model he knows the best. For example, Bart has a habit of making crank calls to Moe's Tavern, asking Moe to call out made up names (Oliver Klozoff, Al Koholic and Seymour Butts) that embarrass the bartender in front of his customers. While Bart is making the phone calls, Lisa is listening to them, laughing at the jokes and clearly enjoying herself. Although even her parents consider Lisa "the good kid," she once in a while seems to enjoy the bad role model that Bart offers (2F19).

Another instance of bad role model takes place in "Lisa's Rival" (1F17), when a new girl, Allison, comes to Lisa's class. Lisa soon finds out that Allison is better than her in almost everything and Lisa feels threatened by her. Bart wants to help his sister but only acts as a negative role model to her. He offers his "bartesque" trickery to help Lisa "find some dirt" on Allison with the intention of using it against her. However, Bart cannot find anything bad about her, "she's clean as a whistle," and they have to think of other ways to discredit Allison. Their opportunity comes as Allison takes part in a diorama contest in school. Bart replaces her entry of Poe's "The Telltale Heart" with a box containing a bloody cow's heart. It is very uncharacteristic of Lisa to allow Bart help her this way. It seems that Lisa is not as immaculate as her image on the surface would appear; she is willing to compromise her integrity if something important is threatened, like her position as the smartest child in her class in this example.

Even though Lisa is the younger of the two, she is the one who most often acts as a role model to her brother. This is, in fact, contrary to the theoretical expectations as older siblings usually pay little or no attention to the younger siblings and often select parent or other adults as social models (Shaffer 1994:466). In "Life on the Fast Lane" (7G11) Marge is about to have an affair with her bowling instructor and her relationship with Homer takes a turn for the worse. One morning, as Lisa and Bart are leaving for school, Marge showers them with candy and extra money for school lunch. From this

behavior, Lisa comes to the correct conclusion that their parents' marriage is falling apart. She explains to Bart about the eight stages that "kids whose parents no longer love each other" go through. Lisa, being the sensible one just like her mother, acts as a role model and adviser for Bart in going through the stages.

Many times when Lisa offers Bart a positive role model, it simply does not fit his character and he cannot act accordingly. In the episode "The Boy Who Knew Too Much" (1F19) Lisa encourages Bart to reveal what he knows about an alleged crime he witnessed. She wants Bart to follow her example in being honest but since it is not in his best interest to come forth with his information, he refuses to follow Lisa's advice.

Although in the previous example Lisa wants her brother to follow in her footsteps, she reacts in an unpredictable way when Bart actually does this (8F15). After Bart has had a taste of authority while spending an exciting evening in a police squad car and enjoyed it, he starts doing better in school and helps Principal Skinner as the hall monitor. Meanwhile, Lisa starts to rebel by, for instance, smoking, telling her teacher to "shove it" and letting her grades drop. It appears that Lisa loses some of her identity as Bart begins to act more according to her principles and looks for something new in what used to be characteristic for Bart.

In the same way, Lisa looks up to Bart as a role model when she is not pleased with her old self and wants to create a new, more likeable image for herself (3F22). She does this by copying Bart because he has always been popular with other children. She copies Bart's manners and catch-phrases – such as "Don't have a cow, man!" and "Ay, carumba!" – and also buys new clothes "befitting a generation X wanna-bee [sic]" (Richmond and Coffman 1997:207). This time around, Bart does not like being a role model for Lisa this way and, as revenge, eventually discredits her new image in front of her new friends.

Lisa probably tries to act as a positive role model for his brother because she would like to see Bart change his ways and because he sometimes simply needs the guidance, just as their father. Then again, Bart's model for

Lisa is quite the opposite and for different reasons: Bart does not actively try to be a role model, he is only himself in Lisa's company. Being a role model is a part of their support for each other, be it in good or bad, but they do not apparently always appreciate being a role model when their identity is threatened by the other actually copying it. Bart and Lisa's relationship differs from the theoretical expectations in the sense that it is fairly equal; the older sibling is not the only one being looked up to as presumed by Shaffer (1994:465-466).

7 RITUALS

The final chapter deals with the rituals in the Simpson family. Family rituals, defined by Fiese and Kline (1993:290-291) as patterned and organized social interaction with their own specific symbolic meaning, are divided into patterned interactions, family traditions and family celebrations. We study the eight different behavioral dimensions in each family ritual, which are occurrence (how often it takes place), roles (assignment of roles and duties), routine (regularity), attendance (whether participation is compulsory or not), affect (emotional investment), symbolic significance (meaning of the activity), continuation (perseverance across generations) and deliberateness (advance preparation and planning), on each separate occasion (Fiese and Kline 1993:291).

7.1 Patterned interactions

Patterned interactions differ from other family ritual settings in being most frequent but least consciously planned (Fiese and Kline 1993:290). We have found examples of dinnertime, going to church together, bed talk between Homer and Marge, spending special family time together and watching television.

Dinner takes place in almost every episode of the show. Attendance is not compulsory, but usually each member of the family is present. The symbolic significance of dinner is to discuss pressing and current topics with others, whereas the actual meaning of the ritual is naturally to eat. There is no specific advance planning, although it seems to have set times. Normally Marge is responsible for preparing the dinner and taking care of the shopping involved. Rarely does anybody else even help her, let alone be in charge of it, and she also cleans up after the dinner. Therefore Marge is the only active participant in the family to organize this ritual. The others have roles only during the dinner in eating and taking part in the discussion, even Maggie by nodding, gesturing and so on.

The emotional investment in the dinner discussions varies according to topics. For example, in the episode “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish” (7F01) the dinner ritual leads to a discussion on politics. Homer usually is indifferent to political issues but this time he has a good reason to argue with Marge: his emotional investment lies in defending his idea that his boss, Mr Burns, should run for governor, which Marge is strongly criticizing. In another example from “Kamp Krusty” (8F24), Marge reveals her strong emotional investment in the whole dinner ritual. Bart and Lisa are leaving for the summer camp and Marge breaks out in tears because she is going to miss having family dinners while the children are away. Some other dinner time topics have included Marge’s gambling problem and how to prevent the family from disintegrating in “\$pringfield (or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love Legalized Gambling)” (1F08). Also, Homer’s inane ideas come up often during the discussions, where they are criticized usually by Marge or Lisa. For instance, in the episode “The Crepes of Wrath” (7G13) Homer talks about his family and how Adil, the exchange student from Albania, seems to be a better son than Bart, who has been sent to France. In his opinion, this is the kind of family he has always hoped for and blames the family’s problems on Bart.

Homer has succeeded in faking the dinner ritual in “Secrets of a Successful Marriage” (1F20). Homer invited his whole marriage class to his

home to observe the family while having dinner. However, he omits to tell his family about this plan and they find out only as they sit down to enjoy the dinner. The surprise and the invasion of privacy makes the situation very awkward and uncomfortable, especially for Marge and Lisa. The shock again causes the dinner to appear to be unnatural and acted out. It was planned in advance by Homer, with the intention of letting the class observe the family during its normal activities. This actually happens, by accident, as Bart infuriates Homer by revealing that Homer had double-dared him and Milhouse to destroy mail. Emotional investment is that Marge and Lisa hate the situation, beyond their worst nightmares, while Bart is indifferent and Homer has no idea of having caused the incident.

The ritual of going to church is also a form of patterned interactions (Fiese and Kline 1993:290). Since it takes place more than once a year and it is not unique, it cannot be categorized as a family tradition. It also is not planned as such, it is simply something that the family regularly does. They go to church every Sunday, mostly because Marge insists on it, which makes attendance compulsory, even though Homer has challenged her on this a couple of times (7F20 and 9F01). It is also Marge's duty to get everyone there in time and her role is a kind of a traffic cop. In Marge's words, the symbolic significance of this ritual is "to get a little goodness into the family" and "to learn morals and decency, and how to love your fellow man." (9F01.) This shows that going to church is very important and positive for the whole family, in her opinion, both as a group and as individuals. Homer does not share her emotional investment and would rather sleep in and watch Sunday football on television instead while Lisa seems to attend out of her own will because she is genuinely interested in religious questions. Then again, Bart has alternate motives: Sunday school is another opportunity to drive the teacher out of her mind, it is also the place to meet Jessica, his girlfriend, and Marge would make him go anyway.

Bed talk, another form of patterned interactions (Fiese and Kline 1993:290), takes place between Homer and Marge only and it is their private discussion forum. When compared to the dinner ritual, it is equally frequent but

the topics of discussion and the manner in which they are dealt with are different. The topics may include more intimate issues and Marge is more free to express her feelings and opinions than at dinner. Some of the topics include their sex life, daily issues (for example, problems in parenting, relationships or at work) and planning future events, like holidays. In addition, some specific issues that have come up earlier that day, like politics or the use of money, are continued in more detail. The symbolic significance of bed talk is the interaction between the spouses in the privacy of their bedroom. Bed talk does not seem to be deliberate in the sense that Homer and Marge would plan their conversation in advance. Rather, it is quite spontaneous in that either of them simply introduces a topic that is on their minds. For instance, in the episode "Homer Alone" (8F14) Marge wakes Homer up in the middle of the night to tell him that she needs to go on a vacation on her own. Marge's role is to be a good listener and once again, the sensible one. Homer can also be attentive but he usually fails to see Marge's point of view and is of little help with Marge's problems. A fine example of this is in "The Boy Who Knew Too Much" (1F19) where Homer starts off the bed talk by telling Marge about his experiences while on jury duty. Once he is finished and it is Marge's turn to speak, Homer does not care to listen to what Marge has to say. He puts on his novelty glasses which make him look as if he were awake, thus displaying no emotional investment but rather selfish behavior towards bed talk after his turn.

Another type of patterned interactions we found was family time. According to Marge, family time means "spending quality time together as a family." In "And Maggie Makes Three" (2F10), there is a good example of this when no one knows what to do after the television has broken down and Marge comes up with the idea of spending time together without the television. Family time does not take place in the show as often as, for instance, dinner and bed talk rituals do, but it is as unplanned and spontaneous. Since family time occurs spontaneously, it is neither regular nor deliberate. The symbolic significance is to have a break from the everyday routines of the family and do something different together, as in the episode "The Call of the Simpsons"

(7G09) they decide to go out camping for the weekend with their newly-bought mobile home. The attendance may vary but mostly the whole family takes part in this ritual. Marge and Homer are in charge of family time, for instance, in “Maggie Makes Three” (2F10) they tell Maggie’s birth story while Bart and Lisa listen. The emotional investment in the ritual is higher for Marge and Homer, due to their leader roles, while Bart’s is very low since he would prefer to do something else on his own instead.

(Homer, Bart and Lisa watch TV as Marge walks in holding Maggie.)

Marge: “Okay, TV off. It’s family time.”

Homer: “Oh, but Marge, Knight–boat - the crime solving boat.”

Marge: “Homer, you promised. One night of family time a week. Besides, that back-talking boat sets a bad example.”

Bart: “Says you, woman.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:164)

Here, Homer’s emotional investment in family time is very low because his favorite past time, watching television, is interrupted. Usually starting the ritual is difficult for Homer but once he has passed that, he actually enjoys himself, as in “And Maggie Makes Three” (2F10).

The ritual of watching television shares many of the same qualities as family time, such as being consciously unplanned and spontaneous. However, the occurrence is much higher, which is usually at least once per episode. It is also far more regular than family time, for example, Bart and Lisa always watch the Itchy & Scratchy cartoons on The Krusty Show. The symbolic significance is entertainment - pleasant passing of time, not so much receiving new information (for example, Homer may watch some Spanish channel for hours without understanding a single word). The attendance varies but Homer watches television the most, while Marge not nearly as often, usually because she is so busy with housekeeping. Also Bart and Lisa watch a lot of television but not as much as their father, who watches a lot of nonsense while they watch what they really like. Although Homer watches it to relax, he still feels strongly

about television. For instance, in “Itchy & Scratchy: The Movie” (9F03) Homer lets Bart criticize anything he wants but not television, which Homer regards as a medium of truth and benevolence. The importance of television for Homer is illustrated by his comment: “It’s not easy to juggle a pregnant wife and a troubled child, but somehow I managed to squeeze in eight hours of TV a day” (9F08). Marge’s approach towards television is more reserved; she is even willing to censor what the family watches on it (7F09).

Marge coordinates the activities that have to be prepared for as the others do not usually take the initiative. Without her, most of the patterned interactions of the family would not even take place, except the more passive forms, such as watching television. The main reason for this is Homer’s inactive and indifferent attitude: a lot of times he expects everything to be brought to him on a silver platter and other times he just does not care. Bart and Lisa do their job as their parents’ little helpers, as long as Marge asks or orders them to.

7.2 Family traditions

Family traditions, such as birthdays, anniversaries and family reunions, are unique rituals for each family but not culture-specific (Fiese and Kline 1993:290-291). As Homer notes in the episode “Lisa’s Wedding” (2F15), the Simpsons do not have many traditions. In the 105 episodes examined in this study, we found birthdays (everybody else’s but Homer’s were celebrated once), family vacations and reunions (twice with Homer’s older half-brother Herb and once with Homer’s mother), but no anniversaries. One reason for the small number of family traditions could be explained by the series’ approach to time; the concept of time is inconsequential, as, for example, the characters do ~~not age and seasons do not necessarily follow each other.~~

Birthdays are celebrations which are prepared in advance, because guests have to be invited, food has to be prepared, and they also happen on a specific day. This means that the occurrence is set, once per year, and that the

routine is regular and deliberate as well. The symbolic significance is to celebrate a person's special day and to make it memorable. The birthday ritual is the only family tradition that is likely to continue on through generations. Maggie's birthday takes place in the episode "Lady Bouvier's Lover" (1F21), Bart's in "Radio Bart" (8F11), Lisa's in "Stark Raving Dad" (7F24) and Marge's in "Life on the Fast Lane" (7G11). The attendance is different at each party. Maggie has the Simpson family, Grampa Simpson, Gramma Bouvier, Patty and Selma present, but no other babies because Maggie does not get along with them. Her birthday is first celebrated at home by her family (Patty and Selma join them later at a restaurant) while Bart has his party at Wall E. Weasel's, which is a children's restaurant, with several class mates in addition to his family, Grampa, Patty and Selma. In Lisa's case, the rest of the family forgets her birthday as Homer is put into a mental hospital and she has to celebrate her birthday with Maggie. Maggie's affect dimension of her own party is that she is a bit scared of the situation with the flashing light bulbs, extra attention and strangely-acting people around her. Marge acts quite nonchalantly on her birthday, enjoying the attention (for example, Bart and Lisa prepare a breakfast meal for her in bed) but gets angry at Homer, who selfishly buys a present for her that he actually wants for himself. Bart is disappointed at his party because he gets boring gifts, such as a sweater and a label gun, and the restaurant is tacky. Lisa is naturally very sad because the others forget her birthday and she is very disappointed at Bart in particular as he had promised to get her a nice present this time.

Family vacations are regular for the Simpsons. Although they have been on many vacations, some of them are only referred to, such as the trip to Graceland, the Amish country and the Mystic Caverns. In the episode "Itchy & Scratchy Land" (2F01), the family goes to a theme park and in "The Call of the Simpsons" (7G09) they go out camping. The meaning of the ritual is to get out of the rut and relax as a family. ~~The Simpsons go on a vacation once a year,~~ since Marge says that she has a suggestion for this year's vacation destination (2F01). All the other family members are allowed to make suggestions as well and the decision is made arbitrarily.

In “Itchy & Scratchy Land” (2F01) Lisa and Bart have active roles in really trying to persuade Homer and Marge into going to the Itchy and Scratchy Land. Marge has to be convinced that it would be a better place for a vacation than her suggestion of a bird park which everybody else found very boring. When Marge tells the children to ask their father’s opinion about going to the theme park, they lie to Homer by saying that Marge has approved of it already and so trick him into approving of it. On another occasion, Bart and Lisa use a different but just as underhanded method with Homer in “Brush with Greatness” (7F18), when they want to go to an aquapark called Mount Splashmore. After seeing it advertized by Krusty the Clown on television they start to ask Homer repeatedly “can we go to Mount Splashmore yet?” all through the day until he gives in. The emotional investment is high for the children, but the parents have other issues to think about, especially Marge who does not want to be embarrassed on every vacation by her family. In “The Call of the Simpsons” (7G09) Homer has the greatest emotional investment as he decides to take the family out camping, no opinions asked, and because he has just bought a new mobile home to show off to Ned Flanders. The others are not as enthusiastic about the trip as Homer, who seems determined to go out and have fun, no matter what. Homer is in charge of the trip and he eventually risks the lives of his whole family by nearly driving the camper off a cliff.

Reunions found in the series are not of the usual kind where a large number of family members get together as a tradition. It is not a big family occasion for the Simpsons who meet with only one new person at a time. In the episode “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou” (7F16) Homer is told that he has a half-brother and he decides to find him. Homer’s brother, Herb, appears in another episode as well (“Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes,” 8F23) where he comes to visit the Simpsons. Homer finds out that his mother is not dead after he fakes his own death and she comes to mourn him. All of these reunions come as a surprise to the Simpsons, especially Homer, and the only deliberate action is finding where Herb lives and meeting with him. Homer has the greatest emotional investment in these reunions because both people are his close relatives whom he did not know even existed. For example, when he meets

Herb for the first time, he is overwhelmed by joy. Meeting his mother unexpectedly almost turns him into a child again (doing hand-stands on the sidewalk and yelling “look at me, Mom!”). The others do not react as strongly as Homer, but they are happy about meeting new relatives and show interest and curiosity. The symbolic significance in this case is hard to define because none of the characters actually say anything about the meaning of these reunions.

The family traditions that the Simpsons have experienced in the series seem to have one common aspect: something seems to go wrong every time. The birthdays have never been entirely successful as the persons being celebrated have never had the kind of birthday that they would have wanted. Also, the disastrous vacations seem to be a source of stress rather than relaxation and the reunions that Homer has had with his relatives have ended on a somewhat unhappy note, which is a deviation from the Hollywood tradition (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:15, 29). Marge’s role in the family traditions is not as strong as in the patterned interactions. Instead, Homer is more in the spotlight with his irresponsible attitude and childish nature. Also the children are more involved in the family traditions, taking more initiative and participating in decision-making.

7.3 Family celebrations

Family celebrations include more culture-specific events than traditions, for example, national and religious holidays as well as weddings (Fiese and Kline 1993:291). Different holidays we found were the Fourth of July in “Summer of 4 ft. 2” (3F22), Christmas in “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire” (7G08), Thanksgiving in “Bart vs. Thanksgiving” (7F07), and Halloween in episodes “~~Treehouse of Horror I-VII~~” (7F04, 8F02, 9F04, 1F04, 2F03, 3F04 and 4F02). There is also an episode on Lisa’s wedding but it is imaginary and takes place in the future. The Simpsons basically lead a regular life and celebrate these

rituals like every typical family in America. The restriction of the show not progressing linearly timewise means that there is, for instance, only one Christmas and Thanksgiving episode. The only exceptions to this rule are the Halloween specials that have taken place every production season except the first one.

The Simpsons spend the Fourth of July in the Flanders's beach house in Little Pwagmattasquarmsettport. Naturally, the whole family goes on the trip (with the addition of Bart's friend Milhouse), which is not planned well ahead since the Flanders have to cancel their trip to the beach house at the last moment and offer it to the Simpsons. Homer has the greatest emotional investment in the holiday and seems to be most excited about it. He even purchases illegal fireworks to celebrate the occasion "in the American way." While Homer is just "goofing off" and causing damage to the beach house, Marge takes, or has to take the responsibility for the household once again. Lisa is more interested in building a new identity and spending time with her new friends than she is about the holiday itself. Bart does not enjoy the holiday either, since he is more concerned with being jealous of Lisa. The occurrence, routine and continuation dimensions cannot be analyzed because the Fourth of July comes up in the series only once.

Christmas has also been celebrated only once in the Simpsons. The children do not have any specific roles other than to assist their parents in the preparations, for example, decorating the Christmas tree. Homer has many traditional duties during the holidays: he is in charge of getting the Christmas tree, setting up the decorative lights and providing the money needed for the celebrations. This year the responsibility for buying the gifts goes to Homer since he specifically asks Marge for it. Marge's role is also quite traditional in that she cooks the dinner and does the other housework. In addition, Marge has helped Homer by saving money during the year in "the money jar" which she has hidden away from Homer so he could not spend it. ~~Grampa Simpson, Patty and Selma are invited to spend the Christmas Eve with the family and the attendance is not compulsory but expected. As with the Fourth of July, Homer has the greatest emotional investment in this ritual but this time it is because~~

without his anticipated bonus check he does not have enough money for the presents. The situation gets worse as Marge's savings have to be spent on removing a tattoo from Bart's arm. Homer tries to compensate for the loss by getting a job as a Santa Claus but he receives only a \$13 paycheck which he loses at the dog track. Homer's irresponsibility and desperation to fulfill his duties result in him stealing the Christmas tree and buying cheap presents. Finally, he gets Santa's Little Helper, the dog that finished last at the track and was abandoned by its owner, as a gift for the whole family, which saves the family's Christmas.

Thanksgiving, just like Christmas, has been the topic of only one show. The ritual is planned and deliberate with some extended family members (Grampa Simpson, Gramma Bouvier, Patty and Selma) invited to join the celebration. The symbolic significance of Thanksgiving is a peaceful family get together that is likely to continue through generations. Marge's role is to prepare the food while Homer picks up Grampa and watches the traditional football game on television. Bart has nothing to do and offers help to Marge, but is of more trouble than help, and Lisa has volunteered to make the center piece for the dinner table. Since Bart and Lisa get into a fight even before the dinner and the ritual is not as peaceful as intended, the emotional investment shows clearly in Homer's dinner grace: "... Oh, Lord, be honest. Are we the most pathetic family in the universe, or what?" The Thanksgiving episode has many fine examples of the holiday stress that people commonly experience, especially the parents.

Halloween is the only family celebration that appears more than once in the show. The Halloween specials follow the same formula, which consists of three completely separate and fictional horror stories. The third special differs from the others by presenting how the holiday is spent by the Simpsons. Like Christmas, Halloween involves lots of preparation, such as decorating the house and making the costumes, which means that the ritual is organized and deliberate. The Simpsons invite Grampa and some of Bart's friends over for a party where scary stories are told and everybody, except for Grampa, is wearing a Halloween costume. The children's role is to go out trick-or-treating in

costumes and return home with the candy to tell frightening tales, while the parents stay at home and pass out candy to other trick-or-treaters. Halloween is in general aimed at children but Homer shows his childish nature by taking some of the aspects of Halloween too seriously, such as being scared by the stories told.

A common thread among the family celebrations is that the family sets out to celebrate them, a complication or a crisis comes up, which is eventually resolved, thus resulting in a traditional Hollywood happy end (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:15, 29). Rolewise, Marge is yet again the responsible one who arranges and organizes everything, getting some help from the children. Homer, as usual, is the selfish “slacker:” he mostly does nothing for the arrangements of the entire family and if he does participate, he either does so for selfish reasons or makes a terrible mess, or both. The children are more active than in the patterned interactions – Halloween seems to interest them more than going to church – and help Marge with the preparations as needed.

Overall, the rituals seem to verify the expectations we have presented about the family’s roles and relationships. Additionally, some generic and predictable American features came up in the rituals, such as the idyllic churchgoing and sentimental reunions, displaying the cultural background of the family. Both of these aspects contribute to the show’s realistic nature, making it a more believable fictional cartoon sitcom and appealing to the audiences.

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

On the surface, the Simpsons might look like a regular problem family, who are saved by the traditional Hollywood happy end. Nevertheless, this is what the show is supposed to do as a part of popular culture: as Hietala (1990:50-51) points out, products of popular culture are often seen as modern day myths which deal with problematic issues and attempt to ritualize their solutions. The more popular the show, the more likely one is to find central social and

ideological problems as well as attempts to solve them by studying the show's inner structure (Hietala 1990:51). The happy endings of the show are a perfect example of a ritualization that serves the task of popular culture products, such as the Simpsons. Even the characters in the series seem to realize in a self-ironic fashion that such rituals take place in the show. For example, Lisa tells Bart not to worry about the unusually good relationship between their father and neighbor Ned Flanders because everything will be back to normal by the next episode (1F14). In a similar fashion popular culture is explicitly present in the series through the important role of television. For instance, Lisa says it has had a more central role in raising the children than Homer has (1F05) and Krusty the Clown Show, including the embedded Itchy & Scratchy cartoon, is featured in almost every episode.

We started off by studying the traditionality of Homer and Marge's roles in the family and found plenty of evidence to back up our hypothesis. Marge's role is close to a textbook description of a nuclear family housewife (cf. Brubaker 1993:11, Goldthorpe 1987:57): she is responsible for all the household work, taking care of the children and so on. In addition to this, she has to carry some extra responsibilities that would normally be placed on the husband. Marge proved to be the emotional glue of the family that was desperately needed in a number of situations, including supporting Homer in his responsibilities. This resulted in Marge being overloaded with work, responsibility and eventually stress mostly because Homer was not able to carry out his duties.

All in all, a characteristic aspect of Homer and Marge's relationship seems to be inequality, particularly in sharing parenting and causing stress and conflict. Her importance to the whole family was emphasized by the few times she stepped outside her housewife / homemaker role: whenever she was not in charge, the family could not function properly. For example, Homer could not ~~live up to the expectations, leaving the household in a chaotic state that only~~ made him feel inferior to Marge. The balance within the family was not restored until she returned to her traditional role. In fact, the homemaker role seems to be an essential part of her identity and she is very proud of it as well

(8F15). Another reason for making Marge go back to housekeeping could be that the writers of the show want Homer's character to remain irresponsible, indifferent and childish, which would not be plausible or possible without Marge.

Marge's working outside the home poses an interesting question: why and how does she have the urge to take on more work? Her responsibilities at home are not diminished or reduced in any way, rather the overall work load is actually increased. As Brubaker (1993:11, 100) points out, the main reason for women quitting their jobs is the combined work load because nobody else in the family can or will assume their responsibilities at home. However, in the studied episodes Marge never quits her job because of this reason; instead she is, for example, disappointed of her new status as a worker (2F21) or her business does not turn out to be profitable (4F08). As the unhelpful Homer, as noted above, makes the situation even worse, one is compelled to wonder where Marge's motivation to start working comes from. A fairly obvious answer could be that she simply wants to have new experiences and get out of the daily routines of the housewife, in spite of the consequences. Another answer we offer is that the show wants to criticize the traditional housewife's role and position in the family: she has little possibilities of "escaping" her duties, even temporarily. Even though studies indicate (Acock and Demo 1994:130-131) that mothers themselves do not want to be free of the responsibilities of parenthood and describe their role strain as minimal, the show points out the lack of choice and freedom that the mother has when compared to the other members of the family.

Homer's main functional role is to be a comic effect in the show, not the responsible breadwinner and decision-maker of a nuclear family. Even his understanding of his family is truly questionable as he took Ned Flanders to see "his family", who turned out to be the guys at Moe's Tavern (1F14). Homer ~~tries to fulfill his role as the traditional breadwinner but usually with poor~~ results since he is always looking for an easier way out of doing his work. However, he does take a lot of pride in his breadwinner role which seems to be important in his view of a proper head of a family; when he cannot fulfill this

responsibility he feels inadequate and inferior (for example, 7G08 and 2F14). When it comes to decision-making, Homer is clearly not the sole authority: he often asks and even relies on Marge's, Lisa's and also Bart's advice on different issues. He also lets the whole family be a part in making decisions, for example, when moving to other places, which is a decision most often made the husband only (cf. Allan 1985:81-82). Perhaps the reason for involving the family in decision-making is that even Homer has noticed that when he makes decisions on his own, they have a tendency to go badly wrong, which, again, creates many comical situations.

Although Homer has his bad traits, he still is a dedicated family man in his own special way, as pawning the television for therapy money illustrated – which meant that the happiness of his family was more important than the television (7G04). He also might not be as involved in parenting as Marge, but he certainly is, for example, an important role model for Bart. Even though Homer has many negative qualities, he has his character-saving moments as well, which are those brief, passing moments when Homer realizes some of his shortcomings and tries to make amends, as illustrated in the following passage:

“Look, Marge, I’m sorry I haven’t been a better husband, I’m sorry about the time I tried to make gravy in the bathtub, I’m sorry I used your wedding dress to wax the car, and I’m sorry - oh well, let’s just say I’m sorry for the whole marriage up to this point.”

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:126)

Although one could interpret Homer's last remark as a sign of regret for being married to Marge, what he actually means, and what is clear from the context of the situation, is to apologize for all his mistakes and wants Marge to forgive him.

There is an equilibrium, not so much equality (cf. Acock and Demo 1994:78-79), in the spousal relationship between Homer and Marge, they are the marital equivalent of yin and yang. Their relationship on the surface seems far from perfect, since Homer is completely dependent on Marge for emotional

support and he causes the majority of the strain between them. Conflicts are often serious and require a lot of effort to be resolved, but inevitably end happily. Usually, the chain of events in a conflict situation begins by Homer causing it, continues with him struggling with it or not wanting to fix it and is resolved at the end as he “wakes up,” straightens himself out and is forgiven (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:26-29). In nurturing their relationship and keeping up with their communication, we think that bed talk, as a single form of interaction, carries the most meaning as they have little time to spare for each other and Homer usually has hardly any motivation for the other forms of meaningful interaction. Finding time is a problem not only for Homer, who goes to work and Moe’s Tavern almost everyday, but also for Marge, as her dedication to the children and homemaking takes away from their shared time (cf. Brubaker 1993:98-101).

Another problem they face as a married couple are the mixed messages they send to their children. Homer has difficulties understanding Marge’s point of view on various parental issues; what he tells his children can often be opposite of what Marge tells them. One explanation can be Homer’s lack of participation and experience in parenting, which leads to him being “out of sync” with Marge. This is nevertheless not out of the ordinary since fathers, not only Homer, spend less time with their children than mothers (cf. Acock and Demo 1994:131, 136).

While Homer shares some qualities with the average American father, he is almost exactly the opposite of the perfect father who invests in his children, supports them, is responsible as well as accessible and engages in their lives in general (Acock and Demo 1994:118-119). In spite of this shortcoming, he still manages to fulfill his role of the traditional father by being the breadwinner and provider of his family – although with some difficulties. Homer, as noted, is a more democratic decision-maker than fathers in general (cf. Allan 1985:79-80, 82) by allowing other family members to participate in the decision-making, mostly because his own decisions tend to have negative results. However, according to Acock and Demo (1994:142), fulfilling these traditional roles is not enough to meet the socioemotional needs that the other

family members require of the father. The biggest problem caused by the father's absence is in fact the effect it has on the emotional balance of the family, not practical issues like housework. Studies have shown that being a traditional father, while enough to meet the economic demands, offers by no means any guarantee of the father's sufficient participation in other parenting roles, such as communication, nurturance and emotional support. (Acock and Demo 1994:90, 142.) Here, Homer needs Marge's support and assistance perhaps the most: Marge's constant reminding of his duties and responsibilities towards his family is necessary to make Homer aware of them. Without Marge, he would truly be 'the technically present but functionally absent father' (Acock and Demo 1994:142).

In the end, by fulfilling his traditional role and with Marge's help, Homer manages to be the father that his children and his wife love, and it is Marge's seemingly never-ending love and dedication towards her husband that seems to make it all possible. Still, we are sceptical that this would be an arrangement likely to successfully continue for long outside the fictional frames of the sitcoms, since we attribute Marge's endless emotional resources to American sentimentality combined with an intention to present "good family values." A connected aspect that we approach critically involves the questions of whether Homer's character is believable and whether fathers like him exist in the real world? We think that without Marge's supportive character Homer's would not be plausible or even possible. Concerning reality, according to Acock and Demo (1994:136), mothers tend to naturally take more or most of the responsibilities to themselves, even if they do not have to, leaving more room for men to be like Homer. As it seems that Homer-like fathers can and do exist, it would require mothers like Marge to balance the inequality in the marriage. The problems in American families and the growing number of divorces (cf. Brubaker 1993:6, Kearney et al. 1984:203) lead us to the ~~conclusion that mothers in general are not as strong and patient as Marge,~~ which is consistent with our assumption of her emotional resources outside sitcoms.

After all the mistakes and problems portrayed in the show, it would seem that Homer and Marge are doing a good job on raising their children, which even Homer realizes at the end of the Thanksgiving episode when Bart and Lisa make up after the big fight (see p. 89). The differences in parenting between Homer and Marge are usually in the quality and manner, not in love and dedication: Homer's approach is haphazard, slightly irresponsible, indifferent and short-tempered, while Marge is the opposite. In spite of their differences, it is necessary for them to share the parenting, because neither Homer nor Marge can manage completely on their own, as many examples have shown (cf. Goldthorpe 1987:57, Leslie 1976:17). Since Homer has so many problems, for instance, in being sensitive to his children's needs, Marge has to be the parent that they mostly rely on. A fine example of Homer's inability to handle parental responsibilities, and a reminder of his comic role, are his efforts at fatherly advice, such as: "You see, boy. The real money's in bootlegging! Not in your childish vandalism" (4F15).

Also the children seem to have a kind of a role in the Simpson family. Just as their parents are a couple who balance each other, Bart and Lisa are a similar pair: Lisa is the wise and mature 8-year-old, whereas Bart is the careless and less intelligent rascal. They apparently share many of the same qualities as their parents and it is not difficult to notice the traditional role model setting where the boy takes after his father and the daughter after her mother (cf. Goldthorpe 1987:59). There are plenty of instances where Homer's bad role model is explicitly displayed in the show, while Marge's good role model is more implicitly in the background. An explanation for this could be that the bad role model is far easier to poke fun at than the better. From this viewpoint it is easier to understand why Bart sometimes has a hard time adjusting to the society and its restrictions. Then again, Homer's negative role model does not seem to influence Lisa as much as Bart, since she can obviously think for herself and make better judgement calls. In this respect, Lisa's character reminds us of Marge in miniature in many ways: of the two siblings, she is the more sensible one, giving advice and support to the men, as well as being the morally more mature and aware. Nevertheless, she also has some of her

mother's negative characteristics, such as getting involved in other people's business too much and being zealous.

Lisa has different expectations of her parents in her relationship with them. Marge, her primary role model, is also the parent that she confides in on personal and emotional issues, as she already knows that Homer does not have the sensitivity. Although Lisa is not influenced by Homer's bad role model, she is more affected by his indifferent attitude towards his children because she seems to approach this more emotionally, thinking that Homer's lack of interest means that he does not care about her (8F12). Still, she feels strongly enough about her father that she offers him the emotional support and advice he needs. This unusual reversed support is very important in helping Homer in his problems, as Marge does not seem to have the time or will to do it on her own. The presented setting suggests that Lisa, although only a child, is the "bigger person" when compared with her father in this respect. Lisa can also use her knowledge and intelligence to her own advantage whenever she, for example, does not want to follow given orders, which means that she can be more subtle and conniving in her childish actions than Bart. This could be a reason why she does not get into trouble with her parents as much as Bart.

Although Bart could be called the problem child of the family, he is much loved by his parents. For example, Marge calls him her "favorite lil' guy." This is in accordance with Leslie's (1976: 281) view about "... people having unmixed feelings of love for their children, no matter how troublesome they may be." Especially Homer has a true love-hate relationship with Bart: sometimes Homer gets so angry at Bart that he chases "the boy," as Homer calls Bart whenever he is causing trouble, around the house and chokes him. "The boy" can drive the furious Homer into making statements he does not really mean, like the following:

~~[After Bart has terrorized Springfield with a devastating soundwave explosion.]~~

Chief Wiggum: "You know, you do have options. For example, there are behavior-modifying drugs. How wedded are you to the Bart you know?"

Homer: "Not very."

(Richmond and Coffman 1997:238)

Then again, Homer also treasures his son. This could be because Homer sees so much of himself in Bart both in his appearance (“the button nose and potbelly”) and mentality (for instance, defying authority and sense of humor). This could lead to the fact that Homer is more like “a pal” to Bart than an authority figure which in turn causes a more unusual situation where the mother has to be in charge of controlling the son. Traditionally, the father has the authority and perhaps the duty to control an unruly son (Goldthorpe 1987:59). Similarly, Bart does not consider Marge an authority figure either until she becomes a police officer (2F21). Marge’s primary role with Bart is being his emotional support, just as with Lisa.

Maggie as the youngest child has a distinctly different position among the siblings. As she is too young to talk or walk, she cannot participate in Bart and Lisa’s activities and is mostly taken care of by her mother. Since Maggie is separate from the other siblings, she is easily overlooked and left unnoticed. For example, Homer goes as far as forgetting that she even exists:

Homer: “We always have one good kid and one lousy kid. Why can’t both our kids be good?”

Marge: “We have three kids, Homer.”

Homer: “Maaaarge [sic] ... The dog doesn’t count as a kid.”

Marge: “No, Maggie!”

Homer: “Oh, yeah.”

On another occasion, Homer misspells her name on the birthday cake as “Magaggie.” If Maggie is the invisible child in the family, then Bart and Lisa’s presence is quite the opposite. Their relationship is a fine balance between bitter rivalry and deep affection, shifting back and forth. They offer support and help each other but they also have their fair share of fights. This actually corresponds closely to the account that Shaffer (1994:464-467) presents about the paradoxical sibling relationships in real life: “they are often both *close* and *conflictual*.” While he adds that rivalries and conflicts are common, the

positive and supportive interactions are more usual than hateful and rivalrous conduct. As in all the emotional aspects in the family, Marge, once again, has an important positive role in the sibling relationships as the unfavoring and equal parent, whereas Homer really does not. Bart's and Lisa's relationship differs from that of their parent in being more reciprocal and equal, which also includes one theoretically divergent aspect: Bart is not the sole role model, helper and teacher. Instead, the younger Lisa may assume some of these roles occasionally.

Lisa causes an exception from the theoretical assumptions also in the parent-child relationships in the support she gives her father. Theories we examined do not recognize such a relationship dimension between a father and a child: they do view the relationship as a reciprocal form of interaction, but they do not assume that the child would take on such an important supportive role as it is usually appointed to the mother (cf. Brubaker 1993:99, Goldthorpe 1987:57). One possible explanation for this divergence lies in the problems that Homer so often finds himself in with Marge, and it is quite natural that she cannot offer the support Homer needs in these situations since she is personally involved in the conflict. An obvious substitute is the intelligent and observant Lisa, who reminds of her mother in many other ways as well.

Rituals, which are realizations of the roles and relationships in the family (Fiese and Kline 1993:290), show clearly how the roles and relationships established in the earlier parts of the study come across well in the everyday life of the Simpsons. The patterned interactions seem to reveal the most about relationships in the family, whereas the family traditions and celebrations display the roles more prominently. Rolewise, there seems to be two pairs: the sensible, responsible and dependable women and the men with somewhat opposite qualities, which implies that the parents do act as role models for their children, consciously or not. Marge's central role in the family is displayed as she, for instance, organizes, prepares, carries out and cleans up after her family; not much would be done without her. She is also clearly the understanding and responsible emotional leader, as all children and Homer rely on her almost entirely in taking care of the relationships, Homer perhaps the

most. Also Homer fulfills his duties as the traditional father, but does not come close to the perfect family father.

There are quite a few family celebrations – which are culture-specific by definition – in the Simpsons. This supports the argument that the show is supposed to portray a typical American family, as producer James L. Brooks claims (Kaufman 1989:108). In the studied episodes, the Simpsons celebrate most of the main national holidays, like the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, just as the majority of American families do, even according to our own personal experience. Also rituals befitting the description of patterned interactions were many, which in turn suggests that the show does depict a typical functioning family, because the patterned interactions form the basis of everyday family life. Then again, family traditions were not as numerous as the other rituals. As Homer says: “there are not many traditions in this family” (2F15), supporting our finding while additionally hinting at the loose family ties in the Simpson family outside the nuclear family. This leads us to believe that the show emphasizes the nuclear family by presenting the connections to the small extended kin as few and distant, because only Patty, Selma and Grampa appear regularly, but in passing scenes and quite insignificant roles.

On the whole, the rituals in the show strongly suggest that the Simpsons represent a typical American nuclear family, who experience the everyday life of the average family, placing a strong emphasis on the nuclear family unit. Thus, the statement by Neale and Krutnik (1990:239) that the ideal of nuclear families is strengthened and favored in sitcoms comes true in the case of the Simpsons. The show follows the popular pattern where the initial ideal situation is disturbed, but always returned to, with the balance restored (cf. Neale and Krutnik 1990:26-29). Deviations from the balanced ideal situation are usually there for the sake of humor – as Hietala (1990:62-63) claims – although, additionally we feel that the deviations include some implicit ~~criticism concerning the nuclear family ideal, for example, by pointing out~~ some of its weaknesses (cf. reliance on one provider and Marge’s lack of freedom). On a larger scale, the deviations from the norm and criticism of the nuclear family as an institution can be seen as a part of the on-going discussion

of the changing values in the American society (cf. Gillis 1996:23, Kearney et al. 1984:227). By bringing this discussion out to the public forum, the show makes the audience more aware of the issues it handles, intentionally or not. However, on a more cynical point, the show could be a carefully calculated creation designed to appeal to the Americans and only to benefit financially from the naivety of the masses. All these options for the motivation behind the series are possible when considering the status of the entertainment business in the United States.

In the end, the Simpsons represent a believable American nuclear family from a sociological point of view because of their faults and the problems they experience, while still managing to function and also fulfill its societal purpose. As success through problems and hard work is a very “American” value (Kearney et al. 1984:24-25), the Simpson family, by conquering all the hardships, emphasizes the importance and preserves the image of the American nuclear family.

One possible topic for future research could be to study the changing values and the discussion about them in different media, not only in the Simpsons. Another area could be to take a postmodernist look at the show and consider, for example, how postmodernism is present in the series through the self-aware and self-ironic comments or actions, as well as intertextuality. Then again, the present study would have benefitted from interviews of some writers or producers, which could have given some additional depth through, for example, explicit and direct answers to specific questions.

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Some Enchanted Evening (7G01)
Bart the Genius (7G02)
Homer's Odyssey (7G03)
There's No Disgrace Like Home (7G04)
Bart the General (7G05)
Moaning Lisa (7G06)
Telltale Head, The (7G07)
Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire (7G08)
Call of the Simpsons, The (7G09)
Homer's Night Out (7G10)
Life on the Fast Lane (7G11)
Krusty Gets Busted (7G12)
Crepes of Wrath, The (7G13)

Second season:

Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish (7F01)
Treehouse of Horror I (7F04)
Dancin' Homer (7F05)
Bart the Daredevil (7F06)
Bart vs. Thanksgiving (7F07)
~~Itchy & Scratchy & Marge (7F09)~~
Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment (7F13)
Oh Brother, Where Art Thou (7F16)
Brush with Greatness (7F18)

War of the Simpsons, The (7F20)

Blood Feud (7F22)

Third season:

Stark Raving Dad (7F24)

Treehouse of Horror II (8F02)

Like Father Like Clown (8F05)

Lisa's Pony (8F06)

Saturdays of Thunder (8F07)

Radio Bart (8F11)

Lisa the Greek (8F12)

Homer Alone (8F14)

Separate Vocations (8F15)

Colonel Homer (8F19)

Black Widower (8F20)

Fourth season:

Streetcar Named Marge, The (8F18)

Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes (8F23)

Kamp Krusty (8F24)

Homer the Heretic (9F01)

Lisa the Beauty Queen (9F02)

Itchy & Scratchy: The Movie (9F03)

Treehouse of Horror III (9F04)

Marge Gets a Job (9F05)

Lisa's First Word (9F08)

Brother from the Same Planet (9F12)

Duffless (9F14)

Whacking Day (9F18)

Krusty Gets Kancelled (9F19)

Marge in Chains (9F20)

Fifth season:

Homer's Barbershop Quartet (9F21)

Homer Goes to College (1F02)

Marge on the Lam (1F03)

Treehouse of Horror IV (1F04)

Bart's Inner Child (1F05)

Boy-scoutz n The Hood (1F06)

Last Temptation of Homer, The (1F07)

\$pringfield (or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love Legalized
Gambling) (1F08)

Homer the Vigilante (1F09)

Homer and Apu (1F10)

Bart Gets Famous (1F11)

Lisa vs. Malibu Stacey (1F12)

Deep Space Homer (1F13)

Homer Loves Flanders (1F14)

Bart Gets an Elephant (1F15)

Burns' Heir (1F16)

Sweet Seymour Skinner's Baadasssss Song (1F18)

Boy Who Knew Too Much, The (1F19)

Secrets of a Successful Marriage (1F20)

Lady Bouvier's Lover (1F21)

Sixth season:

Lisa's Rival (1F17)

Itchy & Scratchy Land (2F01)

Sideshow Bob Roberts (2F02)

Treehouse of Horror V (2F03)

Bart's Girlfriend (2F04)
 Lisa On Ice (2F05)
 Homer Badman (2F06)
 Homer the Great (2F09)
 And Maggie Makes Three (2F10)
 Homie the Clown (2F12)
 Homer vs. Patty and Selma (2F14)
 Lisa's Wedding (2F15)
 Two Dozen and One Greyhounds (2F18)
 PTA Disbands, The (2F19)
 Springfield Connection, The (2F21)
 Lemon of Troy (2F22)

Seventh season:

Home Sweet Homediddly-dum-doodily (3F01)
 Bart Sells His Soul (3F02)
 Lisa the Vegetarian (3F03)
 Treehouse of Horror VI (3F04)
 King-size Homer (3F05)
 Mother Simpson (3F06)
 Sideshow Bob's Last Gleaming (3F08)
 Two Bad Neighbors (3F09)
 Summer of 4 ft. 2 (3F22)

Eight season:

You Only Move Twice (3F23)
~~El Viaje Misterioso De Nuestro Jomer (The Mysterious Voyage of Homer)~~
 (3F24)
 Springfield Files, The (3G01)
 Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(annoyed grunt)cious (3G03)

Treehouse of Horror VII (4F02)
Twisted World of Marge Simpson, The (4F08)
Homer's Phobia (4F11)
Homer vs. the Eighteenth Amendment (4F15)
In Marge We Trust (4F18)
Homer's Enemy (4F19)
Secret War of Lisa Simpson, The (4F21)

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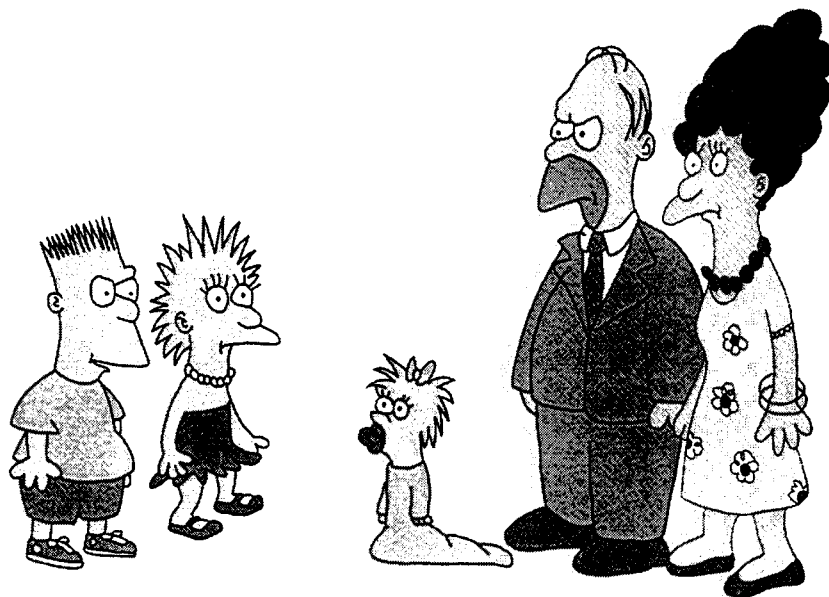
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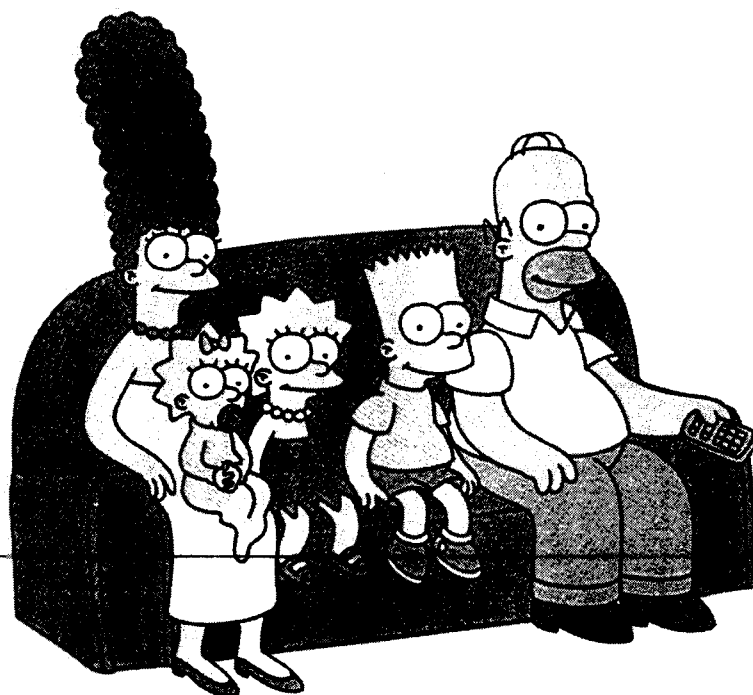
Appendix 1. PICTURES OF THE SIMPSON FAMILY

The Simpsons ca. 1987:



(from left to right) Bart, Lisa, Maggie, Homer and Marge

The Simpsons today:



(from left to right) Marge, Maggie, Lisa, Bart and Homer

Appendix 2. CHARTS USED IN THE ANALYSIS

ROLES

THE ROLES / DIMENSIONS	Homer / Marge	situations
decision-maker		
bread-winner		
emotional glue		
homemaker roles		
shared responsibility of parenting		

SPOUSE RELATIONSHIPS

dimensions	Homer	Marge	situations
Interaction			
quality			
strain			
domestic division of labor			
decision- making			

PARENT - CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

dimensions	people involved	situation
support		
quality		
conflict and control		
parental role model		

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Dimensions	Positive	Negative	Situations
rivalry			
as role models			
objects of attachment			

FAMILY RITUALS

Situation / Dimensions	Settings	Participants