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## LGBT Parents on American Television

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The University of Southern Mississippi

LGBT Parents on American Television

by

Heather Kahn

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the School of Mass Communication and Journalism

May 2014



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Abstract

Television is an ever changing medium used in mass communication, and people often rely on this medium for knowledge about different subjects. This study demonstrates how television depictions of marginalized groups can change over time. Focusing specifically on a subset of the LGBT community – parents – this study documents the evolution of LGBT parents on American television. A total of 14 television shows were selected for a qualitative analysis. The parents depicted in these shows were analyzed according to gender, race, class and sexuality. The results were then summarized and put into historical context. This study contributes to the fields of both media research and queer studies.

Key Words: LGBT Parents, Television, Gender, Class, Race, Sexuality, Mass Media,  
Queer Studies

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

For today's average American, television is as commonplace as oxygen and water. Television is one of the most popular and pervasive channels of mass communication available, and its effects on society –and vice versa – are still being studied today. In 1979, sociologist and media commentator Todd Gitlin wrote of his research in the *Journal of Social Problems*. Gitlin reported that the messages television conveys to its viewers are reflections of what is going on in society, and in the 25 years following Gitlin's initial research, that trend has steadily become more pronounced.

Based on the premise that television mirrors what is happening in society, struggles experienced by majority and minority groups are reflected quickly in television programming. Likewise, one of the most basic conclusions the majority of television researchers agree on is that television programming is fundamentally educational, whether or not it is specifically intended that way (Huston, 1992). Television presents messages about the value, or lack thereof, of groups in society. Depictions in primetime network television programming often mean that audiences are exposed to a group of people – particularly a group that may be marginalized in reality – for the first time. Television programming has the opportunity to present audiences with an inside look into the lives of these groups. Integrating a marginalized group into an established television program or creating a new show centered solely on the group provides a vast amount of potential story arcs and character development. Accurate depictions can lead to greater acceptance, or at least visibility, of marginalized groups. Depictions can influence attitudes, values and actions of the people who view them. (Huston, 1992).

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) characters were first shown openly on American television in the 1970s. For clarity purposes, the definition of a lesbian is a self-identified woman who is attracted to other women; a gay man is a self-identified man who is attracted to other men; a bisexual individual is someone who is attracted to their own gender and also to other genders; a transgender individual is someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender identities are often complex, and it is important to note that a transgender person may also identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual or heterosexual. The opposite of transgender is cisgender, which is the descriptor used to label individuals whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

Since the 1970s, the types of LGBT characters on television have been evolving on several fronts. In today's society, it is much more common for LGBT individuals to be open about who they are than it was as little as 40 years ago. This progression is generally reflected on television. Historically, LGBT characters have been included as comic relief or a villainous presence (Kaufman, 2000). Suicide is not an uncommon theme in regards to LGBT characters, and shows such as *Soap* and *Glee* exemplify this. Today, as a whole, television shows are beginning to include well-rounded LGBT characters who display character development instead of being one-dimensional, which is an important distinction.

A communally observed trend today is to depict LGBT characters in family settings. A LGBT character with a family becomes more relatable to general audiences because such a setting tends to humanize the character and provides common ground for the character and the viewer. Whether they have biological children or go through the



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challenge of surrogacy or adoption, television shows are providing fictional accounts of real life family experiences. Because some groups are isolated from LGBT individuals in society, television may be their only exposure to the realities of LGBT life. Therefore, it is vital that television writers and directors handle these characters carefully. Stereotypes or broad generalizations can be detrimental to the acceptance of the LGBT community by establishing unrealistic ideas of what it means to be LGBT. LGBT parents can even now experience bitter custody battles and unfriendly adoption channels because of their identities, and inaccurate media representation does not make the process any easier. If LGBT struggles are going to be subconsciously evaluated because of television portrayals, said portrayals must be truthful.

This study will build on limited prior research, and its purpose is to give an overview and historical account of LGBT parents on American television. How LGBT parents are portrayed on television can influence how the general public views the demographic. This study will offer an awareness of the variety of LGBT parents shown on American television from 1977 to present day. The goal of the researcher is to provide a cumulative look at LGBT families presented on television past and present and offer a historical perspective on how, and occasionally why, these presentations have changed. While the majority of mainstream television programs still focus on white, heterosexual people and families, as American families evolve, so should television depictions of them.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### *Exposure*

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2011 American Time Use Survey, the average American spends nearly three hours a day watching television. Television is the highest-ranked leisure activity among those included in the survey, with the next most common – socializing – accounting for 45 minutes out of an average American's day (2012). Prime-time television programs, or programs aired from 7 to 10 p.m. Central Standard Time, tend to have the most viewers in weekly rating reports. Media consumption has expanded to include a variety of platforms, but Americans continue to favor television (Nielsen Media Company, 2009). Because television may be the only exposure some Americans get to LGBT individuals, it is important that television depictions are authentic.

### *Representation*

Most viewers do not simply consume media images and remain unaffected, so representation is important (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002). As a result, accurate representation of minorities on television has been a topic of research for many years because of the effect it has on American society as a whole. Much of the research done is focused on women or racial minorities, and attention to inequality of racial and gender diversity has been prevalent for longer than attention to sexual orientation inequalities. Even with the attention focused on these issues, women and racial minorities are still not depicted as often or as accurately as Caucasian men are depicted (Eschholz, Bufkin, &

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Long, 2002). Consequently, it is logical to assume that righting LGBT inequalities on television will take extended periods of time.

For many years, LGBT individuals have been “systematically omitted, vilified, marginalized, and/or homogenized on mainstream television” (Kessler, 2011). When they were first depicted on television, LGBT characters were often presented as largely sexless. Characters were desexualized, and any contact between two people of the same gender, even kissing, was heavily censored. In 1991, *L.A. Law* aired the first kiss between two women on network television (Gross, 2001). The kiss garnered heavy backlash, and both women ended up leaving the show (Gross, 2001). In 1997, Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian on her sitcom, and though that set her career back, she later started her own talk show. Following her lead, LGBT individuals began to appear more often on reality television (Highleyman, 2007). The 2000s produced several shows that threw the sexless stereotype out, but some critics felt they went too far. The depictions on shows like *Queer as Folk*, which depicted two of the show’s main characters engaging in explicit sexual activity during the pilot episode, were the polar opposite of sexless. Critics thought these characters to be similarly one-dimensional because they were over sexualized (Kessler, 2011). In 2014, there are several shows on prime-time television which feature LGBT characters predominately, like *Glee* and *The Good Wife*.

The media is considered a reflection of the mainstream. Today, relatively normal representations of LGBT life are accessible through television depictions (Goldman, 2008). According to GLAAD’s (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) annual “Where We are on TV” report (2012), the number of LGBT characters on prime-time television is increasing. Out of the 701 regular characters on primetime television, 31

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identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. There is only one transgender individual listed. These statistics show progress in quantity, but quality is either being debated heatedly or blatantly ignored.

### *L, G, B, and T*

Human sexuality is researched often and is usually seen to be fluid. The best way for researchers to quantify homosexuality is by using the Kinsey Scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948). However, the Kinsey scale is based primarily on self-evaluation, as is every other form of sexual identification. For the Kinsey scale to be accurate, a researcher must have a certain amount of trust in his or her subjects to be honest about issues people are not always comfortable addressing openly.

It is difficult to get a completely accurate estimate of the number of people who identify as LGBT in the United States. A 2012 Gallup poll found that 3.4% of American adults identify as LGBT when surveyed, which does not take into consideration those not comfortable discussing their identities with surveyors. However, with recent census information showing an increase of 80.4% in the number of reported same-sex households between 2000 and 2010, it is apparent this number is either growing, or those who identify as LGBT are becoming more comfortable with acknowledging their identities in public (Gates, 2012).

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### *Effect*

According to cultivation theory, portraying something on television helps to mainstream it (Gerbner, 1998). Gerbner also states that television spreads the cultivation process involved in shared realities among diverse publics. Put simply, television shares real life situations and individuals with the viewer. Gerbner's model flows both ways; television affects reality and reality affects television (1998). Because of the symbiotic nature of Gerbner's theory, it stands to reason that television depictions of LGBT characters should be evolving as LGBT communities do.

A study done by J.P Calzo and L.M. Wards shows there is a modest correlation between media consumption from certain outlets and an accepting attitude of homosexuality, with television being one of the most notable examples. This same study also states viewing television shows from the 90s with LGBT characters tends to lead to a greater attitude of acceptance towards homosexuality than viewing current shows with similar characters (Calzo & Ward, 2009). This research builds on the suggestion that increased television presence of LGBT parents will lend itself to an increase of acceptance toward these families. Vice President Joe Biden seems to agree with this idea, and he openly gives credit to the show *Will & Grace* for bringing about an attitude change toward homosexuality.

### *Nuclear vs. Modern Families*

Merriam-Webster defines a nuclear family as a group consisting of a father, mother and their children. The nuclear family was considered the most basic form of

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social organization for many years (Encyclopedia Britannica). However, recent years have seen a shift in this ideology. The percentage of nuclear families in the US has decreased from 45% in 1960 to 23.5% in 2000 (Gates, 2011). The definition and role of a family in society is in a state of flux (Lagassé, 2000). The increase of LGBT parents contributes to this shifting paradigm. Recent statistics show that 19% of gay or bisexual men and 49% of lesbian or bisexual women are parents to at least one child (Gates, 2011).

### *Criticism*

Analyses and research conducted about LGBT characters on television are frequently presented as media critiques. These critiques can be specifically targeted, like criticism of *Will & Grace*. Though it is sometimes praised for portraying the idea that not every gay man is the same, it still relied on old stereotypes by presenting homosexuality using a comedic basis and “equating gayness with a lack of masculinity” (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 89). The main LGBT character from *Will & Grace* is also a Caucasian, affluent gay man, and the show has been criticized for excluding portrayals of diverse LGBT characters (Gairola, 2001).

Critiques can also be applied to television depictions on a broader scale. Professor of gender studies and LGBT visibility researcher Suzanna Walters states that portrayals of LGBT characters are problematic because they show how “gayness is seen through the eyes of confused heterosexuals” (2001, p. 104). Scholars Fred Fejes and Kevin Petrich warned in 1993 that though homophobic portrayals of LGBT characters may not be a

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prevalent as they were, presenting LGBT characters using a heterosexual framework excludes “aspects of gay and lesbian identity, sexuality and community that are not compatible or that too directly challenge the heterosexual regime” (p 412).

Building on the media critiques given, this study will make observations about how LGBT parents are presented on television. The importance of these portrayals has been outlined, and this study will document the trends and disparities between depictions. Historical markers indicating societal opinion of LGBT issues will also be provided for context.

RQ1: How are LGBT parents depicted in terms of race, social standing, and gender on television today?

RQ2: How have depictions of LGBT parents changed from 1977 to the present?

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This study uses qualitative research methods to analyze depictions of LGBT parents on television. By having a set list of factors to observe in each depiction, the study provides a precise overview of what is available to viewers. The researcher used network and non-network television sources, such as Netflix and Amazon Instant. The 14 television series used in this study primarily come from GLAAD's timeline of LGBT families on television, with the addition of *The Fosters*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent* because these three series aired after GLAAD published its timeline. For continuity, only fictionalized television series were evaluated, so one-off dramas, reality television and made-for-television movies were not included in the analysis. This study begins in 1977 because that year marks the first reoccurring role of a LGBT parent on American television program that enjoyed commercial success.

The researcher documented gender for each character observed. Gender bias is prevalent in television depictions today and the researcher wished to account for this. Transgender individuals will be recorded using the common categories of either FTM (female to male) or MTF (male to female). Gender was the most basic category used, and characters were assumed to be cisgender unless explicitly presented as transgender. Personal identification and relationship status were both recorded as well.

Current television trends often show LGBT parents as being affluent, so social standing was also documented. When stated, a character's occupation was examined using United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics' national occupational employment and wage estimate of 2012. The average income for each



occupation was then compared to the United States Social Security Administration's national average wage index for the same year. If a character's occupation was not stated, the researcher used social status indicators such as what the character does for a living, what size house he or she lives in, and what kind of car he or she drives to infer social standing for that character.

Race of the characters was also recorded. Race will be identified for each character individually based on the ethnicity of the actor portraying the character. Characters were labeled predominately Caucasian, African-American, Asian American, or Latino American. Couples were also labeled as either interracial or homogenous. The researcher also evaluated whether or not each character faces outright discrimination in the form of negative interactions, and how he or she handled such situations. Discrimination based on gender, sexuality, race or social standing is indicated.

The children of the example characters were also assessed. The researcher noted whether or not the children are open with their peers about the parent's sexuality or gender. The researcher determined whether or not the child faces prejudice because of his or her parent. The child's age was taken into account, and how he or she was conceived was also noted. The relationship between child and parent was evaluated as being healthy or stressed. The researcher evaluated these relationships by noting general demeanor, tone of voice and language used.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### *Soap*

*Soap* is a comedy series that began airing in 1977. One of the series' main characters was Jodie Dallas, a gay man played by Billy Crystal. Dallas was a television commercial director who lived with his mother in Connecticut. According to the Bureau of Labor's Statistics handbook, the median yearly pay for a director in 2012 was \$71,350, which is significantly above the national \$44,322 average (2012). While Dallas remained adamant that he was gay throughout the show's run, he had relationships with several women. As a result of a one-night stand, he had a daughter, for whom he underwent an extended custody battle. Dallas faced prejudice for being homosexual, but these issues were handled in a comedic way instead of being presented as serious issues. Crystal himself is a Caucasian, heterosexual man.

### *The Tracey Ullman Show*

*The Tracey Ullman Show* is another comedy series that featured a gay father character. Airing in 1982, the show focused on a variety of characters played by one actress, Tracey Ullman. One of Ullman's many personas was Francesca McDowell, a teenage girl being raised by her biological father, Dave, and his lover, William. Francesca faces prejudice from peers and teachers because of her fathers, but she stands up for them every time. She has a healthy relationship with her father and William, and she often goes to them for advice. Though their occupations are never stated, Dave and William own an apartment in New York City, and they are able to buy gifts for their daughter, indicating

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that they are middle class at least. Dave and William are played by Dan Castellaneta and Sam McMurray, respectively, both of whom are Caucasian and heterosexual.

### *Friends*

*Friends* began its run in 1995, and it was revealed in the pilot episode Ross, one of the main characters in the show, was married to a woman who identified lesbian.

*Friends* is a comedy series with a large cast. Carol Willick, who was married to Ross Geller, is pregnant when she leaves her husband for a woman. She has the baby, a boy she names Ben, and raises him with her partner, Susan Bunch. Willick is a sixth grade teacher, which had an average yearly income of \$53,430 in 2012, and Bunch does commercial filming, which averages at \$46,280. Both occupations are slightly higher than the nation average wage index of \$44,322. Together, they live in an apartment in Manhattan. The couple faces prejudice about their relationship, particularly from Willick's parents, who refuse to attend the couple's wedding. Though her parents' disapproval originally makes Willick question her choice to marry Bunch, she ultimately decides to get married anyway. Willick is played by Jane Moore Sibbett, and Bunch is played by Jessica Hecht. Both actresses are Caucasian and heterosexual.

### *Will & Grace*

*Will & Grace*, which began airing in 1998, is a comedy series that focuses on a homosexual man and his best friend, a heterosexual woman. The two live together and

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have a host of mutual friends they entertain often. Joe and Larry, a married homosexual couple with an adopted daughter, Hannah, are invited to Will and Grace's apartment regularly. Though the viewers never see Joe and Larry's home life, they are able to observe the couple in a social setting. Joe and Larry are presented as a stable, successful couple. Their occupations are not mentioned in the series, but they live in New York like Will and Grace and are able to support their family. Jerry Levine and Tim Bagley play Joe and Larry. Both men are Caucasian, Levine is heterosexual, and Bagley's sexual orientation is not documented.

### *Queer as Folk*

*Queer as Folk* is an American remake of a British drama series portraying the lives of several LGBT characters in Pittsburgh that began airing in 2000. Two of the show's main characters, Melanie Marcus and Lindsay Peterson, are a married lesbian couple. They have two children, each conceived by one of the women using sperm donated by two of their homosexual friends. They have a son, Gus, and a daughter, Jenny Rebecca. Marcus is an attorney at a prestigious law firm, which averaged an income of \$113,530 a year in 2012. Because she is in a male-dominated field, Marcus faces discrimination because of her gender. She handles discrimination by being aggressive and assertive. Marcus is also Jewish, and the two practice several Jewish customs with their children. Peterson is a curator at an art gallery, which averaged an income of \$44,410 in 2012. Although she identifies as a lesbian, Peterson has an affair with a male artist she works with. The series highlights the sometimes hostile environment facing families with

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same-sex parents, and Marcus and Peterson move to Toronto at the end of the series to keep their family safe. Marcus is played by Michelle Clunie, who is Caucasian and heterosexual. Peterson is played by Thea Gill, a Caucasian, bisexual actress.

### *ER*

*ER* is a medical drama that first aired in 1994. Dr. Kerry Weaver, one of the show's main characters, was first introduced as a closeted, disabled lesbian. Dr. Weaver has several relationships as the show progresses, but each one ends because of her internalized homophobia. In later seasons, Dr. Weaver comes to terms with her orientation and marries Sandy Lopez, a firefighter. The couple decides they want children, so they use artificial insemination for Lopez to have their son, Henry. Later on in the show, Lopez dies because of complications from a fire, and her parents try to get custody of Henry. Dr. Weaver fights, and they settle for Dr. Weaver maintaining primary custody of her son and Lopez's parents watching him while she works. Physicians had a median pay of \$187,200 a year in 2012, and firefighters averaged \$45,250 yearly. Dr. Weaver is played by Laura Innes, a Caucasian, heterosexual woman. Lisa Vidal, a Puerto Rican, heterosexual actress, plays Lopez.

### *The Wire*

In 2003, the drama series *The Wire* began airing on HBO. The series featured Shakima "Kima" Greggs, an African American, lesbian detective. Greggs was openly

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homosexual and in a long-term relationship with a broadcast journalist named Cheryl. Cheryl wanted a child, so the couple used artificial insemination for Cheryl to have a baby boy they named Elijah. Greggs faced discrimination at work because of her gender, and it affected her relationship with Cheryl. The couple split, and Greggs' relationship with her son was strained. The median income of detectives in 2012 was averaged with police officers at \$56,980, and that of a broadcast journalist was \$37,090. Greggs is played by Sanja Sohn, and Cheryl is played by Melanie Nicholls-King. Both women are heterosexual and African American.

### *Six Feet Under*

*Six Feet Under* is a drama series that began airing in 2005. The show begins with David Fisher taking over his family's funeral home after the death of his father. Fisher is closeted, and he goes through a religious dilemma about his sexuality. He begins dating Keith Charles, and the two develop an on-again, off-again relationship. Charles is an African American police officer who is openly homosexual, though he has an affair with a woman he meets through his job. Fisher and Charles eventually move in together and get married. They also adopt two orphans, Durrell and Anthony. Although the relationship between the boys and their new fathers is rough at the beginning, the family builds a life together. The median income of a funeral director in 2012 was \$51,600 a year, and the median income of a police officer was \$56,980. Fisher is played by Michael C. Hall, who is Caucasian and heterosexual. Charles is played by Mathew St. Patrick, who is also heterosexual.

*Grey's Anatomy*

*Grey's Anatomy* is a medical drama that began airing in 2005. Callie Torres is a bisexual, Latina woman who has relationships with several different characters, both male and female. She gets pregnant as a result of an affair with her good friend, and decides to raise the baby girl, who she names Sofia. Torres begins dating Arizona Robbins, another female surgeon in the Seattle hospital. The two eventually move into an apartment together and get married. They decide to raise Sofia together, and she calls Robbins "Mama." Torres' own mother does not accept that her daughter is a lesbian and refuses to attend the wedding. Surgeons averaged a median pay of \$187,200 in 2012. Sara Ramirez, a heterosexual, Mexican-American woman, plays Torres. Jessica Capshaw, a heterosexual, Caucasian woman, plays Robbins.

*Modern Family*

Beginning broadcast in 2009, *Modern Family* brought homosexual parents into the limelight in a big way. Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker, a homosexual couple included in the sitcom's ensemble cast of characters, have an adopted Vietnamese daughter Lily. Pritchett is a lawyer while Tucker is a stay-at-home dad, though he previously coached football and taught music at a local school. The two own a house in the suburbs of Los Angeles. The family is portrayed as a stable unit, though Pritchett is working through a strained relationship with his own father because of his homosexuality. Again, lawyers averaged a pay of \$113,530 in 2012. Pritchett is played

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by Jesse Tyler Ferguson, a Caucasian, homosexual male. Tucker is played by Eric Stonestreet, a heterosexual, Caucasian male.

### *The New Normal*

*The New Normal* is a comedy series that aired for one season, beginning in 2012. The show's main characters, David Sawyer and Bryan Collins, are a gay couple who want to have a baby. They decide to use a surrogate mother, and then have the woman they choose come live in their guesthouse. Sawyer and Collins are very affluent, and they own a large house in Los Angeles. Collins is a writer for a popular television show, and Sawyer is a gynecologist. In 2012, working in programmed television averaged an income of \$83,220 in 2012, and gynecology averaged \$301,737. The series ends with the birth of the couple's son. Andrew Rannells, a Caucasian, homosexual actor plays Collins, and Justin Bartha, a Caucasian, heterosexual actor plays Sawyer.

### *The Fosters*

*The Fosters* is a 2013 drama series that follows the lives of Stef and Lena Adams-Foster, who have several children. Stef, a Caucasian police officer, has a biological son named Brandon from her first marriage. When she marries Lena, a biracial vice principal, the two adopt Jesus and Mariana, and then later decide to foster two more children, Callie and Jude Jacob. Vice principals in 2012 had a median pay of \$87,760 a year, and police



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officers averaged \$56,980. The family lives in a house in San Diego. Sherri Saum plays Lena, and Teri Polo plays Stef. Both women are heterosexual.

### *Orange is the New Black*

*Orange is the New Black* is a Netflix original series that premiered in 2013. The comedic drama series documents life in a women's prison. One of the show's main characters is Sophia Burset, a transgender MTF woman of color. Burset is in prison for credit card theft, and she faces instances of transphobia from her fellow inmates and the prison personnel. Transphobia is negative actions or attitudes towards anyone who is not cisgender because of their gender identity, and one of the most blatant examples of transphobia Burset faces happens when the prison cuts her estrogen dosage in half. Burset needs her full estrogen dose to remain healthy, and she draws attention to this fact. However, when the warden offers her the full dosage in return for sexual favors, Burset refuses. Burset has a teenage son, but their relationship is strained. The son refuses to talk to Burset, even though Burset's wife is supportive of her. Burset is played by Laverne Cox, a transgender woman of color.

### *Transparent*

*Transparent* is a comedy series whose pilot premiered on Amazon Instant at the beginning of 2014. Since the pilot is the only episode released, the data from this series is tentative. The pilot episode of *Transparent* focuses on Mora, a MTF transgender woman,

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and her struggle to come out to her adult children. Her relationship with her children is strained, and she even wonders out loud how she managed to raise three people as self-centered as her children. Mora is financially stable. She owns a house in Los Angeles and is able to loan her daughter money. Since Mora is just beginning her transition, *Transparent* is able to exemplify daily struggles and victories that transgender people face, like a cashier accepting misgendered identification at a grocery store. Mora is played by Jeffrey Tambor, a cisgender, heterosexual, Caucasian man.

Of the 25 total LGBT characters examined, 18 are Caucasian, four are African American, two are Latina American, and one is biracial. Eleven characters identified as gay men, and 12 identified as lesbian women. Even though several characters have sexual relations with people of a different gender, only one character is explicitly bisexual. Mora from *Transparent* is the only character whose sexual orientation is not stated explicitly or implicitly.

Eight out of 11 couples observed are homogenous and three are heterogeneous. Only one of the homogenous couples is not Caucasian. Twenty-two characters have occupations with an average income that is higher than the national average. Of the three that are not employed in a lucrative occupation, only one is not married to a partner who brings in more than the national average.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

Analyzing how television depictions have changed over the years reveals several trends. For example, although depictions of LGBT parents have been primarily Caucasian and remained homogenous until 2002, three out of the seven characters currently being portrayed on television are people of color. LGBT parents have also been mainly portrayed by heterosexual actors, starting with the first example, *Soap*, and ending with the latest example, *Transparent*. However, starting in 2002, four shows have cast one half of a LGBT couple with a LGBT actor.

LGBT parental figures are still being depicted using comedic framework, and only six of the 14 series analyzed were not marketed as comedies. Comedic narrative was used to depict Jodie Dallas' life in 1979, and has been used to depict all but one LGBT parental couple in the most recent five series. Two of those five series mark something completely new for serialized television depictions of LGBT parents by introducing transgender parental figures. Though Dallas debated getting gender reassignment surgery so he could marry his boyfriend, he was always portrayed as a gay man. The distinction between the framing of cisgender Dallas and transgender Sophia Buset from *Orange is the New Black* is striking.

Putting depictions of LGBT parents in historical perspective offers insight into societal expectations of said characters. When *Soap* began airing in the United States, the LGBT movement was already active. The Stonewall Riots had brought the fight for LGBT rights to national attention eight years previously, and the first pride parades took place a year after the riots (Ridinger, 1996). The military ban on homosexuality was also being challenged at this time. Leonard Matlovich, a member of the US Air Force wrote

and delivered a coming out letter to his superior in 1975 (Rimmerman, 2008).

Matlovich's story garnered lots of media attention, and *Time* ran a feature story about him that included a front-page picture. Though he argued in his letter that he was fully capable of serving in the military, the Air Force discharged Matlovich that same year (Rimmerman, 2008). The attention that Matlovich brought to the military policy issues was heightened by extensive media coverage, and several other service men and women were inspired to come out as well.

One of the biggest forces in the fight for LGBT rights during this time was the formation of The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). In the early '70s, strides were being made for national acceptance of LGBT people by pressuring the American Psychiatric Association to declassify homosexuality as a mental disease (Smith, 2003). After they accomplished this task in 1973, NGLTF began lobbying for gay rights legislation and to give openly lesbian and gay individuals the right to be employed by the government (Smith, 2003). This movement led to the first openly gay man being elected as a city official. Harvey Milk was elected to serve on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977 (Smith, 2003).

With the influx of media attention following the Stonewall riots, it was a logical step to introduce a sympathetic LGBT character. While Jodie Dallas was not the first openly homosexual character to regularly appear on American television, he did have "a better developed character than previous gay regulars (Stein, 2004, p. 177)." Dallas struggled with his sexuality throughout the show and even contemplated having gender reassignment surgery. Dallas' character is a good indicator of how LGBT issues were coming into mainstream attention, but how the majority of society had problematic ideas

of what being LGBT meant. Billy Crystal was a well-known actor at the time, and his fame contributed to the show's appeal and subsequently led to more people being exposed to his character.

When the AIDS epidemic hit the United States in 1981, it devastated the LGBT community, particularly gay men (Smith, 2003). Because of the prevalence of AIDS in the LGBT community, AIDS was seen as the "gay disease" by the media and the public (Rimmerman, 2008). Anti-gay organizations used the panic surrounding the AIDS epidemic to garner support for anti-gay and pro-family fund-raising. These organizations attempted to pass the Family Protection Act of 1981, which if successful, would have prohibited the "promotion or support of homosexuality by the government" (Stone, 2012). 1981 also brought Paul Cameron, a now well-known psychologist and sex researcher, into the limelight. Cameron presented unethical research that included false statistics and "invented stories about child victims of homosexual pedophiles" (Stone, 2012).

*The Tracey Ullman Show* began airing the year after the onset of the AIDS epidemic and the rise of anti-gay sentiments. Though episodes involving Francesa McDowell, her father and his partner were infrequent, they are important. Dave and William are portrayed as a successful, healthy couple even though public opinion regarding homosexuality was increasingly hostile. Though *The Tracey Ullman Show* is a comedy and most of McDowell's appearances are humorous, the character takes a firm stand against prejudice aimed at her father or his partner.

Anti-gay sentiments continued to gain political popularity, coming to a head at the Republican National Convention of 1992. Political propaganda continued to use a family

value oriented stance that made “anti-gay” and “pro-family” synonymous (Stone, 2012). AIDS was still claiming lives, including high profile individuals like Robert Reed, who played the dad from the Brady Bunch and was homosexual (Gross, 2001). However, not all media attention was negative. Between November 1992 and May 1994, The New York Times featured nine mentions of LGBT life, including personal stories of struggle and triumph (Gross, 2001). The military’s policy about homosexuality was modified in 1994 with the implementation of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which states officials could not ask a recruit about his or her sexuality, but in turn, personnel found engaging in homosexual activity could be discharged (Rimmerman, 2008). The same-sex marriage debate was once again brought into a national spotlight when President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which “define[d] marriages for federal purposes as the union of one man and one woman” (Rimmerman, 2008).

Carol Willick and Susan Bunch were not afforded a lot of screen time during *Friends*. Willick appeared in 16 out of the show’s 238-episode run, and her partner is only in 12. Nevertheless, viewers got to witness important moments in the couple’s life, including the birth of their child and their wedding. Insight into these moments made the couple a sympathetic example of a non-traditional family going about their lives.

Only three years later, *Will & Grace* offered up its own relatable family in the form of Joe and Larry. Like Willick and Bunch were in *Friends*, Joe and Larry were background characters in the narrative of *Will & Grace*, only appearing in 11 and 14 episodes of the show’s 188-episode run, respectively. Again, like *Friends*, there is an episode dedicated to the couple’s wedding. Joe and Larry adopt their child, which marks the first example of a LGBT couple having a child that is not a biological descendent of

one of the two. Joe and Larry exemplify the old married couple stereotype, which reinforces the idea of a “normal” family.

In April 2000, Vermont passed the United States’ first Civil Union law regarding same-sex unions. This law granted same-sex couples in certified unions the same rights afforded to heterosexual married couples (Smith, 2003). Nondiscrimination legislation passed in 2000 protected LGBT citizens in Maine (Stone, 2012). President George W. Bush met with a group of 12 homosexual Republicans during his 2000 presidential campaign, and with their help, Bush received support from LGBT voters (Rimmerman, 2008). However, by his 2003 election campaign, Bush was supporting the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would constitutionally ban both same-sex marriages and government acknowledgement of state allotted civil unions and domestic partnerships (Rimmerman, 2008).

Within a five-year span that began in 2000, four new LGBT parental couples were introduced on television. The first of these, *Queer as Folk*, is the first example of a LGBT parent played by an openly LGBT actor. Thea Gill, a bisexual actress, plays Lindsay Peterson, a lesbian woman who marries her life-partner, Melanie Marcus. In a time when LGBT individuals were struggling to gain rights in reality, Peterson and Marcus face discrimination as well. *Queer as Folk* follows the couple through the success of bringing down an anti-gay politician to the heartbreak of having a friend killed as a result of a hate crime. Because of the uncertainty of government protection in the show, which mirrored reality at the time, the couple moved to Canada, which offered more rights for LGBT families.

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Even though *ER* had been on the air since 1994, Dr. Kerry Weaver did not come out as a lesbian until 2002. Weaver has a hard time accepting her sexuality, but eventually overcomes her internalized homophobia. She eventually marries a Puerto Rican woman, Sandy Lopez, marking the first example of an interracial LGBT raising a child on an American television show. The first example of an African American LGBT couple having a child together was presented in *The Wire* in 2003. This couple, Kima and Cheryl, were also the first established LGBT parental unit to split indefinitely. In 2005, *Six Feet Under* introduced another interracial couple in the form of Caucasian David Fisher and African American Keith Charles. Fisher deals with the same internalized homophobia Weaver does, but he also overcomes. Like Weaver and Lopez, the couple also got married. They adopt two orphan children, whereas Weaver and Lopez use artificial insemination to have a son. These three shows combined offered diverse examples of what a family could look like.

From 2006 until 2014, national attention has been focused on same-sex marriage. Sixteen states currently issue same-sex marriage licenses, and the Illinois state government is slated to begin issuing licenses in June 2014. Advocates, celebrity or otherwise, have been showing support for same-sex marriage through movements like the NOH8 Campaign, which began as a way to draw attention to California's proposition to ban same-sex marriage. The proposition has since been overturned, but the campaign continues to gain support. Other campaigns, such as Dan Savage's It Gets Better Project, highlight the bullying that LGBT youth face. This viral video campaign also has several celebrity endorsements (Cover, 2012).



With same-sex marriage gaining popularity in the United States comes portrayals of stable, happy family units on television. Unlike the last subset of LGBT parental couples, the majority of LGBT parents depicted in this time frame are not shown facing things like internalized homophobia. Though both *Modern Family* and *The New Normal* handle homophobia, it comes from outside sources. In *Modern Family*, Mitchell Pritchett has a strained relationship with his father over his sexuality. The couple from *The New Normal*, David Sawyer and Bryan Collins, face homophobia from the mother of the woman they chose to be their surrogate. In both shows, homophobia is shown to be an antiquated view that is almost laughable. Both shows also depict affluent, Caucasian couples. Each couple is also depicted by one heterosexual actor and one homosexual actor.

*Grey's Anatomy* introduced an interracial, same-sex couple in parental roles when they had Callie Torres, a bisexual Latina woman, marry Arizona Robbins, a Caucasian woman. *The Fosters* continued the trend of interracial lesbian parents with Stef and Lena Adams-Foster. The Adams-Fosters provide a foster home for children, which is a first for mainstream American television.

Though they served a fundamental part in the Stonewall riots, transgender individuals have been largely left out of the LGBT rights movement because “differences are only included when they are clearly beneficial to the organization in question”(Stone, 2012, p.157). Homonormativity, or the problematic idea of what is “normal” for the LGBT community, often marginalizes those who are not gender conforming (Cover, 2012). Transgender people are a marginalized sector of an already marginalized group.

However, transgender issues have recently been gaining momentum. When Piers Morgan interviewed Janet Mock, a transgender activist and author, he was called out on Twitter for being insensitive and stating that Mock was “formerly a man” (Nichols, 2014). Transgender actress and activist Laverne Cox toured universities in the beginning of 2014 speaking about transgender rights and drawing attention to an unsolved murder of a transgender woman of color in Harlem. When Chelsea Manning, who was convicted of releasing classified documents to Wikileaks, came out as transgender, the National Lesbian and Gay Journalist Association released a statement to the news media informing them about the proper way to refer to Manning.

Though there are no transgender parents on American network television at this time, both Netflix and Amazon Prime offer shows featuring a transgender woman with children. *Orange is the New Black* tackles issues of transgender rights in prison, which is relevant to Chelsea Manning’s real-life situation. Laverne Cox, a transgender woman of color plays Sophia Burset, which is unprecedented outside of reality television.

*Transparent* tackles transphobia and the struggle to come out to one’s children, but Jeffrey Tambor plays Mora, the transgender main character. This casting is problematic because Tambor is a cisgender male, and he is playing a woman. Casting a man to play a transgender woman perpetuates the stereotype of transgender women being men in wigs.

Character portrayals of LGBT parents have come a long way, but they are still evolving. In 1977, Billy Crystal’s preexisting fame and the shock value of a gay character on television helped make *Soap* a success. The character, Dallas, faced many challenges. He was willing to undergo gender reassignment surgery to be able to marry another man, and he also had suicidal tendencies. Dallas also had affairs with women, even though he

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identified as homosexual. When Carol Willick was introduced in 1995 on *Friends*, she was leaving the man she married for a woman. Willick's sexuality was presented as something she had newly realized, and Willick has a strained relationship with her parents because of her sexuality.

In 2000, Lindsay Peterson faced some of the same challenges that Willick did in 1995. During her run on *Queer as Folk*, Peterson's mother was reluctant to accept her daughter's sexuality. Peterson had an affair with a man and identifies as lesbian. Dr. Kerry Weaver from *ER* also mirrored some of Willick's traits. It took Weaver quite a while to accept her own sexuality. *Six Feet Under*'s David Fisher combined the internal struggle to accept one's own sexuality and strained family relationships during his character development. Callie Torres from *Grey's Anatomy* faced the same familial pressures to be heterosexual. Torres marks further character development by being openly bisexual and having relationships with both men and women.

*Modern Family* does not completely throw out strained relationships with the LGBT parents' own parental figures, but that situation does not feature as prominently as it has in past shows. Both *Modern Family* and *The New Normal* focus less on the character's own acceptance of their identity and more on how they express that identity. In contrast to Billy Crystal's fame creating interest in his role as Dallas, Jesse Tyler Ferguson was propelled into fame through his role as Mitchell Pritchett in *Modern Family*. Laverne Cox has also become well known for her role in *Orange is the New Black*, and both she and Ferguson are using their recently gained popularity to advocate for LGBT rights.

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The last show observed that featured a homosexual parent, *The Fosters*, shows a marked difference from Dallas' initial depictions. Though Stef Adams-Foster was married to a man before she married Lena, she is in a stable relationship with her wife. Adams-Foster has custody of her biological son, two adopted children and fosters two more, while Dallas was willing to marry a woman in order to keep his daughter. Adams-Foster also owns a home with her wife and has an average career as a police officer, while Dallas brought in a bigger salary and lived with his mother.

Overall, the issues LGBT parents face have been presented from a comedic undertone. The majority of characters depicted are Caucasian and affluent. They are mostly cisgender. The majority of characters have also been portrayed by heterosexual actors. As reflected in this study, as public education about LGBT issues has increased, so have more accurate portrayals of LGBT parents.

### **Chapter Six: Limitations and Future Research**

Limitations to this study include a lack of cumulative analyses. Though there are several studies currently in progress analyzing depictions of LGBT characters on television, searching through EBSCO databases with key phrases like LGBT television does not yield studies that analyze numerous characters collectively.

Another limitation for any study involving LGBT families is missing or skewed statistics. Though record keeping is steadily getting better, data about LGBT families is still lacking in several areas. Without being able to properly gauge the size of LGBT communities in history, it is difficult to compare past and present situations.

Further research can be conducted regarding different subsets of LGBT characters on television. In depth analysis of the intersectionality of ethnicity and sexuality or gender and sexuality in LGBT parental depictions would be beneficial to this field. Looking at teenage LGBT characters and how they face some of the same struggles adults face would also be an enlightening study. With the relative novelty of LGBT research and new examples being added constantly, the opportunities for further research are abundant.

With television continuing to reflect society and LGBT individuals gaining acceptance as television characters, the number of LGBT depictions on television should continue to grow. With more depictions come more chances to accurately portray the LGBT community and more examples to analyze. Television is an ever-evolving platform, and studies surrounding it will also evolve. Research based on LGBT television is relevant and current, and this study aims to defend that relevance.

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