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The Lifestyle of the "Urban Tribe"

Rachel Friedman, Ph.D., and Nichelle D. McNabb, Ph.D.

Abstract

It was once the norm for people to get married in their early twenties, perhaps right after college or maybe during college. Once married, there was the need to start a family as soon as possible. However, nowadays, people appear to be substituting (at least for this period of time after college) the traditional family structure with a new one – the "urban tribe." This paper takes a critical approach to examining portrayals of rituals in "urban tribes" in two television shows – Will & Grace and Friends in which we argue that the progressive elements of these shows counter the master narratives of traditional family values and that these counter stories act as resistance to the given context of family.

Relevant key concepts: urban tribes, nontraditional family, counterstories, metanarratives, resistance, family values

Introduction

Barkhorn (2013) reported, "Americans are getting married later and later. The average age of first marriage in the United States is 27 for women and 29 for men, up from 23 for women and 26 for men in 1990 and 20 and 22 (!) in 1960." Thus, it would seem that Generation Xers are exploring a stage of life which occurs after college and before marriage. Ethan Watters coined the term "urban tribe," to refer to support systems that have seemingly replaced the "traditional family" during this new unwed period.

These "urban tribes" are characterized in how the group relates to one another in terms of loyalty, gossip, routines and rituals, roles, dating rules, and "barn raising." Watters argued that the meaning of these groups is probably most clearly defined by routines and rituals, perhaps because this helps to solidify their sense of community and belonging. According to Philipsen (1992), ritual "is the culturally preferred way to reaffirm the status of what the culture defines as the sacred object" (p. 77). In this case of the "urban tribe", the sacred object is the relationship or the "family" that is created. These individuals probably gain a better understanding of who they

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are personally and socially through this membership, which requires certain ritualistic behaviors to be enacted over and over.

Watters (2003) claimed to see "urban tribes" depicted in many contemporary television shows thus this paper takes a critical approach to examining portrayals of rituals of "urban tribes" in *Will & Grace* and *Friends*, two shows of American cultural significance. In doing so, our argument is that the progressive elements of these shows counter the masternarratives of traditional family values. In addition, these counterstories act as resistance to the given context of family, if these stories are inevitably acted out in "real life," as they seem to be at the moment. We will begin by identifying the dominant master narrative. We will then briefly discuss the two television shows, as well as provide a justification for choosing these among the large range of possibilities. Finally, we will discuss previous literature on culture, media, and family, and then follow up with the theoretical and methodological inquiries on counterstories and resistance in *Will & Grace* and *Friends.*

The Dominant Master Narrative

While no single element of our popular culture can likely be proven to be the sole cause of a particular family member's behavior, it is our argument that to a certain extent, television sitcoms reflect and shape the reality of the American family. Television shows have to appear realistic enough to viewers that the depictions make sense. Martin (2011) argued that sitcoms have an importance that dramas lack, "A sitcom can become part of our lives in a way that even a quality show like "Mad Men" does not. "Mad Men" isn't really "ours" because it is not our story; rather, it shows us who we want to be and what we are not. The sitcom is "ours" because it comes closer to showing us who we are" (p.20). Thus, in real and important ways, television reflects the reality we perceive.

Moreover, the constant repetition of a particular construction of reality in various mediums, likely helps to shape the reality audiences come to expect in their own lives. Douglas and Olson (1996) advanced the argument that, "television families, including those in domestic comedy, are presumed to offer implicit lessons about appropriate family life" (p.77). Douglas and Olson noted that in particular, television portrayals serve as moulds for marriages or the absence of marriage. Haralovich (1989) traced the historical strategies of advertisers and advanced the following argument, "One way that television distributed knowledge about a social economy which positioned women as homemakers was through the suburban family sitcom. The signifying systems of these sitcoms invested in the social subjectivity of homemakers put forth by the suburban development and the consumer product industry" (p.74).

According to Mock (2011) "That the domestic sitcoms of the 1950s

presented an idealized picture of the American family is a truism that almost no one disputes" (p.30). Haralovich (1989), Lee and Murfield (1995),and Morgan, Leggett, and Shanahan (1999) have noted that the traditional master narrative of family that has been portrayed on American television reflects an image of 1950s America. The image that was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s (Crotty, 1995; Wilinsky, 1999), is that of a generally happy suburbanite (white) American family who deal with various problems. The parents are depicted as solving problems for their children (Reep & Dambrot,1994) and the bread winner or head of the family has traditionally been a college educated man (Haralovich, 1989). Representative anecdotes of such television shows include *Leave it to Beaver, Donna Reed, Father Knows Best* (Morgan, Leggett & Shanahan, 1999) and *Ozzy and Harriet* (Lee and Murfield, 1995).

Will & Grace **and** ***Friends***

Will & Grace began in September 1998, and was a success from the beginning, winning many awards, including Golden Globes, Emmys, and GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards. The program is about Will, a gay lawyer and his relationship with Grace, his straight best friend who is an interior designer. Their two sidekicks are Karen and Jack. Karen is a rich socialite who is a pill-popping alcoholic (but only in the funny way), who works for Grace as a secretary even though her husband is extremely wealthy. Jack is an extremely effeminate gay man, who is often unemployed and lives off of Karen's wealth. He is superficial, rude, and seemingly promiscuous throughout the show. These four characters do everything together. They have holiday rituals, which almost never include their blood relatives. They have dinner together regularly, and they travel on group vacations quite frequently.

Interestingly, homosexuality is not the center of the show. The humor comes from the group dynamics (i.e. how the group functions together). Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2003) stated, "Will & Grace makes the issue of homosexuality more palatable to a large, mainstream television audience by situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly that of the situation comedy genre" (p. 89). In other words, in spite of the fact that Will is gay, the show seems to meet more traditional expectations for what a sitcom with an unmarried dominant male character and a single dominant female character should be. For example, there are frequent references to the fact that Will and Grace once dated. They often act like a couple and audience members often root for them to end up together. Thus, it is our argument that Will's sexuality is not the center of the show. Therefore, we will not examine this particular aspect of the show in relation to urban tribes. In our analysis, we will examine two episodes of this show – *Homo for the holidays* and *All about Christmas Eve*.

Friends

Friends began in 1994 and has since received 44 Emmy nominations (http://www.nbc.com/Friends/about/index.html). The show is about six friends in their late twenties (early thirties by the time the show ended) who come together in the name of friendship. More specific to this show than *Will & Grace* is how clearly defined their roles are. Phoebe is the artistic, somewhat air headed, vegetarian who somehow brings order to things. There is Joey, the actor, who is often the one we laugh at because he lacks intelligence in almost every way. Ross is a paleontologist, who is most successful in terms of money and education, but least successful in relationships, as he has been married three times. Monica is Ross's sister (the only blood-related family members in this group), and she is the obsessive compulsive cleaner, who must win every game she plays. Chandler becomes Monica's husband, and he is the witty sarcastic one, who has an answer for everything. He also has strange parents, so that accounts for some of his neuroses as we will see. Last, we have Rachel, who began the show as the naïve, rich girl, who never worked a day in her life. She ends up having a child with Ross, although they do not marry.

Friends was on four years longer than *Will & Grace*, so the characters have had a bit more time to develop in their relationships, but these shows are good for comparison because both have similar age characters, people who are out of their parent's homes and thrust together into a family-like environment, deal with issues of sex, sexuality and relationships, have shared routines and rituals, and function as a tightly knit group of people, who support each other emotionally, as perhaps a traditional family would. We chose to examine two episodes from *Friends* – "The one with the Thanksgiving flashbacks" and "The one with the holiday armadillo."

Political Context

Both television shows, *Friends* and *Will and Grace,* emerged at a time when great controversy surrounded portrayals of the American family. On May 17, 1992 President George H.W. Bush argued in his Notre Dame Commencement speech, "At the heart of the problems facing our country stands an institution under siege. That institution is the American family. Whatever form our most pressing problems may take, ultimately, all are related to the disintegration of the family." Dan Quayle (1992) echoed these sentiments in a now famous speech on family values to the Commonwealth Club of California. Senator Quayle ignited great controversy when he said:

> Ultimately however, marriage is a moral issue that requires cultural consensus, and the use of social sanctions. Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong. …

It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown - a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman - mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice.'

Though Senator Quayle may have been arguing that fathers should be more involved in their children's lives, the example he chose, seemed an apparent attack on single motherhood. Two days later, candidate Bill Clinton delivered a speech to the Cleveland City Club, on the topic of family values. In his speech, he talked about his own family. He argued for a more inclusive definition of family, by noting that he was raised by a single mother, and when she had to go back to nursing school, their extended family raised him. Clinton (1992) also argued that instead of attacking television, Americans' values, or families that are constructed of something other than a mother and father who are married and their children, the government should be more concerned with families' material needs: "Family values alone can't feed a hungry child. And material security alone cannot provide a moral compass. We must have both."

The "family values" argument is rooted in political ideology and religion (Cloud, 1998; Lee, 2002; Lee & Murfield 1995). Lee (2002) argued that Christian conservatives see Genesis as the story of the first family. According to Lee, "It narrates the creation of man and woman, explains the institution of marriage as the union of one man with one woman, and traces the family genealogy through Noah. After expelling Adam and Eve from the garden, God gave humankind the institution of the family to establish moral boundaries" (p.12). Thus, in creating a family that was not consistent with the Biblical interpretation, Murphy Brown challenged traditional Christian morals.

Morgan, Leggett and Shanahan (1999) tested the hypothesis put forth by Dan Quayle in his argument against Murphy Brown. The researchers used a social survey "to assess relations between television viewing and judgments about illegitimacy and single parenthood" (p. 47). They found that Dan Quayle's argument of media impact on declining family values was accurate. Additionally, they proved their central hypothesis, which was "those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the television world" (p. 49). If viewers' perceptions are shaped by television shows like *Murphy Brown,* then the message that single women can make it on her own may also have persuasive force. If so, the message may be empowering to women who once felt trapped in a marriage because they were without other options (Young, 2001).

Master Narratives, Counter Stories, and Resistance

In general, masternarratives are mythic in nature. This means we recognize them in our culture because the particular myth construction (like family) perpetuates a very specific ideology. For example, when people speak about family values, the rhetoric conjures up mythic images like the good old days, the eternal return, the benevolent community, the possibility of success, and the wisdom of the rustic. The culture already has a set of expectations regarding a moral code, or how people with family values behave. America is a profoundly religious nation, so a biblical interpretation makes sense. Consistent with the history of the early American protestants, is the notion that hard work, honesty, and following Biblical guidelines will bring success to both the individual and the nation. Such mythic stories offer a means of explaining people and their subsequent behaviors. However, the myth can also have ideological implications.

Nelson (2001) argued that "counterstories come into being through a process of ongoing engagement with the narratives they resist" (p. 169). This means the narratives may go back and forth, and some may be stronger, others weaker, but it appears to be a negotiation of sorts. We can often see this process taking place in the media, as it is a forum which permits challenging of the dominant ideologies. *Friends* and *Will & Grace* depict gay parents, single parents, parents who cohabitate but are not married, and "urban tribes." It is possible that because of the discourse offered up through the public and metanarratives, we are beginning to see a paradigm shift (as a form of resistance) through the media outlets. Media tend to be the most progressive when it comes to lifestyles, so it makes sense that there is a "gay trend" or an "urban tribe trend" in television programming.

Instead of an attempt to revive an old perspective (like Reaganism), conceptual narrativity tries to change and challenge the "society," the "actor," and "culture" (Margaret Somers, 1994, p. 620). We contend that the ideological formation of these shows constitutes conceptual narrativity in that the programs aim to create a new narrative (of the "urban tribe") to exist alongside the current ones on family and family values.

Will & Grace – "All About Christmas Eve"

The first show we examined was *Will & Grace* in their "All About Christmas Eve" episode from season five, in which Grace, who is already married to Leo, the Jewish doctor, leaves Will alone for the holiday. Karen and Jack already have plans to stay at a hotel and wait for Santa to drop off their presents. Essentially, Will is the only one without holiday plans. Below is an example of how this "family" functions in this situation comedy genre:

> [1]KAREN: So, Wilma, now that you've gotten rid of the old ball and chain, got any Christmas Eve plans?
>
> WILL: Oh, yeah. I'm gonna spend the whole evening by myself. Yeah. I'm gonna string cranberries around the tree, get in my jammies, and watch every version of A Christmas Carol ever made.
>
> KAREN: Mm-hmm. And which one do you think you'll be watching when you kick the chair out from under you?
>
> WILL: Hey, there's a difference between being alone and being lonely. I... am lonely.
>
> KAREN: Honey, why don't you join Jackie and me in my suite at The Palace Hotel, huh? It's gonna be a real old fashioned Christmas. The stockings will be hung by the chimney with care. And I'll be stinking drunk.
>
> JACK: And then at midnight, we're going to crawl into bed and wait for the sound of hooves on the rooftop.
>
> KAREN: No, honey, Rosie's not invited. [TO WILL] So what do you say?
>
> WILL: And pass up my annual screening of Ebbie, starring Susan Lucci as the definitive female Scrooge? Yeah, I'll be there at 6:00. Maybe we should invite Grace and Leo.

This is just one example where the group gets together to celebrate a holiday. Usually, Will and Grace were the two who led the holiday rituals. Now that Grace is married, she has moved from her clear position in this "urban tribe" as Will's best friend, advice giver, advice seeker, and worrier to Leo's wife, a role which has nothing to do with the immediate inner workings of this group. This is further demonstrated later in this Christmas episode when Leo is paged for work because of an emergency and Grace expects Will to leave what he is doing and take Leo's place so she could spend the holidays with "family."

One other important element in this passage is Will's loneliness. Will is often lonesome, as he has no significant other in his life. Even though he is gay, his friend and life partner was always Grace. They even considered having a child together through insemination. Again, this changed when she got married. She no longer has the same relationship with Will

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[1]All transcripts from these shows were taken from the following websites: www.durfee.net and www.twiztv.com

and wants to have children with her husband. In this episode, we suspect Will finds solace in spending the holidays with Karen and Jack, but still, like most singles, desires a relationship that is more intimate or at least more genuine, like the one he had with Grace. While this does not diminish the importance of relationships in "urban tribes," it does reflect the desires of singles in their thirties to begin the more serious lifestyle. Additionally, this example demonstrates the struggle between the masternarrative and the counternarrative. In other words, Will has his freedom as a single man. He has no specific ties. He has a good career and no children thus far. He is the prime example of this attractive alternative lifestyle, but still desires many of the things we are told are normal by society (like having a healthy intimate relationship – perhaps marriage if he were heterosexual or having children).

As mentioned, Grace expects Will to drop his plans for her when she desires it. Because she is now married, Will agrees to do these things in order to spend time with her. The following is the discussion between Will & Grace about their late Christmas plans:

> WILL: [TO GRACE] What's going on? I thought you'd be on your way to The Nutcracker.
>
> GRACE: [SIGHS] Leo got beeped. All the Jewish doctors have to be on call for Christmas. In other words, *all* the doctors have to be on call for Christmas. So... How would you like to come with me to The Nutcracker? [GRACE HOLDS UP THE TICKETS.]
>
> WILL: I can't. I've got plans with Jack and Karen.
>
> GRACE: Ditch 'em. Come on.
>
> WILL: I-I'm having fun. I'm wearing a bow under here.
>
> [GRACE PEEKS DOWN WILL'S ROBE AND GASPS AND GIGGLES.]
>
> GRACE: Come on, come on, it's The Nutcracker. You have loved this story ever since you were a little kid…
>
> WILL: No, I can't. I'm having fun. I respect them too much to do that to them.
>
> [WILL & GRACE LOOK OVER TO JACK AND KAREN. THEY ARE ON THEIR HANDS AND KNEES LOOKING UP THE FIREPLACE.]

JACK: Oh, look, I think he's coming!

KAREN: I see Santa's crack!

WILL: [TO GRACE] I'll get changed.

In this exchange, Will gives up his time with Jack and Karen to go to the show with Grace; however, Leo arrives at the theater minutes later because it turned out he was paged accidentally. Will hands Leo the ticket and tells him to enjoy himself. Grace replies to Will by saying, "You're a prince. The next holiday is yours. New Year's-- Well, no. Valen-- [BEAT] Ok. I have three words for you: you, me, Purim." It is obvious that Will is left out and he does not have as clearly a defined role in their relationship now that she is married. Additionally, there is some animosity towards the "new guy," Leo, because he is a large reason why she cannot spend the time with Will.

The dynamics of this group only change when one person in the group engages in a more serious relationship with someone outside the group. One reason this may occur is because the outsider does not know the rituals and rules and has not spent significant bonding time with the others. And in this case of the married couple (Leo and Grace), Leo is the outsider who diverts Grace's attention away from the others. In comparison to *Friends,* this is not a problematic issue with the one married couple (Monica and Chandler) because both were members of the tribe from the beginning and their marriage came much later.

Friends – "The one with the Thanksgiving flashbacks"

On the show *Friends,* the "Thanksgiving Flashback" episode demonstrates the ritualistic behaviors of each character. Because this story is told through flashbacks, viewers get to see how each character was first introduced to the others. The audience also sees that the group customarily spends this holiday together, as their relatives (mainly their parents) are always depicted as crazy and irrational. Additionally, everyone is aware that Chandler hates this holiday as Joey says, "Come on, I wanna hear it! It wouldn't be Thanksgiving without Chandler bumming us out." The scene then flashes back to Thanksgiving 1978 when Chandler's mother explains, "Now Chandler dear, just because your father and I are getting a divorce it doesn't mean we don't love you. It just means he would rather sleep with the houseboy than me." Chandler's story is followed by Phoebe's story of her Thanksgiving in a previous life when she was a nurse during the American Civil War in 1862. Since everyone is familiar with Phoebe's belief in reincarnation, they are all quick to correct her in that they are discussing present day Thanksgiving stories.

Interestingly, it is this episode that we can fully conceptualize Monica and Chandler's past and present relationship. In one scene, there is a flashback to Thanksgiving 1987 at Monica and Ross's parents house – the Gellers. Ross brings home his college friend, Chandler. This is during the time that Monica was very overweight and Rachel had a big nose (before plastic surgery). Ross has always had a crush on Rachel and he decides he will ask her out that evening. Chandler replies by saying, "Dude, don't do that to me!…I just don't want to be stuck here with your fat sister." Monica overheard the comment and walked away without any confrontation of the issue. One year later (Thanksgiving 1988), Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, and the Gellers join again. This time Monica is thinner and plans to seduce Chandler. In short, she is so clumsy that she accidentally drops a knife on Chandler's toe and severs it. And then she mistakenly brings a carrot to the hospital instead of the actual toe, thus his toe could never be reassembled. As the scene returns to present day, Chandler asks, "That's why I lost my toe?! Because I called you fat?!" As Monica apologizes, he complains about how much he hates this day and returns to his apartment quite upset. Monica then goes over to his place (which is across the hall) to cheer him up and places a turkey on her head and dances around the room. Chandler replies by saying, "You are so great! I love you." Monica asks, "What?" He replies, "Nothing…I said you're so great and then I just stopped talking!" Monica replies, "You said you loved me! I can't believe this…You love me!" She is happy and the episode ends.

While there are many elements here of the traditional masternarratives (i.e. the woman losing weight for the man, a woman's joy from a man's approval, etc.), this is not the focus of the inquiry, rather it is the resistance in the conceptual narrative on relationships and marriage. This episode demonstrates how "the narrative identity approach embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space" (Margaret Somers, 1994, p. 621). Because this is a flashback episode, the shift is more clearly revealed. Some of the other narratives which surround the conceptual one are also more readily revealed. For example, Monica and Chandler's ontological identity as a couple is negotiated. Their identity is relational, and that there are many aspects of their relationship that are contextually based in the public, meta, and conceptual narratives. This is a change in how traditional love stories are being told. In this "urban tribe," there are dating rules, thus the discourse of relationships is changing all together. On one hand, there is the possibility that Monica and Chandler's potential relationship could ruin the group's dynamics; perhaps that is why Chandler accidentally admits his love. Also, there is the chance that dating may not be tolerated by other group members. Or, maybe things will work out great. Nonetheless, the way their new identity as a couple would be constructed might require a new vocabulary or paradigm that would ultimately be drawn

upon the masternarrative of traditional family relationships. Regular viewers eventually see a more traditional relationship take place as they get married a few seasons later. However, they do live together "in sin" for a period of time. Essentially, Monica and Chandler's relationship as members of the "urban tribe," their commitment apart from marriage, and their delay in getting married all work as resistance to the masternarratives on marriage and family.

Friends – "The one with the Holiday Armadillo"

Another ritualistic event that all the friends participate in is Christmas and Hanukkah. On another episode of *Friends,* the tribe rallies around to teach Ben, Ross's son, about Hanukkah and Christmas (as Ross is Jewish). Ross decides to find a costume that represents Hanukkah the way Santa represents Christmas; however, the only costume Ross finds is an armadillo suit, so he becomes the Hanukkah Armadillo. In the meantime, Chandler shows up in a Santa suit he borrowed from a friend at work. Ross asks Chandler to leave because he does not want to taint the Hanukkah lesson with Santa's influence. In short, Chandler stays as Santa but asks Ross if he could teach both he and Ben about Hanukkah. As the group gathers around Ben, they all learn about Hanukkah and they light the menorah together. Lighting the menorah is a ritualistic element that is usually reserved for families, specifically Jewish families who celebrate this holiday. Interestingly, in spite of the menorah lighting as a secluded act (Jewish families) this may constitute one of the yearly rituals that are acceptable because of the group's history (Watters, 2003). What this means is that perhaps they have a record of holiday seasons together. When Ben (Ross's son) is old enough and is introduced to the holiday celebration, they create a new narrative that includes others who may be in the learning process, even if it is a child. Additionally, Ethan Watters (2003) says, "urban tribes… maintained a narrative momentum, which gave meaning to the group over time…" (p. 57-8). Again, within the framework of conceptual narrativity, the characters on *Friends* are creating a vocabulary and engaging in acts of nontraditional families and lifestyles. In this episode, the single parent trying to educate his son on religious issues. Other members of the group help Ross to parent, which is what Watters terms "barn raising," or helping each other complete some task. And, last, there is the shared ritual around which everyone is involved.

Will & Grace – "Homo for the Holidays"

In this episode, the "urban tribe," Will, Grace, Karen, and Jack, get together for Thanksgiving. As with all the other examples, it is this ritual that brings them together. However, the event that makes this possibly more serious is that Jack has not told his mother he is gay. Thus, he needs social support to do so. Also, Jack lied to his mother by continuing to feign heterosexuality, by saying that he dated Grace, but then broke up with her.

The episode begins as follows:

> WILL: Oh, yeah. Speaking of surprises, we're gonna have a special guest for dinner tomorrow.
>
> JACK: Is this where you guys try to be funny and tell me that Cher is coming? Well, it's not gonna work this time, ok? [BEAT] But is she?
>
> GRACE: Come on, Jack. Cher hasn't eaten since the seventies.
>
> WILL: Give you a little hint. It's someone that you love, but you don't get to see her very often.
>
> JACK: Ok, I'm thinking Liza, but go on.
>
> WILL: And she gave birth to you.
>
> JACK: Ok...
>
> WILL: It's your mom, genius.
>
> JACK: My mo--! How could y--! You're-- [SHAKING HIS FIST] Rotten!

Jack goes on to explain that he does not have a great relationship with his mother and that she "is a monster." Once Jack storms out, his mother Judith shows up on a dry run, hot pot in had. She wanted to see how long it would take to travel from her house to Will's apartment with the dish. Below is Judith and Grace's exchange:

> JUDITH: No, he said you were sort of funny. You're a cutie. I can see why Jack wooed you. Bet you made an adorable couple. [PRESSING THE ELEVATOR BUTTON] Come on, come on, come on!
>
> GRACE: Uh... Wh-wh-whoa! Adorable couple? I...
>
> JUDITH: Yeah. And I think it's terrific that you and Jack have stayed friends even after he dumped you. Bye-bye. [JUDITH EXITS INTO THE ELEVATOR]
>
> GRACE: Dumped me? What are you talking about? Jack's a ho--my god, she has no idea!

Finally, Grace and Will discover that Jack's mother is unaware of his sexuality. The remainder of the episode is devoted to convincing Jack that

he must "come out" to his mother on this holiday. Jack is scared, but gets the support and courage from Will, Grace and Karen.

> JACK: Mom, I'm gay.
>
> JUDITH: Oh.
>
> GRACE: Judith... [GRACE PUTS HER ARM AROUND JUDITH] It's ok. So he's gay. He's still the same little boy who gave you highlights for the first time.
>
> KAREN: I think you're missing the silver lining here. When you're old and in diapers, a gay son will know how to keep you away from chiffon and backlighting.
>
> JACK: Mom, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but... this is who I am.
>
> JUDITH: You could never disappoint me. I just want you to be happy. Looking back on it... There have been clues. When you were a child, you were overly fond of the nursery rhyme "Rub-a-dub-dub, 3 men in a tub." And you do have a lot of flamboyantly gay friends. I mean, look at Will. No matter what, Jack... You're what I'm most thankful for in the whole world. [JUDITH AND JACK HUG. WILL, GRACE, AND KAREN START LEAVING TO GIVE THEM PRIVACY.]

There are so many counternarratives present here; however, the focus is on the "urban tribe." The narratives surrounding Jack's situation are "constitutive to self, identity, and agency" (Margaret Somers, 1994, p. 629). The others involved, Will, Grace, and Karen, were good for his Jack's narrative identity, as a gay man, as a member of the "urban tribe," and as a son. He finds comfort in these multiple identities because part of his life's meaning is constructed through the tribe over time.

Discussion

Nelson (2001) identified three forms of resistance through counterstories: to refuse, repudiate, or contest the masternarratives. Of all three options, the most vigorous act is contestation. The level of resistance here is usually associated with some social movement. While we do see urban tribes throughout the nation, we do not believe "urban tribes" have reached the status of a social movement or replaced the dominant masternarrative of 1950s families. While the urban tribes counterstory exists and can be seen in television shows like *Will & Grace* and *Friends,* viewers still expect to see traditional depictions of family.

From our analysis and research, a show like *Will & Grace* is created to be "culturally digestable and widely circulated" (Nelson, 2001, p. 151). Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2003) even suggested that this show uses humor to make serious ideological conflicts (perhaps like homosexuality) more pleasant for all audiences, specifically more conservative ones. So, in repudiating the masternarratives, the show chooses how far it will go in challenging dominant assumptions. Nelson (2001) believes this "offer[s] a patchwork form of resistance" (p. 171). For example, Will is gay, but he and Grace still act like a couple who knows each others' comings and goings, can finish each others' next thought, get jealous of each other's significant others, etc. Moreover, in spite of the fact that Will challenges many of the stereotypes (he does not act feminine, he is not promiscuous, he is not shallow, etc.) Jack represents these stereotypes. Thus, viewers who want to hold on to stereotypical assumptions can do so even while embracing the counterstory.

The last form of resistance is refusal, which means the goal "is not to change the dominant perception of the group – it's to shift how the individuals within the group themselves understand who they are" (p. 170). In other words, this is more of an internal act that solidifies the identity of the group. To some people, the "urban tribe" will never constitute a family. So, these tribes have to create their own set of expectations and live them out through their counterstory. Again, this only provides "minimal amounts of resistance to the master narratives they counter" (p. 170).

So, in *Will & Grace,* we see Will having a good time with the tribe, but he is still lonely because he is without a serious partner. We see Grace who gets married and wants children, but is generally an independent, hard-working woman. In *Friends,* there is Rachel, who is a single parent, but still seems to be in love with Ross. And, the audience still probably roots for them to be married. As the sitcom *Friends* nears the end, the characters scurry to find mates. While each of them is successful and happy in their own lives, they want to be married and have the socially desirable lifestyle. Again, as all of the people of these "urban tribes" near their late thirties, they sit on the margins of the acceptable/\unacceptable border. Viewers may wonder whether they should be engaged in a more serious lifestyle?

It should be obvious that all forms of resistance are slow moving and poor, and part of this is because the "actors" are still expected to fulfill the liberating and oppressive aspects of the narratives. This is not surprising given the fact that this particular masternarrative is central to Americans' historical and Biblical roots. Thus, in some ways, a masternarrative is so powerful that it becomes self-perpetuating. Even if members of society know logically that there is nothing wrong with someone who is single until she or he is thirty years old, that person may feel pressure from oneself, one's family, and the larger culture. The masternarrative becomes so internalized that it is constructed not only by society, but by members of the urban tribes themselves.

Conclusion

Counterstories are the best form of resistance we have. One of the confusing but most helpful things is that these narratives encompass a complex mix of freedom from and freedom within the masternarratives. In other words, the individual has a right to their desired lifestyle choice, but this does not mean that there are not boundaries within what is acceptable in the counterstory. One probably could not be a polygamist and still be considered to have family values according to most people, as this most likely strays too much from what is socially suitable. But, this is not the case with "urban tribes." Traditionally, there has always been an accepted (although short break) between leaving the birth family, finishing the college education, and marrying and establishing a family. A brief hiatus between college and marriage has been socially acceptable for a while. Now, that period is beginning to stretch out even longer. The "urban tribe" lifestyle is an attractive alternative for many young people and the TV has long depicted this standard of living to the point where it could become a norm, but has not yet replaced the masternarrative.

In this paper, we investigated some of the ideological constructions of the nontraditional family in entertainment. *Will & Grace* and *Friends* provide excellent examples of narratives that lie somewhere in between the conservative and liberal visions of marriage. While the majority of the characters are independent and their "urban tribe" lifestyle is prioritized as most important, many of the characters still want to be married, however, it does not necessarily have to be a traditional type of marriage. Because they engage the masternarratives of marriage and family, they are able to create their own narratives and find a niche, or a position that suits them best. When society silences people, the masternarrative dominates. When a counterstory is produced, it is a cultural reflection. If more marginalized perspectives are heard, then perhaps new ideological formations could exist, thus empowering more individuals with moral agency.

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