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TV Dads: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Viewer Perceptions of Fathers in Television Dramas

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of Fathers in Television Dramas

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ABSTRACT

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The present study aims to identify what viewer perceptions individuals have regarding fathers in television dramas. Framed through uses and gratifications theory and executed through the grounded theory method, 12 participants were interviewed. After analysis, findings revealed that although participants say that general perceptions of fathers on TV are negative, they have seen personally the diversity and variety of father portrayals in their favorite television dramas. Additionally, the realism of the TV dramas and characters influence the relatability to both the father figures and other characters in the show. This relatability, in turn, influences the likeability and loyalty to the TV drama. Such findings imply that negative portrayals are more often and more strongly remembered among television viewers. Likewise, because of the popularity in relatable characters, television networks and producers could have the chance to increase their viewership by including a variety of identifiable characters, especially fathers, within their TV dramas. Four major perceptions emerged from the data and inform the significance of this study. These four perceptions were that fathers in TV dramas were perceived more positively than TV sitcom fathers, fathers in TV dramas are perceived as the "flawed hero," fathers in TV dramas are perceived as a prompt for discussion, and lastly, fathers from TV dramas are perceived as someone who is worthy of emulation.

Key words: father, fathers, perceptions, television drama, TV drama, relatability

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

This study will explore the viewer perceptions of fatherhood as portrayed in television dramas. Fathers are extremely important to family processes and even influence the social, emotional, behavioral, and educational development of children (Alika et al., 2012; Benbassat & Shulman, 2016; Drakich, 1989; Pembecioğlu, 2012). For many years, their impact was understudied, due to both a lack in acknowledgment of their significance and to their actual lack of involvement within the family (Benbassat & Shulman, 2016; Geddes, 2008). Some factors that may have deterred a high level of engagement are challenges within the parental relationship, harmful behavioral aspects of child relationships, and absence from the home overall (Geddes, 2008). However, more contemporarily, fathers who have been more involved in family issues, especially in conflict resolution and engagement with children, have demonstrated a positive impact (Geddes, 2008). Being involved in the home has even resulted in outward effects, particularly in the educational arena. Engagement of fathers in the home has resulted in child engagement in their learning environment (Alika et al., 2012; Drakich, 1989; Geddes, 2008; Pembecioğlu, 2012). Such engagement in school leads to developmental and social benefits as well. Furthermore, the example of parents and their reflective functions have been shown to impact children's social and emotional development over time (Benbassat & Shulman, 2016). With the combination of such long-lasting effects, as well as the meager focus in scholarship regarding fathers and their impact, it is necessary to also study their presentations within the media.

Thus far, the majority of literature regarding this topic has aimed to discover how fathers are represented in television. The majority of literature purports negative portrayals of fathers in television and movies (Drakich, 1989; Kuo & Ward, 2016; Ramchandani & Iles, 2014; Schmitz

2016). More recent studies have suggested that there is a shift occurring that illustrates fathers as "superparents" or more nurturing caregivers within the home (Reep & Dambrot, 1994; Schmitz, 2016). Nevertheless, few, if any studies have been conducted that aim to uncover what viewers actually perceive from these representations and whether these perceptions agree with what scholars have said. As such, the present study offers a unique perspective to the field by researching what individuals perceive about those representations. Television dramas are the platform in which the study was conducted. Due to the use of narrative in TV dramas, they make for the perfect backdrop. Narratives have often demonstrated their persuasive power among audiences (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). In addition, narratives have the ability to frame social identities and exemplify a person's motivations, perspectives, emotions, and goals (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Thornham & Purvis, 2005). They also adequately describe events and situations that have taken place, which again help in the construction of an individual's real life identity (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Thornham & Purvis, 2005).

The proposed findings are significant because of the relevance and influence that popular culture has on individuals globally (Storey, 2018). Pop culture, like TV dramas, has been shown to help people develop intellectually, artistically, and spiritually (Storey, 2018). Similar to that of written communication, pop culture could even be said to act as "equipment for living" to those who consume it (Burke, 1941, p. 61). TV dramas are very often a source popular culture pulls from. They often also reflect the dynamism of culture in general (Fiske, 2010), making pop culture and real-life culture mirrors of each other. This mirroring effect can resemble reality, so much so that parasocial relationships are formed among individuals and media characters. Parasocial interaction generally encompasses the idea that people enjoy a level of closeness and loyalty towards another in the media, but ultimately, that interaction is not reciprocated back to

the viewer (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Feelings of loyalty can often lead to meaningful feelings in that relationship (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Furthermore, parasocial relationships are also one gratification that is sought among users of media (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Other gratifications include learning socially from personalities on screen, escaping one's life briefly, socializing with others, and building an identity (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). These gratifications are generally sought out by consumers because they fill a specific use or purpose. Uses and gratifications theory is a theoretical framework that addresses these types of behaviors and analyzes the actions individuals take when consuming media (Rubin, 2009). Based on the considerable types of uses and gratifications for viewing television dramas, this theory was used as the foundation for the present study. Regarding methodology, the grounded theory method was used to conduct, code, analyze, and interpret the data that was gathered. Grounded theory is a methodological approach that facilitates the understanding of human perspectives and allows theories or patterns to be developed regarding the interactions, experiences, or processes at hand (Strauss, 1987).

Therefore, due to the primary focus of the study (the viewer perceptions of fathers in TV dramas), and the lack of past research that has focused mainly upon the representations of fathers in the media (Schmitz, 2016), further research is needed that analyzes the perceptions and attitudes regarding father-type characters in TV. A series of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted for the present study and participants were recruited from among students who attend Brigham Young University. After the transcription of each interview, coding was conducted in order to establish patterns found among the participants' answers. Implications are discussed regarding the perceptions of TV dads in the genre of Television Drama. Furthermore, how these perceptions influenced participants' broader worldview is discussed.

Literature Review

Representations of Family in Media

Research regarding family representations in the media is extensive. However, the task to find any systematic or consistent review of the perceptions of fathers in television is lacking. Consulting past literature has revealed that many studies focus on the representation of families in TV, but not on the perceptions that viewers hold about those families. This brings up an interesting point due to the fact that over the last seven decades, families in television have never matched the U.S. census demographics (Clark, 2008). After continued searching, some studies highlighting parental portrayals were identified. Reep and Dambrot (1994) performed an in-depth search on how fathers and mothers are portrayed as "knowing best" in television shows (p. 13). They posited that over several decades, parents have been pictured in the media as "superparents," able to handle conflict and solve minor crises within a matter of minutes (Reep & Dambrot, 1994, p. 13). Parents, they observed, seemed to always possess qualities that tiptoed on the border of perfection: rationality, wisdom, unconditional love, concern, and a nurturing disposition. They provided examples in television shows such as *The Cosby Show*, *Growing Pains*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *Family Ties*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and many more. All of these sitcoms encompassed the American dream trope by maintaining the ideal of the "nuclear American family" (Reep & Dambrot, 1994, p. 13). This contrasts with what Clark (2008) has said about family portrayals in teen films. Single parent homes have increased, while the traditional family has decreased, especially since the 1990s (Clark, 2008). Clark's (2008) analysis revealed that single parent families in teen films were also portrayed as being low in socioeconomic status. However, Signorielli and Morgan (2001) have claimed that single parent homes are actually shown to be more affluent and luxurious. This finding also confirms what

Reep and Dambrot (1994) discovered; that in such television shows where a single-parent home was the norm, both parents were still often represented as the perfect team, able to work well with each other and be present for the family. Rarely did they show the troubles or negative side effects of having an absent parent from the home. When parents were portrayed as married, they most often were placed within the middle class, with mothers mainly in charge of domestic responsibilities, while fathers were working professionals and main breadwinners (Clark, 2008). Interestingly, one common theme in the TV shows remembered by the sample was that parents were portrayed as knowing best and children were accepting and even appreciative of their guidance (Reep & Dambrot, 1994). The sample consisted of young adults, who not only remembered this theme, but approved of it as well. Although insightful, it is important to note that family dynamics may have changed since then.

It seems that since the advent of television, the "fictional family" has become a standard for which real-world American families measure their success (Robinson & Skill, 2001, p. 139). Family relationships, particularly within Disney films, were viewed as a strong priority (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). However, fathers were most often elevated in their roles, while mothers were marginalized or altogether forgotten (Tanner et al., 2003). Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca (2014) also asserted that mothers were mostly portrayed in minor roles within Disney films, while fathers were responsible for the majority of caregiving. Hecht (2011) also discovered that siblings were often underrepresented compared to the main character in Disney films. Another study by Pembecioğlu (2012) aimed to understand the impact that television viewership had on consumers about the concepts of family and children. Based in Turkey, his study noted that on average, viewers watched up to 8 hours of television each day. Due to this large consumption of media, an analysis was performed on six Turkish television

channels that aired "serials," or television shows that revolved around a continuous plot (Pembecioğlu, 2012, p. 213). Pembecioğlu (2012) found that the serials shown in Turkey were integral to society members' construction of what a family should look like. Most often, characteristics, such as mystery and secrecy, were the qualities that dictated action among family members and between families. Like Reep and Dambrot (1994) mentioned in their study, this idealistic portrayal of families led individuals to set expectations that were often unattainable. Pembecioğlu (2012) lastly purported that family portrayal in media has the potential to be a powerful influence on consumers. Due to this potential influence media can have upon individuals, more focus should be placed upon the family processes portrayed on TV (Ramchandani & Iles, 2014). This call for further research upon the family processes of TV families begs the question of how individual family members are perceived, especially fathers. As such, it is important to examine the representations of fathers in the media and the roles they have played on screen.

Representations of Fathers in Media

Over the last several decades, fathers have been portrayed as very one-dimensional, low-involved parents (Drakich, 1989; Kuo & Ward, 2016; Ramchandani & Iles, 2014; Schmitz, 2016). This finding is concerning when considering that a father's impact is highly significant; the influence a father has on his children can be seen in social, emotional, behavioral, and educational development factors (Alika et al., 2012; Benbassat & Shulman, 2016; Drakich, 1989; Geddes, 2008; Pembecioğlu, 2012). Many father representations on primetime TV have been limited in their depictions of masculinity (Kuo & Ward, 2016). Likewise, children's television programs show fathers as buffoonish in character and often more permissive than mothers (Callister, Robinson, & Clark, 2007). Drakich (1989) claimed that the way individuals think and

feel about fatherhood has been set up and maintained by the media. She went over the changing roles of fatherhood from a hands-off parental role to an active participant in the day to day parenting tasks shared with mother, and attributed this modification to feminist scholarship and media influences. However, single fathers have increased in the realm of television, even as going far to the extent as making them more likeable by portraying them as widowed, and not divorced (Clark, 2008). Many scholars claim though, that fathers can have immense positive effects on children (Drakich, 1989). In fact, individuals have been found to rely on the media for information acquisition and the establishment of social norms, thereby making media the orchestrator of the quotidian (Drakich, 1989). Media's pervasiveness and accessibility make it a powerful and even reality-transforming tool that could have the potential to distort what it means to be a father. Again, this pervasiveness and power that television, and mass media at large, holds is a strong indicator of how much influence they actually can have on individuals who consume it.

More recently, a new conception of fatherhood has been born: fathers portrayed in the media are more expressive and nurturing than "breadwinning" (Schmitz, 2016, p. 3). This differs from another frequent portrayal of fathers that showcase them as the bumbling buffoon father. Television shows like *All in the Family*, *Married…with Children,* and more contemporarily, *Modern Family* and *The Middle*, have demonstrated at least one father figure that is inept and sometimes even vicious or cruel (Reep & Dambrot, 1994). Conversely, although Schmitz (2016) initially argued that magazines aimed toward women would most often portray fathers as incompetent, uncivilized, and in need of dire help from their female counterparts, she found that an actual shift is occurring: mothers, who for so long were considered the "heavy lifters" of parenting, are now accompanied by an increased involvement from fathers (Schmitz, 2016, p. 5).

This increased involvement is made possible by the "detraditionalization," or the deconstruction of traditional notions, of father-figure responsibilities (Schmitz, 2016, p. 5). Along with increased involvement, men were shown to likewise pair the reflexive ability to consistently contemplate about their own experiences and improve upon spurious practices of past generations through their own parenting techniques. Callister, Robinson, and Clark (2007) also found that although male caregivers in children's TV programming tend to be fairly competent and mature, they are often, if not always, less competent than their female counterparts.

Television Dramas

Like other genres of media, television dramas have been used not only to entertain, but to raise awareness or spark interest in many contemporary issues (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Journell & Buchanan, 2012; Turnbull, 2014; Zhang & Busselle, 2013). They have also been used as a platform to study varied social attitudes and stereotypes (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008; Zhang & Busselle, 2013). Thornham and Purvis (2005) described a television drama as a characteristic experience that involves sequence or flow. This flow constructs the "flow of meanings and values" of a culture, carrying with it the "structure of feeling" (Thornham & Purvis, 2005, p. 2). Referring to Raymond Williams' description of flow, this means that the characters and situations we watch in our television dramas constitute what a "slice of life" must look like (Thornham & Purvis, 2005, p. 2). Raymond Williams was well known for originating this type of approach to analyzing television. He purported that understanding the impact of TV largely rests in the cultural significance that people globally place within the medium itself. Robinson and Skill (2001) also concluded that television closely follows real-world trends and lifestyles, which ultimately shapes the popular culture that becomes prominent over generations of time (Fiske, 2010).

In addition, individuals have been known to form parasocial relationships with characters they see on screen (Callister et al., 2007). Parasocial interaction denotes the level of closeness and loyalty felt towards those who are media personalities, but who do not reciprocate back to the viewer (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). The formation of parasocial relationships generally follows a specific pathway: first, there is a social or task attraction to a character, second, the parasocial interaction is employed, and third, a sense of significance or importance in regards to that relationship is developed (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). A high level of affinity for the characters and the medium in which they are portrayed is often a result of parasocial relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Also, parasocial interaction implies that the relationship is unidirectional and deals with the perceptions viewers have with those they view on their favorite programs (Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2007). Although parasocial relationships may not be realistic, often individuals can perceive them to be based upon the appearance that some characters on TV actually self-disclose to audience members (Schiappa et al., 2007). This, again, influences the relationship importance, which ultimately can lead to intense observation or following by the viewer. Such relationships are available within those on TV dramas, therefore making it important to understand what a TV drama is as it pertains to the present study.

It is important to understand the difference between television and a television drama. It seems to be the endeavor of television dramas to evoke a "way of thinking about something," to give "a basic way of making sense of our experience of the real," and is furthermore, the "means by which we confirm or question our sense of social or individual identity" (Thornham & Purvis, 2005, p. 27). TV dramas bring substance and a rhythm to the convention of life. The flow of "action and acting" become organized, systematic, and almost predictable (Thornham & Purvis, 2005, p. 2). This process of lulling, through the execution of methodical patterns, sets this genre

of television apart from the rest: TV dramas thrive on viewers' rapport and investment of the

characters and their lives. Again, this is accomplished by wrapping up a glimpse of reality into a

serialized, ongoing performance. Subsequently, consumers continue to watch because they know

that the story will continue to be a narrative.

Public narratives help construct, mediate, and frame social and individual identities

(Thornham & Purvis, 2005). They also define the inner-world of a person's or character's

motivations, perspectives, emotions, and goals, in addition to describing events that have taken

place (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). Interestingly, those identities remain fixed and unfixed

simultaneously. As representations on television change, due to history or context, the viewer's

identity also changes. Over time, it seems that television dramas must learn to adapt with these

changes or risk minimal chances of survival. Much research has been done that shows the power

of persuasion available through narrative (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). It is this combination of

narrative, myth, and organization that keep TV dramas viable, despite the countless number of

dramas that seem to revolve around the same plot or setting. Likewise, the desire to experience

specific emotions or emotional shifts may influence viewers' media selection (Nabi & Green,

2015). The role of emotion in the usage of narratives has been shown to increase persuasive

influence and increase continued engagement with the narrative. These influences also seem to

influence how viewers perceive and feel after exposure (Nabi & Green, 2015). Therefore, due to

this influence upon consumers' identities and emotions, as well as the heavy involvement

characters and their actions play in the retention of viewers, television dramas make for the

perfect backdrop to study viewer perceptions of fathers. In addition, although this review of

literature on fatherhood portrayals and perceptions is not comprehensive, it is clear that more

research is needed that aims to discover the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes individuals

experience from viewing fathers in television dramas. The purpose of the present study is to

better understand those perceptions, which ultimately will be accomplished through a framework

of uses and gratifications theory.

Theoretical Background

        Uses and gratifications theory. The uses and gratifications model will act as a

theoretical framework for the following study. Uses and gratifications dictates a model that is

dedicated to analyzing the behavior of media consumers and views individual behaviors as "goal

directed and purposive" (Rubin, 2009, p. 167). This theory provides structure due to the need to

understand the motives for watching particular television dramas and the motivations for making

such choices. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) posited that uses and gratifications

categorizes an individual's needs and expectations into "differential patterns" that essentially

determine why an individual uses or elicits a certain type of media (p. 510). Although some

consequences may be a result of a conscious decision (i.e., the consumers partake in media

because they want to gain information, prepare themselves culturally, or be reassured about their

role in society), other consequences, or effects of that media, are often subconscious and

unintended (Katz et al., 1973). Denis McQuail (1984) also posited that even originally, research

on the uses and gratifications of media officially began as a "simple and straightforward attempt

to learn more... about the connection between the attraction to certain kinds of media content and

other features of personality and social circumstances" (p.177). Katz et al. (1973) further

purported that although the individual uses and gratifications of any media vary from person to

person, common motivations for society's media use can be identified and evaluated. Identifying

collective groups of uses and gratifications for watching specific television dramas may therefore

be useful as these might offer greater understanding regarding this phenomenon.

Previously, uses and gratifications literature had assigned audiences of media as passive

consumers (Rubin, 2009); however, Sundar and Limperos (2013), supported by Katz, Blumler,

and Gurevitch's (1973) findings, established that with the advent of new media, "audiences"

should and must be replaced by "users" (p. 504). The term "users" implies that individuals who

seek out different media sources are active participants in creating their exposure and interaction

with media as a whole (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 504). In relation to television, this active

role must be employed when individuals seek out and become invested in the characters or plot

from a television show. *Interactivity* further strengthens this notion by implying that individuals

have control in the communication process and can exchange roles if necessary (Ruggiero,

2000). Likewise, *demassification* connotes the control the individual has over the medium. In

reality, the media user has the ability to select their media consumption from a wide variety of

sources, which further allows them the capability to tailor media messages to their needs

(Ruggiero, 2000).

Studies on uses and gratifications have also noted that the motivations and use for media

selection often changes between users and the type of media (Katz et al., 1973; McQuail, 1984).

With the ever-changing, ever-transient line-up of television shows (and their paternal portrayals),

focusing on individual perceptions holds important implications for society as a whole. Hayes,

Carr, and Donghee (2016) suggested that symbolic communication can be used to convey a

variety of thoughts and emotions. Such symbolic communication could be present in primetime

TV. The relationship between the medium and the participator influences what is being

communicated and how it is being received and interpreted. This symbolism, manifested through

a uses and gratifications perspective, is what Ruggiero (2000) aimed to understand:

[Uses and gratifications can be used] To match one's wits against others, to get

information and advice for daily living, to provide a framework for one's day, to prepare

oneself culturally for the demands of upward mobility, or to be reassured about the

dignity and usefulness of one's role (p. 4).

Essentially, all media choices are thus symbolic of goal fulfillment.

Ruggiero (2000) additionally discussed the two dichotomies between uses and

gratifications scholarship. In one camp lies the belief that media consumption largely remains a

"leisurely way to pass the time" (p. 18). Media choices revolve only around time-filling and

homogenized behaviors, and specifically, the choices the majority of media audiences make are

for seeking entertainment, relaxation, or escape only (Ruggiero, 2000). Conversely, other

scholars have purported that media use is selective and requires a coordination of "interactive"

needs in order to fulfill them (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 18). Moreover, researchers have found that a

person's motivations often determine the usefulness of the media, and subsequent knowledge

obtained from it. Sundar and Limperos (2013) claimed that media consumers are "agentic" and

pursue sources that they can customize for the type of information they want to receive (p. 514).

In line with these assumptions, individuals who watch television shows do so with the intent that

the information or experiences they are looking for will occur from such a media choice. This

confirms what Bilandzic and Busselle (2013) have said; audiences are not passive, but active

receivers of stories.

Lastly, although it may seem obvious, UGT aims to identify what gratifications a person

gains when they choose certain types of media. In this process, social and psychological factors,

as well as predispositions to a surrounding environment, must all be taken into account when

assessing the uses and gratifications of an individual (Rubin, 2009, p. 166). These factors

ultimately act as a filter, or mediator, of behavior that result from media consumption. Much

research has been done that has identified several motivating factors for individuals who seek out

specific media: social affiliation, excitability, social learning, relaxation, and escapism (Aubrey,

Olson, Fine, Hauser, Rhea, Kaylor, & Yang, 2012; Greenberg & Woods, 1999; Lundy, Ruth, &

Park, 2008; Roberti, 2007). All of these would be considered gratifications. Godlewski and Perse

(2010) also found that several of these motivations, namely social learning, escapism, and

sociability, are linked to identification. Identification, in this sense, refers to the parasocial

relationships consumers form with a character in the media (Godlewski & Perse, 2010).

Discovering if such identification and engagement with TV drama fathers occurs will further

clarify which uses and gratifications individuals pursue when consuming media about fathers.

Additionally, the theory maintains that people are generally more influential than media,

and again, consumers are largely active participants who "initiate selection and use of

communication vehicles" (Rubin, 2009, p. 167). This indicates that the individual, not the media,

has the power to decide what media will be utilized. Because of these characteristics and its

notoriety as a robust theoretical approach, uses and gratifications, along with the grounded

theory method, will work to support the discovery of fatherhood perceptions in TV dramas held

by viewers (Rubin, 2009, p. 178; Ruggiero, 2000, p. 3).

Justification

Though varied in its scope and specialization, research discussing the topic of viewer

perceptions of fatherhood is far from complete. As mentioned above, most literature in this area

aims to identify the representations of such paternal figures, rather than what viewers perceive

from those portrayals. Television dramas make an appropriate platform to study these

perceptions as they are generally longer in format and are serialized, meaning the narrative

continues from one episode to the next. This concept of flow, as described by Thornham and

Purvis (2005), will help to construct a basic understanding as to what individuals think about

fathers on TV, particularly in the genre of TV Drama. Likewise, the opportunity to understand if

people are developing relationships with or learning from the characters in television dramas

could afford the possibility for more robust data. This study ultimately offers a richer perspective

in that it aims to identify what the perceptions of TV dads are. These perceptions can, in turn,

vary in their interpretations based upon the individual. Such interpretations could then have the

possibility of acting as a mobilizing agent of resources or even benefit the person by allowing

them to obtain new information, be entertained, feel an emotional release, or escape from one's

daily life (Ruggiero, 2000). In other words, popular characters and TV dramas have been shown

to have an influence upon viewers (Callister et al., 2007; Thornham & Purvis, 2005). Where that

influence is being seen, particularly concerning fathers, is now the question which needs to be

answered. Therefore, in order to discover how individuals interpret these father representations,

the present study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ 1: What are the viewer perceptions of fathers in television dramas?

Method

To best understand the data, as well as its interpretation, the methodology will be

approached through grounded theory. According to Creswell (2007), the aim of grounded theory

analysis does more than being descriptive, but is the process whereby a theory is ultimately

developed. Anselm Strauss, an original creator of grounded theory, wrote that since its birth,

grounded theory has "emphasized the necessity for grasping the actors' viewpoints for

understanding interaction, process, and social change" (Strauss, 1987, p. 6). This call for

understanding the viewpoints of individuals is what makes grounded theory a perfect fit for the

present study. Strauss (1987) believed that the patterns developed during the phases of coding

was key to grasping a deeper knowledge of the phenomena at hand. The general, more descriptive information led to discovery and breakthroughs. This method differs from others in that it is actually grounded in the data, rather than being stretched to fit a study (Creswell, 2007). Having its roots in sociology, this theory was developed in 1967 by two researchers: Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. These two believed that the theories at the time did not fit many of the participant and research needs. With that in mind, they directed that users of grounded theory should make sure that their data was steeped in the collection of information that results from action, interactions, and the social processes of people (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory posits that situations or experiences should be its unit of analysis. For the present study, the experience that will be analyzed is the viewership of television dramas and their perceptions of fathers based on what they see.

Again, from its origins, Glaser and Strauss purported that such a theory as grounded theory must be executed in such a way that researchers act only as instruments in developing the theory and nothing more (Strauss, 1987). As is apparent, the use of grounded theory was intended so that data would be given a voice. It was created so that through the objectivity and removal of the researcher from the data, the phenomenon could speak for itself. The way that this voice is heard is through the two approaches of grounded theory. The first is the systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin, and the second is the constructivist approach of Charmaz (Creswell, 2007). The first approach seeks to develop a theory that explicates the process, action, or interaction of a topic. With this, a researcher generally conducts in-depth interviews to gain information. With the second approach, grounded theory supports a social constructivist perspective, or a viewpoint that emphasizes the multiple realities, varying local domains, and the intricacies of thoughts, ideas, and actions. This approach accentuates the views, values, beliefs,

and assumptions of individuals, rather than their actions. Kathy Charmaz (2014) argued that her

constructivist approach to grounded theory includes the "iterative logic" that Strauss

emphasized; however, this approach places emphasis on not only the action, but also on the

meaning inherent to the "pragmatist tradition" of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). In

other words, the constructivist grounded theory approach accentuates the malleability of the

method and curbs the "mechanical applications of it" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). Due to this

flexibility, Charmaz's constructivist perspective best suits the present study as the intent of this

research is to understand the perceptions and meanings individuals have about fathers in

television dramas. Using this approach, it is important to reach saturation in the research process,

the ultimate goal of which is to explain or create a theory based off of data collection.

Participants

Participants for this study were gathered using the snowball technique and a recruitment

script. The recruitment script required that each participant watched at least one season of a

television drama, and the researcher assessed whether participants were fit for the present study.

Watching at least one season will have allowed participants ample time to become familiar with

the plot, narrative, characters, and overall development of their favorite TV drama (Thornham &

Purvis, 2005), ensuring richer data would be gathered. In addition, the recruitment script

informed individuals that they were to be asked questions regarding their perceptions and

thoughts about fathers in their favorite television dramas.

The participant sample was made up of college students from a private university located

in the intermountain west. The Nielsen Company (2017) has called this age group the "largest

generation" to engage in media more than anyone else, which thus offered the present study

additional justification due to the familiarity and engagement this demographic has with media..

Demographic information was collected before the interviews began. Participants ranged in age from 19-28 years old, with the average age being 24.75 years old. In total, six females and six males were interviewed, and nine of the participant were married, while three were single. Four of the participants had at least one child and seven participants were graduate students. The remaining five participants were as follows: two seniors, two juniors, and one freshman.

Interviewing

The data was collected through 12 in-depth interviews. The following six guidelines were used when the interviews took place, as recommended by Charmaz (2014):

1. Select research participants who have firsthand experience that fits the research topic.

2. Complete an in-depth exploration of participants' experience and situations.

3. Rely on open-ended questions.

4. Obtain detailed responses.

5. Place emphasis on understanding the research participants' perspective, meaning, and experience.

6. Practice following up on unanticipated areas of inquiry, hints, and implicit views, accounts of actions.

Throughout the interviews, these guidelines were used when participants were asked questions about their television choices and why they watched what they watched. Likewise, when discussing their perceptions of fathers in their favorite TV dramas, follow up questions were asked. These questions were tailored depending upon the responses of the participants. Below are the interview questions participants were asked:

Question: What is your favorite TV drama?

Question: How many seasons have you watched of that show? (Required to have seen at least one season.)

Question: Why is that your favorite TV drama?

Question: Who is your favorite character in that show?

Question: Why are they your favorite character?

Question: What qualities does your favorite character(s) possess?

Question: What qualities does your favorite character(s) NOT possess?

Question: Is there a father figure in the show?

Question: How do you perceive the fathers or father-type figures in your favorite TV drama?

Question: How do you feel about them?

Question: What qualities do they or do they not have?

Question: Do you feel that what you perceive about father figures in your favorite TV drama influences how you will parent? (Or how you already parent?)

Question: How has it shaped what you want to do as a parent? (or potential father?)

Question: Who is your favorite father figure on TV in general?

Question: Who is your least favorite father figure on TV in general?

Question: Do you ever reflect on your experiences with your father when viewing material about fathers?

Question: What is your own relationship with your father like?

Question: Is what you view similar or opposite to your own experience?

Question: How realistic does your favorite TV drama feel to you?

Question: Do you learn about yourself while watching your favorite characters or other characters in the show?

Question: If yes, what do you learn?

Question: If no, why not?

Question: Do you feel that these lessons help you in any way?

Question: Do you gravitate towards any particular genre or to positively/negatively valenced TV dramas?

Question: Do you identify with any particular character? Why?

Question: What does this perception do for you?

One obstacle for a study like this (i.e., a study that deals with personal subject matter), was finding participants who were all willing to open up about their perceptions of fatherhood. After all, people are not always comfortable self-disclosing personal feelings or information if they do not know the researcher well (Guerrero, 2008). That being said, though it posed a challenge to find all participants who were willing and ready to share their feelings on the matter, the necessary participants required for reaching saturation was made in order to complete the project. As Charmaz (2014) suggested, establishing rapport with the participants and facilitating an ancillary environment were key to this execution.

Finally, there are many advantages, as well as challenges, that accompany grounded theory as a methodological approach. Setting aside past theoretical ideas or approaches is extremely important to executing a grounded theory study. Making sure to follow the systemic approach required for this study, despite its inductive nature, is also imperative (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, knowing when categories within the data are saturated is difficult to determine, however, the primary outcome to using grounded theory came about when a central phenomenon, through themes, categories, and subcategories, was established. With these assumptions, challenges, and procedures in mind, grounded theory is a method that has allowed

the collected data to reveal its own story. Grounded theory offers a unique perspective in that it

will articulate a specific phenomenon (i.e. father perceptions in TV dramas) and offer new

insight as to the implications of these findings.

Coding and Analysis

Constant comparative analysis, or the process by which the researcher takes the

information gathered from the data and compares it to developing categories, was used to

complete the coding process (Creswell, 2007). This type of analysis facilitates the identification

of different properties among categories and themes, which helped with the overall classification

process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Furthermore, making comparisons clarified understanding

among participants' descriptions and deeper meaning. Customary to grounded theory, the

properties of the experiences, perceptions, and descriptions given by the participants were the

units of analysis. These properties were used throughout all three levels of coding. The first

round of coding is called *open coding*. Open coding occurs when the data is analyzed for its

major and minor categories (Creswell, 2007). Participants were first invited to be interviewed by

the researcher at a time most convenient for them. Prior information regarding the interview was

communicated to each participant, whereupon the start of every interview, an IRB consent form

was distributed that detailed more in-depth the nature of the study. Participants were informed

that they would be asked questions regarding their perceptions of fathers in TV dramas. During

the interviews, the researcher took in-depth notes and simultaneously recorded the interview for

analysis. Once all 12 interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed each interview into a

separate Word document. Upon completion of the transcription phase, the researcher read

through all interview questions and answers and extracted main ideas. These main ideas were

written first in the margins of each transcription, a practice Strauss (1987) recommended, and

were then compiled into a master document that contained all of the main ideas from every

participant. The master document contained both major and minor categories and thus completed

the first round of coding. As part of both the open and axial coding processes, it is characteristic

of grounded theory to keep a *coding paradigm*, or a mindset held by the researcher that assists in

associating categories and subcategories together while coding (Strauss, 1987). Essentially, it is

central to become familiar with the experiences and perceptions, so much so that it can be

anticipated where the presently coded main idea will be categorized into. The coding paradigm

was used during the coding process for the present study and ultimately worked as a reminder to

code relevant data when given a specific category. Strauss (1987) acknowledged the alternating

nature of open and axial coding, a part of the analyses that will be described next.

To continue, after the master document with each main idea was assembled, all notes

from the 12 participants were printed. After printing, the researcher separated every main idea

out and wrote the associating participant number on each cut piece of paper. Following this, each

main idea was arranged into subcategories, depending upon the focus of the main idea. The

classification of the main ideas into these subcategories are what made up the *axial coding*

process. Axial coding was executed by analyzing open coding groupings and creating

subcategories within each. The main categories for the present study were 1) perceptions of

fathers, 2) reasons for liking a TV drama, and 3) effects from viewing a TV drama. The

subcategories nestled underneath category one were perceptions of fathers in TV dramas,

perceptions of favorite TV fathers, perceptions of least favorite TV fathers, and general

perceptions of fathers on TV. See table one for reference. The subcategories bundled beneath

category two were favorite TV dramas, favorite TV drama characters, relatability, connection to

own father experience, and definition of a good father. See table two for reference. The

subcategories comprised in category three were thinking after viewing, talking after viewing,

learning from viewing, and emulating after viewing. See table three for reference. Once all

subcategories were created and classified, the third phase of coding was conducted.

After all of the subcategories were organized into their respective categories, *selective*

coding was completed. Selective coding is a method for developing propositions or patterns

within the data and by the end, one turns them into a story that helps describe the answer to the

research question(s). After the categories and subcategories were established and upon

discussion with the researcher's mentors, the data from participant interviews were further

interpreted into four common, overarching themes. These themes embodied the perceptions that

all participants distinguished about fathers in TV dramas. The four main perceptions are:

1) Fathers in TV dramas are perceived more positively than fathers in TV sitcoms.

2) Fathers in TV dramas are perceived as human or the "flawed hero."

3) Fathers from TV dramas are perceived as a prompt for discussion.

4) Fathers from TV dramas are perceived as someone who is worthy of emulation or
   learning from.

The above themes (see table four) and subcategories will be further examined in the findings

section. Likewise, additional reasoning and support from participant quotes will explain why

such categories, subcategories, and themes were created. It is important to note that particularly

during the second and third round of coding, a central component, or *core phenomenon*

(Creswell, 2007) of the present study became apparent. The core phenomenon, or essence of the

present study, is the degree to which a character or situation within a TV drama is relatable. The

relatability factor is encompassed in all four themes and heavily influences the perceptions that

viewers hold about fathers in TV dramas. To participants, relatability converted to likability, and

likability impacted loyalty and favorability of a show. Again, further support for this

phenomenon will be provided in the findings and discussion sections.

Lastly, throughout the coding and analysis phase of the present study, the action of

memoing was used, which is a term that implies the process of writing down different ideas or

important concepts about the evolving theory (Creswell, 2007; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987).

These were written in a separate document from the coding sheet. Memoing helped the findings

and discussion section take shape, and contributed to the overall infrastructure of those sections.

It also helped when developing the selective coding themes and the core phenomenon as well.

More detail will be given in the subsequent sections below that describes the four major

perceptions and their subcategories. Significant findings will be identified and will be addressed

in full in the discussion section; these will ultimately identify the deeper and more applicable

meanings to the overall study and answer the research question.

Table 1. Open Coding Category One: Perceptions of Fathers

Axial Coding Subcategories
Perceptions of fathers in TV dramas
Perceptions of favorite TV fathers
Perceptions of least favorite TV fathers
General perceptions of fathers on TV

* The above table represents the subcategories that are nestled underneath category one.

Table 2. Open Coding Category Two: Reasons for Liking a TV Drama

Axial Coding Subcategories
Favorite TV dramas
Favorite TV drama characters
Relatability
Connection to own father experience
Definition of a good father

* The above table represents the subcategories that are nestled underneath category two.

Table 3. Open Coding Category Three: Effects from Viewing a TV Drama

Axial Coding Subcategories
Thinking after viewing
Talking after viewing
Learning from viewing
Emulating after viewing

* The above table represents the subcategories that are nestled underneath category three.

Table 4. Viewer Perceptions of Fathers in TV Dramas

Selective Coding Themes/Major Perceptions
Fathers in TV dramas are perceived as more positively than fathers in TV sitcoms.
Fathers in TV dramas are perceived as human or the "flawed hero."
Fathers from TV dramas are perceived as a prompt for discussion.
Fathers from TV dramas are seen as someone who is worthy of emulation or learning from.

* The above table indicates what perceptions represent the selective coded themes.

Findings

During the coding and analysis, four major perceptions that viewers hold about fathers in television dramas emerged from the data. First, fathers in TV dramas are perceived more positively than fathers in TV sitcoms. Second, fathers in TV dramas are perceived as a "flawed hero" or as someone who is human. Third, fathers from TV dramas are perceived as prompt or a basis for discussion. Fourth, fathers from television dramas are perceived as someone who is worthy of emulation or learning from. Each perception will be addressed more fully throughout this section, and described by the subcategories listed under each perception heading. These will help to illustrate the perception more fully.

Perception One: Positivity

The first perception emerged when comparative analysis was conducted between participants' perceptions of fathers in TV dramas, favorite and least favorite fathers on TV, and general perceptions of fathers on TV. This finding sets the present study apart from previous studies, as the general negative perceptions of fathers do not apply to TV dramas. Reasoning for such will be discussed below.

Perceptions of fathers in favorite TV dramas. Participants were asked if there were fathers portrayed in their favorite TV dramas and then to describe how the participant perceived them. A list of television dramas that participants referenced during their interviews is available in table five. The fathers discussed were Jack Pearson from *This Is Us*, Henry Spencer from *Psych*, Thatcher Grey from *Grey's Anatomy*, Tom Kirkman from *Designated Survivor*, Miguel Rivas from *This Is Us*, Richard Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*, Mr. Yoshikawa from *Good Morning Call*, Henry McCord from *Madam Secretary*, William Hill from *This Is Us*, Richard Webber from *Grey's Anatomy*, Luke Danes from *Gilmore Girls*, Randall Pearson from *This Is*

Us, Mr. Sata from *Good Morning Call*, Robert Crawley from *Downton Abbey*, Christian Shepherd from *Lost*, Stanley Pearson from *This Is Us*, Christopher Hayden from *Gilmore Girls*, and Rick Grimes from *The Walking Dead*. To see a list of all fathers identified in participants' favorite TV dramas, refer to table six. Upon being asked this question, two of the participants failed to think of any fathers in their favorite television drama; the shows were *Suits* and *Criminal Minds*. Although these participants felt that actual fathers were not portrayed, they did think of fatherly figures within the show who were indirectly paternal role models to the main characters.

By far, the most common fathers talked about were those from *This Is Us*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Gilmore Girls*. In the majority of the television dramas discussed, participants were able to identify both good and bad fathers within the same television show. For example, participant 5, 11, and 12 all mentioned the variety of fathers portrayed in *This Is Us* and said that they felt the show writers juxtaposed Jack or Randall Pearson's good fathering to Stanley Pearson's or William Hill's bad fathering. Participant 5 felt that he thought fathers, especially those on screen, needed to be selfless. "I like and I think better fathers are the ones who take energy from sacrificing, which is a very, very hard skill to master. Just to feel like you are fulfilling your life's purpose by not focusing on yourself. That's a really hard thing, but I think the best fathers do that. And I think [Jack Pearson] develops that over time." Like participant 5, there were several participants who mentioned the quality of adaptability and noticed the character growth in many of these father figures. An example of this could be seen in Richard Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls* or Robert Crawley from *Downton Abbey* as they strove to adapt to the needs of their families and the demands of the time period. Some qualities that many of these fathers possessed included being a teacher, caring, supporting, communicators with spouse and

children, loving, protecting, disciplining, forgiving, and having integrity. Participant 1 said this about Mr. Yoshikawa from *Good Morning Call*: "I think that's something that's really special…to have a parent, especially a dad who's going to take their time and listen to their daughter to see what matters to her and what she wants. Not to be like, 'Hey, this is what's best for you and I'm making a decision.' It's, 'This is what I think is best for you, but let me talk to you, let me understand, and let's figure this out.' So I think in the show that's exemplified a lot." Clearly, participants have developed admiration, respect, and an overall connection to positive portrayals such as this.

Remarkably, the majority of fathers were characterized by both strengths and weaknesses. Participants often mentioned one or two qualities that a father lacked, but proceeded to believe and share that they were a good father in spite of that fact. It seems that there is ultimately a positive perception of fathers in TV dramas, as well as diversity among fathers within the same show, and within an individual father as well. Indeed, participant 11 even observed that *This Is Us* offers a variety of fathers and types of relationships to "pick and choose" from. Quite interesting is the fact that not once was the quality of "stupidity" or "buffoonery" mentioned in the description of fathers in their favorite TV dramas, yet most participants listed these as qualities they perceived were characteristic of fathers on TV. Implications for this finding will be discussed later on.

In addition, biological dads came across as more accepted by their children than step-parents, especially in the situation of Miguel Rivas from *This Is Us*. Even despite his efforts to assert himself as a father figure, the children in the show resisted, but the grandchildren didn't. Participant 11 perceived this as a huge difference in comparison to other shows. Likewise, participant 9 perceived Henry Spencer on *Psych* as good and caring, although he felt that the

show endeavored to portray him oppositely, especially from the viewpoint of the main character,

Shawn. Participant 12 observed that maybe there is shift in television that illustrates more

progressive, rather than stereotypical fathers. This could be an explanation for the above two

situations.

Table 5. Represents what TV dramas were listed as favorites by participants.

Favorite TV Dramas	Number of Participants
This Is Us	4
Gilmore Girls	3
Madam Secretary	2
Downton Abbey	2
Good Morning Call	1
Lost	1
Grey's Anatomy	1
Criminal Minds	1
Castle	1
Suits	1
The Walking Dead	1
Designated Survivor	1
Psych	1
Blue Bloods	1

*The second column denotes how many times the TV dramas were mentioned by participants.

Table 6. Represents what fathers from favorite TV dramas were listed by participants.

Fathers from Favorite TV Dramas	TV Dramas
Jack Pearson	*This Is Us*
Henry Spencer	*Psych*
Thatcher Grey	*Grey's Anatomy*
Tom Kirkman	*Designated Survivor*
Miguel Rivas	*This Is Us*
Richard Gilmore	*Gilmore Girls*
Mr. Yoshikawa	*Good Morning Call*
Henry McCord	*Madam Secretary*
William Hill	*This Is Us*
Richard Webber	*Grey's Anatomy*
Luke Danes	*Gilmore Girls*
Randall Pearson	*This Is Us*
Mr. Sata	*Good Morning Call*
Robert Crawley	*Downton Abbey*
Christian Shepherd	*Lost*
Stanley Pearson	*This Is Us*
Christopher Hayden	*Gilmore Girls*
Rick Grimes	*The Walking Dead*

Participants' favorite father on TV. Participants were asked who their favorite father figure was on television in general. The fathers listed came from both TV sitcoms and dramas. To see a comprehensive list of which fathers were specified by participants, see table seven. While some fathers were described as being "reliable," "supportive," "caring," "selfless," "protective," "authoritative," "humble," "perseverant," "trustworthy," "loving," "committed," "funny," "attentive," "adaptable," and "authoritative," others were liked for being "stupid, but hilarious." There seems to be a difference in viewers' perceptions on what it means to be a "good" father, however, more consensus on what it means to be a "bad" father. Implications will be discussed later on.

A few participants also mentioned some father figures from movies, such as Mufasa from Disney's *The Lion King* and Cornelius Lewis Robinson from Disney's *Meet The Robinsons*, as exemplifying strong family ideals and togetherness. Interestingly, several participants noted that some of their favorite fathers were those who had strong marital relationships with their spouse and positive interactions with their kids on screen. TV dramas like *This Is Us* and *Madam Secretary* were praised for showing the "best marriages on TV" and were not only seen as good examples to those on screen, but to those off as well (Participant 5). Participants felt that this strong family dynamic contrasted many other shows available to watch. The fact that these fathers had flaws, but kept on trying to do their best for their family was a very likable quality. It also made them more relatable to the participant, which is the core phenomenon of this study. Implications for this element of relatability will be further discussed, In addition, many fatherly attributes were attributed to those male characters who were older and came across as wise.

Table 7. Represents what TV fathers in general were listed as favorites by participants.

Favorite Fathers on TV	TV Shows
Jack Pearson	*This Is Us*
Jonathan Ritter	*8 Simple Rules*
Ron Swanson	*Parks and Recreation*
Leonard Green	*Friends*
Phil Dunphy	*Modern Family*
Jim Halpert	*The Office*
Keith Mars	*Veronica Mars*
Joe DuBois	*Medium*
Danny Tanner	*Full House*
Richard Castle	*Castle*
Frank Reagan	*Blue Bloods*

Participants' least favorite father on TV. Participants were asked who their least

favorite father figure was on television. While some suggested fathers from their favorite

television drama, most provided examples from other shows they watched, including sitcoms. In

fact, most of the fathers that they liked least came from TV sitcoms. Such fathers like Michael

Scott from *The Office*, Phil Dunphy from *Modern Family*, Roger Peralta from *Brooklyn Nine-*

Nine and Steve Wyatt from *Parks and Recreation* were labeled as "selfish," "mean,"

"manipulative," "dumb," "morally inappropriate," "awful," "dishonest," "disrespectful,"

"belittling," "unsupportive," "buffoon," "domineering," "competitive," "unaccountable,"

"ignorant of spouse and children," "goof-off," and "absent." Other fathers that were listed as

least favorites can be viewed in table eight.

Participant 5 also mentioned that they thought the fathers portrayed in *Riverdale* were

extremely negative, as well as many fathers in Disney Channel television shows and Disney

animated movies, such as *Coco* and *Moana*. Also, it is worthy to note that some fathers listed as

least favorites had problems with substance abuse or excessive drinking. One participant strongly

felt that such negative examples of fathers led to unmerited attacks on fatherhood in general.

Likewise, another participant felt that negative portrayals in children's television programming is

due to the goal to empower children by removing parents altogether, as a tool to create more

independence within the child. Unfortunately, for participant 1, these negative qualities, she felt,

are exceedingly harmful. Watching fathers act in this way was not only something she disliked,

but something that actually triggered an emotional response, so much so she avoided watching

them altogether. Implications for such a response will be discussed later.

Interestingly, some participants expressed that even though they disliked these negative

father portrayals, their dislike did not inhibit them from continuing to watch. It seems that the

comedic relief provided by such fathers moderated the harmful or disengaging effects they could

have had. However, some participants admitted that they had ceased to watch a particular show

due to the negative influence they felt from watching the undesirable characters and relationships

between them. It also is apparent that there is overlap between some participants' favorite and

least favorite fathers on TV, such as the case of Phil Dunphy from *Modern Family*. Again, the

humor or personal family background of the participant could account for this overlap.

Table 8. Represents what TV fathers in general were listed as least favorites by participants.

Least Favorite Fathers on TV	TV Shows
Michael Scott	*The Office*
Phil Dunphy	*Modern Family*
Roger Peralta	*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*
Steve Wyatt	*Parks and Recreation*
Homer Simpson	*The Simpsons*
Frank Reynolds	*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*
Walt Miller	*New Girl*
Thatcher Grey	*Grey's Anatomy*
Rogelio de la Vega	*Jane The Virgin*
Horace Bryant	*Downton Abbey*

Perceptions of fathers on TV. During the interviews, participants were also asked to identify their general perception of fathers on TV. Participants 4, 9, 5, 11, and 7 explicitly stated in their interviews that they believed that most television shows do not portray good fathers. They used terms such as "stupid," "buffoon," "negative," "comic relief," "dominating," "competitive," "proud," "bad," "garbage," and "not strong" to describe their perceptions of fathers on TV. One participant even observed that there were negative portrayals of fathers in children's shows as well, calling fathers the "punching bag" of other family members. Many participants also agreed that such negative illustrations of fatherhood ultimately has a detrimental influence on society at large. Participant 4 even stated that some attacks against fatherhood are unmerited due to the bad depictions of father figure characters. Likewise, participant 11 felt that most shows not only portrayed fathers as having "terrible" relationships with their children, but that it was inevitable to have such an unfavorable relationship.

One participant shared that they felt that because of the social, political, and even historical issues that are presently in the public's mind, fathers are portrayed weak and not good. Showing an increased portrayal of empowered minorities also has led to what the participant felt as the tearing down of men in order to boost up other minorities, especially women. Participant 9 believed that the television networks seemed aimed at this agenda. He also expressed his desire for more traditional portrayals because he felt that he is personally striving for this lifestyle and would like to see more options for him to view fathers and families that match his own life.

Likewise, participant 5 stated that it was a "huge dereliction of duty on the part of the networks" for showing bad father figures. He perceived that there was a lack in good fathers available on TV. Participant 9 also agreed with this idea, commenting that it was very difficult to find good portrayals of good men and good father figures. Interestingly, once the participants

were interviewed about their favorite television dramas, many, if not most, were able to identify

positive father figures and good qualities they had. It seems that there is a disconnect between

what people actually perceive is on TV dramas vs. what is actually there. In fact, participant 9

pointed out that there were a variety of portrayals of fathers and they were portrayed in different

ways. This begs the question as to why individuals think TV only shows negative portrayals.

More consideration will be addressed in the discussion section.

The idea of traditional vs. non-traditional family portrayal also came up when being

asked about their fatherhood perceptions. Participant 4 made it clear that he felt that the role of

the father figure is someone who gives advice on logistical or financial questions, whereas

mothers are needed mainly for emotional support. They felt that many shows portrayed this

dynamic. However, participant 9 stated that he feels families are increasingly shown in a

nontraditional sense. This increase, he reported, has made him feel perceive that society is

aiming at showing non-families as if to say that people do not need their biological families to

turn out alright. Essentially, to him, what constitutes a family is blurred by what he sees in

television dramas.

Participant 1 stated they noticed the differences between a child-father dynamic and a

child-guardian dynamic. The child-father dynamic showed more disagreements and problems to

work through, that it took more time to resolve issues, and that the father would listen and give

specific, applicable advice to the child through personal examples. On the other hand, the child-

guardian dynamic showed a more positive relationship, an easiness to getting along, a more laid-

back guardian, and listening, then giving general advice. In a way, the guardian came across as

almost sympathetic, rather than empathetic. As is apparent, when participants discussed their

favorite television dramas and the fathers within those shows, the same charitable feelings did

not cross over into their general perceptions. More discussion regarding this will be examined later on.

Perception Two: Flawed Hero

The second perception regarding fathers in TV dramas is reviewed and supported in this section. First, favorite dramas and characters are described, which contributes to and supports the idea of liking TV drama dads as people who are human and real. The element of relatability is highlighted and deemed by participants as a top reason for their loyalty to their favorite television drama. This is also apparent in participants' descriptions of their own fathers and what they termed a "good" father. Crossover between reality and fathers in TV dramas are connected.

Participants' favorite TV dramas and why. As a main portion of the study, participants were asked what their favorite television drama was. They were also asked why it was their favorite drama. The most commonly occurring and favorite TV drama among the participants were *This Is Us*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Downton Abbey*. See table one for the full list of participants' favorite TV dramas. The top reasons identified by all 12 participants' for why they watched these television dramas were to see positive character interactions and portrayals (especially with fathers), to see strong family dynamics, for social learning, for entertainment, to connect with characters in parasocial relationships, to escape, to feel relief, to live vicariously, to engage in narrative and character development, to watch socially, and to be transported. Participants 3 and 6 were the only two to mention the romantic or attractiveness aspects of their favorite dramas. Participants 1, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12 all mentioned that they watched to feel prompted by their favorite drama to think more deeply about an issue, and even to be inspired, consoled, or have their beliefs reaffirmed. Participant 1 explained that watching her favorite drama was like having a tool to digest life with. Likewise, participant 5 stated that, "TV dramas

are good for evaluating oneself." One unexpected finding resulted when participants 1, 2, 6, 7,

and 9 mentioned they highly disliked watching television dramas that were too stressful, too sad,

or even too real. In some ways, they either triggered bad memories or played upon the

individual's empathetic nature too much. Participant 9 even hated the stress from cliffhangers so

much that he was willing to look up spoilers just to relieve said stress. As is apparent, there were

several significant reasons for participants to watch their favorite TV dramas. Two of those

reasons revolve around character development and the relatability the show or characters. Both

will be addressed in the following segment.

Participants' favorite characters and their relatability. Participants were asked who

their favorite characters were within their favorite TV drama. Such characters were John Locke

from *Lost*, Meredith Grey from *Grey's Anatomy*, Spencer Reid from *Criminal Minds*, Derek

Morgan from *Criminal Minds*, Jack Pearson from *This Is Us*, Randall Pearson from *This Is Us*,

Henry McCord from *Madam Secretary*, Elizabeth McCord from *Madam Secretary*, Lorelai

Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*, Rory Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*, Paris Gellar from *Gilmore

Girls*, Luke Danes from *Gilmore Girls*, Babette Dell from *Gilmore Girls*, Mike Ross from *Suits*,

Rick Grimes from *The Walking Dead*, Shawn Spencer from *Psych*, Burton "Gus" from *Psych*,

and Anna Smith from *Downton Abbey*, Mary Crawley from *Downton Abbey*, Sybil Crawley from

Downton Abbey, and Matthew Crawley from *Downton Abbey*. The top three characters who were

repeated by participants as favorites were Jack Pearson (*This Is Us*), Elizabeth McCord (*Madam

Secretary*), and Lorelai Gilmore (*Gilmore Girls*). Although many answers included fathers as

being their favorite character, the most defining characteristic was the relatability to that

character. Both positive and negative qualities were listed about each character, but it was the

fact that they had flaws that made them comparable to real life. This ability to compare

essentially led to more likeability. In addition, many, if not most, participants revealed qualities about their favorite characters that they wished they had. It seems that a combination of both realism and idealism is what helps determine favoritism.

For example, participant 11 explained that Jack Pearson (*This Is Us*) was not perfect, but that made him relatable. Likewise, participant 1 stated that what she watches feels realistic, "Not everything is happy" in show, but "happiness is achievable" according to the TV drama. Participant 2 posited that he gravitated toward characters and father figures that most matched his own. Participant 7 said that his favorite TV drama provided vicarious situations with hypothetical possibilities for parenting. Again, the balance between realism and idealism. In response to whether she thought her favorite TV dramas were realistic, participant 12 said:

> I think that's what makes a good drama is that it's relatable. Obviously in dramas you know
> that it's a little exaggerated because they have to keep people watching. But I think that
> that's why people are drawn to drama is because you can relate with people living in this
> relatable situation. Even if you've never lived them, you may know someone who has done
> something similar or you could see that happening to you.

Participant 1 also agreed that she though people are all drawn to shows they believe are relatable. Ultimately, the good dramas are relatable according to the sample in this study.

There were also several tropes found in many of the characters' personalities; tropes that many participants identified with. One example comes from participant 6 when she explained that Mary Crawley from Downton Abbey was a "stereotypical daddy's girl", a trait that she said she also possessed. The power of these tropes and ultimately this relatability reminded many of the participants of their own fathers. However, one caveat to this relatability also lies in the content of the TV drama. Participants 8 and 11 both claimed that the fantastical and extreme

conditions of shows like *Lost* and *The Walking Dead* make them hard to relate to or find realistic. And to the majority, perhaps all, of the participants, the more realistic (or the less amount of drama) leads to more relatability, which leads to more likeability.

Participant 3 and 4 also mentioned that due to their lack of knowledge in the medical or criminal justice field, the realistic-ness of their favorite TV dramas feels heightened. Although these types of shows allow for vicarious living and learning about that profession, consequences upon the characters' family lives seem to be the most negative repercussion to choosing that career path, yet other effects are often not documented. Interestingly, participant 2 noted that negative consequences are usually oversimplified on TV dramas, especially within father-child interactions. So in this regard, TV dramas do not feel realistic to some.

Another finding indicated that one participant stated that he did not truly identify with any one character on television. Perhaps this is because as complex and diverse as television is getting, humans and the real world will still be more complex. Most likely there will never be a perfect match between someone seen on screen and someone in real life. This seems to juxtapose what participant 5 said about the relatability he feels to fathers in his favorite TV dramas, "I could not like a character who was a bad father. If they're a dad, they better be a good one. And if they're not a dad, they better be getting ready to be a good one." He explicitly expressed that good fathers are his favorite and immensely relatable to him currently, as he himself is a young father.

Participants' own father experience. Participants were asked to describe what their relationships and experiences were with their own fathers. The majority of the participants, with the exception of one, all expressed that they had immensely positive experiences with their fathers. From describing their dad as being their "best friend" to being a good "listener,"

"motivator," "advisor," "teacher," "protector," "supporter," and even "hero," most participants illustrated their descriptions with an abundance of favorable adjectives. Likewise, many of the attributes they listed in their definition of a good father were apparent in their description of their own fathers. Qualities such as selflessness, morality, service-oriented, approachable, uplifting, generous, hardworking, patient, and involved are some that overlapped.

In addition, 10 of the participants expressed they preferred to watch positive portrayals of fathers, but that their favorite TV dramas did not necessarily need to match their own father experience. Participant 1, however, exclaimed vehemently that she limits and usually altogether avoids watching negative father portrayals that match her own. Her personal experience involved deeply traumatic experiences that left her feeling unloved, unsupported, and not a priority. Her parents also divorced when she was young, another factor that separates her from her fellow participants. All but this one participant still had parents who were married. More consideration as to why her answer was so oppositely different from the rest of the sample will be examined in the discussion section.

Participants' definition of a "good" father. During the interview process, it became apparent that a follow up question regarding the definition of a good father needed to be asked. The participants frequently brought up qualities they thought were positive father characteristics and then proceeded to say that those fathers who possessed them on television were their favorites. To say in the least, a correlation can be seen between what people themselves define as a good father and what they want to see on screen. Good fathers were often defined as "supportive," "loving," "present," "communicative," "trustworthy," "selfless," "tenacious," "authoritative," "kind," "committed," "hardworking," "honest," "protectors," someone who "sacrifices," someone who allows for child "autonomy," and someone with "strong morals."

Morality, or a high set of standards, played one of the largest roles in what participants deemed "good". This was reflected in participant 8's answers as she talked about her favorite father figures and least favorite father figures on TV. She applauded her favorite character from *The Walking Dead*, Rick Grimes, for always striving to protect his family and doing what he thought would best benefit them. She contrasted his example with Frank Reynolds from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* whom she said had no morals at all. Participant 5 also reported that when a father in his favorite TV dramas are able to not focus on themselves, but sacrifice, and take energy from sacrificing, for their family, then he is more inclined to like and even emulate these characters.

On the other hand, participants also mentioned that bad fathering is seen in those that criticize in an insulting or condescending way, in those who try to separate family members from each other either physically or emotionally, and in those who try to fit children into a specific one-size-fits-all mold. Interestingly, although participant 7 said they disliked how the father figure in *Suits* acts, it still did not deter him from watching the show. Participants 3, 5, and 9 also claimed that they did not need or feel the desire to watch shows that only matched their own father experiences, which were all described as extremely positive. Conversely, participant 1 mentioned that she did not like viewing television dramas with negative portrayals for reasons discussed in the next section. It also seems that humor mediated the need to watch a show that aligned with participants' beliefs, especially in the case of participant 4, 9, and 11.

Another interesting finding that came from this interview question resided in the expectation for good fathers to be family-oriented. Participant 12 and 5 both described good fathers as those who have good relationships with their spouse and children. They also believed

strongly that fathers play an integral role in each child's development and ultimately set the tone for how their children turn out, just as Kuo and Ward (2016) confirmed in their research.

Perception Three: Discursive

The third perception materialized when participants discussed reasons for why they watched TV dramas, as well as when they recounted their own experiences with their fathers. Many participants admitted thinking and talking about the fathers from their favorite television dramas. Explanation is featured in the following two subcategories.

Thinking during or after viewing. During the interview process, 10 out of the 12 participants demonstrated that they thought, or elaborated, about the content of their favorite TV drama during or after viewing it. Early on, participants were asked to describe the characters and their relationships in their favorite TV dramas. Oftentimes and without being prompted to do so, participants would mention that they have thought about an interaction between characters or a situation that was presented. These interactions and events were notably used as a hypothetical scenario for many of these participants to think about what they would do in the same situation or to see if the situation itself was realistic (i.e. crimes that occur in *Criminal Minds* or a zombie apocalypse like in *The Walking Dead*). The remaining two participants, when asked if they thought about their favorite show, answered that they did not.

Another question that was asked sought to know whether participants reflected on their own father experiences while watching fathers in their favorite dramas. Again, although the majority said they had, participants 4, 7, 8, 9, and 11 mentioned they had not. This was partially due to the extreme conditions in shows like The Walking Dead that made reflecting and even comparing difficult. Another reason was explained by participant 4 when he said that because he had a "good relationship" with his own father, he did not feel the need to reflect on what he was

seeing on screen. Participant 9 also stated that he does not reflect, most likely as a coping

mechanism in light of his father's death. Contrary to this, participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 10 all

stated that they have used television dramas to reflect upon their own experiences. This means

that they have either thought about their past or present circumstances, or even used these shows

to dictate what they will do in the future. In fact, participant 2 expressed that watching *Lost*

helped him to think about what he both does and does not want to do as a future father. Likewise,

participant 5 has stated the same feeling of motivation from the show *This Is Us*. In relation to

the research question, this finding indicates that an individual's perceptions about fathers in TV

dramas are influenced by their own experiences in life.

     Making comparisons. It was very clear that once individuals conveyed they thought

about TV shows outside of viewing it, they also made comparisons between their own lives and

those of whom they watched. Indeed, even parasocial relationships were seen to have formed

from the way participants spoke about their favorite characters. In one instance, participant 3

said: "I always compare everything to my real life experience because…it helps me to achieve

things in my life." This participant also indicated that though positive portrayals can motivate her

to achieve, negative portrayals and interactions do as well. Feeling gratitude was just one way

this participant showed they made a comparison. Participant 2 also felt such gratitude when

comparing his father relationship to that of Jack and Christian Shepherd on *Lost*.

     Participant 10 also indicated that during her active thinking and reflecting, she also

wished her parental relationships could have been like what she had seen on *Gilmore Girls*.

Comparing her life to Lorelai, Rory, and Richard Gilmore, this participant made many

comparisons to what her parents were really like and what she wished she had. Like her,

participant 1 also claimed she has "always" made comparisons between TV dramas and her own

life. This participant expressed that she loved to see different perspectives represented in TV

dramas because this showed her how her life could be different. After realizing at a young age

that TV dramas with positive parent-child relationships are different from her own, she continued

to seek out those differences so that she could make comparisons as a way to show her what she

could do to make her own future family different from her family of origin.

Talking during or after viewing. Six of the 12 participants revealed they spoke about

what they saw in their favorite TV drama with another person. Most often, the person they talked

with would be a family member or spouse. Participant 2, 5, 8, and 9 were actual parents

themselves and discussed their favorite TV drama with their spouse. Participant 5, 8, 11, and 12

specifically iterated that they usually discuss parenting styles, conflict resolution, and marital

coping skills based on they've seen. For example, participant 5 asserted that, "My wife and I

really use [*This Is Us*] as a play by play of scenarios, what we would do in those scenarios, and

generally as a way to form a discussion." Essentially, shows like *This Is Us* provide tool kits and

manuals for how to do things family-wise. One benefit of talking mentioned by participants was

that it saved time for learning how to parent and that it provided practice for real situations.

Participant 12 also conveyed that TV dramas like *This Is Us*, *Downton Abbey*, and *Gilmore Girls*

trigger a conversation and open the possibility to consider something deeper and more personal

between her and her husband. She specifically stated that she believed "you don't get the same

effect from a sitcom". The magnitude of this observation speaks volumes of the possible

implications.

Perception Four: Role Model

The fourth perception also emerged when participants gave details concerning their

favorite TV dramas and TV drama characters. Learning from and emulating were two behaviors

listed by participants, especially when they made comparisons or saw relatable aspects to the character's life and their own. Examples are illustrated in the section below.

Learning during or after viewing. Nine out of 12 participants reported that they learned something from watching their favorite TV drama. Participant 1 said that watching dramas in an opportunity to learn, especially how to be a parent, what qualities she wants in a spouse, and how her future spouse will parent. Essentially, if she can learn to be like the positive examples she sees on screen, she could cultivate the same type of family dynamic. Participant 3 disclosed that she learned one does not have to have a family of creation in order to put her family first. She felt she has learned from *Grey's Anatomy* that she needs to love and support her future children, as well as make them her first priority. She also has learned that she has similar qualities to that of her favorite character, Meredith Grey, which reaffirms to her that she is self-sufficient, ambitious, hardworking, and family-oriented. Additionally, participant 3, as well as participant 4 and 9, said they learned the consequences of career choices on family relationships from watching such shows as *Criminal Minds*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Designated Survivor*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Psych*. Each drama involves demanding careers. One aspect participant 4 liked about the drama *Castle* was that Richard Castle had a profession in which he was able to be involved and support his daughter, a trait that this respondent emulated greatly. Participant 5 felt similarly to 1 and 3 in that watching TV dramas is a learning opportunity. He definitively stated that he learned how to parent, about his own personality, and from characters' experiences. He likewise expressed he would use television to facilitate the learning of his own children, especially as there are good and bad examples available. Participant 8 also said she learned about herself as well and furthermore, that what she has learned has helped her. "[TV dramas] give you a visual, which makes it easy to remember. I could read a parenting book…but seeing the visual

definitely keeps it in my mind." The use of narratives as a way to learn through was apparent in participant 9's interview as well. He stated he has learned through stories, characters solving problems, and character experiences. Likewise, he has been "given ideas" on how to work through relationship conflict and address other real-life issues that arise. For this participant though, these were unintended benefits. Participants 5, 11, and 12 also specifically stated that *This Is Us* addresses a variety of real-life challenges, an attribute of the show they deeply admire. Participant 4 also expressed that when *Criminal Minds* uses historical accuracy in telling the case stories, it feels more realistic to him. Ironically, participant 2 and 4 both suggested that they did not learn anything "new" from watching these TV dramas, however, there might be an unintended lesson or experience that causes them to compare their own lives to the shows they are watching.

Participant 10 conveyed that she too learned what to do and what not to do when it comes to family life. Seeing the different family dynamics both within one show and across multiple shows provided examples to learn from. She said she has acquired ideas on how to communicate and find common ground with family members she does not get along with. Participant 11 and 12 both acknowledged that they learn about themselves and their spouses as well. Watching their favorite TV dramas together provided that sounding board and ultimately was said to prepare them for when something similar might happen in their own lives or if they even agree on an issue. In addition, participant 12 revealed that she learned of her protective nature towards the characters in her favorite shows. Both 11 and 12 indicated that these lessons helped them. Lastly, participant 6 and 7 were the two participants who conclusively stated they had not learned from watching their favorite TV dramas.

Emulating characters after viewing. Again, nine out of the 12 participants stated that

they also wanted to emulate a character or interaction they had seen in one of their favorite TV

dramas. Only participants 4, 6, and 7 said that they don't necessarily think about emulating

anything they've seen on screen. It seems that those who have learned from TV dramas often

also emulate TV dramas. Interestingly, those participants who were parents themselves all stated

they strove to emulate characteristics as demonstrated by good father figures. In fact, participant

5 called his favorite TV dramas "a sounding board" for what he wants to do as a father. Such

characteristics were identified in characters like Jack Pearson from *This Is Us*, Rick Grimes from

The Walking Dead, Tom Kirkman from *Designated Survivor*, Randall Pearson from *This Is Us*,

Henry McCord from *Madam Secretary*, and Henry Spencer from *Psych*. Those participants who

were not parents also stated that there were characters in their favorite drama that they wanted to

be like, especially as parents. It seems that for many, though, a combination of both TV and real

life examples motivates them for how they want to be as parents.

Some of the qualities that participants indicated they wanted to emulate was being

intelligent, putting children first, listening to children, interacting and making time for children,

to help children problem-solve, to have confidence, to be best friends with children, and to have

the same career path as a character. Participant 7 even noted that from watching the show, and

the conscious thinking that comes from viewing, helps him to emulate the qualities he wants to

mimic. Participant 9 said that he watched TV dramas with a strong family portrayal because he

wants what he sees to match his current and future life as a father, not necessarily what he had in

the past. One caveat to emulating a character from a favorite TV drama is the consideration of

the profession. Participants 3, 4, and 9 all specifically mentioned that they are wary of emulating

a hyper-demanding profession too much because of the detrimental consequences it may have on

their actual families.

For participant 1, TV dramas act as an enabling agent; the positive portrayals she has seen have given her hope, confidence, and a sense of duty to become a positive parent. Again, this teaching and motivating factor for watching positive dramas mattered greatly to this participant and influenced her decision-making process when deciding between a more lighthearted and darker TV drama. Most participants (1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12) also mentioned that they preferred levity in TV dramas. Watching more lighthearted, positive dramas was favored over "adding more bad in the world", especially if they were going to be repeatedly exposed to the content (Participant 5). If the viewing session was only for one instance, however, this was not as much of a deterrent. All in all, the four main perceptions and their subsequent support leave ample room for further discussion and investigation. In the next section, significance for such findings will be addressed.

Discussion

The findings for the present study are full of implications and real-world applications. The research question that guided this study was: What are the viewer perceptions of fathers in television dramas? Below, each of the four, overarching perceptions of fathers in TV dramas will be further discussed, as well as other major findings that contributed to these perceptions. Such findings are: (a) that individuals perceive and remember negative father portrayals more often; (b) that there is a diverse offering of father portrayals on TV; (c) that the participant with a distressing family background extremely disliked and avoided negative portrayals more than any other participant; (d) that what it means to be a good or bad father is related to one's own experience; (e) that having flawed father and character portrayals improves relatability; and (f) that TV sitcoms do not prompt deep thought and discussion among participants like TV dramas do.

   The first finding is that fathers in TV dramas are more positively perceived than TV dads

in sitcoms. Although the ultimate purpose of this study was to explore the viewer perceptions of

fathers in TV dramas, many participants commented on their perceptions of fathers in TV

sitcoms. This was usually done in comparison to one another. Also, when referencing their

general perceptions of fathers on TV, participants often carried over their negative point of view.

Data from the present study revealed, though, that there are numerous examples of good fathers

on TV. There is diversity both within individual TV dramas, such as *This Is Us*, *Gilmore Girls*,

and *Downton Abbey*, as well as diversity across the genre as a whole. During analysis, it became

apparent that individuals were judging all father figures, from both sitcoms and dramas, on the

same level. Generally, more negative comments were received regarding TV sitcom dads and

those negative perceptions were then projected onto every single father on TV in general, even

TV dramas. However, based on the data referring to the most and least liked father figures, as

well as fathers in participants' favorite TV dramas, dads in television dramas are more positively

perceived. They are also not one-dimensional. Fathers within TV dramas are multi-dimensional

and offer many perspectives on what it means to be a dad. This differs from what scholars have

said about fathers who are portrayed only as buffoons, inept, undiversified, or cruel (Callister et

al., 2007; Drakich, 1989; Kuo & Ward, 2016; Ramchandani & Iles, 2014; Schmitz, 2016).

However, this discovery gives pause for why individuals stated the opposite of what they felt.

Perhaps the television shows that receive the most attention or acclaim are those with negative

portrayals at the forefront? This, in turn, leads to more awareness in the public view. It also

became aware that is was extremely easy for participants to think of and describe negative father

figures, and more difficult to think of positive fathers. Research has shown that both positive

(Schmitz, 2016) and negative (Drakich, 1989; Kuo & Ward, 2016; Ramchandani & Iles, 2014)

portrayals exist on polar opposite ends of the spectrum. But what makes negative portrayals impact more?

According to Mongeau (2013), when individuals are confronted with threat, and the severity or susceptibility of that threat, they are likely to respond through negative emotions and fear responses. Threat encompasses anything that individuals believe will take away personal freedoms, and manifests itself in something that will produce negative consequences for an individual (Mongeau, 2013). Essentially, individuals perceive threat in a message, and then feel fear as a result. Seeing a negative father portrayal could potentially have the same effect upon a person, which then might cause them to respond in a way that will eliminate that threat for themselves in real life. This is exhibited in participant 1's desire to change her future family life. This finding, along with all others offered in this study, is significant because of the infusion of popular culture into people's everyday lives (Yenerall, 2014). When individuals only remember negative portrayals, their pool of knowledge becomes that much narrower, and pop culture has been shown to help people develop and process their daily lives (Burke, 1941; Storey, 2018). Indeed, popular culture, like television dramas, can give people frames of references so that they can understand one another (Yenerall, 2014). Pop culture can also perpetuate ideas of civic engagement and social change (Yenerall, 2014) and texts, such as television, "always present a particular image of the world" (Storey, 2018, p. 5). Such images are thus used to create a communal understanding of the world and its people within it. It could even be said they have the potential to help with individual understanding and personal change, like in the case of participant 1. Culture is dynamic (Fiske, 2010) and TV dramas also often portray this dynamism. Therefore, when individuals only recognize the bad in TV, they potentially could project those bad feelings onto reality, which indeed was the case for participants in the present study.

Interestingly, most of the least favorite fathers listed by the participants all came from TV sitcoms. Though the present study aims to understand the viewer perceptions of fathers in TV dramas, this particularly finding reoccurred so frequently that requires further discussion. Participant 4 and 11 both stated that fathers like Phil Dunphy and Homer Simpson are "bad fathers," however, this fact did not dissuade them from watching. This is because of three factors: (1) the humor; (2) strong family backgrounds; and (3) the relatability all act as buffers against these negative portrayals. For example, participant 11 said that "the stupidity [of Phil Dunphy] works well for the humor of the sitcom." In the case of most of the participants, especially 3 and 11, their positive family upbringings acted as a safeguard to negative portrayals. This may be the one reason that participant 1, out of all of the participants, struggled greatly in comparison to her peers. She explicitly stated that she avoided watching negative father portrayals because of her poor experience with her own father. In fact, participant 1 longed to have a positive relationship with her future spouse and kids because of the negative experience she had with her own father. This plays upon the idea of *sehnsucht*, or the intense desire for ideal or alternative circumstances that are either unattainable or extremely difficult to attain (Kotter-Grühn, Scheibe, Blanchard-Fields, & Baltes, 2009). The feeling of longing is often accompanied by goal commitment, especially to bring about the desired change in one's own life. Participant 1 stated she felt inspired by positive portrayals of fathers in TV dramas and felt the desire to break the chain with her own future family and provide them with something she never had. This is what Carlfred Broderick (1993) would call a *transitional character*. A transitional character is one who has survived a harmful family environment and changes the entire course of their lineage by breaking the mold and passing on other positive habits or qualities that will enable them to live a more positive life (Broderick, 1993). Essentially, for this participant in particular,

watching dramas has become an opportunity to learn how to a parent, what qualities are desirable

for spouse, and how that future spouse will parent. This finding denotes the crossover between

the first perception, which is TV drama dads are perceived more positively, and the fourth

perception, which is that TV drama dads are worth learning from or emulating. Participant 12

observed that TV sitcoms do not prompt the same kind of depth of thought and discussion that

TV dramas do, and for participant 1, her experience confirmed this. Her situation was unique as

she was the only participant who had an unfavorable family background. It seems that the

participant's circumstances enhanced the teaching opportunity or desire to seek out teaching

from TV.

Perhaps the most compelling finding is the relatability component of the characters and

narrative in TV dramas. Relatability was the core element that was inculcated in every

perception and among all the findings. An example of this is demonstrated by the extensive role

morality played in the participant interviews. Most participants mentioned that shows with strong

moral values and characters with moral compasses usually were their favorite. On the flip side,

many stated that those who lacked in morality were usually their least favorite, what they

deemed as a "bad father," or a TV drama that they did not watch altogether. These feelings

seemed to greatly influence the participants' expectations for the show and their desired

outcomes for both the characters and themselves for watching. This was because many, if not

most of the participants noted that they personally had high moral standards. Relatability was

also why individuals perceived fathers in TV dramas as human, and one of the main reasons for

viewing the TV dramas themselves. Other reasons for viewing included social learning purposes,

entertainment purposes, to connect with characters in parasocial relationships, to escape, to feel

relief, to live vicariously, to engage in narrative and character development, to watch socially,

and to be transported. These gratifications resonate precisely with what uses and gratifications scholars have identified as motivating factors for individuals who seek out specific media, particularly social affiliation, social learning, relaxation, and escapism (Aubrey, Olson, Fine, Hauser, Rhea, Kaylor, & Yang, 2012; Greenberg & Woods, 1999; Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008; Roberti, 2007). Such gratifications have been shown to help with the formation of one's identity (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). This is significant considering that when individuals watch for their own specific purposes, they are constructing who they are as a person (Godlewski & Perse, 2010; Thornham & Purvis, 2005). Personal identification construction, in the case of the 12 participants from this study, then, has been based at least somewhat on what they have seen from fathers in their favorite television dramas. This is the reason why participants perceived fathers in TV dramas as a prompt for discussion and as a source of learning or emulation. As is evident, individuals discuss, learn from, and mimic behavior on screen in order to make sense of their own lives and actions.

In addition to the personal standards of the participants, their upbringings influenced how they defined good and bad fathering and in some cases, even mediated negative portrayals altogether. Interestingly, when participant 4 was who his favorite father on TV was, he stated Richard Castle from *Castle*. He also mentioned Castle's lack of a moral compass. When asked to explain further, the participant said he considered him a good father because of his compartmentalizing capabilities, which allowed the participant to overlook their lack of morality. It is interesting because this participant, as well as several others, strongly stated that they preferred fathers with strong morals and disliked those without. It seems that there is a dissonance between what people are saying they like and what people are actually consuming. Perhaps participants like 4 project their standards upon those characters that are least liked by

them and made exceptions for their favorite characters. But the key here is relatability. The question of morality issues, stupid humor, or destructive father and family portrayals is solved by the relatability factor, something past scholars did not address when assessing fathers to be low-involved or incompetent (Callister et al., 2007; Drakich, 1989; Kuo & Ward, 2016; Ramchandani & Iles, 2014; Schmitz, 2016). Essentially, they relate to those characters who generally are more like them because of the levels that their beliefs matter to the participants. The qualities that are not as upstanding or desirable in favorite TV drama characters, including fathers, are mediated by their humor or other qualities that the participants want to emulate. These bad qualities are also overlooked because these characters are friends to them. Research has shown that individuals can form parasocial relationships with characters on television, which aid in the emotional connection and identification one feels with a character (Callister et al., 2007). In essence, the characters discussed in the participants' interviews are real to them.

Furthermore, just as people in the real world have flaws, those on screen do as well. In the real world, individuals learn to love and respect each other, even with their flaws. Based on the data provided by the participants, this same process occurs with fathers they see in television dramas. The second perception found in this study is that TV drama fathers are perceived as human or the "flawed hero." Participants demonstrated that they deeply admire and even love the fathers on their favorite TV dramas. TV drama fathers are not caricatures or the punching bags as they so often are called in TV sitcoms. Individuals see them as relatable, human, and someone worth being like. This is significant because television dramas are incorporating more involved fathers in their shows, and scholars have suggested that fathers who are engaged in the family processes of home have a positive impact upon their families (Alika et al., 2012; Benbassat & Shulman, 2016; Drakich, 1989; Geddes, 2008; Pembecioğlu, 2012). Moreover, a type of

parallelism is occurring among participants in the sense that they come to love father figures, despite their character flaws in both reality and virtual reality. The choice, therefore, for participants to stay loyal and support these TV drama fathers is an easy choice to make. This is also partially because individuals feel supported by these characters and feel they can lean on them for knowledge. Fundamentally, individuals are investing their time and dedication to these TV fathers and are receiving ideas in return. This exchange of resources is just another form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986/2010; Coleman, 1988; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Furthermore, this phenomenon is also why "bad dads" are excusable. Even though participants did not explicitly say they excuse poor behavior on behalf of the fathers, analysis of the data revealed that they actually do. This is because when individuals watch their favorite television dramas, they have the opportunity to see themselves, their friends, and their family in those they observe on screen. The characters that are portrayed on TV remind viewers of something, someone, or some other time in their lives. Data revealed, particularly in the case of those participants who were parents themselves, that one's phase of life influences greatly the relatedness and identity one feels with another character. Hence, why so many participants related to the fathers in their favorite TV dramas. This relatability also gave many participants a feeling of nostalgia. For some participants, this nostalgia even pushed them to yearn for something they could still bring to pass in their own families of creation. This idea resonates deeply with the term sehnsucht as mentioned previously. Nostalgia is nearly the English equivalent of the German word sehnsucht, and both concepts dictate that they can facilitate mourning and further motivate a person to develop of a new identity (Pourtova, 2013). Like sehnsucht, nostalgia encompasses a painful or longing feeling and transforms that into the creation of a different sense of self. Unlike sehnsucht, however, nostalgia fails to capture the

notion that the new identity being created is a utopian or ideal identity. In order for sehnsucht to occur, it must contain a longing for an idyllic set of circumstances (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2009). Nostalgia merely takes what is currently present and makes due with what is available. Participant 9 was said to have experienced this while watching his favorite TV dramas. He conveyed that individuals compare TV to their real lives in order to find answers and to be consoled. This power to induce the motivation to change one's own life circumstances is yet another reminder that TV dramas can be deeply influential in many ways.

These viewer experiences and events can lead to both positive and negative feelings. Depending on the participant and their family upbringing, being reminded of good or bad memories triggered them to perform subsequent good or bad behaviors. In the case of participant 1 and 2, they both confided that watching specific mother or father portrayals reminded them of negative past experiences with parental figures. Additionally, most of the participants discussed the character growth apparent in their favorite characters, yet another form of diversity, and desired to become a transitional character, just as they had. Such examples from TV dramas were Jack Pearson from *This Is Us*, Jack Shepherd from *Lost*, and Meredith Grey from *Grey's Anatomy*. This is also why many participants, particularly 1, 3, 6, 8, and 12 were happy for their favorite characters when good things happened to them. It is because of the character growth and attachment to them that it again, felt like reality to the participants. Likewise, the marriage of TV drama viewing and real life experiences shaped the individuals' perceptions, even about fathers. And to the majority, perhaps even all of the participants, the more realistic (or the less amount of drama in the TV drama itself) the more likely the show was to lead to viewers feeling more relatedness, which then lead to more likeability. This could conceivably be the formula television producers, writers, and directors need to follow. People, it seems, want to see the quotidian.

Participants from the present study wanted to see their favorite characters succeed because that is what they want for themselves. Like participant 5 stated about disliking dramas being a "highlight reel" of life, participants indicated they want to forgo the extremes found in dramas and feel the middle ground, or reality of them.

In response to this demand, it seems that new entertainment is quick to incorporate this criticism. Within the present study, there were many instances in which participants lauded the writers and producers of their favorite TV drama for creating more dynamic father figures and for making their favorite shows relatable and uplifting, two characteristics they valued. After all, participants demonstrated their fondness of supportive fathers and that they are being shown in dramas. Rather than paying attention to specific demographics, audiences are noticing parenting styles and the familial processes being shown. They are also taking note of family and father portrayals that are similar to their own. Participant 1 and 9 alluded to the recurring idea of replacing one's family for other non-related individuals, an idea that Holcomb et al. (2014) called *created kinship*. Created kinship denotes a family structure beyond biological ties. It seems that with the diversity of father portrayals, the form and definition of a family is becoming more obscure. One implication for this practice is the notion that people can become well-adjusted, despite the lack of blood-related family members or parents (Holcomb et al., 2014). These portrayals surely have an impact and more research is needed to determine whether that impact is positive or negative. Another portrayal with potentially negative side effects is what participants 3, 4, 6, and 9 said about the consequences of career choices and the lack of showing those consequences in television dramas. Additionally, TV dramas are deemed as the sounding board to discuss family dynamics and parenting styles, something participant 12 declared that isn't available in TV sitcoms. Ultimately, this means that television networks and producers have

the power to teach and leave a lasting impression upon the minds of viewers. This responsibility also lies within families to be mindful about their media choices.

Ultimately, it is evident that the relatability and realistic aspect of TV dramas and characters is the most important factor when it comes to viewers' choices of TV shows. This is demonstrated through the four perceptions that participants recognized from TV drama fathers, namely that: (1) fathers in television dramas are more positively perceived than fathers in television sitcoms; (2) fathers in TV dramas are a type of "flawed hero;" (3) fathers from TV dramas are a basis of discussion; and (4) fathers from television dramas are worth emulating. Characters, like those fathers mentioned from TV dramas, travel through story arcs and tug on the heartstrings of audiences. This ability to induce parasocial interaction increases loyalty (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Feelings of loyalty can often lead to the increase of meaningful feelings in the relationship (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). If TV networks and producers continue to capitalize on this generated loyalty, viewers of television will only become that much closer with whom they see on screen.

Relatability also pinpoints the intent and purpose of the TV Drama genre; sitcoms act as a "daydream" (Jones, 1992, p. 5), while dramas are meant for the study of varied social attitudes and situations (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008; Zhang & Busselle, 2013). Based on the results of the present study, it can be safely said that relatability is also the reason for all definitive participant perceptions. Accordingly, there is much to see, feel, discuss, study, and learn from fathers in television dramas, from both a scholar and consumer perspective.

Future Research

The above findings and implications raised many additional questions that were not able to be answered by the scope of this study. Further examination should focus on the viewer

perceptions of fatherhood in TV sitcoms and compare if the results are different from the present study. In addition, increasing the sample size and obtaining an even more diverse sample would be beneficial. Particularly, those participants who have a variety of family backgrounds may add depth to the current findings.

Another area that could be explored would be to study those characters that participants do not identify with or like as much. Searching to uncover whether participants project higher expectations upon characters they do not like would provide further understanding to the relatability factor of TV dramas.

In addition, studying the diversity in tertiary characters could offer more insight to the diversity of TV dramas as a whole. Medical and police dramas often portray families who are not a part of the main cast, yet who still represent possible family dynamics to be emulated. However, due to the lack of time and focus, perhaps they are more simplified than the main characters in the shows. Further consideration is needed here as well.

Finally, the behavior of watching television shows that individuals do not ideologically agree with leads to the question of whether adverse effects or warped perceptions will occur. Participants in the present study implied their disapproval and complete breakdown of society, as caused by the media, yet they seem to perpetrate this behavior themselves. Delving into additional research regarding this inquiry is needed.

Conclusion

Although the present study took strides in establishing what viewer perceptions are of father in television dramas, there is a vast amount of room for more research on the topic of perceptions of TV dads. For many years, fathers have been shown, both in media and in early research, as one-dimensional players in the parenting game. Their lack of involvement,

downplay of nurturing behavior, inept capabilities (Drakich, 1989; Kuo & Ward, 2016; Ramchandani & Iles, 2014; Schmitz, 2016), or on the other end of the spectrum, their qualities as a superdad (Schmitz, 2016), have been scrutinized as representations that need to include the full scope of reality, but with questions as to how. The present study offers a richer perspective to current scholarship in that it establishes viewer perceptions of diversified fathers within television. These four perceptions are that fathers in TV dramas are perceived more positively than fathers in TV sitcoms, fathers in TV dramas are perceived as human, fathers from TV dramas are perceived as a prompt for discussion, and fathers from TV dramas are perceived as someone who is worthy of emulation. It was discussed that a possible explanation for all four of these perceptions is the relatability factor available in television dramas. Because fathers are highly relatable in TV dramas, they were often liked better and even listed as favorite fathers by the participants. Additionally, relatability is the essence of perception two; participants felt that those fathers they watched on screen were human and real, just like them. Participants perceived that TV drama dads were "flawed heroes" with imperfections, as well as strengths. Watching realistic father interactions and portrayals also motivated participants to discuss such content with another person, and furthermore, participants felt that because TV drama fathers were relatable, they were worth trying to be like following viewership of the show.

Overall, relatability is the heart and soul of these four perceptions. It is the core phenomenon of this entire study. By framing this research through the uses and gratifications theory and applying the grounded theory method, the present implications obtained through the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews enrich scholarship and answer the present study's research question by helping to understand individuals' attitudes and feelings towards fathers on TV. These attitudes, as is apparent, spill over into reality and could further hold implications for the

way individuals perceive their own fathers or other fathers in real life. This is an exciting

speculation when considering that the role of fathers for so long was understudied and

misunderstood (Geddes, 2008). Fathers and fatherhood are extremely impactful upon family

processes (Alika et al., 2012; Benbassat & Shulman, 2016; Drakich, 1989; Geddes, 2008;

Pembecioğlu, 2012), which therefore make the present study's contributions that much more

significant. Overall, fathers, especially within the media, should continue to be a topic of study,

as well as an area of subject matter, that should be further researched, preserved, and protected

due to their positive influence upon people everywhere, regardless of space, age, time, and

distance.

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