

Research Assessment. Representations of Families. *Shortland Street*, *The Simpsons*

The families portrayed in New Zealand's medical soap drama *Shortland Street*, and Matt Groening's satirical cartoon, *The Simpsons*, display dominant messages and values associated with the family unit, and explore the issues that arise surrounding its role in people's lives.

Both texts consider the importance of the unity of the family and its effects on the individual members. When the Hudsons first arrived on *Shortland Street* they displayed strong traditional values of a nuclear family and emphasised communication, later changing when Te Hana falls for another man. When married, both Te Hana and Joe took their role as parents very seriously treating their children, Mihi and Tama, positively and with respect, which in turn gave their kids security and self esteem. The family always took time to sit down for dinner and showed a keen interest in each other's lives. Consequently, they functioned as a whole, providing security and belonging. Mihi and Tama talked to their parents about anything. eg. Mihi confides in Te Hana her feelings for someone she liked and asks advice. Mihi values the togetherness of her family and how she identifies with them. When her parents separate and she moves in with the Heywoods, she is disappointed they don't sit down to family meals. Adam, Marshall and Barb are incredulous when they find her about to prepare a meal. "What are you doing?" We see a close up of her observing them scoff fish and chips in front of the television, and recognise the displacement she feels without her family. However, after the separation this value of communication and the idea that family should be there to support you is still conveyed. Tama and Mihi retain their close relationship. Mihi asks Tama's advice about how she should react to Marshall's behaviour. "Mihi, why are you trying to change him now?"

In comparison to the Hudson's traditional family values the Heywood's family is dysfunctional, and reflect the increasing trend of single parents and broken homes in society. Barb, a single mum, does not have a parental relationship with her sons, such as that of Te Hana's or Joe's, rather they are her friends. Barb's priority is having a good time, and she tends to reject the traditional idea of responsibility that being a mother brings. Marshall, the youngest at 17, does not expect her to tell him what to do and she doesn't. Whilst they care about each other, they lack the order in a family like the Hudsons – it is always Adam, the son, who has to "pick up the pieces" when Barb's boyfriend leaves her. Marshall is discontent as the absence of a father creates insecurity - he is elated that Barb's boyfriend, Paddy Doyle, is supposedly his Dad. "Marshall's happy."

Matt Groening's cartoon *The Simpsons* particularly emphasises the value of a unified family. Dysfunctional as they may seem with Homer, the father, and self-centred well-meaning oaf; Marge, his wife, the rock; daughter Lisa, the voice of reason; son Bart, anagram of brat, and Maggie the baby, *The Simpsons* are a sharp contrast to their perfect, god-like neighbours, the Flanders, but always tolerate each other and remain together. The message that family is an important aspect of your identity is continually pointed out. In '*Bart vs. Thanksgiving*,' Bart runs away after burning Lisa's centrepeice, but then realises how much he needs and misses his family and goes home. "I'm sorry Lisa." The family gathers around the table "Oh Lord, we thank thee for giving our family one more crack at togetherness." In the Country

Club episode, Marge realises that her family is a part of who she is and she is proud of them. "Homey, I like your in-your-face humanity. I like the way Lisa speaks her mind. I like Bart's- I like Bart."

Another dominant message associated with families is the importance of parental authority to give boundaries and control. In the initial Hudson family the kids were well disciplined, always helping with chores around the house. eg. Cooking, taking out the rubbish etc. Their parents provide role models of dedication but sometimes their strong ambitions for Mihi and Tama placed them under pressure to measure up. Tama played rugby not for himself but for Joe's desire to turn him into a sports hero. He wore his Dad's old shoes so as not to disappoint. Mihi was prohibited from being friends with Shannon, deemed by her parents to be a 'bad influence.' Seeking independence from this control she begins to rebel with Shannon. eg. She is caught smoking behind the school. Eventually she realises her mother's point and straightens out. "You're school work is suffering."

Marshall's only father figure is Adam, his older brother. It's difficult for Adam to fulfil the role sufficiently and not only does Marshall want a real father, he needs one. Without firm parental guidance, he tends to mess his life up, not knowing how to be responsible or in control. At one point he falls into drugs, which lands him in jail. "I've been to prison, Nelson. It's not somewhere I want to go back, okay?" From Barb he learns that one does not have to learn from one's mistakes or take responsibility – as we see when Barb gets back with her old boyfriend without thinking about how he hurt her and was a bad influence on Marshall. "I've never been so happy in my life!"

Homer, the father in *The Simpsons*, generally appears to be a laid-back klutz, who spends most of his time sitting on the couch watching TV or drinking at Moe's. However there are times when Homer teaches his children valuable lessons and emphasises the importance of parental authority. He finally makes Bart take responsibility for his misbehavior when he unrelentingly prohibits Bart from seeing the *Itchy and Scratchy* movie. "I guess you won." "We both won. I've set you on the path to something very special." Another episode Homer stops Bart from attempting a death-defying jump on his skateboard, by doing the jump himself, forcing Bart to realise the seriousness of his actions. "I'm sorry Dad. I promise I won't do it!"

The debate of whether one should sacrifice their own needs for their family's, is explored in both *Shortland Street* and *The Simpsons*. Te Hana feels obliged to keep her family together, but eventually pursues her own needs and leaves Joe for Geoff. "We're happy." This causes a rift between her and her kids, especially Mihi who has trouble accepting it and severs communication. This raises the question of who is being selfish – should Mihi be more tolerant of her mother's decision?

Similarly, Barb, preoccupied with having fun, pursues her own needs by resuming her relationship with Paddy Doyle, rather than considering its effects on her sons. Adam refuses to live with him and moves out, reminding Barb that Paddy supplied Marshall with the drugs. "I can't believe your taking him back like nothing happened... I won't be here to pick up the pieces."

Homer, in *The Simpsons*, is constantly faced with choosing between himself and his family, and unlike Te Hana and Barb always chooses the latter, overcoming any

selfishness and making necessary changes to be committed, and successfully emphasising the importance of making self sacrifices for your family. In '*War of the Simpsons*,' Homer goes fishing at a marriage retreat. When Marge is outraged, Homer throws back his 'General Sherman,' showing devotion to his marriage and kids. "I gave up fame and breakfast for our marriage." In '*The Last Temptation of Homer*,' Homer almost has an affair with co-worker Mindy, with whom he has a lot in common, but then decides not to be unfaithful to Marge. "Maybe I want to... but then I think about Marge and the kids."

Shortland Street and *The Simpsons* effectively convey dominant messages associated with the representation of families such as the importance of a family's unity, parental roles and whether one always puts their families first. The breakdown of the Hudson's once stable and functional family and the unconventional nature of the Heywood's family in *Shortland Street* questions whether a traditional nuclear family can ever exist and stay together. *The Simpsons* on the other hand portray the idea that the family should be retained despite everything, and that perfection is not required to do this, but rather tolerance and self-sacrifice.