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Audience Engagement with Mother-Daughter Relationships in Prime-Time Television of the 21st Century: A Qualitative Analysis of Interpretation, Sensemaking, and Perceived Effects

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative analysis examines audience engagement with fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships in prime-time television of the 21st century. I used in-depth interviews with women of different backgrounds to explore how real mothers and daughters interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television; how they make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with these portrayals; and how and to what extent their engagement with these portrayals influences their own lives and mother-daughter relationships.

The results of this study uncovered a process of audience engagement with mother-daughter relationships on television that involved the viewing experience, interpretation, sensemaking, and perceived effects on the participants' real lives and relationships. Throughout this process, female viewers of various backgrounds tended to evaluate the mother-daughter relationships on television using their own relationships as a standard; evaluate their own relationships using the TV relationships as a standard; and ultimately validate the value of their own mother-daughter relationships. As a fourth step in the process, those viewers who were most involved with and identified most strongly with the TV characters also acknowledged effects that their engagement with the shows has had on their lives and relationships. This study demonstrates the importance of studying women's engagement with mother-daughter relationships in media texts and further develops the literature on mother-daughter relationships in fields such as psychology, sociology, women's studies and family studies by bringing popular culture into the discussion.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION OF THE 21ST CENTURY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETATION, SENSEMAKING, AND PERCEIVED EFFECTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont.)

TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont.)

TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont.)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In a 2006 episode of *Grey's Anatomy*, Meredith Grey, a white, upper-middle class, twenty-something surgical intern, stares apprehensively at her friend Cristina Yang, a Korean-American surgical intern also from an upper middle class background, and asks with fear in her eyes: "Do you think we're like them? Our mothers?" Cristina says nothing, but stares back at Meredith with a look of disgust.

Meredith and Cristina, two lead characters in this ABC show about the professional and personal struggles of a group of surgical interns at Seattle Grace Hospital, come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, but their mothers could not be more different from one another—one a prominent surgeon and workaholic and the other a wealthy homemaker who identifies herself as the wife of a well-known oral surgeon. What Meredith and Cristina share in common, however, is a constant fear of becoming their mothers and a determination to avoid doing so.

Research has shown that mother-daughter relationships play a significant role in shaping the lives of both mothers and daughters (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1996; Joseph, 1981; Lesch & Kruger, 2005). Studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, and women's studies in particular have demonstrated that mothers influence their daughters' gender identities (Arcana, 1979; Dias & Lopes, 2003; Fischer, 1981); understandings of sexuality (Lesch & Kruger; Remez, 2003); body image (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1996), self-esteem (Turnage, 2004); and career aspirations (Lerner, 1994). Adult daughters and their mothers also mutually shape one another's understandings of romantic relationships (Fischer, 1986), motherhood (Dias & Lopes, 2003); careers (Foster, 2004); academic

achievement (Foster, 2004); and gender identity (Fischer, 1981; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). Studies have also shown that race and social class play an important role in shaping mother-daughter relationships (Gottfried, 1991; Joseph, 1981; Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004; Rastogi & Wampler, 1999).

The role of this relationship in women's lives has presented an important plot element in a number of contemporary prime-time television shows, including such shows as *Golden Girls, The Cosby Show, Roseanne,* and *My So-Called Life* in the 1980s and 1990s, and *The Sopranos, Grey's Anatomy*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Desperate Housewives, Lincoln Heights, The O.C.*, *Gossip Girl, Big Love*, *Brothers and Sisters*, *The Good Wife, and Parenthood* in the 21st century.

In *Grey's Anatomy*, for example, both Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang have complicated relationships with their mothers that become central to understanding their characters. *Gilmore Girls* tells the story of Lorelai Gilmore, a white middle-class single mother in her thirties, and her very close relationship with her intelligent and ambitious young adult daughter, Rory Gilmore, as well as her strained relationship with her own mother, Emily Gilmore, a wealthy socialite who Lorelai sees as overbearing and manipulative. This show also portrays a complex relationship between Rory's best friend Lane Kim, a young Korean-American woman who secretly rebels against the strict rules and traditional expectations of her Korean mother, who is identified on the show only as "Mrs. Kim."

In addition, *The Sopranos* reveals how a mother and daughter (Carmella and Meadow Soprano) struggle to maintain a stable relationship within a family that is part of a larger, powerful, and male-dominated family—the New Jersey mob, while *Big Love*

depicts the challenges facing mothers and daughters (such as Barb and Sarah Henrickson and Margene Heffman and her mother Ginger) living in polygamous families. In all of these shows, the racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds of the mothers and daughters play a significant role in shaping their relationships as well as their lives.

The popularity of such shows among female viewers and the centrality of mother-daughter relationships in their plotlines warrant further study of how mothers and daughters engage with and interpret the shows' portrayals of mother-daughter relationships in relation to their own lives. The purpose of this study is to understand how mothers and daughters of diverse backgrounds interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on shows they currently watch or have recently watched; how these women make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with these shows; and, finally, how their engagement with fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television influences their lives and relationships. Media engagement in this context can be defined as the act of paying attention to and becoming involved with or engrossed in a media text (Bore, 2009; Smith & Gevins, 2004).

Because of the overwhelming magnitude of shows on different channels at different times that I could consider, I chose to focus only on primetime television shows as these shows attract the largest audiences and, therefore, may have the most significant influence in shaping societal and individual understandings of mother-daughter relationships. I engaged in qualitative interviews with mothers and daughters of various ages, races, and social classes in order to analyze these shows from the perspective of the audience.

Research in the field of media studies has demonstrated that television shapes societal perceptions and identities of women (Glascock, 2001; Larson, 1996; Press, 1991; Signorielli, 2001; White, 1992). Cultural studies scholars argue that television does so primarily through the ideologies it perpetuates concerning gender as well as the discourses it draws upon and presents in its stories (Durham & Kellner, 2006; Fiske, 1987; Kaplan, 1992; White, 1992). The shows mentioned above, for example, may present discourses about mother-daughter relationships regarding what it means to be a good mother or daughter, or what constitutes a "normal" mother-daughter relationship. These discourses may influence how real mothers and daughters make sense of their own relationships.

Current studies of motherhood on television demonstrate that many shows reinforce ideologies that mothers should be entirely responsible for childcare and that it is primarily the mother's responsibility to fix problems within families (Brancato, 2007). Television studies also show that television generally reinforces gender stereotypes, such as the stereotype of women as domesticated mothers whose sole purpose should be to maintain a home and nurture their families (Douglas & Olson, 1997; Signorielli, 2001). In addition, heavier viewers of television among women tend to subscribe to more traditional ideologies of motherhood (Ex, Janssens & Korzilius, 2002).

Similarly, researchers have also shown that, through the discourses it presents, television contributes to the social construction of race, class, and gender (Bodroghkozy, 2003; Butsch, 1992; Carroll, 2008; Coover, 2001; Heider, 2000; Hopson, 2008; Lin, 1997; Poindexter, Smith & Heider, 2003; Stephens, 2004; Xiaoquan & Gantz, 2003). In other words, the discourses presented on television may teach viewers what it means to

be Black or Latino, a man or a woman, or a working-class or middle-class individual, for example. This tendency becomes problematic in light of research demonstrating that many of the discourses presented on television are racist, sexist, and classist, and endorse stereotypes of racial, gender, and class groups (Bristor, Lee & Hunt, 1995; Dixon, Azocar & Casas, 2003; Douglas & Olsen, 1997; Glascock & Ruggiero, 2004; Shugart, 2006; Signorielli, 2001; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999).

In addition to understanding the ways race, class, and gender have been presented on television, it is also important to consider how families, particularly mothers and daughters, have been portrayed over time. The large body of literature on television and the American family reveals that since television has been in existence, family shows have been considered the programs to which most people can easily relate (Brooks, 2005). Television families have steadily become less traditional over time, but often gender portrayals in family shows, particularly portrayals of television mothers, have remained stereotypical (Brancato, 2007; Douglas & Olson, 1997; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli, 2001; Skill & Robinson, 1994). Studies of portrayals of the family on television have neglected, however, to focus specifically on mother-daughter relationships on television.

Overall, mother-daughter relationships have been studied extensively in fields such as sociology, psychology, and family studies, but have received little attention in the field of media studies. Media studies researchers have focused on the construction of motherhood in television (Brancato, 2007; Douglas & Olson, 1997; Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002), film (Stone, 2004; Whitney, 2007; Varzi, 2008), and advertising (Pugh, 2005; Roy, 1998; Stuart, 1978), as well as portrayals of "the family" in television and

film and how those portrayals have evolved over time (Brooks, 2005;; Skill & Robinson, 1994; Watson, 2008). There has been a lack of attention, however, to the construction of mother-daughter relationships as well as father-son relationships in popular culture texts within these genres and audience interpretations of such constructions. What remain to be explored within the genre of television for the purposes of this study, then, are the perspectives of mothers and daughters on the construction of mother-daughter relationships in the television shows they watch.

In addition, the majority of studies on mother-daughter relationships have, for the most part, focused primarily on relationships between white, middle-class women, while still claiming to study "*the* mother-daughter relationship" (e.g., Fischer, 1986; Lerner, 1994; emphasis mine). What remains to be explored further is the significance of race and class in shaping mother-daughter relationships from the perspectives of mothers and daughters of varying ages, races, and social classes.

The significance of this particular study, then, lies in the contributions it will make to the field of media studies as well as the body of research on mother-daughter relationships that spans across other fields. Literature on mother-daughter relationships from fields such as sociology, psychology, and family studies has demonstrated the significance of this relationship in shaping the lives and identities of mothers and daughters of diverse backgrounds. This study adds a popular culture angle that is presently missing from the larger body of literature on mother-daughter relationships. As qualitative researchers have demonstrated, studying popular culture and how people interact with popular culture texts is an important part of understanding how people make sense of their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In other words, mothers and daughters, for

example, may draw upon popular culture texts such as television shows in order to understand what it means to be a "good mother" or a "good daughter."

I took a feminist approach in this study. Feminist studies usually go beyond thinking only about gender by considering multiple axes of oppression, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, and how they affect women's lives (Collins, 1990; Collins, 1994; Sprague, 2005). Feminist studies also set out to examine women's lives and, thereby, to include women's lives and concerns in accounts of society (DeVault, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Sprague, 2005). They privilege women's voices in order to bring their often subjugated knowledge to the surface in research (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

There is also an emphasis on "the personal" in feminist studies (Sprague, 2005). Feminist researchers include women's personal stories as well as personal information about the researcher and how his or her interests, experience, values, and background may shape the studies they conduct. In other words, researcher reflexivity is a critical aspect of feminist studies (Presser, 2005; Sprague, 2005).

In relation to this study, some feminists have articulated the importance of considering the role of race and class in shaping mother-daughter relationships (Chase-Lansdale, Michael, & Desai, 1991; Collins, 1994; Gottfried, 1991; Joseph, 1981). In this study, I have included the voices of women of multiple racial and social class identities in my exploration of audience interpretations of diverse television portrayals of mother-daughter relationships, as the intersectional nature of women's identities is an important part of understanding mother-daughter relationships.

My study also takes a feminist approach in that it emphasizes the personal. By interviewing women about their lives and experiences, this study focuses on the personal

stories of these women and privileges their voices in an effort to build knowledge about popular culture and contemporary mother-daughter relationships from their experiences.

I explored the following research questions in this study:

RQ1: How do mothers and daughters of different racial and social class backgrounds interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships between female characters in television shows of the 21st century?

RQ2: How do these mothers and daughters make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with these shows?

RQ3: From the perspectives of these mothers and daughters, how and to what extent does their engagement with fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television influence their own lives and mother-daughter relationships?

The next chapter provides a review of literature on cultural studies, gender, and television, with a particular focus on constructions of motherhood in the media; constructions of race, class, and gender on television; and television and families. The third chapter focuses on feminist and gender studies scholarship on mother-daughter relationships. The fourth chapter describes the method I employed in this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to understand the foundation of the current study, it is first critical to consider the theoretical background as well as relevant past studies. The following chapter reviews the literature in a number of areas of research, each of which will contribute to an understanding of the significance of examining audience engagement with mother-daughter relationships on television.

First, I discuss research on gender, motherhood, and television, particularly within the theoretical framework of cultural studies, a framework that will shape this study. Second, I offer a review of the research on the ways in which race and class have been and continue to be constructed on television. Third, I review the large body of research on television and the family. In the next chapter, I will review the research that has been done on mother-daughter relationships across several academic disciplines. In this review, I distinguish between feminist and gender studies approaches to studying this relationship and explain how the present study will take a feminist approach.

Cultural Studies, Gender/Motherhood, and Television

Because my aim in this study is to understand how mothers and daughters engage with and interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television, it is critical to review the literature on gender, motherhood and television. In this section, I review this body of literature through the theoretical lens of cultural studies, which provides an important theoretical framework for this study. In addition to cultural studies, I also discuss how a number of approaches to television criticism contribute to a stronger understanding of how women are portrayed on television and how these portrayals may

shape societal perceptions and identities of women and mothers. This provides a context in which to analyze mother-daughter relationships on television, particularly from the perspective of female viewers.

The theoretical framework of cultural studies speaks to the ideological power of television and how viewers engage with these ideologies (Kellner & Durham, 2006). A critical part of cultural studies is examining how audience members make meaning through their engagement with television texts. The television texts themselves are a significant part of culture and, therefore, important in light of cultural studies theorists' argument that the social structure of societies is maintained and reproduced through culture (Fiske, 1992; Kellner & Durham, 2006).

Cultural studies examinations of television have demonstrated that, because television texts are produced by those in power in society, they generally reinforce the dominant ideologies in society, which benefit those in power (Fiske, 1992). This is part of a process that Antonio Gramsci labeled "hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony refers to a system of power in which the powerless submit to their own subordination because they perceive some benefit to doing so (Gramsci, 1971). This is how those in power stay in power. Cultural studies theorists have argued that hegemony creates a situation in which ideologies are constantly struggled over by those in different positions in society. They are all engaged in a struggle for meaning (Kellner & Durham, 2006; White, 1992).

For this reason, Stuart Hall (1980) has argued that, as part of this constant struggle for meaning, television texts never contain a single meaning. Rather, the meaning of the text depends on how it is interpreted by viewers. Viewers may engage in different

readings of television shows (Hall, 1980). For instance, a dominant reading of a television show is one in which an audience member agrees with the preferred meaning (or dominant meaning) presented in the text. A negotiated reading is one in which an individual agrees with some parts of the preferred meaning, but, on a situational level, rejects or creates a different interpretation of other parts. Finally, an oppositional reading is one in which an individual takes a view that is completely opposite the dominant meaning of the television text (Hall, 1980).

Feminist cultural studies theorists, such as Andrea Press (1991), have applied this idea of different readings in their studies of female audience members. In her study entitled *Women Watching Television*, Press (1991), for example, studies how women's social location in terms of gender, race, and class shapes their interpretations of television texts. In doing so, she finds that while some women do agree with the dominant meaning present in television texts, many women consistently engage in negotiated and oppositional readings. Press (1991) also found that middle class women were more likely to identify with television characters on a personal level, that working class women value realism in television more than middle-class women, and that working class women are more likely to identify with television characters on the basis of class more so than gender.

Also in the feminist cultural studies tradition, Janice Radway's (1984) historic study of women and romance novels was one of the first to incorporate analysis of the text as well as the audience. Her use of reception studies illustrated how women make meaning of the text of romance novels and often engage in oppositional readings of these

texts. Radway (1984), therefore, used Hall's concept of preferred versus oppositional readings to understand how female readers interpret romance novels.

In his discussion of cultural studies, John Fiske (1987) argues that television actively genders its audience through deliberately masculine and feminine portrayals. He finds this especially true with gender-specific programs geared at women, such as soap operas. This may also be true in such current programming as *Wife Swap*, *Trading Spouses*, *Nanny 911*, *and Supernanny*, which I will discuss in more detail below. Fiske also emphasizes the importance of David Morley's (1986) theory of discourse. Morley (1986) defines discourse as socially produced ways of thinking about a topic or issue. Audience members are constantly confronted with discourses when they watch television, particularly discourses about gender. Television communicates about women (such as how women should look and act, how they should engage in relationships, etc.) through the discourses it draws upon and presents (Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1986).

Similarly, in her discussion of feminist television criticism, E. Ann Kaplan (1992) draws upon the work of Foucault, whose theories, Kaplan (1992) states, have changed the face of television criticism. Foucault (1980) understands knowledge as discursively constructed, or constructed through discourse. Knowledge about women in society, then, would be constructed through the discourses we engage with in society. Foucault (1980) also argues that discourse is power. In other words, power operates through discourse. In this way, those in power in society (primarily white men, such as those controlling most major media organizations) establish and maintain their power through discourse, including the discourses about women, motherhood, and mother-daughter relationships that are presented on television (Foucault, 1980; Kaplan, 1992).

Ideological analysis also becomes relevant in a discussion of how television may shape societal perceptions and identities of women and mother-daughter relationships. Ideological analysis provides a way of understanding what social and cultural interests are at work in the ideas presented on television (White, 1992). In her discussion of ideological analysis, Mimi White (1992) argues that, according to classical Marxism, ideology is a way that those in power maintain power. Applied to television, classical Marxism argues that, because ideology is essentially false consciousness, television is a form of ideology that lulls viewers into passivity and false consciousness and, thereby, into buying into the dominant ideologies of those in power (White, 1992). One of these dominant ideologies may be, for example, that women should be subordinate to men, that the appropriate space for women is in the private sphere, or that women should be more concerned with raising their children than with their careers. By communicating these ideologies about women to its audience, television works to convince audience members of the validity of these ideologies (White, 1992).

One particularly significant recent study that demonstrates how dominant ideologies about women and motherhood may be communicated through contemporary television is Brancato's (2007) study entitled "Domesticating Politics: Portrayals of Wives and Mothers on Reality Television." In this study, Brancato analyzes two "spouse-swapping shows" and two nanny shows: *Wife Swap*, *Trading Spouses*, *Nanny 911*, *and SuperNanny*. In these shows, families either swap mothers or bring in an "expert" nanny to help them regain control of their troubled families.

Brancato (2007) found an individualistic ideology present in these shows that essentially told mothers and wives that the problems they experience in their roles or with

their families in general are individual attitudinal problems. The message these shows send is that if the moms simply change *their* attitude and *their* approach, that successful, happy family life will be restored. In other words, the women in these shows are the ones responsible for "fixing" the problems in these families. There is no discussion of the possibility that the family as a whole or society at large could contribute to the families' problems (Brancato, 2007).

Brancato (2007) also points out that these shows are constructed in such a way as to encourage viewers to compare themselves to the families in the shows as well as to the social norms that are promoted by these shows. As a result, women watching the shows may attribute problems in their families to their own individual approaches. In other words, they may blame themselves for problems in their families and believe that it is their own responsibility to fix these problems. It is therefore clear that, through the ideologies they present and the dominant discourses they draw upon, shows such as these may shape societal perceptions and identities of women, particularly in terms of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships.

Research on television has, for many years, demonstrated that television acts as an agent of socialization that, particularly through the use of models, teaches its viewers how they should look, act, and interact with others (Bandura, 2002; Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). A variety of studies, most using content analysis, have examined the ways that television constructs women. These studies have resulted in strong evidence of gender stereotyping on television (Asamen & Berry, 2000; Douglas & Olsen, 1997; Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999; Glascock, 2001; Nagy, 2010; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Witt, 2000). For example, women have always been, and continue to be,

underrepresented on television in comparison to their presence in the real population (Glascock, 2001; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Women on television are also more likely to be sexualized and dressed provocatively; they are most often portrayed in less prestigious, lower-paying jobs; and they are more likely to have blonde or red hair (more strongly associated with attractiveness) than dark hair (Elasmar et al., 1999; Glascock, 2001).

Studies in this area have taken the investigation a step further and have also examined the extent to which these portrayals affect societal perceptions of women as well as women's identities (Asamen & Berry, 2000; Gauntlett, 2002; Nathanson, McGee, Sebastian, & Wilson, 2002; Signorielli, 2001). The research has found a strong relationship between television viewing and gender stereotypic attitudes. That is, heavy viewers of television are more likely to subscribe to gender stereotypes (Signorielli, 2001). Furthermore, heavy television viewing is also associated with more traditional gender role development (Signorielli, 2001). In other words, those who watch a lot of television may be more likely to accept *and* to emulate gender role stereotypes. This offers another way of demonstrating how television shapes societal perceptions and identities of women.

A study of young women's images of motherhood in relation to television viewing (Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002) further supports this idea. In this study, Ex, Janssens, and Korzilius (2002) surveyed young women about their television viewing habits and their images of motherhood, both of ideal motherhood and of the approach to motherhood they may see themselves taking in the future. Those young women who were heavier viewers of television and ritualized viewers of television were more likely

to subscribe to traditional ideologies of motherhood (Ex et al., 2002). It was not only the amount of television that was relevant in this study, however, but also the genre of shows the participants watched. Those who spent more time watching sitcoms and soap operas were more likely to subscribe to traditional ideologies of motherhood, both in terms of motherhood in general as well as their own potential approaches to motherhood (Ex et al., 2002).

Researchers have also shown, however, that not all audience members will be affected by gender-specific programming in the same way. In fact, many female audience members are empowered by such programming (Brown, 2004; Fiske, 1987). For example, in her study of female viewers of soap operas, Brown (2004) found that many of these viewers engaged in resistive readings of soap operas that made them feel empowered. Their experience of watching the shows and, particularly, of discussing the shows with other women was both pleasurable and empowering for them. In addition, the female viewers in this study identified most strongly with characters in the soaps who were villains or in some way resisted dominant expectations of how women should look and behave. In this way, these viewers constructed their own identities through their resistance to dominant ideologies, which they achieved primarily through their identification with characters in the soap operas they watched (Brown, 2004).

The ability of media audiences to engage in different readings of media texts also becomes important in an examination of motherhood in the media. In recent years, many media researchers have studied constructions of motherhood in such media spaces as television, film, news, advertising, political communications, blogs, and social media

(Cappuccio, 2006; Gallagher, 2009; Golombisky, 2001; Kahl, 2009; Knudson, 2009; Lopez, 2009; Nagy, 2010; Pugh, 2005; Roy, 1998).

Nagy (2010), for example, conducted an analysis of motherhood and stereotyping in the popular Comedy Central cartoon *South Park*. In this analysis, she identified three primary stereotypes of motherhood in this show: the middle class mother, the Jewish mother, and the single mother (Nagy, 2010). Nagy's (2010) results lead her to argue that rather than merely "poking fun" at these different types of motherhood, the creators of *South Park* draw upon these stereotypes in an effort to parody American society (Nagy, 2010, p. 4).

The depiction of motherhood in film has also received some attention from media researchers. In fact, Golombisky's (2001) examination of the 1995 film *How to Make an American Quilt* sheds light on the construction of motherhood in the film as well as the film's ability to act as "female identity therapy" for mothers and daughters (p. 65). Golombisky's (2001) analysis credits the film with privileging women's relationships, promoting love and understanding in these relationships, and rescuing mother-daughter relationships from "patriarchal matrophobia," or a daughter's fear of becoming her mother (p. 65).

In another example of research on motherhood in film, Gallagher (2009) examined the growing number of films depicting female characters, usually mothers or mother figures, suffering from an illness or injury that ultimately has some sort of impact on the main character(s) in the film. In this analysis, Gallagher (2009) cites examples from contemporary popular films, including action films such as *Spiderman, Superman Returns, Miami Vice, Collateral, and Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. The

hospital-bed and deathbed scenes in these films emphasize the importance of the mother figure, especially to their sons. In fact, a son or nephew's interaction with the mother figure in these scenes often compels him to take some sort of positive action, often as a result of grief or anger. In this way, the mother figure serves as an inspiration of sorts to the male character. In *Spiderman* (2002), for example, the hero visits his aunt in the hospital after she was attacked by the Green Goblin and, as a result, finds new inspiration to combat his enemy. On the other hand, scenes such as this also undermine the agency of these women, many of whom are constructed as symbolic victims (Gallagher, 2009). Gallaghter (2009) argues that "such scenes speak to continued ambivalence surrounding women's representation in popular cinema, and to continued patrolling of the boundaries of female power" (p. 209).

In addition to film and television, media researchers have also examined constructions of motherhood in news media, including the role that such constructions play in the political realm (Cappuccio, 2006; Kahl, 2009; Knudson, 2009). For example, both Cappuccio (2006) and Knudson (2009) examined the construction of motherhood in media discourses surrounding war. Cappuccio (2006) focused on morning news shows, including *Good Morning America* on ABC, the *Early* show on CBS, and the *Today* show on NBC, and examined how these shows used mothers as instruments of support and dissent for the Iraq War. Cappuccio's (2006) analysis showed that mothers who came on these shows to talk about their soldier children often served as justifiers of the Iraq War. This became evident through dominant representations in these shows of mothers in the roles of "supporter/caregiver" and "representative/proud mother" (Cappuccio, 2006, p. 3). Conversely, Knudson (2009) examined media coverage of Cindy Sheehan and how

Sheehan relied on her identity as the mother of a soldier who was killed in Iraq to promote the U.S. antiwar movement. Knudson (2009) found that discourses of motherhood played an instrumental role in Sheehan's arguments for peace. Media coverage of Sheehan, Knudson (2009) argues, "provides ample evidence of the constantly shifting nature of definitions of 'good' and 'bad' mothering in early twenty-first century America" (p. 164).

In addition, in recent years Michelle Obama has been the subject of much discussion surrounding the construction of motherhood in the news media. Kahl (2009) provides a number of examples of how Michelle Obama has focused on the importance of motherhood and the family in American culture. Identifying herself as the "Mom-in-Chief" at the White House, she has emphasized again and again that being a mother and raising her daughters in a normal way is her most important full-time job (Kahl, 2009, p. 317). Mrs. Obama has extended this emphasis on motherhood and families to her focus on the needs and concerns of military families across the country, many of whom have experienced serious financial struggles in recent years (Kahl, 2009). As Kahl (2009) discusses in her article, news media coverage of Michelle Obama has generally reinforced the rhetoric of motherhood and family that remains at the forefront of her political identity.

New media have also become an important space for the construction of motherhood. In her qualitative study entitled *The Radical Act of 'Mommy Blogging': Redefining Motherhood through the Blogosphere*, Lori Kido Lopez (2009) examines the form and content of "mommy blogs" (p. 729) and the role they play in defining motherhood in contemporary American culture. These blogs have become a

phenomenon drawing massive amounts of interest from parents interested in discussions around positive experiences, challenges, and questions regarding parenting. In fact, the most popular of these sites often attract more than 50,000 hits per day (Lopez, 2009). Lopez (2009) found that while some have challenged the use of the term "mommy blogger" as demeaning, these blogs provide a great space in which to build a sense of community among parents and to speak out against negative representations of motherhood in American society (Lopez, 2009). These and other representations of women and motherhood in media as discussed here speak to the importance of understanding how audiences engage with these representations and make sense of them in relation to their own lives.

The theoretical framework of cultural studies discussed throughout this section becomes particularly relevant to an examination of televised mother-daughter relationships from the perspective of the audience through its emphasis on relationships of power in society, the ways in which media content contributes to the ideological struggle for meaning between different social groups, including mothers, and the ways in which viewers engage with media content. Each of these concepts will contribute to a fuller understanding of the ways in which women viewers engage with portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television.

Constructing Race and Class on Television

In this study, I interviewed women from a variety of backgrounds, particularly in terms of race and class, about female television characters of diverse racial and class backgrounds. My discussion of these interviews will be enhanced by an understanding of

the ways race and class have been and continue to be constructed on television. For this reason, this section offers a review of the television research that has addressed televised constructions of race and class.

Constructing Race

Scholars studying race within a number of different disciplines acknowledge that race itself is a social construction (Gandy, 1998; Gray, 1995; Fiske, 1996; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). That is, race is not simply a physical attribute, but rather a concept whose meaning is constructed and reconstructed through cultural texts as well as social interaction (Gandy, 1998; Fiske, 1996). Gandy (1998) refers to race as a "theoretical construct" that helps people to make sense of the world (p. 35). As a popular culture text, television contributes to this social construction of race through its representation and treatment of people of different races (Gandy, 1998; Gray, 1995; Fiske, 1996; Lind, 1996; Mastro & Stern, 2003). In fact, in his discussion of blackness on television, Gray (1995) argues that television, as part of a commercial culture, "serves as both a *resource* and a *site* in which blackness as a cultural sign is produced, circulated, and enacted" (p. 3, italics in original). In addition, critical media research has shown that, in many ways, the media promote and cultivate dominant discourses, particularly when it comes to race and class (Billings, 2004; Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008; Fiske, 1987, 1989; Glascock, 2004; Gitlin, 1986; Hall, 1980; Larson, 2002; Lyle, 2008; Poster, 1990).

Researchers have argued, therefore, that it is critically important to study how race is constructed on television (Fiske, 1996; Gandy, 1998; Gray, 1993). According to this argument, television researchers in particular should include analyses of portrayals of people of color on television, rather than simply focusing on white television characters

and audiences (Gray, 1993). That is, people of color should not be marginalized in critical television research on race, but rather should be a central focus of such research (Gray, 1993).

Many studies have examined race and how it is constructed on television (Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008; Fiske, 1996; Li-Vollmer, 2002; Lind, 1996; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). Research in this area has found that people of color are often absent, misrepresented, or stereotyped on television, particularly in television news (Campbell, 1995; Dates & Barlow, 1990; Entman, 1992, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gandy, 1998; Gilliam & Iyenjar, 2000; Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995). For example, Poindexter, Smith, and Heider (2003) examined race and ethnicity in news stories, story assignments, and source selections and found that Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were virtually invisible as anchors, reporters, and subjects in the news. They also found that people of color were rarely interviewed as news sources (Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003). Similarly, Dixon, Azocar, and Casas (2003) conducted a content analysis of race and crime in news and found that whites were overrepresented, whereas blacks were underrepresented, as victims of violent crime. Whites were also overrepresented as police officers, while African Americans were underrepresented in this role (Dixon, Azocar, & Cases, 2003).

In their historical study of people of color in film and prime-time television, Pieraccini and Aligood (2005) found that, particularly in the early 20th century, actors of color were repeatedly stereotyped. In fact, actors of color during this time period were forced to accept demeaning roles that portrayed members of their race poorly. They had the limiting choice of either accepting these roles or having no roles at all (Pieraccini &

Aligood, 2005). In addition, according to the authors, African American citizens at the time craved images of people who looked like them on television and film so much that they often did not make the distinction between positive and negative portrayals (Pieraccini & Aligood, 2005).

In an examination of African Americans on television from 1948 through the 1980s, MacDonald (1992) argues that the relationship between African Americans and television has been ambivalent at best. On the one hand, some creators of television shows have made a genuine effort to treat African Americans equally and to portray them honestly. On the other hand, African Americans have been the victims of persistent stereotyping in television portrayals and have generally been excluded from the production side of the industry (MacDonald, 1992). In more recent television portrayals, there are more African Americans than there were in past decades, but they continue to be stereotyped (Boylorn, 2008; Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008; MacDonald, 1992). Boylorn (2008) found similar results in a more recent study of representations of race on reality television, as did several studies of the construction of race in television commercials (Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008; Li-Vollmer, 2002; Mastro & Stern, 2003).

The construction of race/ethnicity on television can also be seen in portrayals of Latino/as, who have also been presented according to dominant stereotypes. Studies have shown that Latino men have been constructed primarily as criminals, "bandidos," "greasers," law enforcers, hypersexualized Latin lovers with hot tempers, or comics/buffoons (Delgado, 1998, 2000; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Ramirez-Berg, 1990; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). In addition, Latina women have been portrayed

in both television and film as fiery, passionate, hot-tempered sexualized temptresses, as domestic help, or as comics/buffoons (Freydberg, 2004; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003).

According to Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005), the comic or buffoon is characterized by a heavy accent, laziness, lack of intelligence, and secondary status. This type of depiction can be seen, for example, on the popular television series *Will and Grace* in the character of Rosario (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). In their study of Latino representation on primetime television, Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) found that while some advances have been made in the quality of depictions of Latinos, many televised images of this group remain tied to these old stereotypes. In addition, the percentage of Latinos on television remains dramatically below that of the real-world population (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005).

Similarly, studies of Asian Americans in the media have also shown that the percentage of their representation on television is significantly less than that of their real percentage in the population (Sun, 2003). In addition, Asian Americans have been stereotyped as a "model minority" in media portrayals (Chen, 2004), which tend to focus on Asian Americans as "a group of people who are smarter, who study harder, and have more success than the rest of us" (Chen, 2004, p. 146). Television portrayals of Asian Americans have also constructed Asian American women in particular as "beautiful, docile, and sensual" (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003, p. 201). Researchers have found that these types of portrayals are often rooted in an American fascination with the mysterious "geisha girl" image of Asian American women dating back to World War I.

Downing and Husband (2005) argue that through such portrayals in both news and entertainment, television contributes to the continuing problem of institutional racism in the United States. They posit that researchers need to recognize the role and significance of institutional racism in society and the role that television plays in perpetuating such racism. Whereas prejudice has been conveniently portrayed as an individual problem which is not reflective of a group or of society, institutional racism focuses on routines and activities within television organizations, for example, that reproduce inequality by normalizing the interests of a single dominant group (Downing & Husband, 2005).

Similarly, Gray (1995) argues that white control of the television industry has much to do with the way race has been constructed in the medium. Looking at television of the 1980s, Gray (1995) discovered that although successful black producers, writers, and on-screen talent were able to shape representations of race to some extent, in the end, the creative vision of the white producers predominated. For many of the shows based on the situations and experiences of African Americans, "the conventions of television production serve to discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view…this point of view constructs and privileges white middle-class audiences as the ideal viewers and subjects of television stories" (Gray, 1995, p. 71). In other words, African Americans have been neglected or stereotyped for many years on television primarily because shows about African Americans have been created by white producers with white audiences in mind. Bristor, Lee, and Hunt (1995) see a similar "dominant white ideology" of racism pervading the advertising industry (p. 48). As MacDonald (1992) argues, "throughout television history, these executives felt that profits could be

maximized by employing African Americans in stereotypical roles that would be acceptable to predominantly white audiences" (p. xviii). As the studies discussed here have shown, this phenomenon continues to be perpetuated in contemporary representations of race on television.

Constructing Class

Studies have shown that members of different social classes have been and continue to be constructed in particular ways on television that contribute to cultural discourses regarding class (Glascock & Ruggierio, 2004; Shugart, 2006). These discourses often shape how television viewers understand and interpret what it means to be, for example, a working-class man or a middle-class woman (Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Butsch, 1992; Fiske, 1996).

Many studies in the field of television research offer important examples of this phenomenon (Butsch, 1992; Carroll, 2008; Ellis & Armstrong, 1989; Press, 1991; Scheiner, 2003). Butsch (1992), for example, studied class and gender in four decades of situation comedy. In doing so, he found that for four decades, the few working-class families depicted in domestic situation comedies have inverted the gender roles of father and mothers, with the men being failures as men and the women essentially picking up the slack (Butsch, 1992). On the other hand, television series with middle-class families tend to depict fathers as successes and as "easily meeting the standard of masculinity" (Butsch, 1992, p. 387). In this way, Butsch (1992) argues, gender has often been used to construct contrasting images of the middle class and the working class.

Although not absent, working-class families have appeared much less frequently on television in recent decades than middle-class families (Butsch, 1992). In fact,

working-class families, such as those on *All in the Family*, *Good Times, Roseanne,* and *The Simpsons*, were usually given a chance by the networks when "normal fare" was not established or sustaining ratings (Butsch, 1992, p. 389). *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons* came at a time in the 1980s and 1990s when competition for ratings was intense as a result of the rise of cable and the declining power of the networks (Butsch, 1992). However, even during these periods of popularity, working-class shows still remained a minority among situation comedies (Butsch, 1992).

On the other hand, the majority of domestic situation comedies portray middle-class families (Brooks, 2005; Butsch, 1992; Skill & Robinson, 1994). These middle-class families have usually been affluent and successful, often with the parents working in prestigious professions (Brooks, 2005; Skill & Robinson, 1994). The success of these families often became evident in their home, furnishings, and lifestyle (Butsch, 1992). In discussing these findings, Butsch (1992) argues that:

> A fictional world in which success is so pervasive makes success the expected norm. When success is confined predominantly to middle-class series, and failure to the working class, the failing working-class men are thereby labeled deviants who are responsible for their own failure (Butsch, 1992, p. 390).

In addition to being represented less on television, working-class individuals have also been victims of negative stereotyping in situation comedies (Butsch, 1992). Working-class men, for example, have been constructed as inept and as buffoons (Butsch, 1992). For example, in shows such as *The Honeymooners, All in the Family*, *Married…with Children,* and *The Simpsons*, storylines have revolved around the working-class man's stupidity, immaturity, and general ineptitude (Butsch, 1992). In these shows, mothers typically "know best" and children are portrayed as smarter than

their fathers. In fact, the children's successes are often contrasted with their fathers' failures (Butsch, 1992, p. 391). On the other hand, middle class fathers are very rarely portrayed as inept or as buffoons. Rather, they are portrayed as successful fathers and husbands. In addition, in many middle-class series, the parents are a strong team—both are intelligent, mature, and sensible (Butsch, 1992).

In another study of class and gender on prime-time television, Glascock and Ruggierio (2004) examined Spanish-language television. They found that characters with lighter skin were likely to play major roles in these shows, they were more fit, younger, and more likely to be upper class than characters with darker skin. Glascock and Ruggierio (2004) argue that such representations reinforce stereotypes that may be harmful to people of non-European descent struggling with their cultural identity in an Anglo culture.

In an important study focused on the reality television genre, Shugart (2006) examined the construction of class in reality court shows such as *Judge Judy, Judge Joe Brown, Divorce Court,* and *The People's Court*. Based on her findings, Shugart (2006) argues that the very popular reality court show genre actually serves a "disciplinary function" that aims to manage class as well as race/ethnicity. That is, reality court shows tend to offer characterizations of people of different classes that are stereotypical and often blame those people for their own unfortunate situations as way of "disciplining" them. Shugart (2006) explains that the "moral lapses and excesses" that require such discipline and that are often associated with those of the working and poverty class and people of color are usually attributed to their poor choices, lack of self-control and discipline, and self-indulgence. According to Shugart (2006), "these shows cultivate the

normalization and encourage the internalization of hegemonic, dominant discourses of discipline that revolve around class and race/ethnicity" (p. 79).

It is therefore clear based on previous research that television contributes to the construction of both race and class in contemporary society. The types of portrayals discussed in these studies contribute to and reflect cultural discourses surrounding race and class and, as researchers have shown, shape people's understandings of both race and class (Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Coover, 2001; Press, 1991). Busselle & Crandall (2002), for example, demonstrate that the media's construction of reality with respect to race and poverty influences media consumers' understanding about who is poor and why they are poor. Media audiences use the stories and examples they encounter on television to summarize what it means to be a member of a particular race or social class (Busselle & Crandall, 2002).

This focus on the perceptions of audience members becomes particularly important for the current study in that portrayals of race and class in the mother-daughter relationships on television may shape audiences' perceptions of how mother-daughter relationships are enacted or should be enacted among women in particular social locations.

Television and the Family

Although the mother-daughter relationship on television has received little attention in the field of media studies, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the construction of American families on television. Because most mother-daughter relationships on television are part of a larger family structure, a discussion of

the research on American families on television will contribute to a fuller understanding of contemporary portrayals of mother-daughter relationships and audience engagement with these portrayals. For that reason, in this section, I discuss portrayals of families in American television, particularly with a focus on the significance of contemporary portrayals.

Researchers in this area have argued that the changing portrayals of American families on television have, to some extent, reflected the changing values of American society (Brooks, 2005). From the time when radio was the primary entertainment medium in the United States, family shows were one of the main ways that producers appealed to as large an audience as possible. "Family" has long been considered a topic to which most Americans can easily relate (Brooks, 2005).

Researchers studying the family on television in popular 1980s shows such as *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*, *The Cosby Show*, *Dynasty*, *Kate and Allie*, *Thirtysomething*, *Married…with Children,* and *The Wonder Years* found that maternal perfection became a popular phenomenon in television families of the 1980s (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008). The media buzz phrase for women at this time was that they could "have it all"—a successful marriage, a career, and good kids—and still manage to look great (Watson, 2008). Studies have shown that this was demonstrated on television by such mothers as Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, Maggie Seaver on *Growing Pains*, and Elyse Keaton on *Family Ties* (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008). While real-life mothers were struggling with the "divided life phenomenon," these television mothers seemed exempt from such struggles (Watson, 2008).

Researchers studying the family on television in the 1980s also point out that as the divorce rate continued to increase during the 1980s, one show that reflected this change was *Kate and Allie*, which portrayed two friends who both recently became single mothers after a divorce. These friends move in to a New York City apartment together with their kids and live completely independent of men (Watson, 2008).

In addition, a significant amount of research on this time period in television focused on *Roseanne*, which began in 1988. Analyses of this show demonstrated its uniqueness in that it addressed real life struggles during this period of time. The show was praised for its realism and for showing the real struggles faced by blue collar families and working mothers on a regular basis. The character of Roseanne herself also became a significant figure at this time because of the way the show constructed her as an unconventional mother who challenged the ideology of maternal perfection presented in other shows in this decade. The show itself was praised for its willingness to deal with harsh realities (Watson, 2008).

Research has also shown that since the 1990s, television viewers have encountered a great variety of family structures, such as the wholesome nuclear family on *Home Improvement*, the single-parent family on *Grace Under Fire*, and families born out of necessity on such shows as *Full House* and *The Golden Girls* (Brooks, 2005). In addition, reconstituted families became popular on such shows as *Life Goes On* and *Step by Step*. Researchers have argued that, since the 1990s, there has no longer been a such thing as "the typical American family" on television (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008).

In addition, an important part of understanding the construction of the American family on television in the 1990s and its connection to real families is the fact that in

American society in the 1990s, many citizens expressed their concern that the idea of the American family was falling apart (Watson, 2008). At this time, divorce rates were continuing to increase and childbirth and childrearing became less connected to marriage. In fact, single motherhood began to be portrayed as acceptable on television (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008). This phenomenon led to the famous Dan Quayle-Murphy Brown "war," when Vice President Dan Quayle admonished the television character Murphy Brown for making a mockery of fathers by choosing to bear a child on her own and "calling it just another lifestyle choice" (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008; Skill & Robinson, 1994). The publicity this received led to a heated discussion among Americans of family values in this country (Watson, 2008). This situation has offered media researchers an example of how television portrayals of families and societal understanding of families interact with and affect one another. This becomes important in the present study in that I set out to understand how and to what extent this interaction takes place between televised portrayals of mother-daughter relationships and real-life mothers and daughters.

Research on television families in the 21st century demonstrates that American television viewers have been introduced to a new set of unconventional families as well as "real" families on television (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008). *The Osbournes* presented one of the most captivating family portrayals on television in years (Brooks, 2005). This portrayal was unique in that it invited American television viewers to take a look inside the life of famous rock star Ozzie Osbourne and his family. This was like nothing Americans had ever seen before, especially in portrayals of families on television (Brooks, 2005). Other reality series including *Wife Swap* and *Trading Spouses* have introduced viewers not only to real life families, but to the "experiment" of swapping one

family's mother for another and watching what happens (Brancato, 2007). These two shows in particular contribute to a fuller understanding of contemporary constructions of motherhood and family life on television.

Research on motherhood in contemporary television families has also pointed to a "peculiar" family show called *Malcolm in the Middle* as an example of the "unconventional" nature of mothering in television families today. In this show, Lois, the mother, is portrayed as a cruel and often irrational disciplinarian, while her husband, Hal, is portrayed as a complete wimp as they struggle to raise four boys (Brooks, 2005). According to Watson (2008), while the "wacky" nature of family portrayals such as this have been criticized, defenders of shows such as *Malcolm in the Middle* argue that although they take an unconventional approach, families such as the one in *Malcolm in the Middle* demonstrate that even through chaos, strong families stick together (Watson, 2008).

Finally, other popular family shows of the 21st century such as such as *Gilmore Girls, Desperate Housewives, Two and a Half Men,* and *Big Love* become particularly significant in this discussion in that they continue to portray families that reflect the increasingly unconventional nature of many families in American society today (Brooks, 2005; Watson, 2008). Such contemporary portrayals may also offer viewers more unconventional representations of mothers and daughters and, thereby, reshape the way viewers perceive mother-daughter relationships on television as well as in their everyday lives.

CHAPTER 3

MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

Both feminist and gender studies scholars have contributed for many years to the study of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships. The academic literature on motherhood is vast and spans across several academic disciplines, but has been particularly prevalent in the fields of sociology and psychology. This literature has focused on such areas as the social construction of motherhood (Collins, 1994); experiences of motherhood in different social contexts (Gottfried, 1991); and the social psychology of mothering. A smaller body of literature examines mother-daughter relationships. This research has focused on such areas as how race, class and gender shape mother-daughter relationships (Chase-Lansdale, Michael, & Desai, 1991; Collins, 1994; Joseph, 1981; Lesch & Kruger, 2005); mothers as role models for their daughters (Dias & Lopes, 2003; Fischer, 1986; Lerner, 1994); how mothers shape their daughters' gender attitudes and life decisions (Arcana, 1979; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1996; Lerner, 1994); struggles in this relationship during the adolescent years (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004; Turnage, 2004); and how the relationship changes when the daughter becomes an adult (Abramson, 1987; Fischer, 1981; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006).

A number of studies of mother-daughter relationships have illustrated the importance of taking race, class, and gender into account when studying mother-daughter relationships (Joseph, 1981; Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004; Turnage, 2004). It is important to note, however, that although a significant amount of studies in this area address the experiences of "women of color," the majority of such studies I have come across focus primarily on the experiences of Black women. There has not been as

much attention given in this body of research to the experiences of women of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as Asian-American women, Hispanic women, and Native American women. For that reason, the studies I discuss in this section focus more on Black women than on other women of color.

Gloria Joseph (1981), for example, criticizes the dominant body of literature on mothers and daughters for neglecting to address mother-daughter relationships among Black women. She argues that racial oppression must be considered in an analysis of Black mother-daughter relationships. The major problem Joseph (1981) finds with research on Black families is that it generally follows patterns of research based on middle class White values. She argues that researchers should not "force Black mother-daughter relationships into pigeonholes designed for understanding White models, thus ignoring the reality of their situations" (p. 76).

It is more useful, therefore, to discuss Black mother-daughter relationships in terms of Black women's roles and positions within the Black society in which they live and its relationship to the dominant (White) society in America (Joseph, 1981). More specifically, it is critical to understand mother-daughter interactions within the Black family network. One unique characteristic of this Black family network, for example, is that all Black women, including mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, and cousins, play the "mother" role in Black families. That is, siblings and extended relatives generally play a significant role in raising Black children, particularly in single-parent families (Joseph, 1981).

In discussing single-parent Black families, Joseph (1981) argues that the quality of the relationships among family members matters more in Black families than the

structure of the family. For example, a family in which the father is absent does not necessarily mean that the family is "broken" in some way. Rather, it is simply constructed differently. Joseph (1981) points out that "Black mothers who are single have been described as unwed, irresponsible, promiscuous and ignorant, while single White mothers are referred to as liberated, experiencing an alternative lifestyle, or deliberately choosing motherhood without a husband" (p. 82).

Joseph (1981) presents a number of characteristics of Black mothers that generally distinguish them from White mothers. For example, because Black mothers have generally experienced racial and economic oppression, they know from experience the struggles their children will face in their lives (Joseph, 1981). Black mothers particularly understand the struggles their daughters will face in a world that is dominated by White men, a world in which Black women are devalued and treated as inferior and, therefore, subordinate (Joseph, 1981).

Joseph (1981) conducted a study in which she surveyed Black women about their relationships with their mothers. Another distinguishing characteristic Joseph (1981) discovered through this survey was that Black daughters had a very strong respect for their mothers, particularly because they understood the difficulties their mothers faced in raising their children. There was a strong sense of empathy between the Black mothers and daughters Joseph (1981) surveyed because they shared similar problems with racial and economic oppression throughout their lives. This shared oppression provided a stronger sense of identification between Black mothers and daughters (Joseph, 1981). In fact, even middle and upper class Black mothers and daughters shared this type of respect

and identification because, while they may be in a higher socioeconomic class, they still share the experience of racism and discrimination (Joseph, 1981).

In addition, Black daughters often contribute substantially to the housework, as their mothers are often overworked. Because young Black daughters see how overworked their mothers are, they tend to show care and concern for their mothers and, when they are older, they tend to be more appreciative and understanding of their mothers (Joseph, 1981). These daughters also tend to admire their mothers for surviving significant hardships in their lives (Joseph, 1981).

In addition, the Black daughters Joseph (1981) surveyed acknowledged that much of what they learned from their mothers about surviving in the Black community and in the world and about holding the Black community together was taught through what Joseph (1981) refers to as "oft-repeated comments" (p. 106). Such comments include: "Be independent and as financially independent as you possibly can," "Get an education," "Have self-respect or no one else will respect you," and "Don't trust any man" (Joseph, 1981, p. 106). In fact, Joseph (1981) points out that this is an important feature of Black mother-daughter relationships: the transmission of messages from mothers to daughters.

Patricia Hill Collins (1994) also emphasizes the importance of taking racial and economic oppression into account when studying motherhood among women of color. She states, "Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial ethnic women in the United States, but for all women" (p. 45). In her analysis, Collins (1994) criticizes feminist theorists for

disregarding and, thereby, minimizing the importance of race and class in theorizing about motherhood.

Collins (1994) also criticizes the use of the model of the White, middle class nuclear family in feminist analyses of motherhood. This model, Collins (1994) points out, usually divides family life into the public or "male" sphere of "economic providing" and the private or "female" sphere of "affective nurturing (mothering)" (p. 46). This division of spheres does not exist for most Black women and, therefore, using this model to analyze Black families misrepresents the experiences of Black mothers (Collins, 1994). It is important to remember, therefore, that "for women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concern of racial ethnic communities—one does not exist without the other" (Collins, 1994, p. 46).

Other studies such as those done by Lesch and Kruger (2005) and Pluhar and Kuriloff (2004) illustrate Collins' point in their analysis of the role of race and class in mother-daughter relationships between low-income South African mothers and their adolescent daughters (Lesch & Kruger, 2005) and low- and middle-income African-American mothers and their adolescent daughters (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004). Both of these studies demonstrated the significant impact of race, class, and mother-daughter communication in shaping the sexuality and sexual agency of the adolescent daughters by showing how the ways in which their mothers did or did not communicate with them shaped the decisions adolescents girls of color made regarding their sexuality (Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004).

In addition, Rastogi and Wampler (1999) examined mother-adult daughter relationships across the European-American, Mexican American, and Asian Indian

American cultures. In doing so, they found significant cross-cultural differences in mother-adult daughter relationships and, thereby, also demonstrated the significance of race in shaping mother-daughter relationships (Rastogi & Wampler, 1999). Similarly, Gottfried (1991) argues for the importance of considering difference in socioeconomic status when studying motherhood.

Another group of studies has demonstrated that daughters' belief in their mothers' capability to soothe and protect them has an influence over the daughters' self-esteem (Turnage, 2004). When daughters believe their mothers are capable of soothing and protecting them, their self-esteem tends to be higher (Turnage, 2004).

In addition, mothers' perceptions of their daughters' bodies tends to shape their daughters' body images. (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1996). Daughters tend to agree with their mothers' perceptions of their bodies (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1996).

Research on mother-daughter relationships has also shown that mothers tend to influence their daughters' understanding of work (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1991; Lerner, 1994). That is, daughters of working mothers tend to have a more egalitarian sex role ideology and also are more likely to plan to balance work and children when they are adults themselves. Furthermore, mothers who are happy with their jobs tend to provide their daughters with more positive impressions of the decision to work (Lerner, 1994).

A number of studies of adult mother-daughter relationships have shown that adult daughters tend to identify more strongly with their mothers when they become mothers themselves (Fischer, 1981; Fischer, 1986). In fact, when this happens, mothers and daughters tend to reevaluate their relationship and become more involved in each other's lives (Fischer, 1981). Similarly, mothers tend to choose adult daughters over sons as

sources of emotional and instrumental support, primarily because of their shared gendered experiences and ideologies (Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). In addition, Dias and Lopes (2003) found that in describing what makes someone a good mother, mothers and daughters tend to give similar descriptions. Both tend to appreciate characteristics linked to affection. Daughters also do not often display a conscious desire to be different from their mothers (Dias & Lopes, 2003).

In sum, these studies and many others clearly illustrate the significance of mother-daughter relationships in women's lives. Whether women would characterize their relationships with their mothers or daughters as a "good" relationship or not, years of research has shown that mothers and daughters influence one another's lives in a number of important ways. The significance of this relationship in women's lives contributes to the importance of this study in that women's engagement with mother-daughter relationships on television may influence their own relationships in important ways that could have significant effects on their lives.

Feminist versus Gender Studies Approaches to Studying Mother-Daughter Relationships

Each of the studies discussed here has taken a different approach to studying mother-daughter relationships. Some have taken a gender studies approach, while others have taken a more feminist approach. It is common in contemporary research to see these approaches identified as though they are interchangeable. This, however, is not the case. Gender studies and feminist approaches differ from one another in a number of important ways. They are not mutually exclusive, however. That is, some studies may combine these approaches in some ways. In fact, because all feminist studies examine

gender in some way, all feminist studies may be considered gender studies. However, not all gender studies are feminist, for reasons I discuss below.

Studies taking a gender studies approach set out to analyze the phenomenon of gender (Butler, 1990; Holmes, 2007). Gender has been defined as socially produced differences between being feminine and being masculine (Holmes, 2007). Gender is also understood as a social construction, and so studies of gender often investigate how this construction takes place and how it affects peoples' lives (Butler, 1990; Holmes, 2007; Wood, 2003). Gender has also been defined as a practice, or as something we "do," and so gender studies often examine the ways we "do" gender and construct gender through our social interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Finally, studies taking a gender studies approach examine how gender shapes people's lives, experiences, and relationships and what this means for those people and for society (Holmes, 2007). However, gender studies do not necessarily make an argument against patriarchy or gender oppression. These studies do not necessarily call for social change of some kind. And finally, gender studies do not necessarily privilege women's voices in order to build knowledge from their experiences.

On the other hand, studies taking a feminist approach often present an argument against patriarchy and oppression (Sprague, 2005). However, rather than focusing only on gender oppression, feminist studies consider multiple axes of oppression, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, and how they affect women's lives (Collins, 2000). Feminist studies also set out to study women's lives (Hesse-Biber, 2006; Sprague, 2005). They privilege women's voices in order to bring their subjugated knowledge to the surface in research (Sprague, 2005). Feminist studies also emphasize the importance

of the personal. They include women's personal stories as well as personal information about the researcher and how the researcher's personal interests, values, and background may shape the studies they conduct. In other words, researcher reflexivity is an important aspect of feminist studies (Hesse-Biber, 2006; Sprague, 2005).

The present study extends the literature on mother-daughter relationships in several ways. First, because I studied women's engagement with mother-daughter relationships on prime-time television, my study brings popular culture into this discussion. That is, I have taken into consideration the discourses and ideologies present in popular culture texts, which, as other studies have shown, may shape people's understandings of their own lives and relationships. In this way, I set out to understand how these texts shape discourses of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships by studying how real mothers and daughters interpret and make sense of these portrayals.

I took a feminist approach to this study in a number of ways. First, this is an intersectional study in that I included both texts that portray mothers and daughters of different backgrounds in terms of race, class, sexuality, and disability as well as real mothers and daughters of such varying backgrounds. By interviewing them about their lives and experiences, my study emphasizes the personal stories of these women and privileges their voices in an effort to build knowledge about contemporary mother-daughter relationships from their experiences. Reflexivity about the influence of my social location on the results of this study is also an important component of this research. Finally, this study brings something new to the field of media studies by introducing research that focuses specifically on mother-daughter relationships, particularly from the

perspective of the audience. The method I used to conduct this study is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

In this chapter, I discuss the method and procedures I employed in this study. I begin with a discussion of qualitative research methods and how in-depth interviews, the sole method I used to collect data in this study, fulfills the goals of qualitative research. I follow this with a discussion of the procedures I followed in order to collect and analyze data. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of methodological considerations for this study.

Method

I used qualitative interviews in this study in order to analyze audience engagement with mother-daughter relationships on television from the perspective of female viewers. Qualitative methods such as interviews are naturalistic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). That is, qualitative researchers study people and texts in natural settings and, in doing so, "attempt to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

Several other features distinguish qualitative methods from quantitative approaches, including descriptive data, concern with process, inductive data analysis, and an essential concern with meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people make meaning out of their everyday lives. Qualitative methods are most useful in addressing the research questions in this study because I seek to understand how women make sense of their everyday experiences of being mothers

and/or daughters. I also aim to understand how these women negotiate the meaning of media texts they engage with on a regular basis.

Rather than seeking quantifiable information from participants, qualitative researchers are concerned with participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, I am concerned with participants' perspectives on their mother-daughter relationships and on the mother-daughter relationships they see on television. Because interpretation is central in qualitative research, understanding how mothers and daughters interpret television shows about mother-daughter relationships was critical. In addition, through these interpretations, I identified shared meanings about mother-daughter relationships held by the participants in this study and constructed in the television shows I discussed with them.

Theoretical Frameworks: Cultural Studies and Feminism

This study draws upon two methodological theories: cultural studies and feminism. Several central features of these theoretical frameworks overlap, including the beliefs that all social relations are shaped in some way by power and that power relations in society may be more clearly understood through analysis of individuals' understandings of their daily lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Kellner, 2002; Sprague, 2005).

Cultural studies scholars contend that the media shape people's views of the world as well as their values and, therefore, it is important to understand the ideologies presented in media texts and the meanings media audiences draw from them (Kellner, 2002). For this reason, a cultural studies approach to studying a media text incorporates analysis of audience interpretations of the text. In particular, cultural studies is also

concerned with how subcultural and oppressed groups resist the dominant ideologies that may be present in media texts (Kellner, 2002). As Douglas Kellner (2002) explains:

> Cultural studies…promotes a multiculturalist politics and media pedagogy that aims to make people sensitive to how relations of power and domination are "encoded" in cultural texts, such as those of television or film. But it also specifies how people can resist the dominant encoded meanings and produce their own critical and alternative readings (p. 12).

Cultural studies informed the methodological approach in this study in that, along with other cultural studies scholars, I began with the belief that media texts shape people's views of themselves and the world and, more specifically, that contemporary television shows may play an important role in shaping women's understandings of their mother-daughter relationships as well as how they engage in these relationships. Interviews with female viewers therefore were central to understanding how these viewers relate to televised constructions of mother-daughter relationships. In addition, I was also concerned with how women in different social locations may respond to the ideologies about motherhood and mother-daughter relationships present in these media texts.

The work of feminist methodologists also informed this study. Feminist methodologists take an approach to research that differs from traditional masculinist approaches. In doing so, they assert the value of giving voice to those who have been dominated and oppressed on the basis of gender, race, social class, and sexuality. A few of the methodological goals of feminist research are "to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships and to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification" (Creswell, 1998, p. 83).

Feminist methodology values researcher reflexivity and, thereby, allows researchers to acknowledge their role in the research process and how their own subjectivity may have influenced the research process. In this way, feminist researchers emphasize the idea that no research is "neutral" and "value-free" (Sprague, 2005, p. 22).

Another central goal of feminist methodology is to recognize and minimize possible harms of research (DeVault, 1996; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Sprague, 2005). For many years, feminists have critiqued standard research techniques in social science, including a general lack of concern for the possible negative effects of research and the research process. Feminist researchers promote a committed concern for minimizing possible harm on research participants (DeVault & Gross, 2007; Sprague, 2005).

For example, feminist methodologists aim to recognize and minimize the possibility of misrepresentation of research participants or social groups (DeVault, 1996; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Sprague, 2005). Research has shown a variety of ways in which women and other marginalized groups have been misrepresented through the distortion of their experiences in some social science research (DeVault, 1996). In addition, the way researchers phrase their research questions may misrepresent and, thereby, further marginalize the groups they are studying (Sprague, 2005). It is for these reasons that DeVault and Gross (2007), in their discussion of feminist interviewing, argue that "representing others is no objective, benign process; therefore, understanding how we represent others, who has the power to represent others, and the implications of our representations of others is imperative to any feminist research project" (p. 192). In this study, I aimed to avoid misrepresenting my participants by creating collaborative relationships with them throughout the research process to ensure that I represented their

perspectives accurately. This and the other features of feminist research discussed in previous chapters influenced the approach I took in conducting and analyzing my interviews, which I discuss in more detail in the following section.

Interviews

I used in-depth interviews to examine how mothers and daughters engage with portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television and how this engagement may influence their lives and relationships. Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) define the research interview as a conversation "whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 3). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2008), the subject matter of the qualitative research interview is not objective quantifiable data, but rather, meaningful relations to be interpreted. Interviewers talk to participants about their experiences and, in doing so, seek to understand how participants negotiate meaning and make sense of their lives (DeVault & Gross, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

Qualitative researchers seek participants' perspectives through engaging in conversations with them, rather than only through external observation or experimental manipulation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), "the interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 103). In addition, the knowledge produced in qualitative interviews is understood as constructive, as it is created through the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). For example, in her discussion of race in the context of feminist interviewing, Best (2003) argues that the

interviewer and interviewee construct their symbolic worlds through talk and, in the process, often rely on cultural assumptions about race. As a result, the interview process may contribute to the construction of race meanings in society (Best, 2003). This may also apply to the construction of gender meanings in that the interview process could contribute to the social construction of gender and, particularly in the context of this project, the social construction of mother-daughter relationships.

In addition, interviews are particularly important in a study using a cultural studies approach in that, according to Kellner (2002):

> All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of the reader. Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are going to read texts differently, and cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting, ways (p. 15).

In my interviews for this study, therefore, I sought to understand how women of different backgrounds interpret and relate to portrayals of mother-daughter relationships in different ways and how they make meaning in doing so. Throughout this process, I remained cognizant of the differences among these women, rather than assuming that women of a particular racial or class group are alike. DeVault and Gross (2007) emphasize the importance of feminist interviewers being aware of such differences between the women they interview.

In conducting and reporting on these interviews, I aimed to give voice to my participants and their perspectives on mother-daughter relationships in television as well as in their own lives. Doing so is particularly important for feminist interviewers in that, according to DeVault and Gross (2007), "if we wish to create knowledge that challenges rather than supports ruling regimes, we must constantly be attentive to histories,

experiences, and perspectives that are unnoticed, unfamiliar, and too easily neglected or misrepresented" (p. 182).

Procedures

In this section, I explain the sampling strategies, data collection, and data analysis techniques I used for the interviews in this study. It is first important to note that I conducted some preliminary fieldwork that informed how I moved forward with this study. A few months before launching this project, I conducted three interviews with female viewers about portrayals of mother-daughter relationships in the television shows *Gilmore Girls* and *Grey's Anatomy*. My analysis of these data continued as part of this study. Throughout my discussion of procedures, I will explain how this preliminary fieldwork influenced my methodological choices.

Sampling

I interviewed 22 women between the ages of 19 and 60. I set out to interview women over 18 years of age because, for the purposes of this study, I was most interested in examining mother-daughter relationships in which the daughters are either young adults or adults, rather than relationships in which the daughters are children.

An important goal for me in this study was to include the voices of women from different backgrounds and experiences and, as such, I interviewed women of varying ages, races, and social classes. I also wanted to include a variety of perspectives from women's experiences as daughters and mothers. I therefore interviewed women who discussed mother-daughter relationships from a daughter's perspective as well as women

who discussed mother-daughter relationships from a mother's perspective. Some participants were able and willing to do both.

It was also particularly important to me to interview women who were very familiar with the show I discussed with them and who would be willing to talk openly about their own mother-daughter relationships. A lesson I learned from my preliminary fieldwork was the importance of choosing participants who *want* to talk about my topic. I believe the three interviews I conducted during the preliminary phase of my research produced rich data primarily because these three women love the shows, were eager to talk about the shows, and were also willing to talk with me about their relationships with their mothers. For this reason, I continued to interview women who wanted to talk about the shows they watch.

Because I wished to include women from a variety of backgrounds who wanted to talk about these television shows and who were willing to discuss their own mother-daughter relationships, I engaged in "criterion" sampling, which Creswell (1998) defines as a purposeful sampling strategy in which "all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon" (p. 118). The phenomenon in this case would be the television shows we discussed.

I also used snowball sampling, another form of purposeful sampling in which I asked women I interviewed to recommend other possible participants for the study who would be able and willing to talk about television shows about mother-daughter relationships as well as their own relationships (Creswell, 1998). Because I did not want all of my participants to be alike or to come from the same group, I used multiple snowballs. That is, I made initial contact with a few women who do not have a

connection to one another and then built snowballs beginning with each of these women. I contacted potential participants via phone or email and, in my initial communication, asked them a few questions to ensure they met the criteria I was looking for in an interviewee (such as familiarity with a show portraying a mother-daughter relationship as a significant part of the plot). All participants signed an informed consent form before participating in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted all interviews in-person and in a naturalistic setting, either in the participant's home or another comfortable space with a television. I began each interview by asking the participant about her relationship with her mother/daughter. After discussing their own mother-daughter relationship, the participant and I then viewed an episode of one of the shows together. I chose to ask the participants about their own relationships before watching the show because I did not want this very important component of the interview to be overshadowed by our discussion of the relationship in the TV show. After viewing the episode, I conducted the remainder of the interview, asking the participants more questions about the mother-daughter relationship in the show. I found that this technique worked well because, although each of my participants was familiar with the television series, watching an episode before discussing the show gave them fresh material to draw upon in the interview. The entire interview process, including our discussion and viewing of the show, took approximately two to three hours.

The interviews focused on such areas as: what their relationship is like with their mother and/or daughter, the participants' interpretations of the shows in relation to their

own lives, how they may or may not see their own mother-daughter relationships represented in the shows, how they relate their own understanding of mother-daughter relationships to the portrayals in the shows, how and to what extent they identify with the characters in the shows, and how and to what extent they see their engagement with the shows influencing their own lives and relationships. Please see Appendix A for the interview guide I used in this study.

It is also important to note that the participants determined which television shows would be included in this study. Before our interview, I asked each woman to identify a television show she is very familiar with that portrays a mother-daughter relationship as an important part of the plot. Those who were unable to do so were not included in the study as I was primarily interested in speaking to women who would be very knowledgeable about a show portraying a mother-daughter relationship. After receiving my recruitment email, a few women wrote back to me and asked what sorts of shows I had in mind. I responded to this question by providing a list of shows as examples. This list included the following shows: *Gilmore Girls, Grey's Anatomy, Lincoln Heights, The Sopranos, Desperate Housewives, The O.C., Big Love, and Brothers & Sisters*. After seeing this list, a few women recognized a show they knew well and selected that show to discuss in our interview. However, I did not limit the shows that could be included in the study only to this list. In fact, a couple of participants suggested shows I did not originally have on my list, including *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* and *Gossip Girl*.

I deliberately allowed the participants to determine which TV shows we would discuss because it was most important to me to talk to these women about the shows they knew best. Therefore, rather than attempting to represent all mother-daughter

relationships on American television of the 21st century, the selection of television texts in this study was driven by the participants' viewing experiences. This approach resulted in a relatively short list of shows with which my participants were most familiar, including *Gilmore Girls, The O.C., Grey's Anatomy, Brothers & Sisters, Tyler Perry's House of Payne,* and *Gossip Girl*.

With the permission of the participants, I made an audio recording of each interview, which I then transcribed. My field notes, therefore, were transcripts of the interviews, which included my observer comments, and my own notes taken during the interviews. I began my data analysis process by reading through the interview transcripts several times, taking note of general patterns in the data. I then used NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software to code the data. This allowed me to identify emergent themes, organize the data according to each of these themes, and determine which themes figured more prominently than others. Because I had structured my interview questions to address the research questions, the data analysis process led me to identify interpretation and sensemaking strategies among the participants as well as perceived effects identified by the participants. The data I collected, therefore, allowed me to examine in great depth my participants' engagement with mother-daughter relationships in contemporary television.

Methodological Considerations

It is important to acknowledge my role as the researcher in this study and how my social location may have shaped the results of this analysis. I realize that, having interviewed women from a variety of backgrounds both similar to and different from my

own, my participants' willingness to share personal, possibly sensitive, information and stories about their relationships with their mothers and/or daughters may have been limited in some way by my role as the interviewer. I am a white female graduate student in my late twenties from a working class background. I also am not a mother. Although some participants may have felt they could relate easily to me because I am a woman (DeVault & Gross, 2007), others may have found it difficult to relate to me because of my race, age, social class, and experience (or lack thereof, i.e. my lack of experience as a mother). Although I come from a working class background, participants may have assumed that I am middle or even upper middle class because of my position as a graduate student at a prestigious university. Some participants may have felt uncomfortable with my social location in relation to their own. These issues could have affected the interview process and, therefore, the richness of my data.

I attempted to minimize these potential problems by working to build a strong rapport with my participants. Feminist interviewers seek to build such a rapport with participants in an effort to create a collaborative research encounter, which DeVault and Gross (2007) refer to as "a process of seeking meanings together, where the conversation unfolds as a collaborative moment of making knowledge" (p. 180). I spent time engaging in small talk with my participants, getting to know them, and allowing them to get to know me. Building this rapport allowed us to find some experiences and interests we share in common.

In fact, one of the ways we were able to connect with one another was through our experiences as daughters. It was easy for me to relate to many of the participants' experiences with their mothers, particularly those participants who watch television with

their mothers. Television has always been an important part of my relationship with my mother. From the time I was a child, my family always watched television together. My parents did not treat television simply as background noise when I was growing up, but rather, as an event – an opportunity to spend time together, laugh together, and enjoy each other's company, usually watching a show about a family. When we were still too young to go out on our own, my siblings and I spent Friday nights at home watching family shows like *Full House, Step by Step*, and *Family Matters* with my parents.

To this day, television still connects us and remains a particularly meaningful part of my relationship with my mom. As an example, my mom and I are both watching the current season of *Parenthood*, an NBC show about the struggles of parenting experienced by four adult siblings and their parents. My mom and I love to talk about *Parenthood* on a regular basis and how easily we relate to the mothers and daughters in the show. In fact, one of the mother-daughter relationships in the show feels a lot like our own. Talking about the relationships in the show usually leads us into a discussion about our own relationship, which is something my mom and I both enjoy. As I discuss in more detail in the results chapters, some of the participants engage in a similar exchange with their mothers through the shared experience of watching a television show together.

In addition, the television shows themselves actually served as an opportunity for me to connect with my participants. Before I began asking the questions in my interview guide, I first spent some time with these women casually talking about the series and what we thought about the most recent episodes we had seen. I was able to connect with some participants in other ways as well, but talking about the shows themselves served as an easy and enjoyable way to start our discussions. I believe this speaks to the power of

popular culture texts to provide a common language that can connect people from completely different walks of life. It is my hope that these strategies aided me in minimizing, at least to some extent, the potential limitations engendered by my role as the researcher in this study.

CHAPTER 5

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

As the interview guide illustrates, I began each interview by asking the participants to tell me about their own mother-daughter relationships. My data analysis showed that the nature of these personal relationships becomes essential to understanding how and why the participants in this study engage with and interpret television shows about mother-daughter relationships in particular ways. For that reason, before describing the ways women interpret the shows they watch, which I will do in the next chapter, this chapter offers an introduction to these women and their own relationships. I have organized this chapter according to the women's ages, as the life stages of these women seemed to shape in some ways how they interpreted the television shows and made sense of their own relationships through their engagement with the shows. I begin by talking about women in their late teens/early twenties, then women in their late twenties/early thirties, followed by women in their late thirties/forties, and, finally, women in their fifties and sixties.

Many participants (16 out of 22) described their relationships with their mothers/daughters as "close." On the other hand, a smaller number of participants (6 out of 22) identified their relationships as "complicated," "superficial," "difficult," or just "not very close." This may be an indication that women with close mother/daughter relationships are more willing to participate in this type of study, perhaps because it is easier to discuss their relationship than it may be for someone whose relationship is more complicated or difficult. In other words, women with close relationships may be more

willing and even eager to discuss them with a stranger, whereas women in more complicated relationships may be less so.

In general, women in the youngest age group, ages 19 to 25, seem very happy in their young adult daughter-mother relationships. Most of these young women are at a stage where they are beyond the teenage years when they often argued with their mothers. At this point in their lives, they seem to emulate and, in some cases, even idolize their mothers. Several of these young women recognized ways in which they are becoming like their mothers, particularly in terms of personality traits. In addition, most of these young women rely on their mothers for advice in making important decisions in their lives. For example, Colleen, a white middle class 23-year-old elementary school teacher, stated, "Any big decisions that I would have to make, or if I'm having trouble with something, I would always go to mom, before any close friends or anything." A few participants also watch television with their mothers and consider doing so a pleasant mother-daughter bonding experience.

Anna, for example, is a 19-year-old white college student from a working class background. When I met with her, she was on spring break from her freshman year of college. She therefore had just begun experiencing a long-distance relationship with her mother, Cathy, who also participated in this study. Anna seemed to feel a close connection to her mother as she always had, even though she was now living many hours away at college. She described her mother as her best friend and someone who she seems to be increasingly similar to as she grows older:

> Well, she's kind of like my best friend. We always talk and we do stuff together…we shop and we're always doing little things together. We also like to watch TV together and movies…I guess I don't know if we have the same

> personality, but I guess we kind of…I don't know, we might have the same personality. I feel like as I'm growing I kind of become more like her.

Emily, a white 24-year-old social worker from a working class background, described a deep connection she feels with her mother: "We know each other very well. She probably knows me better than anyone else in the world and we just have that connection—there's something so powerful about it that I don't know what it is." Emily also recognized how her mother's example influenced her own career choice. They both work in "helping professions" and Emily believes this is because she is so much like her mother and emulates her mother's desire to take care of other people. Emily's mother Sally, who also participated in this study, works as a nurse for AIDS patients and Emily currently works in the social work profession. Emily attributed her desire to work in a helping profession to the values Sally instilled in her about the importance of helping people in need.

Faye, a 19-year-old Puerto Rican college student, emulates her mother in a number of ways. Her mother Maria, who also participated in this study, is a college professor who has a very strained relationship with her own mother. She and Faye have made a conscious effort to make their relationship better than Maria's relationship with her mother. Faye views Maria as a strong, accomplished woman who she hopes to grow more like as she gets older. In our interview, she told me,

> Well, my mom is incredibly strong. Like the things she's done and the things she's put up with…Like we've had times where I'm like, 'I'm not as strong as you,' or times where I'm like, 'My mom can do this, I can do this. I can deal with this…' I see the connection she makes with people and students and I've always wanted to be like that. I've always wanted to be as outgoing and professional as her. I hope one day I'll be able to do as many things as she's done.

Lily, a 22-year-old white college senior, had a tumultuous relationship with her mom when she was a teenager. They argued often and she shared that her mother raised her and her siblings with "tough love." As she states here, however, their relationship has drastically improved over the past few years: "I love my mom, though. I think she's great. Like she's awesome. I mean, now that we're far away, it's totally changed our relationship, so we're really close now. We can talk, not fight all the time, which is nice."

Harper, a 25-year-old white middle class woman who works for a non-profit organization in New York City, also considers herself to be very close with her mother. She explained to me that her father left before she was born and that her mother was never with anyone else after that. So throughout Harper's life, "it has always been just the two of us." In telling me about how close this has brought her and her mother together, she stated:

> If I'm like ever having a problem she's the first person that I go to. The second I have any good news, she's the first person that I go to. You know like, when I wanted to move here but I didn't know if I was right… She's just so supportive. I mean, when I was going away to college, I knew she didn't want me to go far away because she would miss me, but she's like "You know I think that's an experience everyone needs to have"…like so really just if I'm down about a guy or if I'm having a fight with a friend like I mean she just is the only person I want to talk to pretty much…about it…well, and then my friends. But it's like… it's just nice to know you always have that one person that's never gonna judge you. It's very comforting to have her there.

In comparison with the other women in this age group, Kindel had a somewhat different relationship with her mother. Kindel is a 24-year-old white woman from a wealthy background who works in the entertainment industry. She lives and works in New York City and was born and raised in a wealthy suburb of the city. She described

her relationship with her mother as one in which she "still feel[s] like a kid" because she feels very dependent on her mother. She depends on her financially in order to maintain her lifestyle and she also feels as though she needs her mother in order to make decisions. For example, at the time of our interview, she stated, "I'm annoyed right now, because she's out of the country and I have a job interview on Tuesday and I was like, 'Mom, what am I going to do if I like get offered this job and I can't talk to you about it?'…It's so weird, as I've grown older I just feel like I'm more and more dependent on her." In addition, Kindel made it clear that she loves her mother, but she also pointed out ways she aims to be different from her. For instance, when she was growing up she witnessed ways that her mother allowed herself to be mistreated by Kindel's father. Kindel clearly remembers how her mother settled for being treated this way and stated that she will never allow that to happen in her own marriage someday.

Women in the next age group (ages 26 to 35) varied more than the younger women in how they described their relationships with their mothers. Three out of five of them are very close with their mothers, while the other two are not. Two of the women in this age group, Livia and Katrina, are sisters. They are white, come from a working class background, grew up in Texas, and currently live together in New York City. Livia is currently 29 years old and an elementary school teacher and Katrina is 30 and works in the musical theater industry. Whereas women in the youngest age group tended to idolize their mothers in a variety of ways, women in their late twenties and early thirties, such as Livia and Katrina, were more likely to value their mothers as role models as well as sources of support and advice. Katrina stated,

> I love my mom. I talk to her at least four times a week if not more than that. She's like my initial phone call if I'm happy or if I'm sad or just bored [laughs].

> We've always been really close and I seek her counsel on just about everything. And she was really supportive of me when I moved to New York. After I first moved here, I wanted to move home because I was miserable and I didn't have any friends. And my mom was like, 'Well you can't come home, so…' [laughs] She said I had to give it six months before I gave up on it because she didn't want to hear me the rest of my life being like, 'what would have happened if I had stayed in New York?' And of course she was right. And now I've been living here for seven years… She's been so supportive emotionally and financially and just always wants me to go for my dreams and, you know, just do it.

Livia told a similar story about their mother supporting her decision to move to New York. She seemed to have a deep appreciation for her mother's ability to encourage them to leave, despite the fact that she would be alone back in their hometown because Livia and Katrina's father had passed away a few years ago. Livia also noted that her mother shapes her opinion of marriage and of parenting. She stated, "I want to characterize my life like hers, you know, she always had her own life. She always made time to have her own life. She didn't live by us. She's a great mom, but her life is not defined by us." Both Livia and Katrina also praised their mother's ability to "let go," something that was very important to both of them in their current stages of life.

Also in this age group, Serena, a 32-year-old African American middle-class woman, lives in Philadelphia and works as a higher education administrator at a small college. Her mother had passed away about a year before we met for the interview. Serena clearly admired her mother very much and, like Livia and Katrina, saw her as a great source of support, particularly when she moved far from her family in the Midwest to take a job on the east coast. Also, because of her own life experience, Serena's mother empowered Serena and her sisters to be independent women:

> So my mom was a stay-at-home mom until my father and her got divorced. So she went from not really having to work to all of a sudden having to go to work, get a job, and do all of that…She was very independent so she pushed us to be

> very independent. And I think after her divorce she was very adamant about us making sure we were women first but making sure we weren't in the same position as her as far as depending on a man to bring in the income. So she was really big on us like hey, you can work, you can be a wife, you can be a mother, you can do it all.

Two other women in this age group, Kate and Kelly, were not as close with their mothers as Katrina, Livia, and Serena. Kate is a 26-year-old white woman from a middle class background who recently completed a master's degree, lives in upstate New York, and works as a media relations coordinator for political campaigns. Unlike Katrina, who stated that her mother is always the first person she calls when she wants to talk, Kate does not seek her mother out in this way. In fact, she often waits to tell her mom something important until she has told her friends and her sister and has talked to her sister about how she should go about telling her mother.

For example, when I met with Kate, she had just had a doctor's appointment during which her doctor found a cyst that needed to be removed and tested. Although she was worried about what the test results might be, Kate chose not to tell her mother because she worried about how she would react and she did not want to worry her unnecessarily. In this way, although she stated that she and her mom are not very close, it seems that, in some ways, Kate does try to protect her mother.

Similarly, Kelly often does not discuss important issues in her life with her mother, but rather, keeps most of their conversations to "small talk." Kelly is 27 years old, white, and grew up in a working class household. She admires her mother very much and believes she is a strong woman who has overcome many challenges in her life, but Kelly also acknowledges that she is not close with her and that they have a complicated relationship. She seemed somewhat resentful of some ways her mother

mistreated her when she was young and often unfairly compared Kelly to her older sister. She also seemed sad to acknowledge that her mother is closer with Kelly's sister than she is with Kelly. Kelly stated repeatedly in our interview that she wants a better relationship with her mother, but recognizes that the relationship they have is more superficial:

> I feel like she and I have more of a superficial relationship. And I'm seeing now that the relationship is so different between me and my mother and my sister and my mother [cries and wipes her eyes]. I mean, like she and I have never been that close and she and I were always the two that kind of went head to head. We're both extremely stubborn. I think that has a lot to do with it. But we talk more about like "How's work? How was your day?" You know… "How's the family?" Whereas like, she and my sister are the ones that are like, "Oh my god. Like I went through this today. This is how I was…" You know what I mean? They talk more about more emotional stuff with one another. Like I don't go to my mom to talk about more important, emotional stuff like that, but I know my sister does.

In the next age group (ages 36 to 49), I interviewed two women who offered their perspectives as both mothers and daughters. Madeline, for example, had just turned 40 when I met her. She lives in New Jersey and is married with two young children – a four-year-old daughter and an infant son. She is Asian-American, comes from a middle-class background, and has a successful career as a pharmacist educator. She feels close to her mother and her entire extended family and stated that having that closeness with her family is very important to her. She also described her mother as someone she can talk to when she has problems or issues in her life. She also talks with her mother about raising children. She does acknowledge, however, that that her mother is often overprotective and that she does not wish to be so with her own daughter:

> She's very protective. So even though I'm 40 years old, she'd probably rather that I didn't cross streets, drive on the roads when it snows, that sort of thing. But we just get to the point where I just tell her, "I'm okay. If I need any assistance, I'll ask." So that's the only tension point between me and my mom is that she's very protective still. She still thinks I'm her…well, she still treats me as her child, not as a 40-year-old woman.

Also in this age group, Rhonda, a middle class African American woman in her late forties who is married and works as a lawyer, is currently raising an adolescent daughter. During our interview, she recalled many of the ways she rebelled against her own mother when she was her daughter's age. At this stage of her life, Rhonda is close with her mother and draws upon the methods her mother used in raising her when she deals with her young adolescent daughter, who is currently struggling to find herself:

> Well, she's entering adolescence and it just takes a little bit more talking to reason, which is understandable. My mother calls it going over Fool's Hill, but if you've done a good job, they'll come back. And so I just spend extra time with her and I try to be as tolerant as I can when I can. But I just know it's different than it was before. It takes a little bit more effort… And I just figure it's all in the way of her finding herself, that's all. And when she finds herself she'll be okay… But she still sees me as an authority figure. Like when I put my foot down, she knows that mama don't play [laughs].

Like Rhonda, most of the participants in the oldest age group, comprised of women over 50, also found that they consider their mothers' examples when raising their own daughters. Ava, for example, pointed out ways that she tries to parent her children differently than her own mother did. Ava, a 55-year-old Filipino woman who left the Philippines over 20 years ago to work as a nurse in the United States, was raised in a poor Catholic family, which she described as "very strict and traditional." In raising her own 19-year-old daughter in the United States, Ava has tried to do things differently than her mother. For example, she makes a conscious effort to consider what she was like at her daughter's age and to see things from her daughter's point of view. She described an argument she had with her daughter recently regarding her living situation at college. Ava was concerned for her daughter's safety, but her daughter was frustrated with Ava and behaved "immaturely." Ava, however, said that her daughter apologized and she

forgave her, "because I remember when I was that age too. It's like, you know, you get this attitude when you don't get your way."

Maria had a somewhat similar story in that she has tried to create a different relationship with her young daughter than the one she has with her mother. Maria is 52 years old, Puerto Rican, comes from an upper middle class background, and works as a college professor and advisor at a small college in New Jersey. She grew up in Puerto Rico and had a high-paying job as a lawyer in Puerto Rico (a job she took to please her parents), but she decided to leave that job (against her mother's wishes), move to the United States, and get a Ph.D. in Psychology. She has tried to encourage her college-age children to pursue careers that will make them happy, rather than those that will bring them a lot of money.

Her daughter Faye, who also participated in this study, is a 19-year-old college freshman. In describing her relationship with her own mother, Maria stated, "I have a very bad relationship with my mother and even after all these years it's very hard for me to interact with my mother." Her relationship with Faye differs a great deal, however. They are very close and, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Faye actually strives to be more like her mother. Maria feels very humbled by how much her daughter admires her and, in fact, still feels surprised by it, particularly because she has always had a difficult relationship with her mother. She told me in our interview:

> And Faye is a lot like me, it's that simple. She's a lot like me, we're very, very similar in personality, which is why we sometimes argue, but it's also why we're so close. My daughter pretty much tells everybody, "I don't get homesick like oh my God, I miss home. I get mommy sick. I miss my mom." And she text messages me a lot. As long as she can have that connection with mom, she's okay. And when it doesn't happen I realize that I miss it. I'm usually not the one reaching out, but when she's not text messaging me four or five times a day, I'll ask her, "What's wrong? What's going on?" and I'll miss it. But it took a while

> to get there, it took a while. And for me to understand that wow, this is my kid, she's literally emulating me and she looks up to me. It was kind of wild. I'm used to kids hating their parents.

Cathy, a 51-year-old white working class woman, works as an administrative assistant in a hospital in Pennsylvania and is married with five children, ranging in age from 15 to 27. I also interviewed her daughter, Anna, a 19-year-old college freshman. Like Maria and Faye, Cathy was experiencing a long distance relationship with Anna for the first time because Anna had started going to college about six hours away from home. She described their relationship as a very close one in which they talk often and really listen to each other. She repeatedly told me that Anna is there for her in terms of listening and offering advice just as much as she is there for Anna. In fact, she said that when her parents passed away, Anna was "my little psychologist" who listened and helped Cathy cope with the loss of both of her parents within a short period of time.

Sally, the mother of Emily, is a 60-year-old white middle class woman in the nursing profession. She describes her relationship with Emily, a 23-year-old social worker, as "the most important relationship in my life." In fact, Emily told me in our interview that at Sally's 60th birthday celebration, she asked Sally what were the five best days in her life. Sally responded that the best day in her entire life was the day she gave birth to Emily and the second best day was the day she married Emily's father. Sally told me:

> Having a daughter is what I've always wanted and it's better than I ever thought it would be. We fight, we laugh—we laugh more than we fight, and we enjoy each other's company. I enjoy her company more than anybody else in the world. I just love her beyond life… We're different also, which is good because she's much more outgoing than I am, has a lot of friends and likes people. She's much more social than I am. But I think we just like each other 95 percent of the time (laughs).

Although most of the women in this age group spoke primarily from a mother's perspective, Maya, a 57-year-old middle class African-American woman who works as a business administrator, offered a daughter's perspective. She has one child – a 38-year-old son - and she was very close with her mother, who had passed away a few months before our interview. "Mama," as Maya called her throughout our interview, was 94 when she passed away. Maya repeatedly told me in our interview that her mother was a wonderful person and a great role model for her. However, Maya also feared that, in some ways, she had disappointed her mother:

> Mama was a very quiet person. Never had anything negative to say about anybody. And when you would start saying anything negative about people, she'd say, "Sh, sh. Come on now, baby. Come on." That was my mother—she didn't want you to say anything negative about anybody. She was a believer that if you can't say something good keep it to yourself. We were close but I think a lot of times I disappointed her because…I don't know… That's hard to put into words but I think I did disappoint her in some ways. I know I disappointed her with my first marriage because it ended up in divorce and that was a first in my family. Nobody had ever gotten divorced; you just suffered through and burrowed through and kept it going. But I just didn't.

Maya also talked about experiencing a role reversal with her mother as they both grew older. Maya realized that, as her mother got older, Maya and her older sisters needed to take care of their mother as she had once taken care of them. Maya told me stories about Mama teaching her how to cook, how to wash the dishes, and how to iron when she was young. When Mama got older, however, Maya realized that she was now helping her mother with these things around the house and, on some occasions, reminding her how to do them:

> By the time she hit around 85, she had literally… we had tried to slow her down from cooking because a couple of times she left the stove on and burned up pots and pans. She had stopped doing a lot of things that she used to do. She was tired and she would say she was tired but she wanted to feel useful and so she would

> still try to do things. And her eyesight wasn't the best and now she would wash dishes and of course there would still be remnants on there… But it was just almost like some of the things she taught us when we were young, we were now reminding her of in her later age.

Two other participants in this age group, Kim and Vivian, have daughters who are in their thirties. Kim is a 50-year-old African-American registered nurse who lives in a middle class neighborhood in southern New Jersey. She has two children – a daughter who is 33 and a son who is 16. Kim was a teenager when she gave birth to her daughter and told me that the experience of being a teenage mom had significantly shaped her outlook on parenting as well as life as a whole. Because she had made "some bad decisions," as she called them, when she was young, she did everything in her power when raising her daughter to make sure her daughter did not make the same choices:

> And I think she was probably more focused at a younger age than I was. It took me a longer time to figure out direction in life. And I think a lot of that had to do with the bad choices that I made being younger limited my ability to figure out what I wanted to do in life. But she went straight from high school to college and kept on going on. She had the opportunity to have the college experience, living on campus. She was really bright in school and I was pretty smart too, but when you have a teenage pregnancy that kind of changes the course of what you have to do. So my course was shifted whereas she went through and she had the whole college experience. She lived on her own, she didn't have her daughter until she was like 26, which is the right time you're supposed to have a child. So I think her plight in life was a lot different from mine based on the choices she made versus the choices I made at a younger age.

Kim also told me that she and her daughter are not as close as many other mothers and daughters that she knows. Their relationship is based more on "checking in" just to "see what's going on," rather than a more "friend-like" relationship that some adult mothers and daughters have with one another. Kim also believes strongly in the importance of giving her daughter space and not meddling in her life the way that some mothers do. For instance, Kim told me about some marital troubles that her daughter and

son-in-law were having that made Kim dislike her son-in-law. She acknowledged, however, that it is not her place to interfere or to tell her daughter what to do. She believes that if she did, her daughter would end up resenting her. For that reason, Kim believes in taking a "hands-off" approach in her relationship with her daughter.

On the other hand, Vivian, another participant in this age group, has a very different relationship with her adult daughters in that she spends a lot of time with them and considers their relationship to be a friendship. Vivian works as an administrative assistant, is 54 years old, white, and lives in upstate New York. She has two daughters – one in her late twenties and the other in her early thirties. Her older daughter is married and has an infant daughter, so at the time of our interview, Vivian had recently become a grandmother for the first time. Her younger daughter is single and a full-time graduate student.

Vivian and her ex-husband (her daughters' father) had divorced years ago and, afterward, Vivian found that she focused most of her time and energy into spending time with her daughters and helping them in any way she could. She would babysit her granddaughter, take both daughters shopping, or visit either of them just to watch an episode of one of their favorite television shows together. While she still does those things, in recent years she has begun to focus more on herself and her own social life, including dating. But she is very close with both daughters and feels happy that they all enjoy one another's company and feel comfortable talking to one another about important aspects of their lives, including their romantic relationships, friendships, children, and their favorite television shows.

As this chapter illustrates, the women who participated in this study come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of age, race, social class, occupation, and perspectives on mother-daughter relationships. These women all willingly shared with me their experiences as mothers and daughters and, in doing so, offered meaningful perspectives on the nature of mother-daughter relationships in the 21st century. In addition, as I will discuss further in the following chapters, these women also offered valuable insights regarding how they interpret television shows about mother-daughter relationships; how they make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with these television shows; and how they believe their engagement with these shows influences their lives and relationships.

CHAPTER 6

HOW MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS INTERPRET PORTRAYALS OF MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS ON TELEVISION

The first research question I explored in this study was:

RQ1: How do mothers and daughters of different racial and social class backgrounds interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships between female characters in television shows of the 21st century?

The interview data revealed a number of interpretation strategies participants used in processing and talking about mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch. Among these strategies, three stood out as the most common among most of the participants: first, participants criticizing the televised relationships; second, participants admiring and, in some cases, idolizing the televised relationships; and third, participants identifying relationships and storylines as realistic or unrealistic. These themes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however. The third theme, for example, relates closely to the first two themes in the sense that participants who identify relationships and storylines as realistic or unrealistic may be simultaneously admiring or criticizing these relationships and storylines. However, this "realistic versus unrealistic" theme became prominent and nuanced enough on its own to warrant closer focus and, therefore, a separate section in this chapter.

The purpose of this chapter will be to delve deeper into each of these prominent themes and, thereby, paint a full picture of how the women I interviewed interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television. While this chapter focuses primarily on interpretation strategies, it does *not* provide an in-depth view of how these

women make sense of their own relationships through their engagement with these shows. This topic will be the focus of the next chapter.

Criticizing the Televised Relationships

When asked to discuss the mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch, many participants were quick to criticize the relationships in the shows. In fact, the participants in this study were much more likely to criticize the relationships than they were to admire or idolize them. When I initially asked participants to discuss the relationships in the shows, I expected that they would engage in more description of the relationships before making an assessment of them. I was wrong. It became clear as I conducted more and more interviews that one of the most common ways the women I interviewed interpret these relationships is through criticism. As I explain in further detail later, this criticism seemed to be driven by the participants' desire to validate their own lives and mother-daughter relationships. The following sections offer a number of examples of this theme.

"Emily Gilmore is a perfect example of a bad mother"

The character of Emily Gilmore, Lorelai Gilmore's mother in *Gilmore Girls*, received a significant amount of criticism from the *Gilmore Girls* viewers in this study. In the show, Emily is portrayed as a very wealthy woman with a generally haughty and elitist attitude. Her daughter Lorelai became pregnant with Rory at the age of 16 and ran away in order to escape Emily pressuring her to get married. In the meantime, Lorelai made a happy life for herself and Rory despite her mother's disapproval. They come back into each other's lives in a significant way at the beginning of the series when

Lorelai visits her parents' home to ask them if she can borrow money to send Rory to a private high school. Emily and Richard, Lorelai's father, agree to lend Lorelai the money, under one condition: Lorelai and Rory have to attend Friday night dinners at Emily and Richard's house every week. It therefore appears from the start of the series that Emily wants to get to know her daughter and granddaughter better. However, the constant tension between Emily and Lorelai, along with Emily's snobbishness and general disapproval of Lorelai's lifestyle, makes Emily a character who most viewers love to hate.

Cathy, a 51-year-old white working class mother of five children, stated that she has always loved watching *Gilmore Girls* with her 19-year-old daughter, but that when she watches, she feels troubled by the difficult relationship between Emily and Lorelai, which she believes needs some work:

> I think Emily and Lorelai could work more on their relationship but they're so different in personality that that would be hard because Lorelai doesn't like the same things Emily likes and vice versa. So it would be hard to… But they should probably work more on their relationship.

Similarly, Livia, a 29-year old white working class elementary school teacher, felt that, with some work, particularly from Emily, this relationship between Lorelai and Emily could be stronger than it is:

> I feel like…had Emily given a little bit to like get to know her daughter, they could have had a relationship that worked. I think it probably still would have been strained but I don't think nearly as cold as it is now. Because I think that, knowing other parts of the show, Lorelai is willing…like she really is willing. She wants to be herself. She just wants to be understood. So I feel like if her mom understood her she'd be willing to put up with like the high society things from time to time.

Faye agreed with Cathy and Livia's belief that the Lorelai-Emily relationship

needs work, but she went a step further than Cathy in placing most of the blame for the troubled relationship on Emily and her approach to mothering:

> That relationship bothers me because I can't understand how moms can be so rude to their daughters. I don't know… Emily doesn't say thank you, she doesn't give her daughter credit for all the stuff Lorelai did. Like Lorelai left the house, got a job to support her and her kid, kept climbing, ended up owning her own successful inn and business and her mom couldn't even say "good job" without it being torture. And I just don't understand how a mom could act that way. Like that's your kid; you should be there, you should help them, you should give them enough credit. I can't stand that. I just think Emily's too uptight.

Faye's reaction to Emily's behavior on the show seems reflective of her own relationship with her mother Maria. Faye described Maria not only as a role model, but as someone who supports her, encourages her, and always wants the best for her. It therefore seems that Faye feels this way about Emily Gilmore because she wants Lorelai to have a supportive, encouraging mother like she herself has always had. In other words, Faye seems to want Emily Gilmore to be more like her mother Maria.

Maya, a 57-year-old middle-class African-American woman who loved her Mother dearly, criticized Emily as a mother, but overall, simply felt sorry for these characters, particularly because she treasured her own mother so much:

> I always felt bad for them because it was Emily's only child and her only grandchild and she was so caught up in her little world that she never ventured outside to go into her daughter's world or her granddaughter's world. And Lorelai never trusted her mother enough to share a lot of things with her. And I think in some respects she always felt she would be criticized or talked down to because of it. And Emily probably would have, but that was just Emily.

Maya also went on to criticize the way Emily handled the situation when Lorelai became pregnant at the age of 16, particularly because of how this has affected their relationship in the present:

> From the way they portray it in the story, you can always feel that Emily was more concerned about her friends' reactions to the fact that Lorelai was pregnant

> as opposed to protecting Lorelai. And I think that was some of what Lorelai was running from, you know? It's not about what your friends think of me or us, but what we do. And Emily was so into etiquette and the proper way to be that she didn't support Lorelai and Lorelai got upset about that and left home. And that's sad.

Finally, Sally, a 60-year-old white middle class woman, also disapproved of Emily's mothering in a number of ways. However, like several of the mothers in this study, she also seemed somewhat sympathetic toward Emily, as if she wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt:

> Emily's really tough to love but you know deep down that she really wants to know Lorelai. I kind of resent the fact that she never bothered with them when Lorelai was young. I find that to be appalling. As a grandmother, I would never allow that. Even if your daughter's mad at you, you still try. I would never give up. Never. I find that appalling on Emily's part but at least she's trying now. She's come to her senses.

"A mother should not try to be her daughter's best friend"

Emily Gilmore was not the only character these participants criticized, however. In fact, nearly all of the women I spoke to about *Gilmore Girls* criticized Emily *and* Lorelai Gilmore and their approaches to mothering. For example, five different participants (both younger women and older women) thought that Lorelai spent too much time trying to be her daughter Rory's best friend when she should have been more focused on being her parent. All five of these participants argued that a mother should not try to be her daughter's best friend.

For example, Amy, an 18-year-old white middle class college student, stated that, "It seems like Lorelai's not playing the mom. She's trying too hard to be the best friend and it seems like she's putting her better judgment aside so that she can be fun and like have a second shot at childhood again." Amy explained in our discussion of her own

relationship that her mother does *not* try to be her best friend and emphasized that she views her mother's approach as the *right* approach to mothering a teenage girl. Similarly, Emily, a white 24-year-old social worker from a working class background, told me that in watching *Gilmore Girls* over the years she always felt something was missing from the Lorelai-Rory relationship. When I asked her what she thought that was, she said, "The word that's coming to mind is authority or respect that comes from being a mother. Like I almost think that Lorelai and Rory don't have that because they're friends first. I think that's where it's probably lacking." Emily also compared her own relationship with her mother to this dynamic:

> I think their relationship is lacking some of the gravity that comes with what a mother's influence is. That might be missing if your mother's your buddy. Because you can take in what a friend says…like how I take in what a friend says is different than how I take in what my mother says. Because my mother's more…she's authority, she's more of my…much more of an influence on me than a pal is.

In addition, Katrina, a 30-year-old white woman who grew up in a working class family in Texas and currently works in the musical theater industry in New York City, pointed out the importance of a mother being an adult, rather than a child, in the relationship:

> And I guess, you know, with Lorelai and Rory it's just… I think a lot of people see that relationship and think, "Oh that's what I want for my kids, to be their best friends and I want to do all the stuff they do." But I think that, you know, you can't always be their… you can't always be their best friend. You have to raise them, you know…be the adult.

Lily, a 22-year-old white middle class college student, also criticized Lorelai, but offered a different perspective. She contended that Lorelai not only tried too hard to be her daughter's friend, but also behaved immaturely and depended too much on her

daughter to take care of *her*. Lily explains that although she watched *Gilmore Girls*, this was something that sometimes made her feel turned off by the show:

> I think Lorelai is the most immature character, which has always kind of turned me off from the show. I think she looks to Rory to raise her too. I just really don't like the way they have portrayed that Lorelai is so stuck in this relationship with her mom and that she depends so much on Rory. At least when Rory is as young as she is…because…at least, like if I bring my own experience into this… like, you *have* to grow up before you can experience… before your mother can depend on you. That's how I see it.

This insight from Lily was particularly relevant to her own relationship with her mother. She had told me earlier in our interview that it was not until recently that her mother began confiding in Lily and talking to her about serious issues in her own life, including her relationship with Lily's father. Lily emphasized that she is happy she can be there for her mother in this way at this stage now that she is an adult herself, but that at a younger age, she would not have been able to deal with this type of dynamic with her mother. Therefore, recent developments in Lily's relationship with her mother seem to have affected her interpretation of the relationship between Lorelai and Rory in *Gilmore Girls*.

Maria, a middle-aged, middle class, Puerto Rican mother of a 19-year-old daughter, watched *Gilmore Girls* regularly with her daughter Faye, who also participated in this study. Maria criticized some elements of Lorelai's mothering on the show, but she offered a different perspective from Amy, Emily, Katrina, and Lily in that she also identified with Lorelai as a mother and, therefore, sympathized with some of Lorelai's struggles. She stated:

> Faye and I always found it really cool how Lorelai and Rory interacted with each other and there's a lot of similarity in how we interact with each other. The only difference is that I always knew I was mom. That never stopped. And more than one time in our conversations, Faye and I would get to a point where I would say,

> "I do truly understand how you're thinking and feeling, but I'm your mother and the answer is still no." Or, "It's still going to be this way. Period." Which I felt Lorelai should have done a little bit more of.
>
> Maria went on to sympathize with Lorelai, however:
>
> But she did the best that she could. Did she forget to be a mom sometimes? Yes, I do believe that. She was also in her late twenties herself though, you know? Where's the balance there? And those of us that are older with children, we're not perfect. We blew it more than once. So you know…we need to be careful when we look at Lorelai and condemn some of her behaviors without understanding where she's coming from.

As with Lily, Maria's interpretation of the Lorelai-Rory relationship on *Gilmore Girls* seems reflective of her own experience, including her experience as the mother of a 19-year-old daughter. Specifically, her experience has taught her the importance of being "the mom" rather than her daughter's friend and she wished that Lorelai would also recognize the importance of maintaining this boundary. On the other hand, Maria's experience as a mother who has made mistakes may have made it easier for her to sympathize with Lorelai as a mother than it may be for younger women like Amy, Emily, Katrina, and Lily to do so.

A few additional insights came to mind regarding Maria's seemingly defensive attitude toward those who may be quick to criticize Lorelai Gilmore as a mother. First, Maria made it clear in our interview that she is an avid viewer and fan of this show and that she strongly supports what it represents (specifically the idea that it's okay for a mother and daughter to get along and to have a strong emotional connection – even when the daughter is a teenager). She told me of a few occasions where she heard people criticize the *Gilmore Girls* for being "cheesy" or "over the top." In her opinion, these people "just don't get it." The passion with which Maria spoke about the importance of

having a positive mother-daughter relationship like Lorelai and Rory's seemed to be driven to some degree by her frustrations with her own mother and the strained relationship they have had since Maria was very young. In describing her relationship with her mother, she stated, "I have a very bad relationship with my mother and even after all these years it's very hard for me to interact with my mother." She told me in our interview that she always felt a lot of support from her father as a young woman, but not from her mother. In fact, she said she never doubted that her father would always love her and support her unconditionally – regardless of what career path she chose, who she married, etc. Maria did not feel this same support from her mother, however. Maria's mother was very angry with her, for example, when she chose to leave her very high-paying, prestigious job as a lawyer in Puerto Rico (a job she took to please her parents) to move to the United States to pursue a Ph.D. in Psychology. Maria knew that she would make significantly less money by choosing this new career path, but she didn't care because Psychology was an important passion of hers. She shared the following when describing the lack of support and love she felt from her mother:

> I had a wonderful relationship with my father, very open. Even when he was angry with me I knew that that unconditional love was there, whereas with my mother it was always, "I love you but…" or, "I love you with…" It was very conditional, whereas my father was, "I love you, period. I don't like what you're doing and I'm going to tell you that but I love you. They have nothing to do with each other."

Maria has made every effort possible to avoid having such a bad relationship with her daughter because she still feels pain and regret about the relationship she has with her mother. For that reason, Maria may feel extra defensive of a show like *Gilmore Girls* that promotes positive, supportive mother-daughter relationships. I also wondered if perhaps Maria realizes that she has often been critical of her mother's parenting, but feels

somewhat more sympathetic now that *she* is the mother of a teenage girl and, as a result, feels defensive when people are quick to "condemn" a mother like Lorelai Gilmore who, in Maria's opinion, is just doing the best she can.

"Mothers should not be too controlling or restrictive"

A few participants criticized television mothers they perceived as too "controlling" or "restrictive." These women seemed to agree that mothers who try to control their daughters too much end up harming their mother-daughter relationship more than they help it. In addition, these women argued that, by being too controlling, some mothers on these television shows may ultimately hold their daughters back from being strong and independent.

Amy, one of my youngest participants, criticized Emily Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls* for being too controlling. Amy found Emily's mothering style particularly unsettling because she deeply appreciates the "mature and open" relationship she has with her own mother. In her criticism of Emily Gilmore, the mother of Lorelai Gilmore in the show, she stated:

> Emily would be an example of a bad mother. She's just…she's very controlling. She doesn't let her daughter have her own point of view. She doesn't look at it from the other side. It's her way or no way and… she refuses to see other points of view. And if her daughter does something she doesn't approve of, she'll pretend like it didn't happen or she'll ignore her or she'll hold it over her head. Like…stuff that isn't really healthy in a relationship. She never actually sits down and has a mature conversation about it.

Also discussing *Gilmore Girls*, Faye, a 19-year old middle class Puerto Rican college student, criticized another character – Mrs. Kim. Mrs. Kim is the mother of Lane Kim, Rory Gilmore's best friend. Faye contended that Mrs. Kim tried to control Lane and her decisions too often. Faye offered this criticism not long after she told me that she

appreciates the fact that her own mother Maria is not too controlling because if she were, Faye would simply "go crazy." Interestingly, however, in her criticism of Mrs. Kim, Faye quickly attributed Mrs. Kim's controlling nature to her Korean background rather than strictly her parenting style, implying that Mrs. Kim may not have known better:

> Mrs. Kim is an example of the mom being too much of a mom…being too restrictive. I mean, it also has to do with the origins and where she was from…her culture. But I mean it's just hard to understand. It's hard for her. I kind of blame it more on culture because she can't adjust to how things are here and understand that her daughter is an American daughter and not just whatever culture they're from. That's just how she was brought up and it's hard to break that. I know a lot of families where it's hard to break that tradition.

I found this comment from Faye interesting in the sense that I would not have expected a young Puerto Rican woman to make such an assumption about another woman of color. However, as I describe in more detail in the next chapter, a number of participants, including Faye, reinforced stereotypes of women of other races and cultures than themselves, regardless of their own knowledge of or experience with stereotypes. In this case, Faye (as well as a few of the older white participants whose comments I share in the next chapter) seemed to speak from the perspective of an "American" stating "how things are here," (i.e., different from how things are in Korean cultures) as opposed to the perspective of a young woman of Puerto Rican descent who may, at times, find herself the subject of similar stereotypes.

Kim, one of the older participants, is a 50-year-old African American nurse and has a 33-year-old daughter. She described the character of Nora Walker in *Brothers and Sisters* as controlling and over-involved in her adult children's lives. The character of Nora Walker, played by actress Sally Field, is a 60-year-old widow with five adult children between their late twenties and late thirties. All of her children live nearby and

Nora is a significant part of each of their lives. Kim criticized Nora from the perspective of a middle-aged mother who also has an adult daughter:

> I think I see the mother as being a little over-involved for adult children. Even though I'm pretty sure her heart's in the right place, but she appears to be a little controlling… I mean, I guess she has a good relationship with her daughters, but it seems like the daughters accept the mom for who she is and they try to work their lives around it. But I think she's a little over-involved.

Kim's criticism of Nora Walker seemed reflective of her own philosophy about mothering adult children. As discussed in the previous chapter, Kim made it very clear that she believes the best approach a parent can take with adult children is a "hands-off" approach. It made sense, therefore, that Kim felt uncomfortable with Nora Walker's level of involvement in her children's lives.

In addition, in our discussion of *Gossip Girl*, Kindel criticized the controlling nature of the mothers in the show. *Gossip Girl*, a series targeted at teens, portrays the often scandalous lives of a group of wealthy high school students attending the top prep schools in Manhattan. Kindel believed that the mothers in the show were "just putting so much pressure on their daughters to live up to these New York society rules. There is like a whole rule book that they have to follow." Kindel argued that the mothers on the show, particularly Lily Van der Woodsen and Eleanor Waldorf, prevent their daughters from fully being themselves by restraining them with the rules and expectations of high society.

Kindel's assessment of the mothers on *Gossip Girl* also reflected her own experience. She identified with the characters of Serena Van der Woodsen and Blair Waldorf to a certain extent because she grew up in the New York City area and comes from a wealthy background. However, Kindel's mother differs from the mothers on the

show in that, according to Kindel, she never forced Kindel to succumb to such societal expectations. Rather, she always allowed Kindel to express herself and to be an individual, no matter how her unconventional personality might be perceived by others in their social circle.

"Mothers should care enough to be present in their daughters' lives"

Three participants criticized mothers who they felt were too absent in their children's lives, arguing that a mother should care enough about her daughter to, at the very least, be *present* in her life. For example, in our discussion of *Gossip Girl*, Kindel criticized the mothers of Serena Van der Woodsen, Blair Waldorf, and Jenny Humphrey for being so absent in their daughters' lives that they often do not know where their daughters are, who they are with, or what they are doing:

> I mean, they're like so ridiculous. Like I definitely have liberal parents in a sense, like not being around that much and knowing I was drinking and like not caring, but these mothers are so over the top in that sense. They know their kids are like going to clubs and stuff. I mean when I went out, I would have to tell my mom where I was going. But they never know where their kids are, it's so weird. Especially in the city, you don't know where your kid is, that's insane. And they're so absent, like Blair's mom is never there. And Jenny's mom is so selfish, like… How could you abandon your child like that? It's like these girls don't have moms.

Similarly, Rhonda, an African American lawyer in her late forties raising an adolescent daughter, criticized Janine Payne, a young mother in the television sitcom *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, for being absent in her daughter's life. Janine, a recovering drug addict, always put her addiction before her daughter and, in doing so, failed to be present in her daughter's life or to show her daughter that she cared about her. According to Rhonda,

> Well, especially when she was on crack, she was not a good mother because even though she cared, she didn't follow through. Her actions didn't reflect any caring.

> So that's what I meant earlier about being a good mother. Janine's mindset or her drive was all about the drugs, which is… I mean, that's the whole essence behind addiction. You know, everything else goes by the wayside. And in this instance, so did her children.

Serena, a 31-year-old African-American woman who works in higher education administration, criticized television mothers for their lack of presence in their daughters' lives. Serena and I discussed *Grey's Anatomy* and the mother-daughter relationships in that show between Meredith Grey and her mother and Cristina Yang and her mother. In both cases, Serena, who had a very close relationship with her recently deceased mother, criticized the lack of closeness between the characters:

> To me, both relationships seem very distant. They just seem sad and lonely because I'm used to having such a different relationship. So they both come off…both mothers seem very cold and very distant. More like I wouldn't even call them mother-daughter relationships, but more of a… I don't know, just someone who's around, but isn't really a part of her daughter's life.

These participants wanted to see the mothers in the shows make a stronger effort to care for their daughters and to prioritize their relationships with their daughters. Ava, a 55-year old Filipino woman who works as a nurse and has a 19-year-old daughter, summed up this argument in her criticism of the character of Julie Cooper, the mother of Marissa Cooper on the hit teen series *The O.C.*:

> I would watch the show and say how can a mother be jealous of her own daughter? And I think her main focus is her boyfriends, the men in her life. It's never her daughter. And I think that's the one that really upset me. My children have always been my top priority. And they know that too. I think this mother is just too caught up with her own issues.

<u>"I don't want a mother-daughter relationship like theirs"</u>

After criticizing the mother-daughter relationships on television, a few participants simply stated that they would not want to be like the women in these

relationships. That is, these participants felt grateful for the relationships they have with their mothers/daughters and would not want a relationship like the ones they see in these television shows. For example, Anna and Cathy, a mother-daughter pair who participated in this study, both acknowledged that after years of watching *Gilmore Girls* together, they know they would never want a relationship like the Lorelai-Emily relationship in the show:

> Sometimes I'm glad I'm not them because they get very stubborn together when they're in a fight. They just like completely shut off from each other. I guess my mom and I might be like that sometimes, but I just don't want to be like that (Anna, 19, white, working class, college student).

> Well, I guess when I see Emily and Lorelai, even though they're older than Rory, I guess I'm glad we're not like that (Cathy, 51, white, working class, administrative assistant).

Similarly, Faye acknowledged that she would not want her relationship with her mother Maria to resemble the relationships in *Gilmore Girls*. In this case, she is speaking specifically about the relationship between Lane Kim, Rory's best friend, and her mother Mrs. Kim:

> God, the relationship between Lane and Mrs. Kim is another one where I don't know what I'd do if my mom were like that. If my mom were that strict, I probably would have rebelled. I probably would have been a lot worse than Lane. Like Lane at least turned out to be a good kid but I don't think I would have. Because I know myself and that wouldn't have gone over well.

The final participant in this group, Kindel, told me that although she was a rebellious kid in her younger years, her mother still cared enough to know where she was and to be present in her life. Watching *Gossip Girl* has made Kindel more grateful for this aspect of her relationship with her mom. She even went so far as to say that *Gossip Girl* characters such as Lily Van der Woodsen and Eleanor Waldorf should serve as examples to real life moms of the kind of mother they should strive *not* to be:

> I think a show like *Gossip Girl* can really open the door for moms to talk to their daughters about things and for moms to watch and be like, "That's a shitty mom. I should try to be more involved than I am because look at how bad these kids are because their moms aren't around."

"Television focuses too much on the negative aspects of mother-daughter relationships"

My data analysis revealed an interesting distinction in the participants' critical responses to the mother-daughter relationships on the shows they watch. While most participants criticized the relationships themselves, others criticized the *portrayal* of mother-daughter relationships on television. In other words, participants in the latter group were actually critical of the medium of television and how the creators of these television shows construct mother-daughter relationships in their storylines.

For example, Colleen, a white middle class 23-year-old elementary school teacher, spent a significant amount of time in our interview pointing out the ways television constructs these relationships in a negative way. Specifically, in our discussion of *Grey's Anatomy*, a show she has been watching for years, she explained that this show focuses too heavily on negative aspects of the characters' relationships, while neglecting more positive aspects of these relationships:

> With Meredith and her mom, it kind of seems like her mom portrays that she doesn't think Meredith is good enough. So there's that issue there with Meredith not feeling like she's good enough for her mother. So I think, in television, they show more of the negative aspects of the relationship. They don't really show any sort of positive aspects of it. They just kind of…they weigh more heavily on the negative issues between mothers and daughters.

When I asked Colleen to elaborate, she explained that she does not understand why mothers and daughters on television have to argue all the time, particularly because Colleen and her mother have a very positive relationship. Rather than so much negativity, she would like to see more focus in television on positive, everyday

interactions between mothers and daughters, like the interactions she normally has with her mother. She seemed to be seeking a more authentic viewing experience:

> And I mean, I know it's different with every mother-daughter relationship, but it seems like the ones they portray in television there's always a lot of fighting and arguing and that's something that I just don't see in my relationship. There's always so many misunderstandings between mothers and daughters in television and it often just gets blown out of proportion. I would love to see television relationships where the mothers and daughters just hang out together like me and my mom do, like just watching TV together or going out to lunch.

Kate, a 26-year-old white middle class woman who works in politics, also desired more authenticity in her television viewing experience, particularly with shows portraying mother-daughter relationships. She criticized the way television constructs these relationships, particularly the need for television shows to always have a "bad guy," or in this case, a "bad mother":

> I feel like television says that, you know, you're a bad mother if you have a strained relationship with your daughter or if you're not all that close. And I'm not necessarily sure that's accurate, particularly based on an experience from my life. My mom's sister was estranged from my grandmother for a really long time and my grandmother died with them still kind of being estranged. But I wouldn't say that my grandmother was a bad mother to her. So, you know, just because those things happen doesn't necessarily make you a bad mother. But in TV, you *have* to have somebody who you don't like, who you think is the *bad* person. And in *Gilmore Girls*, it ends up being Emily because she's the easiest to dislike. So…I think it's just, because it's TV, it can paint a very different picture of what it's like to be a *real* parent in the *real* world.

In addition, Maya criticized the portrayal of mother-daughter relationships on television, particularly in *Gilmore Girls*. She summarized in a few words an implication also made by Colleen and Kate that, often, real life and real relationships are not "interesting" enough for television:

> I liked the show but actually I can't really say that there was ever anything in there that I would have compared my relationship with mama and said, "I wish we were like that." No. I think there were a lot of things that mama could have taught them, but then it wouldn't make good television.

Admiring/Idolizing the Televised Relationships

Although criticism of the mother-daughter relationships on television seemed most common, the participants in this study also admired and, in some cases, idolized the relationships in the shows they watch. Several participants, for example, admired the relationship between Lorelai and Rory on *Gilmore Girls*, citing a number of examples illustrating the strength of their relationship and the positive effect it has on both Rory's and Lorelai's lives. Other participants found redeeming qualities in mothers such as Ellis Grey from *Grey's Anatomy*, Emily Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*, and Janine Payne from *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, all of whom received mostly criticism from other participants. In addition, a few mothers who participated in this study sympathized with mothers on television and emphasized their admiration for the best qualities of these characters and their relationships. Finally, rather than admiring the relationships themselves, a few participants praised the television shows and how these shows construct mother-daughter relationships.

Lorelai and Rory Gilmore exemplify a strong mother-daughter relationship

Six participants expressed their admiration for the Lorelai-Rory relationship on *Gilmore Girls*. On the whole, these women perceived this relationship as exemplary because Lorelai and Rory enjoy each other's company, support each other, lean on each other, and genuinely care about each other. For example, Cathy, a 51-year-old white working class woman who works as an administrative assistant in a hospital in Pennsylvania, said that in the years she has watched *Gilmore Girls*, she has always

appreciated this relationship because, in some ways, it resembles her own relationship with her daughter Anna:

> I really like the relationship between Rory and Lorelai because they have such a good open, relationship where they both lean on each other. And I also see how they both enjoy each other's company and I really like that. I know a lot of kids in real life think their moms are nags and pains. And vice versa – a lot of mothers think their kids are just troublemakers and nuisances. And I don't have that relationship and so I look at them as it's enjoyable to see them enjoying each other because that's what you're supposed to do, you know?

Emily, a white 24-year-old social worker from a working class background who had spoken at length about how deeply she loves her mother and how important her mother's love is to her, expressed her admiration for the genuine love she sees between Lorelai and Rory in the show:

> You can definitely tell…They seem like their love seems true, like they genuinely really care about one another and love one another, which I think is the thing I said about being a mother the most is how they love their children. And I think that's displayed in the show.

Interestingly, Faye, a 19-year-old Puerto Rican college student from New Jersey, offered a different interpretation of Lorelai as a mother than those who had criticized Lorelai for trying too hard to be Rory's best friend. Faye perceived Lorelai as a mother who knows how to balance being a fun, cool friend and being a mom:

> Their relationship is fun. They have movie nights all the time, they window shop, they make up crazy analogies and metaphors. It really is a best friendship kind of thing, but it's also really cool because when it comes down to it Lorelai always pulls out the mom card and Rory listens to that. Because I know a lot of times some parents try to be the best friend and lose the mom figure and lose the authority figure. Or sometimes it's too much of a mom figure and they can't even talk to their kids because it's too much. But Lorelai and Rory just have so much fun and they're so close but they know when it's time to be serious. So that's cool.

In addition, Katrina and Livia, the pair of sisters I interviewed, recognized the

ways in which Lorelai loves and supports Rory and teaches her to be a strong, independent person. Katrina and Livia are both white, in their late twenties/early thirties, come from a working class background, and currently live together in New York City. Both of these women have a great relationship with and a strong admiration for their mother and, therefore, appreciate the positive relationship between Lorelai and Rory:

> I think the relationship with Lorelai and Rory was like…you never had a doubt how much she loved her. She sacrificed a lot, you know, as a teenage mom, to give her child a better life and, you know, she supported Rory through a lot of things, even when Rory was being such a brat by the end of the show when she was older. When I had turned my back on Rory, Lorelai still did not (laughs). (Katrina, 30, white, working class)

> I think Lorelai gives Rory strategies to be a grown up and be on her own and supports her with her decisions no matter what – even when she doesn't agree with them. Whenever Lorelai was right and Rory was wrong, she's still there when Rory figures it out. I think that's what makes a good mom, maybe because that's what my experience was (Livia, 29, white, working class).

In addition, Livia also spoke to the way Lorelai made Rory an active member of their small community of Stars Hollow. Livia told me that, as a teacher as well as a daughter of a teacher, she strongly appreciates a parent who gets her child involved in activities and makes him or her feel like a member of a community. In describing her appreciation for Lorelai's approach in particular, she stated:

> I like the fact that Lorelai gave Rory a community at Stars Hollow. Like making her involved and making her not be the teenager that just sits at home and does whatever she wants…making her go volunteer at all the cheesy Stars Hollow events. And having like a routine – like they go to Luke's for coffee and they go to the town meetings, showing that you can make a difference in a place. That is such great empowerment of a child.

In addition, Maya, as the youngest of five children, particularly appreciated the way that, in her opinion, Lorelai protected Rory and supported her, as Maya's mother had done for her. She stated, "The one thing I will say that was good was that Lorelai was

very supportive of Rory. She was very protective of Rory and mama was very supportive of all of us and she was also very protective of me because I was the youngest."

Finally, Sally, who had told me about her own struggle with "letting go" of her daughter Emily, who is now 23 years old, said that she was impressed with how well Lorelai let Rory grow up and be her own independent person:

> Toward the end of the series when Rory got that job traveling around with the presidential campaign, Lorelai let her go and I was really supportive of that. I mean, Lorelai hated to see her go, but she was happy to see her go. She let her be a person rather than just a daughter… So I think that Lorelai is basically a very good mother. She's not me, but she's a very good mother.

I found it intriguing that each of the women in this group who admired and praised the relationship between Lorelai and Rory in *Gilmore Girls* also have a very strong, loving, and supportive relationship with their mother or daughter. Their interpretations of the Lorelai-Rory relationship, as well as their love of this show, seem to directly reflect their own experience in their mother-daughter relationships and what they value most about their relationships.

Praise for the "Villains": Ellis Grey, Emily Gilmore, and Janine Payne

Ellis Grey, Meredith Grey's mother in *Grey's Anatomy*, Emily Gilmore, Lorelai Gilmore's mother in *Gilmore Girls*, and Janine Payne, Jazmine Payne's mother in *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, all received criticism from a number of participants in this study for their approaches to mothering and building a relationship with their daughters. However, a few participants found redeeming qualities in these characters and recognized positive aspects in the characters' relationships with their daughters. For example, Colleen, a white middle class 23-year-old elementary school teacher and fan of *Grey's*

Anatomy, felt that although Ellis Grey made Meredith feel as though she was not good enough, she still saw potential in Meredith and pushed her to reach this potential:

> You know, Ellis pushed Meredith to be the best that she could be. And even though she sometimes gives the impression that she's not good enough, it kind of makes Meredith work harder, you know, to be better and to be the best that she can be. So I think…I think that her character as a mother is almost kind of showing the parent, you know, kind of pushing for your child to be the best that you *know* they can be.

In addition, in our discussion of *Gilmore Girls*, both Kate and Livia argued that, although she has her faults as a mother, Emily Gilmore still has moments where you can see that she loves Lorelai and that she wants to try to have a better relationship with her. Kate, a 26-year-old white middle class woman who works as a media relations coordinator for political campaigns, provided the following example to illustrate this point:

> In one episode, Emily and Lorelai are out together and Emily takes a detour and stops at a realtor's office. And Lorelai's like, "What? Why are we stopping here? What the hell could you possibly need to do in a realtor's office?" And it turns out that Emily and Richard were planning on buying a house for Lorelai and Luke, who are getting married soon. And for people who watch a lot of the show like I do, they know that Emily and Richard hadn't always been very big fans of Luke and Lorelai's relationship. But I think…as the relationship evolved between Luke and Lorelai and between Lorelai and Emily, you see where Emily decides this is something she really needs to support. She really needs to stand behind Lorelai. She's making this big life changing decision, she's going to get married for the first time. So Emily's way of supporting her was to go and find this fabulous house and buy it for them so that they would have a new place to start this new chapter in their lives. So I think that supportive element of all the mother-daughter relationships sort of runs through the whole series, even with Emily.

Livia, a white 29-year old elementary school teacher who grew up in a working class family in Texas, used another example to explain how Emily Gilmore makes an effort throughout the series to get to know Lorelai and Rory better and to be a part of their lives:

> I love the fact that Emily made them come to Friday night dinners because of giving them money for Rory to go to school. I liked that she did that but I also… I think that shows Emily wants to know these women. She, you know, she doesn't know how, so the only way is to make them have to come.

Finally, in our discussion of *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, Rhonda, a middle class African American lawyer in her late forties, argued that, although Janine Payne may be seen by other viewers in a negative light because of her drug addiction, she still has managed to create a healthy relationship with her daughter, Jazmine Payne:

> I think their relationship is healthy, you know? Because those circumstances are really very common in a lot of families and their reactions are very healthy. I mean, there are some shows where Janine's expectations are unrealistic and sometimes they transfer roles. You know, Jazmine tends to be the mom and Janine is the kid. But it's only because of her issues. And so that adds to the comedy of it all. But I think their relationship is healthy.

Mothers sympathizing with mothers

Another theme that emerged in the data analysis process was mothers sympathizing with mothers. That is, the mothers who participated in this study were more likely to sympathize with the television mothers than were the younger women in the study who are not mothers themselves. Although the mothers in this study offered some criticism of the mother-daughter relationships in the shows, a few of them also sympathized with the television mothers and seemed to believe that, although the television mothers were not perfect, they at least were doing the best they could.

Cathy and Madeline provide good examples of this. Cathy, a 51-year-old white working class mother of five who works as an administrative assistant in a hospital in Pennsylvania, criticized Mrs. Kim from *Gilmore Girls* for being a bit too "old school" in her mothering, but also defended Mrs. Kim's right to mother the way that she feels is right and that she knows best. She said, "And Lane and her mother Mrs. Kim, well that's

just funny because she just is raising her like an old fashioned mother, but you have to do what you think is right. And that's the way she thinks is right and Lane might complain about her but she really does love her mom."

Similarly, Madeline, a 40-year-old Asian-American middle class woman who works as a pharmacist educator, thought that although Ellis Grey in *Grey's Anatomy* made some mistakes, she still did the best she could in raising Meredith:

> Well, I think Meredith's mother was a good mother. She did the best she could, like any mother would in any situation. She just didn't have your traditional husband/father/children role. Like she had issues with Meredith's father, and then when he left there was also strife because the mom was never at home with Meredith and then she fell in love elsewhere. So I think she portrayed a good mom because she was still providing for her and still… She took care of Meredith, because it wasn't the father who was taking care of her – he left. So she lived with Meredith. So she was at least the role model for Meredith. I mean, what it was probably wasn't the best but it was her role model and Meredith's mom did the best she could as a mom.

Praise for the television shows and the construction of mother-daughter relationships

As discussed in the "Criticizing the Televised Relationships" section of this chapter, I found that while some participants focused on the relationships between the characters in their interpretations of the shows, other participants made assessments of the television shows themselves and how they portray mother-daughter relationships. The examples I provided earlier in the chapter illustrate how some participants viewed these shows as negative portrayals of mother-daughter relationships. A few other participants, however, perceive the shows they watch as positive portrayals of mother-daughter relationships and, therefore, praise the creators of the shows for their construction of these relationships.

For example, Kate, a 26-year-old white woman from a middle class background, praised *Gilmore Girls* for its approach to portraying Lorelai and Rory's relationship:

> It's a TV show, but it really does a good job of just kind of portraying those everyday things that happen with mothers and daughters, like a birthday party or going away to college, or breaking up with your boyfriend, where…a lot of times, the only person you can think of that you want to talk to is your mom.

In addition, Maria, a 52-year-old Puerto Rican woman who comes from an upper middle class background and works as a college professor, spoke from the perspective of a mother and also offered a positive interpretation of *Gilmore Girls* as a television show:

> I think *Gilmore Girls* is more realistic than other shows because it shows that it's okay for mothers and daughters to get along and have a good relationship. When it first came out, I felt this show was very important for teenagers – especially at the time. It says it's okay to get along with your mom. There's nothing wrong with that. You get along with your mom, it's not a big deal. And to the parents, the mothers, it's okay to talk to your kid and there's nothing wrong with talking to your kid and having fun with your kid and sharing stuff with your kid. It's okay. So if you were listening, it was a great show. I think it did a great, great job of portraying a different way to be a mother-daughter combination.

It is therefore clear that, while more participants criticized the mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch, a number of participants also admired and appreciated certain aspects of the mother-daughter relationships in these shows. Several participants also expressed their appreciation for the television shows themselves and how these shows constructed fictional mother-daughter relationships.

Identifying Relationships and Storylines in the Shows as Realistic or Unrealistic

The data analysis also revealed that about half of my participants identified the relationships and storylines in the shows as either realistic or unrealistic. Interestingly, most of these participants quickly made this distinction without me asking them to do so. That is, although I had not asked them if they thought the portrayals were realistic, they still made this assessment on their own. With each interview I did, this type of interpretation became increasingly evident.

Anna, for example, felt that the relationships between Lorelai and Rory, and Lane and Mrs. Kim in *Gilmore Girls* seemed unrealistic. In particular, she thought it unrealistic that Rory and Lane would both "turn out so well" when Lorelai basically let Rory do whatever she wanted and Mrs. Kim kept Lane under lock and key:

> Well, I guess Lorelai and Rory, they're much more casual in their relationship. They're just like best friends, I guess. And it's kind of unrealistic. And Lane and Mrs. Kim's relationship is strict and also unrealistically strict. I guess with Lorelai and Rory… I think Lorelai is maybe too casual sometimes and I'm not sure if that could actually…that Rory could come out to be the way she is in the end. Like she's so perfect, and yet her mother lets her do pretty much anything. And then Mrs. Kim is too strict. I'm sure there's people out there that would lock their daughter in but I feel like Lane would probably… In real life she would be a lot more rebellious than she really is and she probably wouldn't care about what her mother said when she was locked in so much.

Emily, a white 24-year-old social worker from a working class background, also felt that the Lorelai-Rory relationship in *Gilmore Girls* was unrealistic, particularly the drastic differences she perceived between the characters of Lorelai and Rory. She too seemed to be seeking a more authentic experience from her engagement with this show. She shared the following:

> Well, just like Rory is so straight and narrow, you know what I mean? Going to Harvard, going to the prep school. And while Lorelai went to the prep school, she also was more of a rebel and had boyfriends and got pregnant. She would tell stories about how she drank and things like that. So just very different than Rory. So I think realistically they would not be so… Like I feel like they would be more similar to one another if they were not in a television show. Like there wouldn't be so many drastic differences in actuality.

Emily also acknowledged earlier that she and her mother Sally are very much alike and that her own experience in her relationship makes it hard for her to believe that Lorelai and Rory would be so different. She stated, "I don't know if that kind of relationship could be realistic because it's not my reality or anything that I've ever

experienced with a mother and daughter, so I don't know if that could exist. I'm not sure."

Madeline's interpretation of *Grey's Anatomy* provides another example of a participant viewing the relationship in the show as unrealistic because it is very different from her own relationship with her mother. In discussing the relationship between Meredith Grey and her mother Ellis Grey, she stated:

> I remember Meredith's mom would always yell at her daughter and command her daughter to do things and Meredith would do it. But I think in real life it's more like you would ask or you work with someone else rather than command. Right now as a mom I command because, you know, my kids are little. So I say, "You're not doing that, no, get off the table." But I think later in life it's more like you ask what you want the other one to do. Like my mom, for example. Like now I'll ask her to come over to watch the kids. I won't be like, "You have to come over and watch the kids."

In addition, two other mothers, Maria and Sally, argued that the relationship between Lorelai and Rory in *Gilmore Girls* is unrealistic because no real mother-daughter relationship could be that perfect. Maria contended that the lack of arguments between Lorelai and Rory would never happen in real life:

> Yeah, well, Faye and I butt heads a lot and I think sometimes… I just think it's unrealistic to think that just because they're a young mom with a daughter, single, it's just them and that solidarity and that just getting along and relating to each other. That doesn't necessarily mean you're not going to argue. I think it's very unrealistic to think that there's no arguments.

Similarly, Sally, a 60-year-old white middle class woman who lives in a suburb of New York City and works as a nurse for AIDS patients, felt that a relationship in which a mother and daughter hang out all of time and tell each other absolutely everything is not realistic at all:

> I don't think it's real. I mean, mothers don't go to coffee shops with their daughter every morning to have coffee before they go to school. No, that's not real, that's not real. Though it sounds fun. And I also think the majority of kids

> keep things back from you, which they should. I kept it back from my mother and there's just a lot of stuff your mother doesn't know. But Lorelai seems to know everything that's going on in her daughter's life and that's not ever going to happen.

However, although many of the women I interviewed believed the portrayals of mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch seem unrealistic, a few participants actually applauded the shows for offering realistic portrayals of mothers and daughters. Cathy, for example, believed that the closeness between Lorelai and Rory Gilmore seemed very realistic. She explained:

> Well, I think it's realistic. I know a lot of people think it's unrealistic. But I do think it's very realistic because I think that Anna and I share a similar relationship to them and not everybody's that lucky, I think. But I do know a lot of people who don't think…Oh my gosh, I know so many parents who don't know… They actually pride themselves on not knowing what goes on in their kids' life and never seeing their kids and stuff. They actually pride themselves on that. And you know, so they would think this was a whole bunch of rose colored glasses looking. But I feel it's very realistic.

In addition, Livia felt that the conversations that Rory and Lorelai have with one another appear to be very true to real life:

> The way they can talk to each other, like in this episode, like it's just amazing. But it's so true, like it's so real life. Like I know I can have a conversation like that completely with my mom and it's just amazing. And I think that in the banter they have together Rory shows that she's not so rigid. And they call each other out on things and I like that like I think that that shapes how they're gonna act with different people in life too. And like I know I can do that with my mom too.

It seems from both of their statements that Cathy and Livia perceive these portrayals of mother-daughter relationships as realistic because of their similarity to their own mother-daughter relationships. Of course, further analysis of the statements of all of the women in this group reveals that, for the most part, they use their own relationship as a standard by which to evaluate the mother-daughter relationships on television. When

they see elements of these TV relationships that seem very different from their own, they tend to think that the televised relationship must be unrealistic. Similarly, when these women recognize similarities between their own relationship and the relationships in the shows, they are more likely to identify the televised relationships as realistic.

This common theme among the participants' interpretations of the shows led me to ask the following question: Did the women who described the televised relationships as unrealistic believe that the types of relationships they see in these shows could not actually exist in the real world, or did they call these relationships unrealistic in an effort to maintain their belief that their own relationship represents what a "normal" mother-daughter relationship should be? In other words, are these women seeking some sort of validation through their engagement with this television programming? In addition, how do the participants' different levels of involvement with these television characters and relationships play a role in shaping their interpretations of the shows and how they relate the shows to their own lives? I explore these and other similar questions in more depth in the next chapter.

As the research question at the beginning of this chapter states, I set out to understand how mothers and daughters of different racial and social class backgrounds interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television. The data I have shared throughout this chapter revealed a number of interpretation strategies participants used in processing and talking about mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch. Among these strategies, three stood out as the most common among most of the participants: first, participants criticizing the televised relationships; second, participants

admiring and, in some cases, idolizing the televised relationships; and third, participants identifying the relationships and storylines as realistic or unrealistic.

Because the research question implies that these interpretations could be shaped in some way by the race and class of the participants, it is important to note that the racial and social class backgrounds of these women did *not* play as significant a role as I might have expected in these initial interpretations of the mother-daughter relationships on television. When it came to criticizing the relationships, admiring/idolizing the relationships, and identifying the relationships as realistic or unrealistic, the nature of the participants' *real* relationships seemed to be the primary factor shaping their interpretations of the television portrayals. I did not see any noteworthy patterns in the data that would indicate that the participants' race or class had a significant influence on their tendency to criticize or admire the relationships on TV. For example, Serena's and Madeline's similar criticisms of the mother-daughter relationships on *Grey's Anatomy* and their arguments for the importance of a mother being present in her daughter's life seemed to be driven more by the very close relationships they both have with their mothers and their appreciation for the many ways their mothers were "just always there" than by the fact that Serena is a middle class African-American or that Madeline is an Asian-American from a middle class background.

However, I did find that the race and class of the participants and the television characters played a more significant role in how the women in this study made sense of their own relationships through their engagement with these shows. That is, the race and class of the participants came into play to a more significant degree when they went beyond the level of criticism or admiration discussed in this chapter and began to define

and validate their own relationships through their discussion of the shows. For instance, as I explain in more detail in the next chapter, one of the ways the participants made sense of their own lives and relationships was to distinguish themselves from the characters and relationships in the shows on the basis of their racial/cultural and social class backgrounds. I delve deeper into this phenomenon in the next chapter, the purpose of which is to explain how the women I interviewed make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with the shows they watch.

CHAPTER 7

HOW WOMEN MAKE SENSE OF THEIR OWN MOTHER-DAUGTHER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH TELEVISION SHOWS

The second research question I explored in this study was:

RQ2: How do these mothers and daughters make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with these shows?

The participants in this study employ a variety of sensemaking strategies as they engage with portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television and consider how these portrayals relate to and shape their own lives. A few of these strategies emerged as the most prevalent among these women: first, participants defining their own relationships through their connection to the relationships on television; second, participants relating directly to the television characters' experiences as mothers/daughters and, thereby, understanding themselves and their relationships on a deeper level; and third, participants characterizing and justifying their mother-daughter relationships by distinguishing themselves from the characters and relationships in the television shows they watch. In each of the following sections, I will discuss these themes in more detail.

Defining Connections

When I asked my participants to discuss how they saw themselves and their relationships represented in the shows they watch, many of them easily identified connections between themselves and their relationships and the characters and relationships in the shows. By identifying such connections, these women defined their

own mother-daughter relationships through these connections. Some participants focused on positive similarities between themselves/their relationships and the characters/relationships in the shows, while others focused on more negative similarities. On the positive side, for some participants, the strong, supportive, loving mother-daughter relationships on some of the shows felt like reflections of their own relationships. On the other hand, a few of the women saw stronger similarities between their own relationships and the more dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships on prime time television.

Characterizing Positive Connections

Fourteen of the women I interviewed identified positive connections between their relationships and the fictional relationships. A few of these women discussed how the supportive relationships between mothers and daughters on television were reflective of their own relationships with their mothers/daughters. In our discussion of *Gilmore Girls*, for example, Amy, a 19-year-old white college freshman who grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Connecticut, stated, "My mom's really supportive of me just like Lorelai's really supportive of Rory." Also talking about *Gilmore Girls*, Emily, a white 24-year-old social worker from a working class background, shared the following:

> Well, one similarity I see would be like their love for each other very much. I was watching the final episode that they ever had on the last season. In the final episode they were packing up Rory's college room or something like that and there was just… I can't think of the quote, but it was just a quote about a mother's love and it reminded me of my mother. I was like, oh yeah. And also just that Lorelai wants the best for Rory and that's something my mother wants for me. And just looking out for Rory in terms of who she's dating, where she's going to school. You know, like Lorelai's concerned for her just as my mother is for me.

In addition, Livia, a white 29-year old elementary school teacher who grew up in

a working class family in Texas and currently lives in New York City, felt that both her mom and Lorelai offer their daughters support in a way that encourages them to be adults and make their own decisions:

> I think the support that Lorelai gives Rory is my mom wholeheartedly. My mom's just always been like that. She's been just that rock. She's the one you can go to for anything and she knows how to listen, which Lorelai also does with Rory. My mom has that really good mix of knowing when to start problem solving and when to just be there. Like, for example, when I was moving here [to New York City], I would be in tears and crying and be like, "What should I do?" and she just said, "Let's make a pros and cons list." You know, she didn't tell me what to do because it's my life. But she helped me make the choice and she gave me strategies to be an adult. I think Lorelai gives Rory strategies to be a grown up and be on her own and supports her with her decisions no matter what – even when she doesn't agree with them. She supports her, but when Rory's wrong she's still there when Rory figures it out. My mom is like that, like had I moved here and it was horrible and if like things hadn't worked out with me and my fiancée, I would have been on the first plane home, I know it. And she wouldn't have told me I was wrong. She would have said, "You had to go to find out."

In addition to the supportive nature of mother-daughter relationships in life and on television, several participants pointed out the friendships between mothers and daughters on television as an important connection to their own relationships. These participants include Anna, Faye, Katrina, Lily, and Amy. Each of these women described their relationship with their mother as a friendship, much like the relationships in the shows they watch. For example, Lily, a 22-year-old white middle class college senior who grew up in a rural area, stated, "I do see the friendship aspect a lot more in my relationship with my mom. Like how Lorelai appreciates Rory as an adult and doesn't just treat her as a kid. I see my mom trying to do that too now that I'm older." Similarly, Amy said, "There's like a very big bond between them, like a friendship bond there that…I've been very fortunate and I see a lot with the relationship between me and *my* mom."

Two of the mother-daughter pairs I interviewed, Maria and Faye as well as Cathy and Anna, described their relationships with one another as a friendship, which each of them felt was very similar to the Lorelai-Rory relationship in *Gilmore Girls*. For example, Faye, a 19-year-old Puerto Rican college student from New Jersey, shared the following:

> My mom and I would definitely be more like Lorelai and Rory than Lorelai and Emily. Less crazy, of course, obviously, because it's a TV show. Like her and I always throw back crazy analogies. I always speak through analogies and I get that from her. We always try to have fun with each other and I always try to go and see her as much as I can. We always go to lunch and when we go out and it's just us, we have so much fun. We talk about everything. It's like she's my best friend but at the same time it's like oh, it's my mom. So it's cool. It's more like Lorelai and Rory.

In addition, Maria and Cathy both talked about how much they and their daughters depend on each other and also enjoy spending time with each other and how this is something they both love about watching the Lorelai-Rory relationship on *Gilmore Girls*. According to Cathy, a 51-year-old white working class woman who works as an administrative assistant and is married with five children,

> Rory and Lorelai's relationship has a lot of similarities to my relationship with my daughter. Anna and I really depend on each other – more than me and my other daughter. And Lorelai and Rory are like that. And I guess the fact that they like to spend time together and they have a good sense of humor. That would be a similarity to us. And that they enjoy each other's company.

Maria, a 52-year-old Puerto Rican woman who comes from an upper middle class background and works as a college professor and advisor at a college in New Jersey, spoke passionately about how she and her daughter Faye share the same kind of support and solidarity with one another as Lorelai and Rory. She also shared how meaningful watching *Gilmore Girls* with Faye has been over the years. When I asked her to tell me

more about their connection to the show and the connections between their relationships, she responded:

> The solidarity and the unconditional support that Lorelai and Rory share is something we share as well. No matter what happens we always feel that solidarity. My daughter knows that okay, my mom may be pissed off because of something I did, but she's there. We feel that kind of trust in each other. And like we feel like we can't lie to each other. It's really funny because we have gone through it and we would see it in the show and we'd laugh. We had just gone through it. Faye was trying to, I guess, make up some sort of story or something. And I'm just looking at her. And finally she goes, "Oh God, I don't even know why I bother lying to you anyway." So she just tells me whatever it was. And a few months later, we're watching this one episode and Rory does the same thing and says to Lorelai, "I don't know why I bother lying to you," and tells her whatever. And Faye just kind of looks over and we both started laughing. So there's that sincere knowledge inside that yes, my mom can get ticked off at me, but she'll always be there for me, she'll always love me, she'll always support me, she'll always help me. And that I think is something that is there in Rory and Lorelai's relationship."

Two other participants, Harper and Serena, made connections between their relationships with their mothers and the relationships between Nora Walker and her daughters, Sara and Kitty Walker, on *Brothers & Sisters*. Both Harper and Serena stated that Nora Walker reminded them of their own mothers because of the way she loves being a mom, is very involved in her adult children's lives, and would drop everything to do anything for her children. In fact, Serena, a 32-year-old African American middle-class woman from the Midwest, and I were actually discussing the mother-daughter relationships in *Grey's Anatomy*, which we had just watched together. However, because she did not see any similarities between her relationship with her mother and the mother-daughter relationships in *Grey's Anatomy*, she told me that she also watches *Brothers & Sisters* and proceeded to share some of the ways that Nora Walker reminds her of her mother: "For my mom, her family was everything – just like Nora Walker. And she would drop anything to do what we needed or to be there for us for anything. As far as

being our number one supporter in anything, that was her. So if I had to compare, I would compare her more to Nora."

Similarly, Harper, a 25-year-old white middle class woman who works for a non-profit organization in New York City, pointed out similarities between her relationship with her mother and Nora Walker's relationship with her children. In particular, Harper focused on how her mother is very involved in her life and how she loves being a mom, just like Nora. She stated:

> I feel like Nora is like so obsessed with her children and so involved in their lives and I feel like my mom is so involved in my life too and vice versa. And like Nora is just so good to her children and she just wants to give them everything and I feel like my mom's the same way. And I always say like Nora Walker is the best mom! Like every time I watch an episode I'm like she's just so…she reminds me of my mom like she just loves being a mom so much like you almost wish she would stop mothering everyone because she even mothers people who aren't her kids. And that's how my mom is with my friends!

Characterizing Negative Connections

Although many participants made positive comparisons between their relationships and those in the television shows, Kelly, Kindel, Maria, Rhonda, and Madeline defined their own relationships with their mothers/daughters through identifying negative connections to the characters and relationships in the shows. That is, they felt that the negative aspects of some of the more complicated or dysfunctional relationships were more reflective of their own relationships. For example, Kelly, a 27-year-old white woman from a working class background who works as a college admissions counselor, shared a number of ways in which she and her mother resemble Meredith Grey, Cristina Yang, and their mothers in *Grey's Anatomy*. She felt as though her mother represents a combination of both mothers in the show. She explained:

> Well, just like Cristina's mother, my mother's also very hung up on appearances. She is all about what things look like and what other people think. Like it's not okay for me to say in front of other people that I'm living with my boyfriend because of how other people are going to see that. For her, it's never about what the reality of the situation is. It's about what things will look like. And it's the same within our family structure. Like with my dad being an alcoholic. My mom thinks that nobody knows. I'm like, Mom, everybody knows. It's just easier for you to like keep up the appearance that we're this happy all-American family when, you know, things have been rough. It's not a big secret, you know?
>
> And like with church. I was raised Catholic, but I don't go to church every weekend. And like my mom says to me, "It kills me that you don't go to church anymore." I highly doubt that's for my spiritual growth. I think it's more… you were baptized Catholic, you were born and raised Catholic, why are you not keeping up that appearance of being this good Catholic girl that I raised you to be? So yeah, I think a lot of that has to do with appearances. That's probably the strongest way that my mom and Cristina's mom are very very similar. Umm… my mom's also feisty and stubborn and has a will on her like no other woman I've ever met. She's very much like Meredith's mom in that aspect.

Interestingly, Maria also described her mother as a hybrid of two television mothers - Mrs. Kim and Emily in *Gilmore Girls*. She talked about the very difficult relationship she has always had with her mother since she was a young woman growing up in Puerto Rico and how her mother's personality feels like a mix of both Emily and Mrs. Kim from the show:

> My mother's more like Mrs. Kim than Emily. But a lot like Emily. My mother's very snobby like Emily, a perfectionist like Emily, critical like Emily. But overbearing like Mrs. Kim. So there's a combination of both. And both Lorelai and Emily have a bad relationship and Laine and Mrs. Kim have a bad relationship. So it's a combination of both things I have with my mother. That combination is what I really, really did not want in my relationship with my daughter.

Another negative comparison came from Kindel, who talked about the mother-daughter relationships in *Gossip Girl*. She discussed how being from a wealthy family in New York, she has often felt spoiled by her mother, like the young female characters in *Gossip Girl*:

> Yeah, I definitely think I led a life like… I definitely felt spoiled. And I felt, growing up, and even still at this point, my mother gives me things to make up for not being around. That was definitely a thing that happened as a kid. My parents would go away for all of July every year and like we got like presents when they came back, like tons of presents. I remember seeing them go away one time and telling my mother, 'You're going away for a month and I need a CD player and I'm going to get it.' And being like I can't believe that just worked. And I would like manipulate my mother to get things because they weren't around. And I definitely see that's something that happens mostly with Blair and her mom on the show.

Deeper Connections: Relating Directly to Characters

About half of the participants in this study also went a step beyond pointing out similarities between their relationships and the relationships in the shows and explained how they relate to and feel a significant connection with the characters in these shows. For some, their ability to relate to the characters on a deeper level is the reason they watch the show. Among all the participants I interviewed, these women who truly related to the characters were also the most dedicated viewers of their shows. In other words, the greater the connection they felt to the characters, the greater their investment in the show.

Rhonda, Faye, and Katrina all told me that what distinguishes the show we discussed from other shows on television is their ability to see themselves in the characters and storylines. Katrina, a 30-year-old white woman who grew up in a working class family in Texas and currently works in the musical theater industry in New York City, is an avid *Gilmore Girls* viewer. She said, "I feel like I see myself in the show and that's why I enjoy the show so much. Sometimes I watch and I think it's amazing how they just took my life and put it on TV." Faye explained that "For me, it's easy to relate to this show. I love shows that I can relate to. Where I can watch and be like, 'Oh yeah, I totally get that…' I'm not big on shows that I can't associate with.'"

In addition, in our discussion of *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, Rhonda, a middle class African American woman in her late forties who is a very successful lawyer, explained that, as an African American, she finds it difficult to relate to television shows about white people. However, because *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* focuses on an African American family, Rhonda stated, "Now *that's* a show I can relate to." I discuss Rhonda's distinction between the experience of watching "white television" and "black television" in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Several participants felt a connection with Lorelai and Rory on *Gilmore Girls* because of the closeness of their mother-daughter relationship. For example, Amy shared that "I think my relationship with my mom is a lot like Rory and Lorelai. Like I just have a really strong connection with this show just because me and my mom are so close." Similarly, Cathy explained the connection that she and her daughter Anna felt when they watched the show together: "Every afternoon we'd watch it together when Anna was in high school. We made it like our little thing to do. And they're really close on the show, Rory and Lorelai, just like me and Anna are. And I guess we just felt a connection there. I felt like it was made for us." Maria made a similar comment about sharing the experience of watching *Gilmore Girls* with Faye:

> While the show was on it was wonderful and it was pretty cool that my daughter and I…that the timing was right. Because my daughter was a teenager and we were able to watch it together and relate to some of the situations that were going on there. Because we live in a small town, that's a small town. Everybody knows you, everybody here knows each other. It was pretty cool, watching it along the way.

In addition, Lily shared the following about how she relates to the characters:

> The relationship I have with my mom now is us being best friends. So it's like…I mean we're at a different stage from where they're at in the show because I'm older than Rory, but that's what I really see. This episode really speaks to my life

> because we *are* friends and we *are* able to connect on that level… And I can also relate to the episodes where they don't always get along because that sometimes reminds me of the fights I used to have with my mom.

Emily felt that one of the reasons she and her mother Sally connected so much with the characters on *Gilmore Girls* is the fact that she is an only child. She explained:

> Rory and Lorelai have that only daughter connection. So I don't know if that influences… I bet it does, how we relate to the show. Because it's like the two of them and it's the two of us. I don't have siblings. I don't have big brothers and sisters. I don't have them, so that whole situation where sitting down with my five brothers seems strange, you know? But for me it's much more relatable to be sitting across from the table with me and my mother, you know what I mean? So I bet that definitely influences how we relate to the show.

In our discussions of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Brothers & Sisters*, both Colleen and Harper related to the frustration the daughters in the shows felt as a result of their mothers not giving them enough space. This shared frustration made Colleen, a white middle class 23-year-old elementary school teacher from Philadelphia, feel that she could easily relate to Cristina Yang in *Grey's Anatomy*:

> The situation with Cristina and her mom is more relatable, I guess, for me. Just because it's almost, you know, sometimes if your mom's wanting to be there for you for something because she feels like you need her, but you kind of just want to be left alone, you know? I've had that happen before with my mom where you just kind of… if you don't want to talk about something, but, you know… your mom always wants to be there for you, you know, to be able to help you. But sometimes you just don't want to deal with that or you just don't want to be helped. With my mom, you know, sometimes I just kind of like want her to back off in a way. So I can relate to that.

Harper related to a similar phenomenon in *Brothers & Sisters*, but also pointed out that while she and the characters in the show may feel frustrated by their mothers' involvement in their lives, at the end of the day they probably would not want to change it:

> I feel like I just love this show because it is so real. Like I feel like it's so typical for a mother to like weasel their way into every aspect of your life whether you

> want them there or not. I watch how Nora's so involved in her kids' lives and they're old and I feel like that's so going to be me. Like I'm going to be like in my thirties and like my mother will know everything that I'm doing and like she'll want to cook every meal for my family every night [laughs].
>
> Like I just feel like it's so true in my mind that mothers are overly involved in every aspect of their child's lives. And I think *Brothers & Sisters* is so funny but it's so true. That like with Nora, her kids can't get rid of her and then they always realize in the end that they don't want to get rid of her. The whole episode they're like, "Oh my god like mom is so annoying like leave me alone. Let me have my own life." And then at the end they're like, "Oh thanks mom, what would we do without you?" And I'm like that's so true. Even when my mom is driving me crazy, at the end of the day I'm like, "Aww what would I do without that?"

Vivian also offered her perspective on the character of Nora Walker on *Brothers & Sisters*. Vivian is a 54-year-old white woman who lives in upstate New York and works as an administrative assistant. She has two daughters – one in her late twenties and the other in her early thirties. Unlike Harper, Vivian related to the character of Nora on a deeper level as a mother of adult children who has experienced similar struggles in her life to those Nora experiences in the show. For instance, in the show, Nora's husband dies and after she loses him Nora puts most of her time and energy into taking care of her children, all of whom are adults. Vivian explained that she strongly identifies with Nora because she went through a similar stage in her life after she and her husband divorced. She explained:

> I really see where Nora comes from in a lot of the situations in the show. It's funny maybe that's why I like it so much. Like going through a divorce I was totally a co-dependent being, you know, everything about my life revolved around someone else. I had no individual life, and now my kids are old enough to be out on their own, my husband's left and I'm just who I am, which is who exactly? You know I never really pursued that, so… umm Nora is very much in that same situation with her husband dying and how she interacts with the different kids and stuff. She did a whole thing where she was like "I'm just here for my kids, that's all I'm gonna do is my children." And now that has changed for her – now she's more like "Ok this is your life. You live your life. I don't need to take you into consideration when making my decisions." So now she isn't living day to day just to fulfill some need that one of her children has.

> And I did that for at least…well I mean I always did it when my daughters were growing up, but that's what you do as a mom. Once they go to college or they're out on their own…somewhere along the line you're supposed to stop doing that, but because I divorced in the middle of that transition, I continued it and then exaggerated it. I had nothing else but "What do you want me to do for you today? Because if I'm not busy, I will be sad. I'm either going to sit in front of the DVD player or the movie or I'm going to be doing something, but I don't have anything to do…so let me wait on you hand and foot." I mean I would at the drop of a hat do whatever they asked…because I didn't have anything else to do and I needed it. And I think Nora does a lot of that, but in some ways I really think she's transitioned beyond that now.

In addition, Vivian explained that another reason she felt so connected to the character of Nora Walker was because Nora finds out after her husband dies that he had had a long-term affair with a mistress for many years. Vivian strongly identified with the pain Nora experienced during this time, especially her struggle to figure out how to communicate with her children about their father's infidelity:

> I understood what Nora was going through when she found out about her husband's affair and her kids found out too... My husband was a good father, but he handled the divorcing me very poorly because he lied. Yeah, he was dishonest with the girls and because of it he's really got, you know, this scar, this big X on his report card kind of thing. I don't lie to my girls. I did keep some truths from them umm… but I had reason and I gave them the reasons and they were good reasons. You know I didn't come right out and say "Ok your dad and I are getting divorced and this is because he's having an affair and I won't put up with it." Umm no, because I felt that it was his place to come to them and say, "I have fallen in love with someone else and I'm going to leave your mother because of that." That's your job. That is not my job. But he wouldn't do it, so it was a long time before…umm they were flat out told. Because I said, "No that's not my job, that's not my job, you need to talk to your daughters about this, because I'm here. I'm not doing anything wrong and I'm not going anywhere. It's your decision to talk to them." And I just felt like this emotional raw piece of meat during that time and Nora went through that stage too. It's like your mental attitude is just raw hamburger. But, you know, I've moved on and Nora is moving on now too.

As the examples in this section illustrate, many of the participants in this study made sense of their own relationships by identifying connections between themselves and the television characters. The types of connections these women identified varied

depending on their viewing experience of these shows. Participants such as Amy and Lily, for example, made more superficial connections by identifying similarities between their relationships and those on the shows. Both Amy and Lily characterized their relationships with their mothers as a friendship, much like the relationship between Lorelai and Rory on *Gilmore Girls*. On the other hand, participants such as Vivian went beyond identifying more superficial similarities and identified ways they relate to the television characters on a deeper level. Most of the women falling into this category, including Vivian, characterized their deeper connection to the television characters as driven primarily by shared experiences. Whether identifying superficial similarities or deeper character identifications, all of the women included in this section engaged in the sensemaking strategy of building connections with television characters and, thereby, defining important aspects of themselves and their own mother-daughter relationships.

Defining Distinctions

Although about half of the participants in this study focused on similarities between their relationships and those in the shows, even more of them defined their own relationships by emphasizing important differences between their relationships and those in the television shows they watch. Many of the women who employed this sensemaking strategy seemed to feel more comfortable describing their relationship by pointing out all of the ways that they were *not* like the relationships in the shows. For some, making sense of their own relationships in this way involved criticizing the relationships in the shows, while for others, it involved simply making noteworthy distinctions without necessarily making judgments of the characters or their relationships.

The types of differences the participants emphasized varied between fundamental differences between themselves and the characters and more superficial differences. For instance, some women focused on class differences and racial differences between themselves and the characters. They explained why fundamental differences such as these shape the lives and relationships of both themselves and the mothers and daughters on television. In addition, a number of participants emphasized differences between their relationships and those in the shows in terms of how the mothers and daughters relate to one another and interact with each other, the role they play in one another's lives, and how the make-up and dynamics of their families shape their relationships.

Class Differences

The participants who focused on class differences distinguished themselves from the television characters by pointing out that they were *not* members of the "class" or the "society" in which the characters live. They made note of these differences in a critical way, emphasizing that they do not belong to the characters' social class and they also do not wish to identify themselves with members of that class.

Amy, who grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Connecticut, discussed class differences among the characters in *Gilmore Girls*. She noted that Lorelai and Rory live in "middle class" society, while Emily lives in an entirely different world – the world of the "upper class." As her words illustrate, Amy aligns herself and her mother more with Lorelai and Rory and criticizes the way Emily and others from the upper class parent their children:

> You can definitely see that class difference between Emily and then Lorelai and Rory. Umm… like I don't wanna like blanket statement anything, but… it just seems that with experience I have, the richer you are, like the more detached they are because they can have like nannies or send their kids off to private school or

> boarding school. So, like it seems…I don't know, that's always how it's portrayed on TV. And considering that I'm not upper class, I really couldn't give my personal experience, but it just seems with the show that there's not really a good connection between someone that's rich and their parents. They always have to try to impress them when really they have a secret lifestyle…that kind of thing. And it seems like everyone kind of lives their own lives more, because they have the resources to do that, as opposed to like middle class or lower class.

After she made this statement, I asked Amy if she would consider Lorelai and Rory as falling into the middle class. She continued:

> Yeah. Because they have their own home, they live in a nice town. It's not like they live in the projects of Connecticut. But umm… because she works like a nine to five job, she's there for dinner, she's home. So they have more time together, so they have better relationships and the stuff that they do together isn't as extravagant, so it's more like bonding kind of stuff. Like, hanging out and watching TV. Like it's very simple stuff that like you don't need to spend a lot of money doing.
>
> And I think with like middle class, and in small neighborhoods like theirs, people know each other and they look out for each other, as opposed to upper class, where it's just kind of like, "Oh, that's so and so, let's invite him to our party." And it's more like business ventures. And that's what the closeness is based on, as opposed to she's actually a good person, let's just be friends.

In distinguishing herself from Emily and those in the "upper class," Amy Communicates her belief that those in the middle class (i.e. people like herself and her mother) are essentially better at building strong mother-daughter relationships. Amy thereby reinforces her relationship and her own way of life through her criticism of particular characters and relationships in *Gilmore Girls* who differ from herself.

Cathy also discussed what she considers a significant difference between herself and the characters in *Gilmore Girls*: money. She mentioned a few times in our interview that she has experienced financial struggles throughout her life as a mother. She and her husband have five children and they do not make a lot of money. Cathy talked about how sending her children to college has made their financial situation increasingly stressful.

Her daughter Anna, who was a freshman in college at the time of our interview, is the third child Cathy has sent to college. When we discussed differences between herself and Lorelai as mothers, she immediately referenced the fact that they both have daughters in college (Rory goes to college in later seasons of the show) but this does not seem to put financial stress on Lorelai as it does for Cathy. She referenced this difference when she noted:

> I guess money isn't an object for Lorelai because she doesn't really try to use her parents' money to get anything. You don't seem to hear too much about money problems; they do go on trips and they do go shopping. You don't hear too much about where she can't afford to do things because of her daughter in college.

Kelly and Kim made similar distinctions between themselves and the characters in *Grey's Anatomy* and *Brothers & Sisters*. When I asked Kelly to describe any differences she noticed between herself, her mother, and the women in *Grey's Anatomy*, she referenced the characters of Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang, stating that: "They're both privileged. I think they both come from very privileged backgrounds and I don't." Similarly, when I asked Kim, a 50-year-old African-American registered nurse who lives in a middle class neighborhood in New Jersey, if she saw any aspects of her relationship with her daughter in *Brothers & Sisters*, she said:

> No, because this is truly TV. I mean, I consider this to be TV and a little bit over the top. I mean, I just don't think it's real life. For one thing, they've got more money than I'll ever have. Like their whole life is just so not mine. And they have the opportunities to do what they do because they're privileged. So I don't really see similarities in that respect.

It was not surprising that Kelly and Kim found little they had in common with the characters on these shows in terms of class. Kelly grew up in a white working class family where money was a constant struggle. She certainly did not have the financial privileges that Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang of *Grey's Anatomy* had growing up that

allowed them to attend Ivy League universities and top tier medical schools. Similarly, Kim differs from the Walker family from *Brothers & Sisters* in terms of both race and class. While Kim is African American, lives in a middle class neighborhood, and works long hours as a nurse, the Walkers are a wealthy white family living in Southern California who have long enjoyed the financial benefits of their father's very successful family business. In addition, Nora Walker married a successful business man and her five children were born into a life of privilege, whereas Kim was a teenage mother who did not have the opportunity to go to college after high school and struggled to make a better life for herself and her daughter. These differences came across as fundamental to both Kelly and Kim, particularly because although they may have recognized some more superficial similarities between their relationships and the relationships in the shows, they both quickly distanced themselves from the characters as human beings because their backgrounds are so drastically different.

In addition, Maya and Livia referenced the "high society" world of Emily Gilmore as a foreign place that they found difficult to identify with or understand. Livia stated:

> Well, not growing up in a world of high society, umm…I don't really understand the struggle Lorelai has gone through with Emily. I mean, when you look at them, you definitely see just these different personalities of women with Emily being the one who's very proper. She does everything because she's supposed to by the rules, you know? And then you see a girl in Lorelai who, of course, is very rebellious to that structure.

Maya, a 57-year-old middle class African-American business administrator from Philadelphia whose mother had recently passed away at the age of 94, also found it difficult to understand the high society world of Emily Gilmore. What Maya found more difficult to identify with and even upsetting, however, was the way that Emily's concern

with appearances ultimately drove her daughter away. Maya adored her mother and found the estranged relationship between Lorelai and Emily Gilmore to be both frustrating and sad. In her view, it seemed that Emily Gilmore cared more about appearances and proper etiquette than she did about her own daughter:

> I've never really understood, not being from that class. Emily was all about the proper way to do things. She was very much into etiquette. You could never do anything that wasn't proper. And I always felt bad for them because Lorelai was Emily's only child and Rory was her only grandchild, but she was so caught up in her little world that she never ventured outside to go into her daughter's world or her granddaughter's world. And Lorelai never trusted her mother enough to share a lot of things with her.
>
> I mean, when Emily found out that Lorelai was pregnant at 16—they don't show that, of course—but from the way they portray it in the story, you can always feel that Emily was more concerned about her friends' reaction to the fact that Lorelai was pregnant as opposed to protecting Lorelai. And I think that was some of what Lorelai was running from, you know? It's not about what your friends think of me or us but what we do. And Emily was so into etiquette and the proper way to be that she didn't support Lorelai and Lorelai got upset about that and left home. And that's sad…
>
> My mama wasn't like that. She was always there. Always there. I guess in some ways Mama had her own little points of etiquette like Emily, but she never put those ahead of the relationship that she had with me and my sisters. I mean there were…Like when I got divorced, Mama wasn't thrilled and happy about that. But she was more about supporting me to help me get through the situation emotionally and to help me get back on my feet financially than she was about the stigma that would be on me for being divorced.

In this case, Maya makes sense of her own relationship through her criticism of Emily's mothering as well as her pity for both Emily and Lorelai in terms of the relationship they could have had if Emily's social class and obsession with upper class social etiquette did not prevent it. Maya's interpretation of the role of class in Lorelai and Emily's relationship on *Gilmore Girls* allows her the opportunity to express her feelings about her own mother and her mother's ability to prioritize Maya's feelings and well-being over the importance of proper social etiquette, particularly during Maya's

divorce. Through her engagement with *Gilmore Girls*, Maya found herself feeling more intensely grateful for the relationship she had with her recently deceased mother and increasingly sad for women such as Emily and Lorelai who do not have the opportunity to have such a meaningful relationship.

Racial & Cultural Differences

A number of participants focused on racial and cultural differences between themselves and the mothers and daughters in the shows. Amy, Cathy, and Sally, for example, talked about differences between their own culture and the culture of Mrs. Kim from *Gilmore Girls*. Mrs. Kim is the mother of Rory Gilmore's best friend, Lane Kim, who is Korean American. In the show, Mrs. Kim is very strict and at times even seems cold. She is portrayed as essentially the opposite of Lorelai Gilmore, Rory's young, white, attractive fun-loving mom. Mrs. Kim yells at her daughter Lane frequently (at home and in public), insists that she obey her rules, and expects her to date only Korean boys and eventually marry a Korean man (preferably a doctor). To Amy, Cathy, and Sally, all of whom are among the white participants in this study, Mrs. Kim's mothering style is different than what they have experienced as daughters/mothers. They each made note of this difference and seemed dismissive of the difference between their own and Mrs. Kim's approach to parenting, referring to it as just a "cultural thing."

Amy, who criticized mother-daughter relationships among people of the upper class and explained her belief that women in the middle class have healthier and more involved relationships with their daughters, said the following about Mrs. Kim, who is also a member of the middle class:

> There's one exception I think that's portrayed in the show…umm as far as the middle class thing goes. It's with Lane and her mom. And I think that's more of

> a cultural thing. Like, that's the way the culture's raised is the mom needs to be very controlling, and the daughter's supposed to be very submissive because she's the female and she has to listen to her mother. And when she becomes a wife, she's going to be very submissive to her husband and that kind of thing. So I think she's the one exception because in the other middle class families, it seems like there's a really healthy relationship between the daughter and the mother.

Cathy, on the other hand, described Mrs. Kim in a more sympathetic way. However, her comments reveal that although she may feel critical of Mrs. Kim's mothering, Cathy, who is white, also feels hesitant to criticize her because of what she refers to as Mrs. Kim's "nationality":

> I guess when I see Emily and Lorelai, I'm glad me and Anna aren't like that. But I guess I can't say that with Mrs. Kim, though, because I really think she's trying and doing her best. And I think a lot of it comes from her nationality, from her… whatever she is. They might do things a little different than we do.

Cathy's comments reveal that she sympathizes with Mrs. Kim as a mother and appreciates that Mrs. Kim is "doing her best." However, although Cathy acknowledges a cultural difference between herself and Mrs. Kim, she does not attempt to understand what that cultural difference means in terms of how and why she and Mrs. Kim parent their daughters differently. In addition, although Mrs. Kim's Korean background is mentioned on a regular basis on the show, Cathy, a frequent viewer of *Gilmore Girls*, could not identify Mrs. Kim's background (she stated, "…it comes from her nationality, from her…whatever she is."). Rather, she simply noted that "they" do things differently than "we" do. However, she did not specify whom she referred to when she used the pronouns "they" and "we."

Cathy's comments about Mrs. Kim illustrate her privileged status as a white woman in contemporary American society. In her article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Peggy McIntosh (1988) lists a number of conditions of white

privilege. One of these conditions is that a white person "can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color…without feeling in [their] culture any penalty for such oblivion" (McIntosh, p. 190). Cathy's comments bring this condition to life in the sense that not only does Cathy *not* identify or understand Mrs. Kim's Korean culture; as a white person in contemporary American society, she does not *need* to identify or understand Mrs. Kim's culture. Cathy will not be penalized in any way for her lack of knowledge about Mrs. Kim's background, cultural norms or customs. One could argue, however, that as a Korean immigrant living in a middle class suburban area in contemporary American society, Mrs. Kim would be much more likely to experience negative effects of such a lack of knowledge about the dominant white, middle class culture in America.

This condition of white privilege is also exemplified by Sally's interpretation of Mrs. Kim in *Gilmore Girls*. Sally, a 60-year-old white middle class woman who lives outside of New York City and works as a nurse for AIDS patients, also attributes the differences between her own approach to mothering and Mrs. Kim's to Mrs. Kim's cultural background:

> The interesting part about the mother-daughter relationships in this show is that all three of them are opposite. Like Lane and her mother, she's about to do exactly what her mother says at all times. I think it's all cultural, though. Just the way the culture's run, which is, I guess, acceptable in some climates but it's just not acceptable in our kind of circle. Because I would like to tell my daughter what to do all the time, but it's not going to work. I think we'd be fighting more than we would do anything.

As with Cathy, Sally recognizes a cultural difference between herself and Mrs Kim, particularly in relation to their mothering, but she does not attempt to explain the difference or even to identify Mrs. Kim's culture. She thereby implicitly criticizes Mrs.

Kim's culture, noting that Mrs. Kim's approach to mothering is "just not acceptable in our kind of circle." Also similar to Cathy, Sally, a middle class white woman, makes the distinction between "us" and "them." In Sally's case, it appears clearer that she is referring to the parenting of people like Mrs. Kim (i.e. Korean Americans) as "them" and white people, particularly those in her own Irish neighborhood on Long Island, as "us."

Similarly, Kelly and Serena both made comments about Cristina Yang's mother on *Grey's Anatomy,* who is also Korean American. Kelly said the following about Cristina's mother having been divorced and then remarried: "I find it surprising that Cristina's mother divorced because I wouldn't… I guess, back to race and culture, I wouldn't have expected her to have divorced, honestly. That might be a horrible stereotype, but, umm…" Kelly seemed to imply here that, from her perspective, it would be atypical for a woman of Korean descent to get a divorce. She recognizes that she may be reinforcing a stereotype by saying this, but she also chooses not to rectify this, but rather, to continue with the discussion we had been having regarding class issues in the show.

Serena also discussed the cultural differences she noticed between her own mother-daughter relationship and the relationship between Cristina Yang and her mother on *Grey's Anatomy*. In particular, she found the lack of affection between these women to be very different from her own experience: "And it was weird, there wasn't a lot of interaction; I guess what I'm used to, affection or things like that. But that might be partially Yang just being very distant or it might be how she was raised—different cultures or whatever, like that." As with the white women speaking about the Korean American characters in these shows, Serena attributes the difference she mentioned to

Cristina Yang's "culture." She does not, however, state what she believes Cristina's cultural background is, what she knows about women of that background, or why she believes culture is a relevant factor in terms of how and why their relationships differ. In other words, although a lack of affection may exist between a mother and daughter of any demographic background, Serena, along with the other participants who discussed the relationships between Korean American mothers and daughters in the shows they watch, reinforces stereotypes of Asian American women by attributing these elements of the mother-daughter relationships to Asian American cultures. These participants assume that Mrs. Kim must be extremely strict because she is Korean American and that Cristina Yang and her mother must have a distant, unaffectionate relationship because they are Korean American.

This led me to wonder whether these participants would make such assumptions about women of their own cultural backgrounds. In other words, would Sally assume that a mother and daughter relate to one another in a particular way because they are Irish American? And would Serena make such an assumption about a mother and daughter because they are African American? Either way, these results show that the participants in this section made sense of their own relationships by emphasizing the differences between themselves and the characters in the shows and distancing themselves and their own relationships from the relationships in the shows. The results also illustrate that these women evaluated the differences between themselves and the characters on the shows from an ethnocentric perspective. In other words, participants of all races tended to evaluate television characters of different races and cultural backgrounds from the

perspective of their own cultures and thereby demonstrated their belief in the superiority of their own racial or cultural norms.

Rhonda also offered an interesting perspective about race and television. Only a few minutes into our interview, she told me that as an African American woman, she finds it very difficult to relate to shows about white people. She is a fan of *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, which we discussed in our interview. In describing the show, she shared the following:

> Sometimes when I'm cooking dinner I'll turn on *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* because I love comedies. And that's a show I can relate to. For example, some of the other shows on TV, like some of the shows you listed as examples, I've tried watching them and I just can't relate to it at all. My husband and I, we sit and we watch it and we say, "Oh, that's white world." It's just like oh, I just can't. Can't get into it. But Tyler Perry, it's about a black family—somewhat dysfunctional, I guess, only because there's a younger generation who have to move in because of circumstances beyond their control with relatives. And these circumstances are like the crux of the comedy. And it's just easier for me to relate to.

As with Cathy and Sally, Rhonda's comments also speak to the concept of white privilege. Rhonda explains that she cannot relate to most of the shows she sees on television because she considers this content to be solely a depiction of "white world." In her article on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh (1988) lists as another condition of white privilege the fact that a white person can turn on the television or consult any other media source and see their own race widely represented (p. 189). Although McIntosh's article is over 20 years old, the dominant representation of whites on television still exists today.

In fact, I expected more of the women of color who participated in this study to share this sentiment. I realize, however, that while some of these women may, in fact, share this sentiment, that does not necessarily mean that they would communicate this to me as clearly and emphatically as Rhonda did in the quote above. Interestingly, however,

Serena, who made no such comment within the context of our interview, shared a similar opinion with me after our interview ended and I had turned the recorder off. She seemed to relax more at this point and she started asking me about what I had been finding so far in my interviews. She asked if I had interviewed other black women and if these women had said anything about race in the shows. When I told her yes, Serena proceeded to share with me her view that, although she loves plenty of shows focused on white characters and can relate to them in some ways, she still believes that women of color should be more widely represented on television. I found it noteworthy that it was not until I had turned my recorder off that Serena shared this perspective. From a methodological perspective, this made me wonder how much more I might have learned from some of these women if I had had such extended "unofficial" conversations with more of them after the interview was over.

Differences in Family Structure

Several participants focused on differences in their family structure and the family structures in the television shows they watch. Cathy, for example, made note of a significant difference between her family and the Gilmores: Cathy is married and, therefore, shares parenting duties with her husband. This is not the case for Lorelai Gilmore, who is a single mother. Similarly, Katrina and Sally explained that their mother-daughter relationships involved the mother being much more strict than Lorelai is with Rory in *Gilmore Girls*. Ava and Maria also noted that an important difference between themselves and the mothers on the shows they watch is their age. Ava, a 55-year-old Filipino woman who grew up in a poor family in the Philippines, was 35 when she had her daughter and, for that reason, she sees herself as a much more mature mother

than the mother in *The O.C.* Similarly, Maria was much older than Lorelai Gilmore when she had her daughter Faye. As Maria explains below, a mother's age and experience have a significant influence on the nature of mother-daughter relationships:

> Sometimes I thought Lorelai forgot to be a mom. However, her heart was in the right place and we must never forget that she was very young herself and a single parent. I don't have that. I didn't have my son until… I mean, he was born in June, I was 29. But that October, a few months later, I turned 30. So I was grown. And I didn't have Faye until I was 34. So there's that difference too. I was a grownup when I had my children; therefore I was an even older grownup as my daughter hit her teenage years. And I think that had a lot to do with it because if you look at Rory and Lorelai, they're parallel to each other. The mother's in her late twenties trying to figure out her life and the kid's hitting her teens trying to figure out being a woman. And so, you know, they're both dating, they're both looking at relationships, you know what I mean? So it is a different thing and so for some of the older moms, looking at Lorelai, of course they're going to be critical. It's a different life, it's a different thing. I was behaving like Lorelai when I was in my twenties. It's what you do. That's who you are.

In addition, Kate, a 26-year-old white middle class woman who works as a media relations coordinator for political campaigns, recognized a significant difference between her mother-daughter relationship and the Lorelai-Rory relationship on *Gilmore Girls*: Kate has a sister. For her, the fact that she has a sibling makes her relationship with her mother different from Rory's relationship with Lorelai. She stated:

> There really wasn't any aspect of dealing with siblings and pitting… well, not necessarily pitting one kid against another in *Gilmore Girls*, but… I think mother-daughter relationships are very different when there's a sibling involved.

<u>Mothers' and Daughters' Roles in Each Others' Lives</u>

As they explained the differences between their relationships and those in the shows, some participants also focused on the role that mothers and daughters play in each other's lives. Ava, Madeline, and Serena contended that mothers need to put their children first above everything else in their lives. In comparing themselves to the

characters in the shows, they each felt as though the mothers in the shows failed to do this, whereas, in their view, they and their mothers did not.

Ava has a 19-year-old daughter with whom she watched *The O.C.* Ava described how the mother in *The O.C.* appears to be unhappy and focuses most of her attention on attracting men, rather than on taking care of her teenage daughter. According to Ava, this is the main reason that so much friction exists between the mother and daughter on this show. Ava distinguished herself from this character's mothering style by explaining how, even in the most difficult of times, she always puts her children first:

> When I got divorced from my daughter's father, there was no time for dating. My main focus was my children. Also, my ex-husband was a gambler. So when we separated, this house was in bankruptcy and it was going to be foreclosed. The credit cards were like thousands and thousands and thousands. So when we separated my main goal was to get the house not to be foreclosed, pay all these debts. And I wasn't interested in dating at that time. Because I had these children I needed to focus on and I don't think I could have focused on anything else. But the mother on *The O.C.*, I think her main focus is the boyfriends, the men in her life. It's never the daughter. But for me, my primary goal has always been to do what's best for my children. And they know that too.

Madeline is a 40-year-old Asian American woman from a middle class background who has a successful career as a pharmacist educator. She lives in New Jersey and is married with two young children – a four-year-old daughter and an infant son. A viewer of *Grey's Anatomy*, Madeline felt as though Ellis Grey, Meredith Grey's mother, was too absent in Meredith's life. Madeline explained that her mother made her children a priority significantly more than Ellis Grey made Meredith a priority in her life:

> I think Meredith didn't really know her mom because her mom was always a career woman. Her mom was more career focused, whereas my mom would be more family focused. So her main focus was just to make sure that we were okay, the children. So like my mom did not have a career so she was always there. I mean, when we were older and we were at school longer she did go get jobs and stuff. But at home we were always… she was always there, growing up. So like we always had her there. It wasn't like she was at work or anything like that.

> There was nothing interfering with her relationship with us. But with Ellis Grey, it seemed like she was always gone in Meredith's life. Yeah, she wasn't around when Meredith needed her. I really don't know who raised Meredith because if you figure her mom was such a prestigious surgeon, she would never be there. So I don't know.

Serena's mother was also a stay-at-home mom and, in our discussion of *Grey's Anatomy*, Serena explained how this had a significant impact on her relationship with her mother. She also distinguished her mother from Cristina Yang's mother in the show, who comes to see Cristina in the hospital, but seems too preoccupied to actually focus on her daughter's needs:

> Yang's mother just seems so preoccupied with her BlackBerry and things. So she didn't seem like Yang was top priority. My mom was not like that. She was just all about being a mom, all about these are my girls, my boys, my family. My kids are first. It's funny, I tell people all the time, "I know our mother loved us but I really think she was *in love* with us." She truly was in love with her children. So anything we needed or wanted, that came first.
>
> She stayed home with us and she always said, "I would never change being at home with you all during the time when you were growing up because I think that's helped who you all are now." And it has. There was never a time when I didn't feel mom was there. I don't know what it feels like to come home and my mom not be there because she's still at work. And it's funny, I would hear my friends saying, "My mom works long shifts," and this and that, "We got away with doing this, we got away with doing that." I was like, "I don't know what that feels like." My mom, she was always around. She was just always around.

In our discussion of *Gilmore Girls*, Amy distinguished her mother from Lorelai Gilmore by explaining that her mother gave her more independence as a young person than Lorelai gave Rory on the show. She stated:

> My mom and I would watch *Gilmore Girls* together and the main thing my mom had a problem with was in season four, when Rory goes off to Yale and that relationship then and how the mother is really clingy and how she spends the night in Rory's dorm room on her first night at college. My mom hated that because she's the director of residence life at a university. So she's been around college life forever. So she's like, "We don't allow that at our school. We kick the parents out right away. If someone, like if the mom wants to do that, we're like, no, your daughter needs to go out on her own."

> So, I think my mom allowed me to be more independent than Lorelai allows Rory. Which is nice…because I'm allowed to go out and make the mistakes on my own and I know that I can go to her and she can help me see what I did wrong and how to correct it and like that kind of thing. But I feel like the best way to learn is to actually try it, as opposed to like…just looking at it like, "Well, you did that then, so I'm not gonna do it."

In addition, Kim made note of a difference between herself and the character of Nora Walker on *Brothers & Sisters.* That is, Kim believes Nora is too involved in her adult children's lives. Kim, on the other hand, deliberately gives her 33-year-old daughter space and makes a conscious effort not to interfere in her life or be over-involved with her life decisions. In our discussion of this difference between herself and Nora Walker, Kim illustrated her point through the following example:

> I see the mother as being too over-involved for adult children. I'm pretty sure her heart's in the right place, but she appears to be a little controlling… I don't see any similarities between me and her. I mean, I would never interfere in my daughter's life the way she interferes in her children's lives…
>
> My daughter's husband is not her daughter's father. That was her choice. Now he wouldn't be somebody that I would pick for her but they've been together since high school so it's like her high school sweetheart. So I think a controlling parent would have tried to talk a daughter out of that relationship, but I felt like if that's who she chose, that I would support it. Then there was a little time that there was some infidelity in their relationship and she confided in me and she was torn about what she should do. Well, she maybe kind of confided in me too much because there was information that I probably didn't need to hear. But I told her if she needed help financially that I would be there for her because that should never be a reason that you would stay with a man. And she chose to stay.
>
> So me being an adult, her being an adult, I'm not going to impose my opinion because that's her life. So would that be what I would want for her? No. But if that's what she's choosing I have to step back and say, "This is her choice."

On the other hand, Kindel a 24-year-old white woman from a wealthy background who works in the entertainment industry in New York City, made the opposite distinction between herself, her mother, and the mothers and daughters on *Gossip Girl.* Unlike Kim,

who perceived Nora Walker as over-involved in her children's lives, Kindel argued that the mothers on *Gossip Girl* were not involved *enough* in their daughters' lives. She explained:

> These girls like never need their mom. You know what I mean? Like sometimes they have to go to dinner with their mom because like a *New York Times* reporter is going to be there, but they're never like, "Oh but I told my mom I was going to go with her to dinner tonight." There is no like, there is none of that. Their parents are never involved in their education and that's so weird to me. Like, my mom would always be like, "What do you have to do? What's going on at school? Who got cast in the play?" If these moms are there, it's because they're chairing the ball for the school, you know what I mean? Like my mom always knew about like what kind of grades I was getting and talked to me about my teachers and my mom picked me up after school in high school. And we did stuff together after school. And I needed my mom. I needed her to pick me up and take me places. But in the show, like there is definitely like no dependency. And that's sad for these girls. Like there's no sort of raising being done.

As their words illustrate, Ava, Madeline, Serena, Amy, Kim and Kindel each made sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their critique of the relationships in the shows. Each of these women distinguished themselves from the characters in the shows and, in doing so, argued not only that their own relationships are *different* from the relationships on television, but also that their own relationships are *better*. This process, however, was not only about these women acknowledging differences and critiquing the characters in the shows. More importantly, it was about these women defining their *own* relationships with their mothers/daughters.

For instance, Kim's interpretation of Nora Walker's approach to mothering her adult children on *Brothers & Sisters* was not only about Kim's disapproval of Nora Walker's invasiveness in her children's lives. Rather, Kim's interpretation of the character of Nora Walker was about Kim defining *herself* as a mother and justifying her approach to mothering. As she communicated her disapproval of Nora's "over-involved"

mothering, Kim validated her decision to deliberately give her daughter space and avoid getting over-involved in her life.

Similarly, as Madeline and Serena both criticized the mothers in *Grey's Anatomy* for being absent in their daughter's lives, they simultaneously reinforced their belief that their own mothers made a better choice – to be stay-at-home moms who always put their children first and were "always around." They therefore reinforced the traditional notion that the role of a "good mother" is to stay at home with her children and to always prioritize her children before herself. As these and the other examples in this section demonstrate, the television shows I discussed with these participants provided an avenue for these women to make sense of and validate their own lives and to reinforce their beliefs about the strength and value of their own mother-daughter relationships and the role of a "good mother."

However, the perspectives of these participants about mother-daughter relationships may be shaped not only by their own life experiences, but by their television viewing as well. For example, the perspectives of Madeline and Serena regarding the role of a good mother may be influenced by their mothers' choices to be stay-at-home moms *as well as* their viewing of such television shows as *Grey's Anatomy*. Current studies of motherhood on television demonstrate that by deliberately setting up certain untraditional mother characters as the "bad mother," (such as Ellis Grey in *Grey's Anatomy*) many shows reinforce ideologies that a "good mother" should be entirely responsible for childcare and that it is primarily the mother's responsibility to fix problems within families (Brancato, 2007). In addition, a number of television studies have shown that television shows generally reinforce gender stereotypes, such as the

stereotype of women as domesticated mothers whose sole purpose should be to maintain a home and nurture their families (Douglas & Olson, 1997; Signorielli, 2001). Given the pervasiveness of such stereotypical portrayals on television, heavier viewers of television among women tend to subscribe to more traditional ideologies of motherhood (Ex, Janssens & Korzilius, 2002). Therefore, Madeline and Serena may be criticizing the character of Ellis Grey from *Grey's Anatomy* not only because of their own experiences as daughters of more traditional mothers, but also because of their exposure to television shows, including *Grey's Anatomy*, that reinforce traditional notions of motherhood by demonizing untraditional mothers.

Mother-Daughter Communication and Affection

The participants in this study also distinguished their relationships from those on television in terms of mother-daughter communication and affection. Some of these women communicate with their mother/daughter more than the characters in the shows communicate with one another. For others, watching the shows made them realize how much more or less affectionate they are with their mothers or daughters than the characters in the shows.

Kate distinguished her relationship with her mother from the relationship between Lorelai and Rory in *Gilmore Girls* by explaining that, unlike Rory, she (along with several other participants) does *not* tell her mother everything:

> This is one example, in this episode, where you see the thing where Rory *doesn't* share something with Lorelai. And like I talked about, there are times when I *don't* tell my mom things. And I think that's something that you don't often see represented here. Where… at least in the Lorelai-Rory relationship, you don't see very often that Rory would keep something from Lorelai. And…I think there are a lot of women who have things they haven't told their mother. But for me…I mean, I wouldn't say there are *lots* of things I don't tell my mom. I'm okay with telling my mom things about work, about my life in general, but… it's when I get

> to sort of personal things like my health, or my love life, or things like that I just… I haven't found a good way to talk to my mom about those…
>
> The thing that's different about Lorelai and Rory too is that Lorelai didn't really date when she was raising Rory when she was a little kid, so now they're both sort of dating and meeting guys together at the same point in their lives. So they're kind of at the same place at the same time, whereas I don't think a lot of women and their moms *are* at the same place at the same time. So, I think that's kind of what maybe makes them closer and makes it harder for other women to be as close with their mom because they're always at sort of very different points in their lives.

In addition, Madeline and Serena both distinguished the communication and affection between mothers and daughters on *Grey's Anatomy* from their own experiences. For example, Madeline perceived the communication in the mother-daughter relationships on the show to be practically non-existent:

> Well, my mom and I actually talk, whereas it seems like Meredith and her mom and also Cristina and her mom, they don't talk. Or if they do it's more take care of business, that sort of thing. It's not a closeness, like "How are you feeling? Are you emotionally okay? Are you stressed out?" You know, "Do you have any other issues that you need to talk about?" So I think my mom and I have more of an emotional support system, whereas they don't have too much emotional support.

I found it noteworthy that this comment from Madeline, who is Asian American, Actually challenges the stereotype of Asian Americans as unemotional and unaffectionate that Serena had mentioned in the previous section. When Serena discussed the lack of affection between two Asian American characters on *Grey's Anatomy* (Cristina Yang and her mother), she assumed this had to do with their Asian background as she attributed their lack of affection to "other cultures or whatever." Madeline challenged this stereotype of Asian Americans by distinguishing herself from the characters in *Grey's Anatomy* and sharing how communicative and emotionally connected she is with her mother.

Serena also emphasized the importance of affection between a mother and daughter. When I asked her if she noticed any important aspects of her relationship with her mother that were missing from the relationship in *Grey's Anatomy*, she responded:

> Oh, the affection obviously. Like I don't remember seeing anyone hug anyone in the show. And that was just a big thing. My mother was very affectionate, very loving, very caring and made sure that we were first, we were first in her life. I didn't see communication there. There was no, "Hey, Mom, how was your day?" "Good, how was your day?" This and that. It didn't seem like communication. Or the difference is the type of communication I had with my mom. The communication seems to be lacking there the way I'm used to it. The affection, I mean, there's no way I could have sat there and cried like Yang and my mom would not have consoled me. I didn't feel the love. I didn't feel the love, it seemed very cold compared to what I'm used to being around.

In addition, Emily and Colleen focused on the arguing they often see between mothers and daughters on television. Emily, an avid *Gilmore Girls* viewer, found the arguments between Rory and Lorelai Gilmore to be more dramatic and exaggerated than the arguments she has with her mother, particularly because Rory and Lorelai often end up not speaking to each other for lengthy periods of time after they've had a fight. Emily said, "Like sure my mother and I have fights, but we deal with whatever's happening and move on. Like we would never not talk to one another or not see each other for so long. So that is kind of foreign to me."

Colleen had been critical throughout her interview of how television constructs mother-daughter relationships. She continued her criticism of portrayals of mother-daughter relationships in *Grey's Anatomy* specifically when she shared the following:

> Well I think a lot of times with the television, they're just…the daughters are just so blunt with their moms, like "we don't want you to be here" sort of thing. And I feel like that… like that is just kind of something I would never do. You know, I feel like if my mom were doing something that I didn't want her to do, I would, you know, explain to her why and, you know, kind of let her off easy. Whereas in television, they're just like, "go away," you know?

> I guess it's just a lot more fighting and arguing on television than I would see in my relationship with my mom. Because my mom and I just…we just don't really argue. And I mean, I know it's different with every mother-daughter relationship. But it seems like the ones that they portray in television are…you know, there's always a lot of arguing at some point. In television there are always misunderstandings between mothers and daughters. Whereas, my mom and I…we kind of understand each other. And if we don't understand something, it would be something we would discuss. Whereas in television, you know, if there's a misunderstanding it often just gets blown out of proportion. Or they focus on it a lot.

Again, as in the previous section, these women use the relationships in the shows to define, and simultaneously argue for the value of, their own mother-daughter relationships. Their words also illustrate how important their mother-daughter relationships are to them.

The women who participated in this study came from a variety of backgrounds in terms of age, race, education, social class, and profession, but all shared something in common: each of them made sense of their lives and relationships in some way through their engagement with fictional constructions of mother-daughter relationships on television. The participants employed a variety of sensemaking strategies in this engagement process, the most prevalent of which included: first, participants defining their own relationships through their connection to the relationships on television; second, participants relating directly to the television characters' experiences as mothers/daughters and, thereby, understanding themselves and their relationships on a deeper level; and third, participants characterizing and justifying their mother-daughter relationships by distinguishing themselves from the characters and relationships in the television shows they watch. The next chapter will discuss how the participants in this study also went beyond identifying connections or distinctions between themselves and

the television characters to discuss how and to what extent these fictional portrayals may or may not shape their real lives and relationships.

CHAPTER 8

FICTIONAL PORTRAYALS SHAPING REAL RELATIONSHIPS

The third research question I explored in this study was:

RQ3: From the perspectives of these mothers and daughters, how and to what extent does their engagement with fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television influence their own lives and mother-daughter relationships?

Intentionally or unintentionally, many of the participants in this study acknowledged ways in which the television shows have had some sort of effect on their lives and relationships. The word "effect" takes on a few different meanings in this context. In some cases, viewing these shows may have influenced these women's behavior in their everyday lives, particularly in terms of their mother-daughter relationships. For others, engaging with these shows may have shaped their perspectives on their own relationships or mother-daughter relationships in general. These findings provide support for social cognitive theory, which states that individuals learn and adopt behaviors and attitudes through their observations of and interactions with models, including mass media models (Bandura, 2002).

However, a number of participants believed that the television shows we discussed have no real influence on their everyday lives, but acknowledged the possibility that the portrayals may have an influence on the lives of others. In other words, these participants demonstrated the third person effect, which refers to the perception that the media have a greater influence on others than on oneself (Perloff, 2002).

For a few women, the experience of watching the shows cultivated communication between themselves and their mother or daughter. Others explained that the show became an integrated part of their lives and an important shared experience between mother and daughter. A few participants also acknowledged ways in which they emulated or deliberately chose *not* to emulate the characters and relationships in the shows. The women who acknowledged that the fictional portrayals shaped their perspectives of their real mother-daughter relationships primarily fell into two categories: first, those who found that the viewing experience led them to appreciate their real mother-daughter relationship more; and second, those who found that watching the show made them wish their lives or relationships were somehow different. Throughout this chapter, I will delve deeper into each of these themes surrounding how television shows about mother-daughter relationships shape women's real lives and relationships. In the conclusion chapter, I will also discuss in more depth the theoretical implications of these findings within the context of cultural studies, uses and gratifications, and social cognitive theory.

Cultivating Communication

An important component of engaging with these shows for about half of the women in this study was sharing the viewing experience with their mother or daughter. Several participants explained that their engagement with the show cultivated communication between themselves and their mothers or daughters. For that reason, the show became more for them than simply a form of entertainment – it became an opportunity to open the lines of communication between mother and daughter.

Rhonda, for example, explained that watching *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* with her daughter fostered communication between them. Because the young mother in the show, Janine, is a crack addict, Rhonda used the shared viewing experience as an opportunity to talk with her teenage daughter about drugs:

> But we do talk about things, like the issue of the drugs and the fact that Janine is a crack head. We talk about that. We talk about the consequences and how that's affected the family. So it's been a good talking point there.

In talking with her daughter about the show, Rhonda reinforced lessons she has continuously tried to teach her daughter about the dangers of drug use and the negative consequences it has on people's lives.

Livia also found that watching the show together fostered communication between her and her mom. However, although she acknowledges that she and her mom talked about the show, Livia believes that this was a more superficial type of impact in that it created conversation, but didn't necessarily shape their relationship in any significant way. She explained:

> Well, when I lived at home we watched *Gilmore Girls* together and it spurred conversations with my mom. Like situations in the show were situations that never really happened to us because, you know, we just had different upbringings than this show. But it would spur conversation as to what would you do when this happened? Or like we would talk about how happy we were when Lane just said "Screw it, Mom!" you know?... But no, I don't think it really shaped it [their relationship] but it definitely…like we talked about it and we loved the show I think because our relationship was similar to Lorelai and Rory's.

Similarly, Emily found that watching *Gilmore Girls* with her mother Sally often resulted in conversations between them and, in some cases, made Emily think about her own relationship in different ways. However, Emily maintained that this did not leave the actual viewing experience. In other words, she did not find herself starting conversations with her mother at a later time because of watching *Gilmore Girls*, nor did

she recognize any influence on her perception of her mother-daughter relationship at any time other than when she was watching the show:

> Yeah, like while watching the show it's influenced what I've thought about us but it hasn't left the viewing experience. When we're spending time with one another I don't think about that. But there's been times where we've been watching the show and joking around about how that doesn't happen with us and different things like that. There was the episode where people thought Lorelai and Rory were sisters and my mom's like, "How come that never happened with you and me?" So we'll joke around like that during an episode but it hasn't ever gone further than that.

While each of the women mentioned so far have shared the viewing experience with their mother or daughter, Harper and Katrina stand out in this group because neither of them share the viewing experience of the show with their mothers. In fact, both women live a long distance from their mothers, but are very close with them. For these women, although they do not watch the show with their moms, they explained that the shows still foster communication between themselves and their mothers because they make them want to call their moms. Harper explained it this way in our discussion of *Brothers and Sisters*:

> I feel like I always end every show like wanting to call my mom. Like my mom doesn't watch it and I always get so mad. I'm like, "Mom, you gotta watch this cause you would just be like 'Oh my God this is us.' Like you're a Nora Walker. You're always butting into my life but then I end up appreciating it."

Katrina offered a similar perspective in our discussion of *Gilmore Girls*:

> The show probably made me want to call my mom more… You know, they would chat about such stupid things sometimes but then sometimes they would have really heartfelt discussions and the music would play or whatever. You know maybe it… I don't know if it like consciously changed the way I relate to my mom, but maybe…you know I'd see the show and I'd be like, 'Oh I need to call my mom.'

Mother-Daughter Television Shows as Integrated and Shared Life Experiences

My conversations with these women also revealed that for several of them, the show they watch had become an integrated part of their lives and, in some cases, an integrated part of their mother-daughter relationships. Sally, Madeline, and Cathy provided examples of this phenomenon. Cathy noted that for her and her daughter Anna, *Gilmore Girls* is "just another thing to share. We love talking about the episodes together."

Although Sally felt that *Gilmore Girls* did not have any real influence on her life or her relationship with Emily, she did acknowledge that sharing the viewing experience with one another was an important part of their relationship. In fact, as Sally explains below, watching *Gilmore Girls* provided a way for her to spend time with her daughter that otherwise she may not have had:

> Maybe it was something to do to make her talk to me after work, sit and talk to me. There's a lot of times kids go home and go to their room and just talk to friends and stuff like that rather than…especially years ago. You know, talk to friends rather than talk to you. Which is normal, I know I would have wanted to talk to friends instead of my mother. So *Gilmore Girls* was something to talk about, something to do together.

In addition, at the end of my interview with Madeline (as with all of my participants), I asked if she had anything else she'd like to add about *Grey's Anatomy* or about her relationship with her mother (she has a five year old daughter, but we had spent most of our time together discussing Madeline's relationship with her mother). Madeline shared the following:

> I just wanted to say that I watch *Grey's Anatomy* with my daughter. I have my five-year-old watching probably a show that only adults should be watching. Because my girlfriend was like, "You let your daughter watch *Grey's Anatomy*?" [laughs] I was like, "Yes I do. It's our bonding time." She goes, "but she's picking up everything on the show." I go, "No she doesn't. If I don't react to it,

> if I don't…" Like there's often times where they're in bed or when they had the lesbian episode. If I don't react to it, like I don't go [gasps] "Oh my gosh, what are they doing?!" she's not going to react. She's just going to sit there and lay down and… I don't know. It's more of our just physical quiet time unwinding.

In this final comment, Madeline attempted to justify watching the show with her young daughter as she shared and then refuted her friend's criticism. More importantly, however, she clearly explained that the experience of viewing *Grey's Anatomy* is about more than just entertainment. For Madeline, watching this show represents a rare and special opportunity for her to share some quiet, intimate time with her daughter. For Madeline, what resonates most about watching *Grey's Anatomy* is the togetherness and physical and emotional "bonding" with her daughter within the context of the viewing experience more so than the storylines in the show. Although her daughter may be picking up on some of the "adult" themes of this show, at this point Madeline does not seem concerned about this possibility.

Modeling TV Characters and Relationships

As part of incorporating the characters and shows into their lives, a few participants described ways in which they view the mothers and daughters in the shows as models they seek to emulate. For example, Cathy described how her daughter Anna viewed Rory from *Gilmore Girls* as a role model in her life. In fact, when Anna wrote her essay for her college applications, she wrote about how she perceived Rory as a role model, particularly because of her academic aspirations. Cathy explained:

> And just to give you an example of how important the show is in our life… Anna wrote about it in her college letter. Like she thought of herself so similarly to Rory. Not that she was like a movie star crazy kid…But she took the examples of how Rory was a good student and how Rory put a good college as the top of her consideration. She wrote about this in her letter and it was very well true. So it just really became like a real, true piece of our life, you know? And Rory sets a good example. She's a normal kid and she's a good kid even though she does

> some things once in a while that are wrong. So do we all. But I think Rory's a good example and I'm really glad that Anna, mostly through her high school years, really followed her. Even though she wasn't a real person, you know?

Cathy's comments reveal just how important *Gilmore Girls* has been in hers and Anna's lives. That is, although Rory Gilmore is a fictional character, she became a very real and significant figure in Anna's life as Anna viewed her as a role model. From Cathy's perspective, this had a very positive influence on Anna's life when she was a young teenage girl.

Similarly, Faye shared a few ways in which she views the relationship in *Gilmore Girls* as a model for the type of mother-daughter relationship she wishes to have with her mother Maria. Faye shared the following:

> I think even though we both know it's a TV show, it's good to want to have the kind of relationship that Lorelai and Rory have because it makes everything so much easier. To know that you're my mom and when something happens, like when the shit hits the fan, you're there and I need to listen to you. But at the same time I can still go to you and have fun and we can go shopping and just joke around, talk about anything. So I think we've both… she [her mother Maria] won't admit it because she doesn't want to admit that anything on TV could affect life because it's just TV. But I mean I've always tried to understand where she's coming from, kind of like in *Gilmore Girls*. I know I'm stubborn but at the same time I try to think why she's doing it and then it helps in calming down and talking to her about it. And it's dumb but I learned that from the show.

Although she qualifies it at the end of this statement as "dumb," Faye seems to feel confident in her belief that she and her mother have modeled the behavior of Lorelai and Rory from *Gilmore Girls*. I found it intriguing, however, that although Faye seems to think her mother, Maria, would never admit to such modeling because "it's just TV," the reality is just the opposite. Faye's mother Maria communicated to me on more than one occasion her belief that she and Faye may have emulated these television characters. Her first mention of this came in her response to my recruitment email. In my email, I

mentioned that I wanted to talk to women about mother-daughter relationships in prime-time television shows. Maria's email response included the following statements:

> The only mother-daughter TV show that I can sincerely say I have watched is *Gilmore Girls*. It just so happens that my daughter and I used to watch it all the time. Now that you bring it to the forefront of my awareness, I wonder if we subconsciously modeled our interactions to reflect the show or if we liked the show because of its similarity to our interactions. Food for thought..... (personal communication, February 23, 2009).

After receiving Maria's email and realizing that she had already put some thought into this, I was very excited at the prospect of interviewing her. During our interview, Maria speculated that, in the case of her and Faye, this phenomenon was a mix of both modeling and appreciating the similarity between their relationship and that of the characters:

> And I don't know, probably because you brought it to the forefront of my awareness whereas before we just liked it, we just thought it was hilarious and we laughed and we just liked watching it. But I don't know if it's because of your study and the fact that I was thinking about it before you got here that now I'm thinking - did we like the show because it's similar to our relationship or did we end up modeling the behavior because we were watching it and we found it so funny? I think it's a little bit of both. I think it had already begun to be that way because we had that talking to each other thing.

In addition, Madeline discussed her tendency to put herself in the shoes of the characters she watches on *Grey's Anatomy*. Although she may not directly imitate the characters or emulate their relationships, she does ask herself "what would I do?" She explained:

> I like seeing their relationships. Like the love relationships, the spice when they have someone being mad at someone else. And it's intriguing just watching how other people interact and work when they have different problems. It makes you think, what would I do in that situation? Would I do what they do? If I was unhappy at home, would I have an affair? It just makes you think and then it's like… It takes you away from your mundane home life into like a fantasy world kind of.

Lily also offered an important perspective on this topic. She found that in watching *Gilmore Girls* she often learned how she did *not* want to act in her relationship with her mother. She had explained earlier in our interview that, because she is 22 now and very close with her mom, she struggles with how to be a friend to her mother in addition to being her child. Watching the relationship between Lorelai and her mother Emily on *Gilmore Girls* has taught Lily a valuable lesson about creating a mature, adult relationship with her mother:

> I mean they'll have little lessons in the show. So like in this episode, for example, it's like maybe I can tell that I'm not really listening to my mom. Or like you really need to be open and explicit. And I guess just keep in mind that we *are* friends. So, with that, there is an exchange. And, you know, you fight with your friends, you don't always agree with your friends, or your friends tell you things that maybe you don't want to hear. You know, it's not a mother-daughter relationship anymore – you're on the same level. So I have to just remember to keep that in mind. Because the part of the show I don't like is that Lorelai hasn't grown up in her mother's eyes. So they still have that like teenager-mother relationship, which is really kind of frustrating to watch. So I just need to make sure that doesn't happen. Stay open. Stay responsive. Stay adult. Just treat each other with respect and love and we'll be fine.

Several other participants, including Emily and Colleen, acknowledged that the show they watch makes them consider behaving more like the characters, but they had mixed feelings about emulating some of these characters and relationships. For instance, Emily is impressed with how much Rory shares with Lorelai in *Gilmore Girls*, but she would not want quite as much openness with her mother because she values her boundaries:

> I think like when Rory's first beginning to go out with Dean and she's hiding it from her mom and then she kind of switches it and just starts telling her mom everything and stuff like that. Sometimes I wonder if I should be more open with my mother about how I date and stuff. But I don't know, that's also my personal life that I don't share with her in terms of that. Like I remember when Rory had sex for the first time, her mother knew soon after. And that is something to me

> that like she doesn't need to know about. You know? There are lines that have been drawn and boundaries and stuff.

Similarly, Colleen shared her mixed feelings about emulating the relationship between Meredith Grey and her mother Ellis Grey on *Grey's Anatomy*:

> Umm like Meredith and her mom. I would definitely say I *don't* want my relationship to be like that. But at the same time, like when you're watching that, you see that their relationship is so difficult and part of it is that her mom has Alzheimer's. So at the same time, you would think, you know, how Meredith tries to take such good care of her still. So, I mean, that's something you think about, like, you do *want* to be like that. You want to be able to care for your mom if ever, you know, God forbid, something like that would happen. So, you know, there are some negatives and some positives. You know, that even though her mom can be so awful to her because of this disease, she's still willing to try to care for her.

As their comments illustrate, the women included in this section recognized and acknowledged a variety of ways that, from their perspectives, the televised relationships they engage with on a regular basis shape their own lives and relationships on a number of different levels.

Appreciating Real Mother-Daughter Relationships

Not all participants, however, acknowledged direct effects on their *behavior*. Most participants, while not believing the shows made them act in a particular way, did identify ways that these shows have shaped their *perspectives*. A few of the women I interviewed, for example, acknowledged that watching the mother-daughter relationships in these shows made them appreciate their own relationships more. These feelings resulted from watching both "good" and "bad" mother-daughter relationships on television. For instance, Faye described how watching the relationship between Lorelai Gilmore and her mother Emily made her more grateful for the way she was raised by her mother and for the many ways her mother Maria appreciates the person she is:

> Oh my God, I'm glad that my mom's not like Emily. Because I think about it and I just don't know how… I don't know, I don't know how I would have turned out if my mom was as mean as Emily because… I don't know, I can't handle that kind of thing. I can't handle somebody so close to me not even appreciating what I do. And every time I see it and I see Emily being so rude… I know it's a TV show, but at the same time I'm so thankful that my mom's not like that and I've never had to deal with that. Because I know that even though it's a TV show, so many families and so many moms are like that. I feel bad for kids who have to deal with that. So I'm thankful and every time I see it I'm thankful.

Similarly, Kindel and Serena both explained how watching *Gossip Girl* and *Grey's Anatomy* respectively made them feel sorry for the daughters on the shows and reinforced the respect and appreciation they both have for their mothers. Kindel criticized the mothers in *Gossip Girl* for trying too hard to compete with their daughters rather than just being their moms. In her words, she "couldn't imagine" her own mother acting like this. She explained:

> It makes me appreciate my mom. I mean, I don't know, like I can't imagine. Like my mom's so homely, I can't imagine… I mean I would feel insecure if my mom wasn't like that, the way she is… because she, she was like dorky. And I think if I had to compete with my mom ever like the girls in *Gossip Girl*, that would be so awful. Like the moms, the moms who want to be skinnier and want to be better dressed and want to be cooler than their daughters. Like the *Real Housewives of New York*. Do you ever watch that? It's a reality show, but like there are moms who like, like one of the moms, her daughter is like, "Mom that skirt is too short." Like it's embarrassing.

Serena focused on the ways that Ellis Grey, Meredith Grey's mother on *Grey's Anatomy*, negatively affected Meredith's adult life by instilling in her a fear of romantic relationships and commitment. Watching this relationship and its effects across several seasons of *Grey's Anatomy* made Serena appreciative of the positive relationship she had with her mother that has made her a strong person in many ways:

> So I think, like I said, I don't think Meredith and her mother's relationship was bad, it was just different. It seems like now it's a problem for Meredith because she's lacking so much as far as especially relationships and commitment. That seems to be a hard problem and she's related it back to how she was brought up.

> So obviously it's an issue for her how she was raised. So yeah, I'm just thankful for my relationship I had with my mom.

However, not all participants were thankful their mothers or daughters were *unlike* the television characters. In fact, Harper found that watching Nora Walker, the mother on *Brothers & Sisters* played by Sally Field, made her appreciate her own mother more because Nora and her mother have so much in common. Harper described both of them as women who are "just *so good*" at being mothers. In addition, Harper went on to say that if she did *not* have such a wonderful mother with whom she is so close, she probably would not want to watch *Brothers & Sisters* at all:

> I feel like Nora on *Brothers & Sisters* is just such a good example of a good mother and like that's what I'm used to. I just can't imagine not having a mother like that's just *so good* at being a mother. But I feel like there's so many people that don't have any sort of person they can call and confide in. Like I had friends in college that would literally go weeks without talking to their parents, whereas I literally would call my mom like… even now, I call her on my way to work, on my way home from work. Like she's like my husband basically. In fact, when I was in a relationship it was kind of hard because I was like "oh I should call Adam…nah I'll call my mom." I feel like I would get sad if I didn't have that. I feel like because I have our relationship I love watching stuff like this. Whereas like if I didn't have a mother that made such an impact on my life I'd be like depressed watching this. I'd be like ooooh I want a mom like that!

Seeking Something Different

While their engagement with television shows about mother-daughter relationships made some participants appreciate what they already have, several participants found themselves seeking something different. These women acknowledged that watching these shows made them wish their lives or relationships were different in some way.

Ava, for example, was raised in the Philippines in a very strict Catholic family. She found that her mother's adherence to strict beliefs and traditions often interfered with

Ava's ability to have a good relationship with her. When Ava moved to the United States to work as a nurse, got married, and had children, she did everything in her power to ensure that she would not repeat this cycle with her own daughter. Ava watched *The O.C.* with her teenage daughter and realized that when they watched it, she found herself reflecting on her relationship with her mother back in the Philippines:

> The daughter on *The O.C.* is a daughter that's trying to reach out to the mother, but she just has a lot of issues within her. When I look at the show, it's a shame because I was always saying, "Life is too short." And looking back with me and my mother, I just wish that it could have been different. But it's just…she's so… It's just how I guess it was, how she was brought up.

For Anna and Katrina, watching *Gilmore Girls* occasionally made them wish they had relationships with their mothers that were more like the relationship between Lorelai and Rory on the show. Anna, a 19-year-old white college student from a working class background said, "I do watch and think I wish I could be like that with the relationship sometimes. I guess when they have their little chats together, I like that." Similarly, Katrina, who is 30 years old and is very close with her mother, explained that when watching the show she found herself wishing she and her mom had been a little more fun and spontaneous like Lorelai and Rory:

> I would sometimes watch the show and be like oh I wish that, you know, we were… our relationship was more casual and like, you know, we could like… you know, Lorelai was always like crawling into bed with Rory and chatting with her. You know, they would wear each other's clothes and that kind of thing. Just a little bit more fancy-free maybe is the word I'm looking for. Maybe a little bit more spontaneous or flexible.

Serena and I also discussed ways that watching television shows about mother-daughter relationships has affected her perspective on her own relationship with her mother. Serena's mother had passed away a few months before our interview. She and Serena had been very close and Serena always felt that she could talk to her mother about

anything. However, watching *Brothers & Sisters* and other shows portraying mothers and daughters makes Serena wish she had been more open with her mother about her personal life:

> I remember one episode of *Brothers & Sisters* where Kitty was talking to her mom Nora about the dating process with the congressman and all of that. And I do wish I was more open about my relationships with my male friends with my mother. And I don't know why I felt so protective about sharing that information with her because she was very open to us. But I was very hesitant about being open with my relationships to her. And that probably was because I was in a few relationships where down the line you just knew they weren't going to work out. So I may not have wanted her to ever think…to have to worry about me or anything like that.
>
> So when I do see things like that where the daughters are talking to the mother about their boyfriends and getting advice as far as "How would you handle this, Mom?" I really hate that I didn't do that. Because I even remember my mom asking like, "Who are you seeing? Who are you dating? What's going on?" And I was always like, "Oh, nothing, I'm just hanging out." And I don't know why I was so closed about that with her. Somebody that I know I could talk to about anything. So that, as far as when I see that on television, I'm always kind of like, I don't know why I'm so protective over that part of my life with her.

Harper also discussed how *Brothers & Sisters* has shaped her perspective on her life as well as her mother's life. Seeing the family dynamic between the five adult siblings on the show as well as the independence of Nora, the mother, makes Harper wish her life and her mother's life looked a little different. Harper's father left before she was born and her mother has been a single mom for all of Harper's life. Harper describes her mom as an incredible mother who has always made Harper the number one priority in her life.

Throughout our interview, Harper insinuated that she feels some guilt about the fact that her mother has not been in a romantic relationship for the entire 25 years of Harper's life. The relationship with Harper has always been the most important relationship in her mother's life. When Harper watches Nora Walker on *Brothers &*

Sisters as she starts dating at the age of 60, she wishes that her mom would do the same. Now that she is an independent adult in her mid-twenties, it seems Harper feels the need to "give back" to her mother by helping her move on with her life and, perhaps, find someone with whom she can share her life. Harper explained:

> Watching *Brothers & Sisters* definitely makes me want siblings. But then like I wonder would I have liked siblings? Like people always growing up were like "Oh are you sad that you were an only child?" And I'm like no I really wasn't. Because I got to have my mom to myself. And she let me bring a friend on every vacation we went on. And she let me have a friend for dinner like everyday. So I felt like I had the better end of the stick because I didn't have to share her, but watching *Brothers & Sisters* definitely makes me wish that I had a bigger family.
>
> And now that Nora's dating on the show it makes me wish my mom was dating. Or like sometimes I definitely wish for her that she was married or like that it worked out with my dad. Sometimes like she always jokes like "Oh it's too late now. Why do I want to meet someone now?" And I'm like, "But you have so much life left, like you know you're not a dried up prune." She calls herself a dried up prune, sadly. But I feel like, when I watch shows with like happy nuclear families I wonder if my mom wishes she had that. Like I sometimes feel like that's another reason why I want her to love this show because I'm like, "Look at Sally Field on her own." And like my mom doesn't care, but she *does* care. You can tell that she wishes that she had somebody in her life. So maybe she should watch it because then she would go out and get a boyfriend! I'm like, "Do you want to go on match.com, Mom? I'll make your profile, it'll be really fun."

Harper, along with Katrina, Anna, Ava, and Serena, recognized that her engagement with a television show about mother-daughter relationships affected her way of thinking about her own mother-daughter relationship by making her wish her life was different in some way. However, although these and other participants identified ways that the viewing experience shaped their perspectives on mother-daughter relationships, others believed that their engagement with these shows had no such effect.

"No Influence on *Me*"

When I asked participants if they noticed ways that the shows they watch might have any influence on their real relationships or the way they think about their relationships, several women essentially told me, "Definitely not." While the women in the previous sections of this chapter identified a number of ways in which these shows shape their lives, participants such as Kim, Rhonda, Livia, Maya, and Kindel believed these shows do not affect their lives in any noteworthy way, but that the shows may have some influence on others.

Both Kim and Rhonda viewed the shows they watch (*Brothers & Sisters* and *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* respectively) as a form of entertainment and nothing more. From their perspectives, their engagement with these shows does not lead them to think or behave any differently, particularly in terms of their mother-daughter relationships. Kim and Rhonda had both pointed out during their interviews that they saw no similarities between themselves and the characters in these shows. This lack of identification with the shows' characters seemed to be driving their belief that these shows do not shape their lives. Kim shared the following:

> No, because like I said, I watch *Brothers & Sisters* for sheer entertainment. And because I've never seen any similarities, I don't think that thought has ever popped through my head. So maybe now when I watch, things may pop up that might trigger my memory to think things like that. But no – as of now, I've never thought that.

As Kim mentioned, these women also explained that their sole purpose for watching these shows is to be entertained in a simple way. Rhonda explained this point in the following response:

> Oh no, I don't see any influence. It's just a comedy. You know, it's just…I don't take anything instructional from it. Just something light. Although the content

> may not seem light, it's handled in such a light, funny manner until it just… Because sometimes I deal with really sad, depressing situations in my work and it's something good to come home and see something light and airy, for me. Something different. So no, I don't take it seriously.

Although Rhonda claims here that watching *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* does not influence her life, her earlier comments actually point to the contrary. As mentioned in the "Cultivating Communication" section, Rhonda had told me earlier in our interview that when she watches this show with her teenage daughter, she uses it as a vehicle for talking to her daughter about drugs. In this sense, although she stated above that she doesn't "take anything instructional from it," it seems she actually does. Rhonda may have been thinking primarily of herself when she answered the question regarding the influence of the show on her life. That is, she may not recognize ways that she herself is influenced by watching a television show like *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*. She may believe that watching this show does not change her *own* perspective on life or mother-daughter relationships. However, her engagement with this show does, in fact, have some influence on her life in the sense that it has helped her to foster open communication with her teenage daughter about drugs.

Livia also believed that watching *Gilmore Girls* has not shaped her own relationship with her mother or the way she thinks about her relationship in any way. Interestingly, however, it seems that Livia believes this to be the case not because it would be impossible for a television show to have such an influence on her, but rather, because she *chooses* not to let *Gilmore Girls* affect her own relationship. She explained:

> But I don't really think I had thoughts like that because I think my relationship with my mom is what it is and I'm happy with it exactly the way it is. Like I wouldn't change based upon something that I see on television, because I think that our relationship is really good.

Maya shared a similar view on this:

> I liked *Gilmore Girls*, but actually I can't really say that there was ever anything in there that I would have compared my relationship with Mama and said, "I wish we were like that." No. I think there were a lot of things that mama would have showed them, but then it wouldn't make good television.

Finally, a couple of participants believed that although the shows they watch may not have a significant influence on them, these shows may be influential on the lives and perspectives of *others*, thus supporting the third person effect hypothesis mentioned earlier in this chapter (Perloff, 2002). For example, Rhonda shared her hope that watching *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* has a positive influence on her daughter. She shared the following:

> But I think it's good that my daughter sees that because hopefully she values how I treat her as opposed to, unfortunately, how some other children are treated and what other children have to go through. So it just shows her, hey, maybe it's not so bad at home.

Kindel, an avid viewer of *Gossip Girl*, shared her belief that the show does not shape her relationship with her mom, but it can and *should* have a positive influence on mothers of teenage girls. Kindel is in her early twenties and believes that her age prevents her from identifying with the teenage daughters in the show or their mothers. However, as she explains below, Kindel hopes that mothers of teenage daughters will use this show as an opportunity to talk to their daughters and, as a result, create a better relationship with their daughters than the relationships on the show:

> I'm not sure if *Gossip Girl* really influences me or the way I think at the age I'm at now. I think if I were younger it would. I do think this show opens up the doors for parents to talk to their kids about things… like about… I mean the whole advertising for this show is so provocative. I mean like this show is dangerous. And yea like if I were a mom now and I had a 15-year-old daughter that was watching this show, I would want to watch it with her, and be like, "Are kids your age really doing that? Are they having sex? Are you going to hotel parties?" I'm more aware of the bad things that kids can do than my mom was

> aware when we were growing up. And so I think that with a show like this you can really open the door for moms to talk to their daughters about things and for moms to watch and be like that's a shitty mom, I should try to be more involved than I am because look at how these kids are because their moms aren't around.

Conclusion

Each of the participants in this chapter acknowledged ways in which their engagement with fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television influences their own lives and mother-daughter relationships. From the perspective of these women, the most common effects the shows have on their real lives include: first, the engagement with these shows cultivating communication between mothers and daughters; second, mother-daughter television shows becoming integrated and shared life experiences for mothers and daughters; third, participants modeling themselves and their relationships after the characters and relationships in the shows; fourth, participants appreciating their mother-daughter relationships more as a result of watching the shows; fifth, engagement with the television shows leading mothers and daughters to seek something different in their own lives and relationships; and finally, a shared belief among some participants that these shows do *not* have an influence on their real relationships, but that these portrayals may have such an effect on others.

The next chapter will provide a summation of the purpose of this study as well as the key findings, further insight around how these findings relate to previous research on mother-daughter relationships, the theoretical implications of this study, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

For many years, research in such fields as sociology, psychology, and women's studies has shown that mother-daughter relationships play a significant role in shaping women's lives. Media studies research has demonstrated that television shapes societal perceptions and identities of women by reinforcing ideologies of gender, including ideologies about what it means to be a good mother or what constitutes a "normal" mother-daughter relationship. As this study has shown, media discourses such as these may influence how women engage in and make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships.

The purpose of this study was to understand how mothers and daughters of diverse backgrounds interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television shows, make sense of their own relationships through their engagement with these shows, and perceive effects that this engagement may have on their lives and relationships. I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with mothers and daughters of various ages, races, and social classes in order to analyze this process from the perspective of the audience. Using this method, I explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How do mothers and daughters of different racial and social class backgrounds interpret portrayals of mother-daughter relationships between female characters in television shows of the 21st century?

RQ2: How do these mothers and daughters make sense of their own mother-daughter relationships through their engagement with these shows?

RQ3: From the perspectives of these mothers and daughters, how and to what

extent does their engagement with fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television influence their own lives and mother-daughter relationships?

As the interview data revealed, the participants in this study used a number of interpretation strategies in processing and talking about mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch. Among these strategies, three stood out as the most common: first, participants criticizing the televised relationships; second, participants admiring and, in some cases, idolizing the televised relationships; and third, participants identifying relationships and storylines as realistic and/or unrealistic.

When asked to discuss the mother-daughter relationships in the shows they watch, many participants were quick to criticize the relationships in the shows. In fact, the participants in this study were much more likely to criticize the relationships than they were to admire or idolize them. This criticism seemed to be driven by the participants' desire to validate their own lives and mother-daughter relationships.

Participants criticized television mothers such as Emily Gilmore of *Gilmore Girls*, Ellis Grey of *Grey's Anatomy*, Lorelai Gilmore of *Gilmore Girls*, Nora Walker of *Brothers & Sisters*, and Lily van der Woodsen of *Gossip Girl*, for a number of different reasons. Some believed, for example, that the mother characters on these shows tried too hard to be their daughters' best friend instead of being a true mother figure. Several participants also argued that some of the television mothers were too controlling or restrictive with their daughters, while others did not have a strong enough presence in their daughters' lives. As they criticized these relationships, participants such as Cathy, Faye, and Kindel also stated that they would not want a mother-daughter relationship like

those in the television shows they watch. In addition, a few participants, including Colleen, Kate, and Maya, criticized the tendency of television shows to focus primarily on the negative aspects of mother-daughter relationships.

Although the most common way the women I interviewed interpreted the television relationships was through criticism, the participants in this study also admired and, in some cases, idolized the relationships in the shows they watch. Several participants, for example, admired the relationship between Lorelai and Rory on *Gilmore Girls*, because of the strength of their relationship and the positive effect it has on both Rory's and Lorelai's lives. Other participants found redeeming qualities in mothers such as Ellis Grey from *Grey's Anatomy*, Emily Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls,* and Janine Payne from *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, all of whom received mostly criticism from other participants. In addition, a few mothers who participated in this study sympathized with mothers on television and emphasized their admiration for the best qualities of these characters and their relationships. Finally, rather than admiring the relationships themselves, a few participants praised the television shows and how these shows construct mother-daughter relationships.

The data analysis also revealed that about half of my participants identified the relationships and storylines in the shows as realistic and/or unrealistic. Interestingly, most of these participants quickly made this assessment without me asking them to do so. Participants such as Maria and Sally found the relationship between Lorelai and Rory Gilmore unrealistic because it was essentially "too perfect" – that is, from their perspectives, it would be very unlikely that Lorelai and Rory would get along so well and argue so rarely in "real life." On the other hand, other participants believed that the

relationship on *Grey's Anatomy* between Meredith Grey and her mother Ellis Grey seemed extreme and unrealistic, given that these characters tended to yell at each other more than they talked to each other. Cathy and Livia viewed the Lorelai-Rory relationship on *Gilmore Girls* as realistic because they found it to be very true to their own lives.

For some participants, however, certain aspects of the relationships in the show seemed realistic while others felt unrealistic. Cathy, for example, found the relationship between Lorelai and Rory Gilmore to be very true to her relationship with Anna. However, she also found Lorelai and Rory's lifestyle unrealistic. From her perspective as a working class mother of five who is frequently concerned about her family's financial situation, Cathy found it unrealistic that, although Lorelai is a young single mom, money rarely seems to be a concern for her.

Overall, the nature and extent of the participants' criticism and/or admiration for the fictional mother-daughter relationships depended on the extent to which the televised relationships were similar to or different from their own reality. When they see elements of these TV relationships that seem very different from their own, they tend to think that these elements of the televised relationship must be unrealistic. Similarly, when these women recognize similarities between their own relationship and the relationships in the shows, they are more likely to identify aspects of the televised relationships as realistic. On the whole, most participants tended to use their own relationships as a standard by which to evaluate the mother-daughter relationships on television.

In addition, the women in this study employ a variety of sensemaking strategies as they engage with portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television and consider

how these portrayals relate to their own relationships. A few of these strategies emerged as the most prevalent among these women: first, participants defining their own relationships through their connection to the relationships on television; second, participants relating directly to the television characters' experiences as mothers/daughters and, thereby, understanding themselves and their relationships on a deeper level; and third, participants characterizing and justifying their mother-daughter relationships by distinguishing themselves from the characters and relationships in the television shows they watch.

Many of the participants easily identified connections between themselves and their relationships and the characters and relationships in the shows and, in the process, they defined their own mother-daughter relationships through these connections. Some participants focused on positive similarities, as the strong, supportive, loving mother-daughter relationships on some of the shows felt like reflections of their own relationships. A few of the women focused on negative similarities, as they saw stronger similarities between their own relationships and the more dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships on prime time television.

About half of the participants in this study also went a step beyond pointing out similarities between their relationships and the relationships in the shows and explained how they relate to and feel a significant connection with the characters in these shows. For some, their ability to relate to the characters on a deeper level is the main reason they watch the show. These women who truly related to the characters were also the most dedicated viewers of their shows. In other words, the greater the connection they felt to the characters, the greater their investment in the show.

However, although about half of the participants in this study focused on similarities between their relationships and those in the shows, even more of them defined their own relationships by emphasizing important differences between their relationships and those in the television shows they watch. Many of the women who employed this sensemaking strategy seemed to feel more comfortable describing their relationship by pointing out all of the ways that they were *not* like the relationships in the shows.

A number of participants, including Cathy, Maya, Amy, Kelly, Kim and others, focused on class differences and racial differences between themselves and the characters. They explained why fundamental differences such as these shape the lives and relationships of both themselves and the mothers and daughters on television. For some participants, such as Rhonda, race and class became important in the selection of shows to watch. Rhonda, for example, deliberately chose to watch shows such as *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* rather than shows that portray "white world," because she felt that she could more easily relate to African American characters on television. Race and class also shaped the participants' assumptions about why the mothers and daughters on television behaved in particular ways within the context of their mother-daughter relationships. For example, participants such as Amy and Livia attributed Emily Gilmore's snobbishness and elitist attitude toward Lorelai to her upper class status, while other participants including Serena, Cathy, and Sally assumed that Cristina Yang on *Grey's Anatomy* and Lane Kim on *Gilmore Girls* had distant and difficult relationships with their mothers because of their Korean backgrounds. In addition, some participants, including Katrina, Sally, Maria, Ava, and Serena, emphasized differences between their

relationships and those in the shows in terms of how the mothers and daughters relate to one another and interact with each other, the role they play in one another's lives, and how the make-up and dynamics of their families shape their relationships.

Furthermore, many of the participants in this study acknowledged ways in which the television shows have had some sort of effect on their lives and relationships. For some of these women, viewing these shows may have influenced their behavior in their everyday lives, particularly in terms of their mother-daughter relationships. For others, engaging with these shows has shaped their perspectives on their own relationships and/or mother-daughter relationships in general. However, a number of participants believed that the shows have no real influence on their everyday lives, but acknowledged the possibility that the portrayals may have an influence on the lives of others.

For a few women, the experience of watching the shows cultivated communication between themselves and their mother or daughter. Others explained that the show became an integrated part of their lives and an important shared experience between mother and daughter. A few participants also acknowledged ways in which they emulated or deliberately chose *not* to emulate the characters and relationships in the shows. Among those who acknowledged that the fictional portrayals shaped their perspectives of their real mother-daughter relationships, some found that the viewing experience led them to appreciate their real mother-daughter relationship more, while others found that watching the show made them wish their lives or relationships were somehow different.

Filling Gaps in the Literature

This study makes a number of contributions to research in several academic fields. For example, the results of this study extend the literature on mother-daughter relationships in a few ways. For many years, research on the topic of mother-daughter relationships has been focused primarily within the fields of sociology, psychology, and family studies. The current study makes a significant contribution by bringing popular culture into this discussion. This study examines how popular culture texts shape discourses of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships by studying how real mothers and daughters interpret television portrayals of mother-daughter relationships and make sense of their own relationships through their engagement with these portrayals. This study also extends the mother-daughter relationship literature by focusing on women of various backgrounds in terms of age, race, and class, whereas the larger body of research on this topic has focused typically on white, middle class women.

In addition, I took a feminist approach to studying mother daughter relationships on television. By interviewing female television viewers about their lives and experiences, my study emphasizes the personal stories of these women and privileges their voices in an effort to build knowledge about contemporary mother-daughter relationships from their experiences. I also used an intersectional strategy in this study in that I included both texts that portray mothers and daughters of different backgrounds (age, race, class, etc.) as well as real mothers and daughters of such varying backgrounds.

Finally, the current study also makes an important contribution to the field of media studies. Research on television and the family has neglected to focus specifically on mother-daughter relationships on television. While mother-daughter relationships

have been studied extensively in other fields as mentioned above, these relationships have received little attention in the field of media studies. This study, however, introduces research that focuses specifically on mother-daughter relationships in entertainment media, particularly from the perspective of the television audience.

Theoretical Implications

This study has also uncovered a process that television viewers experience as they engage with portrayals of relationships on television. The model on the next page provides an illustration of audience engagement with TV relationships – which, as the results of this study show, is a process of viewing, interpretation, sensemaking, and perceived effects. I begin this section with an explanation of the model and how it works. I have kept this explanation brief as each phase of the model has already been described in more depth in the results chapters as well as in the summary of key findings at the beginning of this chapter. I follow this with a discussion of how the theoretical perspectives of cultural studies, uses and gratifications, and social cognitive theory inform the key findings of this study and, more importantly, how the results of this study extend and, in some ways, go beyond the central tenets of these theoretical perspectives.

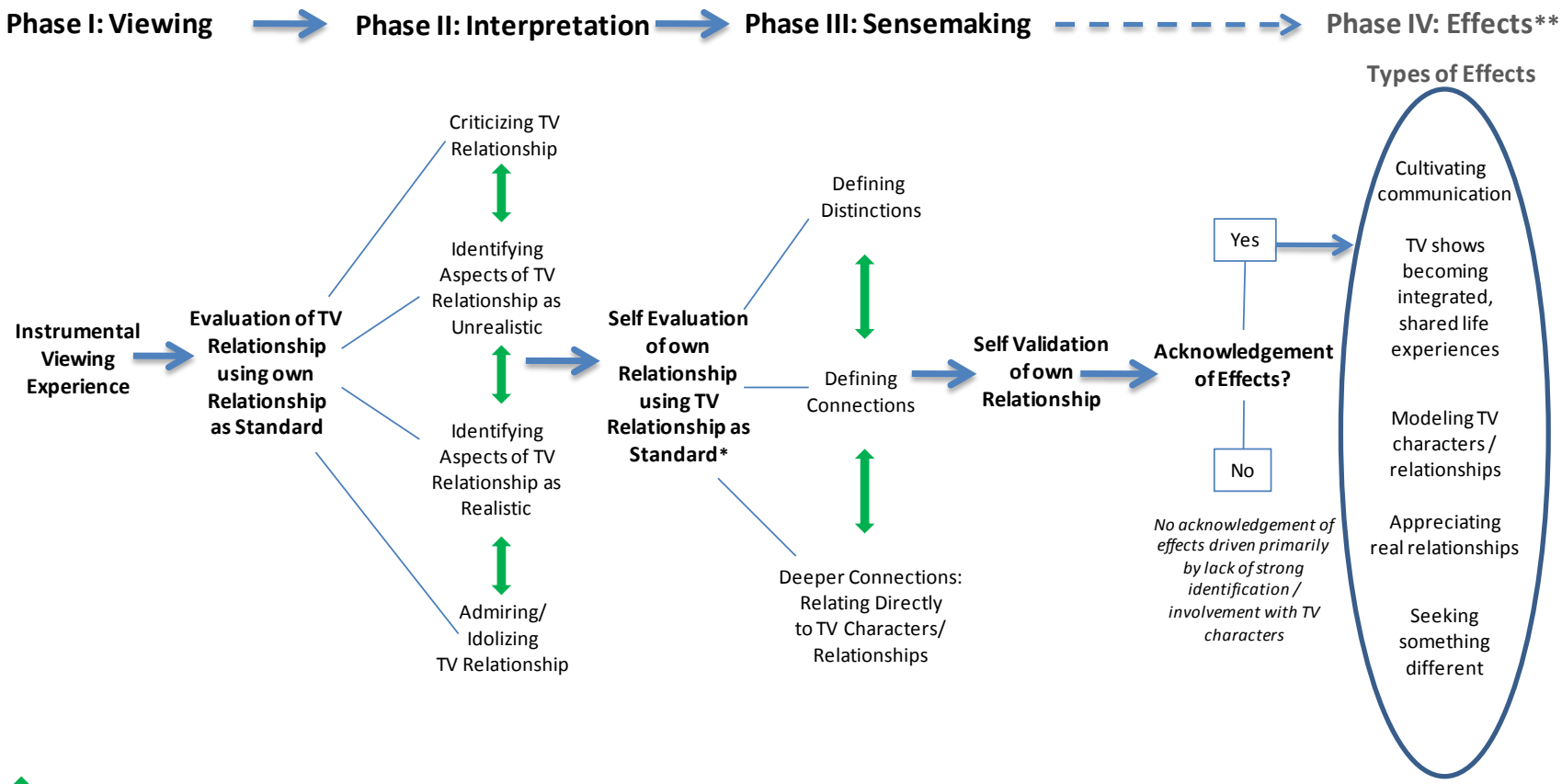
As the results of this study demonstrate, the process of audience engagement with TV relationships (as illustrated in the model on the next page) begins with an instrumental viewing experience. *Instrumental viewing* refers to prioritizing the content of a program over the medium of television (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999; Rubin, 1983). An instrumental viewer sits down in front of the television with the purpose of watching a specific program. On the other hand, a *ritualized viewer* prioritizes the medium over

content and usually uses television simply as a diversion or a way to pass the time (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999; Rubin, 1983). In other words, a ritualized viewer enters the viewing experience simply to watch television, regardless of what program they ultimately choose. According to Rubin (1983), ritualized television viewing involves less intentionality and selectivity on the part of the viewer than instrumental viewing.

The model begins with the instrumental viewing experience because each of my participants engaged in instrumental viewing of these shows. That is, they deliberately selected the shows I discussed with them and were regular viewers of these programs. These participants may engage in ritualized viewing at other times, as most viewers do (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). However, when it comes to these shows, these women engaged in an instrumental viewing experience. They sat down every week with the purpose of watching these programs specifically – they did not simply happen upon them during a ritualized viewing experience. In fact, my participants essentially had to be instrumental viewers of these shows in order to qualify for this study, as I deliberately sought out women who were regular viewers of television shows portraying mothers and daughters who would be able to speak knowledgeably about the relationships in the shows.

The participants themselves determined which shows were included in this study in that when I asked them to choose a show for us to watch and discuss in our interview, I specifically requested that they select a show they knew well. This resulted in a relatively short list of shows with which these women were most familiar, including *Gilmore Girls, Brothers & Sisters, Grey's Anatomy, Tyler Perry's House of Payne, The O.C.*, and *Gossip Girl*. Therefore, rather than attempting to represent all mother-daughter

Audience Engagement with TV Relationships: A Process of Viewing, Interpretation, Sensemaking, and Perceived Effects



- Indicates interpretation and sensemaking strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

**Participants defined their own relationships by identifying connections between themselves and the relationships on television and/or by distinguishing themselves from the characters and relationships on television - hence the terms "defining connections" and "defining distinctions."*

All participants moved through Phases I, II, and III, but only some reached Phase IV. Phase IV is colored in gray and connected to the other phases with a dotted line to illustrate this difference.* ***Participants acknowledged experiencing one or more of the perceived effects listed here.

relationships in American television of the 21st century, my intent in this study was for the selection of television texts to be driven by the participants' viewing experiences.

In the model, the viewing phase is followed by the interpretation phase, in which participants evaluate the TV relationships using their own relationship as a standard. Within this stage, participants use a few interpretation strategies, including criticizing the TV relationships, identifying aspects of the TV relationships as realistic and/or unrealistic, and admiring/idolizing the television relationships.

Participants then move into the sensemaking stage, in which they make sense of their own relationships through their engagement with the shows. In this phase, participants evaluate their relationships using the TV relationships as a standard. As part of this phase, the women I interviewed use one or more sensemaking strategies, including defining their relationships through distinctions between themselves and the characters and relationships in the shows, defining their relationships through connections between themselves and the characters and relationships in the shows, and making deeper connections by relating directly to the characters and relationships in the shows.

Ultimately, the participants' evaluations of the TV relationships and their own relationships lead to the second part of the sensemaking phase: self validation. The participants argue for the value of their own relationships and explain why their own relationships represent what a mother-daughter relationship *should* be.

Finally, most of the participants acknowledged effects that their engagement with these shows has had on their lives and relationships. Those who did not acknowledge such effects also did not identify as strongly with the characters in the shows as some of the other participants. In other words, identification and involvement with the TV

characters and relationships play a significant role in determining how and to what extent engagement with TV relationships leads viewers to perceive effects on their lives and relationships. Among those who did acknowledge effects, some of the effects they perceived included cultivating communication in their relationships; the TV shows becoming integrated, shared life experiences among mothers and daughters; participants modeling the TV characters and relationships in their everyday lives; participants appreciating their real relationships more; and finally, participants seeking something different in their relationships as a result of their engagement with the show.

The theoretical implications of these results can be more fully explained through a discussion of cultural studies, uses and gratifications, and social cognitive theory and how these theoretical perspectives become relevant to understanding the results of this study. I will also discuss the ways in which this study extends and goes beyond certain aspects of these theoretical perspectives and, thereby, makes an important contribution to the field of mass communication.

Cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall (1980) argue that the meaning of a media text depends on how it is interpreted by viewers. Feminist cultural studies theorists add that women's social locations in terms of gender, race, and class may shape their interpretations of television texts (Press, 1991). Cultural studies research, therefore, focuses on the importance of understanding how viewers interpret media texts and make sense of their own lives through their engagement with these texts. Cultural studies informs the results of this study in that, as the model illustrates, viewers' interpretation and sensemaking strategies were a critical part of how they engaged with and drew meaning from the television shows they watch on a regular basis. Therefore, while

cultural studies provides a context within which to interpret the implications of this study, the results of this study also extend the theoretical perspective of cultural studies by explaining interpretation and sensemaking processes within the context of audience engagement with TV relationships. In addition, this study also goes beyond the interpretation focus of cultural studies by also explaining how and to what extent viewers' interpretation and sensemaking processes lead them to perceive effects that their engagement with television texts has on their everyday lives.

Uses and gratifications examines how people select particular media texts and use those texts to gratify their needs (Rubin, 2002). Uses and gratifications research has argued that media audiences' behavior is goal directed and driven by motives that vary depending on an individual's personal traits, social context, and interaction (Ebersole & Woods, 2007; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Rubin, 2002). These individuals take the initiative to choose the media they wish to use and then select particular messages from these media in order to gratify their needs (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Rubin, 2002). This initiative varies depending on the individual (Rubin, 2002).

An important part of the relevance of uses and gratifications to this study, therefore, is its emphasis on how individual differences and choices constrain direct media effects (Rubin, 2002). When it comes to the effects phase of audience engagement with TV relationships, individual differences determine how and to what extent viewers acknowledge effects. Those viewers who were most involved with and identified most strongly with the TV characters were most likely to perceive effects that their engagement with these portrayals has on their lives and relationships, while those

who did not experience such strong identification and involvement were much less likely to perceive such effects.

Social cognitive theory also provides a conceptual framework for understanding media effects and how individual differences, particularly in the form of psychological processes, might constrain those effects (Bandura, 2002). An important part of this perspective is its focus on how individuals learn behaviors and attitudes from media models (Bandura, 2002). According to Albert Bandura (2002), this process may be enhanced by important individual factors, including: an individual's symbolizing capability, or the extent to which individuals use symbols to "give meaning, form, and continuity to their experiences" and to inform their judgments and actions (Bandura, 2002, p. 122); self-reflective capability, which involves using "social verification" to evaluate one's views against the views of others (Bandura, 2002, p. 122); vicarious capability, which refers to our ability as human beings to learn not only through direct experience, but also by observing people's actions and the consequences that result from those actions; involvement with media models; and, finally, the extent to which an individual's reality depends on the media's symbolic environment (Bandura, 2002). Bandura (2002) argues that "a vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media" (p. 126).

Social cognitive theory informs the results of this study in a number of ways, especially in terms of understanding how individual differences affect interpretations of media portrayals of mother-daughter relationships as well as the types and degrees of effects that may result from engagement with these portrayals. For example, the level of

involvement with TV characters was central to the willingness of participants in this study to acknowledge effects on their lives and relationships. This supports Bandura's (2002) argument that level of involvement with media models affects the extent to which individuals learn from and model their own behaviors and attitudes after media models.

Media studies research has identified different types of involvement with television characters. A viewer's level of involvement can be defined as the extent to which he or she engages in one or more of these types of involvement, including *parasocial interaction*, which refers to a viewer being involved in a "role relationship" with a television character; *identification*, which refers to a viewer sharing the television character's perspective in some way; *wishful identification*, or when a viewer wishes to imitate the character; and *interest in favorite character*, which involves the viewer caring about the character (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Cohen, 1999; Hoffner, 1996). The participants in this study who engaged in these types of involvement (e.g., Faye and Maria, who imitated the relationship between Lorelai and Rory Gilmore, and Vivian, who strongly identified with Nora Walker from *Brothers and Sisters*) were most likely to perceive effects that their engagement with these characters has had on their lives.

In addition, from Bandura's (2002) perspective, the extent to which an individual models the behavior and attitudes of television characters also depends to some extent on their motivation to do so. People are motivated by the successes of others who they view as similar to themselves, but are discouraged from modeling the behaviors and attitudes that have resulted in negative consequences for television characters (Bandura, 2002). In this study, Faye provides an important example of this. She explained more than once

during our interview that she and her mother Maria have modeled certain aspects of their relationship after the Lorelai-Rory relationship on *Gilmore Girls*. Faye's engagement with this show has led her to interpret Lorelai and Rory's mother-daughter relationship as a success story and to model her behavior and attitudes within the context of her relationship with Maria after those of the characters in this show. Conversely, several participants lacked such motivation to model their relationships after those on the shows because they were not as involved with and did not identify as strongly with the characters in the shows.

While the theoretical perspectives of cultural studies, uses and gratifications, and social cognitive theory all inform the results of this study, this study also extends and, in some ways, goes beyond the central tenets of these theoretical perspectives. One of the ways it does so is by providing a new context in which to explore the types of phenomena examined within these theoretical perspectives. As mentioned earlier in this section, the model developed from this study extends cultural studies research by explaining interpretation and sensemaking strategies within the context of audience engagement with TV relationships. The model also goes a step beyond traditional cultural studies research by providing an understanding of how and to what extent media audiences perceive effects of engagement with TV relationships on their lives and the factors that influence their willingness to acknowledge such effects.

This study also extends both uses and gratifications and social cognitive theories by explaining how both of these perspectives work within the context of audience engagement with TV relationships. In addition, this study goes beyond the *effect*s focus of uses and gratifications and social cognitive theories by examining in more depth

viewers' *interpretation* and *sensemaking* processes, during which they evaluate the TV relationships, as well as their own, and ultimately validate the value of their own relationships. Therefore, the most important distinguishing features of the model include: a focus on *evaluation* of TV relationships and viewers' own relationships, *self validation* of viewers' own relationships, and *perceived effects* on viewers' lives and relationships.

Finally, although the focus of this study was mother-daughter relationships, the process outlined in the model is not necessarily unique to mothers and daughters. In fact, this process may look very similar within the context of other personal relationships, including father-son relationships, romantic relationships, sibling relationships, and friendships.

Strengths, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this study demonstrate the value of using qualitative in-depth interviews to analyze audience engagement with mother-daughter relationships on television. Qualitative methods such as interviews are naturalistic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). That is, qualitative researchers study people and texts in natural settings and, in doing so, seek to understand how people make meaning out of their everyday lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I found it valuable to share the viewing experience with my participants as this set a very natural, comfortable mood as if we were friends watching the show in the participant's living room and chatting about it together. This also provided a great opportunity for me to relate to my participants through our shared knowledge of and affinity for the shows.

Qualitative methods proved useful in addressing the research questions in this study because my goal was to understand how women make sense of their everyday experiences of being mothers and/or daughters and how they negotiate the meaning of media texts they engage with on a regular basis. Rather than seeking quantifiable information from participants, qualitative research such as this is concerned with participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, the qualitative interviews I conducted allowed me to understand my participants' perspectives on their mother-daughter relationships and the mother-daughter relationships they watch on television. The interview process also allowed me to understand in great depth the process of viewing, interpretation, sensemaking and perceived effects my participants experience through their engagement with portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television. Finally, interviewing these women about their lives and relationships effectively fulfilled my goal of privileging their voices in this study and building knowledge based on their experiences.

One of the limitations of this study, however, was the third person effect. A few participants willingly acknowledged effects that the shows may have on others, but failed to recognize the effects that their engagement with the shows might have on their own lives and relationships. Because the effects discussed in this study are *perceived* effects, the tendency of some women to not acknowledge real effects could have limited the depth with which I was able to understand how their engagement with the shows affects their lives and relationships.

I also believe that my social location may have limited the results to some degree. As I discussed in Chapter 7, Rhonda was the only woman of color I interviewed who

openly and emphatically criticized what she referred to as the "white world" of television to which she can not relate. Serena, on the other hand, did not criticize the underrepresentation of women of color on television until our "official" interview ended and I had turned my recorder off. In this conversation, Serena was very open about her concerns, but something about the interview itself kept her from sharing these views when the recorder was on. I believe that my social location as a young white female graduate student may have limited the degree to which some of my participants, particularly women of color like Serena, were willing to be completely honest regarding their perspectives on the construction of mother-daughter relationships on television. I am not necessarily assuming that participants were not completely honest with me, but I can not help but wonder how many of the other women of color in this study share the same views as Rhonda and Serena but did not feel comfortable sharing those views with me in any real depth.

In working toward a deeper and more nuanced understanding of audience engagement with television relationships, I believe future research in this area should address a number of different questions. For instance, the nature of the current study was such that only instrumental viewers of these shows participated in the study, which is why the model discussed earlier in this chapter begins with the instrumental viewing experience. This naturally begs the question, however, of how this process works among ritualized viewers of shows portraying relationships. Future research in this area should therefore focus on ritualized viewers with the goal of understanding how this process may work differently within the context of their viewing experience.

I would also like to understand how the findings of this study would apply to relationships between mothers and younger daughters. The youngest participants in this study were 19, so I did not focus specifically on relationships between mothers and pre-teen to teenage daughters. It would especially be interesting to examine these relationships given the popularity of several new prime-time shows portraying mothers and teenage daughters, including *Parenthood* and *The Good Wife*, both of which are currently in their second season. *Parenthood* portrays the mother-daughter relationships between Kristina Braverman and her 16-year-old daughter Haddie Braverman as well as Sarah Braverman and her 16-year-old daughter Amber Holt. *The Good Wife* portrays the relationship between Alicia Florrick, a lawyer and wife of a state district attorney recently involved in a very public sex scandal, and her 14-year-old daughter Grace Florrick.

Furthermore, I believe that future research on this topic should go beyond fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships to examine audience engagement with mother-daughter relationships in reality TV shows such as the *Real Housewives* series, *The Biggest Loser*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Amazing Race*, *Survivor*, *Teen Mom*, and *16 & Pregnant*, to name a few. Mother-daughter relationships have been and continue to be an important aspect of these and other shows in the reality TV genre. On season 10 of *The Biggest Loser*, for example, Lisa, one of the contestants, explained that her pre-teen daughter was her motivation for going on the show to lose weight and get healthy. Earlier that year, she had taken her daughter to the ER because she couldn't see. She soon found out this happened because her daughter was severely dehydrated after starving herself, which she had been doing out of fear of becoming obese like her mom. The importance of this relationship in Lisa's life became an ongoing

theme of the show throughout the season. Similarly, a recent season of *The Amazing Race* included a mother/daughter pair who met for the first time through the show. The daughter, who had been adopted 21 years ago, always wanted to meet and have a relationship with her biological mother. In addition, older female contestants on reality shows such as *Survivor* often take on the role of "mother" and mother-daughter-like relationships often result that ultimately shape the experience of these characters on the show. As these examples illustrate, focusing on mother-daughter relationships in reality TV shows will add an important dimension to the study of audience engagement with mother-daughter relationships on television, as women watching these shows may view the mothers and daughters in the shows as more "real," and therefore perhaps more relatable.

In going beyond fictional portrayals of mother-daughter relationships, future research should also examine audience engagement with constructions of mother-daughter relationships in the news. This could include portrayals of the relationships between public figures such as Michelle Obama and her daughters Malia and Sasha, Hilary Clinton and Chelsea Clinton, and Sarah Palin and her daughters Bristol, Willow, and Piper Palin.

Finally, future research should also examine audience engagement with other types of television relationships, including father-son relationships, romantic relationships, sibling relationships, and friendships. It will be interesting to understand how the model described above works within the context of these types of relationships.

This study has demonstrated the importance of understanding how women engage with portrayals of mother-daughter relationships on television and how this engagement

shapes their lives and relationships. It will therefore be important for communications scholars, including myself, to continue to pursue this line of research and to expand it by addressing some of the additional questions and areas of focus discussed here. It is also my hope that this study will encourage more scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, women's studies, and family studies to consider the importance of women's engagement with popular culture texts in their analyses of mother-daughter relationships and the central role that these relationships play in women's lives.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Could you tell me about your relationship with your mother/daughter?

    a. How do you and your mother/daughter relate to one another?

    b. Would you say that you identify with one another? If so, in what ways?

    c. How, if at all, do you think you might shape one another's life choices?

2. Based on your own experiences, how do you define what it means to be a good mother/daughter?

    At this point, the interviewee and I watched an episode of one of the shows. Then I continued with the following questions:

3. Now that we've finished watching this episode of _____, the first thing I want to ask you is how do you see mother-daughter relationships portrayed in this episode?

    a. How do the mother(s) and daughter(s) relate to one another?

    b. Do they identify with one another? If so, in what ways?

    c. How, if at all, do they seem to shape one another's life choices?

4. How might you relate your own experience in your relationship with your mother/daughter to what you see in the show?

5. How do you see yourself and your relationship with your mother/daughter represented in this show?

6. What, if any, aspects of your relationship with your mother/daughter do you *not* see represented in this show?

7. How do you think this show defines what it means to be a good mother/daughter?

8. Do you see the mother-daughter relationship in this show affecting your own mother-daughter relationship in any way? If so, how? If not, why not?

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EDUCATION

Ph.D., Mass Communication, Syracuse University Expected May 2011
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Dissertation:
Audience Engagement with Mother-Daughter Relationships in Prime-Time Television of the 21st Century: A Qualitative Analysis of Interpretation, Sensemaking, and Perceived Effects
Adviser: Carol Liebler, Ph.D.

M.A., Media Studies, Syracuse University May 2006
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Thesis: *Gender Roles and Femininity in the* Personal TLC *Series: A Qualitative Analysis of Audience and Text*
Adviser: Carol Liebler, Ph.D.

B.A., Communication and Philosophy, University of Scranton May 2003

TEACHING INTERESTS

I am prepared to teach courses in such areas as:

- Media and Diversity (Race, Gender, Social Class, Sexuality, etc.)
- Film, Television, and Popular Culture Studies
- Communications/Media and Society
- Communication courses cross-listed with Women's Studies (e.g. Gender and Communication, Women and Media)
- Communication Theory and Research
- Media Criticism
- Media Research
- Communications Law

RESEARCH INTERESTS

My research falls primarily under the umbrellas of critical and cultural studies and feminist media studies. I use both qualitative and quantitative methods to study how the media construct social groups who are marginalized on the basis of their gender, race, social class, and/or sexuality and how and why media audiences interpret, identify with, reinforce, and/or challenge these media representations. I am also interested in studying how these individuals from marginalized social groups understand their own lives, relationships, and identities in relation to media portrayals.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University

Adjunct Professor

Race, Gender, and the Media (COM 346) — Fall 2008

This course of approximately 30 students provides an introduction to fundamental issues of diversity facing both media professionals and audiences.

Women in the Contemporary Media Environment (COM 400) — Spring 2008

I co-designed and co-taught this course of 15 students, which addresses contemporary issues regarding portrayals of women in media content, experiences of women working in the media, and how women's use of media shapes their everyday lives.

Communications and Society (COM 107) — Spring 2007, 2009

I co-taught this lecture-based course of 75 students, which provides an introduction to the mass media and their functions.

University Teaching Fellow — 2007– 2008

I served as one of 25 teaching associates chosen by the University's Graduate School to train incoming teaching assistants in its summer TA Orientation Program. I led small groups of teaching assistants in microteaching and discussions on pedagogy, academic integrity, and diversity issues in the classroom, and developed panel presentations for large group sessions.

Teaching Assistant

Communications Law for Advertising & Public Relations (COM 507) — Fall 2007

Communications and Society (COM 107) — Fall 2006, Fall 2005

Communications Law for Journalists (COM 505) — Spring 2005, Fall 2004

Guest Lectures

"Rock Star, Diva, or Princess: A Qualitative Analysis of the 'Ultimate Girl Experience' at Club Libby Lu"
Presented in Fashion Advertising — Spring 2008

"Regulation of Commercial Speech"
Presented in Communications Law for Advertising and PR — Fall 2007

"Access to Information and Public Places: The Freedom of Information Act, the Privacy Act, and Sunshine Laws"
Presented in Communications Law for Advertising and PR — Fall 2007

"Libel Law and its Implications for Print Journalists"
Presented in News Writing — Fall 2007

"The Film Industry"
Presented in Communications and Society — Fall 2006

"Diversity in the News: A Discussion of *White News* by Don Heider"
Presented in Communications and Society — Fall 2006

"The Freedom of Information Act and its Implications for Journalists"
Presented in Communications Law for Journalists — Spring 2005

"The Freedom of Information Act and Access to Public Places"
Presented in Communications Law for Journalists — Fall 2004

Participant, Future Professoriate Program,
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications 2006-2008

Attended seminars and professional development workshops about teaching and research. Worked with a teaching mentor to refine my teaching strategies and explore future teaching opportunities. Developed a teaching portfolio in anticipation of earning a Certificate in University Teaching in May 2009.

RESEARCH / PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Research Analyst January 2010 – Present
The Nielsen Company, Florham Park, NJ

Work within the Continuous Analytics group in the Consumer Research division of The Nielsen Company, supporting clients in the Consumer Packaged Goods industry. I conduct consumer research projects that help clients address their most pressing business issues in such areas as marketing, sales, consumer targeting, consumer purchase dynamics, and brand management.

Senior Research Analyst June - September 2009
Nielsen Entertainment, The Nielsen Company, Los Angeles

Worked with the Nielsen Entertainment Television Strategic Marketing Science team on custom research projects for clients in the television industry. These projects used applied marketing research techniques to provide insights on branding, programming, ad sales, and in-depth consumer/viewer profiling. I contributed to all aspects of the research process, including identifying clients' core business needs, proposal writing, data collection and analysis, and report writing.

Research Assistant Summer 2007 & Summer 2008
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University

Conducted a critical feminist study with Dr. Carol Liebler of the "ultimate girl experience" at Club Libby Lu, a mall-based retail experience store targeting "tween" girls. This study includes

textual analysis of the store, its website, and its products, participant observation, interviews with mothers who take their daughters to Club Libby Lu, and content analysis of media coverage of Club Libby Lu.

Research Assistant Summer 2007
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University
Conducted research with Dr. Sue Alessandri on a study of Wegmans Food Markets and how the company visually represents its corporate identity.

Research Assistant Spring 2006
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University
Conducted research with Dr. Carol Liebler on a variety of projects relating to women and girls, the media, body image, and the role of feminist theory in Mass Communication research.

Research Assistant Summer 2005
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University
Conducted research with Dr. Brenda Wrigley on a variety of projects relating to women, public relations, and communications. The research included conducting focus groups, in-depth interviews, electronic research, case study research, and analysis of qualitative data. The main study conducted was an examination of the public relations implications of Wells College's decision to go co-ed and the ways in which the administration communicated with its publics about the decision.

MANUSCRIPTS/CONFERENCE PAPERS

O'Brien, M. Gender roles and femininity in the *Personal TLC* series: A qualitative analysis of audience receptivity. Under review for publication.

Wrigley, B.J., Lloyd, C., O'Brien, M., & Staed, R. Coed or dead: an analysis of the change management process at Wells College. Hawaii International Conference on the Social Sciences, Honolulu, HI (May 2007).

Liebler, C.M. & O'Brien, M. Pop stars, divas, and princesses: Little girls as spectacle at Club Libby Lu. Accepted and to be presented at the Consumer Culture and the Ethical Treatment of Children Conference (November 2009).

O'Brien, M. Gender roles and femininity in the *Personal TLC* series: A qualitative analysis of audience receptivity. Cultural and Critical Studies Division: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) National Convention, San Francisco (August 2006).

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

O'Brien, M. (panelist). "Discussing from within: (Wo)mentoring across the academic lifecycle." Panel to be presented at the Annual Convention of the National Communication Association, San Diego (November 2008).

HONORS AND AWARDS

Certificate of University Teaching, Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University — May 2009

Certificate of Advanced Studies in Women's Studies, Women's Studies Department, Syracuse University — Expected May 2010

Teaching Fellowship, TA Program of the Graduate School, Syracuse University — 2007-2008

Teaching Associate, Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University — 2007-2008

Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, Syracuse University — 2005-2006

Graduate Assistantships in Teaching and Research S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University — 2004-2007

Professor Bernard J. McGurl Award for Excellence in Communication, University of Scranton — 2003

National Society of Collegiate Scholars Nomination, University of Scranton — 2003

Lambda Pi Eta Communication Honors Society Nomination, University of Scranton — 2003

ACADEMIC SERVICE

President, Newhouse Doctoral Student Organization, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University — 2007-2008
I was elected president of the doctoral student organization for the 2007-2008 academic year. My responsibilities included organizing events for my classmates and acting as a liaison between students and faculty.

University Teaching Fellow, Syracuse University — 2007-2008

Communications Law Faculty Search Committee (student member) Syracuse University — 2007-2008

Teaching Associate Representative and Guest Speaker, Communications Teaching Assistant Orientation, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications — 2006-2008

Media Literacy Day, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University — 2007
At this annual Newhouse School event, I participated in teaching sixth graders from a local public school about media literacy and its significance in their daily lives

Student Representative and Guest Speaker, Media Studies Program Open House, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University — 2005-2008

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication
International Communication Association
National Communication Association

REFERENCES

Carol Liebler, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director of Doctoral and Media Studies Programs, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University
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