

The Psychology of The Simpsons

Edited by Alan Brown, PhD with Chris Logan

Completely
Unauthorized

D'oh!

BEER

DO-NUTS

MARGE

MORE
BEER

STUPID
FLANDERS

MOE'S

NAPS

SEX

PORK
CHOPS

TEMPORARILY
OUT OF SERVICE

BART, LISA AND
THE OTHER ONE

KWIK-E MART

LOUAC

TV



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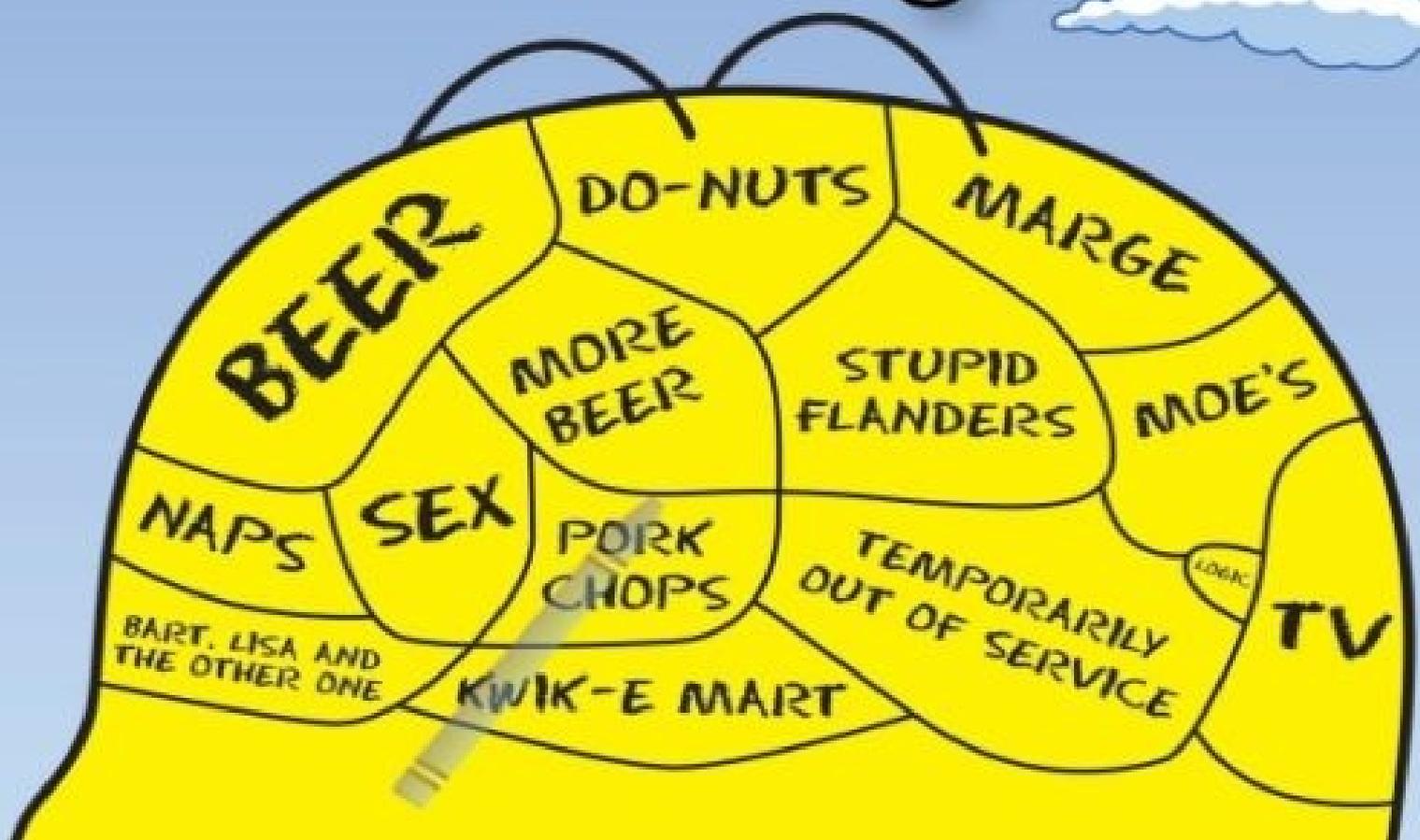


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The Psychology of The Simpsons

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BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.

The Family Simpson

Like Looking in a Mirror?

Misty K. Hook, Ph.D.

THE UNITED STATES is a country that talks a lot about “family values.” That particular phrase is often used as the rationale for major social, political and even business decisions. But what do “family values” mean to individual people? In general, people tend to look at families through two lenses: (a) how their own family operates; and (b) how they think other families operate. We tend to think of our family as “normal,” but at the same time we judge the quality of our family life based on what we think other families are like. We form our views of other families based on what other people tell us . . . and what we see on television.

This can be unfortunate, because we tend to look at other families through rose-colored glasses. We have to rely on what other people tell us—and their accuracy is often in question. After all, who wants to admit that their family is flawed? Family processes are shrouded in secrecy. Gone are the days when we all lived together and could actually see how families talked and played together, what kinds of discipline methods were used, and what roles everyone played. Now we have to guess how it is that other families behave or rely on possibly erroneous self-reports.

Given this secrecy and the reluctance people have to let others into their private lives, where are we to look for examples of family life? Why, TV, of course! By making hits of TV shows like *The Brady Bunch*, *The Waltons* and *The Cosby Show*, we showed ourselves to be fascinated by other families. However, the early television version of families was too sanitized, too perfect. The Bradys didn't even have a toilet and six kids shared a bathroom without maiming or killing each other! Anyone who has ever had to share a bathroom with even one sibling knows that is very optimistic. The Walton and Huxtable parents rarely lost their cool! Clearly these were Stepford parents. We enjoyed these shows because they portrayed families as we wished they were in real life. Of course, it's all too easy to view our own families poorly in comparison.

Into this atmosphere of warm, loving and ideal families came the fledgling network FOX. They had other ideas about families—they could be loud, hostile, deviant and quite dysfunctional—and the programming reflected these notions. Thus, in its early days, FOX brought us two of the most dysfunctional family sitcoms to date: *Married with Children* and *The Simpsons*. The Bundy family depicted in *Married with Children* was too outrageous to be seen by most viewers as anything but a parody. The Simpson family was different. While they too could be rude and insulting, there was a soft core at the center of their dysfunction. This was a family who, at the end of the day, were there for each other. They loved each other and this could clearly be seen through their forgiveness of each other, their unity in the face of external adversity, their sacrifices and their own brand of affection. In many ways they were more like our families than the Bradys or the Cosbys. It was these qualities (along with all the things that the Simpsons get away with) that, in a *TV Guide* poll, made so many people choose the Simpsons as the TV family to which they would most like to belong.

In the Simpsons, we have a family that draws people into their world week after week, year after year. What does their family say about us? Are they the American family? Do they fit into our cultural ideals about families in general? Do they reflect our way of life, our family members, and our family values? Are they truly dysfunctional? In short, we need a deeper analysis of the Simpsons as a family within the larger system of families in the United States.

General Family Demographics

As a family, the Simpsons accurately reflect a large portion of the families in the United States. They are Caucasian, middle-class and have a typical family structure in that their nuclear family is comprised of two married heterosexual adults, three kids, a cat and a dog. They live near some extended family, including a grandfather, a grandmother (occasionally) and two aunts. Gender roles are somewhat traditional as Homer is the primary breadwinner and Marge, although she dabbles in outside careers, is generally a stay-at-home mother. Homer is allowed to come and go pretty much as he pleases, while Marge volunteers in the community and rules over the domestic domain. Thus, from the outside looking in, it seems as though the Simpsons look like a “normal” middle-class, Caucasian family. However, upon further examination, this is not exactly the case.

Family Hierarchy

When thinking about families, you usually expect to see a clear hierarchy. When there are grandparents around, they frequently hold considerable influence. They are followed in power by the parental dyad, with the father generally being the most powerful. Directly below the couple are the other adults in the family (like aunts and uncles). At the lowest end of the power spectrum are the children, with the most power being held by the oldest child and the youngest having the least amount of power. At first glance, the Simpson family appears to totally disrupt the traditional power hierarchy . . . but do they really?

In contrast to what you would expect to find, it seems as if Grandpa Abraham Simpson has the least amount of power in the family. He is treated as little more than a child and is often even ignored by Marge, Homer and the kids frequently laugh at his failing memory and his ineffectual attempts to get what he wants. Even Bart and Lisa do not listen to him. He is left behind, forgotten and rarely invited to spend time with the family (Marge: “Are you really going to ignore Grandpa for the rest of your life?” Homer: “Of course not, Marge. Just for the rest of his life”).

However ineffectual he is now, Abraham Simpson had a considerable influence in the formation of Homer’s character. Flashbacks repeatedly show what an angry, critical father he was to Homer. He yelled, used corporal punishment and constantly belittled Homer’s attempts to have fun, date and excel at various activities (Abe to young Homer: “You president? This is the greatest country in the world. We’ve got a whole system set up to keep people like you from ever becoming president”). These interactions stick with Homer. Marge has only to remind him of how his father treated him and

Homer will change the way he treats Bart, Lisa and Maggie (like the time when he became coach of Bart's football team and forced Bart to be quarterback despite his obvious lack of ability). Homer will become gentler and more supportive because he is determined to avoid being like his father. Homer also tries in vain to repair the relationship with Abraham and continuously seeks his approval. However, Abe continues to be just as critical as ever ("The good Lord allows us to grow old for a reason: so we can find fault in everything he's made"). Grandpa Simpson is not without influence, but he certainly does not play the traditional grandfather role in the family hierarchy.

In most traditionally gendered families, the father holds more power than the mother. Is this true for Homer and Marge? Homer does earn most of the money, tends to the finances (as is shown by his constant loss of wealth), metes out discipline to the children and does little, if any, of the household chores. He also is consulted on all major decisions. In contrast, Marge takes care of all of the household tasks and seems to defer to Homer on most major decisions. So, it seems as though Homer holds more power than Marge. However, Marge makes her desires known. She is good at subtly influencing Homer's decisions and he consistently asks for help. Moreover, whenever Marge gets truly fed up with Homer's behavior, she takes charge and tells him what he needs to do. In an effort to make Marge take him back, he tells her, "I know now what I can offer you that no one else can: complete and utter dependence!" Consequently, although she has to endure a lot to get it, in the end Marge almost always gets what she wants. As such, it looks as though Marge holds the most power in the family although she lets Homer believe that he has more than he actually does.

For Bart and Lisa, the power equation is a little less clear. Bart tends to bully Lisa until he gets what he wants. He is free to be as insulting and rude to her as he wants to be. That is, until she gets fed up. Then, like Marge, Lisa takes charge and gets her way. Whenever Lisa gets hurt or angry, Bart will almost always suffer until he backs down and apologizes. For example, when Bart was being particularly mean to Lisa on a school field trip, she obtained a restraining order against him. Bart had to live outside the house and be in school with Groundskeeper Willie in order to adhere to the legal requirements of Lisa's order. Bart suffered until he became so wild that Lisa forgave him and he ended up apologizing for his behavior. Consequently, the power is somewhat shared between Bart and Lisa despite Bart being the older child. As a baby, Maggie does indeed have the smallest amount of power.

When analyzing the power differential between the parental dyad and the kids, the situation is a bit more difficult. Like many of today's parents, Marge and Homer do not seem to understand appropriate and consistent discipline. Thus, Bart, Lisa and Maggie (yes, Maggie—how many other babies show up like the local billionaire and get away with it?) do what they want without much parental interference. Marge and Homer rarely get the kind of obedience that they wish to have from their children. As Bart once said, "I can't promise I'll try. But I'll try to try." Thus, it seems that the kids have more power than the adults. However, just as in the parental dyad and the sibling subsystem, the kids have more power until it becomes too much. Then Marge and Homer take charge and the power reverts back to its usual structure. For example, for punishment, Homer once refused to let Bart watch the Itchy Scratchy movie. Homer dreamt that Bart ended up becoming a Supreme Court Justice as a result of Homer's demonstration of parental power. Similarly, when Marge puts her foot down and exerts her power, the kids fall into line. When Bart was caught stealing, Marge is extremely upset. For once Bart shows remorse: "Mom, I'm really sorry." Marge: "I know you are." Bart: "Is there anything I can do?" Marge: "I dunno (long pause). Why don't you go to bed?" Bart: "Okay." Consequently, Marge and Homer do have more power than the kids when they decide to wield it. This is as it should be.

Family Roles

Every family has roles for its members to play and these vary by the type and needs of the individual family. Family roles are continuous patterns of behavior through which family members meet the needs of the family as a whole. Each role comes with specific cultural and family expectations for how these roles should be performed. Roles can be anything from something general, like parent or child, to something more specific, like nurturer or family hero. For healthy family functioning, both instrumental and effective roles must be present. Instrumental roles are those that provide physical resources, make decisions and manage the family. In contrast, effective roles provide emotional support and encouragement. Family members usually play more than one role and they can change.

While there are a number of roles possible, there are five general roles that are vital for a healthy family: Provider, Nurturer, Teacher, Maintenance and Sexual Gratifier. Homer fills the role of Provider. He works at the Springfield Power Plant and his salary pays for the house, food and other necessities. Marge is the Nurturer and Teacher. She gives comfort and emotional support for every member of the family and provides the physical, emotional, educational and social development for Homer, Bart, Lisa and Maggie. The Maintenance role involves leadership, decision-making, handling family finances and maintaining appropriate roles with respect to extended family, friends and neighbors. Other responsibilities of this role include maintaining discipline and enforcing behavioral standards. Both Homer and Marge occupy this role to varying degrees. Homer makes some decisions, handles the finances and participates in discipline. However, Marge fulfills the role to a greater degree. She also makes decisions, disciplines the kids and makes sure Homer, Bart, Lisa and Maggie all behave appropriately. She is the one who insists that the family be kind to their neighbors, the Flanderses, when they do not want to do so. She makes certain all members are dressed suitably and behave as well as she can make them. During Lisa's wedding rehearsal dinner, Marge urgently whispers, "Bart! Homer! Maggie! Company eating rules!" Thus, Marge is the primary occupier of the Maintenance role. Indeed, she is the glue that keeps the family together.

However, she does not always have much influence over Homer. He frequently ignores her attempts to keep him within the bounds of correct society, like the time he decided to boycott church or when he decided to gain as much weight as possible in order to be able to work at home. The final role for healthy families, the Sexual Gratifier, involves the parental dyad. Although *The Simpsons* is a family show, it is quite clear that Marge and Homer have a very satisfying sex life. They keep their relationship fresh by taking opportunities for new experiences. They've literally rolled in the hay, made out in a miniature golf windmill, taken a sexual enhancement tonic and had plenty of spicy sexual experiences. As such, both Marge and Homer fulfill this role.

The Simpson kids also have family roles. All families seek balance and attempt to present a good image (whatever it may be) to outsiders. Thus, children choose their roles based on what they think the family needs. The Simpson children fall into some classic roles. Lisa is the family hero, the perfectionist. She is an excellent student and is accomplished in many different areas. As she once exclaimed, "Ugh! I am sick of everyone being so proud of me!" However, despite the successful appearance, the family hero often feels inadequate and their self-worth requires the approval of others. They badly want their families to look good and when they fall short of their goals, they feel like they have failed. Lisa strives desperately to be popular, win Homer's approval and have her family look

good. She feels awful when this does not happen. Her lack of popularity, for example, is a constant sore spot. When she was at military school trying to conquer The Eliminator, she says longingly, “only I was back in Springfield, all my friends would be cheering me on! Oh, God, I’m delirious.”

Lisa also plays the Parentified Child role, especially when Homer is in charge. If Marge is not around or refuses to help, everyone turns to Lisa to tell them what to do. This was especially evident when Marge and Homer were having trouble in their marriage. Homer pleads with Lisa, “I know you’re only eight years old and I don’t want to put a lot of pressure on you, but you’ve got to save my marriage!” Lisa responds, “You’re very lucky to have Mom.” Homer (not liking what he hears) tries to put her back in her child role: “That’s your advice?! Go to bed!!” During another period of marital discord, Homer takes Lisa’s advice and convinces Marge to let him return to the family. Lisa says to him, “I knew you could do it! Now don’t screw it up.” Lisa’s role as the Parentified Child also extends to her attempts to get the family to do the right thing. She tries to convince them of the moral correctness of everything from recycling and vegetarianism to literacy and anti-consumerism.

In direct opposition of Lisa’s role, Bart is the classic scapegoat. The scapegoat is the child who acts out for attention. Acting out includes behavior problems, delinquency, or poor school performance. In the classroom, scapegoats often get into trouble because they don’t accept authority well. Bart constantly gives his teacher, Mrs. Krabappel, a hard time. Moreover, the list of Bart’s delinquent acts is long and cannot be enumerated here. However, suffice it to say that he is blamed for most of the family’s problems.

Maggie plays the mascot role. The mascot’s job is to be cute and humorous. While mascots are generally older children who can be the clown, Maggie still fits the bill as she diverts attention away from things via sucking on her pacifier or falling down. The roles that Bart, Lisa and Maggie play tend to be complementary versus symmetrical. Instead of acting alike (symmetrical), every member has a particular task to do (complementary). If one person fails to fulfill his or her role, other members are negatively affected and try to make up for it. Consequently, when Lisa is unsuccessful, she may act out (the scapegoat role) while Bart becomes the hero. Similarly, both Bart and Lisa have taken turns being mascot when Maggie is not being cute.

Family Rules

Just as every family has roles that its members play, every family also has its own rules. Some are overt and are openly discussed. These usually involve things like bedtime, when friends can come over, the timing of family meals and participation in religious activities. However, there are also covert rules. These are rules that exist but are not mentioned out loud; every family member is just expected to know them. These rules have more to do with interpersonal interactions than events and activities. They also are intimately linked with power and the roles that each family member plays.

For the Simpsons, one covert rule is that everyone can ignore and make fun of Grandpa Simpson. However, as befitting his status of holding some power in the family, another rule concerning Grandpa is that he is part of their lives. The family still invites him over to the house and he is involved in many aspects of their lives. When Grandpa is staying with them overnight, they wonder where he should sleep. Marge: “Where are we going to put him?” Homer: “Bart’s room.” Lisa: “Bart’s room.”

Marge: "Bart's room." Bart: "Dumpster."

Another covert rule is that it is okay to acknowledge Homer's obvious failings. In this way, the power he holds in the family is lessened. When Homer became a food critic, Marge commented to the kids, "Only your father could take a part-time job at a small-town paper and wind up the target of international assassins." When at a company picnic, Mr. Burns tells Homer: "Make yourself at home." Bart responds, "Hear that, Dad? You can lie around in your underwear and scratch yourself." At the same picnic, Homer tells Bart and Lisa, "My boss is gonna be at this picnic, so I want you to show your father some love and/or respect." Lisa: "Tough choice." Bart: "I'm taking respect." In another example, when Homer asks the family if he is slow, all the kids look away in discomfort.

In her role of Nurturer, it is a rule that Marge will always think the best of Bart. She calls him "my special little guy" and is determined to close her eyes to his bad behavior. For example, when Bart was caught shoplifting, Marge refused to believe it. Marge: "I know in my heart that Bart is not a shoplifter...Fine, fine, play the tape and you will see that you have got the wrong boy." She is heartbroken when she discovers that he has indeed stolen from the store. Homer also has a rule concerning Bart: he will yell and threaten bodily harm (and in some of the earlier episodes he even appears to actually strangle him) unless Bart's behavior benefits Homer in some way.

The rule regarding Lisa is that her gifts are frequently ignored and her political beliefs are patronized. When Lisa decided to become a vegetarian, Bart made fun of her concerns while Marge ignored them. Lisa asked, "What's the difference between the lamb I'm eating and the one that kissed me?" Bart mockingly replied, "This one spent two hours in the broiler," and chomped on a lamb chop. Marge said, "Bart, sensible bites." Later, Homer was irritated with Lisa and said to her, "I don't need any serving suggestions from YOU, you barbeque-wrecking, know-nothing, know-it-all!"

The rule for Bart and Lisa has its roots in the quest for power in the sibling subsystem. As they both are rivals for their parents' affection and control of the family, Bart and Lisa constantly fight. Bart bullies Lisa while Lisa gets the best of Bart through her intellect. However, sometimes they just play off and bug each other. During one family therapy session, Marge said, "Bart! How could you shock your little sister?!" Bart: "My finger slipped." Lisa: *{Shocks Bart}* "So did mine!"

While these rules dictate everyday behavior, there are exceptions. While the family belittles Homer, they go out of their way to help him get the things he wants. In accordance with his wishes, Maggie's first word is "Daddy." During Springfield's bicentennial parade, Lisa decides to forego telling the truth about Jebediah Springfield so that Homer can continue being the town crier. Everyone sometimes listens to and appreciates Lisa's political leanings. Lisa and Bart can join together to accomplish a goal. When they both went to military school, Bart faced the ridicule of his classmates to help Lisa surmount a physical challenge.

Communication and Emotional Patterns

Every family has its distinct ways of communicating with one another. Some families are loud, fast talkers who interrupt constantly while others wait patiently for breaks in the conversation to speak. There are generally rules about who gets to speak first and last, who speaks the most, and what kind

of statements are allowed. Some families communicate solely at a surface level and do not allow members to express emotions or anything truly deep. Other families have very few boundaries surrounding appropriate conversation and talk about everything, including taboo topics like sex and drugs. In larger families, there are also rules about who talks the most to which other member. These are called alignments, coalitions and triangles. Traditionally, alignments occur among the parent dyad and coalitions are found in the sibling subsystem (the kids) but many other variations exist. Triangles occur whenever two people are in conflict and bring in a third person in order to defuse the situation.

The Simpsons appear to have relatively normal communication patterns. Each member of the family gets conversational time, with Marge and Homer usually getting the most. The family members do occasionally interrupt and ignore each other (especially when the TV is on) but not excessively. Homer tends to get the first word but usually not the last. That is reserved for Marge and the kids. In contrast to families in which the children are not allowed to question the adults, every Simpson is allowed to challenge the authority of everyone else. Bart and Lisa can ask questions about the purpose of the adults' behavior or even directly criticize without retribution. However, Marge and Homer do provide structure in conversational rules. They give boundary directions (e.g., "Don't talk when your mouth is full" and "Be polite") and let the kids know when they've crossed the line. Moreover, while the Simpsons are able to talk about anything, Marge and Homer do enforce some limits. For example, they rarely reveal details of their sex life.

In terms of groupings within the family, several are traditional. Marge and Homer are definitely aligned with each other. While each may speak somewhat disparagingly of the other, they obviously are a team. They do not undermine one another's authority and they usually consult with one another before making significant decisions. Similarly, Bart, Lisa and Maggie are in a coalition with one another. Although Bart and Lisa continuously annoy one another, they frequently join in order to get what they want from their parents. In one episode, they decided they wanted a pool. So, they repeatedly asked Homer (in unison), "Dad, can we have a pool?" While Maggie cannot exert much influence, she appears to be in agreement with Bart and Lisa. There also appear to be alignments along gender lines as Marge and Lisa appear particularly close (and they throw Maggie into that mix sometimes), while Homer and Bart are often in agreement with one another. There also exist some triangles in the Simpson family—but who is in them is dependent upon the situation. If Marge and Homer are having difficulty, Homer will usually consult with Lisa to help him know what to do. Similarly, Homer will sometimes ask the kids' opinions about a particular disagreement he is having with Marge. Bart and Lisa frequently try to get one or both of their parents to intervene in their disputes. However, the triangles within the family are not excessive.

Parenting

How are Marge and Homer as parents? From flashbacks, we learn that Marge and Homer got married because Marge was pregnant with Bart. As such, they were reluctant parents, at least initially. However, they both agreed to try to build a family and seem to have warmed up to the idea (so much so that they had two additional kids). As parents, Homer and Marge have some obvious failings. Homer has virtually no idea of how to be a parent. His mother left his family when he was young and

his father was overly critical and lacked warmth. Homer's own behavior is so outrageous that he has difficulty being aware of the needs of his children. In fact, Homer can barely even take care of himself, much less other people! Consequently, he is the stereotypical clueless father who has to be told what he needs to do as a father.

Both Marge and Homer really need some work on consistent, appropriate and effective discipline. Their methods of teaching the kids right from wrong are erratic, sometimes unacceptable (the implicit and overt violence) and often futile. Many of Bart's antics are greeted with humor or avoidance. When Homer returned from being kicked out of the house for a day, Bart told him, "I missed you so much that I couldn't concentrate in school and I got an F." Homer: "This is dated two weeks ago." Bart: "Oh, sorry. Here's a fresh one." Marge then makes suggestive comments to Homer and Bart's poor school grades are ignored. Similarly, when Bart is demoted and Lisa is promoted to the third grade, Homer only becomes aware of this after he sees them on TV. His only comment to this incredible state of affairs is, "They're gonna be in the same class together?" When Bart is actively rude to other kids (how many kids get away with saying things like, "Don't have a cow, man!" or "Eat my shorts!"—Or how many kids got away with saying things like that before they became part of the national lexicon?), Marge and Homer do little more than scold. That is, until they get completely fed up and institute punishment like denying Bart the opportunity to watch the Itchy & Scratchy movie. Homer: "Someday, you'll thank me for this, son." Bart: "Not plenty likely." Homer: "I know my punishment may seem a bit harsh, but I can't go back on it. You're welcome to watch anything you want on TV." Bart: "TV sucks." Homer: "I know you're upset right now, so I'll pretend you didn't say that."

There are other problems with Marge and Homer's parenting skills, including their excessive use of the TV, the patronizing and parentification of Lisa and the lack of attention paid to homework and Maggie's developmental skills (how often is Maggie featured anyway?), yet they also do a lot that is good. In her roles of Nurturer, Teacher and Maintenance, Marge makes certain that the kids have their physical and emotional needs met. The children have a permanent roof over their head, get enough food and sleep and have some material comforts. The kids also know that their parents love them and would do anything for them. As Marge declared, "The only drug I'm on is LSD: Love for my Son and Daughters." Despite Homer having the job of his dreams with the Globex Corporation, he decides to return to his old job when Bart and Lisa are not happy. When Bart and Lisa get lost in Capitol City, Marge and Homer rush to look for them. Similarly, when the kids were sent into foster care with the Flanderses, Marge and Homer attend parenting classes and do whatever they can to get them back home. Homer to Judge: "Okay, I'm never going to win Father Of The Year, in fact, I'm probably the last guy in the world to have kids . . . wait, let me rephrase that. I love my kids. I'd do anything for Bart and Lisa." Judge: "And Margaret?" Homer: "Who? Lady, you must have the wrong file." Marge: "She's taking about Maggie." Homer: "Oh, Maggie. I've got nothing against Maggie." Despite his flippant response, Homer rushes to save Maggie from what he considers a fate worse than death: "Oh, no! In the eyes of God, they'll be Flanderses." Marge and Homer are also affectionate with each other and their children. There are lots of hugs in the Simpson family. Finally, Marge and Homer are active and present parents. They attend their children's events and are there for them when they are needed.

Conflict Resolution

Even the best of families experience conflict. After all, no one gets along perfectly all of the time. This especially holds true for people who know all of your faults and with whom you spend inordinate amounts of time. Consequently, families tend to have a lot of conflict. There are both good and bad ways to resolve conflict. One good way to resolve conflict is to hold a mature conversation where each member involved in the conflict has a chance to express their feelings and truly listen to the point of view of the other person or people. Another good way to settle conflict is to brainstorm compromises and potential solutions to the problem or, whenever possible, agree to disagree. Bad ways to resolve conflict include violence, yelling and avoiding the problem or the person involved.

Like many people, the Simpsons seem to muddle through conflict without actually having a plan. Sometimes the response is quite childish. When Lisa decided to become a vegetarian, she ruined Homer's barbeque and he was furious with her. Instead of telling her how angry and hurt he was, he decided to give Lisa the silent treatment. Marge foolishly went along with this and even allowed herself to get caught up in their feud. Homer: "Marge, since I'm not talking to Lisa, could you please ask her to pass me the syrup." Marge: "Please pass your father the syrup, Lisa." Lisa: "Bart, tell Dad I'll only pass the syrup if it won't be used on any meat product." Bart: "You dunking your sausages in that syrup, homeboy?" Homer: "Marge, tell Bart I just want to drink a nice glass of syrup like I do every morning." Marge: "Tell him yourself. You're ignoring Lisa, not Bart." Homer: "Bart, thank your mother for pointing that out." Marge: "Homer, you're not talking to me, and secondly, you've heard what you said." Homer: "Lisa, tell your mother to get off my case!" Bart: "Uh, Dad, Lisa's the one you're not talking to." Homer: "Bart, go to your room!"

At other times, the conflict resolution is unacceptable or incredibly inappropriate. First, there is the violence. While the Simpsons are cartoons and, as such, do not get injured the way real human beings would, the violence is still inexcusable. The Simpson children do not get spanked (the "normal" violence toward children seen in the United States) but Bart does get threatened, chased and even strangled. Other methods of conflict resolution are just inappropriate. Homer in particular often says horrible things that are meant to be comforting and distracting. When Lisa and Bart were arguing about whether either of them was capable of shooting Mr. Burns, Homer said soothingly, "Kids, kids. As far as Daddy's concerned, you're both potential murderers."

However, while the Simpsons frequently demonstrate the negative aspects of conflict resolution they also exhibit the positive ones. Apologies are frequent in the Simpson household. Bart eventually apologizes to Lisa for making her unhappy, Homer apologizes to the children for his poor parenting skills and Marge apologizes to anyone she believes she has wronged. The Simpsons have attempted family therapy and only a curmudgeon would point out that they used electroshocks on one another and ended up getting their money back so they could get a TV (the source of their initial argument). They also try to spend time together in order to connect with one another. Homer goes with Lisa to a sensory deprivation chamber because that is how she wants to spend time with him. Marge and Homer go on weekend retreats and find other ways to spend time alone. The Simpsons also make compromises in order to smooth hurt feelings. When Marge accused Homer of lying to her, in order to prove his love, he lets his obsession (catching General Sherman—the freakishly large catfish) go.

Social Interaction

Families are connected in some way to the larger community in which they live. However, there are varying degrees of connection. Some families, particularly those with secrets (e.g., abuse, addiction) have a low level of connection to the community. Friends are rarely, if ever, invited to the house, family members have minimal participation in community activities, and they do not talk about the family to outsiders. These types of families are called closed families. In contrast, open families are highly connected. They frequently interact within the community, invite people to the house, and talk freely about their family life. It isn't difficult to guess which is the healthiest way of being.

The Simpsons are clearly an open family. They are intimately involved in the Springfield community. Bart and Lisa participate in sports, plays, musical performances and even a beauty contest, while the whole family turns out for parades, festivals and other community events. Marge and Lisa have even been involved in community governance through Marge's job as a police officer and Lisa's turn as a community elder through Mensa. Marge has even given advice to the community and led the march against the local house of prostitution.

The Simpsons are extremely social. Almost everyone in Springfield has been to their house for one reason or another. Marge and Homer throw disastrous parties (like the one that caused the Van Houtens to divorce or the barbeque that resulted in a pig flying through the air), weddings and other events. They also are well known and accepted within the Springfield community. Homer plays poker with the guys. Marge buys a weekly lottery ticket with the girls. Bart goes on to play with Milhouse. Lisa spontaneously interacts with various adults. However, although the Simpsons tend to get along with most of the citizens of Springfield, there are exceptions. Homer can't stand Ned Flanders (although that distaste doesn't prevent them from having numerous adventures). And one only has to consider the ominous threat George H. W. Bush made when he moved next door to the Simpsons: "I'll ruin you like a Japanese banquet!" However, Gerald Ford seemed to get along well with Homer.

A Healthy Family?

After all of this examination, one might ask: are the Simpsons a healthy family? There are several ways to answer this question. One way is to take a look at qualities of healthy families. These include commitment and appreciation of the family, willingness to spend time together, effective communication patterns, the ability to deal with crisis positively, ways to find meaning, encouragement of individuals, clear roles and a growth-producing structure.

The Simpsons clearly have a commitment to and appreciation for the family. When push comes to shove, they choose their family. Homer pretends that he smokes so that Patty and Selma won't lose their promotions, thereby making Marge happy. Marge gives up potentially illustrious careers to be with her family. The kids help each other and their parents. The Simpsons spend a lot of time together as a family and tend to be honest and clear in their communication. They resolve crises, sometimes weekly, and seek meaning in their activities. All members of the family are encouraged to follow their dreams. Bart and Lisa are supported in whatever ventures they attempt, while both Marge and Homer have tried various careers. As mentioned previously, roles are pretty well defined yet are not rigid. There seems to be a lot of potential for growth in the family should anyone actually attempt it. Consequently, based on the qualities of healthy families, the Simpsons basically seem healthy.

A second way to evaluate the healthiness of the Simpson family is to analyze the two overarching family dynamics of family cohesion or togetherness and flexibility. Cohesion is composed of four elements: the I/We balance (how the family balances emphasis on the individual versus emphasis on the family), closeness, loyalty and independence/dependence. Families can be disengaged where the focus is mainly on the I—family members are neither close nor loyal and most are strong and independent. Other families go to the opposite extreme and are enmeshed. This is when the focus is predominantly on the We to the exclusion of the I—family members are excessively close, loyal and dependent. However, there is a middle ground where the family is connected. Connected families maintain a good balance between the I and the We and family members are close, loyal and equal, independent and dependent.

The Simpsons focus a lot on the individual until the family becomes in jeopardy. Then the focus reverts back to the We until the crisis has passed. For example, they moved to further Homer's career (the I) but returned to Springfield when the family started to fall apart (the We). Similarly, Bart and Lisa both tried to navigate military school (the I) but joined together to conquer The Eliminator when Lisa was having trouble (the We). They are close to one another and exhibit a high level of family loyalty. Lisa was once upset when she thought that the Simpson genes were destined to make her stupid. Through Marge's help, she was overjoyed to discover that she was a member of an illustrious family, just on the female side. The kids are still dependent on Marge and Homer for the necessities and structure, yet are encouraged to be independent as well. Moreover, while Homer and Marge both profess their dependence on each other, they frequently go off on their own ventures. Thus, the Simpsons appear to be relatively connected with one another.

Family flexibility is comprised of leadership, role shifts, amount of change and discipline strategies. Chaotic families have no leader, roles are shifted dramatically, there is constant change and erratic discipline. On the opposite end of the spectrum are rigid families. They have a domineering leader, static roles, very little change and strict, often harsh, discipline. In contrast to both, flexible families have shared leadership, occasional role shifts, change when necessary and democratic discipline.

It is somewhat difficult to characterize the Simpsons on flexibility. On some dimensions, the Simpson family is very flexible while on others they tend to be a bit more chaotic. Marge is the clear leader in the family yet she is not domineering. While one could make the case for shared leadership with Homer, he cannot be relied upon and Lisa frequently has to give him advice. Thus, leadership is difficult to quantify. Roles are fairly well established yet there are occasional role shifts. Generally, Homer is the breadwinner and Marge the homemaker. However, at times, Marge has taken on a position outside of the home and Homer has been able to tend to the kids. Lisa and Bart also intermittently switch roles. So, roles are flexible. The amount of change that occurs is also on the flexible end of the spectrum. Although the Simpson family encounters a lot of different situations (benefits a weekly TV sitcom), there is actually very little change in the overall family structure. Bills get paid, needs get met and the same people are constantly present. However, discipline is another story. As has been discussed previously, discipline in the Simpson household tends to be erratic. Hence, although the Simpsons are mostly flexible, there are chaotic elements. Consequently, based on family dynamics, the Simpsons seem mostly healthy.

A third method of assessing the health of the Simpson family would be to look at the stressors they encounter and the coping strategies they employ to combat the stressors. Healthy families tend to

aware of the potential stressors in life. There are generally two types of stressors: vertical and horizontal. Vertical stressors are ones that bring past and present issues to bear equally on things like family attitudes, expectations, secrets and legacies. They are historical and inherited from previous generations. Types of vertical stressors include all the isms (e.g., racism, sexism, consumerism, ageism, classism), poverty, workplace issues, family emotional patterns, violence, depression and genetics. Horizontal stressors are aspects of our lives that relate to the present; they are developmental and unfolding. Many are predictable (e.g., life cycle transitions) while others are unpredictable. Types of horizontal stressors include moving, accidents, unemployment, war, political climate and natural disasters.

The Simpsons tend to be aware of the stressors they encounter. Like all families, vertical stressors are quite present in their lives. There have been some family secrets that have been brought to light throughout the years (e.g., Mother Simpson's life on the run, Abe Simpson's participation in a secret society with Monty Burns). It also is clear that the family attitude of criticism is alive and well in the current Simpson clan. The isms are also well represented. Marge faced sexism when she was a police officer and Lisa constantly faces sexism in her quest for intellectual stimulation. Grandpa Simpson faces ageism whenever he tries to do anything and Montgomery Burns ensures that the whole family faces classism (Mr. Burns after a company picnic on his estate: "Please get off my property until next year. I suggest you don't dawdle; the hounds will be released in ten minutes"). The Simpson family also faces depression. Marge once became so depressed that they had to hire a nanny, Sherry Bobbin. Lisa has also experienced depression, so much so that she was sent home from school for it (Aside: that really worked, schools would be a lot emptier!). Horizontal stressors don't seem to affect the Simpson family as much as vertical stressors, primarily because they tend to be developmental (time does not seem to affect the Simpsons) and relatively lacking in humor.

There are a variety of coping strategies that families employ to help them adjust to life situations. Generally speaking, most families cycle through a process of coping. When the crisis first occurs, the family becomes disorganized. They do not know what to do and each member may try something different. A period of dysfunctionality ensues. The crisis then ends and recovery begins. Recovery will depend upon the resources the family has at its disposal and the utilization of these resources. The family itself may change only superficially in order to meet the crisis (known as first-order change) or the family may change its rules and way of being (known as second-order change).

As a general rule, the Simpsons do not engage in much second-order change. They bounce from one crisis to the next without significant modification in family structure or dynamics. For example, when Lisa was so depressed that they sent her home from school, each family member reacted differently. Marge insisted that Lisa needed more attention while Homer responded with dismissal and misunderstanding: Marge: "I don't know . . . Bart's such a handful, and Maggie needs attention, but all the while, our little Lisa's becoming a young woman." Homer: "Oh, so that's it, this is some kind of underwear thing." Bart reacts with jokes. Lisa tries to describe her feelings: "Every day at noon the bell rings and they herd us in here to feeding time. So we sit around like cattle, chewing our cud and dreading the inevitable." Bart jokes, "Food fight!" Dysfunctionality reigns as no one knows quite what to do to help her depression go away. However, Lisa is quite resourceful and uses her social and musical talent to forge a relationship with Bleeding Gums Murphy who helps alleviate her feelings of sadness. Consequently, the family did not have to change much to recover from the crisis. This is typical for the Simpsons. However, given that all of their crises are relatively minor (as is the case for most comedies), perhaps major change is not needed. Consequently, based on stressors and coping

strategies, the Simpsons appear to be, more often than not, healthy.

A final way to consider the health of the Simpson family is to look at the ways in which they try to stay healthy. Families tend to stay healthy or even get healthier through participation in certain activities, usually in connection with other people. For example, things like family rituals, family dinners, family retreats, interactive cooperative activities, family councils and structured exercises all tend to increase family health.

More so than most families, the Simpsons engage in lots of connective activities. They have a major family ritual that occurs in each episode: they all race for the couch so they can watch TV. They eat meals together and go on family retreats, vacations and do other interactive activities, like farming and playing games. However, they do not usually have family councils or participate in structured exercises. Thus, the Simpsons spend a lot of time together and do fun things but could do more. Consequently, based on active attempts to stay healthy, the Simpsons seem surprisingly healthy.

The Simpson Family as the Cultural Ideal

So, are the Simpsons the American Family? Can we look to them for information about our family values? The Simpsons do look like many American families (well, sort of—no one is quite the orange). They are a middle-class, Caucasian, heterosexual, two-parent household with the requisite number of kids (mixed gender) and the normal variety of pets. The Simpsons also act like many families. They have a not uncommon hierarchy and typical roles. Some of the Simpson family rules do tend to be a bit cruel. However, for the Simpsons and many other families as well, unkindness seems to be more the result of a lack of awareness of how to be in intimate relationships with others. How do you acknowledge someone's flaws while still loving them? How do you accept the good with the bad? How do you live day after day with people who drive you crazy? In the Simpson family, the solution to these dilemmas lies with humor and mild denigration. In this, they are certainly not alone.

However, despite the unkindness, the heart of the family beats with love, forgiveness and the desire to do what is best for the family. Each member is allowed to talk about what is going on with them and they do so in a mostly clear and effective manner. Many American families have good communication skills but this may not be the norm. We as a culture do not do a good job of dealing with difficult feelings or confronting controversial topics. While the Simpsons have a good foundation with their communication, the kids have not yet reached adolescence. It could all change then.

Marge and Homer's parenting skills, especially those linked with discipline, need work. This is probably true for most parents. As mentioned previously, family dynamics often are cloaked in mystery. Thus, few people have role models much beyond their own parents and grandparents. As such, the skills involved in parenting frequently are unlearned or minimally practiced. Unfortunately, violence toward children is not as rare as we'd like to believe. Again, much of this goes back to the decrease in positive role models and a lack of awareness of other disciplinary options. It also speaks to the overall cultural acceptance of violence, a fact that *The Simpsons* parodies quite effectively. Similarly, the Simpsons appear to find conflict resolution quite difficult. While they are able to eventually settle the argument or work through the hurt feelings, they need to practice more effective solutions. Given our cultural difficulty to resolve conflict on both a national and international scale,

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