Sociology in Family: *The Simpsons*’ gender and class representation

The Simpsons is a famous family sitcom from Fox Broadcasting. The program is famous for its satire of American culture and lifestyle. The Simpsons family is designed to represent the middle and working class living on an imaginary state Springfield in United States. Their living environment and lifestyle are often associated with the stereotypical representation of the middle class, such as paying mortgages, always having a tight budget, watching television, attending auto races, gambling, bowling, drinking beer, and fast-food consumption. (The Simpsons) The family consists of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. Homer, the father, is a nuclear power plant inspector and earns the wage of the average working class, and he is often portrayed as being foolish. Marge, the mother, is a housewife whose domestic labour is often not well-recognized. Bart is a brat boy, likes to hang out with friends, and is not educationally successful. Lisa is a girl who is educationally successful but not popular in school. Both children receive typical public education. Maggie is a baby girl who has a pacifier all the time. The Simpsons family fits well into the academic definition of a family.

Vanier Institute defines family as a group consisting of more than two persons "bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth, and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities." (Mitchell 9) The responsibilities include "socialization of children" and "social control of members." (Mitchell 9) Homer portrays his socialization of children through his firm will to not raise Bart to a gay. In doing so, he forcibly exposes Bart to activities Homer perceives as masculine, such as watching sexual commercials. ("Homer's Phobia.") For an example of social control, Marge commands Bart and Lisa to wear uncomfortable but fancy-looking clothes to enter the Country Club. ("Scenes") This scene shows that one member can have social control over other members. The Simpsons family fits well into the academic definition of a family by being bounded together as a typical North American Family and serving responsibilities together.

This paper uses Conflict Theory to analyze the class struggle around and within the Simpson family. Conflict Theory defines a society as a place of conflicts over the distribution and maintenance of power. For families, the theory analyzes how families “can create, reinforce, or dismantle inequality as they compete over resources” through family structure and practices. (Mitchell 37) Power relations can be found in macroscopic structures, like between the “family system and the work/employment/economic system,” and microscopic structures within the family. (Mitchell 33) The divisions include gender, social class, race, and age. Also, by analyzing the conflict between classes, the theory points to the exploitation of the lower class. (Alexander, “Social Class - Soci 200” slide 14)

For a macro level, Homer's financial struggle and his boss's exploitation of the situation demonstrate the class struggle between families in the work and economic system. In "Homer vs. Dignity", Homer finds out that they have multiple mortgages, leading to multiple bankruptcies, and looks for ways to make money. ("Homer vs. Dignity.") His negotiation for a wage raise fails. Instead, he becomes Mr. Burns’s prank monkey. Then, he is humiliated for Burn's amusement. For example, he was put on display at Springfield Zoo wearing a female panda suit. This episode well represents the conflict between Homer's harsh labour and financial struggle as a working class and its upper-class counterpart, the capitalist Burns, who has dominant means of production like nuclear plants. Using his dominant economic power, Burns exploited Homer through very inhumane labour.

For the micro level, the episode "The Springfield Connection," clearly shows the power dynamics within the Simpsons family. The housewife Marge became a cop, and her upward social mobility threatened Homer. ("The Springfield") Marge not only enforces the law for Springfield, but she exercises her power over Homer. For example, Marge tries to ticket his car and arrests him when Homer does not comply and taunts her. Later, she arrests Homer and his friends for private gambling. The power dynamic in the Simpsons family is reversed by two intersecting factors class and gender. For class, Marge becomes superior by becoming a law-enforcing police officer, which is perceived to be more prestigious than Homer's job as a nuclear plant inspector. For gender, Marge reverses the traditional gender roles, such as physically saving Homer from being a hostage. Marge is portrayed as strong and heroic, which used to be part of Homer's dominant gender role. Thus, Marge's upward social mobility dismantled the former power dynamics, which was based on Homer's dominant social class and gender, and reversed the dynamic within the family. Consequently, Conflict Theory allows us to analyze how macro- and micro-structures are divided into class struggles and creates inequality by certain groups dominating others. Compared to upper class families, the Simpsons family's economic status disadvantaged Homer's labour to be more strenuous and self-deprecating. Within Simpson's family, class and gender dynamics were reversed by Marge's upward social mobility.

Gender refers to the socially constructed divisions between men and women that portray the system of power relations. (Weber 20) Unlike sex, which is based on physical differences, gender focuses on its social constructions that include behaviours, traits, expressions, and social positions. (Alexander, “SOCI 200 - GENDER” slide 3-4) Gender gives the social attributions and identities linked to masculinity, femininity, and the umbrella of non-binary to people. (Alexander, “SOCI 200 - GENDER” slide 14) Since it is a social construction, the dominant group defines and justifies the ranks between the genders and creates power dynamics. (Weber 18) Homer’s parenting to Bart based on heteronormativity exemplifies how the dominant male group oppresses the subordinate gay group and creates gender inequality, as well as reproducing it by socializing his child. In “Homer’s Phobia”, Homer meets a new friend John, who quickly becomes close with the Simpsons family. (“Homer’s Phobia”) As soon as Homer discovers that John is gay, he becomes hostile and expresses homophobic remarks and attitudes. Also, he is worried about his family being too close to him. When Homer sees Bart dancing with a blonde long-hair wig, he is extremely worried about Bart’s gender and sexuality. Then, he exposes Bart to his definition of manlike activities, such as looking at sexually provocative commercials, shaking hands rather than hugging, and deer hunting. Analyzing this episode in terms of gender, Bart adopted a stereotypically feminine trait and behaviour, like having long hair and styling it with curls. Homer perceived Bart’s actions to be socially wrong. Homer’s reaction can be analyzed as a heterosexist bias, which labels non-heteronormativity as a social problem. (Mitchell 55) Then, Homer tried to fix Bart’s problem through the activities that Homer perceives as masculine. His parenting portrays how the dominant male group can define the non-heterosexual group’s behaviour as socially wrong and apply gendered socialization to his child as a solution, reproducing the gender inequality.

Unrecognized domestic labour is one of the key studies for gender studies, and the Simpsons well portray the topic through Marge’s housework strike. In “Homer Alone”, Marge becomes sick of household chores and errands and takes a spa vacation alone away from home. (“Homer Alone”) Without her, the family realizes the importance and difficulty of domestic work. Bart and Lisa are sent to their aunts’ house, and they are dissatisfied by the aunts snoring, watching adult-TV shows, and providing inadequate meals. Homer is left home with Maggie, but he cannot take care of her. Due to his lack of care, Maggie leaves home to find Marge, and he ends up finding her on the roof of an ice cream shop. When Marge returns, the dishevelled family welcomes Marge and promises more participation in house chores. This episode demonstrates the often-unrecognized women’s domestic work and the hardship for them to make structural changes to share the chores. Before Marge’s burnout, house chore was recognized as naturally belonging to Marge, and there was no special respect for it. Homer’s struggle to pull everything together shows that domestic work is also laborious to the dominant male group, and thus it should be recognized as more important work for family’s survival. This gender dynamics between the parents are exposed to the children as a gendered socialization and let them reproduce the structure. This gender inequality leads to women’s “time poverty” by limiting their usable time and resources to other social and economic activities, thus limiting social mobility. (Mitchell 157) Therefore, gender dynamics and inequality are evident in the Simpsons family, especially in terms of heteronormativity and the underrated domestic labour of women.

Originating from the geological explanation of stratification as "successive layers or strata of rocks", social stratification consists of the classes that categorize and ranks people based on the standards like wealth, income, education, gender, race and ethnicity, and political power. (Weber 1) Many categories and ranks overlap and create intersectionality in individuals. (Michell 38) In terms of social classes, they are commonly divided into upper, middle, and lower classes. According to Max Weber, the upper class typically have persisting property income and privileges of education, while the lower class is reversely privileged on both factors. (Saunders 22) The middle class are the people in between, having either less property or education or both compared to the upper but more than the lower. (Saunders 22-23) Social Mobility refers to the ability to move between the ladders of social stratification. (Mitchell 411)

The Simpsons family's middle-class status and its efforts to gain access to upper class resources represent the class struggle. In "Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield," Marge luckily buys a discounted old channel set, and by wearing those, she is invited to the Country Club, where the upper class socializes. ("Scenes") In doing so, she tries to mimic the upper class in the club. For example, she makes her family look luxurious by putting them in their most formal clothes and telling them to act and talk sophistically. The concepts of class struggle, social capital, and social mobility can be found in the episode. For class struggle, the Country Club can be only joinable when one is approved and invited by other upper-class families. The club restricts lower classes' access and provides a channel to share exclusive resources, reflecting the class struggle between the richer and the poorer. For social capital, the riches' socialization within the club refers to access to social capital, which is Bourdieu's concept that theorizes one's social relationship that can potentially give access to resources. (Mitchell 135) For social mobility, by Marge wearing the channel set, she was perceived as one of the upper classes and gained access to the club. The Simpsons' fake upward social mobility temporarily allowed them access to the upper classes' exclusive community. In addition, Lisa well portrays how one can obtain upward social mobility through educational success. Throughout *The Simpsons* series, she becomes the first woman president of the United States. Her educational success and other success factors made her one of the most powerful leaders worldwide. ("Mr. Lisa's Opus") ("Bart to the Future") In terms of Max Weber's Life-Chance that suggests life chances positively correlate with the given socioeconomic status, Lisa can be seen as one who used the best out of her chances. (Alexander, "Social Class - Soci 200" slide 15) Therefore, the class struggle in *The Simpsons* is evident between middle-class Simpsons and upper-class Country Club, and Lisa uses educational achievement as upward social mobility to join the upper class.

The analyzed gender and class dynamics can also be found in my family, with similarities and differences to the Simpsons family. They are similar in their patriarchal structure and unequal educational investment in children for upward social mobility. My family consists of my father, a former philosophy professor and current director of education institutions, my mother, a singer and early childhood educator, my older sister, who has Down’s Syndrome and lives with us, and me. Like the Simpsons, my father has economic dominance over my mom and pursues conservative Catholic social values, so he has a heteronormative understanding of gender like Homer. Although my mother is not a housewife like Marge, they are alike because my mother oversees all the domestic work, and my father focuses on economic earning. For education, both families’ educational investment is one-sided to a child. Although Bart and my sister are different since my sister has an intellectual barrier to pursuing post-secondary education rather than voluntarily not engaging. Also, I am like Lisa in that we both try to use our education level as upward social mobility. She gets into Harvard and becomes a president, and I am willing to pursue grad degrees for a higher social status.

On the other hand, the Simpsons family and mine are different in that my parents' occupation allowed the parents to stay in my proximity and that we have different racial backgrounds. I was raised and educated in my parents' kindergarten and education centres. Compared to the Simpsons' parenting, where Homer had to be away to work nine to five, my parents' parenting time is almost equal. I went to my mother's kindergarten and father's educational centres afterwards. As I grew up, I realized that I perceived my father as more emotionally supportive and comfortable than other Korean children. In contrast, Bart often shows that he cannot understand Homer and thinks he is unreliable. (The Simpsons) Also, there are racial differences between the families. The Simpsons are white Americans, while my family is traditional Koreans. Comparing the two cultures, Korean families often have more conservative and traditional cultures. This difference is well shown through the role of grandparents. While Bart's grandfather is portrayed as behind the time and an unwelcome member, my grandfather often serves the role of the head of the extended family and receives higher respect from family members. (The Simpsons) Consequently, the Simpsons family and my family are similar in having the traditional gender role of the dominant male and having a one-sided educational investment in one child. However, they are fundamentally different since the families have different parenting structures and racial backgrounds, which can significantly affect the parenting and attachment style and the extended family's involvement.

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