

## Class on Television: Stuck in *The Middle*

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IN *TIME* MAGAZINE'S 2012 COVER STORY ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE American dream, Jon Meacham writes that "the perennial conviction that those who work hard and play by the rules will be rewarded with a more comfortable present and a strong future for their children faces assault from just about every direction. That great enemy of democratic capitalism, economic inequality, is real and growing" (28). That is the reality, but what does current entertainment television, long a popular means of escape, relaxation, and, not coincidentally, purveyor of ideology, indicate about social class these days as many Americans struggle to just hold on to the status quo?

Several series throughout television history have addressed social class in a variety of ways. While the Kramdens on *The Honeymooners* (CBS 1955–1956) and the Connors on *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–1997) struggled to pay their bills, the Ewings on *Dallas* (CBS 1978–1991) and the families of *Gossip Girl* (CW 2007–2012) illustrated more opulent lifestyles. The Clampett clan showed us what it was like to move from a shack in the Ozarks to a mansion in *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS 1962–1971) and *Beverly Hills 90210* (FOX 1990–2000) showed two Midwestern middle class teenagers adjusting to their new rich neighborhood. A multitude of police procedurals and entertainment news often show the seamy side of the lives of the rich and famous, while several reality shows give others a chance to become like them. Both the world of television and daily life offer us the sense that we can reach the American dream if we try hard enough. In 2009, however, ABC introduced *The Middle*, a family comedy that reflected just how hard that dream is to achieve and maintain.

Lessons about social class are everywhere. As sociology professor Diana Kendall writes, “By analyzing how the media socially construct meanings about class, we can more clearly see how ideology and everything that passes for knowledge in our society can affect our thinking about inequality and our personal identity in regard to the class structure” (6). Watching television continues to be the leisure activity with which we spend the most time.<sup>1</sup> Narrative comedy arguably has been the most consistently popular genre in the history of television, reflecting and influencing the mood of its viewers. This article will argue how a modern television family situation comedy that proclaims its status in its very title, *The Middle*, reflects the current economic crisis, while reinforcing lessons about social class from decades of television situation comedies (sitcoms).

As part of the *New York Times* series about class that began in May 2005, Janny Scott and David Leonhardt wrote that “Today, the country has gone a long way toward an appearance of classlessness. Americans of all sorts are awash in luxuries that would have dazzled their grandparents” (2). They go on to say, however, that class is still a powerful force in American life. Over the past three decades, it has come to play a greater, not lesser, role in important ways. At a time when education matters more than ever, success in school remains linked tightly to class. At a time when the country is increasingly integrated racially, the rich are isolating themselves more and more. At a time of extraordinary advances in medicine, class differences in health and lifespan are wide and appear to be widening (Scott and Leonhardt 2). With protests on Wall Street and elsewhere coming from the unemployed and those deeply in debt as well as from the rich who don’t want to pay higher taxes, it seems that class is very much on many people’s minds these days.

## Class Defined

Scholars and journalists in the United States over the last few decades have discussed social class in many different ways. For example, an economics professor and specialist in working-class studies, Michael Zweig sees economic and political power as the basic guide

to defining class, and talks about the porous borders among the capitalist, middle, and working classes (4–8). In the *New York Times* series of articles that explores classes as they exist today, class is defined as “groups of people of similar economic and social position; people who, for that reason, may share political attitudes, lifestyles, consumption patterns, cultural interests and opportunities to get ahead” (Scott and Leonhardt 8). Readers are offered a chance to see where they fit in class stratification based on four common criteria: occupation, education, income, and wealth (“Interactive”). Class groupings are divided into the top fifth, the lower fifth and the great middle area—upper middle, middle, and lower middle. As sociologist Diana Kendall writes, however, “Even sociologists who have spent years studying the US class structure do not agree on what constitutes the middle class or whether such a class actually exists (some assert that there are only two classes: the upper class and the working class)” (185).

While many Americans might think that the United States is the land of the middle class, we readily categorize people in ways that are connected to class and stratification. For decades, high school students have referred to themselves and others as “greasers,” “jocks,” and “freaks and geeks,” among other names that come and go with new generations.<sup>2</sup> “White trash,” “trailer trash,” and “rich bitch” are some of the terms used to denigrate (and stratify) people that span generations. New terms come and go as economics and politics change, such as “yuppie” and “New Right” (Ehrenreich 161, 196). However, regardless of our initial status, in this country, we have the American dream that anyone, if they just work hard enough, can obtain a good job, a family, a house and a car (or perhaps now, two cars and a house filled with electronics). Scott and Leonhardt wrote in the *New York Times* that

mobility is the promise that lies at the heart of the American dream. It is supposed to take the sting out of the widening gulf between the have-mores and the have-nots. There are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes; but as long as one can become the other, as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers. (2–3)

## Previous Studies of Social Class in Prime-Time Fictional Television

Resonating with the myth of almost everyone in America being middle class, several studies of prime-time entertainment television have found the middle class over-represented (e.g., Butsch and Glennon; Moore; Butsch; Signorielli and Kahlenberg). In their thought-provoking study, Sari Thomas and Brian P. Callahan explored television's role in the myth of the "happy poor," a myth they said "is central in limiting social mobility (or social change in general) so as to preserve the status quo" (184). In their content analysis of fictional families in series broadcast on ABC, CBS, and NBC between 1978 and 1980, they found that "the television family generally enjoys stronger interpersonal harmony, more agreeable personalities, greater felicity and good will, and better problem outcomes when it is located in lower socio-economic strata" (189).

Muriel G. Cantor explored the representation of the American family in situation comedies starting with the late 1940s through the 1980s. She found that "TV families rarely tackle real-life problems. Rather the stories can be considered parables, morality plays, about appropriate and inappropriate beliefs and behaviors" (206). According to Cantor, compared to other genres, situation comedies were "where human virtues prevail" (215). She concluded that, "because television repeats the same themes and situations over and over again, the message is clear: it is through the family that the American Dream becomes a reality" (215).

H. Leslie Steeves and Marilyn Crafton Smith examined class and gender in the ten highest-rated broadcast programs on prime-time television in September 1985, using a socialist feminist framework. They found no major characters from the working class. Furthermore,

by far most references to class in our sample indicate popular and simplistic gradational views, according to which the lower class is associated with dress and demeanor that imply less education (e.g., Nick on *Family Ties*, Sammy Jo on *Dynasty*, Easy Mary on *Night Court* and all except Diane on *Cheers*), less progressive values and/or aspirations (e.g., Elvin on *The Cosby Show*), and/or immoral/promiscuous sexual values (e.g., Sammy Jo on *Dynasty* and Easy Mary on *Night Court*). (57–58)

Herman Gray compared the representation of race and class in fictional television programming to the portrayals in a 1985 CBS News documentary, *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*. In the documentary that highlighted unwed black parents, "by the final segment of the report the theme of moral irresponsibility and individual behavior as explanations for the crisis of the under class is fully developed" (381). In programs such as situation comedies, however, he found a very different picture: "Successful blacks who populate prime-time television are charming, unique, and attractive individuals who, we assume, reached their stations in life through hard work, skill, talent, discipline, and determination. Their very presence... confirms the American value of individual success and mobility" (382). Particularly in situation comedies, Gray found that the characters were "pleasant and competent social actors whose racial and cultural experiences are, for the most part, insignificant" (383).

Sari Thomas and Steven LeShay analyzed all fictional programs on ABC, CBS, and NBC in specific periods during 1988 and 1989, looking specifically at characters "who professionally and directly engaged in economic activity of a commercial or industrial enterprise (97). Significantly, they found that the upper class "is routinely portrayed as engaging in a greater amount of negative behavior," including intentionally causing problems among friends and family (99). Working-class characters were the most positively portrayed in ways such as "sincere concern for others or affectionate behavior" and they were the happiest (100). Interestingly, Thomas and LeShay argued that "it is *because* the poor must emerge as happier than the rich that they are typically contextualized in comedy; conversely, it is because wealth must be shown as troublesome, if not evil, that its portrayal is most likely to be found in dramas, and particularly in dramatic serials where problems can be compounded and prolonged" (102). Television programs thus discouraged upward social mobility.

Andrea Press and Terry Strathman's analysis of work, family, and social class in images of women in prime-time television considered the cultural context of changes over the years in connection to feminism and real women's lives. In family television that was "prefeminist" (before the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s), Press and Strathman found that "the working-class family is seen as 'matriarchal' as opposed to 'patriarchal' or 'egalitarian' portrayals of middle class families." During the feminist period of family television

starting in the late 1960s and continuing through the early 1980s, Press and Strathman pointed out that “feminist” shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Cagney & Lacey* “focused on stories of individual achievement and success [. . . They] reversed the feminist maxim that the personal is the political by reducing the political to the personal; women’s oppression in the workplace was the result of individual, idiotic bosses, not the expression of a patriarchal system.” According to Press and Strathman, in the next phase in the 1980s, “television postfeminism retains some aspects characterizing feminist era television, but re-packages them. Women have some version of a work identity, however superficial, alongside their family role.” Significantly, the focus on individual responsibility (or blame) for a woman’s social class position that Press and Strathman found resonated with Herman Gray’s conclusion about the negative portrayal of African Americans on television in the 1980s.

Lewis Freeman explored social mobility in situation comedies in the 1991–1992 television season and found two interrelated themes when characters attempted to improve their status: sacrifice and self-reliance (401). According to Freeman, “sacrifice takes several forms: suffering personal indignities, jeopardizing personal relationships, giving up resources. . . , and demonstrating worthiness through hard work” (401). Freeman found that those characters who achieved upward mobility could regret it in one of two ways: “First, characters may discover that the realization of mobility was not worth the price exacted to achieve it. Second, the ground gained may be soon lost” (403). Those characters who failed to achieve mobility often found other benefits, such as self-direction and improved interpersonal relationships. Freeman concluded that

television comedies reinforce the myth that the United States is a land of economic opportunity where anyone can become anything through industry and persistence. Paradoxically, the same comedy programs would seem to deter individuals’ aspirations for significant mobility and discourage challenges to the current social and economic order. The repair of conflicts and negation of change are necessary for the maintenance or restoration of felicitous social life. (405)

Again, television was found to encourage people to be happy with their social class status.

In her extensive analysis of class as presented in both newspaper articles and television entertainment series over many decades, Diana Kendall found that “media framing of stories about the middle class tells us that this economic group is the value center and backbone of the nation” (234).

### Stuck in *The Middle*

Situation comedies in the twenty-first century echo many of the lessons previous research has indicated about class on television, particularly that working-class/middle-class people are usually happier and nicer than those in the upper classes and that achievement of the American dream is up to hardworking individuals. The harsh reality of people struggling to make ends meet is still not often seen, and, when it is, characters ultimately tend to be content, as they have for decades in prime-time television sitcoms. Family is what matters, not class status.

When *Everybody Loves Raymond* went off the air in 2005, it was the most popular situation comedy on television, depicting an extended middle class family with the traditional breadwinner dad and stay-at-home mom. *Two and a Half Men*, with its drunken, womanizing rich bachelor, his financially struggling divorced brother, and his nephew, then became the most watched sitcom. Somewhere among all the popular police procedurals and reality series, *The Big Bang Theory* was the only other comedy that did well in the ratings, centering on four young physicists, who were stereotypical nerds in need of life lessons from their neighbor, a pretty waitress. The cultural clashes and anti-intellectual undertones are not hard to find between the working-class waitress and the university researchers.

In 2009, ABC introduced *Modern Family*, a half-hour comedy shot faux-documentary style, depicting the lives of three interrelated families: the more traditional Claire and Phil Dunphy with their two teenage daughters and prepubescent son, Claire’s brother Mitchell and his partner Cameron with their adopted Vietnamese baby girl, and Claire’s father Jay Pritchett with his young, sexy Columbian wife and her 10-year-old son. This highly critically acclaimed and Emmy-winning series is indeed “modern” in its portrayal of three different configurations of what constitutes a family, but it is also a throwback to early television shows with each of the three families living middle

to upper-middle class existences on one salary. Neither money nor work is a primary focus. The message is the same as other comedies throughout television history—simply put, family is important and we should be happy as we are.

In contrast to the economic stability found in *Modern Family* is FOX's *Raising Hope* (2010–2014), featuring a working-class family with questionable intelligence but lots of love. Virginia Chance, who works for a cleaning service, and husband Burt, who independently cuts lawns and cleans pools for a living, reside with Virginia's senile grandmother, with their grown son Jimmy. They are depicted essentially as "trailer trash" in a house. In the pilot episode, Jimmy has an affair with a mass murderer, who gives birth to Jimmy's daughter Hope in prison and, upon the mother's execution, he is determined to raise Hope: thus, the title. While Virginia and Burt first want Jimmy to give up the baby because they can't afford the extra expense, they fall in love with their granddaughter and, in the eternal optimism of sitcoms, hope is being raised, literally and figuratively, despite the family quirks and shortcomings. Early in the second season when Jimmy discovers his crush, Sabrina, is from a rich family, he makes her realize that she is jealous of the achievements of her rich friends and "everybody you meet is gonna be better than you at some stuff and worse than you at other stuff." His parents learn upon the receipt, and then return, of a \$2,000 toilet from Sabrina's father that, "It's better to crap on something you earned than to feel crappy on something you didn't work for." Although more crudely expressed, it is the same message told in many episodes of many television series over many decades.

A few years after the original production of *Everybody Loves Raymond* ended its portrayal of the comfortable middle-class Barone family with its stay-at-home mom, ABC introduced perhaps the most modern yet traditional family of all, the Hecks (*The Middle* 2009–), whose social class resides somewhere between their contemporaries, the Dunphys and the Chances. In *Raymond* and *The Middle*, Patricia Heaton plays a wife and mother of three (two sons, one daughter), but the economic circumstances of the two families are quite different. Regardless of having only one income, money never seems to be an issue for the Barones, while money is always an issue, even with two incomes, for the Hecks. Their locations are quite different, with the Barones living on Long Island (Ray is a sportswriter for *New York*



*Newsday* who commutes) and the Hecks living in Orson, Indiana. Mike Heck is manager at the local quarry and his wife Frankie works in sales at a car dealership in the beginning of the series. Their son Axl is 15 years old as the series begins, plays football and struggles with his studies, while his 13-year-old, eternally-optimistic sister Sue struggles to find a club or sport in which she can succeed. Seven-year-old Brick would rather read a book than do anything else, and has the habit of repeating words to himself in a whisper. In contrast to *Raymond's* traditional multiple-camera shooting style with limited sets, flat lighting, and ever-present laugh track, *The Middle* tells its stories in single camera style, with multiple locations, no laugh track, and Frankie's voice-over to frame the story and supply the lesson in the end. Episodes begin with Frankie's voice heard over film clips of families decades ago, connecting this modern family to the past, giving it legitimacy and tradition, indeed establishing it as part of the "backbone of the nation" (Kendall 234).

Executive producers DeAnn Heline and Eileen Heisler explain that the title to them means "middle age, middle class, middle of the country" and that *The Middle* is their love letter to the Midwest, whose stories were missing from TV and "needed to be told" ("Raising a Sitcom Family"). Television critic Ken Tucker describes this series as "the saga of a family struggling to keep their heads above the choppy economic waters" and compares it to one of the most popular sitcoms of the 1990s, *Roseanne*, "using realistic situations and exaggerating them for laughs, but rarely to the point of absurdity" (62). The series reveals the most common elements used to determine class (income/wealth, employment/work, education, and lifestyle) in contemporary middle class family life.

### Income/Wealth

Unlike most middle-class families in previous sitcoms, the Hecks clearly live from paycheck to paycheck. Mike is manager at the local quarry, but needs to find another job during the few months it is closed. Frankie gets a minimum base salary at the car dealership, but is not selling any cars. In the first season's "TV or Not TV," they are three months behind paying the electric bill, and the electricity is turned off. Frankie asks Mike how it happened, and explains, "I

figured if we kept plugging holes until the quarry reopened we'd be okay." Mike mentions the offer of a free one-hour consultation with a financial planner, and they go to see him. The planner looks through their papers and says, "Long story short you're spending a lot more than you earn. You need to find places you can cut back—unnecessary expenses." Mike points out Frankie's \$3 cup of coffee, and she retorts that he buys imported beer. The consultant says "Look, here's the thing. Spend less, cut back, pay off your debts. Seven of your credit cards have doubled their rates. Pay 'em down." This conversation could apply to millions of American households, including the debate about over-priced consumer products as necessities.

The fragile state of their financial well-being is further illustrated in the second season episode, "The Big Chill," when Frankie accidentally purchases a \$200 eye cream. When she learns she can't take it back, Mike says he'll have to work the night shift delivering Little Betty snack cakes in addition to his quarry job because they needed that money to pay property taxes. To help, Frankie also takes on a second part-time job. She is upset that, rather than yell at her about her mistake, Mike says very little. When she confronts him, he admits that he's not mad that she made a mistake, but that "I'm mad because we can't afford to make a mistake. You think I like it that 200 bucks sends us over the edge? Or that at this point in our lives we have to have four jobs just to stay poor? I mean, dammit, we should have some kind of cushion so we can make a mistake every once in a while or at least fix the kitchen table." While class mobility may be the heart of the American dream (Scott and Leonhardt 2), Mike is very aware that movement can also easily turn downward, as many families have struggled to maintain their middle class status. In contrast to Cantor's find that sitcoms rarely address real-life problems, this comedy consistently tackles a serious issue, albeit in a humorous way—the money worries of modern families.

Jabs at easy credit and the reckless pursuit of consumer goods are made throughout the series. In the first season's "The Cheerleader," Frankie walks into the living room with the mail, and says to her husband, "Oh my god, Mike, it's 2009." He responds, "What! Already?!" The credit bill for all the things they bought many months before has now come due. By the end of the episode, we can blame the credit card companies again for their debt. After surviving a tornado, Frankie says in voice-over at the end of the episode: "Our luck started to turn

around after that. Some stupid bank actually approved us for a brand new credit card. . . . And the best part of the new credit card? No payments 'til 2012. And I'm sure by 2012 everything's gonna be great." The audience can laugh at her eternal optimism perhaps because our national level of credit card debt and love of consumer goods also blinds us to the reality of the bill coming due faster than we think.

## Employment/work

Unlike many other family sitcoms, *The Middle* places much emphasis on the importance of work and money. Frankie is sometimes seen at the car dealership or struggling to find other work, and Mike is occasionally seen at the quarry in his office. When he goes to a "job fair" because the quarry is temporarily closed, he is disgusted that it does not consist of potential employers but rather consultants who, according to him, want to take money from people who can't afford it.

Like many middle-aged people who find themselves out of work after years on the same job, Mike is clueless about interviewing for a new one. The questions appear artificial and silly to him (what makes you want this job, what is your strength, what is your weakness, etc.). Frankie tells him that "whatever crap job they're offering you, you have to make them think it's your passion." When Frankie asks him how the interview went, Mike says, "It killed my soul." Downward mobility is not just a matter of money, but also potentially a soul-killing demotion contradicting the happy poor of previous decades of situation comedies that research has revealed (e.g., Thomas and Callahan, Thomas and LeShay, Freeman).

As Press and Strathman found through their research, sexism is depicted as coming from individuals, not from a patriarchal society. At the car dealership, Frankie's boss, Don Ehlert, is the stereotypical sexist older man who tells Frankie he hired a woman because she is supposed to be able to sell to other women. Frankie is also a stereotypical working mom—over the loudspeaker in the lot she is constantly getting calls from her family, interfering with her work. In "The Bee," the employer ploy of giving workers an important-sounding title instead of a raise is illustrated when her boss tells her she must send 5000 birthday cards to customers, claiming it's a promotion to "Customer Relations Supervisor."

While the Hecks are supposed to be middle class, some of their actions are indicative of lower class behavior found in previous television research. For example, Frankie is always taking things from work (sugar cubes, donuts) and using things for her own purposes, such as the company photocopier machine to make flyers for her son. However, in "The Fun House," we learn that Frankie, petty theft aside, has ethics in larger matters. When a woman comes in supposedly drunk and is ready to buy a car, Frankie refuses and says she should come back later. It turns out that the woman, Abby Michaels, is a consultant Ehlert hired. She shadows Frankie and interrupts her to give her advice. At one point, she tells Frankie:

I know you. See, you've got this tape playing in your head—"Oh, I'm just a person who never finished college. I'm just a mom." Let go of the 'justs,' Frankie. Just let 'em go. Empower yourself to be who you want to be and love that person. 'Cause right now you're livin' paycheck to paycheck and the sad thing is, you're working really hard.

Frankie is momentarily inspired by this postfeminist sitcom speech, but her problems (her "justs") are not her lack of education or because she is a woman—she is "just" trying to keep her head above water. As a recent report of "Women, Money and Power" suggests, "In this economy, millions of women as well as men are too worried about falling out of the middle class to dream of rising above it" (Mundy 30).

For both Mike and Frankie, the pleasure they get from work is getting a paycheck so they can purchase what really gives them pleasure (primarily cable television it seems) and pay their bills. While they are not seeking glorious careers, they do instill a work ethic in their children. For example, they struggle to help Brick keep the paper route he got to earn money for night vision goggles (he wants to read in the dark).

## Education

Education, particularly a college degree, is seen by most people as necessary for upward mobility, for achieving the American dream.

Many episodes of *The Middle* involve stories about Frankie and Mike pushing their three children through public school, but their ambitions for getting them through college are rarely mentioned. Frankie dropped out of college, evidently to get married, and Mike may not have gone at all. In a paper Brick is writing about his parents, Frankie reveals her childhood ambition as wanting to be a dancer on a television variety show. High school student Axl is a jock and not interested in studying, but in the third season, a college recruiter visits him for a possible football scholarship. Mike tells Axl that if he gets a scholarship, it would help the whole family since money is tight. He doesn't mention how a degree could help Axl get a good job; perhaps it can't. When Axl does get to college he spends most of his time partying and avoiding classes.

While Sue is not one of the happy poor found in some sitcoms, she is a good example of the happy, struggling middle class. She is constantly trying out for things at school and always screwing up, yet she bounces back with enthusiasm. After school activities seem more important to her than studying. In the first season's "The Final Four," second-grader Brick got an A on Sue's math homework he did for her. (She had done C work before). It bothers Sue to lie on other occasions, but it doesn't bother her that her brother got her an A. Like many teenagers, Sue is very status conscious, but in an endearing way. In the second season's "The Prom," Sue and her girlfriend Carly obsess over which table to sit at in the lunch room. Frankie explains in a voice-over that a clear pecking order exists in middle school, and nowhere is it more obvious than in the cafeteria with its A, B, C and D tables. Every day Sue and Carly walk around the cafeteria and eat their lunch, sharing who holds the tray because they don't know where they should sit or where they'd be welcomed. The cafeteria is a microcosm of our class system, and the scene is a metaphor for the American desire for upward mobility. It is significant that the rules are unclear and satisfaction is fleeting. Sue assumes she will be going to college, however, and in the fifth season begins her search for scholarship money. Despite being discouraged by her mother, Frankie, who complains she has two more years before she would go, Sue recognizes the scarce family resources and, unusual for the Hecks, plans ahead.

Brick is the only one in the family who seems to really care about learning, but he does it for pleasure, not for any ambitious dreams of

his own success. In the first season's "The Neighbor," Axl has a 20-page paper on *Moby Dick* due. Brick loves the book and, as usual it seems, agrees to do the homework of an older sibling. While the C he gets Axl is a reflection on how smart Brick is, it can also be an indictment of the quality of high school education. There is also no mention about the lack of academic integrity, and neither Frankie nor Mike question Axl's grade. In a final voice-over, we hear Frankie say she never finished the book either, and she should ask Brick how it ends.

The second season finale, "Back to Summer," says much about the family relationships and attitude toward education. Unlike many parents who dread their children being underfoot all summer, Frankie looks forward this year to no more homework about which to nag, or fieldwork forms to remember to sign, or confrontations with Brick's teacher, Ms. Rinsky, to whom she will inevitably lose. Unfortunately, each of her children has one more obstacle to overcome. Mike and Frankie frantically help Brick with his journal entries—which are to reflect the whole school year—or he won't pass fourth grade. His teacher knows many entries are faked, however. In the last one, Brick writes that he's trying to finish the incomplete journal and that his mom said not to worry, that Ms. Rinsky's too lazy to read it. The ethics of Frankie and Mike are questionable as they try to get their children through school. Their desperation, unfortunately, may serve as an excuse, since they are generally loving and likeable.

With the Hecks, family relationships are clearly more important than educational achievement. The final scene of the second season finale is of the family laughing with Sue at her eighth-grade graduation after her name is called incorrectly. In voice-over, Frankie says, "Then it hit me, we might not remember what happened on some dates, but these are the moments you remember." There is a montage of family events, big and small, that emphasize their love for each other through whatever obstacles or mishaps life throws at them—including school, often seen as a problem, rather than a means of social mobility.

## Lifestyle

While the upper class on television is often portrayed as unhappy and nasty, the Hecks illustrate the general goodness of the middle class.

Frankie and Mike have been together for about twenty years, and genuinely seem to like and love each other. They disagree sometimes, but there are no big fights or general nastiness. All three children have their idiosyncrasies, as indicated earlier, as do their parents. The entire family attends church together, and we see Frankie, in particular, pray on occasion. According to *TV Guide* writer Craig Tomashoff, "Whether it's praying for her daughter's cross-country team to disappear or taking in a foreign exchange student via their church, the notion that the character believes in God slips in without preaching" (17).

The Heck home is in a well-kept middle-class/working-class neighborhood with small yards. Their house is in constant need of repair, however, and, in a third season episode, they explore how it would be cheaper to sell it and rent an apartment, an idea their children hate. The messy inside of their house is a reflection of their lives. When Frankie and Mike come home from work, they usually grab a beer and sit on the couch in front of the TV. Frankie's idea of cooking dinner is bringing home take-out food, with the family sitting in front of the television while they eat. On the infrequent occasions that they sit at the kitchen table, Brick must sit in a lawn chair.

As indicated earlier, the family has been known to overspend, relying on delayed credit card bills for a number of items, including appliances that should make their lives easier. However, in "Jeans," Sue is subject to hormonal teenage rages and cries for an expensive pair of jeans that all the kids are wearing. Frankie understands and pays \$112 for them, and they seem to give Sue the confidence to get a callback to drama club auditions. Mike doesn't understand and is upset since they really can't afford the jeans, but when Axl wants a car to impress a "hot" girl, he changes his tune. Consumer goods, including designer jeans and cars, are desired, even when the benefits of them are a short-lived, unaffordable illusion. Their usual sweatpants, lawn chairs, fast food, television viewing, messy house and sometimes messy values were once sitcom iterations of the lower class, but are now indicative of the struggling middle.

In "TV or Not TV," after Frankie and Mike win \$1,000 at Bingo, the family squabbles over how to use it, in a typical episode dealing with consumer goods and tight money. Mike is upset when Frankie uses it to pay for a year of cable rather than pay off a credit card, and asks how she can justify what she did. Frankie replies, "Cause I

thought we agreed to spin the wheel. You know, go for what we want and take the risk that it'll all work out. I thought we were both spinners, Mike." He rants that she is delusional. In a *deus ex machina*, Axl walks in and sees the muted TV news that Mike's quarry is reopening! Mike will return to work and Frankie's optimism, along with her irresponsibility, is rewarded.

The first season episode, "Average Rules," is representative of the primary theme and focus of *The Middle* where each child has his/her own problem with which Frankie and Mike must cope, along with their own money and work-related problems. At the end of this episode, as the family celebrates their little victories by eating cake around the kitchen table, in voice-over Frankie says, "Maybe we are just average, but the way I see it families where the parents get up every morning and go to jobs that are hard so they can get their kids through school and through life, and struggle to make it all work and manage to do it with dignity and humor—well, that's not average. That's extraordinary."

## Conclusion

In the pilot episode, when Frankie complains about how tired and bedraggled she looks on her new driver's license compared to how young and attractive she looked on her license seven years ago, her husband Mike tells her that back then she was young and shiny, wondering what life was going to be, and now she knows. By the end of the episode, despite her work and money pressures, and the demands of her three children, we hear, in Frankie's concluding voice-over, the lesson we've been taught in countless sitcoms over the decades: "So yeah, back then on the old license I didn't know what my life was gonna be. And Mike's right—now I know. This is my life. It's not gonna be in *People* magazine or anything, but you know what? I got it good." Whether this is a subtle lesson about keeping people happy in their place because of the failure of the American dream's upward mobility, or whether it is a reflection of the reality of most people's lives, it certainly indicates the importance of family. It also indicates the importance of both parents. While the stories are told through Frankie, both she and Mike are strong, contributing to the family finances and raising their children.



A clue as to why financially struggling people are often seen as happy on television can be found in “TV or Not TV,” which begins with old color clips of game shows, horse races, rolling dice, and other scenes of gambling. Frankie says in voice-over, “It’s a great American tradition to believe that anything is possible. I don’t know if it’s all the game shows we were raised on or what, but secretly we all think we’re just one spin of the wheel or one roll of the dice away from being a big winner. That kind of crazy, delusional thinking may be practically bred into us. As reported by neuroscientist Tali Sharot in *Time* magazine, “a growing body of scientific evidence points to the conclusion that optimism may be hardwired by evolution into the human brain.” While a realistic vision of the world would leave us all mildly depressed, “to make progress, we need to be able to imagine alternative realities—better ones—and we need to believe that we can achieve them” (Sharot).

The Heck family is perhaps like most other families in the United States—spending more money than they have on consumer goods, watching too much television, and struggling to pay their bills and get their children through high school, perhaps college. For the Hecks, jobs are simply a means to an end. They are neither rich nor poor—they are indeed in the middle, a slippery slope where they easily could slide into foreclosure or win the lottery, but they are happy where they are. The occasional lapse in ethics (e.g., Frankie taking things from work, Brick doing his older siblings’ homework) is troubling albeit unfortunately realistic.<sup>2</sup> However, the primary message is the same as it has been throughout sitcom history—family is important and people should be happy with what they have. Conceivably *Modern Family* gets higher ratings because it allows us to fantasize about an upper-middle class or secure middle class lifestyle that perhaps we could obtain regardless of our “racial and cultural experiences,” as in the very popular *The Cosby Show* two decades ago (Gray 383), but *The Middle* indicates where many people are during these hard economic times. Newspaper and online television critic David Zurawik says that *The Middle*, “despite all its processing through the corporate belly of the ABC-Disney beast, is more in touch with middle-class America and the pain it is feeling than any of the people running the country today.” While our ingrained optimism helps us get through our crises, so does laughter.

## Notes

1. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans 15 years old and older in 2012 spent 2.8 hours per day watching television, about half of their leisure time. Socializing in person “was the next most common leisure activity, accounting for nearly three-quarters of an hour per day.”
2. Various research has concluded that lack of academic integrity is on the rise, both in public schools and at the college level. Many blame the ease of getting information from the Internet, and parents sometimes are not blameless for their children’s ethical lapses. See, for example, Gabriel.

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