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EVERYBODY LOVES GUIDO. THE ITALIAN CHARACTERS ON MODERN U. S. SITCOMS

Conducted by Linda and Samuel Lichter, co-directors of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, a study of 1988 examined the relationship between watching television and ethnic and racial groups attitudes. This study was sponsored by the Commission for Social Justice of the Order of Sons of Italy and other anti-defamation groups. It showed that many people regarded television as “a learning tool and an accurate reflection of the real world,” and that about one-third of those who expressed opinions regarding this topic said that the characters they watched on television affected their ethnic self-perception and the attitudes towards other groups (Litcher and Lichter 1-4).²

Television is a primary source of entertainment for millions of Americans and it influences people’s opinions with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. Small groups of people build up their opinions on what they see on TV, however the role of television as a reinforcer and crystallizer of existing attitudes is significant. Some studies have shown that viewers’ orientation to their own and other social groups is influenced by television portrayals:

Television is a crucial location in which relationships between social groups, stereotyping, group identity, and the like, are played out (...) The media are transmitting and perpetuating stereotypes of social groups, and these images are affecting majority and minority group members’ perceptions of groups and intergroup relations (Harwood and Anderson 81-82)

Furthermore, the study of 1988 that we mentioned before showed that the more positive or favorable the response to a TV character is, the more likely the viewer sees the character as typical of his or her ethnic group. Comic characters, for example, create likability through humor, and this factor is important in evaluating the degree to which ethnic characters on sitcoms may reflect reality for viewers, particularly for young people.

Situation comedy is a mass genre and a consistent staple of broadcasting over the world. It can be defined as a “form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent” (Mills 49). Sitcom “comic impetus” is the most obvious and significant genre characteristic and while the audience might enjoy it for a variety of reasons, its humor is “always of paramount concern” (5-9).

Sitcoms are half-an-hour series which focus on episodes involving recurrent characters in similar situations and in essentially the same setting. Within each episode, it follows a common narrative structure: there is an initial state of equilibrium and this is disrupted by some action. Then there is the recognition of this disruption and an attempt to repair it. Finally, a new equilibrium is established: “This faculty for the ‘happy ending’ is, of course, one of the staples of comedy” (Mintz 115). Since we are returned to the initial situation at the beginning of each episode, there is little room for narrative progression or character development. Therefore, characters’ incorrigible nature and inability to learn from mistakes provide endless humor and laughter. Sitcom adopts a shooting style based on the three-cameras set up. When two characters are confronting each other, two cameras will shot close-ups of each character, while the third camera will shot them together. This is effective because it contributes to make the viewer laugh from the funny thing that has been said and for the character’s reaction. The show is generally performed before live audience, whether live broadcasting (in the old days) or filmed or taped.

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² The study, entitled *Television's Impact on Ethnic and Racial Images*, surveyed 1,217 students at John Adams High School in Queens, New York. The school was chosen because it contained a multi-ethnic population, with large numbers of black, Hispanic, and Italian American students.



Since the outset of the television age, Italian Americans have been a presence both in front and behind the camera.³ From melodramas to situation comedies, from detective stories to Reality TV, Italian American characters have been playing prominent roles. As in cinema, television has often represented Italian Americans stereotypically, displaying a parody of ethnic traits associated with this culture. Indeed, ethnic portrayals on TV have mirrored many of the social and political changes in American life since the inception of television.

In 1980, more than 12 million people of Italian ancestry lived in the U.S.⁴ They were the 6th ethnic group and the 5.4% of the American population. Census data draws a portrait of a group with very good education and occupation levels and with a level of income that was much higher than the national average. Apart from the Jewish group, no other important ethnic group had accomplished a greater social mobility. Moreover, Census highlighted a clear evolution in the Italian American men and women's occupation status. Their presence in upper and middle-class jobs had reached the white population's national average (Bonutti 95-115). Notwithstanding all this, on the small screen, blue-collar characters with an Italian name were still the most numerous ones.

In 1974, Arthur 'Fonzie' Fonzarelli (Henry Winkler) on *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984) set the stage for a generation of lovable *Guido* figures. An inner-city young man of Italian descent, with slick-backed hair and a strong masculinity, *Guido* can be regarded as the "working-class answer to the Latin lover" (Tamburri 215).⁵ A former gang member and a high school dropout, Fonzie prompts other characters to see him as a rebel with a bad influence. But, beneath his leather jacket and streetwise toughness, he has a heart of gold. He is extraordinary good with engines and women, and constantly surrounded by a bevy of beautiful teenage girls. However, during the course of the show, at the white middle-class Cunningham family table, Fonzie undergoes a few changes: he earns a high school diploma, becomes a full-fledged teacher, lessens his sexy womanizing attitudes for long-term relationships and, finally, though never married, he adopts a young orphan boy, completing the transformation from the rebel thug to a rehabilitated member of the dominant class (Ruffner 233).⁶

³ Early Italian characters on American television include the ludicrous Latin lover of *The Continental* (CBS 1952-1953) and the naive new immigrants of *Life with Luigi* (CBS 1952) and *Mama Rosa* (ABC 1948-1950). Highlighting the criminal element of Chicago during the Roaring Twenties, *The Untouchables* (ABC 1959-1963) brought the mythology of the Mafia onto the small screen. The David Chase's successful series *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007) shows the Mafia is still big business in the American entertainment industry. In addition, "Tony Soprano and his cohorts symbolize the assimilation of Italian American in the middle-class America, as Tony and his family confront many of the same issues that non-ethnic Americans face today" (Gardaphe 64-67).

⁴ For the first time, the 1980 Census asked Americans to declare their ancestry. It was a question that allowed a multiple answer, being a person able to cite two or more groups as part of his or her own ethnic heritage. 6.883.320 people declared the Italian ancestry only, 5.300.72 listed other ancestries beside the Italian one, 803.633 were the Italian born.

⁵ More recently, the word *Guido* has come to refer to a particular youth subculture, a life style that is distinguished by the Italian ancestry of its actors. It has a predominantly expressive character, it is not committed to any ideology or political program and flourishes in heavily Italian American areas, ranging from largely blue-collar districts to middle-class suburban sections (Tricarico 44).

⁶ Butsch notes that over a half century of television comedies have reinforced images of the middle-class as better than the working-class (16). Being success confined predominantly to the middle-class, the working-class men are labeled deviant and responsible for their own failure. While there are more shows featuring working-class people in the 1990s, the men continued to be stereotyped as not too bright and immature.



Fig. 1: John Travolta as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*



Fig. 2: Henry Winkler as Arthur 'Fonzie' Fonze in *Happy Days*

A year after *Happy Days'* premiere, John Travolta played another classic *Guido* as Vinnie Barbarino on *Welcome Back, Kotter* (ABC 1975-1979). Vinnie is the leader of the Sweathogs (the nickname for the Special Guidance Remedial Academics Group) at James Buchanan High in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, a predominant working-class Italian American neighborhood. He is vain and not very smart, but his ability with women is a source of amusement and envy among his classmates. Vinnie comes from a very poor Sicilian family and he is proud of his origins: "I got my own idea of what God is like. I know he's a sharp dresser. He's good looking. And of course he's Italian." Toward the end of the series, Vinnie gets a part-time job as a hospital orderly.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the challenge of the working-class is a prevalent theme in the Italian American comedy. *Happy Days'* spin-off *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC 1976-1983) is set in the 1950s. It tells the story of Laverne DeFazio (Penny Marshall) and her best friend Shirley (Cindy Williams), working on an assembly line in a beer factory. Tough-talking, unsophisticated, occasionally wisecracking, Laverne is the cynic of the pair. Her relationship with her father, the Italian-born Frank (Phil Foster) who runs the local Pizza Bowl, becomes central to her character, as Frank constantly interferes with Laverne's endless search for the perfect husband. The show also features Shirley's high school sweetheart Carmine "The Big Ragù" Ragusa (Eddie Mekka), an aspiring dancer and part-time boxer.

Angie (ABC 1979-1980) is a Cinderella-story about Angie Falco (Donna Pescow), a waitress who falls in love with and eventually marries a doctor, son of one of Philadelphia's richest families. Angie and her mother Theresa (Doris Roberts) – who raised her and her younger sister by herself, after the husband deserted the family – later open a beauty parlor together. *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993) stars the waitress Carla Tortelli (Rhea



Perlman) and the bartender Ernie “Coach” Pantusso (Nicholas Colasanto). While Carla is cynical and acid and has a harsh word for everyone (but she is respected because of her wit and tough attitude), Coach, though slow and forgetful, is affable and caring, listens to people’s problems and tries to solve them with advice and analyses.

The former boxer Tony Danza played the taxi driver Tony Banta on *Taxi* (CBS 1978-1982; ABC 1982-1983) and the housekeeper Tony Micelli on *Who’s the Boss?* (ABC 1984-1992). Banta is sweet-natured, if somewhat dimwitted, and dreams to become a professional boxer, but has little success and, finally, the boxing commission takes away his license because he has been knocked out one too many times. Louie De Palma (Danny DeVito) is the company’s taxi dispatcher. He is abusive, despotic, he shows no morals and soon becomes one of the most despised men on television. Wanting to provide a better life for his young daughter, widower Tony Micelli relocates from Brooklyn to Connecticut, where he finds a job as live-in housekeeper for a divorced advertising executive. The show turns upside down the traditional family and gender roles, where a woman is the breadwinner and a man (although he is not her husband) stays at home and takes care of the house. It also challenges the stereotypes of Italian young males as macho and boorish, being Tony depicted as sensitive, lighthearted, and domestic.

Another twist to the gender roles within the family is brought by Frank and Irene Lorenzo (Vincent Gardenia and Betty Garrett), the politically liberal couple who lives next door to the outspoken bigot Archie Bunker (Carroll O’Connor) on *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-1979). While his wife, a strong willed woman of Irish heritage, assumes many of the household duties normally associated with husbands, Frank is a jovial salesman who takes pleasure and pride in cooking and singing. This pose arouses the sarcastic comments of Archie, who thinks that Frank is homosexual.

Laverne & Shirley is not just the first modern comedy to feature a leading Italian American female character. If on the surface the characters appears to be longing to fulfill the stereotypical role associated with womanhood, their actions and attitudes (“Give us any chance, we’ll take it. Give us any rule, we’ll break it. We’re gonna make our dreams come true. Doing it our way”) cast them as two of television’s first liberated women (Nill b; Ruggieri and Leeborn 1273-1274).

Far from the frustrated women in the 1950s and 1960s sitcoms, more outspoken female characters can be traced in the changing roles of women in the workplace and the home, with the shift from nonworking to working mothers, delaying of marriage and childbirth, and more single-parent families. In 1980, almost 6% of the Italian American families with children had a single female head. If in the past decades, the widowers as single-mothers had been prevalent, divorced and not married women are the 1980s increasingly numerous. The development of a sense of individuality was for ethnic women “a first step toward reappraisal of their role inside, as well as outside, the family and toward emancipation” (Tirabassi 140).

In that period, two other shows stand out in depicting independent, intelligent, hard-working Italian American women: *One Day at a Time* (CBS 1975-1984) and *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985-1992). On *One Day at a Time*, Ann Romano (Bonnie Franklin) is a divorced mother who moves to Indianapolis with her two teenage daughters and gets a job in a advertising agency, a profession that surely raises “the professional bar among Italian Americans on screen, placing them outside the standard civil service jobs” (Tamburri 215). She married when she was 17, she feels that she has always been either someone’s daughter or wife, and wants to prove that she can live and raise up her children independently. The program emphasized the struggle of balancing a career and motherhood. As other comedies of the era, *One Day at a Time* mixes comical elements with more serious issues, such as pre-marital sex, birth control, and suicide: “Its decision not to shy away from difficult themes, its warts and all portrayal of contemporary life, especially of women’s lives and of female adolescence, sets it apart. Thus the series helped expand the dimensions and role of U.S. television comedy” (O’Dell).

The Golden Girls revolves around the Sicilian born Sophia Petrillo (Estelle Getty) and her daughter Dorothy (Bea Arthur), sharing a house in Miami with two older, single women. Sophia, who moved to New York after fleeing an arranged marriage, epitomizes the Italian American grandmother: she is physically small, funny, candid, and has a great talent in the kitchen. Despite her sharp criticism of her daughter and roommates, she loves and cares for them deeply. There are hints in the series that Sophia and her family have some mafia connections and she makes reference to several vendettas. Sophia strongly believes in ancient Sicilian customs and traditions, and in the power of a “Sicilian curse.” A divorced school teacher, Dorothy is



intelligent, independent and strong. She is the voice of reason and the most grounded of the four women, but her lack of love life is often harshly criticized by her mother. An aspect of the Italian American family that is frequently a part of the comedic plotline is the relationship between different familial generations (Nill b; Ruggieri and Leeborn 1274).

Since his wife left the family to pursue her own career, session musician Nick Russo (Ted Wass) becomes an overprotective single father on *Blossom* (NBC 1991-1995). The series centers on the life at school and at home of her daughter Blossom (Mayim Bialik), a bright and enterprising teenager. During the show, Blossom learns many hard lessons, including abuse, alcohol, drugs, divorce and many more. Her oldest brother Tony (Michael Stoyanov) is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict; the middle brother Joey (Joey Lawrence) is a not-so-smart baseball player and ladies man.

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, many other Italian characters play a leading role on the American sitcoms, featuring the recurrent images of the working-class man and woman, the *Guido* love boy, and the hotheaded “Italian Stallion.”⁷

In 1994, the new charming *Guido* Joey Tribbiani (Matt Le Blanc) debuts on *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004), one of the most successful and beloved TV series ever. Joey comes from an Italian American family of eight children and, having refused to become a pipefitter as his father, he struggles to become an actor. A mix between the two traditional stereotypes of the *fesso* and the Latin lover (Giagnoni 223), he loves food and is extremely promiscuous with women, often relying on his catchphrase pickup line “How you doin’?” Despite his apparent boorish and simple-minded nature, Joey is repeatedly shown as a caring and kindhearted person, capable of good ideas when the situation arises. For this role, in 1999, actor Matt Le Blanc was awarded the National Italian American Foundation Entertainment Achievement Award. After the 2003-2004 final season of *Friends*, Joey Tribbiani became the main character of the spin-off *Joey* (NBC 2004-2006), where he moved to Los Angeles to improve his acting career. His sister Gina Tribbiani (Drea de Matteo) and her son Michael (Paulo Costanzo) were two other central characters of the show. Gina, a hairdresser, is portrayed as a typical *Guidette*: she has a hard look, stressed by tight pants and heavy make-up, speaks in a high voice and is often judged to be trashy. At a party, a guy is not aware he is talking to her brother and claims: “She’s fine for a solo night. Not exactly for a movie or a dinner, right?”



⁷ Italian comedic characters include Fonzie’s younger cousin Charles “Chachi” Arcola (Scott Baio) on *Joanie Loves Chachi* (ABC 1982-1983) and Carla Tortelli’s sleazy and good for nothing ex-husband Nick (Dan Hedaya) on *The Tortellis* (NBC 1987), which [drew protests for its stereotypical depictions of Italian Americans](#). The character of Sophia Petrillo returned on *The Golden Place* (CBS 1992-1993) and *Empty Nest* (NBC 1988-1995). The huge popularity of the film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) [inspired the comedies *Makin’ It* \(NBC 1979\) and *Joe and Valerie* \(NBC 1978-1979\), starring Italian working-class young men who frequent the disco clubs at night](#). Due to consistently low viewers, many of these shows were short-lived and canceled after a few episodes.



Fig. 3: Matt Le Blanc and Drea de Matteo as Joey and Gina Tribbiani in *Joey*

In the 1990s, middle-class Italian American characters are more frequent. However, ethnicity seems not to be an important factor in the concept of many of these shows, emphasis being placed instead on more universal themes such as idiosyncratic characters and dysfunctional families. Television writers and producers give the impression to relegate ethnicity to working-class stories “boasting crude language and Old World gestures” (Laurino 4). This is, for example, the case of three funny and brilliant shows: *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS 1996-2005), *Just Shoot Me!* (NBC 1997-2003), and *The War at Home* (FOX 2005-2007).

Regarded as the last classic sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond* revolves around the life of Raymond Barone (Ray Romano), a sportswriter living with his wife Debra (Patricia Heaton) and three children in Lynbrook, New York. Whiny and careless, Raymond does not take things seriously, making jokes in nearly every situation and constantly avoiding any sort of real responsibility. Raymond’s parents, Marie (Doris Roberts) and Frank (Peter Boyle) and older brother Robert (Brad Garrett) live across the street, and frequently make their presence to Raymond and Debra’s frustration:

Real families constantly walk a thin line between love and hate, and no show has captured that tightrope walk quite as vividly as *Everybody Loves Raymond*. With their ambivalence, their petty jealousies, and their misguided attempts at generosity, Ray and his family are thrilling caustic, unpredictable, and above all relatable (Reimers 117)

Many of the situations in the show are based on the real-life experiences of Ray Romano and of creator/producer Phil Rosenthal, but when addressing the ethnic background of his script, Rosenthal argues: “I think we consciously avoided trying to pigeonhole into any type of ethnicity. In fact, CBS wanted to populate the cast with what they called ‘non-ethnic ethnics’ They didn’t want to scare away Middle America.” “CBS wanted – Romano adds – the wife to be more blond, middle-American-not ethnic. They wanted my last name not to end with a vowel. So we fooled them with Barone. It still ends with an ‘e’, but it’s a silent ‘e’”. (Laurino 4; Romano and Rosenthal 9). Wondering if Raymond Barone can be considered a “crypto-Jewish” character,⁸ Sandler concludes: “*Everybody Loves Raymond* does not have an Italian sensibility or a Jewish sensibility. It has an American sensibility, where cultures don’t so much melt together but rather overlap each other, and the lines blur. Everyone sees their own family in Frank and Marie and Ray and Debra and Robert” (2).

⁸ Crypto-Jews are characters whose portrayals may lead viewers to believe that the character is Jewish, but the role is never defined as such; this ambiguity is thought to be appealing to larger audiences. Another crypto-Jewish character is considered to be George Costanza (Jason Alexander) on *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998). Though his father is Italian born, the character of George was originally based on *Seinfeld* Jewish co-creator Larry David. George both looks (short, pudgy, balding) and acts (whiny, tightfisted, neurotic) stereotypically Jewish. He is self-obsessed and besieged by his mother, and he has been described as one of the most widely Jewish characters in TV History. All this even though, “diegetically speaking, George is manifestly not-Jewish” (Brook 107).



Fig. 4: The Barone family in *Everybody Loves Raymond*

A workplace comedy, *Just Shoot Me!* centers on Maya Gallo (Laura San Giacomo), a New York hot-tempered feminist writer who reluctantly takes a job at the glamour magazine *Blush*, owned by her father, the Donald Trump-like Jack (George Segal). The cast includes womanizing and usually over-sensitive photographer Elliot DiMauro (Enrico Colantoni). During the show, however, the characters' ethnicity is never clearly expressed.

The War at Home follows the antics of the Italian-Jewish family Gold, living in Long Island. The mother Vicky (Anita Barone), a part-time receptionist of Italian origins, spends her time dealing with the unreasonable, often paranoid and bigoted behavior of her husband Dave (Michael Rapaport). She is Generally clever and reasonable but can be quite obnoxious herself. Every day, the couple struggles to keep his kids in line.

Showing no particular interest or enthusiasm in their ancestry, Raymond, Maya and Vicky somewhat become the "non-ethnic ethnics" Phil Rosenthal was talking about, that is, "someone who is obviously from New York, but doesn't look too Jewish or Italian" (Laurino 4). In fifth season's premiere, Ray Barone and his family travel to Italy for a birthday celebration. Ray is not much excited at that and declares: "I'm not really interested in other cultures," and so actor Romano: "I had never been to Italy, and I'll be honest, I wasn't excited. I'm not crazy about travel and all that, and I could have done without it" (Romano and Rosenthal 67). After a time of moping around and bothering himself ("It's like a third-world country. Whole place is annoying ... I'm just dumb Ray who likes New Jersey"), Ray is eventually captured by the magic of the place, coming away with a new perspective on life and family: "There's like a feeling here. I don't know how to describe it, but it's more simple ... It's like they know how to live here." The connection between Barone's family and his own Italian ethnic background goes, however, unexamined.

The shows analyzed in this article were appreciated by audience and received critical appraisal and even though they may no longer go on air on their networks of origin, they frequently continue to appear in syndication. In 1999, *TV Guide* ranked Louie De Palma and Arthur Fonzarelli number one and four respectively, on its 50 Greatest TV Characters of All Time list. The sitcoms' Italian characters gained the greatest popularity and continue to impress both young and old viewers.

Today, Italian Americans are a highly visible group of professionals in business, politics, entertainment, and art, and have, generally, become members of the white establishment. They feel free to proclaim their own



ethnicity and to protest against stereotypical and discriminatory images as still projected by the media, since they might weaken their position in the society:

Never in my 27 years of fighting bias, bigotry and defamation of Italian and Italian Americans – writes National CSJ President Santina Haemmerle – have I seen the proliferation of negative stereotyping as we all experienced these past few months (...) We are deluged and bombarded with negative images of Italians and Italian Americans in all media and advertising on a daily base. This is a wake-up call for Italian Americans to add their voices to ours and those of other Italian American organizations: "... if you see something, say something". It's that simple – e-mail, phone, write letters, but do something – now! (Order Sons of Italy in America, National Commission for Social Justice 2)

Italian characters' personal traits have been consistent for over forty years in American situation comedies. They have presented a mixture of positive features such as loyalty, independence, cheerfulness, tough attitude and negative ones such as excitability, boorishness and idiocy. Those portrays can actually lack realism: "Dress, eating habits, and language accents are exaggerate to surround the character with an outer framework that is hollow, one dimensional, and unreflective of reality" (Brizzolara 162).

The main and most obvious sitcom's aim is making people laugh. Television comedies are repeatedly judged on their funniness, but, when humor becomes disparagement humor, it creates "a normative climate of tolerance of discrimination, the social conditions that encourage the expression of negative stereotypes and prejudice toward the targeted group" (Ford and Ferguson 79).

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