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Family models in Spanish television comedy (1990-2010) ^[1]

Tatiana Hidalgo-Marí [[CV](#)] [[ORCID](#)] [[CGS](#)]. Professor and Researcher. Universidad de Alicante / University of Alicante. Spain – tatiana.hidalgo@ua.es

Anna Tous Rovirosa [[CV](#)] [[ORCID](#)] [[CGS](#)]. Professor and Researcher. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona / Autonomous University of Barcelona. Spain - anna.tous@uab.cat

Luís Fernando Morales Morante [[CV](#)] [[ORCID](#)] [[CGS](#)]. Professor and Researcher. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona / Autonomous University of Barcelona. Spain - fernando.morales@uab.cat

Abstract

This article analyses the representation and relevance of family models in Spanish television comedy. **Methods.** The study is based on the qualitative analysis of 46 TV family comedies produced and broadcast by mainstream channels from the opening of the Spanish television market (1990) to the analogue blackout (2010). **Conclusions and discussion.** The results offer a chronological description of the evolution of family representations in Spanish TV comedy and confirm that the construction of the family within TV comedy alternates hyperrealism with conservatism

Keywords

Comedy; family; prominence; roles; sitcom; TV.

Contents

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
(PhD in Communication, University of London)

1. Introduction

The family in general and family relationships in particular have been recurrent themes in television narratives and for a long time were considered the only narrative center around which a good part of narrated stories were constructed (Fogel, 2012: 37).

Television fiction, as a cultural product aimed at family consumption, fosters environments of union in front of the television set. For this reason and because they are also consumption stories, and faithful facilitators of identification between the audience and characters, family narratives acquire such vital importance. Thus, it is based on the social realism that characterizes the neotelevision (García de Castro, 2008: 5) and on which the progress of television fiction production has been established. The representation of family models in television fiction therefore represents a reflection of the roles that have been attributed to the social institution over time, integrated by appropriate attitudes, norms, values, beliefs or behaviors (Greenberg and Neuendorf, 1980).

Although the representation of the family in the fiction is a little studied subject (Moore, 1992), some authors, speaking of the American case, verify that the families of the fiction are a reflection of the real families (Glennon and Butsch, 1982; Greenberg et al., 1980), compared to those who affirm that representation is characterized by the reflection of traditional values attributed to the family (Crotty, 1995, Olson and Douglas, 1997, Lacalle and Gómez, 2016). Others argue that there is no prototypical model that represents the prototypical family (Furstenberg, 2003: 6). In the case of Spanish fiction, the few studies reveal that the reflection of families in fiction is still carried out from the prism of the traditional family (Lacalle and Hidalgo, 2016: 10, Ortega and Simelió, 2012: 1009), that dysfunctionality in the family is becoming the most common way to represent the family in fiction (Lacalle and Hidalgo, 2016: 9) and even some claim that television fiction in no case mentions emerging family realities (Chacón and Sánchez-Ruiz, 2011: 24).

Within the study of the family in fiction, family comedy, as a subgenre of television comedy, acquires vital importance by giving meaning to own narratives in which families are the protagonists. In addition, the unquestionable success of the family comedy makes it a subgenre of necessary analysis, both for its impact on audiences and for its influence on the social construction of families, roles and protagonisms.

This work, with the aim of advancing the study of the family in fiction and the representations and imaginaries implicit in this relationship, provides an overview of the family stories and models in the Spanish television comedy, establishing a taxonomy of how it has been that representation, what changes it has undergone and how it has been consolidating the construction of the family within the television subgenre of comedy.

2. Spanish TV Comedy

It is undeniable that Spanish fiction has had a direct legacy of advances in American fiction, at all levels. The North American production, of innovative form began to include, from the Seventies, unconventional families, adapted to the realities of the country at that time. So, fictions like *The Brady*

Bunch (ABC, 1974), *Married ... with Children* (Fox, 1987) or *Full house* (ABC, 1987), were postulated as pioneers in a context of family fiction in which families began to appear unstructured, extended families, single parent families and where the feminine roles rebounded with an air of independence, transgression and social innovation in a context marked by social openness and the winds of change.

In Spain, the family comedy has undergone changes and evolutions since its consolidation as a television genre: while during the seventies and eighties literary adaptations predominated (*Curro Jiménez*, 1976-1978, *Cañas y barro*, 1978, *La barraca*, 1979 or *Los Pazos de Ulloa*, 1985) and regional accounts (*El último café*, 1970-1972, *Sighs of Spain*, 1974-1975 or *Verano azul*, 1981-1982), little by little space is left to other more novel proposals, which they reflect a new social and family situation, giving rise to changes in traditional costumbrist representation and advocating new trends in television narration. The changes not only developed narrative level but also significant alterations occurred to s in format, duration or longevity (Hidalgo-Mari, 2018: 45) that, in one way or another, acabañan conditioning development of the narrations.

The fictions of these decades were very marked by the family feeling and the representation of an exemplary family model, in line with the moralistic logics that continued to prevail in Spanish society. However, since the 1990s, a timid innovation has been seen through the inclusion of new family structures based on the reflection of changes in Spanish society. The divorce, the singleness of the parents, the new relational forms, the increase in the age of emancipation of men, the incorporation of women to work and their social autonomy had shaped a new society far removed from post-Franco society. This evolution in the representation of the family was developed in parallel to the family evolution of Latin American soap operas, which began to bet on versatile and daily stories, in search of narratives much closer to the family audience (Chicharro, 2011: 20).

Ever since the national fiction was bet, screenwriters and producers looked for domestic and community environments, issues close to a heterogeneous audience, that were easy to consume and that supposed to be profitable for advertisers (Galán and Herrero, 2011: 27), therefore, the stories that promoted these family consumption quickly spread on the small screen.

While in the first 15 years, experimented with new genres and new themes, but always thinking of a family audience, as of 2005 this trend is modified as a consequence of the fragmentation of the hearings, motivated not only by the arrival of the two new channels and if not also for the change in the traditional reception of television within the family (Gómez, 2017: 48).

The story of the family as a classic family institution coexisted with new family models of more avant-garde, novel and, at times, even exotic, representing a new moral hyper-realism (García de Castro, 200: 73), which combined past and present, timid form, but that quickly settled as the trend in the television fiction story

3. Objectives and methods

The present aims to offer a chronological overview of the models and family stories that have characterized the family comedy produced in Spain since the break of the television monopoly (1990) until 2010, when the analog switch-off resulted in an offer multiplied channels, programs and products.

The work, which is part of a larger project that includes all fiction genres and formats issued from 1990 to 2010 in the generalist chains, has been carried out using quantitative and qualitative analysis, which has been characterized by viewing and the classification of all the fictions of own production. In this particular case, those titles that fall under the subgenre of the family comedy have been filtered, understanding that the family comedy covers all those fictions that, in a humorous tone, encompass situations involving family communities or neighborhood communities or other ties social networks that generate simulated communities to which the concept of family includes.

Applying the criterion that allows classifying as a family comedy, 46 case studies have been obtained, which have been submitted to viewing and classification. On this sample of 46 Spanish family comedies, a qualitative study has been carried out that has addressed the following variables: 1) Year of issue, 2) Type of family model and 3) Protagonisms within the story of the family.

- Year of issue: allows to establish coincidences and differences between the different periods and years analyzed and returns the possibility of establishing a chronological taxonomy and its stages around the Spanish family comedy.
- The prevailing family model: it deals with the organization of the family based on the role of the parents, fundamentally. In this sense, traditional families are defined, dysfunctional families, single-parent families, extended families, mixed families....
- Protagonisms within the story: it allows us to know if there are differences in the protagonism of men and women or if, on the contrary, its protagonism is choral. This variable broadens the meaning of the investigation of the prevailing family models when responding to the weight that men and women acquire in the representation of the different family models in fiction.

The application of these analysis variables allows the classification in periods, genres and protagonisms and contributes to achieve the purpose of contributing a taxonomy around the representation of the family in the Spanish television comedy, deepening in the organization of the family institution in the fiction, the protagonism of the subjects and their fundamental role. Thus, an analysis model that provides results around the evolution of the family in comedy is established, from the opening of the television market in Spain (1990) to the analogical blackout (2010).

4. Results

4.1. Primitive family models: costumbrismo and dysfunctionality (1990-2000)

The fictions of the nineties highlighted by the costumbrismo that dominated in all its plots, despite the progressive introduction of new themes and stories that, somehow, updated and modernized the content of the fiction comedy. The first fictions of that period represented familiar everyday scenes, constellated with curious situations and great gifts of humor. Thus, fictions such as *VillaRosaura* (TVE1, 1994), *On the part of Who* (La2, 1993) or *Tango* (TVE1, 1992), focused on varied and fun family nuclei, with certain picaresque features, but without too much impact on the renewal of the story.

Farmacia de guardia (Antena3, 1991) was the first fiction of the nineties to introduce the real problems of families in the stories, with new plots that supposed a renewal and, in part, a revulsion of previous

family comedy: divorce, the gender difference, the wage and labor gap, gender violence or other issues related to sexual and affective freedom (introduced in a timid but evident way) found their place in the fiction of Antonio Mercero.

While it is true that *Farmacia de guardia* was a turning point in the representation of the family, the comedy coexisted with other stories that represented the traditional or nuclear family, such as *Por una solos* (Antena3, 1994), in which the parents of family struggle to get their four children leave the family nucleus and become independent. *Villarosaura* (TVE1, 1994) was another example of traditional narrative around the family construction built around an extended family formed by the parents, their son, grandfather and his niece arrived from town, who will put into practice the picaresque necessary to survive in a house that they have occupied.

Other later comedies of the last decade of the century kept betting on traditional stories, with chauvinist and classist reminiscences, which went unnoticed in the context of that period, without contributing to the advance of the family comedy: *Menudo es mi padre* (Antena3, 1996), *Carmen y familia* (TVE1, 1996) or the popular *La casa de los líos* (Antena3, 1996), starring Arturo Fernández who played an unprecedented raptor who lived at the mercy of his nieces, were the references with the highest audience of an era that flirted with the uses and customs of the past and the present, destined to disappear to make way for a much more innovative fiction production.

With the premiere of *Médico de familia* (Tele5, 1995) the reflection of new family models in Spanish comedy was perpetuated. The extended single parent family gained importance, in which the father, a widower, dealt with his employment as a doctor, the education of his children, his nephew arrived in the capital to study and the grandfather. All this in a family that recalled the series *American Forced Parents* [2] (ABC, 1987) and included other characters such as Aunt Alicia, who will evolve to become the mother of the family and the servant, who shared with the aunt the maternal roles absent in the family structure. The extensive single-parent model was reproduced in *La casa de los messos* (Antena3, 1996), in which Arturo Fernández interpreted the uncle of a single-parent family (in this case, female, derived from a divorce) that dealt with the daily situations of his family. four nieces and the housekeeper *Ana y los 7* (TVE1, 2002), also represented a structure very similar to that of the Tele5 fiction.

The period analyzed also included other much more transgressive models, such as *At eleven at home* (TVE1, 1998), in which a separated man who lives with his second wife and children and his ex-wife becomes another member of the family. your new family In *All men you are equal* (Tele5, 1996), three divorcees resume their lives as singles and go to live together, recreating a family model not exploited in fiction until then, which integrated the family histories of each of the protagonists with Those of the assistant, who assumes the maternal role in a scenario marked by the family disintegration taken to the extreme.

Although the families of the Spanish comedy were debated between the dysfunctional family, the single-parent family and the assembled families, it is necessary to highlight the premiere in 1998 of a series that supposed an advance in the representation of the family in the comedy and gave a narrative turn to family models: *Uncle Willy* (TVE1). This fiction narrated the vicissitudes of a homosexual who, after returning from San Francisco, is forced to act as the father of his three nephews, due to the

bad family situation in which the parents of the young people are. In addition, the family structure is joined by Willy's partner, who moves to Madrid to formalize their relationship. For the first time in the family comedy, homosexuality takes center stage, together with other family representations such as the family dysfunctionality of the traditional family. All a renovating paradigm that, in spite of not having been very exploited in the later fictions, supposed an advance in the introduction of the homosexuality within the familiar scenes.

4.2. Transgressive family models (2000-2005)

While the nineties stood out for the costumbrismo, the timid reflexes of thematic openness of that period came with force to the new century. In particular, the private channels Antena3 and Tele5 promoted a sequence of fictions that dealt with much more real issues, even though one could still breathe the traditional aura in the narrations. *Ala ... Dina* (TVE1, 2000), *A pacifier for her* (Antena3, 2000) or *Javier no longer lives alone* (Tele5, 2001) combined fiction with reality, introduced new family models, reflected the society that fueled the fictions and they became reflections of the day-to-day of the spectator. Single fathers, extramarital affairs, divorces, amorous disagreements, new sexualities and other topics acquired importance in the fiction of the beginning of the century.

Successively, fictions were consolidated that bet to reflect the wide range of family models of the 2000: *The Serrano* (Tele5, 2003), *Ana and the seven* (TVE1, 2002) or *My adorable neighbors* (Antena3, 2004). The families assumed new structures according to the social reality, the children began to be problematic adolescents that altered the stability of the family and money, work and lack of resources began to have some importance in the narrations.

The assembled families represent another interesting perspective in the family construction of the comedy following the inheritance of *the tribe of the Brady* (ABC, 1969), individual single-parent families (either by divorce, or by widowhood) that come together contributing to the new family. The respective children acquire relevance as of 2000. Thus, *Los Serrano* (Tele5, 2003) is perpetuated as the paradigmatic example of the assembled family, reproduced later in the form of a subfamily within a much more extensive structure represented by the "community" *Of the neighbors Here there is no one who lives, the one who approaches or Aida* [3].

A decade later, *Mesa para cinco* (La Sexta, 2006) radically modifies the traditional family nucleus, after the death of the father in a traffic accident that turns five brothers and their caregiver into the axis of the home.

4.3. The revolution in the family model: neighborhood communities

It is interesting to note the diachronic character in the typographic construction of the family in Spanish comedies. While the first fictions incorporated new models of family with a certain innovative air (for example, *Pharmacy on duty*, *Family Doctor*, *Los Serrano*...), as the years progressed and television fiction consolidated as a successful product, families are moving away more and more from the traditional model. It is no longer the introduction of family models prevailing in the real world (divorces, assembled families or single parent families), but the narratives themselves acquire a truly

transgressive character, incorporating hyper-structured, homosexual, non-parental families and other models existing in society.

It is a non-isolated fact, which can be seen mainly in the series of neighbors: where the totally dysfunctional and single-parent families (*Aída's* family nucleus) coexist with homosexual families in search of descendants (Mauri and Fernando in *Here no there are who*), single homosexual mothers (Bea in *Here there is no one who lives*), families assembled as a result of infidelities (Amador Rivas and Mayte Figueroa in *La que se avecina*), families that integrate new social subjects (for example, the use of a surrogate mother by Antonio Recio in *La que se avecina*), or other models more related to the economic argument than to the construction of the family itself (family generations who join in the face of the impossibility of maintaining themselves: Javi and Lola they are forced to keep their parents in their own home in *La que se avecina*).

From *Aída* (Tele5, 2005), which reflects the real drama of a poor family mother, without resources, with a junkie son, a self-conscious and vulgar adolescent daughter, a prostitute friend and a delinquent son, even the multiple themes of *Here not There are those who live* (Antena3, 2003): murders, robberies, stolen children, poverty, employability, infidelity, lack of love, homosexuality, maternity, gender violence, and many other variants that manage to tell more realistic stories than a good part of family comedies of previous century. *The one that is approaching* (Tele5, 2007-) supposes a turning point in this sense, with the critic to all the social scene of the moment that carries out: political corruption, criticisms to the church, machismo, violence of sort, drug addiction, sexuality, infidelity, etc.

All these fictions that reflect the family model through the construction of a community of neighbors, alter in the most hyper-realistic way possible family representation in television fiction, giving a creative and humorous turn that, on the one hand, highlights the entertainment characteristics of the own subgenre of comedy and, secondly, substantially alter what had been a manners construction, with certain innovative and realistic reflections of the family in the Spanish comedy.

4.4. Gender differences in the leading roles of family comedy

At the time of deepening the study of family models in Spanish comedy, it is necessary to know the distribution that has been made of the role, in order to know if there are gender differences in this regard. Since the family is one of the social institutions that has had more weight in the distribution of gender roles, the knowledge of these roles and protagonisms will allow us to go a step further in the definition of the family models of fiction.

According to the results of the analysis, the prevailing role in the Spanish family comedy has a choral character (50% of the cases analyzed confirm this). A logical fact if we take into account that, within the family narrations, the roles played by the protagonists tend to maintain a certain equity between the traditional characters (female and male, indistinctly) that make up the family. However, the relevant role of the father is also noted, with 28.2% of the analyzed series that stand out above the rest of the household members. *Menudo is my father* (Antena3, 196), for example, it represented a family environment in which the protagonism fell on the daily life of Juan Carrasco, a Spanish taxi driver, played by the now deceased singer El Fary. *Javier no longer lives alone* (Tele5, 2002) also gave the

prominence of fiction to a male character in his forties and single, who lived alone in his small apartment in the center and welcomed his nieces into his house, after his father entered the prison of the girls. This series also inaugurated, in the Spanish context, a new model that distanced itself from both traditional families and single-parent families (Lacalle and Hidalgo, 2016). *Tocao del ala* (La2, 1996) revolves around a father who returns home after spending a few months in the psychiatric hospital. However, the most representative case of masculine protagonism continued to be *Family Doctor* (Tele5, 1995), which not only enhanced the figure of the father in the development of the narrative, but also inaugurated the importance of single-parent families in the successive fictions.

The feminine protagonism of the family comedies is less relevant than the masculine, (it is only detected in 13% of the analyzed cases). They emphasize, in this respect, the already mentioned *Aída*, in which a mother of family takes the reins of the lives of her children, mother and brother; a faithful representation of the "courage mother" in a poor environment with few resources. In *Ana y los 7* (TVE1, 2002), female protagonism is given by a stripper who, by mistake, arrives to babysit a wealthy single-parent family. *Carmen and family* (BBC1, 1996) or *Ala... Dina* (BBC1, 2000) also highlights the role women both working women ruler of a business, in the first case, as the peculiar Mary Poppins Spanish second.

The relevance of the choral protagonism, followed by the masculine and the feminine, in the Spanish family comedy (91.3% of the total of analyzed cases) reduces to the essential the presence of other family models in the analyzed period (homosexual couples or other type of family nuclei). We only detect a case in which the protagonism is shared by two men, but in this case it is not a homosexual couple. It is, however, two forty friends since adolescence, who meet again by chance and, as both had lost the woman they loved, decide to share a flat with their two daughters (*Half*, Antena, 2002). In some cases, the protagonism of a heterosexual couple becomes choral and is shared with the rest of the characters in the narrative as the series progresses (*Casa para dos*, Tele5, 1995 or *A cakes with life*, Antena3, 2005).

Be that as it may, we observe that family models, despite being represented as innovators, transgressors or hyperrealists, continue to distribute their protagonism between men and women in an equitable manner (representing a traditional model of family, led by father and mother). Although dysfunctional families and single parents acquire importance in the renewal logics, as shown by the protagonisms.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The diachronic panoramic of the family comedy allows us to affirm that we are dealing with a subgenre of fiction that stands out, on the one hand, for the prevailing costumbrismo in its plots and, secondly, for the configuration of specific narrative patterns derived from the sitcom U.S.

We can say, then, that the family comedy develops in three different periods, each characterized by innovation or conservatism that sustains it: the first fictions, after the breakdown of the television monopoly, characterized by conservatism, with some nuances and featured elements. It was a television consumed by the whole family gathered around the television in the 90s (Gómez, 2017: 49).

The period of transition between a century and another, which opts for the timid innovation of the story, maintaining largely the conservatism inherited from the previous century, although fictions appear that break with the conservative tendency, as with the premiere of *Family Doctor*. In a study on production, Diego and Pardo (2008: 52) affirm that *Family Doctor* represented a standardization in the production of series in Spain. This statement can be extrapolated to a standardization in the story, if we take into account that the premiere of this fiction perpetual new family models on television, through the exposure of an extended single-parent family never seen in a Spanish fiction.

The last years of the first decade of the 21st century, on the other hand, allow us to glimpse a fiction more similar to the current one: a reflection of social problems, of the reality that sustains fiction, a tool of social denunciation that, of some mode, it puts on the table the social panorama that gives meaning to fiction. As already affirmed other works focused on the analysis of the family in fiction:

(...) the dysfunctionality in the family is becoming the most common way of representing the family in fiction. In the field of comedy, this dysfunction is consistent with the desired humorous effects, while in the drama it provides the necessary tension between scenes and characters to build the crescendo of the story (Lacalle and Hidalgo, 2016: 8).

However, the new realities reflected in the fictions of the first decade of the twentieth century continued to coexist with the traditionality and costumbrismo that, rarely, reflected the most pressing problems of society. It will be the consolidation of the series of neighbors, which represent the family as a set of subfamilies arranged in independent dwellings, the factor that will allow us to speak of a regenerative air in the family comedy, thanks to the forceful introduction of social scourges, real problems, current and specific, never seen in the family breasts of television comedy.

In any case: "the Spanish television fiction projects a complex image of the family (...) but that tries to reflect the society that constructs it" (Lacalle and Gómez, 2016: 10), therefore, it is logical that the temporal advance be the trigger of the evolution of the comedy, taking into account that the last years have supposed important changes in the conjugation of the familiar instruction.

6. Notes

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[2] Whose original title was *Full House* (ABC, 1987-1995).

[3] Understanding the community of neighbors as a macro family composed of micro families, it is very common to find assembled sub-nuclei, in some cases, derived from the unions of own family nuclei, such as the new family of Juan Cuesta and Isabel in *Here there is no one who lives* (Antena3, 2006), the marriage formed by Soraya and Chema in *Aída* (Tele5, 2005), or the various mergers carried out in the families of Antonio Recio and Berta or Amador Rivas and Mayte Figueroa in *La que se avecina* (Tele5, 2007).

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