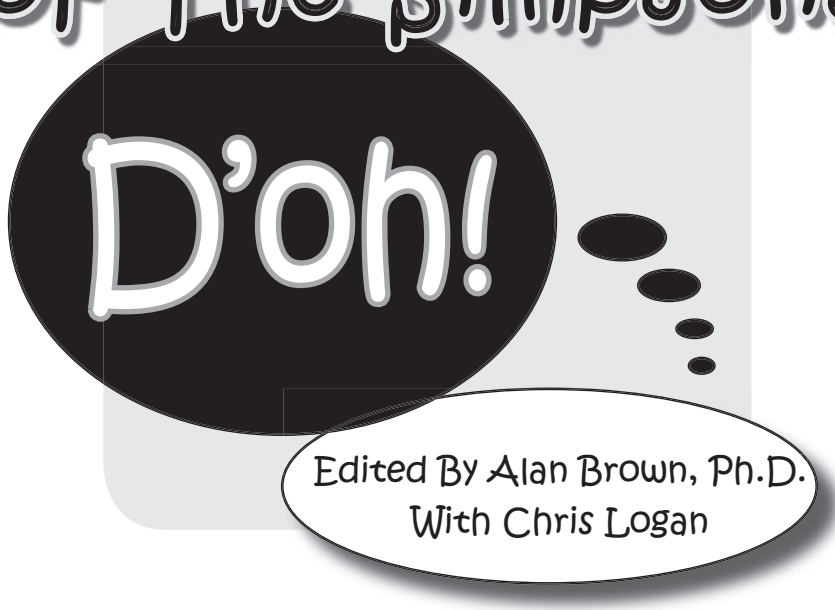
The Psychology of The Simpsons



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The Family Simpson

Like Looking in a Mirror?

Misty K. Hook, Ph.D.

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

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

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

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

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

For Better, or Worse?

The Love of Homer and Marge

Wind Goodfriend, Ph.D.

"The course of true love never did run smooth."
—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Act I, scene i

THE MEDIA SEEMS OBSESSED with following the lives of famous couples, watching and commenting as relationships run their course from flirting, through initial dating, perhaps marriage and eventually (most often) a horrific, and captivating, messy breakup. At some point in many relationships there will inevitably be a "tragic turn for the worse," in the language of *The E! True Hollywood Story.* However, most of the relationships that the media focus on seem somehow unrealistic: They are both movie stars, or one is a supermodel or one is just insanely rich. A refreshing change can be found in Homer and Marge Simpson.

Homer and Marge's relationship has many qualities that are common in "typical" American relationships. For example, the family consists of two opposite-sex parents, three children (the oldest being a boy, as preferred by most couples according to a Gallup Poll in 1997) and a variety of pets, consisting of mostly dogs and cats (admittedly, there have been some atypical pets, not found in most households, such as Princess the pony, Stampy the elephant and Pinchy the lobster). Marge is a home-

maker and Homer maintains a middle-class job from which he gets little sense of purpose. They have annoying in-laws, go through financial hardships and often question each other's decisions and choices. Although the traditional idea of "family" in America is certainly changing rapidly in the modern world, it is easy to see how Homer and Marge exemplify what many traditionalists envision as an average couple today.

That said, how does psychological theory apply to the analysis of such a normative example of a romantic relationship? The answer comes from Interdependence Theory, one of the most popular and established methods for examining love within psychology.[1]

Interdependence Theory

Interdependence Theory began with the book *The Social Psychology of Groups* (1959) with the premise that a couple is the smallest group that can be studied by psychologists. The main idea behind the theory was to set up a framework in which interactions between two couple members could be understood. At the base of this theory is the idea that when individuals interact with each other, they will affect and influence each other. Take an example: you and your partner go to the video store to rent something. You want to see a romantic comedy, whereas your partner wants to see something with karate and machine guns. Now, let's say your partner gives in and you rent the movie you wanted. Short term, you're happy, right? But your partner now sulks, and brings up this sacrifice the next day and you end up having dinner at Hooters to make the situation "even." In short, one partner's happiness depends on the other's. This example is brought to life in the episode "Catch 'Em If You Can," where we witness this exchange between Homer and Bart after Marge makes the family rent the movie *Love Story*:

Homer: Son, seeing sappy movies with a lady has certain payoffs.
Bart: Like what, they'll do something with you that *they* hate?
Homer: Exactly.

Interdependence Theory is complicated (and kind of boring in parts). Entire semesters of college courses are taken up trying to explain just the basics. However, one of the primary purposes of the theory, and the one most relevant to the point here, is the suggestion that we can pre-

[1] Interdependence Theory was originally theorized by John Thibault and Harold "Hal" Kelley in 1959.

"Which One of Us Is Truly Crazy?"

Pop Psychology and the Discourse of Sanity and Normativity in *The Simpsons*

Molly Snodgrass, M.A.,
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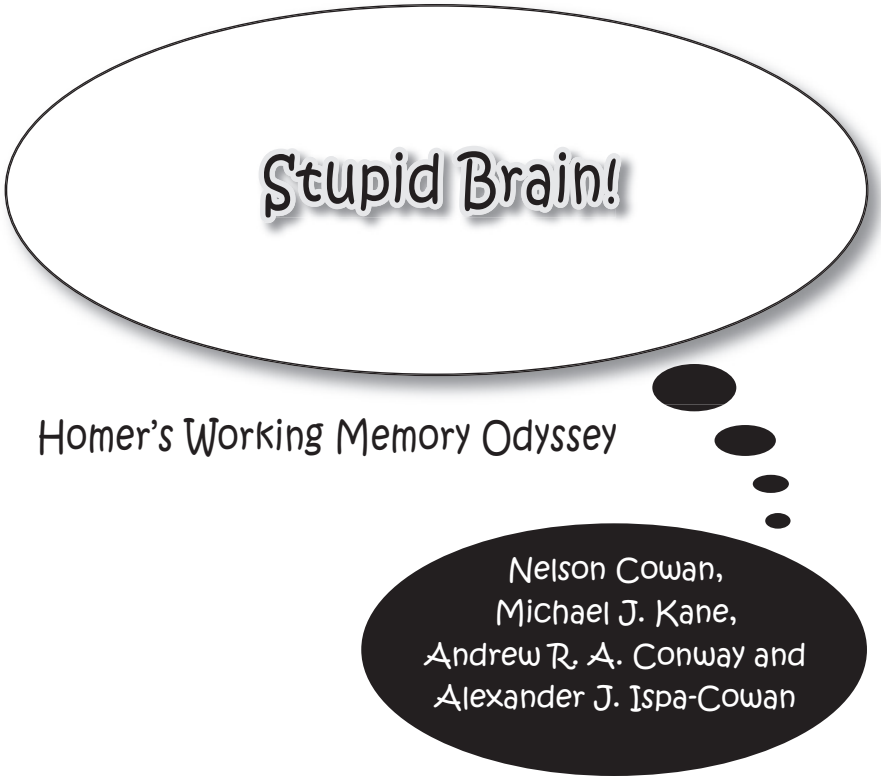
MORE SO THAN ANY recent situation comedy, *The Simpsons* is highly engaged with the discourse of psychology and popular psychology. Whether it is Lisa, who often voices Freudian insights when confronted by absurdity (usually in the form of something that Homer has done), or through direct parodies of the discipline in the figures of Dr. Marvin Monroe or Dr. Zweig, the writers of *The Simpsons* understand the reach of psychology in the popular imagination. It is a show which depends on the familiarity of the American public with various psychological concepts, ranging from the psychoanalytic (e.g., the Oedipal Complex, the Electra Complex, Rorschach therapy, the Id, Ego and Superego), to the diagnostic (e.g., the Rorschach or Ink-blot Test and diagnoses such as ADD and a specific phobia), to the therapeutic (e.g., shock therapy and free association) to the various personality tests that often make appearances in episodes. In its sixteen seasons, *The Simpsons* has found success in part because its premise that its audience is psychologically literate has proven to be true.

And yet, the relationship between psychology and the show's subject matter is often ambivalent. Much of the subtext of the plots that

revolve around the psychological deals with the legitimacy of various precepts and the effectiveness or even the value of treatment. In the episode "Marge's Fear of Flying," Homer advises Marge to repress her fears so as not to "bother anyone," whereas Lisa argues for the value of finding the root of her phobia through analysis. This commentary serves as a microcosm of the running debate found in the series: What is the validity of psychology and, as in this example, therapy? Does it help or harm the individual? For while *The Simpsons* often takes the psychology industry to task (including "crack-pot" psychoanalysis and the self-help trends of pop psychology), it often finds itself allied with the main tenet of pop psychology—that an individual is capable of recognizing and understanding the self in better, more effective and fulfilling ways.

Along these lines, *The Simpsons* has worked to expose the enormous role that socialization plays in the process of creating norms and often questions the motives and modes of defining what is "sane" versus what is "insane." The show often critiques pop psychology's sometimes gross oversimplifications and its participation in institutionalizing conformity, which often puts the tenets or stated goals of psychology at odds with the well-being of the individual. In short, *The Simpsons* seeks not simply to deconstruct these tenets and goals, but to engender a conversation that reveals the complexities, contradictions and relevance of pop psychology by seeing it in action (or inaction) in the lives of the most familiar fictional American family.

At first the Simpsons seem to be the archetypal dysfunctional family: a father with a drinking problem, a mother with a gambling addiction and a series of phobias, an angst-filled daughter and a hellion of a son with ADD and oppositional-defiant disorder combine in hilarious but troubled ways. But upon closer examination, the Simpsons are actually quite functional. The family has endured sixteen seasons of marital problems, money problems, personal problems and literally hundreds of misadventures. It is because of their problematic lives that the show has resonated with its millions of viewers. The show brazenly throws the concept of "normality" into serious doubt; anything that can be considered "normal" is examined with great skepticism as *The Simpsons* explores the establishment and maintenance of social order. Again and again, the sitcom questions the role of pop psychology and clinical therapy in the maintenance of a healthy family and a healthy self. Oftentimes we find a shared sensibility between some of the basic aims of counseling and the show's precepts about the importance of communi-



JANUARY 6: Today the doctors pulled a crayon out of my nose, taking pressure off of my brain, and almost at once I felt a kind of awakening of my mind for the first time since I was a young child.

JANUARY 7: Homer. What did my parents have in mind when they assigned me that moniker? Was it the blind Greek bard of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, or slang for the act of propelling a baseball over the wall and out of the playing field? . . . I was leafing through the dictionary today and only now, I believe, have I mastered the words *assign, moniker, propel, slang* and *manifestation* (see the following), as well as Homer in its ancient Greek manifestation; and until now I have not questioned the meaning of my name at all. I have plenty of time to ponder such questions, now that I've lost my job at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. Of course, this is not the first time I've been terminated. Mr. Burns was rather upset the time that I caused a meltdown, but he was happy to have me back when I ended my push for public safety in the nuclear power industry. This time seemed different, though. Mr. Burns seemed more than just angry. In the past he's been upset by the ridiculous problems I've caused—quite a few—but this time he just seemed

threatened and a bit frightened as if he imagined, let's say, that I would eventually take control of his company. Mr. Smithers didn't defend me in any noticeable way, either. I found it appalling, and below my dignity to fight their fabricated accusations. Oh, Marge and Bart just came in and I smell some fresh-baked doughn—

JANUARY 8: Dear Diary: Two days ago I stole you from Lisa's closet floor but it's for an important cause. Now I know that *I am so smart!* I am so s-m-A-r-t! (I used to leave out that A). Diary, you were blank except for three pages written several years ago, and I really needed to tell my story. I'm tempted to throw about some of the marvelous new words I've learned (like *marvelous*), but I must remember that someday I may be unable to read these words anymore and I will want to reflect upon this period of my life. Homer of the future, if you're reading this, good for you, pal! (Why did I just write "If you're reading this?" You only need the rest of the sentence if you ARE reading it. Well, I do go on too long sometimes now. Ciao!!)

It all began with our trip to the animation convention last month. I lost my life savings in a bad investment and had to sell my body for medical testing to make money. The x-ray turned up something so unexpected that I never would have dreamed of it. There was a crayon lodged in my brain! I do vaguely recall shoving it up my nose when I was a kid to see what would happen, but I cannot be sure that the memory is authentic. At any rate, the doctors removed the crayon and, as it seems, within several minutes I was noticeably smarter. Within about fifteen minutes, I grew ashamed of many of the things I've done during my life, all while unaware of what I was really doing.

The doctors explained it all to me and so now, Dear Diary for Homer of the New Brain, I want to explain it to you. The human brain includes many different systems of nerve cells working together. We know about it from people with brain damage, from new equipment that watches the brain in action (like one they call functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI), and now from the new field of "neurocrayonology" announced in a recent publication reporting the study of my own case. It seems that there is a large piece of neural real estate called the frontal lobe that is just behind the forehead, and my crayon was pressing up against that part of my brain, limiting the blood flow. It's the part of the brain that does many active things. Human things! When people have severe damage to the frontal lobes, they often seem like vegetables. They can still hear, see, feel, smell, move around, and pick up things, mind you. You can tell them stuff and they may remember, but they of-

Homer's Soul

Paul Bloom and David Pizarro

THE DEEPEST QUESTION in psychology—perhaps the deepest question that humans have ever faced—concerns the very existence of mental life. We know that our minds are the products of our brains. We can even use methods such as fMRI to localize certain sorts of mental events, such as the concentration involved in reading a difficult passage of text, the nervousness that many whites feel while looking at a black male face, or the anger at being cheated while playing a simple game. But we remain mystified by what the philosopher David Chalmers has called "The hard problem": How is it that a physical object (and not a fancy one at that, a bloody lump of grey meat) gives rise to pain, love, morality and consciousness?

Fortunately, scientists can make considerable progress without solving this problem. Viewing the mind as a computer, for instance, has given rise to detailed and intricate models of language learning, visual perception and logical reasoning—all without a theory of how computation can give rise to conscious experience. Similarly, clinical psychologists don't need to solve the mind-body problem to ascertain the causes of specific mental disorders, or to assess potential treatments. Scientists

were able to invent Prozac and Viagra without an explanation of how a material brain can produce the experience of sadness and lust. But, still, solving the mind-body problem remains a major preoccupation of both psychologists and philosophers; no science of the mind can be complete without it.

What does *The Simpsons* have to say about this issue? Most likely, absolutely nothing. *The Simpsons* is a fine television show, but it's not where to look for innovative ideas in cognitive neuroscience or the philosophy of mind. We think, however, that it can help give us insight into a related, and extremely important, issue. We might learn through this show something about common-sense metaphysics, about how people naturally think about consciousness, the brain and the soul.

This is a question that really matters. For one thing, such notions are intimately related to our religious beliefs, and if we wish to answer the question of what all religions have in common (and why religion is a human universal), we would do well to understand how people think about bodies and souls. Furthermore, our folk conception of the mind is implicated in all sorts of social and political issues, including stem-cell research, cloning, abortion and euthanasia. Common-sense beliefs, for instance, about what counts as a morally significant being—a fetus, a chimpanzee, or someone with brain damage, such as the controversial case of Theresa Schiavo in 2005—rest in part on our beliefs about the nature of mental life. Like many fictional creations, the world of the *Simpsons* embodies our intuitive assumptions about the nature of things, and so the study of this world might teach us something about what these assumptions really are.

Consider, in this regard, Homer Simpson. In the earliest shows, he was portrayed in a fairly realistic manner, as a flawed, but loving, father and husband, but—in line with the general evolution of the show—he has become increasingly fantastical, often bizarrely stupid and criminally indifferent to his family. More than any other character, his traits have been exaggerated. But this sort of exaggeration can be valuable from a psychological perspective; it might bring to light facts and distinctions that are more subtle, and hard to appreciate, in the actual world.

Homer has at least three parts. There is Homer himself, an experiencing conscious being. There is his brain. And there is his soul. The implicit metaphysics of *The Simpsons* provides a striking illustration of how we naturally draw these distinctions in the real world—not only for the American television viewer, but for all humans.