

Observe prime - time  
portrayls of  
communication in two  
different ethnic  
families....

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The Family Interactions of Two Sitcom Families For this comparison study, I have chosen “ The Bernie Mac Show” starring Bernie Mac, and “ Home Improvement” starring Tim Allen. The reason I chose to compare these two shows is because they are both comedies with men as the lead character interacting with their families. There are several differences between the two families’ interactions, which I will outline below, particularly the major differences between the two families which can be attributed to ethnicity. In one episode of “ Home Improvement,” Tim gets a very unflattering picture of Jill enlarged for a dinner in her honor. The kids don’t figure prominently in this episode, but when they do appear, it’s clear that they know their father will be in trouble for using such a bad picture of their mom. It’s as if they take it for granted – that their father screws up a lot – lovingly, of course, but he gets into “ trouble” this way a lot. The kids are sarcastic at times when they “ talk back” to their parents, but not disrespectful. Their cheekiness is very good-natured. They grumble when asked to do things they don’t want to do (like purchase the family groceries) but the boys still do what they’re told. Their mother knows that when she tells them to do something, they will do it. It’s part of the humor of the sitcom that Tim Allen’s character is a goof, and that his wife is right 99% of the time. This does seem to be a common theme with “ The Bernie Mac Show” as well, but the humor is structured slightly differently. The emphasis on Bernie in his show points more toward his wounded masculinity, even in cases where he acknowledges his wife is right. He has several asides to the audience where he re-asserts his masculinity, and this seems to be the most important part of his character –

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coming out on top.

With regard to interaction with the children, in Bernie's African American family, there are several differences. First, the nuclear family unit is made up of Bernie, his long-term girlfriend, and her children. He does take a fatherly attitude about the children, even though they aren't his, but it takes an interesting twist – in one episode, his girlfriend's daughter gets an A + on an essay, and he wants to take the credit for it, because he helped her focus on her studies. In fact, he seems almost eager for his girlfriend (the children's mother) to admit that he is the reason her daughter did so well. Surely, this is done for the sake of humor, but this tactic most likely would not have worked in the case of the white family sitcom, where it would have most likely been perceived as tacky or inappropriate for the father to claim credit for his daughter's grades. The emphasis would have more likely switched to the child and her personal achievement. Another interesting difference between the Bernie Mac family and the Tim Allen family is the attitude toward the boys. In the Bernie Mac family, the girls are protected, and the boy is a co-conspirator in Bernie's schemes, such as sneaking meat into a neighbor's meatless Thanksgiving dinner. Bernie admonishes the boy at first, but then encourages him to put some food in plastic bags to take with them, so they can eat it in case the vegan food is terrible. They are both playing the role of "naughty child" and know that they will both be in trouble if Bernie's girlfriend finds out. In the Tim Allen family, the boys take turns being the mischievous one.

In the Bernie Mac sitcom, Bernie Mac takes the youngest girl to the doctor,

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and warns her about sitting in the corner of the waiting room where the sick children are playing. His tone is firm and direct. She obeys him at first, but then goes over and plays with the sick children anyway. So it seems that he doesn't have very much parental power. The mother looks after her sick daughter, telling her to rest and get better, but by contrast, no one seems to mind that the little boy in the Mac family is trying to get the same minor infection the little girl has, so he can get attention and miss school. The emphasis appears to be on him getting into mischief, the same way Bernie Mac would. It is interesting to see the different family reactions to the children, and their respective roles in the family dynamic.