In this paper we introduce a wonderful video resource that can enhance the undergraduate learning experience. The animated television series, The Simpsons, can be particularly effective for illustrating sociological themes and encouraging critical thinking among today’s undergraduates. Borrowing from Mills (1959), The Simpsons complements teaching philosophies that stress applying the sociological imagination to the observation of everyday life. We have found that the show is an effective pedagogical tool for demonstrating sociological concepts and fostering students’ understanding of the course material. Students can relate to the show and by engaging them in critical discussions, The Simpsons is a valuable pedagogical resource to the sociology curriculum. The true indication of successful teaching is measured by the students’ ability to grasp course material effectively, and then use that knowledge beyond the classroom. The Simpsons provides an excellent way to accomplish this goal.

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Ohio State University

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In this paper we introduce a wonderful video resource that can enhance the undergraduate learning experience. The animated television series, The Simpsons, can be particularly effective for illustrating sociological themes and encouraging critical thinking among today’s undergraduates. Borrowing from Mills (1959), The Simpsons complements teaching philosophies that stress applying the sociological imagination to the observation of everyday life. Through the use of The Simpsons and related in-class exercises, we have

*We share equally in the authorship of this paper. We wish to acknowledge Andrew Cognard-Black, Kristina Dallas, Doug Downey, Mikaela Dufur, Kimberly Dugan, Randy Hodson, Elizabeth Kaminski, Pamela Paxton, Townsend Price-Spratlen, Vincent Roscigno, Nicole Yandell, the Teaching Sociology editor and three anonymous reviewers for their critical commentary on earlier versions of this paper. Please address all correspondence to the authors at the Department of Sociology, Ohio State University, 300 Bricker Hall, 190 N. Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210-1353; e-mail: scanlan.5@osu.edu or feinberg.13@osu.edu

Editor’s note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Jay R. Howard, Kathleen Lowney, and Mary Lou Wylie.

1These are the official production codes used by Fox Broadcasting so that episodes can be identified with production and syndication schedules.

2There are 53 cites named “Springfield” in the United States, making it one of the most common geographic names in the country (Getty
ideas central to the study of sociology in the context of this animated society, this resource encourages students to think critically about course concepts, thus enhancing lectures, discussions, and readings.

**POPULAR CULTURE AS A PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE**

Our idea builds upon a tradition of successful use of popular culture within the classroom. Television (Cantor 1991; Douglas and Olson 1995; Olson and Douglas 1997; Snow 1983) and feature films (Burton 1988; Hannon and Marullo 1988; Loewen 1991; Prendergast 1986; Smith 1973, 1982; Tipton and Tiemann 1993; Tolich 1992) have an established place in sociological pedagogy, and continue to be utilized in creative and effective ways (Leblanc 1997; Valdez and Halley 1999). More recently, additional forms of popular culture have been successfully introduced into the classroom, particularly popular music (Ahlkvist 1999; Armstrong 1993; Martinez 1994, 1995; Walczak and Reuter 1994), comic books (Hall and Lucal 1999) and newspaper comics (Schacht and Stewart 1990; Snyder 1997).

The extensive literature offers ideas for implementing popular culture using numerous approaches for a wide variety of sociological courses, covering methodological, theoretical and substantive topics. For example, Leblanc (1997) demonstrates how feature film analyses help students practice ethnographic observations as training for their final methodology project. The author reports that students are able to recognize methodological strategies through simulated "reel" life subcultures within films, and apply these techniques to their real life data analyses. Similarly, Martinez (1995) documents that students can recognize theories of deviant behavior through a content analysis of popular song lyrics. The author provides audio and written lyrics of popular music to "create a unique learning environment, foster class discussion, and help students question assumptions about themselves and others" (1995:415). Finally, the literature provides resources for utilizing popular culture across a wide spectrum of substantive topics, including the sociology of sport (Snyder 1997), race, class and gender inequality (Hall and Lucal 1999; Loewen 1991; Martinez 1994), medical sociology (Pescosolido 1990), social problems (Hannon and Marullo 1988), and social movements (DeFronzo 1982) among others (see Burton 1988).

In a number of classroom contexts, popular culture stimulates class discussion (Martinez 1994; Snyder 1997), fosters critical thinking skills (Remender 1992; Snow 1983; Valdez and Halley 1999), improves student comprehension (Ahlkvist 1999; Walczak and Reuter 1994), and encourages individuals to develop a sociological imagination (Burton 1988; Prendergast 1986; Tipton and Tiemann 1993). To summarize, these studies demonstrate the immense value of popular culture for the sociological classroom through a variety of topics and pedagogical techniques.

This paper presents The Simpsons as an important contribution to the use of popular culture in teaching sociology. Due to its topical relevance to current events, its critical commentary, and its ability to engage students in the active learning process, The Simpsons provides an ideal resource for helping students to think and see "sociologically."

**THE SIMPSONS AND SOCIOLOGY**

The Simpsons is currently the longest running prime-time show on television, airing more than 240 episodes since its premier in 1990. During that time, the show has been transformed from its original satirical focus on a dysfunctional nuclear family (Larson 1993) to a more recent focus on the interactions between individual family members.
and the larger community. *The Simpsons* broadly represents contemporary American culture, and has been described as “a fun-house mirror reflection of the ‘average’ American family, as it still persists in our national imagination” (MacGregor 1999:27). The show reflects current events and everyday social interactions in a comedic narrative. For example, recent episodes have involved the California Proposition 187 anti-immigrant movement, female entry into an all-male military school, a municipal debate over legalized casino gambling, gun control, the role of educational and religious socialization in promoting adolescent conformity, the threat of corporate downsizing, protest over logging natural habitats, medical treatment of attention deficit disorder, and a teachers’ strike in opposition to school funding cuts.

These “real-life” illustrations provide an excellent foundation for lectures and classroom discussion on a number of topics. For example, in “Lisa on Ice” (2F05) curriculum requirements for physical education class force the eight-year old daughter to play hockey. Lisa becomes the first girl in league play, illustrating gender issues and the sharply divided parenting roles of the mother and father. When Lisa’s team plays her brother Bart’s team in the championship game, their mother tries to minimize the importance of competition, while their father aggressively challenges them to fight mercilessly “to win your parents’ love.”

“Lisa on Ice” includes additional themes of deviance, media socialization, the role of public education, riot behavior, and the pervasiveness of sport in society. This single episode demonstrates a variety of sociological topics.

*The Simpsons* is an ideal classroom resource because it addresses sociology’s major themes. Following the outline of an introductory text, it is easy to find episodes relevant to virtually any lecture topic. In addition to introductory sociology, *The Simpsons* can be useful for upper-level courses in criminology, education, family, globalization, social psychology, social movements, and race, class, and gender stratification, among others. Sociological references are more than fleeting critiques in the show, but rather, are often thoroughly developed illustrations of the causes and consequences of various social processes. For example, images of adolescent deviance are common throughout the show, and are supplemented with numerous references to the role of the family, peers, schools, and law enforcement in promoting conformity and preventing delinquency.

The episode “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” (1F12) highlights gender and deviance themes. The Simpson daughter is outraged because her talking doll encourages little girls to reproduce patriarchal gender roles: “Let’s buy makeup so the boys will like us.” The episode traces Lisa’s attempts to voice her concern to school friends and family. She critiques the doll’s corporate manufacturer, addresses the issue of workplace sexual harassment, and eventually promotes her own doll that serves as a positive role model. As the excited girls rush to purchase Lisa’s new doll, one minority child encourages her friends: “Keep running, we’re almost there.” This episode typifies the series in that it addresses key sociological concepts like consumerism, inequality, gender socialization, and patriarchy, and how these concepts manifest themselves within society.

Table I provides a more detailed sample of the many sociological themes embedded within *The Simpsons*.

Practical and logistical considerations also make using the show beneficial. An entire episode is approximately 22 minutes long, leaving plenty of time for same-day lecture and discussion. The complexity of the content also allows points to be made in much shorter clips of less than five minutes as opposed to showing an episode in its entirety. Such versatility allows easy integration in a lesson plan for a lecture of 500 introductory students, or more intense upper-level seminar discussions.

Finally, students are excited about the episodes, perhaps the strongest asset of *The Simpsons* as a pedagogical resource. They
Table 1. Key Sociological Concepts as Illustrated by *The Simpsons*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociological Concept</th>
<th>How <em>The Simpsons</em> Illustrates the Concept</th>
<th>Key Episodes and Illustrative Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aging, Health, and the Life Course          | - The Simpson grandfather lives in a nursing home where he and the other elderly residents are often neglected by the outside world and frequently experience ageism  
  - Illustrations of the accessibility and quality of the U.S. health care system, with attention given to emergency care, hospitalization, mental health, and surgery            | “Stark Raving Dad” (7F24)  
  “Old Money” (7F17)  
  “Homer’s Triple Bypass” (9F09)  
  Homer: “Aw, Dad. You’ve done a lot of great things, but you’re a very old man now, and old people are useless. [tickle Grandpa] Aren’t they? Huh? Yes they are! Yes they are! Tee hee.” (“Homer the Vigilante” 1F09) |
| Class and Socio-economic Status             | - The Simpsons are a working class family living month to month with the father employed as a safety inspector in a nuclear power plant  
  - Power exhibited by the owner of the nuclear power plant and other elites including television and sports celebrities  
  - Poverty and inequality depicted by illustrations of unemployment, homelessness, and the “underclass” | “Burns’ Heir” (1F16)  
  “Scenes from a Class Struggle in Springfield” (3F11)  
  “Homer the Great” (2F09)  
  Homer: “You kids should thank your mother. Now that she is a better person, we can see how awful we really are.” (3F11) |
| Collective Behavior and Social Change       | - Illustrations of social movement actions including anti-immigration sentiment, anti-pornography and censorship, 1960s counterculture, gay rights, the Green movement, and prohibition activities  
  - Collective behavior processes including mob mentality, panic about Springfield’s destruction from a comet, and sports rioting | “Bart Discovers a Comet” (2F11)  
  “Bart’s Inner-Child” (1F05)  
  “Homer versus the 18th Amendment” (4F15)  
  Mayor Quimby: “Are these protesters getting louder or dumber?” (“Much Apu about Nothing” 3F20) |
| Crime, Law, and Criminal Justice           | - Attention is focused on inept police chief and his officers as they confront illegal drugs, organized crime, stalking, terrorism, juvenile delinquency, and violence among other criminal activity in Springfield  
  - Includes exploits of career criminal Snake and repeat offender Sideshow Bob  
  - Illustrations of justice system including the death penalty, police brutality, prisons, inequality, discretion, and sentencing | “Home the Vigilante” (1F09)  
  “The Springfield Connection” (2F21)  
  “Homer Buys a Gun” (5F01)  
  Bart: “Do you have room in your jail for a two-time loser?”  
  Police Chief: “No, but that never stopped us before.” (“Black Widow” 8F20) |
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| Deviance             | - The Simpson son is the excessively deviant child, misbehaving at school, disrespecting his parents and elders, and in general acting rebellious with behaviors indicative of a number of sociological theories of deviance  
- Carney, Jimbo, and Nelson represent trouble-making bullies who command respect through coercion and petty thievery  
- The Simpson’s elder daughter is the classical non-conformist, challenging local historical myths (Whacking Day and Springfield’s history) and religious fundamentalism while struggling to be the “smart kid” in school | - “Homer’s DUI” (9F14)  
- “Homer Steals Cable” (7F13)  
- “Bart the Mother” (5F22)  
- “Two Bad Neighbors” (3F09)  
Homer: “You can’t take away my right to raise a disobedient child.” |
| Economy and Work     | - Examines the nature of work not only as a source of income but also as identity as exhibited by a bartender, convenience store clerk, educator, factory worker, government bureaucrat, minister, police officer, school bus driver, small business owner and other members of Springfield’s economy  
- Includes illustrations of alienation, complex organizations, corporate takeovers, downsizing, entrepreneurship, job transitions, harassment, strike activities, and unemployment | - “Burns Verkaufen der Kraftwerk” (8F09)  
- “Labor Union” (9F15)  
- “Marge Gets a Job” (9F05)  
- “The Old Man and Lisa” (4F17)  
Homer: “My job is my identity. If I’m not a safety watch-you-call-it, I’m nothing.” (8F09) |
| Education and Peer Socialization | - Attention is focused on the Springfield Elementary School and issues including school bureaucracy and funding, standardized testing, quality of educational instruction and facilities, tracking  
- Examines important child development and interaction patterns including bullying, in-group versus out-group identities, and rivalries with specific focus on the difficulties the Simpson daughter has being an overachiever in a sub-par world | - “Principal Skinner Gets Fired” (1F18)  
- “Teachers’ Strike” (2F19)  
- “Lisa Becomes a Vegetarian” (3F03)  
- “Separate Vocations” (8F15)  
Sign claims: Career Aptitude Normalizing Testing (CANT) Center: Determining your future since 1956. (8F15) |
<table>
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| Gender and Sexuality                 | - Examines important themes in gender inequality such as sexual harassment, patriarchy, the glass ceiling, and the second shift  
- Focus on homosexuality and society as portrayed by Smithers, the closeted assistant to the owner of the nuclear power plant, as well as more focused episodes including one-time characters Karl and John | “Marge on the Lam” (1F03)  
“Lisa versus Malibu Stacy” (1F12)  
“Lisa on Ice” (2F05)  
“Homer’s Phobia” (4F11)  
“Lisa Enters Military School” (4F21)  
Lisa: “I always knew someday Mom would violently rise up and cast off the shackles of our male oppressors.” (1F03) |
| Marriage and the Family              | - Critique of the Simpson family as the traditional American concept with father working outside the home, a stay-at-home mom, three kids, a dog, and a cat in a suburban setting  
- The Simpson father contributes very little to child rearing or housework while the stay-at-home mother finds much of her work unappreciated  
- Examines love, courtship, and relationship patterns including arranged marriages, divorce and remarriage, single-parent families, intra-office romance, loneliness, sibling rivalry, and child resource allocation | “A Milhouse Divided” (4F04)  
“Lisa’s Pony” (8F06)  
“Home Sweet Homeniddly-Dum-Doodily” (3F01)  
“Lisa’s Wedding” (2F15)  
Homer: “OK, I’m not going to win father of the year. In fact, I am probably the last guy on earth who should have kids.” (3F01) |
| Mass Media, Pop Culture, and Collective Identity | - Emphasis on the dominance of television as a media outlet and means of shaping popular perceptions with specific focus on local news and entertainment  
- Illustrates “community” and identification of place with affiliation to and pride in Springfield and examination of local folklore, heritage, and traditions | “Homer Bad Man” (2F06)  
“Sideshow Bob’s Terrorist Plot” (3F08)  
“Lisa the Iconoclast” (3F13)  
Lisa: “Sorry, Dad, we do believe in you, we really do.”  
Bart: “It’s just hard not to listen to TV. It’s spent so much more time raising us than you did.” (2F06) |
<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Politics and Government**  | - Diamond Joe Quimby is Springfield’s corrupt and womanizing six-term mayor  
- Examines local, state, and national political processes including elections, campaign finance, citizen action, and lobbying  
- Focus on bureaucracy with attention on the IRS, Springfield bureau of motor vehicles, and sanitation department | “Lisa Goes to Washington” (8F01)  
“Burns Runs for Governor” (7F01)  
“Sideshow Bob Runs for Mayor” (2F02)  
Mr. Burns: “Do you realize how much it costs to run for office? More than any honest man could afford.” (7F01)                                                                                                                                 |
| **Race and Ethnicity**       | - The focus is on white America, though Springfield’s residents are racially diverse  
- Examines issues in race relations including the immigration debate as well as global perspectives on culture and ethnocentrism                                                                                                              | “Apu’s Arranged Marriage” (5F04)  
“Much Apu about Nothing” (3F20)  
“Bart versus Australia” (2F13)  
“30 Minutes over Tokyo” (AABF20)  
Bart: “You can’t stereotype a place you’ve never been to. That’s what people do in Russia.” (“The City of New York versus Homer Simpson” 4F22)                                                                                   |
| **Religion and Society**     | - Focus on institutionalized, structured religion as represented by family’s active membership in Springfield’s Christian church, in addition to allusions to Agnosticism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Judaism among other more general references  
- Critique of religious fundamentalism as exhibited by the Simpsons’ neighbor, Ned Flanders and his family  
- Attention to questions of faith versus reason as well as religious perspectives on issues such as death and free will                                                                                      | “Lisa the Skeptic” (5F05)  
“Homer’s Religion” (9F01)  
“Marge Becomes the Church Listen Lady” (4F18)  
Reverend Lovejoy: “Once again, science has crumbled under the weight of overwhelming religious evidence.” (5F05)                                                                                       |
become actively engaged in the learning process. The show has been among the most watched television programs over the last 10 years (hence its longevity), and has been the highest rated television show among teenage audiences (UltimateTV 1999). Because many students typically watch the show as a form of entertainment, *The Simpsons* provides a unique opportunity to find sociology in this everyday medium of popular culture. By directing this enthusiasm, we have had great success in promoting active learning, and encouraging thoughtful discussion that develops from being able to see sociology in everyday life in “Springfield, U.S.A.”

**HOW TO USE THE SIMPSONS**

A number of references are available to help instructors incorporate *The Simpsons* into their lesson plans. To become acquainted with the resources offered by the show, it is best to begin at *The Simpsons* Official Website (http://thesimpsons.com). The most useful information from this site is located under icons headed as “Episode Guide,” and “Store.” “Episode Guide” provides up-to-date descriptions of episodes, both past and present. Several episodes can be obtained directly through the “Store” category. A second source is *The Simpsons Archive* (http://www.snpp.com/) maintained by an online newsgroup (alt.tv.simpsons). The archive contains detailed information on *The Simpsons* and is not commercial like the official site produced by Fox Broadcasting. There are several directions for exploration here. “FAQs, Guides and Lists” contains broadcast and general episode information, character files, frequently asked questions, history, information on Springfield, and lists of Simpson references to real life. “Upcoming Episodes” gives a brief description of future shows including national syndication schedules, while the “Episode Guide” gives season by season synopses of past episodes. “Episode Capsules” links to detailed episode by episode information including quotations, references, summaries, and themes. Finally, interviews with show creators and articles from the popular press comprise “Miscellaneous.”

These sites help pinpoint the sociological relevance of certain episodes, or episode portions, to a particular topic. Instructors can become thoroughly knowledgeable about the pedagogical significance prior to actual viewing in the classroom. Because episodes are not all available yet in video stores or from university libraries, instructors should contact Fox Broadcasting during the course preparation stage prior to the start of the term to obtain appropriate copyright permission for a particular episode.

After becoming familiar with *The Simpsons* as a source of sociological content and learning, instructors will find numerous opportunities to incorporate the show into their particular classroom. While specific strategies for using *The Simpsons* will vary according to the unique style of the instructor, we offer some general approaches that we have found to be successful. To fully utilize this resource, it is necessary to supplement each episode with discussion and/or critical thinking exercises. We have directed students to look for sociological concepts in the video, and then to identify their origins and relevance to class material through follow-up discussion or a written essay. For example, in “Scenes from a Class Struggle in Springfield” (3F11), the Simpson family tries to impress the local elite to obtain membership in an exclusive country club. For this episode, we guided student viewing with specific questions in addition to a list of characters that they were asked to categorize by class status. How are the different classes presented in course readings illustrated in the show? How is class viewed? What kinds of portrayals of rich, working class, and poor characters are used? How do the creators use audio and visual cues and stereotypes that depict class status? This activity encourages students to search for and ques-

3The authors of the paper are willing to provide additional direction, information, or suggestions to assist in the implementation of this teaching tool.

4Letters of request should be sent to Fox Broadcasting Company, Attn: Legal Affairs, P.O. Box 900, Beverly Hills, CA 90213-0900.
tion class, wealth, and status indicators within the episode.

Another successful idea involves screening the first half of an episode that parallels a particular course topic. Then, by stopping the episode at an appropriate mid-point, we discuss what outcome students expect based on course readings and lectures. For example, in “Homer’s Phobia” (4F11) the Simpsons meet John, an eccentric business owner, who quickly becomes a close friend of the family. We pause the tape after Homer, the father, realizes that John is gay and becomes furious. In small group discussions students identify possible explanations for his homophobic reaction, predict its effect on the family’s friendship, and provide a sociological explanation for Homer’s reaction and their prediction for the result. Thus, students must look beyond stereotypical images of homophobic prejudice to challenge critically homophobia’s sources and deconstruct these attitudes. We raise specifically issues of masculinity, child socialization, stereotypes, and tolerance. By pausing the episode, student groups have time to generate a number of unique and original ideas for the episode’s ending by applying their own sociological imagination to the storyline. Discussion after viewing the entire episode focuses on the determinants of each group’s predicted outcome. Why did they differ from the show’s actual conclusion wherein Homer finally accepts John as a friend after realizing his fears were largely based on stereotypes? This technique is effective even for students who have previously seen “Homer’s Phobia” because they must apply the sociological perspective to their interpretation of the show. Students are highly responsive to this critical thinking exercise, particularly because they are asked to use their sociological imaginations to predict outcomes by synthesizing course material with their own observations.

EVALUATION

We distributed questionnaires following the implementation of this teaching technique to measure students’ assessment of using The Simpsons in the sociology classroom. Table 2 presents empirical data from anonymous, open-ended evaluations of these exercises for two separate upper-level classes in social stratification. In addition we refer to subjective and objective end-of-quarter evaluations from 15 previous courses that utilized The Simpsons.

Table 2 reports overwhelming positive response with regard to the show. It helps illustrate concepts, complements class lecture and discussion, and helps students think critically about course material. Favorable responses indicate that students enjoyed watching the show, but more importantly revealed that The Simpsons enabled them to see sociology in new ways that reinforced one-dimensional readings or lectures. In fact, several students commented that they could no longer watch The Simpsons recreationally, their view of it “contaminated” by its sociology. The quotation sample provided in Table 2 illustrates that students support this teaching technique as an asset to the sociological classroom.5

Furthermore, the end-of-quarter evaluations indicate that the value of The Simpsons impresses students beyond questionnaires given immediately after a viewing. Open-ended evaluations suggest that students apply critical thinking skills beyond a one-time class viewing. For example, comments from recitation sections of an introductory sociol-

5 Using The Simpsons has partially contributed to significantly higher quantitative end-of-quarter evaluations for our classes. Consistent with Martinez (1995) the average of our scores on the anonymous standardized Student Evaluation of Instruction reports from Winter 1996 to Winter 1999 are higher when compared to similar classes in the Department of Sociology. The mean score for the authors was 4.48 versus 4.15 for other classes in the department of sociology with a T-value for the difference being −5.29, which is significant in two tails at a p-level less than .001. Data were derived from 10 classes of introductory sociology and 5 classes in contemporary world societies with over 750 students. We recognize that other factors contribute to these scores; therefore, they should be interpreted conservatively.
Table 2. Summary of Results of Student Responses to Questionnaire Evaluating the Use of *The Simpsons* in Social Stratification Courses, Autumn 1999 (N=72)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Illustrate</th>
<th>Insignificant</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Complement</th>
<th>Distract</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the humor in <em>The Simpsons</em> makes specific concepts</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>97.2%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seem insignificant or does it help illustrate the course material? Please explain.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion does using <em>The Simpsons</em> complement or distract from readings and class discussion and/or lecture?</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using <em>The Simpsons</em> does or does not help you think critically about course material? How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that using <em>The Simpsons</em> is an effective or ineffective teaching/learning tool? Why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample quotations from open-ended evaluations of *The Simpsons*:

"*The Simpsons* is packed full of little bits that occur in society."

"I have always watched *The Simpsons* with a 'sociological perspective' and I am glad that it was used in this class. I believe the show is created for humor, but *primarily* to display social injustices in our society."

"I personally believe that *The Simpsons* program is almost pure sociology. With regard to the humor, we need to be able to laugh at this stuff—it is serious, but makes it easier to deal with."

"It helps illustrate the concepts by over-emphasizing the (class) distinctions and adding humor to help people recognize the differences and their absurdity."

"*The Simpsons* is an accurate yet compact reflection of society. Therefore, I feel that it provides a 'model-sized' world to think critically about course material."

"It allows us the chance to apply what we learned and read about to everyday life. Who would have ever thought a cartoon show could be so meaningful?"

"By showing you that concepts we discuss are everywhere in society—even places we wouldn’t think about, like cartoons—*The Simpsons* helps you think critically about course material."

"It makes us look at and question a TV show that most of us just watch and don’t think anything about."

"It is current, it is identifiable, and is example that is general as opposed to personal experiences."
ogy course (N = 100 students) claim that “Watching The Simpsons was a good way to incorporate sociology views and theories into everyday life” and that “(The Simpsons video) was helpful in applying the material that we had learned.” As a note of caution, these end-of-quarter results should be interpreted conservatively due to their limited ability to “prove” the effectiveness of The Simpsons. That is, they do not isolate the specific use of the show from the remaining course content.

CHALLENGES AND PRECAUTIONS

Incorporating The Simpsons into the sociology classroom requires precautions that merit attention beyond the general preparations noted above. The satirical nature of the show can do a disservice to course content and goals if not properly addressed. Simpson’s satire demands special consideration. Specifically, the use of stereotypes to convey themes and define the context of the show and its characters is potentially problematic. For example, regular characters include the corrupt police chief, a Hindu convenience store clerk, the Kennedyesque six-term mayor, and a gay man hiding his sexual orientation from his supervisor. It is possible that some students may miss the satire behind these stereotypes, potentially undermining the value of the lesson plan. In our experience however, students do critically challenge these stereotypes, and question their origins and influences. In fact, the satirical images are so exaggerated that we actually use them in lecture and discussion to highlight the topic of stereotypes and their effects. One of our exercises specifically asks students to identify stereotypes while watching an episode. We ask students to list four stereotypes in the video, and then write a short paragraph about each one that addresses the source of these stereotypes, their accuracy, and the potential harm they may cause to individuals or groups. Reaction essays reveal that stereotypical images in The Simpsons are not reinforced and perpetuated, but rather, sociology students identify and critically assess these stereotypical images. As one student wrote: “Shows like The Simpsons based on making a mockery out of stereotypes can work to bring such stratification realities in the front of people’s minds.” Another student added: “It helps illustrate these concepts and shows the stupidity of their existence.” These responses confirm Beeman and Volk’s (1996) and Davidson’s (1987) findings that the use of ethnic jokes and stereotypes can successfully challenge students to critique these images and their discriminatory effects.

These studies imply that humor and satire can be effective techniques for challenging students to think critically (see also Kirman 1993; Reeves 1996); however, there is always the potential that some students may miss the point of satirical references. Because The Simpsons address important sociological concepts, it is essential that students interpret the satire so as not to trivialize the significance of a particular topic. As Schacht and Stewart (1990) suggest, humor must clearly relate to the topic at hand, and should not isolate or mock a particular perspective if it is to contribute positively to the classroom. As Table 2 illustrates, student evaluations of the use of The Simpsons in our courses suggest that the exaggerated story lines and cartoon format clearly mark the show as satire, and students have little trouble interpreting the content as such. However, one international student found the material difficult to follow, largely because of the satirical nature of the show. This critique is understandable because much of the show’s content focuses on the subtleties of American cultural norms and values. Accordingly, and with any use of popular culture, special consideration should be exercised when presenting satire in a course setting with students unfamiliar with aspects of American culture.

Finally, while multicultural in many ways, the show focuses on the experience of white America and the “traditional” nuclear family. Homer warns his wife following an evening concert at a downtown park: “These streets aren’t safe for us upper-lower-middle
class types" ("The Springfield Connection" 2F21). Students should be made aware of the origins, influences, and biases of this mainstream perspective. For example, a discussion question that incorporates multiple viewpoints could be: "What did Homer discover by successfully taking on 'the role of the other' and looking at the immigration debate through the lens of an immigrant threatened by stricter laws?" ("Much Apu about Nothing"). If properly acknowledged and addressed, The Simpsons challenges students to look beyond their traditional means of understanding society from a single perspective.

CONCLUSION

We have had tremendous success using The Simpsons to illustrate sociological themes and concepts in our classes. Students can relate to the show and by engaging them in critical discussions, the show is a valuable pedagogical resource to the sociology curriculum. The true indication of successful teaching is measured by the students' ability to grasp course material effectively, and then use that knowledge beyond the classroom. The Simpsons provides a wonderful way to accomplish this goal.

REFERENCES


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