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# Family Guy: Relief Theory Applied to Instances of Same-Sex Attraction in Family Guy

Natasha A Magness, *Scripps College*



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FAMILY GAY: RELIEF THEORY APPLIED TO INSTANCES OF SAME-SEX  
ATTRACTION IN FAMILY GUY

Natasha Magness

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Gay characters compose less than 5% of central television characters; a peculiar fact in light of the popularity of the topic of gay marriage and LGBT equality in culture. One could easily argue, however, that homosexuality is one of the main topics in television, marking a significant disparity between the occurrence of characters who openly identify as LGBT and the discussion of same-sex attraction amongst straight characters. Gail Dines in her essay, *Toward a Critical Sociological Analysis of Cartoons*, notes the contradiction of the rising influence of cartoons in society and the lack of serious analysis of their content. She argues that the majority of cartoons cater to an adult audience, and that the study of adult cartoons requires examining intended audience response on the part of the writer's: examining why the writer's think the audience will laugh at certain jokes. One of the most neglected cartoons in sociological and psychological analysis is *Family Guy*, one of the most popular shows still on air and receiving more weekly viewers than the longest running cartoon television show in history: *the Simpsons*. Regular viewers of *Family Guy* know that a significant amount of the humor in *Family Guy* centers on the topic of same-sex attraction, especially the ambiguity of the sexual orientation of the baby, Stewie. Operating off of Dines' imperative to study writer's intent/audience response, the humor regarding same-sex attraction in *Family Guy* functions to offer relief to its audience through the acknowledgement that same-sex desire can be recognized without being materially realized or socially identified/solidified.

## **A New Perspective in Relief Theory**

The significant move in modern humor studies towards arguing for the inherent subversion and deviance of humor relies on a simplification of Freudian understandings of humor as primarily a source of pleasure-filled relief. Shock and discomfort are necessary factors in the humorous, some theorists argue, and jokes are naturally provocations that chip away at established norms. In such a view, Freud's theories merely operate from a pre-scientific understanding of the human body as being akin to a "steam-machine" and thus represent a simple understanding of laughter and the unconscious. However, Freud's central argument regarding humor's subconscious function toward relief has been found to correlate to neuro-scientific understandings of the brain when listening to jokes. When listening to a joke the mind evaluates the jokes in sections, and once the pinnacle of the joke is told the mind can be said to "purge" certain patterns and suddenly allow new ones to develop that bring pleasure. In other words, during the build-up to the punch line the mind is in a state of "building up" patterns and when the punch line is delivered a "spread pattern occurs" – essentially offering a form of relief. Thus, it is not sufficient to dismiss Freud's relief theory primarily on account of his elementary understanding of human biology.

This new perspective on relief theory is especially pertinent in understanding jokes regarding sexuality. Robert Westwood argues in his essay "Comic Relief: Subversion and Catharsis in Organizational Comedic Theatre," for an understanding of humor as encouraging relief regarding the continuation of the status quo. He argues that in a managerial setting "comedy cannot subvert established order" because "comedy contains an inherent challenge and subversive potential, but its effect as comedy lies precisely in the fact that the threat remains a potential." This carries great implication for sexual humor for it implies that jokes regarding

perversity or deviance exist to ease one's mind that such a deviance will not literally occur in reality. A familiar instance in television, the straight character having a "gay moment" can be interpreted in this regard. Applying the new perspective in relief theory to such jokes: momentary same-sex attraction in straight characters functions to relieve the mind of the audience of any possibility of gay identity in themselves (if they identify as heterosexual) despite any momentary homoerotic feelings in their past or present.

Westwood proceeds to describe comedy as "edgy juxtaposition" which frees the human mind to experience sub-conscious desire in a "safe-place." For by definition, if the audience responds to a character's recognition of same-sex attraction it is "just a joke" with no implication for personal identity when experience through the medium of comedy. Westwood claims that humor's relationship to its audience is comparable to a jester's relationship to a King: a jester may speak radical and unsettling truth (i.e. the reality of occasional same sex-desire) and even the most indignant King laughs and takes no offense (i.e. is relieved of the potential of gay identity). Creating a timeline for the function of relief, Westwood defines four-stages to humor: presence, withdrawal, continued absence and re-presence. The defining difference between the final two stages for Westwood is contingent upon experienced embodiment. Before relief, the audience experiences a moment of fear when realizing the potential that the humor bears unsettling truth and feels a disconnect or loss of control of their body. In the example of humorous momentary same-sex attraction, one's control over one's primary sexual desire is distended momentarily. This disconnect corresponds to the "build-up" in the mind and consequentially when the relief/disbursement is experienced neurologically, full embodiment is also experienced by the audience. The body settles back into the normal and assumed patterns of heterosexual behavior without anxiety.

## Gay Identity vs. Same-Sex Attraction in Cartoons Broadly

The history of gay identity in the American cartoon is marked by contradictions and an instilment of shame. Before the gay rights movement began, certain characters such as Hannah Barbara's "Ruff and Reddy" comfortably existed in the asexual realm that left gay interpretations open to the public. However, with the right-wing moral crusades in the 80's there came an increasing pressure to mold characters into an entirely unambiguous and stereotypical heterosexual mold (i.e. He-man, Strawberry Shortcake). Moving into the early-present 2000's, despite a considerable progression in acceptance of LGB individuals, cartoon characters (especially those in children's television shows) are only subtly and occasionally gay or even unabashedly homophobic. The main ironic tension in the portrayal of same-sex desire in cartoons, is that either romantic desire or sexual desire can be portrayed, but very rarely are they displayed together, and if they are such a relationship is still not acknowledged to be entirely legitimate.

Jeffery Dennis in his essay "Signifying Same Sex Desire in Television Cartoons" identifies this tension and classifies the main qualifier for the two types of depictions of same-sex desire in cartoons as depending on if the cartoon is "real" or "surreal." He comments that more "realistic" cartoons such as The Simpsons or Daria "acknowledge gay and lesbian identities while presenting same-sex desire as ludicrous" and surreal cartoons such as South Park and SpongeBob Squarepants as those which "ignore gay and lesbian identities but present same-sex desire as ordinary and even vital and worthwhile." Dennis paints the former category the "realistic" cartoon as the more cruel form of depicting gay individuals; The Simpsons in particular is described as "mocking [even] the possibility of same-sex desire" while the surrealist equivalent, South Park, is comfortable with "same-sex passions" between characters. In fact, one South Park character named Jimbo claims that, "everyone is a little gay." This is an essential

characteristic of the function of relief in humor regarding same-sex attraction, everyone is a “little gay,” therefore, “feeling gay” doesn’t signify gay identity.

### **Stewie the Sexually Ambiguous Baby**

Family Guy’s most controversial main characters is the baby Stewie, who is simultaneously a perpetual baby throughout every season and the most intellectually mature of the characters. In the first two seasons, critics claimed that it was inappropriate to portray Stewie as any level of violent and sexual because of his age. Instead of retreating from such topics, however, the writer’s intentionally began portraying Stewie as gay, and even planned on him becoming an officially out gay character. To play it safe, head writer Seth Macfarlane eventually decided against putting a defined “gay” label on Stewie, but later in an interview with The Advocate said “We all feel that Stewie is almost certainly gay, and he’s in the process of figuring it out for himself. We haven’t ever really locked into it because we get a lot of good jokes from both sides, but we treat him oftentimes as if we were writing a gay character.” An exhaustive list of every instance wherein Stewie expresses same-sex attraction would likely include almost every episode of Family Guy. Most episodes are sprinkled with Stewie’s expressed interest in men, such as the fact that his cell-phone backdrop is repeatedly shown to be a shirtless, muscular man, and he repeatedly goes out of his way to look at naked men whenever they are on screen (even including naked Jesus). Several episodes hint that Stewie is already steeped in gay culture, and involved in secret relationships with older gay men. Thus episodes portraying Stewie as highly interested in women stand out despite being somewhat frequent, such as the episode titled “Chick Cancer” in which Stewie enters a pretend marriage with a female friend. The episode ends with this pretend marriage coming to a very real end, only for Stewie to ask Brian why men don’t just live with other men; Brian responds, “It’s called being gay” to which Stewie says

“That's what “gay” is? Oh yeah, I can totally get into that.” As exemplified in Macfarlane’s own statement, Stewie clearly experiences high levels of same-sex attraction while his stated sexual identity remains purposefully ambiguous and flexible.

Dennis’ claim that surrealistic cartoons portray same-sex attraction as desirable while degrading same-sex identity especially synthesizes the role of same-sex attraction for Stewie. One of Stewie’s most consistent relationships on the show is with his teddy bear Rupert, who is sometimes anthropomorphized to offer the audience a glimpse into Stewie’s fantasy life regarding marriage. One such episode is “Road to the North Pole,” in which Stewie fantasizes that him and Rupert are on their honeymoon; Rupert is shown as having a muscular human body and donning tiny-shorts as he lays next to Stewie on a beach. Scenes of pseudo-marriage are particularly frequent in Stewie/Rupert scenes, and Stewie develops a particularly romantic relationship to Rupert compared to other single-joke instances of Stewie’s same-sex attractions. The full romantic/sexual range of same-sex desire is experienced by Stewie, but always in the safe boundaries of the surreal and absurd.

Despite a surface-level reading of these texts as depicting a cute childhood marital dream and endorsing Stewie’s identity as a gay male, these texts exist in the realm of the surreal and these instances of intimacy exist to reveal what Westwood coins “the hoax.” A truly subversive script is one that depicts realistic same-sex couples in a positive light, and in a homophobic/hetero-normative society such a depiction rarely exists in comedy. For even when a primarily comedic script depicts same-sex relationships, such instances carry so much tension that only momentary gay-puns can relieve the overall cultural tension of the moment. Such an example is Ross’ ex-wife on Friends making jokes about shopping at Home Depot when it is revealed that she is marrying a woman. For the audience of Family Guy, a realistic depiction of



same-sex couples is inappropriate for the medium and audience of today's society. One cannot fathom Family Guy adopting the plotline of Stewie legitimately having a human boyfriend. Thus, the most "realistic" gay couple in Family Guy is entirely surreal and absurd, consisting of a maniacal infant and his teddy bear. True to Dennis' categorical implications, this surreal relationship is a mere instrument to allow Stewie to express same-sex desires without literally being gay. For no matter how "real" Stewie's relationship with Rupert becomes, it still pales in comparison to even the most ridiculous of his opposite-sex relationships with real girls/women. Ultimately such a relationship does not subvert hetero-normativity and functions as a "hoax;" to the relief of the audience, gay identity is a false "alternate" to heterosexual identity as "is "shown to be unreal" and thus "[relief] is experienced as humor."

### **The Meaning of Peter's Momentary Same-Sex Attractions**

While Stewie is the quintessential character when discussing instances of same-sex attraction in Family Guy, the main character of the series, Peter Griffin, is also portrayed as occasionally having "gay moments." A robustly straight character, Peter's few confessions of same-sex attraction are jarring and unexpected compared to Stewie's. Applying Dennis' categories of real/surreal the 2013 episode, "The Giggity Wife," the episode operates off of the surreal notion akin to South Park "that everyone is a little gay" and applies this idea to Peter. Indeed, Peter's confession of same-sex attraction is the shocking punch-line of the entire episode. The absurd plotline begins as Peter's best friend Quagmire accidentally marries a prostitute named Charmisse while drunk in Las Vegas. Desperate to divorce love-struck Charmisse, Quagmire lies to her and claims to be gay. Charmisse demands to watch him have sex with a man to prove that he is not lying, so Quagmire begs Peter to have sex with him. The last few minutes of the episode show Peter and Quagmire attempting to have sex, before Charmisse stops them with

only a second to spare. Afterwards, Quagmire is relieved and tells Charmisse that he isn't really gay but Peter admits he's "been at half-mast all day so he must be something" (i.e. be a little gay). The underlying assumption of the plot is that gay identity is not acceptable, but revealing latent same-sex attraction is. All "literal meaning" is stripped from this admission of desire as it is the last punch line of the episode. Thus, humor brackets off any potential fear by the viewer that Peter's admission will lead to an acceptance of a gay/bisexual identity.

### **Hyper-Masculinity and Cross-Dressing as Exceptions to the Rule**

Peter Griffin can be rightfully called a "robustly" heterosexual character because his personality is based in his misogyny and his stereotypically masculine behavior he exhibits around his group of best friends. Indeed, around his friends Peter is putting on a deliberate "show" of hyper-masculinity. In her essay "Queer Theory and Gender Performativity in The Office," Laurie Cohen discusses this same phenomenon in the British version of The Office. She remarks that characters Brent and Gareth attempt hyper-masculinity, taking their heterosexual identities "so seriously that they become ridiculous." Thus, the fragility of their performed heterosexual and masculine identities is revealed and heterosexual "performance is rendered absurd." Likewise, Peter and his gang of male friends are relentlessly mocked for their overtly misogynistic and hyper-masculine behavior; a significant amount of this behavior being in-group competition to prove masculinity. Several episodes depict Peter and his friends as playing "Would You Rather?" as each friend attempts to show-up the other friends in "courage." In the episode "The Splendid Source" Peter asks his friends, "Would you rather get a massage from a gay man or surgery from a female hispanic doctor?" Such a blatantly absurd depiction of male competition functions as a mockery of hyper-masculinity and by extension a settled

understanding of heterosexuality. Indeed, more than instances of portraying same-sex attraction, scenes mocking hyper-masculinity threaten hetero-normativity.

Like Peter, Stewie also performs a stereotype of gender and comments on the heterosexual norm, yet for Stewie this performativity is cross-dressing and drag. However, this behavior can actually be seen as minimalizing the potential threat of homosexuality to the audience. Dennis categorizes cross-dressing behavior in cartoons as outside the realm of depicting same-sex relationships. In fact, he claims that cross-dressing in cartoons supports the hetero-normative norm and describes cross-dressing as soothing the viewer that heterosexuality is the prevailing ideal. For example, he claims that in *SpongeBob Squarepants*, SpongeBob dresses up like a woman when marrying Patrick in order to convince the viewer that they are merely “playing dress-up” instead of literally getting married as two men. Indeed, the instances of Stewie in drag is antithetical to other instances of portraying same-sex attractions; the initial shock/discomfort that proceeds relief when a straight viewer watches a moment of same-sex attraction does not even exist. Straight male audience members cease to identify with Stewie when he dons a dress and adopts a female persona, thus relief is not experienced by the average straight male viewer. Instead, the average straight male viewer mocks cross-dressing or even female identity at a distance, no longer feeling relief from the universal “gay moment” but is instead laughing at an entirely unrelatable experience.

### **Conclusion**

While it is rightfully misleading to describe *Family Guy* as a “conservative program,” its most prominent and long running sexual joke functions to reinforce comfort and clarity above all else. The “gay moment” is eminent in *Family Guy* almost every time two men interact in a close

environment, yet the “coming out” experience is entirely neglected and even openly rejected. Truly subversive humor exhibits same-sex attraction as natural and consequentially substantiated in a political/social identity. However, in contemporary society, such humor falls under the scalpel and sexual identity is only discussed in humor when audiences laugh at stereotypes and same-sex desire is oddly limited to straight-identifying characters. Cross-dressing, likewise, is stripped away of all radical implication and is designated a tool to charade same-sex relationships as opposite-sex relationships. However, old-norms are questioned through Peter making a spectacle of gender performance; the sexist-humor often hated in Family Guy is in actuality the show’s only incendiary humor. The abandonment of the “gay moment” joke is not the solution to the show’s prevailing lack of fully out and proud characters; for the show’s root desire to project real feelings and experiences onto the medium of the surreal in order to ultimately reassure the audience that “everything will be okay.” Rather, instead of divesting hope for the end of heterosexism in show’s such as Family Guy, one needs to ask why one of Family Guy’s consistently prevalent punch lines functions to reassure heterosexual audiences of their sexual identity. In the study of audience response, clearly, the writer’s sensed identity-anxiety in culture and now viewers turn to Family Guy to be as gay as they want to in the straightest way possible.

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