

University of Richmond

From the Selected Works of Scott T. Allison

2016

Subverting Racial Stereotypes by Affirming Nuclear Family Stereotypes

Scott T. Allison
James K. Beggan



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/38/

Subverting Racial Stereotypes by Affirming Nuclear Family Stereotypes

Scott T. Allison and James K. Beggan

Where does *Star Trek* get matters of family most right? Without a doubt, the award for best parent would go to *Deep Space Nine*'s Benjamin Sisko, the first lead *Star Trek* character and commanding officer to be portrayed by an actor of African-American descent. Sisko defies negative racial stereotypes about African-Americans with regard to personal and professional accomplishment. Sisko is the leader of a strategically important space station. In that capacity, he demonstrates high intelligence, problem solving and leadership skills, and courage under fire.

Despite *Deep Space Nine*'s considerable emphasis on futuristic technology and interplanetary conflict, one of Sisko's most prominent roles in the show is that of father to a teenager. In *Deep Space Nine*, Sisko commands a space station located in the most strategically important part of the galaxy, and he must shepherd the crew of the station through a long and violent war against an intractable enemy that threatens the survival of the human race. Despite the obvious demands and pressures of this command position, Sisko shows a steadfast commitment to parenting his son Jake. Sisko's popularity as a father in *Deep Space Nine* is so great that he is frequently recognized in polls as among the best fathers in television history. *Deep Space Nine*'s televised portrayal of Sisko as an effective leader and devoted father during the 1990s was striking in its unique emphasis on countering the African-American paternal stereotype.

Some have argued that a prominent feature of our cultural landscape—television—has contributed to the persistence of unfavorable stereotypes of minority

populations. Prior to the 1980s, African-American actors on television were relegated to stereotyped roles that portrayed Blacks as monolithically ignorant, foolish, and subservient. During the 1950s and 1960s, African-Americans on television predominantly played the roles of maid, janitor, shoeshine boy, and waiter. While a few exceptions existed, such as *I Spy* and *Toast of the Town*, African-American actors could only find employment in television roles that perpetuated negative racial stereotypes. In Western society, African-American males have been stereotyped as abandoning their parenting responsibilities. The tendency of media to perpetuate stereotypes can lead to what psychologists call a *confirmation bias*, which is the practice of portraying images that confirm existing beliefs.

There are at least four ways that the relationship between Sisko and Jake is a highly favorable one that subverts the unfavorable stereotype of the African-American father-son relationship and further demonstrates techniques of good parenting:

1. Sisko is completely devoted to his son and gladly accepts the responsibility to raise him.
2. Sisko is a responsible male with the highly prestigious job as Captain of the entire Deep Space Nine station, and he capably balances his two roles of Captain and father.
3. Sisko is consistently loving, affectionate, and nurturing in his approach to raising Jake.
4. Sisko resolves conflicts with his son with great effectiveness and thus demonstrates strong parenting skills.

Assuming Responsibility for Fatherhood

The pilot episode of *Deep Space Nine* introduces the father-son tandem of Sisko and Jake in dramatic fashion by showing flashbacks of the military attack that killed Sisko's wife Jennifer three years earlier. In keeping with Star Trek's generally quite conventional view of sexuality, marriage and family, until that tragedy the family is portrayed as a strong, intact, and loving unit. In the aftermath, the adjustment to life without Jennifer is difficult, but Sisko resolves to maintain a close connection with his 14-year-old son and involve him in decisions that will affect both of them.

Not surprisingly, a child who loses a parent has a 25% chance of developing mental health problems. Possible negative psychological and emotional consequences include lowered self-esteem, developmental emotional regression, and anxiety through fear of annihilation. Because Jennifer dies unexpectedly during a Borg attack, Jake would probably be even more strongly affected by her loss, given that he has no time prior to the loss to prepare for it psychologically.

An important factor in helping children cope with loss is when the surviving parent or caregiver provides an anchor of security that includes a feeling of being noticed and attended to and a sense of having structure and order. We can look at Sisko's behavior toward Jake as a model for what to do right to help a child cope with such a devastating loss. In contradiction to racial stereotypes, Jake is raised in a single-parent household by his father rather than his mother. Sisko's commitment to parenthood while commanding the space station represents a marked departure from the original *Star Trek* and *Next Generation* series, where the ship's captains show indifference to or even disdain for families and children. For Sisko, there is no *diffusion of responsibility*, which

refers to people's tendency to assume that others will do the work. On this space station, Sisko seizes responsibility and takes command of parenthood, demonstrating his commitment to being emotionally and physically available to Jake as much as possible. Sisko displays deep anxiety when he is separated unwillingly from Jake. Ultimately, even *Deep Space Nine* cannot escape the pressure of conventional marriage. By the end of the series, Sisko intends to marry. In the series' final episode, when Sisko in death becomes deified, he tells his pregnant fiancé, "I will be back," and in this way avoids perpetuating the stereotype of an African-American woman raising a baby alone.

Balancing Role of Captain with Role of Father

Sisko's professional obligations as commanding officer of the space station during a tumultuous time are daunting, but he includes Jake in his life in meaningful ways. When Sisko and Jake spend days in close quarters aboard a small craft, they use this opportunity to enjoy many meaningful discussions that strengthen the bonds between them. One way to increase cooperation and sociability is to work on joint tasks.

Deep Space Nine characters often face conflicts between doing what is best for family members versus doing what is best for their careers. Almost without fail, the show's characters balance the two priorities of work and family to the best of their ability, with the welfare of the family usually trumping professional advancement. The tendency of *Deep Space Nine's* characters to place family and children as equal (or greater) in importance to career distinguishes the series from other Star Trek series. Sisko's willingness to place Jake as equally important or more important than his career demonstrates a subversion of African-American stereotype of ineffective fatherhood—thereby achieving what psychologists call a *work-life balance*.

Loving and Affectionate Relationship between Father and Son

Both Benjamin and Jake Sisko consistently express their love and affection for each other. In almost every episode featuring the two characters, Sisko wraps his arm around Jake or places his hand on Jake's shoulder. Psychologists are only recently becoming aware of the emotional and physiological benefits of *interpersonal touch* as mechanisms for loving, healing, and nurturing others.

Deep Space Nine also ensures that viewers recognize that Jake is every bit as devoted to his father as his father is to him. Jake plays matchmaker for his father by setting him up to date the commander of a cargo ship, Kasidy Yates. The long-term presence of the character Yates comes close to creating the feeling of an intact nuclear African-American family. Yates represents a mother figure to Jake, and her role in the show contributes substantially to the closeness between father and son. Psychologists have realized that a stepmother has a better chance of being an effective parent if she can come to terms with the role in a positive light.

The loving bond between father and son may be best exemplified when Jake believes his father dead and notes that "the worst thing that could happen to a young man happened to me. My father died." Devastated by the loss of his father, he remains in a depressed state for months following the accident. After discovering that Sisko did not die in the accident but was instead propelled into another dimension where time stands still, Jake devotes the remainder of his life toward becoming an astrophysicist capable of developing a plan to rescue his father from his temporal prison. The solution requires that Jake kill himself so that both Sisko and Jake will be propelled back in time to the scene of the original accident, a moment before it occurred. On the surface, their separation—

albeit involuntary—could appear to confirm the stereotype of the absentee African-American father, but they show us that their bond cannot be severed even when powerful circumstances conspire against them.

Effective Parenting Skills

In addition to showing affection, Sisko also *listens* to Jake, conveying their open and effective communication style. When Jake dates a Bajoran girl who works as a scantily clad cocktail waitress at the station's bar and gambling establishment, Sisko has dinner with them, hoping to reveal her unsuitability as a girlfriend. To his surprise, he learns that she has many intellectual strengths and impressive professional ambitions that reflect very well on her as Jake's girlfriend, and by revising his views, he demonstrates several character strengths that positive psychologists would identify several as an strengths for an effective parent: *social intelligence, fairness, perspective, and humility*. Rather than move forward with his plan to discourage Jake from dating her, Sisko shows flexibility and an open mind by revising his opinion of her.

The family meal usually features an important conversation intended to underscore the openness of the relationship and loving bond between father and son. Dinner conversations between Sisko and Jake often provide opportunities for sharing feelings or making important pronouncements. Psychologists have emphasized the importance of the family meal in promoting interpersonal bonds and healthy emotional expression in families.

Parenting Beyond Trauma

One of the most positive examples of parenting in any Star Trek series is that of Benjamin Sisko, in direct contradiction to negative stereotypes about African-American

fathers. Until the past two decades, television contributed more toward reinforcing existing negative stereotypes about African-Americans than refuting them.

Sisko assumes the role of single father with grace, humor, courage, and love. Unlike lead characters in previous Star Trek shows, Sisko embraces his role as father and gladly raises his child rather than abandon him. Balancing his work life with his home life took skill and patience, and clearly challenged him, but Sisko manages to create a safe and loving environment for Jake amidst a backdrop of persistent violent conflicts that beset the space station. His achievement is even more impressive given that he has to deal with the loss of his wife, even as he helps Jake cope with the loss of his mother. One consequence of losing a spouse is an increased likelihood of the survivor's mortality. This increased risk would have certainly been a liability for the commander of a military space station especially during a time of war with an aggressive alien race like the Dominion.

Jake grows up to become a talented, mature, successful young man who trusts and adores his father. Rather than follow in his father's footsteps to become a Starfleet officer, he walks his own path as a writer. He has become his own man but at the same time honors his father with love and respect. Jake's success is the final evidence of Sisko's achievement as a father who not only has raised a son but has done so in spite of significant hardship. Although *Deep Space Nine* never showed us a future or alternative universe where Jake had children of his own, the foundation created by Benjamin Sisko would certainly create a positive feedback loop that would, in turn, help Jake become an outstanding parent as well.

References

- Allison, S. T., Eylon, D., Beggan, J.K., & Bachelder, J. (2009). The demise of leadership: Positivity and negativity in evaluations of dead leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20, 115-129.
- Allison, S. T., Mackie, D. M., Muller, M. M., & Worth, L. T. (1993). Sequential correspondence biases and perceptions of change: The Castro Studies Revisited. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 151-157.
- Argyle, M. (1991). *Cooperation: The basis of sociability*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Beggan, J. K., & Allison, S. T. (2003). Reflexivity in the pornographic films of Candid Royale. *Sexualities*, 6, 301-324.
- Boushey, H. (2016). *Finding time: The economics of work-life conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chiricos, T., & Eschholz, S. (2002). The racial and ethnic typification of crime and the criminal typification of race and ethnicity in local television news. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 39(4), 400-420.
- Cleve, E. (2008). *A big and a little one is gone: Crisis therapy with a two-year-old boy*. London, UK: Carnac.
- Darley, J. M., & Gross, P. H. (2000). A hypothesis-confirming bias in labelling effects (pp. 20-33). In C. Stangor (Ed.), *Stereotypes and prejudice: Essential readings*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8(4, pt. 1), 377-383.

- Davis, J. L., Burnette, J. L., Allison, S. T., & Stone, H. (2011). Against the odds: Academic underdogs benefit from incremental theories. *Social Psychology of Education, 14*, 331-346.
- Erdman, T. (2000). *Star Trek Deep Space Nine companion*. New York, NY: Pocket.
- Eylon, D., & Allison, S. T. (2005). The frozen in time effect in evaluations of the dead. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*, 1708-1717.
- Fulkerson, J. A., Story, M., Mellin, A., Leffert, N., Neumark-Sztainer, D., & French, S. A. (2006). Family dinner meal frequency and adolescent development: Relationships with developmental assets and high-risk behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 39*(3), 337-345.
- Gallace, A., & Spence, C. (2010). The science of interpersonal touch: An overview. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 34*(2), 246-259.
- Goethals, G. R. & Allison, S. T. (2012). Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence and virtue. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 46*, 183-235.
- Kim, J., Allison, S. T., Eylon, D., Goethals, G., Markus, M., McGuire, H., & Hindle, S. (2008). Rooting for (and then Abandoning) the Underdog. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 38*, 2550-2573.
- Mackie, D. M., Allison, S. T., Worth, L. T., & Asuncion, A. G. (1992). The generalization of outcome-biased counter-stereotypic inferences. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 28*, 43-64.
- Nilsson, D., & Ängarne-Lindberg, T. (2016). Children who lose a parent suddenly: What kind of assistance do they feel provides relief? A content analysis study of

- children and their parents. *Child Care in Practice*:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13575279.2015.1118014>
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Riness, L. S., & Sailor, J. L. (2015). An exploration of the lived experience of stepmotherhood. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56(3), 171-179.
- Sniderman, P., & Piazza, T. (2003). *The scar of race*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Sossin, K. M., Bromberg, Y., & Haddad, D. (2014). Loss of a parent during childhood and adolescence: A prismatic look at the literature (pp. 1-28). In P. Cohen, K. M. Sossin, & R. Ruth (Eds.), *Healing after parent loss in childhood and adolescence: Therapeutic interventions and theoretical considerations*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stikkelbroek, Y., Bodden, D. H., Reitz, E., Vollebergh, W. A., & van Baar, A. L. (2016). Mental health of adolescents before and after the death of a parent or sibling. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 25(1), 49-59.
- TV Week (2014, January 3). *TV Guide's '50 greatest TV dads of all time.'* TV Week: <http://www.tvweek.com/in-depth/2014/01/tv-guides-50-greatest-tv-dads/>
- Ytterstad, E., & Brenn, T. (2015). Mortality after the death of a spouse in Norway. *Epidemiology*, 26(3), 289-294.