“Odd Family Out: Closely Reading Kate & Allie’s ‘New Women’ Household”

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CULTURAL HISTORIANS HAVE REACHED A NEAR CRITICAL CONSENSUS that 1977 was a benchmark year in shaping mainstream American (mis)understandings of feminism. One of the year’s banner events was the National IWY conference held in Houston which was to be the ultimate expression of a year dubbed the “International Women’s Year.” The conference’s greatest legacy was not a proliferation of progressive initiatives but rather an arsenal of rhetorical distortions about feminism crafted by conservative groups (Spruill; Lassiter 21–23; Irvine 66–68; Lichtman 320–31). Savvy, high profile political organizers created “IWY Citizens Review Committees” to disrupt state IWY conferences and held a protest rally at the national conference. The conference enabled the conservative movement to etch some of the most enduring stereotypes about the “feminist agenda.” These include the conflation of feminism with lesbianism, and the association of liberal feminists with the denigration of homemakers, callousness about abortion-on-demand, and “anti-family” beliefs.

Conservative “feminist oppositions” were culminations of a larger backlash begun at the outset of the 1970s and amplified by advancements in grassroots organizing (Lichtman 281–349). 1977’s events made opposition to feminism a key component of conservative strategizing for decades to come. The 1980 presidential victory of Ronald Reagan solidified the persuasiveness of feminist opposition and other organized campaigns against progressive initiatives such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and gay and lesbian rights.
Despite the resonance of anti-feminists with voters in the political sphere, the 1980s was the era of the “new woman” in American popular culture, especially television. The capitalist and feminist implications of popular culture’s “new women” have been widely reported and researched (Bathrick 99–131; D’Acci 463–65; Kerr 29; Levine 128–35; Lotz 8–10). But the way “new women” challenge mainstream kinship ideals and family relationships is under-theorized. Investigating the cultural circulation of alternative family and kinship models is socially and politically important given the increased visibility of social movements aiming to pluralize marriage access, adoption rights, and household recognition.

This essay analyzes the changing perceptions of kinship in the “new woman” era through a close reading of several episodes from the groundbreaking depiction of a matriarchal household in the popular CBS sitcom *Kate & Allie* (hereafter referred to as *K&A*), which aired from 1984–89. I argue that the show’s nuanced depiction of the struggles of divorced “baby boomer” mothers and their ability to create a household represents a benchmark redefinition of family in American television. The series centers on Allie Lowell (Jane Curtin) who has recently divorced her philandering ex-husband Charles and moved from Connecticut with her two children (Chip and Jenny) to cohabit with her best friend Kate McCardle (Susan Saint James). She too is a divorcée raising her daughter Emma in a Greenwich Village apartment. The series reflected a growing awareness of women as spectators and as a consumer demographic. But it is equally significant for responding to a broader social trend—the cultural decline of traditional heterosexual nuclear families toward more diverse households and family structures. Despite debuting in a conservative political age its plots routinely challenged conventional beliefs about the traditional nuclear family’s legitimacy and it endures as an early symbol of the contemporary diversification of family definitions.

Though a few scholars have assessed *K&A*’s feminist content (Deming 154–67; Rabinovitz 3–19) and depiction of female friendship (Spangler 13–23) I perform the first close reading of the show’s unique expansion of kinship’s definition. Notably I address the show’s strategic narrative alignment with traditional nuclear family sitcoms and its subtle subversion of the form. I also delve into the unique “family exchange” relationships, or non-biological kinship relations,
that the series presents as legitimate alternatives to the biological relationships typically depicted in sitcoms.

A new vocabulary of kinship concepts and terms has emerged within contemporary anthropology and sociology that reflects a critical diversification of families regarding what constitutes authentic structures and relations. The term “family exchange” derives from a synthesis of these scholarly reconfigurations of kinship. Anthropologist David Schneider’s definition of kinship, which he defines as a unique form of love rooted in “enduring, diffuse solidarity” meaning “doing what is good for or right for the other person, without regard for its effect on the doer. Indeed, its effect on the doer is good and beneficial by virtue of the good it does” (51), is an influential perspective drawn from his 1968 study *American Kinship*. His original definition distinguishes kinship from friendship by noting that, “Friends are relatives who can be ditched if necessary, and relatives are friends who are with you through thick and thin whether you like it or not and whether they do their job properly or not. You can really count on your relatives” (54).

Since his original argument numerous scholars have demonstrated how more fluid boundaries exist between these spheres than commonly believed, which the series mirrors. For example Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin*, a study of urban black communities, pioneered the notion of “exchange relationships” that are premised on reciprocity among adults for financial support and childcare among other relations (43–48; 53–59). Sociologist Patricia Hill-Collins has identified the African-American female participants in these informal networks as “othermothers” who represent a tradition of older African-American women assisting struggling younger mothers, of no blood relation, with childrearing (180; 189–90). Though her definition focuses on older and younger African-American women, the intimacy and reciprocity of these relationships is arguably adaptable for a range of female relationships regardless of age or race. The reciprocity and support that comprise the “family exchange” notion are routinely evident in the actions of the lead characters and their children. These relations align the series with Kath Weston’s conception of “families of choice,” contemporary families that “embrace friends; they may also encompass lovers, coparents, adopted children, children from previous heterosexual relationships, and offspring conceived through alternative insemination” (3). K&A’s routine expressions of solidarity
challenges friendship and kinship boundaries through multiple exchanges and a more flexible concept of mothering. These exchanges include the advice Kate and Allie give each other on practical matters such as childrearing, dating and financial concerns, and the household’s atmosphere of moral support.


**A “New Household” Among “New Women” Series**

The 1970s is commonly understood as a pivotal decade for (primarily white) female-centered narratives in film (*Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, *Mahogany*, *An Unmarried Woman*) and television (*Alice*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Maude*, *One Day at a Time*). Though the feminist content of these series is debatable, commercially they demonstrated a newfound viability for depictions of contemporary women negotiating professional and familial obligations. The mainstreaming of sexual freedom, increased divorce access, increased awareness of rape and domestic violence, and sophisticated female-targeted consumerist appeals were among the contemporary contexts their characters confronted (Waters 54–58). During the 1980s a few ’70s era “new women” series continued (i.e. *Alice, One Day at a Time*) and various new archetypes of assertive women achieved critical and commercial popularity. CBS was at the forefront of this shift via programs like *Cagney & Lacey, Designing Women, Murphy Brown, The Scarecrow & Mrs.*
King and K&A. Elsewhere the proliferation of female ensemble comedies (Golden Girls, It’s a Living) and female character-centered series (The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd, Roseanne), and the Lifetime Television Network’s 1984 debut (Hundley 174–75) solidified the industry’s dual interests in female audiences as viewers craving representation and as a valuable consumer demographic.

Among the 1980s’ “new women” programming K&A was unique in its focus on two protagonists rather than a lead character or ensemble format. The structure fostered a focus on the mechanics of constructing a new kind of household distinct from a single woman’s romantic pursuits or a married woman’s relationship to her husband and children. K&A also centralized divorce and the unique way two divorcées relate to each other more consistently than Designing Women’s two divorced characters (Mary Jo Shively and Suzanne Sugarbaker) and The Golden Girls’ one divorcé (Dorothy Zbornak).

These differences are significant because they contribute to the kinship and family subversion the series represents. First, the dynamic of K&A’s two characters fosters an intimacy within the confines of their household that enables them to blend friend, sister, spouse and mothering roles with a seamless intensity. Whereas Cagney & Lacey and Designing Women are workplace ensemble series, Kate and Allie primarily relate as friends and household companions with parallel social situations. This feeds the dismantling and reorienting of platonic and familial roles.

Second, divorce—particularly its unique impact on baby boomer women—is integral to K&A’s design. Series creator Sherry Coben specifically created the show to address her perception that divorce was growing more common among her generation and adult friendship was a key coping mechanism (Bedell Smith C15). The show’s setup and characterizations present two social and political binaries to model the struggle of divorced baby boomers. Kate is a lifelong liberal whose divorce from her struggling actor ex-husband Max preceded Allie’s. Kate’s divorce was manageable because of her strong sense of autonomy. Kate finished college and supports herself and Emma working as a travel agent. In addition to being a mother she has an active dating life. She symbolizes the way many women of her generation pursued a traditional intimate path of marriage and childrearing without abandoning their educational commitments and professional aspirations.
Comparatively, Allie symbolizes a baby boomer woman operating from a traditional pre-feminist notion of marriage and the nuclear family as an infallible source of status, emotional bliss and financial stability for women. Her divorce forces her to confront the limits of conservatism including her faith in traditional gender roles, especially for women, and how her withdrawal from college for family life has left her in challenging financial straits. A central part of their relationship in K&A’s first two seasons are Kate’s continual attempts to steer Allie toward achieving autonomy such as encouraging her to complete her undergraduate degree, find a job and expand her concept of family. Allie also advises Kate in various areas such as motivating Emma to strive for greater academic achievement and dating. The series realistically depicts divorce as a struggle but suggests that it is primarily survivable via a strong network of support. Despite such a potentially dark subject the show’s popularity throughout its run is crucial since it circulated many challenging conceptions into mainstream culture that belie the decade’s association with conservative family values.

From *Two Mommies* to *Kate & Allie*: Series genesis and reception

*K&A* was originally called *Two Mommies* and developed after Coben observed the behavior of some of her divorced classmates at her high school reunion. Coben has explained, “The show occurred to me after a high school reunion where I watched all of these people who were divorced and had children. They seemed so lonely, and I thought it would be nice to do a show about two women who live together out of friendship and mutual need” (Bedell Smith C15). CBS’s New York programming office found the script “fresh” and liked its sociological angle on single parenthood. Once the lead actresses were cast and a director was signed the series began production (Catron). *K&A* began as a mid-season replacement series in March 1984 and consistently ranked in the top 10 of the Nielsen ratings; 122 episodes aired from March 19, 1984-May 22, 1989.

In addition to emerging in an era where major TV networks had achieved success with “new women” sitcoms (Deming 159; Levine 131), *K&A* also debuted when networks shifted their economic focus from achieving high weekly TV ratings toward achieving desirable
audience demographics. For example Todd Gitlin notes how in the 1970s CBS overtly pursued programming that was “young, urban and more ‘realistic’” as an audience strategy (208–09). Network executives and programmers also grew more attentive to TV’s ability to reflect political and sociological changes (Gitlin 211). The emergence of “new women” sitcoms overlapped the growing awareness within the advertising industry that advertisements needed to relate to more liberated female consciousness for economic and social reasons (Levine 130). By the early 1980s networks had honed a clear sense of their most desirable demographic which largely focused on younger and more affluent viewers. CBS programs like *K&A* and *Cagney & Lacey* were two of the most important series of the early ’80s for their broadly feminist content and their direct appeal to 25–54 year old female viewers with incomes over $30,000 (Kerr H29). Though the most salient element of demographic appeal is its correlation with profitability, viewers’ identification with and attraction to female characters is significant since it suggests television was inching closer to presenting believable characters. This is particularly relevant for social groups who tend to be underrepresented and narrowly depicted in mass media.

Commercially, *K&A* significantly contributed to CBS’s dominance of the 1983–84 ratings during its debut season. Though the first season was its ratings peak it continued to rank among the top 20 series on TV for three more seasons and was popular until the end of its run (Brooks and Marsh 1254–56). Critically, mainstream TV reviewers consistently praised the series as an adult-oriented sitcom with likable, believable characters and convincing performances from Curtin and St. James (O’Connor C15; Shales C1). The series was also positively received within the television industry garnering multiple awards and nominations from various organizations (“Kate & Allie”). In essence despite its unusual premise and the conservative political context it was a mainstream commercial and critical success. Its deft refinements to family structure and subtly innovative narrative patterns are integral to its success.

**Episodic Overview and Analysis**

In viewing the first season’s six episodes in relation to later seasons it is clear that one of the show’s creator’s primary objectives in
season one was to ease viewers into the show’s unusual structure by positing the show as both familiar and strange. The first season’s episodes employ three narrative patterns. First episodes present scenes and dialogue that establish the Lowell-McCardles as a recognizable and legitimate “household.” Second the episodes continually depict friendship bonds and rituals among the characters especially Kate and Allie, but also among the household’s children. Third “divorce discourse,” narrative moments where characters self-consciously acknowledge and reflect on the impact of divorce on their lives, recur throughout.

My close reading of the episode “Odd Boy Out” (aired April 16, 1984) illustrates these three narrative patterns and represents the way the series cleverly employs and expands upon the formal vocabulary of traditional family sitcom narratives. My analysis of household innovations employs language drawn from anthropological analyses of non-traditional households. I explore the show’s depiction of “exchange relationships,” its status as a “family of choice,” its variation on familial expressions of “diffuse solidarity” and the unique friend and mother overlaps that occur between the lead characters.

In “Odd Boy Out” Chip arrives home after school with his hood drawn over his head and attempts to scurry upstairs without greeting Kate or Allie who are sitting in the living room. They ask him to stop and greet them and then he lowers his cap and reveals a scar on his cheek. Chip pretends he fell but eventually reveals that he was beaten up. Kate asks him how the other guy fared and an embarrassed Chip says, “I don’t know; I kept my eyes closed” and runs upstairs. Kate asks Allie if Chip knows how to fight and Allie reveals her anxieties about not having his father Charles around. The following scene features Kate’s intervention:

K : Allie does he know how to fight?
A : You’ve seen him with the girls.
K : I meant self-defense.
A : I taught him everything I know.
K : Which is?
A : Not to walk down dark streets. Not to talk to strangers. Not to flash jewelry.
K: (interrupts) Keep his purse close to his body? Did you ever mention fists?

A: Fists never came up.

K: I think they just did.

A: I knew they would. Boy I hate to admit it but at this moment I need Charles. [referring to Charles] Uh, God do I hate you (cups head in hands)

K: What do you need Charles for when you got me?

A: You know how to fight?

K: Who do you think beat up my brothers in Connecticut?

Kate then goes upstairs to Chip’s room where the following dialogue transpires:

(Kate knocks on Chip’s door)

C: Who’s there?


C: You-a-forgot-a-who?

K: (Kate enters) You a-forgot-a-to-protect-your-face.

C: It’s not funny.

K: I know its not funny Chip. Its very serious. You know your mom’s right, fighting is not always the answer to everything. But if it comes up you shouldn’t go down.

C: What do you know, you’re a girl.

K: So was Wonder Woman. (Kate stands up) Look, I’m gonna teach you a few things, a couple of rules, OK, so you can protect yourself. Rule one—gotta have balance, footwork, that way you’re prepared, OK? Rule two—keep your fists up, protect your chin, OK? Get a good jab (Kate jabs the air) big roundhouse punch (Kate continues punching air) go for the nose —bleeds a lot scares ’em OK? Put it all together, (Kate begins bobbing) bob and weave, bob and weave…

C: Stop acting stupid!
K: Bob and leave, bob and leave (Kate leaves)

After Kate’s failed attempt to teach Chip how to fight Emma and Jenny arrive and confirm that students have been calling him a “sissy” because he does not have a father and lives in a “house of women.” This also provokes Allie to reflect on the detrimental effects of the divorce on Chip and inspires Kate’s intervention:

A: Maybe Chip is turning into a sissy. Maybe we are instilling feminine values and don’t even know it.

K: That would be great. He would grow up to be a nurturing, thoughtful human being.

A: Who wears his sister’s clothes.

K: You’re inventing problems Allie.

A: What do you know about it? You don’t have a son. Boys need a father.

K: He’s got a father.

A: His friends don’t think so.

K: So just trot Charles out, walk him around the playground a few times, and then, put him back in his stall.

A: That’s exactly what I am going to do… (Allie gets up and walks to the phone)

Per Kate’s recommendation Allie calls Charles and asks him to spend some time with Chip and his friends. Charles takes Chip and his friends out to a hockey game. Chip returns wearing a hockey jersey, holding a hockey stick and bragging about how Charles let him eat anything he wanted and even let him taste beer. As he leaves to go to his bedroom he announces that he plans to move in with Charles. Kate tries to comfort a dismayed Allie who concedes to Charles’s appeal for Chip:

A: Of course he wants to live with Charles. Charles buys him hot dogs, I blackmail him with broccoli.

K: There’s more to life than hot dogs and broccoli.

A: Chip doesn’t know that.
K: Charles can’t take care of him.
A: Chip doesn’t know that.
K: He’s not prepared to be a full-time parent either.
A: Chip doesn’t know that either.
K: Charles knows that, let him explain it to him.
A: Charles doesn’t explain things. Charles buys him hockey sticks, I dress the wounds. Charles buys him beer. I hold his head while he throws up. Look I mean he’s living in a nylon ghetto. There’s sewing stuff all over the place.
K: You can’t hem a skirt with a chainsaw.
A: He’s the mascot of a sorority.
K: I know plenty of guys that would do anything to switch places with him.
A: None of them eight-year olds.
K: Only emotionally
A: I’ve got to talk to him.
K: Allie why don’t you sleep on it?
A: Are you kidding? He’s up there packing.
K: What are you gonna say?
A: I’m going to tell him the truth. I’m going to tell him why his father is so guilty he buys out Madison Square Garden. I’ll tell him about his father’s girlfriend who considers him an inconvenient obstacle to her weekend orgies with him. I’m going to tell him...
K: (interrupts) Hey that’s great, this is a great time to bury Charles. So what if you bury Chip along with him.
A: Next time I have kids, I’m the father (Allie goes upstairs to talk to Chip)

Allie goes up to Chip’s room to explain how Charles’s schedule as a surgeon would not permit him to be a full-time parent. She also reas-
sures Chip that he is needed in their new household. Chip acknowledges her point and concedes that the hockey game may have helped his image; but he also complains that he’s only not a sissy once a week, to which Allie replies, “You’re not a sissy” and “This is where you live.”

Subsequently she prepares a special dinner and dessert for Chip and Kate agrees to lend him her ex-husband’s sleeping bag for a camping trip Charles has planned. Later Charles calls to cancel the trip. Before the disappointment sets in Kate steps in and proposes to Allie that they take Chip and his friends camping. Allie agrees and the next shot shows them waiting for the rain to stop. In lieu of the weather they hold the trip inside the apartment. Kate holds a séance and tells scary stories which impress the boys; Allie introduces the boys to eating s’mores, and the scene ends with a belching contest. The next morning as the boys leave, one says to Chip, “You’re really lucky. Your mothers are even better than your dad.” In the show’s customary tag Kate and Allie converse on the sofa about the day’s events. They end “Odd Boy Out” by discussing parenting and gender roles:

K : You always wanted a boy.
A : Yeah, but I didn’t think I’d know what to do with one.
K : You’re right, you don’t.
A : They are different aren’t they, boys and girls?
K : I guess so, but we make ‘em that way don’t we?
A : I don’t know it’s all so complicated.

(Allie asks Kate to teach her how to belch and the credits roll)

Three significant narrative patterns recur throughout these plot points. First, “Odd” builds from the prior two episodes by establishing Lowell-McCardles as a “recognizable” household. Through discernible household roles and depictions of parent-child relationships the show is seemingly familiar. This is crucial since the traditional family sitcom had a major commercial rebirth in the 1984 and 1985 seasons via The Cosby Show, Family Ties, and Growing Pains. Allie’s role is domestic—she is seen preparing peas for dinner, hemming Kate’s red dress for a date, and cooking a special dinner for Chip. As the household’s primary breadwinner Kate is ostensibly masculinized but the
series handles her gender identity complexly. Neither traditionally feminine nor “butch” the series presents her as both a traditional female televisual baby boomer—heterosexual, a mother, and sexually desirable and a mature “tomboy” who is assertive, street smart, adaptable and autonomous. The program’s key innovation with Kate is the casual suggestion that women do not have to conform to rigid conceptions of gender to be authentic women. Nor do they have to sacrifice their sexuality to be romantic partners, effective parents or economically functional. This becomes more evident in season two where she has an active dating life.

There are also the requisite biological parent-child relationships. In addition to clearly establishing Chip and Jenny as Allie’s children and Emma as Kate’s there are several scenes where parental authority is asserted. For example when Allie commands Chip to come back down the stairs to show his face and advises Jenny to not call one of Chip’s friends “scum” for labeling Chip a “sissy” the children clearly obey their biological parent. Jenny and Chip also have a clear relationship to their biological father Charles. The seemingly clear demarcation of roles and clear biologicalties links the series to traditional sitcom narratives.

Within this structural familiarity are subtle narrative variations that render the family “strange.” The complex and full-bodied contrast of Kate and Allie’s personalities and “family exchange” elements are among the more challenging elements portrayed in the episode and the series. Because the series defines Kate as heterosexual and a mother one could argue that her tomboy-ish tendencies are more permissible than if she were bisexual or lesbian. Kate’s athletic apparel, including the running suit and hunting outfit worn in the episode, her story about beating up her brothers and her appeal to Chip’s friends through telling scary stories and belching, makes her one of the 1980s’ most unique female characters. She is permitted to be unconventional without overtly claiming to be oppositional. This fosters a rare mobility within the female televisual gender spectrum and also opens her character up to spectatorial ambiguity. The simultaneity of Kate’s feminine and masculine performance renders her character as relatable for the traditional middle-class (implicitly heterosexual) female consumer CBS was targeting and to viewers with sexual and gender orientations beyond this demographic.
Though Allie is by default more dependent, both on child support from Charles and her identity as a doctor’s daughter and a doctor’s ex-wife, the series presents the full context of her life. Instead of defining her as a pitiful divorcée who cannot survive without a permanent male partner or a triumphant heroine who instantly masters post-divorce parenting, the series takes a more gradual and nuanced approach. Though she laments the impact of Charles’s absence on Chip and struggles to reconcile her traditional parental views with the reality of her changing life, the audience witnesses a gradual transition. She embraces Kate’s notion that women could teach little boys essential skills like how to fight; is forced to acknowledge the artificial and unequal expectation that fathers are fun and mothers are mundane; and warms up to the alternative camping trip Kate proposes. By the episode’s tag when she and Kate converse about raising children, her belch symbolizes liberation and indicates her continual process of discovery.

From the second season (Fall 1984-Spring 1985) onward her post-divorce awakening continues including her return to dating and sex, the completion of her college education, and the pursuit of full-time employment. The show’s portrayal of these incremental steps succeeds because the comedic approach leavens the overwhelming and intimidating prospect of starting one’s life over in the late 30s with an eye for the awkwardness, uncertainty and joy it involves. Ultimately, the series resists a simplistic depiction of triumph over adversity in favor of presenting the postmodern negotiation of gender and new challenges involved in the Lowell-McCardle’s “family of choice.”

The “family exchange” element also extends the episode’s critical utility. Throughout “Odd Boy Out” characters blur the boundaries of the biological model of family. Kate’s attempt to teach Chip how to fight, Emma and Jenny’s lighthearted attempt to cheer up Chip (in a scene where they don mustaches and impersonate stereotypical teenage boys), Kate’s lending of her ex-husband’s sleeping bag to Chip, her suggestion of the indoor camping trip and Chip’s gratitude toward Kate are all examples of a “diffuse solidarity” that regularly blurs family and friend boundaries in the series. The double occupation of the apartment does not obligate the Lowells and McCardles to be so socially intertwined. Yet characters willingly transcend traditional social boundaries by eschewing biological boundaries in favor of a relational solidarity. While it is typical for friends to offer advice
and solace in challenging times, the series integrates this element throughout the series which amplifies the way these exchanges can function in intimate domestic spaces. For example Emma and Jenny’s closeness parallels their mothers; throughout the series they gradually become best friends sharing academic and romantic struggles even as they venture off to college.

For balance the series also depicts transitional tensions. For example in “Dear Diary” (aired April 30, 1984) Allie’s intrusive décor clashes with Kate’s sense of style, and Emma resents Allie’s advice to Kate to push her academically in “The Very Loud Family” (aired March 26, 1984). Ultimately the voluntary and generous exchanges chip away at the presumed supremacy of biological relations. This is particularly true in the contrast between Kate’s accessibility as a co-parent for Allie compared to Charles. In many ways Kate functions as a “friend-parent” or “friend-mother” a non-biological platonic associate intimately involved in the rearing of a friend’s children in ways that transcend typical friendship boundaries.

In addition to establishing the household as both familiar and strange the episode incorporates two innovations—female friendship bonding and rituals apart from both children and romantic obligations, and divorce discourse. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Jane O’ Reilly have noted Kate and Allie are, “both equal and complementary in a way that is new to television… (It’s the) first major sitcom that really shows what women are like when we are alone together” (10). Friendship rituals are integral to the show’s narrative structure as each episode begins with a teaser, typically comprised of the two friends walking the streets of New York and conversing. Within “Odd” a strong element of trust informs Allie’s relationship to Kate including her willingness to take her advice to call Charles and restore Chip’s image, her advice to avoid trashing Charles in response to Chip’s desire to move, and staging the indoor camping trip. Their conversation in the tag regarding the way parents socialize boys and girls differently is brief but an unusually reflective approach to discussing gender. Even the beers and belch they share offers additional respite for the women from the demands of child rearing and partnership. The show’s ongoing tag element indicated the importance for women and mothers to have experiences of nurturing and bonding that are not in service to a professional, romantic or biological relation.
Finally references to divorce strongly permeate the series in a very noticeable manner during the first two seasons. In addition to Allie’s occasional barbs about Charles are important moments when Allie weighs the consequences of raising a male child as a single woman. One wishes the episode pushed the conversation further by interrogating the impropriety of Chip being a “sissy” who declined to be violent or minimally being “different” from the other boys. However in the context of sitcoms K&A strongly balances realism and humor in addressing the way baby boomers negotiated gender expectations at the time. Allie’s fears about Charles’s absence seem less about a finite assumption that a boy will inherently suffer at the hands of his mother than a projection of her anxieties about needs she may have never anticipated. The episode’s willingness to acknowledge Allie’s concerns about Chip’s alienation from his peers because of his different household quietly signifies the nuclear family’s presumed social dominance and its centrality as the mythical social norm even among children (Coontz xi, 8–10, 23). The way Allie’s concerns are amplified when Chip suggests moving in with Charles further disarms Allie. She is forced to confront the way gender sameness has been normalized as a natural and desirable element of effective parenting.

Chip’s friend’s statement that his two mommies are better than his dad at the end might seem stagy and even trite. But sitcoms rarely feature characters that trumpet motherhood and, even more crucially, they rarely valorize single parents or families of choice. The show’s subtle configuration of gender roles and contrasting characterizations, the family exchange elements, especially “friend-mothering” and the sobering divorce discourse are key components that distinguish the show as a dissonant text in relation to traditional family sitcoms. Lesbian couple parenting has been depicted on Friends, Queer as Folk, and The L Word and “friend-parenting” has occurred in varying degrees on My Two Dads and Full House. But no TV series has duplicated K&A’s diverse reconfigurations of kinship roles and relations.

Continuous Intimate Innovations

Though my analysis focuses on one episode from K&A’s first season the show remained committed to its initially challenging redefinitions of family, the changing nature of gender roles and the
salience of friendship. Various metacommentaries on the show’s innovative familial depiction were featured during its run. Season one’s “The Very Loud Family” (aired March 26, 1984) concludes with Emma’s video diary on divorced families for the school project “Our Changing World.” This is followed in season two when Kate and Allie pretend to be lesbians to justify the double occupancy of the apartment to their lesbian landlord who will permit the arrangement if it involves lesbians. Eventually they acknowledge their heterosexuality but ask the landlord to be tolerant of their unorthodox family (“Landlady” aired October 15, 1984). In season three the episode “High Anxiety” features the friends, notably a nervous Allie, discussing their unique family on The Dick Cavett Show alongside other cohabiting divorcées (aired February 17, 1986).

In season two Kate declines to marry Ted, a Brooklyn-based plumber she dates throughout the season, because she is disinterested in moving to Brooklyn and raising a brood of kids (“Goodbye Plumber” aired April 8, 1985). Ted returns in season three and a lonely Kate ponders reconciliation but she remembers that they have incompatible visions of family life and declines to reunite with him (aired March 3, 1986). In season five Jenny is completing a research project on women’s historic labor struggles (“Working Women,” aired February 22, 1988). The episode handles the concept by depicting the leads working in various scenarios such as a 1920s New York sweatshop, and a 1940s WWII era ammunitions assembly line. This progression has a somewhat flat teleological construction but emblematizes its attempt to place the female characters in a broader social context.

Season six is particularly daring in its choice to maintain the series’ emphasis on female friendship and comradery. As the season begins Emma attends college in California, Jenny is enrolled at Columbia University and Allie marries Bob Barsky. During their honeymoon Kate laments her loneliness and attempts to reconcile with Ted. This effort fails and she faces her new life as Bob, Allie, Chip and Jenny move to a new condominium. Kate sublets the Lowells’ bedrooms to a group of college students for whom she is incompatible (“Allie Doesn’t Live Here Anymore,” aired December 19, 1988). Meanwhile Bob secures a sports anchor position in Washington D.C. and commutes which opens up a space for Kate to move into the newlyweds’ apartment. The characters’ routine eventually resumes and the series maintains its focus on their working relationship and friendship. The
The final episode “What a Wonderful Episode” (aired May 22, 1989) centers on a dispute between the characters that escalates into a mutual wish that each friend would stop giving the other advice. During a series of haunting dream sequences the characters see what their lives would be like without the other. They wake up from their nightmares and the next morning they do not speak of the dreams, but agree to continue taking each other’s advice and retaining their intimate connection.

Intimate Possibilities in “Our Changing World”

The great contradiction of the anti-feminism of the 1977 conservative protestors, particularly the notion that feminists rejected housewifery as a viable female labor option, was their failure to realize that second wave feminism catalyzed the very premise that married women should have employment options. It was also integral to domestic protections for mothers including increased awareness of domestic violence, marital rape and the urgency of accessible divorce rights for women. The second wave’s efforts to address legal and economic inequality responded to the quotidian challenges of women as did late ’70s efforts to recognize women’s diverse options ranging from abortion rights to lesbian rights (Evans 196, 204).

Conservative anti-feminists were embroiled in a war that transcended single issues; they were resistant to the changing contexts of women’s lives. The social reality that inspired Coben to create K&A was the autonomy baby boomer women sought in response to failed marriages for complex reasons like the failure for husbands to function as reliable breadwinners (Kate), as active parents (both) and to adhere to their marital commitments (Allie). The faith in separate gender roles and marital bliss that anti-feminists idealized grew increasingly outdated for modern women, many of whom organized in the late 1970s to discern the ways women could survive economically and socially.

Women’s (and men’s) increased abilities to form functional relationships and households outside of the nuclear design is a burgeoning social reality that has steadily gained momentum since K&A’s television run. Recent changes in census data collection and household trends strongly indicate the diversification of American households. In 1990 it added such categories as “unmarried partner”
and “step child” to the household categories “to measure the growing complexity of American households.” It currently defines a “household” as “a person or group of people who occupy a housing unit,” and a “family household” in traditional kinship terms consisting of “householder and one or more people living together in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption.” This definition has three variations of “married-couple,” “female householder, no husband present” and “male householder, no wife present.” The “nonfamily household” category refers to “a persons living alone or a householder who shares the home with nonrelatives only; for example roommates or an unmarried partner” (Simmons and O’Neill 2). When one considers the nation’s changing demographic profile the Census’s distinction between family and nonfamily seems increasingly less clear-cut.

According to the 2005–07 and 2006–08 American Community Surveys (ACS), compiled between the Census’s typical 10 year intervals, the prominence of married couples with children has steadily declined. Comparatively nonfamily households are growing at a more consistent pace. The statistical minority status of nuclear families suggests increased competition from other household types. Some of the strongest indicators of this include the following:

- Numerically non-family households grew at a significantly higher rate than family households. Family households increased 11% from 1990–2000 whereas non-family households increased 23% during the same period (Simmons and O’Neill 1).

- In 2000 married couple households comprised 52.5% of U.S. households and comprised 49.7% in 2005 (Roberts; Jayson and DeBarros).

- The percentage of married-couple families with children under 18 decreased from 23.5% in 2000 to 21.6% in 2006 (“New Census Bureau Data”; Harden).

- Unmarried partners have increased from five million to six million from 2000–2006 (Jayson and DeBarros).

- Numerically nonfamily households have continued to increase at a higher rate. Nonfamily households grew from 33.7 million in 2000 to 36.9 million in 2005–07 and 37.5 million from

Though statistics are amenable to change, these numbers signify ongoing shifts in Americans’ intimate practices. Demographic shifts do not equal wholesale ideological shifts. But, they do indicate the increased social visibility of household practices outside of the enduring nuclear norm and strongly suggest the array of household options adults can “aspire” to rather than a singular model. Consistent coverage and analysis of these shifts by the popular press is a discursive indicator that there is considerable interest in changing intimate patterns.

A myriad of circumstances influence non-nuclear household formations including divorce, spousal death, couples’ overt choices to cohabit, and the legal restrictions that disallow co-habiting couples from accessing the legal and economic benefits of legally recognized marriage/partnerships. At issue is not the morality of the nuclear family but the importance of legal, social and economic recognition for the diverse intimate choices an increasing number of adults are making as friends, romantic couples and/or as guardians is at stake. Within the non-profit and activist sectors a spate of organizations, whose primary agenda is to illuminate the society about the legitimacy of diverse households, has emerged.² Popular media is one of the culture’s most compelling and accessible vehicles for deepening these activist efforts through its ability to represent realities and possibilities that exceed the boundaries of stolid conceptions of what constitutes legitimate, viable intimate household practices.

Despite the conservative backlash that preceded the “new women” era of the 1980s, television programming that conveyed aspects of new intimate realities for women was largely well-received with little protest. Though previous scholars have assessed *Kate & Allie*’s economic function within industrial capitalism and its often ambiguous relationship to “feminism” the uniqueness of its depiction of kinship and its transcendence of the decade is inimitable. The series’ innovative depiction of a female-headed household remains a benchmark for representing the intimate possibilities for “new women” in “our changing world.”
Notes


Works Cited


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