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Spaghetti and Spanakopita: Representations of Italian and Greek Women and the Respective Cultural Stereotypes in American Movies

Heather Abzug

Denison University

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Introduction

Stereotyping has likely plagued our world for many decades, perhaps even centuries, and is a topic that pertains to several disciplines including psychology, communication, and philosophy, just to name a few. As Berg (1990) explained, stereotypes are “a way in which humans make sense of the world” (Berg, 1990, p. 20, as cited by Nailog, 2009). When stereotypes are present within cultures and societies, they can be excluding and rude; however, when the scope is broadened to the interaction of individuals or groups from different cultures, stereotypes are amplified to where they are hurtful, insulting and insensitive. It is important to note that the stereotypes themselves don’t create these negative consequences, but rather become problematic when stereotypes are acted on and propagated, especially because stereotypes are often incorrect or skewed representations.

In terms of this research endeavor, stereotypes of Italian and Greek cultures in popular American movies are examined, with a special focus on how women are portrayed. Examples of Italian and Greek cultures in the media are examined through the media texts of *The Godfather* (1972) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002)*.* In addition to these media texts, communication and select psychology theories are applied and used to analyze the media texts in an attempt to advance our understanding of cultural stereotypes, gender roles and ultimately, develop useful skills when interacting with individuals from non-American cultures.

The issue of cultural stereotypes is one that likely everyone will encounter at some point in their lives. Whether it’s when you’re traveling abroad or when a new neighbor moves into your neighborhood, differing cultures come into contact, thus providing opportunities and settings for conflict and dialogue. These settings often lead to the formation and/or perpetuation of stereotypes, which reveals the relevance and significance of this research. Therefore, the primary reasons for this research project are to understand how cultural stereotypes are formed and maintained, to develop best practices when engaging with individuals and/or groups from non-American cultures due to increasing globalization, and to examine the representations of Italian and Greek women, in part because I identify as an Italian woman. Furthermore, I identify as Jewish, which is often considered an “other” culture; therefore, I am interested in how women from “other cultures” (i.e. Italian, Greek, Jewish) are portrayed in popular American movies. Finally, Italian and Greek cultures are similar, however, have rarely been studied in conjunction, therefore, this presents an opportunity to deepen the study of cultural stereotypes and female gender norms within the contexts of Italian and Greek cultures.

As mentioned earlier, globalization and the increase of intercultural interaction have great relevance to this research topic, especially because it is becoming more and more important to be able to engage and understand individuals from cultures different from our own. By studying examples from popular American movies, a greater understanding of which stereotypes exist and are salient in American culture has been gained. In addition, the communication and popularity surrounding these media texts can be studied to further understand the presence of stereotypes of non-American cultures in American visual media. Additionally, this research project seeks to understand how stereotypes are formed and reinforced, which has pertinence not only to the field of communication, but also to everyday life. The reality is that everyone encounters and engages with stereotypes at some point in their lives, therefore, it is interesting and important to attempt to understand how stereotypes are created and what facilitates their staying power.

In terms of the theories and methods that are used in this research project, theoretical frameworks primarily from communication are utilized; however, due to the cross-disciplinary nature of the topic of stereotypes, theories from other fields [i.e. psychology] have also been applied. The primary research method that has been employed is textual analysis. Textual analysis is categorized as a critical research method, which seeks to analyze, critique and improve human communication. Using textual analysis, *The Godfather* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* are studied. The primary goal of this method is to analyze portrayals of Italian and Greek women, create a holistic understanding of the cultural stereotypes from these texts, and then dissect these stereotypes to understand their formation, maintenance and legitimacy.

Literature Review

The breadth and diversity of research pertaining to intercultural communication is extensive and there is a fairly robust body of research related to stereotypes. However, the study of intercultural stereotypes with a special focus on women, especially when portrayed within certain cultural contexts, is a relatively unexplored topic. The main themes of prior research conducted for this research are related to definitions of stereotypes, stereotypes of women and gender roles, conflicts that arise when confronted with the “other,” and theories and applications of stereotypes. All of these facets relate to the larger study of representations of women from “other” cultures in popular American media and the respective cultural stereotypes. Therefore, these representations help to provide a foundation for the current research project.

*Understanding Stereotypes*

As mentioned earlier, stereotypes have been examined broadly across disciplines. The formation, maintenance and presence of stereotypes are themes that are generally incorporated into articles dealing with stereotypes. Several articles address these themes while analyzing definitions and the presence of stereotypes in various media texts and contexts (Ajtony, 2013; Hedley, 1994; Inigo, 2006; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Nailog, 2009; Tan, 1997). While all of these studies provide explanations for the formation and maintenance of stereotypes, they rely on slightly different, though related, theoretical frameworks. Although the theories applied in these studies differ slightly, they nonetheless provide reference points within the realm of communication.

To start, an understanding of what is meant by the term “stereotypes” is essential. Due to its relevance, stereotypes have been studied extensively, both within communication and other fields. Within the realm of communication research, stereotypes have been explained as “(i) the categorization of individuals usually on the basis of identifiable characteristics, (ii) the attribution of specific traits, roles, emotions, etc., to all or most members of a category, [and] (iii) the attribution of said characteristics to any individual member of the category” (Inigo, 2006, p. 3). From this definition, it is clear that stereotypes have many layers and require more than just the studying of a specific individual or culture, but rather examining the holistic combination of both factors.

Nailog (2009) explains stereotyping as a “psychological mechanism, having to do with the creation of categories, which allows people to manage the swirl of data presented to them from the environment” (Berg, 1990, p. 287, as cited by Nailog). It is also noted that stereotypes are understood within the context of “others,” in that “it [stereotyping] is an ethnocentric process of emphasizing the differences among groups. It is a non-flattering generalization used by one group (the in-group, *Us*) about members of another group (the out-group, *Them*)” (Berg, 1990, p. 277 and 288, as cited by Nailog, 2009, p. 20). As mentioned in the above quote, it is important to make the distinction between generalizations and stereotypes, which are often thought of as interchangeable. Bennett and Bennett (1994) provide clarity, explaining that “generalizations are based on research and can be used as hypotheses when approaching members of a specific culture (…), cultural stereotypes can be generated by applying generalizations (…) to every single member if a culture” (Inigo, 2006, p. 3).

According to McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears, (2002), there are three guiding principles of stereotypes: “a) stereotypes are aids to explanation, b) stereotypes are energy-saving devices, and c) stereotypes are shared group beliefs.” All three of these principles relate to cultural stereotypes, however, the legitimacy of stereotypes can sometimes be questioned because although a stereotype exists, it may lack any real truth to it. Additionally, with increasing globalization, cultures are coming into contact with each other more and more often, providing ample arenas for intercultural conflicts and dialogues to occur. Recent attempts have been made to facilitate awareness of cultural stereotypes and best practices for interacting with individuals or groups from differing cultures; however, there are still numerous possibilities for improvement in this area.

*Stereotypes of Women and Gender Roles*

Throughout communication research, stereotypes of women and gender roles are topics that are repeatedly investigated, yet they continue to provide a unique and insightful lens through which to understand other communication topics. This is true when examining cultural stereotypes, thus an examination of literature pertaining to stereotypes of women, gender roles and representations of women in the media supplemented the current research project.

Several studies have examined stereotypes of women and gender roles within popular media. Kim and Lowry (2005) examined gender role stereotypes in Korean television advertising, in which they mentioned that women from western cultures were less likely to be shown as professionals than men; more likely to be in advertisements related to household/domestic products than; were often portrayed as younger and less experienced than men; and more likely to have a voiceover than men (p. 903-904). In terms of Korean advertisements, the researchers found that “preparing meals, doing house chores, and nurturing children were the main depictions of women in television advertising” (Kim & Lowry, 2005, p. 908). Additionally, researchers have identified that “women in advertisements are portrayed as sex objects, [therefore] one can argue that young (i.e. unmarried) female characters are sexually suggestive” (Kim & Lowry, 2005, p. 908). These findings help build a foundation and context through which an analysis of female representations in the media texts of this research project can be examined.

Just as Kim and Lowry (2005) found that women were typically represented in the domestic sphere, Bazzini et al. (1997) also classified stereotypes into two primary sections: ageist and sexist stereotypes. Within these classifications, Bazzini et al. (1997) discussed the role of appearance for women in the media, in that “women characters were portrayed as thinner and younger than their male counterparts…[which] may imply that women’s primary value lies in the possession of physical beauty” (p. 2). This emphasis on appearance and beauty proved to be rather salient throughout their study, especially in terms of their examination of ageist stereotypes. This was particularly relevant to ageist stereotypes because “even if a woman possesses beauty when she is young, she will ultimately be unable to maintain that beauty” (Bazzini et al., 1997, p.11). In this way, women are stuck in a double bind, where they are expected to maintain their youthful appearance, despite the unfeasibility of the task.

Naji and Iwar (2013) reference a reciprocal cycle related to the construction of realities, which resonates with Williams’ (1984) concept of the female “other.” Essentially, the female “other” exists because women “deviate” from the norm of a heterosexual, Caucasian male and thus are viewed as the “other.” Williams (1984) explains Chodorow’s theory of female identity formation, in which “the woman’s sense of self is based upon a continuity of relationship that ultimately prepares her for the empathic, identifying role of the mother” (p. 19). Additionally, feminist film theorists grapple with this concept in that females tend to over-identify with on-screen images, thus “act[ing] out the masquerade of femininity that manufactures a distance between spectator and image” (Williams, 1984, p. 19). This over-identification results in the distancing of women from accurate representations of themselves and each other, which ultimately results in women holding misleading and unrealistic images of their gender.

*Otherizing the “Other”*

Research of the theory and presence of the “other” has relevance across many disciplines, including psychology, sociology and especially, communication. Three studies addressed situations that arise when confronted with the “other” or when an “us versus them” conflict occurs in intercultural communication (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Naji & Iwar, 2013; Williams, 1984). While all three articles address the “other,” they did so in relation to the specific focuses of the individual studies. For example, Naji and Iwar (2013) address the presence of the Muslim “Other” in two primary areas: mainstream media and digital games. Through the literature review conducted, Naji & Iwar (2013) summarize that the “‘Arab Other’ has come to exist as the ‘folk devil’ of our time” (p. 117).

This perspective of the ‘Arab Other’ in mainstream media is largely based on the *Orientalism*, which is the primary concept through which western cultures have learned about Muslims and Islam (Naji & Iwar, 2013). Through Orientalism, non-American cultures are identified as the “other,” thus as “alien, distant, antiquated, irrational, sensual and passive” (Naji & Iwar, 2013, p. 117). In terms of the Muslim “Other” in digital games, Naji and Iwar (2013) reference Chomsky’s principles regarding “Representation as Reality” which they go on to explain in that “the representation of the Muslim ‘Other’ in political-social reality contributes to the creation of the symbolic reality in which we find […] digital games. The symbolic reality in turn contributes to distortion of the social reality, which in turn influences the political-social reality and so on and so forth” (p. 119). This concept also relates to the theory of over-identification discussed in Williams (1984), in that women tend to over-identify with on-screen images, thus influencing the images they create about themselves and other women.

Similar to the theory of over-identification discussed by Williams (1984), Hughes and Baldwin (2002) reference the constitutive nature of images, representations and stereotypes in that “the existence and propagation of […] stereotypes themselves are inherently communicative, as it is communication that creates, perpetuates, or contests stereotypes” (p. 114). Ultimately, we use stereotypes to make sense of our world, therefore, “stereotypes guide our thoughts in times of mindlessness unless we purposefully control or individuate our impressions of the other” (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002, p. 116). In this way, stereotypes reinforce the notion of the “other,” which reveals, in part, how stereotypes are maintained.

As mentioned earlier, Naji and Iwar (2013) and Williams (1984) both referenced the concept of the “Other” but also situated the concept within the scope of their specific studies. This is also the case for Hughes and Baldwin (2002), in that they employ the racial “Other” in order to answer the question of “Whether interracial communication is possible?” What is particularly interesting about this study, and what differentiates it from the previously discussed studies, is that, while it is generally assumed that Blacks are considered the “Other,” it explains both Whites and Blacks as the “Other,” depending on the perspective in which one is considering the other “culture.” This is interesting for the current research project because it provides an addition lens through which to analyze the intercultural stereotypes. While the study of the “Other” in terms of Muslims, women and Blacks is interesting and informative, there are several cultural groups that are excluded, such as Italians and Greeks, just to name a few. Therefore, this research project aims to fill the void related to the absence of certain cultural groups. Although these groups can be considered “Others” in American culture, they could nonetheless reveal differing insights and degrees in which they are classified as such.

*Theories and Applications of Stereotypes*

Tan (1997) and Kim and Lowry (2005) both reference cultivation theory as a framework in which stereotypes are formed and maintained. Tan (1997) explains that, “cultivation occurs when viewers generalize to their own social environments the realities they have learned from television […] such as violence, crime, gender roles, and political orientations” (p. 270). According to Kim and Lowry (2005), cultivation theory “suggests that exposure to media content creates a worldview, or a consistent image of social behavior, norms, values, and structures, based on the stable view of society provided by the media” (p. 902). Additionally, Kim and Lowry (2005) explain that, “television has the power to cultivate people to have the same views of the world, for example, stereotypical views of gender roles in our society” (p. 908). In this way, as we are exposed to media images, these images come to constitute our reality and are then maintained through the cycle of viewing and recognizing similar images over and over. In regards to stereotypes, it is clear how cultivation theory could facilitate the formation and maintenance of stereotypes because as people view media images, they come to constitute and embody these images in their actual lives.

In addition to the discussion of cultivation theory, Kim and Lowry (2005) also consider gender roles and the presence of a subjective reality. The concept of a subjective reality is raised, which, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), “cannot be maintained without a certain social base and social processes,” therefore, “consistent media images of stereotypical gender roles have reinforced the public’s subjective reality (Pollay, 1986), and those images remain in the public without portraying the actual ‘reality’ of the society” (Kim & Lowry, 2005, p. 902). Similar to cultivation theory, subjective reality functions as a constitutive tool of communication and our lives.

Tan (1997) also includes other relevant theories that address the ways in which stereotypes are formed and maintained. Social cognitive theory “explains how behaviors, attitudes, and values can be learned vicariously by observation” and that “learning is affected by both environmental and cognitive factors […][which] are often found in television and the television viewer” (Tan, 1997, p. 269). This theory addresses the media element of this research, in that, similar to live actions, media texts (i.e. movies, television shows, etc.) can also influence the formation and maintenance of behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and, especially, stereotypes.

A similar theory that explains how beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes are formed and maintained is affect control theory (Heise, 1977, 1979; Heise & Smith-Lovin, 1981, Smith-Lovin 1990, as cited by Hedley, 1994). Affect control theory is based on the principle that “individuals respond affectively to social interaction along the dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity […][and] that social interaction is targeted at confirming the fundamental sentiments about self and others” (Hedley, 1994, p. 725). In this way, affect control theory connects the “micro-level theory of social interaction to a macro-level question concerning the processes of socialization and enculturation” which reveals a process in which stereotypes and cultural beliefs are maintained: the interaction between individual and cultural beliefs (Hedley, 1994, p. 725).

It is this interaction that ultimately allows for meaning-making and the formation of stereotypes to occur. The interpretation of the symbolic meaning of a situation is a learned process; therefore, “popular culture influences the learning process when it systematically associates specific social identities with specific affective characteristics and specific patterns of interaction” (Hedley, 1994, p. 726). It is also helpful to consider how projected cognitive similarity and the out-group homogeneity effect are related to the study of stereotypes. Projected cognitive similarity refers to the assumption that “you know someone else’s perceptions, judgments, attitudes, and values because you assume they are like your own” (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 22). The out-group homogeneity effect is “the tendency for people to see members of an out-group as less diverse and more stereotypic than the members of that group see themselves” (Neuliep, 2009, p. 168-169). Therefore, from these theories and their applications to popular culture, it is clear that stereotypes are formed and maintained relatively easily. With relevance to intercultural communication then, it is no surprise that many of the stereotypes held of non-American cultures are propagated and maintained through popular media texts.

Another relevant theory that explains stereotypes is the notion of stereotypes as schemata (Ajtony, 2013). Stereotypes often function as means of simplifying and categorizing information we receive and perceive (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002). Similarly, schemas help us make sense of our realities by enabling a better understanding because it allows an individual to situate new information in the context of previously stored knowledge (Ajtony, 2013). Furthermore, a schema of a stereotype “functions as a frame which can be filled in with new information all the time during cognition,” however, these frames don’t “allow for perfect and total insight,” thus leaving room for misinterpretation and inaccurate portrayals of and beliefs about groups of individuals (Ajtony, 2013, p. 6). As seen in the aforementioned studies, theoretical frameworks play a large role in understanding the formation and maintenance of stereotypes, and are therefore highly relevant to this research project. A successful research endeavor is largely dependent on a clear and thorough understanding of all of the theories at work within a topic, thus the study and inclusion of a wide range of theories is crucial.

As evidenced from the breadth of research pertaining to stereotypes and intercultural communication, the combination of these two areas of study is one that is particularly necessary and relevant, especially considering the increase in globalization and interaction cross-culturally. Additionally, while portrayals of women from non-American cultures in American media has somewhat been explored, an examination that also considers the relationship of these portrayals with cultural stereotypes is a topic that is notably under-researched. Therefore, this research project aims to unite these relatively unrelated areas of study to reveal how the representations of Italian and Greek women within popular American movies is connected to the presence, formation and maintenance of cultural stereotypes. Thus, the following questions guide this research project:

1. How are Italian and Greek women represented in popular American movies?
2. How do these representations form, support, and maintain cultural stereotypes of these cultures (Italian and Greek)?

Methodology

In this research, the author aims to examine how stereotypes of non-American cultures are formed and reinforced through the portrayals of women, as represented in popular American movies. More specifically, representations of Italian and Greek women have been examined in *The Godfather* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, respectively. These movies were selected because they are both well-known, popularized representations of these cultures, even though they come from different time periods. In addition to these examples, communication theories, supplemented by select psychology theories, have been applied and used to analyze the examples in an attempt to develop productive and progressive skills when interacting with individuals and groupds from non-American cultures. Additionally, for this research project, non-American cultures have been considered any culture not classified as part of the United States. Although there are clear distinctions between the various cultures classified as non-American, for the purposes of this study, the most important distinction is that these cultures are presented as the “other” in American movies.

The primary research method utilized in this research project is textual analysis, which is derived from the critical research paradigm. This method enables successful research because it facilitates analysis and works to improve human communication. Textual analysis is a suitable method for this research because, as explained by Larsen (2002), “the content of a text must be conceived a meaningful whole, and hence that analysis necessarily involves an act of interpretation which, like other readings, is based on specific assumptions to be made explicit in the course of analysis” (p. 122). Textual analysis relies first on the holistic interpretation of a text, followed by a detailed dissection and analysis, in an effort to derive meaning and understanding from the text.

Thus, to collect data, the media texts were viewed and all situations in which cultural stereotypes were directly or indirectly referenced were recorded. Following the initial viewing, the media texts were analyzed holistically to gain an understanding of the overall depiction of women in these media texts. Specific scenes and examples in which cultural stereotypes, of both western and non-American cultures, were particularly salient were analyzed and then related to other similar examples. Particular keywords, derogatory phrases, and/or slang references were noted. Finally, the media texts were viewed a second time to observe any situations and/or nuances that were missed during the first viewing.

Following the data collection, the findings were analyzed by applying the selected theoretical frameworks to the specific examples found within the media texts. The primary theories utilized are cultivation theory, cognitive similarity, affect control theory and social cognitive theory. These theories provide lenses through which the media texts have been analyzed and deciphered in terms of the portrayals of women from non-American cultures. Additionally, these theories help formulate central themes that guide the organization and journey of this research. From the application of these theories and the holistic study of these media texts, a better understanding of how Italian and Greek women are presented and also how these representations form and maintain cultural stereotypes has been gained.

Discussion

*Women as Ornaments in “The Godfather”*

*The Godfather*, set in 1944-45, is an American crime film centered on the fictional crime family, the Corleones, which is led by the Godfather, Vito Corleone. The movie tracks the transformation of the youngest son, Michael Corleone, from family outsider to brutal mob boss. At the beginning, Michael is portrayed as an outsider because he has gone off to college and become a Marine, whereas his brothers have stayed close to home and helped with the family business. Throughout the movie, the family’s power and involvement in crime is revealed, in addition to following the transition of Michael becoming the Godfather, which is essentially the head of the Corleone family and empire. The final scene culminates in the Michael’s first “attack” as the Godfather, in which all of the other New York dons (mob bosses) are killed. The movie also features Michael’s long-term relationship with Kay Adams and, eventually their wedding and family. By utilizing the method of textual analysis, *The Godfather* was studied to examine portrayals of Italian women and the respective cultural stereotypes.

This text revealed interesting information about the roles and presence of women within Italian culture. In *The Godfather*, women are largely presented as ornamental. They are not situated or included as relevant, significant characters, and are always excluded from meetings and any matters pertaining to the family business. Additionally, women are presented as either emotionless and lacking in personality or as highly emotional and hysterical. Finally, the women are always presented in regard to their relationships; they are essentially irrelevant without their relationships, especially once married.

There are several scenes that support the notion that women are excluded from any important situations, and are therefore, insignificant. For example, there is a scene that occurs right after the Godfather of the Corleone family, Vito, returns home from the hospital after recovering from multiple gunshot injuries. All of the women of the family are shown in the kitchen, socializing and preparing food, while the men gather with the Godfather and discuss the family business. While this scene may seem unimportant, it reveals the foundation upon which the gender roles within the Italian culture in the 1940s functioned. A woman’s place was in the kitchen caring for members of the family, while the men were responsible for the business and affairs of the family.

Additionally, in the scene following the baptism of Connie and Carlo’s youngest child, the women are shown interacting primarily with each other and the children, while the men discuss business – primarily the assassinations that occurred while the baptism took place. Instead of inquiring about the nature of their business or for any updates, the women keep to themselves and don’t challenge the firmly established gender roles. Thus, *The Godfather* alludes to the solidity of the separation of the women and men and the defined gender roles because these are principles that have been passed down from generation to generation and also reinforced by society.

Women are also portrayed as either emotionless or highly emotional in *The Godfather*. There are two characters that clearly demonstrate this theme: Connie and Kay. Connie is Michael and Sonny’s sister and she is the female character who receives the most screen time, whereas Kay is Michael’s longtime girlfriend and who eventually becomes his wife. Connie is married to Carlo, who is abusive, degrading and lazy. The majority of scenes in which Connie is shown are in relation to, or directly showing, her being abused by Carlo. Usually following these scenes, Michael and Sonny are shown defending their sister or threatening to hurt Carlo if he abuses Connie again. Ultimately, Michael has Carlo killed, not only because he violent and abusive to his sister, but also because he is unfaithful to the family.

In one particularly memorable scene, Connie answers a phone for Carlo from his mistress. Connie reacts by destroying the entire dinner she had just prepared and breaking virtually all of their plates, glassware and vases. Carlo then chases Connie, who is pregnant, around their apartment with a belt and into the bathroom. Although the end of this scene isn’t shown, we hear Connie screaming and it is assumed that Carlo proceeds to whip her. Rather than present Connie as the victim that she is, she is presented as a hysterical, hormone-raging, pregnant woman. She is vulnerable and unable to escape the abuse of Carlo, but nonetheless stays married to him throughout the film, until he is killed by Michael’s order.

On the other side of the spectrum is Kay, who is presented as bland and rather emotion- and personality-less. Kay is well-educated, aspires to be a teacher and is aware of the Corleone family business and involvement in the Mafia. Despite this, however, Kay is easily persuaded and rarely, if ever, displays much emotion. Even when Michael returns from Italy after mysteriously disappearing for a year, it only takes about five minutes for Michael to convince Kay to marry him. She isn’t the slightest bit upset that he left unannounced and provides no explanation for his disappearance.

Kay’s personality and expression of emotion in comparison to Connie is significant for a variety of reasons. First, it is interesting in regards to cultural differences; Connie is full Italian, while Kay is not. Second, it is interesting that Kay’s personality can be interpreted as bland or unemotional, whereas it could also be read as calm and poised. As so often is the case, in popular media, women are presented within binaries: thin or fat, smart or dumb, beautiful or ugly. In the case of *The Godfather*, the binary of emotional or unemotional is relevant because with the extreme example of Connie, thereby, Kay, and any other women who are relatively moderate or calm mannered, must be therefore unemotional and lacking in personality.

A final theme that was found through a textual analysis of *The Godfather* is the idea that women are essentially irrelevant without relationships, namely marriages. There are several scenes in which men are shown discussing and arranging the marriages of their daughters. In one of the first scenes of the film, a family friend receives counsel from the Godfather, Vito, regarding his daughter and a supposed failed relationship. He claims that his daughter is depressed and doesn’t know what to do with herself since the relationship ended, but that he thinks if she just got married, she would be happier and find purpose in her life. Another similar scene is when Michael addresses the father of the woman, Apollina, he meets in Sicily. Instead of approaching Apollina directly, he makes the arrangements of their courtship and marriage with her father, thus leaving Apollina without any input and completely out of the process.

It is important to at least consider that while many of these findings could be due to cultural differences and underlying gender themes within Italian culture, they could also be due to the overall context and plot of the film, which was the crime and business of the Mafia in the 1940s. *The Godfather* contains several direct portrayals of women, especially with consideration of cultural stereotypes, but overall it is largely a male-dominant film. That being said, the absence, as opposed to the presence, of women in the film is indicatory of the role of women within Italian culture in this time period. The final, iconic scene of the film embodies this notion and combines all of the themes referenced throughout the movie in one single scene. When Kay leaves Michael’s office to get them something to drink, but sees the door be closed on her, signifies the overall position of women: they are separated, uninvolved and insignificant.

*Female Gender Roles as Examined in “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”*

Similar to Italian culture, Greek culture is very family-centric, with men as the head of the house. From the start of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, we learn about the three principles guiding the lives of “nice Greek girls.” Toula, the main character, informs us that “nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies and feed everyone until the day [they] die” (Goetzman, et al., 2002, 1:35 minutes). These principles continue as themes throughout the film, with the portrayals of female characters often related to these concepts.

The first description we receive about Toula’s mother, Maria, is related to cooking, with Toula explaining that “My mom was always cooking foods filled with warmth and wisdom, and never forgetting that side dish of steaming guilt” (Goetzman, et al. & Zwick, 2002, 4:00 minutes). Not only does this description provide insight into the personality of Maria, but it also situates her role within the family as the one who provides food, and also is considered warm and wise, in addition to some motherly guilt. Additionally, we see the dependence and expectancy from men for the women to be the cooks of the house, such as when Toula’s brother, Anthony, says “Mom I’m hungry” and Maria immediately gets up to make him something to eat. Anthony is in his mid-twenties and definitely able to cook for himself, but instead, because this is what he’s accustomed to, he relies on and expects his mother to cook for him. By showing women within the setting of the kitchen and in contexts related to food, the notion that women are the providers of food for the family is reinforced and maintained.

Another theme that is present through *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is the idea that young women must be married and that this is essentially their only responsibility. Toula begins the movie by saying that her father often nags her about not being married and repeatedly critiques her. In one instance, when Toula asks permission to take classes in computers and her father, Gus, denies this request and instead asks why she can’t get married and make babies (in addition to saying that she looks old). Gus later comments to his wife that Toula is “smart enough for a girl,” implying that there is a certain level of education that women need and beyond that education is unnecessary (Goetzman et al. & Zwick, 2002, 18:38 minutes). In Gus’ traditional perspective, Toula’s only responsibility and focus should be on getting married, not on things such as school or a job. Thus, through the emphasis placed on marriage seen in this film, the notion that young women’s’ primary goals should be on marriage is continually reinforced.

Despite the various representations of women that support traditional gender roles, there are fleeting moments in which women challenge traditional gender norms. One character in particular that seems to defy, or at least challenge, traditional gender roles is Toula’s aunt, Voula. Voula and her husband own a dry cleaning business, in addition to a travel agency. Voula is largely responsible for the travel agency and displays business insight throughout the film. Additionally, Voula is rarely depicted with her husband, but rather on her own or with other male members of the family. For example, during Ian and Toula’s wedding, Voula is seen at the bar with many male family members, as opposed to being with the female family members who are seated or serving food. Finally, Voula is one of Toula’s strongest supporters in pursuit to take computer classes and supports and enables Toula’s employment at the travel agency. These events – her enrollment in computer classes and employment at the travel agency – mark the transformation of Toula’s life; therefore, Voula’s support of Toula to challenge gender norms is perpetuated and reinforced.

A final theme of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is that women are presented as the heart and uniting bond of the family. Without the involvement and passion of the women, the family would lack serious cohesion. Different from *The Godfather*, where men are the exclusive ones, women do the excluding in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. One example of this is on Toula’s wedding day and all of the female family members are getting ready and one proclaims, “No boys allowed.” While this example is not particularly firm, it nonetheless conveys the separation of men and women experienced in traditional Greek culture. It also goes on to reinforce the notion of separate and different gender roles, in that the women are exclusive when they are dealing with matters of beauty and traditionally feminine tasks, but when they are cooking for the family, everyone is welcome regardless of gender.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, Italian and Greek cultures are similar in a variety of ways, which partly inspired this research project. Despite the similarity of these cultures, little research of these cultures in conjunction has been done. Additionally, there seems to be much more research pertaining to stereotypes of non-western cultures than of Italian or Greek cultures. Thus, this research has added greater depth to the topic of cultural stereotypes by examining cultures not typically studied. Furthermore, this research has added insight into to the study of gender roles, especially in terms of how Greek and Italian cultures are represented within popular American movies. *The Godfather* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, although set in different time periods and released several decades apart, both address and display similar themes of gender roles and cultural stereotypes. Thus, opportunities for future research could examine media texts from the same time period or texts popular in different countries (i.e. popular British movies could be studied instead).

Both films, *The Godfather* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, reveal interesting themes about how women are portrayed and viewed within certain cultures, specifically Italian and Greek. Furthermore, Italian and Greek cultures are often viewed as similar, which held true in this assessment, but it is also important to consider and evaluate these cultures individually because of the nuances present within each culture. Thus, a textual analysis of *The Godfather* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* provided numerous examples of stereotypes of women and traditional gender roles, and also revealed interesting themes about stereotypes of the respective cultures.

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