

**Television Sit-Com Analysis  
(sample essay by the instructor)**

The *King of Queens* episode “Business Affairs” illustrates how situation comedies send messages about the meanings of maleness and femaleness. In this essay, I will describe this episode and suggest three messages it sends about gender: (1) men are less intelligent than women, (2) men and women are different kinds of people, and (3) close male-male friendships are problematic.

*King of Queens* focuses on a married couple, Doug and Carrie Heffernan (played by Kevin James and Leah Remini), and Carrie’s father, Arthur Spooner (played by Jerry Stiller), who lives with them. The episode “Business Affairs” (original air date: Oct. 28, 2002), also features two characters from the Heffernans’ work places, Carrie’s co-worker Curt (Cameron Watson), and Doug’s co-worker Deacon (Victor Williams).

The episode contains three interconnected story lines. The first story line concerns Doug and Carrie’s decision to refinance their house. The second concerns the relationships between Doug and Carrie and their work friends. The third concerns Arthur and the dog-walker the Heffernans pay to take him on walks. This third plot line does not contribute significantly to the episode’s gender messages and isn’t tightly connected to the other two. My analysis will focus on the first two story lines.

At the beginning of the show, Doug returns home from a meeting with the mortgage officer with information about refinancing the Heffernan’s house. He admits he didn’t actually read the documents, but tells Carrie that they can lower their payments by getting a new 30-year mortgage, replacing their current mortgage, which will be paid off in seven years.\* He also expresses concern about whether they will still “dig” each other in thirty years. After walking in the kitchen, Doug realizes that Carrie is making brownies for her friend Curt. He attempts unsuccessfully to get at the

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\* Although the episode doesn’t comment on it, this re-mortgaging plan makes no financial sense since the Heffernans will be paying tens of thousands more dollars over the course of the loan. This may reflect how out of touch rich Hollywood sit-com writers and producers are with the financial realities of middle-class life.

brownie batter and expresses jealousy that Carrie is baking for another man. Carrie tells him he has nothing to worry about since Curt is gay.

In the next scene Doug goes to Carrie's workplace with mortgage documents to sign—although he still hasn't read them. There he sees Carrie and Curt talking and laughing at inside jokes. He also learns from a co-worker that Curt is called Carrie's "work husband." Upon returning home, Doug shares this news with Arthur, who tells him that he once had a "work wife," with whom he eventually had sex. Arthur tells Doug to worry about this situation even though Curt is gay.

That night Doug confronts Carrie about her "work husband." Carrie responds that Doug has a similar relationship with his friend Deacon—so Deacon is his "work wife." Doug rejects this notion, but in the next scene he sees Deacon in the locker room and has a day-dream montage of Deacon and him participating in activities like watching TV, eating a sandwiches and playing football, while the song "You Are Everything" plays in the background.

After work Doug tells Carrie that Deacon is his "work wife" and he is going out with him that night. Carrie then makes plans to go dancing with Curt. Later that night, the two couples run into each other at a restaurant, setting up the climax to the plotline about the "work husband" and "work wife." Doug plays the part of a couple with Deacon in order to compete with Carrie and Curt. After he brags about how much Deacon can bench press, Carrie responds "Wow, Doug, your work wife can bench more than my work husband." Deacon and Curt both leave the awkward situation. Deacon, who is angry, tells Doug, "If anything, you're *my* work wife!"

The climax of the re-financing plotline takes place in the mortgage office. Doug is worried that, since they prefer the company of other people, they don't have anything in common and maybe shouldn't get a 30-year mortgage. Carrie says they have a great sex life, but Doug believes that the sex won't last because her bones will get brittle and "I'll crush you to dust." Their solution is to make lists of their 20 favorite things and not sign the papers unless they get at least one match. After they read their first 19 items, none of them match. However, Carrie decides to sign the papers anyway, telling Doug, "I bet you our number 20s match... And even if they don't, it

doesn't matter." Later she says "You can't put this [gesturing back and forth between them] on a list." For fun they compare the final items on their lists. She has "chamomile tea"; he has "porno."

This episode sends three major messages about gender. First, men are less intelligent than women, or at least less able to deal with relationships and decisions within the family. Second, men and women are different kinds of people. What holds them together as husbands and wives are not similar interests but sexuality and romance. Thus, opposite-sex friendships are fraught with the potential for sexual attraction. Third, close male-male friendships are problematic.

### Men are less intelligent than women

The show indicates in several scenes that Doug's character is unable to muster the thoughtfulness needed to participate as an adult member of his family. Instead, he is depicted as taken with simple pleasures. One example of this is Doug's inability or refusal to make sense of the mortgage refinancing documents. When he first brings them home, he explains that he favors the plan on the purple pamphlet because the "the middle-aged black couple here [on the pamphlet] seems pretty happy with it." Later he explains that the banker has put tabs next to where they are supposed to sign to save him the trouble of reading the document. In both scenes, Carrie presses him to pay more attention, once asking him, "You're not ready to do grown-up stuff on your own, are you?"

In two scenes, Doug is seen expressing strong emotions toward a batch of brownies made by Carrie. In the first of these, Doug exclaims "Holy sweet mother, I'm staring at a bowl of chocolate" and picks Carrie up and moves her away from the mixing bowl so he can eat brownie batter. Later at the office Doug is sad when he is confronted with the empty brownie tray.

Doug is generally depicted as the butt of the jokes in the episode. He plays the fool by being jealous of his wife's friendship with a gay man and by embracing the idea that Deacon is his "work wife," which he doesn't realize will be problematic.

### Men and women are different kinds of people

Two scenes highlight the message that men and women are different kinds of people, an assumption that Sandra Bem calls “gender polarization.”(Renzetti and Curran 2003, p. 81) The first of these takes place when Doug and Carrie are making plans to go out with their co-workers. Doug tells Carrie this is good because “Now you don’t have to pretend to care about sports and ground beef and I don’t have to pretend to care about your new shoes and your feelings.” The climatic scene also focuses on this message. Doug and Carrie decide they will only refinance their house if the lists of their 20 favorite things contain at least one match. Her list contains “sunsets,” “a good book,” “salsa dancing,” and “chamomile tea.” His includes “new car smell,” “Spaghetti-Os,” “Beefaroni,” and “porno.”

The episode also suggests that since men and women don’t have similar interests, what keeps them together is related to sexuality and romance. This is suggested by Carrie’s assertion that their sex life is good and by her claim that what holds them together can’t be put on a list. This message is also present in the theme that opposite-sex friendships are fraught with potential for sexual attraction—even if one of the friends is gay.

In addition, although the episode doesn’t focus on traditional male-female roles, which are connected to the claim that men and women are different kinds of people, we do see Carrie in the kitchen baking when Doug comes home from work. This is the only instance of domestic work in the episode.

### Close male-male friendships are problematic

In his discussion of male-male friendships, Walter Williams (2003) claims that “American masculinity is rather unique [sic] in its suppression of displays of affection, and of close and intimate friendships, between adult men” (p. 350). The problematic nature of male-male friendships is illustrated with the episode’s central gag, the romanticization of Doug’s friendship with Deacon. Immediately after Carrie says that Deacon is Doug’s “work wife,” Doug objects. But he quickly becomes comfortable with the idea. In his daydream, we see him remember or fanaticize about participating in several activities with Deacon. The music and style of the montage is suggestive of

romance. The montage ends with Doug tackling Deacon during a football game and the two of them rolling around together on the grass with smiles on their faces.

The humor of this story line is based on its putting two heterosexual men into a type of relationship that is inappropriate for them in our culture. The sexual danger of this close male-male friendships is made explicit by labeling Deacon Doug's "work wife." This title also suggests that in a close male-male friendship, at least one member of the pair must give up some masculinity.

The climax of the story line takes place when Doug and Deacon have dinner with Carrie and Curt. Doug is overtly treating Deacon like a romantic partner by attempting to order a margarita for them to share, asking Deacon what kind of beans he (Doug) likes, and by comparing Deacon's bench-pressing ability to Curt's. Deacon appears puzzled by this, but he reacts with disgust when he finds out that he has been labeled Doug's "work wife." Doug is the butt of the joke not only because he doesn't see anything wrong with Deacon being his "work wife," but also because Deacon says that Doug is his "work wife"—suggesting that Doug is the one who has given up his masculinity to be in the relationship.

In conclusion, this episode sends three major messages about gender. The first message, illustrated by Doug's behavior throughout the show, is that men are less intelligent than women. The second message is that men and women are different kinds of people. This message is the focus of the climatic scene in which Doug and Carrie fail to come up with any matches on the lists of their favorite things. However, their relationship is strong in spite of their differences. The third message is that close male-male friendships are problematic. This is illustrated by the comedic results of Doug's close friendship with Deacon.

## **References**

- Renzetti, Claire M. and Daniel J. Curran. 2003. *Women, Men, and Society*, 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Williams, Walter L. 2003. "The Relationship Between Male-Male Friendship and Male-Female Marriage." Pp. 349-360 in Estelle Disch (ed.) *Reconstructing Gender*, 3rd ed. Boston: McGraw Hill.