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## Breaking a Bad Stigma: *Breaking Bad* and the Need for Dynamic Fatherhood Roles to Overrule Historical Stereotypes

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### Writing Process

*Editor's note: This paper is the recipient of the Best-Researched Argument award.*

The overarching theme of my English 114 course focused on the depiction of family in popular culture. Thus, the final research project required me to research some aspect of family in American or popular culture, which led to my decision to analyze the 2008 television series *Breaking Bad*. My initial research question sought to answer how fatherhood was depicted in the show. However, I was unable to find much research on the show in general, leading me to choose a more physical and psychological route. I came across multitudes of research on the role of fathers as “providers” and the implications of the role on relationships in the real world, allowing me to narrow down my focus to the historical stigma surrounding traditional father roles. With my sources gathered, I drafted the paper within a few days, reread and revised it a few days later, had the paper peer-reviewed by two fellow students, and produced my final draft!

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# Breaking a Bad Stigma: *Breaking Bad* and the Need for Dynamic Fatherhood Roles to Overrule Historical Stereotypes

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*Ella Bellflower*

Family structure, particularly the way in which families have been portrayed on television, has drastically changed in the past few decades. American culture's shifting towards a less traditional family style has challenged the historical stereotypes of breadwinning fathers and housewife mothers. Yet, another form of opposition to these historical stereotypes has surfaced in the media; in her essay for the *Journal of Communication*, Kelly Albada responds to the way in which the traditional family is occasionally "mocked in fictional television formats" (81). By using exaggerated scenarios and situational irony, the traditional family style is ridiculed from time to time for its failure to consistently produce the picture-perfect family unit with strong values. One television show in particular embraces this cultural shift through its satirical nature. The 2008 television drama *Breaking Bad* depicts the troublesome outcomes of the stereotypical breadwinning father with the extreme circumstances of the White family. Walter White, father to Walter White Junior and husband to Skyler White, is doing everything he can to provide for his family despite his low-paying jobs as a high school chemistry professor and an employee at the local car wash. Already financially struggling, Walter, better known as Walt, receives a cancer diagnosis and decides the only option he has left to relieve all of this financial stress is to quit his job at the car wash and get involved in a new business—making methamphetamine (Gilligan). The implications of his new job regarding family life are demonstrated best through his involvement and lack of involvement in three relationships: the husband-wife relationship he has with Skyler, the father-son relationship he has with Walter Junior (along with the very minor father-daughter relationship he has with his newborn Holly), and the pseudo-father-son relationship he forms with

Jesse Pinkman, his partner in the drug business. Ultimately, *Breaking Bad* presents a satirical depiction of fatherhood in the traditional family structure through its illustration of the physical and psychological dangers of historical stigmas that reduce the role of a father figure down to the sole provider of the family.

Historically, the traditional family structure assigned roles of the family based on gender, and the father, still commonly understood today, inherited the role of “provider.” This term first entered the English language, according to scholar in American Sociology Jessie Bernard, in 1532 with no direct connection to a particular gender. However, she explains that by the time the word was defined in Webster’s Second Edition, it referred to “one who provides, especially, colloq., one who provides food, clothing, etc. for his family” (2). Right away, a clear connection between being a “provider” and being a financially and institutionally successful male in a family is established. By instituting this notion of the father figure in a traditional family as a “provider,” a stigma regarding both gender roles and paternal success has evolved and still finds itself in popular culture. Despite the rising statistics of direct paternal involvement within families, an article from *Time International* expresses the concern that “society hasn’t made it easy for newly evolved dads to feel manly” (Cullen). Due to the assignment of roles by the traditional family and the term “provider” being linked to male responsibilities by definition, fathers feel inclined and pressured by society to abide by these gender norms. In fact, the majority of the stay-at-home fathers from the study referenced by *Time International* expressed happiness in terms of their relationship with their family, yet they were worried about being judged by the rest of the world for the decision not to pursue a career in the workforce (Cullen). The fear of judgment from these fathers is rooted in the gender roles associated with the traditional family style even though there is a great movement towards challenging stereotypes within popular culture today. As a result of this, *Breaking Bad* serves to demonstrate the detrimental impacts of forcing fathers to abide by this historical stereotype that reduces them down to “providers.”

Consequently, one of the most direct examples of Walter White’s provider role damaging familial relations in *Breaking Bad* is presented through his relationship with his wife, Skyler. The pilot episode serves to introduce the stresses in the White’s traditional family lifestyle. In the opening scene, the initial tension between Skyler and Walt’s career is immediately uncovered as she expresses that she wants him home on time, explaining, “You get paid until five, you work until five.” The first episode also concludes with a similar portrayal of tension as Walt shows up much later than he promised because of his first attempt to earn extra money in the drug business, prompting Skyler to ask where he was

with tears in her eyes (“Pilot”). From just the first episode, it is evident that Walt’s desire to earn as much money for his family as he can is already burdening Skyler, causing her extreme emotional distress. Though he is taking on his role as a provider, he is immediately depicted neglecting his role as a husband.

Furthermore, despite his intentions of being a “good” provider by earning more money, Walt raises suspicions and leads Skyler to question their relationship. Eventually, Skyler takes matters into her own hands telling Walt to “pack [his] things and leave,” accusing him of having an affair with another woman in order to pay off his cancer treatment when it really was him who paid for all of the expenses (“ABQ”). This encounter emphasizes the irony of Walt’s character as a father. By simply taking on his role as the financial head of the household, Walt is called a liar and is even served divorce papers in the third season during which Skyler also develops an intimate affair with her boss (“No Más”). Walt loses the loving relationship he had with his wife by trying to provide for her. Walt’s long hours and aggressive attempts to earn money that would allow his wife to live comfortably led to a completely severed relationship, portraying the way in which *Breaking Bad* takes Walt’s role as a provider to the extreme to demonstrate how minute stigmas can have big impacts.

Though *Breaking Bad* demonstrates the most extreme and satirical nature of the detrimental effects of Walt’s fatherly role on his marriage, these effects are not only present in the fictional television world. The research conducted by Aaron Rochlen and James Mahalik and published in the *Journal of Psychology of Men and Masculinity* examined women’s perceptions of gender role conflicts experienced by men, specifically their husbands. The most interesting of their findings involved a correlation between women’s mental health and their perception of how their husbands scored in different categories, three of which were “Success, Power, and Competition.” These three categories were broadly tied to business and financial success, and it was concluded that women who perceived their husbands as ranking higher in these categories had a greater level of dissatisfaction with the relationship and higher levels of anxiety and depression (147). These results directly connect the emotional distress experienced by Skyler in the fictional series *Breaking Bad* to women in the real world. Because of Walt’s pressure to conform to a particular family role that is dominant in “Success, Power, and Competition,” Skyler is confronted with emotional distress and a clear dissatisfaction with her relationship as she pushes for a divorce, something that could likely occur outside of the fictional world as well.

Yet, the emotional and physical disconnect between Walt and Skylar is not the only negative outcome of Walt’s seemingly good intentions as Walt struggles to form sincere relationships with his own children, particularly Walter Junior. Walt

is notorious for being absent from some of the most important parts of family life because he was busy making and dealing drugs to earn money. In season two, Walt misses his daughter Holly's birth followed by missing Walter Junior's sixteenth birthday later in season 4. While Holly is too young to show the emotional impacts of this, Walter Junior is able to express his feelings through his words and actions throughout the entire series. For instance, when Walt initially refuses to receive chemotherapy treatment to save money for his family, Walter Junior struggles to accept this, asking his father, "Then why don't you just die already?" ("Cancer Man"). This harsh, cathartic statement encompasses all of the built-up emotions that Walter Junior has experienced. Walter Junior no longer wants his father to think solely about money. He wants his father to think about fighting to stay alive to spend more time with his family. Walt's son recognizes his provider role clearly prioritizes monetary success over familial relationships, damaging his son emotionally.

Moreover, just a few episodes after Walter Junior's catharsis, Walter Junior displays further evidence of the negative effects of his father's obsession with money. Walter Junior finds himself at a gas station with some acquaintances attempting to illegally purchase alcohol ("Gray Matter"). Without his father figure around to act as a role model to him, Walter Junior begins to act out against the law, possibly in an attempt to gain the attention of his preoccupied father. Finally, Walter Junior decides that he no longer wants to be associated so closely with his father and begins going by a new name, Flynn ("Down"). Walter Junior finally decides to emotionally separate himself from his father after the extensive physical separation that he experienced while his father was busy working, proving that Walt's role as a father in the traditional family led to the physical and emotional separation of him from his child. This depiction of fatherhood in *Breaking Bad* shows the damage that Walt's provider role does not only physically in his relationships but also emotionally in all individuals involved.

It is clear that Walt's absence as a caregiver to his son as a result of his commitment to working took a toll on Walter Junior's emotional well-being and likely would have done the same to baby Holly based on the research of various individuals. In her dissertation focused on masculinity in *Breaking Bad*, Stephanie Willie emphasizes that Walt "believ[ed] that his children [would be] more grateful for a financially secure future than shaping good memories with their father" specifically referencing Walt buying Walter Junior a red Dodge challenger for his birthday and showing baby Holly all the money from his drug deals while whispering "See what your daddy did for you" (29). Furthermore, when Walter Junior creates an online donation website for his father's cancer, Walt is offended and has no intention of letting his son help him raise money ("Phoenix"). By

assuming he would form a better relationship with his children by working long hours and earning as much money as possible, Walt actually did more harm than good. Psychology also serves to support this claim as studies that have focused on the impacts of fathers' caregiving and child development state that "greater interaction with fathers has been significantly linked to decreases in delinquency and behavioral problems and to increases in cognitive development, educational attainment, and psychological well-being" of their children (Carlson 103). Walter Junior exhibits delinquency/behavioral issues as he takes part in illegal activities as well as psychological well-being concerns by hitting a breaking point and telling his father to die. Similar to Walter Junior, or Flynn as he would prefer to be called, the implications of the traditional father role could negatively affect any child in that situation, regardless of whether he is in the physical or fictional world.

In stark contrast to the relationship Walt has with Walter Junior is the pseudo-father-son relationship that Walt forms with Jesse Pinkman. Jesse was a former student of Walt's who had been involved in the drug business for some time when Walt contacted him to become business partners. Because of the immense amount of time the two spent together as partners, a close relationship forms between them, ironically a seemingly more emotional relationship than Walt has with his own son. Their relationship is so personal that for a few episodes, Jesse is the only character that is aware of Walt's cancer diagnosis other than Walt himself ("Pilot," "Cat's in the Bag...," "...And the Bag's in the River"). Right away, a bond forms between them based on trust and emotion. Walt refuses to even tell his own family about his lung cancer, but he trusted Jesse enough to share his big secret. Their relationship grows stronger and stronger with every new drug ordeal, and eventually, Walt begins to take on the role of the father figure in Jesse's life. In the final episode of season two, Walt and Jesse share a touching moment in which Jesse cries into Walt's arms after the death of his girlfriend, and seeing how Jesse has been struggling, Walt decides to check Jesse into rehab to prevent his drug abuse from getting worse with this tragic loss ("Phoenix"). Though one could argue that Walt let Jesse's lover die as she choked on her own vomit while he watched, Walt cared enough to protect Jesse and only Jesse. He cared enough not to let drugs get in the way of his life as they had for Jesse's girlfriend. Other small gestures throughout the series demonstrate the tight-knit relationship that Jesse and Walt have such as Jesse buying Walt an expensive watch for his birthday ("Fifty-One"), and Walt comforting Jesse during a breakdown in season five, placing his hands on his shoulders and emphasizing the importance of "having each other's back" ("Madrigal"). In no way, shape, or form is their relationship perfect. In fact, it is far from it. Yet, the relationship that Walt and Jesse share shows that Walt is capable of caring and developing a relationship

with his own family, but it is his work and desire to earn money that prevents him from doing this.

Also, Walt's interpretation of earning money as the means of success for his fatherly role led to his misunderstanding of who his family truly was. Spending so much time in the drug business, his mind so enthralled by dollar bills, Walt found a new form of family in this lifestyle. His work life is such a large part of his fatherhood that in season four, he calls his own son, Walter Junior, "Jesse" ("Salud"). This Freudian slip communicates the way in which Walt associates anyone and anything related to his financial business with his family. Additionally, it goes to show that Walt takes Jesse in as his son to fill the void from the lost relationship with his own son. All in all, *Breaking Bad* ironically portrays Walt's failure to be a good father to his own biological son yet his ability to prioritize and care for anything and anyone that is associated with earning money.

While Walt's actions appear to be all about earning money for his family, some critics would disagree. In fact, co-executive producer of the show, Peter Gould, claims in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* that Walt's actions had nothing to do with his family. When Walt tells Skyler in the series finale that everything he did, he did for himself, Gould claims that this was the end because Walt is "no longer lying to himself" (Couch). However, this claim completely contradicts Walt's character. Even in the first episode of season two, Walt can be seen calculating the exact amount of money, \$737,000, he must acquire to leave his family financially stable should he not survive his cancer diagnosis ("Seven Thirty-Seven"). Through this action, Walt is directly making known his intentions; Walt wants to provide for his family even when he is not around anymore. Walt is not calculating the money he needs to buy himself new clothes or cars or a new house. Therefore, Gould's claim seems to fall apart as Walt's actions prove to be based upon selflessness. Furthermore, Gould's arguable claim echoes the satirical nature of *Breaking Bad*. Gould is presuming the bad aspects of Walt's fatherly nature. Though Walt did not start out with bad intentions, his ego began to grow as he proved to be so successful in performing the provider role that society told him he needed to. By shifting dynamically into a sole breadwinner and a joke of a caregiver, Walt ironically portrays the historical role of a father.

All in all, the satirical portrayal of fatherhood in *Breaking Bad* calls attention to the dangers of historical stereotypes that reduce the role of fathers down to providers of the family. The inability of Walt to form sincere relationships with his wife and children as a result of this stereotypical role is highlighted as a paramount theme throughout the series, emphasizing the need for American



culture to more widely embrace dynamic family roles. Psychological and statistical research supports the need for both breadwinning and caregiving fathers, so it is important to acknowledge that the theme of this 2008 television series is a direct call to action in the physical world. The modern world needs to be willing to break the bad stigmas associated with historical and gendered family roles.

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