Gangsters, Mothers, Sex Symbols and Fessos:
Exploring Italian-American Stereotypes in Television

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Welcome to the Family

- Italian Americans are almost always portrayed in stereotypical terms in television.

*Everybody Loves Raymond*  
*The Sopranos*
A Question of Stereotypes

• Prior research on Italian-American stereotypes in the media have ignored the stereotypes of Italian American women in *The Sopranos*, and more subtle Italian stereotypes found in a show like *Everybody Loves Raymond*
Gangsters and Housewives: Previous Studies

- Most of the research on Italian-Americans has focused heavily on gangster depictions, studying movies like Scarface and Caesar.

- Research on stereotypes surrounding Italian American women is limited to images of the Italian American housewife, while ignoring depictions of Italian-American women as sex symbols for men.
Influence of Italian American Stereotypes

• A 2001 Zogby survey of 1,300 teenagers 13-18 found that 44% of teenagers said that Italian Americans would be cast mainly as crime bosses or restaurant workers

• Even more astonishing: 46% agreed that Italian Americans are accurately portrayed on television or in the movies
Defining Italian-American Stereotypes

Here is a list of the four major stereotypes that I found and defined in *The Sopranos* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*:

- Mafia gangster
- *Fesso*
- Mother/Matriarch
- Sex Symbol
Research Method

• I chose episodes from the first seasons of *The Sopranos* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* as the basis for this study because each show contained shared stereotypes that previously had not been explored.
# Results

**Common Stereotypes in Each Show**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Stereotypes</th>
<th>Female Stereotypes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Inept and Inactive fathers</td>
<td>• Wives obsessed with children and home</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Still dependent on their Mothers</td>
<td>• Mothers are domineering and controlling</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Uneducated</td>
<td>• Women can only be mothers or a sex symbol</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Violent</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Physically Lazy</td>
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Implications

• Former stereotypes still persist but new stereotypes have evolved
  – Creation of new stereotypes about Italian-American women

• Italian American stereotypes vehicle for indulging the baser instincts & prejudices of others

• America is very comfortable with stereotypes in general
References


