

Braxton Family Values

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the television show Braxton Family Values.

Keywords: Review | Television | African American Families | Gender Roles | Family Structure | Communication

Article:

Braxton Family Values [Television series].
Braxton T. & Braxton, T. (Producers). (2011).
New York, NY: Women's Entertainment LLC.

Braxton Family Values is one of the newest reality television shows that debuted on Women's Entertainment (WE) network in Spring 2011. Consistent with WE network's tagline—life as WE know it—the series fits the network's objective to appeal to and feature the experiences of women. This show portrays the family dynamics of five upwardly mobile African-American women who work in various sectors of the entertainment industry. It stars Toni Braxton, Grammy award winning R&B and pop star, and her four sisters: Towanda, Tamar, Trina, and Traci. The episodes primarily center on the tensions between sisterly support and sibling rivalry; however, the sisters' mother, Evelyn, plays an important role as the family matriarch. The sisters' husbands and children are also regularly featured. The debut season consisted of ten one-hour episodes that aired weekly and concluded with a live family reunion special. The show has been renewed for a second season.

Reality television shows such as *Braxton Family Values* provide opportunities to engage connections between representations of social identity and popular culture and entertainment. Although reality television shows are often dismissed as "low culture" entertainment, their growth in popularity reflects the fact that this genre has been cemented as part of American television viewing preferences. *Braxton Family Values* provides a unique opportunity to engage topics not often found other than in texts focused on feminist frameworks and theoretical approaches, including family communication, gender, and sexuality. The show supplements

various forms of feminist scholarship and pedagogical practices because it offers an accessible way to understand concepts and theories that students of gender studies or communication may find dense or abstract.¹ In particular, the show highlights intersectional feminist approaches that consider the ways in which gender works with other forms of social identity construction, such as socio-economic status and racial/ethnic background.

For example, the interaction between Trina, Tamar, and Traci regarding Trina's husband, Gabe, provides interesting points of comparison and discussion about perceptions of gender roles in familial relationships. In a scene entitled, "Stamp of Approval," Trina seeks a new beginning with Gabe after they have experienced marital difficulties. Gabe finds a new house for them and their children to symbolize their fresh start. Trina shows the new house to her sisters, Traci and Tamar, in hope of receiving their approval regarding her decision to move and give Gabe another chance. Traci supports Trina's decision and sees the house as a nice gesture, but Tamar criticizes Gabe's efforts to win Trina back. Tamar compares the house to cars as she states that she anticipated a Porsche, but instead sees a Mazda Miata. Tamar continues to express her disappointment in Gabe's "starting over gift" and believes that Trina deserves a Bentley, a boat, and a platinum card.

Towanda and Toni's experiences as female breadwinners also show different ways women can perceive their roles as financial providers for their families. Towanda's perception of her husband, Andre, reflects the fact that some women may not desire to be the primary source of income for their families. Towanda resents her husband for not being able to provide for his family financially. Although she acknowledges that he is a good father, she thinks that her husband is less than what a man should be and refers to him as a "loser" and a "grown child." When her family has to move in temporarily with Toni, she files for separation to start divorce proceedings. Conversely, Toni takes pride in her career and ability to employ her family members and take care of her children financially. Towanda works as her assistant full-time. Towanda and her other sisters often work as her back-up singers when she tours. Although she feels pressured into assisting her sisters with their musical careers, she expresses joy in being able to be an active part in helping them pursue their goals.

Braxton Family Values provides an opportunity to consider gender roles within public and private spaces and ways in which these roles can be challenged and/or reinforced in family structures not commonly researched or included in textbooks. A portrayal of a Black family living a privileged American upper class lifestyle adds to the conversation concerning the various intersections of gender, race, and social class at work in the lived experience.

Note

¹ Clips from the show and blog posts from viewers can be found on Women's Entertainment website (<http://wetv.com/shows/braxton-family-values>). Many of these clips range from two to six minutes and can be incorporated into existing class discussions and lectures.