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“Communication is important. I learned that on the *Fresh Prince* show.” *
Soft Skills Portrayed in Five Prime-Time Television Comedies:
A Quantitative Content Analysis

Arcadia University
Ed.D. Program in Educational Leadership

Jacquelyn Bader

A DISSERTATION
IN EDUCATION

Presented to the Faculty of Arcadia University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

2021

* Dialog spoken by character Missy on TV show *Young Sheldon*, 2021



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Dissertation Defense Approval Form
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Name: Timothy Belloff

Signature: Timothy Belloff

Date: 1/26/2021

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, my daughters, my cats, and my friend Morris. Let us begin with Morris. For 40 years, Morris, a gifted attorney, my role model as a parent, and a man with dazzling wit and unbounded generosity and love, has offered truly useful advice, guided me, encouraged me, and showed me the loyalty and kindness that not everyone is lucky enough to have in a friend. He shared every step of this journey with me, from the time I discussed with him the 71 different dissertation topics I was considering to serving as my second coder in the reliability testing of the coding instrument. Morris always believed in me and actually thinks I am an accomplished person. I fooled him, and I love him and his awesome kids, wife, grandkids, in-laws, and dog Lola.

My cats, the formerly homeless and currently spoiled Dr. Shoshanna P. Edelstein, and Justice Penelope O. Nussbaum, are also worthy of dedication. They both spent hundreds of hours, napping next to my PC, at the part where the warm air exits from the side, quietly snoring and probably secretly laughing about how they get to sleep, play, and eat all day, while I work at my laptop. Their warm, soft presence, inches away from me, as I conducted the study and wrote these pages, gave me comfort and kept my stress level low. They are magical, and I love them dearly.

This work is also dedicated to my daughters Mykali Elsa Rocki Bader and Montara Catt Lylli Bader, teenagers extraordinaire. Even while navigating high school assignments and tests, their entire college application processes, friend drama, rose gold hair dye drama, green hair dye drama, drama in general, sleepovers, learning to drive and taking their permit and road tests, working at their jobs (Mykali at a movie theatre and Montara at a supermarket), two concussions, several meltdowns, and COVID-style birthdays and graduations, they still managed to cook enough of their own meals, take themselves to enough of their own appointments and job shifts, wash enough of

their own laundry, and even occasionally clean their rooms enough times to allow me the luxury of time to do my class assignments and then the dissertation. Although it was the least fun activity they could imagine, they even attended my quantitative research methods poster presentation at Arcadia University and graciously pretended it was not one of the worst evenings of their lives. I thank them for being helpful, responsible, intelligent, and supportive young ladies. They are phenomenal students, thoughtful friends, loving caretakers of our cats, and even more exceptional at being nice—my greatest wish for them. I am proud to be their Mom, and I love them more than they could possibly realize.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the funniest, most generous, most loyal, and most patient and loving person I ever met—the man I married, Troy. I felt sorry that I worked all day and then spent all evening doing my doctoral program work, largely ignoring him. He just laughed and said it gave him peaceful time to watch TV without anyone bothering him. When I often did not have time to make his favorite chicken matzoh ball soup for him, he stopped at Szechuan East or the Ritz Diner and brought home dinner for our family. When I sometimes read my research papers to him, he pretended he was not bored and made jokes about the serious topics. He quoted dialog from my favorite TV shows and movies to make me laugh when he saw my stress increasing during final paper time. He went to Montara's parent/daughter dance and Mykali's senior dinner, where both daughters proceeded to ignore him, and he simply came home and imitated their voices, made jokes, and had me laughing until I forgot the disappointment of missing these events because I had Arcadia classes those evenings.

In our 35 years together, Troy has seen me through deep losses and deliriously happy moments. Even with his surgeries, pacemaker battery changes, biopsies, and glamorous colonoscopies, he has been the steady, strong, consistent, fiercely dedicated, singularly focused

provider of love and support and my source of non-stop laughter and comfort. He frequently told me that he knew I could complete this process and that he is proud of me.

Troy is the reason my dreams came to fruition, including adopting our daughters and cats, thereby becoming a Mom, earning my bachelor's, master's, and now doctoral degrees, and having a life of TV watching, take-out food, and laughter. Yes, Troy tells people he is lucky to have me, but I surely hit the jackpot having him. I love him immensely. He will laugh when he sees that I dedicated this dissertation to him. He will probably say that he'd rather have some matzoh ball soup.

Acknowledgements

This research endeavor consumed considerable time, patience, strength, and heart, and its contents kept me focused on the entertainment industry nearly as much as the educational field. Consequently, writing these acknowledgements feels like an Academy Awards speech.

I wish to first thank my agent (committee chair), Dr. Christina Ager. Despite her likely having been warned by other Arcadia University professors to stay clear of that strange Ed.D. student with the even stranger research topic, Dr. Ager surprisingly accepted the challenge. She was a superior educator, cheerleader, manager, psychologist, mediator, and source of unending encouragement. She made me think along new lines, made me a more organized writer, and helped me make connections between what I uncovered in my study and the meanings that could be associated with those discoveries. She made me feel safe to make mistakes and then learn from them—with the genuine heart of an educator. I scored the big prize, working with her.

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Academy (Arcadia) gave the Oscar to some other deserving professor that year. Maybe the Academy will recognize Dr. Campbell's distinction next awards season.

May I please also thank Dr. Marc Brasof. I adore and want to emulate his teaching style. He has such an engaging sense of humanity and humor that I almost failed to realize how much I learned in his classes. He also taught me not to assume that unconventional hair color (blue) always equates to a lack of seriousness or success, so, when my older daughter dyed her hair green, I managed to remain calm and not lose my mind.

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accomplishments, the awe she inspires, her sleek ponytail, her devoted husband who brought dinner for her during the class break, and her Boca Raton tote bag, Dr. Godett is whom I want to be when I grow up.

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Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and bosses at Becker's School Supplies, who were concerned that I would earn this doctoral degree and then abandon the company and become a teacher somewhere. Years from now, when they see I am still working at Becker's, then perhaps their fears will be allayed. I love my job.

And now... the entertainment reporters and fans want to know whom I am wearing to these Academy Awards. It is still the Great Pandemic of 2020-2021, so I am wearing sweatpants, my Arcadia t-shirt, and fuzzy slippers. Thank you, and good night.

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Abstract

This research study merged the seemingly divergent challenges of a soft skills shortage among workforce-ready young adults and the need to develop curricula that are interesting enough to hold students' attention. This study, based on social learning and human capital theories, explored the portrayal of soft skills in five prime-time television (TV) comedies from the 2019-2020 broadcast season, with the idea that, if the portrayals were sufficiently frequent, readily identifiable, and led to what the TV characters wanted to achieve by exercising those skills, then perhaps the viewing of TV comedies could constitute part of the elusive yet engaging and effective curriculum of presenting, for students' learning and modeling, the exercise of soft skills.

The results of the study demonstrated that, indeed, soft skills were portrayed often (every four minutes, on average) in the episodes observed. They also showed that, in most cases (83.7% of the time), the characters did achieve their desired outcomes by using the soft skills.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

We had to fire him. I gave him warning after warning, but he did not heed them. I went into his office, closed his door, and had a colleague-to-colleague chat with him. I explained to him that more professionals, at his level, lose their jobs because of ancillary attributes, attitudes, and behaviors (I did not know to call them *soft skills* back then) than because of the inability to perform their assigned technical duties. He adamantly disagreed. I told him he needs to stop his potentially offensive jokes, be more encouraging toward his staff, and participate in company morale-boosting functions. He told me that he is leading the profitable sales representatives who are generating revenue, and the areas for improvement that I detailed were irrelevant. Nevertheless, as he continued his behaviors, we issued him additional specific warnings. He chose not to address the issues. We terminated his employment.

What are these elusive soft skills, the lack of which cost our otherwise competent sales director his job? Whatever soft skills are—not everyone has them. Some people, such as our sales director, do not have them and do not even recognize the value of them. If he were the only person whose lack of soft skills cost him his job, the issue would not be worthy of study. As the literature review in Chapter 2 details, though, employers, educators, and students themselves recognize a widespread soft skill deficiency. Because many employers are unable to hire people with the soft skills they desire, because many educators are frustrated that they do not have interesting, engaging ways to teach soft skills, and because students see their own lack of soft skills as impeding their eventual employability, the issue is indeed worthy of study.

Statement of the Problem

Employers cannot find graduates to fill job openings because many candidates lack skills they deem critical. U.S. employers consider these candidates unemployable. They do not lack a particular hard, technical skill that is needed for a finite number of jobs. They lack the soft skills that are needed for *every* job. As employers lament candidates' lack of soft skills, they look to educators and wonder why students are not learning soft skills before graduation. Educators struggle to teach soft skills because they are hard to define and are not easily aligned with a pedagogical premise. It is also challenging to capture students' attention with the vague, relating-to-all-fields imprecision of such concepts as professionalism and problem solving. So, students need to learn soft skills in order to become employable, and educators must find a way to teach soft skills in a way that keeps students' interest.

Research Questions

In addressing the problem of a shortage of soft skills and the difficulty in making the subject interesting, one answer may be utilizing the attention-garnering nature of popular media. Specifically, it may be revealing to know if students could learn soft skills if they see them portrayed in television (TV) show they enjoy. Toward that end, the research questions for this study were:

1. To what extent and how are soft skills portrayed in episodes of five prime-time TV comedies?
2. In the episodes, to what extent did the use of soft skills lead to the show's characters' desired outcomes?

The work involved in an extensive study is worthwhile if it addresses a problem that needs to be resolved. There must be a reason to expend energy, time, and resources to perform research

to answer these particular questions. Such effort is worthwhile if the problem is significant. The following section details the significance of the problem of the soft skill shortage, rendering it worthy of study.

Significance of the Problem

A society in which most of its citizens are employed typically enjoys not only higher incomes, but also such additional benefits as less crime, better health outcomes, and longer lives (Visram, 2013). It is in everyone's best interest if not only privileged groups possess the skills necessary for stable employment but also if others too possess those skills. It is shortsighted to resent one's taxes going to the education of "others," including lower socio-economic status (SES) groups of people, people who are currently incarcerated, people requiring educational support, etc. The more "others" are educated, particularly in the skills that will help them earn living wages, the more the entire society benefits with a decreased need for publicly funded welfare.

One challenge in the acquisition of any skills, including soft skills, is the understanding that skills are viewed, valued, and acquired differently in different contexts. For instance, in the workplace, skills "resid[e] in the job context and as social construction" (Hurrell et al., 2012, p. 167). In the workplace and in society in general, oftentimes, the dominant group in that society determines the rules and, in turn, what skills are critical to follow those rules and to thrive in that group (Kuntsman et al., 2015). For example, a higher SES group or a predominantly white group who assert themselves as the dominant group use their privilege and power to retain their position, somewhat by emphasizing and self-rewarding particular behaviors and learned skills (Kuntsman et al.). Some of a dominant group's actions—intentional, subconscious, ingrained, or otherwise—include valuing certain soft skills and certain ways of demonstrating those skills. If a

typically marginalized group of people, such as in the U.S., LatinX, African Americans, Indigenous People, or Asian Americans, do not have the soft skills, as defined, nuanced, and valued by the dominant group, they are disadvantaged. That disadvantage is readily apparent in the world of work. Virginia Commonwealth University sociology professor and author Tressie McMillan Cottom commented particularly on the disadvantage to African Americans in not having an equal opportunity to learn or benefit from what the dominant group has deemed the necessary soft skills (MacMillan Cottom, 2020). She explained that the failure to teach soft skills leaves them vulnerable to the realities of today's economy. It is not sufficient for African Americans to be taught hard technical skills only. For a level playing field, they must be taught soft skills as well. She commented:

Jobs have shifted from production and manufacturing to professional services, and the highest-paying ones can be some of the most resistant to the kind of training that college affords black Americans. One does not train for a job in, say, consulting the way one does for engineering. The soft-skills jobs that trade in relationships are difficult ones for black workers to break into.” (McMillan Cottom, 2020, p. 45).

If the problem of a soft skills shortage is not addressed, society has the continuing problem of unemployed graduates, many with crushing college debt, increasing society's cost (taxation) for unemployment benefits and subsidies for housing, food, and childcare, as well as the discriminatory, unjust disparity for populations lacking soft skills (Houle & Addo, 2019).

Background and Theory

Before researching and analyzing the possible links among the portrayal of soft skills on TV, their observance by viewers, and the viewer's eventual employment and other benefits by such observance, it is helpful to understand the theoretical framework behind such learning and

behind the employability associated with learning. Two such theories are discussed in this section—social learning theory and human capital theory.

Learning theory involves the principles that explain how a student acquires information. One particular learning theory is cognitivism, which explains that students' knowledge changes when they see real-world examples and link them to what they already know (Stevens-Fulbrook, 2020). Students observe such behaviors as problem solving and discuss them to learn from them. Students learn through observation. That notion of learning by observing other people's actions and then modeling one's own actions after observation is examined, specifically, in social learning theory (Deaton, 2015; Yilmaz et al., 2019). The research questions ask if soft skills can be observed (are they portrayed) in episodes of the five prime-time TV comedies and, if so, do the exercise of such skills lead to the expected outcomes. The rationale for this study was to determine the extent that soft skills are portrayed in the sampled shows and how they are portrayed for the ultimate purpose of possibly using the shows as an interesting, attention-maintaining educational tool for observing, learning, and possibly modeling such skills. The study will be conducted in the method of a quantitative content analysis of a visual medium (TV). In such content analysis, it is desired that the data collection and analysis are systematic and purposeful and not simply counting, in this case, TV characters' behaviors or words, in a meaningless way (Insch et al., 1997).

Human capital theory explains that individuals will invest in education and training if they are young enough and expect to have enough years to see that investment pay off (McKernan & Radcliffe, 2002). According to this theory, individuals are seen as investing in themselves—in their own human capital. Each person makes the judgement call by considering the full cost of that education and training, including not only costs such as tuition, books,

computers, Wi-Fi, and Internet and cable service, but also the opportunity costs of the foregone income; that is, the wages that will not be earned because the person is in class instead of earning a paycheck on a job (McKernan & Radcliffe). The person making the judgement calls weighs that total cost for education and training against the additional expected income that is likely to result from the education and training.

Young adults in high school or college who invest in their own human capital by learning soft skills benefit from their educational investment by enhancing their likely employability. Also, while they are still in school, their soft skill development provides another advantage—it likely enhances their academic performance. Students are not the only beneficiaries of such skill development. Employers too benefit because more students having soft skills means a larger pool of qualified employees to meet their hiring needs. A challenge is that, for the most part, students are not learning soft skills in school and are therefore unable to invest their human capital learning such skills (MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). Students' and employers' perspectives about soft skills and what researchers' studies have revealed about soft skills and their importance are explored in the literature review presented in Chapter 2.

Linking the underlying premises of the two theories framing the research—social learning theory and human capital theory—the emerging main themes are that (1) people learn from observing and watching (social learning theory), and (2) people can learn soft skills, in particular, as they observe TV, as one way to invest in their own capital and employability (human capital theory).

Throughout Chapters 2 and 3, certain terms will be used. Most are frequently used in general writing and likely carry a commonly understood meaning. Some warrant definition for purposes of this study. The definitions appear in the next section.

Definitions

Popular Media

Throughout this study, *popular media* will mean the commonly liked and accepted products of such communication means as “radio, recorded music, Internet, television, print, film, [and] video” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Stack & Kelly, 2006, p. 6), as well as the products of those means, such as television (TV) shows, films, video games, websites, etc. (Stack & Kelly, 2006, p. 6).

Prime time

The TV time geared to young adult viewing is prime time, which typically means 8 p.m. through 11 p.m. Prime time is also the period when TV viewership is high (Nielson, 2011).

Soft Skill(s)

By combining the parts of definitions that are most relevant to this work, a *soft skill*, throughout this study, was understood to be a portable, non-job-specific ability that involves people or problems, is difficult to assess in the work world, and is critical for success in work and life. (Durlak et al., 2011). The seven soft skills that were the focus of the study are each actually categories of skills but were referred to, for simplicity purposes, as skills themselves.

Student(s)

A *student* is understood to be a learner who attends some school in some format (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Throughout this study, a student is a young adult approximately age 16 through 25.

Technology

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines *technology* as applying knowledge to achieve goals. In this study, a more operational definition will be used. *Technology* will mean the electronic

devices and accessories that allow for technological activity, including computers, laptops, phones, iPads, headsets, earbuds, etc.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature in two parts. Part I discusses soft skills, and Part II discusses learning through popular media. In Chapter 3, these two parts are tied together by detailing the study that explored viewing soft skills by watching popular TV shows.

In the section that follows, Part I, the discussion of soft skills includes a list of alternate names for soft skills, the complexities in understanding soft skills, definitions of soft skills, details on their importance, and the sources for the selection of the soft skills that were included in the study. Part I also contains an explanation of why, ultimately, the term soft skills was selected for use throughout the study, as opposed to any of the alternate names.

Part I - Understanding and Defining Soft Skills

Scholars explain that the concept of soft skills is complex. In this section are four reasons for such complexity and the challenging comprehension, delineation, and definition of soft skills.

Soft Skills' Other Names

One reason for the complexity of soft skills is that scholars, educators, and others use various terms, sometimes referring to the same general concept, sometimes with slightly differing nuances. Terms used to describe these not-easily-defined skills include:

- 21st-century competencies (e.g., National Research Council, 2012)
- 21st-century skills (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Character strengths (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Dispositions (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Essential skills (e.g., Cukier et al., 2015)
- Generic skills (e.g., Cukier et al., 2015)

- Grit (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Habits of mind (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Habits of the heart (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Human-relation abilities (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2010)
- Mindsets (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Non-cognitive skills (e.g., Farrington, et al., 2012)
- Professional skills, such as in discussions of medicine or engineering (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2010)
- Social skills (e.g., Grugulis & Vincent, 2009)
- Social and emotional skills (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011)
- Social-emotional learning (e.g., Claxton et al., 2016)
- Transferable skills (e.g., Colburn, 2018)
- Workplace skills (e.g., Cukier et al., 2015)

Such a variety of terms for seemingly the same concept creates difficulty, possible overlap, and confusion when trying to conduct research, understand, categorize, and draw conclusions regarding soft skills.

Choice of Term for this Study. Numerous terms are available for use when discussing these skills. For simplicity and consistency, one term—*soft skills*—was ultimately chosen for use throughout the study. The literature, as summarized herein, provides insights into the meaning and importance of soft skills and provides evidence of the negative consequences when soft skills are lacking in various arenas including academics, the workplace, and life in general (Caputo, 2005). Because the research in the study focused on the negative outcomes in employability, more so than those in other arenas, it was appropriate to select the particular term

soft skills. In the business community, *soft skills* is the term frequently used (Schazenbach, 2016). Stemming from research conducted by the University of Chicago Nobel prizewinning economist James Heckman that showed the relationship between the learning of such skills and employability, further research built upon his work and continued the use of *soft skills* as the term of choice when referring to their connection to the workforce (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Heckman & Rubenstein, 2001).

Knowledge, Behavior, or Attributes?

Secondly, people who have studied soft skills not only disagree on precise terminology; they also disagree on what concepts comprise soft skills. Some define soft skills in terms of concrete, clearly demonstrable behaviors (Garcia, 2014), and some define them more in terms of personality traits or attributes (Robles, 2012). Some scholars question whether soft skills are even skills at all. Hurrell et al. (2012), in exploring this notion, conducted a mixed methods study of soft skills as understood by front-line employees, their managers, and human resources staff at two busy hotels in Glasgow. Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups involving 79 study participants, the researchers learned that these ancillary, difficult-to-pin-down attributes, personality features, or behaviors that are known as soft skills are readily apparent in various levels of work and are important in service-oriented work, even at the so-called low-skill levels. They added another dimension to demonstrated actions and personality traits. Through their data collection and analysis, they added knowledge to the definition. They delineated particular, established fields of knowledge as equating to the mastery of various soft skills (Hurrell et al., 2012). Consequently, defining soft skills is complex because different people see such skills as knowledge; some see them as behaviors, and yet others see them as intangible attributes. Hurrell et al.'s (2012) study's results showed that soft skills can be understood as encompassing specific

knowledge, and knowledge is equated with hard, cognitive skills rather than soft skills (Robles, 2012), further adding to the confusion and overlap inherent in trying to understand the reach and meaning of soft skills.

Differing Definitions

A third reason for the difficulty in forming a clear, useful understanding of soft skills is that scholars disagree on the very definition of soft skills. Some do not offer an explanation; instead, they simply list examples of soft skills as clarification (Nonet, 2016; Policies Commission for Business and Economics Educators, 2007). Some describe what soft skills are not, rather than what they are; for example, they are not cognitive-based. They are not what one learns but are one's capacity to learn (Farrington, 2012). More specific clarification is offered by scholars who explain that soft skills are the people skills that make working with others possible. Colburn (2018) mentioned personal qualities, interpersonal skills, and general self-awareness and self-management abilities and drew a link between those attributes and workplace success. Similarly, Del Mas et al. (2018) wrote about the need for soft skill development for managers at Swissmedic, the professional knowledge-intensive agency that authorizes and supervises drug research and development in Switzerland. Swissmedic leadership wanted their professionals, who already had the hard skills (nearly half had PhDs), trained in soft skills, including resilience, self-reflection, individual responsibility, and loyalty with such workplace objectives as conflict resolution and enhanced communication and teamwork. Because they chose to train the professionals in soft skills, with those goals in mind, one could surmise that they define soft skills as those likely to bring about such business advantages. By developing and implementing soft skills training programs, they helped to paint the definition picture of soft skills as the interpersonal skills that allow for improved workplace collaboration and results.

Measurement in the Work World

A fourth reason soft skills are complex to study, categorize, or define is that, within the world of work, they are difficult to measure or teach. Unlike hard skills, they are subjective and therefore difficult to see and to assess at work (Nonet, 2016; Robles, 2012). After her research was complete, Robles (2012) concluded that soft skills are more of “who we are than what we know” (2012, p. 458). If such skills comprise one’s existence or being and not one’s accumulated knowledge, then this sentiment supports the notion that they are difficult to acquire. One can acquire more skills, but it may not be possible to acquire more of who one is.

Measurement in the Educational Field

In the educational field, soft skills are more frequently referred to as *social skills* or *social emotional skills* (see definitions in Part I of this section). The learning of such skills and the measurement of the impact of that learning have been extensively researched and reported, particularly in the area of special education. Educators, administrators, and researchers utilize a variety of rating scales and observation instruments (Dart et al., 2016). These tools for measurement are theoretically available in the world of employment; however, the limited time and resources and the ever-present sense of competitive urgency in business present considerable challenge to direct, useful measurement of such skills.

At the end of Part I of this section, there is discussion about employers’ lamenting employees’ shortage of soft skills. As is detailed in the section, employers complain about the extensive challenge of losing employees because of their lack of soft skills and the high cost of attempting to replace those employees with people who, ultimately, may or may not have soft skills (Bauman, 2017). In the very world (employment) that suffers the negative impact of the soft skills shortage, there is similarly a shortage in tools or techniques to measure such skills.

Agreement Among Scholars

Because of the different nuances in various scholars' explanations of soft skills, ascertaining a clear understanding of the body and meaning of soft skills remains somewhat of a challenge. However, even with the disagreements among the scholars and the inconsistent definitions of soft skills (Cukier, 2015), there are general themes that are more consistently noted in the literature. For example, three commonly mentioned themes are that (a) one can know soft skills when one contrasts them with hard skills, (b) soft skills are not specific to any particular industry, and (c) soft skills are useful in employment and beyond.

Soft Skills Should be Differentiated from Hard Skills. In attempting to clarify the meaning of soft skills, researchers often distinguish between so-called hard skills and soft skills. Robles (2012) defined hard skills as such tangible abilities as typing and soft skills as such intangible ones as leadership.

Farrington et al. (2012) also categorized hard skills as academic and cognitive and soft skills the "fluffier" (p. 2) ones. Claxton et al. (2016) similarly likened hard skills to underlying knowledge and soft skills to the desire to use that knowledge. It appears there is general agreement among scholars that hard skills represent the actual facts, knowledge, and know-how to get a job done, and soft skills represent the personality traits that allow a person to execute those skills. It may not be reaching to assume that both types of skills are complementary and necessary in order for work to be performed, be it at school, on the job, or elsewhere in life.

Soft Skills Are Not Industry-Specific. In contrasting hard skills with soft skills, one clear and useful distinction is that hard skills are technical and relate to the specific industry to which they relate, and soft skills are more generic and not specific to any industry (Andrews & Higson, 2008). They are transferable skills (Colburn, 2018; Cukier et al., 2015; National Research

Council, 2012). Cukier et al. (2015) emphasized that, while each industry has particular technical knowledge that is needed, everyone needs soft skills to work in *any* industry. Soft skills are critical because any occupation or life activity requires them (Cukier et al., 2015).

Robles (2012), a business communications professor, instructed her 45 students, as part of a course assignment, to each interview two business executives. She did not mention if the 90 interviewees were executives in the same industry. Without such distinction, one may reasonably surmise that the executives represented multiple industries. After the interviews, the students sent a thank you letter and a survey, that Robles developed, to each of the interviewed executives. In the survey, the executives were asked to name topics they thought business graduates should study. From the responses of the 49 returned surveys, Robles found more than 500 soft skills listed. With this convenient sampling of executives, by matching and organizing the common themes, eliminating duplicates, and coding the responses, Robles narrowed the list to 26 and then to the top 10. She found that most of the executives, presumably in different fields of work, valued the same soft skills in their employees (listed alphabetically): communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, teamwork skills, and work ethic.

Then, in the two subsequent semesters, Robles (2012) again instructed her students to interview executives. This time, 91 students each interviewed two executives for a total of 182 interviewed executives, comprising the sample for the next stage. Students, again, sent a thank you letter to each interviewed executive, and the correspondence included a second survey that Robles created. This instrument listed the top 10 soft skills derived from the first phase of the study and asked respondents to rate their importance using a five-point Likert-type scale.

Of the 182 surveys sent, 57 executives responded, and the executives unanimously rated all 10 soft skills as either *very* or *extremely* important. Thus, across the two phases of the study, a commonality emerged: first, 49 executives identified 10 soft skills as being important, and then 57 different executives confirmed their importance. This agreement suggests soft skills, generally, and these soft skills, in particular, are important across various industries. In other words, they are likely critical in whatever field one hopes to be employed. The results of Robles' study, that is, the identification of the top 10 soft skills executives desire, were utilized in the upcoming section on naming specific skills that comprise the categories of soft skills and in the study itself.

Soft Skills are Useful in Employment and Beyond. Scholars agree that soft skills are critical not only for employability, as discussed in the previous sections, but also for thriving beyond the world of work—specifically, in academics and in life, as described next (Durlak et al., 2011; Garcia, 2014). These studies explored relationships between soft skills and skills in academic and life.

Better Outcomes in Academics

In their work, researchers have noted a positive correlation between soft skills and better academic outcomes. Farrington et al. in their 2012 synthesis of articles, found a positive relationship between soft skills (they called *noncognitive* skills) and such academic outcomes as high school grades and GPA scores and academic-related outcomes such as attendance, time management, and work habits. Durlak et al. in their 2011 meta-analysis of 200 interventions, found that enhancing soft skills (they called *social emotional* skills) led to, on average, an

11-percentile point gain in academic achievement. These researchers found that academic outcomes are improved when soft skills are taught and nurtured in school.

Better Outcomes in Employment and Life in General

Heckman & Rubinstein (2001) conducted a longitudinal study that examined outcomes in employment and in life among General Education Development (GED) program graduates and high school graduates. The two groups, on average, had the same levels of cognitive skills, or intelligence, but the GED graduates, over the long term, had lower hourly wages, less income from employment, more drug use, more criminal records, and more encounters with police. Although the GED graduates were just as intelligent as the high school graduates, controlling for other factors, the researchers found that the GED graduates lacked the soft skills that the high school graduates had (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001).

Caputo (2005) also conducted a study involving GED graduates. After analyzing economic and health outcomes of 1,927 people, Caputo found that GED graduates, at mid-life, had lower incomes, fewer assets, more depression, and more physical illnesses than people who graduated with conventional high school diplomas. Caputo asserted that the GED graduates did not have the opportunity to learn socialization and workplace attitudes and behaviors that people in conventional classrooms did. He wrote that GED graduates had not “internalize[d] the norms suitable for [the] workplace” (Caputo, 2005, p. 79).

Definition of Soft Skills for the Study

Integrating the important principles from definitions in the literature, the definition of soft skills, for this study, were tri-part. Soft skills were defined as:

- Portable, non-job-specific abilities (Cukier et al., 2015);
- that are difficult to assess in the work world (Nonet, 2016; Robles, 2012);

- and yet are critical for success in work and life (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011).

Categories of Soft Skills for the Study

The study utilized the definition of soft skills listed in the previous section; that is, portable, non-job-specific abilities that are difficult to assess particularly at work, yet critical for success in work and life. Under the main topic of soft skills, categories of specific skills were identified. In this section, the process for deriving seven soft skill categories for the study will be described, and a definition of each of the soft skill categories will be provided.

Process of Determination

Three studies were used to determine the seven categories of soft skills that were the focus of this study: Robles (2012), Cukier et al. (2015), and National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2019).

The first study was Robles (2012). As described previously, through two phases of surveys, Robles found that executives identified 10 soft skills as being *very* or *extremely* important for employees to have, listed here alphabetically:

- Communication
- Courtesy
- Integrity
- Flexibility
- Interpersonal skills
- Positive attitude
- Professionalism
- Responsibility
- Teamwork

- Work ethic

The second study, Cukier et al. (2015), was a systematic review of the literature about soft skills. They mainly sought articles that provided definitions, methods of measurement, and details on soft skill shortages and development. They initially identified 6,683 articles about soft skills and then narrowed them to the 570 that were published since 2000. The soft skills that were named most frequently in those articles are listed here alphabetically:

- Communication skills
- Critical thinking
- Interpersonal skills and intercultural sensitivity
- Problem solving
- Teamwork and working with others

The third study was NACE (2019). Each year, NACE conducts a survey, asking employers about their hiring intentions and other employment topics, so they can project the employment outlook for new college graduates. In one section of the survey, employers rate the importance of eight career readiness skills, using a five-point Likert-type scale. Of the 3,134 surveys sent, 150 employers responded. Collectively, the employers identified four skills as being either *essential* or *very essential*, listed here alphabetically:

- Critical thinking/problem solving
- Oral/written communications
- Professionalism/work ethic
- Teamwork/collaboration

Seven Selected Categories

Synthesizing the findings from Robles (2012), Cukier et al. (2015), and NACE (2019) (see Appendix A) resulted in the following seven categories of soft skills that were used in the study, listed here alphabetically:

1. Communication
2. Flexibility
3. Interpersonal skills
4. Positive attitude
5. Problem solving and critical thinking
6. Professionalism
7. Teamwork

A definition for each category is presented next.

Definitions

In this section, definitions for the seven categories of soft skills are provided. Although the skills are organized as categories, for simplicity, the term *soft skills* (rather than *categories of soft skills*) will be used.

Scholars, in their works cited throughout this literature review, have offered definitions of various soft skills. Dictionaries also provide suitable definitions. For this study, however, definitions as provided by a relevant prominent authority were most useful.

Relevant Prominent Authority

Because skills and, in particular, soft skills, are frequently discussed and studied with respect to their role in employment, the U.S. Department of Labor is a relevant and prominent voice in offering a useful definition. Department of Labor specialists author reports on

employment, skills, job openings, and job shortages, created with the mandatory and voluntary participation of employers throughout the U.S. The U.S. Department of Labor (Office of Disability, 2012) defines soft skills as applied skills that help people become effective employees and managers. Consequently, soft skills' primary purpose—reason for identification, reason for study, and reason for concern if they are lacking—is employability. This connection with the workplace will be crucial in the definition used in this study.

The Department of Labor's Office of Disability (2012) created a soft skills curriculum for all students, including students with disabilities. This publication was another source that confirmed these soft skills are important. It was a detailed blueprint for teaching students about soft skills for the purpose of increased likelihood of employment. It did not, however, detail its underlying research methodology and therefore could not serve as one of the key sources for the study. It was useful because it included easy-to-understand definitions of the soft skills listed. The curriculum covered and defined six particular soft skills, listed here alphabetically:

- Communication (which precisely matches category 1 of the skills to be explored in the study)
- Enthusiasm and attitude (which fits neatly under category 4, positive attitude)
- Problem solving and critical thinking (which precisely matches category 5)
- Networking (which is a skill needed in order to be professional and fits under category 6, professionalism)
- Professionalism (which precisely matches category 6)
- Teamwork (which precisely matches category 7)

The Department of Labor's (Office of Disability, 2012) curriculum also mentioned the importance of such additional skills as flexibility (category 2) and interpersonal skills

(category 3). Their publication notes that one of its underlying research sources, the Society for Human Resource Management, found in its study, that flexibility is an important skill for not only new hires but also for experienced workers. Their publication also pointed to a 2008 NACE survey that found that employers want employees to have interpersonal skills.

The fact that the Department of Labor (Office of Disability, 2012) designated these soft skills as the ones worthy for teaching students corroborates the list of soft skills named in this section as appropriate for examination in the study.

Examining more deeply the specific soft skills and the larger categories that comprise them is important because the names of skills, skill sets, and broader categories of skills are often used interchangeably. Throughout the study, when the term *soft skills* is used, it means categories of soft skills. Appendix A lists the seven soft skill categories and the specific soft skills that logically fall in each. Appendix B provides the definitions, as summarized from the Department of Labor's (Office of Disability, 2012) curriculum. These definitions are useful because they were utilized in the methodology and data collection phases of this study. For the study, the Department of Labor's curriculum, *Skills to Pay the Bills*, provided the definitions for all the soft skills discussed except *interpersonal skills*. The definition for *interpersonal skills* was summarized from the Lovett & Jones (2008) survey. The soft skill definitions for the study are listed here:

- Communication is defined as the way information, ideas, and opinions are given and received (Office of Disability, 2012).
- Flexibility is defined as changing according to circumstances to maximize a benefit(s) (Office of Disability).

- Interpersonal skills are defined as the ability to be considerate and courteous (Lovett & Jones, 2008).
- Positive attitude is being upbeat, interested, and willing to learn (Office of Disability).
- Problem solving and critical thinking are being able to use facts to solve challenges (Office of Disability).
- Professionalism is demonstrating responsibility, accountability, and excellence (Office of Disability).
- Teamwork is effectively working with other people to accomplish a task (Office of Disability).

A more detailed version of these definitions appears in Appendix B.

Shortage of Soft Skills in the Workplace

The literature demonstrates that soft skills are important because of their impact on academics, employment, and life in general, but that assertion, in itself, is not what makes the topic relevant today. It is the shortage of soft skills in students—who are typically the people who eventually seek to become employees—that brings the issue to the forefront. For soft skills to be considered lacking among students and employees, the shortage must be confirmed by interested stakeholders. In the next section, such stakeholder confirmation is detailed.

Soft skills are important because they are needed for success in academics, employment, and life in general. The literature shows that soft skills are important, but it does not show that they are commonplace. The literature, instead, includes references to a shortage of soft skills in the workplace. Employers and educational leaders, as well as students, confirm the shortage (Doyle, 2020; Gill, 2011; Lovett & Jones, 2008; Mazur, 2007; Ortiz et al., 2016; Phillips, 2006;

Rae, 2007; Stevens, 2005; The Experts, 2013; White, 2013).

Confirmation from Employers

Because employers attempt to hire qualified job candidates, they are in a position to determine whether or not job candidates have the skills they deem necessary. Employers, for the most part, find that job candidates lack soft skills.

The literature contains details of employers' recognition of such a soft skills shortage. Eight sources illustrate such employers' recognition. In this section, these eight sources are highlighted.

1. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in the U.S., there were one million more job openings than unemployed people (CBSNews.com, 2019). Yet, the many available jobs cannot be filled because of skill shortages (The Experts, 2013). When employers speak of skill shortages in general and do not name specific technical skills, they are referring to the soft skills that are transferable among industries.
2. Manpower Group's annual global Talent Shortage Survey revealed that employers throughout the world are unable to fill open jobs because they are unable to find people with sufficient soft skills (White, 2013).
3. One-third of British employers reported through the Confederation of British Industry that they have to send their employees for remedial training because they so severely lack basic skills that they did not learn at school (Phillips, 2006).
4. The results of a survey sponsored by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) showed that 70% of employees lack the

professionalism and work ethic to successfully do their jobs and that graduates at various levels of schooling lack written communication skills (Mazur, 2007).

5. Stevens (2005) conducted a study among Silicon Valley employers. Silicon Valley is “an economic powerhouse of high-tech development and innovation” (Stevens, 2005, p. 3), yet Stevens’ survey revealed that “employers’ comments focused on the lack of attention to detail, noting typographical errors” (Stevens, 2005, p. 6). Stevens explained that students avoid writing, they are unable to organize their thoughts, and they cannot even proofread. She further reported that employers had to terminate the employment of people because they could not effectively communicate in writing—another soft skill (Stevens, 2005).
6. Ortiz et al. (2016) found that only 54% of managers who interview recent graduates think the graduates are ready for a job. They also found that only 44% of recruiters find graduates able to communicate well enough to be effective on a job (Ortiz, et al., 2016).
7. The research includes another declaration about the tenuous state of job security of people lacking soft skills. Rakesh R. Saha, of the Soft Skills World Training Centre, warned, “People get hired for their professional skills, but get fired for their lack of soft skills” (Gill, 2011).
8. Career blogger Doyle (2020) listed the top 10 reasons people are fired, and only one relates to actual job performance (knowing the hard, technical skills that the job requires). The other nine are infractions connected to a lack of soft skills.

The available research on employers’ grievances about the dearth of soft skills is extensive. These are only some examples of such grievances. Clearly employers face a

predicament.

Confirmation from Educators and Organizational Leaders

Professionals in the educational field, including leaders of educational organizations and professors, also see the shortage of soft skills. They recognize the dichotomy between the skills employers require and those being taught and learned at various school levels. Two such sources illustrate this point:

Erickson, president of Education and Career Solutions for ACT, Inc., emphasized that high school educational standards do not meet college expectations, and college educational standards do not meet employers' expectations (The Experts, 2013).

Howell, a professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and a senior partner at Howell Group LLC, asserted that our educational systems ignore basic skills, and employers are frustrated by their new employees who cannot demonstrate such basic skills, including soft skills (The Experts, 2013).

Confirmation from Students

Even students themselves recognize that they lack soft skills (Lovett & Jones, 2008; Rae, 2007). The research contains references that support the idea that students are aware and are concerned about being deficient in soft skills and therefore being less employable. Two articles that provide evidence for this awareness are:

Lovett & Jones (2008). In 2008, at the University of Texas at Brownsville, 200 business administration students completed a survey, and the survey results revealed that 62% believe their own interpersonal skills are lacking (Lovett & Jones, 2008). The survey results also showed that 81% believe interpersonal skills or workplace etiquette should be taught at school (Lovett & Jones, 2008). In the survey's dining etiquette section, three questions were answered correctly by

only 30% of the students. In the survey's general business courtesies section, two questions ranked last in correct answers. The students' survey responses, as well as their performance in answering etiquette right/wrong questions on the survey, confirmed their shortage of soft skills.

Rae (2007). Rae (2007) showed that some students recognize the importance of learning soft skills in college for employability purposes.

In analyzing the research on confirmation by various stakeholders—employers, educational leaders, professors, and students as well—one does find corroboration. The research supports the assertion that a shortage of soft skills is confirmed by various stakeholders.

Consequently, from the literature, it is clear that soft skills are important and that stakeholders find them to be lacking. The challenge, then, was to fill the gap. To find an efficient way to fill that gap, one may first want to examine where students most likely learn, where they are influenced, and whose behaviors and attitudes—and, ultimately, skills—they choose to emulate and learn. The next section explores a source for imparting information to students; that is, through popular media.

Part II – Learning through Popular Media

This section of the literature review, Part II, details the students of interest in the study and identifies one of such students' sources for learning; that is, through popular media.

Which students are considered in the study?

Because this literature review and the scope of interest for the study involve students who are learning and training with an eye toward employment, the focus of interest was high school and college students (young adults), rather than younger learners. In the study, the term *students* will refer to such young adults, as explained in the Definitions section in Chapter I.

Where do students learn skills generally?

Having established that soft skills are important, and stakeholders want students to learn them, it is reasonable, then, to first examine where students learn skills in general and then, in a more focused analysis, examine where students learn soft skills in particular.

While parents may prefer to be the influencers and role models for demonstrating attitudes and behaviors, researchers suggest that more learning and influencing is happening elsewhere, namely, from technology, rather than from more traditional sources such as live lectures and books (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002; Choi, 2018). Technology, as explained in the Definitions section in Chapter I, encompasses electronic devices, such as TV and Internet access on computers. Supporting Anderson & Cavallaro's (2002) assertion that students learn from technology and prefer to do so are two studies. In one study, Mitchell (2018) reports on the expressed opinions of more than 3,400 people in the U.S. who were surveyed. She found that the most preferred method for learning is through TV or online, rather than learning by reading. The technology of media is preferred. In another study, Gallardo-Echenique et al. (2016) received survey responses to a 78-item online questionnaire from 204 first-year college students, majoring in education, at three different campuses in Spain and reported that, although many claimed they preferred in-person classroom experiences, the majority preferred to learn through technology, not from a live person, to work alone and not in groups, and to study at home. So, students want to be in a room with other young people, but they want to learn from a screen, not a human.

The Mitchell (2018) and Gallardo-Echenique et al. (2016) studies provided evidence that young adults preferred to learn, in general, from technology and through the media that are presented by that technology, rather than learning from humans or books.

Although the Mitchell (2018) source may be limited because it involved only people in

the U.S., and the Gallardo-Echenique et al. (2016) source may be limited because it involved only education majors in Spain, they detail trustworthy studies involving large sample sizes, and their findings could be indicative of larger populations as well.

In the literature, not only are there articles that support the position that people prefer to learn from technology, there are also articles that describe teaching various skills through technology, and through one particular type of technology; that is, popular media (Bumpus, 2005, for example).

Eleven of such articles are listed in Appendices C and D. Appendix C includes eight articles detailing descriptive studies—ones that detail the teaching of certain skills through showing certain films and TV shows to students. Appendix D includes three articles that describe actual investigative studies that involved teaching with popular media.

The table in Appendix C lists each article's author(s) and what he or she explored; that is, what skills could be taught using what particular type of popular media. For example, Appendix C lists articles that explore teaching evolutionary psychology with the TV show *Dallas* (Fisher, 2012) and encouraging interest in political science with the TV show *The Daily Show* (Beavers, 2011).

Where do students learn soft skills in particular? Rather than comprising bits of technical information, soft skills comprise attitudes, behaviors, and strategies (Garcia, 2014). Students learn the cognitive skills and technical facts in school (Jones & Kahn, 2018), but where do they learn the non-cognitive, or soft, skills? It is important to understand where students encounter attitudes, where they see the behaviors they choose to model, and who outwardly demonstrates the strategies they later adapt in higher education, career, and life. To understand if such findings indeed generalize from teaching education subjects as in Mitchell (2018) to

teaching other subjects and to know if the preference for learning through technology holds in settings other than in Spain as in Gallardo-Echenique et al. (2016), one could review additional articles (see next paragraph).

In addition to the articles that explore miscellaneous skills being taught with popular media, the literature also includes articles that detail actual investigative studies of teaching, in particular, soft skills with popular media. Three such studies are listed in Appendix D. The authors of the articles describing teaching with popular media, as well as those who detailed their actual investigations of doing so and specified the positive results, endorse teaching with popular media. One article author, a medical school clinical ethics professor, even ended his article with the quote, “My advice to the faculty and the students thus is: Watch more TV” (Spike, 2008, p. 12). Although the literature certainly presents evidence of the negative effects of popular media (Johnson et al., 2019, for example), these articles demonstrate the presence of positive effects as well.

Learning from TV. Learning from TV is a notion frequently explored and sometimes berated by educational scholars. Linebarger (2011), however, in her analysis of studies, sited evidence of the positive academic outcomes of students’ learning by watching TV shows that is “too compelling to ignore” (p. 64). Linebarger had conducted earlier research that showed economically disadvantaged people typically watch more TV than more affluent people, and economically disadvantaged people frequently suffer lower academic outcomes (Piotrowski & Linebarger, 2010). So, if they are already watching more TV, and TV can be an effective source of improving their learning and outcomes, it may be beneficial to explore the possibilities of learning with TV. Although Linebarger’s (2011) work focused on young children, the literature also supports the premise that adults learn from TV as well. The Centre for Adult Literacy

(2000) compiled an annotated bibliography that invites readers to revisit 30 years of studies involving adults learning with TV. The Centre for Adult Literacy (2000) reminded readers of studies that showed adults with limited literacy watch more TV than adults with higher levels of literacy, and their work challenges researchers to reconsider their perceptions about TV's having caused the lower literacy. They suggest that TV is not the cause; rather it is the outcome. Many people with limited skills simply enjoy watching TV shows. Consequently, once again, capitalizing on the fact that audiences of interest (people traditionally marginalized by mainstream educational approaches—those economically disadvantaged and those in need of more academic support) are already watching TV, one could surmise that TV, a favored medium anyway, could be a source of learning and not simply entertaining.

The researchers who conducted the three investigative studies listed in Appendix D detailed positive findings of their work. Beavers (2011), a California State University political science professor, found her students to be uninterested and a tough audience until she introduced episodes of *The Daily Show*, a popular political satire TV show. Through students' performance in assigned papers and through student surveys, she found that, after they watched the episodes, her students had a measurable increase in their interest in the topic and their willingness to be involved in politics. She capitalized on the popularity, acceptance, and enjoyment of TV and confirmed Thomas's (1986) idea that people being entertained are distracted enough by that enjoyment that they may not even realize how receptive they are to learning. Similarly, Quain et al. (2018) found that test scores and self-reported enjoyment of management theory education both improved after the students viewed episodes of the TV show *The Profit*, and Tyler et al. (2009) found that business college students' interest and perception of

their own understanding of management concepts increased after watching various TV shows.

Summary

Myriad sources in the literature list soft skills that are deemed critical for students who will soon enter the workforce. Based on three such authorities, seven soft skill categories were identified as most important: communication, flexibility, interpersonal skills, problem solving and critical thinking, professionalism, positive attitude, and teamwork.

Employers, educators, and the students themselves believe students lack soft skills and are disadvantaged when trying to secure and retain employment and navigate life in general. Because of the soft skills shortage, finding ways to effectively impart soft skills to students is justified. Popular media, including TV shows, may be practical means for imparting those skills. Some researchers warn that behaviors learned and character traits developed by watching and modeling those of TV characters are negative, such as the need for quick gratification instead of doing the hard work (Elias, 2009, for example).

It could be revealing, however, to examine an area seemingly not evident in the literature; that is, could people similarly learn positive behaviors and model prosocial character traits if they see them on TV? Whatever viewers are learning from TV characters, even fictional ones, learning is happening. Because research shows students learn through watching TV and spend four and a half hours per day watching TV (Richter, 2019), the next section, the section that describes the methodology for the study, will describe how the portrayal of soft skills through five particular prime-time TV shows was analyzed.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methodology

The literature shows that employers, educators, and students agree that people entering the workforce are doing so, lacking the soft skills that employers deem most critical for on-the-job success. Educators seek ways to engage students in class topics so that they remain interested and learn effectively. Research has shown that students prefer to learn visually and through technology, rather than through lectures or books (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002; Choi, 2018). Some teaching methods that have been suggested as helpful in doing so are the use of humor (Pozsonyi & Soulstein, 2019) and the use of brief lessons, rather than lengthy ones (Barclay, 1979; Clark & Harrelson, 2002). Thomas (1986) reasoned that when audiences are enjoying film media (TV or movies) and are being entertained, their normal defenses are down, they do not even realize they are in position to receive and absorb messages, and lessons, being sent by media. Short lessons, humor, and viewing enjoyment are features of TV comedies. That information is transferred readily through humor is not the only reason comedies were selected for this study. The population of interest for the study comprised workforce-ready people, who are usually adults. Studies show that adults prefer comedies over other genres. For example, when 2,200 adults in the U.S. were asked to rank 12 different genres of films, they ranked comedies in first place (Watson, 2019). When 5,340 adults in the U.S. and Canada were asked to rank 12 different types of TV content, “the clear favorite is comedy” (Marketing Charts, 2019).

Consequently, if students learn from TV shows, particularly short humorous ones, and they enjoy comedies more than other types of shows, and stakeholders want students to learn soft skills, it appeared worthwhile to explore the portrayal of soft skills on TV. Although the literature includes examples of researchers exploring other themes and characteristics in TV

shows, it does not appear to include an exploration of soft skills in TV shows. This research explored soft skills in five particular TV comedies; namely, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Goor et al., 2013-present), *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present), *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), and *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present). The criteria for selecting these particular shows for the study are detailed in the upcoming Research and Design Methodology section.

Because the learning of soft skills is desirable and watching TV shows is a popular way of learning, the findings of this study could contribute to the literature. The researcher studied the content of episodes of these five shows and determined the extent to which soft skills were demonstrated by the shows' characters and contributed further to the research by revealing that such demonstrations of soft skills, in the TV shows, usually lead to the desired outcomes in the episodes. The overall theme elicited from the study was that watching characters demonstrate soft skills on the TV show and seeing that the characters met their objectives by demonstrating such skills, perhaps the viewers can learn and model their behavior accordingly. If the viewers themselves, ultimately, regularly demonstrate soft skills, they may benefit, as the literature suggests, in aspects such as education, employment, and life in general.

The two main themes of the research are that (1) people learn by observing, and (2) that observation can be of soft skills as portrayed by characters on TV shows. This chapter includes a description of how such portrayals were studied. It provides details on the research design and method, as well as the selection of the shows observed and analyzed. It also describes the data sampling process, research questions, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, reliability of the study's findings, potential threats to credibility of the research, and why board review was not necessary.

Research Design and Method

For the study, a descriptive research design was most appropriate. One of the researcher's objectives was to identify the portrayals of soft skills in the five selected shows and to depict, or describe, them—precisely the purpose of a descriptive research design (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Among the methods that can be used to conduct descriptive design studies is the observational method. The researcher observed episodes of the shows and identified portrayals of soft skills by characters in those episodes.

Quantitative Paradigm

Because the researcher viewed the TV shows, noted the portrayals of soft skills, and coded those portrayals, she herself was not independent of the study. She actively participated by observing and recording those observations. She was not involved in the production or airing of the shows and did not speak with or interview any person in connection with the data collection effort. The research on the content of the shows was conducted objectively, and the findings were used to directly answer the research questions, without values or inferences. Because of this research type, the quantitative approach, with its objectivity, was logical.

Although the study was primarily quantitative in design, execution, and analysis, there was also a small add-on qualitative component. The researcher generated, collated, and synthesized research notes, such as descriptions of characters' words and actions, as the data were compiled and analyzed. There were also additional research notes that were qualitative in nature, as they comprised collections of patterns, discoveries, and themes that arose, based on the underlying numerical data. These qualitative notes were culled for information and patterns and assisted in the discussion part of the research study.

Because the researcher only observed data, as they exist, in this case, in the visual medium of TV, and did not observe the impact of any manipulation or disturbance of anyone or anything, the research method was one of analysis rather than investigation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The specific research method employed in this non-intrusive study was content analysis. Content analysis lends itself well to watching a TV show to observe certain phenomena because content analysis is a systematic way to study something, such as a visual form (Creamer, 2018; Insch, et al., 1997).

Show Selection

Selecting suitable shows to be studied can make the difference between a useful study and one that is not. When selecting TV show(s) or film(s) for a study sample, Wilson (2009) argued that, oftentimes, researchers simply choose their favorites or are too lazy to employ a sound sampling technique. He rejected such shortcut methods for selecting a sample and explained that simply using media that are convenient or favored means the resultant studies are not necessarily generalizable and are too biased to produce desirable results (Wilson, 2009).

To address this bias, Wilson (2009) created a sampling procedure that he called the Unified Film Population Identification Methodology (UFPIM). His objective was to create a procedure that combined the best of existing media content analyses and “improv[e] the reliability, validity, and replicability of future studies” (Wilson, 2009, p. 31). Although Wilson wrote of his method’s application to crime shows and films, his UFPIM appears to be readily adaptable to other TV show genres. His procedure comprised distinct phases, narrowing down procedures, and the application of criteria that are logical for the particular research interest.

For this study, the show selection began with the entire universe of TV shows, as listed by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), one of the world’s largest and most authoritative digital

databases on nearly every TV show or movie ever released (Feng, 2019; IMDb.com, n.d.; Wilson, 2009). Then, by narrowing the selection with the following six criteria that were broadly based on Wilson's (2009) procedure, the TV shows *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Gore et al., 2013-present), *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present), *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), and *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present) became the shows ultimately selected. The criteria used were character diversity, real-life (non-animated) comedies, honors, free viewing, time slot viewed by young adults, and at least five renewed seasons.

1. **Character diversity.** Using Wilson's "must have [and]... must not have" (Wilson, 2009, p. 25) criteria suggestion, the researcher wanted shows that the group of which feature main characters who represent a diversified population to have the opportunity to analyze soft skills as demonstrated by multiple groups of people, not just by the middle- or upper-class, straight, white, Christian, able-bodied male characters who dominate many shows' casts (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). The five TV shows ultimately selected include main characters who represent populations typically unrepresented in popular media. For instance, in *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), women of color comprise half the lead roles, men of color comprise the other lead roles, and all of the main characters are in a high socioeconomic status. *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present) stars a Jewish female lead character and her family. All the lead characters in *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present) are women, most of whom are in a lower SES and recovering from addiction, and the show features a lead character who is an individual who is disabled and uses a wheelchair. Two of the lead characters in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Gore et al., 2013-present) represent the LGBTQIA+ population. The main characters of *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present) include a gentleman with a disability who uses a

wheelchair, individuals struggling in the lower SES, an individual who is gay, and people of various races. These shows depict the characters' genders, racial identities, sexual orientations, and disability and SES as simply part of the characters' descriptions, not necessarily the driving the plots of the episodes, allowing for a realistic, intelligent, and natural portrayal.

In addition to understanding the portrayal of soft skills within different communities of individuals, the researcher wanted to include shows with diversified main characters because she wanted shows that are likely to endure the current Me-Too and Black Lives Matter movements. Sampling only shows revolving around the traditionally depicted middle- or upper-class, straight, white, Christian, able-bodied male characters may mean that, in just a few years' time after the conduct of this study, the findings may be nearly useless because of the outdated sample shows.

- 2. Real-life (non-animated) comedies.** The researcher desired the analysis of TV shows that depict fictional characters based on real, human characters. She wanted to analyze shows with live, human characters, rather than animated ones, and TV shows that tell real-life stories, rather than those based in fantasy or science fiction. She elected to eliminate from sampling shows that merely retell a true-life news event or feature real people discussing topics. Regarding the particular TV show genre, she wanted to study soft skill portrayals in comedies, rather than in dramas, specials, or competition shows. Comedies show real-life situations in an entertaining and memorable way and therefore have widespread appeal, viewership, and impact (Thomas, 1986). Furthermore, comedies are the genre most preferred by the population of interest in the study; that is, pre-workforce-ready people—young adults (Marketing Charts, 2019; Watson, 2019).

Considering the possibility that the study's findings may show that soft skill portrayals were numerous, the researcher wanted the portrayals to be in TV shows that are widely popular so that the findings can ultimately be useful and relevant.

3. **Honors.** The researcher preferred to study shows that have earned commendations of excellence in the form of honors because such honors are indicative of shows that are popular and widely viewed and critically acclaimed, so any findings based on the shows would be meaningful to a large percentage of both media industry professionals and the larger viewing public. As Wilson (2009) suggested, a researcher could focus on media that have been nominated for industry or community awards. All five of the shows selected for study have been honored with nominations and awards for excellence in the entertainment industry and in various communities, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).
4. **Free viewing.** Being nominated and winning awards is not the only indicator that a show is popular and likely viewed by a large audience. Increasing the likelihood that a show is watched is also the cost to view. Because the researcher wanted to focus on shows available to the largest audience, she chose to limit her sampled shows to ones airing on one of the three major free-to-air, non-subscription, non-streaming, non-cable networks—the Big Three (American Broadcasting Company (ABC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC)).
5. **Prime time.** The particular TV-viewing audience that interests the researcher, for purposes of seeing portrayals of soft skills, is the population of high-school-age and college-age students; that is; teens and young adults. The TV time slot geared to young

adult viewing is prime time, which typically means 8 p.m. through 11 p.m. Prime time is also the period when TV viewership is high, and the researcher wanted to include shows that are likely to enjoy widespread appeal and large audiences (Nielsen, 2011). All five shows selected for the study air during prime time.

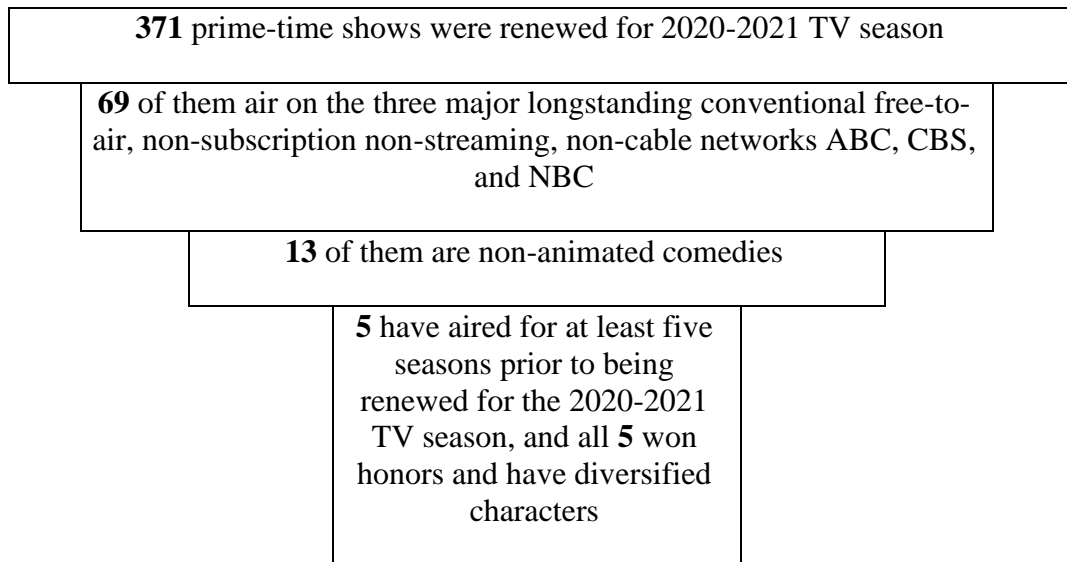
6. **At least five renewed seasons.** The researcher wanted the analyzed shows to be ones that are still in production and not yet cancelled so that the characters' dialog and actions and the shows' storylines are currently relevant and relatable during the conduct of the study. Even more telling than whether or not the show is being renewed for the upcoming 2020-2021 TV season would be if the show has already proven staying power by having aired for a number of seasons prior to being renewed for 2020-2021. Consequently, the researcher wanted the selected shows to not only be currently in production, renewed for the upcoming 2020-2021 TV season, but also to have aired for at least five seasons prior to the 2020-2021 TV season.

From 371 Renewed Shows to Five Selected for Study

Broadly based on Wilson's (2009) suggested strategy for selected popular media for study, the researcher narrowed to the final five TV shows as detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Narrowing from All Renewed Prime-Time TV Shows to Five Shows



From IMDb.com (n.d.)

See Appendix E for details about the premise of each of the five shows selected for analysis in the study.

Sample Size

The researcher consulted previous research that identified the portrayal of themes or characteristics on TV shows. One study that was particularly useful for modeling an appropriate sample size was Trunfio (2005), in which the researcher analyzed health messages mentioned in 88 randomly selected episodes of the total 176 episodes of the TV comedy show *Seinfeld* (David, 1989-1998), exactly half the total episodes aired.

To elicit a similarly large sample of TV show episodes analyzed in the study, the researcher studied 10 randomly selected episodes of each of the five shows aired during the 2019-2020 TV season, the season most recently completed, yielding a 50-episode sample. Observing and analyzing 50 episodes in total (10 of each of the five shows) comprised exactly

half of the shows' episodes in the most recently completed TV season. Having a 50-episode sample size allowed for a large amount of data, and such a large sample enhanced the validity and generalizability of the study's results.

Sample Episode Selection

Following are the number of episodes of each of the five TV shows in the recently completed 2019-2020 TV season:

Table 1

Number of Episodes of the TV Shows to be Analyzed in the 2019-2020 TV Season

TV Show	Number of Episodes in 2019-2020 TV Season
<i>Black-ish</i>	23
<i>The Goldbergs</i>	23
<i>Mom</i>	20
<i>Brooklyn Nine-Nine</i>	13
<i>Superstore</i>	21

The five shows aired, in total, 100 episodes during the 2019-2020 TV season. Analyzing 10 of each shows' episodes yielded a sample size of 50, and that representation of half the pool of episodes mirrored the sampling in the Trunfio's (2005) similar study.

To select the 10 particular episodes of each show, the Excel spreadsheet non-repeating randomizer formula RANK.EQ + COUNTIF was used. For example, the show *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present) had 21 episodes in the 2019-2020 TV season. The formula was used to select 10 different episodes of *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) among the 21 episodes in the 2019-2020 season. For example, when the formula generated, or returned, the number 20, then the

20th episode of the 2019-2020 season of *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) was one of the 10 episodes of that show analyzed in the study.

Then, continuing with *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) as the example, the formula was copied downward into the subsequent nine cells in the spreadsheet, so that, in total, 10 unique randomly selected numbers, inclusive of 1 and 21, generated, or returned. The process was repeated for each of the other four shows, until the 50 different episodes were randomly selected.

Observed Content

Specifically, the analysis in the study comprised viewing episodes of the shows, noting the extent that the seven soft skills, as listed in Appendix A and defined in Appendix B, were portrayed by the show's characters, and coding each portrayal with a predetermined coding scheme. The goal of the coding was to confirm that the analysis was reliable and replicable. Throughout the data collection and analysis, the research questions guided the work.

Research Questions

The viewing and analysis of characters' soft skill portrayals in the analyzed episodes of the five shows, allowed for the answering of the following research questions:

1. To what extent and how are soft skills portrayed in episodes of five prime-time TV comedies?
2. In the episodes, to what extent did the use of soft skills lead to the show's characters' desired outcomes?

In order to answer these research questions, data were collected, coded, and analyzed.

These three processes are described next.

Data Collection

Each of the episodes selected for study was viewed on a Smart TV with the Hulu service. Each episode comprised, on average, approximately 22 minutes of the show and eight minutes of commercials, totaling 30 minutes (Charney, 2014; Episode Length Database, 2015).

The episodes were visual data and not written documents, so their content was saved for repeated retrieval to allow for re-viewing by either the researcher or the other coder. The notating of the codes and miscellaneous notes was performed in Microsoft Excel and Word, in documents saved on the researcher's home laptop and backed up with Carbonite. The researcher paid for and utilized her home-based Internet service, backup service, and wireless Internet connection.

The researcher viewed the 50 randomly selected episodes in their entirety, watching for portrayals of the seven soft skills of interest to be detailed in the coding process. Some of the shows' episodes began with an educational or historical background of the topics explored in the plot or a humorous contextual explanation of the topic. These pre-episode openings were not part of the analysis.

Coding

Content analysis, as an approach to research, offers advantages such as non-intrusiveness and flexibility, but, like other approaches, its objectivity can be compromised if certain steps are rushed or executed in a careless manner.

To be useful, a content analysis must be carefully carried out and must be objective. The coding process is critical to preserving the objectivity of the study (Duriiau et al., 2007). A researcher, for example, should not watch the TV show episodes, notice which actions are portrayed, and *then* create a coding scheme that includes those actions. Objectivity would dictate that the researcher, instead, use the research questions to guide what actions are of interest to the

study and should comprise the coding scheme and *then* watch the episodes to see if those pre-determined actions are portrayed. In this section, information about three aspects of the coding instrument is provided; that is, information on data that identified which episode was being analyzed, information about the specific soft skill portrayals observed, and information about the review of the coding instrument.

Coding Instrument – Identifying Data. A coding spreadsheet was prepared for each episode. At the top of the spreadsheets were fill-in cells for the following identifying data:

1. Number of the coder completing the spreadsheet (Coder 1 or Coder 2)
2. Date the coding was executed
3. Name of TV show
4. Season during which the show originally aired
5. Episode number within the season
6. Episode number from beginning of the series
7. Date the show was originally aired
8. Name of the episode

Coding Instrument – Episode Data. The remainder of the spreadsheet, for each episode, contained columns of cells for the following data particular to that episode:

1. In the first column, the seven soft skills of interest in this study (communication, flexibility, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, problem solving, professionalism, and teamwork) were pre-listed.
2. The second column contained cells for descriptions of the portrayals (for example, “Dre exhibits problem solving when he arranges for a date with Bow in a rough neighborhood, so he can demonstrate his courage”). For multiple portrayals of the

- same skill, descriptions of each portrayal of that skill were noted in the same cell, denoting the first portrayal as A, the second portrayal as B, and so on.
3. The third column contained cells for denoting the outcome score of the utilization of the soft skill(s) observed (for example, “did not lead to desired outcome” or “only partially led to desired outcome”). When multiple portrayals of the same skill were observed, the outcome score for each of the multiple portrayals was noted in horizontal columns with column heading A for the outcome score for the first portrayal, column heading B for the outcome score for the second portrayal, and so on.

Coding Instrument – Review. During her defense of her proposal for this study, the researcher benefited from the review and suggested edits of the instrument from all three members of her committee. The coding instrument that the researcher and a second coder used to capture the codes, while viewing the shows, appears in Appendix F.

In the following section, details are provided regarding the necessary training of another coder, the conduct of a pilot test, and the steps taken to assure intercoder reliability.

Training the Other Coder

A second coder was utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of the coding scheme. After the sampling and initial coding were determined, training of the second coder was the next step. To assure reliability and replicability, there had to be specific, detailed instructions that were precisely and consistently followed during the coding process. The researcher delineated the proposed coding and trained the other coder to follow the instructions in a pilot of the coding process. Then the researcher compared her coding with that of the second coder and then slightly modified the instructions as needed. Observing the portrayal of the same skills in the same

episodes resulted in the nearly the same coding, independently, between the researcher and the second coder, demonstrating interrater reliability (Neuendorf, 2010).

The researcher trained the second coder by:

1. Explaining the coding scheme.
2. Providing a sample completed coding page with examples of codes and how they properly fit into the cells and the types of additional information and comments that can be added.
3. Providing definitions of all relevant terms.

Intercoder Reliability

To enhance the reliability of the study's findings, two steps were taken—coding based on specific actions that were deemed to indicate that a skill was portrayed and following a specific method to ensure a designated level of trustworthiness:

1. The researcher and the second coder utilized the following list of specific actions that signified that one of the soft skills was being portrayed in a TV show episode:

Communication. To be coded as a portrayal of communication, the action cannot simply be that a character speaks. The character must communicate with another character(s), in person, by phone, or digitally by text, digitally, or through a social media site, with a specific purpose for the communication, other than general, recreational conversation. Examples are communicating in order to change someone's mind or communicating to entice, update, teach, etc.

Flexibility. To be coded as a portrayal of flexibility, the character must consider or take one action in trying to meet a particular objective and then, due to a change of

mind or circumstances, pivots instead to an alternate action to meet that same objective. The character must show adaptation based on the situation.

Interpersonal Skills. To be coded as a portrayal of an interpersonal skill, the character must take an action that is generally understood to be an act of listening, showing patience, showing empathy, making things right or apologizing, complimenting or praising sincerely, encouraging, accepting criticism constructively, standing up for someone, helping, putting someone else's needs ahead of one's own, being friendly to a stranger, mentoring, being honest even when that is difficult or dishonest to be nice, or generally being kind.

Positive Attitude. To be coded as a portrayal of positive attitude, the character must smile or nod while listening, lighten a negative mood, speak of or act on the recognition of a silver lining in an otherwise negative situation, demonstrate confidence without arrogance, demonstrate enthusiasm or being upbeat, or agree to and show belief in the success of a project or thought.

Problem Solving and Critical Thinking. To be coded as a portrayal of problem solving and critical thinking, the character must be faced with a challenge and use facts to devise and then execute an action to address the challenge. The character need not be successful in solving the problem; he or she just needs to reasonably attempt to do so. (The success or failure of the attempt will be reflected in the response to Research Question 2—whether or not the execution of the soft skill results in meeting the character's objective in executing the skill.)

Professionalism. To be coded as a portrayal of professionalism, the character must take an action that is generally viewed as demonstrating responsibility, integrity, accountability, or excellence in a legitimate line of work.

Teamwork. To be coded as a portrayal of teamwork, the character must engage effectively with another character(s) with the goal of accomplishing some task. (It is not necessary that the team successfully completes the task, only that the team attempts to do so with input from each team member.)

2. The researcher and the second coder utilized Holsti's method to learn if they naturally reached a reliability score of at least 80. Holsti's method is a well-known measure of reliability, in which a score of at least 80% means the coding scheme is reliable. The percentage is calculated by dividing double the number of agreements between the two coders by the total decisions made by the two coders (Lacy et al., 2015). For example, if two coders each code 50 TV show episodes, that means the denominator is 100. If they agreed with each other in 42 of those portrayals, then double the agreements would mean an 84 in the numerator. The reliability score would be 84 divided by 100, or 84%, meaning the coding scheme is reliable.

Pilot Test and Intercoder Reliability

To know if the soft skills were portrayed and if they resulted in their intended outcomes, data needed to be collected and analyzed. The collection and analysis of data yields meaningful results only if these processes are executed in a planned, methodical way that is reliable. One way to enhance the study's reliability is to use a coding scheme that, if utilized by multiple

people, would result in similar codings. An accepted level of similarity to establish such reliability is the 80% level established in Holsti's method (Lacy et al., 2015).

Before using the coding instrument designed for this study, the researcher engaged the assistance of another coder and used Holsti's method to determine if the coding instrument was sufficiently reliable for this study. The following section describes the steps that were taken and the subsequent events that occurred, some of which were planned and some of which were unplanned.

Planned Events

The planned events that occurred in connection with testing the coding instrument included selecting the particular TV show to be coded for the testing and selecting and training an appropriate person to serve as the second coder.

Selection of a TV Show for Testing of the Coding Instrument. For a coding instrument to be repeatable and therefore reliable, it must work and yield similar results even if the coders coded a different TV show than the one(s) to be used in the actual study. Consequently, a separate TV show that met most of the criteria for the study's TV shows was selected for the coding instrument's pilot test. The show *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present) met all the criteria, except that it has been airing for only three seasons, instead of the minimum of five seasons required of the shows in the study. The design of the pilot testing process was based on a reliability-testing process described in another quantitative TV show content analysis doctoral dissertation (Trunfio, 2005).

Another reason a show similar to the actual ones in the study was selected for the pilot testing was that the similarity enhanced the trustworthiness of the pilot testing. *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present) is a popular industry- and community-award-winning comedy,

with a diversified cast, and is similar in plot content because it happens to be a spin-off of one of the five shows in the study, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present). The researcher used the non-repeating randomizing Excel formula, detailed in Chapter 3, and that process yielded Episodes 4, 7, and 8 of Season 3 of *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present) as the episodes to be coded by both coders in the test piloting.

Selection of a Second Coder. After the selection of the show to be used for testing the coding instrument, the next step was to select the person to serve as the second coder. The research committee chairperson and the researcher agreed that the second coder should be someone with a high level of formal education and an appreciation for detail, and, to mitigate potential bias, not a family member of the researcher. The researcher also wanted the second coder to be someone who enjoys watching TV shows and is conscientious enough to care and take the endeavor seriously. She asked her friend, Morris I. Raub, who is a practicing corporate attorney and mediates legal arbitration hearings, and he agreed to serve as the second coder. In the coding instruments, Mr. Raub was designated as *Coder 2*, and the researcher herself was designated as *Coder 1*.

Training the Second Coder. The researcher provided Mr. Raub with the coding instrument—the Excel spreadsheets with the episode-identifying data pre-filled and empty cells for Mr. Raub’s input. She also provided him with a copy of the study proposal, highlighting the particular sections that (a) detail the operational definitions to be used for each of the seven soft skills for the purpose of coding and (b) list the specific actions that will denote a portrayal of the particular skills. Finally, she provided him with one spreadsheet, filled in with commentary and coding for a TV episode that was neither a pilot test episode nor an actual study episode, so that

he could see how a completed coding instrument appears (see the sample provided to Mr. Raub in Appendix F).

After the instructions, instrument, and sample were provided to Mr. Raub, he and the researcher had two telephone discussions, reviewing the procedures and the specific way his data was to be recorded.

Mr. Raub proceeded with his work and contacted the researcher only once with two questions. He wanted to know how much time he had to complete his work. The researcher asked him if one week would be sufficient, and Mr. Raub agreed to the timeline. Mr. Raub also asked about the application of the operational definition of one of the soft skills, and details of that unexpected question are provided in the next section. Exactly one week later, Mr. Raub had completed his assigned work as the second coder.

Unplanned Events and Corrective Steps

Choosing the TV show for testing the coding instrument's reliability and selecting and training the second coder whose work would allow for the reliability checking were expected steps and proceeded according to plan. As the researcher and the second coder began the actual coding to be compared and tested, however, they both confronted unplanned events that had to be addressed immediately in order to facilitate the remaining work. The unplanned events were the realization that (1) certain aspects of the shows were unfamiliar and would require additional steps and time in order to perform the work, (2) the order in which portrayals were recorded in the instrument mattered, and (3) the operational definitions of two of the soft skills being studied had to be clarified and enhanced in order to distinguish between them and to precisely code their portrayals.

Unfamiliarity with Shows, Characters, and References. Because neither the researcher nor Mr. Raub had previously viewed the show *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present), they were unfamiliar with the show's premise, the names of the characters, or the frequently mentioned college-age popular culture references. When they noticed a particular soft skill was being portrayed, they each had to perform independent online research to identify the name of the character who portrayed the skill so the coding instrument could be completed accurately. Viewing three episodes appeared to provide sufficient content to be able to compare coding between the two coders, but they were insufficient to provide the coders with enough background information on the premise or running storylines of the show. The coders both noted that they had to play back certain scenes to understand the plot, and such understanding was necessary to determine the secondary coding of the portrayals; that is, determining if the portrayal resulted in the desired outcome for the character. In addition to expending more time to research the characters' names and understand the story and characters' motives, the coders each had to consult Internet browsers to know the meanings of such college-age dialog as *chop it up* (talk) and *backslide* (have sex with an ex).

While having to perform brief additional research added extra minutes to the pilot test procedure, it led to deeper understanding of the stories and the characters' portrayals. Consequently, the coders agreed with each other that the additional effort lent accuracy and trustworthiness to the work. Although a challenge, the additional research enhanced the coders' confidence in their coding.

Introduction of a New Element – Order of Portrayals. When the researcher designed the coding instrument, she expected that, in one episode, there could be multiple portrayals of the same skill. She created additional columns in the Excel spreadsheet and proceeded to label the

multiple portrayals A and B, if there were two, A, B, and C, if there were three, etc. In the columns for scoring the outcome of each portrayal, the leftmost column was for the numeric coding of the outcome of the portrayal listed as A. The second column was for the numeric coding of the outcome of the portrayal listed as B, and so on. The unexpected challenge arose because the two coders arbitrarily listed one portrayal as A and another as B, not always in agreement with each other. Realizing this phenomenon would count as a disagreement when Holsti's formula is ultimately applied, when truly there was no disagreement, the researcher implemented a new instruction and asked Mr. Raub to revisit his coding and enter any multiple portrayals of one skill in an episode in the order in which the skills were portrayed. That additional instruction is one that the researcher could not have guessed as necessary until the test coding commenced. The instructional correction caused minor additional work for both coders before the codes could be applied to the Holsti's formula, but it tightened the test pilot methodology, and its documentation herein could assist future researchers who may test coding of TV show portrayals.

Necessary Further Definition of Skills. While Mr. Raub was viewing the first episode, he called the researcher to clarify the proper placement of the codes, and he mentioned an example of a character's action. He stated that the character was solving a problem. The researcher realized clarification was necessary and that a distinction was needed between solving one's *own* problem and solving *someone else's* problem. Mr. Raub considered the action *problem solving*, no matter whose problem he was solving. The researcher had not viewed the portrayal that way. She saw the character's helping another character as helpfulness, an action listed under the study's definition of *interpersonal skills*, not *problem solving*. The naturally differing understanding of the notion of solving a problem may be gender-related. Gray (1992) suggests that men nearly always go into fix-it mode when hearing of a problem, but oftentimes,

women hear of and discuss another person's problem as conversation, trying to be helpful, not necessarily with the motive of fixing the problem. Mr. Raub, a male, may have naturally saw the action as *problem solving*, and the researcher, a female, may have naturally viewed the same action as an *interpersonal skill* instead, perhaps gendering the definition. To crystallize the definition and mitigate the chance for another difference in categorizing different portrayals to the same action, the researcher enhanced the definition, for purposes of this study, to confirm that helping someone else with his or her problem will be the *interpersonal skill* of helping. *Problem solving*, as an operational definition in this study, will mean solving one's own problem.

Once the researcher and Mr. Raub performed sufficient research online to familiarize themselves with the pilot test show characters' names and the show's premise, agreed to list skill portrayals in the order in which they occurred in each episode, and clarified the operational definition of two particular soft skills, they proceeded to view the shows and code the skill portrayals, utilizing the standardized coding instrument. The coding results of both coders in the pilot test phase and the subsequent coding results of the actual study are detailed in Chapter 4.

This section detailed the pilot testing that was conducted to ensure reliability of the coding. Such reliability was not the only value the researcher sought. She also wanted to be cognizant and address any other potential risk to the study's trustworthiness. The recognition and addressing of such threats are discussed in the next section.

Credibility Threats

Because the researcher is an avid TV fan and enjoys TV comedies in particular, she may have been inclined to recognize positive attributes of TV show characters, including constructive ones such as the demonstration of soft skills. Judging whether or not a TV show character

achieved her objective through the execution of a soft skill could possibly be subjective. There may have been some interpretation inherent in the assignment of codes to certain characters' actions and triumphs. To mitigate these potentials for bias, a second coder tested the coding instrument with the researcher to confirm that their judgements aligned sufficiently.

Review for Approval

There were no live humans involved in the study. The researcher viewed TV episodes and analyzed their content. Because no people were observed in person, no people were interviewed, and no study participants were asked to perform any tasks in connection with this study, there was no requirement for a review for approval, such as one offered by an Institutional Review Board (IRB).

CHAPTER 4

Results

Purpose of the Study

There is general agreement among educators, employers, and students themselves that soft skills are critical for students' success in their careers and in life in general and that there is a shortage of such skills among students ready to enter the workforce (Doyle, 2020; Gill, 2011; Lovett & Jones, 2008; Mazur, 2007; Ortiz et al., 2016; Phillips, 2006; Rae, 2007; Stevens, 2005; The Experts, 2013; White, 2013). Scholars have identified the following seven soft skills as most critical: communication, flexibility, interpersonal skills, problem solving and critical thinking, professionalism, positive attitude, and teamwork (Cukier et al., 2015; NACE, 2019; Robles, 2012).

Educators struggle to identify and utilize ways to teach that are informative yet still interesting enough to capture students' attention. Media such as TV are noted in the literature as popular and attention-getting and therefore a possible source of demonstrating skills that people want students to model.

In determining if TV shows can be a practical source for soft skill portrayals, this study was conducted. To make the study's potential results more useful and relevant and likely to be copied in educational practice, current popular TV comedies were selected as study samples.

The researcher wanted to ascertain if the portrayal of these seven soft skills is frequent, occasional, or non-existent. Also of interest was the impact of those portrayals. If the soft skills are indeed portrayed in TV shows, did they lead to the characters' intended outcomes? As examples: If a character communicated a message to another character, did the recipient get the

message? If a character demonstrated an act that is meant to solve his or her problem, was the problem solved for that character?

To summarize, the purpose of the study was to analyze if and how soft skills were portrayed in the sampled TV comedies and, if so, was the execution of those skills successful.

Result of the Pilot Test

The researcher (Coder 1) and Mr. Raub (Coder 2) viewed three randomly selected episodes of *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present) to see if the coding, as performed by both individuals would be consistently applied and therefore deemed reliable. It was critical to know if their codings were sufficiently similar to each other and, therefore, the coding process itself could be relied upon to produce similar results if followed by other people on other samples. The researcher collated Mr. Raub's codings with her own and compared the codings using Holsti's method, a well-known measure of reliability, in which a score of at least 80% means the coding scheme is reliable. The percentage is calculated by dividing double the number of agreements between the two coders by the total decisions made by the two coders (Lacy et al., 2015). In this application of Holsti's method, the two coders reported, between them, a total of 19 portrayals of the soft skills in question. Each portrayal had an outcome score associated with it (a 1 if the character fully achieved his or her objective by exercising the skill, a 0.5 if the character only partially achieved the objective, a negative 1 (-1) if the character did not achieve the objective at all, and a zero (0) if the coder could not determine, from the particular episode, if the character achieved the objective). With each of 19 portrayals having an outcome score associated with it, there were 38 total possible decisions to be made by each coder. Comparing the researcher's codes with Mr. Raub's codes revealed that:

- In three instances, Mr. Raub identified an action as a soft skill portrayal, but the researcher missed that identification.
- In the other 16 instances, the researcher's and Mr. Raub's codings aligned precisely.
- Each of the three instances in which there was a disparity (Mr. Raub saw the portrayal, but the researcher did not) equated to two points of disagreement—one was the missed portrayal and the other was the missed outcome score. Because the researcher did not identify the portrayal, she also did not assign an outcome score.
- Three disparities with two points of disagreement each equated six total discrepancies between the coders' codes.
- In total, Mr. Raub's work resulted in $19 \times 2 = 38$ codes, and the researcher identified soft skill portrayals and agreed with Mr. Raub in 32 of those instances.

Applying Holsti's method resulted in the following percentage:

- Numerator: Double the number of agreements because there were two coders = 64.
- Denominator: Total possible decisions made by all coders = 38 possible decisions by each of two coders = 76.
- Percentage: $64/76 = 84.2\%$. The coding was considered reliable because the percentage was at least 80%.

With a coding instrument that was deemed reliable, the researcher was then able to begin data collection. The first steps in data collection involved randomly selecting the episodes to be

viewed and securing those episodes for viewing. The next section describes these processes and the events that unfurled during the processes—both planned and unplanned.

Processes of Coding and Calculating

Certain steps in the coding and calculating proceeded as expected. Some did not, and additional or divergent steps had to be taken. The next section details the steps that proceeded as expected.

Steps and Planned Events

The first step in the coding process was to select the particular episodes to be viewed in the study. Simply viewing previously familiar episodes, favorite episodes, or some ordered sample, such as the first 10 episodes of the season would likely produce biased results. Perhaps the favorites were the funniest with a less than representative number of portrayals of serious subjects such as soft skills. Perhaps the first episodes in a season deal with too similar or repetitive, continuing storylines that would feature a non-representative sampling of certain skills, repeating in those storylines. To mitigate such slanting of the results, the researcher used random sampling to choose the episodes.

Random Sampling to Mitigate Bias. Ten episodes needed to be selected from each of five shows' recently completed TV season, the 2019-2020 season, totaling 50 episodes. Having a 50-episode sample size allowed for a large amount of data, and such a large sample enhanced the validity and generalizability of the study's results.

To select the particular 10 episodes of each show, the Excel spreadsheet non-repeating randomizer formula RANK.EQ + COUNTIF was used. For example, the show *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present) had 21 episodes in the 2019-2020 TV season. The Excel formula was used to select 10 different episodes of *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) among the 21 episodes in

the 2019-2020 season. The ten episodes randomly produced by the Excel formula, for *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) generated in a random order, and, when sorted numerically, they were: Episode numbers 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, and 20.

After the sample episodes were randomly selected, the researcher viewed all 50 episodes, coded every soft skill portrayal she observed, and also entered a code representing the outcome of the skill portrayals (character's objective was fully met by exercising the skill, character's objective was partially met by exercising the skill, character's objective was not met at all by exercising the skill, or no outcome determination was evident in the episode).

After the portrayal and outcome codes were entered into the coding instrument, the researcher proceeded to write Excel formulas so that the data could be efficiently analyzed. The objective of the analysis was to answer the research questions, and the questions asked how many times the soft skills were portrayed and how many times those portrayals were successful—both questions seeking quantitative answers. With the research questions guiding the data collection and the analysis, it was important that the number crunching was precise. To achieve that precision, the researcher wanted to preclude any human error in the calculations, so she wrote formulas, even for the simplest tasks.

Excel Formulas to Preclude Human Error. The CountA formula was used to add columns of portrayal incidents. For example, in one show, there were 34 soft skill portrayals observed over the course of 10 episodes. The CountA formula counted the number of entries in a column, no matter what words or numbers were in those cells. The frequency formula of =CountIf counted the number of times a particular code appeared in a particular column. For example, in the 10 episodes of *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present), the outcome score of 0.5 appeared eight times. Instead of having to rely on the accuracy of manually counting how

frequently a code appeared, the formulas allowed for exactness without the potential for human error. To ascertain the totals of incidences in general and frequencies in particular, the adding formula =Sum was used. For example, the CountIf formula showed how many times the soft skill *flexibility* was coded during each episode of each show. The summation formula =Sum added up all the =CountIf formulas, showing that the soft skill *flexibility* was coded 27 times in total, across all 50 episodes.

Exact Spreadsheets to Enhance Consistency and Efficiency. In addition to mitigating potential bias with randomly selected episodes and mitigating potential human error with Excel formulas, the quality of the study was also enhanced by using exactly duplicative spreadsheets for all coding. Instead of using data collection pages created on the fly, the researcher instead created and performed a trial run on digital pages, in Excel, that are exact duplicates of each other. The duplication allowed for the consistent application of processes, no matter which show or which episode of a show was being coded. Moreover, by having the codes in the same cell throughout multiple sections of spreadsheets and multiple sheets within the Excel workbooks allowed for efficiency because the formulas were easily developed that spanned multiple sections and allowed for subtotals, grand totals, and other statistical analyses.

In summary, randomly selecting the episodes for viewing in a systematic way and developing formulas in Excel spreadsheets were expected parts of the data collection process. Not all parts were expected, though. Three events occurred that were entirely unplanned and required some flexibility, patience, and humor. These challenges, as well as the corrective measures taken to address them, are mentioned in the next section.

Unplanned Events and Corrective Steps

Accessibility of Randomly Show Episodes. The researcher did not anticipate the difficulty in accessing the TV show episodes to be viewed in the data collection process. She searched through the hundreds of shows already saved in her Xfinity service, Netflix, free access channels, Prime Video, and Apple TV. She had previously thought at least one of these services for which she paid handsomely would offer the viewing of last season's episodes of these popular TV shows. Not one did. Consequently, she purchased the Hulu service, and, with a steep learning curve, help from Hulu's technical support staff (who generously did not laugh at her technical ignorance), and the online instructions, she finally ascertained how to use the service and then viewed the particular episodes that were randomly selected.

Breaks and Even Concentration. Until this study, the researcher had watched TV shows purely for entertainment. Watching them for the detection of soft skill portrayals made the viewing experience different. She thought she would endure the one lengthy Hulu commercial in each episode in order to have access to the commercial-fast-forwarding feature, but she quickly learned that she needed those commercial breaks to think, to consider what portrayals she just witnessed, and to type the portrayal descriptions into her laptop computer. Even with the new strategy in place—watch and absorb during the show and code during commercials, she still did not find an efficient, workable process. In order to enter data into the coding instrument, carefully consider the soft skill portrayals, and code their outcomes with clear and careful judgment, she needed to pause and restart each episode dozens of times throughout each viewing. This start-and-stop action necessitated two new sets of batteries for her TV remote control. Finding the humor in these minor obstacles, the researcher forged ahead. She also found that the lengthy process of watching one episode after another required large quantities of junk

food and frequent breaks in order to maintain proper concentration. An experienced TV comedy aficionado, the researcher initially thought she could watch at least five consecutive hours of TV shows without losing concentration. She could not. Breaks after every two or three episodes became necessary in order to maintain focus and a quality coding effort.

Interim Notetaking. The final unplanned event was the necessity for a place and time to collect thoughts, ideas, questions, and documentation of needs for further research, while watching the TV show episodes. For example, taking time to list questions, both procedural and content-wise, that arose, during data collection, was not previously considered. As part of the coding instrument, there should have been an additional worksheet in the Excel workbook for typing such miscellaneous bits of information. By the end of the viewing of the first episode, the researcher created an additional worksheet in the coding instrument for capturing such thoughts, questions, etc.

All these steps—both the planned and unplanned ones—comprised the work necessary for this study's data collection. Directly guiding the data collection effort were the research questions. Indeed, the reason for viewing the 50 show episodes was to collect relevant data that could be analyzed to answer to the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: To what extent and how are soft skills portrayed in episodes of five prime-time TV comedies?
- Research Question 2: In the episodes, to what extent did the use of soft skills lead to the show's characters' desired outcomes?

The answers to the research questions, as provided by the results of the data collection, are detailed in the next section.

Answers to the Research Questions

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asks first a direct quantitative question—to what extent are soft skills portrayed in the 50 episodes? It then asks *how* those skills are portrayed, and that question warrants some qualitative support in its response. In this section, both the quantitative and qualitative answers to Research Question 1 are provided.

Extent of Soft Skill Portrayals in Total. While viewing the 50 episodes, the researcher found a total of 252 portrayals of the seven soft skills. Characters in the shows demonstrated soft skills in their actions (such as family members working as a team in staging an intervention) and in their words (such as a mother explaining to her son that she was offended).

Extent of Soft Skill Portrayals Per Minute. The first research question is concerned with the extent to which soft skills are portrayed at all in the five TV shows studied. Not only were soft skills portrayed; they were portrayed extensively. The data revealed that there were 252 incidents of the seven selected soft skills being portrayed throughout the 50 shows.

The average length of a TV comedy show is 22 minutes (Charney, 2014; Episode Length Database, 2015). There were 50 episodes of comedy shows viewed in this study. With 252 incidents of one of the seven soft skills involved in this study being portrayed, that means a soft skill was portrayed, on average, every four minutes. In each of the 50 episodes, on average, there were approximately five soft skill portrayals. Table 2 details the frequency of soft skill portrayals in these five shows.

Table 2*Per-Minute Average of the Seven Soft Skills in the Five Shows*

Each episode →	22 minutes
X 50 episodes =	1,100 minutes
Which approximates →	18 hours of TV
252 soft skill portrayals =	1 every 4 minutes
252 soft skill portrayals =	On average, 5 per episode

Extent of Portrayals Per Skill. Although, on average, there were five portrayals of soft skills in each episode, the distribution of the various soft skills throughout the shows was not even. The results of the coding demonstrated a wide discrepancy between the number of times each soft skill was portrayed. For example, in the 50 episodes, there were 79 portrayals of *interpersonal skills* but only 14 portrayals of teamwork. Table 3 shows the number of portrayals of each of the seven soft skills studied, throughout the 50 episodes.

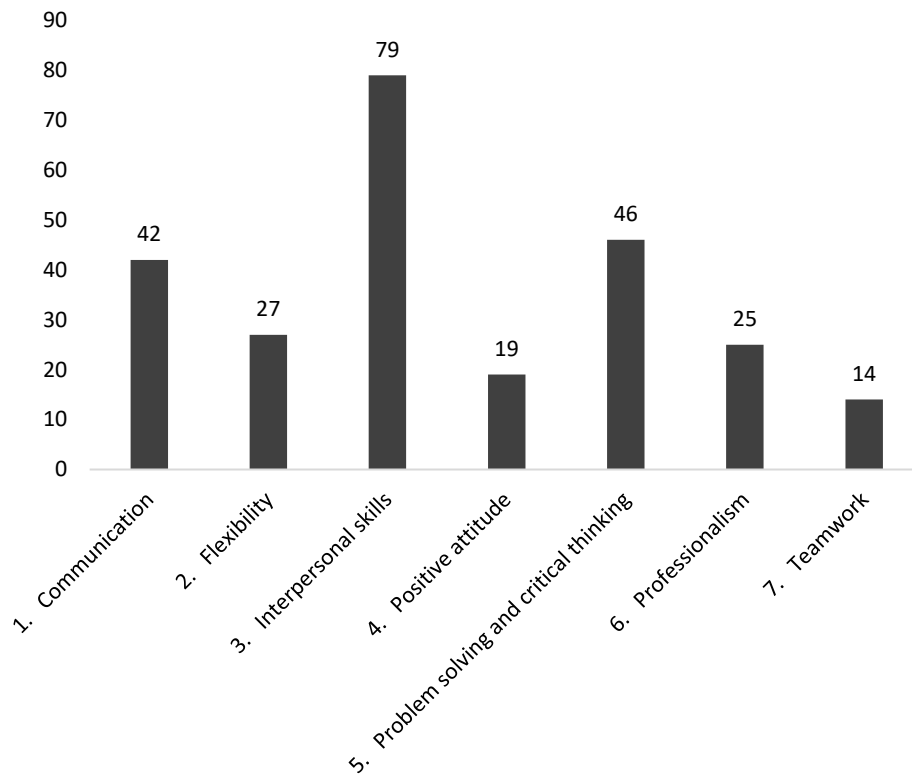
Table 3*Frequency of the Seven Soft Skills in the Five Shows*

Soft Skill	Number of Times Skill was Portrayed	% of Total
1. Communication	42	16.7%
2. Flexibility	27	10.7%
3. Interpersonal skills	79	31.3%
4. Positive attitude	19	7.5%
5. Problem solving and critical thinking	46	18.3%
6. Professionalism	25	9.9%
7. Teamwork	14	5.6%
Totals	252	100.0%

Figure 2 shows the wide discrepancy between the frequencies of the soft skills' portrayals.

Figure 2

Comparison of Frequency of the Seven Soft Skills in the Five Shows

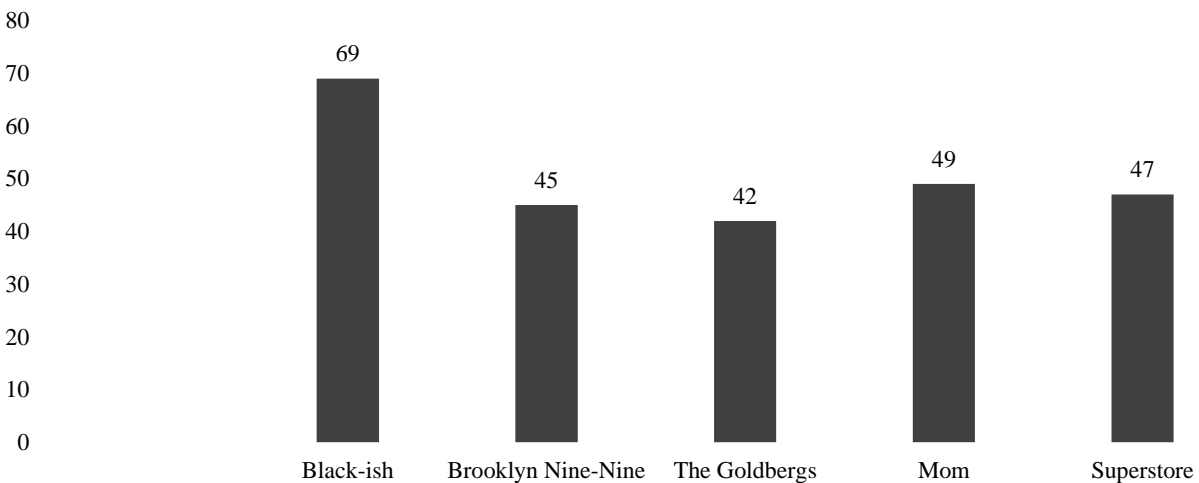


Extent of Portrayals Per Show. Not only did the data collection reveal wide discrepancies among the number of times each of the seven skills was portrayed, it also revealed a wide discrepancy between one show, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) and the other four shows insofar as the number of times *any* of the skills were portrayed. Specifically, each of the other four shows had between 42 and 49 total soft skill portrayals throughout their 10 observed episodes. *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) had 69 such portrayals, a number 29% – 40% higher than

each of the other four shows. Figure 3 shows, graphically, how many more soft skills were portrayed in *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) than in any of the other four shows.

Figure 3

Number of Soft Skills Portrayed in Each of the Five Shows



Which Skills Were Portrayed Most Frequently in Which Shows? With more than a third of the 252 skill portrayals being *interpersonal skills*, it is expected that, in each individual show, *interpersonal skills* would be the most commonly portrayed skill as well, and, indeed they were. The researcher detected portrayals of *interpersonal skills*, as defined in this study, 19 times in each of *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) and *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), 15 times in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Goor et al., 2013-present), and 13 times in each of *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present) and *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present).

The dominance of *interpersonal skills*, as well as the listing of the second-most frequently portrayed soft skill in each show, is depicted in Table 4.

Table 4*Most and Second-Most Portrayed Soft Skills in the Five Shows*

Soft Skill	Black-ish	Brooklyn Nine-Nine	The Goldbergs	Mom	Superstore	Total Per Skill
Communication	18 Second- Most	2	5	10 Second- Most	7 Tied for Second-Most	42
Flexibility	7	5	4	4	7 Tied for Second-Most	27
Interpersonal Skills	19 Most	15 Most	13 Most	19 Most	13 Most	79
Positive Attitude	3	3	7	3	3	19
Problem Solving and Critical Thinking	11	11 Second- Most	9 Second- Most	8	7 Tied for Second-Most	46
Professionalism	8	4	1	5	7 Tied for Second-Most	25
Teamwork	3	5	3	0	3	14
Total Per Show	69	45	42	49	47	252

The previously mentioned dominance of *interpersonal skills* as evidenced by the data collection results led the researcher to delve further into those particular results to uncover more meaningful results. Perhaps *interpersonal skills* were portrayed far more than any other soft skill because this skill was the widest category, encompassing the most sub-skills, as detailed in Chapter 3, where *interpersonal skills* were defined as an act of:

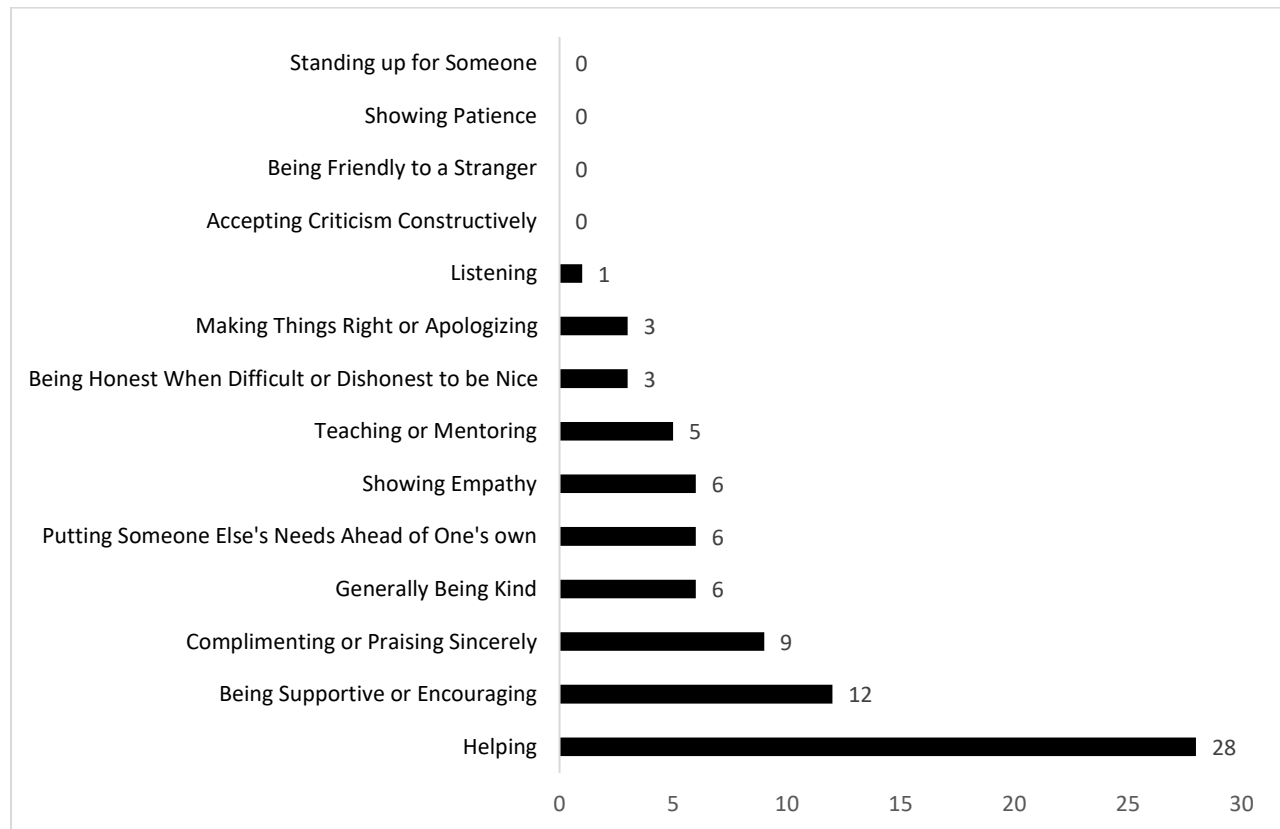
- listening;
- showing patience;
- showing empathy;
- making things right or apologizing;
- complimenting or praising sincerely;
- being supportive or encouraging;
- accepting criticism constructively;
- standing up for someone;
- helping;
- putting someone else's needs ahead of one's own;
- being friendly to a stranger,
- teaching or mentoring;
- being honest even when difficult or being dishonest to be nice; or
- generally being kind.

With so many different ways to demonstrate *interpersonal skills*, it may be logical that *interpersonal skills* was the skill most frequently portrayed in the study's shows—79 times. In order to further answer Research Question 1, it became clear that further calculations were necessary. The researcher then separated the 79 incidents of *interpersonal skills* that were

portrayed in the shows into the specific components listed in the operational definitions detailed in Chapter 3. It became important to know which of the specific components of *interpersonal skills* were most frequently portrayed. This detail could set the stage for one element in future research (see Chapter 5). The breakdown is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Breakdown of Interpersonal Skills Portrayed in the Five Shows



To answer the research questions posed in this study, it is important to know the frequency in which the soft skills were portrayed in the episodes, and the data can be analyzed (see Chapter 5) to delve into the meaning of those frequencies. It is similarly important to understand *how* the soft skills were portrayed in the episodes.

In some instances, the skill was portrayed by a character's dialog—usually demonstrated by a character's speaking with another character(s) and occasionally with the production decision of displaying what a character is thinking (the TV audience hears the voice of the character stating what he or she is thinking). Two examples of soft skills being portrayed through actual dialog with another character included:

- In Season 7, Episode 7 of the show *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), Christy encouraged Tammy to move out from Marjorie's house because she wasn't happy living with Marjorie. Christy encouraged Tammy through her words of support, and her words gave Tammy the confidence to plan her move. The portrayal comprised no physical action, rather just conversation.
- In Season 5, Episode 1 of the show *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present), Amy suggested to Cheyenne that she may be irritable because she missed Mateo, and perhaps she should consider visiting Mateo in the detention center. Amy demonstrated the soft skill of communication, clearly telling Cheyenne about her observation. Amy's skill portrayal took the form of words, not action. She merely made the verbal suggestion.

Two examples of a soft skill's portrayal through a character's *not* saying his or her thoughts aloud but rather thinking them included:

- In Season 7, Episode 15 of *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present), Adam's thoughts about his grandfather's advice actually being relevant and useful were audible to the TV audience but not to other characters in the show.
- In Season 6, Episode 18 of *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), Dre's silently convincing himself to be proud and not insecure at his wife's work event was also audible to the TV audience but not to other characters in the show.

In other instances, the skill was portrayed by a character's actions. Two examples of soft skills' being portrayed through actions included:

- In Season 7, Episode 9 of *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present), Geoff solved his issue of being caught in the middle by writing a binder of policies, outlining how college dormmates Erika and Barry could get along with each other. Geoff carried out the physical action of writing a binder to solve his problem of feeling caught between his girlfriend Erika and his friend Barry.
- In Season 6, Episode 19 of *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), Bow denied Pops' request to write prescriptions, so his friend Loose Craig could sell the medicines illegally. Bow did not simply say no. She demanded that Pops return the prescription pad she knew he stole, and she walked out of the room, and she took the pad with her, still intact. Bow's denial of his request took the form of physical steps, not just dialog.

After knowing the frequency of the portrayal of each of the soft skills in total and by show and knowing which specific elements of *interpersonal skills* were portrayed in the shows, as well as knowing how, through words and actions, the soft skills were portrayed, the researcher then became interested in another result. While calculating frequencies and totals, and denoting patterns and outliers, she noticed some shows in which most or all of the soft skills were portrayed, and some shows in which a smaller variety of the soft skills was portrayed. For example, in seven of the 10 sampled episodes of *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), at least five of the seven soft skills were portrayed. In *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), only one of the 10 sampled episodes featured a portrayal of at least five of the seven soft skills. This variability in the assortment of different skills portrayed in the shows is detailed in Table 5.

The number of portrayals of each soft skill, in total, as shown in each show, is detailed in Table 6.

Table 5

Variety of Soft Skills Portrayed – Number Portrayed in Each Episode

Viewed Episode	Black-ish	Brooklyn Nine-Nine	The Goldbergs	Mom	Superstore
First Episode Viewed	5	7	2	5	6
Second Episode Viewed	5	5	3	4	4
Third Episode Viewed	5	4	3	4	4
Fourth Episode Viewed	5	2	3	3	4
Fifth Episode Viewed	4	3	6	4	3
Sixth Episode Viewed	6	2	4	2	4
Seventh Episode Viewed	5	2	4	3	2
Eighth Episode Viewed	4	2	3	3	3
Ninth Episode Viewed	4	4	4	3	3
Tenth Episode Viewed	5	3	3	3	5
Average	4.8	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.8
Of 7 skills, on average, % of the seven skills portrayed in each episode	68.6%	48.6%	50.0%	48.6%	54.3%

Table 6*Number of Soft Skills Portrayed in Each Show*

	Black- ish	Brooklyn Nine-Nine	Goldbergs	Mom	Superstore	Total by Skill
Communication	18	2	5	10	7	42
Flexibility	7	5	4	4	7	27
Interpersonal skills	19	15	13	19	13	79
Positive attitude	3	3	7	3	3	19
Problem solving and critical thinking	11	11	9	8	7	46
Professionalism	8	4	1	5	7	25
Teamwork	3	5	3	0	3	14
Total by Show	69	45	42	49	47	252

Finally, an additional research element arose, and that is the potential bias relative to researcher fatigue. The next section describes the emergence and addressing of this issue.

Researcher Fatigue and Potential Declining Quality

The researcher determined, at the outset of data collection, that she would watch all 10 episodes of one show consecutively, so she could become familiar with the characters' names and be able to describe their skill portrayals efficiently and be able to remember each show's premise without having to research characters' names or be refreshed of the show's premise. To mitigate the effects of other factors, the researcher used the non-repeating Excel randomizing formula to determine the order in which the five shows would be viewed. She viewed the 10 episodes of one show, then the 10 episodes of the next show, and so on.

An unplanned concern occurred while the researcher viewed the episodes. She wondered if she was more alert and able to notice more soft skill portrayals in the shows she viewed earlier

in the process. Her question was, would she be more fatigued, viewing the later shows and the research findings would therefore be skewed in this fashion.

To address her concern about declining coding robustness from the earliest viewed shows to the subsequently viewed shows, she collected data, based on the order of the viewed shows. To analyze if the order in which she viewed the shows and coded the portrayals had a correlation to the number of portrayals she detected, she collected those comparative data also. Those data are listed in Table 7 and depicted graphically in Figure 5.

In Figure 5, the actual number of portrayals coded from the 10 shows viewed per day are shown in the black trend line. The black trend line shows that the number of portrayals identified and coded decreased only slightly during the viewing of the first three shows' episodes and then increased more dramatically while viewing the last two shows' episodes. If increasing fatigue caused identification of fewer portrayals, the trend line would have decreased over the course of the viewing. It did not. The researcher's fear was unfounded. She was not identifying soft skills at a declining rate over time. To provide a baseline for the analysis, in Figure 5, there is also a gray (artificial, not actual) trend line that shows how a steady decline in portrayal identification and coding would likely appear.

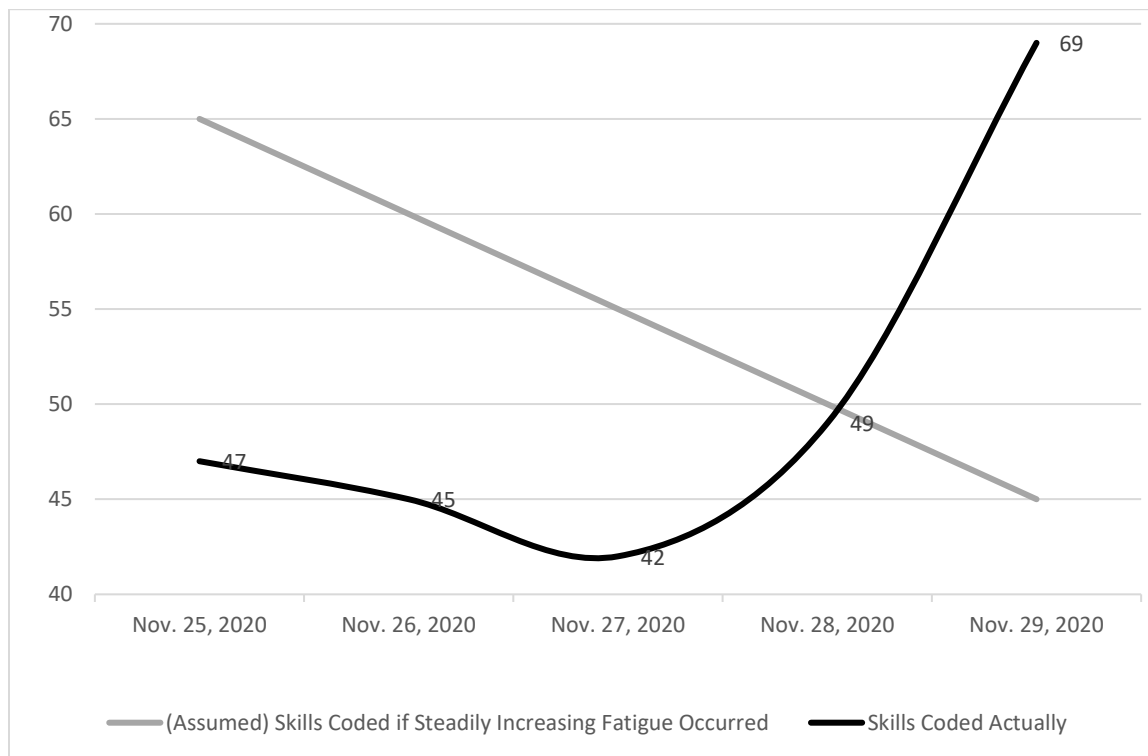
Confirming that fatigue over time did not cause decreased skill spotting, however, led to a new concern—did the earlier coding experience lead to greater skill spotting later in the process? To allay the new concern, the researcher, after having already coded all 50 episodes, returned to a randomly selected episode (episode 2) of the first show viewed, *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.), and carefully recoded it. She detected the same skills and outcomes as when she coded the episode previously. Neither fatigue nor experience appeared to have impacted her coding ability, maintaining confidence in the methodology.

Table 7*Number of Soft Skill Portrayals Coded During a TV-Fueled Thanksgiving Weekend*

Date Viewed and Coded	Order in Which the Shows Were Viewed and Coded	Show	Number of Soft Skill Portrayals Coded
November 25, 2020	Viewed first 10 shows	Superstore	47
November 26, 2020	Viewed second 10 shows	Brooklyn Nine-Nine	45
November 27, 2020	Viewed third 10 shows	The Goldbergs	42
November 28, 2020	Viewed fourth 10 shows	Mom	49
November 29, 2020	Viewed fifth 10 shows	Black-ish	69

Figure 5

Number of Skill Portrayals Coded vs. Number Assumed Coded if Fatigue Occurred



In summary, the answer to Research Question 1 is: these seven soft skills are portrayed extensively during the randomly selected episodes of the five TV comedies, some more than others. Specifically, of the 252 portrayals of soft skills identified in the 50 episodes, nearly a third of them—79—were *interpersonal skills*. There were frequent portrayals of the soft skill of *communication*, as well as the soft skill of *problem solving and critical thinking*. Of the shows viewed in this study, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) featured the most portrayals—69—far more than any of the other four shows. The 50 episodes accounted for 1,100 minutes of TV, so, on average, the soft skills were portrayed every 4 minutes. Finally, it appears that the sampling technique was appropriate, the coding instrument was reliable, and the data collection was evenly vigorous throughout the process, unmarred by the consecutive, binge-worthy concentrated TV watching.

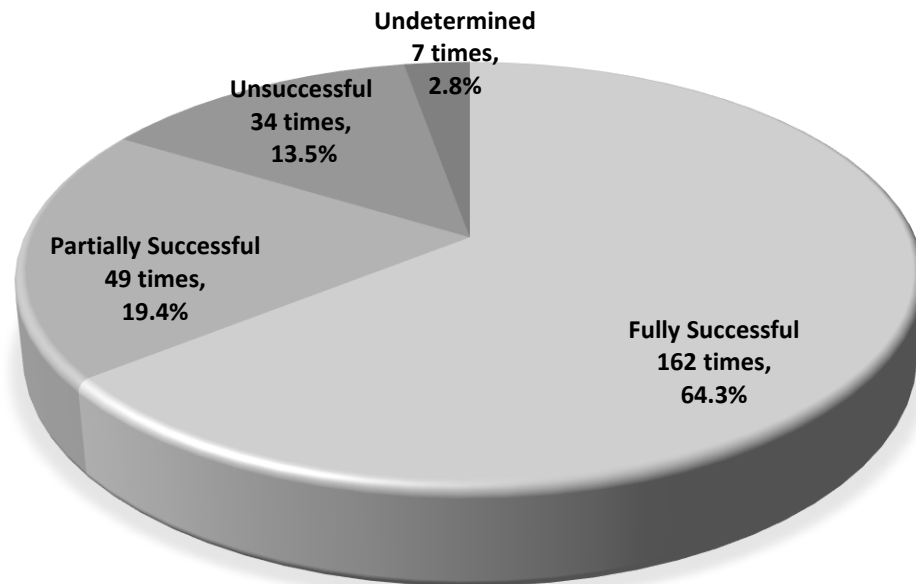
With Research Question 1 answered, the researcher then reviewed the collected data to answer Research Question 2. Research Question 2 is concerned with the outcome of those portrayals. The data was collected in a way that could, numerically, allow a reader to know how many of each type of skill led to the result that the person exercising that skill wanted, how many only partially led to the desired outcome, how many were entirely unsuccessful in resulting in the desired outcome, and for how many it was not possible to know (based on the story as it unfolded in the particular episode).

Research Question 2

Outcomes of the Characters' Use of Soft Skills in Total. When characters in the shows exercised the soft skills in this study, they were usually successful in achieving the outcome they expected. Of the 252 times a soft skill was portrayed, the character who portrayed the skill fully achieved his or her objective 162 times, or 64.3% of the time. The character who portrayed the skill partially achieved his or her objective 49 times, or 19.4% of the time. The character who portrayed the skill did not at all achieve his or her objective 34 times, or 13.5% of the time. In seven instances, or 2.8% of the time, the achievement of the objective was not able to be determined during that episode. These frequencies and percentages are listed in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Outcome of Using the Soft Skill Execution: Did the Character Successfully Achieve the Objective?



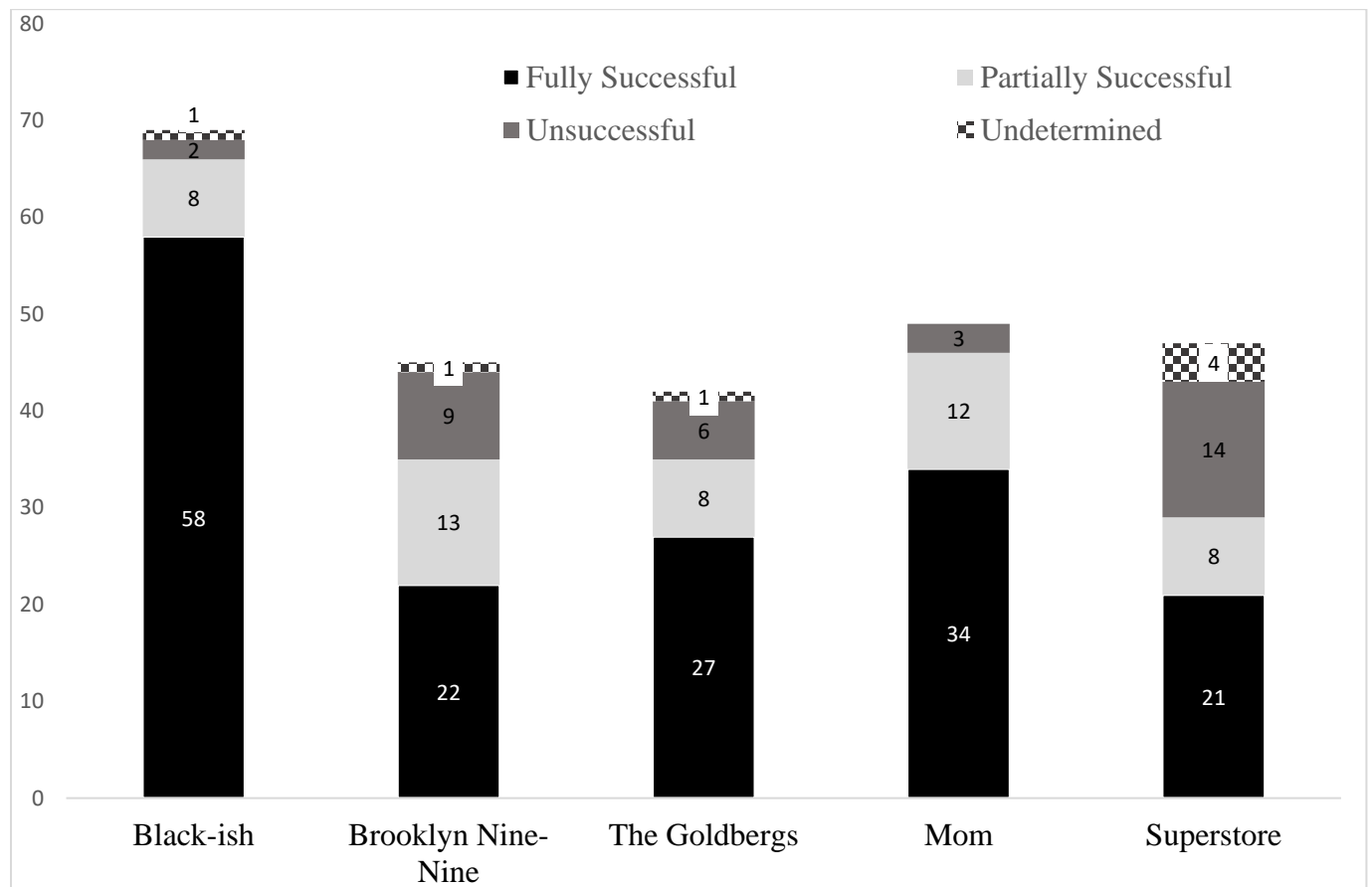
Outcomes of the Characters' Use of Soft Skills Per Show. For each soft skill portrayals, the possibilities of outcomes were: fully *successful*, *partially successful*, *unsuccessful*, or *undetermined*. In every one of the five shows, the most frequent outcome was *successful*, meaning the majority of the soft skill portrayals resulted in the characters' fully achieving their objectives. The show with the highest percentage of successful outcome scores was *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), with 58 of its 69 portrayals being fully successful, or 84%. Even the show with the fewest fully successful portrayals, *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.), showed those portrayals as fully successful in 21 of the 47 portrayals, or 45% of the time, and that was the highest percentage of all the outcomes for that show too. As an example of a fully successful outcome, in

Season 7, Episode 17 of *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), Adam wanted to communicate effectively with Bonnie about the intentions of another woman, Sam. He wanted to be honest but not upset her. He spoke with Bonnie with honesty, a gentle tone, and obvious concern, and he simply told her that she was right to be suspicious of Sam's motives. He indeed communicated effectively, so the outcome score was a 1, which was the code for fully successful.

Although *fully successful* was the most common outcome for the soft skills portrayed in every one of the five shows, there was a difference in the extent to which *fully successful* was the majority outcome. The various soft skill outcomes, per show, are depicted graphically in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Outcomes of Characters' Use of Soft Skills in Each of the Five Shows



It was notable that most of the portrayals, in total and per show, resulted in the characters' achieving what they wanted to achieve by exercising the soft skills. The researcher was also interested to know the extent to which each of the seven skills, individually, was portrayed as successful, unsuccessful, etc. The next section reveals the results of the collection of outcome data per skill.

Outcomes of Characters' Use of Soft Skills Per Skill. After sorting the data by soft skill, the researcher learned that:

- For six of the seven soft skills studied, the majority of their portrayals' outcomes were fully successful. For the soft skill *teamwork*, only 21.4% of its portrayals' outcomes were fully

successful. Although there were only 14 portrayals of *teamwork* throughout all 50 episodes and that is a limited sample size from which to generalize, half of the *teamwork* portrayals had outcomes that were only partially successful.

- *Communication* was the soft skill, the portrayals of which had the highest percentage of fully successful outcomes. In 83.3% of the instances when a character portrayed the soft skill *communication*, the character fully achieved his or her objective by communicating.

The outcomes of the portrayals for each of the seven soft skills are listed as amounts in Figure 8 and in percentages in Table 7. The undetermined score indicates that the researcher was unable to ascertain whether or not the character achieved his or her objective from the storyline in that particular show episode.

Figure 8

Number of Times the Soft Skill Portrayals Resulted in Achieving Objectives

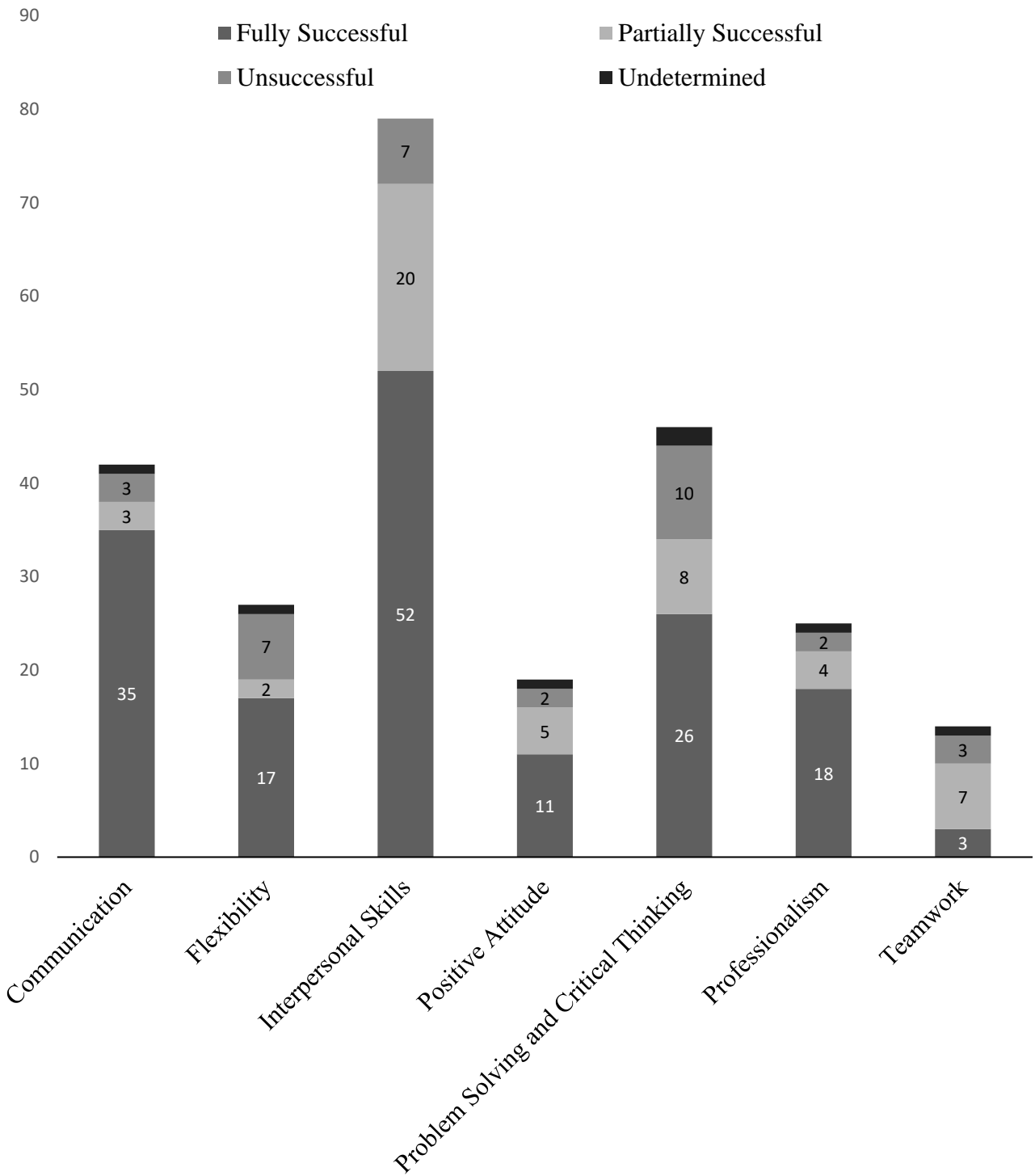


Table 8*Percentages of Soft Skill Portrayals' Outcomes*

Soft Skill	Outcome Scores			
	Fully Successful	Partially Successful	Unsuccessful	Undetermined
Communication	83.3%	7.1%	7.1%	2.4%
Flexibility	63.0%	7.4%	25.9%	3.7%
Interpersonal Skills	65.8%	25.3%	8.9%	0.0%
Positive Attitude	57.9%	26.3%	10.5%	5.3%
Problem Solving and Critical Thinking	56.5%	17.4%	21.7%	4.3%
Professionalism	72.0%	16.0%	8.0%	4.0%
Teamwork	21.4%	50.0%	21.4%	7.1%

In summary, the collection of data answered the research questions, and those answers were:

- Research Question 1: The seven soft skills being studied were portrayed extensively throughout the 50 episodes viewed in the data collection. There were 252 portrayals of the seven soft skills.
- Research Question 2: In the majority of the soft skill portrayals; that is, 83.7%, the character portraying the skill achieved his or her objective fully or partially—64.3% and 19.4%, respectively.
- *Interpersonal skills* was the soft skill that was portrayed most frequently of the seven soft skills examined in this study, and *teamwork* was the soft skill of the seven that was portrayed least frequently.

- For purposes of this study, *interpersonal skills* comprise 14 different actions. Of the 14 different actions, *helping* is the one most frequently portrayed in the five shows studied.
- Of the five shows studied, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) was the show that portrayed, on average, the greatest variety of the seven soft skills.
- Of the five shows viewed and coded, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) was the show that had the most soft skill portrayals. *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present) was the show that had the least number of soft skill portrayals.

The numbers themselves are interesting and, for the researcher, comprise a compelling story about viewing soft skill portrayals in TV comedies. Scholars, however, are also interested in the interpretations of these numeric revelations. The next section, Chapter 5, includes a discussion of those interpretations and such additional information as the limitations, practical and theoretical implications, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

Analysis

As mentioned in the literature review, scholars have warned that behaviors learned by viewing and modeling those carried out by TV characters are often negative, such as the need for immediate gratification rather than doing the work first and enjoying the rewards later (Elias, 2009). Seemingly absent in the literature is a discussion of the possibility that viewing fictional TV characters' behaviors could have a positive impact. An interesting question is, "Do people model prosocial behaviors that they observe on TV?" Because research has shown that people are already spending four and a half hours per day watching TV (Richter, 2019), perhaps a closer look at the possibility of TV's being a source of positive behavior learning is warranted. Before prosocial behavior can be viewed and modeled, though, researchers have to first determine if such behaviors are depicted on TV.

Taking a fresh approach to this issue, the researcher chose to study five TV comedies, selected through a methodical, research-based approach, including random sampling and pilot-tested coding (detailed in Chapter 3). The particular prosocial skills, the TV portrayals of which were of interest, were also selected through an amassing of the existing literature. Because this work was conducted with a focus on the business and employability angle, the term of choice for the skills in question was *soft skills*, and the study of the literature included referring to the papers, surveys, and studies of business educators and employers, as well as educational scholars.

The overall premise for the study was that employers find that employees lack soft skills, workforce-ready people are watching TV comedies anyway, and could such a popular medium be utilized as part of curriculum in teaching soft skills. In order to know if proceeding in such a direction could be logical, it was necessary for the researcher to know the extent that soft skills are

portrayed by characters on TV comedies. Consequently, the first research question asks to what extent and how are soft skills are portrayed in episodes of five prime-time TV comedies.

An interesting unknown, at the outset of the study was: even if the show's characters portrayed the soft skills, do the episodes' storylines show the effectiveness of exercising such skills? Do the characters, for example, communicate and show flexibility and a positive attitude but still do not accomplish whatever they wanted to accomplish through the exercising of those skills? Keeping in mind the eventual application of future research commensurate with this study, it became important to learn the extent to which the soft skill portrayals were successful in achieving the desired outcome in the researched shows. Therefore, the second research question guiding the work became: to what extent did the use of soft skills lead to the characters' desired outcomes?

With the research questions crystallized, the proposed study approved, and the coding methodology deemed reliable, the researcher viewed the 50 TV episodes, coded the portrayals and their outcomes, and analyzed the resultant data. Those results were detailed in Chapter 4. In this chapter, the analysis of those results is discussed.

One of the first areas for such an analysis is typically a step-by-step comparison of the findings to those mentioned in previous literature. The researcher did not find any previous literature detailing the portrayal of soft skills on TV shows, but she did find a study that detailed portrayals of health messages on the TV show *Seinfeld* (Trunfio, 2005), one that detailed portrayals of female law enforcement on TV (Booker, 2018), and one that examined the news content portrayed on *The Daily Show* (Lee, 2008), as well as investigative studies detailing students' subsequent interest and academic outcomes after viewing certain TV shows (Beavers, 2011; Quain et al., 2018; Tyler, 2009). The results of this study were similar to the results discussed in these studies about TV show content because they show the content in question was indeed portrayed in

the TV shows being explored. The results of this study differ because they involve soft skills and not the particular content analyzed in the other studies.

One connection to the existing literature that does involve a similar set of skills is the seminal body of experiments conducted in the early 1960s by psychologist Albert Bandura (Mazziotta et al., 2011). Bandura observed how children behaved after watching videotapes of adults behaving aggressively toward a Bobo (bounce-back) doll with rewards, with punishments, and with no consequences. He found a relationship between the behaviors the children witnessed in the videotapes and their own subsequent behaviors (Mazziotta, et al.). Bandura, more than 60 years before the conduct of this study, posited that people learn from other people by observing those behaviors being portrayed and seeing the results of those portrayals, and then model their behavior after what they observed (Mazziotta, et al.). It is documented in the literature that people model what they see, particularly from people Bandura noted as “relevant others” (p. 257). The question is, can society, and educators in particular, use that modeling for good, such as imitating prosocial behaviors? In popular TV comedies, many characters are *relevant others*. They are characters portrayed by human actors whom viewers find similar, relatable, and therefore relevant. Can watching TV comedies in which these relevant characters act out soft skills and then achieve their objectives by doing so—being rewarded, as Bandura (Mazziotta, et al.) saw it, similarly lead to the viewers’ then demonstrating soft (prosocial) skills? It is the researcher’s hope that this study connects with such venerable existing studies as Bandura’s and then expands on them by examining the portrayals of soft skills in TV comedies, a newer, popular version of those 1960s videotapes. Perhaps, with sufficient soft skill portrayal and sufficient positive outcomes shown after those portrayals, viewers would model those skills, as the children in Bandura’s (Mazziotta, et al.) studies did.

The next part of this chapter includes a discussion of the specific results of this study's data collection, beginning with the findings with respect to Research Question 1.

Interpreting the Findings of Research Question 1

The raw coding data were organized, sorted, summed, and frequency-counted in order to find meaning while answering the research questions. The first research question asked to what extent and how soft skills were portrayed in the TV comedies that were viewed. The data revealed that they were portrayed extensively, in total and in each show. In total, there were 252 soft skill portrayals noted in 1,100 minutes of TV viewing. This result is that a viewer, watching these particular five shows, could expect to see a portrayal of one of the seven soft skills, on average, every four minutes. The result could possibly be extrapolated to a larger pool of similarly situated media (other current, popular TV comedies, perhaps), meaning a viewer may be able to see a soft skill portrayed every few minutes on many TV comedies.

Differences and Meanings of Portrayals Per Show

Examining the data more closely revealed that there were differences, among the five shows, in the extent to which soft skills were portrayed. The show *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) alone featured 69 of the 252 portrayals of soft skills, a frequency 41% - 64% greater than that in the other shows. The other four studied shows each featured between 42 and 49 of the portrayals, quite statistically similar, quelling any attempts to associate the higher instance of soft skills in *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) with such factors as *Black-ish's* (Anderson et al.) predominantly home setting of its episodes or the major roles of women in its cast. Most of *Black-ish's* (Anderson et al.) storylines involve a family, but so do those on *The Goldbergs* (Goldberg et al., 2013-present). *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) features diverse characters, but so does *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present). Even if one considers the angle that *Black-ish*

(Anderson et al.), although a comedy, often tackles serious subjects in an attempt to correlate that fact with its extensive portrayal of soft skills, one would realize that *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present) does as well—in nearly every episode.

One possibility for an explanation could involve the intelligent connections to history, culture, and society that *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) makes. The show has won not only entertainment awards but community awards as well. Perhaps the award-winning plots connect to enhanced tapping into such aspects as relevance, comprehension, appreciation, and widespread popularity. The show is the only one of the five that has a spinoff(s), and *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) has not one, but two successful spinoffs on the air today—*Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present) and *Mixed-ish* (Anderson et al., 2019-present). Perhaps the show presents something particularly engaging to a wide audience, with soft skills somewhat playing a role. Are soft skills portrayed extensively in the show because they are so needed in today's society and workplace, and that is one of the reasons the show is successful, or in an opposite possibility, does the success give the writers a wide berth from which to explore skills not often a subject matter of TV show plots?

Finally, this particular show may have so many soft skill portrayals because it features a nonhegemonic society with diverse characters representing minority cultures—people who sometimes need soft skills to navigate life in general. This discussion provides no one definitive explanation of why *Black-ish* features so many more soft skill portrayals than the other four shows. It merely confirms this fact.

Differences and Meanings of Portrayals Per Skill

In addition to the differences in the number of soft skill portrayals per show, there were also differences in the number of soft skill portrayals themselves. One skill, *interpersonal skills*,

accounted for 79 of the 252 soft skill portrayals. One reason that this particular skill dominated the frequency distribution may be that it was the skill with the greatest number of sub-skills, even within its stated, operational definition for this study. With 14 components listed as comprising *interpersonal skills*, such as listening and showing empathy, it is likely that portrayals of *interpersonal skills* were so frequent because so many different actions constituted *interpersonal skills*.

The second- and third-most frequently portrayed soft skills were (1) problem solving and critical thinking with 46 portrayals and (2) communication with 42 portrayals. One reason that *problem solving* was so prevalent in these shows could be that these shows, by design, were selected in part because of their widely diversified characters of different backgrounds, different professional levels, different races, different sexual orientations, different marital statuses, different able-bodied statuses, different citizenship statuses, different ages, different socioeconomic statuses, different genders, and more. The varying characters possibly lent themselves well to affording the writers the broad lens to create stories rich with problems and the need for solving them. A boring group of similarly situated people may not provide a basis of dynamic and interesting problems to solve.

One reason that communication was so prevalent in these shows may be that they are all situation comedies. They are not action-packed, racecar-driving, or building-explosion stories. Their premise and their well for jokes are conversation, arguments, questioning, teaching, etc.—all modes of communication—rather than jokes about actions.

Meanings of Which Skills Were Portrayed Most Frequently in Which Shows

The soft skill category that was most frequently portrayed overall, *interpersonal skills*, was, not surprisingly, the soft skill that was most frequently portrayed in every one of the five shows.

Overall, *problem solving and critical thinking* and *communication* were the soft skills that were the second- and third-most portrayed. They were also the second- and third-most frequently portrayed skills in four of the shows individually. In the fifth show, they were the second- and fourth-most frequently portrayed skills. Across the studied shows, the most frequently portrayed soft skills were, generally, the same. The overall rankings were largely reflected in the individual shows.

With a relatively small number of shows in the sample—five—it is expected that the overall rankings are mostly reflected in the individual shows. It may be of equal interest, then, to examine the meaning of the portrayal of the *least*-frequently-portrayed skills in particular shows. For example, there were only 25 total portrayals of *professionalism* across all 50 episodes. Why, then, were more than half the *professionalism* portrayals in just two shows—*Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) and *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present)? One reason may be that *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) is the only show of the five that features lead characters who are college-educated and working in highly paid high-status careers (an anesthesiologist and her California marketing executive husband), so demonstrations of professionalism, in connection with their work, within their show's storylines, is likely. In her role as a medical expert, in one episode, Bow, from a professional standpoint, explained to Dre that Pops may benefit from therapy or medication while trying to deal with his recent breakup with Lynette. In another episode, Bow,

again from a professional standpoint, explained to her son that he should stop paying attention to baseless conspiracy theories and get the flu shot.

Another relatively infrequently portrayed skill overall was *positive attitude*. Why then were there portrayals in *Black-ish*? A possible reason *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present) had portrayals of positive attitude is that most of the main characters are high achievers, in their own professional work or in school. Perhaps the episodes' storylines follow the real-life adage that a positive outlook is one of the necessary and powerful predictors of success.

A reason *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) may have proportionately more portrayals of the otherwise infrequently portrayed *professionalism* is that it is the only one of two shows of the five that is entirely workplace-based. With every one of the show's plots centered in a work environment, filled with people of all executive, managerial, and staff levels, it is expected that there would be portrayals of professionalism. Besides *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.), it is the only show in which some of the main characters are white-collar business people.

In a similar vein, it may be of interest to explore the meaning of the appearance of the soft skill that was least frequently portrayed—*teamwork*. Portrayals of *teamwork* occurred in only 14 of the total soft skill portrayals across all 50 episodes. Characters in three shows had only three instances each of *teamwork*, and one show had no evidence of *teamwork*. Only one show had more than three *teamwork* portrayals, and that was *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Goor et al., 2013-present). One possible explanation is that this is the only show of the five in which the main characters' jobs and lives in the show depend on teamwork. The police officers and detectives are constantly in dangerous, violent situations and frequently play one part of an armed group of individuals doing their jobs, such as pursuing a crime suspect. The relatively higher frequency of *teamwork* portrayals in the one show of the five that has mostly male lead characters brings to mind studies

that show the lopsided statistics of how many more boys than girls play team sports and the future benefits, academic and otherwise, that boys gain by playing team sports (Beadleston et al., 2019; Pedersen & Seidman, 2004). These studies appear to underscore the fact that team-necessitated work such as police work is still dominated by (team-accustomed) males—only 12% of local police officers in the U.S. are women (Clickinbeard, 2020). So, perhaps this police show has more *teamwork* portrayals because it features more men.

Another reason that the skill *teamwork* was so infrequently portrayed may be that two of the shows were workplace comedies, and a workplace team's not functioning successfully is integral to a comedic plot. Alternatively, *teamwork* may have been so infrequently portrayed in the studied shows because perhaps *teamwork* in real life may be a somewhat infrequent occurrence. It is unknown the actual reason(s) for *teamwork's* being the least frequently portrayed soft skills in these studied shows.

In addition to examining which soft skills were portrayed most frequently in the shows and which soft skills were in which shows, it is also of interest to know which shows included the greatest variety of the soft skills being studied and to understand if there is any meaning underlying that statistic. That element of the study's results is explored in the next section.

Meaning of Which Shows Included the Greatest Variety of Skills

After analyzing the coding, the researcher noted that the show that included the greatest variety of the seven soft skills was *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present). With 69 of the total 252 soft skill portrayals' having occurred on that show, it is expected that this show would have portrayals that span most or all of the seven soft skills. That six of the seven shows also had portrayals of all seven soft skills, however, was not expected. The only show that did not have even one portrayal of a particular skill was *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present). Not once in the 10 coded

episodes of *Mom* (Lorre) was there evidence of *teamwork*. Referring back to the earlier discussion about *teamwork*'s typically greater prevalence among males than females, it may make sense that *Mom* (Lorre), with its nearly all-female cast, would have little or no portrayals of *teamwork*.

Interestingly, the seven soft skills were selected for this study because they were the ones most frequently cited by business educators, employers, and scholars as the ones most critical for success in employability. In this chapter of reflection, stepping back for a moment and eyeing the big picture, one would see that the very skills the stakeholders named as important are ones that are widely portrayed in four of the five randomly selected TV comedies in this study. Extrapolating that to the larger pool of comedies or TV shows in general could mean that the soft skills stakeholders want people to see and model are readily available for view in some of the most popular TV shows.

As shown in Table 5, in each of the coded episodes of *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), the researcher observed, on average, 4.8 of the seven skills. In second place, was *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present). In each coded episode, there were, on average 3.8 of the seven soft skills portrayed.

A summary of the findings of Research Question 1 would be that soft skills are portrayed extensively in the five shows in the study, and, of the five shows, *Black-ish* (Anderson et al.) featured portrayals of all seven skills and featured more total portrayals of those skills than the other shows.

Interpersonal skills was the particular skill that was portrayed most frequently throughout all the shows, and that may be because it comprises 14 different sub-skills. Of the sub-skills, the one that was portrayed most frequently was *helping*. In this chapter, possible reasons were suggested for the show *Black-ish*'s (Anderson, et al.) having the most portrayals and the greatest

variety of portrayals among the five shows. The show features lead characters who are professionals (typically lending themselves well to showing professionalism and problem solving), some males (typically demonstrating teamwork), and members of a large, active family, spanning different ages, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses (groups of different people co-residing possibly adept at such getting-along abilities as communication, flexibility, and interpersonal skills).

Interpreting the Findings of Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asks to what extent, in the coded episodes, did the soft skill portrayals lead to the characters' expected outcomes? A discussion of the answer to this question is in the next section.

Differences and Meanings of Outcomes of Using Soft Skills in Total

In 162 of the 252 soft skill portrayals (64.3% of the time) in the 50 coded episodes, the character used the skill and fully achieved what he or she wanted to achieve by using the skill. In 49 portrayals, the character partially achieved the desired outcome. So, in 211 portrayals (83.7% of the time), the characters achieved their desired outcomes.

In only 34 portrayals (13.5% of the time), the characters did not achieve their desired outcomes. In some of those cases, the outcome was not achieved in that particular episode but was in a subsequent episode or in a different way, equally satisfying to the character. In only 7 portrayals (2.8% of the time), the researcher was unable to determine the success or failure of using the skill from the show's content.

The characters' achieving their desired outcome by exercising soft skills was important to the long-term implications of this study. The researcher had actually predicted wrongly that, because these shows were comedies, it may make for funnier scripts if the characters do what is

considered right and then fail anyway. She was concerned that the results would show that most of the portrayals of soft skills would show the skills' being enacted but the outcomes' being the opposite because that is, simply, a more humorous turn of events. The study results, however, were significantly different than her expectation. The larger interpretation is that, if workforce-ready individuals view these shows, they will see demonstrations of soft skills that experts deem critical, and they will see popular TV characters' benefiting from their use of such soft skills.

Differences and Meanings of Soft Skill Outcomes Per Show

In each of the individual five shows, in more than 60% of its soft skill portrayals, the characters achieved the outcomes they desired when exercising the soft skill. The show with the lowest overall outcome achievement score was *Superstore* (Spitzer et al., 2015-present), with 61.7% of the soft skill portrayals' fully or partially leading to the characters' desired outcomes. There may be some correlative relationship between the fact that most of the storylines in *Superstore* (Spitzer et al.) are outlandish—an employee locks her bickering bosses in a cage, a jealous ex-girlfriend attempts to kill the new girlfriend's cat, and employees build an escape route through a sewage system to free their coworker being detained by ICE. Because most of the scenarios are funny but unrealistic, perhaps the setup would not lend itself well to effectively using a (rather serious) soft skill to achieve a normal, positive result. It is sometimes considered funnier when someone either tries to do the right thing and fails or attempts to do the wrong thing and fails.

The two shows with the highest overall outcome achievement scores were *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014-present), with characters using soft skills and fully or partially achieving their desired outcomes 95.7% of the time, and *Mom* (Lorre, 2013-present), with characters using soft skills and fully or partially achieving their desired outcomes 93.9% of the time. Both of

these shows have strong, high-achieving, intelligent women in lead roles. Perhaps having women exercise many of the soft skills, simply because they dominate the occurrences in these two shows, led to many of the outcomes of those skills being positive.

The researcher found it thought-provoking to analyze the possible meanings of the differences in soft skill outcomes between the shows. It is similarly intriguing to analyze the differences between the outcomes of the exercising of each of the individual soft skills and to try to understand the meaning of those differences. Such an exploration is in the next section.

Differences and Meanings of Soft Skill Outcomes Per Skill

For purposes of practical application of this research, it would be beneficial to know if some or all of the particular soft skills, of the seven examined in this study, led to higher levels of the characters' achieving their desired outcomes. If, for example, only one of the seven soft skills was the reason for the overall positive achievement outcomes, when looking at the shows, then that tells educators that they may want to focus solely on that skill if including soft-skills-as-portrayed-on-TV in classroom instruction.

The random example, just mentioned, of perhaps only one soft skill's being connected with high achievement scores, is actually quite incorrect. In the portrayals of all seven soft skills, the desired outcomes were fully or partially achieved in the majority of instances. When there were portrayals of *interpersonal skills*, the characters fully or partially achieved their desired outcomes from exercising those skills 91.1% of the time. Because *interpersonal skills* also happens to be the soft skill that was most frequently portrayed in the shows, in the vast majority of cases, viewers, when watching these shows, would see the positive results (characters' desired outcomes fully or partially achieved) relative to the use of soft skills in general and *interpersonal skills* in particular.

When a character used the skill *communication*, he or she fully or partially achieved the desired outcome 90.5% of the time. When a show character used the skills *professionalism*, *positive attitude*, or *flexibility*, he or she fully or partially achieved the desired outcome 88%, 84.2%, and 70.4% of the time, respectively. Even *teamwork*, the portrayals of which led to the characters' fully achieving their desired outcomes only 21.4% of the time, led to the characters' partially achieving their desired outcomes 50% of the time. See Table 8 for details and to see this analysis graphically.

Consequently, the majority of the time when soft skills were portrayed, the characters achieved their desired outcomes, completely or at least partially. The researcher's fear that the whole study would turn in a different direction because the inherent nature of comedies would mean that characters would mostly fail in their actions, including soft skill execution, was an unfounded one.

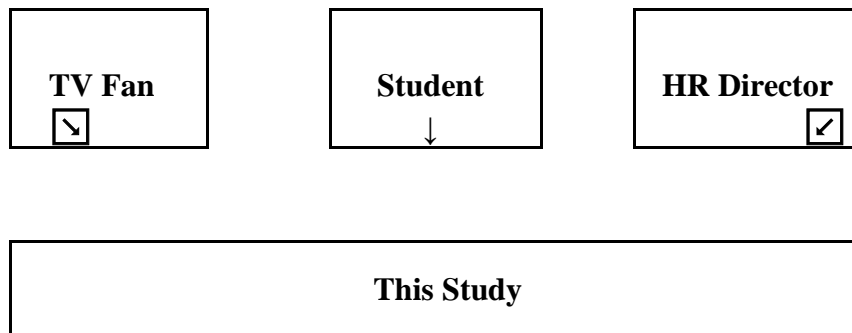
With the happier results—that soft skills were indeed portrayed extensively in the shows, and those portrayals most often led to the characters' desired outcomes, the researcher submits this study as another piece of the complex puzzle of techniques, curricula, technology, and media that educators and business leaders rely on to develop a competent and productive workforce. Regarding that rosy image, the researcher developed a list of implications of this study for the practice of education and workforce training and for the theories discussed in this study. Those two lists appear in the next section.

Implications for Practice

The researcher arrived at this study from three different perspectives that dovetailed into one overarching theme. She is a lifelong ardent fan of TV. Having grown up financially insecure, for her, TV, when the family occasionally had one, provided entertainment and escape. TV

positively influenced her through the modeling of financially independent women, educated women, women of means, and people in general living with humor and satisfaction.

She has also been a motivated student, driven to academic achievement simply out of fear of returning to poverty. During her more than 50 years of formal education, she enjoyed stimulating, life-changing classes as well as boring, tortuous ones. She also worked, during the last 40 years, in human resources (HR) and employee benefits. She, like other HR directors throughout the world, noticed a shortage of soft skills among employees and the frustrations that shortage causes management and employees alike.



She wondered if there could be a connection among the (1) ever-present need to find interesting ways to engage students, (2) the availability and popularity of TV shows, especially humorous ones, and (3) the need for workforce-ready individuals to see soft skills being exercised and done so with success, so they could observe and potentially model such skill execution in academics, on the job, and in life. Could watching TV characters portraying soft skills be beneficial to society? Would watching TV and reflecting on it in classes be an effective way to influence and develop soft skills in students? The first step was to learn if soft skills are even prevalent in TV comedies, and that is what this study accomplished. The researcher added a small piece to the literature. The possibilities for implications for practice are:

- Use this study as a catalyst for additional research to build onto the literature on educating with popular TV shows.
- Use this study, in the workplace, as a basis for developing and implementing a professional development program, in which employees view TV comedies, particular workplace-based comedies, and then reflect on and discuss the situations that were resolved or not resolved with the use of soft skills.
- Develop a test-case curriculum for teaching high school or college students about the importance of mastering certain soft skills, including the showing of one 22-minute episode, in the classroom, once a week, for example, followed by in-person (or digitally as necessitated by the current pandemic and social distancing recommendations) discussion.
- Survey the students after the class, asking if they believe they benefited from the subject of soft skills in general and from watching and discussing the TV episode in particular.
- Expand on this study by using age-appropriate TV comedies to teach or bridge the teaching of soft skills.
- Email the writers of current TV shows, enclosing a copy of this study, asking if they would consider scripting an episode about soft skills, the shortage in the workplace, and perhaps a related humorous attention-getting angle.

Implications for Theory

The theoretical frameworks that guided this study were social learning theory and human capital theory.

Learning theory involves the principles that explain how a person acquires information. Social learning theory, in particular, explains that people learn by observing and modeling others' actions (Deaton, 2015; Yilmaz et al., 2019). The theme of this study was to

systematically observe and record a particular behavior; that is, the exercise of seven particular soft skills, on seven TV comedy shows, code how many of those behaviors were portrayed in the shows, and code to what extent the shows' characters achieved their objectives in exercising those skills, with the assumption that people are more likely to model their behavior after an observed behavior if that action is perceived as successful. The implication for social learning theory is that another layer could be added onto the literature. If funny, popular TV shows that people enjoy watching anyway portray the use of soft skills, the shortage of which is detailed in Chapter 2 of this study, then perhaps the viewers will learn and model the soft skill execution. When a viewer sees a TV character maintain a positive attitude and then get the job interview he wanted or sees a TV character act in a professional manner and then earn the promotion she wanted, the viewer may be likely to prove some of the premise of social learning theory, learn a few soft skills, and perhaps benefit in his or her academic life, work life, or life in general.

Human capital theory explains that individuals will invest in education and training if they are young enough and expect to have enough years to see that investment pay off (McKernan & Radcliffe, 2002). According to this theory, individuals are seen as investing in themselves—in their own human capital. Each person makes a judgement call and weighs the total cost for education and training against the additional expected income that is likely to result from the education and training.

People who complete high school, and more so, college, invest in their own human capital. If they learn, in or outside of school, soft skills, they will typically benefit from their investment in learning soft skills by enhancing their likely employability. Also, if they learn soft skills while they are still in school, their soft skill development provides another advantage—it likely enhances their academic performance.

Employers, as well as students, benefit because more students' having soft skills means a larger pool of qualified employees to meet their hiring needs.

Linking the two theories framing this study—social learning theory and human capital theory—the focus of the research became (1) people learn from observing and watching (social learning theory), and (2) people can learn soft skills, in particular, as they observe TV, as one way to invest in their own capital and employability (human capital theory).

Because the results of this study show that soft skill portrayals are extensive in these five TV shows, the implication for theory is that TV comedies can be an additional tool to be added to the few teaching efforts being made to enhance students' soft skills, and the students are likely to remain engaged throughout the lessons because the shows are popular and likely to be attention-keeping.

Suggestions for further research, as detailed in the next section, include using other media, genres, or seasons and learning if other behaviors or phenomena are portrayed on TV.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study takes a step in filling the gap in the literature about soft skill portrayals in popular TV comedies. It does not, however, go far enough. Further research could add to current knowledge by:

- Using the coding instrument to learn:
 - The extent to which soft skills are portrayed in other media, such as movies and theatrical productions.
 - The extent to which soft skills are portrayed in TV shows other than comedies, including dramas, documentaries, or other TV genre such as news, reality, or competition shows.

- The extent to which soft skills were portrayed in shows aired in countries other than in the U.S. or shows aired in TV seasons other than the 2019-2020 season.
- The extent to which another skill, such as health or safety knowledge, is portrayed on a particular popular medium.
- Adding another layer to the coding and analysis to learn if the soft skills are portrayed more frequently or with more successful outcomes by TV characters of particular ages, races, genders, orientations, identifications, socioeconomic status, able-bodied status, etc. or if soft skills are portrayed more frequently or with more successful outcomes in certain types of shows, in shows aired on particular channels, in shows that are workplace based, or in shows scripted by particular writers.
- Expanding the study to include a different sample of TV comedies.
- Expanding the study to examine more episodes than just the 50 examined in this study.
- Conducting the same study but on *interpersonal skills* only, exploring more deeply into the 14 component skills of *interpersonal skills*, as defined in this study.
- Expanding the study to include TV shows specifically chosen by a sample group of students, rather than an Excel randomizing formula (perhaps a group of students for whom the soft skill viewing and developing curriculum would subsequently be designed).
- Conducting a follow-up investigative study; for instance, one involving a control group and a treatment group, with the treatment group viewing soft skill portrayals on TV comedies.

Limitations

The generalizability of this study is limited because its involved only one type of popular media; that is, TV comedies; and by including only five series to analyze. The results of this study may be applicable only to TV shows and possibly not to movies or live theater, for example.

The study results are valid but may be valid only as far as TV comedies. It may be that the results are valid only for comedies and not so much for dramas, documentaries, or other TV genres such as news, reality, or competition shows.

The results could also be limited to just these five shows that were studied. Perhaps the results would have varied substantially if five different shows were studied or if a greater number of shows were analyzed.

The results could also be narrow and applicable only to U.S. TV shows and not those based in other countries or only to shows initially broadcast in the 2019-2020 U.S. TV season.

Finally, generalizability may be limited to findings related to the portrayal of soft skills only. Perhaps the findings would be materially different if the researcher wanted to learn, for example, the extent to which healthy habits are portrayed on TV, the extent to which references to religion are portrayed on TV, or the extent to which grammatically incorrect language is portrayed on TV.

Conclusion

This study builds on previous content analyses that explored specific subject matter portrayed on TV shows. New to the literature is this exploration of the portrayal, on five specific TV comedies, of seven particular soft skills that scholars, business educators, and employers deem critical for success in academics, employment, and life in general. This study's results revealed that the seven soft skills are extensively portrayed in the TV comedies, or at least in the 50 episodes that were sampled in this study, and that most of those portrayals led to the characters' achieving what they wanted to achieve by exercising those soft skills.

This study represents only one more building block on the vast extant literature involving learning from TV. One of the purposes at the outset of this work was to test the notion that there is good to be found on TV.

If the identification and coding of the 252 soft skill portrayals in this study and the accompanying analysis of those portrayals become a useful tool for developing soft skill curricula in academics or present practical groundwork for further research, then the educational community may want to heed the words of medical ethics professor Dr. Jeffrey Spike who, recognizing the power of teaching important skills with popular TV, recommended, “My advice to the faculty and the students thus is: Watch more TV” (Spike, 2008, p. 12).

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Appendix A

Analysis and Consolidation of Soft Skills Identified in the Literature

Soft Skill Category	Skills in the Category	Terminology used in three key studies		
		Robles (2012)	Cukier (2015)	NACE (2019)
Communication	Communication	✓	✓	
	Oral and written communication			✓
Flexibility	Flexibility	✓		
Interpersonal skills	Courtesy	✓		
	Interpersonal skills	✓		
	Interpersonal skills and intercultural sensitivity		✓	
Positive attitude	Positive attitude	✓		
Problem solving	Critical thinking		✓	✓
	Problem solving		✓	✓
Professionalism	Integrity	✓		
	Professionalism	✓		✓
	Responsibility	✓		
	Work ethic	✓		✓
Teamwork	Team work and working with others		✓	
	Teamwork	✓		
	Teamwork and collaboration			✓

Appendix B

Definitions of Soft Skills Used in the Study

Soft Skill	Definition
Communication	How we give and receive information, ideas, and opinions (can include verbal, aural, non-verbal, written, and visual)
Flexibility	Being able to customize or adapt according to the situation's needs
Interpersonal skills	Being considerate, courteous, and polite
Positive attitude	Being upbeat, enthusiastic, and willing to learn and showing interest
Problem solving and critical thinking	Being able to analyze challenges, use facts, and find solutions
Professionalism	Behaving with responsibility and integrity, being accountable, and demonstrating excellence
Teamwork	Working effectively with other people to accomplish a task(s) (can include cooperating, contributing, and respecting teammates)

Note. Definitions for all terms except interpersonal skills are summarized from the Department of Labor's Skills to Pay the Bills curriculum (Office of Disability, 2012). Definition for interpersonal skills is summarized from the Lovett & Jones (2008) survey.

Appendix C**Articles Describing Teaching with Popular Media**

Article	Description
Bloch (2011)	Teaching job interviewing skills with TV show clips
Bumpus (2005)	Teaching management principles other than diversity with racially inclusionary films
Fisher (2012)	Teaching evolving psychology and evolution with TV show <i>Dallas</i>
Gioia & Brass (1986)	Teaching college students, in general, with TV
Hickey (2018)	Teaching psychodynamic psychotherapy concepts with the film <i>Frozen</i>
Pehlke et al. (2009)	Teaching fathers' behaviors and life lessons about race with TV shows
Ruud et al. (2017)	Teaching introductory contract law with the movie <i>Draft Day</i>
Spike (2008)	Teaching ethics and professionalism to medical students with the TV show <i>Scrubs</i>

Appendix D**Investigative Studies Measuring Understanding or Appreciation of Subjects****with TV Shows**

Study	Investigation and Results
Beavers (2011)	Measured political science college students' increase in interest and involvement in political science after viewing the TV show <i>The Daily Show</i>
Quain et al. (2018)	Measured hospitality college students' increased test scores and enjoyment of learning method after viewing the TV show <i>The Profit</i>
Tyler et al. (2009)	Measured business college students' increased interest and perception of their understanding of management concepts with TV shows

Appendix E

Premise of the Five Sampled TV Shows in this Study

1. *Black-ish*

Black-ish is about a financially successful African American family comprising an anesthesiologist mom, an advertising executive dad, their four children, and the dad's live-in parents. They live in a predominantly white neighborhood in a wealthy California suburb. Many of the episodes' plots revolve around the dad's concerns that his family has assimilated too much with general culture and his efforts to create a sense of black cultural identity for his family, or at least one that is close, or "black-ish." Although a comedy, the show's plotlines frequently delve into serious topics about race, parenting, and politics.

2. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*

Brooklyn Nine-Nine is about the detectives and officers who work in the 99th police precinct in Brooklyn, New York. The captain tries to manage his staff, including a talented but immature detective who is accustomed to doing whatever he wants. The show is a comedy that rarely addresses serious topics.

3. *The Goldbergs*

The Goldbergs is based on the show's creator's growing up in 1980s small town Jenkintown, Pennsylvania. The Jewish middle-class family comprises an overprotective, over-involved, loving mom, her husband and live-in dad, and her three children, the youngest of whom enjoys videotaping the family during their everyday activities. Many of the episodes involve the children's typical teenage challenges. The show is a comedy that rarely deals with serious subjects.

4. *Mom*

Mom is about a young, financially struggling single mother who is recovering from alcohol and drug addiction. She works as a waitress in a small California town. She lives with two children and her own mother, who is also recovering from alcohol addiction. Although the show is a comedy, it occasionally makes underlying commentary about the difficulty of recovery from addiction.

5. *Superstore*

Superstore is about the employees who work in a big-box store in St. Louis, Missouri. This comedy offers hilarious commentary on workplace situations, rules, and relationships. It does not make serious statements but rather illustrates the humor.

Appendix F
Coding Instrument

Identifying Data		Show	Black-ish		
Coder number	1	Season number	3		
Date coded	10/17/2020	Season episode number	6		
Date episode originally aired	11/9/2016	Series episode number	54		
Episode name	Jack of all Trades	IMDb storyline	Dre and Bow try to accept that Jack may have a blue-collar future.		
Episode Data		Portrayal of Skills	Did Skill Lead to Desired Outcome?		
			Yes fully = 1 Yes partially = .5 No = -1 Undetermined = 0		
			A	B	C
1. Communication		A. Bow and Dre explained to Dre's parents why they want Jack to have a profession, not a trade. They are not convincing to Dre's parents. B. Bow and Dre talked with each other, analyzing their reasons for their preference. They recognize their motives but do not sway Jack toward a profession.	-1	0.5	
2. Flexibility		Dre and Bow began to realize that they should allow Jack to just be happy and choose his own career.	1		
3. Interpersonal skills					
4. Positive attitude		Jack is enthusiastic about a trade and enjoys beginning to learn about it.	1		
5. Problem solving and critical thinking		Pops begins teaching Jack plumbing and carpentry skills	1		
6. Professionalism					
7. Teamwork		A. Bow and Dre each try to show Jack the advantages of a professional career. B. While at Dre's job, Jack works with a custodian and learns about a maintenance career and enjoys the work.	-1	1	

Additional coding information, including the entire coding journal, is available from the author by emailing: Jacquelyn.Bader@cjbinc.com