

**“It Matters Who You Are”:
Parenting Styles in S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra**

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Parenting and parenting styles remain under-explored topics in Whedon studies. Jes Batts set the tone for examination of the families and familial relationships in his book, *Blood Relations*, where he examined the chosen families and the roles of the characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004) in their chosen familial structures, including the complex depictions of parents and parenthood in the two series. Cynthia Bowers examined what she terms the “problematic parenting” of Buffy by her watcher Rupert Giles and her mother, Joyce Summers, tying it specifically to the generation divide between baby boomers and their children, in which the former address their own needs first, and the latter are forced into parenting their parents (Bowers). In *Sex and the Slayer*, Lorna Jowett addresses these

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particular issues and complex relationship patterns within Buffy's reimagining of family structures away from "traditional," "mostly corrupt" (Busse, quoted in Jowett 168) nuclear family set-ups (Jowett 167-190). Gwen Symonds' discussion of Angel's son Connor in *Angel* suggests that parenting Connor was always going to be difficult. Even if Connor had not grown up in a hell dimension, rebellion against "the mission" in order to develop his own identity would have been inevitable, and is yet another Whedonverse example of the "fragility" of family (Symonds 155-165). Elizabeth Rambo's recent article on "third-culture kids" (i.e, children who have been raised outside their parents' culture due to parental military service, corporate or diplomatic positions, or missionary work [Rambo para 2]) posits that particular *Buffy* characters, including Buffy herself, fit this description (Rambo). Finally, both Samira Nadkarni and Erin Giannini have written on the parenting/family cultures within *Dollhouse* (2009-2010). Nadkarni particularly focuses on the "transgressive mothering" of Adele DeWitt (Nadkarni 81-96), while Giannini discusses how the corporate environment undermines the "chosen family" trope Battis identified (Giannini 157-175).

In a reversal that perhaps reflects Joss Whedon's limited input on the series—and harkens back to an earlier era of television—fathers play what might be considered an outsized role (rather than being most notable for their absence) within *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013- ; hereafter: *AoS*). Across five seasons, fathers or father figures include Skye/Daisy's father Cal Johnson, Hydra head Gideon Malick, Mr. Ward, John Garrett, Alastair Fitz, Glenn Talbot, and Phil Coulson. Aside from Daisy's mother Jiaying, who attempts to kill her own daughter ("S.O.S. Part 2" 2.22), it is only in Season 5 that mothers or mother figures take a more prominent role, including central characters Jemma Simmons and Melinda May. If, as David Greenwalt suggested, *Buffy* was about "how hard it is to be a woman," and *Angel*, "how hard it is to be a man" (Nazzaro 158), *AoS*'s focus on fathers/fathering allows the series to comment on the toxic patriarchal elements that can exist within family dynamics, which, as in the case of characters such as General Hale, can transcend gender boundaries when the individuals are mired in that structure.

This focus is apparent in the series' first scene. Since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), Whedon's series have taken pains to have the first scene set the tone and theme of the series, whether it is *Buffy's* subversion of the "blonde in danger" trope, the extended battle of Serenity Valley in the open of *Firefly* (2002), or Caroline and Adelle's discussion regarding "cleaning a slate" in *Dollhouse* (2009-2010). *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* follows the same pattern, with a voiceover about heroes and villains by the yet-to-be introduced Skye, ending on Michael Petersen and his son Ace discussing Ace's upcoming birthday, one that highlights the real-life struggles of an unemployed, single parent. This erupts into a heroic moment where Mike steps up to save a life in a display of superhuman powers, while hiding his true identity. The set-up of Mike and Ace in this first scene suggests that this show is about more than superheroes; it is about family and parents, especially fathers. As David Kociemba writes: "Such sequences present an unusually direct form of communication between the authors of the series and their audience. They explicitly serve to prepare particular viewing postures...present a series of promises about what narrative forms, visual pleasures, formal approaches, and themes to expect," and "offer the most direct expression of the authors' perception of what is most important about the work" (Kociemba, para 2). While Kociemba is speaking particularly of opening credit sequences, his words are applicable to the "teaser scene" many series employ in lieu of extended credits. In that respect, the focus on a parent, and a father in particular, strongly signals the particular concerns *AoS* will interact with going forward.

Thus, in this article, we will examine the ways in which parenting styles—particularly regarding fathers, most of whom are white and cisgendered—are portrayed within the series. We will focus on Diana Baumrind's theories of authoritative and authoritarian styles as enacted within *S.H.I.E.L.D.* and its associates versus Hydra, concentrating especially on Grant Ward, Leo and Alastair Fitz, and Skye/Daisy Johnson¹ and Phil Coulson. In particular, we will argue that *AoS*—which, unlike earlier Whedon series such as *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, employs not only a female co-showrunner and several writers of color but also features a more diverse cast—suggests through its narrative that

authoritative and mixed-gender parent-child dyads provide the most positive results. It also reveals the toxicity and dangers inherent in authoritarian parenting styles.

“Blaming mommy and daddy and mean older brother for your problems”: Parenting Styles

In 1966 (with continuing revisions), developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind examined and codified particular parenting styles and their outcome on childhood development (Baumrind, “Effects” 887-907; Baumrind, “Child” 43-88), breaking them into four categories: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting/neglecting. Among these four, authoritative parenting is the ideal: parents are both demanding and responsive; are behaviorally consistent; set and enforce clear guidelines for children’s behavior; and offer children age-appropriate autonomy. Children raised in this mode tend to have better self-confidence, emotional regulation and social skills, and flexibility (Baumrind, “Effects” 891-892).

The other three styles do not generally produce excellent outcomes. Authoritarian parenting, which posits the parent as the final authority and arbiter, uses power plays and threats to keep children obedient, with little or no discussion as to why the rules exist. While children raised in this manner are unlikely to engage in activities parents disapprove of (e.g., drinking, drug-taking), they display low thresholds of frustration, are frequently withdrawn, and struggle with decision-making (Baumrind, “Effects” 889-891). Nor is permissive parenting much better; the lack of rules and consequences means that children raised in this fashion also struggle with self-image and self-regulation (Baumrind, “Effects” 889-890). (The fourth parenting style—rejecting/neglecting—was added later and is fairly self-explanatory; its effects are similar to authoritarian parenting.) While there have been revisions to Baumrind’s work (see Maccoby and Martin 1-101), her research on parenting styles still holds currency in contemporary psychology (e.g., Power S14-S21).

Without necessarily naming them, television has provided numerous examples of all of these parenting styles throughout its

history. Examples of authoritative parenting could conceivably encompass Ward Cleaver of *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) and Mike and Carol Brady on *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) to Keith Mars on *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) and Beth Pearson on *This Is Us* (2016-current). Authoritarian television parents cut across socioeconomic lines, from midwestern, working class Red Foreman, who frequently refers to his son as “dumbass” in *That 70s Show* (1998-2006), to east coast society parents Emily and Richard Gilmore, whose strict, class-based parenting alienate their only child on *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007, 2016), or Aaron Echolls, who vacillates between narcissistic neglect of his children and physical abuse when they misbehave (*Veronica Mars*). Lorelai Gilmore, perhaps due to her own upbringing, also occupies a liminal space between authoritative and overly permissive parenting of her own daughter, Rory, who as an adult struggles to find her place (*Gilmore Girls*). Both Eleanor Shellstrop and Tahani Al-Jamil in *The Good Place* (2016-current), despite cultural and socioeconomic differences, can claim rejecting (Manisha and Waqas Al-Jamil) or neglectful (Doug and Donna Shellstrop) parents; Eleanor makes the connection herself when she admits she used her upbringing as an excuse to be selfish and unkind (“Mindy St. Claire” 1.12).

This variety, as opposed to the frequently oversimplified and “ideal” parents of early television, is more prevalent in contemporary television. Jen Chancy asserts: “They’re not simply parents, they’re also people still trying to figure stuff out. The idea that parents want to do more than just parent is far more universally accepted, in real life and on TV, than it was even 20 years ago, and that certainly has had an impact on the way parental figures are written and portrayed” (Chancy). The depiction of parents and television families changes to reflect current society and its more varied and flexible family dynamics.

The portrayal of parents on television is often cyclical, with particular trends reappearing at various cultural moments. As Susan Faludi points out, sixties series, from *Bonanza* (1959-1973) to *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), either sidelined or eliminated female characters in favor of father-controlled households, a trend that recurred in the mid-to late-80s, with increasingly over-the-top scenarios (Faludi 155; Karlyn).² Given the contemporary variety of channels and methods for

both viewing and production, such trends are more difficult to trace on the macro level; however, limiting such an examination to a single showrunner usually reveals particular narrative signposts. For Joss Whedon, as an example, fathers tend to be either absent (Hank Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) or toxic (Daniel Holtz on *Angel*/Boyd in *Dollhouse*). While his involvement with *AoS* is minimal, the focus on family, and fathers in particular, is one connection the series shares with the larger Whedonverses.

“It Wasn’t Nearly as Terrible as Watching Mom and Dad Fight Downstairs”: S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Attempts at Authoritative Parenting

Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. gives the audience a variety of parental figures to relate to and be repulsed by; like other series within the Whedonverses, *AoS* features both biological and surrogate parents as well as children and adults in need of a parental figure, with as strong emphasis on fathers and fathering. As Battis writes of *Buffy* and *Angel*, but equally applicable to *AoS*:

Family within these shows remains a site of both satisfaction and disappointment, and any familial relationship encodes pain and loss just as much as happiness and fulfillment. But fathering in particular is a problematic institution here. We have absent fathers, murdering fathers, vampire fathers, cyborg fathers, demon fathers, and quite simply, human fathers who are negligent and abusive. (91)

As the opening scene shows, and the series backs up, fathers are a key subject of examination in the series. The show features Agent Phillip J. Coulson as both team leader and surrogate father in their family unit: Agent Melinda May as “mother” and Jemma Simmons, Leopold Fitz, Grant Ward, and Skye as the “children.” This is underscored by a conversation between Coulson and Skye in “Eye Spy” (1.4), in which they discuss the past mission that put Skye in danger; she quips, “It wasn't nearly as terrible as watching mom and dad fight downstairs” in

reference to Coulson and May's argument (00:20:23-28). The surrogate parents of S.H.I.E.L.D. are (mostly) shown in a positive light; the series highlights "bad" parents, both biological and surrogate, mostly through Hydra, which will be addressed in the next section.

It takes three episodes of the series for new recruit Skye—a self-described "hactivist" who worked alone out of a van—to suggest that the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents she is surrounded by are a family ("The Asset" 1.3). While this is in line with her characterization throughout the first season—her hacking and infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. is initially driven by finding out what happened to her birth family ("Girl in the Flower Dress" 1.5)—it also ties into the greater Whedonverse focus on created families (Battis). Indeed, when given the chance to hack into the redacted file that would provide information on her parents, she chooses instead to hack the mission parameters of two team members, out of concern for their safety ("The Hub" 1.7).

Despite the way in which blending a family and workplace structure could disempower the "children" (who are, in fact, adult professionals), it is clear from the beginning of the series that Skye is desperate to create a familial structure. As the oldest and most experienced members of the crew, Coulson and May become *de facto* parents, with May providing discipline and structure (as her superior officer, she trains and mentors Skye from Season 2 onward)³ and Coulson providing nurturing and support. In Baumrind's analysis, fluidity of gender roles is itself a hallmark of authoritative parenting; the later reveal of Ward as a double agent for Hydra ("Turn, Turn, Turn" 1.17) and the authoritarian ways in which he was formed ("Ragtag" 1.21) are suggested in his rigid adherence to a particular, traditional definition of manhood (Interrante).⁴ Skye's actions, such as lying to the team regarding her continued connection with the hactivist group the Rising Tide, are met with appropriate consequences (she is briefly, technologically barred from computer use ["The Girl in the Flower Dress" 1.5]), and she is praised and encouraged regarding her skills when it is warranted ("Repairs" 1.9). All of these actions fit in well with the authoritative style of parenting, in that:

Measured and consistent in discipline, parents who employ this

style set clear cut standards for their children and are very firm about enforcing them. However, they allow their children autonomy within the limits, are not intrusive or restrictive, and are able to engage in calm conversation and reasoning with their children. Moreover, they are responsive to their children's needs and communicate openly with them. (Boateng and Cleveland)

Yet because S.H.I.E.L.D. itself is both a workplace and, as is revealed near the end of the first season, corrupted by their nemesis Hydra, Skye's desire for family remains just that: wish fulfillment. The military-like structure of S.H.I.E.L.D. means that the team members themselves are not on equal footing, and the secrets—both work and personal—prevent deep trust and bonding from developing. Skye initially hides her purpose for being there (“The Girl in the Flower Dress” 1.5); May is secretly reporting to Nick Fury on Coulson's well being (“End of the Beginning” 1.16); and Ward is a Hydra double agent (“Turn, Turn, Turn” 1.17). It is only when they are outside the structure of S.H.I.E.L.D. that the group becomes a better fit for the chosen family trope. (The situation also draws *AoS* closer to other Whedonverse series, which almost entirely focus on those outside of traditional professional or command structures.)

This is perhaps most clear in “The Hub”, Skye's first real interaction with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s command structure. She is shocked at her teammates' unquestioning acceptance of secrecy, and pushes back against Coulson's claim to “trust the system” (1.7, 00:14:42-43). Indeed, the term is repeated multiple times throughout the episode, and yet Coulson himself displays ambiguity regarding its wisdom, first confronting Victoria Hand about what Skye's hacking uncovered, attempting (unsuccessfully) to access files regarding his own death, and hiding from Skye what he discovered about her background. The revelation of how he was brought back to life further undermines his faith in the “system,” despite the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. represents for Coulson, as it does for Skye, his “only family” (“The Magical Place” 1.11, 00:26:35-36). The end of the season elucidates this point more clearly: it was “trusting the system” that allowed Hydra to infiltrate and shape the organization to its ends. This reading is underscored when the

same words are used at the Hydra academy, to convince the last remaining student, Ruby Hale, to kill her dog as part of her training: “Do not question the Hydra way! You trust in the system!” (“Rise and Shine” 5.15, 00:15:40-44).

Freed from the organization, the team more easily replicates a family structure in subsequent seasons; however, it is the father/daughter dynamic between Coulson and Skye that is of greatest interest, both to this analysis and the series itself; as will be suggested in the later analysis of Grant Ward, mixed-gender parenting/mentor dyads seem to produce the best results.⁵ It is clear that Skye imprints on Coulson as a father figure early in the first season; however, it is Season 2, with the reappearance of Skye’s biological father, Cal, that shows how much Coulson has also imprinted on Skye. Throughout the season, both as Skye and Cal interact, and as Skye’s Inhuman powers are unlocked, Coulson frequently risks both himself and the team to help her (“What They Become” 2.10). He also opens up to her about his compulsive carving, caused by the drug with which he was injected to bring him back to life after the events of *The Avengers* (2012), in hopes she can make sense of it (“A Hen in the Wolf House” 2.5); she is the only one of the team besides May who knows. When the team is unwittingly put in an alternate reality known as the Framework, it is Daisy whose presence triggers latent memories of the real world in Coulson, despite the fact that he is first confronted by Simmons, speaking to the greater connection Skye and Coulson share (“What If...” 4.16). They rely on one another for advice and support, and following the dissolution of S.H.I.E.L.D. and its command structure, Coulson, May, and the team not only set guidelines for their own behaviors, but discuss and take into account others’ points of view; i.e., they are less apt to resort to the aforementioned “trusting the system” or clearance levels to justify their actions.

In contrast, Skye’s biological father’s behavior is initially exceedingly violent and unhinged, including murdering two patients in frustration when Skye is not brought to him (“A Hen in the Wolf House” 2.5) and teaming up with other violent individuals to kill his perceived parental rival for Skye’s affection, Coulson (“One of Us” 2.13).⁶ While Cal attempts to create a similar dynamic to that between

Coulson and Skye with Raina—training her from a young age to carry out what is suggested are criminal activities—he turns his back on her once he has the potential to be reunited with his daughter (“Aftershocks” 2.11).⁷ Perhaps most egregiously, he manipulates events so that Skye is positioned to unlock her powers, despite her desire not to do so (“What They Become” 2.10). Indeed, despite Cal’s desire for his daughter to unlock her potential, to serve as a guide for her to master her abilities, and provide acceptance for her difference, it is clear those things already exist for her within the S.H.I.E.L.D. created family dynamic. Her long-anticipated reunion with her parents ends with the sanctuary (known as Afterlife) destroyed, her mother’s (Jiaying) attempt to drain Skye’s life force and subsequent death at Cal’s hands, and Cal’s memory wiped (“S.O.S., Part 2” 2.22).⁸

Thus, fathers take on a more significant role in *AoS* than in the other Whedonverse series, to a great extent because they are a part of the lives of their children, both biological and chosen. Jiaying berates herself for not being proactive in searching for their daughter, indicating that Cal continued to search long after she had given up hope (“Melinda” 2.17). In a similar vein, Mike Peterson allows himself to be experimented on in order to have money to provide for his son; Hydra uses Peterson’s love for his son to manipulate him into doing their bidding (“The Bridge” 1.10; “The Magical Place” 1.11; “Beginning of the End” 1.22). The series revisits this particular emotional beat from a different perspective in Glenn Talbot’s character arc in the fifth season; suffering from a head injury inflicted at the behest of life model decoy Aida (“World’s End” 4.22) and struggling to maintain emotional control, he alienates his son, pushing Talbot into an emotional spiral and eventual decision to take on the power of an unstable substance called gravitonium to both heal himself and make himself a superhero in his son’s eyes (“Option Two” 5.19). For Hydra as well, it is the fathers and father figures (Garrett, Gideon Malick, Christian Ward, Alistair Fitz), whose parenting choices create or remake those entrusted to their care, with potentially world-ending results.

To Kill or Not to Kill the Dog: Hydra's Authoritarian Parenting

Sean T. Collins, in an analysis of TV's worst parents, asserts that "many of the best dramas and comedies on the small screen are driven by mean moms and bad dads who've neglected, smothered, abused, and confused the kids in their care, wreaking havoc well into adulthood." The curse of these bad parents has become a common theme for both main and minor characters; it is a relatively simple way to create the necessary narrative/character conflicts that form the basis of ongoing series. Science fiction and fantasy occupy a particular space within this spectrum, especially because the poorly raised children in these worlds can become not just bad but true villains. Bad fathering, in particular, is a trope of both the genre and the Whedonverses. There is the present but passive fathering of Giles, which Battis describes as: "entail[ing] a great deal of watching from the sidelines, and an attendant sense of frustration at the inability to make anyone—least of all the Scoobies—listen to self-fashioned paternal wisdom" (Battis 89). Absentee fathers, such as John Winchester in *Supernatural* (2005-current) or Ichabod Crane in *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-2017), or estranged fathers like Walter Bishop in *Fringe* (2008-2013), frequently influence their children through their absence.

This trope is particularly prevalent in the superhero subgenre. Kara Kvaran writes: "Most contemporary superhero films evoke father-son drama, thereby emphasizing heroics and masculine and homosocial stories about men as most essential. Like Batman, these superheroes have also lost their mothers, and they struggle to fulfill the legacies of their inspirational fathers" (219), especially as these fathers "serve as inspiration and to encourage masculine endeavors. They provide a symbolically masculine image, which can either serve an idealized or adversarial function for the hero" (223). Kvaran's analysis can easily be applied to these films' television counterparts; however, while the relationships between parents and their children in these genre shows influence and shape our heroes and villains, they usually are not the main theme of the series. In *AoS*, however, this influence is not only thoroughly examined, but serves as a significant theme.

In a visually and narratively ambiguous moment in the episode "Ragtag" (1.21), Hydra double agent John Garrett orders his protégé,

Grant Ward, to kill the dog that has been Ward's sole companion during his lengthy Hydra training. Ward hesitates, prompting Garrett's scorn. It is not revealed until the series' fifth season that this is a typical part of Hydra operatives' training, with the aim of forcing them to prove that they are willing to do anything in order to forward Hydra's agenda ("Rise and Shine" 5.15). For Ward and other Hydra trainees, this insistence on cutting emotional connections is a hallmark of authoritarian parenting. While the series only shows three examples in any depth—Grant Ward, General Hale, and Ruby Hale—each parental/parental figure relationship is "high in demandingness and low in responsiveness" (Boateng and Cleveland). Garrett appeals to Ward's rage, takes him out of juvenile detention, and abandons him with a dog, a gun, and an ax, telling him to fend for himself ("Ragtag" 1.21). This is ostensibly to teach Ward self-reliance; however, when Garrett returns months later to find Ward has both survived and managed to construct a shelter for himself, his praise is minimal. The dynamic between Ward and Garrett is give and take; Ward strives to obey Garrett and procure what Garrett needs to prolong his life. Garrett only demands more and displays little patience when asked for a reason.

Garrett is part of a wider Hydra culture of authoritarian parenting, with individuals who are "unresponsive to their children's needs and not open to communication. They employ and enforce strict rules and demands using parental power and threats. They expect their children to comply with their rules without questions or explanations and require complete obedience from their children" (Boateng and Cleveland). That is, there is no room for questioning, different perspectives, or disagreements within this structure. This is made clear through Hydra's command structure. Despite their motto, "cut off one head, two more will take its place," in Season 2, Daniel Whitehall serves as the undisputed leader and final word, directing agents on everything from career choices to, as seen in a Season 5 flashback, childbearing ("Rise and Shine" 5.15). The brainwashing technique Whitehall employs references "compliance" numerous times; it uses a call and response structure that instructs its subjects that "compliance will be rewarded" ("Making Friends and Influencing People" 2.3, 2:00-2:02). His death, at Coulson's hands ("What They Become" 2.10), creates a power vacuum

that is never sufficiently filled despite the efforts of Ward, Malick, and Hale. This is perhaps not surprising, as authoritarian parenting puts the emphasis on obedience over individuality, meaning adults who are raised in this style are frequently either passively dependent on the parent, or significantly aggressive (Kopko 2). Sherry Ginn suggests, “Families control our actions in many respects... Parents control access to information as well as other people. They provide reinforcement for correct behavior and mete out punishment for incorrect behavior. Their function is to socialize their children, raising them to be responsible, and in our society, independent adults” (Ginn 142). In that respect, Hydra fails in the final analysis, as none of the “children” of Hydra—Stephanie Malick, Grant Ward, Werner Von Strucker, or Ruby Hale—are shown to be capable of independent and responsible action without the guiding force of their parent(s).

In a moment of generational commentary, the narrative of “Rise and Shine” (5.15) shifts between General Hale’s own training more than 25 years earlier and that of her daughter Ruby’s in the present day. The timing places Hale on the cusp between the Baby Boom generation and Generation X, and shows Hale to be loyal enough to Hydra’s mission to forego her own ambitions in order to serve as part of Hydra’s breeding program. Her daughter, however, is less easily managed; Ruby consistently defies orders, including the Hydra-required dog killing.

Yet the generational divide goes deeper than that. The flashbacks show a Hydra at full power; a school filled with students, including future Hydra leader Wolfgang Von Strucker, and teachers, with the literally rejuvenated (using Inhuman DNA) head of Hydra Daniel Whitehall still in charge. The present-day version is nearly abandoned; its inhabitants consist of two scions of Hydra’s leaders: the aforementioned Ruby and Werner Von Strucker, and two prisoners: Phil Coulson and Glenn Talbot. Ruby’s defiance illuminates the folly of trying to keep the old and clearly irrelevant structures and rules in place. While General Hale still wields enough power to negotiate on behalf of Earth, her adherence to and insistence on maintaining the “old ways” end with her own death, the deaths of Ruby and Werner (“All Roads Lead” 5.18), and likely Hydra itself.

Even the outlier family—the Malicks—who do not follow the

more recent incarnation of Hydra as shown in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and as directed by Red Skull's protégé Daniel Whitehall in *AoS*, still follow similar parenting methods to those found in the current Hydra. The third season adds a twist to Hydra's real purpose: to worship and serve the "god" inhuman Hive until his return to Earth. This "worship" includes a yearly sacrifice of a "traveler"—initially one of their own followers—through a portal. The Malicks represent generations of the dedicated followers of this sect of Hydra, elucidated most clearly in the episode "Paradise Lost" (3.16). The episode shifts between two generations: the present day with Gideon and his daughter Stephanie, interspersed with flashbacks and memories that Hive possesses. It starts with the funeral for Gideon's father, where he and his brother Nathaniel pledge to each other to carry on the family tradition and not bow to Whitehall's version of Hydra. In a forced meeting with Whitehall, it is revealed to the brothers that their father, while instilling loyalty in them, was using a parlor trick to insure he was never chosen as the traveler, unwilling to chance having to sacrifice himself. When Gideon chooses this same way out and his brother is sacrificed, he becomes the *de facto* leader (as his father did before him) and raises his daughter as he was raised.

While Stephanie Malick was neither sent to the Academy nor personally "trained" as was Ward, she displays similar problems to the other Hydra "children." Indeed, Malick indicates to Coulson that Stephanie not raised from birth as a follower, but was told about Hydra after he was convinced of her capabilities through watching her tame a horse ("The Team" 3.17). There is little indication, however, that Stephanie has developed hobbies, professional interests, or personal ties outside of Hydra and her father; she continues to live with and take care of him, never questioning his goals, veracity, or character. When Hive returns, she is the perfect follower: she immediately falls under his influence and is willing to obey (that is, "comply"). This unquestioning following of Hive leads to her death as punishment to her father for his weakness and avoidance of the act of sacrifice Hive required.⁹ While still fitting the definition of an authoritarian parent, Gideon showed more love and attachment to his child than other Hydra parents, and is reflective enough, at least on the point of his own death, to understand

his mistakes and their consequences. This is in marked contrast to the other Hydra fathers, including Garrett, Alistair Fitz, and Wolfgang Von Strucker.

While Werner Von Strucker's childhood is not shown within *AoS*'s narrative, the results of it are clear. When introduced in Season 3 ("The Purpose in the Machine" 3.2), Werner is partying and drinking on his boat surrounded by bikini-clad girls, an obvious rebellion from his scientific, serious father Wolfgang. It is not until Season 5 that Werner reveals the physical and mental abuse inflicted by his father. Werner opens up to Ruby about a childhood incident, in which she got hurt while he was babysitting her; his father beat him in front of Ruby and her mother as punishment ("Principia" 5.13). Grant Ward, no stranger to either abusing others or being abused himself, captures and tortures Werner in an attempt to take over Hydra. After escaping Ward, Werner seeks help from Gideon Malick ("Chaos Theory" 3.7); Malick tortures him further, causing permanent brain damage and abandoning him to be found by S.H.I.E.L.D.. S.H.I.E.L.D. itself, under the auspices of gleaning needed information, compounds Werner's trauma by putting him through the "memory machine", which had been previously shown to cause both physical and mental pain ("The Magical Place" 1.11; "The Writing on the Wall" 2.7); the way the memory machine pulls up painful and/or traumatic memories the user mentally and physically experiences is an interesting allegorical take on the experience of post-traumatic stress.¹⁰ After escaping and finally getting help in a mental institution, choosing the name Alex Braun as a final rejection of who he was, he is pulled back into the Hydra fold by General Hale, to the disastrous results discussed above. While both Werner and Ruby find some solace in one another and their shared backgrounds, neither is able to transcend their abusive, Hydra-influenced upbringing while still being trapped within it.

No case is clearer than that of Grant Ward. The influence of John Garrett on Grant Ward was previously discussed in detail, but it is suggested, by both the narrative and Ward himself, that his vulnerability to Garrett's machinations is caused by the abuse Ward suffered at the hands of his biological family, including his parents and older brother. When Trip meets Ward, he mentions that Garrett told him that the Wards were like, "the cable version of the Kennedys" ("End of the

Beginning” 1.16, 00:13:14-15). Skye points out that his family is “respected and pretty much loved” (14:55-14:58) in the public sphere; Ward suggests this public face obscures the reality (“Making Friends and Influencing People” 2.3). This is not the first time; the problematic nature of Ward’s family is established in the first episode. While being interviewed by Coulson for a position on the team, Coulson brings up Ward’s family, making Ward visibly uncomfortable as he reviews Agent Hill’s assessment. The picture of his people skills is described as a “poop with knives in it”—Hill later tells Coulson it is actually a porcupine—for which Coulson comments, “That’s bad right? And given your family history, I’m surprised it is not worse” (“Pilot” 1.1, 00:09:37-47). The subsequent two seasons tease out Ward’s deep family issues, including a physically abusive father and mentally abusive mother, who set her three sons against one another by obviously favoring the youngest, Thomas.

This particular dynamic is explored early in Season 1. While the details shift depending on who narrates this particular incident (“The Well” 1.8, “The Things We Bury” 2.8, and “Closure” 3.9), Grant claims his older brother Christian both tortured Thomas and made Ward torture him as well. The incident at the well, when Thomas was pushed in and Christian would not allow Grant to help him, is considered a defining moment for all three. This pivotal moment driven by the abuse at the hands of their parents¹¹ affected each of the brothers differently. Christian becomes the controlling and overbearing patriarch. Ward was left broken and vulnerable to Garrett. As he tells Agent 33: “My family did a number on me. Stripped me down, left me hollow. I was a shell. So, when someone finally did come along and offer to build me back up, I didn't resist. Even though what he really did was make me a killer” (“Love in the Time of Hydra” 2.15, 00:20:02-21). In essence, Ward merely trades one abusive authoritarian parent for another, even more powerful one. Offering a different choice, however, is the youngest: Thomas. While arguably suffering even more abuse than either Christian or Grant, Thomas elects to change his name, eschew any ties with his family of origin, and try to lead a quiet life. As Thomas tells Coulson, “Just 'cause you grow up in a family of abusive monsters doesn't mean you have to become one” (“Closure” 3.9, 00:27:54-59), underscoring the concept of choice as a corrective to negative influence. The effects of

both are explored within the Framework arc.

It could be different: Inside the Framework

Given its particular structure, it is appropriate that the first episode of the Framework arc is entitled “What If...”. A computer system reminiscent of *The Matrix* (1999), the Framework uploads human minds into a computer-generated world created by Holden Radcliffe and the life model decoy he built, AIDA. In the Framework, Radcliffe and Aida change one regret in the lives of each of the people inserted within it. What if Agent May had saved the child in Bahrain (“Melinda” 2.16)? What if Coulson had never joined S.H.I.E.L.D.? Perhaps most importantly for the concerns of this analysis: What if Ward had been saved from the abuse of his biological father by a parental figure more authoritative than authoritarian? What if Fitz had had his father in his life instead of absent?

Daisy, who sneaks into the Framework unchanged, struggles to believe that eliminating one regret can change so much. Radcliffe counters that with, “One person in your life, one decision, one sentence has the power to change you forever... Depending on the circumstances, anyone is capable of anything. Just look around” (“No Regrets” 4.18, 00:22:00-41). In the Framework, the effect of fathers and father figures is particularly significant for two characters who have mirrored one another through the first three seasons: Grant Ward and Leopold Fitz.

Ward

In the world of the Framework, Hydra is in control and S.H.I.E.L.D. had fallen. Those loyal to S.H.I.E.L.D. are either deep underground or dead. Phil Coulson works as an eccentric high school teacher (“I make my own soap!” 00:02:19-21) initially too scared to stand up to Hydra (“Identity and Change” 4.17). Skye, Agent May, and Grant Ward are Agents of Hydra.

At first glance, given his position within Hydra, it would seem that Ward had not changed. In certain respects, this is true: it is revealed he is a double agent, but in this reality he is working underground for S.H.I.E.L.D. inside Hydra, attempting to help the Inhumans that Hydra either eliminates or harvests. In Season 2, Ward makes a similar confession to Skye as he later does to Agent 33: “My family tore me down. Garrett built me back up the way he wanted” (“Making Friends and Influencing People” 2.3, 00:14:50-6). In the Framework, the change that the computer-generated Ward experienced was deceptively simple: he had a different mentor. Instead of being recruited by Hydra and an authoritarian John Garrett, Ward was saved from his abusive situation by a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. He tells Coulson, “Her name was Victoria Hand. She was the first person to tell me I could be a good man” (“All the Madame’s Men,” 4.19, 00:14:23-30). Although how Agent Hand trained and mentored Ward is not shown, previous examples of how the S.H.I.E.L.D. Academy worked as an authoritative institution—that is, setting appropriate guidelines for student behavior while allowing them to develop (“Seeds” 1.12)—and its effect on students such as Simmons and Fitz, suggest that Ward experienced a similar training. This, along with the Framework Ward’s change in attitude and commitment to protecting life and people, shows the influence that this change in parenting wrought.

Fitz

Mirroring Ward as he does in the real-world (see: Interrante), Leopold Fitz in the Framework becomes the shadow side of the pair in order to show how the exact opposite can affect someone whose primary qualities are gentleness and empathy.

When it is revealed to the team that Ward is a double agent for Hydra (“Nothing Personal” 1.20), the individual who struggles the most with that revelation is Fitz. Ignoring both the arguments of his teammates and all available evidence, Fitz continues to search for an “out” for Ward: cybernetic control, manipulation, brainwashing (“Ragtag” 1.21). It is only when Ward, regretful as he may appear,

attempts to carry out Garrett's kill order on Fitz and Simmons that Fitz lets go of his illusions ("Ragtag" 1.21). Throughout Season 2, he struggles to understand why Ward acted as he did.

Within the Framework, however, Fitz is second in command of Hydra, in a relationship with Madame Hydra, also known as AIDA, and is ominously referred to as "the Doctor."¹² The Doctor is known to be working on either eliminating the Inhumans or doing experiments on them from which they do not return. He tortures Skye and murders Radcliffe's lover in cold blood just to punish him and get information ("Identity and Change" 4.17). This version of Fitz is cold and heartless; Ward refers to him as a sadist.

The "What If..." that changed Fitz from the man who cried yet refused to bow to Hydra ("Turn, Turn, Turn" 1.17) was simple: the reintroduction of his father, Alistair Fitz, into his life. Alistair Fitz is a cold authoritarian that tells his son that sympathy is a luxury that they cannot afford and pushes him not to bend to "guilt or womanly sentiment." Alistair reminds him, "Everyone needs the strap across their back now and again. Teaches respect" ("No Regrets" 4.18, 00:24:45-49), a callback to similar sentiments Garrett instilled in Ward in the real world, in which Garrett mocks Ward for being "soft" (i.e., letting his feelings affect his actions). This is contrasted with Coulson assuring a Skye regretting letting Ward live that: "You weren't weak, you were compassionate. That's harder" ("Ragtag" 1.21, 00:19:42-46). The Fitz of the Framework is more a reminder of the Grant Ward of the real world: abused and broken down into someone else's killing machine.¹³

The correlation and comparison of Framework Fitz and real-world Ward is not lost on the characters in the series. When he returns to the real world Fitz is understandably upset about his actions in the Framework. He tries to explain this to Aida and she tells him, "It was learned behavior, programmed into you by an overbearing father figure." Fitz responds, "Just like Ward. I'm just like Ward" ("The Return" 4.21, 00:29:07-20). While this is an obvious conclusion, underscoring the value of appropriate influences, there is a particularly significant difference: Fitz immediately takes responsibility for his actions within the Framework, something that the "real world" Ward was unable to do.

The basic element of these parallels is both Ward and Fitz's

emotions. Regardless of the toxic influence of Garrett and Alastair, neither Fitz nor Ward, in Skye's words "feel nothing." Indeed, it is Fitz's capacity for love that ends up being the emotion Aida uses against him. Not satisfied with fixing Fitz's "regret", she also puts herself in Simmons' place, redirecting Fitz's feelings for Simmons to make him love her instead¹⁴ and allowing her a stronger control over him within the Framework. As Ginn explains:

Although the Joss Whedon television series ... are all about power and control—who's got it and who wants it—they are also about love. Love of family, love of friends, sexual love, platonic love—Whedon explores them all. Love is a powerful emotion. It can make people engage in horrific behavior that they would never dream possible, and it can also incite noble types of behavior. (23)

In the Framework, "love" makes Fitz into Aida's willing tool; it also makes his mirror, Ward, into a better person. As Skye explains to Coulson, "The reason Ward kills isn't because he feels nothing. It's because he feels too much" ("Closure" 3.9, 00:12:54-57). Ward cites not only Hand's more positive influence, but the Framework version of Skye's love for him that allows him to move beyond his authoritarian past and become the man he always wanted to be ("All the Madame's Men" 4.19).

Conclusion: A Part of Something Bigger

It is significant that, with all the parent/child pairings within the series, it is the mixed gender ones that provide the most positive results. Coulson and Skye, Ward and Hand, Fitz and his mother, it is suggested, balance one another in unexpected ways, and allow the series to make pointed commentary against authoritarian, patriarchal control. It is Coulson and Ward who tend toward emotional responses to situations, while Skye is seen taking difficult things in stride ("Seeds" 1.12; "Yes Men," 1.15), and Hand is portrayed as decisive and unemotional ("The Magical Place" 1.11; "Turn, Turn, Turn" 1.17). This extends across all

five extant seasons of the series; Season 5 addition Deke, later revealed to be the grandson of Fitz and Simmons, cites his mother rather than his father as a positive influence, particularly since she gave her life fighting against totalitarian control (“A Life Earned” 5.4).

As elucidated above, *AoS* makes an unsubtle point about the toxicity of authoritarian parenting. While their demise is not strictly caused by toxic parenting, none of the Hydra “children”—Ruby, Werner, Stephanie, Ward, and Fitz¹⁵—survive. Without the tools provided by the more effective, authoritative style of parenting, they lack flexibility, independent thought, the ability to take responsibility for their behavior, and moral complexity. Trapped in rigid behavioral and/or gender roles, they are unable to save themselves or address difficulties when they arise. While Skye/Daisy (a character always central to this theme) frequently experiences similarly problematic or abusive situations, including feelings of abandonment, physical or emotional manipulation, or betrayal, the flexibility instilled by the authoritative parenting provided by Coulson, May, and the S.H.I.E.L.D. structure allows her to recover and rebuild within the organization in which she had created her family.

Notes

¹ Skye / Daisy Johnson / Quake is a character that goes by many names. When she is first introduced she goes by Skye, the name she gave herself in the orphanage in lieu of the name the orphanage gave her, Mary Sue Poots. In the beginning of Season 3 after finding out about her true parentage and birth name she goes by that name, Daisy Johnson. When Daisy enters the Framework, she is once again called Skye by the people in the Framework. For clarity in this essay she will be referred to just by the name she was using at that time.

² This trend was fairly short-lived, as the near-total disappearance of any significant female characters led to a precipitous drop in viewership and affected ad prices (Faludi 145).

³ That being said, she is not above, as per example, participating in the team pranking one another, although no one guesses it is her doing it (“Repairs” 1.9). This moment, at the end of the episode, is indicative of May perhaps moving beyond a particular trauma in her past.

⁴ This is also made clear in Ward’s later interaction with Agent Maria Hill, when he maligns her skills and taunts her with: “A lot of us lost respect for Fury when he picked you as his second. If he needed eye candy around, he could have at least picked Romanoff” (“Nothing Personal” 1.20).

⁵ While we are focused more particularly on the gendered aspects of these differing parenting

styles, that S.H.I.E.L.D.'s team is diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity, as opposed to the white male dominated Hydra, is an element that deserves exploration, although it is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ This violence is later revealed to be the result of a self-created serum to offer Cal superhuman strength, in order to avenge his wife's brutal murder by Daniel Whitehall and retrieve his daughter from S.H.I.E.L.D. custody.

⁷ He coldly suggests to a transformed Raina that if she is unhappy with what happened (she went through a process called Terrigenesis, which gave her psychic ability but covered her body in thorns), she should simply kill herself ("Aftershocks" 2.11).

⁸ This loss continues to resonate for Daisy, making her vulnerable to the cult-like Hive and leading to a brief alienation from the team ("The Ghost" 4.1).

⁹ This provides an interesting correlation to the killing of the dog at the academy; Stephanie is Gideon's weakness and he must sacrifice her to Hive

¹⁰ Thanks go to Eve Bennett for this observation.

¹¹ The two parents that seemed to cause the most damage—the Wards—by helping create the Ward who killed numerous people (including them ["The Things We Bury" 2.8]) are never named, suggesting that they represent less individuals than archetypes of abusive, authoritarian parents.

¹² Aside from the obvious *Doctor Who* reference, it should be noted that before being introduced as Skye's father, Cal was referred to as simply "The Doctor" ("Heavy is the Head" 2.2), and what we see of his actions are similarly brutal and sadistic to those of the Framework version of Fitz.

¹³ Brett Dalton, the actor who plays Ward, commented on family in response to a question about the Berserker Staff. The Berserker staff is featured in the episode "The Well" (1.8). It is an Asgardian object carried by their Berserker army, capable of tapping into the wielder's worst memory, causing uncontrolled rage and inhuman strength. While on a panel, Dalton was asked about the Berserker staff and its relationship to the rage Ward showed: "I think that his rage really comes from just a terrible, terrible childhood. That maybe he did a pretty good job in hiding it and that just sort of brought it out... yeah hurt people, hurt people" (Dalton).

¹⁴ This false love that AIDA created in the Framework does not change Fitz's love for Simmons within the real world. Fitz's rejection of the newly human, empowered Aida leads her to use her powers to destroy everything Fitz cares about ("World's End" 4.22).

¹⁵ Fitz's ultimate fate remains undetermined; he is killed, but another version of him exists aboard an alien ship ("The End" 5.22).

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“Seeds.” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, Episode 12, 2014. Written by Monica Owusu-Breen and Jed Whedon, directed by Kenneth Fink. ABC Studios, 2014.

Sleepy Hollow. Len Wiseman, Alex Kurtzman, Roberto Orci, and Phillip Iseve, creators. Sketch Films, K/O Paper Products, and 20th Century Fox Television, 2013-2017.

“S.O.S., Part 2.” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Second Season*. Season 2, Episode 2, 2015. Written by Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, directed by Billy Gierhart. ABC Studios, 2015.

Supernatural. Eric Kripke, creator. Kripke Enterprises, Warner Bros. Television, and Wonderland Sound and Vision, 2005-current.

- Symonds, Gwen. "The Superhero Versus the Troubled Teen: Parenting Connor, and the Fragility of 'Family' in *Angel*." *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, edited by Wesley Haslem, Angela Ndaliansis, and Chris Mackie. New Academia, 2007, pp.155-165.
- "The Team." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Third Season*. Season 3, Episode 17, 2016. Written by D.J. Doyle, directed by Elodie Keene. ABC Studios, 2016.
- That 70's Show*. Mark Brazill, Bonnie Turner, and Terry Turner, creators. Carsey-Werner-Mandabach Productions, 20th Century Fox Television, and Carsey-Werner Company, 1998-2006.
- This is Us*. Dan Fogelman, creator. Rhode Island Ave. Productions, Zaftig Films, and 20th Century Fox Television, 2016-current.
- "The Things We Bury." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Second Season*. Season 2, Episode 8, 2014. Written by D.J. Doyle, directed by Milan Cheylov. ABC Studios, 2015.
- "Turn, Turn, Turn." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, Episode 17, 2014. Written by Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, directed by Vincent Misiano. ABC Studios, 2014.
- Veronica Mars*. Rob Thomas, creator. Silver Pictures Television, Stu Seagull Production, Rob Thomas Productions, and Warner Bros. Television, 2004-2007.
- "The Well." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, Episode 21, 2014. Written by Monica Owusu-Breen, directed by Jonathan Frakes. ABC Studios, 2014.
- "What If..." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Fourth Season*. Season 4, Episode 16, 2017. Written by DJ Doyle, directed by Oz Scott. ABC Studios, 2018.
- "What They Become." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Second Season*. Season 2, Episode 10, 2014. Written by Jeffrey Bell, directed by Michael Zinberg. ABC Studios, 2014.
- "World's End." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Fourth Season*. Season 4, Episode 22, 2017. Written by Jeffrey Bell, directed by Billy

Gierhart. ABC Studios, 2018.

“The Writing on the Wall.” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Second Season*. Season 2, Episode 7, 2014. Written by Craig Titley, directed by Vincent Misiano. ABC Studios, 2015.

“Yes Men.” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, Episode 15, 2014. Written by Shalisha Francis, directed by John Terlesky. ABC Studios, 2014.