

By **Dahlia Schweitzer**

The Mindy Project:

Or Why

**“I’m the Mary,
You’re the Rhoda”**

**Is the RomComSitCom’s Most
Revealing Accusation**

The Mindy Project (FOX) Season 1, 2012–2013. Episode: Pilot. Airdate: September 25, 2012.
Shown: Mindy Kaling. Photo courtesy of Fox Broadcasting Co./Photofest.

A photograph of Mindy Kaling on a stage, wearing a blue sequined dress and holding a glass of wine. She is gesturing with her right hand raised. The background is dark with bokeh lights.

**“Mary is who you
wish you were,
Rhoda is who you
probably are,
and Phyllis is
who you’re afraid
you’ll become.”**

—Valerie Harper,
the actress famous
for her portrayal of
the exuberant Rhoda
Morgenstern on
*The Mary Tyler Moore
Show* and *Rhoda*

“Hey, Rhoda, calm down.”

—Danny Castellano, as portrayed
by actor Chris Messina,
chastising the exuberant
Mindy Kaling-as-Lahiri on
The Mindy Project

ABSTRACT: This article situates *The Mindy Project* in a broader sociocultural context by examining its reappropriation of the cinematic romcom and the televisual sitcom. It is argued that the audience's knowledge of the conventions and stereotypes of the genre allows for an interrogation not only of contemporary social convention but also of postfeminism itself.

KEYWORDS: gender, postfeminism, television, romantic comedy, sitcom

As the central character of *The Mindy Project*, a popular sitcom originally on the FOX network, Mindy Lahiri is a female anti-hero. A self-aware, self-loathing, self-congratulatory whirlwind without fear or filter, Lahiri is not conventionally likeable. In fact, she can be lazy, racist, shallow, superficial, and—worst of all, it sometimes seems—human, allowing herself to hold contradictory points of view without any loss of self or center.

Lahiri's flaws, selfishness, and internally contradictory self-image issues are similar to Lena Dunham's character Hannah Horvath in HBO's *Girls*. However, *Girls*—likely a result of its high-profile debut and premium-cable cachet—has received far more critical recognition for breaking down boundaries, introducing bold narratives, and removing the sugar-coated gloss from post-*Sex and the City* female-driven programming. *The Mindy Project*, meanwhile, is often dismissed as disposable fluff centered on yet another delusional, boy-crazy, perpetually single woman.

Upon closer examination, Horvath—however richly drawn and brilliantly

presented she may be—reveals herself as not just rejecting convention but also clueless as to the nature, value, or function of the conventions she is so actively rejecting. Lahiri, however wild her escapades, understands these conventions all too well, teasing and manipulating them with a mix-and-match abandon that would make Helen Gurley Brown proud.

How does *The Mindy Project* do it? It is impossible to know until one acknowledges Kaling's childhood obsession with cinematic romcoms and televisual sitcoms, specifically *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Once we take this into account, we see that—in stark contrast to Horvath, who seeks nirvana through nothingness, an escape from all social norms—Lahiri seeks freedom through everythingness, embracing whatever social norms, whichever female archetypes, suit her whim.

Yes, on the surface, she is the chirpy, enthusiastic Mary Richards. It is also true that, every now and then, she gives herself permission to become the controlling, judgmental Phyllis Lindstrom. But—as noted within the narrative itself—she is, for the most part, a vivid, amped-up re-imagining of the loopy, colorful, neurotically self-expressed Rhoda Morgenstern.

This path to liberation via subversive reappropriation versus argumenta-

tive rejection—one similarly traveled in the music medium by Madonna—is what sets apart Kaling, Lahiri, and *The Mindy Project* as fresh, provocative, and worthwhile in contemporary prime-time programming. It is also what enables the program, and everyone involved in its production, to deflate and deconstruct different romcom clichés with each and every episode.

Kaling-as-Lahiri is not trapped nor limited by her immersion in and adoration of cinematic romcoms. Rather, she uses them as navigational technologies, intuiting what to do (and what *not* to do) in matters of home, heart, career, and finance. In the process, she becomes a far more fully realized human being than any of her actual/fictional predecessors while also creating, through the meta-intertextuality of *The Mindy Project*, not only a fascinating type of television, but a fascinating type of television and gender analysis.

The Mindy Project is not a typical romantic comedy. Instead, the show self-reflexively both repurposes and comments upon cinematic conventions from the romantic comedy genre to show the usefulness (or lack thereof) of these tropes to the modern woman and modern romance. In addition to borrowing from romantic comedy themes, structures, and storylines, *The Mindy Project* also references and incorporates aspects of the workplace comedy genre, reflecting the importance of the workplace family for the career-driven contemporary woman. At the same time, *The Mindy Project* demonstrates the difficulty of reconciling professional ambition with the expectations of idealized romance that plague many women, who have been encouraged from childhood to expect that real life will mirror romantic comedy.

Not only does *The Mindy Project* critique and rethink the romantic comedy genre by repurposing it in the television format, exposing its flaws and improbable idealizations, but it also rethinks the medical format by transposing it to the format of a sitcom, and by casting a woman as its lead. *The Mindy Project* is only one television program, and it may not have sent out the same magnitude of cultural shock waves as its predeces-

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sors. However, the fact that it exists in self-conscious relationship to both the cinematic romcom and the televisual sitcom provides us with an opportunity to observe the forward and backward steps made in media, personality, and identity politics over the past fifty years—and to intuit how and where we might be moving in the very near future.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show was truly revolutionary in its time and can be considered the mother ship of televisual postfeminism in the United States. An American television sitcom created by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, it aired on CBS from 1970 to 1977 and featured Mary Tyler Moore as Mary Richards, a never-married, independent career woman. Geoff Hammill writes that Richards, a single woman in her thirties, “presented a character different from other single TV women of the time. She was not widowed or divorced or seeking a man to support her.” Mary and her best friend Rhoda had to deal with a specific set of problems caused by their status as this new type of woman. Not only were they “working, single, independent, and confused,” but as Jane Feuer argues, “the *MTM* women appeared to possess a complexity previously unknown to the genre” (153, 154). Mary and Rhoda created not only a different kind of show, but a different kind of woman.

The impact of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the area of comedy is generally recognized. This is significant because as Marshall McLuhan often noted, all comedies involve statements of grievance. “Comedy is sometimes one of the only spaces in some societies in which social controls can be resisted and interrogated,” write Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson in the opening to their book *Satire TV* (10). That said, the influence of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was also felt in the genres of drama, action, and fantasy, on shows as varied as *Charlie’s Angels* and *Murphy Brown*.

The Mindy Project follows OB/GYN Mindy Lahiri (Mindy Kaling) as she tries to balance her personal and professional life (often poorly and to humorous effect) with the encouragement of her cast of co-workers at their medical office in New York City. While *30 Rock*

can be seen as a remake of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, with Liz Lemon as a higher-powered producer than Mary Richards was, Mindy Lahiri can be seen as a reflection of Rhoda Morgenstern, Mary Tyler Moore’s best friend, whose spin-off show, *Rhoda*, also became hugely successful. *Rhoda*, starring Valerie Harper, aired on CBS from 1974 to 1978. Morgenstern and Lahiri are both food-addicted native New Yorkers, self-referentially ethnic, chubby, flamboyantly dressed, self-loving, -loathing, -effacing, and -adoring in complex/equal measure, obsessed with replaying roles and narratives from movie romances and very good at their difficult jobs, Lahiri as partner at an OB/GYN office, Morgenstern as owner of her own window dressing company. Also, Danny Castellano (Lahiri’s love interest) even looks, sounds, and acts the same as Morgenstern’s eventual husband, Joe. But that’s just a superficiality. Rhoda is also interesting because she has several major reinventions, and by the end, was far better off than Mary, in almost all ways. So what does it say when “I’m the Mary; you’re the Rhoda” is an insult—

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yet Rhoda eventually gets the man *and* the money?

The dueling drama between Mary and Rhoda created rich source material. Victoria Johnson writes that the difference between the two characters was an essential part of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which “consistently drew contrasts between Mary’s Midwestern-native Protestantism and Rhoda’s New York-native Jewishness. While Mary was drawn as an all-American pompom girl, homecoming princess, and sorority girl who wears flannel pajamas and ‘never even had to stay after school,’ Rhoda was portrayed as a drum and bugle corps member, a Sharkette, and a native of ‘neighborhoods you’re afraid to walk alone in’” (136). However, the Rhoda character is conspicuously absent in *30 Rock*, and the Mary character (arguably reflected in Lahiri’s blonde and all-American friend Gwen) is phased out of *The Mindy Project* after a couple of episodes, leaving Lahiri significantly girlfriend-free. One of the results of post-feminism, as evidenced by these shows, may be a woman’s ability to stand alone, a lack of the need for a sidekick or wing-woman or judgmental BFF.

Ella Taylor, in her book, *Television Culture in Postwar America*, credits the success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* with giving rise to the “wave of series with occupational settings” that followed it, including *Lou Grant*, *Taxi*, *Barney Miller*, and *The Bob Newhart Show*. Although less of a presence in the top twenty than network dramas, “the workplace comedies attracted loyal audiences over long periods of time and have proved more durable in reruns” (Taylor 110). Taylor writes that the “growing prominence of the world of work in television” is a result not only of “baby boomers preoccupied with occupational life, professional success, and ‘getting ahead,’” but also of the “overlapping but much larger market of women, the majority of whom were by this time working” (111). When Taylor says “by this time,” she is referencing the early 1970s, the time when *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was on the air. However, by 2012, when *The Mindy Project* debuted, working women were all the more common.

However, Mindy does not just want a career. She wants, like many women, a career *and* love. Contemporary femalehood, both on the screen and in real life, is a tricky balancing act, and not only in terms of romance. Leigh Kolb, in an article entitled “*The Mindy Project*: A Case for the Female Anti-Hero,” argues, “The expectations we have for female characters in entertainment rival the expectations we have for women in our culture. . . . Be pretty, but not vain. . . . Be excellent at your career, but don’t sacrifice love and motherhood.” However, Mindy Lahiri is unapologetic in her defiance of these expectations. Much like the single girl exemplified by Helen Gurley Brown in the 1960s and 1970s, Lahiri is committed to establishing her identity outside of marriage, separate from maternity, and within a

Much like the single girl exemplified by Helen Gurley Brown in the 1960s and 1970s, Lahiri is committed to establishing her identity outside of marriage, separate from maternity, and within a rewarding and successful career.

rewarding and successful career. And the show, accordingly, spends the greatest amount of time at the workplace, at the clinic Lahiri runs with her partners. The men and women with whom she works are her family.

One of the ways *The Mindy Project* keeps things fresh is by its witty and critical commentary on the clichés that plague the romcom genre. But one of the ways *The Mindy Project* keeps things relevant is by portraying a character who, despite her pursuit of love, never relinquishes her personal ambition; a character who makes us want to be the Rhoda; a character who celebrates everything that sets her apart from the thin WASP princess, aka the Hollywood ideal.

A crucial distinction between *Rhoda* and *The Mindy Project* is that Valerie

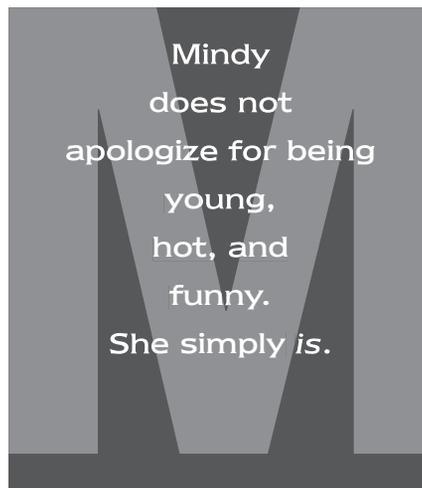


The Mindy Project (FOX) Season 3, 2014–2015. Episode: We’re a Couple Now, Haters! Airdate: September 16, 2014. Shown from left: Chris Messina, Mindy Kaling. Photo courtesy of Fox Network/Photofest.

Harper played chubby but was really quite thin and not actually Jewish, which was a gigantic part of Rhoda's identity, and revolutionary on its own terms at the time. Mindy, on the other hand, really is zaftig. During an interview on *The Daily Show* in May 2013, she told Jon Stewart that she does not want to sleep, because she does not know for how long this will all last. She realizes, as many of us may, how unusual it is for a chubby minority (her words) to be the star of a show on a major network. Comedy may be more forgiving a genre than drama in terms of "quirkiness" and sex appeal, but every woman on *Friends* was probably a size two or size four, whereas *Vogue* describes Kaling as "a fluctuating size 10" (Ballentine).

Normally, in a sitcom, you are either funny *or* you are sexy. And if you are funny and sexy, you are also a size two. And you are definitely white. Somehow, Mindy has slipped through the cracks. She is not a size two. She is not white. She may be gorgeous, but she is a type of gorgeous uncommon in Hollywood. And she is also not afraid to draw attention to these things on her show, where episodes frequently revolve around her flaws, her weaknesses, her love of food, and her disdain for fitting in. Mindy makes mistakes, just like we all do, and they feel real. Her authenticity is part of what makes her (and her persona) so effective. Victoria Johnson quotes Mary Tyler Moore talking about her show, describing the significance of seeing "everyday" people rather than just Hollywood stars—that encouraged *MTM* staff, critics, and the programs themselves to promote an ethic of 'authenticity' that was closely hewed to setting and Midwestern 'values.' According to Moore, the program's 'real,' believable qualities 'promised you truth.'" (qtd. in Johnson 134). *The Mindy Project* also aims for this feeling of believable authenticity, of the charmingly imperfect, of the real.

But, at the same time, the show does not dwell on Lahiri's mistakes or force her to indulge in self-deprecation. The premise of the show is not that Lahiri is a failure. Lahiri knows she is awesome. She refers to herself as "young and hot." She refers to herself as a "tiny, dainty



bird." She does not whine and mope. Unlike Liz Lemon, there is not a preoccupation with Mindy's failures in life. Jokes are not made about her bad hygiene or poor fashion sense. Mindy does not apologize for being young, hot, and funny. She simply *is*. And that fact is one of the most radical aspects of *The Mindy Project*. Robert Lynch, a cultural anthropologist from Rutgers University, says: "[W]omen have to go overboard with the self-deprecation because comedy can be an alpha thing (the alpha being the class clown, the attention-grabber, the presence dominating the room). Women alphas in general tend to be disliked. . . . And they're not sought after" (qtd. in Fetters).

But Mindy is alpha. And funny. And a minority. And pretty. And she does not seem to feel the need to tone down any of these attributes in order to be liked.

The real-world Sunday-brunch musings of women everywhere, whether to be a Mary or a Rhoda—just as *Sex and the City* fans wonder whether they are a Carrie, a Miranda, et cetera—are given cinematic treatment in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (Dir. David Mirkin, 1997), in which the climactic argument between the two female leads is based entirely upon who gets to be the Mary in the relationship and who gets to be the Rhoda. "I'm the Mary, you're the Rhoda" might be the most famous line from *Romy and Michele*. It is part of an argument between the two leads, during which the two archetypes are described, compared, and evaluated, with Mary seen as the desired and more

appealing persona, even if Rhoda may be more interesting and empowering.

That many of its themes have already been covered in the 1970s might make *The Mindy Project* look less "important" or "groundbreaking." However, what is gained by placing *The Mindy Project* in its place within a larger cultural narrative is a new vision of it as a commentary on *Mary Tyler Moore*: the way to get ahead is not to be Mary but rather to be Rhoda. This is an explosive case of intertextuality, one with *Romy and Michele* as obvious mediator or anticipant, in which the loud, chubby, stylish, streetwise, opinionated, ethnic chick emerges victorious (finally!) over the timid, bumbling, classically thin and gorgeous, steadfastly determined WASP princess.

This is exactly why the character of Gwen had to go. Gwen, as the blonde, white, skinny, married mother with the nice suburban house, is everything Mindy Lahiri is not. Not only was Gwen's role that of Lahiri's critic, the voice of rational pragmatism and mother-knows-best, but as the blonde Hollywood archetype, she also upstaged Lahiri, bringing her down and emphasizing the lack in Lahiri's life. However, by removing the skinny blonde from the show, Rhoda, in effect, wins.

The story of a television show matters not very much compared to the effect of the construction of the show itself on the thinking of the viewer and the culture, as well as its ability to reference and incorporate other media forms. From this perspective, Mary Tyler Moore is a woman from a world of worrying about message whereas Mindy Kaling is from a world of manipulating media. So, yes, in their own way, Mary and Rhoda acted out certain scenarios, and represented certain types of women. But Mindy and company are doing them in a manner that draws more power. For the latter's actions do not just change women—they change television itself. It may seem to be an obscure and seemingly minor point, but as film, television, and the Internet overlap, it is actually quite important.

In the initial sequence to *Romy and Michele*, the two women watch *Pretty Woman* (Dir. Garry Marshall, 1990) on

TV, lying on twin beds as they discuss their favorite sequence. Hilary Radner, in her book *Neo-Feminist Cinema*, writes that this scene “characterizes the way in which ‘cinema’ has been transformed, particularly for the ‘feminine’ viewer. The VCR (later DVD and VOD) brought cinema literally into the bedroom,” which both allows for repeat viewing and also for the repeated viewing of isolated scenes (49). What *Romy and Michele* provides is a self-reflexivity within the cinema genre, where one movie comments upon another. However, when television comments and critiques on the implausibility of the cinematic, on the ideality that we have come to expect when we contribute our suspension of disbelief, this is when the true meta-intertextuality takes place.

In the pilot episode of *The Mindy Project*, we watch Lahiri meet a sexy doctor at the hospital, complete with an elevator sequence right out of a typical romantic comedy, even down to the sappy music, elevator malfunction, and just the right touch of adorable awkwardness. Of course, just like in the movies, they start to date. Of course, just like in the movies, they fall in love. “I’m basically Sandra Bullock,” Lahiri tells us—until the romantic flashback is jarringly interrupted by a cop interrogating Lahiri in a police station interview room. Real life, it is clear, is *not* like the movies—even if “real life” in this case is a half-hour sitcom. Real life is not a meet-cute Meg Ryan vehicle. In real life, relationships end, and, in this case, Lahiri gets dumped for being too old. Not only does she lose the guy, but she is humiliated as she gives a toast at his wedding when he marries her young and beautiful Eastern European blonde replacement.

This sequence is not the only dramatization of the ugly clash between reality and cinematically fueled expectations on *The Mindy Project*. In fact, one of the show’s ongoing themes is just how much life is *not* like the movies, and how anyone expecting to transpose one onto the other is practically certifiable. “I think he’s Hugh Grant in *About a Boy*,” says Lahiri, about one of her crushes. “I think he’s Hugh Grant in real life,” is Gwen’s retort, trying to

bring Lahiri back to reality. Continuing this pattern, Gwen asks her, her tone full of contempt and criticism, “Did you think Tom would ditch the wedding and run off with you like you’re Katherine Heigl?” and Lahiri replies, “Kind of. Yes.” Romantic comedy archetypes have set women up for disillusionment and disappointment. In fact, Lahiri is arrested for basically playing the role of a romantic comedy heroine, biking away from the wedding and accidentally falling into a pool. To further emphasize the implausibility of believing in a romcom fantasy, Gwen tells Lahiri, “Well, your life is not a romantic comedy. Right now it seems more like a sad documentary about a criminally insane spinster.”

Another episode, aptly titled “You’ve Got Sext,” mimics the romantic comedy *You’ve Got Mail* (Dir. Nora Ephron, 1998), full of the same mistaken identities and letter writing (only in the twenty-first-century update the letter writing has been replaced with sexting), except that on *The Mindy Project* there is no fairy-tale ending. In fact, the guy goes off with another girl he meets while waiting for Lahiri. The episode “Harry and Mindy,” a clear reference to *When Harry Met Sally* (Dir. Rob Reiner, 1989), opens with Lahiri lurking in the lobby of the Empire State Building, believing that this is where she will spot her own special someone—only, of course, she does not. Life may entail romance, but not for Mindy Lahiri.

However, the show further diverts from expectation—from the rules of the romantic comedy genre—by not wal-

lowing in Lahiri’s spinsterhood. The show is not exclusively focused on her attempts to find love. Because Lahiri, as much as she wants to be loved, is not willing to change who she is in order to find love. Not only does she refuse to lose weight—something that is suggested to her several times—but she also refuses to compromise her career. In fact, after the Hugh Grant exchange with Gwen, Lahiri races off to the hospital to deliver a baby, and later in the same episode, she cuts a date short to, again, race to the hospital for another delivery. She may acknowledge where she would rather be (“Do you know how difficult it is for a chubby 31-year-old woman to go on a legit date with a guy who majored in economics at Duke?”), but she still gets up to leave the restaurant and her date, running, shoes in hand, to the hospital. Moments later, we see Lahiri, in full surgical apparel, successfully delivering a baby.

In the following scene, Lahiri is watching *Sleepless in Seattle* (Dir. Nora Ephron, 1993), but this time, something has changed. She realizes there is another path available to her: “You know, this morning I woke up in jail ‘cause I was broken up over a guy who fixes teeth for a living,” she tells Danny. “Now I’m watching one of my favorite movies. I just delivered a baby into this world. I have a new patient. This is working. This is progress.” Her work gives her purpose and drive. And this distinction is crucial both to the trajectory of the series as a whole and also to Lahiri’s evolution. “Maybe I won’t get married, you know?” Lahiri says, partly to herself and partly to Danny. “Maybe I’ll do one of those eat, pray, love things. Ugh, no, I don’t wanna pray. Forget it, I’ll die alone.”

First, she shifts her priorities based on another cinematic archetype—a rebound from romantic comedy to a journey of self-discovery. But then she realizes that genre does not fit either, so she chooses to opt out from both—to opt out from what we expect from thirty-something women in the movies. Lahiri is not going to get married, she tells us; she is going to die alone. By dying alone, she removes herself from the expectations (and restrictions) of the genre, since

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romantic comedy heroines do not die—and certainly not alone.

However, what is important is not that Lahiri plans to die alone—because we know that she does not mean that on a literal level. What is important is that she places her romantic desires (and disappointments) within the perspective of her career. This is where Lahiri truly subverts romcom cliché. Alyssa Rosenberg writes that “[t]he finest episodes of the show’s first season were the ones where Mindy’s work helped her realize important things about her approach to dating and relationships—and ultimately made a sly argument that even if Mindy has to run out of dates and parties to deliver children, her commitment to her career is actually one of the things that’s helping her make incremental progress towards a healthier personal life.”

Life, for Lahiri, just like for contemporary women, is not just about finding love. Life is not just about playing the role of a romcom heroine. Life now affords other opportunities. As Mary Tyler Moore discovered decades earlier, and as countless women discovered as a result of Mary and Rhoda’s adventures, not only *could* they work, but their careers could be just as fulfilling, if not more so, than romance.

And it is the ongoing presence of her career that plays a pivotal role in Lahiri’s life. Despite the constant meta-intertextuality and referencing from romantic comedy themes, structures, and storylines, *The Mindy Project* is situated firmly in the workplace comedy genre. The “workplace family” is especially significant for an empowered and career-driven woman, for whom, as Taylor argues, “the opportunities for emotional engagement and support no longer lie in the family but in the workplace” (149). During the twenty-first century, it is more and more common for families to be separated geographically, for children to be living far away from their parents, and even for families to be nonexistent, as people are waiting longer and longer to get married and have children, to make families of their own. On *The Mindy Project*, Lahiri’s parents are nonexistent, and her brother

only makes a few short appearances. In fact, during the “You’ve Got Sext” episode, when Lahiri complains that she will be responsible for ending her family’s lineage as a result of her lack of both partner and child, Danny asks, “What about your brother?” and Lahiri replies, “I forgot about him.” His role on the show—in her life—is so small, that she literally forgets he exists.

For Mindy Lahiri, much like for most of us, there is no close-knit nuclear family, much like there is no fairy-tale ending. Significantly, the show critiques our romantic-comedy-fueled expectations from within the world of a woman who is overflowing with agency. On one level, Mindy Kaling is in charge. This is her show, her self-titled character. She is producer, writer, and lead actress. As an auteur, there is no question that she is in control. But as Mindy Lahiri, there is also no question that she is also in control, and we see this in POV shot after POV shot. We *hear* this in voice-over after voice-over. And while Mary Richards was not overtly sexual, Mindy Lahiri is. Mindy Lahiri has sex, she pursues men, she has one-night stands, she ends relationships that do not fulfill her. She has a job that revolves around the care and maintenance of women’s health, and her devotion to this cause is emphasized repeatedly. Her career is important to her, symbolically and literally. Mindy *is* the new Rhoda.

Although many television shows have incoherent or mixed messages, moments of cultural clarity that are instantly contradicted by subsequent opposing messages, or narratives that are an intentionally escapist response to current events, *The Mindy Project* does not. Women may still dream of the knight on a white horse, but an increasing number have, like Lahiri, come to realize that they are going to have to rescue themselves.

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