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Genderlect Theory in *Parks and Recreation*

I. Introduction

Men and women have many different ways of communicating messages among themselves and with one another. Societal norms and stipulations have conditioned men and women to communicate in certain ways over time. These communication differences can be seen on a daily basis. From television to movies to day-to-day interactions, males and females have always had differing communication styles that have separated them from one another throughout time. One of the most popular ways that we see this today is through television shows.

Parks and Recreation is a mockumentary comedy show produced by NBC. The show ran for seven seasons, ending in the spring of 2015. It follows the life and times of the parks and recreation workers of Pawnee, Indiana as they work to make their town a better place, despite the struggles they face from citizens and other government employees. The show features a core cast of ten characters, all who range in appearance throughout the seven seasons. Each of these unique characters brings their own vibrant energy to the show, making it more enjoyable for the viewer, as well as easier to connect with.

In this mix of characters, there are six males and four females. Though these may be their genetic genders, their communication styles may not match overall. This paper will seek to answer the question: Do the characters of *Parks and Recreation* fit with their specific genderlect communication styles? Throughout this paper, the ideas of genderlect communication and how they relate to personal communication will be explored. This will help to address genderlect communication, not only in *Parks and Recreation*, but also in television mockumentaries and sitcoms across the networks.

II. Literature Review

Genderlect in television is something that many viewers are familiar with seeing. Many societal norms and traditions are portrayed in television shows and sitcoms, making them easy to learn from. Several television shows explore this idea of the genderlect theory by portraying characters in their traditional genderlects. Many researchers and writers have looked at shows like *The Office* or *How I Met Your Mother* to try to understand the concept of male and female character dialogue.

Genderlect styles are common in many types of television programming, but can specifically be challenged in the ways of comedic sitcoms. In a study done at Boston College, researchers compared how characters communicated with their significant others in different television sitcoms in order to see how their genderlects would hold up against one another. They hoped to show that males would prove to be more authoritative and status-oriented whereas women would focus more on their feminist ideals (Walsh, Fursich, Jefferson, 123).

Another example of this genderlect communication in television would be in an article published in the *Journal of Men's Studies* looking at the images of men in popular sitcoms. The study focused on the portrayal of male characters in hit television shows and how accurate these characters lived up to the typical male stereotype. In turn with this, they also analyzed how much

these characters fit with a traditional male genderlect form of communication. The results showed that there has definitely been a shift in male character traits when looking at popular television shows today, as compared to popular shows from thirty years ago. However, the majority of male characters still fit a traditional male genderlect, even if they do respect feminist ideals more than they used to (Klumas, Marchant, 269). They showed that these males tended to lean towards communication styles such as report talk, angling their communication to be more direct and information driven (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 434).

Though these kinds of studies can be used to affirm established gender roles, they can also be used to challenge them, like many of the *Parks and Recreation* characters do in their character roles. In an article published in the *Critical Journal for Film and Television*, the idea of female roles in movies and broadcast television today is looked at from a much different approach. The author challenges this submissive-female stereotype and explores many strong, feminist characters in the media today. These characters all challenge the female genderlect because of their ability to establish status and power through communication, while still creating a connection between themselves and other characters (Wagner, 35).

III. Theory Application

The theory that best helps to analyze these gender specific types of communication is the genderlect communication theory. Genderlect communication is defined as “a term suggesting that masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects” (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 433). This means that males and females each have a individual away of communicating that is different from one another. For example, females tend to use communication to establish connection with others, where as males tend to communicate in order to gain status or show power.

The other aspect that fits with this theory is the idea of rapport vs. report talk. Rapport and report talk are both ways of communicating that are used in order to converse and exchange information with another. Women are more likely to engage in rapport talk, which is conversation that is typically used to establish a connection with another conversational partner. On the other hand, males are more likely to engage in report talk, which is a conversation style that involves commanding attending, conveying information, and winning arguments with a conversational partner (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 434).

The first character to look at in *Parks and Recreation* is Leslie Knope. Leslie would be considered the main character of the show and is often the focus of the storyline. Though the cast has many characters to focus on, Leslie tends to be the character that drives the plot the most. Leslie fits a very female genderlect style when it comes to her communication methods. Leslie is constantly trying to connect with people on a deeper level. She instantly tries to establish a connection with people when she meets them. One will often find her over sharing with people about her hobbies or personal life in order to connect with someone.

Though Leslie is somewhat concerned about her status, especially because in parts of the show she does hold different positions of authority in the government, she always tries to use this technique of connecting with people over establishing dominance. Instead of forcing her communication to raise her status, Leslie uses her communication effectively to connect and relate with the citizens of Pawnee. This is what eventually gets her elected onto City Council. Her personal relationships and close connections with people absolutely fit the descriptions for a female genderlect communication style.

The next character to look at that would fit a female genderlect is Leslie’s best friend Ann. Ann holds many jobs throughout the show, but is as a constant friend and support system to

Leslie. Her communication style is very direct, but much like Leslie, is always used to establish connection instead of trying to establish dominance over another. One of the traits that is often noted about Ann throughout the show is that she takes on the personality and communication of the man that she is dating. This shows that she is constantly trying to connect with her partner instead of trying to one-up them in the relationship.

One of the most applicable parts of the female genderlect that Ann possesses is the ability to effectively listen. She is the character that many people go to for advice or counsel in times of distress. She is able to listen and assess a situation, while responding effectively, often using things like cooperative overlap (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 435). These characteristics definitely help to classify Ann as a female genderlect in her communication style.

Another character that fits a more female genderlect style is Andy. Andy is an employee at City Hall and cycles through many different positions throughout the show. He is also married to one of the other main characters/employees, April. Though Andy is male, his communication style overall tends to lean more towards the female genderlect. He is never concerned with status in how he communicates. He genuinely tries to establish a connection with people when he meets them, and works to find out more about them as their relationship progresses. Over the course of the show, viewers tend to learn more about how Andy communicates, which helps them to understand that he is not just the loveable goofball he is often portrayed to be, but is actually a genuine person trying to establish a deeper connection with people.

Andy is never concerned with report talk. He is one of the more team-oriented characters you see throughout the show. He is often concerned about the good of the group instead of how the situation can benefit him personally. The idea of argumentation and winning is never something that concerns him. Because he is more concerned about establishing connections, Andy does not make an effort to try to fight with people about different arguments or situations. This makes his communication genderlect more female than male.

The last character that fits a more female genderlect is Jerry. Jerry is an employee that is seen throughout the show, but definitely has a more prominent part in the later seasons. He is the parks and recreation employee who constantly seems to be the butt of everyone's jokes. Though he is consistently put down, Jerry never seems to use his communication skills to assert status over anyone to try and defend himself.

Though Jerry does not use his communication to show his status or try to win over his coworkers, he does communicate what is important to him. He is constantly seen talking about his wife, Gayle, and his daughters. His emotional connection to his family is what is most important to him in his life. He does not care as much about his professional status or the advancement of his career. All he truly cares about is his happiness and his family. This type of connection and communication makes him fit more of a female genderlect.

Though there are many characters on *Parks and Recreation* that fit this female genderlect communication style, there are several that fit a male genderlect as well. The first character that could be seen as having a male genderlect is Ron. Ron is the director of the parks and recreation department. He is an extremely private person who keeps to himself as much as possible, while still using his communication to uphold his position of power. He constantly uses report talk to try to show his coworkers that he is correct and refuses to back down from challenges.

One of the biggest aspects of the male genderlect that Ron possesses is this idea of asking questions. Ron refuses to show weakness or admit that he is wrong in most situations. He is typically concerned with saving face and maintaining authority over truly caring for himself.

This definitely fits with the male genderlect of wanting to gain and maintain status over establishing connections, making Ron more of a male genderlect overall.

Another character who fits a male genderlect would be Tom. Many people may think that Tom would be a female genderlect when first thinking about the character himself. As a character, Tom is quite feminine and often enjoys more womanly things, such as shopping, spa treatments, and fancy restaurants. However, even though Tom's character enjoys taking part in these activities are often defined as more feminine, his communication style is absolutely male. Tom is very concerned with what other people think of him. He is constantly trying to use his smooth talking to increase his status and win over others. He only bothers to establish a connection with someone if that person can do something for him in the future.

One of the aspects of male genderlect that Tom often exhibits is the idea of storytelling. He constantly tries to paint himself in a positive, heroic light, especially when he is dealing with women. Tom also uses storytelling to validate his arguments throughout the show. His persuasive measures are usually based around some sort of story where he is in a power position. This domineering attitude definitely helps to categorize Tom into the male genderlect.

The last character that could be considered as having a male genderlect is Donna. Donna is a character that is seen throughout the show, but is definitely more prominent towards the end of the series. She, much like Tom, definitely likes the more feminine things in life. However, her communication style definitely reflects a male genderlect. Donna is very direct in her communication. She speaks very firmly when it comes to conflict and does not stray from confrontational situations as it is typically seen for females to do. She is often the one in the office who is called when there is a problem that needs to be confronted head on.

Overall, Donna's communication style is very driven by report talk. She is constantly arguing to prove herself, especially over male coworkers who may be trying to one-up her. She pushes against their advances and uses their arguments against them. Donna constantly working against anyone that is trying to bring her down. Overall, Donna's communication style definitely leans more towards a male genderlect than a female.

The show *Parks and Recreation* has many characters that have distinct male or female genderlects communication styles. However, there are some characters on this show that exhibit signs from both male and female genderlect styles. Many characters exhibit qualities from both their own genderlect as well as the opposite gender. These styles can be seen in many instances throughout the show.

The first character that shows this mixed genderlect style is Ben. Ben is Leslie's husband and comes into the show during end of the second season. He is a hard character to identify the genderlect style of. As an accountant, he is a very factual person. He likes to know what is going on at all times, and tends to manage people, even in personal situations. However, it is always done from a place of caring and connection with everyone around him.

Ben tends to communicate with people in way that helps him maintain his status, but does so by connecting with them on a more personal level. This is why he and Leslie go together so well. He needs to have this personal connection with people in order to maintain his status level over people. Though he focuses on facts and numbers, he still works to establish a connection with the people he interacts with on a daily basis.

The next character that can fit both the male and female genderlect style is April. April is Andy's wife and is a prominent character in the series from start to finish. Her genderlect is extremely tricky to identify. Her character's personality is unlike anyone else on the show. She is extremely aloof and reserved. However, she allows herself to open up and connect with her

husband, Andy. She uses communication very strategically in that she tries to manipulate people into doing work for her or to one-up others. However, when she does care for someone, she effectively uses her communication skills to connect with them on a deeper level. This is seen more in the later seasons as she develops deeper relationships with some of the other characters on the show.

The last character that fits this mixed genderlect styles is Chris. Chris is the city manager and comes into the show at the end of season two. As a person, Chris is very driven and motivated to succeed. He is athletically fit, attractive, and overly positive about life all the time. These characteristics help to shape his general view of the world. As an authority figure, Chris' communication is often very factual and direct, making it seem like a male genderlect. However, Chris is always concerned with the wellbeing of others. He can read people's emotions and detect when someone is upset. He then adjusts the situations and tries to develop a more meaningful connection with them based off their emotions.

Though his professional and management communication is often that of a male genderlect, Chris exhibits many signs of female genderlects as well. He deeply cares for others and desires to develop genuine connections with them, unlike any other character on the show. Chris exhibits many of the traits that are discussed in the book *Gender and Communication at Work*. The book discusses how to effectively communicate with both genders in a professional work environment, and Chris really emphasizes the lessons of this book, specifically the issues on Leadership and Communication because he is highest authority figure on the show (Barrett, Davidson, 183). Chris definitely has one of the most split genderlect personalities of any of the characters on this show.

IV. Conclusion

Overall, there is a wide range of genderlect communication styles within the cast of characters from *Parks and Recreation*. Though some characters fit with their specific genderlects, others strayed more towards the opposite gender. This helps the viewers to see that characters are more dimensional than networks often play them off to be. It can also help viewers to connect with different characters in ways that would not be possible if their communication and personality styles were not portrayed as they are.

These portrayals of characters on sitcoms can really affect how viewers see their genderlects depending on the specific show. Each show has a different cast of characters that makes it a different occurrence for the audience to experience. These types of shows are one of the main ways that society has come to formulate beliefs about gender roles, specifically genderlect communication. These television programs can either affirm or challenge what society has already come to know and believe about cross-gender communication. This can be challenging to accept, but is also important not to overlook as television becomes more progressive in how it portrays characters of different genders and their specific communication styles.

It will be interesting to see how future sitcoms will portray characters and their genderlects. More feminist characters, both male and female, are becoming much more common in television and movies today. This can drastically impact the idea of the typical male and female genderlect. Female characters are much more likely to challenge others for status roles whereas male characters are seen striving for connection over power. This change in character dynamics will impact the overall scheme of genderlects in media characters overtime. However, it is impossible to know the true severity of this impact at this time.

Genderlect communication styles are absolutely prevalent in media fixtures today. From movies to television, characters each have their own way of communicating that is specific to their personality. Every character knows how he or she want to depict themselves and every writer of a show or movie knows how they want a character to be portrayed. These genderlect communication styles are just how they interact with each other and how they truly present themselves.

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