

“Impact of Gender on TV.” A Content Analysis of *Parks and Recreation*

Albert J. Renteria-Jetter

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Dr. Rachel Romero

Department of Sociology

A04688825

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 4 years, gender/gender roles have become a huge topic and has been forced to the front of the list for many individuals in terms of the inequalities our country faces. The way gender/gender roles are portrayed in television plays a large role in the overall perspective of gender as being viewed as either stereotypical or nonconforming. People tend to watch shows that generally have a portrayal of the character's gender/gender roles that align with their beliefs of what gender of their gender roles should be. The primary objective of this study is to analyze How gender/gender roles are depicted in the American Sitcom "Parks and Recreation".

You can look just about anywhere, in terms of television sitcoms, to get a grasp of how gender/gender roles are portrayed, but you might have to switch channels to get multiple views. That's what makes "Parks and Recreation" so great. You can turn just about any episode of the show and you can find a multitude of characters performing many different gender/gender roles. Because Parks and Recreation has had such a large following since it's start, many hold it to a high standard and think of it as the torch carrier of how gender/gender roles should look within society. I think "Parks and Recreation" does an excellent job balancing out the amount of individuals in position of power with both men and women and there are many great examples of hyper masculinity as well as women in a majority male dominated space.

It's hard to say if television sitcoms influence gender/gender roles on an individual household level, one thing is for certain, Parks and Recreation, for some, can be a societal model in the way men and women behave and how they do gender. With its large viewer ship, I feel it is critical in examining how much of an impact the show has on the average viewer and more so on society from a holistic approach.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There seems to be a mixed bag of articles regarding gender and gender roles in American television. I focused my study on the broad topic of gender and how it is defined to getting more focused on specific concepts of gender like masculinity and femininity in television. Because gender is such a pivotal topic within today's society, there was an over abundance of articles on the many subtopics of gender. The articles range from the female view on the gender/gender roles in society to the negative impact that the current roles in television have on men and women in society and the articles will explain some of the main topics in current and past research in asking the question, how are gender/gender roles depicted in the American Sitcom, Parks and Recreation?

Gender roles research has become increasingly more available partially because of how society is trending toward a broader definition of it. On articles that involve gender roles in television, the primary focus is the female image, and how they either make or break the gender roles. In the first article, "That's what she said", a show about the American hit The Office, the message the authors were trying to push across was that the show was made particularly to mock what many see in the American office settings, they ask the question, how might the form and layout of the show and their representations of gender reinforce or challenge the patriarchal status quo of corporate life in America? (Birthisel and Martin)<sup>1</sup>. The article uses an episode example that shows Michael, the boss, telling Pam to kiss a blowup doll (p. 65 Birthisel and Martin)<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the article Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast, the show has a focus on women, but even more negative. According to Kimberly Walsh<sup>2</sup> et al., television wrongly pushes the second wave feminist message that women in television will never advance past the

roles they normally have, because they “express what women want rather than the expression of the continuing constraints on women’s options” and “the only female alternatives offered in the sitcoms present dire consequences – being alone or socially inept.” The male point of view is also prevalent in this article. The dominant theme in this section is that, sometimes in American television, there may be the gender roles that portray women as being the dominant force in shows. As stated in the article, “Cheryl, is way too good for Jim. She is wittier, smarter, more competent and more attractive” (Walsh, et al. p. 129)<sup>2</sup>. Although this is not an overarching theme, it does suggest that there are multiple views of women regarding their roles in television.

Focusing just on gender roles, Beth Vanfossen<sup>3</sup>, looks at how the family views the roles the mother and father have in modern society. According to Vanfossen<sup>3</sup>, there are two explanations of how the aspirations of females are formed. The first, sex role values are artifacts of personality and passive traits and characteristics lead women to prefer a wife and mother role. The second being that sex roles emerge from cultural values. The study done in this article uses multiple variables to determine their aspirations and sex role values (Vanfossen p. 564)<sup>3</sup>. How are these gender and sex roles portrayed in the American Sitcom Parks and Recreation?

With regards to the study of men in television, it is a far less researched topic. “the bulk of research on television and sex roles/gender is slanted toward investigating images of women and sexism. Second, it appears that frequently men and male characters are used as a “normative referent” against which to launch the research.” (Kimmel 1986)<sup>4</sup>. According to Garfinkel (Image of Men)<sup>4</sup> and Hess, Grant (Gender-Role Behavior)<sup>5</sup>, television provides men and women with unreal gender roles and role model images. Taking it a step further into the roles of men in television, the article focuses heavily on the image of famous characters in American sitcom history. What the researchers found was “all of the shows that were reviewed in the article had some similar themes. Heterosexuality was taken as a given; men and women are different; and changes in sex roles and status are confusing if not downright problematic”

Lastly, the article “Feminism, Sexism, and the Small Screen” focuses heavily on feminism in television. As stated by Du Vernay<sup>6</sup>, “the depiction of women and girls in reality television shows such as My Super Sweet Sixteen and the Real Housewives franchise gives children and teens the wrong idea—that women are not doing phenomenal things every day (or worse, that they don’t have the desire to)”. This is another article that comes to the conclusion that women play roles in television that are typically not valued highly within our society. Du Vernay<sup>6</sup> also claims, popular culture has a huge role in shaping the gender and personal identification of children, which is why popular culture’s offerings deserve scrutiny and analysis”. To me this is why this topic is important and it ties in greatly to how gender is depicted in Parks and Recreation.

In conclusion, the examination of gender in television is huge because of the changing landscape of television and how we, as society, define the always changing definition of gender and the roles that have defined them. The research ties together multiple aspects of gender and sex roles in society and television. Applying the information gathered from these articles on gender to the television show Parks and Recreation, I believe, will add to the overall discussion of gender and gender roles in television and the effect they have on society.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This study utilizes an unobtrusive method to analyze “How gender/gender roles are depicted in the American Sitcom “Parks and Recreation”. I conducted a content analysis of seven episodes of the sitcom “Parks and Recreation” one from each of the seven seasons. I choose

these seven episode because, I felt they had the most upside with providing great examples of the depictions and portrayals of gender/gender roles. Because Parks and Recreation was such a huge hit on the television screen and people still watch it today, it is very important that we look at critically. Parks and Recreation was chosen because of its large fan base and being one of the most watched American sitcoms in recent history.

Gender/gender roles is a very interesting topic in my eyes, it has come to the forefront of many policies and laws in the past few years and because I felt as though Parks and Recreation would provide great examples of gender/gender roles, content analysis was the most appropriate methodology for my research question “How gender/gender roles are depicted in the American Sitcom “Parks and Recreation”. I watched seven episodes of Parks and Recreation in search of any data that would directly relate to my research question. Going into each episode blind was a really tough thing to do but I was determined not to go looking for data that would answer my research question, rather I just collected data and analyzed them and found patterns and themes throughout the collected data.

It is important to address the limitations associated with this study. Firstly, you can find examples and depictions of gender/gender roles just about everywhere you look throughout many forms of media from books, movies, news outlets and many other sources, just looking at American sitcoms is kind of narrowing the amount of data you could possibly gather. Secondly, through the various forms of media, there are likely more depictions of both stereotypical gender roles and gender nonconforming roles. Lastly, I wouldn't exactly know where to start if I were trying to answer the same research question when using other methodological forms like in-depth interviews or focus groups. With the in-depth interview and focus groups I could get a more diverse outlooks to how others view gender/gender role depictions in television.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to explore “How gender/gender roles are depicted in the American Sitcom “Parks and Recreation”. To fully understand this, I watched some of my favorite episodes, one from each season, of “Parks and Recreations”. The episodes I observed were, Season 1, Episode 4 “Boys Club; Season 2, Episode 10 “Hunting Trip”; Season 3, Episode 16 “Flu Season”; Season 4, Episode 13 “Bowling for Votes”; Season 5, Episode 9 “Ron and Diane; Season 6, Episode 20 “One in 8,000”; and Season 7, Episode 12 “One Last Ride”. An analysis of these episodes will help the reader paint a mental picture that answers my research question. I have watched Parks and Recreation all the way through and it became clear to me that I was going to have a hard time trying to distinguish from what I had previously known about the show and re-watching these episodes to see if I the data I collected would answer my research question how is gender/gender roles depicted in the American Sitcom “Parks and Recreation”.

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, three major themes emerged. (1) A majority of men portrayed in “Parks and Recreation” as stereotypical forms of hypermasculinity and stupidity. (2) Some women in the show have roles that are in positions of power within the workplace and in relationships. (3) Men are portrayed as being rational and women are portrayed as being over emotional. Below, I discuss each theme to provide reader an opportunity to evaluate “Parks and Recreation” sociologically.

*Men are messy, they act like idiots, and they don't eat or drink healthy.*

Theme 1: A majority of men portrayed in “Parks and Recreation” as stereotypical forms of hypermasculinity and stupidity.

The most prevalent theme through out each episode is that a majority of the male characters in Parks and Recreation are depicted as being super masculine, very stupid and just overall stereotypical male. Based on what you find when watching the show, you can come to the conclusion that most of the men are either super manly, love eating meat and drinking, are complete morons and are messy. I never really thought about the average man in Parks and Recreation being messy my first go round, but when I tried to analyze male stereotypes they were prominent in the show. In Season 1 episode 4 “boys club”, you can see the way the character Andy Dwyer is depicted. He is messy, leaving Ann’s house looking like a pigpen and he himself is also eating terrible junk food and cereal at the couch. When he cleans up a little, he just bags it up and throws it into the pit behind Ann’s house. While he is out there, the camera pans over to another male character doing the same exact thing, throwing bags full of trash into the pit.

The masculine role is a lot easier to spot when watching. In Season 2 episode 10 “Hunting Trip”. A few of the main male characters go on a hunting trip every year and they don’t normally allow any women on the trip. When they first get to the lodge, where they are all going to stay for the weekend, one of the male characters pulls down the pants of another and yells “I am the pants king”. It’s a pretty small thing but it plays right into the gender stereotype role of masculinity and idiotic behavior by male characters. Again, across the entirety of the show there are countless examples of Andy or Gerry Gergich making a complete buffoon of themselves and that is a key trait of masculinity. Ron is completely embarrassed to even be seen around people or things he perceives feminine.

Every episode analyzed reinforced the average male gender stereotypes as being messy, hyper masculine and eating and drinking unhealthy. Looking further into the unhealthy eating and drinking of some of the male characters in the show, every episode analyzed you are almost certain to see one of the lead characters Ron Swanson eating some kind of large amount of meat and drinking excessive amounts of Lagavulin Whiskey. Although it is a stereotype that men eat excessively, the depiction of male gender roles is reinforced in Season 3 episode 2 “Flu Season” where Andy Dwyer introduces Ron Swanson to the “meat tornado” and explains to Ron that it literally killed a man last year. This portrays a complete disregard for health when one of the male leads is eating something that has killed someone in the past and it further plays on the gender stereotype that men are idiots, because no sane person would ever put that “meat tornado inside of them”.

### *Women with power in both relationships and at work.*

Theme 2: Some women in the show have roles that are in positions of power within the workplace and in relationships.

The topic of women in positions of power is actually higher on the totem pole in terms of gender roles and how they are portrayed in Parks and Recreation, but because Ron Swanson is a more intriguing character to me, I chose to put the portrayal of women with power second. Throughout each episode analyzed, you will find a woman that is either in control in the workplace or in control of her relationships, there will always be one or the other and sometimes both. It is not odd to say that men have an extremely overwhelming amount of power when it comes to politics, which is where the show Parks and Recreation is based, and just as much stake in the workforce. I would guess that the number one reason individuals were so enamored with the show was because a woman, Leslie Knope, controlled the Parks Department in the show even though she was not at the top in the department. In Season 4 episode 13 “Bowling for

Votes” Leslie conducts a focus group to gauge her popularity within the community to see where she ranked among the candidates running. One of the members of the focus group said that he would not vote for her because she didn’t seem like the type of individual that you can go bowling with. So Leslie goes out of her way to challenge the man that made the remark and persistently tries to be more relatable to gain the man vote. She took complete control of the situation showing she had the power to persuade and get things done. Similar to Ron always eating extremely unhealthy food or Andy always being portrayed as being messy, Leslie’s gender roles are always non-conforming in the show. Stereotypically, women in the workforce have very little say or the political ability to sway individuals and members of city council, but she is the head honcho that organizes and runs everything in the department.

Similar to men in the workforce, traditionally, men tend to have a majority of the power in the relationship. Some would argue that’s not the case but men have always been the head of a household. Donna Meagle breaks the mold when it comes to relationship control and who lays the rules. With regards to gender roles, the depiction of Donna is that she is a boss and always stands her ground. Roles that are usually given to the male. Season 6 episode 20 “One in 8,000” when she gives her ex another shot at her, he asked her if she would wear one of his favorite outfits, and she responded “I’ll wear that when you deserve to see me in that”. She is in complete control of power in every relationship she partakes in and she never gets lowballed all are gender characteristics that typically define men.

*The biggest gender/gender role stereotype: Men can reason; women are too emotional*

Theme 3: Men are portrayed as being rational and women are portrayed as being over emotional.

I’m almost certain this is one of the hardest gender roles to shake for women. The idea that they are all too emotional to use logic and reasoning when trying to resolve issues and conflicts. Throughout all of the good portrayals of women in Parks and Recreation, the depiction that men are more logical individuals and that women are more emotional and go overboard is overwhelmingly prevalent. Like the other themes, this can be seen throughout the entirety of the series where the main male lead, Ron Swanson, is always cool, calm, and collected and is constantly telling Leslie and other female coworkers to think things through. The one female character in the show that he doesn’t have to tell to relax is April and that largely due to the fact that she is the only character in the show that is remotely similar to Ron. The same could be said about other male characters like Mark Brandanowitz and Andy Dwyer, although Andy is depicted as being really dumb, he does use some forms of skewed logic and never emotionally overthinks anything and reacts more with his gut.

Parks and Recreation depicts a majority of women as too emotional and over thinkers of everything. I can reel off a bunch of characters in the show that fit that mold, from the lead Leslie Knope and her best friend Ann Perkins, who by the way her entire character seems to be based on emotion, to even the hardy Donna Meagle. Donna is a tough character to crack because even though her gender roles when it comes to power are masculine traits, she does have the stereotypical overemotional feminine characteristics as well. Sure you can have both. Leslie, however, is the leader when it comes to overreacting and being emotional when she should just brush it aside. In one of the funniest scenes in the series, Boys club, Leslie is freaking out because she feels as though she is going to be severely punished for opening a basket that was given to them, as there are laws within local government that prohibit government employees from receiving gifts of over a certain amount of dollar. Ron tells her not to blow this out of

proportion and Leslie responds, I will blow this in proportion. This is actually Leslie in just about every episode of the show, not just the ones I analyzed for the sake of this research. One could look at this interaction between Ron and Leslie as just humor or you can look a little deeper and try break down the portrayals of women that always seem to be over emotional and they need men to talk some logical and rational sense into them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The reason for this study was to analyze “How gender/gender roles are depicted in the American Sitcom “Parks and Recreation”. The analysis and reviewing of the seven episodes revealed three key themes thought the process of data collection. These themes are supported by using the transcripts from the show as examples of the depictions of gender/gender roles.

The first theme is that a majority of men portrayed in “Parks and Recreation” as stereotypical forms of hypermasculinity and stupidity. This was found throughout the seven episode examined depicting most men as being messy, acting like idiots and eating extremely unhealthy. The second them was that Parks and Receptions depicted some women in the show have roles that are in positions of power within the workplace and in relationships. Again, this was consistent across all episodes analyzed with the overall depiction of women as strong and persistent and having much to say about the everyday lives of women in the workplace and in relationships which are areas that are traditionally dominated by men. The last and most prevalent theme was the depiction of men are portrayed as being rational and women are portrayed as being over emotional. This was an overarching theme that was not affected at all by any of the other characteristics that the characters in Parks and Recreation showed. The trend was, you can be messy and dumb, but if you are a male you are calm and rational. You could be strong and have all the power, but if you are a female, you are over emotional and always blow thing out of proportion.

The reinforcement of these gender/gender roles portrayed in Parks and Recreation can be problematic because they are painting a picture in individual’s minds that this is what society is supposed to look like and these are the gender roles that individuals within society must follow. We know that gender is something you do and that the stereotypes that are tied to someone biological sex are socially constructed. Men and women both can be messy, eat unhealthy foods and like masculine activities or characteristics, they both can have power in the workplace and in relationships and they both can be rational and over emotional. These stereotypes are not mutually exclusive to on sex or the other. Parks and Recreation is arguably the greatest television sitcom in my generation, but it too can portray gender/gender roles that could be potentially harmful at an individual level and even more so at the societal level.

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