That’s What They Said-

Representations of Gender, Race and Sexuality in

NBC’s The Office.

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Abstract

NBC’s *The Office* is an American version of the British television show with the same name, it is said to represent the corrupt ways of the American business system, in this dissertation, I aim to find out how the treatment of different types of people does this.

The problems that arose during the writing of this dissertation were mainly within the chapter looking at Sexuality. I found there wasn’t a lot of previous writing on it, so I had to come up with my own ideas and reasoning. There was also difficulty finding specific items written specifically on the American version of *The Office* as most work has been on the British version.

This dissertation is going to be looking at the way that gender, race and sexuality is portrayed within the NBC television show *The Office* and how it represents the American business system, and how it used for comic effect.
Introduction.

NBC’s *The Office* was created in 2005 as an American ‘version’ of the popular British comedy, it was adapted in America by Greg Daniels. Sometimes marketed in other countries as *The Office: An American Workplace*, *The Office* has become one of NBC’s most successful comedies and is set to finish after nine seasons later on in the year (2013.) On the NBC official *The Office* website the successes are described as:

> “Since its premiere on NBC in March 2005, "The Office" has established itself as a genuine hit, earning prestigious television honors such as the 2006 Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series, 2006 Peabody Award, 2006 and 2008 AFI Honors, Producers Guild Award, Writers Guild Award, SAG Award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy, Ace Eddie Award for editing and a Television Critic's Association Award for Outstanding Achievement in Comedy.” (NBC, 2013)

A ‘Mockumentary’ based around the Scranton branch of the fictional Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, the show tends to follow the boss Michael Scott (later Andy Bernard, played by Steve Carell and Ed Helms respectively) and his assistant Dwight Schrute (played by Rainn Wilson) as they get along with ‘office life.’ Michael is very often portrayed as a bully, being quite rude to his employees and not quite understanding other people’s emotions. He often insults people thinking that he’s being funny, or can be rude to people on purpose. (This is especially true with the character of Toby, whom Michael appears to hate for no apparent reason.) However, the way that Michael treats these people is very often down to the fact that he thinks it’s the right way to behave and doesn’t think that what he’s doing is necessarily wrong. There are many characters that work within the office and are subjected to the abuse, and bullying from Michael. Many of these characters are either women, people of different races or homosexual characters. Women in *The Office* are very often portrayed stereotypically and are treated very differently, along with the ethnic minorities and homosexual characters. Previous research into this area claims that that character of Michael Scott is a metaphor of the American business system and is mean to be a comic version of this.

> “Michael Scott is a comic representation of the hypocrisy of the American business environment; personifying both its urge to be seen as likable and tolerant and its longing to return to a time when it could freely run on a system of white male
privilege. A manager who became successful during a time when business shamelessly ran on the good ol' boy system, Michael cannot change his sexist and racist outlook to keep up with the corporate world's new need to seem inclusive.” (The Feminist Underground, 2007)

The whole programme is based upon this ‘war’ between the corporate needing to seem inclusive (mostly represented on screen by the characters of Jan Levenson and David Wallace) and Michael being unable to move of from the views that he has.

This study aims to look at some of the reasons why women and people of different races and sexualities are portrayed and treated the way that they are and how this creates a successful comedy television programme. Within, the study I will be looking mostly at the earlier seasons, although it may briefly cover episodes from seasons 1-7 mostly as they are the ones widely available in the UK at the moment.

Plain Jane and Fancy Nancy: The Portrayal of Gender in The Office.

“Studies which consider associations between television and gender can, unsurprisingly, take a number of forms. They can be categorised most simply into three types of research questions, and consequently distinguished by separate approaches and methods. There are studies of gender representation – the different ways in which women and men are portrayed on television; studies of gendered behaviour – the (different) preferences, interests and usage of television which may be held by men and by women; and studies of gender influences – the ways on which women and men adopt their (potentially different) gender attitudes and roles from television.” (Gauntlett & Hill 1999:209)

This chapter of the study will look at what Gauntlett describes as ‘studies of gender representation’ and will look specifically at the two main female characters of Jan Levenson and Pam Beesly.

The portrayal of women in The Office is something that can be widely debated about. There are many different female characters in The Office, who all bring different things into the show. It can be argued that women are portrayed stereotypically as Birthisel explains:

“…though The Office features a relatively diverse cast, it still manages to reinforce many gender stereotypes that plague Western corporate culture. As media scholars have demonstrated, television shapes viewer’s perceptions of real-world social issues
such as gender. Finally, despite its problematic gender and class representations, The Office’s satirical presentation uses what Fiske (2011) calls “excess as hyperbole,” allowing exaggerated characters to simultaneously reflect and critique dominant workplace gender ideologies.” (Birthisel 2013:65)

In the Pilot episode (2005) there is a scene in which Michael Scott is sat in a meeting with corporate employee Jan Levenson (played by Melora Hardin) and the office receptionist Pam Beesly (played by Jenna Fischer). In this scene we see the two different ends of the business scale just by the clothes that the characters are wearing and their positioning. Michael is seen edging himself closer to Jan who it is made evident that she is the corporate member of staff due to her costume and her posture. Pam is shown to have a lower position as she sits further away from Michael and Jan and doesn’t get a say in the conversation that they are having even though it is to do with downsizing which directly affects the character. The reasons for why this has been done could directly reflect the idea that Michael is a metaphor for the hypocrisy of a typical American business man. Why would he want to be associated with someone like Pam, when he could be associated more with a corporate member of staff like Jan? It is also in this scene that Michael acts inappropriately towards a female as Griffin points out:

“In the first episode, during a meeting with Jan, Michael touches her legs with a sheaf of papers, as if to accentuate his point. She seems startled but says nothing.” (Griffin 2008:160)

This very often happens within the series, and the female characters tend to keep quiet, perhaps not wanting to make a big deal of things. It does also reflect some kind of ignorance towards women from Michael.

Pam, however, becomes the complete opposite of what is expected to happen to her in the series. Seen as just a receptionist many people wouldn’t consider Pam to be the type to get the happiness in the series. Gunter writes about a study that Reep and Dambrot conducted in 1987 about the working woman on TV: “The study revealed a less stereotypical portrayal
of working women than in the past and a serious attempt to present realistically the problems of a professional woman.” (Gunter 2000:21) Whilst the working woman was becoming more realistically portrayed the study also found that the women didn’t necessarily have a happy personal life.

“These women [working women] were to some extent shown as being less successful in their personal lives, however. They were less than perfect mothers and generally lacked romance in their lives. The theory that many capable young women fail to achieve professional success because it can lead to loneliness and a less than satisfactory private life receives some support here.” (Gunter 2000:21)

Pam, goes entirely against this theory. In season six Pam receives a promotion from receptionist to sales associate. She also marries the love of her life, Jim Halpert, and goes on to give birth to their first child. Pam is seen to balance work and family life successfully and can easily start to prove that the Reep and Dambrot study is outdated.

Jan, however, doesn’t quite live up to the corporate ideologies that we think she may. It is noted by Michael in season two that Jan got divorced. Marital status and job roles have been analysed in the past and it appears that women tend to be the ones who have the unsuccessful or unhappy marriages. As Gunter explains:

“Manes and Melnyk compared the marital status of male and female job holders on television compared with male job holders, females were depicted as less likely to be married and more likely to be unsuccessfully or unhappily married.” (Gunter 2000:17)

Jan certainly manages to prove this theory right as do a couple of other women in The Office such as Meredith. However, there seems to be a balance as there are also divorced men working there such as Toby.

At the end of season three Jan is fired from corporate due to misusing her powers. At the start of season four it becomes apparent that she may be mentally unstable. This comes to the audience’s attention in the season four episode ‘Dinner Party’ (2008). In this episode we see that Jan is in a relationship with Michael and living with him. Many people argued that this was a strange pairing however according to Walsh “Mismatched television couples are nothing new. However, within the past ten years, there has been a proliferation of these couples[.]” (Walsh 2007: 125) In a series of events throughout the episode Jan is seen to be
acting strange. The episode climaxes with Jan throwing a ‘Dundie’ award through Michael’s television screen. Jan is very rarely seen after this and it is revealed that she had a child with the help of a local sperm bank. Birthisel compared the characters of Jan and Pam stating:

   By analysing the white female characters Jan and Pam, the show’s two female lead characters, we see these extremes, At the high end of the professional achievement spectrum is thin and beautiful Jan, Michael’s boss from corporate headquarters. At the low end of this spectrum is twenty-something secretary Pam, who is plainly pretty yet professionally powerless.” (Birthisel 2013: 68-69)

This comparison between the two characters is a truthful analysis of the way that the female characters are portrayed within The Office.

   We mustn’t assume though that Pam had an easy ride. Originally set to marry Roy from the warehouse, she became the centre of a love triangle between him and future husband Jim. She also wished for an art career that Roy said would never work and Jan describing her art work as ‘doodles.’ (Dinner Party: 2008) Pam, decides herself to put her art career on hold for the sake of her career at Dunder Mifflin. However, she is still seen to be happy within her personal life as Birthisel reiterates the earlier made point about women being not so higher up being happier personally:

   “Lower-achieving women are more personally successful, as exemplified by Pam. She is the least powerful women in the office yet she is greatly envied by the other women, not only for her marital engagement, but also for the convert of attention she recives from handsome co-worker, Jim, a salesperson.” (Birthisel 2013: 69)

   It should be noted that professional women have only just started to become common within television. In the past it had been noted that men dominated prime time television and women were underrepresented a lot, and the jobs they held were often lower than that of the male characters as Holtzman explains:

   “From 1965 to 1975, the percentage of male characters on prime time television was 71 percent and that of female characters was 29 percent. While more women were portrayed as workers by the 1990’s overall women were still underrepresented, held lower status, and were chiefly focused on domestic issues.” (Hotlzman 2000:75)

Whilst, the representations of women in The Office may not always been seen as ‘fair’, they still do play and important part. They show women at work in high power roles, and they show women progressing as well as the domestic side of things.
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From Mr Brown to Mexican Lemonade: The Portrayal of Race in *The Office*.

Possibly the most famous example of the portrayal of race in *The Office* comes from the episode from season once called ‘Diversity Day.’ (2005) ‘Diversity Day’ is an episode based around corporate sending a trainer to teach the people of the office about diversity, due to Michael doing a race based Chris Rock routine. Throughout the episode we see many examples of Michael’s ignorance to race. As Beeden explains this is how the humour of the episode is created: “The comedy of this episode of *The Office* therefore relies on Michael’s complete disregard for cultural understandings and social cues associated with the issue of race in the United States.” (Breedan 2009:16) During the seminar led by an African American man Michael interrupts constantly, and at one point re-acts the Chris Rock routine which caused corporate to send this person down in the first place. The members of the office who are present during the seminar are seen to be shocked at Michael’s actions, whilst he considers it ‘funny.’

After the African American seminar leader – appropriately named Mr Brown – leaves Michael decides to host his own diversity day. Michael makes everyone in the office wear stickers on their head with a ‘race’ and the other people have to use stereotypes to make them guess which race they are. During this part the office’s African American employee – Stanley (played by Leslie David Baker) – gets the ‘Black’ sticker. Whilst Michael insists it was an innocent mistake we can see that Stanley isn’t impressed.

Stanley is very often the subject of race due to him being the only black member of staff working in the office. During the episode ‘Basketball’ (2005) Michael makes a basketball team based entirely on race and gender. Whilst choosing the team Michael stereotypes as Griffin picked up on: “*Michael blatantly stereotypes according to race. He selects Stanley, saying, “Stanley, of Course.”*” (Griffin 2008:160) This further back-ups the idea that Michael likes to use stereotypes in the work place.

Michael’s ignorance to race doesn’t stop at the party game during ‘Diversity Day.’ Indian worker Kelly (played by Mindy Kaling) is absent during Michael’s diversity day
‘party game.’ Upon her return Michael imitates an Indian shop worker to illustrate the types of stereotypes he wants the other workers to use. As usual Michael takes this too far as Griffin explains:

“When Kelly returns to the meeting Michael again parodies an Indian accent: Oh welcome to my convenience store. I have some very delicious googie googie. Only 99 cents plus tax. Try my googie googie. Try my…” He stops when she slaps him.” (Griffin 2008:159-160)

It isn’t until Kelly slaps him that Michael actually realises he’s gone too far with his ‘game.’ At the end of the episode a rather sheepish Michael tries to explain to the group that his intentions weren’t actually bad: “I just wanted to do it on our own. Our way. I want you guys to know I’m really proud of you all.” In this scene Michael appears to redeem himself in the eyes of his employees and in the audience’s eyes. However, he still has a racist quip when he allows the group to go saying: “Hasta la vista, Oscar.” (Diversity Day: 2005) Although, this doesn’t seem so bad compared to Michael’s behaviour throughout the episode and after his redemption.

Mexican office worker Oscar Martinez (played by Oscar Nunez) also gets some racial stereotypes used against him mostly from the character of Michael. This again is evident in the ‘Diversity Day’ episode. At the beginning of the episode we see Michael talks to Oscar in front of Mr Brown. It is clear that Michael doesn’t actually want to talk to Oscar, however, when Oscar introduces himself to Mr Brown Michael claims that he didn’t actually know Oscar’s surname (even though he did.) This is Michael’s lame way of trying to show Mr Brown that he isn’t racist, however it isn’t done in the best way possible. Later on in the episode Michael has an exchange with Oscar about being called Mexican:

“Michael: Now, is there another term you like to use besides ‘Mexican?’ Something less offensive?
Oscar: Mexican isn’t offensive…
Michael: It has certain… connotations.
Oscar: Like what?
Michael: Like… I don’t know.
Oscar: What are the “connotations”, Michael?” (‘Diversity Day’, 2005)

Michael doesn’t answer Oscar’s question. This is probably due to the fact that he is too embarrassed to explain what he feels the connotations of being Mexican are.
Oscar is also stereotyped with again when the office workers decide to throw a party for him in the season three episode titled ‘The Return’ (2007). The character of Ryan is seen creating ‘Mexican Lemonade’ simply by drawing some accents over various letters with a marker pen. This scene is used more for a comedy effect and isn’t as offensive as some of Michael’s actions in the series.

Races only really started to become portrayed on prime time television in the mid 90’s as Barker explains:

“The first point to make regarding the representation and construction of race on western television is that members of ethnic groups other than whites have for a long time simply been ignored. Thus, in the USA it was not until the late 1960’s and 1970’s that we begin to find any black families in television drama.” (Barker 1999:77)

This could be part of the reason why certain television shows don’t portray these people as well as they could.

“Or, That’s What He Said”: The Portrayal of Sexuality in The Office.

In The Office there is only one openly gay character and that is Oscar. Oscar’s sexuality was never mentioned until halfway through season two in the episode entitled ‘The Secret’ (2006). In an interview with Oscar Nunez, Nunez jokes “He wasn't gay at the beginning. They made him gay. They gave him some pills or something.” (Nunez, 2011) In the episode Oscar pulls a sickie from work. Dwight being Dwight refuses to believe that Oscar is actually ill and decides to investigate his ‘illness.’ At the end of the episode we see Dwight waiting for Oscar outside his house. When Oscar eventually pulls up, he gets out of the car with another man and it is clear to the audience that the other man is his partner. When Dwight talks to the camera the audience expect him to ‘out Oscar’ when he says “Guess what I found out about Oscar” but he simply says “he was lying to Michael about being sick.”

Holtzman explains that in American television is hasn’t been until recently that homosexuals have been portrayed realistically on prime time television:
“Until recently, fundamental industry rules have meant that images of gays, lesbians and bisexuals have been almost completely missing. As these images and themes began to emerge they most frequently appeared as stereotypes… In the 1950’s and 1960’s, stereotypes of gay men were fair game for prime time television. A limp hand, exaggerated lisp and the occupation of interior decorator, hairdresser, or florist were standard fare and likely to evoke a laugh. It has been in the late 1990s that any complex characters and themes have evolved around homosexuality.” (Holtzman 2000:299-300)

*The Office* try to avoid the stereotype using the character of Oscar who is an accountant and very rarely speaks of his personal life. However, Dwight does use this stereotype explicitly when Michael tells him that Oscar is gay, he responds: “He’s not dressed in women’s clothes.” (Gay Witch Hunt: 2006)

The most famous episode in regards to sexuality is the first episode of season three entitled ‘Gay Witch Hunt’ (2006). The entire episode is centred around the sexuality of Oscar. The episode starts with human resources member of staff Toby, telling Michael that Oscar had launched a complaint against being called ‘faggy’. Michael doesn’t’ understand why this was offensive so Toby carries on to inform Michael that Oscar is actually gay and that he should keep it a secret. Michael is a character that is well known for not being able to keep secrets (he reveals to Pam that Jim has a crush on her in ‘The Secret.) Michael ‘outs’ Oscar to other various characters and Oscar begins to feel discriminated against. Religious character Angela treats Oscar the worst, using hand sanitiser when near him and pretending to be pushed over by him. Kevin can only react by laughing at him. Like in ‘Diversity Day’ Michael attempts to redeem himself but only appears to make things worse. When Oscar snaps, Michael is clearly upset and Oscar apologises, however Michael takes this too far and kisses him on the lips. He tells the office workers “I want you to watch this and I want you to burn this into your brains. This is an image that I want you people to remember for a long time to come.” (Gay Witch Hunt: 2006) This image has in fact turned out to be one of the most famous images when it comes to the earlier seasons of *The Office*. It could be said at the end of the episode that Michael has ‘redeemed’ himself when he changes his famous ‘that’s what she said’ saying to ‘that’s what he said’, however his ignorance is shown when Oscar’s boyfriend comes to give him a lift and he refers to him as
“Oscar’s roommate” and continues to the camera “I wonder if he knows.”

Oscar’s sexuality isn’t really brought to the forefront in anymore other episodes, however, there are still the odd remarks. Remarks were made about Oscar co-founding the ‘finer things’ club and in the season six episode ‘Mafia’ (2009), Kevin tells Oscar that “you would love jail.” When Oscar asks why he would love jail Kevin just replies “’Because… you would love it’” and gives a look to the camera so that the audience ‘gets’ what he means. These examples of little quips are very much like the ‘Mexican Lemonade’ example earlier and are just used for comedic purposes. D’addario claims that the reason Oscar’s sexuality isn’t really brought to the central plots much after ‘Gay Witch Hunt’ are: “The show was unwilling to write for a gay character for a while, so Oscar took a leave of absence.” (D’addario 2011) This could be partially true; however, the character had to be temporarily written out due to the actors other commitments.

Conclusion.

To conclude, The Office is a successful American comedy that uses many techniques to be the success that it is. Walters states that the American version of The Office was a success in the early days was because:

“The show nevertheless provided well suited to its new setting, not least because many of the workplace anxieties that The Office tapped into result from the economic practices that originated in America, in the US the consequences of having a negligent manager are potentially more grave than in the UK, and therefore have more comic potential.” (Walters 2005: 162)

The character of Michael can be seen as the ignorant type who uses stereotypes to create comedy. At the beginning of the series his character is almost a direct copy of the British character, David Brent. This didn’t really work and Michael comes across more as a nasty boss than as just a bit of an idiot. He is toned down slightly in season two to get the audience more on side with him. Throughout the series (up to season seven) Michael seems to redeem himself more and more within the eyes of the audience. This ultimately comes to an end when Michael leaves to marry his girlfriend Holly, and is seen getting a ‘happy ending.’
Television in America isn’t, however, just images on a box. It is important within American lifestyle. This is why it is important that television tries to portray things as accurately as possible, as Comstock explains:

“Television is intrinsic to the American experience. It accounts for a substantial proportion of the national expenditure of time; legitimates and sometimes celebrates political and social institutions; provides a common experience and transcendent popular culture; participates in socializing the young; is an endorsement; servant of means to the consumer of economy; and participates in the history of the times as well as being a means of observing the unfolding of that history.” (Comstock 1991: 128)

*The Office* has become a well-known show, watched by many American families on Thursday nights. However, on the 16th May 2013 that is due to come to an end as *The Office* will officially close its doors for one last time. The show has shown that it can portray many different types of people in many different ways, and has successfully created characters that people can relate to and learn to love. It will always be remembered within America’s television history.

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References


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**Filmography.**


