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Communication Theories in *The Office*: Relational Dialectics and Genderlect

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Abstract

The Office, known largely for its comedic brilliance and the famous romance between main characters Jim Halpert and Pam Beesly, also acts as a cultural artifact as it follows the development of their relationship. Through this essay, the interpersonal theory of Relational Dialectics and the intercultural theory of Genderlect Communication will be analyzed in the context of Jim and Pam’s relationship. Relational Dialectics will be used to analyze the interpersonal relationship between Jim and Pam, and the ways in which it develops and changes throughout the seasons of the show. Genderlect will describe the reasons behind the differing communication issues Jim and Pam have throughout their relationship. Jim’s communication style as a man is vastly different than Pam’s as a woman, leading to confusion and occasional conflicts.

Keywords

genderlect, relationship dialectics, communication theories, *The Office*

“When you’re a kid, you assume your parents are soulmates. My kids are gonna be right about that” (Lieberstein, 2009. 5.14). Two complete strangers, Jim Halpert and Pam Beesly, met in their work office, eventually becoming friends, and later husband and wife. As their relationship develops, “contradictions/tensions are constant...no matter the circumstance” (Owsley, 2008, p. 18). The pair must adjust to communicating cross-culturally, as they have very different communication styles. Additionally, they must learn how to interpret the status of their relationship as they progress from

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being friends to dating, getting engaged, and eventually marrying. From the perspective of the Relational Dialectics and Genderlect theories, this essay examines the development of Jim and Pam's relationship as they face variances within their communication styles.

Baxter and Montgomery's interpersonal communication theory, Relational Dialectics, explains the "meaning-making between relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 349). Their theory aims to interpret how different parties with opposing viewpoints can find meaning in a close relationship with each other. According to Julia T. Wood, these tensions are "what we can use to understand how relationships work, and how they grow and change over time" (Lusk, 2008, p. 4). Relational dialectics features "relationships [that] are close not because pre-formed selves are revealed but because the parties' selves are given shape through relating" (Baxter, 2004). Through this relating, individuals decide for themselves if they can work through the issues any relationship will have.

Jim and Pam's relationship is constantly moving through new stages, as their initial attraction gives way to spending time together and growing closer. As Jim begins to develop feelings for Pam despite her being engaged, their friendship displays tensions between their conflicting feelings about each other. Their journey through these changes can be understood using internal and external dialectics within the Relational Dialectics theory.

Jim and Pam's friendship reaches a shift in dynamics as Jim's feelings for Pam grow increasingly intense. After Dunder-Mifflin's Casino Night party for employees, Jim runs up to Pam and blurts out, "I'm in love with you." (Carell, 2006. 2.22). Pam sadly reminds him she is engaged and apologizes that he misinterpreted their friendship. Through Pam's sorrowful rejection, the viewer can see one internal dialectic in the relational dialectic theory, certainty, and uncertainty. Jim's certainty about his romantic feelings clashes with Pam's uncertainty of her own. While she does

consider him a best friend, she remains unsure whether her feelings extend beyond this. Responding to the tensions between these conflicting feelings, Jim decides to confront the issue further and kisses Pam, who returns the gesture (Carell, 2006. 2.22). This incident displays the certainty-uncertainty internal dialectic and the connection-autonomy internal dialectic. While once again Jim is seen being certain about his feelings for Pam, Pam demonstrates her uncertainty when she kisses Jim back despite her blatant denial of feelings for him an hour before. According to Baxter, “Whenever we communicate, we are invoking--often indirectly and by implication--multiple systems of meaning. These discourses often compete, oppose, and struggle with one another, however” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 349). Pam demonstrates this pattern by communicating two different emotions to Jim through her actions. Her unrequited feelings for Jim conflict with her desire to remain autonomous and be faithful to her partner. While Jim desires a romantic connection with Pam, he recognizes he cannot overstep his bounds. With both of them struggling with multiple systems of meaning, their relationship reveals how these different meanings can compete with each other. The beginning phases of Jim and Pam’s relationship show Relational Dialectics in action through ever-present tension.

As time progresses, Pam realizes her feelings for Jim and calls off her wedding to her partner, breaking up with him entirely, leading to a series of events that display the revelation-concealment dialectic. Eventually, Jim and Pam begin dating, and they decide to keep it a secret from the rest of their co-workers. A flustered Jim blushes when his coworkers question if they’re dating, responding with a humble, “Ummm... yup. Yes, we are.” (Schur, 2007. 4.3) The effort to hide their new relationship is a significant example of the revelation-concealment external dialectic. “Public disclosure is a relational rite of passage signaling partners and others that the tie that binds them together is strong” (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks, 2015). Since Jim and Pam both felt uncertainty

surrounding this new relationship, they didn't want to reveal it to their co-workers until they better understood how they would work as a couple. Later, they find out Pam is pregnant and again decide to keep it a secret from their coworkers. When their boss creates a rumor that Pam is pregnant and spreads it around the office, the two of them feel forced to reveal the truth. Trying to confirm that Pam didn't tell anyone, a panicked Jim exclaims, "I didn't tell anyone! Who did you tell?" (Lieberstein, 2009. 6.1) The couple's desire to keep the pregnancy a secret is another example of the revelation-concealment external dialectic. They concealed the news; both wanted privacy and to avoid the judgment of their coworkers as long as possible. Their lack of closeness with everyone in the office explains their hesitance to inform colleagues as quickly as they told their families and close friends.

Shortly after their announcement, Jim decides they are ready for marriage and plans a surprise proposal to Pam, a characteristic of predictability-surprise dialectic. He pretends to propose many different times, stopping in random places and bending on one knee. As Pam becomes used to him joking, she predicts that it will be a joke each time he proposes to her. When he does propose by a dilapidated store sign in the pouring rain, she is shocked. This impact on the strength of their relationship is in line with Cavanaugh's findings that "surprise has been determined to be a critical necessity in social and personal relationships" (1999). Pam's positive surprised reaction makes her appreciate Jim much more, as seen through her very affectionate behavior toward him in the next couple of episodes. Through the Relational Dialectics theory, Baxter provides a logical explanation for the relationship journey that Jim and Pam are on.

Jim and Pam's interactions are influenced by relational tensions and the communication styles arising from their gender roles. Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Styles theory describes "how masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects" (Ledbetter, Griffin,

Sparks, 2015). At its core, it describes how “different sets of linguistic features used by males and females develop through the gender acculturation process” (Johnson, 2009). While there are many communication differences between different genders, six specific examples are very common. These are private vs. public speaking, telling a story, listening, asking questions, conflict, and nonverbal communication. The six communication issues significantly shape Jim and Pam’s relationship throughout their different stages.

Throughout *The Office*, Jim and Pam have one significant cultural difference in their communication styles. This cultural difference is their genders, which leads to different ways of communicating with each other. Jim identifies as a man, and Pam identifies as a woman, demonstrating stereotypical gender roles. While their respective genders have different communication norms that create tension, they begin to adapt their communication styles better to understand each other more fully. Using Genderlect Styles theory, Jim and Pam’s relationship can be analyzed to see where their differing genders contributed to communication problems and the deliberate steps they took to allow them to communicate better as two individuals becoming one.

One example of this is demonstrated in the way that Jim reacts when he is upset. When Pam is engaged to her fiancé Roy, Jim becomes visibly upset at his uncaring behavior toward her. Showing this tension through non-verbal communication, he watches Roy interact with Pam, rolls his eyes, and responds coldly when Roy acknowledges him. When doing this, Jim is displaying a classic way men address conflict: assert dominance (Liebstein, 2006. 2.14). “Men hold forth with authority” (Haas, 1979). Jim tries to assert his dominance over Roy by acting in a manner that communicates he is better than him. His power display hides his jealousy of the two’s relationship, a behavior that conforms to common masculine tendencies to repress difficult emotions. According to Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, “the socialization for divergent masculine and feminine communication strategies

begins in childhood, and these preferences are carried over into adulthood,” causing men and women to display different language styles that lead to miscommunication (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2005). According to Genderlect, men are taught from a young age the ways to be “manly”, and asserting dominance is one of them. As their relationship blooms, Jim’s anger begins causing tension between them. This tension comes to a head when Jim does something that makes Pam uncomfortable, and she displays anger by avoiding him. Jim doesn’t understand why she is acting different and at first is hurt, until Pam comes around to explain herself (Eisenberg & Stupnitsky, 2005. 2.6). She describes how she felt ashamed to confront him about her discontentment. Jim is confused at why she didn’t address him sooner, which is an example of the communication divergence that exists between men and women. As a man, Jim would be far more likely to address anything that makes him unhappy head on and establish dominance.

Pam grows to realize the depth of the feelings she still has for Jim, deciding she needs to tell him and admitting in front of the entire office that he was the reason for calling off her wedding and she misses him terribly (Celotta & Daniels, 2007. 3.21). As she says it, she can’t stop stuttering and gets choked up, running away in nervousness after she finishes her confession. From the standpoint of Genderlect theory, women typically engage in private conversations rather than public, because women are taught not to draw additional attention to themselves. Because this public conversation was out of her comfort zone, she had difficulty expressing her emotions fully.

Jim continues to be direct and confrontational in his communication style, as seen through his interactions with his former girlfriend, Karen. When Jim is still in love with Pam while in a relationship with co-worker Karen, it changes the dynamic of his current relationship because he cannot be as open and vulnerable as he used to be. Under the Genderlect Theory, Jim makes the most stereotypical decision for a man and decides to address the issue. From a young age, studies have

found that mothers of boys tell their young sons what to do more- leading men to be more directive in their speech patterns (Ledbetter, Griffin, Sparks, 2015). By admitting his feelings for Pam, Jim subconsciously gains dominance in the relationship through displaying vulnerability, a quality many women find highly favorable. While his news may have been disconcerting, his honesty is refreshing for Karen because she appreciates Jim being upfront with her.

Once Jim and Pam marry, they both experience challenges listening effectively. When Jim finds a potential new job in his friend's company, Athlead, he decides it will be a good investment in his family's future. However, Pam decides it would be smarter if Jim stays closer to home due to the birth of their first child. She communicates this with Jim, who goes behind her back and do it instead of listening to her opinion. When Pam brings up the subject after she believes he is no longer going to take the position, Jim switches the conversation. However, all along, Jim knows his plans to avoid accepting the job and be dishonest to Pam.

Pam also begins noticing changes in Jim's nonverbal communication that occurred due to their different communication styles. He becomes more discrete, less engaged, and is spending increasingly long days in the office, supposedly working on a barrage of extra assignments he received from Dunder Mifflin. However, once Pam calls him out on his odd behavior, Jim is truthful, describing how a need to ensure future success for their family caused him to go behind Pam's back (Daniels, 2009. 9.1). While Pam is disappointed, she eventually moves on and permits him to accept a part-time position at the company. The distance causes tension within their relationship, driving them apart. As predicted in this theory, Pam avoids conflict and seeks to find an alternative that makes both her and Jim happy. She decides the best option is to try not to talk about the issues and only focus on the good things going on in their lives (Green and Miller, 2013. 9.12). On the other hand, Jim is overly eager to discuss relationship issues over the phone at work, which deeply upsets Pam.

“You can’t even wait until we get home? Are you that busy?” (Green and Miller, 2013. 9.12). Once again, their communication styles manifest in the different ways they handle tension within their relationship.

Fortunately, Jim and Pam took the necessary steps to communicate more effectively. Genderlect theory asserts that “understanding each other’s style and the motives behind it, is the first step in overcoming destructive responses” (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks, 2015). They begin this process when they decide to go to marriage counseling together. Through counseling, they learn how to listen to each other better and see each other’s point of view. Also, Jim creates a video of their memories together and describes how much he loves her. Under the Genderlect theory, males are not as likely to express their deepest emotions this way. Still, Jim now understands Pam’s communication style enough to see that she and many other women appreciate outward shows of affection. Pam changes her communication style to become more expressive with her desires, demonstrating what she wants instead of prompting Jim to make an educated guess. Through their relationship’s improvement, one can use Genderlect to analyze how they learn to listen to each other’s needs.

The application of Relational Dialectics and Genderlect offers insight into how individuals communicate interpersonally and through cultural differences. Though the show is getting older, it will remain culturally relevant due to its focus on relationships and how individuals communicate with one another. The comedic appeal and beloved relationships of familiar television characters portray fictional events yet can reveal many fundamental communication styles relating to each other. Jim and Pam are an excellent example of a loving relationship being challenged by different styles, but eventually evolving as they strive to become closer. Their relationship highlights the different ways men and women interact with each other and how growth is ultimately possible when both parties commit to mutual understanding. The on-screen relationship offers a highly stereotypical

portrayal of men and women's character and provides insight into the different ways people communicated in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, the broad themes of their communication are relatable across generations, making it a cultural artifact that will be shared and enjoyed for years to come.

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