

Repowered Feminist Analysis of Parks and Recreation

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By
Bailee M. Bahr
Southern Utah University

Thesis Committee:
Kevin Stein, PhD, Chair

I certify that I have read and viewed this project and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in
scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Professional Communication.

Kevin Stein

Kevin Stein, Ph.D., Capstone Chair

Matthew Barton

Matthew Barton, Ph.D., MAPC Graduate Director

Abstract

This paper analyzes the television show *Parks and Recreation* in order to find principles of Foss and Foss' (2009) characteristics of repowered feminism. This paper aims to discover if Leslie Knope represents a new form of feminism, what characteristics specifically that she represents, and if these qualities contribute to a freer, less oppressed Leslie Knope. The analysis examines three episodes of the show and uses feminist rhetorical criticism to analyze the findings. I found that repowered feminism applies both to a feminist's concerns with feminist issues and the applicability of repowered feminism to all types of problem solving. Knope, whether focusing directly on feminist issues or on the various obstacles she faces while doing her job, is usually presented as more successful when she implements the characteristics of repowered feminism.

Keywords: parks and recreation, repowered feminism, pop culture

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Introduction

Parks and Recreation is a popular television show, running for 7 seasons for a total of 125 twenty-two-minute episodes. The show ran from 2009 to 2015. It follows the fictional story of

Pawnee, Indiana's deputy director of Parks and Recreation, Leslie Knope. David Sims called it NBC's last great comedy (2015), and Joanna Robinson commended the show in 2015, saying it had become the best show on television. Throughout the series, Knope struggles with various issues relating both to politics generally and to being a woman in politics. Leslie Knope is an excellent subject of study then, to see which feminist strategies lead Knope to success- traditional third wave strategies or the newer, and more effective, repowered feminist strategies.

The feminist perspective in communication research has led to social change, including the need to analyze artifacts through lenses developed to understand female communication and the communication of marginalized groups. However, feminist literature has limited itself to the same findings- that women are oppressed, and that it is men who are doing the oppressing

Viewing the show through a feminist perspective gives us a unique take on the way prime-time sitcoms present a feminist character. In fact, surrounded by characters from other shows like Big Bang Theory, My Name Is Earl, and Community, Leslie Knope stands out as a bold female lead and her character and dialogue might reflect a pop culture minority; a truly oppositional representation of feminism in the media (Sellnow, 2010; Baxter, 2009).

Literature Review

I will now discuss the history of feminist perspective and the theoretical foundations of post-feminism, which includes a brief analysis of the shortcomings of recent feminist perspective research.

History of Feminist Perspective

Feminist perspective in communication studies has been influenced by feminist goals throughout history, with each wave of feminism emphasizing different injustices of various social practices. First wave feminism focused on white, middle-class women's right to vote, own

land, and abolish political gender discrimination (Krolokke & Sorenson, 2006). Second wave feminism focused on creating equal opportunity for women and men, resulting in policies such as Title IX (Sellnow, 2010). Additionally, “It was no longer considered appropriate to represent women as stupid or clumsy or as existing solely to satisfy men's sexual needs on television and in other forms of media. Women writers, women's experiences in history, and women's social issues became respected topics for academic research (Moses, 2012).” Feminist researchers argued that female communication was fundamentally different than male communication, and therefore required a new brand of critical theory to correctly analyze female speech. As female rhetoricians evolved into an acceptable area of study, it became increasingly apparent that the male-created English language failed females in terms of expression (Foss, Foss & Griffin, 1999).

Third wave feminism began focusing more on the way society communicates about women as a whole, including women of varying social class and color (Bardsley, 2006), encouraging political correctness and inclusive language. It also developed broader reach towards gender equality for all genders and acceptance of varying sexual orientations (Sellnow, 2010). In 1999 the goal for some feminist research was to create what modern universities might call ‘safe spaces’ using the knowledge gained from research of the female style of rhetoric (Foss, Foss, & Griffin). They suggest that the feminine style of speaking cultivates an environment in which difficult topics can be taken apart, analyzed, and put back together without directly threatening the social powers in place.

Postmodern feminism morphed from third wave feminism, though some feminists debate whether postmodern feminism and third wave feminism are, in fact, separate eras (Jervis, 2004). Postmodern feminism has several factions and characterizations, including Black feminists

(focusing on women of color) and LGBTQ feminists, who advocate especially for females in the LGBTQ community (Gold, 2018).

Naomi Wolf, a controversial feminist, wrote a hugely influential book *Fire with Fire* in 1993. According to Hains (2009), this national bestseller offered a scathing review of the then current feminist movement's failures. "Wolf....conceived of power feminism as a positive form of feminist thought and engagement that begins with the assumption that women have 'enormous power,' both financially and politically. Wolf argued that women can use this power to effect sweeping change in society- working within the system, using the master's tools rather than outside of it as radicals (p 90)." Power feminism boomed in pop culture, creating television shows boasting strong female leads (including *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *Alias*). Younger female viewers also got their fair share of tween feminism with the emergence of shows like *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Kim Possible*, and others. However, Hains (2009) argues that this emergence of "Grrl power" in the media led to over commercialization of the feminist brand, which cheapened the movement's goals and oversimplified barriers women faced from society.

Though Hains' (2009) argues passionately against power feminism, claiming the movement excludes lower class, non-white women, Wolf vocalized a growing trend among young women that continues today- that 'feminism was out of touch with the average woman's needs and mindset (p 89)." In fact, professors of women's studies have noted a trend among millennial students- they don't want to be labeled feminist, even if they agree with and believe in feminist ideals (Bardsley, 2006; Gold, 2018).

In 2009, Karen and Sonja Foss published *Our Journey to Repowered Feminism*, a compelling narrative of their path into feminism (Foss & Foss, 2009). Repowered feminism is

characterized by an invitation to change how the oppressed interpret their oppression and oppressor, to motivate change in a positive manner, and to celebrate the successes of feminism and find examples of that success in artifacts. In other words, repowered feminism aims to use communication and language to reframe the perspective of the oppressed and their unequal circumstances.

Theoretical Foundations

The aim of feminist perspective is to expose the underlying masculine hegemony that empowers heterosexual men and suppresses all other genders and orientations. “Feminist perspectives are grounded in critical rhetoric, which suggests that a dominant ideology controls what people take for granted as common sense beliefs, values, and behaviors” (Sellnow, 2010, p. 139). In other words, it is an analysis of how rhetoric (or signs and symbols) explain: (1) How things are and; (2) How things ought to be, specifically regarding societal representations of masculinity and femininity (Sellnow, 2010). This perspective, then, is not so much a theory as it is a lens through which to apply other theories of communication. Feminist perspective can be applied in the other traditions of communication theory.

Feminist perspective of rhetorical theory aims to create social change, specifically representing a “commitment to eliminate relations of oppression and domination in general” (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2004, p. 3). It is characterized by wide diversity, aiming to represent many perspectives, and validating ‘values and experiences often associated with women’ (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 1999, p. 5).

However, Foss and Foss (2009) pioneered a new definition of feminism. They propose that third wave feminism has outlived its usefulness, that “...feminist analyses and critiques became standardized, and... we expected such essays to reach particular, almost predetermined

conclusions and to advance a limited set of claims about patriarchy and its negative impact on the lives of women” (p. 41-42). In other words, feminist critiques have begun to produce the same conclusion time after time-that women are oppressed and that men are doing the oppressing. Feminist literature, they argue, needs to transcend limiting beliefs about what feminism really means and how oppression is viewed in order to produce new and useful insights to the feminist movement.

Instead, Foss and Foss choose “to define *feminism* as the *deliberate application of the capacity for unlimited and resourceful interpretation to engage exigencies for the purpose of creating a desired world*” (p. 45). In other words, feminism becomes less about petitioning the hegemonic powers in place for change, but rather petitioning each individual facing oppression to decide what *interpretations* of her circumstances hold herself back. The feminist is then invited to change her interpretation for her benefit, and take steps to change her surroundings through four main principles of repowered feminism, which will be discussed later.

This definition brings to mind authors like Sheryl Sandberg (2013), CFO of Facebook, who believes that women have a significant responsibility in the oppressing of women in the professional workplace through the way they communicate verbally and non-verbally about women in the workplace and behave individually (for example, not sitting at the conference table during meetings, even when invited, and not being more aggressive in asking for raises, among other behaviors).

Most recent post-feminism research has criticized various aspects of post-feminism and cited its negative effects when used in pop culture. For example, Tully (2017) says “at its core, postfeminism centers on women’s empowerment through choice and consumption, hypersexuality, and unbridled confidence, ultimately insisting that feminism is unnecessary

because women have finally achieved equality (p 341).” Hains (2009) agrees, arguing that the once powerful ‘Grrl power’ movement eroded when commercialism used the slogan to sell, well, anything (p 93, 108). Other feminists are downright offended at Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) analysis of the ‘real’ female oppressors. Even more are researchers who argue that postfeminism marginalizes non-white and lower class women by ignoring their unique barriers to success (Hains, 2009; Gold, 2018; Bardsley, 2006; Yebra, 2018). Thus, power feminism and repowered feminism have created a new common enemy for traditional feminists.

However, repowered feminism might be a satisfactory response to the critics of postfeminism because of its applicability to all feminists, not just white, middle-class feminists. In fact, Foss and Foss (2009) said, “[some feminists hold] such a view...[that] contains an implicit assumption...that privileged individuals have control over outcomes...in ways that those without access to economic or political resources do not. Those who make this argument are suggesting that world creating is an act enjoyed only by those who reside in favorable material conditions and who have access to abundant financial and other resources...our revised definition of feminism opens up possibilities for creating new worlds for everyone...because interpretation is what creates possibilities (p 49-50).”

There have been no rhetorical criticisms performed with the lens of repowered feminism, and traditional feminist critique has come to the same predetermined conclusions and offer no original solutions to feminist issues. I will discuss the principles of repowered feminism in the following section.

Research Method

This existential view of feminist perspective becomes the perfect standpoint to approach a pop culture study of television, especially in a research society that refuses, as Foss and Foss

(2009) say, to acknowledge the successes of feminist movements and the true sources of female oppression. This interpretation will invite a new perspective on the representation of feminism in the media, and in popular culture specifically. The goal of repowered feminism is to change individual communication and interpretation of feminism to bring to pass individual and group goals- to create the desired world for each individual feminist.

This study is a qualitative rhetorical criticism with a feminist perspective, searching for specific markers of the repowered feminism qualities as defined by Foss and Foss in 2009. This method is the best approach because it represents a fresh take on tired and repetitive feminist research that pins oppressive behavior on hegemony and negates female or muted group responsibility.

The analysis focuses on three episodes of *Parks and Recreation*, the first, medial, and final episode. These episodes were chosen because of the show's overall feminist theme. As Knope becomes more successful throughout the series, I felt it would be beneficial to study the way Knope's feminist portrayals and behaviors contribute or detract from her successes as a woman in government. Additionally, these episodes do not specifically deal with overt third wave feminist issues, which I felt would be helpful to simplify data. The episodes were streamed through Netflix, which allows for repetitive viewing.

RQ1: What characteristics of repowered feminism does Leslie Knope represent, if any?

RQ2: When Knope represents characteristics of repowered feminism, what is the tone of that representation?

I searched for specific characteristics of repowered feminism as described by Foss and Foss (2009). Much of their definition is influenced by Bitzer (1968) in *The Rhetorical Situation*, but for the sake of clarity, I will rely on their application of Bitzer's ideas. Foss and Foss (2009)

defined feminism as “the deliberate application of the capacity for unlimited resourceful interpretation to engage exigencies for the purpose of creating a desired world,” and identified four main areas of feminist improvement: (1) Exigence, (2) Audience, (3) Constraints, and (4) Fitting Response.

- (1) **Exigence**, as defined by Foss and Foss is a reinterpretation of what constitutes elements that are controlling and determining. In other words, “the oppressive conditions...[previously] viewed as the exigence now became dependent variables that vary according to the nature of the [selected interpretation]” (p. 46). Foss and Foss discuss the ability for feminists to choose their interpretation of oppression. Instead of viewing circumstances as oppressive, feminists have the option to view them as “oppressive, liberating, irrelevant, benign, or any number of other interpretations (p 46).” Feminists should change their interpretations to create their desired world. In so doing, they can choose whether or not to feel oppressed, misunderstood, or offended.

In this analysis I analyze how Knope views her obstacles. If she applies repowered feminism, Knope will recognize her own power to overcome difficulties. If she does not, and exhibits more traditional feminist views, she will cast responsibility for the roadblock on others.

- (2) **Audience** is no longer the dominant culture perceived as being oppressive, but the self. Traditionally, the audience for feminist social movement has been the hegemonic powers in place that contribute to oppression and the unaware and uneducated women who don’t know they are being oppressed. However, the audience for a repowered feminist turns inward. As repowered feminists redefine

their interpretations, the need for traditional feminist methods (such as public marches) becomes unnecessary. Foss and Foss say “As a result of our new view of audience, we stopped participating in Take Back the Night marches, no longer wishing to interpret the night as dangerous...[the night] is a safe-even friendly-place in which we now enjoy jogging and walking (p 48).” Additionally, they define a second possible audience for repowered feminists- the people around them. As repowered feminists change their interpretations, the people around them witness the manifestation of the feminists’ desired world. Knope’s motives as she pursues her goals, since this is a fictional show designed to entertain, are sometimes given to us as we watch. Therefore, I am able to ascertain Knope’s desired audience, be it herself or others.

- (3) **Constraints** are no longer considered outside the feminists control, but rather “the ability to address the rhetorical situation successfully is circumscribed only by the limits of our ability to envision possibilities” (p. 48). Essentially, feminists are no longer constrained by outside forces but have endless possibilities to overcome oppression. Again, this is done by reinterpreting the circumstances surrounding a feminist. For example, I look at how Knope faced her challenges in the following episodes. A repowered feminist would be filled with optimism and novel ideas of problem solving, while a more traditional feminist would pursue more traditional and tired paths, such as petitioning those in power for change.
- (4) A “fitting response” consists of the feminist’s ability to change one’s surroundings **without appealing to a system**. This includes strategies such as *reframing*, or “choosing different labels for what [a feminist] sees” (p 51),

resourcement, which is a choice to step away from the source of ‘oppression’ and seek more positive help, and *brainstorming*, in the which a feminist creates multiple courses of action before seeking to impose one’s will on others. I analyze Knope’s responses to roadblocks in these three episodes of the show.

In this analysis, we examine the way feminism is presented in the popular TV show Parks & Recreation. As I identify and analyze Knope’s decisions, I can determine if this reading is truly oppositional pop culture. While on the surface Knope is an outspoken feminist, her traditionally feminist actions tend to cause her problems with her job and personal relationships. However, because repowered feminism is a more individual type of feminism, these actions should, in theory, lead to a more successful Leslie Knope. Additionally, because the show is set during the postfeminist era, repowered feminism might be a more digestible type of feminism to represent in pop culture which could lead to an oppositional reading.

Repowered Feminist Themes in Parks and Recreation

This analysis is structured to analyze each of the three episodes individually. I chose to analyze each episode individually because I felt Knope’s feminist contributions to her growth as a character were better understand on a chronological timeline instead of grouping by themes. I give a short synopsis of the episode, identify Knope’s central conflict in each of the episodes, and then identify and discuss the characteristics of repowered feminism that Knope exhibits in her problem solving.

Season 1: Episode 1 Pilot

As a pilot episode, the aim of this episode is to introduce the characters and central conflict for the series. Knope is an optimistic public servant with boundless energy and zeal for government work. She has been placed in charge of a community outreach forum which none of

her coworkers want to attend. While conducting the forum, a frustrated community member named Ann Perkins asks Knope to fill an abandoned pit beside her house because her boyfriend (Andy) fell into the pit and broke both his legs. Knope, inspired by the challenge, takes on the project. This episode follows Knope as she attempts to create a subcommittee for the park in order to receive funds from city council to build it.

The first problem Knope faces is in the cold open (the introductory scene before the episode actually begins). While Knope conducts a survey in a local park, a drunk is discovered in the slide on the playground. Knope first attempts to reason with the man, then tries to push him out with her feet and a broom, and finally insists he leaves while kicking the slide repeatedly. She successfully annoys him out of the slide.

This is a good example of *brainstorming*. Knope tries multiple courses of action, including attempting reasonable one-on-one conversation with the man before ‘imposing her will on others,’ as Foss and Foss said. In this example, Knope is successful- the man leaves the slide and the park, creating a safer experience for park attendees.

An overall theme of the series is also introduced in the cold open; the idea that women aren’t welcome in the ‘boy’s club’ called government. Knope maintains an optimistic perspective in this episode, saying “ You know, government isn't just a boys' club anymore. Women are everywhere. It's a great time to be a woman in politics. Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, me, Nancy Pelosi...You know, I like to tell people, you know, "Get on board and buckle up, because my ride's gonna be a big one. And if you get motion sickness, put your head between your knees 'cause Knope Knope's stopping for no one.” While the episodes discussed don’t deal with overt feminist issues (very few episodes, in fact, center the plot around feminist issues), this ‘boy’s club’ undercurrent is usually present throughout the series.

Knope has personally redefined government, which is a good example of *reframing*. Knope feels it is a great time to be a woman in politics, feels that her political work is on par with other powerful women in government, and is optimistic about her future as a civil servant. Her unfailing optimism and persistence is a characteristic that ultimately leads to her success as the series progresses. This will be discussed at more length in the analysis of the final episode.

Later in the episode, Knope mentions that she and Tom work well together because they are both outsiders. “I’m a woman, and he’s a I think he’s a Libyan.” Tom is ethnically Indian, but during an interview, Tom tells the audience he is from South Carolina and calls himself a redneck. In this case, Knope identifies Tom as an outsider even despite the fact that he clearly doesn’t view himself as an outsider. This interpretation of Knope’s status in politics juxtaposes her statement at the beginning of the episode. While she believes it is a great time to be a woman in politics, she also groups herself with outsiders. This could be seen as a more traditional feminist perspective, however, Knope sees the outsider status as a means for she and Tom to do great work together. This is another example of *reframing*.

Knope’s optimism is not represented as effective, however, because she and Tom do not work well together. In that same scene, Knope dictates something for Tom to write down. He pretends to write it down, but in a talking head interview, Tom reveals he has merely scribbled illegibly on a notepad. When Knope asks him to read the dictation back to her, he butchers it completely. While she seems to realize the dictation is incorrect, she doesn’t investigate Tom’s effort. Knope’s attempt to reframe backfires and she appears incompetent.

The next problem Knope faces is the community outreach public forum. Knope is running the forum; Tom is voluntold to attend as well. When Knope and Tom arrive, Knope says “This is a great thing for you [the cameraman] to see...when I go through these doors, I need to

be on like the White House Press secretary.” Again, we see Knope’s unending enthusiasm for government work. This enthusiasm is a catalyst later in the episode for Knope’s success.

The doors end up being locked. Once Knope gets into the auditorium, few community members actually show up. As Knope begins the forum, lights are shut off and the group is forced into a classroom too small even for the few people attending. Despite the problems, Knope remains optimistic. Her identification as par with the White House Press Secretary is, again, evidence of her optimism for her future. She calls the tiny numbers and “amazing turnout. Probably most impressive is Knope’s perseverance. When community members begin explaining their problems, they yell at Knope. She says, “These people are members of a community that care about where they live. So what I hear when I’m being yelled at is people caring loudly at me.”

Knope’s response is a good example of a repowered audience. Foss and Foss say that once a repowered feminist chooses herself as the audience, she will begin to achieve her goals. Once she begins to achieve her goals, those around her will thrive off of her influence. Knope recognizes this as an opportunity for these community members to appeal to a system and she realizes her role as an authority figure in this situation. She allows the community members to discuss their problems and helps where she can. The greatest consequence of these forums, however, is that the community members feel heard. This is evidenced by a character named Barry. He blathers on and on about things that have no bearing in a community forum, like his prison sentence, Laura Linney, and others. Knope knows this man, he is obviously a regular forum attendee. At the end of his rant, Knope thanks him for coming, saying, “Always a pleasure to have you here.” Barry sits down with a smile, knowing he is heard.

Finally, the plot point of the show for the first several seasons is revealed- Ann Perkins, a nurse in the community, tells Knope about a giant abandoned construction pit next to her house into which her boyfriend fell and broke both his legs. Ann, in a move slightly out of character with her shy, quiet persona, says “Look, the bottom line is I’ve been trying to get this thing fixed for months and nobody’s done anything, and it’s ugly, and it’s dangerous, and it’s government owned, and you need to do something about it!” Knope promises to fill in the pit and build a park on the land; as she speaks, her face begins to shine with inspiration and excitement.

After the forum is over, Knope gives an interview. She says, about the park, “This could be my Hoover Dam.” Knope clearly has dreams that span beyond her menial job as assistant director of Parks and Rec in Pawnee, Indiana. A repowered feminist chooses not to participate in public demonstrations, recognizing her inherent power to design the life she wants. Knope’s involvement in community forums, then is a gray area. While Knope is not using the forum to petition a system already in place, she works for the system most traditional feminists petition. This could be an example of *resourcement*, because Knope has chosen to create change within the system instead of petitioning it. As a part of her occupation, she creates more positive help for members of the community.

The next morning, Knope enlists Tom in a brainstorming session to make the park a reality. During brainstorming, Tom suggests they go straight to the city council for funding. Knope rejects that idea, stating that parks are not a priority in the community and that she needs more ‘firepower.’ She decides to form a subcommittee to push the park forward. This is an example of all three principles of a fitting response. First, Knope brainstorms with Tom, identifying alternative courses of action that avoid petitioning a system of power. Second, she reframes the situation by identifying subcommittees as a viable option, and finally,

resourcement, which steps away from the source of oppression, by choosing a path that doesn't utilize the help of the oppressors (the city council in this case).

As they brainstorm, Knope comes up with the idea to enlist Mark Brendanawicz, a city planner, as part of their subcommittee. Knope says "Well if you want something done in this town, you call Mark Brendanawicz because, you know, he's a city planner but he's more than that. He's kind of like a fixer. He fixes things. He's a smart, capable guy. He just-- he knows where the bodies are buried." This example shows Knope is capable of reinterpreting her oppression. Not only does she view this traditional constraint as a positive contribution to her cause, but her actions constitute a fitting response. She reframes the label of 'man' from enemy to contributor. Foss and Foss explained that most feminist literature comes to the same conclusion- that men are the 'enemy.' Here, however, Knope shows her willingness- even excitement- to work with a man who might further her aims. As the show progresses, Mark ends up being the reason Knope gets what she wants. Therefore, this reinterpretation helps Knope accomplish her aims.

Before Knope meets with Mark, she says the following; "City hall is like a locker room. And you gotta get in there and you gotta snap towels at people and you gotta give them the business. And if you can't take it, you know, you- you- then you can't take it. You- you gotta leave the locker room." This is an example of Knope's interpretation of the problems she faces as a woman in politics. The metaphor insinuates that masculine behavior is expected in politics. She is confident in her ability to rough house with the boys, but it is clear to the viewer that Knope's inexperience with masculine behaviors ill prepares her for the road ahead. This could prove repowered feminism is ineffective because the interpretation here is overly optimistic and ignores reality. However, Knope's decision to view government as a boy's club, or a place where

she doesn't belong as woman (i.e. in the men's locker room) echoes of the 'victim feminist mentality' identified by Naomi Wolf (Hains, 2009). In other words, Knope must meet the standards set by others rather than work on her own terms. Therefore, while this echoes repowered feminism, it is actually a more optimistic, albeit misinformed, traditional feminist interpretation of exigence interpretation.

When Knope meets with Mark, her awkward banter and attempts at humor (understood to be her attempts at 'being in the locker room') leave her looking foolish and idiotic to the audience and to Mark, though he is good natured about it. Thus, a traditional interpretation of exigence is ineffective here.

While Knope meets with Mark, he tells her that he thinks the idea of turning the pit into a park is improbable and impossible. He identifies the various obstacles, including bureaucracy, red tape, hoops, etc. Knope, instead of being convinced, rallies instantly, even becoming more jazzed about the project with each obstacle Mark identifies. She says "It sounds like you're telling me to go for it." Here Knope interprets each obstacle as a possibility. This interpretation gives her the drive and confidence to continue forward with optimism and hope despite deterrents. It also gives her fuel for a long-term battle for her goals.

In this episode, Knope is presented as wildly optimistic, passionate, and driven, which unrealistic dreams and unbelievable self-esteem. Ann Perkins said it best "She's a little doofy...but sweet."

This episode features multiple talking head interviews with Knope where she discusses her ideas and ideals. Knope tends to identify with more traditional feminist ideals in these interviews. For example, Knope says that she and Tom are both outsiders in one of these talking head moments. This is an example of a traditional feminist audience because Knope is sharing

these views with a large audience (the fake viewers of the fake documentary), whereas a repowered feminist identifies the audience (to whom ideals are shared and analyzed) as the self.

Often Knope is conscious of the cameras documenting her job. When she arrives at Ann's house, Knope initiates an awkward conversation with Andy (the good-for-nothing boyfriend who fell into the pit), saying, "This must be our hero. The man heard round the world. How ya doing son? I'm Leslie Knope. And the entire government of Pawnee would like to let you know that we will do everything we can to help you." This war metaphor (a play on 'the shot heard 'round the world') is preceded with a quick glance towards the camera, indicating this line is spoken is for the benefit of others. This opposes repowered feminists' interpretation of audience. However, Knope's attempt at drama backfires as Andy replies, "Can you pass me my itch stick?" And begins scratching underneath his leg casts. An awkward silence ensues. Knope doesn't get her payoff- a photo op with the 'war hero.'

Another example is when Knope heads out to the pit with Ann and her team. However, before Knope falls in the pit she shares her vision of the park with Ann. This is a classic example of Knope's overwhelming optimism despite setbacks. She says "Dream with me for a second, Ann. Doesn't this neighborhood deserve a first-class park? Imagine a shiny new playground with a jungle gym and swings, pool, tennis courts, volleyball courts, racquetball courts, basketball court, regulation football field. We could put an amphitheatre over there, with Shakespeare in the Park-" to which Ann replies, "It's really not that big of a pit."

As Knope prepares to descend the pit, she says, "The key to any fact-finding mission is to get right into the battle zone, you know? It's like George Bush when he flew over New Orleans. Or Richard Nixon when he went to China to see what the Chinese were up to." These two political references are significant. George Bush flew over New Orleans in the wake of

Hurricane Katrina after ‘cutting short’ a month-long vacation. He allowed pictures to be taken while he examined the wreckage from the air. U.S. News calls this the beginning of Bush’s undoing, and the PR stunt came off as merely that (Walsh, 2015). Richard Nixon visiting China was not a friendly attempt at reconciliation, but a strategic maneuver to ‘drive a wedge’ between China and the PRC (history.com). Again, Knope uses drama and a war metaphor to engage with her audience and be more significant. This is followed by Knope’s embarrassing tumble to the bottom of the pit. Her attempt to persuade the traditional feminist audience ended with physical injury in this case.

We start to lose Knope’s likeable personality as she attempts to aggrandize what would be a simple process. Whenever Knope’s audience is anyone but herself, she seems phony, awkward, and forced. She often uses masculine metaphors that have awkward responses or dramatize situations. For example, after Knope tumbles into the pit, Ann takes Knope back to her house to patch her up. The following conversation occurs:

Knope: At least my boss will listen to me now that I broke my clavicle.

ANN: It’s not broken.

Knope: It is. Do you have one of those neck foam collar brace things?

ANN: Honestly, you’re- you’re fine.

Knope: (undertone) Oh, honestly, my clavicle’s broken.

In the final minutes of the episode, Knope petitions Ron, her boss, to create a pit-to-park subcommittee. Knope walks into Ron’s office with a travel pillow duct taped around her neck. Again, she uses a war metaphor, saying, “I’ve been a loyal foot soldier. Give me my shot.” The metaphor and the neck pillow do little to persuade Ron. In fact, Ron compares her to “a little dog with a chew toy...she’s insatiable.”

Despite Knope's insistence, Ron sits on the decision of whether or not Knope can form a subcommittee. The catalyst, it turns out, is Mark. When Tom and April (an office intern) walk by giggling over pictures of Knope falling into the pit, Mark takes one of the more suggestive photos from them. He says "Knope is unique. Government work can beat you down. I would say that I lost my optimism about government in about two months. Knope's kept hers for six years. I've got a few rules about how to survive and prosper in a government job, and I think I'm about to break one of those rules."

Mark meets with Ron.

MARK: I want you to give Lot 48 to Knope so she can try to build a park.

RON: Why should I?

MARK: You owe me one, remember?

RON: You want to cash in for this?

MARK: Yeah, I do.

One of the outcomes of a repowered feminism is the influence of others without imposing will or 'violence' as some feminist researchers call it. As the repowered feminist achieved her aims through intense individual reinterpretation, those around her are inspired to do what is 'good' and 'right.' While some would view this outcome as a traditional 'Knope can't do it without the help of a man,' repowered feminism suggests that Knope's unending optimism influenced Mark to step outside of his personal interests to help where he could and push forward a positive goal. In other words, Knope's adherence to repowered feminist ideals helped Mark better himself without saying a word about it.

Season 4, Episode 11 "The Comeback Kid"

In this episode, Knope announces a relaunch of her campaign for city council after a forbidden office romance with boyfriend Ben Wyatt damages her career and causes her professional campaign team to rescind their campaign offer. Knope expresses optimism as she hires a new campaign manager, her inexperienced best friend, Ann Perkins. The team plans a relaunch event at the local sports center. Each team member, all friends and coworkers of Leslie Knope, has a specific role to play in the planning and execution of the event. Of course, as the episode progresses, everything goes wrong. Knope ends up giving her relaunch speech at an ice rink with limited supplies. At the end of the 'worst political event in history,' Knope fires Ann and hires Ben Wyatt, who has more experience in political campaigning, having won a bid for mayor at the age of 18.

Knope begins the episode by solving her first problem-- choosing a campaign manager. She chooses Ann Perkins, her best friend. Ann is very surprised and reminds Knope she doesn't know the first thing about running a campaign. Knope, ever optimistic, expresses her confidence in Ann, tells her to start dressing more like campaign manager, and walks into her office.

While this is representative of imposing one's will on others, Knope is in a leadership position which obviously requires delegation of tasks and orders. Giving Ann orders isn't necessarily against repowered feminism, but during this interaction, Knope also tells Ann not to listen to her instincts but rather listen to Knope. In essences, Knope encourages Ann to follow Knope blindly. Because the goal of repowered feminism is to inspire others to positive change through example, this choice is not repowered feminism.

Knope's campaign team includes all the people in her office. She is relentlessly optimistic about her team's ability to pull off an event beyond their capabilities. Knope runs into her old (professional) campaign managers....Andy comes out having broken the coffee pot by

trying to cook Raman in it. Knope represents repowered feminism in this area because of her ability to be ridiculously optimistic. Like in the pilot episode, Knope's unfailing optimism could be a result of the application of the principles of exigence and constraint interpretation. However, this ridiculous optimism is comically enhanced, and not presented favorably, especially because Knope is just plain wrong as far as the abilities of her campaign team goes.

Ann complies with Knope's request to dress more like a campaign manager. She says, "...I Googled it and they wear a lot of dark colors." Knope replies, "See, there's more to look at on the internet than naked guys, Ann." Ann, startled, responds, "What?" This encounter is totally bizarre, with no background information available. Knope's off the wall comment and Ann's total confusion could indicate Knope's habit of looking up pornographic images. It could also represent Knope's idea of what 'girls like Ann' do.

Their goal is to plan and execute a campaign relaunch event. The main hook for the event is an endorsement from local high school basketball hero 'Pistol Pete.' Pete is famous for a last second dunk in a rival game twenty years ago. When Pete arrives at Ann's house before the event, however, he refuses to dunk at the event, explaining that he wants to stop living in the past. As Ann and Knope attempt to persuade Pete to dunk, Knope gets a phone call from Ron and the others. They have been arrested for illegally driving a commercial truck and other infractions. Knope rushes off to help.

As Knope leaves, she tells Ann to persuade Pete to dunk.

LESLIE: He must dunk, Ann. Do whatever it takes. You know, anything short of sexual favors.

ANN: What?

LESLIE: I do not-- I repeat, I do not want you to tempt him with sexual favors.

ANN: I wasn't going to.

LESLIE: Good, I wouldn't either. That's where I draw the line. Although, I am a little offended that you wouldn't do that for me.

ANN: Go.

LESLIE: Right.

Knope's attempts to be traditionally feminist, like when warning Ann not to give Pete sexual favors or rushing to emphasize that a racist basketball team name was later changed, seem insincere and scripted, like Knope knows what she *should* say even when she doesn't understand the inappropriate nature of what she's saying. This type of insincerity makes Knope seem idiotic and politically correct instead of the intelligent, honest Knope that endears the audience. This is an example of the traditional feminist audience- others. When Knope is concerned with being politically correct, her audience transitions from the repowered self to society at large. The result is a negative perception of Knope.

When Knope gets the phone call, she immediately sets out to fix the problem saying, "Men in uniform love me." This is a twist on the more traditional "women love a man in uniform." Repowered feminism suggests that this is a reinterpretation of what was previously considered oppressive, both because of the gender role reversal, but also when considering the heated conflict present in the media between police officers and racial minorities. Knope's ability to reverse the sexual role and influence the authority figure to allow her friends to go free represents a reinterpretation of exigence. Knope no longer saw her sexuality as oppressive, but rather as a tool to accomplish her goals. Additionally, she chose not to interpret the police officer's ruling as final, but was able to influence him to accomplish her goals.

Finally, everyone ends up at the campaign rally. However, what Knope thought was a basketball court had actually been turned into an ice rink. Abandoning the commercial truck filled with wood meant a miniature stage was built. The campaign signage was printed on a limited budget and shows only a close up of Knope's eyes and the word 'No,' and Pistol Pete is curled up in the back of Ann's car and won't come out. With 100 people waiting in the stands, Knope finally realizes that her optimism is excessive and she gives her team a chance to leave before the event begins. Despite Tom and April's willingness to go, Ann won't let anyone leave.

As the team walks out to Gloria Estefan's 'Get on Your Feet,' the red carpet protecting them from the ice runs out. The team is stuck a good 25 feet from the stage with nothing but ice between them. As the team shuffles onto the ice, the song's blurb plays multiple times. People begin to slip and fall. When Knope reaches the stage, she realizes there are no stairs. Ron tries to help her up, but no one can get traction on the ice. She finally flops awkwardly onto the stage, stands up to the microphone and gives her speech. Knope's cards are wet and out of order, and she finally (authentically) begins to laugh. "Well, this is the worst political event in history isn't it." Pistol Pete suddenly appears, clad in his high school basketball jersey, and all is saved. But when Pete goes to dunk, he slips spectacularly, injuring himself and causing the crowd to groan. Because Knope's repowered feminist perception of her constraints is represented as comical and inefficient, this example is not oppositional.

Analyzing Knope as a repowered feminist in this episode causes an interesting juxtaposition because repowered feminism is essentially a personal and private rhetorical process. However, because Knope is running for public office, she is to stand up in front of people and discuss her ideals. Foss and Foss don't discuss appropriate responses as far as government goes, but while this could be in violation of the audience principle, this does

represent a reinterpretation of constraints and a fitting response due to Knope's power as councilwoman. Her power and influence could achieve feminist goals through means not previously attained to on a large scale in traditional feminism.

While Knope constantly reframes and relabels situations to accomplish her goals, she constantly 'imposes her will on others.' Throughout the episode, Knope forces Ann to change her appearance to look more like a campaign manager, forces Pete (a local basketball star) to dunk at her campaign event, and appeals to the police to allow her friends to go free.

Episode 3: Season 7 Episode

The episode consists of many flashbacks and flashforwards. In the present time, all of the original characters (except Ann) meet in the Parks and Recreation department to say their goodbyes. Knope has prepared an extensive performance including at least one musical number of the history of their department. As everyone complains about the length of the show, a man walks into the department requesting a swing repair. Even though nobody works in the parks and rec offices anymore, Knope volunteers everyone to help repair the swing. "One last ride for the parks and rec gang, who's in?" Everything has gone paperless in the parks and rec offices, but Knope's talent and passion for scrapbooking means that every form the office used to use is tucked away behind plastic in a gift given to Donna. Knope thanks Donna for always coming through and they talk about how much they will miss each other. A flashforward occurs, in which Donna sells a beautiful house in Seattle. While she originally wanted to use her giant commission check to vacation with her husband in the Amazon, she instead uses the money to establish an after-school education program for classes that have been cut from the school system.

Donna has been famous throughout the series for being mildly self-centered and materialistic. She and Tom celebrate an annual ‘treat yourself’ day where they spend significant amounts of money on luxury items. She even resists dating an ex-boyfriend even though he was perfectly nice to her because she doesn’t want to give up her lavish lifestyle and extensive dating opportunities. It is insinuated that Donna’s altruistic behavior in the future is influenced by the example of Knope’s dedication to and passion for public service. This is the ultimate goal for repowered feminism- to influence others to reach their goals without public demonstration or persuasion. Though Knope is not always perfect at resisting the temptation to persuade and ‘voluntell’ (at times Knope is described as a steamroller), her unfailing optimism and passion for public service influenced Donna to step outside herself and give.

In the present, Knope then takes April and Andy to the fourth floor to file the paperwork to fix the swing. In a flash forward, April and Andy are celebrating Halloween. Andy gets depressed seeing all the little kids, wishing that he and April would have children. April is not onboard. They go to Knope’s house for dinner. Andy is disappointed that Knope and Ben’s kids are gone for the evening, so Ben takes him to the kitchen to have a chat while Knope and April talk in the living room.

APRIL: All right, go ahead.

Knope: What?

APRIL: You’re going to lecture me about how Andy and I should have kids. You’re going to be like, “They’re so great. They change your life, and yes, they drive you nuts, but it’s all worth it for the beauty and the majesty and the glory of their little faces in the morning, blah blah and barf. You know why it’s so unfair? Because you guys got so lucky. You had sex one time and you had three kids and they’re all, like, smart, and great, and healthy. And now

your lives are perfect. But our life is pretty perfect already. And you know what, kids act the opposite of their parents, that's why your kids are so cool. But Andy and I are cool already, so our kids will be, like, really lame and weird! I'm sorry. I just don't know what to do. Please tell me what to do. What do I do?

KNOPE: It's not about trying to make your life perfect. Nobody's lives are perfect. You have kids because you and Andy are a team and you want to bring in some new team members.

APRIL: So you think we should?

KNOPE: I don't know if you should have kids. I really don't. But I do like your team.

One year later, April goes into labor, again on Halloween, and gives birth to a baby boy. Knope comes to visit and tells the baby, "Welcome to the team little guy."

Again we are presented with the desired outcome of repowered feminism. Knope doesn't persuade April to have kids. In fact, Knope's tells April it's not Knope's decision. But Knope's positive experience with children has obviously had a strong influence on April's decision.

Back in the present, Knope takes a form to maintenance to pick up the new swing with Tom Haverford. Knope reminisces about her mentorship with Tom, but Tom has his headphones in and doesn't hear a word Knope says.

In Tom's flash forward, his restaurant business has failed and he has lost all his money. He laments his failures, claiming they all occurred because of his own stupidity. This failure, however, occurred despite the fact that Tom was 'smart and careful.' Here we see the effect Knope had on Tom. She mentored him throughout the series to become more intelligent and careful in his business decisions. Tom also has a positive and fulfilling relationship with his longtime girlfriend.

Tom ends up writing an international best seller in which he outlines seven successful personality types, naming them after people in the Parks and Rec office. His description of Knope is tireless, optimistic, and a leader. Tom later tells Knope he couldn't do it without her.

Knope, as Tom's mentor, had an interesting relationship to the egotistical and perverted assistant. Often (as shown in the pilot episode) when Tom would harass women, Knope wouldn't say a word. Though Knope would sometimes give advice when not requested, most of the time she waited for Tom to ask her what went wrong. This relationship is an imperfect representation of repowered feminism. Knope did her best to persuade Tom only when he requested her help. Her influence and optimism taught Tom how to persevere when times were tough.

Back in the present day, maintenance is closed. Tom and Knope go to the mayor's office where Garry (the incompetent one of the office) gets the door unlocked for them. In Garry's future, Knope and Ben attend his funeral. They are accompanied by Secret Service men, though we aren't sure if Knope or Ben is president.

Garry and Knope's relationship is complicated. The characters in the show (including Knope) often teased Garry (whose name changed four times throughout the seasons because none of his coworkers knew his real name). Despite his coworker's endless torment and blaming, Garry Gergich rarely gets frustrated with others, is always willing to help, and is rarely incompetent. He is elected mayor every four years for the remainder of his life and he genuinely, selflessly loves it. Knope uses Garry as a scapegoat for many of her mistakes. This is a negative representation of a fitting response. The essence of repowered feminism is to take back the power feminists have given away to others through a misinterpretation of their agency. This indicates a requirement to take responsibility for the consequences of that agency. Knope avoids doing so, and therefore is not represented positively as a repowered feminist. There are not

consequences to this behavior, however, because of Garry's optimism and charity. He calls Knope and Tom his best friends.

It is also interesting that the show doesn't specify if Knope or Ben is President. This is, after all, Knope's dearest ambition. It's also interesting that Knope and Ben came back to Garry's funeral. It seems a gesture of friendship, but when Ben notices Garry's name is spelled wrong on the tombstone, Knope indicates that it really doesn't matter and they walk away without telling anyone. Thus, Knope's relationship with Garry doesn't represent the ultimate goal of repowered feminism.

Back in Pawnee, Ron fixes the swing while Knope helps. In Ron's future, he has resigned from his job and goes to visit Knope and Ben in Washington. He explains he is at a crossroads and seeks Knope's advice. Knope, excited to give it, finds Ron a job as the superintendent of a Pawnee National Park (a park Knope established while working in the Parks and Rec office).

Knope is not represented as a repowered feminist here because she accepts the job for Ron (even forging his signature) before she even tells him about the job. However, Knope hires Ron despite his lack of experience and education. Ron knows he's not qualified, but when he tells Knope his worries, she says she isn't worried about other people being angry and that his entire life has prepared him for the job. This is a type of thinking outside the box (a fitting response) that Knope has the power to do because of her position in the National Parks office. Knope uses her power to bring up an unqualified-on-paper man to do what he loves. We, as an audience, are left with no doubt that Ron will do a good job.

In Knope and Ben's future, they attend a dinner at Joe Biden's house. Knope is approached by the DNC about running for governor of Indiana. Ben is also approached by a campaign manager to run for the same office. The next day while prepping for dinner, Knope

and Ben can't decide who should run, so they decide to wait before they make a decision. With some trepidation they call their kids down to dinner. The triplets come rushing in, grab plates of food while talking over each other, and rush out again.

Knobe and Ben are represented as disassociated parents. They brace themselves before calling their kids to dinner and seem like they can't control the chaos. The show rarely shows interactions with their kids, and this makes Knobe and Ben's parenthood seem like a part-time job.

Knobe and Ben go to Pawnee, where Ben has organized a surprise reunion of all the Parks and Rec people. While everyone catches up. Knobe and Ben confer about getting advice about the election. Knobe shows personal growth when she suggests they flip a coin. Ben says, "Okay, you, Knobe Knobe, the queen of planning and binders and pro-and-con lists, you want to leave this to chance?" They finally decide they should both run, but when they go out to announce their campaigns, Ben surprises everyone when he announces that Knobe will be running for governor of Indiana.

Knobe's begins to let go, showing her personal growth as a repowered feminist. She proves she can relinquish control even when it involves some of her most desirable dreams. The episode concludes at a graduation ceremony where Knobe has received an honorary doctorate from a university in Indiana. She speaks to the students saying,

"I started my career more than thirty years ago in the Parks and Recreation Department right here in Pawnee Indiana. I've had a lot of different jobs, including two terms as your governor, and soon a new, unknown challenge awaits me, which to me, even now, is thrilling, because I love the work. Not to say that public service isn't sexy, because it definitely is, but that's not why we do it. We do it because we get a chance to work hard at work worth doing

alongside a team of people we love. So I thank those people who've walked with me and I thank you for this honor. Now, go find your team, and get to work.”

Knope's dreams and successes have put her in a position to be persuasive to others and to fulfill the ultimate goal of repowered feminism, which is to influence others through personal growth, fulfillment, and success by using the principles of repowered feminism.

Bach in the present, the swing has finally been fixed. Knope approaches the man who complained about the broken swing, citing this as another example of “dedicated work from public servants.” The man says, “Okay, great,” and walks away. Knope says, “Sounds about right.”

Throughout the series, Knope battles with disappointment when she doesn't receive gratitude or awards for her tireless service to better the lives of the people of Pawnee. Sometimes she comes close to giving up, but she always chooses to continue to do what she loves. This is an example of a repowered feminist's audience- herself. Knope does what she does because making a difference makes her happy.

Conclusion and Implications

This analysis shows that repowered feminism applies both to a feminist's concerns with feminist issues and the applicability of repowered feminism to all types of problem solving. Knope, whether focusing directly on feminist issues or on the various obstacles she faces while doing her job, is usually presented as more successful when she implements the characteristics of repowered feminism. However, Knope's responses to problems are inconsistent and she is not always presented as successful or even intelligent. Her optimism makes her seem unaware of reality and, at times, neurotic and controlling.

However, throughout the series, Knope becomes more and more loveable, and her optimism, grit, and persistence influences those around her for the better. Additionally, while Knope often uses a type of relentless persuasion to get others to do what she wants them to do (and this is not representative of repowered feminism), we have to make allowances for Knope's position as Assistant Director, City Council Candidate, and National Parks Director and the requirements that come along with the job including giving directions and following up.

Knope's alternative responses are fitting to the circumstances she is placed in. As she grows throughout the series, she tends to avoid steam rolling and accepts constructive criticism. She is relentless in achieving her goals and gains the trust and friendship of her colleagues. This is, therefore, an oppositional reading of repowered feminism.

An expansion of the principles of repowered feminism relating specifically to representations in pop culture would be helpful for this type of research. Perhaps a clearer analysis could be performed if we focused specifically on feminist issues throughout the series (like the sexist city councilor Knope must deal with for a season) and Knope's responses to them.

Repowered feminism claims to be applicable across socio-economic classes and in most situations women face. This approach to feminist issues is not popular because while it encourages women to take back power and agency, it discourages public discourse and demonstration. While personal reinterpretation is effective, the need for changes in law is also real and necessary.

Knope Knope is a good example of a merge of these two needs for feminism. She is optimistic and inventive in her response to oppression, but she also seeks positions of power within government to affect change...and that's fitting response.

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