

Analyzing ‘Treat Yo Self’ in Parks and Recreation as a Norm: An Application of Constructivism to Television and Beyond

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The International Relations Theory of Constructivism often involves conversation about norms and how they are spread. However, the theory rarely expands to describe norms outside of the realm of real life events and history. What if Constructivism could be applied at a smaller scale to norms that surround us in our daily lives, such as those on television? In this essay, I will answer this question by arguing that traditional Constructivist theory can be used to analyze how “Treat Yo Self Day” on *Parks and Recreation* is a norm that spreads throughout the show. I will then show how the norm was able to spread and influence young-adult culture. In doing this, I will show a new view: that traditional IR theories can be used to explain events in our daily lives, therefore connecting the international world to everyday society. This link could illuminate many unseen connections between what we watch, and what happens on the global stage. Although IR theory is not typically applied to pop culture, the models used fit almost perfectly to the norms analyzed in this essay.

Introduction

“Treat Yo’ Self! It’s the best day of the yearrr!”, Donna (Retta) and Tom (Aziz Ansari) sing as they shoot off finger-guns into the camera (Yang, 2011). Both characters on *Parks and Recreation* (Gregg, 2009-2015), Donna and Tom are introducing a tradition of theirs: Treat Yo Self, a day in which you can buy yourself whatever you want simply because you want to. The annual extravaganza is always anticipated by both characters. “It’s the one day of the year I can be selfish!” Tom exclaims as he slaps another character’s hand away from a box of cupcakes he bought himself. Donna again adds, “It’s the best day of the year!” (Yang, 2011).

So, what is the purpose behind “The best day of the year”? Other than being a move by the writers to produce humor and mock consumerism, Treat Yo Self Day, within the context of the show, releases Donna and Tom from the monotonous bureaucratic work they do day to day. The show often highlights such work as it follows the Parks and Recreation department of a small, weird, town: Pawnee, Indiana. The

characters of the show are constantly grappling with tasks that are bound up in bureaucratic red tape and dealing with demanding and often irrational citizens. However, the characters' relationships and personalities are often more important than the tasks at hand. Though the characters are all different, they always work things out together and function as a team (Gregg, 2009-2015).

In this particular episode, Donna, is worried about Ben (Adam Scott), a dorky accountant who is living in Pawnee temporarily to fix the city's budget issues. Ben is upset because of his failed relationship with Leslie (Amy Poehler), the ever-peppy boss who is the main leader of the office. While driving away from the office to start Treat Yo Self Day, Donna notices Ben and states, "Oh lord, is he eating soup, on a bench, alone? (Yang, 2011)" Donna then convinces Tom to bring Ben along for the day, to help him get out of his funk. Tom is not happy about the addition. So how then, is Donna able to convince Tom, a fashionably clad self-declared cool guy, to bring a dorky accountant along on "the best day of the year?"

We could ask a similar question about the episode's popularity, and find the same answer. There have been countless memes, blog posts, articles, and videos made about the episode, it has almost a cult following. The premise of taking a day for yourself and being able to do what you want is not only humorous, but relatable. Taking time to "treat yourself" is something that is becoming more and more accepted throughout younger generations, such as millennials. In fact, according to NPR, millennials are "the generation that devotes the most time and money to the \$10 billion self-care industry" (Silva, 2017). Doing things or buying things simply for oneself has become a part of young adult culture. However, how does this relate to the way "Treat Yo' Self" has caught on within young adult culture?

The answer, surprisingly, lies within the international relations theory of Constructivism. Created in the late 90s, the theory attempts to explain events in the international community using social interactions (Adler, 1997). One of the main conversations within the Constructivist community involves norms, which are often thought to define social interaction (Ruggie, 1998). Questions involving norms—how they spread, what their functions are, how they perform these functions—are numerous and greatly debated. Traditional scholarship involving norms in IR either adds to the conversation about the function of norms or applies them to a specific situation, either past or present.

Norms in Constructivism, while often applied to historical events often, are rarely or ever applied to pop culture. This is not to say that IR and Constructivist scholars don't ever discuss pop culture; in fact, there is a whole sub-category of international relations studies dubbed "popular culture and world politics (PCWP)" (Caso and Hamilton, 2015, iii). However, the focus of these scholars typically rests on how pop culture influences world politics or how pop culture can mimic the world around it. It does not specifically apply the theories to the pop-culture texts, except to sometimes provide examples for teaching purposes (Caso and Hamilton, 2015).

The aim for this essay, then, is to apply norm theories in constructivism to a pop-culture text: to both the "Treat Yo Self" episode of *Parks and Recreation* and the responses to the episode itself. By doing this, I will answer both of the previously proposed questions: how the norm of "Treat Yo Self Day" within the show is spread, and how the episode and catch phrase caught on so well with millennials and young adults in the real world.

To accomplish this I will: 1) Explain the theories that will be used to analyze both the show and its responses, 2) clarify the methods of how the theories will be applied through the rest of the essay, 3) analyze the show and how the success of "treating yourself" can be explained using the methods I discussed, and 4) examine how "treating yourself" has emerged from the show into the real world. By doing this, I will show that Constructivism can be applied to the world of media scholarship and to IR theories alike, essentially turning the theory in the opposite direction to how it is usually applied.

Norms in Constructivism and Nations as People

Constructivism, as a school of thought in international relations, seeks to be the "middle ground" between the rigid ideas of realists who believe solely in behavior and the progressive thoughts of critical theorists who believe almost solely in ideas. The theory states that human nature and social cues affect interaction at the international level (Adler, 1997, 321). Since constructivism is concerned with social cues, norms are often a large point of conversation. Defined by Ruggie (1998), norms are "social facts" (13). Constructivists use these "social facts" to try and explain why countries react the way they do in the international system.

Within Constructivism, lots of research has been invested in the way norms spread and change, called “normative change” (Payne, 2001, 38). The foundational model for the spreading of norms, the life cycle model, was developed by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). In their model, norms begin their influence in a stage called “norm emergence”, when “norm entrepreneurs” try to convince a large number of state leaders to adopt their norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 895). The second stage involves a “tipping point” (895) as more and more leaders begin adopting the norm until a majority is reached. This is called a “norm cascade” (895). States may begin to accept the norm because they feel social pressure from other states to comply with it. After the norm is mostly accepted, the third stage is internalization, when the norm is “integrated” (895) into society and seems to be “taken for granted” (895). This model is the most widely accepted, although it has been re-interpreted and criticized by other Constructivist scholars.

One such interpretation involves adding to the norm emergence step. This step involves “norm entrepreneurs”, or organizations that begin the spread of norms, engaging in “framing”. Framing involves establishing new terms to “create” an issue and then repeating them over and over within the international community, to gain public attention (Finnemore and Sikkink, 897). One common example of a norm entrepreneur is a “transnational advocacy network” which is a combination of media channels, activists, and international organizations that push for norm changes using framing (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, 92). A “transnational advocacy group” is an example of how the norm emergence step has been interpreted or added to.

An additional interpretation by Payne (2001) argues that another angle should be included in the life cycle model to discuss not only persuasion by these norm entrepreneurs, as Finnemore and Sikkink’s model does, but coercion as well. Within Finnemore and Sikkink’s model, the way norms move from norm emergence to the tipping point is by convincing groups or countries in the international community using framing. There is not an option for any kind of coercion, or the idea that states may not always act freely but are under other kinds of influence, as Payne points out: “The normative developments constructivists observe often do not reflect persuasion, but instead result from a coercive mechanism” (42). Payne claims that by excluding the idea of coercion,

many of the analyses of norms are incorrect (2001). Therefore, a model where Payne and Finnemore and Sikkink's ideas are combined would allow for normative change that includes the ability to analyze coercion as well.

When discussing what states do with the norms, and how they react to situations, Constructivists subscribe to the idea that states can be thought of as people, as in they will act in similar ways as people when in similar situations. According to Wendt (2004), "To say that states are 'actors' or 'persons' is to attribute to them properties we associate first with human beings—rationality, identities, interests, beliefs, and so on. Such attributions pervade social science and International Relations (IR) scholarship in particular" (289). This assumption means that states can be expected to act similarly in situations as people would, or even the opposite, that people can act similarly to states.

An Example of Norm Application

Finnemore and Sikkink used the example of the founding of the Red Cross and the establishment of the norms involving fair treatment of wounded soldiers in their model. They described a man named Henry Dunant as being the first "norm entrepreneur" (897) They state that "Dunant and his colleagues had to persuade military commanders not to treat valuable medical personnel and resources they captured as spoils of war, to be treated as they saw fit" (897). They describe this as Dunant's form of "framing", as Dunant created an issue. They argue that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to be founded in order to promote change at the international level and begin convincing states to adopt the norm. Then, they move on to step two by explaining that after the tipping point was reached following the Geneva Convention, the Red Cross continued "socializing" and spreading its norm as it did its international work (902). Next, step three, internalization, is explained as only being accomplished after the norm is "taken for granted" by states (905). This usually occurs when professionals are trained in the spreading norm. The example they give is that doctors are expected to save lives no matter what—they are simply trained that way. No one questions that a doctor should save a life, even if that life is an enemy soldier and the doctor is working for the Red Cross. Therefore, the norm of life-saving is taken for granted. Once this level is reached, the norm is complete and the "life cycle" continues until it is disrupted by another "norm entrepreneur."

Methodology

With Wendt's idea that states can be people, and the idea that, therefore, people can act as states, Constructivism can be used to analyze the characters in *Parks and Recreation* by taking the way norms are spread at the international level, such as the Red Cross example, and bringing this process to the community level and examining the characters' actions. Using Finnermore and Sikkink's original model for normative change with the addition of Wendt's idea of states as people, I will seek to show how "treating yourself" spreads through the characters on the show, and then on to young-adult society. To do this, I closely examined the episode of *Parks and Recreation* that describes "treating yo self", Season 4 episode 4: "Pawnee Rangers" (Yang, 2011). I took note of all character interactions regarding the new norm and will now walk through the interactions from the show in this essay to show how "treating yourself" can be seen as norm.

After examining the episode, I will look at the impact on society, sharing data I collected regarding the usage of the terms "treat yo self" and "self-care" using Google Trends, noting that both have seen increased use since the episode first aired in 2011. I will then discuss how the term "treat yo self" has been able to spread as a norm due to an already established platform within millennial culture, again using Finnermore and Sikkink's model. I will add that Keck and Sikkink's model of a "transnational advocacy network" can be applied to show how broader pop culture helped spread the norm.

'Treat Yo Self' as a Norm

At the beginning of the episode, Tom walks into the office clutching a box of cupcakes with "Treat Yo Self" painted on them. He slams them down on Donna's desk and yells, "Donnatellaaaa, three words for you: Treat. Yo. Self" (Yang, 2011). Donna looks very excited and then, in unison, the two both sing "Treat Yo Self 2011!" The show gives no explanation as to how the tradition was started, or whose idea it was to begin the tradition. However, it is clear that the tradition is already accepted, at least within Donna and Tom's small community. No one in the office questions the behavior, indicating it has already been a part of their lives for years. In this case, Ruggie's definition of a norm as being a "social fact", within the context of the office, holds true, as it is recognized by the members of the office and affects social interactions in their community (1998).

At this beginning stage of the episode however, there is no way to explain the normative change through Finnemore and Sikkink's model as steps one and two are missing. Step one, introducing the norm, and step two, spreading the norm, have already occurred outside the context of the episode. It is apparent that either Donna or Tom acted as the original "norm entrepreneur", established the idea, and then made it a part of their daily lives, however this is never explicitly stated. There is no way to analyze how any of the events occurred.

The first opportunity for analysis occurs when Donna realizes the only person in the office who doesn't seem to accept the norm is Ben, the new accountant. Before Donna and Tom leave to start their day, Donna asks if they can take Ben with them saying, "He's a rubber band that's about to snap (Yang, 2011)." Tom protests and says that the day is supposed to be just him and Donna, and that no one else can possibly be as relaxed as them, especially Ben, and that having him around would ruin their day. Donna backs down and the two go on their way as planned.

In this instance, Donna acts as a "norm entrepreneur," much like Dunant in Finnemore and Sikkink's example. She attempts to re-start the process of spreading this version of the norm; this time to a different entity: Ben. Her task is now to convince the other entity involved in the issue, in this case Tom, to accept the changes to the norm. This is where scholars such as Payne might expect Donna to use coercion to continue to spread her norm. Instead of continuing to simply promote her norm by socializing in the way Finnemore and Sikkink describe, they would expect Donna to threaten or bargain with Tom to include Ben. However, she continues to follow a more traditional type of normative change by using framing. She is already using framing by creating the term "rubber band" to make an issue out of the current stress Ben is under, as Dunant made an issue out of the wounded soldiers. She is also using an already established organization—herself and Tom—as way to push for the norm. Dunant had to create a new organization to spread his norm to states, but Donna already has an established organization to spread her norm in the office.

Now, Donna moves to start step two. As the two are leaving, they see Ben again, this time alone on the park bench, in the scene previously described. Donna looks at Tom and asks again for Ben to come. Tom grudgingly agrees. Donna calls for Ben and says, "Come on rubber band!" (Yang, 2011). In this instance, Donna's framing tactic was successful: she

was able to create an issue and repeat it enough to convince Tom that it was in fact an issue. Now, steps one and two of Finnemore and Sikkink's model have been completed. Donna was successful in being a "norm entrepreneur" and therefore was led to step two, the "norm cascade", or attempting to "institutionalize" the norm. In this step, a majority must be convinced in order to reach the "tipping point", when the norm can be rapidly accepted. This is synonymous with Dunant's Red Cross convincing the majority states to adopt his norms after the Geneva convention was signed. In the episode however, since the only communities involved were Donna and Tom, Donna only needed to convince Tom to reach a majority. Tom was convinced, the majority was reached, and the newer version of the norm where Ben is allowed is, for the most part, accepted.

The third step, "integration", however, must still be reached. This step proves to be most challenging for Donna, as Ben is not convinced as easily as Tom. Ben is not receptive to the "Treat Yo Self" norm at first. While seated on massage chairs at a spa he says with disappointment in his voice, "So Treat Yourself Day is just a day where you go to the spa and the mall?" (Yang, 2011). Ben is still looking for the reasoning behind it, therefore the norm has not been integrated. For Ben, his day only gets worse from there. He gets acupuncture, stating "this is the most stressed out I've ever been" (Yang 2011). He then gets taken to the mall and watches Donna and Tom buy cashmere and crystal, looking miserable the whole time. It seems as if Ben has rejected the norm. He does not appreciate the spa or the mall like Donna and Tom do, despite them continuing to act as "framers" and trying to convince him how good it is. Using persuasion tactics such as repeating the terms "relaxation" and "treat yo self", as both Donna and Tom do, aren't helping Ben accept the norm, and therefore, the norm has not yet been "taken for granted".

Finally, as the day is winding down, Donna attempts one last time to finish the final step. As Ben still looks miserable, Donna says to Tom, "Look, maybe this is our version of treat yourself day and he needs to do his version" (Yang, 2011). Donna is attempting to make the norm a little more inclusive, by adding another interpretation of the norm: Ben's. She's not suggesting getting rid of the norm, just that it should be able to be expanded from just a spa day and shopping for luxuries to other things as well. She is attempting to re-frame the norm to encompass something Ben would like.

This time, Donna's tactic works. Ben buys himself a Batman costume and Tom states, "You're part of the Treat Yo Self team now!" (Yang, 2011). Ben agrees, and thanks Donna and Tom for including him. The third step in Finnemore and Sikkink's model is completed. Ben accepts the norm, making it "integrated". It may also be said that the norm is "taken for granted." Now Ben, Tom, or Donna won't ever question "Treat Yo Self Day" as it has become a tradition for all of them, much like doctors don't question that they should save lives regardless of the country of the soldier's origin. Ben now feels better about Leslie, and the day has served its purpose for all that participated. Donna was successful in spreading her norm.

Treating Yourself: A Millennial Activity

It turns out that Donna was successful in spreading her norm outside of *Parks and Rec* as well. The term "Treat Yo Self" is now a part of young adult vocabulary. It can be found in a plethora of articles directed at younger generations. For examples, see: "Best Ways to 'Treat Yo Self' in San Francisco" (2013), "Treat Yourself L.A., a new food festival for millennials, is coming to Santa Monica" (Harris, 2018), "Treat Yo'self Spring Break 2016" (Follet, 2016), and "11 Ways To Treat Yo' Damn Self This Valentine's Day" (Bennett, 2018). All these authors, and countless others, use the term to discuss ways to practice self-care. Mostly, the term is used in student blogs or magazines directed at younger audiences around college age or just after.

The term is almost always used in situations revolving around self-care. The definition of self-care itself usually varies greatly depending on interpretation, but a general definition is "any activity that we do deliberately in order to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health" (Micheal, 2016). Self-care is a more recent addition to conversation. Its use has been increasing at a steady rate over the past few years. As documented on Google Trends, an online software that tracks the amount of times a phrase is googled, the term "self-care" has been googled more and more frequently since around 2011. Since "Pawnee Rangers" aired in 2011, the term "Treat Yo Self" has been googled a correspondingly increasing amount. The data suggests that usage, or at least a curiosity about the meaning of the terms, has been on the rise since the episode aired.

How then, was the norm of “Treating Yo Self” able to spread so easily alongside “self-care” after the episode aired? The term “self-care” existed before the episode aired. According to an article in *The Guardian*, self-care has been around since the ancient Greeks (Mahdawi, 2017). The article also states that lately, “self-care” has become a buzzword. NPR states, “There is one generation that has been consistently defined by its obsessions: avocado toast, memes, Harry Potter...and self-care (Silva, 2017).” So, self-care is a popular topic lately, and has been associated with a certain demographic: the millennials.

In this way, “self-care” and its associated audience, millennials, can be seen as providing a platform in which a “norm entrepreneur” could engage in “framing”, as suggested in the first step in the model by Finnemore and Sikkink. The “norm entrepreneur” in this case is the episode, as it was the first to coin the term “treat yo self.” While the episode did not actively try and convince people to adopt the term, it did engage in some of the elements of framing. The episode repeatedly used certain phrases, such as “treat yo self,” to “create” an issue.

Also, the episode created a kind of “transnational advocacy network” as first defined by Keck and Sikkink in 1999. Usually “TANs” include a media outlet, international organizations, and activists. Some might say that the episode being at the center of one of these networks is far-fetched. Of course, not all that typically applies in the international community will transfer, but one concrete similarity between the two is the presence of media outlets. After the episode aired media outlets published reviews; content written about the episode was shared. There were also “activists”— fans of the show who promoted the episode by word of mouth or sharing on social media about it. As referenced earlier when discussing the NPR article, millennials also share content by creating memes. The huge number of memes that “activists” created and then shared with the internet regarding the episode all contribute to the spread of the norm. An example of a meme aiding in spreading the norm includes text that says: “me: I need to save money, me: gets money, me: ‘TREAT YO SELF’” and includes a gif of Tom from the episode wearing a pink cashmere sweater. These kinds of promotions, which can be interpreted as part of the transnational advocacy network, contributed to spreading the norm and the completion of step two.

In this way, the episode was able to spread the norm to the already established audience of millennials, who were already familiar with the concept of self-care, and eventually reached a state where a majority of people had become familiar with the concept of “treating yourself”. Then, as more and more people discussed it and used it in their daily vocabulary, the norm entered step three of being taken for granted and became a part of daily life.

Conclusion

Drawing on Wendt’s idea that states can, and do, act as people, it’s possible to infer that people can act as states do (2003). Using *Parks and Recreation* as an example, analysis of Constructivist norms has applications beyond the realm of traditional international theory. In this essay, it was used in place of a traditional media theory to analyze how an idea spread within a show and beyond. Constructivism was, in a way, applied backwards. Instead of looking to human interactions to explain international phenomena, such as the spread of the rights of wounded soldiers, this essay instead explained human interactions on a TV show and in real life to and applied it as an explanation of international phenomena. By using the “life cycle model” and “transnational advocacy networks” to look at an event on the show as a norm that then became a norm among millennials, I was able to show that traditional IR theory can be applied at a more micro level.

When looking at the way the norm of “treating yourself” spread throughout the show, it is clear that the norm followed the three-step process laid out by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). The norm was started by Donna, the “norm entrepreneur” and then went through the next two steps until it was accepted. Subsequently, the norm was able to spread to society because of an already established audience of millennials who are associated with self-care (Silva, 2017). In this case, the episode acted as the “norm entrepreneur”, and followed the three-steps outlined in Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle model. It was accompanied by a kind of “transnational advocacy network”, as originally defined by Keck and Sikkink (1999). Media outlets published reviews and individual “activists” praised the show by writing blog posts and creating memes. This aided in spreading the norm, eventually resulting in it being absorbed into millennial culture.

There is an already established sub-field of PCWP, pop culture in world politics (Caso and Hamilton, 2015). However, the field is relatively new, and rather than use IR theory to specifically discuss pop culture, it uses teaches or explains situations in which pop culture can influence world politics. As this essay demonstrates, it would be possible for this field to begin directly applying theory to pop culture in combination with traditional media scholarship. By analyzing this relationship, it may become easier to understand how what we watch or consume relates to the world around us, and how similar it is or isn't. Making this distinction—how what we watch affects the world around us—is something people need in times filled with fake news and uncertainty. Understanding that what we say, and what we watch, can have larger implications, as can be analyzed by IR theories such as Constructivism, could help shed new light on many of today's problems.

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