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Sharron J. Iennon, The Ohio State University

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Gender Roles and Appearance in STAR TREK, The Next Generation

Sharron J. Lennon, The Ohio State University

Star Trek, which is over 25 years old, has spawned two spinoffs: THE NEXT GENERATION and DEEP SPACE NINE. According to TV Guide writer Michael Logan (1991), THE NEXT GENERATION has the highest ratings of any weekly syndicated series in America. By the end of this viewing season THE NEXT GENERATION will have logged twice as many episodes as the original STAR TREK. The old and new "Treks" have been extremely popular and successful and have spawned 6 feature movies, fan magazines, conventions, at least one small company which manufactures uniform tops for fans, and a variety of other memorabilia. Although there was skepticism among hard core STAR TREK fans when the New Generation made its debut, it is now more popular than the original series (Turque, 1990).

The original series has been much criticized for its sexism and lack of any substantive roles for women (Cranny-Francis, 1985; Deegan, 1986; Littleton, 1989; Logan, 1991; Reid-Jeffery, 1982), but at least according to the popular press the sexism has been corrected in THE NEXT GENERATION (Turque, 1990). Although the original STAR TREK has been the basis for several scholarly works (Cranny-Francis, 1985; Deegan, 1986; Littleton, 1989; Logan, 1991; Reid-Jeffery, 1982), at present THE NEXT GENERATION has been the basis for only one such study (cited in Cole, 1993). The purpose of this descriptive analysis was to examine the extent to which women's appearances and their roles are sexist in THE NEXT GENERATION. A stratified random sample was used; 35 of the 126 episodes (28%) were viewed and analyzed for appearances, themes, and roles. Seven episodes were randomly selected from each of the five seasons: 1987-88, 1989-90, 1990-91, 1991-92.

The episodes were viewed and characters from the series were categorized as recurring or as guest characters; their roles were also analyzed and classified. In most episodes important crew members make up the bridge crew, are sent on away teams, and attend staff briefings. In the 35 coded episodes there were a total of 113 bridge scenes, 49 staff briefings, and 33 away teams sent to a planet's surface or another ship. To determine if women and men shared equally in such positions of power on the ENTERPRISE, frequencies with which men and women were part of the bridge crew, were sent on away teams, and were part of staff briefings were recorded. When the action switched from the bridge to the ENTERPRISE to a planet, for example, only one or two people might be seen on the ship's bridge. Therefore, bridge crew members were counted only in scenes in which at least 6 people could be seen on screen. On average the bridge crew was made of up of 5.6 men and 2.3 women, the away teams consisted of 1.9 men and 1.1 women, and each staff briefing was attended by 3.9 men and 1.3 women.

During the 5 year period there were only 8 women with recurring roles. In the 35 coded episodes there was a security chief (appeared in 5 episodes), a helm officer (appeared in 4 episodes), a bartender (appeared in 5 episodes), a botanist (appeared in 1 episode), Counselor Troi's mother (appeared in 2 episodes), and a physician (appeared in 6 episodes). However, the 2 women who appeared the most were Deanna Troi the alien psychologist (appeared in 33 episodes) who counsels the crew and Dr. Crusher who is the ship's Chief Medical Officer (appeared in 28 episodes). Taken together, the 8 recurring women appeared only 84 times. For example, in 1991-92 there were only 6 recurring roles featuring women, only 2 of these women were powerful characters. During the same 5 year period there were 9 recurring men's roles. The men in these roles appeared a total of 203 times; 8 of those men were still featured in 1991-92. Those roles include captain, first officer, science officer, chief engineer, security chief, engineer, a super-being, a transporter chief. Seven of these men were powerful characters. None of the men's recurring roles included care-taking or other helping professions, while 4 of the women's recurring roles were of this type.
In the 35 episodes there were 17 female guest characters who had important but not recurring roles; these included 2 world leaders, 4 scientists, 2 admirals, and 3 captains; these were all strong and powerful characters. There were 41 male guest characters who had important but not recurring roles; these included 4 world leaders, 5 scientists, 9 admirals, 8 ship’s captains, and a terrorist; these were all strong characters in positions of power.

The characters’ appearances reflect their roles. Whereas all the men in recurring roles wore standard uniforms which serve to symbolize their power, in seasons 2 through 5 there was only one woman with a recurring role who wore the standard uniform; she portrayed an active and resourceful crew member. During the first year the female security chief who always wore the standard uniform, symbolizing legitimate power. She was resourceful and clever, but was killed during that season. The other recurring women have either worn variations of the uniform or no uniform. Deanna Troi, the half Betazoid half human counselor, has always worn (during the first 5 seasons analyzed here) either a mini-dress, called a "skant" (Nemecek, 1992), or non-standard tight lycra outfits with decolletage necklines.² It is difficult to appear powerful while simultaneously exposing so much of the bosom. In wearing tight body-revealing clothing with low necklines, Troi is portrayed as a traditional non-threatening care-giver. Thus, not only are strong and powerful women featured less often than men, fewer women have access to decision-making, and their physical appearances underscore their lack of importance and power. Based on this analysis, it may be concluded that sexism does exist in women’s appearances and roles on THE NEXT GENERATION.

NOTES

1. STAR BASE COLUMBUS is run by two women in Columbus, Ohio. According to their business cards they offer the "largest variety of Star Trek items in Central Ohio."

2. The exception to this is the episode Future Imperfect (Season 4), in a holodeck fantasy Troi was featured wearing the regulation Star Fleet uniform. However, in no "real" episode did she do so until Season 6 (not included in this analysis) when she was ordered to by a new captain. Since that episode she has continued to wear a regulation uniform and, in my opinion, she is much more credible.

REFERENCES


Turque, B. (1990, October 22), "Still Klingon to a dream,” Newsweek, p. 82.