

**TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION, INTERNATIONAL ANXIETIES:
EXAMINING CROSS-CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKPLACE
POWER STRUGGLES AND TENSIONS OVER HIERARCHICAL
STANDING IN *THE OFFICE***

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Introduction

Originally broadcast in the United Kingdom from 2001 until 2003, the television show *The Office* has been remade in a variety of nations worldwide, including the United States (2005-present), France (2006), Chile (2008), Israel (2010), and most recently, Sweden (2012). While these adaptations are similar in certain ways, such as using an office setting or employing character archetypes like the inept boss or sycophantic co-worker, they nevertheless remain distinctive, incorporating specific features of their socio-historical contexts to create hybrid programs, neither authentically ‘local’ nor the products of global homogenization (Straubhaar 2007). Cross-cultural comparisons of these different versions of *The Office* can therefore illustrate or provide case studies of how globalization, particularly the global flow of media, is a complex process where cultural diversity is not eliminated through integration, but rather new cultural forms arise that combine ‘local’ characteristics with more ‘global’ elements.

This study specifically compared the culturally-distinct and transnationally-shared representations of workplace power struggles and tensions over standing in the original British *Office* with those in its American adaptation. In doing so, my purpose was to determine whether the programs’ separate depictions of conflicts over power and position reveal mutual anxieties in the U.K. and the U.S. regarding contemporary office work and the corporate workplace, as well as to assess how their commonalities and disparities contribute to questions regarding globalization’s homogenizing and differentiating tendencies.

Literature Review

Theories on globalization have changed considerably since the concept first emerged, and many earlier ones, like the world-systems model proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), have come under extensive criticism for being totalizing meta-theories. Though this problem of universalization persists in studies of globalization, theorists have continued to investigate this topic in an effort to clarify its seemingly contradictory effects. Scholars like Anthony Giddens (1990), for example, have posited that globalization is a process of intensification, where social relations connecting far-flung places around the world become amplified to such an extent that events in one's immediate vicinity affect occurrences in distant areas, and vice versa. Others—including Jonathan Inda and Renato Rosaldo (2008) as well as Jan Pieterse (2009)—have disagreed, arguing that globalization is actually experienced unevenly, with some regions being more intensively linked while others are omitted or excluded. Nevertheless, they too have acknowledged the significance of such interactions between global processes and local socio-historical or cultural contexts.

This emphasis on a 'global-local' connection has gradually begun to incorporate the idea that global flows of products, people, practices, and the like constantly interact with processes of appropriation, adaptation, and opposition at multiple levels, such as the local, (sub)regional, or national. For this reason, most theorists now recognize that the effects of globalization are more complex than simply homogenization, since the existence and potential influence of homogenizing forces is contingent on their widespread dissemination, and such diffusion entails interactions with dynamic local, (sub)regional, and national contexts or processes, increasing the likelihood that the homogenizing forces will be altered as a result (Hopper 2007, Lewellen

2002). Globalization can thus be understood as a ‘global assemblage’ that is mobile yet situated, absorbing elements from different local, national, and regional levels yet remaining relatively heterogeneous, thereby expressing homogeneity and diversity simultaneously (Heyman & Campbell 2009, Tsing 2008, Ong & Collier 2005).

This is exemplified in studies of cultural globalizations, or the multiple ways in which cultures worldwide are affected by and respond to the increase in global flows and interconnections. Research by Jeanette Steemers (2011) and Ien Ang (1996), for instance, has shown that commodities produced for international consumption (e.g. media, clothes) often draw on themes or issues relevant to particular national, (sub)regional, or local contexts, catering to the specific interests and tastes of different cultural markets. Moreover, engagement with these products by recipients is often conscious and deliberate, including active adoption or reproduction, as illustrated in Yunxiang Yan’s (2002) work on how foreign cultural imports like Hollywood films or Japanese cartoons are localized and appropriated in China. Consequently, cultural globalizations represent forms of ongoing ‘cultural intermixing’, where new distinctions and commonalities are constantly being created and the outcome is not a simple dichotomy between homogenization and heterogenization (Pieterse 2009, Iwabuchi 2007).

Although the concept of transnationalism is often included within these understandings of globalization and cultural globalizations, as outlined by theorists like Paul Hopper (2007) and Michael Kearney (1995) transnationalism is a phenomenon which demonstrates that many of what are considered to be ‘global’ flows are really positioned in several nation-states at once. Thus unlike globalization, which is generally perceived as decentered, transnationalism can be seen as having a national ‘anchor’, albeit in multiple nation-states. Transnational practices, people, and products, like *The Office*, must therefore be socio-historically contextualized, for as

Michael Smith and Luis Guarnizo (1998) note, their existence within particular localities and time periods influences them in specific ways.

This concept of transnationalism and the idea that globalization encompasses a variety of interactions between local, (sub)regional, national, and global levels are of particular importance in the field of global media, where the model of Western cultural imperialism and the view of mass media as homogenizing have often predominated¹. Such perspectives tend to ignore how media texts are interpreted, appropriated, and resisted in accordance with local, (sub)regional, or national modes of reception (Inda & Rosaldo 2008, Lash & Lury 2007, Thussu 2007).

However, the growing body of research on transnational media, including the work of Scott Lash and Celia Lury (2007), Mark Peterson (2003), and Scott Olson (1999), is increasingly demonstrating that local interpretations change transplanted films, television, music, and other forms of popular culture into creations that are new and unique within their particular contexts, yet which contain shared aspects that transcend geographical borders and specific identities. Such adaptations thus constitute sites of ‘interpretive struggle’ between the original meanings of these global commodities, the national or (sub)regional ideologies that influence their exchange and/or subsequent modification, and local understandings of them (Peterson 2003, Parks & Kumar 2003). Transnational forms of media are therefore constantly recontextualized as their messages, images, or sounds spread to new geographical and sociocultural settings where their content and overall meaning are transformed.

Such processes are particularly apparent with transnational televisual adaptations, which, as described by Silvio Waisbord and Sonia Jalfin (2009), involve boiling programs “down to minimal contents not specific to any locality, yet easily ‘localizable’” (Waisbord & Jalfin

¹Adorno & Horkheimer’s (1944) view of the culture industry (e.g. film, radio) as standardizing the ‘microcosm’ and the ‘macrocosm’ is an early example.

2009:71). What remains following this process is a program's format—its set designs, screenplays, and style of filming—which is then sold to be reassembled and reformulated elsewhere. As Albert Moran's work has shown, these format elements generally remain the same wherever a program is remade, while the characters, behaviors, language, and sometimes plotlines are translated or revised according to its new local, (sub)regional, or national environment (Moran 2011, Moran 2009a). This allows shows like *The Office* to be modified in such a way that they become recognizable and acceptable in other cultural settings. To quote Moran, such transnational formats act as “flexible templates...awaiting particular social inflexion and accent in other television territories” (Moran 2009b:151), such as the incorporation of locally-, regionally-, or nationally-relevant concerns and events, as well as historical narratives, symbols, or experiences (Waisbord & Jalfin 2009).

Consequently, the themes, topics, and perspectives of transnational television programs draw on real sociocultural, political, and economic events, discourses, and attitudes that exist within the broader public sphere, and their depictions of society thus reflect phenomena occurring worldwide, as well as in the specific contexts where they are adapted. For instance, as is later demonstrated in this paper, the localized workplace power struggles and conflicts over standing portrayed in *The Office* are related to current international employment anxieties resulting from organizational changes which began in the latter half of the twentieth century, such as restructuring and downsizing. For *The Office* in particular, such simultaneously local and global relevance is also partly due to the fact that the show belongs to the semi-genre known as ‘mockumentary’, a hybrid of the sitcom and documentary genres that addresses contemporary social issues and tensions through satirical or parodic representations (Hight 2010).

With regard to the concepts of power and standing in the organizational workplace, this study follows Peter Andersen's (2008) terminological framework, where the former is the ability to influence other employees—superiors, subordinates, or peers—to do as one says, and the latter refers to one's social position (formal rank and informal status) within the hierarchical structure which contributes to one's overall power. Moreover, as defined by Max Weber (1947), power is an individual or group's ability to achieve their will, even in the face of resistance. This conception distinguishes between authority, which Weber describes as legitimate control, and imperative or coercive control (Weber 1947). It is organizational *authority*—in other words, the socially-accepted (i.e. legitimate) use of power in the office environment—which concerns this study, specifically that which derives from a company's formal rules or procedures (similar to Weber's 'rational-legal' authority) and that which derives from its corporate culture (i.e. its longstanding social structures and customs; akin to Weber's 'traditional' authority). In order to facilitate this study's examination of workplace power struggles and avoid terminological confusion, the concepts of power and authority are *both* employed in the sense of legitimate control throughout this paper.

In the contemporary office workspace, power is understood as a socially-constructed system that endows certain individuals with the ability to dominate or control while denying this to the rest of the workforce (Sias 2009, Deetz 2000). This is the structural aspect of power which exists at the 'macro' level of the corporation as a whole: people acquire authority based on their position within the organization which can then be exercised through behaviors, interactions, and communications at the 'micro' level of the office (Deetz 2000, Brass & Burkhardt 1993). In the superior-subordinate relationship, for instance, the former holds official authority over the latter based on their occupational role within the corporate hierarchy: they are formally sanctioned to

assert control over employees by issuing directives; conducting evaluations and surveillance (e.g. computer monitoring); and engaging in intimidation, punishment, or terminations (Deetz 2000, Deetz 1998, Jackson & Carter 1998, Thompson & Ackroyd 1995, Rothschild & Miethe 1994).

Yet subordinate-superior relationships can also be ones of negotiation, rather than simply the top-down or unidirectional implementation of power by those officially in control. Superiors may employ polite requests, friendliness, and rewards in order to obtain employee obedience and increase productivity, while subordinates can influence their bosses through flattery, assertiveness, and the judicious manipulation, withholding, or disclosure of information (Sias 2009, Rothschild & Miethe 1994, Brass & Burkhardt 1993). These practices—even when enacted by superiors—constitute ‘informal’ power, as opposed to the official or formal authority which is bestowed by companies based on hierarchical position. Attempts to assert informal dominance also occur between peers or co-workers (i.e. exchanging favors, teasing/bullying) despite the fact that these employees have comparable ‘formal’ authority (Sias 2009, Brass & Burkhardt 1993). These varying relations of power between superiors, subordinates, and peers, as well as their competing techniques for ‘doing power’ (i.e. ‘tactics’ vs. ‘strategies’), simultaneously function as struggles for control, either to *maintain* one’s existing authority (as conferred by occupational position) or to *gain* control over others and thus *be perceived* as authoritative, thereby acquiring some measure of power (Knights & Vurdubakis 1994, Brass & Burkhardt 1993, Clegg & Dunkerley 1980)².

²Strategies entail the prior existence of authority conferred by a company and can be employed by higher-ranking personnel; tactics may be implemented in the absence of such formal control and can be used by lower-level personnel (de Certeau 1984). Types of power include: coercive (discipline/punishment), expert (greater knowledge), referent (confidence lends one authority), remunerative (control over wages/benefits), collegial (friendly/consensual exertion of authority), and concertive (team members are expected to conform to the group) (Sias 2009; Fox & Fox 2004; Holmes & Stubbe 2003; Holmes, Stubbe, & Vine 1999; Clegg & Dunkerley 1980).

Despite the fact that power can therefore be deployed from above *and* below, making control within the office workplace diffuse and interactive rather than fixed and unchanging (Knights & Vurdubakis 1994), in corporate environments it is treated as something that can be owned, acquired, and lost. As a result, opposition to and conflicts over the distribution, acquisition, implementation, and preservation of authority routinely take place (Deetz 2000). Consequently, the varying relations of authority and competing techniques for ‘doing power’, whether between superiors and subordinates or among peers, are simultaneously struggles for control and forms of resistance, that is to say, processes of social interaction marked by incompatibility, dissension, or hostility (Rahim 2001). Examples of this might include how subordinates who do not benefit from the established organizational hierarchy often challenge it by not fulfilling a superior’s request immediately, by reinterpreting directives in unexpected ways, or by ‘forgetting’ to convey important information.

Such workplace power relations and conflicts are closely entwined with those concerning rank and status, features that can indicate broader class tensions. Teasing or noncompliance by subordinates, for example, can threaten managers’ positions within the hierarchical corporate structure, potentially leading to demotion or reduced rank (Sias 2009). In addition, occupational roles—and hence organizational authority—tend to relate to educational background, often a strong indicator of class-based standing (Atkinson 2009, Walker 1979). This is illustrated in both the U.K. and U.S. *Offices* where characters’ work-related roles and concomitant authority are associated with their educational backgrounds: senior personnel in the two programs—like the corporate executives—tend to hold university degrees and/or MBAs, as these endow them with expert power over those lacking similarly recognized credentials and entitle them to the elevated status, extensive control, and substantial income of their high-ranking positions. Authority and

position in the corporate workplace thus derive from how one's economic, symbolic, social, and cultural forms of capital compare to those of others (Atkinson 2009)³.

Methods

Having laid out the theoretical background influencing the work presented in this paper, I will now describe the research process itself. To begin with, this study was originally conceived as the foundation for future comparative analyses of other versions of *The Office*, as well as for a multi-sited ethnography on the production and reception of these various adaptations. For this initial study I therefore followed a narrower methodological approach: focusing on the original British *Office* and its American remake, I conducted qualitative textual analyses of all fourteen episodes of the former (the first two seasons and the two Christmas specials) and the first seven seasons of the latter, comparing and contrasting the portrayals of power struggles and conflicts over status or rank that arise among the five social categories depicted in both series⁴. These categories are: (1) company owners, Corporate Executive Officers (CEOs), Corporate Financial Officers (CFOs), and Vice Presidents (VPs); (2) supervisors and senior administrators; (3) mid- and lower-level managers; (4) office workers, such as the sales staff, accountants, and receptionists; and (5) warehouse employees, such as truck drivers or those who handle inventory.

³Economic capital refers to control over economic resources such as money or financial assets like property (Bourdieu 1986); social capital consists of social connections/relationships or networks of obligation which can be mobilized as resources by those belonging to the collective (Bourdieu 1986); symbolic capital involves access to resources based on one's legitimate/societally-recognized prestige, honor, or status (Bourdieu 1985). The final type, cultural capital, can be 'institutionalized', 'objectified', or 'embodied': the first denotes formal recognition, such as through academic or professional qualifications and credentials; the second refers to physical possessions; and the third involves the dispositions, ways of thinking, and communicative abilities that one acquires consciously or passively from one's particular environment (Bourdieu 1986).

⁴Though using five for the number of social categories is sometimes contested in the literature on class, this study adheres to five as it is the number most frequently used. The eighth season and (final) ninth season of the American *Office* are not included as they were unavailable during the stages of researching and writing this paper.

The three primary questions posed in this study were: (1) How does the American version of *The Office* depict contestations over power and tensions regarding hierarchical standing among the five represented social categories as compared to the original series? (2) What underlying anxieties about workplace relations, control, and status or rank are revealed through such conflicts, and are these anxieties the same or different in both programs and sociocultural contexts? (3) If some concerns are shared and others are not, what does this indicate about global processes like transnational televisual adaptations, and thus about the nature of globalization itself?

To answer these queries, I examined the characters' workplace interactions, their interviews with the 'documentary' film crews, and the networks of social relationships based on occupational role, level of authority, and hierarchical position. I analyzed these elements through verbal communications, non-verbal behaviors, and the overall plotlines of the episodes, since it was through the characters' speech, conduct, and storylines that struggles over power and position were made manifest and that underlying anxieties could be assessed (Mittell 2010; Guerrero, Hecht, & DeVito 2008; Goodwin & Duranti 1992; Goffman 1967).

Some of the literature on globalization and on television and film analysis asserts that 'global' commodities such as transnational media texts (e.g. the content of movies or television episodes) should not be considered independently from their socio-historical conditions of production and reception (Kackman et al. 2011, Tsing 2008, Dornfeld 1998, Morley 1992, Deming 1986). While acknowledging the importance of conducting such comprehensive investigations, scholars like John Fiske and John Hartley (2003), Jason Mittell (2010), and Michele Hilmes (2009) nevertheless contend that textual analyses of televisual and cinematic content can still be beneficial for understanding the sociocultural processes, experiences, beliefs,

and references that are depicted therein, such as those relating to organizational power and standing in the British and American versions of *The Office*.

This study adhered to the latter position, examining episodes from both the American and British versions of *The Office* as sites where ‘global’ realities take on ‘local’ or ‘national’ appearances (Appadurai 1996), and as transnational televisual texts which can be read through an analysis of the various storylines, uses of language, and behaviors⁵. Doing so facilitated my determination of whether these programs illustrate cross-culturally shared and/or locally-specific anxieties concerning authority and standing in the corporate workplace. Moreover, before beginning my textual analyses I first took into account the socio-historical and cultural settings in which the programs originated and where they were, or continue to be, viewed, in order to better contextualize my analyses and generate more thorough results, incorporating these considerations into my subsequent examinations of the two shows.

Of specific relevance to this study was how these settings influenced the shows’ individual representations of confrontations over power and position, as well as the shared or dissimilar anxieties regarding American and British corporate workplaces that underlie these conflicts. While labor markets and conceptions of work differ between cultural contexts, certain trends—often facilitated by or resulting from globalization—are being faced internationally, particularly in Western Europe and the U.S. (Holmes & Ryan 2009, Munck 2002). These are further analyzed in the following sections regarding the British and American contexts, however this paragraph and the next briefly outline a few of the more salient points. First of all, the continuing (and ever more rapid) adoption of technological advancements has brought about severe declines in employment security, destabilizing the notion of ‘a job for life’ as such

⁵Prior examples of similar textual analyses (specifically of *The Office*) include Beeden & de Bruin 2010, Hernandez 2010, Savorelli 2010, Vlaminck 2010, Bray 2008, Craft 2008, and Griffin 2008.

innovations frequently lead to obsolescence, downsizing, and labor outsourcing (Holmes & Ryan 2009, Standing 2009, Powell 2001, Beck 2000)⁶. For example, routine office work is increasingly precarious as corporate work becomes automated and fewer personnel are needed, allowing corporations to “[shed] themselves of thousands of formerly ‘safe’ white-collar employees” (Powell 2001:40), a process which now occurs irrespective of the health of the national—or international—economy⁷.

Shifts towards organizational ‘flexibility’ and the casualization of labor also mean that white-collar employment tends to be short-term or temporary (e.g. contract labor), rendering workers easily terminated and enhancing employers’ ability to reduce their workforces (Standing 2009, Powell 2001). This has induced greater stress, ambivalence, and distrust among employees who are expected to remain dedicated workers in return for job insecurity and few rewards, and whose labor is becoming more ‘individualized’ as they focus increasingly on self-preservation through personal performance and individual adaptability (Holmes & Ryan 2009, Beck 2000)⁸. In response to such fears of obsolescence, termination, and unemployment, many acquiesce to the demand for flexibility, resigning themselves to reduced pay, benefits, and security (Standing 2009). In addition, knowledge is now a significant form of corporate power for both lower- and higher-ranking personnel (though it is generally controlled by the upper echelons), whether this entails withholding information, distorting it, or offering it at a price (Casey 1996). Accordingly, in the organizational workplace the “distribution of and access to knowledge [has] become a key

⁶Outsourcing: contracting out labor to domestic and/or foreign workers who are often temporary employees.

⁷From the time of C. Wright Mills (1956) to the present, white-collar fears concerning unemployment have been widespread as salaried employees rely on their jobs at a company for economic security. However, the substantial increase in such anxieties and in the number of threats to people’s jobs distinguishes contemporary employment insecurities from those of the past.

⁸Fewer rewards might include reduced pay and pension cutbacks, for example.

element of new social inequalities and conflicts” (Beck 2000:41), leading to greater competition between superiors and subordinates as well as among peers/co-workers (Standing 2009).

As regards office work and the corporate environment in contemporary British society, studies indicate that in the last twenty years there has been (1) a significant increase in contingent employment, such as part-time and temporary work; (2) a growing emphasis on employees’ commitment to their companies through such practices as teamwork and ‘problem-solving groups’; and (3) greater pressure on workers to be ‘functionally flexible’, or to develop their skills and knowledge so that they can undertake multiple tasks or jobs in accordance with the needs of the company (Kersley et al. 2005). Outsourcing and downsizing have also risen in the U.K., which, in conjunction with rapid technological advances, have led to considerable decreases in employment (Standing 2009, White et al. 2004).

New forms of information and communications technology have become prevalent methods for monitoring employees as well: they are commonly used to surveil internet activity or assess productivity (White et al. 2004, Cully et al. 1999). What is more, power and position within the corporate hierarchy are now increasingly dependent on the possession of certain types of information or knowledge that can be disclosed, withheld, and otherwise manipulated in order to assert one’s authority and status or rank (Kersley et al. 2005, White et al. 2004). For instance, data collected about employees is frequently withheld from the workers themselves, or is not revealed in full: supervisors maintain control by providing employees with minimal or no information, since anxieties about retaining their jobs and being promoted will cause the latter to work harder and be more obedient.

Overall, studies show that British corporate personnel are experiencing a variety of employment insecurities (Standing 2009, White et al. 2004, Cully et al. 1999). Many workers

feel powerless as a result of being constantly monitored and having information withheld, while being flexible and working part-time also makes employees feel more vulnerable, since they can be used as needed and then downsized at the company's convenience. Moreover, the possibility of losing one's job is high in the current economic climate, especially as redundancies, outsourcing, and the automation of routine tasks intensify, and it is increasingly difficult to acquire a new one (Standing 2009, White et al. 2004). Such insecurities have led to greater work-related anxieties and higher stress, borne by both temporary and permanent staff, the latter of whom often feel less secure about their own positions due to working alongside short-term or part-time employees (Cully et al. 1999).

With regard to office work in contemporary American society, since the 1970s such labor has undergone radical structural and organizational changes: for instance, the pace and amount of work has drastically increased, and the development of technologies such as activity-monitoring software now allows information about projects, transactions, and personnel performance to be instantly relayed to the highest levels of a company. As scholars like Richard Sennett (2006) and Catherine Casey (1995) contend, such analytical tools and immediate transfers of data enable a 'panoptic' form of surveillance within corporate institutions, permitting superiors to constantly observe and regulate their employees.

These technological advances have also led to the growing automation of white-collar work, resulting in obsolescence, increasingly sub-contracted or temporary employment, and chronic layoffs. Furthermore, akin to the idea of flexibility promoted in the U.K., American office personnel are expected to continually adapt their work-related skills and knowledge as companies restructure or they will be made redundant (Ehrenreich 2005). As a result, contemporary office workers often view themselves as expendable and endure feelings of

confusion, uneasiness, and vexation concerning their labor in the organizational workplace. Overall, such changes have led to the decentralization and internalization of discipline as well as greater disparities among corporate personnel in terms of income, benefits, and hierarchical standing; the latter has in turn produced interpersonal competition and distrust, feelings of stress and insecurity, and anxieties about termination, lack of job mobility, and constant evaluation (Zweig 2012, Sennett 2006, Perrucci & Wysong 2003, Deetz 1998, Victor & Stephens 1994).

Results & Analysis

Turning to my textual analyses of the British and American versions of *The Office*, I must concede that I will not be able to give a complete account of every struggle over power and hierarchical standing that appeared in the two shows, in view of the nearly 200 episodes that were analyzed in this study. Nevertheless, in the following discussion of my results, analyses, and conclusions I will describe some of the more significant character interactions pertaining to my investigation. To begin with, I found that in both series there were three specific types of conflict regarding authority and position in the office workplace: those between superiors and subordinates in which the former was the instigator, those between superiors and subordinates in which the latter was the initiator (which could also be described as resistance), and those between co-workers or peers in which one person tried to exert themselves over someone of equivalent authority or standing. Using these three categories, I examined the types of conflict that arose in the two programs and how their depictions of these were similar or different, finding that the diverse struggles expressed many shared anxieties relating to modern organizational workspaces.

These anxieties included: (1) fears of displacement, replacement, or obsolescence due to the presence of more educated rivals, the rise in temporary or contingent labor, and the increase in automation or technological advancement; (2) insecurities regarding precarious employment in an era of continuous restructuring, downsizing, and cutbacks; and (3) concerns about growing disparities between upper- and lower-level personnel, particularly with regard to job mobility (e.g. static rankings), income, and benefits. For instance, in season four episodes three and four of the American *Office*, Ryan, one of the upper-level executives, begins digitizing the company's paper sales; this threatens the salespeople's job security, and some of them challenge the new computer system in an effort to avoid becoming redundant and being dismissed⁹. Another example of such job insecurity can be seen in season one episode three of the British *Office*, when David (the office manager) feels threatened by one of his subordinates, Ricky, who has a college degree while David does not, and therefore tries to defend his position and assert his authority by competing intellectually with Ricky¹⁰.

Further illustrating these shared anxieties are the respective interactions between David and Gareth (one of the British salespeople), and between Michael, the American office manager, and his employee Dwight (who is also a salesperson like Gareth). In both sets of relationships the two managers express their fears of being replaced or downsized by continuously correcting their subordinates with regard to the latter's job title: Gareth and Dwight are repeatedly told that they are the Assistants *to* the Regional Manager and not the Assistant Regional Managers, despite how the two men tend to act towards others as they try to exert their imagined power and rank with co-workers and superiors alike¹¹. Doing so is an attempt to remind Gareth and Dwight

⁹Season four episodes three and four "Dunder Mifflin Infinity".

¹⁰Season one episode three "The Quiz".

that they have lower standing and less authority within the office, and to ensure that they will not usurp their boss' managerial status and control.

Likewise, David and Michael are sometimes seen as threats by their own superiors, particularly when they act in ways that are noncompliant or above their station, and they are similarly put in their place. This can be seen when their supervisors belittle them, scornfully telling David and Michael that they require babysitters in seasons two and three, respectively¹². Struggles over power and standing thus emerge when a character, fearing that their authority and status have been or may potentially be undermined, becomes concerned about the instability of their position within the corporate hierarchy and the possibility of demotion or termination.

Moreover, as depicted in both the British and American versions of *The Office*, these conflicts and anxieties arise not only between superiors and subordinates, but also between peers or co-workers at both lower- and upper-levels of the corporate hierarchy: they must compete with one another in order to try and secure their positions, given the fact that they are part of a shrinking workforce struggling within an increasingly casualized or flexible labor market. They do so through the exertion of informal power, such as how Tim and Jim manipulate knowledge or data as a way of deceiving their co-workers, often supplying Gareth and Dwight (respectively) with misleading information¹³. A similar example of how such informal power may be executed is when Gareth and Dwight try to deploy social capital at various points throughout the two series, appealing to their 'allies' David and Michael in an effort to punish, fire, or otherwise gain control and standing over Tim and Jim.

¹¹For examples of this, see season one episode one "Downsize" of the U.K. *Office*, and season three episode eight "The Merger" of the U.S. version.

¹²Episode four "Motivation" and episode three "The Coup", respectively.

¹³Tim (a character in the U.K. *Office*) and Jim (a character in the U.S. *Office*) work alongside Gareth and Dwight, respectively, as salespeople.

However, the two shows do exhibit certain dissimilarities with regard to how these workplace contestations, as well as their underlying tensions and fears, are expressed. Such differences are the result of the programs' specific sociocultural contexts, particularly the two nations' divergent perceptions of *class-related* status and rank. For instance, although education functions as an indicator of societal divisions and a source of conflict in both the U.S. and U.K. versions of *The Office*, the American adaptation emphasizes differences between individuals based on the *type* of degree they possess, such as a master's degree as opposed to a bachelor's degree, and on the *specific* college they attended, such as an Ivy-league school as compared to one that is public or state-run. In contrast, the original British series portrays university attendance in general and the possession of a university degree in particular (irrespective of the type) as indicating that one has a more elevated social standing.

In the U.S. version, for example, high-level executives like the aforesaid Ryan possess MBAs, a form of institutionalized (often class-based) cultural capital that simultaneously establishes and justifies their superior rank and income. As Ryan's boss, David Wallace, tells him when he is promoted to Vice President of Regional Sales: "It'll be nice to have another MBA around here" (David in "The Job")¹⁴. In a similar vein, despite having equivalent levels of authority in the workplace, some of the lower-level office workers try to distinguish themselves from their peers and convey greater status by referencing their prestigious former colleges in everyday conversations, such as how Andy, one of the salespeople in the U.S. show, frequently mentions his alma mater, Cornell whether or not it is relevant to the matter at hand¹⁵.

¹⁴Season three episodes 24 and 25.

¹⁵See season three episode one "Gay Witch Hunt" or season seven episode six "Costume Contest", for instance.

Conversely, in the U.K. program the simple fact that the aforementioned Ricky has a university degree leads other characters to presume that he is of higher standing¹⁶. This is because they think that Ricky must have had the financial resources or social connections to obtain such an education, and because they believe that this academic experience endowed him with greater knowledge as compared to those who did not attend university, translating into more power and status in the information-driven workplace. Whether or not Ricky is actually of higher standing, this example demonstrates how social status is correlated to a great extent with overall university attendance, rather than a specific degree or educational institution.

Furthermore, although struggles concerning hierarchical position that draw on larger class tensions are significant in both programs, they are far more visible in the U.K. version where elements like stereotypical representations, language use, and accent explicitly highlight class disparities. The British warehouse workers, for example, are portrayed throughout the series as much cruder than their white-collar counterparts, using coarse or vulgar language and engaging in more sexist discourse. They are also distinguished by their specific linguistic inflections and terminological choices, which are associated with a lack of education and a less privileged upbringing as compared to the accents and lexicons of the show's higher-ranking executives. In addition, both the warehouse employees and the lower-level office staff are less meticulous in their pronunciation and use of grammar, in contrast to their upper-level superiors. These linguistic distinctions are not present in the American version of *The Office*, and the concept of class divisions is less overt as well. Such differences are likely due to the dominant ideology of a 'universal middle class' in the U.S. as opposed to the long, acknowledged history of the class system in Britain.

¹⁶See season one episode three "The Quiz".

Nevertheless, the two series are strikingly similar with regard to the types of organizational struggles over position and authority that they present (e.g. superior-subordinate, between peers), as well as the anxieties regarding employment that underlie them, particularly insecurities about being replaced or downsized. This suggests that in the case of these two versions of *The Office*, the homogenizing aspect of globalization is acting more strongly than its differentiating influence, since variations in the portrayals of workplace contentions result from only slight differences in the programs' specific contexts. The shows' conflicts over power, status, and rank are thus very much alike, reflecting transnationally-shared concerns in the U.S. and the U.K. regarding the ability to attain, preserve, and protect one's place in the corporate hierarchy. There are two quotes which are especially representative of these mutual anxieties. The first occurs in the U.K. *Office* when David declares that "there's always someone ready to step in to your shoes and do your job better than you do it" (David in "Party"); the second arises in the U.S. *Office* when Dwight is forced to leave his job, saying "remember, while today it is me, we all shall fall" (Dwight in "Traveling Salesman")¹⁷.

Conclusion

That the homogenizing factor is so strong in this study is likely due to the cultural and historical proximity of the two shows' sociocultural contexts, where the former denotes cultural and linguistic similarities—including shared values, ideologies, and behavioral norms, as well as a common language—and the latter refers to a sense of mutual historical experience (Straubhaar 2007)¹⁸. As illustrated by this paper's socio-historical analysis of office work in the U.K. and in

¹⁷First quote: season two episode three. Second quote: season three episode 13.

the U.S., the two nations' not only share the English language, similar cultural milieus, and a history of entanglements with one another, their organizational environments and work-related conflicts have also developed in comparable ways. This is particularly apparent with regard to their shared experiences of corporate restructuring and downsizing, increased technological surveillance, the obsolescence of white-collar work, and rising disparities in authority and standing within the corporate workplace.

As Joseph Straubhaar (2007) has asserted, there are other conditions under which the homogenizing tendency of global media (and hence globalization) is stronger, such as when there exists generic or thematic proximity: the first implies that a genre is easily translatable across cultural divides and can therefore be shared without undergoing considerable revisions to make it culturally-acceptable and pleasing; the second indicates that certain issues and themes (e.g. hard work, love, family) are relevant and appealing among diverse cultures. While the mockumentary semi-genre into which *The Office* is classified may not be as recognizable as other genres (such as melodrama), thematically the show is cross-culturally relatable because it addresses many international concerns—such as job insecurity and wealth inequalities—that have only intensified following the recent global financial crisis.

Accordingly, one would expect heterogenization, or the differentiating tendency of globalization, to be the stronger force for *Office* adaptations in contexts where there are greater cultural dissimilarities—such as ones related to organizational ranking, workplace behavior, and a society's particular class structure—and fewer shared historical experiences, including economic developments, technological advancements, corporate practices, and unstable office employment (Straubhaar 2007). Moreover, despite growing interconnections between nations

¹⁸'Cultural shareability' (Singhal & Udornpim 1997) is a concept related to cultural proximity. It refers to values, themes, archetypes, and/or images that are common across different cultures and which allow transnational television programs, like *The Office*, to traverse cultural boundaries more easily.

resulting from the various processes of globalization (especially global media flows), many societies “increasingly put some influence back out to those that have penetrated them, in a form of asymmetric cultural interpenetration” (Straubhaar 2007:16). Consequently, where such interactions occur heterogenization will likely prevail to a greater extent than homogenization.

Globalization is thus neither exclusively homogenizing nor completely differentiating: to be more precise, it is a form of hybridization or ‘global-local’ mixing wherein both processes occur simultaneously, and depending on the varying conditions and contexts, one of these two tendencies may be more influential than the other. It is for this reason that although the workplace struggles for power and position in the U.S. and U.K. versions of *The Office* were remarkably alike, the programs’ specific local or national depictions of these conflicts remained distinct: in other sociocultural contexts heterogenization might be the stronger process or homogenization could be more extensive, leading to increasingly divergent or almost identical adaptations of *The Office*. This is because transnational media’s “integrative effects do not simply eliminate cultural difference and diversity but rather provide the context for the production of new cultural forms marked by local specificity” (Straubhaar 2007:139).

As a whole, this study therefore supplements and extends current research supporting the idea that globalization, such as in the form of global media flows, is both a homogenizing and differentiating process. It does so in two primary ways: first, by identifying and analyzing features related to power disputes and tensions over hierarchical standing that are shared by the British and American versions of *The Office*, its findings illustrate how the programs reflect mutual anxieties regarding corporate restructuring, income and knowledge disparities, interpersonal competition, and the tenuous nature of employment in contemporary offices. Second, by revealing that such concerns may be expressed in locally- or nationally-distinct ways,

it demonstrates how transnational televisual texts function as sites of interaction between local, national, (sub)regional, and global forces (Waisbord & Jalfin 2009). As Terhi Rantanen (2005) contends, “the consequence of globalization is neither homogenization nor heterogenization, but both of these, either simultaneously or sequentially” (Rantanen 2005:116). This study complements Rantanen’s assertion by demonstrating that while both tendencies occur, one will generally prevail over the other in accordance with the individual situation.

Furthermore, this study shows that by depicting the everyday conduct, language use, and relationships of upper- and lower-level personnel in the corporate workspace, the two *Offices* draw attention to current beliefs (both in the U.S. and in the U.K.) about authority, status, and rank in the office. In particular, these series emphasize superiors’ and subordinates’ anxieties regarding their positions within the organizational structure, as well as their reinforcement or contestation of existing disparities in power and standing. Such concerns and behaviors are influenced by contemporary phenomena like downsizing, outsourcing, and the casualization of labor, illustrating how transnational television programs reflect ongoing societal conditions worldwide. Consequently, the different versions of *The Office* examined in this study express local (i.e. national or regional) reactions to global changes, and these adaptations can thus be seen as international “[responses] to the genuine frustrations and anxieties of the workplace at the turn of the century” (Walters 2005:132), particularly those concerning organizational hierarchies in the office environment.

While the results of this study suggest that current issues like corporate downsizing, the obsolescence of white-collar workers, and a general lack of job security in the organizational workplace are internationally-relatable topics, fueling transnational concerns about employment, additional comparative analyses of the texts of other *Office* adaptations need to be conducted in

order to confirm that these anxieties consistently re-emerge in transnational remakes of the series. Such research has potential implications not only for media anthropology, transnational television studies, and ongoing work on globalization, but also for international relations, as the findings could enhance understandings of locally-specific and cross-culturally or transnationally-shared elements (in addition to anxieties about the corporate workspace) that the diverse iterations of this series reveal. Future studies on such media adaptations which expose mutually recognizable and relatable elements (as well as those that are not) may provide greater insight with regard to intercultural commonalities and differences, helping to improve cross-cultural communication and tolerance at local, national, regional, and global levels.

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