

**Power dynamics and sexism: A critical discourse analysis of the 90s sitcom *Seinfeld***

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**Abstract**

This study explores power dynamics and sexism in the 1990s American sitcom *Seinfeld*, focusing on episode 9 of season 6, "The Secretary." Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Glick and Fiske's theory of hostile and benevolent sexism, we evaluate how sexism manifests through dialogue and power dynamics. We utilize static analysis, the Bechdel-Wallace test, and the Mako Mori test to investigate representation and gender-specific interactions. We found prominent examples of gender biases, the male gaze, and male-female power dynamics that call attention to the normalization of sexist power structures in media.

*Keywords:* Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), power dynamics, sexism in media

### **Power Dynamics and Sexism in the 90s TV Sitcom *Seinfeld***

To better understand power dynamics and sexism, three research students utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the American sitcom *Seinfeld*. In the 1990s, *Seinfeld* was a top-rated show and is described as a true-to-life comedy series that follows the events of a group of friends. The research team selected episode 9 of season 6, “The Secretary,” which aired on December 8, 1994, on National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The episode discussed in this discourse follows four characters: Jerry Seinfeld, George Costanza, Elaine Benes, and Ade. The discourse will follow three main storylines: Elaine’s dress shopping and self-image, George’s changing relationship with his secretary and the impact on his employment, and Jerry’s qualms with his dry cleaner.

In a list of ten of the most popular sitcoms that aired in the US between 1985 and 1999, Singh and her peers (2021) found *Seinfeld* to contain the second most sexist content, especially in the form of dialogue. Their definition of sexism is rooted in Glick and Fiske’s (2018) three components of hostile and benevolent sexism: paternalism, gender differentiation, and heterosexuality. Glick and Fiske categorize heterosexuality as either intimacy or hostility, and both are where a male views a female as an object for his desire for closeness or dominance.

To analyze the gender-specific power dynamics and sexism in this episode, the research team utilized feminist CDA. The explicit aim of CDA is “to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality” (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). Feminist CDA expands upon the traditional approach of CDA to question the “relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). Previous literature also highlights the importance of analyzing textual and

contextual analyses, in other words, not just what is said but how and how often it is said (Carvalho, 2008). In this study, we consider what is said, how it is said, and how often it is said to analyze inequalities and sexism within “The Secretary.”

## **Procedure**

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was conducted to gather insights into the discursive patterns within “The Secretary” (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Two male (Jerry and George) and two female (Elaine and Ade) characters were selected for primary analysis due to their discursive prevalence and importance within the episode. Each character is white, lives and works in New York, and is presumably in their 30s. The context of conversations with other characters were not considered conceptually but were considered for static analysis.

### **Methodology**

Previous research has shown that case studies enable researchers to establish an empirical grounding where they analyze the (inter)actions of people and their consequences (Feagin et. al, 2016). The research team thus conducted a qualitative case study on the episode “The Secretary ” to study the episode's discourse (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

### **Data Collection**

A transcript from Seinfeldscripts.com was sourced from the web and imported into a shared document. To verify the accuracy of the transcript and establish investigator triangulation, the three researchers independently read through the transcript as they listened to the dialogue in the episode to collect and analyze data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The researchers then coded

and analyzed the transcript with three aims: 1) statistically quantify interaction and context codes, 2) measure female interaction and representation, and 3) identify themes for CDA.

To build credibility in our findings and remain in alignment with previous qualitative methods, our research team collected and analyzed data collaboratively (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Each researcher watched the episode and read the transcript multiple times to familiarize themselves with the data (Ruona, 2005). The researchers then coded the data to strengthen rigor and trustworthiness (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Aim 1: Static Analysis***

The codes to address Aim 1 were sourced from a previous discourse analysis also aimed at analyzing power in gender in TV (Bardos et al., 2020). Two additional codes, ‘Demeaning of self’ and ‘Demeaning of others’ were added. Furthermore, the research team coded the number of female-male, male-female, male-male, female-female, and group interactions.

### **Questioning**

The text was coded as questioning whenever a character questioned another character’s directive, behavior, or intent.

### **Demanding**

The text was coded as demanding whenever a character demanded information or power. This included any time a character actively or discreetly sought information or wanted to obtain more influence over others.

### **Providing**

The text was coded as providing whenever a character provides information or power. This included any time a character offered new or already known information or demonstrated influence over others.

### **Agreeable**

The text was coded as agreeable whenever a character consented to or accepted an idea or action by another character. It was also used when a character overall cooperated with a request or demand, or generally went along with a specific situation in an agreeable manner.

### **Advocating**

The text was coded as advocating whenever a character appears to represent interest and be a voice for either themselves, another character, or a broader goal or idea. This code also included times that a character would outwardly support or speak in favor of another or defend themselves or others in the scene.

### **Demeaning of Self**

The text was coded as demeaning of self whenever a character belittled, undervalued, or criticized oneself.

### **Demeaning of Others**

The text was coded as demeaning of others whenever a character belittled, undervalued, or criticized another character.

## ***Aim 2: Bechdel-Wallace and Mako Mori tests to measure female interaction and representation***

To address Aim 2, a Bechdel-Wallace test was conducted. In 1985, lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel inked “The Rule” in the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, where one

character explains to another that a movie needs to meet three requirements before she can see it: 1) the movie must have at least two women in it, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something other than a man (Bechdel, 1985). Since then, fans around the world have used the test to measure interactions between female characters in film and other media (Bechdel Test Movie List).

Despite having a simple formula, the Bechdel-Wallace test remains useful for highlighting the number and depth of conversations of female characters within media (an Raalte, 2015). Whether a work of media passes or fails the test does not signify if the piece is rooted in or representative of sexism; however, it does bring the attention of the viewer/critic to the profundity of a female character's role. To understand if the "Secretary" passes the Bechdel-Wallace test, our team coded and analyzed all instances in the episode where there were at least two women who talked to each other about something other than a man.

To further investigate female interaction and representation in "The Secretary," the research team also conducted a Mako Mori test. The Mako Mori test was developed as a response to the Bechdel-Wallace test's simplistic formula which does not readily prohibit sexist media from passing. The Mako Mori test measures to see if a female character has her own story arc without supporting a male's (Romano, 2013). Researchers and critics have used this test alongside the Bechdel-Wallace test to measure female representation within media (Coker, 2017; Frankel, 2019; Gagiano, 2019; Hood, 2014). The researchers conducted CDA on the arcs of Elaine and Ade to see if they passed the Mako Mori test.

### ***Aim 3: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis Themes***

Upon viewing the episode, the research team developed initial codes to look for in the transcript: ‘how men talk about women as objects’ and ‘male-female power dynamic statements.’ The transcript was manually coded in vivo, coding entire phrases and statements (Manning, 2017). The following themes emerged: male gaze (men talking about women as objects- open sexism) and male-female power dynamics (statements made by men to women in a power dynamic, i.e., boss/subordinate or impact of self-view).

## **Findings**

### **Static Analysis**

To quantify the presence and context of each character in this episode, static analysis was conducted. The data show gender-specific power dynamics and instances of sexism. First, the character with the most codes was Jerry, indicating his dominance in conversation contribution. George was second, which indicated the presence of characters in this episode was predominantly male. Second, the context of each character was considered.

Jerry had 18 instances of ‘Questioning,’ whereas Elaine had six and George and Ade zero. The higher questioning instances by Jerry corresponds to his dominant character which may take away the confidence and the voice of others. Notably, Jerry questioned the intentions of others whereas Elaine questioned for clarification. For example, in order to have his dry cleaner admit that he stole his clothes, Jerry asked, “Yeah. Specifically 9:30 shows. Seen any good 9:30 shows at the Paragon, Willie?” (Leifer and Gross, 1994). In contrast, some of Elaine's questions consisted of “Kramer, what are you doing here?” “How'd you manage that?” and “Are you sure?” (Leifer and Gross, 1994). The difference in questioning between the male and female



characters gives the impression that the male is more direct and dominant, whereas the female is more curious and passive.

Furthermore, male characters had a total of 13 instances where they demeaned others and the female characters only one. Of the 13 ‘demeaning of others’ instances by males, only four were about females, further emphasizing the dominant-passive difference seen between genders in the episode.

To gain additional insight to the gender dynamics in the episode, interaction codes were analyzed (Figure 2). An interaction consists of the entire conversation.

Two interactions provided clear insight to our research aim. First, pair 1 (George and Ade) had three encounters - all of which highlighted a power dynamic of boss and subordinate. Second, pair 2 (Jerry and Elaine), had four interactions together in a group setting, all of which revolved around her dress shopping. Analyzing these interactions resulted in the theme findings discussed below.

### **Bechdel-Wallace test and Mako Mori tests**

“The Secretary” may meet the requirements for passing the Bechdel-Wallace test during a total of four brief verbal interactions between Elaine and other women. Three of the four are between Elaine and an unnamed saleswoman at a clothing store where Elaine criticizes the shop’s mirrors for distorting her image. The other conversation is between Elaine and Donna, a woman who works at a dry-cleaner, when Elaine asks if Donna can clean the stain. The discourse between Elaine and Donna does not reveal significant depth to any of the characters. There exists room for potential conversations on the struggles associated with body image, especially amongst women, but the writers did not include any.

Notably, Elaine's arc in "The Secretary" centers around her desire to be seen and validated through the male gaze as an object of beauty and pleasure for a male. Ade's arc is simply to support George and emphasize the irony he faces because of his actions. Therefore, since it is inconclusive if Elaine's and Ade's actions were for their own benefit or the benefit of their male counterparts, it is inconclusive if "The Secretary" passes both the Bechdel-Wallace and Mako Mori tests.

## Themes

### Male Gaze

In reflecting on Mulvey's canonical work in gender and film studies, Feminist philosopher Oliver (2017) claims that "the male gaze limits the possibilities for the female spectator imagining herself as a woman with agency" (p. 452). The male gaze encourages women to act on behalf of the desire to be seen by men. Notably, every female character in "The Secretary" is either directly seen and/or used as an object of sexual pleasure for a male or as playing a role towards satisfying the male gaze. First, Jerry and Elaine had four interactions together in a group setting. One scene in particular highlighted sexist comment: after asking her male friends what they think about her new dress, they respond, "You got no waist in that thing," "Your arms look like something hanging in a kosher deli," and "Well wha'd you buy it for?" (Leifer and Gross, 1994). Although dress shopping can be purely self-serving, the writers of "The Secretary" had Elaine ask her male friends and even a male stranger of their opinion on her dress indicating that the dress was in fact for the male gaze.

Second, near the beginning of "The Secretary," character George Costanza is looking to hire a secretary. He denies employment to two women based on their looks, explicitly stating

that they are too attractive. The person whom he does hire, a woman named Ade (notably pronounced as aid), is dressed in concealing and seemingly old-fashioned clothing, wears her hair up, and sees through a pair of glasses. Due to Ade's presented unattractiveness, Costanza hires her as he expects not to view her as an object for sexual pleasure. When George tells Jerry about how proud of himself, he is for hiring Ade, Jerry applauds George for not being the "lesser man [...] go[ing] after the dish in the surefire sexual harassment suit" (Leifer and Gross, 1994). This reveals that the writers and Jerry's character are aware of the male gaze within the workplace, yet no further action is taken to critique this discourse within the episode.

Finally, in the closing dialogue of the episode, Jerry is eating dinner with a peer of his named Bania. During their interaction, Bania reveals to Jerry that he is excited to meet for the first time a woman, whom he "hope[s] is good-looking" (Leifer and Gross, 1994). This portrayal of women, as passive objects to be looked at and desired by men, is representative of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975/2013).

### **Male-to-Female Power Dynamics**

"There are many main characters on 90's sitcoms who say sexist things about girls and women constantly" (Tsinziras, 2022). "The Secretary," however, explicitly uses sexism to enable power dynamics. As discussed above, George's inability to control his male gaze results in extremely qualified women being rejected from the job, "Well Miss Coggins you're ah, obviously qualified for the job. You've all the necessary skills and experience. But you're extremely attractive. You're gorgeous. I'm looking at you, I can't even remember my name. So ah, I'm afraid this is not going to work out (he crumples her resume into a ball) Thanks for coming in." However, even after hiring a female who does not appeal to his gaze (at first),

sexism and power dynamics still come into fruition. George hired “plain” Ade to avoid sexual tension, but then ended up engaging in intimacy with her soon after and promising her a raise during sex. The episode advances this stereotypical sexist relationship into a power dynamic when George finds out that the raise Ade receives places her at a salary higher than himself and says, “A secretary cannot make more than her boss” (Leifer and Gross, 1994).

Therefore, the male-female interactions portray to viewers that men have the power to (or not to) hire females based on their looks and advocate for them to receive a raise, so long as they continue to make less than them.

### **Discussion**

In conclusion, “The Secretary” is a prime example of the portrayal of power dynamics and sexism in media. The opening monologue - “Why does a man want to see a woman in fur? Men want women to shave their legs, shave their armpits, pluck their eyebrows and then before we go out, we dress them up like a bear” – immediately makes viewers privy to the sexism of the show (Leifer and Gross, 1994). However, *Seinfeld* writers Leifer and Gross disguise these sexist comments as comedy and (un)intentionally desensitize viewers to the implications of these comments and attitudes. Bateman (2017) argues that film has the potential to critique and thus perform CDA if it brings the viewer’s attention to discourse and the problematic nature within it. However, Leifer and Gross chose to only have their male lead critique the sexist discourse within the show once and write their female leads as having no potential for meaningful expression, freedom, or empowerment. Future research should consider how this masking of male dominance and unequal power dynamics with comedy influences viewers.

## Limitations

The Bechdel-Wallace and Mako Mori tests were conducted to measure the amount and level of nonsexist representation of and interaction between women within “The Secretary,” and the episode passed both tests. Abdelfatah and Arablouei (2023) interviewed Bechdel who revealed to them that passing the test does not equate with supporting women and adhering to a feminist approach. Despite their contribution to helping researchers, critics, and fans point out sexism and/or sexist content, neither test serves as an objective indicator of sexism within media. Due to this limitation, the researchers did not rely entirely on these tests, rather using them as supplementary to the CDA.

To measure the representation of women more aptly within the episode, the researchers could have coded and analyzed nonverbal discursive patterns and gestures expressed by the characters/actors as well as the camera movements and angles.

Additionally, this study analyzed a short 90s sitcom episode. An analysis of the entire television series and/or a comparative analysis of multiple 90s sitcoms would provide more data to analyze and help to further develop findings and themes. The researchers decided to limit their work due to time restraints and intentionally work within a smaller and defined focus.

Thursday nights on NBC defined the second half of the 90s as “Must-See TV.” (Lyons, 2013). Journalist Tsintziras (2022) writes that top shows *Seinfeld* and *Friends* and many others displayed sexist main characters for comedic value. Yarrow (2018) reflects on her childhood in the 90s “But it wasn’t until returning to this decade as an adult that I came to see how mainstream 90s narratives in media and society promoted sexism and exploited girlhood...these stories explain the status of women in American society today” (p. xviii). In studying the power

dynamics and sexism of an iconic 90s sitcom, researchers can employ critical discourse analysis in combination with other approaches to unveil problematic views and voices within media.

Further study on the topic of how 90s media influenced current power dynamics and sexism could provide additional context to the normalization of Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Millennials to laugh at sexist comments and not call out inappropriate power dynamics.

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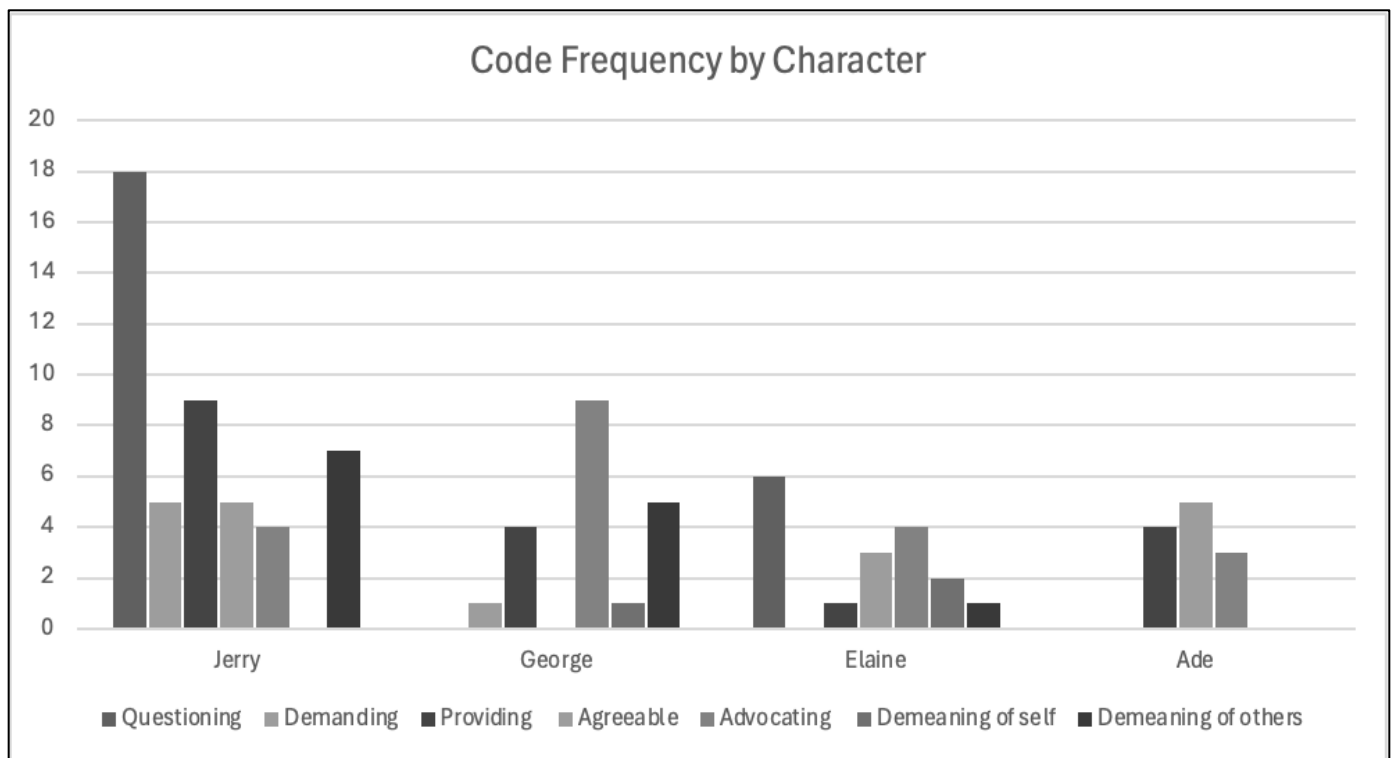
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**Table 1***Static Analysis Results*

	<b>Jerry</b>	<b>George</b>	<b>Elaine</b>	<b>Ade</b>
<b>Questioning</b>	18	0	6	0
<b>Demanding</b>	5	1	0	0
<b>Providing</b>	9	4	1	4
<b>Agreeable</b>	5	0	3	5
<b>Advocating</b>	4	9	4	3
<b>Demeaning of Self</b>	0	1	2	0
<b>Demeaning of Others</b>	7	5	1	0
<b>Total</b>	48	20	17	12

**Figure 1***Static Analysis Results*

**Figure 2***Interactions by Gender*