



ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme Launch

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New Formations of Spectacular Selves

Our research project is on 'Making Class Through the Ethical Scenarios of Reality TV'. But before I go into the project, I am going to build up a framework to convince you that class still exists in Britain. Class is still worth thinking about in so many different ways, but I want to think about it in particular through culture and personhood. So I am going to begin with a frame, its going to be quite quick, so pay attention! And if anyone wants copies of the presentation I am happy to send it to you. I am going to hit you with lots of information to begin with.

Politics of recognition

- Fraser and Taylor note a shift from a politics of redistribution to a politics of recognition
- Depends upon who can inhabit and claim an identity, can that identity be recognised, does the identity have value?
- Multiculturalism/gay marriage/hate crime: claims based on identity (require respectability)

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Nancy Fraser and Charles Taylor have argued that we have witnessed a move from what they call the 'politics of re-distribution' to a 'politics of recognition'. They maintain that the 'politics of recognition' is the culture in which we now exist. This argument makes lots of sense. The Identities Programme, for example, investigates identity politics and who can make claims via identity. But for me when I was thinking about identity what became significant was - who can inhabit and claim an identity? Can that identity be recognised and does that identity have value?

The book that I wrote in 1997 looks at a group of white working class women who did not want to identify as working class. In fact they saw their identity as one with no value. So how do people make a claim within the politics of recognition, if they can not positively inhabit the identity position that has been offered to them? This difficulty is incredibly significant in a situation where all sorts of new legal ways of making identity have been institutionalised through, for example, the politics of multiculturalism and the ways in which that has been incorporated in education, and

through too debates on gay marriage, citizenship and partnership. These new developments are all about making identity claims that can be institutionalised in law, but what if culture is organised against your identity? There needs to be a debate about who can and who can not inhabit identity.

Shifts to subjectivity

- Aestheticisation of the self: Foucault
- Discourse ethics: Habermas
- Governing the soul: Rose
 - Intimate citizenship: Berlant
 - Extraordinary subjectivity: Dovey
 - Compulsory Individuality: Strathern
 - DIY citizenship: Hartley
 - Biographical individualism: Giddens
 - Reflexive/risk individualisation: Beck

Identification of new middle-class selves

- Aesthetic self: Foucault
- Prosthetic self: Lury
- Reflexive self: Giddens and Beck
 - Mobile selves: Urry
 - Enterprising selves: du Gay
 - Possessed self: Kroker
 - Rational Actor: Goldthorpe and hundreds of others
 - All premised on exchange value – accruing value (cultural capital) in the self through cultural resourcing: (see Skeggs 2005)

In social theory too there has been an enormous amount of discussion about the shifts to subjectivity in our current climate. Instead of talking about economic redistribution or talking about inequality, everybody is talking about subjectivity. We have, for example, Foucault's 'aestheticisation of the self', Habermas's 'discourse

ethics', Rose's 'governing the soul', Berlant's 'intimate citizenship', Dovey's 'extraordinary subjectivity' and Marilyn Strathern's 'compulsory individuality'. There are theories of 'DIY citizenship' and 'biographical individualism' which I am sure we will hear about later and reflexive risk individualisation theories. We have Celia Lury's 'prosthetic self', the 'reflexive self' of Giddens and Beck, we have John Urry's 'mobile self', we have Paul Du Gay's 'enterprising self', we have fantastically wild and weird possessed self. We have all the rational actor theories and those of you who are economists will know the profound obsession with rationality within economics. There has been an incredible amount of fantastic research on the new formations of middle class selves. This research doesn't always talk about the selves that they research as being middle class but if you do lots of work in this area, which I have done for many years, you can clearly spot quite obvious class differences coming through.

What I want to argue, and do argue very strongly in the last book, is that all these social theory models are premised upon a self that can accrue value to itself, a self that can, through acquiring culture, through acquiring the right practices and through acquiring the right knowledge, makes itself into a good, respectable, future orientated self. Now this (and lots of you can guess what I am about to say) is very different from the working class selves that we have on offer in our current practices and in current popular cultural output such as reality television.

Working-class selves

- Cannot resource in same way (need access to cultural capital at early stage, the right sort with the right knowledge of how to operationalise)
- **Significance of technologies** for telling: history of forced subjectivity (Steedman: via redemption narratives)
- Changed identity positions of value (e.g. shift from dignity of labour to abject: disidentification (*Formations* 1997))
- **Significance of representations** (symbolic source of value: repetition, circulation of devaluation, e.g. Chavs OED word for 2004)
- Long history of representing the WC as 'natives' (e.g. mass observation, *The Family*)
- Long history of opening out the WC through intimacies (e.g. education)
- Most of the theories on subjectivity and MC selves assume that telling and displaying are resources equally available to all

Working class selves have a very different history and I am going to spend a little time discussing this slide. Working class selves have historically been unable to resource themselves in the same way. They do not have access to the right cultural capital at an early stage, as most educationalists point out very clearly. And sometimes when they do get access to the right cultural capital, they don't know how to operationalize it. They don't know how to put the culture to use and that becomes absolutely key, so it's not just a matter of having the right culture, its about knowing how to use it. What becomes clearly significant, when we start exploring how these

selves differ from middle-class selves, is the importance of 'technologies for telling' and there's some absolutely fantastic historical work that explores education and looks at child development. Valerie Walkerdine, for instance, who is here tonight – her research looks at how a particular working class self has been generated through being forced to tell itself for welfare, with a legal interlocutor. You have to tell us stories of redemption and we will give you money so you can live, you can eat etc...So forced subjectivity became the key technology for producing working class selves, this was totally different from the exchange value, cultural capital, self projected future of the middle class selves, who are acquiring the right knowledge and knowing how to use it. If we look at the history of working class autobiographies, these are stories of redemption. Even those who learnt to tell themselves, usually tell themselves through respectability and redemption.

What this means is that we have very different positions of value on offer to the working class, when they tell themselves as subjects or when they are offered a self to tell. We have had a huge shift, as everybody knows, from the working class being the objects of dignity of labour, to now becoming completely abject. There is lots of work that shows how the working classes, white working classes, have become fixed as abject - in the wrong place, making the wrong choices, with the wrong culture.

What is also significant, along with the technologies for telling, are the representations continually repeated with boring regularity which devalue the working class. The working classes are always represented as the bad ones, at the constitutive limits. It is interesting, for example, that 'Chavs' became the Oxford English Dictionary word for 2004. The Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph both launched a campaign around 'Chavs'. It is quite phenomenal how that word (a word of hatred I argue, identifying objects of hatred, fear, anxiety and threat) has become institutionalised in our language.

Alongside these media representations, in social theory we have a long history too of representing the working classes as natives. If you go back to the early mass observation work, it's fascinating and wonderfully interesting, but you will see how the methodology employed is one of an anthropologist wanting to study natives at home. We see this then being reproduced on television, with the first reality TV programme, Paul Watson's 'The Family'; which had the loud, shouting, badly behaved, working class family, exposing itself without any careful editing at all.

There is also a long history of opening out the working classes through intimacies; working class education has often been about forcing open a particular subjectivity, such as knowing how to care, knowing how to look after somebody, parenting and making sure they know how to do it properly because the way they did it was wrong. Working class girls, for example, were told they didn't know how to make beds properly, which is fascinating.

So most sociological theories of subjectivity and middle class selves assume that the telling and displaying of the self are resources equally available to all - that premise of equality is absolutely key. I would argue that the resources for telling, representing and displaying the self are not equally available.

Significance of Reality TV

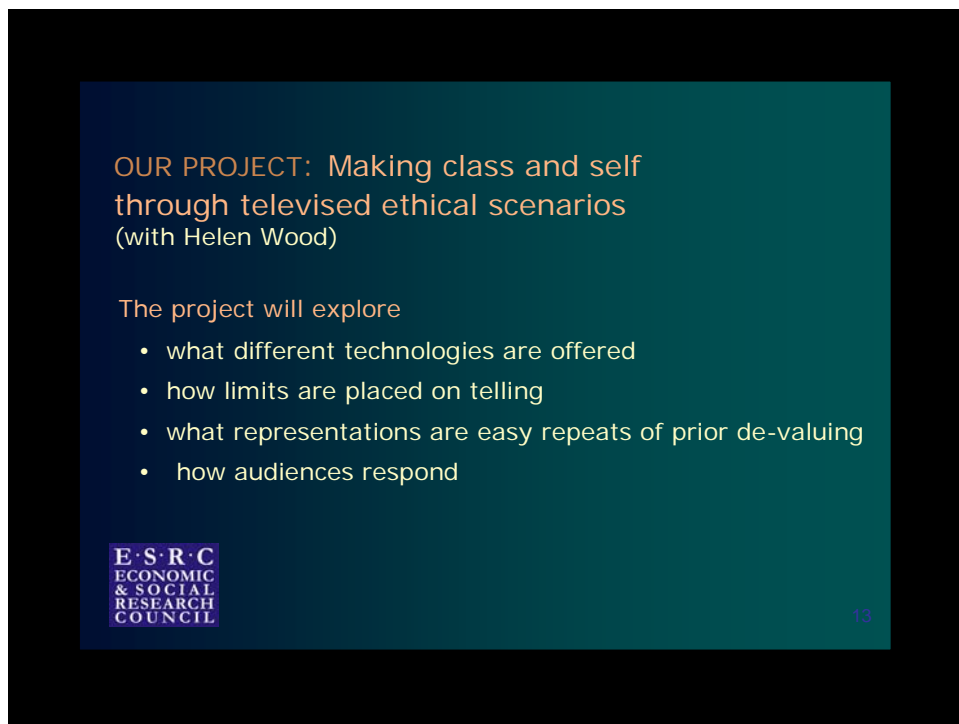
- Technologies for telling, performance and dramatisation (for entertainment), MC articulation of expert psyche discourses developed
- Limited positions offered (eg *Wife Swap*: bad cleaner/bad mother)
- Appears that people are 'telling themselves' but cultural capital also limited
- Focus on personality without resources (eg *What the Butler Saw*)
- Pleasure in revealing (literally: e.g. *Ibiza Uncovered*) but also the breakthrough moments when participants 'get it wrong'

So now on to the significance of reality TV - I am interested in how television literally makes class. We see from reality TV how these technologies for telling, performance and dramatisation, which are there for entertainment, are literally used to tell different selves. We are only 13 days into our project, so we haven't got very far and we are speculating at the moment, but what we have already identified is the very different ways the middle classes articulate on television what we would call 'expert psycho-discourses'. They know how to tell themselves through particular narratives, not of redemption, they don't usually say 'we are good people', but they talk about intimacies in a way that isn't exposing themselves as bad. In fact the middle classes on television are incredibly good at telling themselves without telling a lot. (We all know about the myths of restraint and Englishness.) Our study is about the different positions reality TV offers for people from very different class backgrounds to tell themselves and I am going to show you some clips to illustrate these positions. In the programme 'Wife Swap', for example, you can only be a bad cleaner or a bad mother. There is not a lot of other ways of telling oneself on offer. Reality TV makes it appear as though working class people are simply being human and being normal when 'telling themselves'. But in fact, what is being displayed is lack of culture, lack of taste, and lack of choice.

The other significant thing we have already noticed is the emphasis on personality in reality TV. People become invested in telling themselves 'as a personality' - a personality is something that they can already own. But it is interesting. The people who think that they can own a personality are those who don't have any cultural resources. And the significant programme here is 'What the Butler Saw' - the most humiliating programme ever. I'll give you a little context because I am going to show you some clips from it. 'What the Butler Saw' brings a whole family of 8-10 people - they are usually fighting with each other so you've got drama - transports them to this great big mansion house, gives them servants and they compete for £50,000 in order to see who can be the best Lord or Lady of the manor. Some get thrown out because they haven't performed well enough. They are moved from a working class estate,

usually in South East London, into a really posh manor house, with servants but have no idea how to behave, but are then exposed on TV as not knowing how to behave! They are given a few little tricks to learn, a few little skills to learn, how to use cutlery and things like that, but otherwise they just expose themselves. It's a programme that literally shows what people do not know but the whole narrative is told through personality. Class becomes their own personal deficits.

The other significant aspect of reality TV, after the revealing of bad culture and bad choices, is the programmes which literally reveal. Some of you may own up to watching 'Ibiza Uncovered' or to any of the other 'Uncovered' programmes. These are literally revealing in the most incredible ways because the people presented become the limits, the constitutive limits of Englishness, of respectability, of class. Bodies and people are revealed in the most spectacular ways and are always revealing themselves as bad. So this is how we want to argue class is now being made through these different sorts of good or bad selves. Our project is called, and you can find more details on it, 'Making Class and Self Through Televised Ethical Scenarios'.



OUR PROJECT: Making class and self
through televised ethical scenarios
(with Helen Wood)

The project will explore

- what different technologies are offered
- how limits are placed on telling
- what representations are easy repeats of prior de-valuing
- how audiences respond


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What we are going to look at is the different types of technologies of self being offered in these programmes in terms of televisuality. We are looking at how events on television are being produced, what limits are being placed and at the representations that are continually being repeated which continually devalue the working class. We are also going to investigate how audiences respond to these programmes, to see if we are on to something, if our instincts are right.

REALITY TV
Table by Helen Wood

Fictive boundary



Documentary

Programme	Structuring Relations	Selfhood
Wife Swap	To 'other' wife	Better Mothers, better wives
Family Contract	To higher authority (psychologists)	Behaved selves,
Too Posh To Wash	To higher authority (hygienists)	Cleaner selves
What Not To Wear	To material goods (clothes)	Tasteful Self
What the Butler Saw	To absent higher authority	Culturally failed selves
Faking It	To mentor	An alter 'self'
10 Years Younger	Beauty Coach	Beautiful self
Who Rules the Roost	To spouse	Better spouses
Get a New Life	To potential self	Alter self
Nigel's Place in France	Absent	A more complete self?

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My co-investigator, Helen Wood, devised this table which maps out the tele-visual aspects of these reality TV programmes. I am not going to go through all of these points as you will get some sense from the table of the structuring relationship between the TV programme and the type of selfhood it is offering. Our big problem is that reality TV just keeps expanding. When somebody finds a programme they can make money out of they keep copying it and copying it. We are trying to find out which ones are significant and we are at the stage of identifying them, particularly the programmes about better people, cleaner selves, tasteful selves, and then obviously failed selves.

If you want to tell me these aren't about class I want to argue with you. Thank you.