Making class and self through televised ethical scenarios

Context

This project analysed current theories of individualisation and the fashion for self-representation on 'reality' television programmes. We began the project with two questions. Has individualisation led to the demise of class, and secondly, but connected, has a shift in authority and legitimation occurred, where performing and displaying subjectivity in the public arena becomes a measure of a person's value? We found that the reflexive self was widely promoted on television, but rather than signalling a detachment from class, these new techniques of individualisation actually strengthened and reproduced previous class (and gender and race) divisions in their encounters with audiences.

Key Findings

- We outlined how 'reality' television programmes extended the opening out of intimacy present in the broader cultural trend of 'intimate citizenship'.

- We mapped how the focus upon the individual's accountability and the removal of classed histories in television representations parallels current policy changes on social exclusion.

- Textual analysis identified the blending of melodramatic and documentary techniques to generate a new mode of making 'ordinary' actors responsible for dramatic events. Our methodological design makes visible how discourses of moral value generate immediate 'affective' responses *and* distanced reflexivity that are converted into moral judgements about people on 'reality' television.

- We make visible key textual moments ('judgement shots') that incite audience responses through the 'text-in-action' method.

- The empirical data reveal how a moral economy of personhood circulates amongst women who position themselves in relation to the success/failure visualised.

- We outline how cultural attachments to 'reality' television contribute to the redrawing of discourses and performances of class through a focus upon moral value.

What not to wear – face the mirror

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evident suggests that the moral values of 'reality' television are reaching their audiences in unanticipated ways. Judging and evaluating others is often accompanied by care. Research participants not only evaluated television participants but by doing so located themselves in relation to an established symbolic evaluative system of the moral economy of personhood: a hierarchy of self and other-worth. Viewers are implicated in a 'circuit of value' and therefore their own practices are at stake as they affectively respond to programmes. We found the appraisal of emotional labour in its different forms - care for others, the labour of femininity, mothering and emotional management of relationships - to be central to the connections made to the programmes. People are incited to make judgements about the micro-management of their lives through 'reality' television, but these incitements address people already positioned by other value strata (work, taste, education, bodies, money), that unevenly combine to produce their overall person value as a good/bad subject. Value-defences and value-promotions circulate through responses to television informing the judgements people make.

Identity and Value

Individualisation did not figure in these contestations, which were about positioning and value, resourced through cultural and materially-lived experiences (of class, gender and race). 'Performing oneself', or doing self-reflexivity, to generate self-worth only makes sense if there is consensus about what constitutes self-worth. Our research showed that supposed universal moral values are often highly contested as moral and particular. Most respondents were not convinced by the values on offer contrasting these with their own (staying real, working hard, caring for others). What we saw was a struggle by respondents to display their value in different ways, to demonstrate how they were valuable legitimate subjects, contributing to, and part of, national propriety. It was the *value* attached to identity practices rather than the identity categorisation itself which was important. How people connect or detach from others depends on where and how they are positioned within 'circuits of value'.

Background to the Study

This project set out to see if the ethical scenarios offered by 'reality' television influenced identity formation, against the backdrop of contemporary arguments suggesting that the current concentration on the 'self' in culture and society replaces structural affiliations like class. Focusing on programmes which foreground transformation and self-reflection (like *Wife Swap* and *What Not To Wear*) we identified the dramatic techniques framing the ethical positions on offer to audiences. We combined textual analysis with three empirical methods – sociological interviews, 'text-in-action' viewing sessions (recording women's reactions to television as they view) and focus groups – with 40 women from four different social locations in London, exploring how they interacted with 'systems of value' circulated on 'reality' television. Relationships with 'reality' television were generated through how 'close' viewers felt to the images, which meant that they were often called to evaluate themselves as well as others, generating both discomfort and pleasure.

Publications Include

Skeggs, B., Thumim, N. and Wood. H. (2008) 'Oh goodness, I *am* watching 'reality' TV': How methodology makes class in multi-method audience research. *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 11 (1), 5-24.

Wood, H. and Skeggs, B. (2008) Spectacular morality: 'Reality' television, individualisation and the re-making of the working class. In D. Hesmondhalgh and J. Toynbee (eds.) *The Media and Social Theory.* London: Routledge.

Skeggs, B., Wood, H. and Thumim, N. (in press) 'It's just sad': Affect, judgement and emotional labour in 'reality' TV viewing. In J. Hollows and S. Gillies (ed.) *Homefires: Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture.* London: Routledge.

Skeggs, B. and Wood, H. (2008) The labour of transformation and circuits of value around 'reality' television. *Continuum,* 22 (4), 339-572.

ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme

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Highlights of the Research

Our findings have a number of repercussions, for policy in relation to social exclusion, for understanding the role of the media in contemporary identity formation and how class is being re-made in the contemporary cultural imaginary. Our findings also offer empirical evidence of the role of 'affect' in contemporary identity formation.

'Reality' Television, Individualisation and the Re-making of the Working-Class

We tracked the spread of 'reality' style programmes since our project began in 2005 (recording 92 different programmes just from one week of terrestrial provision), mapping 42 series across a range of transform-ation 'reality' programmes in which different aspects of personal life (homes, work, families, health etc.) were interrogated through various formats (swaps, competition, passing, make-over etc.). We then focused a closer textual analysis on 10 representative programmes (*Wife Swap, Get a New Life, The Apprentice, Ladette to Lady, Nigel's Place in France, Honey We're Killing the Kids, Supernanny, What Not to Wear, Faking It*). The commercial drive of chasing formats to fill available multi-channel television schedules supports the increasingly invasive opening out of personal intimacy on television. The result is what we call 'forensic formats' focusing in on the details of personal life. Using the individualisation thesis to explain 'reality' television as a response to neo-liberalism only gets us so far because it ignores that a key pre-requisite of individualisation, self-reflexivity, cannot be mobilised equally.

Our textual readings, looking for similarities across a number of production formats, suggest that in combining the features of documentary with melodrama, 'reality' television stages the performances of individuals in ways which mimic how class and gender are being rhetoricised in broader neo-liberal politics. 'Social actors' are called to 'perform' in various settings by reacting to immediate situations. They are ahistorically, but domestically, located and drama is created out of their instantaneous behaviour. Traditional melodrama relies on fate and 'happenstance' in which the individual is 'done to'. With 'reality' television individuals are called to account for what happens to them but this is out of their control. It is this structure of impossibility that reveals the mediation of new class formations. Participants appear without context; without the economic or structural features governing their actual everyday lives, so the surface and spectacular dimensions of good citizenship become the focus of the entertainment. Bodily parts are attributed with value and judgement in a process of 'metonymic morality', features like bad taste, unhealthy living and poor communication become inscribed as personal failure, lack of self-discipline or lack of appropriate self-reflexivity in a broader universalising of middle-class values. This collapsing of the social into individual failure or bad culture is exactly the same process as that identified by class theorists who detail the euphemistic transference of responsibility prevalent in discourses of social exclusion.

'Reality' Television, Proximity and Affect

'Reality' television's claims to an epistemological realism are based in their re-construction of temporality and spatiality - of 'nowness' and 'hereness' - a sense of immediacy. This propinquity positions viewers more immanently to the television text than other genres. We revealed the operations of levels of proximity with audiences through a multi-layered methodology: interviews, text-in-action viewing sessions, and focus groups.

Women in discussion in focus groups move seamlessly between empathising with the social actors as real people and converting these feelings into moral and taste judgements. We traced the use of the ambiguous term 'sad' which evokes simultaneously empathy with participants, judgement of them,

Supernanny

critique of the form of 'reality' television, but which ultimately turns to self-analysis.

Questions of proximity and distancing were played out in themes which broadly relate to issues of feelings (care, respect and empathy), questions of civic morality of the nation (health, behaviour, taste, hard work, personal psychology),discussion of tips and advice and visceral affects such as depression, shame, guilt, pity, elation, further connected to discussion of the place of the cultural form of 'reality' television and questions of voyeurism. We can understand these relationships not only in the accepted sense of audience research, which considers texts and readers, but also looking closely at detailed moments of connection where reality television is 'an extended social/public realm'.

Our text-in-action method, which relies on recording people watching television programmes and aligning their responses with the text, revealed the exact places in which the viewers were incited and felt compelled to talk about, but also often address, those on 'reality' television. Close inspection of these moments revealed the power of the edit and the work of the long held close-up, which we have labelled as key 'judgement shots'. There was a surprising regularity to the places where different viewers keyed into evaluative positions at the same moment in the text across different viewing sessions. Our design originally relied on linguistic articulation but our method also exposed the non-linguistic and peri-performative responses made to the television, of affects: gasps, tuts, sighs and laughter. This revealed the textual incitement to moral involvement in the drama, which we refer to as 'affective textual encounters'.

Class Differences

Subject/Object Relations: We found radically different approaches not just to texts but also to the actual object of the television. For some middle-class participants the television was given the status of a bad, powerfully corrupting object that could make them addicted and out of control. In some cases the set had to be locked away and hidden from view; in most, it was carefully controlled through taste, educational, political knowledge. Our working-class participants did not attribute power to the object of television, nor felt required to display their control of it. Television was 'just fun', 'good to shout at' and part of their domestic architecture.

Participation on 'Reality' Television: Middle-class participants thought television exploited uneducated vulnerable people, yet maintained that participants were a particular type of person – 'desperate for celebrity', 'generally trashy people'. South Asian groups evoked an honour hierarchy, concerned that participants allowed themselves to be shamed. In contrast, black and white working-class respondents saw 'reality' television as an opportunity structure, an alternative route to money, or an opportunity for publicly humiliating badly-behaved male partners.

Proximity and Distance: Class (and race) differences were generated through the resources participants had to generate moral authority. Our black, white and South Asian working-class respondents immanently placed themselves within the action: 'This is what I would do/did'; sometimes acting out and 'replaying' moments of the action. Middle-class respondents more often made a distanced critique using resources of wider cultural explication, taste hierarchies, and political and cultural knowledge. Motherhood was used to resource moral judgement by our working-class participants. Yet, proximity and identification do not necessarily create empathy: working-class respondents were highly critical, displaying strong emotions of antipathy, disgust

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and/or anger towards 'experts' *and* participants. Some argue that pleasure from popular entertainment is generated through its provision of solutions to social tensions. We find pleasure generated through occupation of an oppositional moral high ground in current conditions of constant surveillance and judgement. With less access to positions of class-based superiority related to taste and culture, working-class participants displayed their value through mothering against constant government pressures around 'parenting'

Assessing Labour: Our middle-class group thought 'reality' television participants were not deserving of success, 'getting something for nothing', because they did not have any education or skills (not 'working hard at things'), other than performing ('cheap celebrity'). In contrast black and white working-class respondents assessed television participants on the basis of the specific type of labour they performed: 'Just getting on with it', and 'not moaning' were key values enabling worth to be attributed, using the same criteria they would apply to themselves and reproducing indefatigability as a moral value. These findings suggest that labouring, 'making an effort', is a key moral value in middle and working-class culture, but is defined differently. Gendered emotional labour enabled connections to be made across class by com-parison to their own relationship labour.

Ethic of Care: How television participants were shown to care for others was central to how assessments were made by all groups. Often participants read through the negative value loadings of abjectness (sometimes encoded in the texts), to find 'genuine care' and 'real relationships'. Making a 'constitutive ethical actualisation', enabled respondents to immanently share ethical experiences.

Defensive Responses: Black and white working-class respondents, in particular, took a great deal of pleasure from television participants' resistance to authority and refusals to take advice. They also displayed resistance to the negative value attributed to those positioned as the abject working-class: strong defences were made of celebrities Jordan and Jade Goody.

Judgement and Care

If we had only analysed programmes we could show that 'middle-class-particular' values were indeed becoming universally normative, neo-liberal techniques were ubiquitous, intimacy had extended into a profit-making performance review, misanthropy was rife, with the working-class subject to a level of symbolic violence and affective contempt never previously seen. Whilst all this is clearly evident, its impact is not predictable. The quantities and types of defence, refusal, mis-recognition, care, kindness and humorous resistance