

# The Moral Economy of Person Production: the Class Relations of Self-Performance on “Reality” Television

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**Abstract:**

Drawing on the textual analysis of an ESRC research project “*Making Class and the Self through Mediated Ethical Scenarios*”, the paper illustrates how “reality” television offers a visible barometer of a person’s moral value. The research included an examination of the shift to self-legitimation, the increased importance of reflexivity and the decline of class proposed by the individualisation thesis.<sup>2</sup> We focused on self-transformation “reality” television programmes as public examples of the dramatisation of individualisation. The over-recruitment of different types of working-class participants to these shows and the positioning of many in need of transformation, enabled an exploration of how certain people and cultures are positioned, evaluated and interpreted as inadequate, deficient and requiring improvement. We found that the individualisation promoted through the programmes was always reliant upon access to and operationalisation of specific social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital.

**Keywords:** Moral economy; Text analysis; “Reality” television.

The dramatisation and judgement of self-performance on “reality” television is significant, if as John McKenzie (2001) claims, performance will be to the twenty-first centuries what Foucault’s disciplinary techniques were to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, Thomas Mathiesen’s (1997) in another challenge to Foucault’s (1977) analysis of power, suggests that the panoptical governance structure of the few watching the many has been replaced by a synoptical structure of the many watching the many; “reality” television thus offers a useful case study.

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<sup>2</sup> See (Wood and Skeggs, 2004).

## Introduction: “reality” television?

For those who do not watch and doubt the significance of what has routinely and repetitively been condemned as a “low taste” genre of television,<sup>3</sup> we draw attention to “reality” television’s role in the expression of national values: in 2007 “reality” television was the focus for a major international incident that involved UK Prime-Minister Gordon Brown, then Chancellor, apologising to the Indian Prime Minister for the conduct of a *Big Brother* contestant, Jade Goody, about her racist comments against an Indian contestant.<sup>4</sup> Other politicians, from both sides, also condemned the behaviour and linked it to a national crisis of racism and intolerance: “Bigotry in Britain”.<sup>5</sup> Even if the global political dimensions are not taken into account, the fact that the “reality” television format now occupies up to 78% of national free-to-view television and 47% of non-terrestrial television, with up to 92 screened programmes a week,<sup>6</sup> suggests it is a phenomena requiring sociological scrutiny.

Debates about what exactly constitutes “reality” television are extensive, both within television production, journalism, marketing discourse and academic analyses. Sue Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004) detail how the output often identified with “reality” television is far too diverse to be contained within a specific genre, drawing on techniques from light entertainment, lifestyle, daytime TV, talk-shows, documentary and melodrama, in which key skills in television production shift from direction to casting and editing.<sup>7</sup> It is precisely its hybridity and the speed with which it replicates that makes it difficult to define, generating what (Caldwell, 1995) defines as a new form of ‘televisuality’. For a time the term ‘docusop’ was used to identify key features (Bruzzi, 2000; Dovey, 2000; Kilborn, 2003) but the event-focussed lack of narrative structure and short time scale of many programmes questioned the soap element, and the formatted, melodramatic contrived generation of conflict questioned the documentary elements. John Corner (2002) proposes that “reality” television is best viewed as part of television’s “post-documentary context”, a contradictory cultural environment, where viewers, participants and producers are less invested in absolute truth and representational ethics and more interested in the space that exists between reality and fiction, in which new levels of representational play and reflexivity are visualised.

Holmes and Jermyn (2004) however, do note that one consistent feature is how issues of cultural value have always defined the form, which is consistently associated with lack of quality. This is partly to do with the emphasis on “ordinary” people

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<sup>3</sup> See McTaggart Lecture by Lord John Birt, ex-BBC Director speech to the Edinburgh Television Festival, August 26, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See full transcript on <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment>. Downloaded on 15.08.07.

<sup>5</sup> Ofcom recorded a record number of complaints: 19,300 on the evening of the programme, with Channel 4 (the broadcaster) receiving 2,000 complaints directly.

<sup>6</sup> Figures counted for one week in November 2005.

<sup>7</sup> There has been substantial restructuring of Television since the 1990’s across the globe with the introduction of numerous cable and digital channels requiring programmes, accompanied by the decreased role of national television, and in the UK a specific remit to use “independent producers” to cut in-house costs (see Raphael (2004)).

(as opposed to trained actors), the focus on the non-fictional and the “everyday”, specifically the “domestic”, what Francis Bonner (2003) calls “ordinary everydayness”, and which Mischa Kavka (2006) notes is always the “national ordinary”, that which deals with mundane, routine and uneventful lives. Lives made eventful by the dramatic techniques used. The use of “ordinary” people, Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005) suggest, erodes the distinction between audience and performers, generating one of the key elements in the pretension to “reality”. Some suggest that the use of “ordinary” people is democratising, others that it is exploitative. The use of the term “ordinary” people should immediately alert us to the political archaeology latent in the term: Roger Bromley (2000) proposes that “ordinary” is one of the many euphemisms to emerge after 30 years of political rhetoric and academic theory claiming the demise of class, as a substitute for the term “working-class”.

“Ordinary everydayness” is a way of presenting working-class life using working-class people,<sup>8</sup> and it is predominantly working-class women (of different types) that we see recruited to self-transformational television. The type of transformation is often structured through class relations, whereby one group’s standards are found lacking and in need of improvement, or conflict is generated around different standards (usually pitting the respectable/aspirational woman against a “rough” excessive one, repeating a long history of media production and academic theory in drawing these moral distinctions).

Often upper middle-class women are brought in to provide “expert advice” such as Trinny and Susannah in *What not to Wear*, and *Ladette to Lady*, repeating a long legacy of using “advice” to civilise (Donzelot, 1979), and a long tradition within “women’s culture”. Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987) note how in the 1840s a culture of domesticity was established by middle-class women, who were expected to operate as relay mechanisms of manners and morality in “the minutiae of everyday life” to pass on their influence to others. During the twentieth century responsibility was extended to working-class women (see David (1980), and enshrined in law). The extension of responsibility however brought with it increased surveillance, as if working-class women could never be fully trusted, a legacy developed in “women’s genre” television: Mary Beth Harolovich (1992) documents how 1950s sit-coms detail female failure, re-positioning domesticity from a practice in which pleasure was previously taken, to one in which “need to try harder”, “advice required” and “transformation necessary”, become significant tropes, repeated across other women’s genres (Hermes, 1993; Shattuc, 1997). This shift brought into vision a different object: from the middle-class “polite and proper” family to the dysfunctional working-class family

## 1. Research Project

The research project “*Making Class and the Self through Mediated Ethical Scenarios*”, (ESRC 148-25-0040) ran from 1 April 2005 - 1 September 2007, was part of the ESRC “Identities Programme”. Its remit was to empirically investigate the

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<sup>8</sup> See (White, 2006), who shows how there is an over-representation of the working-class on “reality” television in the US, precisely because of their cultural and economic situation, arguing “there is clearly a level of class exploitation at work” (White, 2006, p. 229).

individualisation thesis and explore if and how class relations informed contemporary Western identity formations.<sup>9</sup> It investigated how shifts in authority and legitimation were dependent upon performing subjectivity. The individualisation thesis proposed by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) suggests that in a post-industrial society the individual is now compelled to make her/himself the centre of her/his own life plan and conduct. Self-responsibility and self-management thus become key features of the “new” reflexive self. “Reality” television which foregrounds the display of self-performance by “ordinary” people doing “ordinary everydayness” with new levels of televisual representational play offered us the perfect site for exploring self-making, self-legitimation and the supposed demise of class.

In the 1970s the beginnings of the compulsion to self-performance as a measurement of self-worth was noted by Christopher Lasch (1979) who discerned a “pathological narcissism” of the “performing self” as an increasingly universal characteristic. Yet we were aware from previous research that only some performing selves are positively valued, ones reliant on access to and display of particular forms of cultural capital (Skeggs, 2004a; Skeggs, 2004b). Moreover, the “telling of oneself”, as Carolyn Steedman (1998) details, has radically different classed histories; redemption was always essential to the positive evaluation of working-class lives.

We were also aware of how values and cultural practices traditionally associated with the middle-class, and reliant on access to forms of cultural capital, were increasingly becoming the normative, generating what Savage (2003) identifies as the new “particular-universal”, which he suggests echoes a larger social shift in the late twentieth century:

“[. . .] the middle class then colonised the resulting empty social and cultural space, with the result that it has become the particular-universal class. That is to say, although it was in fact a particular class with a specific history, nonetheless it has become the class around which an increasing range of practices are regarded as universally ‘normal’, ‘good’ and ‘appropriate’.” (Savage, 2003:536) (Emphasis added)

Marilyn Strathern (1992) also demonstrates how middle-class practices have come to increasingly define the Western social itself. The project examined how normative standards traditionally associated with the English middle-classes were promoted on “reality” television.<sup>10</sup>

For Savage, the unpacking of this normalising process requires a subtle kind of class analysis that can take into account and make explicit the role of culture. For this purpose we used Bourdieu’s (1986; 1987) model of how social class is comprised of capitals – economic, symbolic, social and cultural as the mechanisms by which people are distributed in social space according to: the global volume of capital they possess its composition and the evolution of the volume and composition according to their trajectory. For Bourdieu it is not just volume and composition of capital but

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<sup>9</sup> See (Wood and Skeggs, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> We defined middle-class practices from modern manners guides and previous empirical research on the middle-classes (for example, (Featherstone, 1991); (Savage, [et al.] 1992)).

also how one accumulates capital makes an important difference to its capacity to be converted.

We extended this model to show how the use of culture was central to the display of the self (see Skeggs (2004a)). Firstly, how do certain bodies become inscribed with certain characteristics, affectively and figuratively: what types of behaviour are expected and attached to certain people, such as speaking, language use, habits such as exercise, eating, drinking and smoking. Secondly, what systems of exchange enable some characteristics to be read as good, bad, worthy and unworthy? For instance, what value is inscribed on the body of a person who eats, drinks, dresses and smokes to excess? Thirdly, we investigated how these systems of inscription, exchange and valuing are institutionalised, such as in the distinctions between bad and good-enough mothers. Fourthly, we examined what we called “moral subject semiotics” that led to people being read in specific ways by others, such as the codes that reference working-class culture euphemistically, as slob, scrounger, slacker, or locating them in a context of chaos, dirt and disorder. Together these elements were brought together to understand how class was coded, evaluated and read by television participants (how they were read by our research participants is another story: see Skeggs and Wood (2008)). It was here that we noticed the slippage between national, economic and moral values and how they combine on the person.<sup>11</sup> A slippage that we attempted to unpack by examining where and how they cohered or not: for instance, a fat, smoking, drinking, body was repeatedly coded and read as a sign of an unproductive, lazy, non-disciplined, non-self-investing person who was likely to be a drain on the nation through health costs.

The project used four different methods: textual analysis, interviews, viewing sessions and focus groups. We conducted empirical research with forty women, of different generations, middle and working-class, white, Black and Asian, settled and recent residents, from four areas in South London.<sup>12</sup> In this paper the focus is on the first stage of the research where we mapped and tracked the patterns, repetitions, structures and narratives of “reality” television, defining our object through detailing.<sup>13</sup> Between 2004-2006 we tracked the explosion of “reality” television programmes. Our initial funding proposal in 2004 identified three classed types of “reality” television: abject (*Ibiza Uncovered*), working-class transformational (*What not to Wear*, *Wife Swap*) and middle-class transformational (*Nigel's Place in France*) and from this initial analysis we noted different expectations and technologies of performance.

This general mapping identified how intimacy was being opened out as all aspects of relationships, domestic, intimate, sexual, were put under scrutiny and nearly all forms of personal, appearance and domestic behaviour were displayed and attributed with specific values: excess of any kind (even excessive cleaning) was always identified as bad/immoral. Very little was left to remain “private”. We mapped a matrix that put technique against type: see Table 1

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<sup>11</sup> (Graeber, 2005), notes, most academic accounts of value make this slippage, so we should not be surprised that general representations do likewise.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Thumim was employed as Research Associate on the project from October 2005 to March 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere we have discussed the methodological issues related to reflexivity: (Skeggs, [et al.] 2008)

**Table 1: Type and Technique**

Primary Features	Abject	Swaps	Passing Disguise	Challenges	Competition	Physical Make-over	Expert observation	Life overhaul
Work	<i>HR</i> ,		FI	A, FI	<i>A</i>			GNL
Money				<i>GNL</i>		BMD		
Holidays /Travel	IU	HS		BB				<i>GUG</i>
Homes				DHA <i>GNL</i>		HB		NPF
Food & Health							YWE HKK	
Hygiene						TPW	HCH	
Families / Relationships		HS <i>WS</i>		DSS		WRR, BMD	<i>SN, FC,</i> DMDM MEO LA N9	
Sex							SEX,	
Appearance			FI, PIS	FI	PIS	TYY EM, <i>WNT</i>		
Manners		HS	<i>FI</i> , PIS	FI	PIS WBS	WBS		
Explicit Class Mobility			<i>WBS</i> MFL				<i>LL</i> ,	

Our textual analysis also identified certain features such as character casting, editing, use of music, narrative structures, repeated tropes, time-control, the use of melodrama, the organisation of conflict, the presence of voice-overs to generate authority, irony and tone, the use of cameras, either as hand-held, to generate feelings of “reality” and “authenticity”, or as long-shots held on faces and bodies at key moments where emotional expression is incited. We also noted how the visual semiotics were nearly always accompanied by discursive clustering. Adjectives such as noisy, tarty, selfish, clueless would all be attached to one person. For instance, *Wife Swap* develops dramatic tension in the opening opposition between the wives and their lives, where the potential for conflict is established through both visual and discursive semiotic moral value loading, always spoken in an ironic tone and emphasised through the contrast not only between different people and their environments, but also between their words and deeds, and often a humorous soundtrack that points to contrasts and

signals potential conflict. In one episode a smart, sporty, disciplinarian black woman (Sonia) is introduced by saying she hopes she doesn't have to live with a racist slob. Cut to David (the husband with whom Sonia will move in with) in a noisy chaotic flat, who is white, very fat and says that he doesn't think coloured people should live with white people.

Sometimes subjects are set against environments as in *What the Butler Saw* and *Ladette to Lady*, where working-class culture is signified through visual and verbal description of their homes, clothes, leisure pursuits, noise, excessive behaviour, only to be contrasted with the quiet stately home (and a classical music soundtrack) which they are about to enter. The potential entertainment value is established in the culture/person clash.

All the time we read between the textual analysis, with constant re-viewing, to the empirical findings and our theoretical histories and interests. Our familiarity over time made us alert to the repeated significance given to psychological explanations for (socially located) performances.

## 2. Emoting Self-Legitimation

"reality" television is located within the longer process of modernity whereby personhood is opened out through the display of intimacy, part of a moral project in which the self has to show itself to be proper and good, but also as a dynamic project requiring labour (Foucault, 1979). As this project of the self transitions into the present, it takes various shapes, described as enterprising, reflexive, possessed, prosthetic, or mobile self (du Gay, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Kroker, 1992; Lury, 1998; Urry, 2000) respectively.<sup>14</sup> What they all share is an insistence on the centrality of cultural and symbolic capital and the imperative to invest in one's self either by accrual of different forms of capital through enterprise, experimentation and/or play and display of their worth.

Other theories propose that when the traditional foundations for moral authority (e.g. religion, state, etc.) have disappeared, the self is expected to generate its own legitimacy via the performance of intimacy and its emotional control, for instance, Rose's (1989) "governing the soul", Berlant's (1997) "intimate citizenship", Strathern's (1991) "compulsory individuality" and Dovey's (2000) "extraordinary subjectivity", to name but a few. Alberto Corsin-Jiminez (2003) proposes understanding this demonstration of self-value as a "labour theory of agency". We suggest instead it is a labour theory of person-production,<sup>15</sup> part of an economy of personhood. The labour of person-production is however not about extraction of surplus value (as it would be in a traditional Marxist theory of value), but about self-investment.

The ability to publicly demonstrate self-value depends on one's access to psychological capital, or what Diane Reay (2004) identifies as emotional capital, displaying reflexively techniques of self-interrogation. David Lubin (1997), for instance,

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<sup>14</sup> See (Skeggs, 2004b), for critique of these particular-universal self-formations. Note these theories may be performative, legitimating that which they name.

<sup>15</sup> To make it more specifically connected to the labour of self-investment. The concept of agency has a particular etymology associated with "free will" that is discursively associated with the emergent middle-classes (see (Blackman, 2007)).

charts how pre-existing discourses of religious suffering and medical interrogation were crafted into a psychological rhetoric of middle-and upper middle-class nervous interiority and class superiority. Joel Kovel (1988) stresses that introspection signifies participation in a particular class and social relation, and the studies of Philip Rieff (1966) and Jackson-Lears (1981) show how the rise of “therapeutic culture” is allied historically and ideologically to the ascendancy of the white middle-class. Joel Pfister (1997) maintains: “This class’s invention of a therapeutic culture has also been tied to its strategy to establish its ‘inner’ (‘human’) value over the working class and over subordinate ethnic and racial groups” (Pfister, 1997, p. 23). Similarly, in a fascinating article on “suggestibility” Lisa Blackman (2007) also shows how politically and theoretically distinctions have been drawn between those considered suggestible and those who have the capacity to withstand suggestion. Likewise, Tony Bennett (2003) notes, the working-class have consistently been represented as incapable of acquiring the psychological depth needed for self-governance; hence their associations with the “mass”. This does not mean that the working-class is psychologically limited; rather, their subjectivity is understood and incited in terms not of their own making, from another cultural referent, shaped by class interests and institutionalised historically. This makes them appear ripe for the possibilities of transformation, but also puts them at a severe disadvantage when it is not just their culture that is seen to be at fault but also their psychological dispositions, which are necessary for the display of moral legitimation.

Pfister (1997) proposes that modern middle-and upper-class power works in one of its most subtle ways not by uniformly imposing taboos (still a force, but so blatant), or by insisting on the pre-eminence of its “decent”, well-mannered, sentimental character over the character of other groups, but by arguing over the value of types of emotional expression. Whereas John Kasson (1990) details the increasing significance the middle-class placed on etiquette and emotional control, which is often represented in popular culture through repression and the stiff upper lip. Sam Binkley (2004) maintains that the contemporary emergent class fraction of cultural intermediaries working in the informational areas of the economy have eschewed traditional middle-class moralities of self-constraint for morally purposeful hedonism in the “learned capacity for self realisation through highly individualised lifestyle choices” (Binkley, 2004, p. 492). Guy Redden (2008) argues that this is a controlled, rationalised, project-like hedonism directed towards personal progress and self-investment.

As the significance of self-performance to a person’s legitimation and worth increases, Nigel Thrift (2004) argues emotional display too becomes increasingly important. For instance, televisual coverage of responses to 9/11 and 7/7 closed in on faces to see if they were emoting appropriately; thus, making the performance of emotion an index of credibility, of proper emotions. “reality” television offers us the means to scrutinise people’s performances through their emotional expression, as forensic attention is given not just to the performance, to body parts, especially the face, with gesture as the evidence of truth.

By forensically detailing the emotional performance, the programmes allow us, not just to watch what we rarely see (other people’s relationships) over time, but to also construct a spurious relationship between *cause, affect and effect*. On “reality” television we watch actions having very specific affects and effects, elicited from



people and relationships in ways we may have never previously imagined. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) maintain that we really have no idea about what affects human bodies or minds might be capable of in a given encounter, ahead of time, or indeed, more generally what worlds human beings might be capable of building. “reality” television uses the unknown capacity of affect to great effect: we are often shocked and surprised, not knowing what to anticipate, we see affect-in-action, people out and in control, relationships visualised, broken-down and opened-out, amplified in intimate detail.<sup>16</sup>

The fascination with and attempt to use affect has a long history in melodrama, particularly in the theatrical performances of emotional gesture where actors are required to “do sorrow” “perform hate”, etc., to emotionally heighten the gestures represented. “reality” television offers the performance of heightened existence and a more interesting psychic engagement of the ordinary transactions in which we are daily often implicated. Peter Brooks (1976/1995) maintains that melodrama can make ordinarily daily life more interesting through psychological excess, making the ordinary the place for the saturation of significance, suggesting that, “our life may matter”. Affects are dramatised, located, given perspectives and attached to persons (they are sad), evaluated (they deserve to be sad) and offered as evidence of actions undertaken. The body becomes the place for the inscription and performance of highly emotional messages that are often difficult to speak directly (such as jealousy, depression, revenge, passion, desire).

This is complicated even further by the way the psycho-therapeutic experience is developed in different types of “reality” television. The “talking cure” which relies upon people narrating their life stories and performing the confessional in a variety of ways (White, 1992), is also spoken through the legal discourse of “rights” which relies on both telling” and “claiming”, i.e. “I am an innocent victim of hate crime, I claim my rights to state protection as a respectable citizen”, etc. (Moran [*et al.*], 2004). Legality and psychology entwine through *revealing and rights*: Eva Illouz (1997) details how the belief in the positive value of verbalising emotions, as a way of revealing a true self and solving conflicts, generated in the 1970s a new form of intimacy based on “talking” and “revealing”, which enabled emotional fulfilment to become figured as a “right”, a means for “smuggling the middle-class liberal and utilitarian language of rights and bargaining into the bedroom and the kitchen” (Illouz, 1997, p. 49).

By mapping and tracking the programmes we were able to identify how different psychological techniques emerged and merged: the discipline, rules and regulation of behaviour modification, which often relied upon prior emotional confession (psychoanalysis), were organised into (pseudo-legal) claims upon social space, as the next section will demonstrate.

### **3. Metonymic morality: detailing the different techniques**

**3.1 Inciting Shame and Guilt** are key techniques for inciting compliance to potential transformation. Insecurity has to be generated so that security can be achieved – a technique borrowed from advertising. In *Honey we're Killing the Kids*

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<sup>16</sup> See (Wood, 2008), for a specific explication of the use of sadness in its multifarious versions on “reality” television and the responses evoked in our research participants.

children are visually aged 40 years, on a large screen so flaws can be magnified, based on the parent's current childrearing habits. The images of the children morph into those of their parents: the children will become them. The visual transformation is usually responded to with affective horror by the "experts" and the parents, enabling the parent's current behaviour to be identified as the real problem now in the present.<sup>17</sup> The ritualistic visual cruelty of the 45 degree mirror room' on *What not to Wear*, where participants are stripped not only of their clothes but also their dignity, leaves few participants able to defend their bodies as not in need of transformation. In *Supernanny* the camera holds on the face for a long time, whilst Jo (the *Supernanny*) asks mothers to explain their own or their children's bad behaviour. We call this the "judgement shot" as participants are held to account. Guilt is induced by the intense attention of the camera, as participants try hard to explain behaviour that often has no straightforward justification

**3.2 Rules and Advice** are offered as the key to transformation. Rules offer the behavioural modification approach to disciplining behaviour (repeated learning by regulation). The funniest example was "*Bring Your Husband to Heel*",<sup>18</sup> where a dog trainer modifies badly behaving husbands using positive-reinforcement techniques, which were shown to "work". Rules and reinforcement are offered as the solution to the domestic division of labour (e.g. *Who Rules the Roost*) and to mothering practices. *Supernanny* deploys the most rules for shaping and containing behaviour; condensing and establishing parameters to performance where Jo "the expert" uses the "Naughty Step", "the stay in bed technique", "voice training technique", "same page training technique" and "good eating technique".<sup>19</sup> *What not to Wear* use "style rules" for each female body shape,<sup>20</sup> whose take-up is encouraged through a mixture of therapeutic register and behaviour modification: following their rules can potentially "give you confidence", "enable you to cope". Their narrative closure of each programme contains an account of how psychological transformation (through clothes) will enable, not just claims on others, but also greater entitlement to social space: "now she has enough

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<sup>17</sup> *Honey We're Killing the Kids!* was first screened 7 June 2005, on BBC3 (digital) commissioned through BBC Learning and produced by BBC Manchester's Format Entertainment department. Kris Mullins, a Government health adviser, uses data compiled from a series of scientific and medical tests overseen by the Institute of Child Health, provides rules for families to follow on everything from diet, exercise, literacy, sleep and leisure activities, with additional challenges tailored to particular families.

<sup>18</sup> *Bring Your Husband to Heel* was first shown on 24 August 2005, made by Talkback Thames for BBC2. The show, based around the premise that men share 85% of their DNA with dogs, used hidden cameras to film the men, who think they are taking part in a documentary about relationship roles. The BBC was forced to issue an apology over the programme after receiving complaints it was sexist towards men.

<sup>19</sup> *Supernanny* was first screened on 1 July 2004 on Channel 4, made by RDF. There is also a US version. Clips of rules can be found on the official website [Supernanny.co.uk](http://Supernanny.co.uk).

<sup>20</sup> Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine joined the BBC in 2001 to present *What Not to Wear*. The show moved from BBC 2 to BBC 1 running for five series and was also broadcast around the world. In October 2006 they launched *Trinny & Susannah Undress* on ITV 1. The spin-off style books include *What Not to Wear*, *What You Wear Can Change Your Life*, *What Your Clothes Say About You* and *The Survival Guide*, which have been translated throughout the world. They have both written for *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*. In 2006 BBC1 re-launched *What not to Wear* with new presenters: Lisa Butcher and Mica Paris. The web site for the programme contains "Exercises to Boost your Confidence" (based on positive reinforcement techniques and psychotherapy) and "Style Rules" (behaviour modification).

confidence to enter the world”, “now she’ll be able to hold her head up high at work”, “now her children will respect her”.

The so-called lifestyle (clothing, mothering, eating, exercising) “experts” used by the programmes legitimate the normative by promoting the depth model of self: inner qualities are revealed to be hidden by the wrong culture, body, clothes, speech and disposition, hidden qualities that only the experts can see. These therapeutic techniques are powerful as they also connect to other narratives, for instance, the traditional romance narrative (e.g. Cinderella) where the “real” inner qualities are found through visual and linguistic excavation.

The middle-class concern with uniqueness and individuality is exemplified by the consistent emphasis placed on depth psychology via *excavation* – finding and promoting the idea of the inner self. What we see is the paradoxical production of *normative uniqueness*: as if the individual is unique but actually corresponds to the middle-class particular-universal.

**3.3 Social mobility through self-performance:** “reality” television offers the promise of transformation by taking people out of their familiar social positions and “testing” them in another. This formula is especially evident on *Faking It* – where people are tested to see if they can perform as “authentic” in another space. Usually, but not always, the more “creative and artistic”, middle-class cultural milieus are valued more highly.<sup>21</sup> The social mobility programmes make it appear that change is easy if the person is willing to try, i.e., has the “right” dispositions or skills. *Ladette to Lady* focuses on the “willingness” of the ladettes: any resistance is presented as pathological, “unable to change”.

In *What the Butler Saw*, a working-class family is taken to an aristocratic manor to compete to become the best “Lord” and “Lady” (with a prize of £50,000). They are “taught” skills such as eating with a full set of silver service cutlery, but no general knowledge on behavior. What we constantly see is how the skills are not enough, and no matter how much labour they invest in getting the skills right, they always make a mistake. And it is the mistakes that generate humor, a dramatic technique which has been used for some time in transformations films such as *Pretty Women* and *My Fair Lady*. Yvonne Tasker (1998) argues that these films offer the audience pleasure from “catching out” those with aspiration to become socially mobile. The judges who do the “catching-out” on *What the Butler Saw* are disguised as servants, yet visibly marked as working-class: this technique of using the working-class as ventriloquists of bourgeois knowledge is not new, as Bruce Robbins (1986) shows in his study of literature. The servants state, “you can’t make a silk purse from a sow’s ear”, pointing to the impossibility of class-passing. Yet visualising this impossibility makes the individual appear as totally responsible for their lack of knowledge and high-culture. The how of knowledge, that is, how to operationalise knowledge, emotions and performance (Bourdieu, 1980/1990) is hidden. Participants not only lack the specific skills but also the social skills, the cultural capital, the emotional dispositions.

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<sup>21</sup> *Faking It* was first shown on 1 September 2000, made by RDF Media for Channel 4 (UK), sold to the US. Each programme follows a volunteer from one walk of life who lives and trains with an expert from a completely different field. See (Lawler, 1999), for a critique of how narratives of social movement position working-class culture as something to be left behind.

When Mick, the fake-fashion designer in *Faking It* is given a script to repeat he fails: he is not used to public speaking, he forgets lines and is unable to articulate those he remembers in the manner required - with confidence. Yet his skills (his design and sewing are of a very high standard) do “pass”. Through its fetishism of skill and technique “reality” television makes it appear as if skill and disposition (willingness) are all that is needed to become socially mobile; ironically at a time when social mobility had ground to a halt in the UK. Yet mobility would be a different inheritance, a different economical location and a different education system.

“reality” television thus objectifies class by detaching persons from the set of relations (working-class) that make up their experience of the world, to place them inside another set of relations. Objectification is accomplished through the technologies deployed (camera angles, lighting, *mis-en-scene*, music, etc), performances, speaking to camera; all of which constitute aural and visual evidence about the person and their value. The participant is increasingly asked to lay claim to features of the context or environment *as if* they were the outcome of the testing of his or her personal capacities (Lury, 1998).

The emphasis on skills and individual performances also flattens social inequalities so that it is not just class, but also race and gender that are reduced to individualised self-performances. Racism is reduced to a relationship/personal problem through televisual techniques of event, structure and interaction and the individual display of the (lack of) cultural capital; for instance, in *Wife Swap*,<sup>22</sup> when a black working-class family is set against a white working-class family, the conflicts and drama arise around the issue of respectability and aspiration. In the initial set-up (pun intended), where the location, behaviours, taste, cultures and characteristics of the families are displayed, it is the white working-class family that is positioned as the repository of all bad behaviour through its lack of domestic organisation, lack of belief in education, lack of attention to their children, laziness and untidiness and limited cultural knowledge; its members also smoked, swore loudly and frequently, were fat and drank – all coded as irresponsible behaviour. The black family is positioned as the repository of respectability, as normative through its belief in education, discipline, hard-work and cleanliness. The racism of the white family is located as part of its total pathology. All the action is structured around opposition to respectability and aspiration, making the semiotic connection – fat, smoking, drinking, swearing, non-respectable = white and working class = racist. The power of the semiotic connection lies in repetition within and across programmes (and across wider social spaces such as government rhetoric<sup>23</sup>).

The “reality” programmes that recruit middle-class participants (*Grown Up Gappers*, *Nigel's Place in France*, *No Going Back*) can be distinguished by the amount of time they spend on developing the individual's story. Instead of shaming, fetishising or holding participants accountable for bad behaviour, they focus instead on the reflexive telling of the self. Emphasis is placed on the psychological journey: participant Paul Edmonson, an airport manager, on *Grown Up Gappers* travels to

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<sup>22</sup> *Wife Swap*, first screened 7 January 2003, made by RDF for Channel 4. There is also a US version shown in the UK and *Celebrity Wife Swap* and *Wife Swap: the Aftermath*. It is also a DVD board game.

<sup>23</sup> (Wood and Skeggs, 2008).

Africa to “re-connect to the world”, he repeatedly speaks to the camera about his self-development, how he used to be cowardly and shirked emotional responsibility but has now through his journey learnt to become more responsible. Instead of being held accountable by the “judgement shot”, he speaks directly to camera to reflect upon a journey of personal development. The whole hour is devoted to this telling. In *Nigel's Place in France*, the whole series is based on his journey of self-discovery. The display of an expanded reflexive self contrast with the accountable self.

Another metonymic technique used to incite the judgement of the performance of self-investment is through the quantification of the cost to the nation of a person's behaviour..

### **3.4 Measuring bodies, quantifying value:**

*You are What You Eat, Fat Nation, Celebrity Fat Club* and their numerous replications directly focus on lack of correct knowledge, lack of care of the self, lack of discipline and the likely impact upon productivity (jobs, care of the family) and the nation (illness). The very public act of estimating a person's national economic cost is made visible metonymically, so that singular practices such as eating take-aways stand in for the total value of the person, and cellulite is the somatic inscription of the self's numerous failings.<sup>24</sup> It is the failure to continually invest that Francis Bonner (2008) reveals to be a key structuring device of many programmes:

“[W]hether in their renovations, their accumulation of debt or clutter, or the inadequate attention paid to running their businesses. Above all they had failed to maintain their relationships as the years passed since they were first established. The self-monitoring that the reflexive self requires, itself needs time to implement...The person not in need of a makeover is a person who has *paid attention to the passage of time.*” (Bonner, 2008, p. 556) (emphasis added)

Viviana Zelizer (2005) shows how this analysis of investment is legislated for in civil law (especially divorce settlements) that assess the value of investment in a relationship. She demonstrates how the law establishes the monetary worth of intimacy by matching the right sort of (literal) monetary value with the social relationship, institutionalising and making visible what we see on “reality” television. And the adjudication is also similar: audiences are offered the position not just of witness of the performance, or collector of evidence, but of juror, invited to assess the properties of the person, their investments and their relationships.

### **Conclusion**

By these techniques of humiliation, evaluation, dislocation, reification, objectification and quantification which metonymically attach value to people through the evaluation of the emotional, dispositional and bodily performance, the working-class appear to display and dramatise themselves as inadequate, in need

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<sup>24</sup> (2008), identify these programmes as an attempt to develop a citizenry that can compensate for national welfare cuts.

of self-investment. They are shown to have not just deficit culture, but also deficit subjectivity. “reality” television points to solutions, ways to resolve this lack, this inadequate personhood through future person-production – a projected investment in self-transformation – in which participants resolve to work on themselves and their relationships, to make up losses.

Tim Dant (2005) points to the ambivalence that Bauman wishes to celebrate in postmodern ethics, induced through irony, subtlety, shock, twists, shocks, delay of closure and humour to engage and provoke, creating moral outcomes that are not too simple. Bauman (1997) suggests that the “story comes to the viewer pre-packaged” (Bauman, 2002, p. 66). But on “reality” television it is not the story that come to the viewer pre-packaged but the participant, entering the event already value-loaded, their moral subject-positions highly circumscribed, cast to fulfil specific criteria: in need of, or wanting, or willing to participate in self - transformation. Continual repetition of good and bad subject positions across nearly all programmes and through other media coverage (internet forums, gossip magazines and tabloid newspapers all contribute to the evaluation of characters) metonymically associate specific moral values with specific self-performances.

Self-transformation television has to entertain in order to produce viewers. It does this by dramatically visualising “problems” in need of improvement and providing advice on how this can be achieved. The textual production does not offer a great deal of space for ambiguity, suggesting that one of the significant features of “reality” television is its condensation of moral value onto people types. It is a loaded and coded situation when working- class participants are recruited, shown to be in need of transformation (to the new particular universal middle-class standards), dislocated from their cultural resources and psychologised as personally responsible not only for their lack of previous self-investment but also for their lack of access to the requisite cultural resources and emotional techniques. Class inequality is displayed as subjectivity. Yet this should not surprise us, as the self-performance required is already premised on historically loaded psychological explanations that delimit the possibilities for interpreting working-class subjectivity. “reality” television repeatedly asks participants to perform an impossibility: the self-legitimation of themselves as invested in that to which they do not have access.

However, and significantly, this new disciplinary technique of synoptical performance does not always work. Our audience research revealed strong defensive reactions by our Black and white working-class groups in relation to the demonisation of Jade Goody and Jordan (Katie Price). Different moral values – of labouring and care – are contrasted with the programmes’ moral value-loading and participants socially locate themselves *with* Jade (ironically as “ghetto rats”<sup>25</sup>). However, the negative value loading does work for our middle-class group who believe people who appear on “reality” programmes are “cheap celebrities” “getting something for nothing” (see (Skeggs and Wood, 2008).

Even though we can see the extensive promotion of particular middle-class values as universal and normative not just on “reality” television but across most sectors of society, the participants on “reality” television, often set up to be valueless, have the

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<sup>25</sup> (Skeggs and Wood, 2008).

potential to surprise us. In the forced transformation programmes people excel at that which they are supposed to fail in; they show integrity when they are positioned as trivial; they show good will when put into ridiculous situations which are designed to humiliate. Participants do challenge their coding and loading through their self-performances. Even though “reality” television is highly edited, thereby containing the drama it provokes, some of the affect *seeps beyond its containment*. “reality” television offers the pleasure of watching the unexpected. And it is in this affective seepage that moments stand out against the attempts to universalise the particular, to place, contain and devalue working-class people and culture; where attempts to make the middle-class particular universal and normative are ruptured. This may be only temporary, but at least it’s something, a start.

Code: 1) Holiday Reps (HR) 2) Wife Swap 3) Faking It (FI) 4) What the Butler Saw (WBS) 5) Get a New Life (GNL) 6) The Apprentice (A) 7) What not to Wear (WNT) 8) Supernanny (SN) 9) Ladette to Lady (LL) and 10) Grown up Gappers (GUG)

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### **Resumo**

Sustentando-se na análise textual de um projecto de pesquisa da ESRC, intitulado “*Making Class and the Self through Mediated Ethical Scenarios*”, o presente artigo ilustra como a TV do real oferece um barómetro visível do valor moral de uma pessoa. A pesquisa incluiu uma análise da mudança para a auto-legitimação, da importância crescente da reflexividade e do declínio da classe proposta pela tese da individualização. Centramos na auto-transformação dos programas da TV do real como exemplos públicos da dramatização da individualização. O excesso de recrutamento de diferentes tipos de participantes da classe trabalhadora para estes programas e o posicionamento de muitos a necessitarem de transformação permitiu uma análise da forma como certos povos e culturas estão posicionados, avaliado e interpretado como inadequado, insuficiente e a requerer melhorias. Descobrimos que a individualização promovida ao longo dos programas esteve sempre dependente do acesso e da operacionalização do capital social, cultural, económico e simbólico específico.

### **Palavras-chave**

Economia moral; Análise textual; TV do real.

### **Résumé**

S'appuyant sur l'analyse textuelle du projet de recherche de ESRC “*Making Class and the Self through Mediated Ethical Scenarios*”, cet article montre comment la télé-réalité offre un baromètre visible de la valeur morale d'une personne. La recherche comprenait une analyse du changement pour l'auto-légitimation, de l'importance croissante de la réflexivité et le déclin de la classe proposée par la thèse de l'individualisation. Nous mettons l'accent sur l'auto-transformation des programmes de la télé-réalité à titre d'exemples public de la véritable drame de l'individualisation. Le recrutement excessif des différents types de participants de la classe ouvrière pour ces programmes et la mise en place de nombreux susceptibles d'avoir besoin de traitement a permis une analyse de la façon dont certains peuples et les cultures sont positionnés, mesurés et interprétée comme inapproprié, inadéquat et nécessitent des améliorations. Nous avons constaté que l'individualisation promu dans les programmes a toujours été tributaire de l'accès et l'opérationnalisation du capital social, culturel, économique et symbolique spécifique.

### **Mots-clés**

Économie morale; Analyse textuelle; Télé-réalité.