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## **'Oh goodness, I am watching 'reality' television': How methods make class in audience research**

***Bev Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumim***

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### **Abstract**

One of the most striking challenges encountered during the empirical research of our audience research project Making Class and the Self through Televised Ethical Scenarios (funded as part of the ESRC's Identities and Social Action Programme) stemmed from how the different resources held by our research participants impacted upon the kind of data collected. We argue that social class is reconfigured in each research encounter, not only through the adoption of moral positions in relation to 'reality' television as we might expect, but also through the forms accessible to participants to articulate their responses. Different methods enabled display of dissimilar relationships to television, which included reflexive telling, immanent positioning, affect and the use of moral authority. Understanding the form of participants' responses as well as content was crucial to the television encounter. These methodological events underpin our earlier theoretical critique of the 'turn' to subjectivity in social theory, where we suggest that the performance of the self is an activity that reproduces the social distinctions that theorists claim are in demise<sup>1</sup>.

### **Keywords**

Social Class; Methodology; Audience Research; 'Reality' Television; Self; Morality.

## **Introduction: Class, self and audience research**

Making Class and the Self Through Mediated Ethical Scenarios is an ESRC funded 'reality' television audience research project, which examines current social theory which proposes that with the rise of the reflexive self traditional categories such as class and race have declined in significance. 'Reality' television's obsession with what Dovey (2000) identifies as 'spectacular subjectivity' might be seen as testament to this apparent social shift and we collected audience responses to programmes which foreground self-transformation, in part to interrogate the 'individualisation thesis' of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) further. The analysis of class formations in audience research slipped from the research agenda in recent years, despite efforts in the 1980s and 1990s by Andrea Press (1990); Ann Gray (1992) and Helen Thomas (1995) to keep it alive. These studies followed David Morley's (1980) ground-breaking work in The Nationwide Audience. Morley's study was criticised for social determinism by reifying class through occupational categories (Buckingham, 1991). However, writing of late Morley notes:

The recent swing away from theories of social determination, towards the now widely held presumption of the 'undecidability' of these influences, has thus given rise to what may be among the most pernicious of the myths that have come to dominate our field... [D]espite the claims of much post-structuralist theory, class is still very much with us, if in new and always changing forms. (Morley 2006: 108)

The reasons for the 'swing' away from class can be attributed to the post-structural theoretical shifts in thinking about contemporary identity formation. Those who agree on a more general move to processes of 'individualisation' often suggest that the relocation of shared, grounded and localized forms of identity to more particularized and reflexive forms of selfhood is increasingly resourced by mediated symbolic forms, yet there is still relatively little empirical

research which details how this process works. Morley's suggestion that 'class is still very much with us' calls for research to address the media's role in changing identity formations, and we intend our project to go some way towards addressing that enigma.

Thus far our audience research suggests, in parallel with other work in sociology on class in the contemporary era, that class as a category indeed remains significant, but is being remade in new ways (for a useful summary see Lawler 2005). In this article we want to highlight how the politics of research - of calling research subjects to account for themselves through the methods available to us - dovetails into the ways in which class is currently being reconfigured. Of course others have called for a greater understanding of research scenarios as types of interaction generated in-situ (for example see Wilkinson, 1998) and we want to contribute to that debate by exploring how research methods pre-figure the mobilisation of class capitals. For example, interviewing relies on self-reflexivity, but self-reflexivity does not offer the uncoupling of agency from structure, as the individualisation thesis posits, self-reflexivity itself depends upon access to resources and concomitant forms of capital that are classed, raced and gendered (Adkins, 2002; Skeggs, 2002). We therefore draw attention to how the design of a research project can allow research participants access to different modes of articulation, revealed here through a multi-layered methodology. Thus the actual findings from the data cannot (and should not) be easily separated out from the form of their production. In our research the groups of women recruited from different classed and raced backgrounds deploy their available cultural resources to produce 'performances' of class, made rather than found, in each particular type of research event. This challenges the traditional methodological emphasis on excavation (finding and findings) and puts emphasis on the conditions of possibility and techniques available for each research encounter.

## **Summary of research design**

Our multi-layered methodology allowed the production of four different types of knowledge relating to forty research participants and their relationship to 'reality' television. Because of the assumptions about the gendered make-up of the textual formats and audiences ('women's television) for transformative styles of 'reality' television, and due to the complicated relationship 'new' modes of self work and reflexivity have within a longer history of gender relations, all of our informants chosen were women as we are primarily concerned with the intersection of class and gender.<sup>ii</sup> We began with six months of textual and inter-textual analysis to map the range of 'reality' television, finally choosing ten series (out of forty two airing on free channels available at the time) to represent the scope of self-transformation programmes. Our textual analysis was followed by sociological interviews to locate the participants in terms of their social, cultural and economic contexts, domestic geographies and lifestyles. We then organised viewing sessions using the 'text-in-action' method developed by Helen Wood (2005; 2007; in press), which involved watching television programmes with the women and recording their responses whilst they viewed. Finally, focus groups were conducted as a way of contrasting individual responses with viewing events and public statements about 'reality' television.

Snowballing was used to contact 40 women living in four different locations of South London,<sup>iii</sup> accessing existing social networks of women from particular geographical areas through key informants in a broad effort to reflect the race and class mix of the social milieu of South London. Our four key informants included a white-British middle-class woman, a white-British working class woman, a British-Pakistani working-class woman, and a Black-British working class woman. The social make-up of the groups is outlined below:

**Addington:** 10 white working-class (5 mothers, 5 not mothers), ages 18-72. Occupations mainly centre on care work and full-time mothering.

**Brockley:** 6 black British working-class, 3 white working-class, 1 Maltese (only one not a mother) ages 26-68. Occupations in public sector and service sector administrative, caring and secretarial work.

**Clapham:** Southern and British Asian, Asian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, settled and recently arrived; trans-national class differences, (7 mothers, 2 not mothers) ages 18-45. Two are highly educated professional women, one student, the rest full-time mothers or part-time helpers with husband's work.

**Forest Hill:** 7 white, 3 self-defined as mixed race, all self defined as middle-class (3 mothers, 7 not mothers), ages 30-57. Occupations centre on public sector educational, art and psy-drama work.

### **Class identifications and access**

*We used a framework developed from Bourdieu's description of four different types of capital - economic, symbolic, social and cultural – attached to our research participants in different volumes and compositions, convertible into value depending upon the fields in which they are exchanged (see Skeggs, 1997, 2004). iv This enables us to see how gender, class and race coagulate over space and time and generate a person's overall value. For instance, the performance of respectability figures class, gender and race in different ways across space and time (e.g. the nation), conferring different types of value – a moral economy of personhood.*

We also asked individuals whether and how they would identify themselves in class and race terms. The group we suspected to be 'middle class' (from our key informant) almost all defined themselves as such, or in some cases referred to themselves as part of a 'creative class'. They articulated their position with confidence and without the embarrassment that Sayer (2005) suggests is part of a middle-class disposition, but rather saw the category as an empirical description of their material conditions. The Asian group responded by reflecting their transnational experiences and we translated class through their movement from one national classification system to another, and often back again, knowing that some forms of capital travel and convert whilst others do not (e.g. education,

occupational knowledge, style, religion).<sup>v</sup> Specific configurations of economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital located this group in different local exchange-value circuits in South Asia and the UK. Many members of the black and white British-born working-class groups struggled to easily locate a class position and either refused, avoided, dis-identified or read the categories as some form of moral judgement. When asked about race they also avoided or challenged any potential judgement by stating 'the human race'. Gender as a category was not morally loaded in the same way. However, in response to the discomfort and difficulties around issues of class and race we developed questions such as: 'do you think you get a fair deal in life?' These led to responses that were very often explicitly about nation and race and the inequalities of the British class system.<sup>vi</sup>

Our own social positions helped to make class visible and experienced in the research encounter. Participants interpreted us differently as: an equal who happened to be an academic, a junior researcher, a student, a representative of the state or social worker, someone they could help or who could help them, or someone whose identity was simply baffling. As we will discuss later this can have a profound influence over the discursive terms of engagement in research settings. We three researchers carried out the research each with our own different volumes and compositions of capital, able to draw upon different resources to establish rapport with our participants, thereby impacting upon the production of data.

*Class also played a significant role in accessing and maintaining contact with our participants over the different stages of the research. Those who planned with diaries, mostly our middle-class participants were able to organise our demands into a projected future, but at other times we were quite literally left on doorsteps despite our best efforts. We also met with some reluctance from the working-class groups that can be explained by suspicion of the increased monitoring and surveillance of the working class by government bodies as well as academics.vii*

*The deployment of different methods enabled us to see how class was being performed differently through the three stages of our empirical research: interviews, text-in-actions and focus groups.*

### **Interviews: self-reflexivity as capital**

Our in-depth interviews situated television viewing in daily life, producing a broader social context for the reception of 'reality' television. Perhaps not surprisingly middle-class women were most comfortable in the interview situation. They spoke as equals to the interviewer, at ease with their shared status as professionals, and often encouraging a dialogic encounter. They displayed self-reflexivity in response to questions about their everyday life and provided scholarly and critically-distanced views on 'reality' television, involving lengthy elaborations. Our middle-class participants also often assumed that the researchers would share with them the cultural attitude of derision towards 'reality' television, and indeed television per se, as a bad object (Seiter 1990). That is not to say that these women did not watch and express pleasure in 'reality' television, but when asked to discuss particular programmes they did so by displaying their skill in holding the form at a distance, as the following exchange with Ann (who in the initial phone contact claimed not to watch 'reality' television) illustrates:

**Ann:** Oh yes, oh my goodness, yes I love Supernanny, I even bought the book.

**Bev:** Really, I'll write this one down, book [laughs].

**Ann:** Oh goodness, I am watching 'reality' TV.

**Bev:** So you would purposefully watch Supernanny?

**Ann:** Well I watched a bit of it and I did, I even did watch it purposefully, but I think its novelty would have worn off. I think I must have watched about three of them and the reason I watched them is that I have difficulty with my five year old and... she's a willful child and ... in the evening totally strung out over what, she's very ... really-

**Bev:** Right so Supernanny would be a?



**Ann:** But also I quite liked, I like the advice, I didn't, I mean I didn't like the 'reality' aspect of it, I thought these poor families, they were so exposed, these couples with difficulties in their relationships, everything was just wide open for the whole world to see and I thought that was terrible. But in terms of, I did use tips yes and I bought the book and I read it in about two hours and it was very accessible 'cos a lot of things, parenting books are American, and Supernanny books ... by her writer under her name, is actually very, I thought it was very accessible... and it was very English and that was good.

Ann expresses surprise when she realizes that a programme she watches counts as 'reality' television and proceeds to assess and evaluate her interest in the programme in question. Through her ability to perform self-reflexively Ann demonstrates that she is able to provide a contextualized and 'useful' educational reason for watching, whilst still being able to recognize the apparent flaws of the programme type – the "reality' aspect' - and demonstrate a considered opinion on exploitation. She even notes the irony in her own position of being engaged in something that she has previously stressed has absolutely no value. She is able to turn her engagement into a cultural skill - reading the book - very quickly, stressing that because it is English it offers 'tips' of educational value and therefore contains some worth. Her surprise at her own viewing choice and its conversion into a cultural asset that is both told and performed (as reason and irony) enables Ann to use reflexivity as a form of cultural capital to maintain her critical distance and moral value position in relation to 'reality' television. Ann therefore offers a post-hoc justification for her viewing that is a reflexive research 'performance'. Her viewing is in fact very unreflexive – she is surprised by the fact she has watched the programme. But it would be impossible for her to have an un-reflexive viewing position, for then she would have to admit that she watches that which she derides and condemns, and which in the hierarchy of television taste cultures appears very close to the bottom.

Responses like Ann's were reproduced with surprising regularity across all three methods with our Forest Hill group, who offered a highly articulate display of reflexive telling that had little bearing on the practice of viewing itself, even though some did admit to just slumping in front of the television (but only occasionally, only when they had worked really hard, only because they wanted to know what was going on in popular culture, etc.). No other group felt they had to display such a critical stance or self-justification for their television viewing. Ann Gray (1992) in her research on the use of the video in the 1990s also found that middle-class women had to authorize their viewing through some higher cultural source like a film critic. Just as our working-class participants did not want to be attached to the category of class, our middle class respondents did not want to be attached to that which is a cultural display of working-class (low) taste. They needed to show not only cultural detachment, but also cultural superiority to the bad object.

The interview was a much more difficult and uncomfortable event for women who are not middle class (across different race categorizations). Some of the working-class women offered shorter, more stilted, responses to our questions about television without much elaboration of the kind that was gleaned from the middle-class women. For example when asked why they liked Wife Swap some replied simply 'because its funny'; a response which apparently needs no further explanation and certainly no justification. Their approach to 'reality' television as entertainment did not require the mobilization of discourses of cultural value as a form of capital. Instead their 'performance' was much less reflexive in relation to the display of their understanding of hierarchies of taste, and revolved around questions of immediate pleasure. This could potentially support a finding that 'reality' television is less significant to the working-class women, since quantitatively they had less to say even though they acknowledge watching more often than the middle-class women. However, we think that this more accurately reflects which forms of capital can be discursively activated in the research

encounter, a point which is exacerbated further in some of the interviews with the women from the Clapham group who were new migrants to Britain.

In the Clapham group, nation, race, class and gender (via motherhood) intersect and an extreme example was the interview with Saj. Saj is a Pakistani woman who did not have enough English for the interview (we only discovered this on arrival at her home). But Saj is a fan of Supernanny and was keen to take part in the project and so the interview continued. The interview was uncomfortable for both parties because it became clear that Saj viewed the interviewer as a representative of the state, offering her bank statements as if to prove her legitimacy. She also desperately wanted to answer the questions 'correctly' in order to say the 'right' things about her daily life in Britain, and was determined to display a positive attitude to 'reality' television. It was as if Saj thought the interview was a citizenship test and we wanted to hear that she thought Britain and British television was 'good'. There is a powerful context around migration and the politics of culture at work here that produces the type of discourse available within the interview encounter. It seems that Saj is attempting to draw upon her knowledge of British popular culture in order to articulate a position of rightful 'belonging' to a more powerful authority.

These different orders of discourse made in our interviews mean that after the second stage of our research we worried about the comparability of the types of data generated from each of our groups. It is clear that each research encounter offers a particular mode of articulation that relates as much to available resources and powerful contexts as they do to the actual 'findings' on 'reality' television. Form and content are therefore intricately entwined. The middle-class women are able to operationalize their capital by self-authorizing through knowledge and relationship to cultural value and taste, whilst the working-class women often gave answers which were immediate, self-evident and seemed not to require contextualization. Even more strikingly the powerful context of the transnational migrant created a situation that completely determined the way in

which the interview was able to unfold. How could these very divergent types of responses, that were as different in form as much as content, offer us equivalent insights into the women's relationships with 'reality' television? Using alternative methods, giving us access to different types of knowledge, allowed us to explore this further.

### **Text-in-Action and the Affective Textual Encounter**

The second empirical method, text-in-action, was developed by Wood (2005;2007; in press) in research on women's relationships with talk television to capture the dynamic interaction between viewer and television programme as an event taking place in a particular moment in time, rather than as in traditional reception research where data is only gathered after viewing. Digital voice recorders captured the viewing 'event': the dialogue and sound from the television programme along with any dialogue from the viewer. In these sessions research participants watched a full-length 'reality' television episode, which they selected from a list of ten, alone or in groups of two or three. Of course the presence of the researcher and the recording equipment all make the viewing far from 'natural' and by inserting ourselves into the viewing process we do not suggest that this method gives a more 'direct' or 'true' picture of the viewing process; it is still a constructed research event, like the interview.

The text-in-action method produced both comfort and discomfort for our research participants, depending upon their cultural resources. Some working-class women were suspicious of us: 'what, you want to watch us watching television and you're being paid for it!' (Michelle, Addington), whereas our middle-class participants were keen to know the 'rules of engagement', sometimes even questioning the methodological design. However, in other cases the unfamiliar research encounter was made less daunting since the television programme provided a focus, relegating the researcher to the background. This opportunity allowed some women, who had difficulties in directly articulating their responses to 'reality' television in the interview stage a space to 'perform' their viewing relationship in a less self-conscious way.

Our text in action material is transcribed in three columns so that the soundtrack of the television programme appears alongside a description of what is taking place on screen, and alongside any utterances made by the viewer (see Extract 1). What is significant here is how our viewing sessions enabled white and black working-class British women from Addington and Brockley to display a type of authority to which they did not have access in the interview situation. This is an authority not related to reflexive articulation, but from an entirely different relationship to television. The working-class participants responded to the 'reality' television participants as if 'real', not as representations or knowledge providers, investing in positions in relation to the television participants' lives. For example, whilst viewing an episode of Wife Swap, which pitted two women against each other (Tracy who has one child -Lottie, is aspirational and works full-time outside the home for at least 12 hours a day for 'nice things', and Kate who has six children and works full-time in the home), participants from Addington and Brockley take the moral high ground in relation to parenting, demonstrating empathy and judgement through personal experience, immanently positioning themselves within the unfolding drama. They dramatically enact their own life choice - making maternal and domestic sacrifices for the family - as the right choice, displaying and authorising their emotional labour:

## Text-in-Action: Extract 1:

<p><b>Audio Marker</b></p> <p><b>Visual image</b></p>	<p><b>Programme audio extract</b></p> <p><b><u>Wife Swap</u><sup>viii</sup></b></p>	<p><b>Viewer's responses (Brockley)</b></p>
<p>18.50</p> <p>Kate driving home from work</p> <p>Kate pulling onto drive</p> <p>Kate enters the house</p> <p>Kate to Camera</p> <p>Shot of Lottie sleeping</p> <p>Kate and Mark in the living room</p>	<p><b>Kate:</b> I can't believe it's eight o'clock and I left home 13 hours ago no wonder I've got a headache its just ridiculous</p> <p><b>Voice over:</b> By the time Kate gets home its eight thirty.</p> <p><b>Kate:</b> 'How's Lottie'</p> <p><b>Mark:</b> She's fast asleep</p> <p><b>Kate:</b> Ah</p> <p><b>Mark:</b> She was shattered</p> <p><b>Kate:</b> I'm quite disappointed that Lottie was in bed and I didn't get to bath her</p> <p>I'm so tired</p> <p>My body feels really alive but my head feels dead. Quite often at home it's the other way round.</p> <p><b>Mark:</b> Do you think Tracy would be feeling like that now?</p>	<p><b>Sally:</b> Nightmare, absolute nightmare init?</p> <p><b>Sonia:</b> I had to leave home at seven with [name of her child] to get to work and drop them off, I had to leave at seven</p> <p><b>Sally:</b> Oh no she's crying, she had a mare of a day.</p> <p><b>All:</b> Yeah.</p> <p><b>Sonia:</b> She's not had her all day has she? I suppose with all them children ((? ))</p> <p><b>Sal:</b> But <u>that's</u> not fair on <u>that</u> child! (tone of outrage)</p> <p><b>Sonia:</b> Exactly and that's what she's feelin'</p> <p><b>Sal:</b> ((?))</p> <p><b>Sonia:</b> mmm I'm taking the mother's role [<u>performs</u>] and when I woke you up and dragged you out of bed at six o'clock in the morning</p> <p>[and dropped you off at seven o'clock</p> <p><b>Sal:</b> [to have you out by seven</p> <p><b>Sonia:</b> and now it's eight thirty at</p>

		<p>night and you ain't seen me all day. (2) The kid's in bed.</p> <p><b>Sal:</b> How you gonna make up for that?</p> <p><b>Sonia:</b> You <u>can't</u> [tone of righteousness]</p>
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It has been regularly argued by uses and gratifications researchers, that media texts are used as reassurance for people's own lives and choices which is visible in this exchange (e.g. Katz and Blumer 1974). But these exchanges also reveal some of the ways 'reality' television enables moral authority to be taken by working-class mothers. This moral positioning was not spoken in the interview setting but was dramatised in the text-in-action sessions. Good parenting was prised over, and often placed in opposition to aspiration and social mobility, a structural opposition also constructed through the programme's format. How these responses are enabled through the method cannot be disentangled from an understanding of the operation of gendered and classed discourses and practices in relation to 'reality' television.

The moral position taken by our participants is in conflict with current British government initiatives to encourage mothers to return to the labour market as fast as possible (see McRobbie 2006). On the one hand our participants' reaction against the upwardly mobile woman helps legitimate their own positioning outside the labour market. But on the other, in refusing taking up the position of aspiration and mobility, in favour of giving time to children through more traditional modes of femininity, these working-class women are actually resisting some of the contemporary pressures on womanhood. Valerie Walkerdine points out how when women enter the labour market without qualifications it is mostly to 'poorly paid, often part-time work, [with] little job security and periods of unemployment' (2003:241). Therefore it appears that our research participants offer a realistic appraisal – through television -of the pain and pleasure of their

future possibilities: staying at home with friends and children may be preferable to a dead-end job and life lived at the site of the 'working-poor'.

The text-in-action method was not used by our middle-class participants to generate a moral authority missing in the interview encounter and overall, they were less closely involved with some of the details occurring in the lives of 'reality' television participants, showing less empathy with the protagonists, and less likely to immanently locate themselves within the drama. They were more likely to express concern over representation or the format of the programme, its manipulation of the 'real', and its potential for exploitation of participants. This does not mean that the middle-class women are not drawn into a relationship with those on television, but rather it shows that as in the interview, they display their ability to be reflexive, often abstracting from the particular scenario on television to wider social debates. For example, while viewing the same episode of Wife Swap discussed above, Ruby2, from our Forest Hill group alludes to a wider debate about family life and work-life balance:



## Text-in-Action: Extract 2

<b>Audio marker</b>	<b><u>Programme audio extract: Wife Swap</u></b>	<b><u>Viewers' responses (Forest Hill)</u></b>
<p>34:20</p> <p>Image of Tracy reading a book</p> <p>Cut to Trevor taking child out of room:</p> <p>Trevor to camera</p> <p>Shot of Trevor going out of door</p>	<p><i>Voice over:</i> Things are also tense in the Thomas household as Tracy decides its time for a break. Trevor has to put the kids to bed before heading off to work.</p> <p><b>Trevor:</b> Listen I want no talking Josie, no talking to Lucy you understand me its bed time.</p> <p>Good night</p> <p><b>Child:</b> good night</p> <p><b>Trevor:</b> Sometimes like this I'm working till about two – four thirty in the morning just so I can get things done</p> <p><b>Trevor:</b> Right bye</p>	<p><b>Ruby2:</b> I think it's interesting that people say, you know they have got a full time job or whatever, they have got a partner that works at home and they feel that they shouldn't have to do anything when they come home. I always think it is interesting that because- yes you do work really hard but you have a <u>family</u>, do you know what I mean? So if you are not willing to invest in the family you might say "oh yeah well I am working all the hours and I am providing for my family" but that also means <u>time</u> as well and I think you have got to weigh that up, do you know what I mean?</p> <p><b>Bev:</b> Mmmm</p> <p><b>Ruby2:</b> He works, he is a doorman as well and he has got another job as well and he is training to be a social worker and have time to look after his kids, do you know what I mean?</p> <p><b>Bev:</b> Mmmm.</p>

Ruby2's 'it's interesting' was typical of our middle-class viewers' discursive framing of their considered responses. These interjections tended to be offered during particular music and programme identity breaks, rather than as direct interventions in the on-screen action. In this way they were able to display their ability to control the images through commentary, which is another resource that stems from their cultural capital. Foucault suggests: 'commentary is a type of discourse that has the aim of dominating the object: by supplying commentary one affirms a superior relation to that object' (cited in Ang (1985)). Ien Ang uses commentary to describe the ironic stance of her viewers watching Dallas, but irony does not fully explain what is happening here. It is important to note how Ruby2's moral position is adopted very differently to the personal and emotive response outlined by the Brockley and Addington viewers. Ruby2's commentary is more typical of contemporary public debate about a 'work/life balance' within which there is a more abstracted sense of shared responsibility with much less instancing of personal experience. In this sense middle-class viewers often deploy a 'neutralising distance' like that found in public discourse which, according to Bourdieu (1987), serves a double function: indexing the middle-of-the-road approach that middle class ideology values and marking a distinction between those who 'let themselves get carried away' by their emotional impulses (Besnier 1990).

It was precisely getting carried away that offered us another insight into the television viewing relationship. We had spent a few viewing sessions with our white working class group in particular feeling uncomfortable, as were the participants<sup>ix</sup>; they rarely spoke. We wondered if we needed to revise our method. However, by a stroke of luck, when collecting visual examples of close-ups held at 'moral moments' (when the expert makes a judgment and the camera holds close on the face to await the participant's response) whilst listening to the viewing tapes, we were able to find the exact point where participants engaged -- affectively; they gasp, laugh, tut, sigh, 'ooh' and/or 'aah'. Sometimes their affective noise was translated into judgement through mediating statements such

as: 'oh my god' which is then converted into moral judgement, 'how can they let their children behave like that' or 'how can they get into that state', 'how can they let themselves go'. We began to refer to these instances as 'affective-textual encounters' (ATE) in which although textually incited (through the close-up) a powerful non-verbal response is made immanently in the television encounter. If we had asked later about their responses, it is likely that an apparatus of reflexive interpretation would have been accessed (or not), possibly teaching us more about the discursive resources that they bring to bear on television interpretation, than an understanding of their immediate engagement. For instance, this type of affective data was not readily available through the interview or the focus group which are reliant on dialogic and linguistic modes of articulation.

We realized that affective textual encounters offer an alternative mode of articulating one's relationship to 'reality' television. For example, in the earlier case of Saj, where the interview encounter exposed her insecurity in relation to British culture and alone it might seem that Saj could only offer a limited appraisal of 'reality' television; however, in the text-in-action stage Saj was able to take up a strong position of moral authority when watching an episode of Supernanny.<sup>x</sup> Here Saj did not have to self-consciously articulate her understanding of the programme; rather, she demonstrated how she experienced the programme through loud affective declarations of 'No!'. Saj is a fan of Supernanny because of the way the nanny, Jo, imposes what Saj refers to as 'guidelines' on parents in crisis. Saj shows sympathy for the mother in the Supernanny episode but also a certain morality informs her response to the programme: her peri-performative<sup>xi</sup> utterances of 'No!' and her tutting noises suggest the uptake of a moral position as an expert mother which is more revealing of her relationship to 'reality' television than was available in the interview stage of the research. Therefore this method produces a different kind of knowledge about encounters with 'reality' television and the ways in which we might engage our research participants in the research process.

Some of the material collected in this stage of the research was linguistically minimal but powerfully significant. Nevertheless, this is not to be perceived as a quantitative limit on the data collected, but can be explored by opening out the relevance of the nature of 'affective' relationships to cultural forms, which is also helpful to our determination of new class formations. Walkerdine and Blackman (2001) have previously pointed to the problem of over-prioritising the cognitive and rational over affective dimensions of our relationships with media. In this research project we develop the text-in-action method further to locate the circulation of affect between the TV product and audience, using a model of affective economies to show how value circulates and resides on particular figures at particular moments by examining how affect is converted into judgement.<sup>xii</sup>

Therefore our methods produced stark differences between the groups in their dialogue with, responses to, as well as about 'reality' television. Being able to understand our respondents' different types of contributions – reflexive, immanent, moral, affective - in this way offers us an invaluable lens through which to interpret the findings from our focus groups.

### **Focus Groups: the 'value' of 'reality' television**

In the final stage of our empirical research, focus group discussions were used to explore the possibility of group attachments to 'reality' television. While mindful of the criticisms levelled at attempts to reify the role of class in early group interpretations of television, we nevertheless wanted to look for any group dynamics which articulated shared volumes and compositions of cultural resources within and across the focus groups.<sup>xiii</sup> Reflection on the use of focus groups in social science research has usually concentrated on how group interaction influences the validity of the findings (for example Kidd and Parshall, 2000), but here we concentrate on how in our research the focus group method creates types of classed discourses which must be explained before one can interpret the data. We explore this by examining one of the dominant distinctions

between group readings in the focus groups: whether or not 'reality' television had value in relation to social mobility.

In the black and white working-class Brockley focus group consensus was reached that 'reality' television offered an alternative way for 'ordinary' people to make money, who otherwise would not have had the opportunity. The genre was justified as morally worthy in the light of people trying to better themselves. The immanent position through which the women located themselves within the action and made direct comparisons with their own lives, helped them to come to this reading:

**Nancy:** Say a bit more about that?

**Sal:** About giving them a chance?

**Sal:** [inaudible 14.45] ducking and diving, and you get an opportunity through 'reality' TV and then all of a sudden you're able to provide for yourself, provide for your family and not go to bed- and... you know what I mean.

**Ruby:** Think about the dole queue the next morning, yeah

**Sal:** And not wake up in the morning and think, "Oh God, where is this going to come from, where am I going to get that from?" 'reality' TV does that [inaudible 15.10].

**Severall:** Yeah.

The women here directly insert themselves into the lives that are on display on the television, they generate a fantasy of not struggling to provide for their families, projecting themselves into the comfort of the subject position of successful participant as a fantasy of a life lived without poverty and difficulty. 'Reality' television is not viewed as a morally bad, exploitative object (as suggested earlier by our Forest Hill group) but as the remote but imagined

possibility of a less constricted future: not as an ideological object but as a structure of opportunity. A similar position was offered by our white working-class focus groups from Addington, whose discussions revealed that they identified with those who had 'made it' and 'kept real', introducing moral judgement in terms of whether successful 'reality' television participants were worthy of their success, on the basis of their lack of pretentiousness and hence proximity to themselves.

The Forest Hill focus group performed consistently across the methods, deploying considerable educational knowledge: displaying their ability to 'read' semiotically, showing an understanding of media economy and production, exploring the possibility of the exploitation of the participants, and then linking these issues to wider questions of ideology. The notion that participation in 'reality' television programmes might provide a positive route to economic gain was not discussed, in fact they condemned participants for 'getting something for nothing':

**Liselle:** It says at what lengths you will go to and I think, I think we start to think that you don't have to work hard at things and we don't have to, it's like kids who just want to be famous, you know it doesn't matter what I do but I want to be famous. It takes away every sense of working hard at things and thinking about making a difference or it's just about this--,

**Ann:** Yeah.

**Orlaine:** I think, I think it's ... also about this celebrity thing isn't it? About how people get famous and rich for not having any skills any more.

Participation on 'reality' television is here perceived to be an immoral gain since it occurs without the requisite labour, and forms of capital, that have been traditionally associated with success. However, what this shows is not directly 'what they really think of 'reality' television participants', especially considering

that more than one member of this group had considered participating in 'reality' television. Rather this demonstrated how, in keeping with their other responses, they are able to locate this discussion within broader more abstracted forms of public debate around celebrity culture, which can be removed from their own experience<sup>xiv</sup>. A parallel can be drawn to Bourdieu's analysis of consumption:

Consumption is...a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code...One can say that the capacity to see is a function of the knowledge, or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to me to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception' (1986: 2)

This is why, he argues, the consumption of cultural artifacts is predisposed to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.

A different reading on this issue of participation came from our South and British Asian Clapham group who approached the focus group as an opportunity for a social get-together with children, for dressing-up and sharing food. Appearance on 'reality' television was not seen as an imagined opportunity, not even as immoral gain, but consensually as something potentially shameful to oneself and one's family, related to an alternative moral code of family honor. Their discussion facilitated an encouraging and supportive position in terms of their own cultural difference amongst a group of women not often able to be together.

Silva and Wright (2005) also report how class was significant to the performances in their focus groups due to issues related to confidence in public speaking and expectations about debate, which were exacerbated further by the politics of talking about cultural taste. Our findings are similar, however we want to stress here how our access to participants over time, enabling different modes of articulation through different methods, helps to uncover the ways in the focus

groups discussions were able to emerge. The content of the discussion therefore is dependant upon the various cultural resources available to participants to authorise themselves. In that sense the middle-class women could mobilise a straight-forward position of authority through reflexivity and knowledge of public debate and taste, whilst the working-class participants found a moral position related to their affective responses and immanent knowledge of parenting and their economic position, and the Clapham group through the assertion of cultural difference. Had we relied solely on focus group data in this research project these positions might have been framed as observable realities, rather than as modes of articulation, generated through available class capitals.

## **Conclusion**

Research practices do not simply 'capture' or reveal the world out there; they generate the conditions of possibility that frame the object of analysis. We tease out this process by exploring the deployment of techniques, modes of articulation, proximate and distanced relations to the object and affective responses. Our three empirical research methods incited reflexivity from those with both the communicative skills and the desire to operationalize a distanced, abstract perspective on the object of 'reality' television, and who authorised their position within a cultural taste hierarchy. For those not interested in articulating their relationship to television via cultural taste, the three methods offered different forms for enacting their investment in social positions. Whilst the interviews created some linguistic discomfort for some of our participants, the text-in-action and focus group methods offered an opportunity to display, not just an abstracted perspective of cultural value, but an immanent and affective demonstration of their value through maternal authority. We do not want to propose, however, a Bourdiean class distinction of middle-class distanced abstraction versus proximity to necessity, because this opposition is complicated by gender and race, and relies solely upon the linguistic telling of one's position and perspective that reproduces the very hierarchy of value that it seeks to critique <sup>xv</sup>.



That our methodological design enabled different kinds of knowledge to be displayed, and offered a more transparent account of that process than is often rendered in research, reinforces the need to explore how different techniques reproduce what is in fact a demonstration of unequal access to cultural resources, whilst appearing as if a neutral and value-free. Our methods reveal some of the processes by which gender and class are re-made through research practices before we even embark upon any in-depth analysis of the content of the data. Whilst we managed to recruit a radically diverse set of people to the project, we did not anticipate how the divergent volumes and composition of cultural capital across (and within) the different groups would cohere and generate 'performances' so tightly connected to class resources in particular. The use of these capitals can now be analyzed further to explore how 'reality' television mediates a complex moral economy, both re-constituting and disrupting social categorisations of class, race, nation and gender, which are still highly significant as analytical and lived categorizations and certainly not in decline, but always known through the techniques that enable their production.

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

<sup>ii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of gendered traditions in emotional management and responses to 'reality' television see Wood, Skeggs and Thumim. (forthcoming, 2008)

<sup>iii</sup> We drew on our own contacts and those of our colleagues in the Sociology department at Goldsmiths College. Enormous thanks are due to Les Back and Karen Wells.

<sup>iv</sup> We use attachment rather than embodiment following theories on prosthetic culture (see Lury, 1998; Skeggs 2004).

<sup>v</sup> For discussion of the convertibility of cultural capital and the limits placed on non-national symbolic capital see Ong (1999) and Hage (1998).

<sup>vi</sup> See Payne and Grew (2005) for alternative ways of asking questions that address class issues.

<sup>vii</sup> There have been massive changes in public culture in the UK since the New Labour government came to power in 1997, with 3,000 new criminal charges, 57 new acts, and a sustained focus on community surveillance - whilst various forms of punitive intervention have grown in working-class communities, such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). Indeed, Reynolds (2002) notes that Black feminist researchers have met with similar problems of resistance due to being viewed as agents of state pathologisation.

<sup>viii</sup> From programme 22 January 2003. The first series of Wife Swap was screened 7 January 2003, made by RDF for Channel 4. It is now into its sixth series, with a US version, Celebrity Wife Swap and Wife Swap: the Aftermath. It is also a DVD board game.

<sup>ix</sup> In a desperate attempt to recruit difficult-to-access groups, we offered payment, which did work as an incitement and enabled us to keep participants for the three empirical stages.

<sup>x</sup> Because of the late involvement of Saj in the project and the difficult of co-ordinating times for the research, the interview and the text-in-action were done consecutively.

<sup>xi</sup> Utterances that are not designed for a dialogic encounter, but are considered to be spontaneous outbursts that demonstrate beliefs and understandings.

<sup>xii</sup> The idea of affective economies is developed from Sara Ahmed's (2004) work on race, where she extends Marx's formulae of capital accumulation to show how affect circulates and is distributed to produce figures that can be recognised as having (or not) value.

<sup>xiii</sup> Work that reanalyzes Morley's Nationwide audience data by Kim (2004) uses computerized forms of statistical analysis, unavailable in 1979, shows that in fact the decodings of the groups in that project were actually more structured by social position than he originally claimed.

<sup>xiv</sup> Interestingly their position chimes with the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown's position when he criticized 'celebrity culture' as empty and without the values of hard work.

<sup>xv</sup> See Skeggs (2004b) for an outline on how Bourdieu's gender troubles, on his difficulty analyzing female gender, and sexuality.