



Class and productive avoidance in *The Real Housewives* reunions



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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the relationship between topic avoidance, talk, and class in reality television. I analyze interactions in reunion episodes of *The Real Housewives*, a reality television series that since 2006 has followed casts of women in metropolitan locales around America, focusing on their affluent lifestyles. Reunion shows bring cast members together to discuss the previous season's episodes, providing space to talk about what happened and confront each other over unresolved issues. Because disclosure is normative in the reunion context, the casting of topics as “taboo” for discussion is interactionally salient and productive. My analysis shows that topic avoidance is triggered not by a set of categorically taboo topics, but rather by topics that momentarily threaten Housewives' enactment of culturally elite identities. Avoidance serves to protect their public images as both materially endowed—having *status*—and well-behaved—having *class*. I identify and illustrate three types of *avoidance stance*, which differ in the role alignments through which participants are positioned. These stances can function to limit the discussion of information threatening to one's own material status, to preserve one's own image as “classy,” and to introduce threatening information about another's status or class. Ultimately, avoidance stances are a way for Housewives to negotiate the tension between being on a reality television show, which requires openness and disclosure, and being evaluated as culturally elite, which requires behavioral restraint regarding talk about self and others.

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1. Introduction

This article considers how reality television actors manage information disclosure, asking what topics are deemed “taboo” for these actors, and under what circumstances. As a genre, reality television privileges disclosure: at its center is the idea that audiences become privy to the relatively uncensored details of its actors' authentic lives—details which would otherwise be unavailable. Within a context where disclosure is established as normative, an actor's attempt to avoid a topic is a highly salient move, both to other actors in the interaction and to the viewing audience. In this salience, topic avoidance is productive as a resource for interaction and identity management, and casts a topic as “taboo” when it may not previously have been considered so. My analysis contributes to an understanding of “taboo” as interactionally produced (and interactionally exploited) and context-sensitive, rather than categorical or stable.

The data come from reunion show specials of *The Real Housewives*, a reality television franchise focused on elite feminine identities, which I discuss in detail in the next section. Reunion shows bring cast members together to discuss the prior season's episodes and the events that occurred during filming. The reunion

is a metadiscursive sub-genre of reality show that is designed explicitly for revelation: it magnifies the typical reality TV expectation for disclosure. Few topics are treated as taboo in this setting, and successful avoidance of topics is relatively rare. In these reunion interactions, I identify and analyze *stances of avoidance*: moments when a subject appraises the discussion of a topic as inappropriate. The taking of an avoidance stance indexes a topic as taboo—off-limits—but importantly, the majority of topics indexed in this way are not treated by the actors as universally taboo, only momentarily so. I argue that Housewives use avoidance stances as interactional resources for negotiating the tension between being reality television figures and the culturally elite identities they cultivate by being on the show.

These avoidance stances reveal the construction of taboo to be a potent resource in interpersonal interaction. Allan and Burrige (2006: 11) define *taboo* as “a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts.” Casts of *The Real Housewives* share behavioral norms that emerge from the shared persona they portray on the show (as discussed in the next section). What norms guide their treatment of discourse topics as on- or off-limits to discuss in front of a viewing audience? The patterns in these women's avoidance show that taboo is contingent, rather than “absolute” (Allan and Burrige, 2006: 27). That is, what counts as taboo is negotiated and negotiable; things treated as taboo in one

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moment of interaction may be perfectly open to discussion in others. Rosewarne (2013) makes a similar point from the perspective of American pop culture: though many topics are sensed to have a stable shared status as “taboo” in American culture (such as sex and bodily parts/functions), these topics are nonetheless discussed and dealt with in popular culture. The nuances of how taboo topics are represented have much to show about why those topics are seen as taboo in the first place.

In an interactional setting, *when* and *how* topics are branded as off-limits can reveal why they are being proscribed at that particular moment. Within *The Real Housewives* reunions, it is not clear what will be considered taboo until a stance of avoidance is explicitly taken. Taboo is thus an interactional phenomenon in addition to a sociocultural one. Communication researchers have shown that within interpersonal relationships, topic avoidance serves various interpersonal goals and facilitates relationship maintenance—although it is sometimes risky (Dailey and Palomares, 2004; Donovan-Kicken et al., 2013). Likewise, I show that within televised performances of identity, topic avoidance serves the projection and maintenance of identity, but it also carries risk. In the case of *The Real Housewives*, this identity pertains to *class*, which is closely linked with norms around talk, including the proscription of talk.

2. *The Real Housewives* and elite identity

The Real Housewives is a franchise of documentary-style television series that portray women and their families living affluent lifestyles. The franchise consists of several casts, each of which constitutes its own series. Each cast follows five to seven women in a culturally distinctive American locale (currently, these are Orange County, CA; New York City, NY; Atlanta, GA; New Jersey; Beverly Hills, CA; and Miami, FL). The show’s title is something of a playful misnomer: several Housewives have been divorced or widowed and a few have never married; many are businesswomen or public figures of another type. Most Housewives are in their 30s and 40s and nearly all of the cast members have been white (with the exception of the Atlanta cast, in which all but one of the women has been African American or biracial). From season to season, cast rosters typically change, with one or more Housewives leaving the show and others joining anew. My analysis is based on the franchise as it was in summer 2013.

Regular episodes of *The Real Housewives* (henceforth RH) are one hour long (including commercials), and each season of each cast typically contains 10–20 episodes, though this varies. Each episode follows a fairly common formula for American reality TV shows, showing both documentary and interview footage. The majority of scenes show the women filmed candidly in either everyday or orchestrated situations. Interspersed with these unscripted segments are individual testimonials, in which a Housewife faces the camera in a posed setting and provides commentary on the events shown in the episode (this commentary is at least partially prompted by interview questions from the production team). In any episode, the most dramatic scenes involve group events where Housewives gather, such as lunches/dinners, charity balls or other parties, shopping outings, or vacations. Interactional “trouble”—in the form of arguments, slights, hurt feelings, confrontations, and attempts to resolve tension—is a stable feature of these scenes. The women are also shown individually with their husbands, children, house staff, coworkers or business partners, and other friends and family. Each series purports to document and reveal the lifestyle lived by the “elite” of its geographical area—a lifestyle that is presumably not shared by most audience members.

RH airs on Bravo, an American cable television network. Bravo’s niche is lifestyle reality programming, both documentary- and

competition-based (such as its iconic *Top Chef*), with a particular focus on affluent characters, locales, and practices (Coppie Smith, 2012). Within Bravo’s slate of original programming, RH occupies a central role: the franchise has 6 active American casts and several spin-off series. The original cast, *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (California), premiered in 2006 and is still running. Since then, six other locales have been added (New York City; Atlanta; New Jersey; Washington, DC, which lasted only one season; Beverly Hills; and Miami). There are also international spin-offs (see Stanley, 2013).

After the final episode of each RH season airs, a reunion special unites the cast members to discuss the season in a group interview (reunions are common across Bravo’s reality programs). RH reunions are hosted by Andy Cohen, a Bravo producer who has had his own late-night talk show on Bravo since 2009 (*Watch What Happens Live!*). Bravo, Andy Cohen, and the Housewives are highly resonant within contemporary American popular culture (see Squires, 2014). RH has inspired at least two male-centered cable television counterparts: the unscripted *Househusbands of Hollywood* and the parodic *Real Husbands of Hollywood*. The Housewives have also been parodied or referenced on mainstream television shows such as *The Mindy Project*, *Chelsea Lately*, *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *30 Rock* (discussed in Pardo, 2013). Several Housewives have leveraged their celebrity from the show to become celebrities beyond Bravo. Housewives have appeared frequently on the covers of gossip, celebrity, and lifestyle magazines. The franchise thus offers a case study in reality-celebrity culture through which to investigate the mediatization of discourse.

RH offers, in particular, a study in how gendered and class-based identities are enacted in reality television. In both regular episodes and reunion shows of RH, class is a frequent topic of conversation and contestation. The franchise is especially interesting in its contrasts to the well-studied daytime talk show genre, which tends to focus on lower-status participants (Myers, 2001; Grindstaff, 2002; Squire, 2002; contributions to Wood and Skeggs, 2011). In contrast to what Grindstaff (2011: 203) calls “the performance logic of reality television” which attempts to construct “class-less self-expression” that accords with the history of the US as a silently classed society, RH makes social class its explicit narrative focus. This paper explores avoidance—the construction of discourse topics as taboo—as a discursive dimension of the construction of class on RH.

Specifically, I will argue that avoidance stances in reunion interactions emerge from a strong tension between the classed identities of the Housewives and their roles as reality television stars. Housewives project elite, upper-class identities: personae that classically require concealment rather than bald revelation. In her study of a daytime talk show, Grindstaff writes:

The emphasis on public intimacy and emotional expressivity in reality TV – which clearly rejects the bourgeois edict to conceal rather than reveal private life – would seem an especially hospitable environment for both women and the working classes, who are, after all, presumed to lack emotional and physical reserve. (Grindstaff, 2011: 197)

RH features women, but they are pointedly *not* the working-class women appearing on daytime talk shows such as the one Grindstaff studied (cf. Squire, 2002; Myers, 2001). Rather, Housewives are represented as both upper-class and outwardly class-conscious. The series is framed as offering a glimpse into a material and social world unknown to the vast majority of Americans, taking viewers behind the “gated communities” populated by the nation’s elite. The primetime RH thus provides an important (and commercially successful) counterpoint to daytime

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