



## Bringing class to light and life: A case study of reality-based television discourse



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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines representations of class and status differences in American reality-based television programs and some of the ways their design produces a form of dialog. This inquiry is situated in the context of two contemporary social phenomena: ambivalence toward class stratification in U.S. public discourse at a time of increasing class stratification, and a growth in the production and consumption of status-based reality television shows on U.S. broadcast and cable networks. For this study, a year of episodes from two programs were observed, one from network television set in the world of work, and one from cable television set in home life and leisure. Four cases selected from this corpus are analyzed multimodally to show how talk, images, and objects operate discursively to construct a dialog on class. Drawing from theories on the discursive construction of identity and agency, and focusing on members' methods of categorization and ventriloquism, we offer an understanding of class as enacted and engaged in - not just represented and talked about, but performed dialogically.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Discursive dilemmas of class

Much of U.S. public discourse draws on an aspirational narrative—sometimes called “the American dream,” a term coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams (Samuel, 2012, 3–4), or “Horatio Alger” myth. Horatio Alger was a 19th century author of more than 100 books about poor citizens who rose to modest comfort through their virtue and hard work. The wild popularity of Alger's books eventually led to identification of his name with the national myth identifying the virtue of the nation as the promise that anyone can achieve their dream of advancement, from ‘rags to riches’ as a common American expression puts it, and that each generation will exceed the previous in prosperity and accomplishment, especially if they work hard. In this world view, boundaries between classes are held to be permeable as people work to achieve social mobility. As commonplace as these expressions and conceptions regarding class are in American culture, explicit references to class and class-based politics are likely to be cast as ‘anti-American’ or called ‘socialist’ in public discourse. Instead of being addressed in the public sphere as part of a social system, class differences are articulated in descriptions of what people

do and where they live or work. While the focus may be on individuals and their efforts, when class is addressed in American public discourse, it is likely to be described categorically, sometimes metaphorically, and in relational, sometimes contrastive, pairs. For example, during the 2008 campaign for president candidate John Edwards regularly spoke of rich and poor Americans as the “two Americas”. In short, class is represented and indexed, but is not typically marked as a system of differences, semiotically or socially, even when economic policy is involved.

As it happens, economics research indicates that, for the last generation or two, prosperity has not advanced for 80% of U.S. society (Mazumber, 2008), the income gap between rich and poor has expanded every year (Pew Research Center, 2012), and Americans in some occupations are actually earning less (adjusting for inflation) than they did three decades ago (Raskin, 2011). Thus, the lived experience of most people in the U.S. is at variance with the dominant national myth. This raised a question for us: how is this variance being addressed?

Entertainment media offer rich narrative capacities, but present the audience with a puzzling picture of class, which, it might be argued, audiences are called upon to figure out (see for example, Skeggs and Wood, 2008). Situation comedies on U.S. television, have, since their inception, presented Americans with a largely idealized middle class representation of themselves, with few exceptions (Kendall, 2011). The even more prevalent game shows and reality-based competition programs show Americans willing to travel nearly anywhere and do almost anything to get rich—a mediated version of the conventional American dream or

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Horatio Alger myth of hard, steady work rewarded. In the made-for-television version, the extreme individual achievement is rewarded more quickly and dramatically, but the permeability of class boundaries through individual effort is maintained. Rags-to-riches is a dominant myth in *American Idol* for example (McClain, 2011), while the exposure of home life and sacrifice of privacy in exchange for celebrity offers a problematic picture of the middle class American Dream (Weber, 2011).

Recent work on class and reality television has examined a number of qualities related to the construction of class in reality television, particularly its affective dimensions. Skeggs and Wood (2012) explore how reality television constitutes self and personhood through the construction of distinctions of value, connecting to audiences through eliciting emotional responses. In addition to the explicit expression of class-stratified values, they found that the performance of the self relies on formats that also reflect class-stratified values. Grindstaff (2011) places reality television shows on a continuum of moral and esthetic values, discussing emotional performance as a distinct measure of class beyond socio-economic status.

The present study draws on Bourdieu, as does much of the work cited above, but focuses less on the substance of value distinctions that make up social capital and more on the categorization processes available within the dialogic structure of stories told through reality-based television.

### 1.2. Phenomena of inquiry

This project began as a conversation about observations of two phenomena. The first is the dearth of explicit discussion of class as a system in mainstream U.S. political discourse. The dominant discourse is of individual achievement, to the extent that efforts to focus on class as an institution raises the specter of Communism and accusations of being Socialist and/or anti-American. Biressi and Nunn (2013) discuss the change in British conceptions of class starting in the 1980s as moving toward this narrative of individual aspiration and effort, but recognize the latter as a hallmark of U.S. national culture from the founding (Samuel, 2012, 3). Certainly scholarship has established the existence of class stratification in the U.S., but upward mobility has been a deeply cherished principle, in effect effacing class boundaries.

The second impetus was the observation of status-based reality television shows growing in number and popularity on U.S. television. In looking at reality television as a site of public discourse on class, our project parallels in many regards the work collected in Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013a) and Wood and Skeggs (2011). The research reported in these volumes explores the ways in which class is performed in reality television in several countries, including the U.S. None focuses on the programs that are the objects of inquiry here. Our study offers a contribution to this burgeoning body of literature in two ways: by (1) analyzing features of the discourse on class produced on reality television programs beyond their talk and images to consider actors' attributes and engagement with the material surround (i.e. use of objects); and (2) employing a unique combination of theoretical lenses that we argue bring class differences to light and life in narratives that ostensibly attempt to erase them.

Two programs particularly drew our attention for this project owing to their great commercial success and their explicit toying with class identity. *Undercover Boss*, a CBS network hit since its debut after the Super Bowl in 2010, and *Real Housewives of Orange County*, the first in a growing franchise of "real housewives" iterations airing on the Bravo cable channel since 2006. The first is rooted in the world of work, the second in home life. While aspirational narratives were evident in both programs, they appear to be embedded in and compromised by stories of social critique,

personal doubt, economic trouble, and family crisis. We began to look more closely at them for indications and representations of class or status and raised the research question: *How might the discourse of these programs constitute a dialog on class?*

We approached two aspects of this broad question. First, we sought frameworks for analyzing discursive features of televisual texts. This effort corresponded to the question: *What is the audience (or recipient) design of reality television shows and how might it constitute a form of dialog?* Second, we sought a way to connect the discursive structures and features of such to conceptions and representation of class. This effort corresponded to the question: *How does the structure of this discourse invoke (American) conceptions of class?* In the following sections we present the framework we developed in the course of addressing these questions. We begin by introducing membership categorization as a socially interactive multimodal process and noting its crucial role in constituting identity. Next, we explain the role of Cooren's conception of ventriloquized interactants in helping us to see how subjects, objects, and potentially recipients can be mobilized as agents in discourse. We then discuss Bourdieu's conception of boundaries as a means of explicating the connection between methods of categorization and ventriloquism employed in media discourse and US public constructions of class.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Making the invisible visible: discursive markers of difference

The idea of a category is invisible, but in being realized, categories are marked by externalized phenomena. Skeggs and Wood (2012) explain that, in reality television identity is performed by adhering to behavioral norms which have been accorded variable valuation in society. Thus, the meaningfulness of reality television depends on social and cultural categories that exist outside of the specific show, but which make up the essential repertoire of performers and producers. The process of articulating meaning necessitates placing the performers in particular categories. We propose that discourse theory may usefully be applied to explicate the role of mediated dialog in this membership categorization process.

#### 2.1.1. Membership categorization

Language and discourse theorists have long considered how status is marked and categorical differences are constructed in the ways that people talk, interact, and otherwise use symbols (Biressi & Nunn, 2013; Labov, 2006; Bourdieu, 2003; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Burke, 1966; Sacks, 1964-65/1992).

As Harvey Sacks noted in one of his first lectures on membership categorization devices (1964-65), questions as to what people do and where they are from are prominent in the early parts of conversations (Sacks in Jefferson, 1992, p. 40); therefore members may devise abstract descriptions of themselves and others that provide answers to such questions, at least inferentially, regardless of whether they are asked. Such "inference-rich" descriptions of who people are and what they do put those who hear them in the position of inferring that those described are members, or perhaps even representatives, of a category of persons (Sacks in Jefferson, 1992, p. 42).

The assignment or institution of an identity, however, is not just a matter of locution (naming or stating), says Bourdieu, but of what speech act theorists call illocution (doing or initiating action). In other words, signification carries with it social force and potential consequences, a potential for agency.

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