

Communicating a ‘time-out’ in parent–child conflict: Embodied interaction, domestic space and discipline in a reality TV parenting programme

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Abstract

In 2003, a new reality TV genre appeared on British public television built on the spectacle of the parenting of so-called disturbed or problem children. This paper focuses on *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, a programme in which three families are invited to reside in a specially designed house together with a resident clinical psychologist. Such a programme allows us to explore a range of issues, including (a) how a family assembles itself spatially and coordinates its activities across the lived architectures of the home; and (b) how a child is disciplined in and through the embodied activities, spatial formations and talk of the parents. The paper draws upon mediated discourse analysis and conversation analysis – inflected by contemporary understandings of discipline, space and place – in order to analyse the phenomenon of the ‘time-out’, a generalised ‘technique’ of parentcraft that is used to discipline young children who are misbehaving. Rather than debate the merits of the ‘time-out’ as an appropriate disciplinary instrument, this paper explores the local, emergent and negotiated accomplishment of disciplinary practices of temporal and spatial restraint that involve embodied (inter)action, furniture, objects, and the lived architecture of the domestic sphere.

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1. Introduction

In 2003, a new reality TV genre appeared on British public television built on the spectacle of the parenting of so-called disturbed or problem children. A well known ‘media therapeutic’ genre (Hodges, 2003; White, 1992, 2002) of this kind is *Supernanny*. What is significant in these television programmes is the interplay of mediated (inter)action, discourse, technology and space to inculcate better parenting practices and to navigate appropriate disciplinary regimens for reigning in unruly children. This paper focuses on one hybrid genre that mixes the counselling format with some aspects of the *Big Brother* reality TV (RTV) format. *The House of Tiny Tearaways* (HTT) was first broadcast in the UK in May 2005.¹ Such a documentary programme allows us to explore a range of issues, including (a) how a family assembles itself spatially and coordinates its activities across the lived architectures of the home; and (b) how a child is disciplined (for example, using the ‘time-out’ technique) in and through the embodied activities, spatial formations and talk of the parents.

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¹ The TV Production company website for the series is (http://www.outlineproductions.co.uk/catalogue_detail.aspx?program=207). Last accessed: 17.8.2008.

In order to explore the relationships between embodied interaction, domestic space and discipline in the highly mediated environment of a reality TV programme, the paper uses mediated discourse analysis (Scollon and Scollon, 2004; Norris and Jones, 2005) and conversation analysis (Have, 2007), inflected by contemporary understandings of space and place (Crampton and Elden, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2004), as well as a Foucauldian perspective on discipline, governmentality and technologies of the self (Rose, 1999b; Hodges, 2003). First, the specific example of *The House of Tiny Tearaways* is presented, and a case study of the Gwilliam family who appeared on HTT is introduced. Second, a theoretical orientation to parenting, discipline, space and domesticity is discussed. Third, the spatialisation of parenting is analysed using one sequence of discipline-in-action. In this sequence, the key phenomenon is the ‘time-out’, a routine practice of parentcraft used to discipline a child. The paper explores how a ‘time-out’ is negotiated temporally, spatially and discursively by parent(s) and child. The conclusion discusses the findings in terms of the interplay between embodied interaction, discipline-in-action, the governance of space and the governmentalisation of parenting.

2. Communication parentcraft on reality television

Over the last two hundred years, there have been ever-increasing attempts to communicate to parents in a range of media and modalities how best to bring up their children. An interest in the family and its governance in the service of the biopolitical is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, Donzelot (1977[1997]) has documented how the policing of families emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the discourse of ‘the social’. In a more recent study of glossy parenting magazines in the UK in the 1990s, Alldred (1996) gives a short history of parenting advice, in which she concludes that the role of the expert has shifted from a focus on the expert to that of expertise itself, and from advice-giving to abstract knowledge. In her study of contemporary Australian families, Grieshaber (2004) argues that parent and child conflict needs to be rethought in terms of the regimes of practice that normalise and regulate “persons, sites and practices in daily domesticity” (191). Principles and programs that have been developed within the discourse of developmental psychology specify and construct what it means to be a parent, and how parenting should ‘be done’. This is evidenced by the constant stream of parenting manuals, in which “specific instructions are provided to show parents preferred styles of managing parent and child conflict” (191). Besides parenting manuals and self-help guides (Sunderland, 2000, 2006), television has also recently evolved a set of genres related to parentcraft. One particular innovative example, *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, is the focus of this paper.

In the UK in 2005, BBC Three aired a new series combining the ‘supernanny’ (family advice) genre with a reality TV ‘Big Brother’ location. *The House of Tiny Tearaways* (HTT) is an innovative example of the type of programme that was broadcast during the spate of reality TV documentaries (2003–2008) that focused on advising and coaching parents who have what are categorised as badly behaved children (e.g. “tearaways”). It is clear that the title of the programme already intimates that some of its occupants are troublesome (e.g. chronic tantrums or eating/sleep problems), and that it is the HTT house that both contains and domesticates their uncontrollable and/or reckless behaviour.² But, of course, the young children between one- and seven-years-old who arrive in the HTT house need to be ‘worked up’ as ‘tearaways’, yet not beyond salvation, much as their parents need to be worked up as parents who care, but who are not coping (Slembrouck, 2003), and who are thus in need of sympathy and the help that can be given in the HTT house. If the children are not seen at first glance as ‘tearaways’, or their parents are beyond help or refuse help, then the house will quickly be empty.

Four series were broadcast in the UK in the period 2005–2007, and in total there are 102 fifty minute episodes. In the first three series, three families are invited to reside over a six day period in a specially designed house together with Tanya Byron, a resident child psychologist. The house is equipped with two-way mirrors and video cameras, as well as hidden rooms and passages, so that a film crew and the resident psychologist can observe and record the activities of the parents and their children (potentially) 24 h a day. There are two orders of mediated observability present: visual and aural. First, there are over thirty remote CCTV video cameras in the house and garden, as well as human-operated video cameras behind the two-way mirrors that ring the occupants’ living areas. There is also an observation room (with three monitors) and a live television production facility near the house.³ Second, Tanya, Claudia and each member of every family have wireless microphones attached to their bodies. As Ytreberg (2006) has shown for *Big Brother* and *Broth* (this issue) for a live TV studio, this is a very challenging environment for a production

² The version of HTT exported to the USA was rather ambivalently titled *The House of Tiny Terrors*. Only six episodes were broadcast in late 2006.

³ See Goodwin and Goodwin (1996), Heath and Hindmarsh (2000), Heath et al. (2002), Luff et al. (2000) and Heath and Luff (2006) for analyses of technologically rich environments – centres of coordination – for monitoring distant events and activities.

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