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Making Public Shame Bearable and Entertaining: Ritualised Shaming in Reality Television

Martin Hájek
Daniel Frantál
and Kateřina Simbartlová
Charles University, Czech Republic

Abstract

In modern liberal society, a person is considered a 'sacred' entity and any violation of their dignity should produce embarrassment not only on the side of the ashamed individual but in those co-present as well. In our research, we studied public shaming in reality television (RTV), a recent popular culture product, in order to understand the mechanism that transforms otherwise degrading shaming into popular entertainment. The analysis drew on the classical concept of the 'degradation ceremony' (H. Garfinkel) and it covered three RTV programmes originating in different cultural contexts. We discovered that it is strong situational ritualisation of shaming which substantially attenuates the harmful consequences of being shamed for participants' selves and thus protects viewers from uncomfortable feelings. In RTV, the shaming takes the form of a purposively unaccomplished degradation ceremony, which consists of the creation of an extraordinary situation, typification of participants, emphasis on the shared values in whose name the shaming is done, and participants' reflexive performance in the show. The results suggest that in RTV, the social practice of the status degradation ceremony is transformed into a cultural practice of systematic shaming without real identity degradation, which makes it possible for shaming to become global mediatised entertainment.

Keywords

Degradation ceremony, popular culture, public shaming, reality television, ritualisation

Corresponding author:
Martin Hájek, Institute of Sociological Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, U Kříže 8, Prague 5, Praha, 15800, Czech Republic.
Email: martin.hajek@fsv.cuni.cz

Shame is a prominent social emotion (Elias, 2000 [1939]; Shott, 1977) and is said to be mostly invisible or hidden despite its importance and ubiquity in social life (Scheff, 2014). Instead of its public display, hiding shame is preferable since it has undesired implications for the individual's social status and bonds (Chase and Walker, 2013; Gardner and Gronfein, 2005; Scheff 2000). However, we can encounter many situations where shame[1] is purposely induced and manifested; that is, where someone is shamed publicly by someone else. Purposeful shaming commonly occurs in social disciplining, such as education or criminal justice (Braithwaite, 1989; Goodman and Cook, 2019), but also in conflicts within peer groups or in families (Loader, 1998), in hazing rituals (Nuwer, 2001), or in various pranks (Dundes, 1988). Among these diverse acts and procedures, two broad categories can be distinguished regarding the identity of participants: degradative and situational shaming.

In degradative shaming, the primary goal is to remove the person's actual identity and replace it with a much less socially valuable one (temporarily or permanently) as a consequence of his or her alleged misconduct. A typical format of degradative public shaming is *the degradation ceremony* described by Harold Garfinkel (1956), in which the individual's original identity is ceremonially destroyed as false and his or her true identity revealed instead. This new identity puts the person who is shamed outside the legitimate order and makes him or her a stranger. Garfinkel defines the status degradation ceremony to be 'any communicative work directed to transforming an individual's total identity lower in the group's scheme of social types' (1956: 420); thus, the concept can be applied to shaming practices in diverse settings. The ceremony is usually backed by an institution, like a court of law in judicial degradation proceedings, the bureaucratic hierarchy in organisational degradation rituals (Islam and Zyphur, 2009), or a medical authority in psychiatry (Goffman, 1961). Non-ceremonial public shaming aimed at a target's identity degradation also exists and takes the form of mob justice in public space or the (social) media environment (e.g. Ronson, 2015).

Situational shaming, on the other hand, does not aim to transform someone's identity but works as a source of momentary entertainment for a participating audience. We do not refer here to entertaining situations of artistic performance where shaming concerns characters not the actors behind them, that is, in films, theatre, or circus clowning. Cases in real life are usually part of rites of passage or initiation rituals. A widespread example are hazing practices, in which novices – to be accepted into a group – must first undergo a humiliating procedure organised by senior members (Nuwer, 2001). Various other secular rituals include shame-inducing situations like drenching, contamination, enforced nudity, and so on (see Young, 2019 for hen parties). The purpose of humiliation and shaming in these rituals cannot be degrading the identity of their subjects since they have done nothing wrong or shameful; it works as an anti-structural element which underscores the liminal phase between two identity statuses (Van Gennep, 1961 [1909]) while also making the ritual more dramatic and entertaining. The audience can enjoy the shaming because they believe it is for the event's sake and that it does not have any negative consequences for the life of its victims after the event.

Both kinds of shaming practices – degradative and situational – are usually involuntary for the persons concerned. Only rarely do we encounter established voluntary, public, and purposive humiliation practices, for example, the Pope's foot washing ritual.

Given that, it is surprising, that in contemporary cultural production, we can also witness public shaming which is systematically targeted at volunteers for the primary purpose of entertaining an audience – reality television (RTV). Despite being commonly regarded as a site of fame production, RTV is a place of systematic public shaming (Couldry, 2002; Turner, 2006). Besides a desire to have one's moment of glory, shame permeates many RTV programmes as an implicit element of the genre (Danielson, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Hirdman, 2016; Walkerdine, 2011). Participants, mostly voluntarily recruited to the show, are publicly denigrated, humiliated, or at least embarrassed, either by one another or by media professionals; occasionally, even spectators can feel the shame of participants or they blame the producers as shameless because of the severity or unfairness of the show. While a financial reward or chance to become famous is an understandable motivation for people to participate in RTV shows, outweighing the risk of being shamed, it does not explain other people's interest in witnessing systematic attempts to challenge the dignity of their peers. Since, in modern liberal society, the person is considered a sacred entity (Durkheim, 2013 [1893]), and for any violation of their dignity there should be a well-justified reason (cf. the Goffmanian notion of face; Goffman, 1967), any wilful damage of another's face should produce embarrassment rather than amusement in co-present individuals (Goffman, 1956). It is, therefore, a puzzle how shaming participants in RTV can provoke such amusement for viewers that it has become one of the most popular television formats in recent decades.

Reality television is a cultural product, and as such, it has certain class attributes. In particular, mediation of shame links the class and shame firmly together in RTV, 'giving body and form to the un-named' (Hirdman, 2016: 294). Classness is enacted dominantly by means of different class visibility and performativity. According to a study by Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, while both the lower and upper strata of society are made visible in RTV, it is the members of the upper and middle classes who speak to people from lower classes rather than vice versa (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017). In our analysis, however, the primary concern is not in the class-based ideological implications of RTV, which suppose a highly contextual interpretation of situations and interactions between participants (a play on various capitals, tastes, lifestyles etc.; see Wood and Skeggs, 2011), but in an exploration of situationally tamed shaming and its mutation into entertainment. What is relevant for us are the attempts to damage participants' faces and to spoil their identities, which are universally understandable due to the programmes' attention to the shame-related bodily movements or theatrical gestures of participants.

Degradation Ceremony as a Social Practice

In defining the degradation ceremony, Garfinkel assumes that status degradation happens in every society. Thus 'the critical question is not whether status degradation occurs or can occur within any given society. Instead, the question is: starting from any state of a society's organization, what program of communicative tactics will get the work of status degradation done?' (1956: 421). For the ceremony to be successful, Garfinkel lists eight conditions which must be met: to be degraded, both the *event* and *subject* must be (1) removed from the reality of their everyday life and, (2) defined 'as instances of uniformity' in such a way that 'the witnesses must appreciate their characteristics of the

typed person'. The '*denouncer*' must (3) identify himself 'not as a private but as a publicly known person', (4) make the 'dignity of the supra-personal values salient . . . and his denunciation must be delivered in their name', (5) 'arrange to be invested with the right to speak in the name of these ultimate values', (6) 'get himself so defined by the witnesses that they locate him as a supporter of these values', and (7) 'not only fix his distance from the person being denounced, but the witnesses must be made to experience their distance from him also'. (8) At the end of the ceremony, the subject 'must be ritually separated from a place in the legitimate order' (Garfinkel, 1956: 422–423). It is evident that careful and complex coordination work is necessary to accomplish the ceremony's objective.

If all the foregoing conditions are met, the ceremony results in 'the ritual destruction of the person' (Garfinkel, 1956: 421). Destruction reveals the person's true or 'core' identity. The former identity is newly seen as just 'accidental' in comparison to the 'basic reality' of the reconstituted one. When the identity of a spy, a murderer, or a betrayer is assigned in the ceremony, it is intended to be for good. However, it is less clear what Garfinkel meant by rituality. It is not possible to read it only as 'symbolic', that is, communicative, in contrast to the physical destruction of an individual, because the corporal degradation also has a strong ritual dimension; for instance, only an appropriate person can execute it. Rituality, here, is linked to moral indignation as the only legitimate grounds for status degradation as any person is considered a morally protected object in the Durkheimian sense. Degradation ceremonies do not bluntly debase their targets; on the contrary, to be successful in their transformative work, they have to respect the moral constituents of all persons involved in the event.

Since coining the term, Garfinkel's degradation ceremonies have been described in many social contexts (for an overview, see Romanienko, 2014; Thérèse and Martin, 2010). Most of the studies, if not all, tacitly sympathise with the victims of degradation rather than with the denouncers or the audiences, although there is no inherent reason for it. To put it differently, the ceremony is viewed as an offensive and sometimes even objectionable social practice serving to strengthen group bonds. No attempt has been made to extract the form of the ceremony from its 'pre-given' socio-moral consequences, to analyse it as a cultural practice open to different interpretation and reinterpretation (Couldry, 2000). Our study seeks to demonstrate the possibility of this interpretive move through the analysis of its use in reality television.

The idea we will try to elaborate in this article is that despite the declared non-scripted character of reality television shows, production crews use a degradation ceremony scheme to ensure strong ritualisation of face and identity threatening interactions in RTV. The control over shaming serves to prevent direct and harmful threats to the dignity of both programme participants and television spectators who are, in the moral sense, involved in the situation. Thus, we expand Garfinkel's research (1956) into the cultural sphere. We suggest that, paradoxically, the procedure which contributes most to minimising risks for the participants' and spectators' identity in RTV shows is a particular shame-driven form of the status degradation ceremony. According to the logic of the ceremony, reality television participants face situations in which the organisers of the programme or its other participants attempt to discover and reveal a discrepancy between the original identity presented by the participant and the identity implied in his or her

actual performance in order to publicly shame them. At the same time, in coping with difficult tests, the participants either try to keep their identity in line with their performance or pay no regard to their shaming and thus maintain their face – that is, a positive social value (cf. Goffman, 1967; Wei, 2016). As a result, we will argue, thanks to the institutionally administered ritualisation of morally risky interactions in RTV programmes, spectators – and, to a certain extent, participants too – can enjoy these shows. They are aware that public shaming on RTV is socially challenging and often quite risky but controlled enough to be only exceptionally fatal to the participants' identities.

Researching Reality Television: Sample and Methods of Analysis

The analysis of processes producing and transforming emotions in reality television as a classed cultural product is not an easy task because the analysts must reflect their position and their attitudes as ordinary readers (see Hall, 1991 [1973]). Since it is not possible to entirely bracket out our non-analytic reading of the television shows under study, we considered it advantageous to form a three-member research team. The team consisted of both male and female researchers from young and middle-aged generations, thus possessing different configurations of cultural capital, making it possible to cover a wide variety of viewers' social positions and experiences when watching RTV. Furthermore, we strategically constructed a sample of RTV programmes with which we had previous, ordinary experience as viewers since we assumed that, in addition to the shaming and ridiculing of participants, viewer enjoyment also contributes to the phenomenon. All studied programmes were broadcast in our country (the Czech Republic) and, hence, culturally accessible to us as ordinary viewers; nevertheless, they are not specific or limited regionally, which makes the analysis broadly relevant.

We analysed three RTV programmes of different types, broadcast in the Czech Republic over the last decade: *Ano šéfe!* (Yes, boss!), a Czech imitation of the British gastronomic series *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*, in which a well-known restaurateur helps restaurants in trouble; *Wipeout* (*Drtivá porážka*), a translated version of the US game show in which contestants plough through a bizarre obstacle course with the hope of winning a high financial reward; and *America's Next Top Model* (*ANTM; Amerika hledá topmodelku*), a translated version of the US makeover competition show in which several women compete in modelling skills to win a contract with a prestigious modelling agency. After watching several episodes from various seasons, we chose three unexceptional episodes from each programme in which shaming was apparently present for a detailed, shot-by-shot analysis (*Ano šéfe!*, season 4, episodes 3, 4, and 7; *Wipeout*, season 1, episodes 1, 5, and 8; *ANTM*, season 1, episodes 2, 3, and 4).[2] This procedure ensured that we could adequately contextualise our findings from selected episodes within the whole programme.

During the textual analysis, we observed how the different programme productions set up the ritualisation of shaming in their shows, and how the participants performed their roles in accordance with the ceremonial rules – or negotiated or even contested them. In the coding data, we drew from the set of eight degradation ceremony attributes

described in Garfinkel's article (1956: 422–423): (1) a situation of extraordinariness, (2) typification of events and participants, (3) the presence of a public figure or voice, (4) reference to shared values, (5) the host (voiceover) is personally uninterested in shaming and (6) is a supporter of shared values, (7) shamed participant(s) are distanced from the host, viewers, and (8) their original social position (identity). In the programmes under study, we identified if and how these conditions are met. Because Garfinkel based his conceptualisation on moral indignation followed by public denunciation rather than on performance-driven shaming, our coding work comprised searching for corresponding interactional arrangements that were instrumental to shame, humiliation, and ridicule management. In line with our theoretical perspective, we focused on the identity and face-work performed by the participants of the show as well as on their enacted reflexivity as civil, non-professional actors featuring in a 'reality show'. Furthermore, we examined how the legitimate use of defacement was established to provide ground for viewer enjoyment of this situation. We proceeded so that each team member participated in the analysis; specifically, they coded all instances of ritualisation, face-work, and reflexivity in one episode of the selected programme first and then watched one episode from the two other programmes analysed by others, but without coding it. After which, we compared our coding together in order to achieve intersubjective agreement about codes and categories. Finally, we coded the whole corpus throughout. In what follows, we quote from the data to support the points we make; it is understood that these pieces of data are not the only cases of observed phenomena but the ones we selected for illustration from many.

Due to the qualitative character of the data and the aims of the research, we did not construct the sample to be representative of any group of RTV programmes. On the other hand, the selected programmes represent three very different types of reality television formats, making it possible to assess if and how the elements of the degradation ceremony are instrumental in the ritualisation of identity manipulation within this genre of contemporary popular culture. In particular, we could observe diverse types of participants and their identity challenges, ranging from embarrassment and ridicule to humiliation and shaming. We discuss the potential extension of results to other types of reality TV at the end of the article.

'Playing the Role of Laboratory Rabbits': Establishing an 'Out of the Ordinary' Situation

From the outset of our analysis, we noticed that the key feature of RTV – the perceived spontaneity of the participants' behaviour in the show – was achieved by creating a particular interpretive perspective, which provided viewers with instructions on how to understand what is happening in the scene. Unlike in documentaries, the shows signalled to viewers that the situation is not entirely natural but skilfully prearranged. This is a tricky task for reality shows which pride themselves on recording ordinary people acting in non-scripted settings. Drawing on Allen and Mendick's (2013) analysis of authenticity and artificiality in RTV, we found that the solution for sustaining both aspects lies in their sophisticated spatial and temporal distribution.

In two of the programmes under study (*ANTM* and *Wipeout*), the programme took place on special, separate, and dedicated premises (a luxury suite and a stadium, respectively), and the participants were kept isolated – 'out of the ordinary' (Garfinkel, 1956: 422). The third show, *Ano šéfe!*, seemed to have taken place in the ordinary setting of restaurants; however, the filmed arrival of the celebrity (a well-known chef, Zdeněk Pohlreich, the show's host) and the television crew transformed the place into an extraordinary situation, which was evident from the curious views of the restaurant's staff and bystanders upon their arrival. This fact is corroborated by the host's emphasis on the extraordinariness of the situation, for example:

Zdeněk [host]: Dear friends, good afternoon, or almost good evening. Thank you for coming in response to our invitation. Basically, you are playing the role of laboratory rabbits today. We need your help in making the restaurateur's dream come true – make his pub full of people. (*Ano šéfe!*, S04E03, 23:20)[3]

Placing staff and guests into roles of 'laboratory rabbits' whose aim is to 'fulfil the dream of every restaurateur', works as an explicit transfer from the realm of everyday reality to a reality defined as experimental and dreamlike. Another example of the denaturalisation of the ordinary setting in the show is the dramaturgic behaviour of the host, who, by showy gait or gestures, makes the situation theatrical; this helps him to keep the symbolic distance between himself and ordinary participants, but, at the same time, it signals to the audience: 'Look, you will see something extraordinary now!' Whatever that 'something' is going to be, success–pride or failure–shame, it would be essentially relevant for the *here* and *now*, rarely transcending the situation in the show. Our analysis thus indicates that a precondition for ritualised shaming which protects personal identity from its destruction is the establishment of a particular, out-of-the-ordinary situation, where the viewers' interpretation of what is happening can be controlled.

'Young Giraffes from the Serengeti': Typification as Protection against the Personal Consequences of Being Shamed

One of the effects of situational arrangement and consequential interpretive control is that ordinary participants in RTV are not shamed as particular individuals but as representatives of a certain type of, for example, class, ethnicity, physique, or personality. Shows are organised in a way where shame is linked to the type they exemplify, not to their particular personal identity. This is most noticeable in *Wipeout*, a show focused on the constant ridicule of contestants, where the hosts – two well-known television sport commentators John Henson and John Anderson and the onsite reporter Jill Wagner – after briefly introducing the contestant and highlighting one of their personal characteristics, give them a (funny) nickname which typifies them for the rest of the show. For instance, a tall contestant was typified as a long-legged creature.

Jill [reporter]:	Can I ask you how long your legs are?
Colleen [contestant]:	My legs are 150 cm.
John [commentator]:	Nearly two-meter legs, John; it will definitely be a big advantage.
Jill:	That's just amazing! The world has never seen such long legs.
John:	. . . I feel like I am watching a wildlife documentary from the Serengeti, where young giraffes learn to walk. She should hurry or a crocodile will pull her into the water. (*Wipeout*, S01E08, 1:30–2:28)

After shared exaggeration of the length of her legs, both by the contestant herself ('150 cm') and the hosts ('nearly two-meter legs', 'the world has never seen'), the participant is likened to an animal (giraffe). This comparison is then further elaborated in the sense that she, as an animal, is in danger from other animals. As a result, the contestant has been defined narrowly as an animal-like instance of long-legged uniformity. In *ANTM*, the identity-typification work is also performed, but it is not as pronounced as in *Wipeout* – probably because the show is not profiled as the unceasing ridicule of contestants.

In the gastronomic *Ano šéfe!*, the ritualised typification of participants is achieved by assigning them to a scale ranging from an absolute layman to the perfect professional, with the host being at the positive end of the scale: a perfect professional, but also a unique character. The first question of the host is often directed toward finding out where the participant is on the scale, for instance, whether he is an educated chef or what year of cooking school he is currently studying. Unless exemplification is achieved by reference to the professional status of the participants, their behaviour is classified, for example, according to their methods of slicing meat and vegetables, storing food and so on. In the following extract from a conversation between the host and the local restaurant's chef, both are combined, producing a shaming scene:

Zdeněk [host]:	Michal, are you a trained chef? [*passes through the refrigerator where food is randomly deposited*]
Michal [chef]:	No.
Zdeněk:	What is your training?
Michal:	Plumber.
Zdeněk:	And why are you a chef? You were retraining, or why are you doing this?
Michal:	First, I enjoy it.
Zdeněk:	And second?
Michal:	I think I cook well.
Zdeněk:	You think you're cooking well, and you didn't enjoy plumbing, did you?
Michal:	No.
Zdeněk:	This fridge is at eight degrees, do you know that?
Michal:	It should be seven, six.
Zdeněk:	It should be at four degrees Celsius, because below four degrees of Celsius what happens?

Michal: Does the meat not go bad? For example.
Zdeněk: Well, what's not happening there? Why doesn't the meat go bad?
Michal: [*staring*]
Zdeněk: Because bacteria cannot reproduce. [*He closes the fridge and ostentatiously points at the dirt in the kitchen*] This is one of the most disgusting kitchens I've ever been in in my life.
(*Ano šéfe!*, S04E04, 11:45–12:21)

Although it seems that it is Michal who is shamed in the scene, in fact the real target is the self-educated and self-satisfied chef who – in the here and now – Michal instantiates. The viewers are invited to enjoy the humiliating scene on the grounds that either they can be proud they know about four degrees and bacteria, or they can appreciate they learnt something very important for professional cooking (see Holodynski and Kronast, 2009 for similar management of emotions in the classroom).

In contrast to participants, the celebrity host in RTV performs the successful professional type in order to 'be regarded [in the degradation ceremony] as acting in his capacity as a public figure, drawing upon communally entertained and verified experience' (Garfinkel, 1956: 323). Tyra Banks, a host in *ANTM*, exemplifies an outstanding professional in the field of fashion modelling; compared to her, all women in the contest form, both dramaturgically and socially, an undifferentiated mass, ready to be typified by fulfilling emblematic tasks ('challenges'). Together with frequent referral to their personal experiences, hosts pretend to base their judgements on 'professional standards'; in the show, the personal experience of the host thus becomes the gold standard in the field. Every situation a contestant encounters, and every task they must fulfil during the show can be compared by viewers to the host's capabilities.

In *Wipeout*, there is no direct confrontation between the hosts (two commentators) and the contestants. The commentators describe what is happening in a humorous but fairly impartial way; their objective is to find and emphasise unhappy, failed, and possibly embarrassing moments for the contestants (e.g. slipping, falling, hitting, looking ugly, etc.). Their defacement of contestants is never personal because it targets a nicknamed being rather than the unique person behind it. Here and there, their general impartiality contrasts with the admission of their own emphatic affections toward typified contestants, declaring, for example, 'I'll be honest – I'm a bit nervous about Spaz [a nickname of the contestant]' (*Wipeout*, S01E05, 2:40). The third co-host, a reporter on site, interviews the contestants before they enter the course and when they finish it. She does not verbally comment on what is happening but expresses her opinion through eloquent body postures and gestures often trying to ridicule the contestant in the eyes of viewers.

Unbecoming 'Hooked Thumbs': A Supremacy of Common Values Over Participants' Identities

Another strategy for how to make shaming bearable for participants in RTV, and thus prevent viewer embarrassment, is putting emphasis on the enhancement of shared values instead of identity spoiling. The reason for legitimate shaming lies in participants' unsatisfactory enactment of shared values or norms, for example, inappropriate modelling posture, preparation of a tasteless dish, or laughable body movements. In the following

excerpt from a conversation between a host, a cook, and the owner of a restaurant, a dramatic accent humiliates the latter two, not for what they are, but for not observing the paramount gastronomic value of freshness:

Zdeněk [host]: [*pulling frozen pre-cooked pasta from the freezer*] Do you cook the spaghetti like that?
Cook: [*nods shyly*]
Zdeněk: [*addressing the restaurant owner*] You wonder why nobody's coming here. What is important in the kitchen? What is important in the meal?
Cook: Freshness.
Zdeněk: So why the fuck isn't it?
(*Ano šéfe!*, S04E07, 20:35–45)

It is almost the obligation of a host to shame the participants who failed in their conformity to common values. As Garfinkel puts it, for a degradation ceremony, 'the denouncer must make the dignity of the supra-personal values of the tribe salient and accessible to view, and his denunciation must be delivered in their name' (Garfinkel, 1956: 423).

Arguably, shaming others in the name of shared values is an available way to prove one's own social prominence. The trick is not simple though. Through association of a publicly acknowledged person, shared values and their defence is 'a socially employed metaphysics' (Garfinkel, 1956); certain preferences become values only when they are defended as such. A publicly recognised person is one who shows his or her respect for community values, and values are considered to be shared only when they are defended by publicly acknowledged persons. For this reason, the individual components of the legitimacy of the shaming cannot be empirically discerned in the organisation of RTV shows. For instance, both *Wipeout* commentators are well dressed, good looking young men speaking in a cultivated tongue, using a variety of descriptions and euphemisms which show they are aware of the moral obligation not to gratuitously damage the contestants' faces. They describe the behaviour of contestants with traces of empathy but, at the same time, in a very technical way, as if it were the behaviour of some objects or animals:

John H [commentator]: But Keith [contestant] continues to the boxing wall. He tries not to wash himself in the mud.
[*Keith gets hit and falls into the mud.*]
John A [commentator]: This is obviously a failure. His beard is sucking the mud out of our pool. It's like a big human sponge. That calls for a replay. [*The shot in which Keith falls into the mud and climbs out of it is played again*.] He's almost unrecognisable, as if he's just left a troll village.
(*Wipeout*, S01E05, 9:55–10:15)

John H
[commentator]: He (Bryan) can handle this landing, I feel it in my bones.
John A
[commentator]: His body splashed right on the wall . . . And Spaz (Bryan) is swimming again.
(*Wipeout*, S01E05, 3:06–3:12)

Expressions such as 'wash', 'landing', 'his body splashed', or 'like a big human sponge' evoke the description of objects, not human competitors. On the other hand, 'He can handle it, I feel it in my bones' or 'He is almost unrecognisable' show signs of sympathy. The result is an impression that commentators merit respect as public personae because they objectively and in a sense respectfully interpret what is happening on the obstacle course and clarify which situations are acceptable for viewers to laugh at participants and which are not.

In specialised RTV programmes where the hosts are famous professionals, their right to speak (and shame) in the name of respected values is obvious. This is manifest in the open display of the host's negative emotions when a value is violated. In *ANTM*, Tyra Banks or one of the judges dress contestants down if their performance does not adhere to shared values, as in the following example:

Janice
[judge]: [*angrily to one of the contestants*] What were you thinking when you hooked your thumbs into the bottom of your swimsuit? What were you thinking?
(*ANTM*, S01E01, 35:00)

Nevertheless, public shaming of young models should be viewed as a harmless, shame-like by-product of the professional's status confirmation; it is a reflection of it. In *Ano šéfe!*, the host frequently lays bare his anger to stress how much he suffers when he sees the neglect of basic gastronomic values:

Zdeněk
[host]: [*resolutely*] Simply put, a mess in the kitchen is a mess on the plate. Always! Dirt in the kitchen is shit in the stomach. It can't end otherwise.
(*Ano šéfe!*, S04E03, 10:40)

Reference to shared values and their violation thus serves multiple objectives in RTV. The hosts use it as a ground for shaming underperforming participants in order to confirm their own status as respected public personae. Worshipping of supra-personal values may also protect participant identities from being spoiled entirely. Because a symbolic distance between the host and the participants must be maintained throughout the ceremony (cf. Garfinkel, 1956: 423), the asymmetric distribution of value adherence is built in to the RTV programmes and therefore the deficiency of participants in this regard is normally expected.

‘But for You it is . . . Your Job is Making Fun of People’: Participants’ Reflexivity in RTV

RTV candidates’ expectations are predominantly associated with the vision of success and fame (Couldry, 2002; Holmes, 2006; Wei, 2016). They usually know the programme from the perspective of the audience but not from the production side: a backstage view is not publicly available, and all participants are bound by a confidentiality contract, which prevents them from publishing their experience (Mast, 2016). With the exception of celebrities, participants have to be ‘formatted’ by the production staff to perform smoothly on the show (Ytreberg, 2004). Evidence of participants’ reflexivity rarely appears in the show, because the goal of RTV is to create the impression that it is not a ritual but contained spontaneity. There is scarce research published on it and mostly of a sociolinguistic form (see Thornborrow and Morris, 2004; Koutsantoni, 2007). In *Wipeout*, contestants sometimes openly address their families watching them on television:

Jill [reporter]:	We are reporting from the Wipeout Zone. April, what’s going on in your mind right now?
April [contestant]:	I’d like to say hi to my family and friends and all contestants. I’ll be the best, Mom! I’ll be the best! (*Wipeout*, S01E08; 29:08–29:13)

The contestant first contacts viewers, particularly her loved ones and talks to them. Although the communication is illusory because the show is not a live broadcast, it makes the world outside of the competition relevant for a short moment. Through this gesture, viewers are able to realise that participants are well aware of the fact they are being recorded, watched, and evaluated by the television audience. It is also evidence that contestants are conscious the show is not only about their performance in a competition where they can win, but that some other part of their performance, namely their *character*, is also publicly evaluated (for the notion of character, see Goffman, 1967).

In *ANTM*, discussions about the character of contestants are frequent and exposed to the audience because it is assumed that being a professional top model implies not only a particular body and bodily skills but also an extraordinary character. On the other hand, there is virtually no overt reference or address to the television audience except occasional expressive gestures to the camera. In this sense, the show is very focused on its subject and kept extremely self-contained, leaving little place for participants’ reflexivity as performers in an RTV show.

While *Wipeout* and *ANTM* are programmes in which all participants are, supposedly, keen to be in the show, in *Ano šéfe!*, the situation is different because not every restaurant employee must be excited to participate in the show. In the following conversation excerpt, the resistance of a chef documents the reflexivity of participants. Here, the show itself becomes an object through a critique of the host not promoting professional values, but his entertainment programme instead:

Zdeněk [host]:	How do you do, mates?
Chef:	We're fine.
Zdeněk:	I heard you didn't want to let us come in, did you?
Chef:	We are not interested in being on your show.
Zdeněk:	Why not?
Chef:	Because it's fun for you, isn't it?
Zdeněk:	What is it for you?
Chef:	It's a job, for us.
Zdeněk:	For us, it's exactly the same job as for you, isn't it?
Chef:	But for you it is . . . your job is making fun of people.
Zdeněk:	I don't understand what you're telling me.
Chef:	Well, you're kidding around.
Zdeněk:	And you feel humiliated or offended, or . . .?
Chef:	No, I don't feel humiliated. But I'm not interested in communicating with you.
Zdeněk:	For what reason?
Chef:	Because I don't want to be on your show.
Zdeněk:	You can be famous, can't you? [*We hear the laughs of bystanders who are not in the shot*.]
Zdeněk:	[*smiles*] Relax a little, it's no big deal. (*Ano šéfe!*, S7e17, 15:20–16:05)

The exchange took place in the restaurant kitchen with only the chef and Zdeněk in the shot. However, from the transitions of the camera it was apparent that all the kitchen staff and maybe other bystanders were watching the scene. Surely, it was not a relaxed conversation between two colleagues from the industry but a tense public confrontation between a local gastronomic authority and a national authority. The interaction was unequal: the chef spoke in a more formal register with Zdeněk, while Zdeněk spoke to him in a very informal way. By pointing out that the show is not about work but is just 'fun' and 'kidding around', the participant casts doubt on the right of the host to speak on behalf of the shared values of the profession (see the previous section) and ipso facto undermines the ritual (moral) character of the ceremony.

This conversation is also interesting in that it makes explicit another prerequisite of the programme: it humiliates and offends the participants. The inadvertent confession did not come from a contestant but from the host of the show, as if he indeed considered shaming to be the main reason why people were unwilling to participate in his programme. Conversely, for the host, the reason why participants accept and endure his humiliation and offensiveness is because of the chance they will become famous. The host's characterisation of the programme as an opportunity either to become famous or be humiliated, or both, is in line with our reflections on participants' expectations regarding RTV programmes. At the same time, the conversation confirms Garfinkel's insight that the right to speak on behalf of shared values is never a matter of course in the degradation ceremony, but it is a skilful and coordinated exercise among all participants.

A Purposively Unaccomplished Identity Degradation Ceremony?

Despite frequent shaming, most participants of RTV leave the programmes without their original identities being replaced with new ones of lower status. This is a result of RTV's ritualisation, which applies the status degradation ceremony to its participants unsuccessfully on purpose: placing the show out of the ordinary, where social types, represented by 'random' or 'featured' individuals, are praised or shamed according to the measure in which their performance confirms the shared values. Somehow paradoxically, another feature which prevents degradation ceremonies in RTV from being accomplished is their built-in emphasis on shame, embarrassment, or humiliation. Garfinkel (1956) takes great pains to distinguish between two social affects – shame and moral indignation. He suggests that shame has an individualising effect because it forces individuals to withdraw from the public to protect their personal identity. On the other hand, moral indignation leads to 'the ritual destruction of the person denounced' and reinforces group solidarity (1956). Although the distinction may not be so clear-cut, as Garfinkel argues, to make the person's original identity successfully removed and replaced with the new one, the degradation ceremony must arrange grounds for moral indignation. However, we did not observe moral transgressions such as lying, cheating, theft, or murder as being a primary focus in the programmes. Rather bad habits, poor performance, lapses, and other misbehaviour are the grounds for attacks on the identity of participants; it creates a specific, shame-driven form of the degradation ceremony, which is not fatal to the participants' identities.

A typical example of RTV shaming that excludes the moral ground while producing a strong degradative effect comes from *ANTN* when some contestants deal with the behaviour of one among them (Ebony), namely the use of a skin moisturising product which leaves slippery traces on door knobs and other furniture. It combines an impersonal but strong insult with a personal one, delivered with overplayed respect to the face of the shamed person:

> Adrianne
> [contestant]: I'm not living like a pig anymore! I can't take it! My house is immaculate, just like bling, bling, bu-bling, bling, bling [*doing gestures with hands*]. And I came here, it's like prrh, prrh, prrh! No!
> Giselle
> [contestant]: [*to Ebony*] Will you do me one favour, just one favour, just one favour? And I hope it's not, like, not a bad thing or anything . . . [*asks Ebony to wash her hands after putting the moisturiser on*] Just that. That's all I have a problem . . . I don't even know if it's a real big problem or anything. That's all, and it's not in a bad way at all. [*making a grimace of suffering*].
> (*ANTM*, S01E04, 14:40–15:21)

In the analysed programmes, we encountered only one case whereby a participant's original identity was destroyed, and their 'true' identity reconstructed in regard

to the profession. It happened in the show *Ano šéfe!* What follows is an extract from a conversation between two participants, employees of the concerned restaurant, 'secretly' recorded by the production staff:

Chef:	Now, dude, we can do just some bricklayer job, dude, on a construction site. That's the fuckin' truth.
Bartender:	He (the host) smashed us even harder today. And today I feel, I see how tragic we are . . . I feel like it's completely sewn up.
Chef:	. . . And he (the host) has smashed us so completely, dude, that when one of us goes to ask for a job, dude, I will be, like, ashamed! (*Ano šéfe!*, S03E02, 20:20–21:05)

The staff of that restaurant were shamed and humiliated so many times and in such a way that it would be hard to imagine the restaurant could survive. The quotation also indicates that the degradation did not concern the total identity of the participants but only their professional identities; the show has revealed that 'in essence' (Garfinkel, 1956: 421, note 6), they were not chefs but only some guys who pretended to be chefs. Their 'true' identity, however, has not been ritually reconstituted because this is not the aim of the show.

In both *Wipeout* and *ANTM*, unsuccessful candidates are eliminated, but not in the sense of being degraded to someone else; being excluded is part of the game, and as such it does not mean that the person in question becomes 'strange' (cf. Wei, 2016). Only on the basis of extreme shame is the participant's identity transformed into that of a total loser – because shame, not failure, is what is at stake in RTV programmes. This is not to say that not being totally degraded on the show rules out later negative consequences; there are registered cases of mental health issues and suicide among former participants, indicating the ethical or even legal questionability of such programmes (Blair, 2010; Lavie, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

At the beginning of our article, we raised the question of how it is possible that systematic shaming or ridiculing of ordinary people in popular RTV shows is perceived by many as a sort of benign entertainment and not a modern form of pillory (Hess and Waller, 2014). What is the mechanism that 'tames' shaming in RTV and makes it bearable for its targets and entertaining for its viewers? After the examination of empirical material, we suggest it is mainly for its ritualised character (in Garfinkel's and Goffman's sense), embodied in a purposively unaccomplished degradation ceremony involving particular situational settings, identity manipulation, and participant reflexivity, which together protect RTV subjects from identity degradation. Having said this, we must add a qualification. Neither the participants nor the audience are culturally homogenous entities. Shaming in RTV takes place in a zone where the personal and the cultural overlap, and it may be that what someone finds an entertaining spectacle, for another can cause embarrassment. Therefore, for public shaming in RTV to be entertaining or, at least, not embarrassing, a viewer needs to recognise its ritual character: the extraordinariness of

the situation; the typification of participants, including the host; and the shared values in whose name shaming is done (Garfinkel, 1956).

The degradation ceremony has been commonly described as a powerful social practice. Our research of its use in RTV programmes demonstrates that it has become a cultural practice too. This was not achieved by the usual means of mimetic representation within the artistic field but via a specific transformation which made it acceptable as part of mediatised popular culture. The transformation consists of replacing moral indignation, which is a prerequisite for the success of the degradation ceremony as a social practice, by shaming, humiliation, or ridicule, which – due to the strong ritualisation of identity manipulation in the ceremony – do not have such fatal consequences for the participants. By the very same process, degradation attempts in RTV have become reframed for the audience as sometimes dramatic, but harmless entertainment.

This altered degradation ceremony may seem similar to other, more or less ceremonial cultural practices associated with shaming and humiliation, for example, hazing, pranks, or hen parties. Often, they are part of initiation rituals, which have the function of purging a former and ratifying a new personal identity (Van Gennep, 1961 [1909]). In secular rituals, the purpose of identity challenges is not to destroy the target; they represent anti-structural elements that dramatise and accentuate the significance of acquiring a new identity (Gusfield and Michalowicz, 1984; Mann et al., 2016). Such framing makes it possible for the participants to laugh and enjoy otherwise rather embarrassing situations. In the unaccomplished degradation ceremony of RTV, however, the context and framing of shame or humiliation are quite different. There, the shaming does not serve to mark a line between a vanishing old and a coming new, more valuable identity; it does not represent a prolonged moment of liminality between two states in the life of an individual. Instead, shaming or ridiculing is meant literally and with the aim to degrade or mock the other person, referring to her or his bad performance in the programme. And, as we found in our study, it is the ritualisation of the shaming within a ceremony itself that protects the participants from social degradation.

The prominent feature of reality television is blending formalised and impromptu actions. In some approximation, this duality is reflected in the distinction between ritualised and situational shaming, which occasionally may become blurred. The ritualised dimension of shaming in RTV is realised through the particular organised setting in which the show takes place, that is to say: extraordinariness of situation, role/type ascription, framing of shared values, and an emotionally structured plot. However, contrary to standard institutional shaming, the overt objective of RTV is to entertain viewers, not to reveal the spoiled identity of participants or to improve or replace it (albeit many programmes pretend to do so). Importantly, participants are aware of this particular organisational arrangement and use it as a resource for their performance. The shows' hosts rely on it most, but the other participants do so as well; we observed that the entertaining purpose of the show is not unknown to them, for they occasionally signal it – they wave to the viewers, complain about the non-seriousness of the show, or momentarily glance at the camera. Contestants in *ANTM* manifested notably weak reflexivity of the entertaining character of the show; the reason resides in the character of *ANTM*, where participation itself is very much gratifying and promissory regarding the contestants' future career, or all signs of reflexivity have been merely cut from the final edit.

The informality (authenticity) of shaming in RTV shows is obtained mainly by engaging or, rather, creating 'ordinary people' (Carpentier, 2014) whose task is to play themselves. Producers assume that 'nobody can keep up an act all the time in front of the cameras' (Ritchie, 2000: 26 cited in Couldry, 2002: 287), so they either wait till shame, embarrassment, or ridicule spontaneously appear during the completion of assigned tasks (*Wipeout*), or the host catalyses it by comparing the participant's performance with shared values/gold standards (*Ano šéfe!, ANTM*). At the same time, the media staff control spontaneous or catalysed shaming to prevent it from appearing hateful and too violent in the show. Shaming has a ritualised character in the sense of protecting participants' (sacred) identity from being entirely degraded (profaned) in public. It seems that, although we have not investigated the case, if ritualisation is weak and the identities of participants are indeed mortified, shame and status degradation can be transferred to the organisers of the show (cf. Antonio, 1972). It stands in contrast to the shaming practice on social media, where it often takes a form of a devastating flood-like stream of hateful posts (Hess and Waller, 2014; Ronson, 2015; Scheff and Schorr, 2017).

The sample analysed in this study consisted of two competition shows and a 'corrective' gastronomic programme. We may ask to what extent is the unaccomplished degradation ceremony used in other types of reality programmes. Anja Hirdman's research into the management of emotions in the Scandinavian *The Luxury Trap* corroborates the idea by showing that shaming has a determined sequential structure in 'financial makeover' RTV. She found that the show does not irreparably harm the identities of its participants but '[t]hrough acceptance and adjustment, participants are offered release from shame's disturbing impact, and the pain of rejection is suspended' (Hirdman, 2016: 291). Thus, it points to a similar ritualised procedure of identity manipulation as we have identified in our sample. The British 'poverty porn' programme *Benefits Street* also evinces features of strong ritualisation close to a degradation ceremony. In their article, Allen, Tyler, and De Benedictis described an emblematic protagonist of the programme: a female participant who was (a) typified both by the nickname White Dee and by being a representative 'of "the skiver" par-excellence', (b) her home was transformed into a stage, (c) she was well aware of her role, and, eventually, (d) despite her drastic shaming, she preserved her identity and even became a micro-celebrity (Allen et al., 2014).

There are also reality television programmes like *Wife Swap*, which lack a host to play the role – of 'denouncer' in Garfinkel's original study – of guiding and judging the actions of the participants. Nevertheless, the ceremonial character of degradation is quite evident: they achieve the extraordinariness of situation through moving wives to the other participant family's home; as regards typification, '[t]he families selected represent extreme opposites that are figured in terms of differences of class, race, region and religion' (Matheson, 2007: 34; for typification, see also Collins, 2008: 100); the voice-over, accompanied by frequent 'judgement shots' (Skeggs et al., 2008), provides necessary value judgements; the reflexivity of participants is evident from their commentaries on what is happening in the show; and despite no available statistics, most of the participating families 'survive' the programme without their identities being severely damaged – although they must cope with the problems after leaving the programme (see Blair, 2010).

We are not suggesting that the ritualisation of shaming in the form of a purposively unaccomplished degradation ceremony is a universal component, let alone the backbone of all or most reality television programmes. It is evident that some makeover, charity, or docusoap formats employ other forms of ritualisation in which shaming is present only marginally. Our aim was to describe how the universal social practice of status degradation mutated into a particular cultural practice. As Couldry argues, the culturality of a phenomenon means its interpretative openness (Coudry, 2000). While interpretation in the degradation ceremony as a social practice is restricted to a binary moral code (moral indignation) to become successful, ritualised shaming in RTV does not enforce such binary opposition. As we observed, shaming relies on various symbolic resources; otherwise, it would not provoke such extensive follow-up discussions in social and mass media. Our contribution lies, therefore, in documenting the flow between the social and cultural domains; in the demonstration of specific transformations which have made the originally powerful degradative social practice acceptable as a form of benign popular culture entertainment.

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ORCID iD

Martin Hájek https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9213-6404

Notes

1. Shame occurs when the dignity of a person is successfully challenged, often when a person is humiliated, embarrassed, or ridiculed. Shame depends on context: what is shameful for someone or in some situation is not necessarily shameful for another person or in another situation (see Scheler, 1987 [1923]).
2. Episodes are usually very similar in their structure and result only rarely in transcendence of the genre's conventions, e.g. a participant leaving the show early.
3. In citations to television programmes, the numbers refer to the time interval in the programme when the cited conversation happened. There are mostly two numbers – start and end of the extract – but if the quotation is very short, just the start time is indicated.

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Author biographies

Martin Hájek is associate professor of sociology at the Institute of Sociological Studies, Charles University, Prague. His main research interests are normative orders of society, symbolic interactionism, discourse and narrative analysis. He is the author of a monograph on various types of textual analysis in social sciences and has published widely in peer-reviewed journals.

Daniel Frantál is a Master's student of sociology at the Institute of Sociological Studies, Charles University, Prague.

Kateřina Simbartlová is a Master's student of sociology at the Institute of Sociological Studies, Charles University, Prague.