

## (Mis)recognition and the middle-class/bourgeois gaze: A case study of *Wife Swap*

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This article will argue that *Wife Swap* and other ‘reality’ television formats can be seen as part of a wider project: a bourgeois project that, on the one hand, is preoccupied with self-improvement and the accrual of just the right forms of cultural, symbolic and economic capital, and on the other, defines itself in opposition to an *imagined* working-class project of disinvestment of the self. This article argues for the existence of a middle-class gaze in the production of ‘reality’ television shows in general and in *Wife Swap* in particular and examines the complex and inextricable links between the middle-class gaze and gender.

**Keywords:** Feminism; gender; individualisation; middle-class gaze; ‘reality’ television; social class

### Introduction

This article originates from my profound reactions to ‘reality’ television in general and to a particular episode from Series One of *Wife Swap* broadcast in 2003 (Channel 4). The episode in which Lizzie and Emma exchange families is most obviously troubling because of the dramatic way in which Lizzie brings a halt to the swap. In this article I will argue that this episode exemplifies many of the themes pertinent to the numerous series of *Wife Swap* and ‘reality’ television more widely, most notably those relating to contemporary discourses circulating about social class and gender.

When Bafta Award-winning ‘reality’ television show *Wife Swap* first aired in 2003 it was an instant hit, with audience figures peaking at 7.2 million for the first series (<http://www.rdfmedia.com/reality/WifeSwap.asp>).<sup>1</sup> It is one of several high-profile television programmes made by RDF Media, including *Holiday Showdown* and *Ladette to Lady*. They all involve taking people out of their own environment and placing in them in one which is organised around values different from those they have previously expressed. Furthermore, ‘reality’ television’s modus operandi is designed to foster discomfort with the aim of fostering individual self-recognition and self-improvement. As I will argue, the importance of such explicit individualism is a key theme in debates around the significance of social class.

*Wife Swap* provides ample opportunities for reflecting upon both class and gender, for the participants, audience and programme makers. As the narrator tells us, the two couples have never met, ‘but the wives have agreed to swap homes, husbands and children for two weeks to see what they can learn about their own lives’. In preparation, both women fill in a ‘manual’ on how their own household is organised, including details of income, the roles of family members and the family’s social routine. In the first week the wives have to follow the rules as outlined in the household manual. In the second week they may try to lay down new rules for the family. Class differences are highlighted by the producers by the selection

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of particular couples, while gender is centralised not only by the emphasis on women's and men's family roles, but also by the adoption of melodramatic techniques which Woods and Skeggs (2008) associate with a genre attracting a female spectatorship.

This article will argue that *Wife Swap* and other 'reality' television formats can be seen as part of a wider project: a bourgeois project that, on the one hand, is preoccupied with self-improvement and the accrual of just the right forms of cultural, symbolic and economic capital, and on the other, defines itself in opposition to an *imagined* working-class project of disinvestment of the self. At the heart of *Wife Swap* lie inescapable debates regarding the precise roles of men (husbands/fathers) and women (wives/mothers) and how these relate to the links between lifestyle choices and social class.

I propose the term middle-class gaze to understand the ways in which the media operationalise middle-class habitus, a Bourdieusian (1984) term which Skeggs (2004) has deployed when theorising about the making of middle-class 'selves'. I suggest that the middle-class gaze in this context is structured and structuring class debates in the production of 'reality' television formats such as *Wife Swap*. The main thrust of the term echoes the work of film theorist Mulvey (1988), who argues for the existence of a male gaze which is evidenced not just in the Freudian understanding of anxiety that woman is said to ignite, but also by virtue of the fact that most aspects of the films production are informed by patriarchy in all its (dis)embodied forms. My use of the term suggests that a middle-class gaze is a mode of production (symbolic as well as material) which is underpinned by an anxiety about the working classes that has historically entailed the (mis)recognition of the working class as being of lesser value, as particularly suited to specific forms of labour, and as a pathological, abject other. This (mis)recognition of the working class shores up the upper and middle classes' own identities as of greater value and as also particularly suited to different, yet specific, forms of labour, as morally good and right and as the embodiment of propriety and good taste (Skeggs, 2004; Sayer, 2005). After briefly locating 'reality' television in its televisual context, I will illustrate, through the work of new class theorists, the imperatives that are currently at work in the making of the working and middle classes, specifically in relation to gender, to argue for the significance of social class in the UK. The subsequent section will include a close reading of the Lizzie and Emma episode to illustrate the analytic capacity of the middle-class gaze.

### Locating *Wife Swap*

'Reality' television is a worldwide phenomenon and much has been written about why 'we' appear to be so fascinated by the mundane and intimate daily behaviour of 'ordinary people' (Hill, 2002; van Zoonen, 2001). Of several explanatory readings of the phenomenon, I will consider those advanced by Dovey (2000) and van Zoonen (2001). Dovey argues for an economic perspective as well as consideration of the perceptual shifts of what constitutes appropriate public and private behaviour. He claims that an expensive and ideologically suspect tradition in documentary film and television, combined with the explosion of commercial television, precipitated the decline of documentary. The 'authenticity' and subjectivity that used to underpin the validity of documentaries about social problems has now been linked, through the new television formats, to the exploration of individual subjectivities.

Although it marks a shift from the explicit remit of documentary makers to inform the general public about social problems, *Wife Swap* also purports to have an informative aspect – but in this case for the *individual* participants of the show, providing them, as well as the audience, with 'a chance to see how others live their lives and to reflect on what they might learn from this' (voice over, *Wife Swap*). It is instructive to think about how the rise of 'reality' television programming on Channel 4 came about at the same time as the 1992

Broadcasting Act, since this had major implications for Channel 4. Until that time, Channel 4's remit was as a public broadcaster and it did not have to secure its own funding but shared commercial advertising with ITV. When Channel 4 began to generate its own funding, there was a shift in its output to a stronger emphasis on programmes that would appeal to a wider audience, as well as an increase in imported big hit shows from the United States. Its commitment to public broadcasting and its reputation for more challenging and risky television-making, combined with the financial imperative to secure large audience ratings, is the context in which its choices to commission dramatic but 'edgy' 'reality' television formats like *Wife Swap* are made (R. Moseley personal correspondence). 'Reality' formats also echo traditional documentaries in their use of 'ordinary' people, rather than paid actors, but have moved away from making clear links between individual problems and social conditions (Corner, 1996).

Indeed, Dovey (2000) argues that the post-war ideological shift towards the individual and the emergence of new technologies and commercial opportunities has enabled the relationship between individual subjectivities and social problems to be un-coupled in favour of the exploration of individual subjectivities in an ever-widening range of scenarios. He writes that the 'up-close-and-personal' nature of reality/factual shows is 'characterised by a shifting understanding of what constitutes the acceptable domains of the private and the public' (Dovey, 2000 p. 21). He supports this with reference to the emergence of programmes using the video diary format, the prevalence of the 'confessional' in a variety of chat/self-help shows, and the uncharacteristic outpouring of 'grief' in the wake of the death of Princess Diana. Van Zoonen (2001) agrees, further arguing that the proliferation of intimate subjectivities available through factual/reality formats and their huge popularity can be read as acts of resistance to bourgeois proprieties involving the strict demarcation of behaviours appropriate to public and private spheres. This rather positive explanation for the rise of the phenomenon is challenged if we use the middle-class gaze to analyse the show's production in relation to the sorts of moralities that are traded.

Writing about *Wife Swap*, Helen Piper (2004, p. 276) argues that class and specifically the notion of aspirational consumption is a central theme of the show for audiences, 'inviting affinity or disaffinity with its display of cultural tastes'. However we should recognise that this invitation is not neutral but structured by a middle-class gaze and is therefore more problematic than Piper's analysis might suggest. Another important way that the concept of a middle-class gaze might usefully be deployed is when thinking about whose values are given more authority. Piper (2004) rightly argues that 'an opposition between normality and difference is constructed by the inclusion of extreme characters'. She uses the example of the *Dee and Sonia* episode, which contrasts a white, working-class and racist family with a family that is aspiring upper working class and black. Piper (2004) argues that this episode 'represent positions that are popularly and politically outmoded and reactionary so they confine the debate to a battle that is always already won, at least in principle (though clearly not in practice)'. This may be true for the episode to which she refers, where racism, recognised as outmoded, takes centre stage, but this is not true for class, where the debate for which values have positive status may have been started but has certainly not been won. However, meaning making is open to contestation. The research of Woods and Skeggs (2008) and Skeggs and Woods (2004, 2004–2008) suggests that a middle-class gaze is not monolithic and that working-class viewers, at least, regularly both re-inscribe, re-work and challenge the normative assumptions of the middle-class gaze in their own television watching.

In the next section I shall move to examine recent debates on class, individualisation and gender, and link current political projects, especially those embodied by New Labour, to 'reality' television formats such as *Wife Swap*.

### Social class and the imperative of self-improvement

As the subtitle above suggests, the resurgence of debates on social class in recent years has renewed interest in the centrality of social class to social processes, social mobility and individual life chances, but in a distinctive fashion (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Bottero, 2004; Crompton, 2006; Fraser, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Johnson & Lawler, 2005; Kelly, 2001; McDowell, 2006; Nayak, 2006; Reay, 2005; Savage et al., 2005; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997, 2004, 2005; Walkerdine, 2003). Changes in global economies and a move in the UK towards a service and knowledge economy and the concomitant expansion of further and higher education have led to claims by some sociologists that social class has become an increasingly redundant concept. Individuals are thought to have greater freedom to plan and set the terms of their own biographies, leading to the attenuation of class structures/constraints. Despite theoretical nuances between the writers, such debates have become known as the 'individualisation' thesis.

However Skeggs (2004) argues that it is crucial to recognise that the centralisation of individual aspirations, as in the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), is produced within a middle-class habitus that should be challenged by empirically based theorisation making class, gender and 'race' visible. Research documents how class and gender, often inscribed on the body, continue to impact upon social mobility, while aspects of working-classness, in particular, remain an aspect of social derogation (McDowell, 2006; Reay, 2005; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997, 2004, 2005; Walkerdine, 2003). The middle-class gaze as we see it on 'reality' television revolves around taste and appearance. The acquisition of 'taste' is signified through knowledge of and access to cultural artefacts. Skeggs argues,

Appearance matters. It is the means by which others are recognized and it is part of the way in which we want to recognize ourselves. But this is not just a matter of interpersonal, even dialogical construction of subjectivity; it is a matter of how symbolic violence may or may not occur. (Skeggs, 2000, p. 129)

Taste is not simply a cultural matter but has distinct political and economic dimensions. Skeggs (2004) charts how the most recent ideologies of the neo-liberal economic order privilege and naturalise what Paul du Gay (1996) terms the 'enterprising self', whereby people are required to become 'entrepreneurs of the self' – to accrue and exchange the 'correct' cultural, economic and moral capital or resources – that is, to become a subject with value. As Skeggs (2004, p. 77) argues, 'we have different access to becoming a subject with value'. She further argues that Thatcherism, Blairism, market analysts and Third Way sociologists all produce a normative rhetoric of individualisation, implying that we can all be middle-class now. Those who cannot or will not submit themselves to the processes that create an enterprising 'self-improving' aesthetic self which will hold up under the surveillance of the middle-class/bourgeois gaze can be identified as part of a variously posited 'problem', not part of the 'solution'. So well hidden is the middle-class habitus that a veil is placed over collective/class (in)action and the way in which constitutive limits are set through the gendered, racial and classed signifiers inscribed upon the body.

Of course much of this self-improvement is linked to class mobility, but it is also linked to gender, explicitly so in a show like *Wife Swap*. Skeggs (1997, 2004) argues that white, working-class women have historically and remain today the objects of abject, visceral affects which emanate from the middle classes. Skeggs (1997, 2004) and Parker and Lyle (2005, in press) further argue that the middle classes pathologise the working class in order to shore up their own identities. Feminists have argued that, because women are the symbolic bearers of cultural and therefore class identity, femininity and class are inextricably linked (Yuval Davis, 1997). Women's propriety is monitored through mechanisms that control women's conduct through surveillance and a gamut of social and state authorised sanctions. Presenting oneself in public

as decorous is a key signifier of middle-class status, just as allowing oneself to appear indecorous marks one as working class. The working class have long been associated with excess, with inability to control basic desires, while bourgeois notions of femininity have been constructed in opposition to so-called working-class femininities (Skeggs 1997, 2004).

It is the middle-class gaze, coupled with the neo-liberal abhorrence of economic dependence on the state that informs the production and consumption of programmes such as *Wife Swap*. Class struggles are constantly (re)produced through the acquisition and display of 'taste'. Skeggs's (2000, p. 136) argument that 'judgments are still made on the basis of appearance and read as conduct' is highly pertinent for an analysis of *Wife Swap*.

While all texts are polysemic, through an examination of my own reactions to the show, I will argue that the Lizzie and Emma episode personifies the above debates about class, gender and individualisation and the anxiety that they produce. I will argue that one of the dominant and yet veiled roles of 'reality' television is the (re)production of middle-class values via the (re)production of the working class as abject other. Through a close reading of pertinent extracts I will illustrate how the show's ostensible main aim – improvement in the family unit – has mixed results for the participants, including strong resistance to, as well as the adoption of, the middle-class gaze by participants.

### Lizzie and Emma

Every episode of *Wife Swap* opens with introductory shots of the participants: the wives, their husbands and their children. In this 'getting to know you' sequence we also see shots of the participants' homes, and sometimes their cars. From the beginning of the show participants are being fixed in class terms. We are first introduced to the two smiling families by the use of their 'family' name. In this episode we are told that Colin and Emma Sprye have been married for 10 years and have two children, a boy and a girl. The establishing shot shows their family as a whole, followed by close-up shots of each family member. Both parents are dressed smart-casual, flanking their two children; Emma stands next to her daughter and Colin next to their son. Both children are also dressed smart-casual. They look like the model 2.4 family.

Mark and Lizzie Bardsley are not introduced in the same way. Unlike the Spryes we are told straight away where they are from: Rochdale. No mention is made of how long they have been married. The establishing shot of Mark and Lizzie is of them both holding young children – one-year-old twins. The camera pans away and focuses on a further six children, one after the other. In contrast to the Sprye family's introduction, we are told the ages of all their eight children, and the slow revelation of the size of their family is clearly for dramatic effect. The editing makes perfect sense within the context of alarmist media debates round falling birth rates in the UK where profound class anxieties are rehearsed through 'concerns' about the right sort (read: middle-class) of people not having enough children and too many of the wrong sort (read: state-dependent, working-class and teenagers) having too many. The participants' dress stereotypically connotes working-classness: Mark and Lizzie are in matching sportswear. Lizzie is overweight, as is one of their girls. Mark has visible tattoos, the two boys have shaved heads like their Dad and one of the young twins is sucking on a bottle. All of the Bardsley family are shown in greater close-up than the Sprye family, fetishising what Moseley (2000, p. 314) calls 'the threatening excessiveness of the ordinary'.

My initial reactions to this episode were probably not unlike those of other middle-class viewers. Even before the participants' employment status is revealed, I had already assigned Lizzie and Mark a 'non-respectable' working-class status and positioned Emma and Colin as middle-class-ish. At this stage in the show I already knew that this swap was loaded with



explosive potential. I had already situated both families into common class narratives; I already 'know' that these families are going to clash because their appearance will be read as *conduct* (Skeggs, 2000). My own reaction was distaste at the size of Lizzie's family, at Mark's tattoos, their matching clothes, their overweight and 'un-kempt look'. We are told they are from 'the North', which in Britain is code for 'working-class'. Although at the time a relatively naive viewer, I was already well versed in what Skeggs (2000) calls the (mis)recognition of the working classes as pathological and readily recognise when '[stereo] typical examples of working-class life are exhibited for our contemplation' (Cook, 2000, p. 105).

The choice of participants by the programme-makers, and the way in which the Spryes and the Bardsleys are juxtaposed within the first few minutes of the show, combined with the slow revealing of all the children is, I would argue, *intended* to fix them as physically repulsive in class terms. As Skeggs (1997, 2000, 2004) argues: white working-class woman has always been 'othered' by the middle classes; everything that she does is subject to surveillance, criticism and legislation in a society dominated by higher classes. Judgement and scorn have been thrown at her dress, her public and private conduct, how she raises her family, the men she loves, the paid work that she does/does not do. She has been a scapegoat for the nation's ills from the prostitution laws of the nineteenth century (Walkowitz, 1984) to the lone mothers debates in the 1990s (see Wright and Jagger, 1999 Eds). While the specific historical antecedents of current debate may not be known to the majority of the viewers, I would argue that many of them will be more or less conversant with the implicit class codes replete in this section of the show.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I would argue that the success of the show rests upon it.

However, there is something else at work here – we learn quickly that the Sprye family is not *really* middle class; they make a number of 'blunders' that expose their aspirations *to be* middle class. In the next part of the show, the wives are shown talking about their family values. Now the focus is on Emma, and everything she says is seen in contrast to what we already know about Lizzie. The information about the Spryes is presented through voice-overs, by Emma and Colin themselves, and 'interviews' with Emma. Emma describes herself and Colin as a 'modern couple', 'ambitious' and 'aspirational'. Despite having two children she does not consider herself to be maternal: 'I'm not a maternal mother'. This is a pivotal moment in the show: in each episode there is a point at which the more 'respectable' family reveals something about themselves that is potentially discrediting. In this episode, Emma's relationship to motherhood is presented as problematic. While Emma is certainly positioned in opposition to Lizzie, it appears that Emma is not middle class either; rather she has middle-class aspirations. She is heavily invested in the bourgeois project of self-improvement, but as a family they have not 'made it' – yet. We learn that Emma is a secretary, while Colin is the manager of a nightclub; crucially they are planning to open their own restaurant. Emma states that her ideal home would be 'a mansion, with a pool and a butler maybe'. In saying this, Emma exposes that she is not conversant with middle-class codes that dictate (whatever the reality) that the desire for upward mobility and social and financial ambitions should be expressed discretely, if at all, so as to seem invisible in effort and self-evident in achievement.

I would argue that Emma and Colin have been chosen as participants because they are different enough from Lizzie and Mark to provide conflict, drama and spectacle, but also for another crucial reason: they are open to ridicule at this stage in the programme by a more 'authentic' middle-class gaze which can spot that they aspire to, but do not possess, the signifiers of the middle classes.<sup>3</sup> They can also be the object of ridicule and humour for the working classes. Perhaps one of the few working-class defences against the controlling and judgemental gaze of the middle classes is to accuse them of being pretentious. Skeggs argues 'not only is anti-pretentious humour a form of surveillance and a critique of the middle-class by the working-class, it also operates as a form of surveillance within the middle-class ... as they too must

not step outside of their social position' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 114). The distinctions that operate in the middle classes are not fully explored by Skeggs; what my reading of *Wife Swap* highlights is another important piece of boundary work, namely that between the more established/authentic middle classes (programme makers and a knowing audience) and the lower middle classes such as the Spryes.

As we know, women and appropriate femininities are a central focus of the show; these are always played out in antagonistic terms, as illustrated in a segment shot before the women have left their own homes:

Narrator: Lizzie is concerned what Mark's 'new wife' might be like.

Lizzie: Well I don't know she might be a trollop, could she not, that's putting it politely.

The camera cuts to Emma showing the camera a silver glitzy dress that she is about to unpack. Cut to Lizzie.

Lizzie: . . . I don't know if she gets a bit frisky after she's had a drink do I? Goodness knows what she'll be saying about me [direct to camera], but he's mine so keep your mawls off!

The camera cuts to Emma, still holding up the dress.

Emma: I hope I'll be getting a lot of wear out of this in the new house.

Cut to Lizzie holding up a pair of jeans.

Lizzie: . . . [direct to the camera] No! They're not a size ten . . . but I don't care, because me husband loves me!

Cut to Emma who is combing her shoulder length dyed blond hair in front of a full length mirror.

Emma: . . . Mark would like his new wife to be glamorous, conscious about her appearance and a good conversationalist.

Cut to Lizzie who puts on and then takes off a long hair piece saying.

Lizzie: Ooh, I'm a stunner aren't I! (Laughs as she packs it into her bag).

The short montage ends and we see the wives leaving their homes and saying goodbye to their families. This extract serves to further underline the differences between the two families through the two women's seemingly different commitment to and investment in their femininities. The editing of this part of the show serves a number of purposes that reflect the imperatives of a middle-class gaze at work. Showing Lizzie first and the fast cuts to Emma initially work to show Lizzie's fears about Emma's motives, but my own internalised middle-class gaze tells me that it is laughable that Emma would be sexually attracted to a man like Lizzie's husband Mark. Overall the joke is on both women because we 'know' that Lizzie does not fulfil the desired characteristics that Emma has listed and that Emma is not going to get an opportunity to wear her glitzy dress.

Next the wives get to explore their new homes before they meet their new families: these sequences are strikingly similar in each episode. The wives look around, the more 'middle-class' wives appear to struggle to hide disdain at the 'state' of their new homes; the 'working-class' wives invariably comment on how nice, smart and 'posh' their new homes are. Opening a kitchen cupboard Lizzie mimics a 'posh' accent and says 'oohh very posh, shops at Sainsbury's'. Which supermarket one shops in is still a signifier of class in Britain. The most mundane aspects of family life such as food shopping are loaded with class meaning.

Through reading the household manual and by beginning to live under the rules of the other wife, every episode portrays a period of culture shock and adjustment for the swapped wives. These are typically played out in relation to how the other wife manages the household, such as the cleanliness of the home, the level of investment in and deployment of taste in the interior decoration, the gender division of labour regarding childcare as well as paid work. In the version that the programme makers give us, both wives seem very aware of the 'differences' in the

wifely practices of the other, but for Emma and far more profoundly for Lizzie, what unfolds is the consequence of the symbolic violence of the middle-class gaze in action.

The programme continues with the use of a voice-over that informs us that, as a 'modern' husband, Colin does all the cooking; Emma has not seen the cooker in six months. Lizzie, we are told, does all the cooking. Next we see the wives going through the household manual; as with the previous montage, Lizzie's narrative is privileged with Emma's juxtaposed. If we have any doubts about Emma and Colin's 'values', the following excerpt from the household manual dispels them; Lizzie reads out loud:<sup>4</sup>

Lizzie: We are hard workers and do not like people who don't have life ambitions, we are achievers and aspirational.

A shocked Lizzie says

Lizzie: To put that in a book, to have somebody else to come in and have to read it, it's as if you feel that person's not worthy to come into your house.

Meanwhile, Emma is reading that both Lizzie and Mark are unemployed, and says 'Right, no one works then'. The message is clear: Emma only considers paid work to be legitimate, echoing many of the dominant discourses circulating about the working-class in the contemporary as well as age-old debates about 'women's work'. But as Skeggs (1997) argues, working-class women know when they are being looked down upon – and Lizzie is no exception.

The swap progresses and for the rest of the first evening Lizzie in conversation with Colin is shown to be defensive about the benefits of organic food, calling Colin a 'wuss'<sup>5</sup> because he enjoys doing the majority of the cooking and housework. At the other end of the country Emma is coming to grips with what appears to be a more traditional division of labour; looking after eight children overwhelms her and she is reduced to tears on a number of occasions. Mark performs his masculinity in a very rigid, 'old-fashioned' way when making use of the video diary, can of lager in one hand, hand-rolled cigarette in the other, his 'entries' are peppered with expletives. The message is clear: Mark is the opposite of Colin.<sup>6</sup> The differences between the families are dramatised through the husbands' performative masculinities, which are associated with class stereotypes (Beynon, 2002), for instance, the working-class as aggressive, rigid and old-fashioned and the aspiring middle class as more open to ideas, progressive in their gender roles, modern.

As the show progresses it is clear that Lizzie is feeling the full weight of the middle-class gaze: in Emma's place of work, her home and in the restaurant to which Colin takes her. Colin reads Lizzie's defensive, loud and increasingly antagonist behaviour as jealousy, which could also be read as 'justified resentment' (Hughes, 2007), a term which takes far better account of the unequal and unjust economic structures which frame social class antagonisms than a derogatory word like jealousy.

During the swap Colin shows pictures of Emma to Lizzie, and asks Lizzie how she feels about Emma being in her house. Lizzie has learned that Colin was married when he and Emma first got together. For Lizzie this is the catalyst (or pretext) for her withdrawal from the swap. The conversation between Lizzie and Colin turns into an argument about trust and infidelity. Here, issues of sexual morality and appropriate conduct for women and men, which I have already argued are dripping with classed discourses, are battled through. Colin and Emma seemingly have completely different views; Lizzie sees all women as a potential threat to the marital bed and places all responsibility on the woman's shoulders; Colin takes a more 'progressive' stance of trusting his partner. I suggest that the middle-class gaze here works towards a preferred reading of this scenario through which Lizzie's ideas of gender, fidelity and family formation are made to look outdated and ridiculous in the context of her own family formation, while Colin and Emma's are presented as reasonable and modern.



Lizzie's behaviour cannot be straightforwardly read. The middle-class gaze and its layers of symbolic violence buffet Lizzie throughout the show. However, in her own way she acknowledges it, challenges it and subverts it by parodying a 'posh' accent, defending her own position while criticising the Spryes's, and ultimately she calls a halt to the swap after three days. Lizzie is well aware of the way her femininity (and her smoking) is perceived, interrupting Colin when he says 'I think you're ...'

Lizzie: You think I'm picky, you think I am obnoxious and you think I am rude . . . and you don't like me, do you not . . . way hey! Life's a bitch . . . And on that note [puts on 'posh' voice] I shall go and intake some nicotine.

Lizzie's asthma is brought on by staying up all night worrying and smoking, so she fails to go to work on the third day of the swap. Lizzie is interviewed in bed where the impact of the swap (and I would argue, the symbolic violence of the middle-class gaze) hits her:

Lizzie: She's got every thing and I've got nothing, that's the way that it feels.

That evening Lizzie books herself into a hotel and the swap is off. The explanation that Lizzie gives is that she has found out that Colin was married when he and Emma got together, and feels that she does not want a women 'like that' in her house. My initial response to Lizzie's reasons for halting the swap was that she was being irrational and ridiculous. I suggest that this is not an unreasonable audience reading considering how the programme has positioned her thus far. The editing of the programme, which includes news of her asthma attack conveyed via voice-over accompanied by shots of her smoking in her nightie, works to inform us that Lizzie is at best contradictory if not irrational.

As in every episode of *Wife Swap*, the couples ultimately meet up to discuss their experiences. This is always a volatile and dramatic part of the show, and as the entire show is wired for conflict this should come as no surprise. The confrontation between Lizzie and Emma largely involves Lizzie shouting at Emma. Emma appears to be the model of self-restraint by not shouting back, positioning herself self-righteously as morally superior to Lizzie and Mark. In the extract below we see that what Lizzie shouts is painfully revealing not only of the overwhelming force with which the symbolic violence wreaked by the swap but also of the very distinct ways in which the middle-class gaze revolves around the contested sites of gender, work, parenting and health/life styles. For example:

Emma: I am not used to staying in the home everyday living off benefits; I go out and earn my living.

Lizzie: So *do* you see us as second class citizens because we are in receipt of benefits?

Emma: Yeah, I do.

Further interaction includes Emma telling Lizzie she should not smoke around her children and telling Mark that he should get a job and be independent. Here Emma again reveals the ambiguous nature of the middle classes by demonstrating both the lack of reserve associated with the upper-middle classes and the adoption of a moralising tone associated with the lower-middle classes. Lizzie continues:

Lizzie: What you think doesn't come into it, at the end of the day the way you live your life and your whole lifestyle is an out-and-out farce . . . you're so pathetic Barbie Doll, Miss Penelope . . . you're pretty sad really aren't ya.

While Lizzie is talking and defending her family by trying to expose Emma and Colin's pretensions to middle-classness, the shot we see is of Emma and Colin who are just smiling and looking on in disbelief as Lizzie's voice gets louder and louder.

Lizzie: You might think I am a gobby cow, whoopee de do for you, do you want a Blue Peter badge or something like that.

Emma, smiling, glances down then laughingly looks towards Colin.

Lizzie: Yeah look down your noses at us.

Colin: It's not a question of looking down our noses Lizzie.

Lizzie: [she is getting really angry at Colin, starts pointing her finger at them] Don't shout at me. You are no better or no worse than I am . . . don't start fluttering your eyelids at my husband you fucking tart.

Emma talks to Colin telling him to leave her to deal with Lizzie.

Lizzie: [pulling a face at Emma] There's me the gobby cow and there's you sitting there, the blonde one, acting or civil and sophisticated like one that you like to think that you are – but you're not

Any feelings of disdain that I have for Lizzie and Mark turn to pity – until I remember that 'Any judgement of the working-class as negative [including pity] is an attempt by the middle-class to accrue value' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 104), at which point I feel complicit, guilty recognition and finally empathy. Mark is trying to get a word in edgewise and Emma tries to make room for him to speak:

Lizzie: Hey you don't you fucking give my husband permission to talk [she gets up and is looking ready to grab Emma] you stupid fucking Moo.

Mark tells Lizzie to calm down, which she does; he explains that he will talk when he wants to talk

Lizzie: No . . . she sat there, fucking patronising cow, tits on fucking two with her [Lizzie does what can only be described as a crude imitation of a snooty woman with large breasts as she shouts] look at me! Look at me!

Mark: You can be very patronising towards us.

Colin: I just don't think she trusts you Mark, she sees Emma, beautiful Emma there . . . and you are threatened by Emma being there Liz.

Lizzie questions Emma's morals and Emma explains the circumstances of her and Colin coming together and how she fell madly in love; the editing gives us the impression that this silences Lizzie, suggestive of the dictum that love conquers all. The next shot shows Lizzie trying to explain her anguish by drawing on a distinctly moralistic tone that contrasts the love, emotional commitment and protection of a family against the pleasure in the cultivation and consumption of things that she thinks characterises Emma and Colin:

Lizzie: When you're home every day with your kids and your husband and you tell them everyday that you love 'em, and you do. But when you're in an extreme situation such as this one you realise how much [Lizzie starts crying and trying to hold back the tears] you love them and they're yours, they are the most precious things to you, they're not your belongings, they're yours.

Colin: It's the first time I've seen you with emotion all week Liz.

Mark: She is normal.

The episode ends with Lizzie's face desperate to not cry and then a shot of all of them hugging goodbye. The ending provided by the programme makers hints at dilemmas very close to the heart for the middle classes. That is, the tensions that come about from the struggle for distinction, such as the accrual and display of taste and morality via consumptive habits, all of which take time and money. Ironically, as the last extract suggests, such investments ultimately may threaten a key site of middle-class superiority – the family.

## Conclusions

I have argued that the framing and investigation of individuals through stereotypical ways of 'knowing' the working and lower-middle classes simultaneously evoke anxiety around gender, taste, employment, parenting and health and work to shore up middle-class identities

and hegemony. The controlling and pervasive nature of the middle-class gaze structures the participant's experiences during the swap and encourages a *preferred* reading by the audience in terms of classed identities, thus (re)producing symbolic violence through viewer affects. The programme makers have of course not invented such class antagonisms, and despite Lizzie's powerful act of halting the swap, are implicated in (re)producing a pervasive and controlling middle-class gaze.

The programme provides an example of how the middle-class gaze not only operates as an unofficial – though officially sanctioned – form of social (re)production, but may also be challenged in self-defence by those against whom it is directed. I have argued that the middle-class gaze is not monolithic but in certain contexts, such as the production of 'reality' television shows like *Wife Swap*, its effects are somewhat over-determining for participants and (though less clearly) for some viewers. In conclusion, it is important to be clear that the programme makers have selected participants for their incompatibility and dramatic potential. We see that the gaze operates in three distinct but interlinked ways, on and from the participants, the producers of the programme and the audience. All are both surveying and surveyed but with unequal access to modes of self-narrativisation that enable individuals to present themselves as persons of equal value.

### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. Wood and Skeggs (2008) counted 92 'different reality television programmes from UK terrestrial and free-view television packages in one week in November 2005'.
2. Skeggs, Wood and Thumin (2008) explore through Wood's (in press) Text In-Action methodology how working-class and middle-class research participants actually reacted to viewing programmes such as *Wife Swap*, and there appear to be strong differences between the groups.
3. I am unsure whether this exposes or further conceals that the process by which cultural capital is accrued is socially constructed because the Spryes's 'not there yet' status could serve to further naturalise it. I would add that the programme makers are in effect inviting a section of its audience 'who are in the know' to collude with the subtlety of the differences amongst the middle-classes.
4. The DVD has special features, one of which is that you can look at the household manuals; there is a section which asks the wives to sum up the philosophy of their family. Unless they had the DVD or had seen all episodes, the viewer would not know about this.
5. This word is used to describe a man who is weak and effeminate, i.e. not a 'real' man.
6. There are many more examples of the ways in which the husbands are subjected to the middle-class gaze through the investigation of their masculinities. I am committed to the theorising of masculinities as part of a feminist project; however space does not permit that analysis to take place here.

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