Extraordinary acts and ordinary pleasures: the role of celebrity culture in young people’s interpretations of inequality

A sense of inequality, CRESC Workshop, 27th June 2014

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The 10 Highest-Paid Women In Music 2013

No. 10: Nicki Minaj ($29 million, tie)
The only lady among the top earners, Minaj earned $12 million for her American Idol gig—about $6 million less than fellow judge (and ex-wife) Mariah Carey—but matches Carey’s overall total thanks to heavy touring, steady record sales and endorsement deals.
Low aspirations, ‘work-shy’ youth and celebrity

“The figures who increasingly populate our children’s imaginations and embody their ambitions are reality-show winners and footballers’ wives, cover stars of the celebrity magazine Heat and the regulars in OK!” (Michael Gove, November 2013)

“X Factor culture fuelled the UK riots ... Kids believe that their stepping stone to massive money is the X Factor. Luck is great, but most of life is hard work. We do not celebrate people who’ve made success out of serious hard work”. (Iain Duncan Smith, 2011)

"Kids nowadays just want to be famous. If you ask little girls, they either want to be footballers’ wives or win The X Factor ... Our society is in danger of being Barbie-dolled” (Barbara Follett, 2008)

David Cameron: too many British children want to be popstars and footballers

David Cameron met with school children in Monrovia today and said that too many children in Britain wanted to be "popstars and footballers" when they grow up.
The Study

ESRC-funded 2012-14 qualitative interdisciplinary project, exploring:

1) What discourses of aspiration circulate in celebrity representations?
2) How do young people use these discourses in constructing their aspirations?
3) How are these shaped by class and gender?

Group and individual interviews with 148 young people in 6 schools in England (14-17 years) about their aspirations and engagement with celebrity

Textual analysis of 12 case study celebrities
Making sense of celebrity - Making sense of inequality

• Language is not transparent

“If I were to define a discourse-based approach to educational research (a problematic task, as we shall see later), one of the more general things I might say is that you have to suspend your belief in the innocence of words and the transparency of language as a window on an objectively graspable reality.”

(Maggie MacLure, 2003, p.12, original emphasis)

*Talk about celebrity is more than just talk about celebrity*
Making sense of inequality

“In this double-declaiming, envy is kept at bay. The uncalculated calculations of common-sense’s double-declaiming can be used to compare ‘their’ misfortunes with ‘our’ gains ... Speakers are to be heard depicting the pleasures of ‘ordinary life’ in general, and affirming, in a personal way, the credits of their own particular lives.” (Billig, 1992, p.119)

“As the columns of credits and debits are summed, so the accounts are settled to arrive at the conclusion that there is a ‘just-world’, at least so far as royals and commoners are concerned.” (Billig, 1992, p.124)
Making sense of inequality through celebrity

Rhetorical strategies:

*Celebrities do extraordinary things*

*Celebrities are ordinary within extraordinary circumstances*

*Celebrities are disgusting and inauthentic (Schadenfreude)*

*Celebrity lifestyles are risky and vulnerable*
Celebrities do extraordinary things

Bob: It was on the News yesterday. He was like helping eradicate polio from like the world. So yeah. (South West, Year 10)

Herbert: Bill Gates as well. He’s, because he’s like, yeah, well he’s probably richer than anyone here but he gives away like 80% of all his money but he’s still like a billionaire [laughing slightly] so, whereas like those lot they just keep it all and live in huge mansions which they don’t need, but Bill Gates he just gives it all to charity which is yeah, that’s good. (South West, individual interview, Year 10)
The importance of charity

Heather: David Beckham, did you say he was the ideal celebrity?

Bruno: Yeah. ... You can't argue with him. ... like he wasn’t born with talent, there are so many people that are born with something, he had to work for it, like every day, day in, day out. And he would be playing at the time when he would get like £10, and now, £10 a week, and now people get 100k a week. And since then, even now he’s giving, three like three, three million pounds to charity for five months, and he’s playing for a Paris club, but he’s not taking the money, he’s going to give it to charity straight away. I don't think he’s a wrong person, something you can tell like, he’s done nothing wrong.

(London school, Year 12)
Macdonalds on the red carpet: celebrities as ordinary in extraordinary circumstances
Jennifer Lawrence: ‘she’s just like us’

Strawberry: Because she’s just normal. Like she was on the red carpet, and she was ordering McDonald’s, and I thought that was cool, coz like all the rest of them are like starving themselves, and she was giving out a positive message. And then she tripped, and just laughed at herself. (London, Year 12)

Amelia: Jennifer Lawrence always seems like someone who’s just like us, like she always talks about how she’d never wanna get really skinny, because she likes food. [laughter] And she doesn’t like the pressure of having to be really skinny. (Manchester, Year 10)
Celebrity lives as disgusting and inauthentic

Kim: You use the word fake. What do you mean?
Kirsty: Not their-selves. ... Literally not themselves, like some of their body parts just aren’t real. [all laugh] (Manchester, Year 10)

Mike: You could fit all the real parts of Nicki Minaj into ... a drawer approximately that big. She’s just like the biggest fakest walking talking Barbie, and also she tries to be Lady Gaga which annoys me. Um. She’s just, she’s just, argh, if I saw her I would actually hit her. With a brick. [laughter] I would probably knock one of her facial features out. ... I wonder if she does feel like rubber, it would be great, you can bounce her. [laughter] Roll her down a hill. Who wouldn’t want to do that? [laughter] (South West, Year 10, female)
Schadenfreude and celebrity hating

Laura: Why do you find her [Kim Kardashian] funny?
Teresa: Because it’s like she doesn’t, her life isn’t really. She doesn’t do anything worthwhile apart from be a socialite, and I’m not even sure if that’s like a proper career, but it’s just- she’s quite funny to watch, because she’s so materialistic. So it’s amusing.

(South West, year 10)

Laura: So you’d rather meet someone you disliked?
Shane: Probably.
Rick: Just so I can abuse them.
Shane: Yeah ... You know, like it’s like when people say erm [pause] you know, it’s like they’ve got such a big ego, you just want to take them down a couple of pegs. That’s why ... Just because they think so highly of themselves, and they haven’t really done anything so.

(London, year 12)
Celebrity Schadenfreude and Inequality

Schadenfreude as a ‘trans-affective process of resentment’

Individuals have a ‘desire for equality but [are] unable to think of anything other than levelling through humiliation’ (Cross and Littler, 2010: 397)
Credits and debits

Forbes.com, billionaire list on 23/06/14
And what do you think about going to, are there views about like going to Oxford and Cambridge is that much better than going to an ex-poly?

Well, I don't see why it would be much better, because it's the same, it's probably like, it's the same degree, it's just got a better reputation because it's a better university. But I don't even, I wouldn't even want to go even if I got in, because I think it's too far and it's not really my sort of place. I think it's very important to get like where you want to and not like for the degree...I think it's sort of old. I mean, I've never really been, but it just doesn't seem to look the sort of place I'd be interested and like I want to go somewhere where there's good student life. And there probably is, but like somewhere like Leeds or York, or Nottingham and that would be like good for me.

Yeah, so you think it might be a bit old, a bit kind of? Yeah.

Yeah.

And what do you think the people would be like?

Well, I'd imagine and it's probably not true, but I'd imagine they'd be like sort of middle-class or upper-class like. Like I don't know. [Laughs]

Yeah, but you're saying not really your kind of place?

Yeah, I don't think I'd fit in there anyway.

(Manchester, individual interview, year 12)
As the columns of credits and debits are summed, so the accounts are settled to arrive at the conclusion that there is a ‘just-world’, at least so far as [celebrities] and the rest of us are concerned.

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