Celebrity culture and young people’s classed and gendered aspirations

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ESRI seminar
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

- With Heather Mendick & Laura Harvey (Brunel)
- *Economic and Social Research Council* funded
- 2 year project, commenced October 2012
ALLEN, K. AND MENDICK, H. (2012) 'KEEPING IT REAL?: SOCIAL CLASS, YOUNG PEOPLE AND AUTHENTICITY IN REALITY TV.' SOCIOLOGY

THE CONTEXT: A background to the study

(Or: why its not just ‘shallow, glossy stuff’)
1. ‘Aspirations’ a key trope in education policy
2. Celebrity located as ‘eroding aspiration’

“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 MP, 2008

“X Factor culture fuelled the UK riots... Kids are meant to 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 have made success out of serious hard work” - Iain Duncan Smith, 2011

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.
“Not only is celebrity implicated in the production of communities such as fan groups or subcultures, not only does it generate celebrity culture and social networks, it also participates in the field of expectations that many, particularly the young, have of everyday life.... This latter aspect is now regularly picked up in the media, but so far this has produced little in the way of analysis or explanation. In fact, it is notable that while celebrity’s social and cultural implications are probably the aspects we understand least at the moment, they are also the aspects about which we should be most legitimately concerned in the long term” (Graeme Turner, 2010: 13)
Empirical work on people’s engagement with celebrity is limited and problematic

- ‘Para-social relationships’: investment in celebrity as substitute for ‘real’ relationships; focused on girls as ‘vulnerable subjects’; consumer of celebrity given status of ‘cultural dupes’

- Fan studies: focus on extreme, intense rather than the mundane, everyday relationships with celebrity in which we all engage (in some form)
Reality TV as a site of distinction and othering (Tyler 2011; Skeggs & Wood 2012; Ringrose and Jensen, 2013)

Hierarchies of fame and the ‘ordinary celebrity’ (e.g. ‘celebrity chav’) are classed and gendered (Holmes and Negra 2009; Tyler and Bennet 2010)

RTV incites audiences to make judgments; production of classed and gendered ‘other’ via affective responses (shame, disgust) to melodramatic moments.

But it is also a site of contestation.
Young people are ‘participatory actors’ in generating the meaning/s of celebrity in their everyday social practices.

Young people’s talk about celebrity are ‘performance practices’ to position self and others (Duits 2010, p.249).

Draw on work in Sociology of Education: Aspirations and educational choices are not just ‘in the head’ but regulated and shaped by wider inequalities (Ball et al, 2001; Archer et al 2010; Burke 2006).

Bringing celebrity back from the margins of ‘the classroom’ and school life to examine how it mediates and contributes to processes of self-formation and shapes the selves, futures, ways of being young people available.
ASPIRATIONS AND CELEBRITY AS DISCURSIVELY PRODUCED

Young people’s aspirations and subjectivities as multiple, shifting and produced through discourses (Burke 2006), historically and culturally specific configurations of meanings that make some ways of thinking possible and others impossible (Foucault 1972).

Discourses can be used to position ourselves and to judge others and their hopes and dreams; leading to gendered and classed actions (initiatives, speeches, choices etc).

Celebrity is a discursive and disciplinary field where social distinctions are made and relations, behaviours and people are given or denied value (Tyler & Bennett 2010).
‘A discourse-based educational research would set itself the work of taking that which offers itself as common-sensical, obvious, natural, given or unquestionable, and trying to unravel it a bit – to open it up to further questioning.’ (MacLure, 2003: p9)

• What discourses of aspiration, talent, hard work, ambition get taken up in young people’s talk about celebrity and what function do these serve?

• What stories, selves, futures, ways of being does celebrity make available and to who?

• What hierarchies of value are established in positioning of self (and other) via talk of aspiration and celebrity?
THE STUDY
RESEARCH DESIGN

• 148 young people in 6 secondary schools (11-18) in England, rural and urban, reflective of local demographics
• *In each:*  
  • 4 group interviews with 6 pupils each (24 pupils - 12 from year 10 and 12 from year 12)  
  • Follow up individual interviews with 8 pupils per school
• Online forum – collective discussion of celebrity
• Textual analysis of 12 ‘case study’ celebrities (selected from young people interviews)
Youth-centred

Interviews with young people and textual analysis of celebrities

Online and Offline methods: capturing collective, dynamic social practices of meaning making

“Social networking sites play a pivotal role in the production, circulation and reception [of celebrity culture], where online discussions offer a fascinating insight into how televisual characterisations become animated in struggles over identity and value”. (Imogen Tyler, 2011)

Concern with the affective
Emerging themes, tentative findings

(and time for you to do some work)
Disgust ‘is deliberate and self-conscious, it is performed both for our entertainment and as a means of asserting identity claims. ....it is performed in ways that are community-forming’ (Tyler, 2011)
1. **chud**
   
   Canibalistic Humanoid Underground Dweller

   *Defined in the 1984 movie of the same name*

   **buy chud mugs & shirts**

   by shep Abbott  Feb 21, 2005  share this  add a video

2. **Chud**

   It means Canibalistic Humanoid Underground Dweller and originates from the 1984 film C.H.U.D. But is now used to describe ugly stupid people. Most notably in the Kevin Smith film Clerks 2(2006). The phrase is mostly used in America but is now starting to become popular in the UK.

   Jamie: *Why don't girls like me?*

   Scott: *Because you're a fucking chud!*

   *Mother: Nurse when can I see my baby?*

   *Nurse: Are you sure you want to?*

   *Mother: yes of course! why?*

   *Nurse: well because your baby is so fucking ugly. It must take after you. You chud.*

   **buy chud mugs & shirts**

   by Glynn Thomas  Apr 6, 2008  share this  add a video

3. **Chud**

   Used to describe someone who is repulsively unattractive. Alternately, someone who is amateurish or unsuccessful in any given field.
EXTRACT 2: CONSUMING CELEBRITY, PERFORMING GENDER