# People like us? People like them? Contemporary Media Representations of Social Class

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2015

# Abstract

In this thesis, I discuss media representations of social class. My particular focus is on entertaining television formats and as an empirical example, I analyse the BBC Three docusoap *People Like Us* (2013l). To explore how social class is reflected in and impacts on the production of the programme, I conduct interviews with people participating in it, carry out a discourse analysis of its content and also attempt a small-scale audience research to get an understanding of how the programme was perceived. Theoretically, my research is framed by a Bourdieusian conception of social class and relevant related concepts like habitus, doxa and symbolic violence. I come to the conclusion that class divisions are clearly reflected and played out in the media field in multiple, interlinked ways. In the discourse analysis of *People Like Us* (2013l) I show how negative working-class stereotypes structure the programme narratively. I demonstrate how these stereotypical and reductionist images are artificially constructed and how they are linked with contemporary political discourses around class. Furthermore, I discuss how class hierarchies structure access to and power over the production of media output and underpin a division of labour that divides people into subjects and objects of representations largely along class lines. In the analysis of my empirical example, I explore the exploitative nature of this constellation and also the (moral) value that is attached to the respective class positions. Bourdieu makes the point that media representations are part of a wider class struggle. The analysis carried out in this research very much confirms this assessment, however, in the field of large-scale cultural production these battles are fought with very unequal weapons. The discourse analysis of my chosen empirical example explores, in connection with the conducted interviews with participants of the programme, a number of instances of very manipulative editing that cannot just be explained by the genre-typical requirements and the intention of the programme to entertain.

# Acknowledgements

I want to thank Erica Burman for her support when applying for the scholarship and the Research Institute for Health and Social Change (RIHSC) for funding my PhD research. I want to thank Jason Powell and Ian Parker for pointing me in the right direction early on and Ken McLaughlin for taking over from them. I want to thank my supervisors Ken McLaughlin, Martin King and Rachel Roberts for their encouragement and support throughout.

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# 1. Introduction

Debates around state welfare, traditionally a particularly passionate concern for sections of the newspaper market, have, well and truly, arrived on British TV screens in 2013. Of course, social security is not a new issue as such and has always had its place in news reporting as well as fictional and non-fictional genres; however, in 2013 a large number of docusoap programmes that portray people living in deprived communities hit the screens and clearly added another dimension to public discourses around state welfare.

This new trend was kicked off on BBC Three by the rather light-hearted, humorous and seemingly apolitical *People Like Us* (2013l) in February and March of 2013. It received a more sober and politicised treatment on BBC One in *Nick and Margaret: We All Pay Your Benefits* (2013k) in July 2013, was picked up by the commercial broadcasters with programmes like Channel 4's *Skint* (2013i) in May and June 2013, Channel 5's *On Benefits & Proud* (2013h) in October 2013 and, in a sense, culminated in *Benefits Street* (2014d) in January and February 2014. Of course, the first series of *People Like Us* (2013l) was not the first docusoap to portrayed working-class life and neither was the first series of *Benefits Street* (2014d) the final chapter of this particular subgenre of documentary filmmaking. However, I would argue that the former started off a wave of popularised documentaries that were set in deprived communities and the latter was, to-date, the biggest rating success and, arguably, the programme that caused the greatest controversy and generated the most resistance to it (*The Media Show*, 2014e). The second series of *People Like Us* (2014a), *Skint* (2014b), and *Benefits Street* (2015b) were, comparatively speaking, low-key affairs as they consisted of fewer episodes, were met with much less interest (reflected in considerably lower viewing figures) (BARB, 2015) and did certainly not cause a similar reaction in the media. Furthermore, the production of these programmes was significantly hampered by local resistance (Conlan, 2014), and the filming of *Immigration Street* (2015a), for instance, was cut short due to, at times militant, community protest (BBC, 2015).

Building on the work of scholars like Skeggs (1997b), Wood (Wood and Skeggs, 2004) and Lawler (2005), sociological research has started to analyse and make sense of this new wave of, as it sometimes is referred to, 'poverty porn' (MacDonald et al., 2014; Jensen, 2014; Allen et al., 2014). In this thesis, I will aim to contribute to an analysis of contemporary struggles over cultural representations by focussing on one empirical example, the first series of the aforementioned *People Like Us* (2013l). Of course, connections to other, related programmes will be made; however, I expect an in-depth analysis of one particular docusoap to be a fruitful way of exploring the complexities, the context of the production, the specific content and also the perception of contemporary cultural representations of social class.

I will frame my analysis theoretically by discussing terms and concepts fundamentally important to this thesis in chapters two, three, four and six. Firstly, I will explore how the concept of class can be useful in exploring hierarchies and power relations in contemporary Britain. I will go back to its Marxist and Weberian foundations and discuss how postmodern critique and Bourdieusian contributions shape class analysis anno 2015. In the literature review, I will discuss the most central lines of argument of a critique of non-fictional representations of social class in a television context. Some of these considerations will be further explored in an analysis of the genre *People Like Us* (2013l) is located in. A particular focus will be put on the material conditions (classed) representations are produced under. I want to discuss how programmes like the one under consideration developed historically and in what ways the style and content of docusoaps is shaped by general developments in the media field. Throughout these chapters, I intend to demonstrate why I regard Bourdieusian concepts like habitus, doxa and symbolic violence as very useful tools to make sense of classed media representations and their function and role concerning political and social structures. Also my explorations of the media field will be informed by Bourdieu's understanding of the logic of the media field and its interdependencies.

The empirical analysis of my chosen example is threefold. Firstly, I will explore the perception of the programme by analysing how the programme was discussed in the online world. I aim to discuss how these debates comprehend and frame the programme and how *People Like Us* (2013l) is related to wider social and political

discourses. As I will discuss, this part of my analysis is not likely to produce a conclusive and comprehensive understanding of how the programme was generally perceived, but is intended to point to a number of possible readings and explore the ways in which the programme is made sense of. Following from my explorations of the wider genre, I will discuss the content as well as the used filming techniques and production methods in *People Like Us* (2013l) using Critical Discourse Analysis. I will identify the main themes and discuss how these were visually presented and narratively framed. The critique of the programme will, as the third element of my empirical analysis, be informed by interviews with participants of the programme. I will present and discuss their views on the most pertinent questions of this research. Accordingly, the focus will be on questions of authenticity, truthfulness and representativeness as well as the production process, the interviewees' roles in it and considerations regarding access, control and exploitation. In this context it will also be discussed if and how wider power relationships are reflected in this process and whether it is indeed sensible to speak of *classed* representations. Finally, I want to discuss the significance of a programme like *People Like Us* (2013l). It is naturally difficult to pin down and isolate the specific impact of one particular programme or even a genre as a whole. Nevertheless, I will attempt to relate theoretical discussions of stereotyping, othering, and other forms of symbolic violence to the content and the empirically explored perception of the programme.

The empirical findings of the analysis of the production process (from the perspective of the participants), the content (and its visual and narrative presentation) and also the perception of the programme will be discussed using the aforementioned methodological and theoretical tools and will allow me to come to a conclusion regarding the interconnectedness of social structures and media discourses. In other words: I intend to discuss how social hierarchies are reflected in my empirical example, how they shape its production process and also matter in terms of the perception of the programme. I will argue that the significance of, supposedly light-hearted and benign, media representations lies exactly in this linkage and the way they do not just reflect but contribute to the reproduction of (class) inequalities.

# 2. Concepts of Class

## 2.1 Introduction

Defining and problematising the term 'class' is, I would argue, necessary groundwork that needs to be carried out before analysing classed media representations. Discussing how the concept of social class can be grasped and worked with in contemporary sociological debates is a vital and hopefully illuminating exercise that will allow me to arrive at an understanding of the term that the ensuing considerations and analyses can be based on. Marxist and Weberian conceptions of class will be explored and links to Bourdieu's understanding of class and inequality made explicit. Following that, I want to utilise postmodern interventions as well as debates around recognition and redistribution to explore the focal points of contemporary class analysis, and, more importantly in the context of this research, develop an understanding of how class and culture are linked and how this linkage can be made sense of theoretically.

## 2.2 The Marxist perspective

Starting with a summary of the central elements of the Marxist conception of class is a rather obvious, yet (hopefully) productive starting point for this research. It is no exaggeration to claim that Marx's concept of social class forms the basis and reference point for all following theories of class and stratification. Marxist class analysis is the most influential and enduring contribution and hardly any approaches, even those that completely disagree with Marxist premises, do not relate to the Marxist take on class in one way or another. Here, I want to outline the key aspects of the concept and also allude to the most central Neo-Marxist debates and attempts to address post-industrial societal developments from a Marxist point of view.

### 2.2.1 Marx

Class relations are, according to Marx, structured by the organisation of the economy. Throughout history, different forms of production have divided the respective populations into groups, in accordance with their role in the production process. For Marx, the pivotal criterion is the possession of productive resources. In capitalist societies, the main dividing line runs between the owner of the material means of production and those who solely 'own' their labour power. It is not ownership as such that is crucial, but the associated control over the means of production and the unequal power relation between the 'owner' and the 'buyer' of labour (Wright, 2005). Production is a social process with defined role allocations.

Marx, despite it being often alleged, did not imply that in capitalism only two large and opposing groups exist. His class analysis is considerably more nuanced and differentiated. Marx acknowledged that not all members of society can be classed as either bourgeois or proletarian and that there are 'middle and intermediate strata' and groups whose class positions are complex and ambivalent (McLellan and Marx, 1995:183). Marx speaks of

> … the constantly growing number of the middle classes, those who stand between the workman on the one hand and the capitalist and the landlord on the other hand (McLellan and Marx, 1995:184).

Nevertheless, it is the classes at the opposing ends of the spectrum (of the production process) that Marx is most interested in and that he regards as most relevant in terms of historical and social change.

As previously mentioned, production is in Marx's view a social process, but one that is inevitably conflict-laden. The opposing roles of bourgeoisie and proletariat in the production process mean that their relationship must be antagonistic. Marx regards exploitation as the structuring principle of social relations (Savage, 2000). The private ownership and the power over the means of production, allow the bourgeois ruling class to exploit the surplus-producing working class. Following their diametrically opposing locations in the production process, the two main societal groups inevitably have contrasting class interests. However, these interests are not only antagonistic,

they are also inter-dependent. As Wright (2005:29) points out, some degree of cooperation of the subordinate class is needed due to their 'capacity to resist their own exploitation'. This cooperation is ensured by coercion, but also by the use of consent-producing measures. It is important to stress that Marx regards the proletariat as potentially politically powerful, as makers of history.

Conflict plays a central role in Marx's view of society. He sees conflict as the driving force of historical development. For Marx 'the history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggles' (Marx et al., 2002:219). For a class to gain agency in terms of social change it is however necessary to develop class consciousness. This does not, according to Marx, automatically derive from a shared class location. Marx (1963:173) famously distinguished a 'class in itself' from a 'class for itself' and is of the opinion that material and economic structures structure society, but that for the realisation of shared interests, a political process has to take place. Individuals 'find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life ... assigned to them' (Marx et al., 1994:82) however, individuals only form a class that is conscious of its existence in political battle (Marx et al., 1994). Marx argues that objective conditions (like class location) play a significant role in the formation of (subjective) consciousness, but as mentioned, this should not be interpreted in a too mechanistic or deterministic way. For Marx, economic conditions alone do not explain human behaviour and neither does class struggle simply occur as a result of antagonistic interests (Crompton, 2008). From a Marxist point of view, political practice is not reducible to class structure (Johnston, 1986). Class struggle must be preceded by the development of class consciousness and the process of class formation (Wright, 2005).

Also, in this political, ideological struggle, class conflict and the unequal distribution of power come into play. Marx acknowledges that those in control of the material means of production also rule

> … as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of ideas of their age: Thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (Marx et al., 1994:64).

This means that the ruling class can assert influence over the political and intellectual process beyond the boundaries of their own class. As mentioned above, this is of vital importance to guarantee a degree of loyalty of the exploited class and ultimately to secure the power division in capitalist societies.

### 2.2.2 Neo-Marxist contributions

Marx's class analysis is routinely accused of not being able to reflect the radical changes that have taken place in the world of work since Marx's lifetime. Neo-Marxist thinkers therefore developed numerous ways of reformulating and updating Marxist class analysis. In the following, I want to briefly depict their central lines of argument to gain an understanding of the central themes of contemporary Marxist class analysis.

The most critical and most obvious challenge for a Marxist class analysis in post-industrial times is the question of how classes can be defined in a coherent and meaningful way. As mentioned, Marx himself addressed the existence and the growth of the middle classes, but the decline of manual labour and the differentiations in forms of employment potentially call the traditional class divisions into question. Also improvements regarding working conditions, general living standards and workers' participation appear to have softened the conflict between capital and labour. Finally, the emergence of non-manual labour poses a challenge to the theory of labour as 'non-productive work' appears to partly replace 'productive work'.

Initially, Neo-Marxists like Poulantzas, Carchedi and Wrigth responded to this challenge by developing complex models of class location that accounted for new groups of employees (Savage, 2000). More recent approaches tend to be less concerned with the class locations of specific groups or with the value of labour theory. The existence of surplus value is not denied, but it is less seen as the central mechanism of exploitation (Savage, 2000). Instead, the focus has shifted to structures of ownership and power (Bradley, 1996). With regards to white-collar work and the middles classes, this means that it is less their particular contribution in the production process that is relevant, but more their (lack of) autonomy and access to

power. In those regards, white-collar employees are in a comparable situation to blue-collar workers. Both groups need to sell their labour and are ultimately excluded from decision making (Bradley, 1996). From a Neo-Marxist perspective, the processes of democratisation did not alter the societal power distribution in a fundamental way. According to Wright (2005), the distribution of rights and powers nowadays is not as polarised as in the early stages of industrialisation, but must still be regarded as highly unequal and accordingly class relations are still organised in a capitalist fashion. Nevertheless, Wright is among those Neo-Marxists who acknowledge that some class locations cannot be described in traditional Marxist terms, as they show a greater level of complexity. These 'contradictory class locations' (Burris, 1987:72) are prevalent in the higher spheres of white-collar work. Managers and professionals in a sense hold contradicting class positions as they exercise a degree of control and play a part in the decision-making process, but are on the other hand also in a position of dependence and their labour is exploited (Wright, 1979).[1]

Finally, it is the question as to what extent economic conditions determine consciousness that has inspired debate among (Neo-)Marxist thinkers. Since this issue is of central relevance for this research, I will discuss it in more detail. As mentioned above, Marx himself did not advocate an overly deterministic view on this relationship, but, refining Gramsci's approach, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) try to encourage Marxist debate to acknowledge non-class-centred explanations of culture and ideology. Class struggles in this sense are not (inevitable) products of the respective economic conditions, but, like all political struggles, are informed by specific discourses of politicised subjects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

[1] Another aspect contemporary Marxist class analysis has to come to terms with is the diversification of ownership. Unlike in the early stages of industrialisation, the ownership of the means of production is not as easy to assign to and, as I have alluded to above, to some extent, control appears to be uncoupled from ownership. In particular, stock corporations can be seen as forms of collective ownership. Nevertheless, Neo-Marxists like Wright (2005) insist that these developments do not constitute a qualitative change and that ownership (and ultimately control) of the means of production are still concentrated in a small section of society. Empirical evidence confirms that in the last two decades, a process of polarisation has taken place and inequalities have grown instead of levelling out (Devine and Savage, 2000; Ramesh, 2011). Structures of ownership show a greater complexity, but its relative distribution is still highly unequal and can be described in class terms.

Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (2001) have both contributed greatly to advance the Marxist understanding of how economic conditions translate into political and cultural realities. Despite being the intellectual fathers and figureheads of two opposing streams within Marxism, both thinkers can be mentioned in the same breath as they both recognise and emphasise the central importance of ideology for the reproduction of class structures, and both reject an economistic interpretation of the relationship of economic and social conditions.

Gramsci introduced the term 'hegemony' to explain the relative persistence of the societal distribution of power (Gramsci et al., 1971). More precisely, Gramsci aimed to explore how the consent of the subordinate class is achieved with, most of the time at least, relatively little (obvious) violence and coercion (Crompton, 2008). Hegemony can be regarded as the 'organisation of consent' (Barrett, 1991:54). For Gramsci, culture and in particular popular culture is of vital importance for this process. Class struggle in Gramsci's sense is always also a cultural struggle (Crompton, 2008). Ideology is therefore principally contested and not simply determined by the ruling class. Not that Gramsci regarded the superstructure of a society as irrelevant, he emphasised however that ideological and cultural dominance is not necessarily an exact reflection of economic power.

Althusser (2001) focuses on structures and how they are central to the reproduction of power relations. He points out that for power relations to remain stable; it is not only the productive forces that need to reproduce, but also the relations of production. On an individual level, this means that the division of labour has to be accepted just as much as the assigned position in the production process (Carnoy, 1984). Here, ideology comes into play. Ideology is the mechanism by which the members of a society subjugate themselves to its structures even if this means accepting an underprivileged position. For Althusser (2001), ideology works in a similar way to Gramsci's hegemonic consensus – unequal economic and non-economic distributions are made to be accepted by the disadvantaged who are exploited without the use of blunt force.

Althusser (2001) regards societal structures as crucial. For him the state and state institutions are central for the definition and implementation of ideology. The ideology of the ruling class does not automatically become the ruling ideology, rather:

> It is by the installation of the ISAs (ideological state apparatuses) in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology (Althusser, 2001:125).

Althusser crucially distinguishes between the repressive state apparatus (RSA) with its organs (police, army, courts, prisons etc.) that, at least ultimately, 'functions by violence' (Althusser, 2001:96) and the ISAs that mainly 'function by ideology' (Althusser, 2001:97).[2] Although ISAs appear diverse, they are unified by the ruling ideology. Ideological control of the ISAs is, according to Althusser, vital for the ruling class as their power largely depends on 'exercising its hegemony over the state ideological apparatuses' (Althusser, 2001:98). Each ISA contributes to the reproduction of the relations of exploitation in their specific way. The role of the communications apparatus most commonly associated with political indoctrination, nevertheless it is the educational apparatus that is of paramount importance to Althusser (2001). Again, the focus is more on the relational aspect than on the content of the ideological messages. Both, schools and mass media, do not only reproduce the relations of exploitation by defending them as just or by teaching particular skills or attitudes, more importantly ISAs reproduce 'subjection to the ruling ideology' (Althusser, 2001:89). The division of labour and the general power structure of a society are upheld, as Althusser (2001:89) puts it, by ideology and 'the mastery of its practice'. Ideology therefore works not only by influencing conscious political views, but also by turning individuals into subjects: 'People are recruited into identity positions' (Joseph, 2006:74). This process happens largely on an unconscious level, but as a result, people consciously recognise themselves in identities according to their class position.

However, as mentioned, ISAs are, unlike the RSA, not under direct control of the ruling class and neither are they organised in a contradiction-free manner. The ideological function of the ISAs can be contested and therefore turned into a site of

[2] The ISAs include the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the political ISA, the cultural ISA etc. Whereas the RSA is, according to Althusser, relatively directly controlled by the ruling class and at the same time public, the ISAs appear relatively independent and privately controlled and owned. However, for Althusser it is not the directness of influence or mode of ownership that matters, but the function that is crucial.

class struggle. The ruling class relies on a degree of control over the ISAs, but the subordinate classes can develop a counter-ideology that challenges the claims and the function of the ISAs (Carnoy, 1984). Both Gramsci and Althusser analyse the means of the ruling class to secure societal structures that support and reproduce their privilege. Ideology plays a major role in this process; however it is not only understood as an instrument of suppression, but also as a potential tool for emancipation.

### 2.2.3 Conclusion

Marx's take on class has inspired generations of sociologists (and others) and their work has covered a wide range of aspects and led to an array of theories producing a multitude of, partly contradictory, conclusions. Nevertheless, there are a number of axiomatic key features that distinguish Marxist class analysis from rivalling approaches. The most fundamental of these is the view that production processes structure social relations. As economic production under capitalist circumstances is based on exploitation, the relationship between the two most significant classes is necessarily antagonistic. Marxist class analysis is therefore focused on societal conflicts and questions of power. Class is, in a Marxist sense, above all, a relational matter. Classes can only be understood in relation to each other.

As the breadth of work and the continuing presence and relevance of (Neo-)Marxist considerations show, the Marxist approach has a lot to offer for an understanding of the emergence and persistence of societal structures and their connectedness to economic processes.

## 2.3 The Weberian perspective

Max Weber's (1976) concept of social class is commonly regarded as a refinement of the Marxist approach that shares some of the basic assumptions, but comes to distinctly different conclusions. Here, I intend to discuss the key issues of a Weberian class analysis and how they relate to Marxist approaches.

### 2.3.1 Appeal

Weberian class analysis appears appealing for the same reasons that Marxist approaches can be regarded as dated. Weber's comparatively differentiated and open analysis seems to be better suited to analyse the alleged diversity and fragmentations of contemporary capitalist societies (Bradley, 1996). Overall, the Weberian concept and its specific vocabulary show a greater compatibility with a view that emphasises the significance of individualised class positions.

### 2.3.2 Key issues

A central aspect in Weber's class theory is the idea of market-determined life chances. Weber (as cited in Giddens and Held, 1982:62) points out that:

> The kind of chance in the market is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual's fate.

One's opportunities to be successful in the market depend on an individual's resources in the form of skills and education as well as material assets (Breen, 2005). The specific composition of skills and material assets enable the individual to compete in the market for scarce goods. The value of all assets is not objective, but depends on the context of the market.

The potential and factual diversity of assets and the focus on individual life chances suggest a highly individualised view of society. However, Weber acknowledges that life chances are similar for groups of people. Classes in his view do not exist *a priori* (Savage, 2000), but the market produces a number of economic classes (Breen, 2005). People with similar sets of assets, and accordingly similar life chances, can be grouped as economic classes. This large number of economic classes can again be summarised into four large social classes. The membership of these social classes is, however, not only defined by the individual's set of assets, as cultural aspects come into play as well. Superficially regarded, Weber's division into

> (a) the working class as a whole (b) the petty bourgeoisie (c) technicians, specialists and lower-level managers; and (d) the classes privileged through property and education (Weber cited in Crompton, 2008:33)

is similar to Marx's classification, but as Crompton (2008) points out, the sources of class structuring are very different. Whereas Marx regards the position and function in the production process as crucial, Weber sees market processes and relationships as structuring factors. According to Weber, members of classes are not bound together by their shared position, but by a (coincidentally) similar composition of immaterial and material assets. The relative transitoriness of class membership and the potential for social mobility is reflected by Weber's use of the expression 'class situation' (Giddens and Held, 1982:61). Nevertheless, Weber acknowledges that the market is not a level playing field and favours those who have already accrued a wealth of assets. Weber sees little cohesion within social classes and does not regard a social class as a collective or community ('Gemeinschaft') (Giddens and Held, 1982:63).

Since Weber regards social classes as potentially very fragmented and transitory entities, it is not surprising that he is rather sceptical regarding the idea of class consciousness. Weber argues that while shared class positions make it likely that individuals act in a similar way, class positions do not automatically generate a specific consciousness. The formation of class consciousness depends on a number of factors and in particular on the (collective) insight into the relatedness of causes and consequences of class situations. Furthermore, Weber is of the opinion that other social groupings are more likely to stimulate identification and collective action (Breen, 2005).

For Weber, status groups offer in many ways more engaging forms of identification. Unlike social classes, he regards status groups as actual groups or communities and emphasises that, unlike with social classes, the defining criterion is not property but honour (Giddens and Held, 1982). Weber acknowledges that more often than not status and material wealth are linked, but is adamant that this is not necessarily the case:

> Both propertied and propertyless people can belong to the same status group, and frequently they do with very tangible consequences. (Weber cited in Giddens and Held, 1982:65)

Weber (as cited in Giddens and Held, 1982:65) also talks about a 'style of life' that is expected of the members of the respective status groups.[3] Finally, parties are relevant and distinct social groupings that must, in Weber's view, be distinguished from social classes and status groups. The membership of the respective groups overlap, but none of them can be reduced to the other (Breen, 2005). There is no hierarchy in the sense that one of these groupings has general supremacy, however, as mentioned, Weber is of the opinion that collective action is more likely to originate in status groups than in social classes.

From a Weberian point of view, historical development and social change cannot be described as a consequence of class struggle. Weber not only regards social classes as not necessarily in antagonistic opposition to each other and also lacking social agency, he regards the Marxist model of social change as too economistic. Weber sees social change as a highly complex process that is driven by a number of factors and not least by the ideas of a time. In '*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'* Weber (1976) famously describes the influence of Calvinist ideology on the development of capitalism. He argues that certain elements of Protestantism helped the development of capitalism insofar as their rules of living supported the development of a capitalist spirit. Nevertheless, Weber did not intend to replace what he regarded as the Marxist 'one-sided materialistic' view of historic development with 'an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history' (Weber, 1976:183). As I have discussed above, Weber regards collective action as significant, but not exclusively linked to economic positions.

The power distribution within society is, according to Weber, not a mirror of the distribution of wealth or the class structure. Not only social classes, but also all other social groupings, namely parties and status groups, hold specific amounts of power. Weber unambiguously makes clear that power, which he sees as 'the chance of a man

[3] This 'style of life' also lays down rules of social interaction and restrictions regarding members of different status groups.

or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others' (Weber cited in Giddens and Held, 1982:60) is unequally distributed. Weber's intention is not to deny that economic wealth generally translates into power, but to draw attention to social prestige and political parties as other areas of power (Crompton, 2008).

### 2.3.3 Convergence

Overall, there are a number of very significant differences between the classical Marxist and the classical Weberian account of social class. Nevertheless, it is also fairly obvious that Weber did not dismiss Marx's central premises, but set out to refine them. Both approaches regard the economic structures as central and society as divided into interrelated, hierarchically organised groups. Neo-Marxist developments have blurred the dividing lines between both concepts of social class even more. Burris (1987) argues that Neo-Marxist theorists have addressed a number of the most contested issues and opened up Marxist debate. Individual and collective agency features much more prominently in Neo-Marxist debates around social class. This becomes perhaps most apparent with regards to class consciousness and class action, or respectively, the lack of it (Wright, 1985). Secondly, and possibly even more importantly, Neo-Marxists have acknowledged that class-based oppression is not the only form of oppression. Most forms of oppression and discrimination have a link to class, however, not all forms of injustice and exclusion are based on class membership (alone). Marxists still uphold that economic injustice has some sort of primacy and that class relations shape other forms of inequality, but concede that racism, sexism, religious discrimination etc. cannot be reduced to class conflicts (Burris, 1987). The Marxist and the Weberian concepts of class are undoubtedly separate and distinguishable approaches and I have no intention to gloss over their differences. However, in a greater context, they share a number of very central assumptions that, as I will discuss in the following, make it possible for Bourdieu to draw on both approaches.

## 2.4 The Bourdieusian perspective

Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of social class is clearly based on Marxist and Weberian ideas as well as a critical examination of Althusser's structuralism and therefore Bourdieu can hardly be identified with a single 'father figure' (Weininger, 2005:82). In the following, I try to demonstrate how Bourdieu's concept of social class links two central dimensions of class analysis: economic structures and cultural manifestations of inequality. I will argue that Bourdieusian class analysis offers insight into the subtleties, complexities and unconscious psychological aspects of social class without turning its back on the material and economic basis of inequality. Bourdieu's sociological contributions are, in my opinion, often reduced to questions of identity formation and his concept of different types of capital. I intend to show that Bourdieu views these processes as related to social structures and, despite at times it being overlooked, he is very much concerned with economic structures and ultimately the power structures that uphold and perpetuate inequalities in all their different manifestations.

### 2.4.1 Social Space

Bourdieu regards the social world as a multi-dimensional and structured space. He 'breaks with Marxist theory' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:239) to emphasise relations over structure. This means that for Bourdieu the focus is much more on the relations within a social space, than on the concrete specifics of social groupings. Whether this constitutes an actual 'break' with Marxism is debateable[4]. A different disagreement with Marxism is clearer: Bourdieu's emphasis on symbolic struggles over economic struggles. Bourdieu speaks of 'objectivism' and 'intellectualism' that, together with a narrow focus on economics 'leads one to overlook the symbolic struggles that take place in different fields' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:239).

The relation between the economic and the symbolic is very central in Bourdieu's theory. He regards Weber's distinction between class and status group as a purely

[4] Marx, as discussed in chapter 2.2.1, also recognises the interconnectedness and hierarchical structure of classes in capitalist societies.

analytical one. Accordingly, Bourdieu sees social classes as not reducible to economic relations, but always also products of symbolic relations and symbolic struggles (Weininger, 2005). Nonetheless, and here the parallels with Althusser (2001) become apparent, Bourdieu distinguishes a number of social fields that all have their own distinctive rules and logic and are to some degree autonomous (Swartz, 1997). The cultural and the educational fields for instance, can, in Bourdieu's view, not be seen as completely determined by the economic or political field, despite a hierarchical order and varying distributions of power between social fields. The forms of capitals that Bourdieu distinguishes, which will be addressed shortly, are connected in a similar way than the social fields they mainly relate to.

Classes exist in Bourdieu's view not as actual groups. 'What exists is a space of relations' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:232) with varying degrees of proximity of the respective individuals. Accordingly, classes can be constructed along different lines of demarcation. These theoretical classes are not necessarily real classes. For Bourdieu, the defining aspect is what Marxists would call 'class consciousness' and what Bourdieu describes as follows:

> … groups made of individuals united by the consciousness and the knowledge of their commonality of condition and ready to mobilise in pursuit of their common interest (Bourdieu, 1987:7).

So structure alone does not make classes, they are always the result of a historical process. Bourdieu speaks of a theoretical class as a 'class on paper' (Bourdieu, 1987:7) that transforms into a real class by the political process of 'classmaking' (Bourdieu, 1987:8). This is similar to the Marxist distinction between 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' and also in Bourdieu's concept, classes are 'collectives having an economic and social base'(Bourdieu, 1987:9). Despite this agreement, there are considerable differences to the classic Marxist view. As I will show later, Bourdieu sees classes as interrelated and hierarchically structured, the nature of this relationship is, however, not necessarily based on the respective positions in the production process. The same can be said about domination and exploitation – their existence is not disputed, but is not interpreted in a predominantly economic way. Bourdieu is less interested in

the economic structures that define classes, but more in their political cultural and psychological aspects.

### 2.4.2 Habitus

For Bourdieu, societal structures are partly upheld and reinforced through processes that can best be understood with reference to psychological concepts, or more precisely with the utilisation of the idea of an individual and collective unconsciousness. Bourdieu uses the term 'habitus' to describe the unconscious aspects or as the internalisation of societal structures. The habitus reflects the position of an individual or of groups in the class structure, and at the same time refers to collective and individual practice that is shaped by the individual's or group's position in social space. The habitus therefore embodies the 'indirect causal link between position in social space and practices' (Weininger, 2005:90). Habitus not only intends to explain attitudes, beliefs and concepts of self and the world, but also individual and collective action. For Bourdieu these two spheres are closely linked.

Bourdieu intends to explain how the 'outer' becomes the 'inner' (Moore, 2008), and speaks of the 'incorporation of the objective structures of the social space' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:235). This happens largely on an unconscious level as social structures are usually not consciously analysed or verbally expressed by the individual. Bourdieu refers to Goffman's (1951:297) idea of the 'sense of one's place' which he translates into the 'practical mastery of the social structure' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:235).

Similar to Althusser's understanding of the effect of ideology, this 'mastery' is acquired, not predominantly through active reflexion or explicit tuition, but through experience. Individuals experience themselves in social structures and power relations and derive their sense of place from this. The perception of the social world and the production of meaning are therefore structured. How the social world is perceived 'beyond the directly visible attributes' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:235) is influenced by one's position in the social space which is in turn informed by past (symbolic) struggles and characterised by a certain vagueness.

The link between position and disposition is crucial in this context. As mentioned, Bourdieu does not suggest that a given position in social space determines an individual's habitus, he instead claims that positions in relationships of power relate to specific dispositions with regards to the habitus (Crossley, 2008). Positions (of power) tend to be closely related to more general life conditions and therefore Bourdieu see a strong link between position (in social space) and disposition (of the habitus).

The habitus also informs individual and collective practice and serves Bourdieu as a concept of practice that neither relies on objectivism, that understands action as mere reaction to circumstances, nor on subjectivism that overly emphasises conscious intentions (Wagner and McLaughlin, 2015).[5]

### 2.4.3 Forms of Capital

To be able to analyse how economic inequalities effectively translate into social inequalities and social hierarchies, Bourdieu went beyond the psychoanalytically inspired concept of habitus and famously distinguished several forms of capitals. In his understanding, capital 'is the set of actually usable resources and powers' (Bourdieu, 1984a:114). These resources and powers can be analytically divided into three dimensions. Next to the economic capital (all sorts of property), Bourdieu regards cultural capital and social capital as crucial determinants of the social structure. Cultural capital is closely linked to education and could be termed 'informational capital' (Bourdieu, 1987:4). Social capital, on the other hand, is based on group membership and social connections. Symbolic capital, unlike the other forms of capital, is not a set of resources in itself, but an indicator of the value of the different forms of capital. Economic, social and cultural capital are converted into

[5] As mentioned, Bourdieu is rather reluctant to speak of social groupings as classes and therefore it is questionable whether it is advisable to speak of a 'class habitus' in a Bourdieusian sense. Nevertheless, habitus is a collective as much as an individual concept. When the habitus becomes objectified as lifestyle, there are clearly collective processes at play (Moore, 2008). The social aspects of the concept become apparent when lifestyles get categorised in hierarchical order. This order reflects their origin in the social space as well as their proximity to legitimate culture.

symbolic capital when they are regarded as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1987). No form of capital, even economic capital, equals social status and power without legitimation and recognition.[6] Nevertheless, it is the social structure that is the source of power. Capital needs to be validated to become effective, but this validation operates in accordance with the social structure of a society. Power cannot be reduced to any one form of capital and neither to symbolic systems or beliefs. Power originates in the uneven distribution of capital combined with the ability to convince others of its legitimacy.

Bourdieu regards social space as structured according to the (legitimate) forms of capital. It is, however, not only the total volume of capital that matters, but also the composition and the trajectory of the overall capital. Individuals, as well as groups of individuals, are assigned a position in a hierarchical order according to these three dimensions of capital.

Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear why Bourdieu sees 'taste' as a powerful and politically charged category and not a matter of benign and insignificant individual preference. The sphere of consumption mirrors the sphere of production and the hierarchical order of the production process is not only reiterated in the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow taste, it is reinforced by the normative interpretation as legitimate or illegitimate (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu states that 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu, 1984a:6). So it is not only the object that is judged as tasteful or not, it is also the individual that makes the judgement that is, wittingly or not, rated according to the legitimacy of their taste. Taste, as a component of the habitus, is not a solely individual quality. It may be expressed on an individual level, but clearly relates to the (class) structure of a society.

Cultural capital structures and divides in a similar way. This becomes clear when looking at how Bourdieu defines the different states of cultural capital. 'Embodied' cultural capital describes the outcome of an on-going process of accumulation of cultural knowledge. Bourdieu claims that the 'investment' of pedagogic action 'returns dividends in schools' (Swartz, 1997:76). Pupils from privileged backgrounds

[6] The term 'parvenu' for instance reflects this phenomenon.

and with access to objectified cultural capital (books, works or art etc.) are more likely to attain cultural capital in its institutionalised form. These educational credentials are of critical importance for the allocation of life chances. Through this mechanism, the social class structure reproduces itself. Investments in education can be seen as conversions of different forms of capital (Swartz, 1997).[7] Bourdieu sees cultural capital as increasingly the bedrock of social stratification. Still, it is economic capital that is at the root of all other forms of capital. The social and the cultural fields are, despite a degree of autonomy, ultimately subordinate to the economic field. Of course, the conversion of forms of capital via education is not an automatic, contradiction-free process and there is a degree of vagueness, but it is not only Bourdieu's own research that confirms the links between wealth and educational achievement (Dyson et al., 2010; Sodha and Margo, 2010).

Bourdieu's model offers an approach that combines different dimensions of social classification and allows us to analyse their interrelatedness. At the heart of this examination of inequalities and injustice is the concept of symbolic capital that validates or invalidates all forms of capital. Symbolic capital translates economic, social and cultural capital into power, but also disguises precisely this relation. Differences in educational or professional achievement for instance are misperceived as their real basis is obscured. In that sense, the conversion into symbolic capital not only validates other forms of capital, it also increases their potency by obscuring the unequal distribution of opportunities.

### 2.4.4 Symbolic violence & symbolic struggles

Bourdieu uses the term 'symbolic violence' to express the systematic disguise of power relations. Although it is not necessarily perceived as such, the misrepresentation of power structures is a means of domination and suppression. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991) argues that the misrecognition of power as legitimate and just, forecloses critical debate and leads to an acceptance of societal structures as taken for granted. The political and material interests of those who

[7] Economic capital can be converted into cultural capital and this, in turn, can be used to further gain economic capital.

benefit from the specific power distribution are concealed (Swartz, 1997). Social categorisations have a history, but are ultimately completely arbitrary.[8]

For Bourdieu, symbolic systems are politically powerful as they construct reality (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991). As mentioned, symbolic capital validates and therefore reinforces other forms of capital by disguising interest. Furthermore, the ideological effects of symbolic systems lie in their potential to bring about consent and acceptance among the dominated. Ideology in capitalist societies functions to support a culture that unifies and separates at the same time (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991). Consent and classifications are two sides of the same coin.

Symbolic systems shape the individual and collective perception in a way that the objective structures become, similar to the habitus, incorporated into the unconsciousness and are therefore no longer open to conscious critique. Bourdieu regards the access to means of mass-communication as crucial in that respect. In his view, perceptions are greatly shaped by the ability to influence public discourse. For Bourdieu, political power depends greatly on the 'virtue of naming' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:236). This virtue

> … represents a formidable social power, that of bringing into existence groups by establishing common sense, the explicit consensus, of the whole group (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:236).

This power of naming, categorising and classifying is performed continuously. However, it is important to note that Bourdieu, similar to Althusser, does not regard ideological influence as a simple, straightforward, top-down process. Social groupings that are in a position of power clearly are in an advantaged position to establish a worldview that supports their position of privilege, but generally, the process of

[8] This is probably most apparent in the already discussed context of taste. What qualifies as good taste, and therefore legitimate culture, is subject to constant change and hardly justifiable in any objective sense. The same logic can be applied to other areas of the social world. For instance, it can be argued in a Bourdieusian sense that the value that is attached to different forms of work have developed historically, but reflect more distributions of power and influence than their intrinsic worth. Again, underlying interests remain unchallenged and power is misrecognised. Exactly in this legitimation of an arbitrary, unjustified order lies what Bourdieu regards as violence.

production of meaning is contested. The field of cultural production is a field of political struggle, just as all the other fields that contribute to the construction of meaning. Bourdieu leaves no doubt that the struggle over meaning has very palpable political and societal consequences:

> What is at stake in the struggle about the meaning of the social world is the power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of representations of the groups and therefore of the mobilization and demobilization (Bourdieu, 1984a:479).

There is the very real possibility of challenging dominant interpretations of the social world. Hierarchies are reproduced to the degree that powerful groups succeed in portraying the actual systems of domination as legitimate (Schubert, 2008). This, however, also implies that hierarchies are *only* stable inasmuch as the production of meaning is successfully controlled by the social grouping in power. Consensus, produced in the political and cultural field, can be called into question by subordinate groupings. Inequalities that are maintained by forms of symbolic domination can be challenged not least in the field of cultural production.

Symbolic domination, or maybe more precisely, the struggle for symbolic domination, is everywhere and nowhere (Schubert, 2008). It is everywhere in the sense that we all live in hierarchically structured social systems. Symbolic domination is nowhere, because it remains largely unrecognised and it is exactly that which contributes to the authority of embodied social structures. Nevertheless, the effects of these structures are very real, or as Schubert (2008:193) puts it: 'The violence might be symbolic, but the suffering and the reproduction of class hierarchies are very real'.

### 2.4.5 Class

Bourdieu's concept of social space to some extent contradicts the Marxist notion of classes as historically formed entities with specific roles and inherently antagonistic interests. For Bourdieu, social space consists of a multitude of invisible relationships. Each position in this space is defined by the relative location and the distance to other

positions. This assumption, similar to Weber's view, implies a very individualistic view of society as a conglomeration of atomised individuals in a hierarchical order. Bourdieu (1987:3) expresses this view explicitly: 'From a scientific standpoint, what exists is not "social classes" ... but rather a social space'. Nevertheless, Bourdieu, again like Weber, acknowledges that similar positions in social space and the experience of similar living conditions and relative power(lessness) can bring people closer together and can lead to a potentially strong and potent group identity. The commonality of experience happens intrinsically (in terms of material conditions) and relationally (in terms of relative position to other members of society) (Bourdieu, 1987). Classes are for Bourdieu (1987:5) analytical constructs, 'but constructs well-founded in reality'.

As discussed earlier, it is the process of classmaking that turns a 'class on paper' (Bourdieu, 1987:7) into a real class. Classmaking is a political process that critically involves symbolic struggles and has the struggle over representations at its heart. For Bourdieu, classes are defined by position as much as by perception. The 'being' is equally important as the 'being-perceived' and therefore the 'classification struggles aimed at transforming the categories of perception and appreciation of the social world' are, for Bourdieu (1984a:483), 'a forgotten dimension of the class struggle'. In that sense, class struggle is also the struggle over the legitimate vision of the social world and not least over the representation of classes themselves. The contestation of boundaries is a central element of the class struggle. Crossley (2008:97) sums up the importance of symbolic struggles for classmaking as follows:

> What finally transforms these fuzzy lines of division into historically effective class groups ... are representations of class which both resonate with the ... practical sense that individuals have of their position and serve ... to organise individuals as groups.

Bourdieu is interested in the interrelatedness of different spheres of the social structure as well as the relationship between socials structure and their perception. As I have discussed, for Bourdieu, social structures and power structures can, in democratic societies at least, only be upheld if they are largely perceived as legitimate. This focus on the struggles for legitimacy makes Bourdieu's concept of class very valuable for the objective of this research.

## 2.5 Postmodern and contemporary perspectives

Summing up the views of social theorists who regards social class from a postmodern vantage point is a rather ambitious enterprise and certainly beyond the scope of this research. Even more than the above discussed approaches, a postmodern perspective is hard to pin down in a coherent manner as, maybe apart from a general scepticism regarding Marxism, there appear to be few central, axiomatic assumptions that would unify a postmodern concept of social class. However, there are clearly identifiable common themes, and, in particular, a specific way of challenging traditional stratification research that runs through many postmodern contributions. In the following, I will focus on postmodern approaches that directly address the perceived flaws and alleged obsolescence of traditional concepts of social class, but at the same time heavily draw on Bourdieu's theory. I do not attempt to (in-)validate postmodern concepts, but intend to use the postmodern critique constructively to further develop an understanding of social class that takes relatively recent social and sociological developments into account. An exploration of postmodern contributions is also beneficial insofar, as the postmodern critique points to crucial frictions and focal points within contemporary class analysis.

### 2.5.1 The death of class

In 1996, Pakulski and Waters (1996) famously declared the 'Death of Class'. They have repeated and substantiated this claim ever since, and Pakulski (2005) argues that class as a concept has ceased to be both relevant and valid as it is neither able to reflect the actual structure of today's society nor is it a category central to people's lives. At the centre of this reasoning stands the claim that society is too fragmented to be understood in class terms. Lash and Urry (1987) also regard the postmodern world as one of increasing fragmentation which does not offer collective (class) identities anymore. Due to the emergence of an increasing number of 'new class fractions' (Lash and Urry, 1987:287), identification with larger social groups is increasingly unlikely. The authors refer to Bourdieu's idea of habitus, which they

interpret as 'cognitive structures' (Lash and Urry, 1987:292), and argue that processes of fragmentation lead to a dissolution of collective identity. Interestingly, this fragmentation of society leads, according to Lash and Urry (1987:297), to a 'breakdown of particularist identities' and therefore to the decline of boundaries and even social hierarchies. Also Pakulski and Waters (1996:4) come to the conclusion that 'the most advanced societies are no longer class societies'.

None of these authors however assumes that postmodern societies are equal societies. In particular Pakulski (2005:176) is keen to stress that class divisions were largely replaced by other social differentiations; he speaks of 'complex (classless) inequalities'. Pakulski and Waters (1996) state that social struggles still exist, but argue that they are based on different dimensions such as ethnicity, sexual preference, gender, environmental protection, religious beliefs etc. They explicitly make clear that 'these issues have little or nothing to do with class' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996:26). Also, Lash and Urry (1987:301) conclude that stratification in postmodern society is based on individual achievement and speak of 'new cross-cutting forms of social division'. So while class has lost its significance in terms of collective identity and social analysis, other categories have gained relevance and recognition. Both sets of authors argue that issues of 'race', sex, gender etc. are now more meaningful to the individual and more likely to prompt collective action.[9] This peculiar conception of political progress will be returned to shortly, but before that I want to discuss how contemporary class analysis works with and makes sense of the above mentioned social and political developments.

[9] The alleged fragmentation of society is, for Lash and Urry as well as for Pakulski and Waters nothing to be mourned. Quite the opposite; they regard fragmentation as an opportunity and argue that the decline of collective identity opens up the possibility to reach a greater degree of rationality and reflexivity. Lash and Urry (1987) emphasise that a more open and rational subjectivity has an anti-hierarchical element and could ultimately lead to a radically democratic society. Also Pakulski is optimistic about the impact of fragmentation and points to the potentially increased reflexivity and awareness with regards to social boundaries. He claims that discrimination is increasingly impossible to justify and that the collective struggle for equality has already succeeded to some extent. Interestingly, he mentions racial, ethnic, gender etc. discrimination, but omits class. Furthermore, Pakulski (2005:178) points out that these struggles are largely fought on 'the moral, political, and symbolic levels'. Class struggles and demands for economic redistribution, unsurprisingly, do not feature in this vision of postmodern political engagement.

The fragmentation of social structures is one of the central findings of the Great British Class Survey (GBCS), that was conducted by Savage et al. (2013) in cooperation with the BBC. According to the GBCS, a model of seven classes is needed to grasp the fragmentation and polarisation of contemporary British society. Also the well-established, occupation-based, National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) scale of the Nuffield Institute led by John Goldthorpe works with a larger number, in this case 17, distinguishable categories (Rose et al., 2005). However, the similarities with the postmodernists are of a rather superficial nature and almost end there. With regards to identity formation, the Goldthorpe school makes rather limited claims about the links between class position and social identity (Bottero, 2004). Also Savage et al. (2013) come to the conclusion that class membership does not necessarily result in a tangible class identity. However, unlike in the above explored postmodern line of argument, many contemporary class analysts do not regard class consciousness as a condition for the existence of classes. Bottero (2004:989) sums up this view as follows:

> People do not have to explicitly recognize class issues, or identify with discrete class groupings, for class processes to operate. All that is required is for specific cultural practices to be bound up with the reproduction of hierarchy. The emphasis in not on the development (or not) of class consciousness, but rather on the classed nature of particular social and cultural practices.

So for class analysts like Savage, class and identification is more about creating (or reproducing) difference than recognising commonalities. So neither the Goldthorpe school nor the newer generation of class analysts deny that processes of differentiation and individualisation have taken place. However, compared to the aforementioned postmodernists they clearly arrive at very different conclusions regarding their significance. Class, in this view is not dead, it just operates in a different way. Collective identities play a less significant role, but people still do make sense of their social position in relational ways and in class terms. As Borudieu argues, and the GBCS picks up, this process is mediated by culture. Again, postmodernist considerations are helpful in turning the gaze to another crucial focal point in contemporary debates around social class.

### 2.5.2 The cultural turn

As social classes are, according to postmodern critique, dissolving, their relevance for the process of identity formation is alleged to decline as well. As discussed above, class positions and economic distribution are being superseded by culture. Social groupings are formed not on the basis of employment positions or wealth, but in relation to cultural aspects of life. Pakulski (2005) points out that these new formations tend to be very volatile. Since they refer to areas of life that are more likely to change than a person's economic status, this makes perfect sense, as it is compatible with the postmodern emphasis on the reflexivity of the individual. Membership in these kinds of social groupings is much more a question of choice than class membership in a traditional sense ever can be. Lash and Urry (1987:287) stress the importance of consumption to establish distinctions between 'class fractions'; the consumption of cultural goods has the potential to question traditional structures and hierarchies in the cultural as well as in the social world.

Also Pakulski (2005:177) points to the centrality of consumption and explicitly states that the symbolic power of (cultural) consumption is detached from 'production/employment relations, material needs and interest' and operates as 'autonomous social-structuring systems'.

Interestingly, Lash and Urry, as well as Pakulski, draw on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power but with a distinct twist. Whereas Bourdieu is interested in the mechanisms of power and oppression and more specifically how cultural consumption and the normativity of taste deepens the divide between the economically advantaged and the disadvantaged, the postmodern interpretation of symbolic power seems to be much more optimistic. Lash and Urry and Pakulski and Water regard culture as a means of bridging social divisions and of transcending hierarchical order. When Pakulski (2005:177) claims that 'such structuring contributes to social differentiation rather than stratification' he is in clear opposition to Bourdieu's conception of the legitimising or de-legitimising force of culture. However, it appears that he fails to acknowledge that. Also, Lash and Urry (1987) regard cultural consumption as connected to an individual's status, but crucially more in the sense of a conscious attempt of challenging societal structures.

Again, this line of argument appears to resonate with the theoretical approach of the GBCS in that it also puts an emphasis on cultural consumption. Social and economic capital are not brushed under the carpet, but the difficulty of operationalising and measuring both are evident.[10] Mills (2014) is very critical of this way of measuring class and, in defending his institute's occupation-based NS-SEC approach, he claims that Savage et al. (2013) produce a theory-free conception of class that is not helpful. Leaving the struggle over the validity (or monopoly) of the NS-SEC scale aside, Mills' (2013) critique that the GBCS overly focuses on (largely age-related) patterns of consumption appears very plausible.

However, I would agree with Savage et al. (2014) that the GBCS must be seen in the context of the research that has previously been carried out by the sociologists around Savage and, equally important, that the analysis of the data is still in a rather early stage and only a few initial findings could be presented in the report published in 2013. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the 'de-classing of culture' (Bottero, 2005:130) is framed significantly differently by Savage et al. (2013) compared to the above discussed postmodern perspective. Whereas the importance of cultural practice as a source of identity is acknowledged, Savage et al. (2013) clearly do not regard cultural consumption as detached from economic relations, quite the opposite. One of the central objectives of the GBCS is to demonstrate how culture and taste are bound up with class positions. Some of the earlier work of Savage and Le Roux et al. (2008) clearly shows empirically how cultural activity is still very much based on class position. Where some critiques of Savage et al. (2013), unjustifiably I believe, put them in the postmodern camp that overstates the de-classing of culture, Savage criticises the Goldthorpe school for an approach that de-cultures class (Bottero, 2005). His central argument in that respect is that the contemporary class structure cannot be comprehended by an occupation-based measure alone. Class divisions for Le Roux et al. (2008) are produced through the interplay of economic, cultural and social capital. They are naturally correlated to the different occupational spheres, but cannot solely be explained by them.

[10] This is particular true for the web-based 'Great British Class Calculator'. See: Atherton et al. (2013).

Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that in a Bourdieusian sense, differences in cultural consumption do not just reflect the hierarchical order; culture plays a key role in reproducing class differences. Bourdieu has a double understanding of culture and class as intertwined at the structural level, but also at the level of symbolic practice (Sommer Harrits, 2013). The culture-class-nexus will be further discussed throughout this thesis, at this point however, it needs to be pointed out that some of the critique of the GBCS from a Bourdieusian perspective appears to be concerned that Savage et al. (2013) largely remain at the descriptive level and pay too little attention to the function of culture in the reproduction of power. The clarifications of Savage et al. (2014) are very helpful in that context as they point to the divisions and economic differentiations that capitalism creates in a much more explicit way.

One final point of contention that is worth exploring in the context of this chapter is the question of power. Bradley (2014) and Skeggs, on *Thinking Allowed* (2013f), criticise the GBCS for not adopting an understanding of class that, by being overly concerned with cultural aspects of class, ignores how classes are related to each other in terms of economic advantage and political power. Bradley (2014:430) argues that the 'culture-led version of Bourdieu' of Savage et al. (2013) underplays the economic inequalities that are still at the centre of the social structure. Class, according to Bradley (2014) needs to be understood as a relation and not a conglomeration of attributes. This critique clearly resonates with a Marxist understanding of class that attributes class differences and class conflict to the necessarily antagonistic class interests that are based on the respective roles in the production process. Skeggs, in similar vein, notes that power and exploitation are lost in the largely descriptive micro-analysis of the GBCS. Furthermore, Skeggs is critical of the omission of symbolic capital that is in Bourdieu's conception of class essential in explaining the way in which power is exercised and reproduced. Classes are related to each other in a hierarchical sense. This view is expressed by Skeggs (1997b:133) as follows:

> Class positions are not just relative forms in social space, they are institutionalized positions: the cultural capital of the middle class can offer substantial rewards in the labour market.

And later:

> I purposely choose to use the singular—'working class' or 'middle class' rather than 'classes'—to make a political point. The use of the singular is to emphasize that class is about conflict, power and opposition rather than just sites of differences. I am aware that there are many different ways of being of either class but what is fundamental is not lifestyles or the numerous proliferations of distinctions (cf. Bourdieu, 1986) but the issue of access to material and cultural resources (Skeggs, 1997b:138).

In this instance the disagreement between Savage et al. (2013) and their Bourdieusian and/or Marxist critics can, in my opinion, not just be explained by the embryonic state of the analysis, as Savage et al.'s (2014) clarifications also indicate a degree of disagreement with Skeggs' and Bradley's critique. Savage et al. (2014) make clear that classes only exist in relation to each other, and they insist that even referring to classes as classes (and not simply as groups or categories) indicates that they are structurally in conflict. However, Savage et al. (2014) argue that speaking of exploitation in a Marxist sense (in terms of surplus value) is difficult to operationalise and also slightly missing the point. Savage et al. (2014:7) therefore refer to 'mechanisms of accumulation' that are not exclusively linked to the labour market. So classes are related in the sense that there are privileged or disadvantaged positions with regards to the accumulation of *all* forms of capital, but, according to Savage et al. (2014), it cannot be assumed that one class directly gains from the exploitation of another class. Again, the difference to the above discussed critique should not be overstated. Skeggs, Bradley as well as Savage et al. (2014) acknowledge that class position as well as the relating economic and cultural capital are key in the reproduction of power, the disagreement appears to concern the specific mechanisms of the process. The difference to the NC-SEC school are however more pronounced and of a more fundamental nature. Despite its foundation in employment relations, the conventional class analysis of Goldthorpe is not interested in exploitation and does not comprehend the respective classes as in structural conflict with each other. So despite appearing more compatible with orthodox Marxism (due to the central role employment plays in the definition of classes), culture-based class analyses that, like the mentioned examples, acknowledges the economic basis of social divisions can in fact be more helpful in exploring social and

economic inequalities and contemporary class conflict. Whereas postmodern thinkers claim that cultural consumption replaces class as a meaningful category, Bourdieusian class analysis explores the different dimension of their relatedness. To conclude this chapter, I now want to explore the relationship between economic and cultural aspects of inequality (and their connectedness) from one further perspective.

## 2.6 Recognition vs. redistribution

The relatedness of cultural and economic dimensions of inequality is at the very heart of the Bourdieusian concepts that centrally inform this thesis. However, at this point it is beneficial to make this linkage explicit, not least to demonstrate how the discussed conceptions of class relate to each other. Or, in other words, I intend to emphasise that contemporary class analysis that focuses on cultural dimensions of class cannot produce meaningful conceptions of difference and power if the material and the economic foundations of the class structure are overlooked or treated as secondary to cultural aspects. Nancy Fraser's (1995) explorations of the different dimensions of injustice and her distinction between claims for recognition and claims for redistribution appear very useful in this context. Her conception of justice does not pit culture against economy, but convincingly demonstrates how both dimensions of social divisions are linked dialectically.

For Fraser, misrecognition and misdistribution are sources of suffering that need to be distinguished analytically (Fowler, 2009). In contrast to Axel Honneth, whose extensive debate with Fraser does not need to be traced here (Fraser and Honneth, 2004), Fraser is of the opinion that 'the cultural' is not just an expression of 'the material' and that both spheres need to be comprehended as linked, but distinguishable and not reducible to one another. For Honneth, (as cited in Fowler, 2009:145) economic reward is an expression of 'a deeper moral grammar' and economic injustices are experienced first and foremost as misrecognition. Economic injustices are for Honneth largely perceived as a lack of social recognition (Lovell, 2007). Fraser, in contrast, sees the danger that such a focus on recognition leads to a problematic understanding of inequality as being disconnected from economic structures. In her view, the turn to culture has led to a neglect of material

maldistributions. Debates around symbolic and cultural expressions of inequality have to a degree replaced debates around material and structural inequality.[11] For Fraser (1995), this is particularly problematic as remedies for the respective types of injustice potentially interfere with each other, not least because their somewhat contradictory needs to acknowledge difference on the one side or to emphasise commonalities on the other side. So for Fraser there is, also in practical terms, the danger that politics of recognition supplants politics of redistribution.

The relevance of this debate for the conception of social class is obvious. Identity or group identities supplant class interest and the struggle for cultural recognition replaces the fight against economic exploitation. Fraser's concerns with identity politics are shared and developed further by other critical academics. Crompton and Scott (2005:200), for instance, see the battle for recognition as problematic, as its concern with identity resonates with the individualising tendencies of neoliberalism and therefore warn against the danger of 'winning cultural battles but losing the class war'. In similar vein, McNay (2008) argues that if inequality is comprehended as a lack of recognition, it can easily be misunderstood in a solely interpersonal sense and as a psychological problem, open to therapeutic interventions. Furthermore, there is the danger of displacing political struggles into the realms of culture and to depoliticise oppression by only comprehending power differentials as (individually felt) pain and suffering. McNay (2008:10) states that 'recognition claims derive their legitimacy from a certain sentimentalized discourse of suffering'. Of course, this constitutes a very narrow and (potentially) depoliticised interpretation of inequality and oppression. And, as Skeggs (2004) points out, not all underprivileged groups can, or even want to comprehend themselves as suffering, either because they regard their everyday experience as unexceptional or they lack access to arenas in which these discourses are played out. Skeggs (2004:59) summarises her view as follows:

> Identity politics has thus served to reinforce bourgeois individualism that renders some groups outside of the need of justice and places others at the centre of moral authorization.

[11] Ironically (?), this happened in a period of escalating economic inequality.

So struggles for recognition that are detached from material inequalities can set up their own hierarchies of suffering that privilege some groups and exclude others. Structural inequalities and questions of class membership are therefore not necessarily part of discourses of suffering. Furthermore, as this research intends to demonstrate, access to public discourse and the arenas in which identity claims are negotiated is bound up with class position:

> ... the working class (women and men, black and white) have always had restricted access to where these claims are most frequently made (Skeggs, 1997b:127).

Fraser (1995) adds to this that distributive injustice is not always felt as personal injury and shame and therefore is difficult to make sense of in discourses based on recognition claims alone (McNay, 2008).

However, I would argue that it is important not to overstate these contradictions. Recognition and redistribution can be analytically distinguished, but in reality they very much tend to be connected and interwoven (Fowler, 2009). Sayer (2005), for instance, makes the point that egalitarian politics of redistribution require a recognition of the involved groups as of equal moral worth and therefore as equally deserving. Sayer (2005) does not go as far as Honneth and regards distribution as an expression of recognition, but clearly as its condition. He makes the very illuminating point that class inequality is not just reflected in unwarranted attributions, but also in unequal access to practices that generally result in respect and recognition. Again, the difference to Honneth's argument becomes clear: recognition alone is not enough, as access to recognised practices is bound up with material inequalities. In contrast to 'race-' and gender-based differences for instance, Sayer (2005) argues that class differences cannot be resolved through recognition alone. Of course class, gender and race intersect and racism and sexism have economic and material dimensions, but I would agree with Sayer (2005) that possible remedies for the respective forms of inequality are of different qualities. Also Fraser (1995) argues that economic and cultural injustices form a vicious circle and tend to reinforce each other dialectically. Accordingly, redistributive remedies need to be regarded as legitimate and based on a degree of positive valuation or at least on the general

acknowledgement of principal deservedness, otherwise, there is the risk that redistributive remedies exacerbate misrecognition.[12]

The complexities of the recognition vs. redistribution debate cannot be explored in its entire depth in this thesis, I will, however, come back to some aspects that are pertinent in the context of this research later by addressing some relevant and plausible points of critique levelled at Fraser and by relating Bourdieusian conceptions to the debate. In the context of this chapter the condensed summary of the central arguments of the debate shall suffice to establish the underlying basic assumption for the ensuing empirical analysis that acknowledges the interconnectedness of economic and cultural dimensions of (class) inequality.

## 2.7 Conclusion

A sociological approach that promises to address the supposedly fundamental developments in the world of employment and the relating social developments is undoubtedly appealing. However, it is probably fair to say that much of the optimism concerning a postmodern, classless society, has evaporated in the last decade in the light of empirical evidence of the limits of social mobility and the general persistence of social inequality. If anything, the gap between the top and the bottom is widening (Ramesh, 2011), and educational achievement for instance is still largely determined by a person's social background (Taylor, 2006). Empirical evidence to support the claim of a more egalitarian society, not only with regards to material distribution, seems scarce. It does indeed appear that the claimed 'death of class' was based on rather thin and selective evidence (Bottero, 2005).

Postmodern sociology, as presented by the aforementioned authors, is to some extent aware of this, and therefore declares economic inequalities as of less relevance compared to cultural aspects of inequality. It is striking how partially Bourdieu's findings are presented by Lash and Urry (1987) as well as Pakulski and

[12] A rather obvious example would be state welfare that, if perceived as unjust and undeserved, can act to aggravate the stigmatisation of the poor. So cultural disrespect and economic disadvantage are inevitably linked.

Waters (1996). Whereas Bourdieu sees economic and cultural inequalities as two sides of the same coin, many postmodernists pit one against the other. Arguing that social classes lost significance due to indirect and non-economic forms of stratification and exclusion is in sharp contrast to Boudieu's understanding of the social structure. Furthermore, the structural relationship between production and consumption is of great relevance to Bourdieu, but treated as almost non-existent by proponents of class analysis that is solely based on culture and consumption.[13]

Nevertheless, the postmodern critique of the Marxist understanding of class poses some very relevant questions that can help to further contemporary class analysis. I hope to have shown how a Bourdieusian conception of the culture-class nexus can be useful in coming to terms with the structural and symbolic struggles in the economic and cultural sphere. Social inequality is structured by the distribution of material goods, but as Bourdieu shows, non-material manifestations of inequality cannot be ignored by contemporary class analysis.

Class appears to be very much on the sociological agenda again, and despite the necessary critical interventions, the GBCS has invigorated very relevant debates around class and culture. The call of Savage et al. (2014) to focus on the extremes of the class spectrum has already been put into practice and some of the related contributions reached the mainstream of sociological publishing. Savage et al. (2014) convincingly make the point that in contemporary Britain, division in the middle play a less significant role than the cleavage between the elite and everybody else. The need to explore the extremes of the class spectrum is reflected in a wealth of publications that focus either on the elite, like for instance O. Jones (2014), or (ethnographic) explorations of people and communities living in precarious positions (e.g. McKenzie, 2015; Tyler, 2013; O'Hara, 2014). The popularity of these publications and the huge academic and also public interest in the GBCS clearly show that stating the 'death of class' was very premature.

[13] That this issue is not even addressed on the superficial level of the position in the production process and the accordant financial means is rather telling and an indication that the mentioned authors do not necessarily have the poorer members of society in mind when declaring social groups as structured by choice through consumption.

As discussed, postmodernists stress the importance of (cultural) consumption for the formation of individual and collective identity and the cohesion of social groups. Research by Skeggs (1997a) and Walkerdine et al. (2001) for instance, indicates that this is largely true for their respective sample groups, although in a more serious, less playful way than alleged by postmodernists. Most proponents of contemporary class analysis acknowledge the importance of cultural consumption and representations. I therefore intend to explore how culture, taste and consumption are used as means of distinction and to what extent this is exercised as a conscious and deliberate choice. Furthermore, I will analyse how popular media representations of class are structured, how they repeat or challenge stereotypical images of social class and how their production is in itself shaped by contemporary social inequalities.

# 3. Literature Review / Grasping class

In this chapter, I will review studies that use a Bourdieusian framework to explore matters of class and in particular representations of class. I will cluster the arguments around the central Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, doxa and symbolic violence as these will, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, inform my analysis of classed representations and their social and political context. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the relevant research and to define my research question more specifically. However, this literature review is by no means comprehensive and I will refer to further relevant empirical studies and theoretical concepts in the ensuing chapters. By, for now, focussing on the most seminal studies, I want to explore the most pertinent themes relevant to my research area. This rather compact literature review is meant to introduce theory and to identify areas that this thesis can add to.

## 3.1 Bourdieusian Theory

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus offers a way of coming to terms with the complexity and the different facets, nuances and dimensions of social class. Bourdieu frames class as a social phenomenon with very real, palpable, individual and social implications. Indeed, he goes one step further and attempts to bridge the dualism of 'the individual' vs. 'the social' as well as the supposed polarity of a sociological understanding of class versus an (individual-)psychological understanding of class. Habitus can be comprehended as the internalisation of social structures. Despite this psychoanalytic dimension, the formation of the habitus is for Bourdieu a collective as well as a reciprocal process (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992).

Bourdieu aims to challenge the dichotomy between 'inner' and 'outer' or 'individual' and 'social', but does so without damaging the analytical integrity of structure and agency (Maton, 2008). Bourdieu accepts that, for analytical purposes at least, structure and agency can be treated as separate entities, but encourages social research to relate the two terms to each other. Accordingly, it makes little sense to talk about the habitus in isolation, i.e. without talking about the relating field at the

same time. Doing so would 'fetishize' (Maton, 2008:61) the habitus and ultimately reduce it to a rather detached, superficial and ahistorical analysis of habits. Bourdieu suggests a relational mode of thinking that links visible empirical practice to underlying structural and structuring principles. Reay (2004) therefore concludes, that using the concept of habitus as a research tool necessarily encourages a rather broad focus that relates individual behaviour, attitudes etc. to social structures. The social actor is free to make his choices, but the context of these choices is predefined by classed (and gendered) relations.

These constraints are however not usually evident to the individual. On the contrary, they tend to be perceived as normal and therefore not open to conscious analysis. Shared, but nevertheless class and gender specific 'assumptions that "go without saying" determine the limits of the doable and the thinkable' (Maton, 2008:59). The habitus can consequently not be seen as a concept solely referring to conscious, intellectual aspects of human existence. Habitus should rather be understood as 'embodied' – a way of acting as well as thinking and feeling. Hence, habitus informs practice not in a direct, straightforward fashion, but as implicit knowledge of what is appropriate and not, as 'practical mastery' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991) or, as a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990b:61). Again, Bourdieu neither regards the respective (class) habitus as essential nor as natural, but as conditioned by an arbitrary social structure. Finally, it should be mentioned, that Bourdieu acknowledges the possibility of individuals and collectives to transcend the social conditions under which their habitus was formed. The dynamic and reciprocal relations of structure and agency allows for this possibility.

All this makes the habitus a rather broad, one could even say messy, concept. However, Reay (2004) argues that it is exactly this indetermacy that makes the concept of habitus a very appropriate tool to explore the complex messiness of the real world.[14] In the following, I want to discuss attempts to translate the messy concept of habitus into research practice.

[14] Habitus as a concept clearly does a lot of work in Bourdieu's theory of the social world by drawing together a number of highly complex ideas – from psychoanalytical internalisation to the possibility for social change. How the 'outer' becomes the 'inner' is at its core, just as much as how the 'upper' rises and remains above the 'lower'. But at the same time Bourdieu

## 3.2 Research Practice

Despite the discussed contestation to the contrary, class remains a meaningful and powerful category for the way people make sense of the social world and their own place in it. This however happens not in a straightforward and contradiction free fashion. Boundaries appear to be more fluid or at least more contested and the traditional Marxist distinction between 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' seems ever more relevant (see chapter two).

### 3.2.1 Habitus

A number of relatively recent empirical studies confirm that class is a meaningful concept, that is not easily talked about. Savage (2001) points to the ambivalence of contemporary class identities. His findings confirm a continuing acknowledgement of class as a relevant category and a readiness to identify oneself in class terms. However, Savage (2001) also states that the majority of the respondents in his study preferred to talk about class as a category 'out there' and felt less comfortable to talk about how their own lives were influenced by class membership. Class is a very ambivalent, emotionally charged concept that is, in a wider sense, political, as well as loaded with meaning and normativity. Savage (2001) concludes that class identities are generally rather weak, which however does not suggest that class ceased to matter to his interviewees. On the contrary, the acknowledgement that social class is of significance combined with the reluctance to discuss social class on a personal level might point to the complexity and emotional ambivalence of class in contemporary Britain rather than to the alleged anachronism of the concept. From a Bourdieusian perspective, it can be questioned whether the concept of 'identity' is best suited to grasp the social character as well as the different layers and dimensions on which class is played out. The habitus concept goes well beyond (conscious) self-concepts and cannot be easily equated with the idea of individualised identity

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accounts for the possibility of the 'inner' shaping the 'outer' and the 'lower' challenging the 'higher'.

formation (Wagner and McLaughlin, 2015). Equally, I would challenge Savage's conclusion that the tendency of his participants to present themselves as 'ordinary' (as opposed to 'distinct') necessarily contradicts Bourdieu. Leaving the possibility of a skewed sample aside[15], I would argue that it is exactly the normalisation of middle class lifestyles that creates divisions and ultimately distinctions. The wish to appear 'ordinary' can in itself be seen as a way of distancing oneself from those excluded from the ordinariness of social mainstream. I will return to the normativity of normalised middle-classness later, but clearly, what Bourdieu means with habitus cannot solely be understood as conscious identification with one's respective class.

As Skeggs (1997a) points out, and Savage (2001) acknowledges, the dis-identification with class proves the continual power and relevance of the concept. In her longitudinal study with girls and women in the caring profession, she finds a general refusal to be regarded and judged in class terms. Indeed, a majority of the participants make a conscious effort not to be identifiable as working-class. Whereas the existence of different classes is widely accepted, classifications are resisted on a personal level. This refusal or resistance strongly indicates that class plays a role in the lives of the young women in Skeggs' study. Class clearly informs their identity formation, but, as Skeggs (1997a) emphasises, class position and class identity are not the same. There is not necessarily a fit between position and disposition. The resistance to (self-)identification in class terms is for the participants in Skeggs' (1997a) study a consequence of hierarchical order of different types of habitus and their own experiences of the ever present social order and power relations. Similar to Savage's (2001) findings, class is more easily talked about in others[16]. Nevertheless, class is lived, despite, in some quarters, being rejected as a category and despite the difficulty to verbally define and express its essence. Skeggs (1997a) argues that Bourdieu does not sufficiently account for the possibility of resistance to labelling, hierarchisation and judgement. The possible underlying reasons for this refusal can however in my opinion very well be analysed within a Bourdieusian framework.

[15] Chorlton, Cheadle, Wilmslow and Ramsbottom, the areas where the research was conducted, are hardly representative of the North West of England, the area where the study locates itself.

[16] not least because of the contradictions that, as experienced by many of the participants, inevitably occur when attempting to pass as middle-class.

Exactly the widely differing valuations of the respective forms of habitus, and the according lack of a positive discourse around (female) working-class identity for instance, are likely to play a role. This argument will be further developed later in connection with the resulting symbolic violence.

The overall economic trend over the last two decades of ever widening income gaps (Ramesh, 2011) seems generally strangely overlooked in contemporary debates about class, despite not being a very recent phenomenon. Reay (1998) refers to the growing inequalities in the area of paid work when stating that the economic class structure in the UK is increasingly polarised. In her study of mothers of different class backgrounds, she illustrates how class shapes the subjectivity of her participants and influences their actions and attitudes. Reay (1998) concludes that class is central to people's lives and to the way they make sense of the world. Whether people identify themselves in class terms or not, they tend to use the concept of social class to locate and position themselves as well as others. Class is 'powerfully internalised and continually played out in interactions with others' (Reay, 1998:265). Reay (1998) emphasises that class is not only a social, political and theoretical concept, class is 'done', it is lived and performed on a daily basis and shapes attitudes and practice. Acknowledging this is not meant to essentialise class but to advocate a broader understanding of class along Bourdieusian lines. Habitus incorporates psychological aspects and the psychoanalytical concept of internalisation without psychologising social class. Haylett (2003) describes the dialectical nature of the habitus as produced by divisions in society and at the same time reproducing those divisions. Class is, for her, as it is for Bourdieu, a 'matter of embodied social practice' (Haylett, 2003:62).

Bourdieu follows the Marxist premise that classes must be understood as relational and therefore cannot be comprehended in isolation. Inequalities between social groups and the according power structures are reflected in the habitus. As Lawler (2004:113) points out, the habitus explains how the social is incorporated and therefore the habitus is a tool to analyse how the central social inequalities 'are made to inhere within the person'. Again, this is not to say that this is a straightforward, inevitable and unopposable process. However, as Lawler (2004) adds, the possibility to resist does exist, but not for every individual to the same extent. For Bourdieu

(1984a), class is less about choices or conscious identity and more about inequalities and divisions and those are reflected in the habitus.

Walkerdine et al. (2001) examine the myriad of everyday manifestations of class in the lives of female teenagers. Similar to the aforementioned authors, they acknowledge the multiple levels on which class is played out. Furthermore, they discuss how sensitive their participants were to signifiers of social class. Difference is produced and (involuntarily) displayed through accents, style, housing etc. The girls in this study were very competent in sensing these 'micro-distinctions'. But not only that, they also were perfectly aware of the (implicit) social hierarchy and therefore able to precisely judge the value of the respective expressions. Of course, this process is, for young people maybe in particular, emotionally charged and potentially a source of great concern and anxiety. If class positions are seen as easily identifiable, each individual is under constant scrutiny and the object of social projections and judgements. Walkerdine et al. (2001) point out that subjectifications of class not only influence conscious thoughts, but also desires, wishes and anxieties. These valuable insights can, in my opinion, help us to come to terms with questions of subordination and resistance. Again, I do not regard class mainly as a psychological concern, but as one that goes way beyond economic inequalities. Finally, Walkerdine et al. (2001) make the point that as much as class is naturally a collective concept, in the understanding of their participants, (class related) classifications were made based on the characteristics of the individual person. Accordingly, it was the individual that was being rated and judged. And, as Tyler (2008) adds, this judgement is often emotionally mediated.

Looking at class from a Bourdieusian perspective clearly suggests a rather broad interpretation of the concept. Class forms identity beyond conscious affiliations and political attitudes. Therefore, I prefer the term 'class habitus' to the term 'class identity' as the former points to a more comprehensive understanding of class. Habitus includes very relevant unconscious elements of classed being, and also examines the dialectical relation between the material reality and (unconsciously formed) attitudes.[17] This way of thinking appears very much confirmed by the pieces

[17] Bourdieu (1984a:471) illustrates this nexus with the example of perceived limits and confined expectations; through the process of internalisation 'social divisions become

of research discussed above. 'Knowing one's place' (within a hierarchical structure) was a theme that showed in most of the mentioned studies.[18] Thinking 'habitus' instead of 'identity' brings into focus processes of domination and in particular their invisibility.

Finally, I would argue that habitus, as abstract and overly complex as it might appear, is a concept that research can successfully fill with life. After all, social class is, and I would say that the research previously outlined clearly illustrates this, a lived concept. Despite having been declared dead for a while now, class is still very much an idea people can relate to. Questions of class are debated as well as experienced and for all their alleged irrelevance still very much a topic of great intellectual and emotional engagement. Using the concept of habitus can help to come to terms with these complexities and grasp the (inseparable) individual and social dimensions of class.

In the following, I will turn to representations of social class in popular media. Again, I will use Bourdieusian concepts to structure the review of the relevant literature. Whereas 'doxa' will functions as a point of reference for the analysis of the content of (classed) media representations, 'symbolic violence' will inform reflections on the logic of media production, which mirror the highly unequal distribution of economic and political power within society. In the following, I intend to identify general themes that run through the cited studies of media representations of social class.

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principles of division'. The perception of the social world is shaped by mental structures that are themselves greatly influenced by the (power) structure of the social world. Therefore, social realities, like the unequal distribution of power, for example, appear natural or self-evident. This means that dominated social actors perceive their role as justified, or as Bourdieu puts it, the 'embodiment of the objective laws' results in individuals 'adjusting their expectations to their chances, defining themselves as the objective order defines them' (Bourdieu, 1984a:471).

[18] As Walkerdine et al. (2001) point out, this applies to members of the middle-class as well, who are faced with specific (more prestigious, but possibly equally limiting) expectations. Positions of privilege are accordingly expected to be upheld and reproduced similar to positions of exclusion and submission.

### 3.2.2 Doxa

Bourdieu uses the term doxa to address shared assumptions that tend to be absent from public discourse. As I have discussed above in connection with the habitus concept, this has largely to do with the perceived universality and ordinariness of these phenomena. Doxa, as a central element of the habitus, describes unscrutinised, even unconscious knowledge that is based on the (individual and collective) experience of social actors in the respective fields. Doxa describes a set of assumptions of a specific epoch, a reality that 'goes unanimously unquestioned because it lies beyond any notion of enquiry' (Deer, 2008:120). Despite referring to specific fields, those assumptions can have a very high degree of authority and general acceptance beyond the boundaries of the individual field. This is, for obvious reasons, particularly true for the media field as its explicit purpose is to be heard and to exert influence. Apart from that, I would argue, doxa is a very suitable framework for the analysis of class bias in popular media as class is only rarely talked about directly. The pieces of research that will be discussed shortly confirm that assumptions about social class tend to be picked-up, repeated and reinforced in popular media, but are rarely talked about explicitly, let alone challenged. Research along Bourdieusian lines should therefore open up the 'the universe of that which is undiscussed' (Bourdieu, 1977:170) for scrutiny and to question its implicit assumptions.

Broadly speaking, an analysis of representations of social class in popular media, and Reality TV in particular, shows a marked difference between middle-class and working-class representations. Difference is generally conveyed implicitly and not put into larger social contexts, but are generally portrayed and discussed on an individual level. As Lawler (2005:437) points out, social factors, let alone questions of hierarchy or power, tend to be absent from the portrayal of supposedly problematic behaviour of working-class people, which is instead presented 'as the outcome of individual and family pathology'. Middle-class representations tend to be equally individualised albeit with a different angle. As Walkerdine (2003) notes, the aspiring, upward mobile middle-class subject forms an ideal image for the new labour market. This image of modern middle-class professionals emphasises and promotes reflexivity and skilfulness (Skeggs, 2009) which are acquired by the middle-class subject on their

individual journey, driven by the intrinsic motivation for self-improvement. Agency tends to be ascribed much more to the middle-class subject who, in stark contrast to their working-class counterpart, successfully takes on the task of self-management. Skeggs (2004) adds that it is generally only middle-class subjects whose 'life stories' portray them as reflexive and in control of their destiny whereas working-class people are presented as not able to reach similar psychological depths or degrees of control. Those stereotypical accounts justify and reinforce 'the division of society into those who can speak, act, feel and those who are "spoken for"' (Tyler, 2008:32).

Skeggs and Wood (2012b) show that class inequality offers a convenient shortcut to conflict-laden and entertaining narratives, and that exactly these predictable and stereotypical narratives reinforce doxic beliefs. Therefore, media productions need not have a specific political agenda to effectively influence public opinion. Exactly the absence of (politically informed) critique of ideological conditions lends doxic beliefs their potency.

A common focal point for class distinctions is the notion of mobility. Whereas working-class subjects are portrayed as inflexible and fixed, both in terms of social position and actual physical space, middle-class subjects are portrayed as aspiring, intellectually flexible and cosmopolitan (Skeggs, 2004). This can be regarded as particularly cynical, because, as Skeggs (2004) further points out, the ability to move, connect or withdraw is closely related to economic factors, and control over one's mobility is not equally granted to all members of society. Mobility is portrayed as a generally desirable good without further debate.

Another area of discourse in which the working class is depicted as backward and a barrier to progress is the discourse around racism and multiculturalism. Bonnet (1998) shows how whiteness is not a fixed category, but historically variable and constantly developing in the context of wider social and economic conditions. He warns against drawing parallels with US-American developments too freely, and therefore 'White Trash' and 'white working-class' cannot be used interchangeably, but both expressions indicate that white identities have (changing) class connotations. Haylett (2001) points to the interesting contradiction that despite the fact that multiculturalism is predominantly lived in working-class areas, white working-class culture is routinely portrayed as intrinsically racist. Therefore, the

white working class is seen as in conflict with the modern capitalist project of equality and multiculturalism and as a symbol of backwardness. For the context of this study, this is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, discourses around multiculturalism cement the supposed moral superiority of middle-class liberalism (Haylett, 2001) and secondly, the racialised othering of the white working class helps to uphold the notion of an inclusive society. In a sense, the perceived failing of the white working class supposedly proves that race and ethnicity ceased to matter and that the increasingly severe economic inequalities are not down to (ethnic) privilege, but merit.

When collective explanations enter the discourse, it is generally not in relation to economic or social inequalities, but with regards to matters of culture. Haylett (2003) shows for example how the political and economic condition of unemployment is reframed as 'worklessness' and hence portrayed as a cultural rather than economic characteristic. However, not only unemployment, but also poverty in general is construed as a predominantly cultural matter and as caused by certain traits of those living in poverty (e.g. violence, lack of striving, family instability etc.). A curtailed, and ultimately distorted, interpretation of Bourdieu's forms of capital is, as I would add, often (mis-)used to seemingly substantiate arguments along these lines. In particular, when social security is talked about, a normative distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving or the 'underclass' is generally suggested (Haylett, 2001). Benefit recipients are portrayed as excluded from mainstream society and therefore fundamentally culturally different. Here, media representations fall back on an outdated discourses of 'poor culture'. Accordingly, it is, as Skeggs (2004:80) points out, not structural inequalities that are to blame for social ills, but an 'individualised form of cultural inadequacy'. Consequently, possible remedies are social integration and education rather than economic redistribution.

I finally want to mention one more, overarching tendency of class representation in popular media; as I have already alluded to, middle-class experiences and lifestyle are generally conceptualised as norm-setting (Reay, 1998). The above described aspects of class representations (aspiration, self-management, multiculturalism etc.) are emotionally and morally loaded categories and tend to be presented accordingly, hence increasing their authoritativeness. This development, as Savage (2003:536)

points out, is embedded in a wider societal trend that resulted in the middle class becoming the 'particular-universal' class; a particular class whose practices came to be accepted as universally binding. Accordingly, only some types of performing selves, those resembling the ideal type of a middle-class self, are positively valued (Skeggs, 2009). From a Bourdieusian perspective, this is probably not surprising, as Bourdieu identifies a clear hierarchy of different forms of habitus. What is remarkable however, is that Reality TV in particular appears to have taken the distinction between high and low culture a step further by suggesting a generally desirable lifestyle and demanding assimilation to a normalised middle-class style. Ironically, or perfidiously, attempts by people with working-class backgrounds to pass as middle class are mocked as pretentiousness (Lawler, 2005). This follows, according to Lawler (2005), the peculiar logic of the identity formation of social groups. As she demonstrates, representations of social class are less about actual distinct forms of behaving or about lifestyles, but first and foremost about creating difference and a system of inclusion and exclusion (Lawler, 2005). The middle class ascertains its identity and its position of relative power by othering the working class as not just below normalised middle-class ways of thinking and doing, but by excluding the working class from the societal mainstream altogether. The doxic character of this process is summed up by Lawler (2005:438):

> Indeed, contemporary 'public' representations seem to be marked by a notable *lack* of reflexivity, and there is virtually *no* real problematization of a normative and normalized middle-class position (emphases in original)

To conclude, class relations, inevitably, still very much inform contemporary media production. Be it as a cheap and easy way to produce narratives of conflict or as a way of judging allegedly despicable behaviour. Normalised middle class-culture is routinely contrasted with a working-class culture supposedly in need of improvement. Interestingly, these debates, as much as they are about social and cultural phenomena, are almost always played out on the individual level. As Skeggs (1997a) rightly points out, these discourses of individualism are in the interest of the powerful. Privilege is not part of this debate, and therefore social status, wealth etc. has to be understood as individual achievement. The hierarchical order of social class

clearly informs class representations, but does so in a very intransparent way. Exactly therein lies the doxic nature of class representations. The normativity of normalised middle-class lifestyles and the fundamental arbitrariness of this attribution are not part of the media discourse. What is under scrutiny is individual behaviour that is informed by an allegedly deficient culture, but only remotely, if at all, by economic and social inequalities and exploitation. Class representations recreate doxic beliefs regarding the social structure and, by and large, do not challenge their foundation.

### 3.2.3 Symbolic violence

Having discussed aspects of class representations in terms of content, I will now turn to underlying structures as well as possible effects of classed media portrayals. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991) uses the term symbolic violence to refer to public discourses that fail to acknowledge the unequal distribution of power within society. Accordingly, violence is done to those without power, whose suppression is not recognised or is even portrayed as justified and the natural order of things. These doxic beliefs favour the powerful. As I have explored these hidden mechanisms in the context of habitus and doxa, I will now focus more specifically on how this insight can be applied to the structure of the media field.

Bourdieu unambiguously states that relations of communication are always power relations and that the different social classes continually fight out a symbolic struggle over the definition of the social world (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991). At stake are interpretations of the social world that are best suited to the interests of the respective classes as well as the legitimacy of (symbolic) violence. The channels of this discourse owe their credibility to the fact that the way they are shaped by relations of power is generally not recognised (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991).[19] The argument that power structures can be upheld because they are not perceived as such, runs through much of Bourdieu's writing and he also applies this reasoning to the media field. Popular media are instrumental to the authority of symbolic power by 'constituting the given', by 'making people see and believe' (Bourdieu and

[19] Were popular media mainly understood as a tool in the class war of the privileged against the oppressed, they quickly would cease to be popular media.

Thompson, 1991:170) and ultimately by bringing about or preventing social change. The media's role in all this, or more precisely their partiality, is only rarely discussed.

#### *3.2.3.1 Misrecognition*

A central aspect of the misrecognition of power relations in contemporary media products is that social class is very much an issue, but very rarely talked about explicitly. Some sub-genres of reality television almost exclusively feature working-class people or exploit conflicts that arise through class differences (Tyler, 2008), but, as I have already outlined, do so without mentioning class, let alone relational aspects or wider social and political implications of inequality. Lawler (2004), using Bourdieu's habitus model, states that class is still very relevant and visible in representations of the social world, but routinely displaced. What is a social, collective and political concept is reduced to characteristics of individuals or families. Exactly in this individualisation of the social lies the doxic nature of class representations. As Reay (1998) point out, this alleged 'classlessness' is part of the class struggle. Individualistic discourses tend to obscure power relations. I do not want to imply that this is part of a wider conspiracy or that there is an over-arching 'hidden agenda' of the media field, but there seems to be a clear tendency to present social class in a depoliticised manner and this constitutes symbolic violence in a Bourdieusian sense. The omission of class from public discourse and the according delegitimation of class as a relevant concept plays into the hands of those who benefit from an unequal distribution of wealth and power. Representations are therefore political in their content and their effect and hence should be seen in the context of class struggles.

Class formation is a continuous, dynamic process that not least takes place on the level of the symbolic. The classed self is formed under the influence of popular representations and discourses of inclusion and exclusion (Skeggs, 2004). What is, somewhat misleadingly, called Reality TV does not portray social realities, 'but is fundamentally constitutive of contemporary social life' (Tyler, 2012:212). Class identities as well as class relations are influenced by the normative persuasiveness of cultural production in general and Reality TV in particular.

*3.2.3.2 Judgment & taste*

A central mechanism that produces normativity is the, at least in the realm of Reality TV, ever-present judgment. There appears to be a doxic consent that popular media products have the remit to pass judgment and can do so with a great degree of authority. As Couldry (2012:37) points out with reference to Reality TV, judging is done by experts and viewers alike, but is carried out in a persuasive, yet intransparent way as judgment in Reality TV is 'doubly mystified'. Firstly, because the foundations of these judgments are not openly declared and secondly, because the relevance and the validity of these judgments are portrayed as not limited to the specific context of Reality TV, but to be of general authority. What Couldry (2012) also makes clear is that the described judging has a clear class bias. Class differences are not challenged, but reinforced, as it is usually working-class participants who are judged by middle-class experts who apply middle-class norms. This not only generalises (class-)specific norms, but also legitimises the hierarchical order that puts the members of different classes in their respective positions. The working class are therefore always subject to judgment, not only as differing, but as inferior (Skeggs, 1997a). As I have already discussed, classed judgment is often based on matters of taste, which Bourdieu (1984a:511) expresses as follows:

> If there is any terrorism, it is the peremptory verdicts which, in the name of taste, condemn to ridicule, indignity, shame, silence … , men and women who simply fall short, in the eyes of their judges, of the right way of being and doing.

Representations and their associated judgments attribute value to individuals as well as classes and define specific cultures as worth having or not worth having (Skeggs, 2004). Through the mechanism of taste, class positions become charged with normative valuations. Those norms are however not agreed upon democratically, but to a great degree set by those in positions of influence and power and therefore middle-class norms tend to be binding and authoritative. Class, from a psychological point of view, can be seen as a category that regulates normality and pathology (Walkerdine, 1996). As much as this is a wider social process, media representations tend to focus on the individual, so again it is individual behaviour and individual

characteristics that are approved or disapproved, normalised or pathologised (Lawler, 2004).

*3.2.3.3 Control & access*

When exploring the symbolic violence that occurs in popular media, questions of access and control need to be discussed. Who gets to speak and who is denied a voice? Walkerdine (1996:356) therefore rightly asks why it is that 'everything ever written about class is always targeting one class, (usually written by the other)'. Hence, she goes on to suggest that media portrayals of the working class tell us more about bourgeois fantasies of the working class than about actual working-class subjectivity. The working class rarely get to choose the settings, topics and contexts in which they are expected to position themselves (Reay, 1998). The media sphere mirrors the power distribution in the wider social world by granting privileged access to those already in a position of (relative) power (Couldry, 2012). Accordingly, working-class people are vastly underrepresented in the media industry and, because of that, the production of representations of working class culture usually do not happen in conditions of their protagonists' choosing (Skeggs, 2004).

Therefore, working-class people tend not to be in control, but rather the object of classed representations.[20] The editing as well as the specific context, in which Reality TV participants are asked to perform, is beyond their control (Skeggs and Wood, 2012b).[21]

Bourdieu (as cited in Couldry, 2003:15) argues that the increasingly open access to television is offset by what he calls 'a powerful censorship, a loss of independence linked to the conditions imposed on those who speak on television'. Modes of ownerships, outside influences as well as the working conditions in the media field

[20] Tyler (2012) for instance illustrates the lack of control of participants of a particular Reality TV programme have over the editorial process.

[21] Empirical findings in both of the aforementioned studies confirm that participants felt controlled and instrumentalised during the filming and not happy with the aired programmes. Furthermore, and that might well be the most significant aspect, they felt that they were not in a position to enforce their objections.

shape its output. Bourdieu substantiates these claims with empirical examples from the French media industry. I will expand on the above listed axiomatic assumptions and discuss whether they translate into the contemporary British context in chapter six of this thesis.

I would argue that the, in class terms, massively skewed composition of people working in the media field goes a long way to explain its prevailing class bias. Middle-class norms may to a large extent be the yardstick everything and everyone is measured against, mainly due to middle-class writers, producers etc. never having experienced anything else and hence taking them for granted. As I have alluded to earlier, there are indications that common narratives that portray society in a stereotypical way are repeated due to a lack of originality or complacency and possibly less due to an intentional political project to vilify the working class. Problematic in this context is, however, the lack of a powerful and influential counter discourse that offers a different (class) perspective. This, at this point somewhat speculative, assumption will be further discussed and substantiated in chapter six.

#### *3.2.3.4 Exploitation*

Being vastly underrepresented behind the scenes and being rarely in positions of influence, does not mean that the working class is absent from the television screens. To the contrary, as I have mentioned earlier, whole subgenres of Reality TV almost exclusively feature working-class people. Working-class subjects are therefore, arguably in a rather limited and limiting context, very much present and integral part of the shared cultural imagination (Haylett, 2003).[22] Working-class characters are utilised to speak emotions in a way that would not be plausible for characters guided by the restraint of middles-class norms (Skeggs, 2004). The portrayal of the working class in popular media therefore does not only serve to validate and mark-off the middle-class, but also to entertain.

[22] It is also probably no coincidence that the longest running and most popular British soap operas are set in working-class areas.

This entertainment aspect can of course be seen critically, in particular if the lack of control of the portrayed subjects is taken into account. Reality based entertainment programmes have to face up to the charge of exploiting their subjects. Walkerdine (2012:229) states that 'reality television works on emotion, affect and intimacy' and one could add that this happens on both sides of the screen as emotional reactions are provoked from the participants and the viewers alike. As discussed before, in Reality TV programmes social problems tend to be individualised and treated as predominantly matters of (individual) education and culture and presented as emotionally charged game-like challenges (Couldry, 2012). At the heart of those Reality TV narratives is often the, supposedly evident and hence unquestioned, need for self-betterment.

Popular class representations recreate class narratives and exploit (staged) conflicts that arise due to differences in terms of cultural capitals (Wood and Skeggs, 2004). Class conflicts offer easy, convenient and predictable narratives. A host of reality based TV programmes is based on these conflicts. Again, middle-class values are the unspoken norm participants have to aspire to. Class differences frame normative challenges that put participants of Reality TV shows or chat shows on the spot by offering (morally charged) choices and the opportunity to redeem themselves (Wood and Skeggs, 2004). Making the right choices, of course an individual, psychological process, offers a way to transcend one's actual class position.

It could be argued that reality-based TV genres have to some extent opened up and democratised access to means of mass communication. As the discussed pieces of research confirm, there is however plenty of evidence that suggests that this access is a rather limited one and that working-class subjects generally are only granted access to discourses and in conditions not of their own choosing. There is generally little to no debate over the authority and validity of middle-class norms. This lack of openness (both in terms of access and discourse) renders many representations of the working class in popular media exploitative.

## 3.3 Conclusion

Bourdieu is very clear that symbolic violence and power are closely linked to non-symbolic, actual violence and power. Symbolic struggles are fought over the legitimacy of power structures and their means of enforcement.

As the pieces of research discussed here indicate, media representations of social class pick up common stereotypes and only rarely aim to challenge them. According to Bourdieu, the reasons for these unimaginative narratives are rooted in specific mechanisms of the media industry. Repeating 'received ideas' (Bourdieu cited in Couldry, 2003:29) makes programmes accessible as viewers roughly know what to expect. Furthermore, programmes that follow tried and tested paths are faster, easier and cheaper to produce and therefore suit the high pressure of the production process very well. Unsurprisingly, Bourdieu (as cited in Couldry, 2003:29), is very critical of programmes that just repeat clichés about the social world: 'The exchange of commonplaces is communication with no content other than the fact of communication itself'. Media output becomes an end in itself – airwaves need to be filled.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu does not conclude that media output is a benign, ultimately self-serving enterprise. As much as he aims to analyse how specific (working) conditions and economic pressures shape media production, as much is he interested in their effects – intended and non-intended. The above discussed imperative of mainstream televisions programmes to dumb down the discourse of complex social issues, leads to superficial analyses and judgements:

> Our news anchors, our talk show hosts, and our sport announcers have turned into two-bit spiritual guides, representatives of middle-class morality (Bourdieu cited in Couldry, 2003:46).

Moreover, Bourdieu is critical of the tendency to individualise social issues as this depoliticises a discourse that needs to take place not (only) on an individual, but on a more global, social and political level.

The ideological effect of classed representation is first and foremost that they produce normativity and moral value. They legitimise one class position and vilify the other. The discourse of class itself is challenged by individualising narratives that portray class as nothing but an individual responsibility. Class becomes a label and a means of social regulation (Walkerdine, 2003). As several of the discussed empirical examples confirm, representations of class assign roles. With regards to Reality TV, these are often the roles of the judge and the judged (Couldry, 2012). This attribution of power and value might not necessarily follow a political agenda, but, as the discussed analyses suggest, has the ideological outcome of reinforcing social divisions and hierarchies. Symbolic struggles can become institutionalised through policy. Popular media discourses inform political discourse and, in some cases, policy making. Of course, this relationship is reciprocal and rather complex, but, from a Bourdieusian point of view, symbolic struggles, most powerfully fought out in the media field, are of significance in the political process.

Bourdieu (1977) is rather sceptical about the idea of an overarching ideological apparatus that directly controls the media sphere and, similar to Althusser (2001), he grants the relating institutions a degree of independence. Bourdieu regards ideology as working in a rather indirect way. Ideological beliefs that are best suited to the interest of the dominant class are not conveyed as purposeful political indoctrination, but more as the implicit 'practical justification of the established order' (Bourdieu, 1977:188). So it is not only necessary to understand what 'legitimating discourses' are about, but also to problematise the corresponding 'complicitous silence' (Bourdieu, 1977:188). I would argue that the above discussed media products can be seen as practical justification of hierarchies largely by repeating as opposed to challenging them. The established order is reaffirmed by mirroring societal power distributions. Furthermore, I would argue that hierarchies find their expression not just in the content, but are also reflected in the production process of Reality TV programmes. I intend to explore this matter empirically in the analysis of my chosen example.

A number of authors point to the possibility of resistance and Bourdieu acknowledges that no domination or form of control can be complete. People can refuse the labels they are assigned (Skeggs, 1997a). This, of course, does not necessarily challenge

underlying power structures, but members of all classes can refuse (aspects of) classed identity formation. With regards to media consumption, there is evidence that viewers do not automatically take up the suggested middle-class gaze (Skeggs and Wood, 2012b) and at times even identify with the vilified (Tyler, 2012). Bourdieu (1977:170) argues that in times of crises, doxa tends to be challenged. Crises disrupt the taken-for-granted, the fit between everyday order and 'the language of order'. The limits of critique are set by the objective conditions and therefore political, economic or social upheavals broaden the scope and the possibilities of critical discourse. However, Bourdieu is, unsurprisingly perhaps, not overly optimistic about the possibility of social change and points out that crisis is a necessary precondition for the disruption of doxic beliefs, but not in itself a sufficient condition for the emergence of critical discourse, let alone (large-scale) social change (Bourdieu, 1977).

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, my aim was not to conduct a comprehensive literature review, but to produce an overview that points to the most pertinent challenges a Bourdieusian analysis of contemporary representation of social class poses. Doxa appears as a very useful theoretical tool to analyse the content of classed representations and to critically discuss their ideological and stereotypical nature. What this literature however clearly indicates is, that an analysis of the content of media representations needs to be framed not only with regards to a theoretical concept, but also in terms of specific cultural and political circumstances. It needs to be taken into account under what conditions representations of social class are produced and consumed. Therefore, I intend to discuss the working conditions in the media field, the requirements of the specific genre (chapter six) as well as ways in which the programme is made sense of (chapter five). The normative dimension of symbolic struggles will be explored in the context of their production and consumption.

# 4. Methodology

In this chapter, I intend to set out my methodological approach. I will explain which methods I intend to use for my empirical research and how these methods relate to the theoretical foundations of my research. I will particularly focus on potential frictions and inconsistencies to discuss whether it is possible to combine qualitative interviews with Critical Discourse Analysis and, crucially, if these methods fit into a Bourdieusian framework. I will address these issues on a theoretical as well as on a practical level and also with regard to ethical considerations. These will be followed by an assessment as to what extent it was possible to put these ambitions into practice. So subchapters 4.1 – 4.4 discuss the used methods on a more theoretical level, whereas in subchapter 4.5 their practical realisation will be discussed. The former subchapters were indeed written before the data collection was conducted and subchapter 4.5 after it was completed (hence the switch from present and future tense to past tense).

## 4.1 Discourse and ideology

To begin with, I want to discuss the relationship of ideological superstructures and their discursive manifestations. As shown in chapter two, ideology is a key element of the theories that form the theoretical foundation of this research. Both Marxists and Bourdieusians regard ideology as a central mechanism in the capitalist reproduction system and as a part of the class struggle. Gramsci (Gramsci et al., 1971) and Althusser (2001) refine this assumption as they aim to theorise how ideological principles translate into social and political practice. Bourdieu furthers these considerations with the analysis of struggles that take place on a symbolic level, but are crucial for the reproduction of systems of power (see chapter two, three and six).

Whereas ideology clearly is at the core of the theories that underpin my research, 'discourse' is not explained explicitly by them. I would argue that the content of public discourses cannot simply be derived from assumptions about ideology and that it is therefore necessary to discuss the relationship between ideology and discourse. Althusser (2001) and Gramsci (Gramsci et al., 1971) show that the superstructure

does not simply define the ruling ideas of an epoch, and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic struggles suggest a more complex relationship between economic as well as political power and ideological outcomes. Accordingly, I would argue, it would be problematic to assume that a prevailing ideology (however that might be grasped) automatically produces certain discursive manifestations.

MacDonald (2003) asks whether ideology is still a concept that can be applied to contemporary social formations and to today's media in particular. The postmodern critique that suggests that we now live in post-ideological times is in my opinion clearly contradicted by the economic and political developments of the last decade (see sub chapter 2.5). However, the objection that ideology is too broad and too rigid a concept (MacDonald, 2003) to deal with today's fragmented media landscape and, supposedly, individualised consumption has to be taken seriously. It appears that the analysis of *individual* discourses can be more adequate and fruitful as it becomes arguably more and more problematic to identify and locate the overarching ideological influence of political actors, not least because of the sheer number of channels of communication. This development is clearly amplified by the possibilities of lay persons to broadcast to potentially huge audiences that is being realised by recent technological developments. To suggest a great degree of state control or ideological influence of specific players, appears in this context increasingly more farfetched.

I would however argue that ideology in a Marxist and also in a Bourdieusian sense has always been dealt with in a less formalistic and more complex way than the critique alluded to above implies. Althusser, for instance, regarded the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), other than the name suggests maybe, not as a monolithic entity that is directly shaped by state control. The ISAs are not unified by active interventions, but by their ideological function. Also Bourdieu's concept of doxa does not regard ideological influence as intentional manipulation by those in positions of power (see subchapter 3.2.1). Similar to Althusser, he regards doxic beliefs as ideological, but as generally contested and therefore as a field of struggle. Those actors in positions of power, and the state is certainly one of them, are in a privileged position regarding the symbolic battles over the authoritative interpretations of the social world. However, ideology in a Bourdieusian sense, also has a strong

unconscious element. As I have already discussed, the ‘taken-for-granted’ or the ‘common sense’ element is central to Bourdieu's understanding of ideology. Therefore, I would argue, ideology and discourse should not be pitted against each other. Ideology informs discourse in a very subtle manner. Terry Eagleton, apparently agreeing with Bourdieu, states that ideology is often not recognised as such, exactly because it entails what is commonly regarded as self-evident truths (MacDonald, 2003). So ideological beliefs necessarily inform socially and politically relevant discourses and at the same time those discourses reinforces ideology.

The analysis of discourse needs to be related to ideological frameworks. As Fairclough (2001) points out, there is an order of discourse and it is necessary to distinguish mainstream discourses from alternative or marginal discourses. Relating discourses to wider ideological questions can help to analyse how the order of discourses is connected to the social order of a society. Furthermore, discourses have an ideological function insofar as they help to uphold specific relations of domination and suppression (Fairclough, 2001).

Finally, I would argue that ideology cannot be reduced to discourse and therefore Discourse Analysis needs to be supplemented by considerations about ideology. MacDonald (2003:28) argues that ideology as a concept is helpful in order to locate discourses with regards to power:

> Without the ability to relate discourse to ideology ... the relative position of discourse in the spectrum of powerfulness cannot be analysed.

Bourdieu, clearly concerned with questions of ideology, is rather reluctant to use the term ideology as he is of the opinion that ideology as a concept is too vague (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992). I would argue that Bourdieu's concept of doxa comes close to what Marxism describes as ‘false consciousness’ or ideology. However, a relevant distinction has to be made: Bourdieu regards ideological or doxic effects not as primarily working on the level of consciousness, but on the level of practice (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992). This is probably not too surprising since Bourdieu's ambition was to formulate a theory of practice, and also, for instance, habitus, another of his key concepts, is to be understood not only as an intellectual, but as an embodied

concept (see sub-chapters 2.4.2 & 3.2.1). I will discuss later whether this is mainly a terminological issue or indication of a disagreement between Bourdieu and those who strive to locate Discourse Analysis within the broader framework of ideology.

To summarise, the analysis of discourse and considerations regarding ideology operate on different levels and therefore should not be pitted against one another. On the contrary, they are complementary insofar as critique focussing on ideology can help to frame and to locate the analysis of discourse, whereas Discourse Analysis can address the question of how wider ideological principles translate into (political, journalistic, social etc.) practice. Ideology is a framework necessary to understand the power structures that inform discourses. However, this mechanism is, and Marxist critique has always been aware of this, hugely complex, contested and contradictory. In the following, I aim to discuss how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) deals with these complexities and more specifically how I intend to use CDA for my empirical research.

## 4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Wodak (2001:10), CDA aims to 'demystify discourses by deciphering ideology'. She regards the establishment and the reproduction of inequalities as the main function of ideology. Accordingly, discourses are ideological inasmuch as they contribute to sustain an established social and political order that is based on inequality. Ideological discourses are deceptive with regards to agents' interests in a hierarchically structured society. By analysing underlying interests, CDA aims to locate discourses.

One of the central critical features of CDA is therefore the interest in the interconnectedness of discourse and social structures. For Fairclough (2001), discourses are diverse representations of social life. As such, they are necessarily located according to the social actor's position. CDA acknowledges that these positions are principally not equal and that the validity or currency of a specific discourse is related to the actor's position in a hierarchical order. Therefore, the social order shapes the order of discourse. Powerful positions in the social order tend to

result in a greater degree of discursive power. However, it is important to register that this relationship is not deterministic (Wodak, 2001). As much as discourse is historically produced, structured by ideology and power, it still cannot only be explained by social structures alone. Not least, and this will further be discussed later, because there is always the potential for resistance. CDA is interested in where and how power structures shape discourse, but it generally acknowledges that this is a complex process and one that is certainly not free from contradictions.[23]

Social power is enacted as well as resisted in texts. CDA comprehends discourse as an instrument of power, in the sense that dominant discourses powerfully influence the construction of reality (Wodak, 2001). The struggle over the validity of specific discourses is the struggle over the interpretation of the world and is therefore of great significance. According to van Djik (2001), the control over influential discourses is a power resource in itself. He is of the opinion that one of the most basic questions that CDA has to ask is how powerful groups control public discourses and hence exert power over other social groups.[24]

Access to and control over public discourses is regarded as a crucial area of analysis for most proponents of CDA. Access is to be understood as twofold: access to channels of information in terms of consumption, on the one side, and access to, and influence over, the production of discourses on the other side. CDA largely focuses on the latter. For van Dijk (2001), special attention has to be given to influential discourses, which are those discourses that are most closely connected to the execution of power, namely the political and scientific discourse, as well as overarching media discourses. Control has, in that respect, to be understood not so much in a very direct sense. The proponents of CDA do not assume that specific

[23] For example, dominance in discursive terms does not work on suppression alone. Alternative discourses regularly enter the mainstream and as Wodak (2001:35) points out with reference to Foucault: 'Dominant discourses disarm their opponents by taking on board surface aspects of their formulation without making genuine concessions to alternative ways of thinking.'

[24] Van Dijk (2001) points out that discursive power is not absolute and that not all members of a dominant group necessarily are in a more powerful position than all members of a less powerful group. He insists however that, among other factors, because of huge differentials in terms of access to influential discourses, the social power structure of a society is played out in the arena of public discourse.

discourses are (or even can be) determined by a group of individuals, but argue that certain groups of people are in a privileged position when it comes to influencing what enters socially and politically relevant discourses in the first place. This agenda setting power is as difficult to grasp as it is potent. Elites, organised around 'centres of power' (van Dijk, 1996:84) like law, politics, media etc. are in a position to put topics on the agenda that suit their interest. This stands, according to van Dijk (1996), in stark contrast to the influence ethnic minority groups for instance can exert. Their specific issues tend to get less coverage and minority speakers tend to get quoted less. Van Dijk (1996) makes the useful distinction between having passive access, as a topic, and being in a position of control regarding one's representation. Access as a topic is probably already stretching the meaning of the word 'access' to some degree as it could be argued that representations over which individuals have little control makes them objects rather than the subjects of representations.[25] Therefore, I would argue, it is necessary to take into consideration members of which communities / classes gain active access and positions of control in the media sphere.

The mechanisms through which elites control discourses are not limited to the regulation of access and the according control over what people regard as relevant. Also the 'communicative events' (van Dijk, 1996:88) themselves are regulated by a set of rules that appear to confirm existing power structures. The specific role allocation in discourses matter greatly as roles reflect social power. Media discourses tend to assign roles in accordance with social status. The empirical part of this research will discuss this issue with regards to a specific example. Overalll, CDA claims that societal power structures not only regulate access, by doing so they become reinforced and institutionalised (van Dijk, 1996).

Discourse therefore reproduces social power. Privileged access to powerful fields of discourse functions as a means of control. It gives, van Dijk (2001) argues, powerful groups the capability to control other, subordinate social groups. As I have already alluded to, this linkage is not one free from contradictions and frictions, and neither

[25] Van Dijk's (1996) empirically analyses patters of access with regards to immigrants and the Muslim population of the UK. My research intends to explore to what extent similar patterns emerge if access is analysed in connection with social class (acknowledging that class and ethnicity intersect to some extent).

does CDA argue that 'the elite' is in absolute control over all relevant spheres of discourse and public life. What CDA states as one of its key premises, however, is that access to and control over discourses and the media field in particular is not distributed evenly and that it would be very naïve to assume open and democratic access for all members of society. Societal power differentials crucially shape discourses and most significantly those discourses that help to reinforce and reproduce power structures.

## 4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis and Bourdieu

In the following, I will discuss the commonalities as well as the frictions between CDA and Bourdieu's theory of power and media power in particular. I intend to come to a conclusion as to whether CDA is a suitable method within a Bourdieusian framework. On a surface level, there are, of course, a number of obvious commonalities that suggest that CDA is a method well suited for an analysis along Bourdieusian lines. A closer look however reveals a number of discrepancies and even open disagreement between Bourdieu and the discourse analytical method. I intend to discuss the commonalities as well as the disagreements and aim to assess the significance of the frictions.

### 4.3.1 Commonalities

On a basic level, the most obvious commonality between CDA and Bourdieu is an interest in power and the premise that there is a hierarchical order that structures social life in numerous aspects. I would argue that this general commonality can be further developed in three main research interests of CDA.

Firstly, the above-discussed agenda setting power can certainly be related to Bourdieu's idea of distinguishable, but nevertheless related forms of capital. Economic capital tends to be transferable into social and cultural capital. This model is, in my opinion, very suitable to grasp how economic inequalities influence other, non-economic spheres and, more specifically, this Bourdieusian concept can inform

an analysis of the mechanisms that translate economic power into wider influence. Both, social and cultural capital play a role in explaining the influence privileged social groups can exert. Cultural capital relates, for instance, to van Dijk's (van Dijk, 1996) discussion of the regulation of communicative events. Specific types of knowledge become validated through discourses or are even a prerequisite to participate in them. The idea of social capital as an expression as well as self-reinforcing consequence of economic capital can, in my opinion, add to the analysis of power in a discourse analytical sense. CDA is interested in the processes of accumulation of power. Social capital can, to some extent, help to explain how power in one field, the political field for example, can be translated into another field, like the media. It would certainly be short-sighted to reduce this linkage to personal relationships, but within a wider political framework it can be a useful addition to the critical analysis of power structures. Both Bourdieusian analysis and CDA regard power as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that has to be analysed on several, interconnected levels. In that respect, I would see both approaches as compatible or even complementary.

Another relatively obvious parallel between Bourdieusian theory and CDA is the assumption that in capitalist democracies power appears to be perceived as natural. Van Dijk (2001:355) speaks of the 'taken-for-granted actions of everyday life' in which power is enacted. Power is not only integrated into laws and rules, but also into consciousness and into praxis. The commonalities with Bourdieu's approach are clear. Bourdieu is also interested in the 'taken-for-granted' that informs the habitus on a cognitive as well as on a unconscious and practical level. CDA and Bourdieu agree that open resistance to oppression is complicated by the fact that inequalities and power differentials are often not perceived as such. Media representations help to sustain an image of the social world that depicts inequalities as generally justified. However, and this will be discussed in more detail shortly, both approaches are generally mindful not to exaggerate the influence of media representations. In particular in the habitus concept, media influence is regarded as one of a number of fields that are relevant for the concealment and reproduction of power.

One final, closely related, parallel between Bourdieu's approach and CDA is the interest in the discursive mechanisms that legitimise existing power relations. By their naturalisiation, power relations become opaque and potentially critical

discourses are foreclosed. The interests, be it of a political and/or material nature, of those who benefit from the specific power distribution are concealed (Swartz, 1997). The misrecognition of power constitutes symbolic violence in a Bourdieusian sense (see sub-chapter 2.4.4). CDA, as already alluded to, is interested in how power relations inform discourse, or more specifically, how for instance inequality is expressed and legitimised though language (Wodak, 2001). Both approaches therefore see power as legitimised in a rather indirect and non-transparent way.

### 4.3.2 Differences

I will now turn to frictions, differences and disagreements between CDA's and Bourdieu's understanding of matters relevant to this research. This is necessary to assess whether CDA can be applied in this research in a meaningful way.

#### *4.3.2.1 Language*

One of the more salient disagreements between Bourdieu and CDA revolves around the function and the character of language. I will discuss this in greater detail, as I regard this tension as very illuminating and very relevant in the sense that fundamental disagreement regarding the function and the character of language would render CDA unemployable within a Bourdieusian framework. Applying CDA in a piece of research that focuses on media representations and largely follows Bourdieusian social theory requires, I would argue, a shared understanding of language.

One main criticism that some proponents of CDA level at Bourdieu is that he overemphasises structural aspects and as a result loses the meaning aspect of language (Myles, 2010). Bourdieu is interested in language mainly in practical terms and in particular in how social inequalities are expressed in and reinforced by language. CDA, is also concerned with social and structural aspects, but grants language a greater degree of autonomy and sees the relationship between social realities and language as a more reciprocal one, rather than language ‘always being

secondary' (Myles, 2010:34) to social relations. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2000) argue that language can be constitutive of social relations. They therefore refer to (yet) another form of capital, the 'linguistic capital' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2000:401) which is instrumental even beyond discursive struggles. Language, according to this view, can powerfully shape social relations and is not just an expression of them.[26]

According to this view, Bourdieu underestimates the autonomy and also the force of language. Lovell (2003:3) claims that Bourdieu 'reduces the power of words to the power of social institutions'. According to Lovell (2003), words can have impact, irrespective of the social position of the speaker.[27] Bourdieu's understanding of the character of language stands in sharp contrast to the views outlined above. For him, langue is an instrument of symbolic social power. He is mainly interested in language on a practical level and in particular 'in the social conditions of the production of utterances' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992:111). Language is, on a very fundamental level, shaped by the social structure and is therefore by no means a set of neutral signifiers (Grenfell, 2013). For Bourdieu, a critical analysis of discourse needs to go beyond the text itself and look at the authority that legitimises discourse (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992). Accordingly, Bourdieu is rather sceptical with regards to the autonomy of language and sees power as not inherent in language, but in social structures. Standardisation is crucial in that respect. The arbitrary fixation of a specific language variant as the authoritative and legitimate one echoes structures of domination (Hanks, 2005). But also, and maybe more importantly, the access to those standard variants is regulated through education and non-standard variants continue

[26] 'In focussing on symbolic struggles as struggles for *access* to legitimated capital ... Bourdieu essentially plays down the crucial issue that linguistic capital *per se* (emphases in original), in the form of discourse as representations of social processes and relations, is part of the struggle for the constitution and classification of social (field) relations'. (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2000:401).

[27] Butler agrees with this view, as for her language is constitutive of the body and shapes the individual's ability to be reflexive and hence to take part in discourses. She stretches this argument even further, possibly beyond what most proponents of CDA would go along with, by stating that class, race and gender are products of 'naming' (Myles, 2010:40).

to be suppressed. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:49) therefore speaks of a 'hierarchy of linguistic practices'.[28]

As mentioned, Grenfell (2013) does not regard language as set of neutral signifiers. Words always imply a relationship, namely the relationship between social agents and their environment. Arguing along Bourdieusian lines, this assumption goes beyond the observation that communication necessarily has a (social) context. Language is shaped by social structures and hierarchies on a very fundamental level. Grenfell (2013) agrees that meaning is always contested, but states that it gravitates towards the dominant. Power structures inform discourse; the social use of language reproduces a system of social differences (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991).

Also, Lawler (2013) is rather critical about the emancipatory potential of language. For her, language has no agency on its own and it would therefore be problematic to remove language from the user. All language is used and reproduced by embodied social actors. Lawler (2013) does not deny the possibility of language use to escape its constraints, but she asks to what extent this happens in real life. Are the effects of inequality alleviated and undone through language or does language in reality tend to 'instantiate exclusion' as it 'marks out users as knowing or unknowing, worthy or unworthy' (Lawler, 2013:276)? Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:55) points out that speakers lacking the required linguistic competence are 'de facto' excluded from certain social domains. Following this argument and Bourdieu's rather practical understanding of language, Lawler (2013) makes the important differentiation between speaking and being heard. Social actors have widely differing potentials to make their voices heard. And even if social actors succeed in making their voices heard, it is to a great degree their respective social position that lends (or denies) their arguments authority. Again, language use must not be seen in isolation, but with reference to the social actor who speaks and therefore as closely linked to wider social structures and practices.

[28] Hanks (2005:76) puts this concisely and also refers to the unconscious, doxic nature of this process: 'Standardization and legitimation sanction certain ways of speaking, rewarding some while silencing others. The effect is to intimidate and censor speech without any discrete acts of intimidation and censoring. ... the sanctions of the field become part of linguistic practice itself, not external conditions but internal elements.'

Finally, Bourdieu (1984a:113) warns against

> …the mistake of inventing as many explanatory systems as there are fields, instead of seeing each of them as a transformed form of all the others.

Accordingly, linguistic capital must be seen as an expression of and in connection with cultural capital which is in turn an element in a net of social and economic relations.

Despite some salient, and maybe at times over-pronounced, differences, I would argue that Bourdieu's understanding of language is not *fundamentally* incompatible with CDA. I believe this can be illustrated with reference to the aforementioned linguistic capital. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2000), for instance, borrow a Boudieusian concept, emphasise its significance, but appear to neglect its place in Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital. I would argue that linguistic capital clearly has to be regarded as a sub-category of cultural capital. As with all other forms of capital, the relationship to economic capital is not a deterministic one, but neither can it be ignored. Hence, as much as some proponents of CDA would like to see language as relatively independent and potentially emancipatory, the unequal distribution of linguistic capital plays its role in the reproduction of inequalities. As discussed above, grammar, like other forms of cultural knowledge and expertise, arbitrarily defines certain forms as legitimate and worthy and therefore functions as a tool of exclusion.

What is needed to further explore this nexus is a 'duality of focus' (Fairclough, 1998:143). Fairclough suggests that, to reconcile CDA and Bourdieusian theory, Discourse Analysis should not restrict itself to the analysis of communicative events by taking the order of discourse into consideration. By order of discourse he means the enduring and overarching structure of political discourses. However, the order of discourse is not defined by the political field alone. Discursive practice therefore should, according to Fairclough (1998:143), be 'properly integrated with other forms of social analysis'. Discourse Analysis needs to locate communicative events in social practice. Kögler (2013:303), in a similar vein, suggests that a 'conceptual mediation between the power-expressive and the power-transcending dimensions of communicative practice' is needed. He acknowledges the criticism that Bourdieu over-emphasises the former, but points out that every inter-subjective encounter

reflects wider (social and political) power relations. Parker (2005) offers a similar view that can be seen as bridging the differences between Bourdieu and CDA. For him, language does not only describe, but helps to keep 'dominant forms of cultural identity' (Parker, 2005:90) in place by the ways in which the dominant categories are repeated. Discourse is, for Parker (2005), the organisation of language into bonds that include and exclude and function ideologically by presenting 'an oppressive version of the world ... which shows no way out' (Parker, 2005:90). The challenge for Discourse Analysis therefore has to be to analyse how forms of language organise certain bonds.

In my opinion, these considerations and suggestions indicate that it is possible to reconcile Bourdieu's theory of language with the views of the proponents of CDA. The differences appear to be of a gradual rather than fundamental nature. The question as to what degree language can be seen as independent of societal power structures and, therefore, be a transformative force, should not be brushed under the carpet, but I would argue that there are vast commonalities that make the described attempts to bring CDA and Bourdieusian theory together look very feasible. As described above, the shared aim to deconstruct ideology and the interest in the interconnectedness of discourse and social structures is a very significant common ground and I would argue that CDA is well equipped to meet the aforementioned 'demands' of Fairclough (1998), Kögler (2013) and Parker (2005). In my opinion, the differences regarding the character and function of language between Bourdieu and CDA have to be taken seriously and therefore have to be addressed, but for the purpose of this thesis, do not render the two approaches incompatible.

#### *4.3.2.2 Agency*

A further, yet related, point of disagreement between Bourdieu and proponents of CDA revolves around the question of individual agency. Again, Bourdieu is accused of adopting a position that is too much focussed on structure, ignoring degrees of freedom. More specifically, it can be asked whether Bourdieu is too preoccupied with the authoritative effect of hierarchies and systemic relations to acknowledge the

potential for social change or to be able to address individual responsibility (Couldry, 2005).

According to Myles (2010), Bourdieu has come under attack from Critical Discourse Analysts (among others) as he is perceived to put an unreasonable emphasis on social structure and its reproduction and consequently ignores potential and actual social change. MacDonald (2003:21), with no direct reference to Bourdieu though, points to the according problematic implications in the media field as 'vagueness about agency does … prevent clarity about responsibility'. Responsibility, according to this view, generally lies with the producer as well as the consumer of media products. If Bourdieu indeed did not account for the possibility of individual agency, this would fundamentally put (conventional) media critique into question. MacDonald (2003) adds to this by referring to Eagleton's objection that theorists claiming that subjects are passively positioned by discourse can somehow escape this positioning themselves and formulate their critique.

It does appear that there are tangible reasons to assume that Bourdieu sees individual agency as severely limited. For instance, Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:144) is of the opinion that reality 'resides in structures that are transcendent to the interaction they inform'. It unquestionably curtails any potential agency if reality is principally impenetrable by the individual. In 'Distinctions' (1984a:461) Bourdieu underlines this view by stating that 'the dominated … are at the mercy of the discourses that are presented to them'. Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that interpersonal relationships are never individual-to-individual relationships even if they appear to be so. Seemingly individual action and interaction is always informed and shaped by objective structures. Again, this does not suggest a great belief in personal agency and Bourdieu is explicitly critical of scientific methods like ethnomethodology which he perceives to rely too heavily on the characteristics of interactions and situations at the expense of structural considerations (Myles, 2010). Finally, Bourdieu is rather circumspect when it comes to the possibilities of resistance. Ideology for Bourdieu is not be understood as predominantly intellectual manipulation, but as functioning on a subconscious and bodily level. Resisting power structures and inequality therefore is all the more difficult as these are not only misrepresented as natural and just, but also, crucially,

not predominantly dealt with on an intellectual, and therefore principally accessible, level.

> In fact, I think that in terms of symbolic domination, resistance is more difficult, since it is something you absorb like air, something you don't feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992:115).

However, I would argue that a more thorough analysis reveals that Bourdieu is not as pessimistic about human agency as the above suggests. First of all, as Couldry (2005) points out, Bourdieu acknowledges the complexity of human existence and does not suggest a simplistic model of cause and effect. Human agency is in his view certainly influenced by objective structures, but not in a simplistic or deterministic way. As much as he regards economic capital as a significant factor, Bourdieu distinguishes a multitude of different competing (yet interrelated) fields. Those fields have varying degrees of freedom and autonomy as well as distance or proximity to the economic field. Individual action can therefore only be understood as shaped by a number of different, potentially contradictory, structural positions. Furthermore, Bourdieu 'rejects any abstract notion as social structure as a determining force in itself' (Couldry, 2005:356) as social structure is reproduced or contested by individual action.[29] For the objective of this research, it is relevant to point out that this is particularly true for human communication. As discussed above, Bourdieu sees the linguistic field as semi-autonomous and therefore neither fully determined by social nor political structures. Hence, Bourdieu argues that it is possible for the individual to break with doxic beliefs and to recognise the arbitrariness of symbolic power (Myles, 2010).

Without doubt, Bourdieu is very interested in structuring principles and therefore critical of concepts and methods that suggest a great degree of individual agency. However, a closer examination of the concept of habitus shows a rather complex understanding of agency that does account for the possibility of social change.

[29] As discussed with reference to the habitus concept, the link between position and disposition is a strong one and therefore can rightly be seen as an explanation for the relative stability of social structures, but Bourdieu is quite clear about his ambition to move on from objectivism.

Habitus links structure and agency. Through the habitus, agency is always related to structure, but, importantly, in a reciprocal way which means that individuals and collectives have the ability to transcend and transform the social conditions under which their habitus was formed.[30]

It is understandable that critics argue that Bourdieu is overly pessimistic with regard to agency, and indeed his social theory seems better suited to explain the relative stability of social and political circumstances than the possibilities of social change, but it is also clear that Bourdieu does regard change as inevitable and is interested in its preconditions.

Therefore, I would argue, a Bourdieusian framework by no means contradicts the endeavour of CDA to critically analyse the reciprocal interconnectedness of discourse and social structure. Theory that regards this relationship as mechanistic or deterministic, would render this question almost meaningless. However, Bourdieu sees the media field as partly autonomous and sees agency on the side of the producer as well as the consumer. Therefore, CDA's main research interest is highly relevant from a Bourdieusian point of view.

#### *4.3.2.3 The role of the media*

Bourdieu's media critique appears greatly influenced by Weberian thoughts and is hence strongly focused on specific conditions of production (see chapter six). The internal relations and the structural patterns within this semi-autonomous field are of great relevance to Bourdieu. Media production is largely shaped by the internal logic of the media field (Bourdieu, 1998). This is very much in line with the above described reluctance of Bourdieu to assume rather general ideological effects within

[30] Kögler (2013:304) sums this nexus up as follows: 'In other words, while habitus "reflects" the objectivity - and, thus, power - of a social setting quasi as a placeholder in the agent, the agent activates, and thereby also adjusts, transforms, interprets and redefines the habitus in light of the situation. The habitus equips every agent with a socially structured pre-understanding of the situation, but the situation also forces the agent to make a specific use of the habitus, to employ and re-employ the resources given and acquired by previous endless encounters with social reality that formed a habitus in the first place.'

capitalist societies. Furthermore, Bourdieu seems to regard the media field as of surprisingly little significance and accordingly, media analysis is relatively scarce in his oeuvre. From a methodological point of view, there is little guidance as Bourdieu's media analysis is not characterised by his usual empirical diligence (Benson and Neveu, 2005). Bourdieu (1998) gives weight to the fact that the media field is limited both by internal and external factors. Media production largely has to follow market imperatives and therefore generally has to construct its output in a populist fashion. However, outside forces also impact on the media field. Bourdieu sees the influence of advertisers as well as of political players as crucial in that respect.[31]

Several key proponents of CDA are critical of Bourdieu's media theory for a number of reasons. First of all, Couldry (2003) and MacDonald (2003), amongst others, criticise Bourdieu for being is too focused on the analysis of field forces. In their opinion, he exaggerates the significance of the field-specific logic of media production as well as the outside influence of the political and the economic field and underplays the actual power of the media field. Couldry (2003), for example, sees the media as absolutely key as to the formation of the habitus in modern societies. For him, symbolic power is to a great degree expressed through mass media and therefore does not just affect what people do, but also their ability to make sense of the world they live in. Couldry (2003) goes as far as to reverse the relationship between the media field and the political and economic sphere. Media power, he argues, is a 'trump card' (Myles, 2010:30) that works beyond the limits of the media sphere.

Another major point of critique follows from Bourdieu's appraisal of the media field as dependent on other fields. Fairclough (1998), for instance, points out that the media are a much more active player than Bourdieu's theory claims and, more specifically, television greatly contributes to the constitution of social realities. Media productions always create a vision of reality as opposed to just reflecting it. However, MacDonald (2003) is equally clear that Discourse Analysis should not fall for the temptation of exaggerating and isolating the role of the media. Assuming that media

[31] In his essay 'The Power of Journalism' Bourdieu (1998:68) is clear that his analysis is less interested in the alleged power of the media as the 'fourth estate', but in 'the *mechanisms* (emphasis in original) of a journalistic field increasingly subject to market demands (through readers and advertisers)'.

products merely reflect reality by transmitting information would be just as naïve as to assume that they were the sole discourse setter. Simplified models of discourse are not helpful in analysing the complex, reciprocal relationship between media discourse and public discourse. Fairclough (1998) therefore suggests to analyse media texts on the level of production, distribution and consumption and hence to take into consideration how social and cultural practice frame discourses.

To conclude, I would argue that there a very valid reasons to come to the conclusion that Bourdieu's media theory is rather patchy and hence can be supplemented both in terms of theoretical underpinning as well as methodology. In my opinion, Bourdieu's approach is still extremely valuable and an analysis of (economic and political) dependencies as well as of the internal logic of the media sphere can prove very beneficial. However, overly focussing on these relations might indeed risk underestimating the power and also the relative independence of the media field. Considerations regarding the interconnectedness of media, economy and politics, as well as the specific logic of the media field should be complemented with an analysis of the impact of media production that critically assesses how public discourse and media discourses are linked. CDA offers the methodological tools to do this by, as I will demonstrate, furthering and complementing Bourdieusian premises.

#### *4.3.2.4 'Internal analysis'?*

One final disagreement between CDA and Bourdieu that I regard as relevant in the context of this thesis revolves around the question whether CDA takes the social context of discourse sufficiently enough into consideration. Bourdieu is of the opinion that Discourse Analysis falls short in this department as expressed in the introduction to 'Language and Symbolic Violence' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:28-29):

> ... it would be superficial (at best) to try to analyse political discourse or ideologies by focusing on the utterances as such, without reference to the constitution of the political field and relation between this field and the broader space of social positions and processes. This kind of 'internal analysis' is commonplace in the academic literature, as exemplified by the numerous and varied attempts to apply some form of semiotics or 'discourse analysis' to political speeches. The difficulty with all such attempts is similar to the

> difficulty that vitiates all 'formalist' approaches to language: they take for granted but fail to take account of the social-historical conditions within which the object of analysis is produced, constructed and received.

Fairclough (1998:4) agrees that this sort of 'internal analysis' would be of limited value. However, it is certainly debateable whether Bourdieu's critique does justice to the methodology that is CDA. As discussed above, Fairclough (1998) recommends meeting Bourdieu's critique by locating discourse in fields of practice, but it appears that as far as CDA is concerned he might to some extent be preaching to the already converted. The main proponents of CDA agree that the analysis of the relationship between discourse and power is an indispensable part of the discourse analytical project. Considerations on the micro level (language), have to be complemented by studies of the macro level (social inequalities) (van Dijk, 2001). Despite not necessarily being a unitary theoretical framework (van Dijk, 2001) there seems to be consensus that CDA regards the link between text and society, between discourse and power as of fundamental importance. Wodak (2001) adds to this basic assumption that every discourse is historically produced but also analysed in a historic context.

So it appears that Bourdieu's critique is either missing the point, outdated or maybe never directed at that particular strand of Discourse Analysis in the first place. Discussing this would probably be a rather futile debate, but what makes Bourdieu's critique valuable, relevant and timely is to interpret it as a reminder, not least for this research, to take context seriously and to not just address it on a superficial level or pay lip-service to the rather obvious fact that discourse has to be analysed with regards to its specific context. CDA has to take its premises seriously and to make efforts to critically engage with the relationship of discourse and social, political, economic etc. contexts. Of course, this poses a huge challenge, particularly if one strives to address this nexus on the fundamental level that Bourdieu suggests. Nevertheless is it the intention of this piece of research to explore the contexts of the chosen empirical example in terms of production, consumption and in relation to wider political discourses.

### 4.3.3 Conclusion

As the conclusions of the respective sub-chapters already indicate, I would argue that CDA is by no means incompatible with Bourdieu's social theory. In general, I see the discussed differences as one of focus rather than fundamental disagreements. The most notable discrepancies revolve around questions of agency. CDA and Bourdieu clearly have a differing understanding of the degree of freedom and agency of language, of individual agency as well of the influence and independence of the media field. I do not intend to brush these disagreements under the carpet, but my intended rather pragmatic use of CDA as a methodological tool and Bourdieu's social theory as a theoretical framework can, in my opinion, work with these differences. In some respects, as demonstrated, the two approaches even seem complementary. Clearly, the vast commonalities and the shared interest in the reproduction of inequality, the interconnectedness of discourse and power etc. outweigh the discussed gradual differences. In this research, I intend to use the strengths of both approaches and I have shown that it is possible to do so without doing violence to either of them.

## 4.4 Practical considerations

In the following, I want to discuss methodology in more practical terms and also with specific reference to my research project.

### 4.4.1 Discourse Analysis

In this section I want to explore the potential and benefits as well as pitfalls of Critical Discourse Analysis on a more practical level. These reflections will be supplemented with considerations about Documentary Research and Case Study Research that are very relevant for the in-depth analysis of a single document like, in this case, a TV programme.

For May (2011), document research can help to uncover social power relations in a depth that quantitative empirical research might struggle to reach.[32] He also points to the fact that the perception of the audience of any text that is being researched might differ significantly from the researcher's perception. I regard these thoughts as helpful reminders not to commit similar mistakes by assuming that the audience or in fact the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) make sense of the programme in an identical way to myself. I therefore intend to be mindful of the complexity of the programme and the multitude of possible readings. More specifically, I should, for instance, not assume exploitation of the participants only because it would, on a superficial level at least, fit my theoretical assumptions. May (2011:200) regards documents not as neutral artefacts, but as expressions of social power and as 'attempts at persuasion'. As such, they might reflect the marginalisation of particular groups. This is exactly what this research sets out to explore and fits nicely with the methodological and theoretical issues discussed above. And finally, May (2011) points to the interconnectedness of the social world and discourse by stating the need to analyse how texts seek to assert power over the social world. Of course, this is a hugely ambitious research aim and I expect to be able to address this question in a rather preliminary and possibly speculative way, but nevertheless, as discussed above, critical research should not shy away from this endeavour.

Flyvbjerg (2006) convincingly makes the point that it is possible to generalise from a single case study and demonstrates that the most common objections against case-study research, namely the lack of generalisability, the tendency towards verification and a general contemptuousness for context-specific knowledge, appear plausible, but are ultimately flawed. This is particularly true if one regards case studies more as a learning opportunity than irrevocable proof. This view is very much in accordance with the ambition of my research project. It lies in the nature of the topic, and maybe also the subject area as a whole, that the interconnected manifestations of power structures and their implications cannot be proven with absolute certainty. However, Flyvbjerg (2006:226) is equally clear that a 'strategic choice' of a case will greatly increase its generalisability. A wisely chosen case can highlight characteristics of a

[32] This has largely to do with the fact that quantitative empirical research has the tendency to over-simplify data and to ignore findings that do not easily fit into predefined categories (May, 2011).

general problem. In the case of my chosen example, *People Like Us* (2013l), I intend to discuss to what extent the programme is representative for the genre as well as more general structures of production and consumption. Flyvbjerg (2006:237) speaks of the 'rich ambiguity of real life' and this resonates a lot with my own understanding of social life as well as the complex assumptions of Bourdieu's social theory. Finally, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that, while a single case study might be lacking in terms of breadth, it is a very suitable method to provide great depth and insights into subtle and hidden aspects of the chosen example.

I now want to turn to aspects significant for the practical application of the above outlined methods. To begin with, there is, according to Burman and Parker (1993), the danger that Discourse Analysis becomes too academic, too abstract and therefore removed from social practice. This can lead to a misconception akin to empirical research that treats its measurements as if they were not images of reality, but reality itself. Similarly, Discourse Analysis can mistake discourse 'as the total sum, rather than the manifestation of, structural relationships' (Burman and Parker, 1993:162). This underlines the necessity to go beyond the text and to search for connections to social structures as well as social practice. This is where Discourse Analysis comes into its own, but also where the method poses the most challenging questions to the researcher. Burman and Parker (1993) point to the fact that power is (re)produced in discourse, but is also still of relevance in the structural positions independent of the text: 'Power relations endure when the text stops' (Burman and Parker, 1993:158). If Discourse Analysis does not go beyond the confines of the text, it cannot address consequences of a specific discourse on a larger scale (Burman and Parker, 1993). Ultimately, that would defeat the purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Parker (2005) sees the main objective of Discourse Analysis to analyse powerful images of the individual and the social that circulate in society, but as also, crucially, to explore ways of questioning and resisting these images. He suggests an exploration of the shared, possibly stereotypical, cultural images a text uses and, as a consequence, to ask how a text challenges or conforms to patterns of power. I regard this recommendation as hugely relevant when it comes to dealing with political implications of a text in practical terms. How power structures inform discourse is a highly complex and rather abstract question that Discourse Analysis needs to frame

in concrete and comprehensible terms. Parker (2005) is of the opinion that Discourse Analysis is an activity that is constantly being carried out by lay people in the real word. 'Discourse-analytic interviewing' (Parker, 2005:94) can therefore be a collaborative method to explore and to contrast a number of different readings. Of particular interest are contradictions with (the perceived) mainstream or intended reading as well as contradictions with the researcher's own reading. Both can point to ways of resisting the dominant discourse. This technique can however also help to identify the existence of stereotypical portrayals and also the way 'people police language, and how they become active participants in ideology' (Parker, 2005:101). It certainly is the intention of this research to explore how the programme under scrutiny was perceived in the non-academic world and to research to what extent the suggested reading of the programme materialises. Regarding the interviewee as co-researchers means in my opinion to be open about one's own interpretations as well as the wider political implications of the research without foreclosing an open debate.

### 4.4.2 Interviewing

I now want to turn to another method I intend to use: interviewing. First of all, I want to explore the idea of regarding interviewer and interviewee as two co-researchers in more depth. In my opinion, the main advantages of this approach are twofold. On the one hand, a greater degree of openness can enrich research as relinquishing control over the specific topic of the interview can open up the debate to other, unexpected areas. For this piece of research, this can mean that, for instance, alternative readings of *People Like Us* (2013l), or about media power in general, might enter the frame. And secondly, as Burman (1994) points out, treating an interview as a collaborative endeavour has the potential for empowerment. I regard this aspect as of particular importance in the context of this specific research project. Since I deal with inequality in terms of opportunities to make one's voice heard, and potentially exploitative media portrayals, it is my intention not to repeat unequal and undemocratic forms of communication. Parker (2005:55) suggests that the researcher should facilitate the reciprocity of the interview process by enabling the

‘switching of positions’. However, it is important not to be overly naïve about the democratic potential of this approach as well as the difficulties of putting it into practice.[33]

Taking participants seriously does, in my opinion, include giving them the choice to opt for or against anonymity. As I will interview adults who are able to consent, I believe that it is not for me to decide whether the interviewees’ names will be published or not. As my research critically deals with questions of access to and control over representations, I do not want to take the default position of social research of anonymising statements regardless of the participant’s wish. In my opinion, blanket anonymisation is not necessarily the more ethical position as this stance has the potential to be patronising and furthermore makes the researcher less accountable, insofar as statements cannot be easily attributed by the involved interviewees. Parker (2005) makes the point that anonymisation without explicit consent potentially denies the participants a voice and therefore might stand in contrast with what a research project might have initially claimed or what the participants wish. Furthermore, an open discussion about anonymity can also help to address questions around the researcher’s power to control what parts of interviews they decide to publish as well as the privilege to add comments and their interpretations.

To conclude this subchapter, I wish to discuss a number of potential beneficial aspects of the interviewing method as well as potential dangers and pitfalls from a Bourdieusian perspective and demonstrate how the former fit in with the above

[33] One major obstacle could be that the co-researchers might have different agendas. In a way, that, to some extent, lies in the nature of their respective positions as well as possible external demands the academic researcher has to deal with. Furthermore, I would argue, there is still a power differential at work that cannot simply be undone merely by the academic’s good intentions. As Burman (1994) points out, research is always set up and conducted within pre-existing power relationships. Apart from the ‘researcher vs. researched’ dichotomy, other structural relations can enter the research. Gender and ‘race’, or, most relevant for this particular research, class relations intersect with the interviewing relationship. Burman (1994) however asks whether this issue is specific to interviewing or just more visible than in other research methods. Either way, the researcher has to show great reflexivity if they want to take their intention of sharing power seriously. Assumptions, implicit ones as well as explicit ones, always inform and structure research, the challenge for the interviewer is to be aware of and open about them.

discussed premises and demands. First of all, Bourdieu sees the objective of his research, and critical sociological research in general, to act as a counterweight to (media) narratives that misrepresent or outright ignore people on the margins of society. He argues that it is therefore justified to focus on those who rarely get the opportunity to make their voices heard (Bourdieu and Ferguson, 1999).

As discussed above, Bourdieu's explicit ambition is to go beyond the alleged dichotomy of the individual versus the social. He opposes a subjectivism that understands the social world from a subjectively situated point of view as much as an objectivism that aims to explain action as consequences of structural relations (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991). His theory of practice tries to adequately frame the practical character of social life. Individual agency and action cannot be sufficiently explained by the field or by the habitus alone, but has to be understood as an encounter of the two. Hence, with regards to methodology, the habitus is not a concept suitable to research social realities. Since the psychoanalytically informed habitus is such a central concept in Bourdieu's social theory, it might come as a surprise that Bourdieu advises to use rather conventional methods. Bourdieu suggests to focus on the individual narrative as for him the place of analysis has to be the concrete narrative rather than the somewhat elusive habitus (Couldry, 2005). He is very clear however, that this focus on individual narratives does not restrict social research to exploring individualistic points of view. Quite the opposite Bourdieu is of the opinion that individual narratives can express structural conditions:

> This explains the way that narratives about the most 'personal' difficulties, the apparently most subjective tensions and contradictions, frequently articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions (Bourdieu and Ferguson, 1999:511).

This is particularly true for people in precarious positions who develop an understanding of the objective contradictions that 'have them in their grasp' (Bourdieu and Ferguson, 1999:511) .

Bearing in mind the alleged ubiquity of doxic assumptions, this assessment might surprise, and Bourdieu, indeed, sees a number of problems concerning working with individual narratives. First of all, he warns against the over-interpretation of interview

material and insists that sociological research must distance itself from the ungrounded and de-contextualised treatment of individual accounts that is characteristic of popular media representations (Couldry, 2005). The interviewer has to attempt to situate themselves in the place of the interviewees. However, not least because of potentially huge differences in terms of habitus, this has to happen with a great degree of cautiousness and self-reflexivity. Furthermore, it has to be taken into consideration that distortions are also likely to happen on the side of the interviewee, partly due to self-censorship and in particular, when it comes to contentious issues. Finally, the aforementioned power differential that is likely to influence the interview situation can lead to a rather inhibited encounter. The challenge for the interviewer is to get as close to the interviewee's position as possible and to grasp their position without however identifying emotionally and hence compromising one's objectivity (Couldry, 2005).[34]

Bourdieu suggests to conduct interviews as 'methodical listening' (Bourdieu and Ferguson, 1999:609); as a way of countering the aforementioned power differentials. Differences in habitus and social capital can only to some degree be reduced, Bourdieu refers to the use of appropriate language, but the second source of the interviewer's power can be addressed. It is usually the interviewer who sets the rules as well as the objective of the interview in advance and without any negotiations. This, according to Bourdieu, can and needs to be addressed if the interviewee shall 'give a response worthy of the name' and it can be achieved 'if they can appropriate the inquiry for themselves and become its subject' (Bourdieu and Ferguson, 1999:609). Methodical listening is therefore not (only) about reducing the directedness of the questioning, but about transparency and openness about the rules and the objective of the interview. Apart from that, Bourdieu encourages the researcher to offer his own interpretations of the discussed material. This 'technique' not only takes the interviewee seriously, but also stands in conscious opposition to the 'misleading neutrality of structured questionnaires or surveys that reinforce

[34] Bourdieu regards emotions as generally misplaced in an interview and also warns against the danger of 'romantizising the local encounter' (as cited in Couldry, 2005:365). As alluded to above with reference to the ethnographic method, Bourdieu warns against putting too much emphasis on the specific interaction and thus ignoring wider social structures that shape the social space in which the encounter takes place.

rather than soften the power differential between interviewer and respondent' (Bourdieu as cited in Couldry, 2005:363).

Putting these ambitions into practice certainly requires a great degree of attention and reflexivity. In addition, the possibility that the suggested forms of interviewing – discourse-analytical interviewing and methodical listening largely seem to mean the same thing – might possibly contradict the interviewee's expectation, and therefore be met with puzzlement rather than appreciation, has to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless I would argue that there needs to be a fit between the theoretical framework, the researcher's political positions and the used methods. Being critical of undemocratic and misleading media representations almost forces the researcher to be transparent and inclusive. I intend that the above discussed will inform my interview practice and I will analyse to what extent this ambition could be put into practice.

### 4.4.3 Audience research

In the following, I want to discuss the methodological and ethical issues of the type of audience research I intend to carry out and that will form the empirical basis for the analyses in chapter five. These general methodological considerations will be followed by a discussion of specific issues that surfaced when conducting the actual data collection and analysis.

I intend to gain an understanding of how the TV programme under consideration was perceived by the audience by analysing comments that were made on newspaper websites reporting on *People Like Us* (2013l). I will look at what McKee (2003:89) calls an 'intertext' and what he regards as expressions of 'public discussions about culture'. McKee (2003) argues that our understanding of a text can be enhanced if we gain an idea of the audience's reading and this, together with a discussion of the potential (political) impact of a docusoap, is the intended purpose of this analysis.

From a methodological point of view, it is somewhat problematic to use comments that were made anonymously, are rather brief, and cannot retrospectively be followed up to gain clarification. It certainly can be questioned whether anonymous

comments left on a newspaper website reflect the actual opinions of the discussants or whether, for instance, there is deliberate provocation (trolling). Secondly, the brevity of many comments make their interpretation to some degree speculative.

However, this 'unobtrusive' and 'non-reactive' method also brings with it a number of advantages (Hine, 2011:1). Recent research indicates that, compared to face-to-face interviews, these methods of data collection show a lesser tendencies to produce socially desirable answers and to discuss contentious issues in a more open manner (Seale et al., 2010). Also Lee (2010:17) points to the strengths of using 'found data'. However, I need to be clear that the data used in chapter five was not just 'found', it was rather 'looked for'. Debates around *People Like Us* (2013l) have certainly taken place in many spaces. Choosing to analyse comments on *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* websites is meant to reflect a certain breadth of opinion. Furthermore, compared to utterances made on social media like Facebook and Twitter, the use of these comments seems relatively unproblematic from an ethical point of view. I will come back to this shortly, but it needs to be mentioned that my 'sample' is not just self-selected (people who visit the respective websites, who have the ability and wish to partake in online debates), but also selective in the sense that I chose to analyse these two specific arenas of public discourse.

Furthermore, as Hine (2011) points out, simply because data is publicly available, it does not mean that it is ethical to use it for research purposes. This is particularly true if it is not practical or possible to request the consent of the involved discussants. However, I would argue that it needs to be distinguished between the different contexts in which online debates take place. Discussions in closed forums are, from an ethical point of view, clearly more problematic to research than comments posted publicly that are meant to be read by a wider audience. I will come back to this shortly to discuss my specific sample.

### 4.4.4 Combining methods

Whereas the above discussed analysis in chapter five was carried out before, and therefore relatively independent of, an in-depth analysis of the content and production process of *People Like Us* (2013l), the critique of the programme as

presented in chapter eight does combine my own discourse analysis and the conducted interviews. This blending of two separate methods and two separate analyses might be regarded as a methodological flaw and as potentially problematic. I would however argue that it is a legitimate attempt to put 'discourse-analytic interviewing' (Parker, 2005:94) into practice. Of course, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between my own views and the opinions of my interviewees and I intent to do so. However, my critique will crucially be informed by my research participants' views on authenticity, representativeness and control in the context of the programme. I aim to illustrate how these matters are reflected in *People Like Us* (2013l) and also to make connections between the participants' experiences and my own reading of the text. Therefore, I discuss both elements of my analysis in the same chapter. As mentioned, I will use a large number of direct quotes from the interviews to express the views of the interviewees comprehensively and also to provide some context within the respective interviews. As discussed above, a discourse analysis can be a collaborative process and in the context of my research, I would argue that it necessarily has to be just that. My own reading of *People Like Us* (2013l) will inform the interviews in the way the interviews are structured, what areas I will attempt to cover and also in the sense that I will offer my own interpretation of specific scenes and the programme as a whole. Trying to separate these two dimensions in the analysis of the programme appears neither sensible nor sincere.

## 4.5 Reality check

This subchapter was, in contrast to the above, written after I conducted the interviews, worked with them and analysed the programme and the reactions to it. In the following, I now want to retrospectively reflect on the theoretical, practical, methodological and ethical difficulties of putting the above discussed ambitions into practice and reflect on the significance of my own position (in class as well as in cultural terms) in the context of this research.

### 4.5.1 Practical and theoretical problems

First of all, I want to discuss how the small-scale audience research that I present in the following chapter was conducted and how methodological and ethical issues were negotiated.

As alluded to above, the impossibility of a 'non-reactive' (Lee, 2010:8) approach to clarify statements can pose a methodological problem insofar as deliberate provocation or simple misunderstandings cannot be ruled out. However, I would argue that in my particular empirical example there is very little overall that suggests that comments were made with the intention to cause controversy (and if so, they did with very limited success), and secondly, most of the comments under discussion appear rather unambiguous. Nevertheless, there remains a degree of uncertainty that this form of data collection and interpretation ultimately has to live with. The above discussed positives of the chosen approach are however, I would argue, obvious in the analysed debates. A number of politically contentious issues are being discussed in what appears to be a rather uninhibited manner. Internet debates, like the one under scrutiny, are often characterised by a great degree of immediacy and the analysed comments indeed appear to be unfiltered. It is doubtful whether they actually reflect the opinions of their writers in all their depth, however, it can in my opinion reasonably be assumed that, in contrast to more conventional methods of data collection, people feel less inhibited to express opinions that they perceive not to be desirable or politically correct. The frankness of the debates indicate just that. Finally, I want to point to potential ethical issues of this form of data collection. As mentioned above, I would argue that it needs to be distinguished whether comments made in the online world were meant for the eyes of a wider public or not. In my opinion, it is reasonable to assume that commenting on *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* website, as they are the most popular newspaper websites in the UK (Baird, 2015), means that the discussants wanted their opinions to be openly available to the public. As it, turned out, people participating in the analysed debates opted to self-anonymise their statements. I would argue this and, more importantly, the context of the debate make their use for my research, from an ethical point of view, unproblematic.

I now want to turn to the conducted interview. To begin with, I need to point out that the recruitment of participants to this study panned out quite differently to what I had anticipated. I was fortunate to be able to interview seven people who took part in *People Like Us* (2013l) in front of the camera. This was quite unexpected as I could not assume that people who, according to what I had gathered, felt misrepresented in a TV programme and found themselves in the middle of a controversy that played out far beyond the boundaries of their own community (*The Media Show*, 2013a), would be prepared to speak to yet another outsider. As it turned out, most of the people I managed to make contact with[35] were prepared to speak to me. I will discuss the ethical and methodological consequences of this 'recruitment success' shortly. It is however clear that the 'composition of the sample' had an impact on (the scope of) my findings. I was able to get insights into the production of a docusoap from the perspective of the participants and I believe that these insights allowed me to underpin many theoretical assumptions empirically.[36] As discussed above, CDA (like Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence) revolves around questions of power and control. Being able to speak to participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) put me in a position to explore their perspective in this symbolic struggle. However, my analysis of this power dynamic is largely restricted to an analysis of the powerlessness of the working-class participants of the programme. Unfortunately, the production company, Dragonfly, did not reply to any of my interview requests and accordingly their point of view is missing from my analysis. Therefore, this thesis has to rely on more general explorations of the class positions of media professionals, the working conditions in and the logic of the media field (see chapter six). How power distributions in the production of a docusoap is classed, could only be explored from the position of relative powerlessness. Of course, this perspective is very illuminating, and possibly more illuminating than the production company's statements (see: *The Media Show*, 2013a). However, it became very evident when conducting this

[35] Some people I was very keen to speak to could not be tracked down and made contact with.

[36] In particular, the lack of control on the side of the participants with regards to the editing as well as apparently wilful and stereotypically classed misrepresentations could be documented and proved very beneficial in exploring the central questions of this thesis.

research, that the ambition of CDA to explore the actual mechanisms of power in politically and socially relevant discourses is very difficult to put into practice.

Another intention of research along the lines of CDA is to locate the document under discussion to wider (political) contexts. Again, this is something that was only partly achieved. I believe to have managed to locate the programme in the wider genre and to make links with a number of relevant political discourses such as the social security complex (see chapter five). However, an analysis of these linkages has to some degree to rely on plausibility. The assumption for instance that a negative and stereotypical portrayal of the working class, like in *People For Us (2013l)*, is in the interest of powerful social groups and political players is certainly plausible and clearly forms the basis for Bourdieusian concepts relevant to this research. However, empirical evidence for this nexus is difficult to produce. I have worked with examples to the contrary (see chapters six and nine), but it seems that an analysis of the functioning of the media field and its links and interdependencies with those in power require access to the inside of media production that generally eludes the social sciences. Power works in complex ways and I would argue that CDA, underpinned and complemented with Bourdieusian concepts, offers a potent methodological tool to explore these. I have managed to discuss and present the views of participants of the programme and I would argue that explorations of power from the position of relative powerlessness are a very valuable contribution. The production process was explored from the perspective of the participants in front of the camera and this perspective clearly offers insights into the functioning of a docusoap production. As mentioned, I have attempted to locate *People Like Us* (2013l) in the wider genre, but only made few comparisons to similar programmes. Exploring commonalities, differences and general trends in the 'Poverty Porn' subgenre could be a very interesting and beneficial future line of inquiry.

Finally, it is problematic to define tangible effects of classed representations. The logical and methodological reasons for this are summarised in the conclusion to this thesis.

### 4.5.2 Methodological and ethical problems

As discussed above, I generally question the default position of research in the social sciences to anonymise interviews and have doubts whether this is automatically the 'more ethical' position. The problem of anonymisation was compounded by the fact that a number of people who participated in *People Like Us* (2013l) agreed to be interviewed by me. Firstly, having been on national TV and, in the case of the Wakefield family in particular, being the centre of a controversy that took place in the local area as well as the national media, did make the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) anything but anonymous. Hence, referring to the content of their interviews in all but the most general and superficial terms would have given away their identity. Even references to age or occupation for instance would have had the same effect in many cases.

As it turned out, the participants themselves did not regard anonymisation of their interviews as necessary or even as sensible and useful. A few interviewees regarded their participation in my research as an opportunity to make a point and to comment on the programme. Having taken part and being referred to with their real names (with their real lives, in a sense) in a programme that was watched by hundreds of thousands of viewers, it seemed, as some interviewees expressed, not very logical to anonymise their retrospective views on the programme. From an ethical point of view it can be argued that it does not make a difference whether a participant in a research project is known to the wider public or has taken part in a docusoap. If anything, it brings issues around anonymity to the fore and it does certainly complicate the issue as simply using a pseudonym is clearly not a viable option.

Either way, I had applied for ethical approval to refer to my interviewees with their real names, if they wished so, before I knew that I would interview participants of the programme. Initially, I was not granted ethical approval, but the fact that all of my interviewees wanted to appear in my thesis with their real names, and some felt quite strongly about this, made me reapply for ethical approval. In a drawn-out and, at times, somewhat frustrating process, I finally argued my case to the ethics committee. As I had already conducted my interviews, I was required to reapproach my interviewees and ask them to sign a new version of the consent form. It would be

somewhat disingenuous to pretend that my own position was entirely neutral in this process. As mentioned, I feel quite strongly about research participants being given a choice in terms of anonymization. However, as I only became fully aware when working with the interviews, anonymisation, if taken seriously, would have considerably complicated the presentation of my findings. Despite that, I believe to have offered the participants a genuine choice of whether they wanted their interviews anonymised or not without hinting at what my preferred outcome would be. In this sense, it can be seen as a positive that the process of gaining ethical approval was a rather lengthy one, as it meant that the interviewees had several months to reconsider their position. Of course, the interviewees would have always had the opportunity to withdraw from the study regardless, but in this case, they had to actively opt-in and re-consent.

A somewhat related ethical concern transpired while interviewing. I have referred to the wish of some interviewees to make their opinions heard. However, in some of the first interviews that I conducted, I sensed that some interviewees might overestimate the impact and the reach of my research. I believe to have made no overstated claims in that direction, but, possibly, took the environment of academic discourses for granted, assumed knowledge of it and possibly did not sufficiently explain in what ways my research would be published and disseminated. In an attempt to rectify this to some extent, I invited all interviewees to a public debate at which I spoke about my research. A couple of them followed up this invitation and engaged in the debate. Furthermore, I was more mindful of the potential of the impact of my research being overestimated and was more forthcoming in that respect in the later interviews.

Above, I discuss the benefits of semi-structured interviews and the possibilities of conceding control in interviews. In hindsight, it can be said that I managed to partly put this into practice. I started off all interviews with questions about the interviewee's involvement in the programme and in particular the extent to which they felt that they could influence their own representation. Following on from that, I had a set of questions to fall back on, but essentially aimed for a more dialogical and free-flowing conversation. It would be an exaggeration to say that this materialised in every instance, but in all of the interviews, topics were brought up that I had not

anticipated. On more than one occasion however, the conversation only became more natural and uninhibited after I had stopped recording. To conclude, conceding control and opting for a semi-structured interview clearly proved beneficial in terms of depth and breadth of the interviews, but was also very much appropriate in the context of this particular research.

Being critical of exploitation and misrepresentations, as I aim to be in this thesis, clearly implies ethical and methodological questions for the researcher. In many ways, conducting interview research has parallels with the production of a TV programme. By this, I mean the rather unequal allocation of power and, more specifically, how the produced material is worked with. In a sense, the researcher sets the parameters of the discourse (by choosing a certain methodology, by making choices with regards to recruitment, by formulating questions, by defining what is being recorded etc.) not too dissimilar from the way casting and the use of specific production techniques set the scene for a documentary. Condensing and interpreting the interviews mirrors the editing process of a TV production. Choices have to be made as to what is cited in the thesis, in what context quotes are presented, what is left out etc.

As mentioned, I intended to 'share power' in the interviews with regards to being open about the directions the conversations would take (Burman, 1994). In hindsight, I would argue that this was partly realised, but that it would nevertheless be an exaggeration to claim that my research was a truly collaborative process. Many interviewees clearly had the expectation that I would be asking the questions and there was no fundamental discussion that would challenge this established role allocation. I would claim with some confidence that I partly achieved the objectives of 'methodical listening' as suggested by Bourdieu in the sense that I offered own interpretation of the programme and by trying to be open about the direction the interviews took. I would however be an exaggeration to claim that negotiations about the rules and objectives of the interviews took place. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that the interviewees had no actual power in my research beyond the interview itself. As much as I am keen not to repeat misrepresentations and commit symbolic violence in my research, it would not be appropriate to claim that power over the process and the content of my research was shared in a substantial and

meaningful way. Of course, the views of the interviewees had an impact on the direction my interpretation of *People Like Us* (2013l) took, however, the choice was still mine and there was no collaboration in that respect. Having realised that, I was still very keen to be as transparent as possible and to at least keep the interviewees informed throughout the different stages of the research.

Firstly, I sent transcripts of the conducted interviews to all of the interviewees, usually within a fortnight to a month of the interview. In contrast to the production to the TV programme, the participants of my research got to see the 'raw material' and were given the opportunity to clarify things or to decide that they did not want certain answers used in the research. Despite the fact that none of the participants made use of this opportunity, I still regard this as necessary and appropriate. I also tried to be transparent about the 'editing' of the interviews and therefore sent out transcripts of the interviews in which those parts of the interviews that I quote directly or refer to otherwise in my research are highlighted. Again, participants had the opportunity to clarify or delete passages, to anonymise their statements or to withdraw from the study altogether. In my representation and interpretation of the interviews, I aimed to be very honest about their content, to provide context and not to only focus on statements that best served my theoretical claims or my own views on the programme. By this, I mean for instance that I intended to reflect the nuanced and differentiated views of the interviewees. The quantity and length of the used quotes is probably greater than in most PhD theses. This is a conscious decision in order to reflect the opinions of the interviewees in a less condensed and more comprehensive way. To summarise, I regard it as very difficult to produce research in a truly collaborative way when remaining within an academic framework and when relying on rather conventional methods. However, I only grasped the practical implications of this view whilst conducting my research. There remain uncertainties and open questions that clearly would pose a challenge in any potential future research that I might carry out. However, what I hope to have already achieved in this project is to be transparent about my own intentions and about the purpose and limitations of the research. As alluded to, in particular the latter two were not always easy to communicate. I also tried to be transparent in my work with the interviews and all interviewees had numerous opportunities to clarify their statements or to opt-out

(with regards to individual statements or altogether). Whether this amounts to a sharing of power is debateable, but, I would argue, it constitutes a significant improvement compared to the intransparent and manipulative practices that I criticize in my analysis of the programme. I am reasonably confident that my interviewees do not feel misrepresented in my research. Whether we necessarily arrive at the same conclusion regarding the content and (political and social) significance of the programme is a different matter, but I believe to have made efforts to convey the views of the interviewees and to distinguish them from my own interpretations.

### 4.5.3 The insider / outsider problem

Above, I have referred to a couple of ethical and methodical issues that reflect my position as an academic doing research in a community that is not his own: expectations regarding the reach of academic research as well as underlying assumptions about the role and power allocation in the research process. In the following, I want to expand on these issues, explore how my position as an outsider can be made sense of and how this position impacted on the research itself.

A central ethical dilemma of social research is the question 'who actually benefits from research?' In most cases this is probably more the researcher themselves and their respective institutions than the subjects of the research. I have discussed the potential danger of research participants overestimating the reach and impact of a publication. Therefore, (among other reasons) the claim of 'giving a voice to people' must not be made lightly. I would still maintain that this is among the ambitions of this research, but the actual extent to which this can be put into practice is, realistically speaking, rather limited.[37] I do not want to portray my own research as insignificant and would like to think that my analysis adds something to the debate

[37] Even if I have succeeded in conveying the views of my research participants and managed to draw conclusions they agree with, 'giving a voice' not only has paternalistic overtones, but implies that this voice is being heard – something that cannot be guaranteed. Some of my interviewees had given interviews to journalists who work for mainstream media (see: Wheatstone, 2013) and in some cases used their fame to communicate with a considerable number of followers on Twitter. In that sense, they do not need this thesis to 'give' them a voice.

that journalism does not, but it is probably a fair assumption that for participants of the programme articles publishes in the *Manchester Evening News*, had a greater (immediate) significance and a greater potential to tell their side of the story than my academic research. As mentioned, attempts have been made to present my finding outside the confinements of academia, in the real and the virtual world (Wagner, 2014). To feedback my findings in a more readable form, I will send a brief summary of my thesis to the participants of my research.

I have not explicitly asked my research participants for their reasons to take part, but overall I very much got the impression that they were happy to help me out and to have a conversation. Like I said, 'telling their side of the story' was an element (and explicitly mentioned by some), but, unlike for instance the production company of the programme, the interviewees did not seem to be too concerned with the question of what benefit participating in my research had for them.

I now want to turn to the questions of class membership (of the involved parties) and its implication for the research process. As Parker (2005) points out, and as it is at the heart of Bourdieu's habitus concept, (classed) power relations are embodied and therefore impossible to escape. I have alluded to the way in which institutionalised power relations (expressed in expectations and role allocations) structured the conversation to some extent; however, class differences, on an interpersonal level, also played a role in the interviews. Throughout the interview process, I very much got the impression that I was perceived as an outsider in more than one sense, by being an academic, by not being working-class, by not being from the local area or even this country. I believe that this status as an obvious outsider to some extent obscured, but also relativized, my own class position. I would argue that the fact that I am foreign and speak with a foreign accent to some degree runs counter to implicit assumptions about classed judgements. Being an outsider in terms of nationality and language does not only shift the focus away from class differences, it also makes them less acute. Admittedly, this assumption is rather speculative and of course, a foreign accent does not undo class differences or the assumed authority of my institution. Nevertheless, I would argue that, somewhat counterintuitively, being foreign (and therefore being somewhat outside the classed hierarchy of British society) rather helped than hindered the conversations. At the same time, I am quite aware that not

having grown up in the UK and having lived here only for a relatively short period of time (five years) means that my understanding of the British class system is rather detached and academic and that this limits my understanding of how class works in this specific cultural context.[38] I hope to have developed a good theoretical understanding of how class operates and that it is a phenomenon that cannot solely be reduced to economic variables. However, I would argue that the discussed 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett and Cobb, 1972:4) have a strong culture-specific dimension. Acknowledging these theoretically does not equate to experiencing them (in their specific cultural context). Again, it is important not to overstretch this point, but I would argue that my outsider position was to some degree helpful in the interview situation, but at the same time must be seen as a disadvantage in the interpretation of my findings and when trying to grasp the (emotionally charged) complexities of classed hierarchies.

To sum up, how the respective class positions of researcher and researched impacted on the interview process is difficult to assess retrospectively[39]. Nevertheless, I would state that class differences and cultural differences worked in an unexpected way and, to some extent, in a way that reduced distance and can therefore be seen as beneficial to this research. Of course, some forms of capital are quite easily transferrable to a cultural environment that is not too dissimilar to the country where it was acquired. Arguably, being foreign can even in itself, probably depending on the foreigner's country of origin, add to a person's cultural capital (for instance by being perceived as cosmopolitan). However, there are aspects of cultural capital, together with the according of privilege / disadvantage, that get lost in translation or are rather peculiar to the specific cultural contexts of the respective countries. In the context of this research, I would argue that systems of classification (my lack of knowledge as well as practical mastery of and emotional investment in them) are significant. I

[38] Despite the many similarities between Germany, my country of origin, and the UK, class does work in a significantly different way and appears to be a more present aspect of public debates in Britain than it is in Germany. Of course, Germany is not a more egalitarian society, but other modes of creating difference are much more central in political discourses. Furthermore, in particular the class differentiations 'in the middle' play, I would argue, a much less significant role in the German context.

[39] in particular as it was not part of the conversation and is therefore solely based on the inferences of myself as a researcher

would argue that as a foreigner I am less harshly judged and equally less perceived as someone who is in a position to make a judgement on alleged (classed) deficiencies. Again, it is important not to overstate this point and to imagine myself as a neutral, classless or in any shape or form 'objective' outsider. As discussed, some forms of capital travel quite well and the cultural capital that is associated with academia does not evaporate because of a (not even too) different cultural background, but it is still an aspect in a complex relationship that is worth discussing.

It is evident that these are not very well explored thoughts (yet). Nevertheless, I believe that fixing these considerations in writing can be beneficial for this research and (possibly) beyond, in the sense that they point to future lines of inquiry as well as methodological challenges of research that possibly follows on from this thesis.

# 5. Perceptions of *People Like Us*

Judging the (political) impact of cultural products is inherently problematic, not least because the audience's reading of a text might be complex and contradictory in itself and also differ significantly from the researcher's reading. This might be particularly true for a Reality TV programme that claims to depict contemporary social reality. A reading of such a programme is, in a hierarchically structured society, I would argue, necessarily bound up with the respective class positions and differing attitudes (about class) of the audience members. In an attempt to get an impression of the breadth and content of possible readings and interpretations of *People Like Us* (2013l), I will analyse comments that were made in response to newspaper reporting about the programme. I will look at the opposite ends of the UK mainstream newspaper landscape.

Of course, as discussed in chapter four, this approach is somewhat methodologically problematic and also rather limited not least because of the relatively small sample size of 200 comments. Furthermore, the sources that I picked, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* websites, are at the opposite ends of the mainstream spectrum in a political sense, but probably less so in terms of the class membership of their readers. However, given that audience perceptions are not the main focus of this thesis (and therefore more time-consuming methods like in-depth interviews or audience focus groups are ruled out) the chosen approach appears appropriate. It will not put me in a position to conclusively answer the question how *People Like Us* (2013l) was generally perceived, but it will, hopefully, illustrate the breadth of the discourse surrounding the programme and allow me to make tentative conclusions regarding the political significance of *People Like Us* (2013l).

In this chapter, I will again employ some of Bourdieu's main concepts to analyse and interpret the aforementioned online debates. In particular the concept of doxa will be used to problematize the relationship between popular media representations of social class and mainstream political discourses around social security.

The placement of this chapter might appear peculiar as the perception of the programme is discussed *before* the programme itself. Indeed the following analysis

was carried out before the discourse analysis of the programme and before the interviews with people appearing in it. I therefore decided not to pretend otherwise by placing this chapter after the discourse analysis. Of course, I already was very familiar with the content and style of *People Like Us* (2013l) when conducting the ensuing analysis, however, it has taken place without knowing about the views of people involved in the production of *People Like Us* (2013l) in front of the camera. I do not necessarily regard this as a weakness and believe that these aspects of my analysis exist relatively independently of each other. Accordingly, I will first discuss how *People Like Us* (2013l) was perceived and discussed by the audience and then move on to an analysis of the programme itself and its genre.

## 5.1 Audience research

Before I present and discuss my own empirical findings, I want to briefly address existing research around perceptions of Reality TV and docusoaps. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive summary, but to raise aspects of particular importance to this research. Most centrally, I intend to discuss contributions that explore the relation between the class-based content and (potentially) classed readings of docusoaps and Reality TV.

As Hill (2005) points out, docusoaps are popular among men and women and members of all social classes. In particular, the figures for 'occasional viewing' of docusoaps are almost identical for both sexes as well as the major social classes. As I will discuss shortly, there exists however, convincing empirical evidence that despite their universal popularity across social classes, docusoaps are being watched in a distinctly classed manner.

Kilborn and Izod (1997) point out that the reading of any factual television is influenced by the viewers' own experience and a range of factors including age, gender, class, political leanings, personal biography etc. The meaning of a programme is therefore not just read off, but the result of a negotiation, that reflects all of the above mentioned dimensions. Kilborn and Izod (1997:227) acknowledge that there are, from the perspective of the filmmaker, 'preferred readings' and an intended

impact, but that the relationship between the viewing of a programme and the (change in) attitude of the viewer is not straightforward. Of course, this 'preferred meaning' cannot just be attributed to the, more or less conscious and more or less deliberate, political motivations of the filmmaker, but is the result of a complex relationship that reflects the social order (Hall, 1980). I will try to untangle some of these complexities with Bourdieu's (1992) concept of doxa later in this chapter.

For the purpose of this research, studies exploring the classed nature of docusoap viewing are most relevant. Allen and Mendick (2012), working with young people of different class backgrounds, come to the conclusion that interpretations of Reality TV programmes are strongly influenced by class positions. Allen and Mendick (2012) show how, for instance, the devaluation of working-classness in game- or competition-based Reality TV programmes is resisted by their working-class research participants. However, at the same time, many middle- and working-class participants are very critical of 'illegitimate fame' and its repercussions (most notably 'pretentiousness' that many working-class participants are critical of). The reading of Reality TV appears to be clearly classed, but in rather complex and unpredictable ways. Allen and Mendick (2012) explore the functions these interpretations fulfil. These mainly came to the fore in the group interviews that were part of their research. Establishing 'ordinariness', in the sense of normality, appears to be a central function with regards to the acceptance or resistance of the moral judgements that Reality TV invites. Also Mayer's (2012) research in a school setting (US college) confirms that talking about Reality TV provides a platform to perform class and to (re-)establish class membership.

These findings are to a large extent confirmed by the audience research of Skeggs and Wood (2012a) who regard the reading of Reality TV as a deeply classed process, that works in a similarly complex and at times contradictory way. Akin to the above mentioned studies, Skeggs and Wood (2012a) come to the conclusion that their participants use Reality TV to locate themselves in terms of class position. Skeggs and Wood (2012a) worked with focus groups that represent socio-economic groups and demonstrate that there is little overarching consent about whether what was shown on screen represented proper or improper conduct. Working-class participants often resisted the implicit devaluation of working-class Reality TV participants. Skeggs and

Wood (2012a) come to the conclusion that their working-class participants were put in a dual role of being the judge (a position that Reality TV tends to suggest) and being judged (for being working-class themselves) simultaneously. As mentioned, and I will come back to this later in this chapter, proximity and distance in terms of class position does not predict the reading of classed portrayals in a direct manner. Many working-class participants displayed very negative affective reactions towards people on screen who were closest to them in terms of class position. At the same time, there were also class-transcending affective reactions by the members of all groups.[40] The most salient dividing issue in this study was the success and fame Reality TV participants gained from their involvement in the respective programmes. Whereas the working-class participants generally sympathised with successful working-class contestants, the middle-class participants were visibly angered by and expressed disapproval of the 'something for nothing rewards of reality television' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a:232). Similar to the study by Allen and Mendick (2012) this form of success was regarded as illegitimate and as devaluing their own aspirational efforts and investments.

To sum up, the meaning of a docusoap is not just read off, it is created and, as class tends to be a central issue in docusoaps, meaning is very much created in relation to the class position of the viewer. Talking about cultural products, as Bourdieu (1984a) shows, has a wider, politically relevant social function; it creates distance and helps to (re-)affirm the legitimacy of normative boundaries. Therefore, there is a hierarchy of readings and not all interpretations are equally valid and valued. Nevertheless, dominant readings can be contested and challenged.

In the following, I will analyse online discourses around *People Like Us* (2013l). In contrast to the aforementioned studies, the class background of the respective discussants is not known, nevertheless, as I intend to show, the above discussed processes very much appear to be at play.

[40] The former point will be explored later, but it is worth pointing out that Skeggs and Wood (2012a) regard the display of affective reactions as classed in itself, with the middle-class participants tending to create neutralising distance and using their cultural capital to assess the content of the programmes under consideration.

## 5.2 Newspaper articles

Under the headline:

> It's Jeremy Kyle-style, laugh at the chavs TV: Stars of BBC's People Like Us claim it is faked to make them appear drunk, fat and lazy (Hills, 2013)

the *Mail Online* published a relatively short article about the outrage *People Like Us* (2013l) supposedly caused in Harpurhey, the area where the programme was filmed. The tone of the article is rather matter-of-fact and mainly lists a number of opinions expressed at a public meeting in Harpurhey as well as brief comments by unnamed spokespeople of the BBC and the responsible TV production company (Dragonfly). The article is illustrated with three screenshots of the programme, a screenshot of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (2005) and a picture of Media City in Salford. I do not want to analyse the article in depth, but point to a few peculiarities that might inform the following debate to some extent. First of all, the article deliberately conflates the opinion of people appearing on *People Like Us* (2013l), or 'the stars' of the documentary as the *Mail Online* puts it, with opinions expressed by residents of Harpurhey who attended a public meeting where the programme was discussed. None of the used statements were made by the participants of the programme. Therefore, the claim of the article that participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) felt misrepresented is somewhat dubious. Of course, this might very well be the case, but the opening sentence of the article:

> The stars of a new BBC documentary People Like Us have accused the programme makers of making them look fat, drunk and destitute (Hills, 2013)

is not substantiated in any way. This is neither the case for the *Daily Star* (Lawton, 2013) article that the *Mail Online* article is clearly based on.

Secondly, the selection of pictures can be seen as to falsify the claims of misrepresentation. The first screenshot is an image of the mother and daughter of one of the families that feature in *People Like Us* (2013l) in the somewhat bleak and run-down backroom of their workplace. It is however not pointed out that this is a

workplace and a reader not familiar with the programme or the particular episode will in all likelihood assume the room to be a living room in a rather desolate state. The daughter appears to watch TV and not, as is actually the case, images of a CCTV camera monitoring the shop. The caption reads:

> Angry: Residents of Harpurhey, Manchester, have accused TV producers of making them look like 'chavs' who live in a 'slum' in a new documentary by BBC Three.

This screenshot appears to show very poor, almost slum-like living conditions. In the second screenshot, a group of young girls apparently drinking shots of alcohol is pictured. The reference to the article headline is obvious.

To sum up, the main claim of the article is not substantiated in any way as none of 'the stars' of the programme were actually spoken to. Furthermore, it appears that the manipulative choice of screenshots mocks the (alleged) claims of the participants of *People Like Us (2013l)*. The main theme of the article is the disputed authenticity of the programme.

The comment by Fern Brady (2013) on *The Guardian* website critically discusses the problematic effect of 'poverty porn'. As opposed to the *Mail Online* article, the factual authenticity is not the concern of the author who instead points to the repetition of working-class stereotypes. *People Like Us* (2013l) is accused of being voyeuristic and exploitative. There is reference to the current political climate of benefits cuts and the main point of critique is the cartoonish representation of deprivation that, according to Brady (2013), aggravates and deepens the class divide in today's Britain.

## 5.3 Comments

In order to structure the analysis, the readers' comments to the aforementioned articles will be clustered and categorised in four categories. The first category is authenticity and entails comments that discuss whether the TV programme is genuine or fabricated. The second category includes positive and negative value judgments referring to the portrayed individuals and communities. The third and

fourth category refer to the meta debate around the programme and the genre, namely discourses of the media field and its logic and functioning as well as wider political implications of the programme. Some comments cannot be categorised whereas others fit into more than one category. Furthermore, there is naturally a certain overlap and in particular questions of authenticity and the debates around the functioning of the media fields overlap to some extent.

To make the analysis more manageable and to be able to discuss the debates in sufficient depth, only the first 100 comments under the respective articles will be analysed.

*Mail Online*

| | |
|---|---|
| Not categorised | 15 |
| Authenticity | 38 |
| Judgment | 39 |
| Media | 32 |
| Politics | 9 |

The main theme of the article (authenticity) was picked up in 38 comments. Only one of those 38 comments questions the truthfulness of the TV programme:

> 'overexaggerated a hell of a lot' *nickunknown, manchester*

Four comments are rather ambiguous and 33 express the believe that *People Like Us* (2013l) is largely authentic and truthful. Interestingly, a large number of users that believe in the authenticity of the programme refer to the above discussed screenshots as proof for their arguments.

39 out of the 100 comments contain some sort of value judgment. One comment is rather neutral, nine are sympathetic and 29 unsympathetic. Of the positive comments, one is a defence of the area out of personal experience of working in Harpurhey. Three refer to Harpurhey as an ordinary area in a positive sense:

> 'Just a Normal Neighbourhood to me' *BurnageMafia, Manchester*

> ‘It’s just a slice of life’ *Minny25, London*
>
> ‘Even the young lad who admitted being the ‘neighbour-from-hell’ was not so different from any 20/21 year old living away from home’ *Lucy67, London*

In four comments, there is reference to the likeability of the characters. Interestingly, three of those appear to defend the portrayed people on the grounds that they are employed and not, as other comments suggest, claiming benefits:

> ‘… and she has a job’ *Leah, London*
>
> ‘Lots of people in the show work, and are very likable too.’ *Jo123*
>
> ‘The dad had a terrible childhood and has done so much to be a decent adult and father. He works very hard’ *Lucy67*

It is not possible to assess without doubt whether these comments were mainly made in the interest of factual correctness or to what extent employment is used as the basis for normative judgements. The context of the comments suggests the latter might be the case as in two of those comments, work appears to be linked to decency and likability.

Categorising the unsympathetic comments is rather problematic as there is a lot of overlap. However, a number of themes can be identified. Firstly, a large proportion of negative comments refers to matters of style and taste and more specifically to clothing and the state of the decoration of the protagonists’ house:

> ‘they dress chavvishly and their house looks kinda like a slum… did the BBC come over feed you pies, strip your wallpaper and make you wear primark?’ *cheoffshore, variable*
>
> ‘Love, look at your walls.’ *Ikwyaut, Aagdne*
>
> ‘Or is that some kind of ‘New’ and ‘Modern’ wallpaper they have over there?’ *MrComment, Dogmersfield*
>
> ‘Get a bra on that kid in the blue cardy for Gods sake!!!’ *CMC79, Leicester*

Closely related to these judgements based on taste are expressions of shock, shame, disgust and embarrassment. Again, a high proportion of comments more or less

explicitly state to be feeling those emotions or suggest that the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) should be ashamed of themselves:

> 'Look at the STATE of them!' *Steve, Swindon*
>
> 'All it does is make my skin crawl as to what this country is full of' *silas1980, Washington*
>
> 'Maybe they are kicking up a fuss because they are shocked when they watch it back and realise they are embarrassed at what they see and hear?' *The Nit Picker, Blighty*
>
> 'On the bright side, at least they're embarrassed! They should be.' *Annette, NYC*

The word chav is used a number of times and some of the comments are downright dehumanising:

> 'I thought the Kyle creatures were created in a lab' *DMrSoles, Netherworld, Saint Helena*
>
> 'Amazing how this type of Chav can afford a colour telly but can't be bothered to paint the walls' *SocialistShirker, EUSSR, United Kingdom*
>
> 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, as they say.' *Bert The Builder, Kettering, Botswana*
>
> 'Council Tenan t=A simple organism with the ability to convert new property into a slum.' *Kiernan, Manchester, United Kingdom*

As mentioned, there are a number of comments that relatively directly refer to current political debates. Interestingly, all of those address social security. This is insofar remarkable as, which will be demonstrated in the chapter seven, *People Like Us* (2013l) does not explicitly deal with social security and neither is there a reference in the related article. All but one comment appear to suggest that the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) claim benefits and there is the underlying suggestion of benefit fraud or undeservedness:

> 'We're paying for most of them.' *Steve, Swindon*
>
> '… they don't even work so they aren't 'working class'! They are the 'benefit' class!!!' *mestar, Manchester*

A couple of comments, referring to the family running the local laundrette, imply that despite in the programme being shown to work long hours, they still must be claiming some sorts of benefit payments:

> 'Did they manage to say this with a straight face, whilst sitting there with graffiti all over the walls of their own house…or should that be their council houses' *Stevie, Liverpool*
>
> 'I noticed that they said she couldn't 'work in the laundrette because of a bad back (couch, cough, disability benefits) but spent all day in there barking orders' *Laura, Cambridge*

One overtly political comment breaks the mould and whilst also referring to social security, does so with a distinctly different spin:

> 'and this kind of trash-tv plays into the hands of people like Iain Dunce Duncan Smith….' *ProfessorHaushofer, Atlatis*

Unfortunately, this is not explored further and none of the following comments made reference to this statement or to the implied political impact of *People Like Us* (2013l).

32 out of the 100 comments refer to the media field and its functioning and tend to do so in rather abstract terms and sometimes without direct reference to the discussed TV programme. Again, I will cluster these comments thematically. The largest of these groupings are comments questioning the production methods of *People Like Us* (2013l). There is clearly a great degree of doubt concerning its sincerity and truthfulness. This is surprising as, as discussed above, the vast majority of discussants apparently belief in the authenticity of the programme. On a more general level there appears to be a degree of doubt regarding the way programmes like *People Like Us* (2013l) are produced:

> 'The UK media twist and edit to get better ratings' *John, Veliko Turnovo, United Kingdom*
>
> 'Everything you hear or read in this country is enhanced for your entertainment and someones profit' *alfonso55, Cornwall, United Kingdom*
>
> 'When will people realise that 'reality TV' is anything but?' *Dom and Wolfhound, Cotswold Hills, United Kingdom*

> '… it indicates manipulation to fit a story angle' *Mike, York*

It appears that there is critical distance and a degree of scepticism regarding the production methods and the according authenticity of what is shown on screen. This assessment however is made on a more general level and there are few direct references to the actual TV programme.

Interestingly, a large number of comments express doubts regarding the truthfulness and fairness of *People Like Us* (2013l), but at the same time place responsibility on the side of the participants. There is also the, often explicitly expressed, accusation of seeking attention and fame and displaying nativity by agreeing to take part in the programme:

> 'OMG! The producers of this show definitely went to the right place to get cannon fodder for this show. They believe they were going to be portrayed well –and treated fairly– much like the idiots who believe that Jeremy Kyle is going to do the same with them.' *troll, under a bridge, United Kingdom*
>
> 'This is what 'reality' TV producers do. Never go on them, because your ego and their greed will make you look bad.' *triplesec, London, United Kingdom*
>
> 'Put a camera in front of an idiot with the promise of 5 minutes of fame and they'll say anything- just like they have done on this show' *Red Mist, Manchester, United Kingdom*
>
> 'I'm afraid you sell your soul to the devil when you get involved with the media ... Given that there have been many very loud and public complaints about not dissimilar programmes in the recent past, I'm surprised the people of Harpurhey got suckered in.' *Countrylass, Manchester*

It appears that there is an acceptance, almost an expectation, that Reality TV distorts reality. However, this implicit critique does not translate into general consideration regarding questions of access to and control over media productions. To the contrary, most discussants point towards the participants and to their alleged naivety.

Only a very small number of comments, two to be precise, make any reference to the question of access and control. These however appear to be located on the opposing ends of the debate:

> ‘Not ‘stars’ or ‘celebs’ …….. just chavvy embarrassing people who have no right to be on the television’ *Damian, Elsewhere, Afghanistan*
>
> ‘When are people going to realise that tv shows are always going to make poorer people look like scum! Its so the middle class tv producers can feel good about themselfs’ *Heathcliff, Haworth*

A similarly small number of discussants complain about the waste of license fee money. And finally, one comment points to the fact that *People Like Us* (2013l) was filmed in Manchester:

> ‘Because of coronation street we are used to looking down on Mancunians. 5 times a week, 52 weeks a year we enjoy the unhappiness and dysfunction of Mancunians in coronation street. No wonder the producers decided to set it in Manchester. Same reason shameless was set there. If it were set in Liverpool or Newcastle, people would be less comfortable with it.’ *James01, Manchester, United Kingdom*

*The Guardian*

The comments on *The Guardian* website clearly focus on different aspects of the debate:

| | |
|---|---|
| Not categorised | 38 |
| Authenticity | 0 |
| Judgment | 7 |
| Media | 10 |
| Politics | 48 |

First of all, I want to point to the relatively large number of comments that could not be meaningfully sorted into one of the four categories. The vast majority of those comments were only remotely related to the themes of the article and dealt with the culture of debate on *The Guardian* website. Another strand of debate compared the factual and perceived dangerousness of a number of cities which I regard as of little relevance for this research.

Interestingly, the authenticity of *People Like Us* (2013l) was not debated at all and neither was the production process or the editing process of the programme under

scrutiny. In stark contrast to the above presented comments, the question of responsibility for possible misrepresentations was not discussed at all.

The number of comments that included value judgements or judgments based on taste was comparatively small and rather diverse:

> ‘I don’t live on handouts, I simply got a summer job picking fruit- minimum wage to keep the wolf from the door. If normal people can do it so can those on benefits.’ *SamsonB*
>
> ‘Many commentators ATL confuse chavs with the working class, they’re an underclass all of their own whose sole point of existence is to ruin working class communities they infect’ *Jackston*
>
> ‘I have given up on poverty porn since Ross Kemp said ‘I have dodged bullets in Pakistan, seen a witch hunt in Africa … but Glasgow is the toughest place’ *kristinekochanski*
>
> ‘..in the 70s fly on the wall documentaries ordinary families were shown as ordinary .. Now its some grotesque freak show where only selective examples of dysfunctionality are allowed’ *MasterNonPO*
>
> ‘There was this well-known clothing brand which offered to pay one of the Jersey Shore actors quite large sums of money *not* to wear their clothes, as they had been in previous episodes, because they were worried about this kind of reputation damage’ *SolidSquid*

as reply to the above:

> ‘Cool’ Let’s do it again! I suggest giving PR lurgey to such esteemed areas as Hoxton, Islington and Brick Lane. Sort of in the interest of social justice, of course, but mainly for the lulz.’ *TruculentSheep*

In contrast to comments on the *Daily Mail* website, these comments are much less personal in nature and not referring to individual people. Nevertheless, in particular the first four comments clearly show a similar mode of distinguishing and distancing the acceptable mainstream of society from what is described as an underclass. The fourth and fifth comments acknowledge the relevance of cultural goods to achieve distinction, but do so in a rather playful manner and with no direct reference to the TV programme.

The comments that refer to the media field and its functioning again do so on a rather abstract level and mainly focus on two central points:

> 'Its not just the right wing though. The liberal left are quite happy to portray the working class as caricatures.' *Missing yet again.*

as reply to the above:

> 'Depends on what you mean by the 'liberal left'. If you mean New Labour I agree. It also depends on what you mean by caricatures – some are more harmful than others, particularly in the context of attacks on the welfare state.' *robbo100*
>
> 'The fact that it's on Channel 3 disqualifies it by default. Though, wouldn't it be nice to see reality TV set in the dysfunctional and freakish realms of upper middle class suburbia? Or would that, if you'll forgive the cliché, be too close to home for many TV producers and media types?' *TruculentSheep*

as reply to the above:

> 'Didn't the "Bank of Mum and Dad" series do that? Pathetically weak, ineffectual parenting resulting in spoilt, unmotivated, arrogant, idiot children. Even though the cliches on display at the poverty porn end of the spectrum are a bit worm, their subjects tend to be generally more likeable than at the overprivileged end. Tbh though, the upper-middle class do seem to have fairly a predictable life which doesn't make for particularly interesting TV' *chapelle*

Most comments referring to the media field thematise the unrepresentativeness of Reality TV. Firstly, by reducing working-class subjects to caricatures and secondly by almost exclusively focussing on poorer members of society.

As the above quoted comments already indicate, it is rather problematic to categorise statements as political or unpolitical as basically all of the mentioned comments have a political dimension. In this case, I made the distinction again based on a very narrow definition of the word. In the context of this research, it appears appropriate to include comments that revolve around state benefits, bias of the BBC, as well as political implications of classed representations.

> 'With the line between working and the middle class becoming blurred, a new bottom tier is needed to re-affirm the status-quo' *BlackRoads*

> ‘No, it’s the age old trick of social division, create the idea of an other who you can look down on to keep you in line with what the rulers want.’ *MiddleEnglandLefty*
>
> ‘More right wing propaganda courtesy of the Bullingdon Broadcasting Corporation’ *robbo100*
>
> ‘Thats the issue with the beeb – its ultra establishment. It’s not that it’s Tory supporting or Labour supporting – it’s government supporting in general …’ *princesschipchopz*
>
> ‘So all those people on benefits are living off other peoples money then? Would you care to explain to me what national insurance is! I worked for 30 years before being too ill to work.’ *Bifess*

as a reply to the above:

> ‘Well, people on benefits are spending other people’s money. It is money provided through the government by the taxpayer.’ *Mkubwa*

Overall, seven comments discuss whether or in what way the BBC is politically biased and 28 comments debate issues around social security.

## 5.4. Theoretical framing

In the following, I want to frame the portrayed online debate theoretically by using the Bourdieusian concept of doxa as well as Bourdieu’s (1984a) considerations regarding taste. I have discussed the limitations and methodological issues of this form of analysis in chapter four and at the beginning of this chapter. However, as discussed, the aim of this chapter is not to comprehensively explore the general public opinion on matters of class or social security, but to analyse one specific discourse to discuss a way of theoretically making sense of classed media discourses and, more specifically, to get a sense of how *People Like Us* (2013l) was perceived and discussed by its audience. Ultimately, I intend to suggest a way of applying Bourdieusian theory to empirical data and to discuss the linkage between media discourse and publicly expressed opinions along Bourdieusian lines.

First of all, I want to address the doxic character of this particular debate. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the structure and the structuring principles of a society become internalised and therefore are assumed as natural and undisputable: ‘Every

established order tends to produce … the naturalization of its own arbitrariness'. For the context of this chapter this means that doxic beliefs and accordingly doxic representations take social inequalities for granted and, by doing so, uncritically reinforce them. Naturalising the, historically produced but ultimately arbitrary, social order renders fundamental critique impossible or as Maton puts it (2008) 'assumptions that "go without saying" determine the limits of the doable and the thinkable'.

These (collective) blind spots result in stereotypical images of the social world. As alluded to above, what makes doxic beliefs so stable and immune to critique is their location in the (collective) unconscious and the resulting taboos are reflected in stereotypical perceptions of the social world. I will address the question to what extent stereotypical ideas around British working-class life have informed the conception and production of *People Like Us* (2013l), it appears, however, that the perception of the programme was structured by established class stereotypes, around poverty and the benefit system.

First of all, it seems that these three terms and concepts are very much entangled and conflated, which arguably in itself reflects a somewhat biased and distorted view of the social world. Secondly, as pointed out, some comments make the assumption that participants of the TV programme fraudulently claim benefits. Neither the programme nor the related newspaper articles give any indication for this presumption. So it appears that far-reaching assumptions were made by a large number of discussants based on a very scarce information. A number of clichés relating to poverty are referred to, ranging from excess (eating and drinking) to bad taste or a lack of culture and workshyness. It appears that the commentators interpreted the available pieces of information in a very stereotypical fashion by picking up common images and by uncritically associating working-class life with poverty and benefit fraud.

Bourdieu (1984a) famously explores how matters of taste are politically charged. Questions of taste show a strongly classed character and are can be doxic in nature insofar as they tend to obscure structural inequalities and reduce them to supposedly

benign and individual preferences.[41] Socially produced differences become essentialised, charged with value and ascribed to individuals or social groups without acknowledging their social and their arbitrary character. Bourdieu (1984a) points out that tastes are often asserted negatively by distancing oneself from the supposedly disgust-provoking bad taste of others. Taste is not only essentialised, but naturalised in the sense that it is seen as an inherent characteristic of an individual, independent of formal and aesthetic education. What is perceived to be a working class-taste has, according to Bourdieu (1984a), the sole function of constituting a negative reference point.

As discussed above, a large number of comments use derogatory language and speak about the presented subjects as if they were culturally fundamentally different. Expressions like 'chav,' 'Jeremy Kyle creatures' or 'simple organism' indicate that there is no perceived common ground between the discussants' own position and the described other. Accordingly, the (alleged) style and taste is not referred to as inferior, but as of no cultural value whatsoever. Skeggs (2004:153) makes the point that working-class culture is seen as the negative referent without any intrinsic worth, as the 'point zero' of culture. On *The Guardian* website, compare to the *Mail Online*, the comments that portray working-class people as fundamentally different are fewer in numbers, but similar with regards to how they draw boundaries. A clear distinction is made between normality and life at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Finally, traces of dehumanising language (that remain unchallenged) can be found on *The Guardian* website as well as one user speaks of the 'underclass' as 'infecting' working class communities.

In a Bourdieusian sense, this 'othering' has the function of reaffirmation and revalidation of mainstream middle-class culture. Bourdieu (1984a:468) speaks of a 'network of oppositions' that consist of 'pairs of antagonistic adjectives' that classifies objects or persons in a dichotic way. This doxic thinking, he argues, is readily accepted as 'behind them lies the whole social order' (Bourdieu, 1984a:468). Doxic thinking not only confirms the social order, it is also shaped by it, in a sense that classifications express social hierarchies and translate them into a hierarchy of taste. The function

[41] Ridiculing poverty or a lack of education, for instance, is far less socially acceptable than ridiculing supposedly bad taste.

of these (often rather one-sided) classificatory struggles lies in the substantiation and the ascertainment of boundaries as 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu, 1984a:6). So it is not only the object that is judged as tasteful or not, it is also the individual that makes the judgement that is, wittingly or not, rated according to the legitimacy of their taste. In the context of the online debates under discussion, this means that the discussants ascertain their status by distancing themselves from what they regard as bad taste and, more importantly, from an inferior class position. These processes gain their power through the opacity of their political foundation and function. The taken-for-grantedness of taste hierarchies make them somewhat immune to critique such as elitism or snobbery[42]. Savage (2003) points to recent socio-historical developments that resulted in the middle class becoming the 'particular-universal' class; a particular class whose practices came to be accepted as universally valid. Sayer (2005), analysing processes of moral boundary drawing, makes the distinction between conditional and unconditional recognition and demonstrates how these different types of recognition are related to the distribution of economic capital. Furthermore, he demonstrates that claims regarding moral values and virtues are routinely generalised and that their cross-class character is likely to inflict shame as value judgements tend to be normatively and morally loaded. These judgements tend to relate to the hierarchical class structure of a society, but are made on an individual level (Sayer, 2005). As I have shown above, shame and disgust are two very central categories in the online debate around *People Like Us* (2013l).

Before I address the judgments that are made in the online debates around *People Like Us* (2013l), I want to briefly explore the readiness with which judgments are generally made in the Reality TV context. The specific, emotive and possibly manipulative, narrative structure and visual language of the programme will be discussed later, but, I would argue, the Reality TV genre itself invites judgement based on class membership. This is most apparent in several Reality TV subgenres that revolve around (moral) judgements. Crime-based Reality TV (e.g. *Judge Judy* (1996a)) and chat shows (e.g. *Jeremy Kyle Show* (2005)), but also game-based programmes (e.g. *Big Brother* (2000)) and make-over formats (e.g. *What Not to Wear* (2001c)) are

[42] At least as far as the alleged tastelessness of the working class is concerned.

largely based on judgement by experts and also clearly invite judgement by the viewer. Couldry (2012) demonstrates how these judgments have a classed character and how the role of judge and judged are assigned along class lines. Skeggs and Wood (2011:96) make the point that Reality TV can be seen as a 'morality play' with a 'neoliberal imperative to how one *should* live (emphasis in original)'.

*People Like Us* (2013l), it needs to be pointed out, does not fall under the above mentioned sub-genres and I will later discuss to what degree a specific moral judgement is implied. However, I think it is very plausible to assume that viewers are very much used to the default role allocation of most Reality TV formats. The readiness with which the aforementioned judgements are made, bearing in mind that the readers of the discussed newspaper articles actually know very little about the portrayed people, indicates that this is very much the case.

The strong language used in the comments quoted above, indicates that the othering of the working class has a strong emotional dimension and that a lack of taste or of cultural and economic capital has an element of shame attached to it. It is not inequalities and difference as such that provoke disgust and shame, but supposedly individually embodied characteristics. The strong emotional component of the portrayed discourse might indicate that Bourdieu's (1984a) psychoanalytically informed theory that regards processes of othering as founded in the need to ascertain one's own class position by distancing oneself still has validity and relevance. For the purpose of this chapter, I will leave these considerations to one side and instead look at the origins for the prevalence of disgust and shame. Interestingly, those comments that imply that participants of the TV programme should be ashamed of themselves do not base their judgment on any despicable deeds. As illustrated above, shame is associated with the, in the eyes of the discussants, displayed lack of style, bodily appearances and inadequate living conditions. The same can be stated for the reactions of disgust that are equally based on appearance and not action. Disgust is a very powerful, yet underresearched emotion (Lawler, 2008) that, as alluded to above, is difficult to make sense of on a purely rational level. It is not evident why differences in style and taste, whose foundations and hierarchical order are completely arbitrary, should lead to such strong emotional reactions. Lawler (2008) argues that disgust refers to the norm

violation itself and not to the specific content of the respective norms. Again, it is the wish or the need to distance oneself from lower class positions that must be seen as charging these opinions with normativity. Of course, these reactions of disgust cannot be interpreted as individual, solely psychologically founded expressions. The zeal and vehemence of those statements point to the strength of the associated norms as well as the associated stigma of falling short of what defines good (enough) taste. Classed shame and disgust are developed and expressed in collective processes, but, reflecting the doxic character of this process, are generally put into practice on an individual level. The arbitrariness of what defines good taste is not under scrutiny. Quite the contrary; those individuals and groups that are suspected of violating these arbitrary and somewhat opaque norms are judged in the strongest possible terms; not because their actual taste or behaviour would warrant any such reactions, but because of the collective imperative, on the side of the classifier, not to be associated with what is defined as shameful and disgusting. Below a certain threshold, taste is non-negotiable.

Power-blind, status quo-affirming doxic beliefs also can be traced in the comments that refer to the functioning of the media field. There appears to be an acceptance that media products in general and Reality TV in particular are not entirely trustworthy and do not treat their subjects fairly. However, there is a remarkable absence of indignation about that. As shown above, the vast majority of comments in this context indicate that it is the participants and not the producers of docusoaps who are to blame for misrepresentations. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this can be interpreted as the underlying power structure (in the media field) being beyond the reach of criticism. Attempts to deceive and manipulate are accepted as part of the game and ultimately those on the receiving end of an exploitative relation are ascribed responsibility. There is even the suggestion that the longing for the proverbial fifteen minutes of fame combined with a degree of naivety tempted the people of Harpurhey to expose themselves. This argumentation indicates another element of class contempt: the generalised expectation of self-betterment is coupled with a disdain for reaching beyond classed limits. Attempts by people with working-class backgrounds to reach beyond what is ascribed to them are mocked as pretentious (Lawler, 2005). As shown above, a considerable number of discussants

are of the opinion that the portrayed individuals had no right to be on TV or brought the negative repercussions of their involvement in *People Like Us* (2013l) on themselves. There appears to be a tacit acceptance of the established power distribution concerning the production and editorial process that is not further problematized. This is insofar remarkable as their appears to be a degree of scepticism about how 'real' Reality TV is. However, this general scepticism does not translate into the questioning of wider political implications of inequality in the media field.

As shown above, nine out of 100 comments on the *Daily Mail* website and 48 comments on *The Guardian* website make more general statements that can be classed as political in the narrow sense of the word. Interestingly all of those (*Daily Mail*), respectively 28 of 48 (*The Guardian*), comments refer to state welfare. Again, this is remarkable as *People Like Us* (2013l) does not thematise benefits and mainly shows people who are in employment. In particular the family that features most prominently in the programme and is most referred to in the comments are shown as hard working and there is no indication that they actually receive welfare payments. A number of discussants assume that the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) must be benefit recipients and this assumption is hardly challenged by other discussants. It can only be speculated what sets these associations in motion (area? cultural capital? suggestive representations?), but the tone and the choice of words of most comments indicate that debates around social security are very emotionally charged. It is most likely a fair assumption that, since social security and in particular alleged benefit fraud is a pet subject of the *Daily Mail*, that their readership might have a particularly negative and biased view. Other political dimensions of the TV programme like poverty, power, structural injustice or inequality are not part of the debate at all. Politics only appear to matter with regards to potentially unjustified welfare payments. Interestingly, comments referring to social security are even more prevalent on *The Guardian* website. Although the debate there is more balanced in the sense that a number of discussants appear to be generally in favour of social security, none of the analysed comments questions what appears to be a reflex to debate matters of state welfare when working-class life is portrayed and talked about. As the debate shows, this link is made with a wide range of political

implications and a number of discussants defend state welfare, I would however insist that the uncritical conflation of working-classness and state welfare shows the doxic character of mainstream political debate. People at the bottom of the social hierarchy are automatically classed as beneficiaries of welfare payments and as potentially fraudulently claiming benefits they are not entitled to. Questions of low pay, exploitation etc. appear not to enter the frame in this empirical example.

It needs to be added that the characterised debate took place pre-*Benefits Street* (2014d). The way in which working-class positions and state welfare are lumped together in the debate does therefore not mirror the narrative structure of *Benefits Street* (2014d) or other programmes, like *Skint* (2013i), that followed to some extent the blueprint of *People Like Us* (2013l) with the major exception that they put an explicit emphasis on state benefits.

As indicated, a number of comments call into question what can be described as the doxic logic of the class divide. Bourdieu (1977:168) argues that the taken-for-granted is challenged by 'the political and economic crises correlative with class division'. The undiscussed is brought into discussion due to changes in the objective economic conditions that disrupt the congruence of the experience of the social world and the ideological superstructure.[43]

This means that what is thinkable is not fixed and can, in particular in times of crisis, be challenged. In this empirical example, this happens in numerous ways. As pointed out, a small number of comments are generally sympathetic towards the participants of *People Like Us (2013l)* and their authors refuse to distance themselves from them. Despite being relatively small in number, these comments are very significant for this analysis as they illustrate the spectrum of possible readings of the programme. As I explained above, the comments that defend the area where the programme was filmed and the people appearing in it, do so either on the grounds of personal knowledge of the area or because they can relate to the displayed circumstances. This implies that the reading of a programme like *People Like Us* (2013l) is to some degree bound up with class positions. The audience research by Skeggs and Wood

[43] However, Bourdieu (1977:169) points out that there is no inevitability in these ultimately political processes and speaks of 'material and symbolic means of rejecting the definition of the real' that the dominated need to possess in order to break with doxa.

(2011) confirms this assumption. However, it must also be pointed out that this relationship is not a straight-forward one as 'relationships of proximity work in a much more complex manner' (Skeggs and Wood, 2011:100) than one would assume. People are not necessarily more sympathetic towards the 'characters' who are in class-terms most like them. This is very much in line with the above discussed need to distance oneself. In a Bourdieusian sense, the imperative to 'other' supposedly immoral Reality TV participants and to create distance is a greater concern for those who might fear to be associated with them. From the safety of an assured (upper) middle-class perspective, these value judgements need not to be made in the same way. Stating a clear class bias would probably over-stretch what can be deducted from rather brief anonymous comments, it can however be registered that a variety of readings as well as (political) interpretations are possible. And, as the pieces of research discussed at the beginning of this chapter show, these interpretations are to some degree influenced by class positions.

Furthermore, numerous comments indicate a degree of scepticism regarding the truthfulness of the programme. As I will discuss later, the question of authenticity is absolutely key in how Reality TV programmes are perceived. From a Bourdieusian point of view however, this immanent critique ultimately leaves the general political framework intact as for instance neither the social hierarchy nor its structuring principles are called into question. As discussed above, the doubts regarding the truthfulness of Reality TV in general do not lead to a general dismissal of *People Like Us* (2013l) as fabricated. By and large, the programme is taken seriously and discussed as a rather authentic representation of Harpurhey and its residents.[44]

[44] Quantitative research indicates that the trustworthiness of TV genres and sub-genres varies significantly. Whereas 89% of respondents to a ITC/BSC poll said they would 'always' or 'most of the time' perceive the information provided by news programmes and nature and wildlife programmes as accurate, the figure is only 59% for documentaries (ITC/BSC, 2002). The subgenre of docusoap was regarded as 'honest in its portrayal of individuals and the situations they are in' 'always' or 'most of the time' by 42% of the respondents (ITC/BSC, 2002:62). So there seems to be a lesser degree of trust compared to traditional documentaries. However, compared with daytime talk shows (9%) and game-based Reality TV programmes (20%), docusoaps do not fare too badly, in particular as a further 31% of respondents are of the opinion that they 'sometimes' portray its participants and their surroundings honestly. Of course, not too much can be read into these figures (in particular as they are already over ten years old and audience perceptions will certainly have

There are however, predominantly on *The Guardian* website, a number of comments that challenge the functioning of the political and the media field on a more fundamental level. First of all, there is reference to the ways in which cultural capital works as a means of distinction and secondly, some discussants point to the political functions of social divisions. And finally, the bias and unrepresentativeness of mainstream media discourse is referred to. Without overstating the scope of the mentioned comments, I would argue that it is acknowledged by a number of comments that media representations can be political in their effect. Furthermore, some discussants see media output as structured by the distributions of power in a wider sense and as reflection of the social hierarchy of a society.

To sum up, from a Bourdieusian point of view, a large number of comments referring to *People Like Us* (2013l) can be regarded as doxic insofar as they stereotypically pick up common underlying beliefs and translate them into biased assumptions about the programme. It is not only the way in which the TV programme is made sense of, but, possibly even more importantly, what is not talked about that reveals the doxic nature of the debate: structural inequalities, power differences and hugely differing possibilities to make one's voice heard are taken for granted and not worth talking about. By and large, established social structures and their repercussions are not questioned, and affirmative, individualistic interpretations of (perceived) social problems are put forward.

Mirroring the programme under discussion and, as I will discuss later, the genre as a whole, social inequalities are largely discussed on an individual level and comprehended more as individual characteristics than as structural effects, which in itself can be seen as the prevailing, doxic way of seeing the world. Interestingly, the popular distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor seems absent from the debate on the *Daily Mail* website. Instead, poverty and benefit payments are assumed and the underlying suspicion of fraud is apparent in a number of comments. On *The Guardian* website, class is discuss in a much less personalised or individualised way and debates around inequality take place on a rather abstract

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developed), but these figures appear to confirm the impression that a majority of viewers regards docusoaps not as entirely fabricated and at least to some degree believable.

level. Nevertheless, the debate is dominated by questions around state welfare which in itself can be seen as an unwarranted assumption with regards to *People Like Us* (2013l).

## 5.5 Conclusion

The analysis of comments referring to two newspaper articles about *People Like Us* (2013l) unsurprisingly shows a wide range of opinions, but at the same time a small number of common themes that are called upon in order to make sense of the programme. In particular, debates around social security appear to be of central importance in this context. Furthermore, hierarchies appear to inform these debates, but often do so in a rather implicit way. One of the most obvious findings clearly is the noticeable emotional dimension of social hierarchies and their public negotiation. Matters of taste, as expressions as well as fields of contention of stratification, are clearly morally, normatively and emotionally charged and classificatory battles are waged often without, as it appears, conscious awareness of their contestants. Shame and disgust clearly play a role in classed expressions of worth and, again, inform the debate below conscious rationality.

Doxa is therefore a concept that is well suited to explore representations of social class as well as the reactions to it. It allows us to take subconscious elements in the reproduction of the social order into account without depoliticising or psychologising social class. In this specific empirical example I have shown how a, potentially biased, representation of social class sparked debates around social security. Despite the fact that *People Like Us* (2013l) almost shies away from poverty and state welfare, the political discourse of social security dominates the debate. Morally and normatively charged judgments create distance between the mainstream of society and the 'other'. By doing so they cement the established social order and stereotypically portray working-class positions as inferior and in need of (potentially undeserved) welfare payments.

Bourdieu is interested in how social structures shape individual and collective processes that reaffirm the political order, but also points to possible frictions

between objective conditions and ideology that can put established ways of thinking into question. Using doxa as a conceptual tool inevitably puts the unsaid into the frame and therefore I tried to address areas that the analysed debates did not cover. Of course, this is insofar problematic as the researcher himself is not outside social structures and has no, in any sense, outside or objective view on the taken-for-granted. However, as indicated above, Bourdieu is very clear that no form of domination is complete and that there necessarily are frictions, inconsistencies and actual resistance to doxic beliefs. The role of the researcher, I would argue, is therefore to aim to reflexively explore these. Doxa as a method can help to question aspects of political representations that tend to be overlooked as well as pointing to an explanation why they are overlooked.

Reality TV and, arguably, docusoaps in particular, portray social matters in an extremely individualised way. It is therefore not too surprising that the debate around the programme to a large degree mirrors this way of seeing the world. In similar vein, the morally and emotionally charged judgements can clearly be seen as mirroring the narrative structure of a TV genre that is predicated upon (classed) judgement.

Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that the actual impact of a programme like *People Like Us* (2013l) can nowhere near conclusively be assessed by this type of analysis. As discussed above, even this analysis of very limited data shows that there are many different readings and interpretations of the programme. Those are inevitably linked to political as well as class positions and wider public discourses. Realty TV is not produced in a vacuum and it certainly is not consumed and discussed in a vacuum either.

Even this brief analysis has shown how the perception of Reality TV is bound up with current political discourses. In a sense, the fixation on state benefits is indicative of that, but is, I would argue, largely a surface phenomenon of how a social and economic inequalities are justified, internalised and rarely questioned.

# 6. The docusoap genre

In this chapter, I want to locate the docusoap genre historically to explore its similarities and differences with other, more traditional and conventional, forms of documentary filmmaking. I will discuss formal aspects as well as typical themes of docusoaps. However, following the ambition of Critical Discourse Analysis and Bourdieusian media critique, I intend to discuss how wider developments in the television market impacted on the development of the genre. The working conditions of those involved in the production of a docusoap will also be addressed. Equally, the relevance of outside influences and pressures on the media field will be touched on.

Finally, I will discuss some points of critique that docusoaps generally face; namely, questions of quality and impact. Docusoaps are routinely accused of being of poor quality and of having a detrimental political impact. I do not intend to defend the genre against these accusations, but aim to critically engage with this critique and to assess whether it is based on criteria that should inform my own empirical analysis.

## 6.1 The history of the docusoap

The history of the docusoap genre is not easy to pin down, partly due to the fuzziness of its definition. It will be discussed later what constitutes a docusoap, but it is very clear that what is called docusoap today developed from more conventional forms of observational documentary filmmaking. It therefore can be stated that the docusoap is a relatively young television genre with a long history. For the purpose of this research, I want to point to similarities and differences between newer forms of documentary filmmaking (like docusoaps), and earlier, more traditional forms. My aim is to arrive at a characterisation of the genre that takes its historicity into account. Therefore, I will not recapitulate the history of the documentary genre in chronological order, but structure my analysis around a number characteristics relevant to this research.

Observational cinema in the UK emerged as a documentary genre in the late 1950s; building on and further developing pre-war attempts of the filmmakers of the British

Documentary Film Movement around John Grierson (Bruzzi, 2001a). Observational cinema can be seen as a precursor of the docusoap insofar as there are clear parallels in terms of topics and filming techniques. Both tend to focus on 'ordinary people' and use supposedly unintrusive and passive filming techniques. The Australian TV programme *Sylvania Waters* (1992) is often regarded as the first TV programme to be labelled a docusoap (Kilborn, 2000). The commonalities with and differences to a programme like *The Family* (1974), that clearly stands in the tradition of observational direct cinema, illustrate the changing context of documentary filmmaking and points to wider developments in the television market as both were directed by the same director, Paul Watson, and reflect the changing contexts they were produced in.

Arguably, the most consequential development in the documentary sector in the last two decades is the invention and popularisation of Reality TV. Hill (2005) states that docusoaps can be regarded as the second of three waves of Reality TV innovations. Crime-based reality programmes were followed by a boom in dramatized, soap-opera-like observational documentaries and later by game-based reality TV shows (like *Big Brother* (2000) or *Survivor* (2001a)). It can be added that the docusoap genre itself went through a number or reincarnations. Whereas the earlier forms of docusoaps in the UK focused on the portrayal of workplaces (e.g. airports), the genre diversified, portraying the lives of celebrities as well as ordinary families in their homes and local communities. Other popular categories are the make-over format (e.g. *Snog Marry Avoid?* (2008b)) and, more recently, scripted-reality programmes (e.g. *The Only Way is Essex* (2010a)). The latter two are arguably furthest removed from the observational documentary tradition of the genre.

My chosen empirical example, BBC Three's *People Like Us* (2013l), can be seen as the first of a new wave of docusoaps that were set in deprived areas and explicitly advertised as such. It was followed by programmes like *Skint* (2013i) and the hugely successful *Benefits Street* (2014d).[45]

[45] Again, there are obvious parallels with earlier observational documentaries like for instance *The Scheme* (2010b) that are generally put in the documentary category.

According to Kilborn (2000), it was not before the late 1990s that docusoaps had an impact on the schedules of British broadcasters. However, by 1999, alone the BBC had twelve docusoaps in production. Docusoaps proved a hugely successful innovation, even rivalling established prime-time formats in terms of viewing figures (Kilborn, 2000).

Ever since, reality-based programmes fill large parts of the day- and also prime-time TV schedules. Even after 15 years, the draw of docusoaps appears unabated with the first episode of *Benefits Street* (2014d) being watched by 4.3 million viewers, more than any Channel 4 programme in the whole of 2013 (Collier, 2014).

The proliferation of docusoaps was fuelled by two main factors: popularity with the viewers and comparatively low production costs. These factors will be discussed later, at this point, it is important to point out that wider developments in the television market contributed to the rise of the genre. Increasing deregulation and marketization generally made production costs and audience ratings a much greater concern for the broadcasters.[46] Interestingly however, the dramatic increase in the number of TV channels did not necessarily result in a greater degree of variety and specialisation. As Kilborn et al. (2001) argue, consumer-oriented broadcasting largely resulted in uniformity. The docusoap genre is a good case in point, as there are numerous examples of very blatant replication of successful formulas – from BBC's *Airport* (1996b) and ITV's *Airlines* (1998a) to the aforementioned mini-wave of 'Poverty Porn'. Increased pressures on the broadcasters appear to have intensified the tendency to copy successful formats in an attempt to secure a channels' market share. This argument will be further developed in the next sub-chapter.

The production costs of a docusoap are only approximately one third of the equivalent amount of a sit-com (Bruzzi, 2006), which is in turn considerably cheaper to produce than television drama. As mentioned, docusoaps manage to attract vast numbers of viewers and, due to their parallels with popular drama, also attract a similar audience than fictional drama (Bruzzi, 2001b). The marketization of television,

[46] With the launch of Sky television (1989), Channel 4 (1982), Channel 5 (1997) and ITV 2 (1998) and the increasing availability and popularity of cable and satellite transmission, the number of available channels rocketed in the 1990s (Ofcom, 2014) and clearly increased the level of competition in the TV market.

does, as I will discuss shortly, not simply favour 'cheap' formats, it also has a significant impact on the conditions of production and through that on the content of those programmes (Graef, 1999).

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that technological progress played a significant role in the development of the genre. The arrival of digital recording and editing equipment made it feasible to produce large amounts of film material for comparatively little output. Shooting on film would have been prohibitively expensive as the production of a docusoap tends to require a large amount of raw material (Bruzzi, 2001b). Digital filming and editing allows the production and handling of the large amounts of material that docusoaps require.

## 6.2 Characteristics

In the following, I want to explore the central characteristics of docusoaps in terms of content, but also with regards to production conditions and the most tangible and relevant differences to more traditional documentary filmmaking.

### 6.2.1 Production conditions of the docusoap

As mentioned above, due to technological advances, as well as social and political developments, the TV landscape has changed significantly over the last three decades (Ofcom, 2014) and it can certainly be expected that the full impact of the increased availability and popularity of new, digital media is yet to be felt for conventional broadcasters. In the following, I want to discuss how those changes that have already materialised impacted on the production conditions and through them shape the output of contemporary documentary filmmaking.

Bourdieu regards considerations along these lines as highly relevant as he, as has been discussed in the methodology chapter, regards media output as to a considerable extent structured by the internal logic of the field. However, Bourdieu (1998) also acknowledges that the autonomy of the media field is severely limited by external factors like market demands. This is particularly true for the mass media.

Whereas the more elitist field of art, or the 'field of restricted production' (Susen, 2011:176) enjoys a greater degree of autonomy, popular media or 'fields of large-scale production' (Webb et al., 2002:182) are more dominated by economic interest.[47]

This market logic drives the homogenisation of media output. The increased commodification of cultural products and the competition in which media products stand to each other, leads to greater uniformity. Bourdieu (1998) acknowledges that this sounds counter-intuitive and contradicts the promise of the free market economy that competition is a driver of diversity. However, the market pressures on television providers are, according to Bourdieu (1998), even stronger than in other areas of cultural production and leaves them with very little autonomy. Bourdieu (1998:23) therefore speaks of 'a whole series of mechanisms, the most important of which is competition' that lead to conformity. The competition for market share is the central pressure that limits the variety of television output. Many TV channels try to appeal to the biggest possible audience and catering for niche markets in the context of television is rarely a viable option. As alluded to above, another effect of competition is that tried and tested formats that proved successful for a competitor are often copied.

Furthermore, Bourdieu (1998) identifies two more dimensions of competition that lead to a homogenisation of television output. Firstly, time is a rare commodity and people working in the television industry are under pressure to produce their output quickly. As a result, they tend to resort to clichés and to the repetition of what the viewer is used to. Bourdieu (1998:29) speaks of 'received ideas' that are easy to (re-) produce and even easier to receive and understand. Secondly, in a commodified and competitive environment, there is also a scarcity of jobs. This leads to a (partly unconscious) tendency to political conformity among people competing for or trying

[47] According to Susen (2011), there is a dialectic of cultural distinction at play: whereas the somewhat autonomous field of art can create (or help to recreate) cultural distinction, the imperative for mass-appeal largely denies the mass media this capacity. There naturally is a negative correlation between popular appeal and the potential for cultural distinction. Processes of commodification work in significantly different ways for the respective fields of production. Whereas exclusivity and inaccessibility can be seen as vital components of high culture and a necessity in the creation of (economic and symbolic) value, the opposite is generally true for popular media products.

to secure their employment. Bourdieu (1998:17) is clear that this tendency to conform should not be regarded as an individual shortcoming, but that

> ... individual corruption only masks the structural corruption ... that operates on the game as a whole through mechanisms such as competition for market share.

Self-censorship and economic censorship go hand-in-hand.[48] Whereas Bourdieu (2005) analyses processes of homogenisation and commodification on a more general level and in structural terms, a number of authors see his critique confirmed in the actual developments in the UK television market. Biressi and Nunn (2005) for instance, argue that the development of factual television in the UK cannot be understood without taking processes of commodification and capitalisation into account. Crucially, these processes also had a significant influence on public broadcasting that, if one accepts Bourdieu's assumptions, would traditionally show a greater degree of independence (from market forces at least). The move from broadcasting as a public service to a largely consumer-oriented service provider had a very noticeable effect on programming in general and on the documentary genre in particular (Kilborn et al., 2001).

The pressure television workers are under, the scarcity of time and competition for resources that Bourdieu (1998) describes, are confirmed for the documentary genre by the renowned filmmaker Roger Graef (1999), who states that the working conditions and the structural pressures in the documentary filmmaking genre have a negative impact on the quality of its output. Graef (1999:16) sums up his concerns as follows:

> If casualization, short contracts and quick turnarounds are the rule, how are skills developed and passed on? If ethics are not engrained, and results and ratings more important for survival, researchers must deliver or else.

With regards to the scarcity of time Graef (1999:16) states:

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[48] These forms of censorship are, according to Bourdieu (1998), even more effective and problematic than censorship by political players or the state because their principle remains invisible. Television for Bourdieu (1998:27) provides little opportunity to go 'against market imperatives'.

> Time is undervalued in tight schedules. Time to reject and dig in research and development time to shoot over time ...

Hewlett, in conversation with Fiddick (1999:23), seconds this assessments by stating that limited time and limited funding leads documentary-makers to 'seek confirmation of what had been commissioned' rather than to critically engage with the given subject matter and potentially produce unexpected and unconventional results.

The notion of authenticity and truthfulness of documentary filmmaking will be explored later, but at this point I want to argue that the working conditions of filmmakers might be as big a factor (if not a bigger one) as possible political agendas or conscious attempts to manipulate public opinion on the side of the producers of television. Bourdieu goes as far as stating that accuracy is irrelevant in a television context where sensationalised headlines are everything (Webb et al., 2002). I imagine that many media analysts and practitioners would disagree with such a broad-brush judgement, and there are instances where misrepresentations and distortion of reality have backfired and severely damaged the offending programmes and therefore been proven not to be irrelevant at all.[49] Nevertheless, even Winston (1999:22) who speaks of a 'witch-hunt about truth and lies on tv' concludes that commercial pressures on documentary-makers are difficult to reconcile with truthfulness, as in a 'commercialised and casualised tv industry ... sensationalism has become all and honesty an unaffordable luxury'. According to Graef (1999:21), commercial pressures and time constraints lead to mistakes (partly caused by inexperience), but are also a 'recipe for fakery' and further:

> The cheapness and flexibility of the new technology plus the increasing competition and focus on ratings and profits makes hoaxing, or at least massaging a modest story into a sensation, both easy and more tempting

[49] The most prominent example of recent times is probably Carlton Television's *The Connection* (1996c) where the undeclared recreation (maybe fabrication is the more appropriate term) of supposed drug smuggling was exposed as such and caused a lot of financial and reputational damage to the involved channel and production company (Hill, 2005).

Bourdieu's assessment that accuracy is no concern for television might be an oversimplification, but it appears that there is a clear tension between journalistic standards and claims of truthfulness on the one side, and market demands that create working conditions that are hardly conductive to integrity on the other side. Maybe it is a more realistic assessment that accuracy is (only) insofar a concern for documentary filmmaking, as a gross violation of established norms can, if detected, become a problem for broadcasters. I will later discuss what these established norms consist of and to what degree they meet a lay understanding of authenticity.

Finally, I want to point to another dimension of exploitation, as it appears that it is not only people behind the cameras that are potentially being exploited as a result of the commodification of culture and the according market pressures. As I will discuss later, the docusoap genre heavily relies on the depiction of the emotions of its 'characters' and, it could be argued, this focus on displayed emotions provides a substitute for a plausibly developed narration or a more in-depth engagement with the lives of the participants. In order to be able to capture the display of emotions on camera, producers of docusoaps need, generally speaking, to gain the trust of the subjects who agree to be filmed. They are encouraged to share their inner-world with the camera and ultimately with the audience. Docusoaps are much more character-centred than issue-centred (Kilborn, 2000) and are therefore generally very keen on capturing emotionally charged, and therefore 'authentic', situations or (self-confessional) statements of their protagonists. This foregrounding of affect and emotions will be discussed later with regards to the empirical example, but it should be pointed out that pressures to produce successful entertainment at relatively low cost intensifies the temptation (or the need) to prompt and exploit the display of emotions. Again, Graef (1999) backs up this assumption through his experience as a practitioner and argues that there is a huge degree of trust among members of the public as well as institutions that can easily be exploited by the filmmaker. As previously discussed, Graef (1999) is of the opinion that appeals to ethical behaviour and journalistic standards are unlikely to prevail in an increasingly commercialised and competitive environment. Fiddick (1999:23), citing Gardman, refers to the ambiguity of getting close to people and then having to 'distance yourself in the

cutting-room'. It is not a new phenomenon that people are being exploited on television, both behind and in front of the camera, and, as I will argue later, the issue is not a straightforward one when consenting adults are involved. However, there can be little doubt that focussing on the displayed emotions in a potentially exploitative way is very compatible with the need for cheap, easy and fast to produce television entertainment. Bourdieu (1984b:8) argues that the commodification of culture reinforces

> ... the primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation over the object of representation .... Affirming the primacy of the saying over the thing said.

Therefore, appearance is key. Emotions need to be visibly displayed; for Reality TV the authenticity or context is secondary to them being clearly displayed and easily readable.

### 6.2.2 Content

As I mentioned above, the docusoap as a genre is not easy to pin down and even in its relatively short history it has been through a number of reincarnations. Nevertheless, there are a small number of typical and identifiable docusoap themes. Most notably, docusoaps tend to revolve around the portrayal of 'real lives' and 'real people' and 'ordinary' subjects (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004) . The focus of the docusoap tends to be on the banal and minutiae (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a) and the quotidian (Bruzzi, 2006). However, it is fairly obvious that ordinariness in a docusoap context has a somewhat different meaning to the common usage of the word. Even when celebrity-based varieties of the programme are not taken into account, docusoaps tend to depict situations, workplaces and people that are to a varying degree extra-ordinary. Ordinary in a television context therefore, first and foremost, means that the themes and subjects depicted in the programmes are supposed to be non-fictional and at least somewhat relatable to the viewers' perceptions of reality.

As mentioned, the issue of authenticity will be discussed separately, but at this point, I want to question the notion of 'ordinariness' a little further. It is certainly part of the

appeal of docusoaps to revolve around issues, situations and people the viewer can relate to and that are not too distant from their own social world or, if not that, not too dissimilar to accepted conceptions of contemporary social realities. As I will show with regards to my chosen empirical example, authenticity and ordinariness are claimed by docusoaps and used as a major selling point. However, there is a strong case for docusoaps, due to their main intention to entertain, being structurally incapable of effectively portraying ordinariness. Corner (2002), for instance, points to contradictions that arises when docusoaps, and Reality TV in general, pretend to portray ordinariness by creating very temporal, constructed and artificial situations. What appears, or is intended to appear, natural, spontaneous and uncontrolled is, as Bruzzi (2006) argues, a highly controlled setting in which the structure of the programme is predetermined and the locations and cast are carefully selected. The casting of docusoaps clearly, and maybe unsurprisingly, shows a tendency to choose characters that are able and willing to display what Dovey (2000:172) describes as 'new subjectivities' that foreground the particular and the specific. The success of a docusoap appears very much to depend on the main 'characters' and therefore Lawson (2013) states that for the docusoap genre that 'this type of film is as obsessed as any Hollywood blockbuster with casting'.

Docusoaps are, due to constraints of the production process and the medium in general, unable to present all aspects of reality, as Kilborn et al. (2001) demonstrate with reference to the work-based docusoap *Vets in Practice* (1997a). To what extent documentary filmmaking can successfully portray reality shall be discussed later, it seems, however, that the docusoap genre restricts itself to the portrayal of a small number of aspects of reality that cannot be explained by the inherent limitations of documentary filmmaking alone.

As previously discussed, docusoaps clearly favour the personal over the social. It certainly can be argued that the former is easier to capture on camera than the latter, but it is questionable how Reality TV can, in a meaningful way, claim to portray 'ordinariness' without making reference to (ordinary) circumstances. If social background features in docusoaps it tends to do so solely as a, often negative, reference point and as something 'from which the individual has risen, indeed which he or she has overcome, on the quest to selfhood' (Palmer, 2004:186).

Docusoaps, as well as their more sober predecessors, appear to be drawn to working-class communities and the depiction of them and their members. Arguably, depictions of working-class people and communities imply authenticity in a way that portrayals of more privileged circumstances do not. Skeggs and Wood (2012a) show that the Grierson-influenced British social-realist documentaries of the 1940s specifically and explicitly intended to expose everyday life and in their context, working-class experience was almost equated with 'the real', despite, as Kilborn and Izod (1997) point out, the documentarists themselves generally having been middle-class professionals.[50]

Docusoaps do generally not only marginalise issues (Bruzzi, 2006) in favour of the microsocial (Corner, 2002) they take their focus on the individual to the extreme by constructing narratives along the lines of therapeutic discourses. This is most evident in the make-over formats (Palmer, 2004), but a construction of life as an ongoing individual quest for true selfhood appears to inform most varieties of the genre. Docusoaps clearly focus on the self, but often on selves that face challenges that (seemingly) take place on the level of the individual. Biressi and Nunn (2005:96) speak of 'public disclosure' and 'narrativisation of personal identity' as crucial elements of contemporary factual television. I will later discuss to what extent this general assessment is applicable to my empirical example, but it is evident that docusoaps offer a (relatively) new platform for the public performance of a mediated self (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a).

It is debateable whether a hyper-individualised, almost therapeutic narrative of the self can in itself be seen as an 'ordinary' way of making sense of the world. What seems less debateable is the intention of docusoaps to foreground psychological struggles and to neglect social, let alone political, aspects of ordinary circumstances. As I will argue in the following section, this almost exclusive focus on the individual,

[50] It appears that fictional and non-fictional social realist filmmaking influenced each other and that in the British context the approach of the pre-war documentarists was picked up by the filmmakers of the British New Wave around Tony Richardson, Jack Clayton, Lindsay Anderson etc. As Hill (1999) demonstrates, there are clear parallels between the genres in terms of ambition and content. Like social realist documentaries, these fictional representations tried to portray working-class people as '"real", "fully-rounded" characters in "real" settings (the regions, cities, factories etc.) with "real" problems' (Hill, 1999:130).

personal and private is something that sets the docusoaps genre apart from more traditional and conventional forms of documentary filmmaking.

### 6.2.3 Documentary vs. docusoap

As shown above, docusoaps clearly stand in the tradition of documentary filmmaking and observational documentaries in particular. It seems however that an adjustment of the 'focal length' (Corner, 2002:256) has taken place. In docusoaps, localised personal narratives and the display of emotions are much more in the foreground than in traditional documentary filmmaking. As described above, the 'inner story' generally gets 'pulled rather sharply away from its broader social conditions and contingencies' (Corner, 2002:256) and the (social) background of a person appears in the docusoap as just that: a background that might or might not be part of a personal narrative.

This foregrounding of the personal is possibly the most obvious, but actually just one of a number of characteristics of a 'postdocumentary culture of television' (Corner, 2002:257). Docusoaps look different from conventional observational documentaries. This is not too surprising - the hint is in the name - as docusoaps resemble soap operas with regards to the way stories are developed and storylines interwoven, in the way music is used to amplify the affective dimension of the plot, and also with regards to their dramatised narrative structure. Docusoaps generally incorporate many playful elements that conventional documentaries do usually not employ (Corner, 2002). The narration or 'voice-over' of docusoaps tends to be much more light-hearted and humorous. Docusoaps can, in contrast to conventional documentaries, certainly not be characterised as a 'discourse of sobriety' (Corner, 2002:264). This is reflected in the topics, but probably even more so in the style and tone of the programmes. Skeggs and Wood (2012a:26) point out that in docusoaps 'objectivity and rationality give way to subjectivity and sensation.' This development is also reflected in the fact that docusoaps put a much greater emphasis on the 'performance' of their protagonists. This is particularly true for those variants of the genre in which the participants are put in constructed and unusual situations. It can however be argued that alone the presence of a camera (crew) creates a somewhat

unusual and constructed situation and that therefore a performative element is unavoidable. Bruzzi (2001b) makes the very relevant point that despite the performances of its protagonists being a vital component for the success of a docusoap production, the genre displays a great reluctance in acknowledging that fact and to a large extent holds on to claims of authenticity.

This reluctance to concede that performance plays a role in the production of a docusoap, is, as I intend to demonstrate in relation to my empirical example, to some degree caused by a concern that this would undermine the programmes' claims of authenticity and truthfulness. There is a tension between the notions of 'performed self' and the 'true self' that Reality TV exploits, but fails to lay open. Pretentiousness or 'fakeness' of participants can be used in the narrative and the portrayal of a character, but the artificiality of the setting, plus the manipulative potential of the editing process, necessarily remains in the dark.

Truthfulness is another area where differences between traditional forms of observational documentary filmmaking and docusoaps can be made visible. In a nutshell, it can be argued that the focus has switched from the ambition to present the real to the aim to 'stage the real' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a:23). Holmes and Jermyn (2004) come to the conclusion that in contemporary documentary filmmaking attempts to capture real life are secondary to the demands of the format and to an emphasis on performance and display. Whereas a concern with 'the truth' was traditionally at the core of documentaries, docusoaps appear less concerned with the distinction between fact and fiction (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a).[51] Whereas, for instance, Paul Watson's *The Family* (1974) was meant to be read as a true representation of ordinary British family life in the 1970s (Biressi and Nunn, 2005), its descendants do not let go of the claim of truthfulness completely, but appear to be much more geared towards entertaining their viewers and less concerned with the notion of authenticity.

The intended impact and, if one exists, the political agenda of docusoaps remain somewhat unclear. This fuzziness can be seen as another characteristic that

[51] Corner (2002) even argues that the playful, performative and entertaining style of contemporary reality-based programmes impacted to some extent on the general conception of categories like 'the public', 'the social' and 'the real'.

separates the genre from the tradition of documentary filmmaking. Corner (2002) acknowledged that entertainment and diversion has always been among the intentions of documentary filmmakers, but beyond that sees the genre as rooted in journalistic inquiry and a sometimes radical interrogation of perceived social and political ills. Documentaries, or at least a significant proportion of them, traditionally aspired to offer an alternative perspective and to add to the public discourse. In particular, early social-realist documentary filmmaking, influenced by Grierson's work, showed a strong commitment to exposing the living conditions of the poor and capturing working-class experience more generally (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a). The aforementioned *The Family* (1974) can be seen in that tradition and its maker, Paul Watson, as quoted by Biressi and Nunn (2005:66), distances himself from newer, docusoap-like developments of his approach:

> They sneered and didn't enrich our lives or understanding, even when dealing with serious hurt in *Neighbours From Hell*. Most of the time it was middle-class media people taking the piss out of people performing for the 15 minutes of fame.

So Watson's aim was to 'enrich lives' and 'enrich understanding' whereas he regards programmes like the one mentioned as not helpful and potentially damaging. Kilborn (2000:112) follows a similar line of argument and concludes that the programmemakers of docusoaps are more concerned with producing 'mildly diverting entertainment than one that is likely to raise a viewer's level of social awareness'. Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (1966), although strictly speaking not a documentary, is often referred to as a programme that, by choosing to depict the lives and the suffering of (fictional) working-class people, had a palpable impact in a political sense (Biressi and Nunn, 2005).

I would, however, argue that it is problematic to label conventional documentary as inherently critical and docusoaps as solely geared towards entertainment and (therefore) apolitical or even depoliticising. I will discuss this common criticism shortly, but I would argue that it is problematic to jump to conclusions regarding the supposedly depoliticising impact of docusoaps and to contrast them with the alleged journalistic qualities and agency of conventional documentaries. Furthermore, this sort of juxtapositioning runs the risk of producing unhelpful generalisations. I very

much agree with Holmes and Jermyn (2004) who argue that in the contemporary television landscape, boundaries between genres have become blurred and therefore thinking in binaries is not helpful. Programmes and their function and impact cannot be judged based on, increasingly complex, genre classifications. As much as even very sober social-realist documentaries have a somewhat entertaining (arguably voyeuristic) element, as can a seemingly shallow and unpolitical programme like *Wife Swap* (2003) (that I will come back to later) be interpreted as an illuminating social experiment that tells us more about class divisions than conventional, pedagogically-minded documentary filmmaking.

Equally unhelpful are binaries with regards to considerations about the respective genres' relationship with 'the truth'. I would argue that the differences between conventional documentary and docusoap are of a gradual rather than fundamental nature. Even early social-realist documentary filmmaking relied, for instance, on the re-enactment of scenes (Graef, 1999) and John Grierson (as cited in Holmes and Jermyn, 2004:11) himself described his own documentary filmmaking as 'the creative interpretation of reality'. The sobriety and self-restraint of the social-realists can, even with the best of intentions, not escape the contradictions that accompany any attempts of capturing reality or 'the truth' on film. Corner (2002:263), referring to these early social-realist attempts, concludes that their attempted naturalism was ultimately 'highly implausible'. As I have touched on above and intend to develop further with regards to my empirical analysis, the 'truth' and 'authenticity' of filmic representations are extremely complex issues that warrant a thorough analysis of their general conditions and specific realisations. Broad-brush categorisations along genre lines are not helpful.

My intention is not to gloss over significant genre differences and to portray docusoaps as a, more or less, benign and, more or less, realistic representation of social realities. Quite the opposite. However, it seems to me that the docusoap genre has to be seen as developed from conventional observational documentaries and not as standing in sharp contrast to it. The specifics of it can best be explored if generalisations and demonizing value judgments are avoided. In the following, I intend to discuss the most central and relevant of these judgments that tend to

revolve around questions of quality and also further the argument around the allegedly malign political impact of the genre.

## 6.3 Critique

In the following, I want to add to the characterisation of the docusoap genre by discussing points of critique that are generally levelled at it. Firstly, I will deal with the critique that docusoaps lack quality and generally represent rather poor television. Secondly, I will refer to the concern that docusoaps have a problematic political impact.

### 6.3.1 Quality

Docusoaps are often described as an inferior form of documentary filmmaking. Kilborn (2000:111) for instance sees the danger that they 'potentially devalue the whole currency of documentary' filmmaking by trivialising serious subjects. It appears that there is a correlation between the comparatively low production costs and the cultural value that is ascribed to the genre (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a; Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). A rather common line of critique therefore revolves around the assumption that due to their relative cheapness in terms of production costs, docusoaps can be seen as cheap and less worthy television. In the hierarchical order of television output, docusoaps appear close to the bottom and clearly below conventional documentaries. Brunsdon (1990:67) makes the observation that docusoaps are routinely criticised for lacking quality, but that it appears that 'only the most conservative ideas about quality are circulating'. One of the more prominent critics of docusoaps, or in this case of Reality TV in general, is John Humphrys (2004):

> Reality implies authenticity and honesty. And whatever some of this stuff may be, it is not authentic and it is not honest. This is not just bad television in the sense that it's mediocre, pointless, puerile even. It's bad because it is damaging.

Humphrys (2004) is of the opinion that Reality TV damages or 'desensitises' the audience, and has a negative impact on television output in general, claiming that 'they have infected the mainstream of the medium'.

This critique embodies what Holmes and Jermyn (2004) see as a paternalistic impulse to protect a supposedly vulnerable and malleable audience from attempts of manipulation. Also, Brunsdon (1990) is very critical of a value judgement like Humphrys' and rightly asks the questions: 'Quality for whom? Judgment by whom? On whose behalf?' and goes on to state that what audiences gain from docusoaps does not necessarily correlate with ultimately subjective value judgments. However, and Brunsdon (1990) refers to this, value judgments are not subjective at all and always bound up with the social structure of a society as well as with questions of power.

Lawson (2013) makes the point that the relationship between docusoaps and other television genres is a more complex and reciprocal one than Humphrys implies. He points to mock-documentaries like *The Office* (2001b) to demonstrate its creative impact on fictional filmmaking.

Again, it is helpful to return to Bourdieu's critique of taste. Bourdieu (1984a) demonstrates how taste is bound up with class positions and is also used to legitimise, ascertain and reproduce difference. Cultural classification systems reflect the socio-economic divisions of the class system (Susen, 2011). Therefore, supposedly subjective judgments very much tend to reflect socio-economic positions. Brunsdon (1990) adds to this that some judgments are perceived as more subjective than others. In a Bourdieusian sense, value judgements are seen as more objective the closer they are to legitimate taste. Coming back to the docusoap genre, its classification as 'trash TV' is based on moral and aesthetic criteria which are themselves part of an ideological discourse (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). Debates around cultural value are shaped by class struggles and, as Bourdieu (1984a) demonstrates, power is always at stake when the worth of cultural products is discussed. Docusoaps, like their preferred subjects, rank low on the hierarchy of tastes and this fact cannot be explained by supposedly objective aesthetic criteria; quite the opposite, it brings their classed character to light.

This is not to say that cultural products like docusoaps cannot, and should not, be criticised, but acts as a reminder not to 'retreat into a position of class and taste-based superiority' (Palmer, 2004:175). I would argue that there are plenty of reasons to be very critical of docusoaps and some of those will be explored in the empirical analysis, however labelling them as 'trash' is problematic and clearly a reflection of classed cultural hierarchies. Both their relatively low production costs and their focus on 'ordinary people' make docusoaps susceptible to class snobbery. The 'cheapness' of Reality TV makes it an easy target. Assessing the quality or cultural worth of television output can easily and uncritically fall back on unhelpful criteria. I would, therefore, suggest a critical engagement with this critique and an exploration of the implications of classed value judgments. This does not let docusoaps off the hook or make them uncriticisable. Quite the opposite; as I intend to demonstrate in my empirical analysis, docusoaps can be scrutinised if not for their (lack of) 'quality' or their 'tastelessness', but critiqued for their misleading claims of truthfulness, for their potential to exploit their subjects, for their intentional and unintentional political impact etc. My aim is however not to reproduce classed and morally loaded value judgments, but to assess docusoaps against their own claims. Finally, and possibly most importantly, the view of participants of one particular programme will be presented and will help to substantiate an assessment of the programme. Before that however, I will briefly explore lines of argument that criticise docusoaps on a political level and with particular regard to their political function and impact.

### 6.3.2 Banal vs. political & impact

As discussed in the methodology chapter, Bourdieu's media analysis can be described as somewhat patchy and largely focused on the internal mechanisms of the media field as well as on external forces that shape its output. Bourdieu regards the media field as semi-autonomous and therefore of limited capacity to set an agenda independent of influential political and economic players. To what extent media outlets are capable of independently defining and pursuing political aims is debatable, and, as discussed, Bourdieu has been criticised for understating this capacity. He is however quite clear that the impact of mass media is not to be

underestimated. Whether their agenda is their own or largely influenced by powerful players in the political and the economic field, media organisations have a huge influence on their audience. For Bourdieu (1998:18) television is a particularly powerful medium as it

> ... enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think.

The media field, and television in particular, is therefore a crucial battleground where meaning and the legitimacy of power are at stake. As discussed in relation to the Bourdieusian concept of doxa, meaning is always the result of political struggles and power constantly needs to be legitimised discursively. Of course, this process cannot be regarded as transparent and democratic due to the subconscious dimension of doxa and, more importantly, the unequal degree of influence that individuals and groups of people can exert. Cultural struggles, fought out in the media field 'are always struggles over the parameters of social legitimacy' (Susen, 2011:180). Therefore, people or groups of people who are in powerful positions to shape media output have a greater capacity to exert social and political control. Cultural domination, in a (neo-)Marxist as well as in a Bourdieusian sense, goes hand and hand with political domination.[52] Nevertheless, it is important not to over-simplify this relation and to acknowledge degrees of freedom and the potential of media-, even television-, output to go against dominant ways of producing meaning. Bourdieu himself helped to illustrate this fact by having two of his lectures (on television) broadcast on French national television, relatively free of limitations (Webb et al., 2002).

A common line of critique is that docusoaps are apolitical or even depoliticising due to their foregrounding of emotional aspects and their focus on the individual and the micro-social. Bourdieu (1998:51) is very critical of the tendency to dramatise and sensationalise events and states that

[52] This is not to say that material conditions ceased to matter; economic domination is not replaced with, but to a great extent mediated by cultural domination (Susen, 2011).

> ... human interest stories create a political vacuum. They depoliticize and reduce what goes on in the world to the level of anecdote and scandal.

Skeggs and Wood (2012a) refer to this critique along similar lines, regarding sensationalism and rationality as mutually exclusive and emotional engagement as not helpful in the political debate. In this view, the sensation produced by Reality TV has no political connection nor public purpose. Skeggs and Wood (2012a:26) quote Nichols who sums up this critique by stating:

> The very intensity of feelings, emotions, sensation, involvement that reality TV produces is also discharged harmlessly within its dramatic envelope of banality.

Corner (2002) sees a similar dichotomy as for him the focus on the micro-social has to a large extent replaced a critical engagement with social and political structures. This shift is also reflected in the intended purpose of documentary filmmaking, that according to Corner (2002:260) has shifted from journalistic inquiry or interrogation to diversion which he characterises as: 'snoopy sociability' and goes on to state that: 'Propagandistic, expositional, or analytic goals are exchanged for modes of intensive or relaxed diversion'. In this view, the focus on individual stories that are presented in a sensationalised and dramatized way diverts the viewers' attention away from general, structural and political consideration to individual fates. The main point of critique is that any sort of social or political context is omitted from the narrative.

However, it can equally be argued that the foregrounding of emotions and even their presentation in sensationalised form is not in itself apolitical or depoliticising. Quite the opposite, the portrayal of emotions can be very politicising and open up political debates. Corner (2002) points to the fact that even very early, comparatively sober and consciously political documentary filmmaking in the 1920s and 1930s did not just seek cognitive, but also affective impact. Skeggs and Wood (2012a) add that a number of feminist writers regard the portrayal of supposedly private spheres of life, including their emotional dimensions, as potentially political. A focus on the domestic or even on the (supposedly) banal has the potential to politicise allegedly private domains and to illustrate how social and political developments (like for instance policy changes) impact on everyday life of the people concerned. Corner (2006)

explores how the docusoap *Wife Swap* (2003)[53] illustrates class differences in modern Britain in a way that more conventional documentary filmmaking would struggle to do. The 'deliberate mismatch' (Corner, 2006:72) of families is certain to produce tensions and drama, but also often provides insights into the classed differences of domestic life. This view is seconded by Biressi and Nunn (2005:64) who state that:

> The best docusoaps, which may be regarded as a sub-genre of observational documentary, with their detailed attention to family and personal life, are especially adept at exposing the fractures in the social structure that maintain social cohesion.

So it appears that the focus on the supposedly banal and private and the foregrounding of emotions does not preclude political arguments, let alone politicised readings. The portrayal of the specific can clearly, directly or indirectly, refer to the general. Whether intentionally or not, a docusoap like *Wife Swap* (2003) reveals aspects of inequality and class cultures. Even the most personal, seemingly individual, accounts have the potential to challenge social conventions and political convictions.

Furthermore, docusoaps can be seen as politically relevant by widening access to television and giving a voice to people who in the past rarely appeared on screen. Couldry (2011) states that Reality TV can make populations appear and for Biressi and Nunn (2005) the representation of ordinary people is political in itself. Reality TV can make views heard that tend to be absent from mainstream television and provide

> ... implicit social commentary ... through a commitment to revealing social structures and challenging the preconceptions of viewers through the revelation of the patent 'humanity' of its film subjects' (Biressi and Nunn, 2005:63).

Bourdieu (1998:21) argues that the power of television to make populations appear is very significant:

[53] in which two women of often widely differing class background swap their homes and families for two weeks.

> This power to show is also a power to mobilize. It can give life to ideas or images, but also to groups.

However, it is obvious that simply portraying disadvantaged and marginalised groups cannot be seen as giving them a voice and empowering them. Crucially, questions of power and control need to be asked as docusoaps, and documentaries in general, have the potential to exploit their participants and to paint a rather unfavourable picture or, perhaps equally problematic, to adopt a paternalistic stance that maintains power inequalities in a different fashion, but to a similar extent. Docusoaps certainly improved access to television for groups (and classes) that were, and still are, underrepresented on television screens. I would, however, argue that there needs to be a critical assessment of whose terms this widening of access is on, who controls it and who benefits from it.

Finally, there is a line of argument that is less concerned with the focus on individual stories and their emotional dimension, but with the way these (supposedly) individual stories are developed narratively. This view is summed up by Palmer (2004:187) as the 'triumph of the therapeutic' in Reality TV. Bourdieu (1998:52) argues that television, with its tendency to individualise and sensationalise, activates 'purely sentimental and therapeutic forms of mobilizing feelings'. It is not so much the foregrounding of the individual that is seen as problematic, but the way in which these narratives are structured. Life is presented as an endless individual challenge and a quest for individual fulfilment that revolves around a never-ending series of choices.[54] Docusoaps not only focus on the individual, they also suggest that the individual needs to be invested in 'a commercialized and commodified project of the self' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a:28). Self-responsibility is at the centre of many reality formats and probably most prominent in the make-over varieties, but also docusoaps appear very much informed by therapeutic discourses which

> ... provide a language for acknowledging the intensities of subjective experience in a world where power structures and decision-making processes appear to alienate and exclude the everyday individual and the quotidian life (Biressi and Nunn, 2005:104).

[54] Reality TV has the tendency to present these choices as morally loaded and, as Skeggs and Wood (2012a) point out, the ethical judgments of these choices are generally based on conservative ideas of 'the family' and 'responsibility'.

Subjectivity appears to have become the only way of making sense of the world.[55]

As touched upon previously, the individual is easier to capture on camera than the social and equally an individual choice is easier to narrate and to dramatise than the complex and messy interplay of structure and agency. Nevertheless, is it a fair criticism that docusoaps, intentionally or not, tend to reproduce the ideology of self-responsibility and, as Skeggs and Wood (2012a:28) put it, of 'compulsory individuality'. Reality TV acts as a template for self-reliance and self-work and can therefore be seen as a pedagogic cultural technology that promotes self-governance (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a). Docusoaps suggest a way of making sense of the world that neglects social conditions in favour of individual subjectivity. Their narration tends to point to the self as a closed psychological entity as opposed to a self in social contexts.

Here I have shown that it is problematic to make general, broad-brush statements about the political function of docusoaps. There are a number of very valid points of critique regarding their political function, mainly around their extreme focus on individual narratives and their almost complete omissions of the social and political dimensions of the portrayed stories. However, this critique says very little about the actual impact of these programmes. The audience's reading of a docusoap might vary considerably from the alleged depoliticising effect. Equally, the foregrounding of drama and emotions is not depoliticising in itself and, therefore, simplifying conclusions should be avoided. Docusoaps make people who are not usually present at all appear on screen, and offer a chance to make their views heard and offer insights into the lives of people and communities outside the mainstream of society. In particular, in a classed society with extreme inequalities, this can be seen as a very valuable and important contribution. The critique that docusoaps add to the establishment of a very individualised, almost therapeutic world-view, needs to be taken seriously. The way storylines in docusoaps tend to be developed, appears very

[55] Dovey (2000:21) argues: '... individual experience has always been a feature of documentary practices as evidential support to an argument. Here the relationship is turned around; the individual experience occupies the foreground and any "argument" is often impossible to discern.'

compatible with the contemporary and ideological emphasis on self-governance. This world-view gains it persuasiveness from its omnipresence and is therefore a social doxa that is difficult to oppose. As discussed in the methodology chapter, media products like docusoaps can hardly be interpreted in a meaningful way if not related to wider political and social developments. Therefore, I would argue, docusoaps, to a great degree, mirror the power structures of the environment they are produced in. In a sense they offer a chance to challenge common perceptions about the working class, however their potential to empower their subjects should not be overstated and the production conditions and power structures of contemporary documentary filmmaking need to be critically assessed.

## 6.4 Conclusion

Docusoaps, it has been argued, should be seen as a television genre in their own right. However, I hope to have made the point, that a generalising critique is unhelpful in many regards. There is a temptation to see docusoaps as the corrupted offspring of proper, traditional documentary filmmaking in terms of journalistic, inquisitive ethos, filmic quality and intended impact. I would however argue that docusoaps clearly stand in the tradition of (observational) documentary filmmaking and that differences are more of a gradual than of a fundamental nature with regards to all of the aforementioned aspects.

Equally, the potential to exploit their subjects is not unique to docusoaps. The main intention of this research project is to gain an insights into how questions of access and power come into effect in the production of one particular docusoap and to get the participants' view on whether they felt represented fairly. Due to their (recent) focus on underprivileged communities, docusoaps principally offer a relatively rare opportunity to make communities and opinions appear on screen that are generally vastly underrepresented. They have the potential to challenge common, stereotypical perceptions, but they equally have the potential to simply exploit stereotypes as a structuring device and therefore to exacerbate them.

Questions of authenticity and truthfulness are often at the core of debates around docusoaps but are clearly not straightforward to answer. There are examples of detected hoaxing and wilful manipulation. However, even with the best of intentions, documentary filmmaking is faced with the impossible task of depicting realness and ordinariness in artificial and extra-ordinary circumstances. Moreover, as discussed above, requirements of the genre and commercial pressures in the television industry appear to shape the production process in a way that is not conductive to truthful portrayals. I intend to engage with the complexity of the issue of authenticity in filmmaking in my empirical analysis.

Bourdieu's approach to take the actual working conditions and the logic of the media field into account when analysing its output, appears very relevant and there seems to be (limited) evidence that supports the assumption that developments in factual television are to a considerable degree caused by changes in the working conditions of the people who produce these programmes. Incorporating the views of the producers of *People Like Us* (2013l) would surely offer valuable insights, but attempts to recruit people involved in the production of the programme were unsuccessful. Generally, the production side of docusoaps appears relatively under-researched, which is insofar regrettable as research along these lines promises to offer an opportunity to comprehend the commodification of culture and its implications in more practical terms.

As I have discussed in the methodology chapter, the key aim of this research project is to link the discourse analysis of a TV programme to considerations of wider developments in the TV market and wider social and political structures. One of the central aims of Critical Discourse Analysis is to comprehend media products in political and social contexts. I hope to have illustrated in the above that this approach is relevant, meaningful and also potentially fruitful. However, it appears that the internal logic of and, even more so, outside influences on the media field are rather elusive and difficult to research from an outsider's perspective. The degree, the full implications, and the actual exercise of economic and political influence on mass media are very much in the dark. And, as Bourdieu aimed to capture with his concept of doxa, (media) bias cannot solely be comprehended as the result of conscious intervention by those in power. Common perceptions that are picked up and

repeated by the mass media are, from a Bourdieusian perspective, as much influenced by unquestioned, stereotypical assumptions as much as they should be seen as conscious attempts at manipulating public opinion. Bourdieu is quite clear that the mass media are a battleground for the legitimacy of power. Therefore, I would argue, it must be asked in whose interest the repetition of stereotypical images is and, secondly, which mechanisms and structures are in place to shape media output in a biased, interest-driven way. In other words: who benefits from which media representations and who is in a position to control them?[56]

The perception of the audience, as well as the views of participants of one particular docusoap, will be explored with the help of empirical data. I have discussed the limitations of the respective methods, but, I would argue, that it is nevertheless important to attempt an empirical underpinning. As indicated above, there appears to be a tendency to assume a certain political impact of docusoaps and a certain position of their participants. Audiences tend to be regarded as malleable and participants of docusoaps as exploitable. This might well be the case, but I intend to empirically explore the complexities of the perception and production of a docusoap.

[56] As pointed out, considerations along these lines must be careful not to simplify and overstate potential relationships, but at the same time have to rely on plausible assumptions. Doxa is a powerful concept with which to inform research questions, the content of doxic thinking is however naturally difficult to pin down. Therefore, again, this research has to work with assumptions that I intend to substantiate, but are, ultimately, difficult to prove empirically.

# 7. People Like Us

In this chapter, I will critically analyse the TV programme *People Like Us* (2013l) as an example of a contemporary media representation of social class. The specific content and its visual and narrative realisation will be at the core of this analysis. However, this analysis will not be restricted to the descriptive level. Instances of misrepresentation in terms of authenticity as well as representativeness will be critically analysed and finally those findings will be theoretically framed and made sense of with regards to the analytic framework set out in the previous chapters.

The six, hour-long episodes of *People Like Us* (2013l) were broadcast on BBC Three at 9 pm on consecutive Wednesdays between 06/02/2013 and 13/03/2013. The viewing figures for the live broadcast are as follows (BARB, 2015)[57]:

| Date | Viewers in Mio. | BBC Three Ranking / week |
|---|---|---|
| 06/02/2013 | 0.91 | 2 |
| 13/02/2013 | 0.708 | 8 |
| 20/02/2013 | 0.752 | 5 |
| 27/02/2013 | 0.828 | 1 |
| 06/03/2013 | <0.649 | >10 |
| 13/03/2013 | <0.624 | >10 |

The programme was produced by the independent, London-based production company Dragonfly. Dragonfly specialises in factual entertainment and also produces programmes like *One Born Every Minute* (2010c), *The Hotel* (2011), *The Family* (2008a) etc. and described *People Like Us* (2013l) on its website as (Dragonfly, 2014):

> A warm, unflinching and laugh-out-loud funny peek into the challenging lives of people living in or around the little-known Manchester estate of Harpurhey ... Described as 'shockingly real and funny' by The Daily Telegraph, People Like

[57] For the last two episodes, no accurate viewing figures are (publicly) available, as these episodes were not among the ten most watched BBC Three shows of the respective weeks. It is however clear, that there was a significant drop-off after episode four. Unfortunately, there is no data on online viewing (BBC iPlayer) available. Given the young target audience of BBC Three, it can be assumed that these would add significantly to the live viewing figure.

Us is BBC Three highest-rating debut factual series of 2012 by an independent production company.

## 7.1 Production techniques & narrative structure

*People Like Us* (2013l) uses the fly-on-the-wall perspective that is typical for the docusoap genre. Throughout the programme there is no visible intervention by the film crews. The use of hand-held cameras is apparent. On several occasions, even more direct and immediate filming techniques are used. For instance in episode one (2013b), one of the protagonists, Amber, is on holiday and, as it was confirmed in an interview, was given a camera to film her time in Magaluf. Some of the material produced by her was used in episode one (2013b:36min 48 & 38min 00).

In episode four (2013c), a number of cameras shots of a police drug raid are used. Interestingly, these were shot by the police officers who carried out the raid as they wore small shoulder cameras (clearly visible for instance in episode four (2013c:26min 18)). In this incident, no Dragonfly film crew entered the premises and the whole sequence consists of material filmed by the shoulder cameras.[58]

In episode six, footage produced by the 'paranormal investigators' Bob and Pete (2013c:13min 47), as well as mobile phone pictures shot by Karen (2013c:15 min 13) are used. Furthermore, in episode four, several sequences of a home video of Louise giving birth are used in the programme (2013d:49min 34).

Overall, I would argue, these filming techniques appear to be used to underline the claims for authenticity. This assumption will be further explored shortly, but it is clear that in *People Like Us* (2013l) material that participants of the programme produced themselves was seamlessly interwoven with the footage the film crews produced. Using the supposedly non-intrusive and neutral fly-on-the-wall perspective is a

[58] As it was confirmed in an interview with two of the involved police officers, these cameras were not the body cameras policemen and policewomen are officially equipped with, but were provided by the production company. Therefore, the police officers that carried out the raid double as cameramen / camerawomen for the production company. A number of shots that were produced by these shoulder cameras are used in the programme and imitate the point of view of the police officers. The raid culminates less than a minute later (2013c:27min 09) when a police officer, wearing disposable gloves, eventually finds a small bag of cannabis.

common feature of Reality TV programmes; with the inclusion of participant-generated content *People Like Us* (2013l) appears even closer to reality and accordingly less influenced or manipulated by external perspectives.

Occasionally, participants of the show address the camera directly or are interviewed in a studio. Corner (2002:256) points out that the interview is a vital tool for the producers of docusoaps 'to get the personal and the microsocial fully realized on the screen' and indeed, as I will demonstrate shortly, several of the interviews discuss rather personal and often on very emotionally charged matters. All of these interviews are, however, masked interviews (Bonner, 2013) as only the answers and not the questions are shown.[59]

The fact that almost all interviews are edited in a way that only the participants' answers are shown is, I would argue, designed to suggest the absence of any outside interference and to enhance the credibility and authenticity of the programme. Bruzzi (2006) points out that in docusoaps, the camera and the filmmaker remain anonymous. I would add, that by remaining anonymous, their very existence is being concealed and the impression is created that what can be seen on screen would have happened regardless of the presence of a camera. The masked interviews appear more like a video diary than an actual interview. Just like the fly-on-the-wall perspective is intended to play down or even negate the effect of the camera, so does the masked interview eliminate the interviewer and make the answers appear as unmediated, authentic expression of the interviewees' thoughts. The absence of an interviewer makes those interviews appear very personal, almost like an act of self-revelation that, according to Biressi and Nunn (2005:102), is, in a Reality TV context, 'the marker and touchstone of authenticity'.

Throughout the programme, brief shots, usually underlaid with music, are used to mark the switch from one storyline to the next. These shots generally appear to be intended to convey the atmosphere of the area and largely consist of aerial shots and street scenes apparently shot from a distance. They show people that are by and

[59] There are very few exceptions when the isolated answer would not make sense. For instance in the opening sequence (2013b:0min 37 of each episode) the following dialogue takes place: OFF: Are you the neighbour from hell? Pidge: Probably yeah.

large not participants of the programme. As I will argue later, these shots are significant in setting the scene and painting an implicit, emotive picture of the portrayed area.

Generally speaking, there is little voice-over and, by and large, the provided commentary is rather sympathetic, if not slightly patronising at times. Occasionally the voice-over has a slight sarcastic touch, for instance in episode six (2013d:1min 32):

> OFF: This week we meet likely lads Aaron and Mikee who are trying not let partying get in the way of them building a new business.
>
> [over a quick succession of shots showing them working, but then drinking spirit from a bottle, dancing, a female dancer / stripper, Mikee having his face shoved into a chocolate cake]
>
> Aaron (clearly intoxicated outside a night club): It will work, there is no alternative. It’s this or not.

The editing in combination with the sarcastic voice-over mocks the efforts of the two young men and this portrayal is re-inforced at later in the same episode (2013d:11min 24) when the two men are shown to buy two pints of lager.

> OFF: Aaron and Mikee's flyering campaign has not been successful and the wanna-be painter-decorators are still no closer to getting a job.
>
> [pints are put on the bar]
>
> Bar man: 5.90 altogether.
>
> OFF: With barely enough cash for essential purchases, it's time for the lads to rethink their tactic’.

Again the efforts of the young men are contrasted with alcohol consumption and at the same time are alleged as a potential explanation for their lack of success. There are many other examples of commentary that can be either be perceived as sympathetic or snide. For instance in episode six (2013d:54min 26):

> OFF: ...and at the Wishy Washy laundrette it's business as usual.
>
> [spinning washing machine]
>
> [cut to Karen sitting in a chair]

Karen: Now do you think George Bush had anything to do with the Twin Towers?

[cut to female customer]

Female Customer [rather sceptical]: I don't know. I remember...

[cut back to Karen]

Karen: 100 billion million percent. I've studied it, I have researched it, I read everything. He had something to do with the Twin Towers. That is my opinion.

[cut back to customers sitting on a bench]

Male Customer [clearly sceptical]: I think maybe that's a stretch too far...

[cut back to Karen]

Karen: Oh no, definitely. [cut] Do you think the Royals had anything to do with Diana's death?

[end of scene]

Referring to this short scene as 'business as usual' can be read in the sense that there is the usual friendliness and chattiness at the Wishy Washy laundrette, or, in particular if the viewer is critical of conspiracy theories (that are not explored in any depth), 'business as usual' can be read as a displayed lack of productiveness and irrationality.

The narrative structure of *People Like Us* (2013l) combines, as is typical for the genre, the formal characteristics of a documentary with soap-opera-like narratives. Coles (2000:28) therefore states that the docusoap combines two of the most popular television genres, Reality TV and soap opera, and successfully forms a hybrid. As I have shown above and will further discuss in the following, the makers of *People Like Us* (2013l) went to great lengths to stress the authenticity of the programme with regards to the locations, the portrayed people and the supposedly unmediated representational style. In that respect, the programme borrows the techniques of traditional documentary film-making. In terms of narrative structure however, *People Like Us* (2013l) has parallels with conventional soap operas. In each episode, new characters are introduced and four storylines are developed. The storylines are generally narrated independently of each other and only intersect rarely[60]. The

[60] For instance in episode four (2013c) when the Karen, Paul and Amber attend Dale's club night and boxing fight or in episode two (2013e) when Ryan hangs out with Pidge.

editing is rather quick and, as is typical for the genre (Kilborn, 2000), there are very frequent switches between the locations and the characters of simultaneously developed storylines. Bruzzi's (2006) assessment that the purpose of this juxtapositioning and fast-paced editing is rather to move the stories on than to make a point, seems very true for *People Like Us* (2013l).[61] The main purpose of this narrative structure is to 'shape and control the amorphousness of actuality' (Coles, 2000:33) and to enhance the dramatic effect. In each of the episodes, four problems are presented that are then developed towards a resolution. Most of the participants appear in only one episode and in relation to one specific storyline. All of the storylines have a central issue they revolve around and show a clear problem / resolution narrative that can be summed up in a brief sentence:

| **Episode** | **Problem** | **Resolution** |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Amber goes to Magaluf for a 'drink-fuelled holiday' (2013b:1min 39) | Returns safely |
| 1 | Jamie 'planning to Marry his girlfriend Lucy' (2013b:1min 52) | Split up |
| 1 | Chris' 'relationship with Cider threatens to break up his romance with girlfriend Nicki' (2013b:2min 00) | Alcohol somewhat under control, relationship survived |
| 1 | David plans to put on a drag show in the local area | Drag show a success |
| 2 | Amber 'determined to leave home to go to drama school' (2013e:1min 35) | Stays |
| 2 | Dale trying to make it as a boxer and DJ | Loses fight, reasonably successful club night |
| 2 | Ryan 'who's hoping rap could be a ticket to a better life away from his estate' (2013e:2min 00) | Loses battle, but stays out of trouble |
| 2 | Nicola 'considering leaving for a quieter life away from her family' (2013e:2min 08) | Moves away |
| 3 | 'Dad Paul walks out' (2013j:1min 39) | Moves back in |
| 3 | 'Landlord Nik and tenant Pidge face off in an eviction battle' (2013j:1min 45) | Pidge moves out |

[61] The material is organised along specific conflicts, but the individual storylines hardly intersect and there are no over-arching themes in the respective episodes.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3 | ‘Mates Arroll and Patrick prepare for their first holiday abroad together’ (2013j:1min 53) | End friendship |
| 3 | Jim, Sheryl, Avril and colleagues fighting crime | Arrests made, fights broken up |
| 4 | ‘Young mum Sherelle is trying to avoid getting into trouble, while Sherelle's Mom Mandy and neighbour Katie face the threat of eviction.’ (2013c:1min 33) | No eviction |
| 4 | Karen and Paul try to ‘curb Maddie's bad behaviour before she starts high school’ (2013c:1min 51) | Maddie and Paul have father-daughter talk |
| 4 | Louise pregnant | Louise has baby |
| 4 | Cathie struggling with anti-social behaviour of neighbours | Cathie shares her rhubarb crop |
| 5 | Jamie ‘dreaming of pop stardom, but his Mom Donna is unhappy about his unlikely mentor’ (2013g:1min 34) | Jamie has first gig and Donna and Belinda meet up |
| 5 | Break-in at Wishy Washy | Damage repaired, burglars convicted |
| 5 | Dance show of local dance school ‘proving hard work for new trainee teacher Kelly’ (2013g:1min 56) | Does not get job |
| 5 | Anthony tries to get his kids into modelling | Kids signed up at agency |
| 6 | Aaron and Mikee ‘trying not let partying get in the way of them building a new business’ (2013d:1min 34) | Not quite successful, but built a ramp for Aaron's grandma |
| 6 | Jazmine and Kelsea ‘are enjoying their last summer together before one of them moves out of the area’ (2013d:1min 46) | Kelsea moving away |
| 6 | Wakefields ‘feel the time has come to deal with their resident poltergeist Malcolm’ (2013d:2min 08) | Paranormal investigators do their work |
| 6 | ‘Exercise guru Javeno is planning a mass-work-out day to get the locals fit’ (2013d:1min 58) | Work-out day a success |

The focus on discrete and conflict-laden storylines mirrors the narrative structure of soap operas, as does the focus on individual characters and dramatic events in their

lives. Most storylines involve a certain amount of drama, but generally the plots do not appear extremely over-dramatized and several of the storylines revolve around rather mundane, every-day issues. It therefore seems appropriate to speak of a '(mini)crisis structure' (Bruzzi, 2006:127). I will discuss the absence of social and political framing and the peculiarities of the character casting later, but it is evident that *People Like Us* (2013l) portrays a number of individual, largely unrelated stories that have dramatic potential. Most of the portrayed stories have to do with the aspirations of the protagonists, be it building a business (Aaron and Mikee) seeking a career (Amber, Jamie, Ryan), fulfilling one's personal ambition (David, Javeno) or self-betterment (Chris and Nikki, Sherelle, Nicola, Kelsea and her family, Anthony). Only the lives of the main protagonists, the Wakefield family, is, as they appear in every single episode, portrayed with any sense of continuity, but also broken down into discrete storylines about individual ambitions (Amber) and educational and familial struggles (Karen, Paul and Maddie). The storylines involving the police are exceptional insofar as they focus less on the personal and more on the professional lives of the portrayed police officers. These storylines are inherently dramatic (a large scale disorder / street fight, a dramatic, violent arrest, a bail breach, a drug raid), but also a couple of relatively minor, almost comical incidents are portrayed (presumed sexual intercourse in a parked car, alleged urinating in an alleyway).

## 7.2 Claims of truthfulness, markers of authenticity

*People Like Us* (2013l) claims to be truthful and authentic. This happens explicitly through the way the programme is advertised and defended against criticism by the production company. Furthermore, authenticity is suggested through the production techniques used, through the chosen visual imagery, through the casting as well as the choices of storylines and setting. I will explore the featured characters and storylines shortly, but, with regards to the claim of truthfulness, it can be stated that the production team clearly went for somewhat unusual characters and issues, but stayed clear of overly extraordinary and sensationalist occurrences. *People Like Us* (2013l), like most docusoaps, claims to portray real people in real locations. However, this intended ordinariness is emphasised by the programme's focus on a working-

class community. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, working-class people are routinely portrayed as being free from (and possibly incapable of) pretentiousness and therefore being (no-nonsense, salt-of-the-earth) authentic. Choosing a working-class area like Harpurhey as the location of the show is therefore intended to demonstrate a commitment to the truth. The participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) are filmed in their actual homes and places of work. Therefore, the impression is created that people on the programme go about their everyday business, unaffected by the presence of a television camera. What connects the individual participants and their storylines is first and foremost their shared location and therefore the programme goes to great lengths to (rather incorrectly, as I will show) stress the close relationship of the characters with the portrayed area.

As discussed, *People Like Us* (2013l) uses filming techniques that are fairly typical for the genre. These techniques indirectly yet powerfully indicate immediacy and authenticity. The filming appears to be very unintrusive and spontaneous. As Leishman (2001) argues, with reference to a different docusoap, much of the filming happens at eye level in an occasionally unsteady fashion. This gives the viewer the perspective of an eyewitness. So the requirement of the genre to produce the raw material in a rather cheap fashion (small camera crews, few digital cameras) works in its favour with regards to underpinning its authenticity.

Furthermore, the makers of *People Like Us* (2013l) regularly intercut the scenes filmed on site with studio-filmed interviews. In these above discussed 'masked interviews', the protagonists address the cameras, and therefore the audience, directly. The interviews appear less like interviews, but more as rather personal video diaries of the participants.

Finally, as discussed above, footage produced by the participants of the programme is used. What is striking, yet fairly typical for the genre, is the invisibility of camera crews and production team. Their presence and therefore their potential influence on the portrayed events remains completely in the dark.[62] When the participants of *People Like Us* address the camera, it is as if they address the viewers directly. Corner

[62] Not all docusoaps are equally strict in that regard and, as Leishman (2001) shows with reference to *The Cruise* (1998b), where conversations between production crew and docusoap characters take place, akin to more conventional documentary formats.

(1995:80) speaks in that context of 'the illusion of unseen onlooking'. That this is indeed an illusion and that the presence of cameras occasionally interfered in a very direct and palpable way with events on screen will be demonstrated later. The intended effect very much appears to be, once again, to signify authenticity: what is captured on camera appears to have happened independently of its presence.

As mentioned above, the (relatively minimal) narration of the programme is done by an actress from the North of England who is known for playing likeable working-class characters in popular low-brow TV series[63], so it almost appears as if the programme is narrated by someone who could be a in it. I would argue that it is no coincidence that the programme is narrated by a Northern actress with a 'chummy voice' (Brady, 2013). Similar to the filming techniques used, the intended effect is to reduce distance and to underpin the light-hearted and well-meaning tone of the programme. An accent-free speaker with a more formal voice would, in all likelihood, be more perceived as an outsider by the viewer. A more formal narration could have damaged the intended intimate and authentic vibe of *People Like Us* (2013l). Furthermore, the regional accent of Natalie Casey, the narrator, reduces her distance not only to the participants of the show, it also signifies personal integrity (Montgomery, 1995) and, in a British context, Northernness is generally associated with down-to-earthness and unpretentiousness (Leishman, 2001). The fictional character the actress is associated with, can be seen as not too dissimilar to the characters in *People Like Us* (2013l), and therefore helps to underpin the notion of authenticity.[64]

To illustrate these claims of truthfulness further, I will briefly turn to material used by the production company to advertise the programme and then discuss the opening

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[63] Natalie Casey is most famous for her roles in *Hollyoaks* (1995) (1995-2000) and *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps* (2001d) (for the whole duration of the show 2001-2011) (wikipedia, 2014). The use of a prominent voice-over is common practice in the Reality TV genre (Bruzzi, 2006) and Kilborn (2000:113-114) adds that 'Producers have regularly honed in on the familiar and friendly tones of actors and actresses who have already made a name for themselves as performers of sitcoms and soap opera.'

[64] As Dickerson (2012) shows with reference to contemporary long-format documentaries, filmmakers like Michal Moore or Morgan Spurlock opt to use their own voices to add a degree of authority to the narration. In the case of *People Like Us* (2013l) it appears that authoritativeness was not the central concern and truthfulness was intended to be achieved through proximity, immediacy and intimateness.

sequence of *People Like Us* (2013l). In the one and a half minutes of this opening sequence the used documentary techniques are displayed in a very condensed and pointed way.

On the BBC website, *People Like Us* (2013l) is described in the briefest possible way as 'A documentary series about young people growing up on a housing estate in Manchester' (BBC, 2014b). The programme is classed as 'factual' (by genre) and 'documentaries' (by format) (BBC, 2014b). Also, the individual episodes are described very briefly in a single sentence. Under the heading 'meet the residents' the protagonists of the individual episodes are introduced in a few sentences. Again, the focus is on the main issues that are being portrayed in the programmes. Often these introductions end with a question that directly refers to the central issue of their involvement in the programme. This section of the website hints that the programme might not only be categorisable as 'factual' and as a 'documentary'.

The website of Dragonfly, the production company behind *People Like Us* (2013l) is, as quoted above, more direct in advertising the programme and in emphasising its authenticity (Dragonfly, 2014).

> 'A warm, unflinching and laugh-out-loud funny peek into the challenging lives of people living in or around the little-known Manchester estate of Harpurhey, in which they tell their stories in their own words. Giving a voice to young people to talk about the issues they face, People Like Us made stars of the Wakefield family – Paul, Karen, Amber and Maddie – bosses of the Wishee Washee launderette at the heart of the community. ....'

Speaking of a 'peek' into the lives of people living in Harpurhey suggests a neutral, unintrusive and authentic point of view. If 'stories' are told 'in their own words' and young people 'are given a voice' and are even 'made stars', it implies empowerment, distancing itself from any suggestions of manipulation and exploitation.

Simon Dickson, then managing director of Dragonfly, appearing on *The Media Show* (2013a) on 27/02/2013, after three of the six episodes had been aired, defends the programme against criticism, on this occasion expressed by the local MP Graham Stringer (Labour). Dickson is adamant that nothing in the programme was fabricated:

> Everything that we filmed was the result of spending 18 months working with young people in Harpurhey and faithfully recording what was going on in their lives. (2013a:5min 55).

Any suggestions that the programme might to some degree be fabricated are resolutely dismissed. So again, the role of the film crews is described as a strictly passive one that 'faithfully' documents the lives of the participants.

Truthfulness is equally explicitly claimed in the opening sequence of the programme that will be sketched here in its entirety (2013l:0m 00 of each episode):

> [shot of a tower block]
>
> [Jazmine and Kelsea riding on a bike together in front of a row of terraced houses]
>
> OFF: Just north of the city centre is a little-known Manchester suburb called Harpurhey.
>
> [Kids running in the street in what looks to be the same street]
>
> [Jamie fooling around / dancing on a gate]
>
> [multiple shot of loud motorised scooters in a park and a residential area]
>
> [youths pushing a bicycle into the road]
>
> [young children playing in the street. Prams, bicycles, adult sitting on the doorstep holding a can of beer]
>
> [direct to camera]
>
> Amber [direct to camera]: They say the area's just full of rough families. I don't think it's such a bad place.
>
> [youths on motorised scooter and bicycle in residential area]
>
> OFF: Ten years ago, a government report branded it the most deprived neighbourhood in England.
>
> [Nik strapping a sofa to the roof of his car and falling off]
>
> [Donna and Jamie sitting in the living room]
>
> Donna (raised voice): It's a simple question I asked!
>
> Jamie (raised voice): Yeah! And I'm trying to answer it.
>
> [young men doing reverse press-ups on a bench in the park, children in the background]
>
> [Maddie playing cheerfully in the laundrette]

[young children playing the street, older kids in the background]

OFF: Things have got a bit better since then, but life round here is still no bed of roses.

[shot of a sign ‘This is a HomeWatch area’, terraced houses in the background]

[Man swinging a dog that has his teeth sunk into a rope]

Nik [direct to camera]: There is one of them local expressions, ‘they'll steal the shit out of your arse’. Not cos they want it, just so that you haven't got it.

[young women walking in track-suit tops and pyjama bottoms]

[young man taken into a police van, shouting and slamming door]

OFF: Half the people have no qualifications and anti-social behaviour is rife.

[party scenes, including dancing, drinking and singing]

Interviewer from the off: Are you the neighbour from hell?

Pidge [direct to camera]: Probably, yeah.

[Man in the street having a huge spider crawling on his chest]

OFF: People round here might not be the poshest...

[shot of a hen party participant on all fours imitating a peeing dog]

OFF: ...but they are not lacking in spirit.

[Jamie using spray deodorant]

[Karen and Maddie sitting on the bed in their pyjamas]

Karen That's why we call ourselves ‘the dysfunctionals’.

[shot of a Louise with her new-born]

[shot of a wedding]

OFF: They just try to get on with life, be themselves...

[David putting make-up on and then in full drag with wig, high-heels and hand bag and a bottle of cider]

David: I ain't driving the van like this.

[youth doing a wheelie on his bike on the pavement]

OFF: and follow their dreams.

Amber [direct to camera]: I can be like a different person when I'm acting.

[Amber, in the laundrette]

Amber: 'Tis true that a good play needs no epilogue.

[girls running across a multilane road with horses]

OFF: For one long summer, the young people of Harpurhey let us into their secret world...

[shot of a drug raid]

[partying scene including drinking and laughing]

[Karen filming Amber and her friends singing in her bedroom]

Girls (singing): I have a penis, I shake it in the morning.

[Aaron having his brows waxed]

OFF: sharing the good times...

Aaron: Megan Fox, eat your heart out.

[Lucy with tears rolling down her cheeks]

[cat with two legs in cast]

OFF: ...and the bad.

[Katie in the street]

Katie (shouting): Hello! Go and find another street to go and terrorise!

[Youths sitting behind barbed wire]

OFF: This is how it really feels growing up the hard way.

[Jamie being dry-humped by another young man in the market]

[Maddie supposedly sleeping with a dog resting his head on the side of her head]

[Belinda, Jamie and another man performing the YMCA dance]

[Amber, direct to camera]

Amber: Yous might think you know people like us, but you don't know nothing yet! (giggles)

[Jazmine and Kelsea riding on a bike together]

Again, there is relatively little narration. In the one and a half minutes of the opening sequence, there are just eight short narrated sentences. Right after the briefest of introductions, one of the protagonists of the programme, Amber, is shown speaking directly to the camera referring to the bad reputation of Harpurhey, but defending the area at the same time. Throughout the opening sequence, the narration is interwoven with statements by the residents. Again, the impression is created that the participants can express their views rather than being spoken for. A rapid succession of very brief shots is used to underline the truthfulness of the narrated

description of Harpurhey. While Amber is speaking about the bad reputation of Harpurhey, in the space of five seconds, seven different shots are used to visually express the unruliness of the area[65]. The quick succession and the emotive nature of these shots are clearly intended to confirm the claim that Harpurhey is a rough (menacing, chaotic, potentially dangerous) neighbourhood. References to criminality[66], anti-social behaviour[67] allegedly excessive drinking and partying seem to confirm the truthfulness of the claimed roughness of Harpurhey.

However, it is equally evident that the opening sequence is intended to look balanced. First of all through the aforementioned statement of Amber, but also through a change in tone, signified by a change in background music (2013l:0min 40 of each episode). Whereas the first 40 seconds of the opening sequence mainly depict disorder, the second half of the opening sequence shifts the focus to the area being full of life (marriage, wedding, humour), and of its residents having ambitions and 'dreams' (drag queen Diane, aspiring actress Amber). The narration claims that the programme will be showing the 'good times' (singing, beauty treatment, dancing) and the 'bad times' (tears and anger). In this second part of the opening sequence the claims of truthfulness and authenticity are most explicit. It is claimed that the viewer is granted access into the 'secret world' of this 'little known Manchester suburb'.[68] And finally the narration 'This is how it really feels growing up the hard way' explicitly claims to explore the reality of reaching adulthood in a deprived area.

Furthermore, there are a number of shots in the opening sequence that show people who are not further introduced in the programme and remain anonymous. These

[65] Noisy motorised scooters driven by youths, a bicycle pushed into the street, shot of a number of people of all ages congregating in the street including bare-chested men, plastic furniture and a collection of bicycles and prams.

[66] Police arrest, 'steal the shit out of your arse', drug raid.

[67] 'Neighbour from hell', possible training of what looks like a combat dog, hooded youth doing a wheelie on the pavement, 'go and find another street to go and terrorise'.

[68] It is not quite clear what is 'secret' about Harpurhey and why it is referred to as 'little known', but this alleged mystique is reinforced be Amber's statement: ' Yous might think you know people like us, but you don't know nothing yet!'. As it was confirmed in an interview with Amber, this statement was scripted by the production company.

shots have a feeling of randomly filmed street scenes about them. In the context of the opening sequence, I would argue, they are supposed to convey a feeling for the area and the environment the portrayed families live in. The perceived randomness is in my view intended to further underline the claim of truthfulness. This collage of very brief and largely unrelated shots implies a wide focus. In most of these shots[69] the faces of the people appearing are not filmed at all or blurred. This adds to the perception of randomness in the sense that it is not specific people who train their dogs or wear pyjamas, but just any (typical) resident of Harpurhey. I will explore the content of these images later, but it is fair to assume that these images are anything but random and loaded with meaning by referring to working-class stereotypes. Yet, the truthfulness of the programme is implied exactly by focusing on the supposedly rough, dangerous and supposedly tasteless aspects of life in Harpurhey.

Another marker of authenticity is the use of rather private, emotionally charged shots and scenes. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, docusoaps heavily rely on the drama of the private and the interpersonal. I would agree with Leishman (2001) that this focus on emotions and their visual display can be seen as a marker of authenticity in itself.

Apart from the already mentioned rather personal video-diary like direct-to-camera pieces, *People Like Us* (2013l) uses a number of scenes in which the protagonist displays, sometimes dramatic, emotional reactions, for instance in episode five (2013g:15min 08).

> [Kelly walking down a street]
>
> Narrator: Kelly has lived in Harpurhey all her life. Growing up wasn't always easy.
>
> [shots of traffic and house fronts]
>
> Kelly [direct-to-camera in a studio]: You have to learn how to fend for yourself and what not.
>
> [shot of back alleys]

[69] Man swinging a dog on a rope, girls walking in track-suit tops and pyjama bottoms, youths sitting behind barbed wire, girls running across a multilane road with horses.

Kelly [direct-to-camera in a studio]: I've got a big chip on me shoulder, I had a really bad attitude. I was getting into trouble ALL the time.

[photograph of a younger smiling Kelly surrounded by friends, bottle of alco-pop visible]

Kelly [direct-to-camera in a studio]: I just was with the wrong people. You were always…

[Kelly crossing a street]

[Another photograph of Kelly with a friend, holding a bottle of beer]

Kelly:… stood around street corners. Underage drinking and smoking. And young guys would rob cars…

Kelly [direct-to-camera in a studio]: …and we would joyride round the estate in cars and stuff like that.

[Kelly walking in a street again]

[Kelly in her home now, dancing to music]

Narrator: Kelly still lives on the estate, just 10 minutes' walk from the house she grew up in.

Kelly: [pointing to a framed photograph on her wall]. This up here is me Mom, and this is me Dad when he was in the fire-service. That means a lot to me that. Me Mom died twelve years ago. You know like it's been hard. It has been hard for me without her because my Dad had to be me Mom and me Dad, do you know?

[photograph of Kelly, her Mom and Dad presumably on holiday, all smiling]

[sad music sets in]

Sam [Kelly's Dad, direct-to-camera in a studio]: It was basically just me and Kelly since her Mom died. Because everything her Mom used to do, I had to take it on.

[sad music continues]

[picture of Kelly and Dad in a restaurant without her Mom]

[Sam, direct-to-camera in a studio]

Sam: So there is a special bond between me and Kelly.

[another holiday picture of the whole family, all smiling]

Kelly: She had cervical cancer and she fought it for years as well.

[Kelly in her home, in front of the framed photographs again]

Kelly: One year she'd find out she was in the clear, then a few month later, like it'd come back. Then she was clear for a few more months. Then a year later she'd found out it had come back and I think when I came to about the age of nine or ten it just gradually got worse and worse from there.

[sad music still in the background]

[another photograph of Kelly and her Mom]

[close up of Kelly's face, visibly upset]

Kelly: Me Mom would just get really tired of all these operations and medication and in and out of hospital. She just wanted to be left. So…

[a photograph of Kelly at the grave of her Mom]

Kelly: She died when I was about twelve.

Kelly [direct-to-camera in a studio]: The only thing that upsets me now is that I don't remember the sound of her voice. Like, AT ALL. I try to think of it and I can't… I am getting emotional.

[Kelly covering her face with her hands. Sobbing.]

Kelly: I'm ok.

[Another photograph of Kelly's Mom]

Jodie [direct-to-camera in a studio]: I know she had a tough time with her Mom passing away and she kind of got into bad crowds and things.

[Kelly, in her home, dancing]

Jodie: When she first started with me, she was one of those people, she would get up and it did not really matter what she did for the rest of the day.

[Kelly, in her home, dancing]

[shot of Kelly's kitten]

Jodie: I think her coming to us has kind of helped her kind of a purpose.

[shot of the sun setting over the roofs]

[sad music ends, dance music starts, shots of the local shopping centre and market]

Narrator: As night falls on Harpurhey market…

This short scene is one of the more intense examples of how *People Like Us* (2013l) utilises the display of emotions. The editing, as well as the use of music and personal photographs provide evidence of Kelly's ultra-condensed life story and evoke an emotional reading by the viewer. The makers of the programme used at least four different interviews by three different participants to create an extremely condensed and very emotionally charged narrative. What is a very personal account of Kelly's loss is highly edited with a large number of cuts. In a sense, the authenticity and supposed immediacy of the displayed emotions stand in contrast to very fast editing

and the extremely constructed nature of the sequence. Kelly's account and the sincerity of her feelings are evidenced by a number of personal photographs as well as interviews with people close to her (her Dad as well as friend/employer Jodie).

In the same episode (2013g), the tragic story of Anthony who has suffered from severe burns to his face and arms as a child is presented in an equally condensed, emotive and tearful fashion.

Tears, I would argue, are a very strong signifier for strong and sincere emotions. Furthermore, I would argue, tears are a very powerful marker of authenticity, not least because they are notoriously hard to enact. Given the rather light-hearted tone of the programme and the generally more mundane than dramatic storylines, it is somewhat surprising that in every episode bar one, tears are shed:

Episode 1 (2013b):

Lucy crying after talking to Jamie (2013b:40min 28)

Nikki crying after falling out with Chris (2013b:43min 50)

Episode 3 (2013j):

Maddie crying because the family's puppies are given away (2013j:47min 10)

Episode 4 (2013c):

Kathy upset because she is afraid of being evicted and feels treated unfairly (2013c:21min 30)

Kathy again, upset by youths in her street (2013c:47min 47)

Episode 5 (2013g):

Kelly when speaking about how she misses her dead Mom (2013g:17min 07)

Anthony's Mom telling how Anthony got severely burnt as a child (2013g:32min 50)

Episode 6 (2013d)

Aaron's disabled grand-mother: over-joyed and touched by his and Mikee's efforts to build her a ramp (2013d:30min 55)

Many of those stories are developed following a similar pattern. On a number of occasions, dramatic events in the lives of the participants are presented in a very condensed form that foregrounds the emotional impact and consequences of those. Often the participants address the camera directly and tell their stories in a very open, analytical, almost self-confessional way.

Overall, it can be concluded that in *People Like Us* (2013l) emotions are displayed in a very visible and convincing way and therefore help to substantiate the impression that the characters of the programmes act authentically. Leishman (2001) speaks in this context very pointedly of the 'performance of sincerity'. Biressi and Nunn (2005) argue that the visible display of emotions signifies immediacy and through that credibility. Therefore, these self-revelations and emotionally charged interchanges become a powerful marker of realness, truthfulness and authenticity.[70]

Finally, truthfulness and accuracy are implied through the narration by being very precise about the relative location of the filmed scenes. Very often a new storyline is introduced with a reference to the relative location of the scene. Examples from the first two episodes:

> North of Harpurhey Market is Moston Lane, home to the Wishy Washy Laundrette. (2013b:5min 10)
>
> A mile down the road is a local newsagent. It's run by... (2013b:6min 38)

[70] It should be added that I do not doubt the sincerity of the displayed emotions, however, it can be concluded that the editing of these scenes is intended to maximise the emotional impact on the viewer and, for instance through the use of music and personal photographs, to emphasise their sincerity.

> To the west of the market is the Embassy Club... (2013b:22min 42)
>
> They live together in Nicki's house near Harpurhey... (2013b:23min 18)
>
> On the high street out of Harpurhey is the Wishy Washy laundrette. (2013e:2min 22)
>
> A couple of miles south of the laundrette, 19 year old Nicola... (2013e:4min 12)
>
> Nicola and Crystal live in a one-bedroom council flat on an estate just north of Harpurhey. (2013e:10min 53)
>
> Two miles down the road from Dale's house is Strangeways Prison. It looms large over Harpurhey. (2013e:23min 14)
>
> Ryan lives with his parents to the south of Harpurhey... (2013e:24min 25)
>
> A mile up the road is the boxing gym. (2013e:24min 33)
>
> Nicola has moved in with her auntie Lisa 10 miles away on the other side of Manchester. (2013e:47min 08)

At a club two miles west of Harpurhey, the lads from the local boxing gym... (2013e:51min 57)

It appears that these rather precise details about the locations of the individual sites act as proof that *People Like Us* (2013l) was indeed filmed in or near Harpurhey. On several occasions, new characters are introduced in public places like the Embassy Pub (Dale and Friends, Nicki and Chris) or on the market (Jamie and Donna) to imply that they live in Harpurhey. As it turns out, many of the participants do not live in Harpurhey and a large number of used public locations are not in the area either. This was confirmed in a number of interviews with participants of the programme.

Strictly speaking, *People Like Us* (2013l) does not make any false claims about where it was filmed. However, the narration tries to link as many different locations and individuals to Harpurhey as possible as the seemingly shared place of residence is what links the individual narratives. It certainly would have been more truthful to

speak of the actual areas (Collyhurst, Cheetham Hill, Moston etc.) or to use a wider label like North Manchester. This might appear as a minor technicality, but in my opinion, these precise but ultimately misleading details act to enhance the credibility of the programme's claim to portray a specific local area. By doing so, it exploits the label of Harpurhey as the formerly most deprived neighbourhood in England (MEN, 2007).

I will further discuss the notions of truthfulness and authenticity later in this chapter. In particular, I am interested in genre limitations as well as the viewers' perception of truthfulness and authenticity in relation to contemporary entertaining documentaries. I have demonstrated how truthfulness is claimed by *People Like Us* (2013l) in myriad ways, both implicitly and explicitly and how some of these claims are contradictory or downright misleading.

## 7.3 Themes and characters

To conclude this descriptive analysis of the programme, I now want to identify the main themes of the programme and discuss how these are narrated. I will then point to the peculiarities of the casting of *People Like Us* (2013l).

### 7.3.1 Themes

I would argue that overall there are five main themes that the vast majority of the storylines can be categorised under:

Anti-social behaviour / criminality

Alcohol & drug consumption

Parenting (with an emphasis on single-parenthood)

Work / career / individual fulfilment

Racism / nationalism

All of those issues are central to several storylines. The exception is the nationalism / racism complex that only explicitly features in one single storyline and is otherwise largely implied. Of the other four central themes, none can be identified as dominant as they involve a similar number of participants and are equally central to a similar number of storylines. Of course, an analysis of the programme could focus on different issues altogether. Disability is for instance an underlying theme that is visually implied by a large number of shots of mobility scooters but, as I will come back to in the following chapter, not explored narratively despite being a part of the lives' of two protagonists. The portrayal of gender norms, sexuality, inter-generational conflicts, 'Northernness' etc. are all themes that could be discussed in relation to *People Like Us* (2013l) and that are also relevant from a class perspective. I would maintain that the above listed themes are very present in a quantitative sense.[71] Nevertheless, these themes do not just 'emerge'. They are relevant for my particular analysis, and therefore my own viewing of the programme will have to some degree been primed. The viewing of a researcher interested in disability, age, gender, sexuality or regional particularities might 'code' (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the programme in a significantly different way. This is not to say that *People Like Us* (2013l) can be anything that the researcher wants it to be, but to point to the degree of bias in my own identification of central themes. I decided against a quantitative thematic analysis as I agree with McKee (2003) that the coding process is in itself to a degree subjective and that the interpretation of a complex text is therefore not necessarily enhanced by the use of quantitative methods. On the contrary: there is the danger that quantitative analysis 'produces information that is far removed from likely practices of sense-making' (McKee, 2003:129). As I have discussed in chapter five, the reading of *People Like Us* (2013l) and debates around the programme are not determined by the prevalence of the respective themes in the programme, but, as it appears, in connection with popular public discourses. As I am interested in the potential impact of a programme like *People Like Us* (2013l), I will focus on themes

[71] I have summarised the central storylines (see the problem-resolution box) and the majority of them revolve around one of the identified issues.

that feature prominently in the programme, but that also appear to resonate with the popular perception of the programme.

*7.3.1.1 Poverty*

Interestingly, given that *People Like Us* (2013l) is set in the formerly most deprived neighbourhood in England (MEN, 2007), poverty is not an issue that features prominently in the programme. A few characters allude to being short of cash (most extensively Aaron and Mikee in episode six (2013d)), but poverty in the sense of hardship does not enter the discourse. Although the high degree of deprivation is mentioned in the opening sequence and is presumably among the reasons why the programme is set in (and around) Harpurhey, the economic consequences of deprivation are not explored further. The same can be said about social security. There are very few direct mentions of state benefits.[72] Generally, work and employment enter the discourse not so much as an economic necessity, but more in the sense of self-fulfilment. The emphasis appears to be more on how the protagonists 'follow their dream' (2013l: each episode at 0min 51) than the need to sustain oneself. The economic and emotional strain of not having an income is only (superficially) explored in one storyline (self-employed tradesmen Mikee & Aaron in episode six (2013d)). A few of the characters appear not to be in employment, but this is not further problematized. A number of participants show an interest in creative professions, the arts or in the show business[73] and it is not entirely clear whether these are attempts to earn a living or just the participants' hobbies.

Two other central themes, alcohol consumption and drug use as well as nationalism and racism are treated in a similarly 'light' way.

[72] In episode three landlord Nik argues that there is a 'benefit culture' (2013j:19min 15) in the UK, and on another occasion in episode two it is stated, in a rather matter-of-fact way, that 'Nicola and Crystal live in a one-bedroom council flat on an estate just north of Harpurhey. They survive on benefits' (2013e:10min 52).

[73] Amber – acting, Jamie – singing, Kelly – dancing, Anthony for his children – modelling, Dale – DJing / Radio / club promotion, Ryan – music

*7.3.1.2 Drugs & alcohol*

Alcohol consumption is portrayed in every single episode and two participants state that they are alcohol dependent Chris - episode one (2013b), Nicola's Dad Barry - episode two (2013e). Alcohol consumption plays a major role in a number of the portrayed storylines. Furthermore, several of the storylines involving the police appear to be caused by the supposed ubiquity and excessiveness of alcohol and drug consumption. A couple of the protagonists have been jailed for offences committed while intoxicated (Ryan, episode two (2013e), Anthony, episode four (2013c)). In several scenes, alcohol consumption is portrayed as excessive and PC Jim Evans states in an interview that the (young) residents of Harpurhey generally consume cheap alcohol:

> I think for the lasses it's Lambrini. For the lads: cheap, cheerful Special Brew is always a popular one. And your nice White Lightning cider, nice strong cider. (2013j:26min 56)

It is not clear what prompted this remark as, as is common practice in the programme, the interview question is omitted. The interview snippet is shown between scenes of unrest that resulted in the arrest of 'a drunken youth' (2013j:26min 52). So it appears that the excessive consumption of cheap alcohol is problematic.

Whereas the drinking of some characters (Amber as well as Patrick and Arroll) is largely shown in recreational contexts and as excessive but largely unproblematic, the consumption of other characters (Dale as well as Mikee and Aaron) is portrayed as a hindrance in fulfilling their goals.

Drug use, and in particular the consumption of cannabis is portrayed as a very wide-spread phenomenon and a number or characters openly talk about their cannabis consumption and / or the popularity of the drug in the local area (Pidge, Sherelle, Mandy, Katie). The drug raid in episode four (2013c) is portrayed as a rather regular occurrence. This is signified by a (strangely staged looking) scene in episode four

(2013c) when an arriving police van is greeted by two waving young girls. This scene and the following drug raid is framed by Sherelle's comment:

> Brentford Street gets raided, because the street probably DOES SMELL like cannabis because a lot of people sit there smoking it because they got nothing better to do. (2013c:26min 37)

Which is supplemented by her mother Mandy's view:

> Obviously yes, I smoke weed, everyone does, in this world. (2013c:27min 27)

Again, it is not clear what the questions to these answers were, but the message is fairly obvious: residents of this particular street consume cannabis on a regular basis and law enforcement is not a serious concern to them.

Overall I would argue that alcohol and drug consumption are portrayed in the programme as extremely common (with regards to ubiquity as well as choice of intoxicant) and excessive, as potential source of problems (unrest, drug raids), but as ultimately benign and not overly problematic.

#### *7.3.1.3 Parenting*

With regards to parenting, there is a strong emphasis on single parenthood and patchwork families. In fact, none of the families that feature on the programme solely consists of biological parents and their children. Only one of the four portrayed young parents lives with the partner of their children.

Parenting is talked about explicitly on several occasions and a couple of storylines involving the Wakefield family revolve around parental / educational issues[74].

A common theme concerning the young parents featuring on the programme is the dual challenge of 'staying out of trouble' as well as protecting their own children from bad outside influences. All of the four young parents on the programme report of having got into conflict with the law and three of them have spent time in prison.

[74] Episode two (2013e) – Amber and Karen undecided whether she should go to college, episode four (2013c:1min 51) – Karen and Paul trying to 'curb Maddie's bad behaviour'.

Wanting a better future for their own children is expressed by all of the young parents. This is mostly done with negative reference to the local area. One of the protagonists, Nicola, is seen to move away from Harpurhey to what looks like a rural location, stating that:

> I want a new life, I really do want a new life and up here I will be able to get a new life (2013e:47min 36).

Protecting the own children from negative outside influences and wanting a better life for them appears central to all the portrayed young parents and is concisely expressed by Sherelle:

> I would not want my child to follow the road that I went down. No, I don't want him to be a nothing like me (2013c:8min 58).

> I worry about him sometimes because of the community, like, the environment, sometimes ain't a good environment for the kids. He copies most of the boys now, so I couldn't imagine what it's gonna be like when he is older, but I will stop it before it gets to that (2013c:10min 07).

Ryan:

> I don't want my daughter to see what I have seen and been through. And if anything it's just more inspiration to get out of the place you are in. I don't want to raise my daughter round here so it's down to me to do something about that (2013e:31min 22).

And Anthony:

> I hope that something comes out of it [referring to modelling] so I will be able to give my kids a better life (2013g:25min 19).

Positive aspects of raising a child in Harpurhey are expressed by Sherelle in episode four, (2013c) as well as Jazmine's mother Jaki in episode six (2013d). However, Jaki is also portrayed as contemplating a move away from the area:

> It's my duty as their parent to take them somewhere safe (2013d:10min 22).
>
> Jaki: We can live a better way. When people like here have a problem what do they do?

> Jazmine: They just wanna beat each other up.
>
> Jaki: The norm THERE (pointing to the screen that shows a picture of their new place) is to actually sit down and have a discussion (2013d:21min 08).

So with regards to parenting, environmental influences do indeed enter the discourse. However, they mainly do so with reference to problematic influences and solutions are clearly individual ones. On two occasions the alleged chaos and danger of a childhood in Harpurhey is contrasted with the supposed safety and order of a gated alternative living project in Hulme, Manchester and a non-descript rural area 10 miles south of Harpurhey.

#### *7.3.1.4 Anti-social behaviour & criminality*

Anti-social behaviour and criminality is clearly one of the central themes of the programme. Not so much in the sense that a huge number of storylines explicitly revolve around the issue, but more as an undercurrent. Crime and anti-social behaviour are at the centre of three discrete storylines.[75]

A large number of characters portrayed in the programme report on camera of past or ongoing involvement in some form of criminal behaviour. The portrayed offences range from relatively minor offences to the aforementioned drug-taking and shoplifting ((2013e) and (2013j)) and serious offences including grievous bodily harm (2013g) and large-scale disorder (2013j).

With regards to anti-social behaviour and criminality, what Skeggs (2009:10) describes as 'judgement shots' are very relevant. These are camera shots and sequences that as Tyler (2012:218) puts it: 'incite [the audience BW] to respond with judgement'. A huge number of those 'judgement shots' are employed to display anti-social behaviour and (low level) criminality. As described above, alone in 90 seconds of the opening sequence there are large number of short scenes that arguably depict

[75] Pidge facing eviction (2013j), Kathie having to deal with anti-social behaviour (2013c), break-in at Wishy Wahsy (2013g)) as well as, naturally, all the stories around the portrayed police officers ((2013j) and (2013g).

some form of what is commonly understood as anti-social behaviour (see chapter 7.2).

Of course, not all of the behaviour depicted in these shots constitutes anti-social behaviour as such, but, I would argue, they clearly paint a picture of the area as unruly, chaotic and somewhat menacing. These, and other, judgement shots are not only used in the opening sequence, but throughout the programme. As mentioned previously, many of those shots are not put into any sort of context or explained in any way. So most of the people featuring in these shots remain anonymous. I would argue that this adds to the implied menacing and chaotic aura of Harpurhey and also makes the (sometimes faceless / pixilated) people ideal projection surfaces for (class) stereotypes. The choice of activities and outfits on display is very emotive and clearly refers to a number of easily recognisable working-class stereotypes. Overall, these shots contribute to a portrayal of Harpurhey as an area where crime and anti-social behaviour are extremely common occurrences. This is made explicit in the opening sequence when the narrator states that 'anti-social behaviour is rife' (2013l:0min 35 of each episode).

The ubiquity of criminality is, not very subtly, implied when the narration talks about Strangeways prison:

> Two miles down the road from Dale's house is Strangeways Prison. It looms large over Harpurhey and to a few in the area it's a second home. (2013e:23min 10)

That crime is extremely common in Harpurhey is also implied through the editing. The most striking example is in my opinion the editing of episode three (2013j). The dramatic scenes of police officers breaking up a fight involving a large number of youths are interwoven with interviews. Right after the arrest scene is brought to a close and commented on, the programme continues with the depiction of an, allegedly out-of-control, birthday party.

> (2013j:25min 39)
>
> [Several shots of a small group of young man carrying large quantities of alcohol.]

OFF: It's Friday night and Jim's colleagues Sheryl and Avril are on the late shift.

[Avril and Sheryl on their way to the location of the unrest. Serene blaring, police radio describing the nature of the unrest: 'There are youth running towards the market, they have now got their tops off. They are all chanting "pigs" at the police']

Sheryl: [smiling] Shocker!

Avril (to the camera): It's a grade one. We are going to several youths fighting and throwing bottles at each other and passing vehicles. So a couple of other patrols are making their way there as well.

Arroll (studio interview): I will say to you, on a Friday night it gets a bit lively, people have drinks. The next thing you know the estate's flooded, there's people on it and everyone is running from the police here and there and everywhere. And that's it and they have a laugh.

[Avril running after and stopping a young man]

Patrick (studio interview): When Jeremy is boring me, I just go to my bedroom window.

[Arrest of a young man]

Jim (studio interview): I think for the lasses it's Lambrini. For the lads: cheap, cheerful Special Brew is always a popular one. And your nice White Lightning cider, nice strong cider.

[More shots of the arrest]

Sheryl (interview in the street, apparently shortly after the arrest): Obviously there has been some sort of ado on the estate and it's trying to find a fine line really between trying to maintain the peace in the area and trying to look after your own safety which can be quite difficult sometimes.

Sheryl (now in a studio with Avril): It has been known that I have gone out in town and had a glass of wine or two in the past and I have never got myself into a fight. So I do ask the question why these people constantly find themselves, because we do generally come across the same people time and time again, so I do ask the question why they are constantly is these situations. And I don't know why that is. Can you offer an answer to that?

Avril: No.

OFF: It's eleven o'clock and half a mile up the road at Pidge's his 21st birthday party is just getting going.

[A number of shots of people drinking, smoking and dancing]

OFF: By 1 am the party is in full swing and shows no signs of ending soon.

Question from the off to Pidge: Do you ever worry about what the neighbours think?

Pidge: No.

Party guest: Fuck the neighbours. Fuck. The. Neighbours.

Pidge: Fuck the neighbours. [both laugh]

The way in which short interview snippets are interwoven with pictures of the unrest and following arrests, to some degree plays down the dramatic and violent nature of the events and at the same time makes them appear as a very regular occurrence that ultimately entertain the residents of Harpurhey. In the interviews, some of the involved police officers expressed surprise that very little of the footage produced in relation to the unrest was used in the programme and that in particular the more violent and dramatic shots were left out. This, in connection with the rather light-hearted statements, fits well with the general style and tone of the programme but is insofar surprising as, according to the interviewed police officers, these scenes would have made very spectacular television.

The way in which the following party scenes were cut to and introduced, implies that the portrayed party took place on the same night as the unrest. This adds to the created sentiment of Harpurhey as an unruly, chaotic place where a Friday night is characterised by fighting and partying and little consideration for the neighbours. I would argue that the repeated references to the time of night are intended to signal the anti-social nature of Pidge's behaviour that is made explicit in the interview question.

*7.3.1.5 Racism & nationalism*

Racism and nationalism, two more issues that are routinely associated with the working-class (Haylett, 2001), feature in the programme, but not as prominently as the aforementioned issues. Nationalism is not explicitly talked about, but implied in a large number of different shots of seemingly omnipresent England flags[76]. Racism is explicitly talked about in episode six in connection with Jazmine who 'became the target of racism' (2013d:19min 02). Although it is stated that racist abuse had a negative impact on Jazmine and her family and is part of the reason why they

[76] For instance in (2013e:6min 27 & 36min 09), (2013c:50min 15), (2013g:41min 48) and (2013d:45min 52)

consider moving away from the local area, the nature and extent of racism in the local area is not explored in any depth.

#### *7.3.1.6 Conclusion*

So overall, a number of alleged symptoms of deprivation are depicted, but not explored in any depth and generally with little seriousness. It appears that the programme even shies away from anything but a very superficial exploration of violence, poverty and racism. Working-class stereotypes clearly structure the narrative of the programme, but do so in a very individualised way. *People Like Us* (2013l) deals with a number of social problems that are typically ascribed to the working class, but does so with very little seriousness. It could certainly be seen as a positive that the programme does not sensationalise contentious issues like social security, drug consumption, racism etc., but I would argue that the omission of serious and negative repercussions of the above mentioned issues plays them down, trivialises and ultimately depoliticises social problems. Inequality does not enter the discourse as poverty is treated as a purely individual phenomenon. Whether this was the intention of the makers of *People Like Us* (2013l) can only be speculated on, and the possibility that too graphic depictions of poverty, violence etc., let alone any seriousness societal or political considerations, were omitted in order to uphold the rather humorous, light-hearted and entertaining tone of the programme seems a likely scenario. Ultimately, however, as I will explore later, questions of intentionality are not overly relevant for a Bourdieusian critique of the programme.

### 7.3.2 Characters

Over the six episodes of the series, the viewer is introduced to a large number of characters, just over 50 of whom are introduced by name and get to talk on camera. I would argue that 33 characters can be seen as protagonists insofar as they are central to at least one storyline. Only a small number of participants appear in more

than one episode and are involved in more than one discrete and closed storyline.[77] The vast majority of participants are, as discussed above, introduced with reference to one particular issue that is developed and usually brought to a close within the same episode.

As mentioned above, the participants on the programme very much appear to be cast for dramatic effect, and, as Brady (2013) shows with regards to the attempted casting of a young looking pregnant women, it appears with a pre-set agenda.[78] In this sense, the casting of *People Like Us* (2013l) confirms Bonner's (2013) assessment that docusoaps, despite generally claiming to be interested in portraying ordinary people, look for characters who embody a small number of easily recognisable stereotypical qualities. Their dramatic and comical potential should ideally match the qualities of sitcom characters. This view is echoed by Coles (2000:36) who states that the protagonists in docusoaps are as important as the characters in fictional drama. He also points to the 'dual role' of docusoap participants who perform as experts and presenters of their families and communities etc., but at the same time are expected to act as if the cameras were not there. The former is particularly evident in the direct-to-camera-pieces in which several participants make general statements about the local area.[79]

A 'dual role' could also be ascribed to the participants of docusoaps in the sense that they are allegedly seen leading their normal lives, but do so 'temporarily for the benefit of the television camera' (Bruzzi, 2006:141). In a way, it could be said, they play themselves. The complexity of the notion of authenticity will be discussed later, but with regards to the 'characters' of docusoaps it can be stated that it is of vital importance that, despite the artificial setting and circumstances created by the presence of cameras, their emotions must appear real.

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[77] The Wakefield family, Jamie and Donna as well as the police officers Avril, Jim and Sheryl.

[78] The young lady was approached but then not considered to take part in the programme when it became apparent that she looked younger than she was and could therefore not embody the apparently sought after pregnant teenager.

[79] Amber and Cody in episode (2013b) or Avril and Sheryl (2013j) for instance.

The importance of the portrayed 'characters' for the success of a programme can hardly be overstated. Docusoaps focus on the stories and emotions of actual people and therefore foreground visuals, characterisations and the individual narrative (Hill, 2005). Skeggs and Wood (2012a:25) point out that this focus on the character in the 'improvised drama' of the docusoap is no coincidence insofar as docusoaps 'fill the slot vacated by traditional drama across our schedules' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a:26). The focus on character does in my opinion not only apply to the (convincing) display of 'true' emotions but also in the sense that the displayed characters play their part, their 'role', with regards to the wider narrative of the programme.

Even a superficial analysis of the main storylines of *People Like Us* (2013l) indicates that participants were not only chosen for their comedic and dramatic potential, but that the character casting was also influenced by the aforementioned working-class stereotypes. Most participants of the programme can clearly be identified with a single trait they are set to represent. I would argue that this assumption is confirmed by the way the stories of the participants are introduced and then narrated.

As discussed above, most participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) only appear in a single episode and their respective stories are therefore introduced and brought to a close within one episode. As a consequence, it is not surprising that the individual characters are introduced with reference to their specific, easily recognisable, role within the problem-resolution narration of the programme. Most storylines revolve around a specific struggle that appears to relate to THE central characteristic of the character.

The alcoholic (Chris), the troubled single Mom (Sherelle, Nikola), the party-girl (Amber), the gigolo (Jamie), the drag queen (David), the neighbour from hell (Pidge), the partying entrepreneurs (Mikee and Aaron, Dale), the rapper with a criminal past (Ryan) are all examples of easily recognisable and simplified characters that, as I will explore later, resonate with stereotypical depictions of the working class.

Again, it could be argued that these shortened portrayals are first and foremost a result of the constraints of the genre. However, and this will be discussed in more detail with regards to the representativeness of the programme, the casting of the programme appears to be structured by stereotypical images. Taking the

‘requirement’ of Reality TV to look beyond the ordinary and to recruit more colourful and intriguing characters into account, it still can be can be questioned why so many of the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) are reduced to (often negative) characteristics that are generally associated with the supposed deficiencies of contemporary working-class life.

# 8. Critique

After having explored the production techniques and content of *People Like Us* (2013l) on a more descriptive level in the previous chapter, I now want to critically interpret these findings and relate them to my research question. This critique will take place on three levels. Firstly, I intend to analyse whether the claimed authenticity of the programme stands up to scrutiny. Following that, I intend to explore, taking into account the complexities of the notion of authenticity, whether the programme can be regarded as an unbiased representation of the local area and, more generally, of contemporary working-class life in the UK. And thirdly, I want to explore whether this critique can be generalised to address wider questions around the political and social significance of contemporary documentary filmmaking. The Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence will be used to analyse whether the empirical example under consideration is indicative of wider (power) structures and is a mode of reproducing them. The first and second part of this critique is based on interviews with participants of *People Like Us* (2013l). Their opinions on authenticity and representativeness will be presented and related to the discourse analysis of the programme. Unfortunately, the views of the makers of the programme are largely missing from this research as my interview requests remained unanswered.

## 8.1 Authenticity

In the previous chapter's rather descriptive analysis of *People Like Us* (2013l), I frequently refer to the notion of authenticity. In this chapter, I want to further explore what authenticity means in the context of contemporary documentary filmmaking and point to potential frictions between a professional and a lay conception of authenticity. Furthermore, and most importantly in this context, I want to portray the viewpoints of participants of the programme and their opinions on its truthfulness. Finally, I want to discuss the relationship between authenticity and truthfulness. I will however begin by asking the question whether authenticity is of significance to the audience in the contemporary television environment.

### 8.1.1 Significance of authenticity

As I have shown above, markers of authenticity are extensively used in *People Like Us* (2013l). From specific recording techniques and the use of material produced by the participants of the programme, to a focus on displayed emotions and their largely sympathetic narration, a range of elements are intended to signify authenticity. However, there appear to be widely differing opinions as to what extent audiences regard Reality TV as truthful representations of real life and to what degree authenticity even matters to the viewer. Corner (2002:264), for instance, claims that a 'belief in the veracity of what you are watching is not a prerequisite to engagement and pleasure'. Also Skeggs and Wood (2012a) come to the conclusion that 'fakeness' is a problem for formats that claim to portray reality, but that viewers are ultimately not overly invested in the truthfulness of the respective programmes. 'Truth' for Skeggs and Wood (2011:94) is not found in transparency, but 'rather in the social or the inter-subjective truths' that can resist or even be created by the artificiality of a Reality TV setting.

The popularity and broad variety of programmes and formats that are, in one way or another, based on notions of reality certainly not only changed the television schedules, they surely impacted on the audience's readings of products of documentary filmmaking. Furthermore, as outlined in chapter five, the truthfulness of reality-based programmes has been, and is being, publicly debated. There are documented instances in which reality-based television programmes have been accused or found guilty of wilfully distorting the truth and misleading the audience (for a historic example see chapter six). However, the actual impact of these revelations and, more generally, the ways in which viewers nowadays trust or doubt reality-based programmes is not quite clear. Corner (2002:263) regards the 'self-display' in docusoaps no longer 'as an attempt to feign natural behaviour, but as a performative opportunity in its own right'. Not least, this performative element, but also the 'new playfulness' with which docusoaps engage with reality, 'must have raised popular audience awareness of just how constructed audio-visual documentation can be' (Corner, 2002:264). Also Hill (2005:57), claims that television audiences are aware that editing techniques can 'create different degrees of reality'.

Therefore, trust in the authenticity of a docusoap is complex and dependent on the respective set-up and execution of an individual programme.

These assessments largely confirm the findings of my own analysis of online debates around *People Like Us* (2013l). As I discussed in the chapter five, many discussants expressed general scepticism regarding the authenticity and truthfulness of reality-based television programmes. However, this general scepticism was, by and large, not actually applied to the programme under discussion and its content was treated as real and discussed at face value by the vast majority of discussants. It appears that the participants in the analysed debates acknowledged the potential of television producers to represent reality in a distorted way, but found little or no evidence of misrepresentations in the actual programme. It could be argued that the latter is not too surprising, as distortions and misrepresentations are rarely evident.

I would argue that truthfulness did not cease to matter to the audience. As I have discussed in chapter six, a lack of truthfulness can, if suspected or detected, be very damaging to programmes that claim to portray reality.[80] Viewers appear willing to accept that docusoap settings are somewhat manufactured and controlled and that editing can be a powerful tool, but within these parameters, programmes and the behaviour of the people appearing in them must appear truthful. I would argue that this can be seen as the central reason why, as discussed above, markers of authenticity are heavily employed in *People Like Us* (2013l). It seems almost like the artificiality of the docusoap setting must be offset by the realness and credibility of its content. In a sense, it appears like the onus of truthfulness was transferred from the makers of a programme to the 'characters' appearing in them. Despite the artificiality of the setting, their behaviour and display of emotions must appear unpretentious and authentic.

It can be asked why, if 'realness' is of no concern to the audience (any more), would the producers of docusoaps go to great lengths to signify authenticity? Audiences are generally willing to trust the ability of Reality TV to capture reality (Hill, 2005), but this trust is somewhat fragile and needs to be constantly re-established. If docusoaps

[80] As Bruzzi (2006) shows, even very popular docusoaps like *Driving School* (1997b) and *Clampers* (1998c) suffered in popularity when it became obvious that their production relied on a greater degree of artificiality than the programme suggested.

and other reality-based programmes were, indeed, regarded as a playful and largely fictional interpretation of loosely 'realistic' occurrences and characters, docusoaps could be much more open about their respective set-ups and production conditions. As I demonstrate above, truth is claimed implicitly and explicitly, but this claim is not problematized in any sense. Reality TV, with the most notable exception of *Big Brother* (2000), does not signal its artificiality. On the contrary: what is in effect a highly constructed and controlled setting is meant to appear unconstructed and natural (Bruzzi, 2006). The question can be asked, why, if the viewer is aware and does not mind the 'fakeness' of Reality TV, is there not more openness about its constructedness.[81]

Also in the empirical example under discussion, questions of authenticity and truthfulness are, as I have discusses in chapters five and seven, at the heart of reporting on and the debating of the programme (see: *The Media Show,* 2013a; Wheatstone, 2013; Brady, 2013; Hills 2013).

To conclude, I suggest that the absence of 'a making-of' or generally a greater degree of openness regarding the production methods of a docusoap like *People Like Us* (2013l) cannot be interpreted as a lack of interest on the side of the audience that is cynical about and not too interested in the truthfulness of reality-based programmes. Quite the opposite – I would argue that the opaqueness about the production conditions of docusoaps stems from an unwillingness to undermine the carefully crafted notion of realness on the side of the producers and broadcasters. The discussed, genre-typical, use of markers of authenticity as well as the analysed perception of *People Like Us* (2013l) strongly point to this conclusion.

[81] It is interesting, and maybe telling, that the authenticity of natural history programmes appears to be under much greater scrutiny than the authenticity of documentary programmes concerned with the human species. The controversy around the BBC programme *Hidden Kingdoms* (2014c) is exemplary in that respect. The use of blue screen technology, re-enacted elements and misleading editing forced the BBC to precede the screening of each episode with a message indicating the dramatized nature of the programme (Conlan, 2013). Ten minutes of the programme were dedicated to the production techniques that are also outlined on the BBC website (BBC, 2014a). A 'making-of' of a Reality TV programme could, in my opinion, be equally revealing, but is probably a rather remote possibility.

### 8.1.2 Examples of questionable authenticity

In the following section, I want to point to examples of questionable authenticity in *People Like Us* (2013l). Here, I want to incorporate the views of participants of the programme. Their experiences and assessments are at the centre of this analysis. My intention is not to comprehensively list a large number of instances in which distortions and manipulations took place, but to present the views of the participants of the programme and to exemplarily depict a number of cases of questionable authenticity that can help to further develop the notions of authenticity in a docusoap context.

For the purpose of this analysis, I will use the term authenticity in a rather narrow sense. This means that I will focus on possible distortions of what was being filmed as being caused by the filming process itself i.e. by the presence of cameras or specific demands of the makers of the programme. Authenticity, in this sense, refers to the supposedly spontaneous, unscripted and unstaged nature of the programme. Misrepresentations caused by misleading and unrepresentative editing or for instance by showing scenes out of context will be discussed in the following subchapter.

All of the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) that I interviewed agreed that the programme was an authentic depiction of them insofar, as, by and large, what they said on camera was not scripted, directly influenced or manipulated by the production company or the presence of the camera crews.

Paul sums up this general view:

> Paul: It was us, that was us, being ourselves. What you got is what you saw. What you heard is what was being said. You know? What comments you heard me saying is what I naturally say. I wouldn't say it like I had a script put to me. There was no script.

Also Sheryl is of the opinion that the programme matched her experience of the local area and that people in it ‘were quite true to life’ and that she ‘felt it to be quite factual’.

Donna and Amber confirm this view and make connections between their authentic display and their likeability as characters in a docusoap.

> Donna: Oh yeah, but to be honest with you, we did not get a lot of bad publicity. Even on the market. Actually, people said: 'You are the natural people. There's no airs and graces with you'. People love the bit where I whack him on the chair with the remote. And shout and that. ... So people kind of liked us for our honesty and people liked us more for our funny side, how we laugh at life.
>
> Amber: Oh God, everything you see like is how we were. If you didn't like us, you didn't like us. If you did, you did. It's just the way they put it together.

The last statement indicates that there is more to truthfulness than the absence of a script and that authenticity and representativeness cannot be discussed in isolation. I will come back to that shortly, but it can be stated that none of the interviewed participants of the programme claimed the events on camera and the dialogues to be scripted and fabricated in a very direct sense. However the presence of a camera (crew) at times had a significant impact on the filmed events.

Even Paul, who, as the above quoted statement indicates, is very clear that he acted naturally in front of the camera, concedes that their presence, and in this particular case the interview situation, did slightly alter the way he expressed himself.

> Paul: With me, if you play the game fair with me, then I don't like to cheat. That's how I look at things, that's how I look at life. You know.
>
> BW: So you would say you are in front of the camera just the way you are…
>
> Paul: That is exactly how I was.
>
> Karen: You forget the camera's there, don't you?
>
> Paul: Yeah.
>
> BW: I found it particularly strong in these interviews, you make a number of very...
>
> Paul: ...funny?
>
> BW: Very male, witty, funny comments...

> Paul: It's funny that you say that, cause like those sort of comments are comments I would naturally make. Because I have not seen them on the camera, that's what I normally say. I never really giggle at them. But when I have seen them back on the interviews, I thought, well that sounds funny to somebody else the way I said that, you know, so I have laughed at it.
>
> Karen: There is one false thing you did do though. He smiled on television and that's just against the rules, cause you don't smile in life. [laughs]

So Paul's awareness that what he says on camera will be watched by an audience has to a degree influenced his demeanour.

This can be seen as a fairly benign interference that hardly damages the authenticity of the programme. However, I would argue that this exemplifies the unavoidable influence that the presence of a camera excerpts, even on a very unruffled person like Paul who, as he also expressed in this interview, did not even watch the finished programme in its entirety.

A more significant and more serious example of the effect the presence of a television camera can have, was discussed by police officers Sheryl and Avril with reference to the above discussed large-scale disorder.

> Sheryl: ... Because they were being a bit aggressive, we were really aware that there was a camera man with us and I would feel guilty if he'd got hurt, so we kind of asked him to stay out that time.
>
> Avril: ... But there were times when we gotta be switched on about OUR security and safety. Like the night on the estate. What you DON'T see is glass going everywhere, what you don't see is Sheryl having to deal with an offender and then another offender tries to push Sheryl out of the way and grab the guy that she's got. We are dealing with reports of, you know, of glass going everywhere, fighting, we don't know what we are walking into and we are in a rat run and they don't show that. And it ended up being quite a few officers turning up. And you see the one minute you see things getting out of hand and the next minute, you see, 15, 16 officers turning up. You think: 'How's that escalated?' and you don't see that bit in the middle where actually there was a point when Sheryl could have got herself hurt, I could have got myself hurt, we had to physically deal with people and then as well you have in the back of your mind to look after the camera man, because when he was running through the alley way there were people following him. And that's why we pulled in so many officers. I did not like that they did not show the continuity.

Sheryl: To be fair, he was just lucky on that incident. On a couple of incidents that he was just there when a job came in it just kicked off a little bit. Why they chose that one, I don't know.

BW: I'm thinking, would you agree, or is there not the danger that the camera creates a situation as opposed to document? For instance when you took this young lad out of ASDA and you clearly can see that he tries to kick the camera. I was thinking: 'Did that not wind him up even more?'.

Sheryl: Certainly on the estate. You see that later part when the guy is arrested and I think I talk a little bit on camera. When we got there, the camera guy was with us. There was about 16 lads having a bit of a scrap. They calmed down when they saw me and Av and I think that might have been, you know, a little bit because of female officers and things like that. But you put a camera there and... It it got...

Avril: Chests get puffed out, everybody...

Sheryl: Yeah, so it did aggravate the situation. Certainly in that situation it did. And many things could have aggravated that situation, not just the camera, but certainly that did not help matters at that point. And to be fair, when we asked him to put the camera down 'don't point it at them, because they kick off' he did as he was told. He might still have been recording or doing the audio, but he did put the camera down at the point. I think because he realised there were 16 of them, three of us and we were getting a kicking had it got to that point [laughs], him included. To be fair.

Avril: Yes, I'll have that.

Sheryl: I don't think it was as intrusive as it could have been. I was expecting him to be a bit more aggressive with the camera work. Certainly in that situation, because it was getting out of control, but when we told him to put his camera down, he did.

The scenes Sheryl and Avril are referring to, are both from episode three (2013j) and depict an arrest of two young men for shoplifting as well as large-scale disorder involving young people fighting and causing damage. Sheryl and Avril vividly describe how their concern for the safety of the cameraman played a role in their decision-making and how the presence of a camera escalated an already very tense and dangerous situation for the police officers and the cameraman. Again, and Avril and Sheryl are very clear about this, there was nothing staged about either of the instances, but not only did some of the context get lost in the editing, the situations

themselves would have unfolded differently had the camera not been there. I would argue that the described events and their portrayal very well illustrate the complexity and somewhat contradictory nature of the notion of authenticity in a docusoap setting. The camera and camera crew are visible and influence events they are supposed to portray, however this effect is not addressed in the programme at all.

As a final example of the filming process interfering with events, I want to quote Amber, whose decision whether to go to drama school or not is one of the central storylines of episode two (2013e). In the programme, Amber's and her mother's concerns appear to be whether both 'are ready' for Amber to leave home. As Amber points out in the interview, her actual thought-process did not revolve around her readiness, but around possible career opportunities arising from her involvement in the programme.

> Amber: I couldn't go to drama school at the moment because it looked like on the scene that I didn't wanna go cause I couldn't do my own washing. Absolutely rubbish! I could do my own washing, I know how to work a washing machine, I love doing my own thing. I am very independent. The only reason I didn't go is cause they said once the programme is up we gonna be asking you to do these jobs, these jobs, this job, this job. So I was thinking: 'So why go to drama school to learn for three years when you gonna be putting me out there for my own life experience. I'm gonna be out there doing what I want to do. I didn't go through for that reason. As soon as it's over I'm like 'Uhhm... So I got no drama school and I have got no job'. So I had to do another course just for the meantime.
>
> BW: So had it not been for the programme you would have gone...
>
> Amber: ...I would have gone to drama school, yes of course I would have.
>
> ...
>
> Amber: Everything, so why on earth would she [her mother] would want to push me not to go to drama school.
>
> BW: But it's 100% how it comes across, isn't it?
>
> Amber: 100%. They were, like, saying: 'Your Mom didn't wanna push us'. My Mom would do anything.

So, according to Amber, her involvement in the programme and promises made by the makers of the programme were key in her decision not take up the offered place at drama school. So in this case it was not the presence of cameras, but Amber's involvement in the programme that impacted on the events on screen. It seems like the actual reasons for Amber's decisions were misrepresented in order to keep the notion of an authentic, passive and disengaged representation intact. According to Amber, promises made by the production company created the initial conflict, whether to go to drama school or not, that was then, cynically one could say, misrepresented.

Finally, I want to point to misrepresentations and distortions that were not accidental or (unavoidable) side effects of the production process, but appear to be caused by specific demands of the producers of the programme.
First of all, on a number of occasions the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) were asked to (re-en)act scenes or to use a prepared script. For instance, Amber's contribution to the opening sequence (2013l:1min 17) was scripted.

> BW: In the opening sequence you say famously 'Yous think you might know People Like Us...'.
>
> Amber: '...but you don't know nothing yet.'.
>
> BW: Exactly. Did you come up with that?
>
> Amber: No.
>
> BW: Yeah.
>
> Amber: Obviously not. There was so much, in a way, they made us say, but...

Whereas the scripted nature of that particular utterance is somewhat obvious (hence the question), several scenes that appear very spontaneous and authentic were staged or re-enacted. One of the central storylines of episode one (2013b) is the development and eventual end of Lucy's and Jamie's relationship. As the actual break-up happened off camera, the production team requested that Jamie and Lucy meet up to produce filmic evidence of it. According to Jamie, the meeting was requested and set-up by the production team:

> Jamie: Yes, when I was in the park with Lucy, doing, well, the break-up, the night before, I had already done the break-up, you see. We spoke about it. I said Lucy listen it's not working, we both argue all the time, breaking into fights and I don't want that for you. We called it a day, we were both happy with it, we both walked away as mates. We got pissed the same night and left it at that. The next day I got a phone call off the crew saying can you please come to Queen's Park, that's where it was filmed, saying can we please go over the break-up to confirm it on camera. And the minute I turned up, the way it was placed, I thought 'fucking hell' I knew what they were gonna do. I should have walked away, but I didn't. You know, they just filmed this but when I walked off they nit-picked her until she started crying. You know like 'Aw, what do you think about that? What was good?' and all this.

Jamie states that he felt very uncomfortable about how the scene was set and felt it to be a rather one-sided and inauthentic and ultimately manipulated representation of what had happened. The viewer is left in the dark about the staged nature of the meeting.

Another, less dramatic, staged scene was discussed by Avril and Sheryl. In episode three (2013j), a briefing of the local police is shown that according to Sheryl was 'very staged'. She explains:

> Sheryl: We don't sit around the table like that. We basically have got a briefing room and our Sergeant stands at the front of the briefing room and says: 'Right, these are your duties today, these are the hot spot areas, and in particular we need to get this, we got this amount of appointments, off you go'. What they had done is, they got Jim to lead the briefing. That has happened, officers do that, but generally it is the supervisor that does it and we don't sit around the table in the kitchen and I am not allowed to eat grapes in general [laughter].

Sheryl adds that the nature of their work renders certain aspects of such a briefing off-limits, but that ultimately the intentions of the filmmakers were the decisive factor in the set-up of the briefing:

> Sheryl: A lot of it is intel-led stuff so they had to be a little bit careful about what they did record. They did want us to... There were certain topics they wanted us to discuss. It's not a world away from what we would have discussed, but I think it just helped them to link things within the programme. So they kind of wanted to do that a little bit more. But, yeah, it wasn't how we would normally do a briefing really.

Again, what was being shown in the programme was not 'a world away' from reality. Whether this, undeclared, staging of scenes is problematic will be discussed later, but it becomes clear from these statements that requirements regarding the narrative structuring of the programme directly impacted on the set-up of numerous, seemingly unstaged scenes. As I will show in the following, final example, what I called 'requirements' can, similar to the 'confirmed' break-up, put a spin on a story. Sheryl, referring to Pidge's shared house that features in episode three (2013j) as the location of what is depicted to be a rather wild party:

> Sheryl: I'm gonna be honest with you - they wanted us to call that the 'party house' all the time. They asked us to call it. So they were obviously trying to make something of that.

Avril adds to that:

> Avril: I mean I don't know whether they have spoken to Pidge and said: 'Are you having a party?' or encouraged him to do that. I don't know.

Even if we assume that Pidge's party was not staged, encouraged or sponsored by the producers of *People Like Us* (2013l), it is remarkable that it was attempted to use the authoritative voice of the police to emphasise the above discussed spin that was put on this particular narrative. As Sheryl puts it, the attempt 'to make something of that' indicates an attempt to emphasise and possibly exaggerate a particular aspect of a story.

One final aspect that I want to discuss in the context of how the notion of authenticity is reflected in the production methods of the programme is the use of content that was produced by the participants in the programme. As touched on in the previous chapter, on several occasions material created by the participants is used in the programme. Amber as well as Avril talk about their respective experiences:

> BW: And when you went on holiday, erm, did they give you a camera?
>
> Amber: They gave me a camera. I filmed so much, I filmed so much and they just put in crap. ... I did some funny stuff like 'we are just going off to the beach. Gonna get something to eat' and it was some really nice stuff. But instead it was obviously the drink again. Do you know what, they were more upset we did not film our nights out. I didn't film them. I didn't film them. For one I didn't want the camera just being lost anyway and for another thing I thought 'No, I'm not filming my nights out'.

As discussed above, the scenes of Amber on holiday with her friends were filmed by herself with a camera provided by the production company. What could potentially be a very authentic and autonomous way of producing material was in fact to a great degree controlled by the production company insofar as Amber was under the instruction to specifically film her nights out and, as we will come back to shortly, condensed and distorted by a very biased editing process. Apparently, Amber resisted these demands, but had not control over how her material was edited. So, again, it becomes very obvious that the relationship between authenticity (with regards to the used filming techniques) and truthfulness is a complex one.

Police officer Avril was involved in the above mentioned drug raid. In the following, she explains that the scenes that are recorded from her point of view were not recorded by the body cams that police forces are currently being equipped with, but by shoulder cameras provided by the production team.

> BW: I found it remarkable that they could obtain the material and then...
>
> Avril: But they were their own cameras. The shoulder cams were the production company's own cameras.
>
> BW: Ah, I see.
>
> Sheryl: We wear body cams ourselves, but you were wearing a shoulder cam.
>
> Avril: They would never have access to police body cams. That's evidential. And you see a lot of officers wearing them now. What you have to do is to switch them on. But I was wearing a production company shoulder cam so they could use that footage.

For the context of this research, it is interesting to point to Avril's distinction between pictures produced by a body camera and the shoulder camera she was wearing. Whereas material produced by the police's body camera could not have been used in the programme, the pictures produced by the production company's shoulder camera could be and were used. This is somewhat ironic, as, due to their proximity, both cameras will have produced almost identical pictures. Still, as I will discuss in the next sub-chapter, the police had little or no control over the use of the material produced by the shoulder cameras their officers were wearing. Again, the control

over very authentically produced material lies completely with the production company.

### 8.1.3 Authenticity and truthfulness

In the following, I want to attempt to theoretically frame the above discussed findings by coming back to a question that was raised when comparing contemporary and historic forms of documentary filmmaking: how real can a documentary be? Holmes and Jermyn (2004:12) argue that the question 'how real is reality TV' is becoming 'increasingly tautological' in the context of highly structured and artificial Reality TV settings. Nevertheless, I would maintain that this question is still relevant in the docusoap context, as programmes like *People Like Us* (2013l) claim to tell us truths about contemporary social life and contribute to relevant political discourses (around social security for instance – see chapter five) .

Bruzzi (2001a:129) questions the notion of authenticity by asking whether filmic representations can ever be undirected:

> How can that film ever just be a 'way of looking' as opposed to a way of altering and manipulating the reality it is looking at?

This conundrum is reflected not only in the aforementioned effect of the presence of cameras, but also in the casting, the choices of topic, the voice-over, and most notably in the editing of a programme. In the following, I will try to distinguish these general limitations and dilemmas of documentary filmmaking from specific requirements and rules of the genre to arrive at a discussion of different understandings of authenticity.

Corner (2002:256) speaks with regard to observational documentaries of a 'field naturalism' that has always been full of contradictions and therefore has always been 'highly implausible' (Corner, 2002:259). Skeggs and Wood (2011:93) come to the conclusion that Reality TV must be seen 'more as a fiction of "presence" rather then re-presentation'. Documentary filmmaking has always faced the impossible challenge of capturing social life on camera and to then present it in a very condensed forms. As I have already discussed above, the 'amorphousness of actuality' (Coles, 2000:33)

can hardly be depicted by the means of documentary filmmaking. Events need to be condensed, feelings visibly displayed (and filmed) and thoughts to be uttered and recorded in interviews to present unfolding events in a comprehensible, meaningful and coherent way. Reality does not occur in a way that is easy to narrate and to dramatise and therefore, filmmakers need to resort to the aforementioned techniques. In the docusoap genre, the need for soap-opera-like condensed and dramatised storylines is even greater and, I would argue, very much reflected in the above discussed ways in which events in *People Like Us* (2013l) were stage (the break-up), labelled (the party-house) or linked (the staged briefing). Couldry (2011:194) sums up this way of producing reality:

> Reality TV needs to be understood as a form whereby objects, mechanisms of representation and people (producers, participants, audiences) are arranged to sustain claims – plausible at some level - that social 'reality' is presented through these means.

In this context, it is necessary to refer again to the material conditions of television productions. I will not repeat the arguments presented in chapter six, but it is clear that an arrangement of reality like *People Like Us* (2013l) is influenced by the requirements of the television market as much as by the working conditions it is produced under. Docusoaps are, in terms of production costs, relatively cheap television and therefore, as discussed, production teams are under the pressure to maximise their allocated resources. In this environment, authenticity is presumably of lower priority than the need to capture or create catchy narratives. Bruzzi (2001a:131) speaks in this context of a producer's 'shopping list', meaning visual elements of a narrative that a filmmaker would need to 'seek out, if not directly engineer'. Some of the above discussed examples indicate that the production of *People Like Us* (2013l) was to some extent also structured by a 'shopping list', most clearly with regards to the above mentioned attempted recruitment of a pregnant teenage girl and Amber's instructions to film her and her friends going out.

A final aspect that illustrates the complexity of the notion of authenticity in a docusoap context is the alleged performative character of the behaviour displayed in all forms of Reality TV. I have alluded to the impact the presence of a camera potentially excerpts, but of course this impact is not caused by the camera itself, but

by the knowledge of being recorded and eventually being broadcast and watched by a potentially very large number of people. Participants of docusoaps, and other forms of Reality TV, will have watched similar programmes and to some extent have an idea of what is expected of them or have expectations regarding the filming process and its outcomes. It would probably be an exaggeration to claim that there is an established way of talking and behaving on a Reality TV programme, but it must be assumed that not only in the game-based and overtly artificial, but also in more conventional docu-style settings, performativity nowadays plays a greater role than it did for the participants of the very early Reality TV productions. As the viewing habits and expectations of the audience have changed over two decades of Reality TV, so will people taking part in these programmes have been influenced by past experiences of Reality TV. Biressi and Nunn (2005:102) refer to shifting expectations in the field of Reality TV as a 'new realism in the digital age' in which self-revelation is a key element and a marker of authenticity. In a sense, participants of Reality TV play themselves or, as Žižek (2002:226) puts it pointedly:

> The distinction between real life and acted life is thus 'deconstructed': in a way, the two coincide, since people act their 'real life' itself, i.e., they literally play themselves in their screen-roles.

Kavka (2012) seconds this view by stating that in a Reality TV setting the circumstances are more of display than of observation. Accordingly, performing in front of a camera is generally associated with acting and therefore unnatural behaviour. I have discussed this supposed split between 'true self' and 'performed self' already, but, perhaps this spilt is not as dichotomous as suggested. By this I mean that any sort of, also off-camera, behaviour possibly has a performative element. It could be argued, that different 'selves' emerge in different contexts and that, in this respect, the Reality TV context is just another arena of performance. Lawler (2008:102) shows that this 'social and cultural preoccupation with authenticity', that pits performance against being true to one's identity, is a phenomenon of the Western world. Lawler (2008) challenges this dichotomy by questioning the hierarchy of authenticity and truthfulness of the respective performed roles in the sense that a version of the self that is displayed in a more intimate and private setting is not

necessarily a truer version of the self displayed in a more official or professional setting.

In my own research with participants of *People Like Us* (2013l), there is little evidence that the participants felt like they were performing a different version of themselves for the benefit of the camera or to support specific narratives. It certainly can be argued that this might not be an entirely conscious process, but of the interviewees only Sheryl and Avril talked about how the awareness of being part of a docusoap shaped their behaviour in front of a camera:

> BW: But you were quite mindful of that with the editing they could portray you...
>
> Sheryl: I was extremely mindful. It was the thing, I've actually said it before, if I had got asked again, I think I wouldn't do it. Purely on the basis that I was just so nervous all the time and I am not a particularly... I don't swear all that much, I think I'm quite a decent cop. I certainly don't do anything that breaks the law and I treat everyone with respect. But even then you just feel under pressure all the time that the media can really make things look different, I am really aware of that and I got aware of it about two weeks in. It just hit me and I thought 'Oh, if they take something out of context or...'. Yeah, I was very aware of that all the time.

And later:

> Sheryl: He [the camera man] was always trying to have a laugh and a joke with us. We were really wary of that. You know when someone is laughing and having a joke with us, we were wary that he was trying to set us up.
>
> Avril: We had conversation with him about this, because you become very suspicious as a police officer, you cannot help it, it goes with the territory. You question so much more than you would, had you been an ordinary member of the public who have a different job. We did, we were very conscious of it and we were very conscious that the police has been portrayed in a very bad light in the past, and quite rightly so in some circumstances. Secret Policeman - completely, yes, it changed the way this force dealt with diversity, and other forces as well. But we had been portrayed in a really bad light because people sometimes just don't know how we have to deal with certain incidents in a certain way.

In a sense, their knowledge of the potential of Reality TV to manipulate and misrepresent, influenced their behaviour. The performance they put on for the

camera was characterised by a great degree of wariness and guardedness. This holding-back was clearly influenced by their role as police officers representing their force and by an awareness of previous negative representations of the police. The question as to whether their way of consciously keeping a safe distance in their roles of representatives of the police is authentic and true to their 'true selves' becomes somewhat self-defeating. Avril and Sheryl were aware that they were not part of a police documentary and that the programme was interested in their personalities as well as their professional roles in the community. The need to act as a representatives of the police force, possibly more generally of female police officers and certainly of their own personality for the benefit of a mistrusted camera, clearly demonstrates the complexity and messiness of the notion of authenticity in a docusoap context.

Before I discuss possible frictions between a professional and a lay understanding of authenticity, I want to briefly come back to the classed nature of the term. As discussed in chapter three, questions of authenticity and its counterpart pretentiousness are often framed in class terms. Lawler (2005) points to the cruel irony of the working class being expected to aspire to take on or imitate middle-class taste, but if doing so, risks being branded as pretentious. Middle-class norms are seemingly universal standards that are normatively and morally loaded and can therefore not be refused without sanction (at least not by the working class). The conception of working-class people as behaving authentically is therefore, despite appearing as a positive attribution, problematic. Not only are attempts to deviate from essentialised attributions readily branded as pretentiousness, there is also the underlying assumption that working-class people lack the capacity to act in any other way than being authentic. As Skeggs (2004) shows, stereotypical representations of members of the middle class tend to revolve around aspirational and reflexive selves that are in control of their lives, whereas working-class selves tend to be presented as incapable of such degrees of psychological depth and control. Clearly, there is more to be said about this linkage and some of its aspects and repercussions will be picked up in the following sub-chapter, but at this point it shall suffice to state that the notion of authenticity is a deeply classed one.

Coming back to the difficulties of docusoaps to capture reality, I want to raise the question whether there is possibly a disconnect between a lay understanding of

authenticity and the professionals' view on the subject. Unfortunately, Dragonfly, the production company behind *People Like Us* (2013l), did not reply to my inquiries and therefore I have to rely on official guidelines regarding acceptable production techniques in a docusoap context. After the BBC's admission that scenes in *Driving School* (1997b) were staged or re-enacted, guidelines were developed by the BBC. The key points were:

- Programmes should be truthfully and fairly depict what has happened
- Programmes should never do anything to mislead audiences
- Contributors should not be asked to re-enact significant events, without this being made clear in the film
- If significant events have been arranged for the camera that would not have taken place at all without the intervention of the programme-makers, then this must be clear to the audience

(Bruzzi, 2006:131)

The difficulties in putting these rather general guidelines into practice are apparent. In particular, the first two guidelines can be read as a commendable, but rather vague aspiration. However, even the third and fourth guidelines that I chose to quote are, as discussed above, not as clear-cut as they might appear. The above mentioned examples (the break-up, the police briefing, the disorder - just to name the most apparent instances) would have unfolded differently or not taken place at all without the presence of a camera. Whether this qualifies as a re-enactment or an artificial interference and set-up is debateable. The discussed scenes might, from a professional point of view, be regarded as acceptable use of legitimate production techniques. It is however very questionable as to whether they are compatible with a lay understanding of authenticity and truthfulness. As discussed, the participants themselves did explicitly express the feeling of having been set up (Jamie) or being part of a 'very staged' (Sheryl and Avril) set-up. However, to be clear, Jamie as well as Sheryl and Avril were very much of the opinion that the majority of the scenes involving them had little or no degree of artificiality.

Either way, I would argue that my analysis of the content of the programme and the interviews with participants illustrate that the truthfulness and fairness that are referred to in the first two of the quoted BBC guidelines cannot be reduced to being

a technical problem. The difficulties of representing actuality and reality can however only partly explain why docusoaps are routinely accused of misrepresenting communities and individuals taking part in them. Questions of performativity clearly have a relevance, ultimately, their significance pales in comparison to the power of the editing process. To put it simply, the technical difficulties of achieving a truthful representations are academic if there is no intention of doing so. J. Jones (2014) discusses the potential for deception of authentic pictures with reference to a picture taken at a protest in Ferguson (USA) in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of a black teenager by a white police man. The picture depicts a black, sobbing boy hugging a white police officers. He comes to the conclusion that 'a picture does not have to be staged to be a lie'. In the context of this research this means that questions of authenticity and its technical realisation are only one aspect of the truthfulness of (media) representations. Authenticity does not necessarily equal truthfulness. In the following, I will therefor turn to the question whether *People Like Us* (2013l) can be seen as a truthful depiction with regards to its representativeness.

## 8.2 Representativeness

Docusoaps and Reality TV more generally are often accused of portraying a skewed picture of the real world by focussing on stereotypical images and foregrounding them in a way that does not mirror their occurrence in real life. I have described what I regard as an over-presence of working-class clichés in *People Like Us* (2013l) above. I now intend to turn to the assessments of the participants of the programme and then frame those insights theoretically.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I have identified the following issues of the programme as the central issues in *People Like Us* (2013l):

Anti-social behaviour / criminality

Alcohol & drug consumption

Parenting (with an emphasis on single-parenthood)

Work / career / individual fulfilment

Racism / nationalism

However, as discussed, the programme is very much centred on characters rather than issues. The above mentioned themes are central to a number of storylines, but not so much narratively depicted in an explicit or systematic way. The arguably skewed and clichéd representation of the area is reflected as much in the casting and editing as it is in the central narratives of *People Like Us* (2013l). In the following, I want to present and discuss views of the participants of the programme regarding the representativeness of the programme.

First of all, the view that *People Like Us* (2013l), like many docusoaps, is very character-centred is confirmed by Sheryl:

> Sheryl: There are so much more things they could do with Harpurhey as a programme and really, like, to get to the nitty-gritty stuff, but I just think that that's not what they were trying to achieve with this particular programme. And you are right, they probably sold it wrong by saying this is what real people are like. They should have said: 'we picked some people who have some interesting lives and some interesting stories'.

Sheryl challenges the claim of the programme of representing Harpurhey instead of presenting a small number of somewhat unusual and entertaining characters. At the same time, she makes a clear distinction between docusoaps and more serious and sober forms of filmic representations:

> Sheryl: I think you have to be realistic about what channel the programme was on. It was on BBC Three and the audience that the BBC goes for... If you wanted to make a programme about deprivation and issues and communities...
>
> Avril: ...on Panorama.
>
> Sheryl: Yeah, BBC Four is the place for you, isn't it? And I think that's what people need to be a bit realistic about.

Again, genre-typical frictions and contradictions come to the fore. However, none of the interviewees regarded *People Like Us* (2013l) as a gross misrepresentation of the local area and most expressed mixed feelings regarding its representativeness:

> Jamie: I'd say 50:50 in terms of representation.
>
> BW: Overall, would you say that it is a fair representation of you as a family and of the area as a whole?
>
> Karen: Well, I would and I wouldn't.
>
> Amber: I don't know, it's quite a difficult because in a way it's true and in a way it's not.

Again, I would argue that this ambivalence to some extent reflects the incapability of filmic representations to capture truth. However, I would also argue that these limitations can only partly explain misrepresentations and certainly do not account for their classed nature.

Several interviewees felt that the editing of the programme and the choice of presented narratives was very selective. Avril and Sheryl offer some insights into the mechanisms of editing:

> Avril: And in the end, out of an hour being in that studio, we got ten seconds.
>
> Sheryl: And it was a joke.
>
> Avril: It was. We had jeans, we were wearing jeans. We had the top uniform bit on, but we were wearing jeans underneath and I was on holiday.
>
> Sheryl: It was funny actually, because for what they have shown. They showed that silly little joke at the end. I can't even remember having that conversation...
>
> BW: You said something along the lines of...
>
> Avril: I like a drink or two....
>
> Sheryl: I was really shocked that they played that bit. I was glad of it, but the type of questions they had been asking up to that point just did not link in with it. Because they were asking us questions like 'Why did you become a

> police officer? How much police involvement did you have in your life as a child?'. Really quite emotive things and then they just showed us having a laugh. And I didn't...
>
> Avril: It wasn't like that. We said some good stuff about Harpurhey. That's where we work, I have always worked in Harpurhey. I have never been off this division and I have always covered the Harpurhey area. I asked to go there in my probation and I said that. I said that in my interview. Because we said a lot about the variety of the job and the people we go to in Harpurhey. And we said some good stuff and I was genuinely gutted that some of that stuff wasn't put across because I thought it could have done loads to improve the relationship between the police and the locals in the area.

Avril and Sheryl refer to an interview that was recorded in a studio. Of the whole conversation, only a very short sequence was picked (2013j:27min 22):

> Sheryl: It has been known that I have gone out in town and had a glass of wine or two in the past and I have never got myself into a fight. So I do ask the question why these people constantly find themselves – because we do generally come across the same people time and time again – so I do ask the question why are they constantly in these situations. And I don't know why that is. Can you offer an answer to that?
>
> Avril: No.

This short interview sequence is cut between the aforementioned (allegedly alcohol-fuelled) disorder and the (seemingly out of control) house party. So clearly, this short interview sequence was used as a structuring device and its content appears to confirm the inability of some residents of Harpurhey to consume alcohol without causing trouble. The decision of the makers of the programme to choose this particular utterance was puzzling and disappointing for Avril and Sheryl who felt that it was shown out of context and was not representative of the opinions they expressed in the hour-long interview.

The tendency of docusoaps to overemphasise the extraordinary and spectacular (in ordinary contexts) and to therefore paint a rather skewed picture is discussed by Amber and Karen as well as Sheryl.

> Amber: We had so many good scenes. Just so many loving-family-time erm just doing things like really nice things.

> Karen: We allowed them to come out with us to the restaurant. It was your birthday. They could film us, having a birthday meal. They refused, didn't they? And went 'Ah we are leaving that now'. That would be so nice, watch us as a family going out for a meal.
>
> Amber: A nice family meal for my birthday rather than the drunken birthday. They could have a bit of both maybe.

Sheryl comments on the representativeness of the programme:

> Sheryl: You are right, there was a lack of, sort of, I don't want to use the word normal, but everyday sort of people, getting up at 7 o'clock in the morning to go to work, there was a lack of that, definitely.

And later:

> Sheryl: I don't think it's completely away from the truth. Those people that they recorded that exist and I've seen them exist and I have come to work in GMP [Greater Manchester Police BW] for six years and I worked in Harpurhey for 2 1/2 year and I was busy every day dealing with people they portrayed, that they showed so I know that that does exist. To the extent that they have shown it? Proportion wise? In a ratio? Is that right? Probably not, it is probably not right in the ratio.

However, both Karen and Sheryl point to the requirement of a docusoap to be entertaining and therefore to focus on the extraordinary:

> Karen: I think the editing and that. I think they make it look worse for entertainment. Otherwise, it'd be boring. Because if they showed the library… It would be boring watching someone going into the library…
>
> Sheryl: But I guess that wouldn't make good TV if it just had, you know, Joe Bloggs getting up in the morning and going to work, eat egg on toast and then going to bed after... Do you know what I mean? I understand that it's a TV programme it is made for entertainment purposes and they want ratings.

Again, the conflicting remits of a docusoap come to the fore and both participants accept the focus on the extraordinary as legitimate. Furthermore, it lies in the nature of a docusoap, and any documentary filmmaking, that events need to be condensed and specific narratives need to be focused on to create a somewhat coherent and watchable programme. However, I would argue that it needs to be asked whether

the requirement to create entertaining narratives fully explains the editorial choices made in *People Like Us* (2013l). As I have discussed above, an analysis of the content of the programme suggests that its makers intentionally employed working-class stereotypes to build and structure the central narratives of the programme. The questions needs to be asked whether the focus on the unusual and extraordinary was driven by a specific, possibly classed, agenda.

As shown above, excessive drug and alcohol consumption are a central underlying themes of many storylines. One of the protagonists, Amber, expressed that she could not recognise or identify with her portrayal as a somewhat promiscuous party-girl.

> Amber: I do remember watching the first one when I was drunk and fair enough, yeah it was my 18th birthday, I did go a bit wild, there was a little bit in the toilet that made me laugh. But then there was a point where erm, it sounds awful but I kissed a boy on it and he is one of my friends from college and we are not anything, we are friends. And when he had seen he was like 'Oh my God' like laughing and I thought: 'Why have they put that in?'. Fair enough, put that in, but then there was another scene with another scene and I thought 'Crap', he was a friend again and I am not the type of person who is 'all look at me everyone, come to me'. I like to keep myself to myself, so they show me kissing another boy and people have thought like 'God, she must get round a bit' and I thought that's so horrible to put in. And on the show I am trying to make myself out like 'I wanna study, I wanna go to drama school', but now they are showing this wild side of me but too wild it was just too much.

And later:

> Amber: It annoyed me that, cause I thought that's my friend, a college mate. There's a part in it people saying Happy Birthday and stuff and giving me a hug, like my friends, it could have been so much nicer. Instead they have me going 'I'm gonna need some water'.

Amber refers to a sequence of scenes filmed on her 18$^{th}$ birthday (which was not made clear to the viewer and therefore appears like a regular night out) that were in her opinion edited in a very biased way. The scene culminates in a shot of a clearly intoxicated Amber stating to the camera that she needed water. As discussed above, Amber felt that also her holiday with a group of friends was misrepresented as drinking and partying was vastly overrepresented in the programme:

> Amber: So the only bit [of partying BW] I got [on camera BW] in was the boat party, so yeah they made sure they put that in.

There are several more examples of participants feeling misrepresented in a way that builds on stereotypical images of the working class. As discussed above, Harpurhey is presented as a rather chaotic, unruly place. Karen recalls one incident that illustrates the techniques used to establish and reaffirm this picture of the area:

> Karen: Yeah, it was actually on the way to Sticky Fingers when we were driving. They put like outside dragging settees down the street and we did not pass anything like that. They put us in this really scummy area, going past with the music going. And lads on bikes and all throwing things and I thought, that's wrong.

The brief sequence Karen refers to is a very telling example of manipulative editing and it is therefore worth sketching (2013c:34min 00):

> [After Paul and Karen discover a theft when watching CCTV tapes they decide to pay the alleged thief a visit and confront her.]
>
> Karen [next to Paul in the office of the laundrette watching the CCTV images]: Got ya, you sweaty, old, funny-arse. I'm right round her house.
>
> [Cut to Paul's and Karen's car setting off]
>
> [dramatic music sets in]
>
> [cut to Paul's and Karen's view from inside the vehicle]
>
> [sweeping shot of poorly-lit streets]
>
> [hooded youths filmed from behind, walking]
>
> [shot of two hooded people pulling a large object (settee?) in a poorly-lit street]
>
> [cut to Paul's and Karen's view from inside of the vehicle, busy, well-lit, main road]
>
> [shot of a group of teenagers, several motorbikes noisily driving past]
>
> Karen (on the phone, from the off): Hi Stacey, do you know what's happened?
>
> [shot of a woman in an ill-lit street playing with a dangerously looking dog snapping at something]
>
> Karen (on the phone, from the off): Just took a service wash back, right, all his cloths are missing. We watched the CCTV. Sticky-fingered Lil has been at it again. She took all his cloths.

[Karen getting out of the car at their destination and walking towards a house]

Karen (on the phone, from the off): I'm furious, so I'm going round there now.

The short and uneventful journey of Paul and Karen to the house of the alleged thief is intercut with five different scenes that all signal potential dangers. As Karen stated, none of these street scenes were filmed during the actual journey. Combined with the dramatic music, the impression is created that Harpurhey at night is a very dangerous place. The short sequence is littered with emotive pictures that signal danger, anti-social behaviour and criminality (hooded youths, motorbikes, dangerous dog, poorly-lit streets etc.). What makes this sequence so powerful, and for the context of this analysis so revealing, is the fact that an unsuspecting viewer would reasonably believe that all those shots were taken on the actual journey. Furthermore, the individual shots do not portray any illegal, anti-social and threatening behaviour as such, but due to their brevity the viewer is hardly able to notice that. The fast-paced editing and the emotive nature of the pictures work on an emotional level and create a threatening aura. I would argue that this is a clear example of manipulative editing, that pieces together scenes from different contexts in a wilfully misleading way.

Similar to the aforementioned discussed portrayal of Amber, there appears to be an agenda behind these portrayals. Further examples of misrepresentation that were mentioned by the participants of the programme support this assumption:

- Jamie is referred to as 'market trader Jamie' despite actually selling goods online. In the programme, the impression is created that Jamie is a stall holder on Harpurhey market.
- Amber and Cody are portrayed shopping at Harpurhey market. According to Amber this was requested by the makers of the programme and the market is not a place where they would normally shop.
- The aforementioned shots of people wearing pyjamas in public is according to Amber a very clichéd and unrepresentative image of the area
- Donna was aggrieved that her wedding was misrepresented in a way that fitted into the main narrative of episode one (the break-up of Lucy and Jamie)

> but had little to do with the actual events of what she felt should have been her big day.

I would argue that, in particular the first three examples underline the classed agenda of misrepresentations in *People Like Us* (2013l). The portrayal of Jamie as a market trader (as opposed to doing business online) and Amber and Cody as customers there (as opposed to shopping on the high-street) paints a picture of them that is in line with an image of the working class as lacking sophistication and not being in tune with technological developments or mainstream shopping habits. The portrayal of English white working class people as being bound to 'anachronistic spaces' is explored by Lawler (2012:409).

In the following, I want to further explore the classed nature of the editorial choices in *People Like Us* (2013l) by pointing to extraordinary and potentially telegenic narratives that were not addressed and which participants felt underrepresented by the programme.

As discussed above, the programme very much appears to be staying clear of serious issues, or of too negative and serious aspects of the portrayed subjects. Several interviewees felt that the omission of health issues and disability and the impact on their lives contributed to a very skewed representation of them.

> Donna: Well, I'm not well myself, I try to do some work to better my life. Unfortunately, health battered me. Could no longer work. Do you understand? But this was never portrayed. This was never said. It was just all, there she's on the market. Loads of money.

And later:

> Donna: But then they did not show when I come home and I had to take my painkillers and I couldn't move for a few days. I worked two days a week with permission of the benefits. ... I still got permission. I did not earn enough, it was therapeutic, to get me out and stuff like that. None of that was ever mentioned.

> Karen: It did not mention that my spine is crumbling. It did not mention that I was disabled because of my spine, it did not mention any of that. I got a lot of hassle because of that, really bad slander.

Also Amber felt that the failure to mention her Mom's disability lead to a very distorted picture of her Mom and her relationship with her partner.

Again, it can only be speculated why, despite being a central part of the participants' lives, health issues and disabilities were not mentioned in the programme. It very much appears that the makers of *People Like Us* (2013l) tried not to disrupt the generally upbeat and light-hearted tone of the programme too much and address the more serious repercussions of deprivation. Apart from that, the programme very much avoids issues around social security. The omissions of disability as an issue can also be seen in this context of a reluctance of going near potentially contentious questions of deservedness or undeservedness of state welfare.

The assumption that class stereotypes were used as narrative devices is underpinned by the fact that more telegenic aspects of live in Harpurhey that were captured on camera also did not make the final cut.

Police officers Sheryl and Avril refer to two instances that were filmed, but, to their surprise, were not included in the programme.

> Sheryl: Was I surprised by the editing?
>
> BW: Yeah.
>
> Sheryl: Erm...
>
> BW: About the choices that they did make.
>
> Sheryl: Yeah, I mean, there was some elements that, like, there were some topics that we covered. It just so happened that we had an indecency job come in. It's a sexual sort of crime and so everyone tends to find that a little bit more interesting. And they did, they recorded a lot of that, and sort of set it up a little bit so they could record some more stuff. And they never played anything to do with that. I did not really work out why. I was glad if I am honest, because I think it was quite a sensitive subject. But, I think they recorded it thinking that it's a 'sexy' topic, so to speak, and that people would enjoy that and it never ran.

And, as mentioned, with reference to the discussed disorder:

> Avril: And you see the one minute you see things getting out of hand and the next minute, you see, 15, 16 officers turning up. You think: 'How's that

> escalated?' and you don't see that bit in the middle where actually there was a point when Sheryl could have got herself hurt, I could have got myself hurt, we had to physically deal with people ... I did not like that they did not show the continuity.

In these instances, extraordinary, spectacular and presumably telegenic events were not included in the programme or portrayed in a shortened and sanitised way that does not convey the dramatic nature of the disorder incident.

Several participants of the programme come to the conclusion that the portrayal of Harpurhey is sensationalised in some respects, but also toned down and sanitised in other respects.

> Karen: Definitely could have made it look a lot worse. I have seen years on this lane, we are here all the time, even sometimes until 3 o'clock in the morning. We see the gory details and everything. I could have made it look a lot worse.

> Jamie: What you see in Harpurhey and Moston, people pissing up walls and crack dens. That is that is the real Harpurhey.

Poverty as an issue is almost completely absent from the programme. As discussed in the descriptive part of this analysis, poverty very rarely enters the discourse and is not explored in any depth. In one single storyline poverty is a central element. However, it is framed more as a cash-flow problem than as hardship, and the portrayed negative impact of it is offset by plenty of scenes in which the protagonists of this storyline, Aaron and Mikee, are seen drinking and partying. Of the interviewees, Donna was most aggrieved about this from of misrepresentation:

> Donna: It supposed to show how Manchester people are. It wasn't, it was more about the gay scene which I have nothing against, druggies, alcoholics, everybody else. It was nothing about how mine and Jamie's life revolved around each other, how I'm supporting him, how I was always there for him.

And later:

> Donna: It was a lot of lies and deceits and not true to us Manchester people. They did not show our lives. ... Alright, I'll tell you where they get this shit from. If you film my flat, right? My flat looks great for someone who is on benefits. Telly on the wall, nice sofa. But what you don't see is the rips in the carpet. So people go 'Oh, they are on benefits and they can afford that?'. But what people need to think, do you understand where I'm coming from, I've

> had the telly five years, I had this lino down three years, all my furniture is scratched up to fuck and breaking. ... People don't look at that side of things. Do you understand? People get in debt for things. Is there any food in the freezer?

Poverty, like social security and state benefits, is largely absent from the programme and Donna does not agree with this superficial and one-sided way of presenting her life. *People Like Us* (2013l) was shot in and around Harpurhey which, as the narration in the opening sequence points out, is formerly the most deprived neighbourhood in England. It appears, however, that deprivation is only addressed in a rather superficial and stereotypical sense. A few alleged symptoms of deprivation are used to structure the narrative of the programme (substance abuse, single-parenthood, anti-social behaviour etc.), but the more serious repercussions of inequality and poverty are avoided even if they are central to the lives of the protagonists and have been captured on camera. It could be argued that *People Like Us* (2013l) is comparatively restrained in its choice of topics and did not set out to demonise a poor community. However, the point could also be made that a partly sanitised representation that avoids the portrayal of suffering is equally exploitative. I will come back to this question later in the context of symbolic violence, but now want to attempt to frame the presented insights theoretically.

The 'marginalisation of issues' (Bruzzi, 2006:122) in favour of the micro-social is fairly typical for the docusoap genre. There are, as discussed, a number of recently aired docusoaps that seemingly break the mould by focussing on a specific social issue, like social security in the aforementioned *Skint* (2013i) and *Benefits Street* (2014d). However, even these more issue-centred docusoaps very much foreground rather personal aspects and individual stories as opposed to exploring wider, more general dimensions of the relating issues. Even in *Benefits Street* (2014d) and *Skint* (2013i), 'big issues' like poverty, inequality, deprivation etc. are rarely explicitly discussed. It is again more the 'small dramas of life' (Kilborn, 2000:113) that docusoaps revolve around. The settings of these dramas have certainly changed over time and gone through different phases (from airports to vets practices to poor neighbourhoods), but the narrative structure and the level of analysis appears to have remained the same. Serious social or political issues tend to be off-limits. In that respect, *People*

*Like Us* (2013l) appears very typical for the genre. What is however remarkable, is that this effort to avoid seriousness and depth is not only reflected in the choice of characters, topics, in the tone, structure and style of the programme, but also appears to render supposedly telegenic and spectacular scenes off-limits. Most notably the discussed large-scale disorder was portrayed in a way that seemingly confirmed the image of Harpurhey as unruly and chaotic, but stayed clear of a too graphic depiction of violence and threat to the involved people. As discussed, deprivation as a topic is used as a label that suggests social commitment, documentary integrity and investigative interest, but this label largely remains a label and is only explored in the most micro-social and superficial terms and furthermore in a rather sanitised way. The effects of deprivation and poverty are largely absent from the programme. In this sense, the representativeness of the programme must be questioned. A lack of representativeness is, I would argue, reflected in a very limited framing of the presented issues. Docusoaps are keen to portray drama, extraordinary characters and unusual events, but, as it appears, only within narrow and well-defined limits. These limits are reflected in the choices of what appears on screen and what does not. Furthermore, I would argue, these choices are very much structured by stereotypical perceptions of social class. Harpurhey and its residents are portrayed as stereotypically working-class and this image is not interrupted. Aspects of life in Harpurhey that are too close to middle-class normality (shopping on the high street, doing business online, family meals etc.) are as absent from the programme as are depictions of poverty and serious symptoms of deprivation.

This bias is indicative of general tendencies within media portrayals of the working class in Reality TV contexts. In particular, the depiction of excess is central to many representations of the working class. As Skeggs (2005) argues, excess is associated with the working class with regards to consumption (alcohol, food etc.), (hetero-) sexuality and (excessively uncontrolled and loud) behaviour.[82]

[82] These themes are, as discussed, very present in *People Like Us* (2013l) and the parallels to Skeggs (2005:965) analysis of the portrayal of hen-parties are obvious '…we now have the loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting, hen-partying woman who exists to embody all the moral obsessions historically associated with the working class now contained in one body; a body beyond governance.

As discussed, there are many examples where the excessiveness of behaviour is portrayed and emphasised in *People Like Us* (2013l). From the allegedly promiscuous Amber and the 'gigolo' Jamie to drunken street fighting and out-of-control house parties. In particular the latter two signal a lack of governability. As the over-representation of single-parenthood, these portrayals stand in contrast to the self-restrain and alleged moral integrity of the middle class. Harpurhey market, that features heavily, not least in the unconnected and uncommented shots that are used to mark a switch from one storyline to the next, can be seen as a symbol of local attachment and backwardness that clashes with the 'cosmopolitan modernity' (Skeggs, 2005:972) displayed by the middle class. As discussed, nationalism and racism are central to one storyline and are suggested by the implied ubiquity of England flags that is in the programme not put into any context but is a powerful signifier of old-fashioned, redundant nationalism. The oversimplified narratives of *People Like Us* (2013l) that appear incapable of acknowledging that the participants of the programme behave in a way not consistent with stereotypical perceptions of class, essentialise the portrayed attributes and add a morally loaded judgement to the narratives.

## 8.3 Symbolic violence

In the following, I want to discuss how these skewed, stereotypical representations are exploitative and, in a Bourdieusian sense, are a form of symbolic violence against individuals, a community and ultimately against a whole social class. Furthermore, I will use the concept to make sense of the above-described (classed) misrepresentations in a wider, political sense. The significance of media representations will be discussed alongside questions of access, control and exploitation. Again, I will draw on the experience of participants of the programme, but also locate the discussed processes in a wider political context and to point to their significance.

### 8.3.1 Control & Exploitation

In the chapters three and six, questions of access to the media field and control over its representations have been raised. As discussed, Reality TV formats have clearly expanded access to the television screens for previously underrepresented demographics (Murray, 2010). In the following, I want to exemplarily discuss on whose terms this widening of access happened. More specifically, I want to explore to what extent the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) felt in control regarding their own representation. Taking into account the class background of media workers, I intend to frame these specific struggles over access and control as wider (class) struggles over recognition and legitimacy.

I have already discussed that a number of interviewees felt that aspects of their lives as well as the area they live in were misrepresented in the programme. These grievances regarding the finished programme already indicate a lack of control on the side of the participants. Now, I want to explore the relating process a bit further by presenting and discussing statements of the interviewees that refer to their involvement and decision making (or the lack of it) in the production process. Exploitation will be addressed in a rather direct sense as experienced by the individual participants.

With regards to the control over the content of the programme, the central finding of the conducted interviews is that most participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) did not get to see the programme before it was broadcast. In the interviews only members of the Wakefield family, who feature by far the most prominently, stated that they were given the opportunity to watch the edited programme beforehand and to request changes. All of the other interviewees stated that they only got to see the programme as the individual episodes were broadcast on BBC Three. This of course means that they were not in a position to influence the content in any way. Equally, they were left in the dark concerning the choice of scenes, the narration, the context their storylines were put in etc. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

> BW: So you didn’t get to see it beforehand?

> Jamie: No, we didn't get told nothing about it. We were promised a lot of stuff like we would see it, like we would be taken to places in London… But, no we never watched…
>
> BW: So that means that there was no chance to have any influence on the editing or…
>
> Jamie: Exactly. We just got a phone call saying that it's gonna be out on this date. And we got a phone call on the day as well saying it would be aired out. But we did get no warning or nothing.
>
> ...
>
> BW: So you had no influence, no say in that…
>
> Jamie: No, we did not know what was gonna be put out. Obviously we had an idea, but we could not say, 'well that's gonna go out but take that out cause we don't like it'. We didn't have a choice over anything, no.

This experience is mirrored by Donna's.

> BW: So did you then have ANY IDEA what of those hundreds of hours they would actually pick for the programme.
>
> Donna: No. No idea at all.
>
> BW: And you did not have a say in that either?
>
> Donna: No. They just put on what they wanted to put on. It was all shit.

Sheryl was not certain whether her employer, Greater Manchester Police, was given opportunity to influence the content of the programme, but she personally did not:

> BW: Alright, so that means that you couldn't have any say in what went on the programme?
>
> Sheryl: Not personally. I don't know if GMP as an organisation had a little bit of say over it. I personally didn't.

A few interviewees already sensed during the filming process that the way the programmes was produced meant that there was an inherent risk of being misrepresented, but did not feel that they were in a position of control:

> Donna: And I said to him: 'What the fuck is going on here?' and he said, 'I haven't got a clue Mom', until we'd seen it.

Donna refers to the aforementioned re-enactment of the break-up of her son Jamie and Lucy.

> Sheryl: … we were wary that he was trying to set us up.

So despite sensing the potential for misrepresentations due to the way the filming process unfolded, neither Donna and Jamie nor Sheryl and Avril felt like they could request more transparency from the production team.

The Wakefield family were, from what could be established in the interviews, the only participants who were given the opportunity to preview an edited version of the programme. However, according to Karen, the changes they requested were only partly realised:

> BW: And you said you had something changed?
>
> Karen: I had them change one of the, number three, because it said that Paul's left the family. ...
>
> BW: And they were quite happy to make that change?
>
> Karen: They changed it, but they did not change it as much as I wanted to.

To conclude, participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) were generally not in a position to influence the editing of the programme and had very little control over their representation on screen. This is particularly noteworthy as the participants of the programme granted its makers access to their lives on a very intimate level and over a long period of time.[83] So despite opening their lives to the scrutiny of cameras in a private and extensive way, the participants of the programme were not given the opportunity to influence the editing of the programme and therefore had no control over which aspects of their lives would be shared with the viewing public. Amber,

[83] Camera crews followed the lives of the Wakefield family for 18 months and, as stated in the interviews with family members, a camera crew was even given a key to their home. Also other participants expressed that 'hundreds of hours' of material was produced (Donna and Jamie) and that the filming stretched over a significantly longer period than anticipated and initially agreed (Avril and Sheryl).

who was particularly unhappy with the choices that were made in the editing process, expresses her frustration as follows:

> Karen: And then instead of acting, it's getting bladdered and throwing milkshakes at people in McDonalds.
>
> Amber: Cody's very like... It never really explained what why. But to be honest it didn't even have to be explained cause it didn't have to be shown. It did not have to be shown. So no one needs to know about that.

Karen refers to the skewed portrayal of Amber that treated her ambitions as an actress as a side-show to her daughter's alleged partying and, in this particular instance, being banned from a McDonalds branch. Amber, in the interview stopping herself from providing an explanation for the incident, criticises the lack of context, but also, crucially, is of the opinion that there was no need to even include a reference to this insignificant incident which contributed to the portrayal of her holiday as a wild, out-of-control binge. This might appear like a relatively minor and benign case of misrepresentation, but it clearly illustrates the power of the editing process and the lack of control over it on the side of the participants. Granting television crews access to their lives, did not give the participants any say in the naturally highly selective and potentially manipulative editing process.

In this context, it needs to be pointed out that the participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) did not get paid for their involvement in the programme. Apart from a small allowance of £30 for each interview recorded in studios, no payments were made. Most participants were invited to the studio once and even the family members of the Wakefield family only had a total of nine appearances in the studio between them.[84]

A number of interviewees referred to the success of *People Like Us* (2013l) and expressed that they felt like they were part of this success, but did not benefit from it. Amber sums this sentiment up with the words: 'They did well out of us'.

[84] So it very much appears that the docu element of the docusoap was leaned on and participants were treated like (unremunerated) participants of a documentary and not like (paid) actors of a soap opera. This non-payment of participants is of course among the reasons for the relatively low production costs of docusoaps.

The word ‘exploitation’ was not used by any of the interviewees, but most expressed the opinion that promises from the production company were not kept and that their involvement in the programme did not have the desired impact on their lives. This is illustrated by the following quote of Jamie:

> Jamie: We got promised the world when we signed up for that show. We were promised we were going like TV shows, like *Chatty Man* and *This Morning*, we was gonna be in papers, stuff like that. They never did anything. Karen was promised they'd help her in case people were starting to have a dig, and they did. They received nothing. They received absolutely nothing.

Jamie clearly expresses that he felt promises regarding promotion, exposure and fame were made to him and other participants. What he describes as ‘help in case people were starting to have a dig’ refers to the promise of counselling for the protagonists of the programme. The lack of support once the filming had finished, angered and disappointed all the interviewed members of the Wakefield family who expressed their views in separate interviews:

> Karen: ...we stuck up for them through thick and thin, didn't we?
>
> Amber: We did. We tried to think of the good side, but when we think about it. It's not about the money, it's not about the fame. It's more about that they promised us that we'd have counselling at the end of it all. And they didn't. They just left us like a piece of meat, just ready to just face, face the world on our own. They promised to get us help to talk to people.
>
> Paul: We got just like cut off. Do you know what I mean? Left to fight the battle on our own.
>
> Karen: No, there are no *serious* regrets. The only thing is: they promised they would look after us after the show and they abandoned us. They told us we would get counselling. I thought ‘We don’t need counselling’ and they said ‘Karen, believe me you will’. And this woman from the BBC said ‘We are staying in touch, I’m not leaving you’ and they promised this and we got any of it. Dragonfly. They just used us and they just… That was is. Dumped us.

What was particularly disappointing for the Wakefield family was that members of the production team they came to regard as friends cut all ties with them:

> Paul: ... So he said 'leave that with me, get it dealt with. Instead of texting me or phoning me, can you email me?'.
>
> Karen: He was a good friend…
>
> Paul: He was a good friend. Yeah, I think a text or a phone call is more personal... And he said 'in the future can you email me?'. Do you know what I mean? It's like - what happened? What's wrong?
>
> Karen: He was really friendly with us.
>
> Paul: Do you know what I mean? Once they have got what they wanted, all ties were cut.

It appears that the genre-typical process of getting close to people and then 'distance yourself in the cutting-room' (Gardman cited in Fiddick (1999:23)) that was discussed in the media chapter, was well and truly put into practice.

Finally, it must be mentioned that several participants felt that their involvement in the programme had a negative impact on their lives. Much of the anger about the misrepresentation of the area was directed at them personally and there were instances of bullying as a result of the programme. Some interviewees spoke of positive repercussions and generally positive feedback, but the hoped-for career boost (in the cases of Amber and Jamie for instance) did not materialise.

The issue of exploitation in Reality TV can be framed in class terms. Walkerdine (1996) for instance asks why it is that 'everything ever written about class is always targeting one class, (usually written by the other)'. There is compelling empirical evidence that working-class people are vastly underrepresented in the UK film and television industry (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012) and therefore, it does indeed appear that working class people are usually the objects, but seldom the subjects in the production of Reality TV programmes. As mentioned, I would argue that this outsider's perspective (of the production team) is indeed one of the reasons for the prevalence of stereotypical and one-dimensional representations of the working class. However, I would also argue that the actual class background of television workers is less significant than ideological, doxic thinking that structures perceptions of class and through that the content of media representations. The demand to

produce easy-to-recognise, stereotypical narratives has been discussed so I will turn to the function of these ongoing classificatory struggles.

*People Like Us* (2013l) is clearly a very character-centred representation that neglects social issues in favour of personalised and individualised narratives. At the same time however, it is a programme about class, more specifically about the working class. The setting in a working-class community, the shared class background of its participants and the use of common class stereotypes as structuring devices make the programme a representation not only of individuals or the community they live in, but a programme about the British working class in general. In the following, I want to discuss the significance of these classed media representations and argue that, in a Bourdieusian sense, exploitation and symbolic violence was not only suffered by the participants of the programme, but by their social class as a whole.

As discussed in chapters three and six, *People Like Us* (2013l) is not a unique, isolated example of a class-based docusoap that exploits class conflict (in a cultural more than in a political or militant sense) for entertainment purposes. In a Bourdieusian sense, these representations are dimensions of classificatory struggles that are very significant in the reproduction of hierarchies and class inequality. Bourdieu (1984a:481) sums this view up as follows: 'The fate of groups is bound up with the words that designate them'. Media representations like *People Like Us* (2013l) that very much appear to repeat (and therefore reinforce) common, value-loaded perceptions of the working class, help to sustain doxic images that legitimise inequality.

However, I would add that media representations should be understood as a key dimension, but not the origin of classed perceptions. Media representations, in particular if they relate to contemporary social issues, need to resonate to some degree with existing attitudes and real-life experience of the audience. Bourdieu (1984a) argues that it is the hierarchical nature of the social order that structures the experience of the social world and is therefore inscribed in people's minds. 'Social divisions become principles of division' (Bourdieu, 1984a:471) and media representations that repeat the attributions of this seemingly natural order of things, contribute to the consolidation of these divisions. However, media representations also have the potential to disrupt and to challenge social doxa and there are, as

discussed in chapter six, examples of documentary filmmaking that very much appear to have done just that. The analysis of the perception of my chosen empirical example does not indicate that this is necessarily the case in *People Like Us* (2013l), but it became apparent that the readings of the programme are bound up with the viewers' class position. Media production and media perception happens in a social context and the ideological processes that doxa describes are by no means restricted to the media field. I will return to the question of the significance of representations in the following, concluding chapter, but at this point it is important to point out that representations and cultural aspects of inequality can, in a Bourdieusian sense, not be seen in isolation from material and economic conditions of inequality. This becomes apparent with regards to the working conditions in the media field and the market demands that structure its output (Bourdieu, 1998), but also with regards to the content of reality-based programmes that often incorporate the above mentioned 'principles of division' (despite not being their root cause).

Docusoaps, as discussed above, often exploit class-based conflicts around taste, consumption, attitudes and practice and do so in a normative and dichotomous way. The above described artificial and constructed overemphasis on different forms of excess exemplifies the stereotypical nature of portrayals of the working class that imply a negative normative judgement. Bourdieu (2005:38) argues that

> … opposition between 'unique' or 'rare' and 'common' or 'vulgar' ... draw from ordinary class racism – 'distinguished' people and 'vulgar' people'.

The 'particular-universal' (Savage, 2003:536) practice and taste of the middle class are norm-setting beyond the boundaries of this particular class. I will shortly expand on the tendency of stereotypical representations to ascribe and essentialise characteristics and to naturalise the arbitrariness of hierarchical orders, but it needs to be pointed out that Bourdieu regards these processes as highly significant, as social classes, as discussed in chapter two, come into being through discursive processes that mirror the economic and material structures to some extent, but are not totally determined by them. However, as the above quoted considerations regarding designating words indicate,

> ... a class is defined as much by *being-perceived* as by its *being* [emphasis in original], by its consumption ... as much by its position in the relations of productions (even if it is true that the latter governs the former) (Bourdieu, 1984a:483).

'Being perceived' is therefore a dimension of the class struggle. At stake is the meaning of the social world. Systems of classification mirror material and economic divisions. They do not cause inequality, but are central in its reproductions and legitimation. A docusoap like *People Like Us* (2013l) offers therefore, regardless of its intentions, an interpretation of the social world, and its classed hierarchies. I would argue that from a class perspective, hierarchies are reflected in the division of labour or more specifically in the allocated roles as objects and subjects of a discourse. As discussed above, those contributors to the programme that were shown on screen were in a much less powerful position than the invisible makers of the programme. In *People Like Us* (2013l), members of the working class get to talk on camera, but they do so under conditions they have little control over. As discussed, most of the interviewed participants did not feel grossly misrepresented, but from a class perspective, the stereotypical nature of these misrepresentations is significant. To further develop this argument, I will now turn to the related process of stereotyping and othering.

### 8.3.2 Othering and stereotyping

Class stereotypes are employed in *People Like Us* (2013l) as a structuring device and inform the presented narratives in numerous ways. As I have discussed, the choices of characters and storylines rely heavily on stereotypical images of the working class and extensively feature appearances, virtues and attributions commonly associated with the working class. In the following, I will briefly summarise the relating findings to discuss their political implications. Processes of 'othering' and stereotyping will be at the core of this debate and used to make sense of and to theoretically frame the central misrepresentations in *People Like Us* (2013l).

As I have discussed, many storylines in *People Like Us* (2013l) revolve around stereotypes that are commonly associated with the working class. These range from

many forms of excess (in terms of consumption and sexuality) to crime and anti-social behaviour, from racism to single-parenthood and educational difficulties.[85]

As it became clear in the interviews conducted, stereotypes were not only achieved by selective casting and editing, but also manufactured trough the manipulation of several storylines. Despite having no relevance for the development of their narratives, Amber and Jamie for instance were portrayed as selling or buying at the local market despite doing business online (Jamie) or shopping in high street fashion shops (Amber). Participants were asked to use particular terms (see the 'party house' example) to validate the stereotypical portrayal of another participant. These examples indicate the classed nature and the intentionality of misrepresentations in the programme.

Furthermore, the heavy use of emotive, yet uncommented shots of unnamed people (man swinging a dog on a rope, youths sitting behind barbed wire, girls running across a multilane road with horses etc.) are loaded with classed associations. Who the depicted people are or in what context the filmed sequences took place is not mentioned in the programme and neither do they seem relevant for any of the storylines. Those shots are employed as morally charged visual signifiers of class. The makers of the programme further advance into ethically problematic territory by intercutting an uneventful car journey with emotive street scenes that did not take place on the actual journey. Again, it is not obvious at all in what way this would contribute to the narrative or the portrayed storyline, and the purpose of this manipulative and misleading editing appears to be the validation of the alleged dangerousness and unruliness of the local area.

The combination of skewed casting, selective editing and bending of storylines that all revolve around stereotypical images of the working class structures the narratives of the programme. Since the production company ignored all interview requests, the

[85] These themes are central to a number of storylines, but also implied by the discussed use of a large number of uncommented and emotive pictures that were not put into any context. These pictures are used to enhance the credibility of the portrayed narratives and to validate the stereotype-ridden representation of Harpurhey and its residents. Pyjamas, track-suits, hooded young men, attack dogs, litter and noisy motorbikes do not constitute anti-social behaviour or criminality, but are, at least from an outsider's perspective, strong signifiers of unruliness and potentially of threat. Furthermore, they are all associated with the working class and its alleged deficient taste.

reasons for this can only be assumed. Following on from the discussed logic of the media field in general and characteristics of docusoaps more specifically, I would argue that the creation of easily identifiable narratives is more likely the reason for class bias than a political agenda as such. The usual narrative structure of docusoaps means that only very few aspects of the participants' lives are presented in an ultra-condensed and dramatized way. The participants of *People Like Us* (2013l) are therefore, in a sense, used as characters who embody a specific trait. The requirements of the genre explains the reductive nature of the portrayals and also, to some extent, their stereotypical nature. The very limited amount of airtime that is available for the portrayal of each character[86] makes resorting to stereotypical characterisations a very tempting shortcut. Very few participants appear in more than one episode and are portrayed with any sense of continuity. The participants of *People Like Us* (2013l), I would argue, are set up to embody specific working class clichés like: the alcoholic, the single mother, the neighbour from hell, the party girl, the rapper with a criminal past etc. As mentioned, this single-issue reductionism does not apply to all of the participants and in particular not to those who were portrayed more extensively. However, even the Wakefield family who appear in each of the six episode felt that certain aspects of their lives were portrayed in an extremely exaggerated, disproportional way.

#### *8.3.2.1 Othering*

Before I frame the process of stereotyping theoretically, I want to briefly discuss a closely related yet distinguishable discursive device. *People Like Us* (2013l) heavily uses a process that Hall (2013) describes as 'othering'. In my empirical example this means that Harpurhey and its residents are portrayed in a way that makes them appear as fundamentally different from mainstream society. What difference in that sense refers to will be explored shortly, but for now I want to point to empirical evidence of this process. Speaking of empirical evidence is somewhat problematic in this context, but I would argue that there is not only a suggested reading of the programme, but also a suggested perspective: the perspective of an outsider looking

[86] Four main storylines, usually involving several participants, per 60 minute episode.

in. This perspective is reflected in the production process and is shared by the makers of the programme and (the majority of) its viewers. This assumption can be substantiated by an analysis for the aforementioned stereotypical portrayals, but is also reflected in the title and the narration of the programme. The title of the programme indicates distance between the maker and the viewers of the programme on the one side and the people appearing in it on the other side. 'People Like Us' clearly refers to the participants of the programme and implies distance. For people of different geographical and class background 'People Like Us' translates into 'People Like Them'. The title of the programme implies particularity and difference.

This alleged difference is also expressed through the narration of the opening sequence of the programme (2013l:0min 02 of each episode):

> Just north of the city centre is a little-known Manchester suburb called Harpurhey.
>
> Ten years ago, a Government report branded it the most deprived neighbourhood in England.
>
> Things have got a bit better since then, but life round here is still no bed of roses.
>
> Half the people have no qualifications and anti-social behaviour is rife.
>
> People round here might not be the poshest but they are not lacking in spirit.
>
> They just try to get on with life, be themselves and follow their dreams.
>
> For one long summer, the young people of Harpurhey let us into their secret world sharing the good times and the bad.
>
> This is how it really feels growing up the hard way.

It is not evident why Harpurhey should be referred to as a 'little-known' suburb and therefore I would assume that this wording is intended to underline the alleged difference of Harpurhey. When the narrator expresses that 'People round here might not be the poshest but they are not lacking in spirit. They just try to get on with life, be themselves and follow their dreams' it is clear that an outsider, somewhat patronisingly, comments on a community that is alien and significantly different from mainstream society. Finally, 'the young people of Harpurhey let us into their secret world' clearly adds to the aura of mystique and difference that is created by the

narration and visual language of the opening sequence. Finally, the above discussed focus on many forms of deviant behaviour, that is visualised in an extremely condensed form in the opening sequence, contributes to the 'othering' of Harpurhey and its residents.

The above quoted narration of the opening sequence of *People Like Us* (2013l) strongly resonates with Stuart Hall's (2013:255) introductory remarks to 'The Spectacle of the 'Other':

> How do we represent people and places which are significantly different from us? Why is 'difference' so compelling a theme, so contested an area of representation? What is the secret fascination of 'otherness'?

Otherness is clearly a notion that *People Like Us* (2013l) extensively works with and which is very much foregrounded and emphasised, presumably to increase the appeal of the programme. Hall (2013) bases his arguments on racial and ethnic differences, but explicitly expresses that his findings can be applied to other areas of inequality and difference like gender, disability and class. As shown above, *People Like Us* (2013l) does not mention social class explicitly, but is clearly based on class difference and emphasises a few of its (actual as well as imagined) aspects and exploits them for entertainment. Hall (2013:216) adds to this that:

> Representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with 'difference', it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way.

Again, I would argue that in the case of my chosen empirical example this is very much true, but certainly not in the sense of an unavoidable by-product. Class stereotypes are used as a structuring devices and on countless occasions (middle-class) fears are intentionally elicited with regards to morality as well as with regards to what constitutes acceptable behaviour. The above-discussed extensive use of a large number of very emotive, anxiety-provoking shots illustrates the intentionality with which perceptions of difference were exploited on an emotional level. However, it also needs to be pointed out that, as I have discussed with reference to the online debates around the programme, there is a multitude of possible readings of media

representations and, as other research confirms convincingly (Skeggs and Wood, 2012a), readings of class-based Reality TV are bound up with the class position of the viewer. Processes of othering work not in a universal and straight-forward way. Hall (2013:218) therefore speaks of a 'preferred meaning' of media representations that employ or contribute to processes of othering. What is required, is a certain point of reference against which difference is constructed. If othering is comprehended as part of the wider classificatory struggle in a Bourdieusian sense, it becomes clear that this reference point is not fixed and clearly defined, but needs to constantly be re-established and confirmed. As discussed, the particular practices and tastes of the middle class have come to be regarded as universally binding, Savage (2003:536) speaks of the 'particular-universal' which can be seen as the reference point from which value judgments are made. However, ongoing classificatory struggles shape the meaning of middle-class norms and othering plays a significant role in defining them. Norms are not only positively defined, but also very much defined against deviations. One of the central functions of othering is therefore the establishment of normalcy (Dyer, 1984). Bhabha (1983) makes the point that otherness is always necessarily an ideological construction. The other is fundamental in the construction of the self and, if portrayed as inferior, in the legitimation of inequality. The group identity of dominant groups needs to be ascertained against what is constructed as outside of normalcy. Identity, Hall (1996) argues, is constructed through and not outside difference. Bourdieu (1984a:479) seconds this view by stating: 'Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat'. Furthermore, the alleged homogeneity of (dominant) groups is not a natural occurrence and needs to be constructed and reconstructed on a constant basis. Othering is central to this process and is employed to give credibility to a largely illusory homogeneity and to define the limits of normalcy.

Again, I do not suggest that the political function of processes of othering played a defining role in the conception of *People Like Us* (2013l), I would however suggest that it partly explains the appeal of the programme. The willingness or maybe more the perceived need to make classed judgements is to a great degree reflected in the discussed online debates around the show. Distancing oneself from the portrayed tastes and (to a lesser degree) practices was a central element in many of the

contributions. I will come back to this argument shortly, but I believe to have shown how the representation of Harpurhey as significantly different is clearly reflected in many aspects of the programme and used as a key selling point. The analysis of online debates around the programme indicates that othering also played a significant role in the perception of the programme. However, I would also argue that this point should not be overstated with regards to the chosen empirical example. The binary form of representation that Hall (2013) talks about can, in my opinion, only partly be attributed to *People Like Us* (2013l). Despite the emphasis on difference and the exoticising of Harpurhey, the participants, or at least those that feature more prominently, are not portrayed in a completely one-dimensional way that lacks any nuances which a binary representation implies. As discussed, most participants could identify with their portrayal to a large degree. Of course, this does contradict the argument made above, but I would point out that it is important to acknowledge gradual differences between individual programmes and to distinguish *People Like Us* (2013l) from more polarised and polarising representations.

To sum up, the TV programme under consideration clearly uses strategies to other and to exoticise the portrayed local area and its residents. I would argue that the main function of this process is to ascertain middle-class identity and identifications. Class division and difference is not explored explicitly in the programme, but clearly is employed to increase its appeal. The ongoing re-establishment of difference, as explored by Lawler (2005) and Skeggs (2004), is a central element of Reality TV in general and *People Like Us* (2013l) in particular. In the following, I want to further explore the problematic implications of othering and stereotyping. I will try to make the point that it is not the emphasis on difference in itself that is problematic but the way in which difference is framed.

#### *8.3.2.2 Stereotyping*

Acknowledging difference in a capitalist, unequal and classed society could be regarded as a positive contribution to discourses of inequality, and Reality TV programmes have indeed taken credit for widening access to television screens for previously underrepresented groups of society. However, as discussed, this widening

of access needs to be analysed critically with regards to questions of power and the potential for misrepresentation and exploitation. In the following, I want to discuss the concept of stereotyping to explore whether these distortions can indeed be comprehended as acts of stereotyping and framed theoretically in this sense.

Bourdieu (1984a:479) speaks of 'social stereotyping' as 'attributing certain properties to members of the different social class'. This attribution creates distance and tends to reduce and oversimplify perceived characteristics and can be seen as 'swallowing up all distinctions' (Hall, 2013:225). Stereotypes reduce the complexity and heterogeneity of social groups to a small number of simple and supposedly essential characteristics. These attributed characteristics appear as fixed and therefore as natural. Brown (cited in Dyer, 1984:30) speaks of 'inborn and unalterable psychological characteristics'. This naturalisation fixes meaning in the sense that attributes that are perceived as 'inborn' are not open to change (Hall, 2013). Stereotypes are therefore, according to Dyer (2002:131), always 'images of stasis'. As discussed above, from a Bourdieusian point of view the content of stereotypes is the result of discursive struggles and therefore principally subject to change. However, this change or a lack of it, is a result of changing social power structures and it can be questioned whether working-class stereotypes have in recent years been challenged to the same degree than for example stereotypes based on gender or ethnicity. The underlying social structure that informs discursive practices appears largely unchanged with regards to social class. Furthermore, I would argue that working-class stereotypes are static both in terms of structural changes as well as their specific content. As discussed in the literature review, members of the working class are often portrayed as remaining fixed to places and outdated practices. In contrast to members of the middle class, they are portrayed as lacking the required mobility, agency and control to move on from obsolete traditions (Skeggs, 2004). In *People Like Us* (2013l) this stereotypical perception is for instance reflected in the over-emphasised and manufactured significance of Harpurhey market to the lives of Amber and Jamie. It is a general characteristic of stereotypes that change and the developments in the respective stereotyped groups are kept to a minimum (Dyer, 1984) in order not to disrupt their alleged naturalness. However, with regards to

working-class stereotypes, this lack of change is a defining feature of the stereotype itself.

Dyer (1984:31) analyses how filmic representations work with, exploit and reinforce stereotypes:

> Films use a certain set of visual and aural signs which immediately bespeak homosexuality and connote qualities associated, stereotypically, with it.

Whereas Dyer (1984) refers to signs that indicate the homosexuality of fictional characters, *People Like Us* (2013l) is very explicit about its setting in a working-class area from the off (without using the word class). However, as discussed above, a whole range of strong signifiers of class, some of them rather artificial and manufactured, are used throughout the programme. Dyer's (1984:32) argument that 'iconography is a kind of short-hand – it places a character quickly and economically' was derived from the analysis of representations of homosexuality, but, I would argue, can seamlessly be applied to classed representations. Again, *People Like Us* (2013l) appears relatively unsubtle in that respect as most participants of the programme are employed as characters that are set to embody a specific, narrowly defined type. This pigeonholing of individuals and their very condensed and often distorted representation is, as discussed, exploitative. I would however argue that these often wilful and manipulative misrepresentations constitute an injustice not only in an individual, but also in a collective sense. The repetition of stereotypes fixes not just the portrayed individual, but also the group (or class) the specific stereotype refers to. The function of stereotypes is to fix boundaries and to exclude. Stereotypes split the normal from the deviant and define what belongs and what does not belong (Hall, 2013). They shape perceptions and expectations both internally and externally. I have discussed with reference to (class) habitus how social structure and individual and collective attitudes are linked in a way that is rarely open to conscious analysis. The impact of stereotyping becomes, therefore, all the more damaging. Defining specific characteristics as essential and natural to a group or social class makes these characteristics, positive as well as negative ones, within the logic of the stereotype incontestable. Without overstretching this argument, I would argue that also the title

of the programme and its introductory narration point to an essentialised understanding of class difference.

Stereotypes are a central element of doxa (see chapters three and five) and therefore central in the obscuring and reproduction of (power) inequalities. Dyer (2002) points out that one of the key functions of stereotyping is to reassure and to control. However, he also acknowledges that their 'endless repetition' (Dyer, 2002:131) indicates the need to constantly reassert their meaning in order to uphold their validity. The alleged essential nature of stereotypical attributions needs to be constantly revalidated.

### 8.3.3 Social class misrecognised as individual characteristics and personal choice

The above discussed conception of class stereotypes very much resonates with Bourdieu's concept of doxa as both acknowledge the political dimension of shortened and normatively loaded representations and their significance in the reproduction of power structures. These processes own their power and persuasiveness to their opaqueness. As discussed, doxa, like stereotypes, are reproduced in a way that is generally not open to conscious analysis. The underlying judgements are based on assumptions around morality and taste that are rarely made explicit. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991) sees the reproduction of doxic thinking through stereotyping as framed in the wider context of classificatory struggles that are bound up with material conditions and economic inequality. In the following, I want to discuss how stereotyping can be framed as symbolic violence and in which ways classificatory struggles are fought out in *People Like Us* (2013l).

For Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991), struggles over the legitimacy of categories take place in every field.[87] I would argue that stereotypes solidify and fill these categories with meaning.[88] Stereotypes in this context represent a

[87] These struggles may be fought out in the open, like for instance to some degree in the political field, or in a less public manner, in less explicit terms and with even more unclear fault-lines. I would argue that processes of class-making fall more in the latter category.

[88] Categories are, for Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:236), 'the stakes *par excellence* (emphasis in original) in of the political struggle'. These categories of perception

condensation of doxic thinking that take assumptions about social role allocations for granted. In that sense, stereotypes hinder challenges to power distributions within the respective fields.

Bourdieu argues that in contemporary capitalist societies these forms of symbolic domination are much more central to the reproduction of social inequalities than physical force (Schubert, 2008).[89] Processes of distinction are regarded as legitimate and therefore provoke little frictions and resistance. For Bourdieu (1990a:127),

> symbolic violence, gentle, invisible violence, unrecognized as such ... presents itself as the most economical mode of domination because it best corresponds to the economy of the system.

So symbolic violence is in itself misrecognised and, like stereotypes, perceived as the natural order of things. However, as discussed above, stereotypes as well as the legitimacy of attributions and divisions need to be constantly reaffirmed or risk becoming obsolete.

Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:234) speaks of a 'labour of representation' that agents need to 'continually perform in order to impose their own vision of the social world'. As the considerations regarding the legitimacy of langue use show, structural inequalities clearly have the tendency to reproduce themselves. However, classificatory struggles, in some fields more than in others, are fought out between different active agents. Clearly, representations, like the ones under consideration, do not just happen, they are produced by agents, who, consciously or not, put their interpretation of the social world forward. Institutional contexts (for instance in the media field) are reflected in these interpretations as well as the objective and

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are crucial in our understanding of the legitimacy of the social structure and the potential for social change.

[89] I would argue that this assumption can be illustrated by Bourdieu's conception of language. As discussed in the methodology chapter, Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991) sees language as a form of domination and an instrument of symbolic social power. Language reproduces inequalities by distinguishing legitimate forms of language use that are rewarded from illegitimate ones that are penalised (arguably most clearly and consequentially in the educational system). Educational institutions reproduce social capital and make it transferrable into economic capital. Therefore, inequalities are reproduced without the use of what is commonly regarded as oppression and without physical force.

material conditions they are produced under. But not only that, interpretations of the social world also, to some extent, reflect the class position of the respective agents. As I have discussed above, the reading and the interpretation, of a media text is in itself bound up with the class position of the recipient. As shown, this relationship is however anything but straight-forward. A disadvantaged or oppressed class position does not automatically lead to a reading of class representations that questions inequality and its underlying power structures. Form a Bourdieusian point of view, the economic structure of a society informs the perception of the social world: 'relations of power are also present in people's minds in the form of the categories of perception of those relations' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:236). Established inequalities therefore appear as generally legitimate and taxonomies need to be actively challenged if the status quo affirming images of the social world are to be put into question.

Agents (and groups of agents) in positions of power are in a very privileged position to make their view of the social world the legitimate one. The concepts of doxa and habitus offer a convincing account of the reproduction of power and of the above discussed normativity of the factual. However, also in a more direct and active sense, agents who are rich in economic, cultural and social capital have greater access to respected and legitimate channels. Interpretations of the social world that favour the powerful are therefore much more likely to be heard and to gain recognition and legitimacy. This linkage will be further discussed in the following chapter, but it is clear that distinctions between speaking and being heard (Lawler, 2013) and speaking and being spoken for (Tyler, 2008) are crucial in this context.

In this context, Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:236) speaks of the 'magical power of naming' as a key element of political power. Again, the power to impose an interpretation and 'visions of the divisions of the social world' (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:239) is key in the legitimation of (or challenges to) the established social order. The legitimacy of the speaker, either based on personal or institutional authority, determines the recognition of attempts to name and to categorise.

I would argue that the discussed portrayal of a working-class community in *People Like Us* (2013l) contributes to the ongoing reproduction of class categories. In particular the described process of othering is central is this respect. The programme

employs a range of visual and discursive signifiers of social class. I have discussed how the programme foregrounds the alleged otherness of the portrayed area and its residents. The selectiveness and classed nature of this process could be empirically evidenced. Acknowledging and portraying difference is not in itself problematic, quite the opposite it could be argued, but the hyper-individualised, naturalising and essentialising nature of the portrayal can in my opinion be seen as an affirmative form of stereotyping. Difference is used as a narrative device that is set to confirm class categories without acknowledging the relational nature of them let alone questions of social inequality and social justice. Harpurhey is portrayed as a micro-cosmos with no connections to other, more privileged communities and no connection to wider political processes. The arbitrariness of the social order[90] is not addressed in the programme. The programme portrays some (alleged) symptoms of deprivation, but fails to put them in a wider context and certainly shies away from any explorations of the flip-side of the coin: privilege.

I have extensively covered how the programme is narratively structured by class stereotypes[91], but at the same time shies away from any explorations of too negative symptoms of poverty[92]. In a Bourdieusian sense, such a portrayal must be seen as symbolic violence in the sense that suffering is misrecognised. Of course this does not mean that working-class life can only be portrayed as a state of constant exploitation, oppression and suffering, but I would argue that the, for whatever reasons, wilful omissions of these aspects in *People Like Us* (2013l) constitutes symbolic violence.

*People Like Us* (2013l) works with class categories and exploits class difference, but at the same time ignores the significance and the impact of the social order on the portrayed community and on the lives of the participants. As is typical for the genre, *People Like Us* (2013l) uses a hyper-individualised mode of storytelling that disregards

[90] reflected for instance in Manchester's very own North-/South-divide

[91] and how categorisations are employed as narrative short-cuts to produce easily recognisable characters.

[92] social security for instance rarely enters the discourse. And, despite being central to participants' lives and also of huge relevance to the portrayed storylines, the disabilities of two participants were not addressed at all. Material poverty and hardship are almost completely absent from the programme and only alluded to in a rather humorous and extremely superficial way.

collective, social and political aspects of the portrayed phenomena. Class membership is reduced to questions of choice, taste and consumption.[93] Class differences are, in the programme, only comprehended in an individualised sense, as deprivation and, therefore, as cause for the 'otherness' of the residents of Harpurhey, but neither as material conditions nor in a collective, let alone political sense. Of course, it can be argued that a docusoap is hardly the place for complex explorations of class habitus, social structures and power inequalities. However, the mode of storytelling, the very selective casting and editing and the reluctance to go near serious consequences of inequality and poverty point to a wilfully sanitised and depoliticised portrayal of a poor community. Class difference is acknowledged and exploited as a structuring device and narrative short-cut, but ignored in any other sense. *People Like Us* (2013l) claims to be a legitimate representation of Harpurhey but, through its narrative structure and content, is set to confirms the legitimacy of the social structure.

Finally, I would argue that *People Like Us* (2013l) can be seen as confirming the legitimacy of the social order as its own (disguised) power structure mirrors the prevailing social order. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991:239) speaks of the 'monopoly of legitimate naming' of agents rich in symbolic capital. In *People Like Us* (2013l) it is clearly the producers who are in a position of control to present their interpretation of the social world. The programme claims to be an unbiased, authentic, almost empowering representation of an underprivileged community. However, the people in front of the camera were clearly not in a position to control their own representations. The underlying role allocation in *People Like Us* (2013l) confirms the above referenced monopoly[94]. What makes this particularly problematic is the opaque nature of media production. As discussed, the truthfulness and authenticity of the programme is strenuously, and I would argue rather convincingly, claimed throughout the programme. The selective and agenda-driven

[93] I have explored how, for example, the area of work is not portrayed as an economic necessity or problematized as potentially hard to come by in a deprived area. Work is portrayed as a playful means of self-fulfilment and the lack of paid work in a largely deindustrialised city does not enter the discourse. Structural aspects of the portrayed phenomena are neglected in favour of psychologised, almost therapeutic discourses.

[94] the makers of the programme, rich in economic as well as symbolic capital, are in a privileged position to put forward their vision of the social world.

nature of the casting and editing is not apparent to the viewer. In a sense, this imbalance of power remains in the dark and is misrecognised as an inclusive, collaborative, authentic and sympathetic representation. In some respects *People Like Us* (2013l) is indeed accurate and, as confirmed by the interviewed participants, authentic, but in other respects, namely with regards to questions of power, privilege and suffering, it, crucially, is not.

## 8.4 Conclusion

I have demonstrated how *People Like Us* (2013l) revolves around class without using class terminology. The programme's interest in class is rather lop-sided as it focuses on difference in terms of taste and consumption and foregrounds narratives that are set to underpin negative and stereotypical perceptions of the working class. There are numerous examples of manipulative editing that reflect the classed and stereotypical nature of the process. I have explored some of the specifics of the used techniques and hence the practicalities of manipulation that I comprehend as expressions of the logic of the forces at play in the field of popular television production as well as wider (internalised) ideological assumptions. I argue that a depoliticised, supposedly benign and light-hearted entertainment programme like *People Like Us* (2013l) has a political impact. It is naturally difficult to isolate and pin down this impact, but, with reference to my own small-scale audience research, I have demonstrated how the programme can be located in wider, politically relevant classificatory struggles. I applied the concepts of othering and stereotyping to a Bourdieusian framework and have demonstrated how both can be seen as expressions of doxic thinking and elements of symbolic violence by fixing meaning and reproducing inequalities. Power imbalances and the according capacities to speak are reflected in the production processes of the programme. Arguably, imbalances in terms of control and instances of exploitation are not uncommon in the field of cultural production, from a class perspective however, the docusoap genre is insofar problematic as the power to control and the potential to be exploited appear largely divided along class lines. To summarise this research, I want to move

on from my empirical explorations and to come back to the question of significance of media representations in a wider sense to locate their role in the political process.

# 9. Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, I want to summarise my findings, point to gaps, open questions and further lines of inquiry and, once more – from a different angle though – discuss the significance of media portrayals. Throughout this thesis, I have referred to Bourdieu's (1998) line of argument that the media field is instrumental in the reproduction of power by legitimising existing power relations. In the following, I want to pursue this argument further and discuss the relation between material and symbolic domination in a more systematic way. Therefore, I want to come back to Nancy Fraser's (1995) distinction between cultural and economic dimension of injustice that was introduced in chapter two of this thesis. Further exploring the central arguments of this debate is relevant in the context of my research, as I have naturally focused on the cultural aspects of injustice. Of course the relatedness of cultural and economic dimensions of class inequality is at the heart of the Bourdieusian concepts that frame my empirical analysis, but, to conclude, I now want to discuss this interconnectedness of cultural and economic dimensions of class in a more explicit way. Therefore, I intend to link Fraser's main arguments to Bourdieusian distinctions.

Following on from that, I want to point to gaps in this research. I will discuss issues that were beyond the scope of a doctoral thesis as well as issues that only emerged while conducting the research and therefore could not be incorporated.

## 9.1 Significance of classed media representations

Media representations are neither a very central concern for Fraser nor for Bourdieu, however, both acknowledge their role in the reproduction of power. I hope to have made the point that class-based media representations are bound up with and also tend to exploit difference and inequality. In the following, I want to use Fraser's and Bourdieu's considerations regarding the linkage of cultural and economic injustices and analyse how this linkage can be applied to the empirical example under consideration.

Fraser (1995:71) states that cultural or symbolic injustice 'is rooted in social patterns of representation'. Misrepresentations happen not only in the form of nonrecognition ('being rendered invisible'), but also by disrespect (for instance through negative stereotypical representations). I would argue that both forms of misrecognition are very evident in *People Like Us* (2013l). I demonstrated how stereotypical perceptions of the working class inform the narratives in the programme and it also became obvious that a large number of filmed stories and potential topics were rendered invisible by its makers. And, most importantly, it could clearly be shown that a very unequal distribution of power led to these skewed and censored representations. Fraser (as cited in Fowler, 2009:145) makes the point that a lack of recognition 'springs from damaging cultural representations, that is, from the "othering" of a certain group'. As I have discussed in chapter two, recognition is a precondition for redistribution and an acknowledgement of the principal equality of actors, a precondition for redistributive action to take place and for it to be perceived as deserved and legitimate. If, however, a groups (or class) is portrayed as fundamentally culturally different it leaves the door open to denying this group equal treatment and to perceive them as undeserving of redistributive action. This linkage is very much reflected in the analysed online debates sparked by the programme: many discussants made a connection between the supposed deficiencies of the protagonists and the deservedness of alleged welfare payments. Of course, and I will come back to this shortly, it is methodologically and logically difficult to prove that misrepresentations are the cause for negative attitudes towards welfare, but it can nevertheless be stated that at the very least the skewed and stereotypically classed representations in *People Like Us* (2013l) do not challenge doxic assumptions about inequality and social justice. McNay (2008) adds to this that representations of the social world inform action and interaction as the perceptions actors have of the social world cannot just 'be deducted from social structures' (McNay, 2008:12). The way in which social reality is determined by its underlying structures is not open to immediate experience. McNay (2008:13) cites Bourdieu who sums this nexus up as follows: 'the visible, that which is immediately given, hides the invisible which determines it'. The empirical example under consideration can be characterised along these lines. The preoccupation with a small number of (alleged) symptoms of deprivation leaves no room for more general considerations let alone a critique of

underlying structures. Furthermore, many viewers will have no personal experience of a deprived urban community and for parts of the audience the misrepresentations in *People Like Us* (2013l) will not clash with personal experiences and therefore be all the more believable. The somewhat sanitised picture of poverty and the sympathetic, humorous and light-hearted tone of the programme in all likelihood contribute to an individualised, soap-opera-like and depoliticised perception of the programme. When McNay (2008) claims that representations are determined by structures, I would argue that this is true for *People Like Us* (2013l) in a dual way. Firstly, in the sense that class differences structure the programme narratively and secondly that structures within the field of popular cultural production impact on the format and content of the programme. *People Like Us* (2013l) reflects the power structures of wider society in its content as well as in regulating access to and allocating power within the production process itself. For Bourdieu (1984a), systems of classification mirror material and economic divisions. They do not cause inequality, but are central in their reproduction and legitimation. 'Being perceived' (Bourdieu, 1984a:483) is therefore part of the class struggle. Recognition and material distribution are interlinked, but, as shown, they are so in a dialectical way. Recognition is bound up with class positions, but also the discursive process of assigning respect through representations is structured by unequal access to and control over the field of cultural production. It is therefore key to go beyond the acknowledgement of cultural aspects of class difference, by pointing to the classed character of the cultural reproduction of inequality.

To conclude these considerations of the significance of (classed) representations, I want to discuss how the impact of media representations can be made sense of theoretically. Therefore, I will explore the relevance of recognition by relating the term to central Bourdieusian concepts. It is somewhat obvious that Fraser's distinction between the two forms of injustice fits well with Bourdieu's distinction between the different interrelated, yet distinguishable forms of capital. Not only is the distinction between economic and cultural capital useful in this context, Bourdieu also points out that any capital needs to be transferable into (recognised) symbolic capital to become meaningful and effective. Accordingly, misrecognition in Fraser's sense appears very compatible with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence.

However, there are also clear differences that are relevant in the context of this research. Most importantly, the way that power translates into consciousness and action, how power impacts on subject formation appears underdeveloped in Fraser's conception. McNay (2008) very convincingly makes the point that power remains rather abstract in the recognition vs. redistribution debate. I would add, that a simplified, largely discursive understanding of power risks overstating the significance of media representations without however, at the same time, grasping their full impact. McNay (2008:8) makes the point that the 'pervasive nature of social domination' is underplayed in the recognition vs. redistribution debate. She refers to the way that structures and one's place in the social hierarchy are perceived and internalised. This process is only partly conscious and does certainly not take place on the discursive level alone. Media representations are, as discussed in chapters four and six, embedded in wider social and political structures. Their actual impact is therefore naturally impossible to isolate and difficult to assess. On a theoretical level however, the habitus concept is a very useful tool to grasp the complex nature of subject formation as inevitably bound up with the social hierarchy. As discussed, with the habitus concept, Bourdieu links the psychological with the social and demonstrates how structures become embodied (Wagner and McLaughlin, 2015). An understanding of power that is largely based on (political) discourse is bound to overlook subconscious, psychological and emotional aspects of the internalisation of power structures. As I have discussed with regards to the content as well as the perception of my empirical example, emotional and subconscious aspects play a key role in the production and the consumption of the programme. I could demonstrate that shame and disgust as well as sympathy and positive identification were devices the audience of *People Like Us* (2013l) used to make sense of the programme. Also, on the side of the participants, exploitation for instance was more comprehended on a personal and emotional than on an economic level. McNay (2008) makes the point that the subjective dimension of oppression needs to be taken into account. In the literature review I have pointed to numerous pieces or research that have put this demand into practice. Skeggs (1997a), among others, demonstrates how the habitus concept is of great relevance to the sociology of class. The individual and collective experience of inequality is crucial in understanding oppression and resistance (McNay, 2008). Habitus as a research tool allows us to explore the subjective

dimensions of inequality in connection with structural conditions. Furthermore, the habitus concepts helps to comprehend collective aspects of class culture relationally without essentialising them. However, admittedly, this piece of research has not quite succeeded in contributing a great deal to the understanding of class habitus. Of course this never was the objective of the analysis and I would argue that the habitus concept was indeed used as a way of comprehending class and as a research tool and no so much a concept to be substantiated empirically. Other, more pertinent, gaps shall be pointed out in the following.

## 9.2 Gaps

The methodological challenges of this research have already been discussed in the according chapters. In particular the intention to relate the analysis of the chosen empirical example to wider social and political developments proved problematic. Similarly, the actual impact of *People Like Us* (2013l) is difficult to assess. I would however argue that this is not a particular flaw of this piece of research, but a much more general problem. If media representations of class are comprehended as an expression of and as informed by the wider social order and the hierarchical nature of contemporary capitalist societies, their impact is difficult to isolate and to assess. This piece of research therefore constitutes more a theoretical exploration than an attempt to empirically prove the impact of media representations. I have nevertheless attempted to conduct a small-scale audience research of the programme and the logical and methodological limitations of my chosen approach have been discussed in chapter four. Even this limited analysis indicates however that a variety of possible readings exist and that a class-based Reality TV programme is clearly made sense of in a classed way. Taking class positions into account, like for instance Skeggs and Wood (2012a) do in their focus-group-based research, therefore seems necessary and very beneficial. Furthermore, I would suggest not to only comprehend impact as a *change* in attitude. Media representations, as I have shown, can be impactful exactly by confirming stereotypical perceptions or even in ways not intended and anticipated by their makers. Equally, it is in my opinion useful to analyse what contemporary representations of class do not provide. I have pointed to (rather

telling) omissions that characterise classed representations in a docusoap setting. As I have demonstrated, *People Like Us* (2013l) largely revolves around well-established images of the working class and largely repeats those stereotypical images. In a sense, this can, at the very least, be seen as a missed opportunity and it generally can be stated that the widening of access of (formerly) underrepresented communities that Reality TV brought about did not extend to production side. Representations of the working class still exploit rather than represent. It certainly is difficult to fathom in the current political climate and the current state of the television landscape, but there are, as discussed, historical and contemporary examples of documentary filmmaking that challenge stereotypical perceptions of class and successfully expand their focus to wider social and political structures and issues. I would therefore suggest that it might be illuminating to also attempt to assess the impact of cultural products that challenge rather than confirm the established order. If we attempt to measure impact, contrasting the perceptions of different examples of documentary filmmaking could be a fruitful line of inquiry.

Contrasting a number of different docusoaps could however not only be beneficial with regards to their impact. This research has only made a small number of references to similar programmes like *Benefits Street* (2014d), however, analysing a larger number of programmes would not only point to differences and commonalities, but also possibly reveal patterns and systematic differences. With regards to my specific research question, an analysis of the ways in which the portrayals of the different social classes differ would be very intriguing. In the literature review I point to findings that indicate that docusoap portrayals of the middle class are significantly different in style, tone and content compared to portrayals of the working class. In particular comparing issues around casting and control could prove very insightful. Furthermore, it could be analysed in what ways roles are assigned to the participants of these programmes and whether the established role-allocation is identical for representations of the middle class. As discussed, the default position the viewer of docusoaps is put in is the position of a judge. It would be beneficial to explore whether the same applies if the protagonists are members of the middle, or upper class.

In 2014 the second series of *People Like Us* (2014a) was aired and *Benefits Street* (2014d) was followed up by a second series (2015b) and its spin-off *Immigration Street* (2015a) in 2015. In particular the latter two were met with resistance and also the second series of *People Like Us* (2014a) is recognisably different to the first series in terms of tone as well as scope. An intriguing line of inquiry therefore could be how public debates around and resistance to exploitative docusoaps has impacted on their production process, their content as well as their perception.

Another gap in this piece of research is the lack of a systematic conceptual foundation of contemporary class stereotypes. I have relied on those conceptions of class stereotypes that are outlined in the literature review and focused on those working-class stereotypes that structure the docusoap under consideration in terms of content and perception. Further explorations of classed representations however could attempt to systematically explore what constitutes contemporary class stereotypes and how these are perceived by members of the respective classes. In a sense, speaking of working-class stereotypes is a generalisation, and a useful line of inquiry could be an analysis of the increasingly popularised distinction (in the political field at least) between 'hard-working people' and (suspected and actual) recipients of state benefits. I would argue that the aforementioned generalisation is, in the context of this research and considering the nature of my chosen empirical example a legitimate one, but a more detailed and systematic analysis of the nature of contemporary class stereotypes could be useful.

Another term that in relation to my research question clearly warrants a more thorough exploration is the term doxa. Of course, there is a considerable amount of research on how (class) inequalities are perceived and how they become distorted, disguised, misrecognised and internalised. I have pointed to research along these lines in the literature review; however, doxa remains a somewhat elusive concept. What is taken for granted is naturally difficult to pin down and, presumably, there is in the academic sphere a degree of reluctance (of being perceived as) to attest to false consciousness. Nevertheless, I would argue that the analysis of media representations of social class can offer a very rich way of exploring viewers' perceptions of social class and inequality by discussing how these representations resonate or clash with viewers' opinions. Furthermore, discussing media

representations of class can open up important debates around the (moral) value attached to images of class.

One final gap in this research has already been referred to on several occasions: the rather limited explorations of the production side of media representations. As discussed, Dragonfly, the makers of *People Like Us* (2013l), did not reply to my numerous attempts to make contact and therefore I had to rely on secondary sources. Consequently, the motifs and intentions of the production company could only be alleged. Whereas the intended function of some visual and narrative devices appear quite obvious, other conclusions are more based on plausibility. I have made the point that in a Bourdieusian framework, the focuses on the respective field logics are much more central concerns than individual motivations and intentions, but nevertheless it is regrettable that the production company's view is missing from my analysis. I attempted to empirically underpin the assumptions around the principal functioning of the media field by referring to statements of people working in the field. It appears however that the actual internal functioning of the media field is somewhat underresearched. The same can be said about external pressures and influences that largely remain in the dark despite occasional, rather isolated, revelations (like for instance Oborne, 2015). Similarly, the connections and dependencies of the media field with other centres of power, most notably advertisers as well as corporate and political players, warrant further analysis. Of course, also media ownership and the self-interest of the major players in the field will impact on the output it produces. Whether an interview with the production company behind *People Like Us* (2013l) would have contributed a great deal to our understanding of these matters will never be known, but I would argue that the Bourdieusian critique of the journalistic field could benefit from further empirical underpinning. Research along these lines could shed a light on the impact of advertising, political dependencies and the different forms of media ownership on the conception and realisation of individual programmes. I have pointed to some potential and actual areas of conflict and to the benefits of a Bourdieusian conception of the field of cultural production that combines an analysis of outside pressures with the acknowledgement of the specific, particular field logic of media production.

However, more empirical analysis of the praxis of cultural production is clearly needed.

## 9.3 Central findings & future lines of inquiry

I have summarised my findings in each of the respective chapters, so I will only briefly discuss the most central findings and then point to one final potential future line of inquiry.

Class divisions are clearly reflected in the media field. This rather general statement refers to questions of access to, and power over, the production of media output as well as to a division of labour that divides people into subjects and objects of representations largely along class lines. In particular in the Reality TV genre and the docusoap subgenre, working-class people rarely find themselves in positions of control, but frequently as the object of portrayals they have little control over. In the analysis of my empirical example I have explored the exploitative nature of this constellation. Bourdieu makes the point that media representations are part of a wider class struggle. The analysis carried out in this research very much confirms this assessment, however, it appears that in the field of large-scale cultural production these battles are fought with very unequal weapons. The discourse analysis of my chosen empirical example could, in connection with the conducted interviews of participants of the programme, expose a number of instances of very manipulative editing that cannot just be explained by the genre-typical requirements and the intention of the programme to entertain. To what extent the underlying agenda of this process is determined by unquestioned stereotypical assumptions, by the working conditions in the media field, by the need to reach a large number of viewers or by specific (class) interests requires, as discussed, further analysis. What seems clearer, however, is who is exploited and who benefits from the prevalent structure and composition of the media field.

Finally, I hope to have demonstrated that representations of class matter and have an impact. I have discussed the methodological and logical difficulties of isolating the impact of a single television programme and the limitations of the small-scale

audience research conducted in this research. Nevertheless, I would argue that the way questions of moral value and (classed) taste were at the centre of the debates around *People Like Us* (2013l) and how readily the deservedness of state welfare was made the central issue (unprompted by the programme itself), points to the relevance of media representations for political discourses and classificatory struggles. Beyond the damaging repetition of (largely negative) working-class stereotypes, docusoaps are insofar problematic in their impact as their narrative style contributes to a depoliticised and individualised discourse of inequality. Structural aspects, let alone class terms, are absent and replaced by psychological, almost therapeutic discourses. Removing class from structures of production and portraying class membership as largely revolving around choices based on consumptions contributes to a depoliticised understanding of inequality.

Above, I have pointed to potentially fruitful future research questions and to the possibility of exploring how resistance to stigmatising portrayals has an impact on the way docusoaps are produced and structured. One final suggestion, with which I want to conclude this research, is to explore counter discourses. By this, I mean representations of class that challenge doxa and that reverse the established allocation of power (in the media field). In addition to that, future academic research could encourage a debate around the question of what progressive representations of class could look like. Of course, it could be argued that this is less the responsibility of academics and more the right and responsibility of people and communities who are involved in cultural productions that represent the working class. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that academic research can play a role and at the very least contribute to an analysis of existing misrepresentations against which counter discourses can be established. I hope to have pointed to the cornerstones of the debate. Of course, there are already numerous examples of documentary filmmaking that are not exploitative and deal with class issues in a critical and political way. To redress the (power) imbalances in the field of large-scale cultural production, progressive film-making could however aim to produce a docusoap along these lines which could call itself, with some justification, 'People Like Us'.

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# Appendix:

## I, Published word:

Wagner, B. and McLaughlin, K. (2015) 'Politicising the psychology of social class: The relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus for psychological research.' *Theory & Psychology*, 25(2) pp. 202-221.

## II, Interview Questions:

General questions:

In each of the seven interviews, I started off by asking questions about the interviewees' involvement in the production of the programme with regards to time scales as well as the decisions making and editing process. I therefore asked questions like the following:

> *When was the first time you actually saw the finished programme?*
>
> *How long did the filming take? Over what period of time would you say? How many hours a week would you say?*
>
> *Generally speaking, you said they filmed for 18 months, sometimes many many hours each day. So in the end, are you happy with the editing of the programme and what they picked?*
>
> *So in the end, was the programme very much like you expected it to be or were you maybe surprised by the choices that they made?*
>
> *Were you then in any way surprised by the editing?*
>
> *So, generally speaking, would you say that you were happy with the editing?*

In all of the interviews, questions about the authenticity and representativeness of the programme were discussed:

> *Overall, would you say that it is a fair representation of you as a family and of the area as a whole?*
>
> *During the filming were you mindful of the editing process or...*

Furthermore, the impact of the participation in programme on the lives of the interviewees was discussed:

> *You already indicated that it had quite an impact on your lives...*
>
> *If you look back at it now over the last year or something. How would you say did it change your lives?*

Finally, perceptions of the programme were discussed:

> *I don't know whether you had a look on the internet about the reaction that the programme caused...*

Specific questions:

As I conducted semi-structured interviews, the respective conversations explored different aspects of the participants' involvement in the programme. Whereas Paul for instance referred to the disappointment that he felt when people he regarded as friends cut all ties after the filming was finished, Donna on the other hand was aggrieved that the city she lives in was misrepresented. In the interviews with Jamie, Amber as well as Sheryl and Avril the power of the editing process and the intentionality of some misrepresentations come to the fore. The complexity of the notion of authenticity was discussed in connection to specific scenes and occurrences and, in some interviews, on a more general level. Here are examples of more specific interview questions that capture the specifics of the respective conversations:

> *I wonder, at some point, did you forget that there was a camera around? Because it appeared very much like that on the programme? (Interview with Karen)*
>
> *When it was filmed were you aware that you would be the main characters, the main family? (Interview with Karen)*
>
> *Coming back to the reaction of the local community, how would you say that was? (Interview with Karen)*

> *And when you went on holiday, erm, did they give you a camera? (Interview with Amber)*
>
> *You appear to defend the area quite a bit on the programme. (Interview with Amber)*

*With hindsight, would you again to agree, I mean, would you still give your consent to take part in the programme or for your wedding to be filmed? (Interview with Donna)*

*Was there any point after the programme got broadcast that you thought, where you considered taking up this offer of getting counselling? (Interview with Paul) Great stuff, just one last question then: there are a number of very personal scenes I would say. For instance I remember the one scene where take Madison fishing by the canal, erm, did you have any regrets over these rather personal scenes? (Interview with Paul)*

*You already mentioned it, but this break-up scene was incredibly personal with loads of tears… (Interview with Jamie)*

*Because when I watched it, and like I said before I watched it a number of times, and when I watched it maybe for the third or fourth time it occurred to me that after the break-up scene you have another chat with your Mom and she said "well, you were never really in love with her" and I thought that was a bit of "unfortunate" editing. (Interview with Jamie)*

*Because I definitely remember that they said or that they refer to you as "market trader Jamie". (Interview with Jamie)*

*But you were quite mindful of that with the editing they could portray you... (Interview with Sheryl and Arvil)*

*So there was no, sort of, internal casting, it was basically the decision of you whether you wanted to take or not. (Interview with Sheryl and Arvil)*

*But how did this come about then. Did they say: "Well, we would like to film the briefing but we want it to look a bit less formal"? (Interview with Sheryl and Arvil)*

*I did not mean that it was staged, because it does not look staged, at all. I just thought: "why is the camera there?". (Interview with Sheryl and Arvil)*

*I'm thinking, would you agree, or is there not the danger that the camera creates a situation as opposed to document? For instance when you took this young lad out of ASDA and you clearly can see that he tries to kick the camera. I was thinking: "Did that not wind him up even more?". (Interview with Sheryl and Arvil)*

*And it appears that erm... I mean, do you wear cameras for these raids? Because it appears like there are these shoulder cameras. (Interview with Sheryl and Arvil)*

## III, Portraits of Interviewees:

Karen:

Karen and her family are the main 'characters' in *People Like Us* (2013l) and as the only participants they appear in every single episodes. Karen is involved in numerous storylines that portray her family as well as her professional life. Together with her partner Paul, she runs the local laundrette.

Paul:

Like Karen, Paul appears in every episode of the programme although is a slightly less prominent role. He is seen working in the laundrette and the family home and the storylines he is involved in revolve around his own upbringing and his role in the family.

Amber:

Amber is Karen's daughter and appears in every episode of the programme. Most centrally, she is involved in two storylines that portray her thought-process whether to go to university or not as well as her holiday in Mallorca. On numerous occasions, Amber provides commentary on the portrayed family life as well as the local area.

Jamie:

Jamie appears in two episodes (2013b; 2013g). The programme portrays his professional life (somewhat misleadingly as a 'market trader') as well as his love life and his interest in music. Jamie is involved in a number of very emotionally charged scenes as well as rather humorous and entertaining portrayals of his efforts as an aspiring singer.

Donna:

Donna is Jamie's Mom and, like him, appears in two episodes (2013b; 2013g). In the programme, she comments on Jamie's behaviour and is seen as playing a big role in his life. Donna's wedding is portrayed in episode one (2013b), however, very much to her disappointment, the wedding is a sideshow to Jamie's and Lucy's developing relationship.

Sheryl and Avril:

Sheryl and Avril work as police officers for Greater Manchester Police. In the programme it is more their professional than their personal live that is being portrayed. In episode three (2013j) Sheryl and Avril are involved in a number of dramatic storylines. Avril and Sheryl comment on their police work well as the local area as a whole.