2011

That is Bad! This is Good: Morality as Constructed by Viewers of Television Reality Programs

Joseph Charles Losasso
University of South Florida, jlosasso@mail.usf.edu

That is Bad! *This* is Good: Morality as Constructed by

Viewers of Television Reality Programs

by

Joseph LoSasso, Jr.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
College of Arts & Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Donileen R. Loseke, Ph.D.
Sara L. Crawley, Ph.D.
Laurel D Graham, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
April 7, 2011

Keywords: Culture, Femininity, Moral Boundaries, Audience Reception, Message Board

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Reality shows that feature people going about their presumed daily lives are not base entertainment. Internet message boards about reality programs are sites where moral work happens. Viewers write about the appearance and actions of show characters and construct moral lessons. Through naturally occurring data produced by fans of these shows, I find that viewers generally express a traditional heteronormative morality around class and gender through stating moral lessons, explaining what is wrong with the characters, or through ridicule and praise.

INTRODUCTION

The typical image of Americans watching television, besides a couch and some unhealthy snacks, includes the viewers' general passivity while the flickering lights from the television destroy brain cells. Following this image is the typical analysis that this medium, while entertaining or opinionated, and only occasionally informative, at best reflects our pacified culture and at worst degrades it. Reality television programming is a common target by academic observers for examples of public spectacle as entertainment.

Lowney (1999) argued that television talk shows like Oprah were more about moral sense-making than simply public spectacle. In a similar vein, I challenge scholarly readings of reality programming, not through a reading of my own about reality programs, but rather, through a study of audience reception of these programs (Neuman 2003).My data come from viewer comments about particular shows on internet message boards. Other audience reception studies of presumed simple entertainment, namely women's romance novels (Radway 1984) and television programs that women watch (Press 1991), found that women do not merely absorb what they read and see. Instead, they work to make sense of it. How do audiences of reality programs use these programs as a site encouraging moral sense-making?? How do audiences use reality programs to make moral judgments about their own lives and experiences? What kinds of agency or conformity do audience members express? What kinds of observations do on-line venues for discussion permit audience members to express? To what extent are reality show participants on the program accepted as normal (or even ideal) and to what extent are they ridiculed for going against norms and subverting the hegemonic narratives of U.S. society (Ewick and Silbey 1995)?

Through inductive theorizing, I find that reality programs are more than merely poor reflections of current American culture. On Internet forums sites, audiences clearly articulate what they see as right and wrong in reality show portrayals. Further, I extend Lamont and Molnár's (2002) concept of *symbolic boundaries* by introducing the idea of *moral* boundaries, which are a type of symbolic boundary that allows us to categorize people and practices into *rights* and *wrongs*. This paper serves to illustrate how moral work, and by extension, culture, happens through viewers who actively post on internet forums. They do so by articulating moral lessons, explaining the individual pathologies of bad behavior, or simply ridiculing it. In addition, the moral boundaries mainly encircle traditional American values of individuality and heteronormativity, including traditional masculinity and femininity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reality Programs. The reality show genre is a big umbrella. The genre has expanded to feature individuals engaged in a wide variety of activities, for example, fixing, matchmaking, updating, travelling, hiring (and firing), collecting and tracking. Mast (2009) states that the reality show label is an "unstable designation that covers a wide and hybrid array of 'popular factual programming'" (231). The growing number of shows within the reality genre suggests the production of these programs is not simply a cost cutting measure by stretched networks. Because these programs tend to be aired as series, they present their content in multiple episodes. Subgenres of reality shows include contest formats such as *Survivor, The Bachelorette* and *Top Chef* and expert formats like *Kitchen Nightmares* and *Hoarders* that aim to fix people or businesses that have gotten off course. A third subgenre is the "mundane format" which show people in parts of their presumed *everyday lives* where those people have *presumed real, experienced life outcomes.* These shows are assumed to be unscripted: there is no plot and no one has lines to read. I am most interested in mundane shows like *Jersey Shore*, *The Hills,* and *The Real Housewives* which, because of their focus on everyday life, tend to inspire talk from viewers about class, gender and morality.

While reality programs have received attention from scholars, so far they have given little attention to how viewers use these programs to negotiate and define their moral views. Thus far there has been research on the construction of these programs

(Baruh 2009; Bondebjerg 1996) and on why people watch them (Reiss and Wiltz 2004). Other research has been critical of reality show portrayals (Skeggs 2009; Van Zoonen 2001) or of the exploitation of participants (Grindstaff 2002). Bratich (2006), in an analysis of the subgenre of reality programs that aim to fix individuals, argued that reality television is about power, configured in a "new society of control and communication." Lorenzo-Dus studied reality court shows to explore "conflict talk" (2008). While some studies have focused on audience perception of reality programs (e.g. Lundy, Ruth & Park 2008; Cooper 2003; Gamson 1998; Kavoori 1999), none have analyzed the moral evaluations viewers independently and actively make of them. Reality shows are more than just another example of exploitation, control, or novelty in American culture; they are tools for viewers to use in defining moral boundaries.

Reality programs and the production of morality and culture. An empirical study of morality and culture is also a study of the *process* of how culture is produced. It has been argued that mass culture is defined through media, where our outward, public projections of youth, health, and sexuality are valued (Denzin 1991). DiMaggio argues that culture happens through the interaction of cognitive structures and cultural phenomena that activate them (1997: 264). Citing evidence from both psychology and sociology, he discusses how functionalist notions of culture are incomplete. Considering that life deviates from what is depicted as normal in the media, for example, one cannot assume that culture exists as a single, uniform system expressing ideas about who we are. As Calhoun (1994) argues, a moral fragmentation exists within mass media. Because of the many outlets available, there are many different voices contending for our attention.

Before the advent of multiple media outlets, life lessons came from relatively few sources, perhaps through family and religion.

Moral fragmentation is present, yet there are socially constructed cultural codes in American society. Americans value "hard workers," help the "deserving," and value "freedom." Symbolic boundaries are what people define through conceptual distinctions in an effort to categorize life experiences and simplify complexity. Lamont and Molnár (2002) write that examining symbolic boundaries "allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations." On the cognitive level, we form "islands of meaning" through the mental process of lumping and splitting (Zerubavel 1996). For example, what exactly constitutes *good* motherhood? Large numbers of people might agree on what a mother looks like, but they likely do not agree on when mothering practices are good and when they are bad. However, through language and interaction, people collectively construct common labels, and how these labels are conceptualized as symbolic boundaries. Through this interaction we are able to communicate not only difference and similarity, but moral evaluations of the differences and similarities.

Therefore, I further Lamont and Molnár's notion in my analysis by defining *moral* boundaries that viewers articulate from two reality shows, and also by illustrating through my data how these boundaries are defined. Viewers know what motherhood *is*; and they are working out when mothers are *good* and when they are *not-so-good*. This is where morality work is done.

In a sense, reality programs function much like the older "television talk show" genre does to help viewers sort out moral boundaries. The literature on talk shows details how these shows engage with moral discourse. First, Lowney's (1999) book on the talk show genre argued for the re-evaluation of talk shows that are considered fodder for the airwaves. She argued that each component of the shows served a purpose in educating audiences about what is right and what is wrong. In addition, talk shows sought to change the guests through a sort of conversion discourse (64). Her project was immensely instructive for understanding the intersection of television programs, morality and audiences.

If moral work is done on reality shows, it is not done by the production of the show alone. Reality programs analyzed in this project have no narrating voice that explicitly states moral lessons: there is no one to diagnose the problem under examination or to stop the show at a logical place for a commercial break (51, 52). There is also no studio audience that acts as “society’s conscience” (55), meaning home audiences are left without a gallery’s input on the moral assessment of the participants’ activities.

Second, Gamson (1994; 1998) studied daytime talk shows that featured transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Particularly interesting is Gamson’s focus on agency, and on how the “media-generated battles over sexual norms and morality” provided a forum for the participants to speak for themselves (1998). Gamson also explored the conditions that would compel audiences to subject participants to moral condemnation or moral tolerance. For example, participants were generally seen as spectacle and the focus of ridicule. However, there were calls for tolerance from hosts and audience members when there was an antigay bigot (109-119). Internet forums focused on reality television are different in that audience members are constructing how life should be without interacting with the reality show participants. Yet, internet message boards enable viewers to interact with each other about what they have seen on the programs. Rather than being simply passive viewers who watch fodder to pass time, reality show viewers on these message boards exercise agency, interacting with others to make sense of their lives.

Gender, "reality," and the loss of the private sphere. Gamson notes that talk shows wreak havoc with the "public sphere" in that private moments are up for public discussion (1998: 18). Lowney argues that talk shows are similar to nineteenth-century Protestant revivals, where the host is a preacher looking to create a conversion experience for sinners willing to confess and convert to a moral lifestyle through revealing their private sins to a public audience (1999: 18). The private sphere is muddied in mundane reality programs as well. Particularly obvious in programs where confession serves the purpose of opening a life to intervention (e.g., the reality show: *Intervention*), mundane programs always offer glimpses of private moments in order to invite moral evaluation and a potential resolution.

Research on reality programming is relevant also in part because of the second wave feminist notion that the "personal is political." Feminists during this period have been concerned with power men have over women and people of color. While major goals of second wave feminism are to create opportunities and access to resources, another major goal concerns changing the social messages about women and men (Crawley, et al. 2008: 206). Gender accountability comes from heteronormative images of the "essential" masculine man and feminine woman (West and Zimmerman 1987; Crawley, et al. 2008). People apply these images as an unfair standard, in effect, gender is done *to* us, and we are judged on our performance based on the standard. There exist boundaries that mark the line between good performance and bad, but where the line is drawn is not as important as the notion that family, friends, peers and strangers do it to each other as a normal practice, asked for or not.

Mundane reality shows participants open themselves to audience evaluations about their adherence to norms as the portrayal of their presumed everyday lives is the main focus of the show. Single-sex shows are particularly exemplary of gender accountability, as the programs become about either femininity or masculinity. While it should be noted that show participants are well aware that a camera crew is filming and are likely trying to perform well, their portrayal reveals enough to an audience to pass judgment.

Erasing the boundary between private and public life opens reality portrayals up for moral scrutiny and sense-making; from the way people look to how they behave. For an example on gender, Trogos (2009) argued that *Monster Garage* and *American Chopper* are "cultural signs representing a nostalgic desire for traditional masculine identities" (542). Trogos' use of "nostalgia" suggests that viewers positively view these identities and would practice this form of masculinity if possible. Cato and Carpentier (2010) studied viewers' notions of female empowerment and related this to their enjoyment of a reality show featuring women "getting ahead" using their sexuality. Reality shows, thus, can be a moral tale for gender, sexuality, race, and class. However, it should be noted that expectations are nuanced: gender might well be understood one way in *Kitchen Nightmares* when the expert chef fixes chefs and owners in financial trouble, but in a different way on *Biggest Loser* when the expert fitness trainers fixes people with weight issues (Connell 2008). Because of these gray areas of acceptable gender performance, drawing the line between good and bad can be difficult. Once again, audiences work this out through their interaction with the programs and the people that watch with them.

The agency of participants on reality shows is constrained, despite the apparent lack of any formal structure. Given that the shows are shot in a sort of documentary form, scenes are likely staged, from pre-show instructions, to fashion, to rehearsed interviews and on to editing. Moreover, the drama of the reality show occurs when one participant takes the role of the villain and "wrongs" another participant, thus providing the viewing audience with a melodrama: they can pity a victim, cheer a protagonist and also ridicule the villain or the way the protagonist handles the situation. Heroes, victims and villains abound, but because of show production and unpredictability of "what makes for good TV," participants do not have full control of how audiences perceive them.

In my project, finding the "truth" of the production of the shows is not as important as how audiences accomplish moral work. In addition, there is a blurring of the boundaries that separate everyday life from the phenomena that are possible with television. Locating a camera and television personality within a home, store or workplace mixes "real life" and television (see Denzin 1991: 69). Some programs use surveillance cameras that give viewers an eagle-eye view of private rooms; others use a camera to enable a spoken journal, where the participant talks seemingly "alone" in a room about a given situation. Hence, there is no "truth" in the production of shows; instead, "reality" emerges as an interactive effect between producers, characters, audiences and culture.

What we should focus on, then, as analysts, is what audiences are saying about reality shows. More broadly, we should look at how cultural texts intersect with the lives of the viewing public. Those intersections can be accessed by examining their existing online conversations about the programs. They likely can articulate implicit rules of life – how it *should* be – thus garnering the moral lessons from them is informative for defining their particular culture and also how culture happens. Because of the specific mundane reality programs I selected for my data, I am most interested in social class, the performance of gender and a general morality governing how we ought to act. I am also interested in how viewers go about articulating these moral boundaries. There is a lack of research on how reality programming contributes toward socializing and normalizing viewers, and this study aims to start a dialogue on this topic.

DATA, SAMPLE AND METHODS

Data. This is a project first and foremost about how viewers construct meaning and moral messages from what they see in reality programs: what they *say* about them. Therefore this is an audience reception study seeking to answer the following questions: How do audiences express approval or distaste? What are the moral boundaries that audiences care about and work to define? What kinds of agency or conformity do audience members express? What do venues for discussion permit audience members to express? To what extent are reality show participants on the program accepted or ridiculed for going against norms, subverting the hegemonic narrative (Ewick and Silbey 1995)? How do audiences use reality programs to make moral judgments about their own lives and experiences?

When I started looking at the types of reality programs available, I found my way onto the websites of the shows. It was on these websites that I discovered how people were commenting about reality programs in an open forum, bounded only by the subject lines people were creating in the original post. Anyone could post, and together these posts constituted public data. There were multiple forums made available by the websites of the networks airing these programs. In addition, I found the episodes available for viewing online in their entirety. Underneath these episodes on some networks (such as www.mtv.com) was a place for people to comment about the show they were watching. While there were sometimes hundreds of comments from watchers of these programs directly underneath each episode, I found that there was more commentary in the dedicated forums for the shows I selected. While viewers can post anonymously and that it is not possible to know anything about the demographic characteristics of those posting, a strength of these data is that they are non-reactive: I had no part in the production of the data, and therefore, I did not influence data characteristics (Neuman 2003). Finding naturally occurring interactions among reality show fans presented me with a fantastic opportunity, as these data are particularly insightful for audience reception studies which typically rely on interviews or focus groups. Below I describe how I came to select *The Hills* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, and then I conclude this section with how I analyzed the comments.

Sample. Because I am more interested in shows that narrate people in their "everyday" lives, I did not analyze programs like *The Amazing Race, Big Brother* and *The Apprentice* because they put ordinary people into a sort of unusual "contest." I also excluded shows that have "expert" celebrity personalities like *Supernanny* and *Kitchen Nightmares* because they have a celebrity personality that comes in and fixes everything in one hour's time, also an extraordinarily unusual (if not impossible) occurrence in real life. Both contest and expert shows would be more likely to have comments that point at the structure of the show, as in the way people on the show played the game, or how the expert accomplished the turnaround of the failed kitchen. In contrast, series such as *The Hills*, *Jersey Shore, Real World* and *The Real Housewives* show people in their *presumed everyday lives*. In a sense, mundane shows are presented as 'more real' than the other genres of reality TV. By selecting a mundane show, I am more likely to find viewers commenting on their perceptions of everyday life.

I noticed right away that among the available programs, MTV's *The Hills* and Bravo's *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* featured similar types of people. *The Hills* featured predominantly upper-class white women in their early to mid twenties who lived in Beverly Hills. *The Real Housewives* featured the same, only this group tended to be in their 40s and 50s. These two programs featured people living in the same place at the same time with roughly the same amount of money, with age as the only noticeable difference, so I chose these two programs.

The Hills had two main hubs for posting comments. One was directly underneath an episode available for public viewing online on www.mtv.com. The other was a message board on another webpage within the MTV website. I chose to restrict my data gathering to the message board since *The Real Housewives* had only a message board. At the time of my data collection, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* was airing its first program, while *The Hills* had recently wrapped up its series. However, upon looking at the message board thread designated for the first episode of *The Real Housewives*, I found 47 web-pages of comments.

Method. This was an inductive exercise, and my task was to categorize the data according to the narratives that surfaced within these web-pages. I followed Loseke's method found in the "The Empirical Analysis of Formula Stories" (2011) for this project. I read all the data. Then a few days later I read the dataset again. At some point I would find a particular series of comments interesting with regard to moral judgment and read those again. On other occasions I would search for comments from *The Hills* that were similar to comments from *The Real Housewives*. This process continued for a few months, with the purpose of looking for patterns in the data. I was not looking to understand one comment for that individual's take on a given issue; rather, I was looking to see how that individual comment might be linked with other comments that linked with still other comments, culminating in a forest of comments that represent a series of ideas centering on certain themes that emerged throughout the process.

The unit of analysis was either individual comments or a short interaction among two or more people that constructed an argument. For example, a comment such as this one from the *Real Housewives* message board represents a piece of data that I found relevant to my research questions, this one centering on plastic surgery and relationships:

> Someone needs to tell Taylor that those lips are just hideous, and the sunken cheeks--horrible. Can you imagine living with the thought that it's just a matter of time before your husband dumps you for a younger model? It happens but to almost be expecting it? How sad is that?

Themes began to emerge from the comments. For example, I found quite early on that people were interested in three particular subjects: *plastic surgery, relationships* and *motherhood*. As I found other themes I wrote those down as well, indicating how they were linked. For example, *plastic surgery* was related to a larger category, *gender*, which was related to a larger category: *how to look*. What developed was a map of all the comments that sought to answer my research questions.

These questions, mixed with the data, turned into categories and subcategories that stemmed from a first-order category called "moral sense-making." The second-order sub-categories I found from the data are called *how to look* and *how to act.* The third-order sub-categories are *class* and *gender performance.* My analysis will highlight a few subcategories within these: *appearance, motherhood,* and *relationships*. Under each of these subcategories were additional subcategories that can be simplified here as to how narrators determined "what is good" and "what is bad." While most of the above categories connect to one another, a floating category called *age* formed because it is the only difference between the two programs. Because viewers on the internet forums did not speak directly about morality surrounding age, this category bubbled up in my reading of the data. Age affects each category of the analysis, so rather than spend one section providing examples I will instead touch on it in each section.

I ignored many common categories of comments including those referencing technical problems ("I can't access the show") and idle banter unrelated to the show. While these data are not relevant to my research questions, *per se,* I felt the people composing my data were more than just random anonymous posters: they were part of a community. Finally, people on *The Hills* message boards quite frequently questioned the reality of the show ("is this real?" "This show is fake!"). Delving into the "realness" of the shows is outside of my research questions. However, it is interesting that viewers seemed to question the truthfulness of the production *and* still used the shows to articulate moral boundaries.

The quotes used in this analysis were for the most part included as is. I wanted to keep intact the integrity of the language posters used, as colloquialisms and dialects generate more context for the reader. There were a few occasions where I added brackets to make the passage more clear. More common was paring down some of the longer posts through the use of ellipses, but I used them as little as possible.

While my data fell into clear-cut categories related to gender and social class, it was not possible to create a category about race. The shows feature white women and men; however the comments did not explicitly acknowledge this. What this means for my analysis is that the characters and comments from the show suggest an implicit whiteness in the moral sense-making. An analysis of the comments from shows like *The*

Hills compared to a show that features a different race, or multiple different races, of women would be a compelling follow-up. If morals are gendered, heteronormative, aged and classed, as I will illustrate below, they are likely raced. In other words, certain practices and actions might be deemed “good” for a white woman while they are deemed “bad” for a black woman to engage in.

FINDINGS

Moral Boundaries Around Class.

Posters often engaged in discussions about social class, but more specifically they analyzed what it meant to be rich. The message board community analyzed the rich, defining moral boundaries by which we ought to live. This is the case with the following posts from *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*:

> Ladygabber: Just remember, MONEY can't buy you class………….
>
> Qweenlizz: Hi Ladygabber! It can't buy you class, but it sure can buy you a good time! And shoes, fabulous, fabulous, shoes!
>
> Mel42: It can buy you a great plastic surgeon!

By "class," Ladygabber could mean many different things. What we do know, is that class and money are not the same thing. The three posts suggest that "rich people do not necessarily have class" is important. The lesson I take from this is that no matter how rich a person might become, that person will not be able to buy his/her way to classiness. However, as the second two responses note, money gives one access to supposedly desirable things like shoes and whatever a "good time" might mean. Nevertheless, *money can't buy you class* is an explicit moral lesson.

Moral boundaries and the "type" of rich. *The Real Housewives* posters actively connected where the money came from to moral evaluations of the people on the show. In a response about what sorts of people they might expect on the show, one poster writes:

> I agree several are "old money" I find them usually to be more eccentric haha.

It is interesting that in this relatively small amount of text there is a connection between how much money one has, how they acquired it, and their presumed level of eccentricity. What is more interesting is the assumption that the poster *knows* this type of rich person well enough to make this claim.

Another post suggests that watching rich people makes for good television:

> […]I like the sisters because, call me sick, but I love to see the dysfunction of the rich and "so called" famous.

More subtly, however, is that this post illustrates that viewers are fascinated by rich people, but at the same time want to see them struggle. They have a morally superior viewpoint toward the rich, one that is not often stated so plainly as above. Additionally, an important element to this stance includes distancing themselves from the women on the show. Posters do not have the same daily lives as those they are watching. Simply put: *rich people are bad people* and *posters, who are not rich, are good people*.

Posters lumped the rich together, but also distinguished between among within the larger category (Zerubavel 1996). The following post not only is an illustration of this mental process, but serves as a justification for the moralizing the poster takes part in.

> My pre-show thoughts on the very very rich. There's two kinds of very very rich (I'm not talking old and new). There's the work hard all their lives and secure in their money and there's the married into/or accidentally was in the right place at the right time and insecure about their money. I love the former but get seriously irritated at the latter. So I'm probably going to be irritate a lot over the next few weeks...apologies going out now.

There is a distinction between the rich who work hard and those who did not earn their money. This is a reflection of the American code of individualism: hard workers are to be respected and others are not.

This explanation of his/her view splits rich people into deserving and undeserving, and defines moral boundaries: hard workers deserve their money and security. Those with money by other means are undeserving. Therefore, to viewers, *how* one becomes rich is important because it will aid in the moral rubric they use in their assessment.

An instance of viewers scrutinizing what they evaluated as the undeserving rich occurs in the data from *The Real Housewives* when posters analyzed the family dynamics of the Kardashian sisters. One sister, Kim, appears to have far fewer financial resources than her sister, Kathy. Viewers post about why Kathy does not help her sister.

> I think it's kind of strange that her sister, Kathy, is practically a billionaire and Kim can barely afford a home with enough bedrooms for all her kids. I wonder why Kathy doesn't help out. I know if I had that much money, my siblings wouldn't want for anything. Sounds like there's something more going on...

According to this post, those with money should provide for family when they can. However, this cultural belief was violated in this case, and much time was spent on this particular issue as they worked out under what conditions it is acceptable not to financially assist siblings. As the postings continue, another viewer argues that there is an appropriate way to spend money, and then uses a personal story to justify the moral position.

> Regarding Kim's sisters helping her out financially. I wouldn't blame them at all for maybe making sure she is never struggling to find food but never really giving her money. Something about her just screams "I can't manage my money and I'm a spastic spender who is impulsive." Why share your wealth with someone who is going to squander it? Kyle's comments about Kim wanting a home were pretty justified if she's financially hurting and Kyle would probably have to help her out. When I started making

> decent money, I decided I would upgrade from my "normal" phone to the best on the market. My younger brother came to visit me and begged me to buy him the same phone. At first, I thought "sure, I have the money." And then I thought about how he's had 5 different phones in 2 years and would destroy the phone. I then told him to ask his dad to buy it for him. Why waste your money on someone who is just going to waste what you give them?

In other words, the moral lesson is *do not give money to those, including family members, who will not take good care of it.* A second lesson, by extension, is that *people are less likely to take good care of things if they do not have to work for* it. The writer used a personal experience as evidence why he/she was qualified enough to assess the situation from the show. In doing so, this viewer lends support to my assertion that these moral lessons are meant not only for those on the show, but developed, applied and refined by those posting on these message boards. Another example in response to the above post concurs:

> Hi Tera Bash, welcome to the board. I T[otally] A[gree] with your post. KIm had money and wasted it. If she can't be responsible for herself and her children why should her sisters have to do it. I can understand helping with basic needs, but if she is so broke do what most people do.....get a job. She is NOT too pretty to work!

As evidenced from the above example, there was little sympathy from the message board community on this issue. According to this post, Kim deserves no help from her more responsible sisters. Interestingly, the writer does find it acceptable to help with “basic needs,” but we do not know what is specifically meant by this. Nevertheless, another moral lesson from this post is that people *can* help with the basic needs of a family member, but everything else must be earned through “what most people” do: hard work. The assertion that the irresponsible are undeserving is again in line with American ideology of individualism. Women who did not earn their economic status through hard work were evaluated using a different moral lens than those who were presumed to be hard workers.

Moral boundaries and consumption. One of the main differences between the two sets of data was the way in which posters connected social class to morality. Underlying the discussion above was the idea of how the rich should spend their money. When a show participant on *The Real Housewives* had what was considered to be a smaller home than what is expected, it drew attention from viewers on the message boards, as well. The data indicate that viewers would post only when the lifestyle of a show participant exceeded or fell short of their expectations, generating a discussion on "what went wrong" or "how fascinating."

However, *The Hills* audience posting on this topic typically centered their talk on things that *appealed* to them. MTV's crafting of the program included information on the song and artist of the music played as a kind of product placement. Comments from posters looking for the name of the song and artist that played during the show were common. An occasional post, such as the following, makes the point that people watch these shows and evaluate fashion in positive ways, as well.

> Hey you guys! I loved that shirt that Lauren wore when eating lunch with Whitney. The blue plaid one. Does anyone know where I can find that shirt because i really really want one.

Viewers made other comments looking for particular clothing and fashion items; however, I did not find *explicit* moral evaluations on how the characters in the show acquired the resources to live an upper-class lifestyle. For *The Hills* posters, it did not appear as relevant as the ability to take from their lifestyles what they found relevant to the production of their own identities.

In general, when people saw a particular fashion style, heard a song, or viewed home décor that they thought was good they commented and sometimes asked the community where to find it for themselves. This was more often expressed as something that they *desire* or were *jealous* of, such as this post from *The Hills*:

> So I was watching the new episode and fell in love with Kristin's sunglasses. I've been on a mission to find out where they're from and what model they are. I looked through the MTV website because they tell their viewers what each person was wearing in what episode but they haven't put it up yet. Does anyone have any idea where her sunglasses were from? […]

In addition to regular advertising, it appears that MTV intentionally crafted this program to tie in to products. Rather than have the products easily identifiable through logos or other more obvious means, the producers make it so that viewers have to visit their website to discover the featured brands on the show. It would seem that although the fashion is successfully appealing to viewers, they may not have made finding the featured products and brands easy enough for them to find on their website.

It appears *The Hills* viewers did not express disdain for the depicted class as much as *The Real Housewives* audience did. Rather, *The Hills* posters appeared willing to participate in the portrayed lifestyle especially related to consumption choices. Since the posts dealt primarily with music, clothing and accessories, I interpreted *The Hills* posts as being more positive and supportive of the portrayed social class. The women on *The Real Housewives*, on the other hand, were generally criticized. Message board posts emphasized how participants achieved their “rich” status. If participants did not earn their money and lifestyle through hard work, then there was something amiss. Posters wrote more about moral boundaries than they did about findings ways to incorporate consumption choices of the rich into their own lives.

The age of the characters should be considered as a likely ingredient that explains the differences in attitudes between the shows. *The Hills* participants were likely products of “old money” in that their parents must have at least in part subsidized their lifestyles. Also, the main characters typically had jobs, such as Lauren Conrad, who started her career as a clothing designer. However, viewers perceived the forty-something *Real Housewives* as divorced and re-married, plastic, jobless at-home women. Therefore a hidden moral boundary around age and class exists for these women: it is unacceptable to have unearned money at forty, but it is acceptable at age twenty if certain conditions are met.

While viewers from *The Real Housewives* would write about attractive homes, cars, and fashion, they were also tuning in to see “dysfunctional” class performances of rich, married women. In addition, some of the characters are also mothers. Considering traditional American values, a rich, stay-at-home married mother is generally accepted while a rich housewife can be seen as a gold digger that spends her husband’s money. The specific context of the each character is tainted when appearing on the title of the show, *The Real Housewives.* That title immediately invokes a negative moral evaluation. The ideology of American individualism is present throughout the analysis, but nowhere else is this issue more salient than with viewers’ moral evaluations of class.

Moral Boundaries Around Gender

I want to begin with two points about gender and its relationship to this project. First, just as our world is gendered, morality is also gendered. Moral standards applied to women are different from standards applied to men. West and Zimmerman argue that gender is a practice of accountability-- that it is *done to you*, as well as being *done by you* (1987). Hence, gender is a constant, reiterative, process that emerges through talk and interaction (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987.) This argument about accountability is consistent with these data in my analysis. Therefore this section makes explicit the idea that the viewers posting about these programs believe there is a proper way to practice gender, and, because these shows focus on hyper-feminine women, I will be focusing primarily on the practice of femininity.

Second, the following analysis focuses on moral evaluations of the appearance and behavior of women, as made through a heteronormative frame. Women and men are expected to form relationships and marriages, "look their part" and be accountable to these heteronormative rules. It happens that the shows, and my data, focus primarily on women and how well they perform, with men in the background. If the shows featured men, comments that about gender would likely evaluate gender on the basis of cultural notions of what it means to be a man.

Moral boundaries and femininity & romantic relationships. I will detail two heteronormative scenes in the data about femininity and romantic relationships. Both of these scenes do not bode well for women. The first is that while women have individual agency, they are ultimately responsible for any romantic hardships they experience. While men perform hegemonic masculinity, which is the practice of dominance over other types of masculinity and all women (Crawley, et al 2008; Connell 1995), posters do not critique hegemonic masculinity; rather, it is assumed as though a normal experience of everyday life. Instead, viewers take a morally superior stance on the women who resist, critiquing individual decisions and actions. Despite allowing for agency, women should be able to easily navigate through this assumed hazard, and failures are met with criticism and ridicule of individuals.

There is a second, contending scene that is equally as condemning toward women, which is that as part of what it means to be a "good woman," women must comply with men's demands. In this narrative women have no agency. In romantic relationships, men are viewed as active forces that both define and change women's lives, according to the posters. This is what constitutes "good femininity," and women are stuck with whatever man they get.

Talk about men's actions was generally limited to their relationships to women, and on *The Hills*, this meant primarily Spencer's relationship with Heidi. There were other relationships on the show, and occasional posts about them, but the overwhelming majority of attention was paid to Heidi and Spencer. This relationship was rocky throughout the series both in show content and show comments. Nevertheless, they went from dating to marriage during the show's run, with much conflict between the two. Spencer was generally seen as a villain and Heidi as both a victim and enabler. Even though comments about their relationship painted Spencer consistently in a negative light, Heidi garnered most of the criticism.

For example, posts alluded to Spencer's dictating and holding power over Heidi. One viewer explained why Heidi's appearance changed twice in one day.

> Its because Spencer controls what she does and probably wears to work. I noticed it too her hair being up then in the next scene they show Heidi with her hair down. Well just like her nose and other parts of her body has been changed.

This response is noteworthy because it suggests that Spencer produces Heidi's physical appearance, and thus Heidi here is described as a woman without agency. Note that in this case there is a lack of explicit moral judgment; it is matter-of-fact in tone, likely because this is part of traditional notions of femininity, no matter how wrong Spencer's actions are. Therefore, although there is no explicit moral lesson there is still an embedded message in this post: it is almost as though the writer is saying "these things happen."

Another post about Spencer and Heidi expressed the hegemonic tale:

> [...] I think that he needs to grow up and be a man and know that her mom needs to be there to see her get married. He needs to get over himself and stop brain washing her and let her have her old friends back that is what she needs as we saw what happened on the finale with Lauren.

Here is an example of someone calling out Spencer to "be a man." The moral lessons for men, if present at all, were typically like the above: ambiguous. The post does accuse Spencer for practicing hegemonic masculinity; however, the "be a man" solution is more of an epithet than anything of substance. Rather, the post and embedded moral lesson are likely aimed at women: this is how men are or are not supposed to behave. Whereas these kinds of posts from viewers argued Spencer treated Heidi poorly, they did not really call for Heidi to leave Spencer. Instead, while these comments "talk back" at this example of hegemonic masculinity, they nonetheless reinforce its status. I expected these kinds of posts to end with "so leave him" or "dump him." Instead they say, "You're stuck with him!"

Viewers went further on this issue from *The Hills*. Again, while they talk about relationships with men, viewers scrutinize Heidi's actions through both pity and blame. It was as if Heidi did not heed the obvious life lessons; thus viewers expressed blame through sadness in combination with anger, at times. For example:

> I feel bad for Heidi...shez is dating the devil... She lost her friends, she lost her job and now shez losing her family... how blind is the gurl?? The boy is the worst omen thatz ever happen to her... does she not see how everything she loves and work hard for is going down the drain...oh and family come 1st u stupid gurl!!! […]

Contradictory messages were common, and although moral lessons can be pulled from this post, it seems no matter what Heidi does she will be seen as wrong. In this case there is a mixing between both tales: Heidi is stupid for not seeing what is happening to her (scene #1), but as Spencer is described as an "omen," Heidi has no control over her situation and must comply (scene #2).

These kinds of posts construct those who post them as morally superior, as evidenced here through pitying Heidi ("I feel bad"), but by the end blaming her ("u stupid gurl!!!"). Here, she failed to follow the moral lesson that family comes first: before boyfriends and fiancés. The moral boundaries stated in this way are not being worked out as much as they are merely being stated as reasons to pity, blame or ridicule Heidi, the offender no matter what she does.

When I analyzed comments about relationships from *The Real Housewives*, things change. Moral boundaries are present in both shows, but *The Hills* viewers state it in a morally superior way compared to *The Real Housewives*. Instead of pity and blame at the poor decisions of women, *The Real Housewives* comments were more empowering. Getting into the potential reasons behind these differences is better suited for a later time, but there is something happening that is worth looking further into. In addition, women have agency in their relationships and thus do not have to subscribe to typical femininity. They can choose to purchase plastic surgery to look younger, for example, or they can leave their husbands altogether. One post summarized relationships this way.

> […] Most men grow old gracefully and we women can come to resent it (unknowingly too). With age, the men tend to gravitate towards younger, spunky women and/or become appealing to those younger women because these men (due to their wives nurturing over the years) are now more mature and lets not forget, settled in life (career wise). I say, if you feel you have to compete or have any insecurities at all about the above, then move on!! Who is anyone to make you feel this way? Clearly this is only some of what these women are or have gone through. But believe me, there are far more important things in life than trying to obtain and/or hold on to possessions (including that man)!!

The moral tale that men gravitate toward younger and spunkier women and not older women once again suggests that men cannot help who they are. If they act out of line it is not their fault: it is some undeniable force. Moreover, that older women are the ones who "nurture" men into maturity and strong careers smacks of heteronormativity and gendered human constructs. However, this post calls for women to move on: *there are more important things in life than possessions, which include relationships with men.*

This moral boundary is sophisticated and distinct; and it is not present in *The Hills*. It is apparent that posters could not navigate beyond why Heidi would remain with Spencer for so long considering all the offenses he has committed. Because of this, posters concluded that Heidi needed psychological help, or suffered from "battered syndrome," in one poster's words. This post from *The Hills* is in response to a scene in which Spencer hit a child.

> If that were my husband we would be in a knock down drag out fight. You DO NOT disrespect a child or your wife like that! […] Thinking about it, I've come to the realization that Heidi's life with Spencer will be good in the sense that she can get all the material items she wants, but she will never be truly happy. Mark my words. She will be an emotional wreck on the inside but put a big smile and expensive clothes on on the outside. This is what her mom feared. It's sad.

Again, viewers did not paint life with Spencer as acceptable, yet there were few if any explicit calls for Heidi to move on. This viewer would rather have a "knock down drag out fight" and be treated without respect than actually leave. In the end she predicts Heidi's future as without happiness, which shows *The Hills* viewers were more concerned with moral superiority than with defining empowerment.

As with class, age might account for viewers using a noticeably different moral rubric. Older women *should* leave men that gravitate toward younger women. Younger women *should* have either figured out their situation and dealt with it (tale #1), or they should accept their fate and stop trying to manipulate the situation (tale #2). Older women, as described next, should "look and act their age," but in doing so they are more likely to free themselves of constricting heternormative relationships.

Moral boundaries and appearance. The women on both shows from Beverly Hills were scrutinized on their adornment. While posters talked about looks in many different ways, I will focus on the topic of plastic surgery. This is because plastic surgery was one of the most talked about themes emerging from the data and best illustrates the moral work of posters. Most of the posts relating to plastic surgery were condemning the practice. Viewers ridiculed women who did not meet their standards in very dramatic ways. This post from *The Real Housewives* is particularly scathing:

> Could these women be any scarier to look at? I can't even look at Taylor without her hugenormus lips getting in the way. They're like magnets; big, fat lip magnets. Adrienne... you look like the Creeper from Scooby Doo. Bunch of face-deformed freaks. They all look like ass!

One gets the sense that the posters particularly enjoyed this part of moral work, judging by the amount of creativity used in the name-calling. Nevertheless, the name-calling for not conforming to moral codes is a necessary part of the process of developing and defining the boundaries for what sort of plastic surgery is "good."

One viewer talks about the *Real Housewives*' first episode and claims she will not watch any more episodes because of plastic surgery.

> I'm going to pass on this particular series----These women are very hard to look at --they look like old bar hags....I have a question----- Why do women use botox and plastic surgery to HIDE their age?????? Noting [sic] says over 40 like plumped lips and pulled skin!!!!!

The moral lesson is that there is a certain way to hide age, and the plastic surgery used by *The Real Housewives* women was not acceptable. The "old bar hags" assessment is but one in a list of ridiculing labels that include "cat lady," "alien," "Barbie," "duck lips," and so on. Note that an "old bar hag" sounds like someone who does not take care of herself, whereas this viewer is using it to describe women who have gone too far trying to look younger and more attractive. Some posts sought to answer the above question. Taylor, one of *The Real Housewives*, is considered to have "too much plastic." The following post attempts to explain the "why" and "so what:"

> Taylor is very sad and insecure. Her husband will cheat and leave her if that is what he wants to do. No amount of plastic sugery (sp) or injections will keep him around if he is a dog at heart.

The moral statement about Taylor's husband once again illustrates that women are the focus of the moral evaluation. Here, the viewer makes an assumption that Taylor had plastic surgery in order to keep her husband. Getting plastic surgery for this reason is wrong, and there is something wrong with the individual who purchased it. Another post is in agreement:

> [Taylor] sure is worried her hubby is going to leave her.She makes me sad to go threw[sic] all that surgery to stay young to only end up looking kinda freakish... Girl stop that if he is going to go let him YOU ARE ENOUGH of whatever your [sic]chasing. Let him and his little company comments go if he doesnt give you the validation you need.

The first post seemed to pity Taylor by calling her sad, while this one takes it a step further by attempting to convince Taylor she is good enough the way she is. Both posts, however, construct her as insecure, as evidenced by her use of plastic surgery. Even though the posts reflect the heteronormative notion that women should attract men based on their looks, the moral boundary is crossed when plastic surgery is used to this extent in remaining attractive. A final post on the same topic underscores the connection to viewers' lives:

> Someone needs to tell Taylor that those lips are just hideous, and the sunken cheeks--horrible. Can you imagine living with the thought that it's just a matter of time before your husband dumps you for a younger model? It happens but to almost be expecting it? How sad is that? Is the lifestyle really worth the blows to your self esteem and worth?

Viewers also considered plastic surgery as a means with which women appeared attractive to men as bad, if not done "properly." Viewers typically ridiculed the results of the plastic surgery and then questioned the character's mental health. From a comment on *The Hills*:

> heidi was a beautiful girl and ruined her looks with stupid 10 PLASTIC SURGERIES IN ONE DAY! she obviously needs like psychiatric counseling

Posters evaluated “too much” plastic surgery as indicating the offending individual has a “mental problem,” ranging from insecurity about relationships, to their own self-worth; and, in Heidi’s case, something a professional ought to look into. The moral boundary has been crossed: there is a certain way women should look, and rich women engage in a lifestyle that is bad for their self-esteem, relationships, and appearance.

Plastic surgery and hyper-femininity. Not all comments on plastic surgery made the point that something was wrong in the heads of these women. Rather than suggest they need help or are insecure, one post from *The Real Housewives* offered this explanation:

> It is very sad 1107..... Many are just fixated on it........and their looks.... all want to be Barbies......

A fixation with looking like Barbie, although at first seems like ridicule, is different from the assertions above. Barbie is a cultural icon of traditional femininity, an image that some viewers argue some women aspire to look like. It is not that these women are starting at “ugly,” and aiming for “beautiful,” it is that they are striving for an idealized, hyper-feminized image of the white American woman. The women are not called out for merely looking like Barbie. Rather, they are outside the moral boundary of acceptable ways in which people can look like Barbie. Plastic surgery is an unacceptable means by which these women shape themselves.

In a similar vein and also relating to *The Real Housewives*, viewers construct plastic surgery as part of the accepted culture of Beverly Hills:

> I had a conversation with someone who lived in this world [Beverly Hills] a few years back and she said that [plastic surgery] is a status symbol. It use to be about trying to keep all your plastic surgeries secret (and still is for those in front of the camera with real careers). But now it's about how much money and which doctor you can afford...or your husband can afford. It mostly affects wives of the famous or unknown actresses/wannabe actresses who marry wealthy. Plus birds of a feather... It's a lot like a group of blond women in the same social circle say [Orange County], after a while they start to try and out do each other in their blondness. Doesn't matter if that color of platinum looks horrid on most skin tones, all that matters is their hair is blonder than the other women. Same with the plastic.

In a way, viewers construct a separate moral universe for women "who marry wealthy" and aspire to be famous. It is interesting that this viewer used "affects" as though there is something in the water afflicting them all and causing them to act in this bad way. This explanation is different from an explanation that targets the psychological problems of the individual as the root cause of their plastic surgery. Viewers construct these women as having a different moral boundary than they do. Instead of the viewers' boundary set at concealing how they look like they do, now, according to this viewer, these women shape their bodies to reflect money and status, like a form of competitive consumerism, not unlike changing hair color or styles of clothing, all as means to prove how feminine they are.

To be a "good woman" is to be compliant toward men. Another component, at least according to the moral evaluators of Beverly Hills, is to look as feminine as possible, according to the idealized cultural image. Therefore, to viewers, accomplishing femininity though obvious plastic surgery is wrong because it is also a reflection that the individual has money: and outwardly showing wealth is wrong.

Where is the boundary drawn for accomplishing a “good” appearance through plastic surgery for these viewers? They attempted to clarify the boundary between acceptable and what is considered too much plastic surgery. It appears that viewers set the boundary: plastic surgery is acceptable but it must remain concealed. However, what is considered concealed? Can someone conceal breast implants? What is the purpose of adding Botox to lips if it drastically changes one’s appearance? For example, from the *Real Housewives* message board:

> I'm just curious, is "OBVIOUS" plastic surgery the trend these days?? I'm not against it or the new injections, laser treatments offered today. However, the key to it is "MODERATION"!!! […]

The above post illustrates that plastic surgery is a complex issue. The key to plastic surgery is moderation, according to this poster, but what does moderation look like, exactly? What seems to be the key to defining the territory is when posters think about their own appearance as evidence for their moral claims. This post illustrates this idea.

> […] I prefer the old look. But, what do I know? I stayed in suburbia and happily share my age by showing my well earned wrinkles - no botox for me!!

As with class, when viewers distance themselves from Beverly Hills’ culture, they articulate a different moral universe. What makes this post interesting is the poster’s link of suburbia to aging. There is some connection between the two, for this poster, and the moral claim is that people in suburbia happily refrain from plastic surgery and show aging: it is a part of suburban lifestyle. The moral boundary for suburban women, for this viewer, is to show off “well-earned wrinkles.” From another viewer:

> I don't have a problem with someone "freshening" themselves up. But I just don't understand having so much work done that they don't even look like themselves anymore.

Again, an ambiguous term is used, “freshening,” yet there is no stated criteria for one to understand what it means to “freshen up” or any other of the terms posters used. Nevertheless the boundary is set somewhere around concealment, and viewers think it is wrong when one does not “look like themselves.”

The idea of what is “real” is contested. For viewers, some plastic surgery is acceptable, but it must look “real.” However, the boundary between “real” and “fake” can be crossed as long as others do not deem a woman’s appearance as “fake.” The individual can control the amount of plastic surgery and where, but others will hold her accountable to how well she accomplishes femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). This is succinctly illustrated in the following passage:

> According to the women in this [plastic surgeon’s] office the number one request-[is] not to look fake. The office gave me samples of sometype of anti-aging serum--guess that is a hint.

Moral boundaries and motherhood. Motherhood is a topic that was more common in *The Real Housewives* than *The Hills*. This is due to the life-stages the show participants were in, as *The Hills* chronicled people who did not yet have children. As is noted in other categories with age, married women with children are evaluated with a different moral rubric than women in relationships without children.

When bad motherhood was identified by posters, ridicule was not as prevalent as in the other forms of moral work. On *The Hills,* it was revealed that Heidi wished to become pregnant without her husband Spencer’s knowledge. Posters evaluated this action as wrong: the moral lesson is that *married couples ought to cooperate to produce children together*.

> […] I am a bit peeved about Hiedi trying to get pregnant without Spencer's knowledge...ESPECIALLY since I have 5 brothers and a step-brother! Heidi said, "You know what you got into...You knew I wanted kids...", at the same time she knows what she got into as well; what the hell made her think that Spencer would even want kids?! Females that have that perspective on marrige and family irk my soul.

This viewer takes the man's position by stating "I have 5 brothers." Also, the post illustrates once again that men are not seen as culpable, or the ones that need to change, in relationships. The situation as described above appears to be one where Heidi and Spencer have conflicting views on if and when to have children. Yet, the viewer asserts that Heidi is wrong and that Spencer is not responsible. A second moral lesson from this post is that *it is wrong to force one's way into motherhood without a partner's consent*. Another post takes the issue one step further:

> They are a young newly married couple. He wants to just live the newly married life, while she wants kids. He is 25 years old and says he never wants kids... I know for a fact that his mind will change in the near future, he is just still so young. So Heidi decides that she is going to discontinue her birth control behind Spencer's back, and not tell him so she can sneak-a-ly get pregnant....... thinking that he will just grow up from it.................. PLEASE! That's why the level of single mom's is so high because people like Heidi have all the wrong reasons to have a baby. GROW UP HEIDI! MTV YOUR DISGUSTING FOR SENDING THAT MESSAGE!

Interesting here is the notion that men will change their minds about having kids as they pass age twenty-five. According to this idea of how men "come around" and want children, a woman who wishes to become a mother should not do so behind her husband's back. Rather, she should wait until he is ready, and this viewer knows "for a fact" that this will happen sooner rather than later. The lesson is: *be patient wanna-be mothers in your mid-twenties! Your immature husband will grow up and tell you when he is ready for children.*

Moreover, that women do not adhere to this moral lesson serves to explain the social problem of single-motherhood. This problem, according to the viewer, is constructed as a problem women, and only women, cause. Heidi is seen as having crossed a moral boundary, first for wanting to become a mother without her husband's consent, and second for having this theme presented to a national audience for other, impressionable women to copy. Further, men are the sole decision makers in relationships, according to this moral universe, thus this is defining traditional femininity: without agency.

Motherhood and appearance. Deciding when pregnancy is acceptable is one matter, but another involves how to acceptably perform femininity once the child is born. Early on in the *Beverly Hills* message boards, a link emerged between how women ought to look and how women ought to engage in motherhood. Once viewers realized that one of the show participants, Camille Grammer, planned to not physically carry her child, they generally ridiculed this notion.

> A surrogate carry her babies? Can you imagine being so vein you would do that>
> DISGUISTING.

My initial assessment is that viewers were appalled by a presumed cosmetic motivation behind surrogacy. The moral lesson appeared to be that surrogacy, if it is not medically necessary, is wrong. However, over the course of the posts, theories emerged that spoke to the individual pathology of the characters and also illustrated that their moral work went deeper than simple “bad” and “good” judgments. Once again, the issue and the moral boundaries are complex.

> Camille is going to be my favorite one to hate. […] She chose to have someone else bare her children for vanity reasons period!!Not IBS or other health problems. […] She had children to hang on to her famous husband is all I can come up with. To not go and check on a sick child is beyond with me. […] She has NO maternal instinct at all. She has no idea what a mother child bond is. I pray that the public is so outraged by her neglect of her children as I am. […]

The above example talks about Camille, and is laden with moral evaluations all stemming from surrogacy and the plan to hire nannies to help with parenting. In general, to be a good woman: *the woman must have a maternal instinct in order to be a good mother*. *Good mothers look after their sick children. Good mothers bond with their children.*

Another explanation for motherhood practices in Beverly Hills speaks to the presumed culture of Beverly Hills. Viewers distinguish between their own worlds—which are evaluated as logic and moral—and the world of Beverly Hills evaluated as not moral. Notice in the following how a complicated history is constructed to account for mothering in Beverly Hills:

> I think (from discussion with a few friends) that the whole surrogate thing is a trendy thing in hollywood for two reasons. One vanity and two they're so skinny it's hard to get pregnant sometimes when you're severely under weight. The latter use to be a problem in hollywood because the rich husbands wanted children and the emaciated wives couldn't get pregnant and it caused problems in the marriage. Either the wives had to go on hormones and/or gain weight or the marriage was over. Now it's a "blessing" because they use the too skinny as an excuse to have a surrogate have the baby and they keep their bodies, don't have to go through the whole pregnancy/labor thing and there's a baby for

> the marriage. I'm not saying this is the situation with Camille...just a thought on the whole famous/surrogate issue.

Similar to moral work on plastic surgery, the above narrative explains surrogacy as a cultural norm in Beverly Hills. "Rich husbands" and "emaciated wives" live there, according to this viewer, and surrogacy solves marriage problems of the famous. Another post deems surrogacy as good in Camille's case.

> she should use a surrogate if anything. I mean she doesn't eat! She doesn't get enough nutrients, that babies going to starve, the baby can't live off coffee all day. The woman exerts herself to the point shes sick, she doesn't sleep, she doesn't eat, and she's stressed. I don't see how that will be a healthy baby. She doesn't really seem like she wants to be a mom either or have that mom instinct.

This viewer implies Camille should not be a mother because of her lifestyle, concluding that "mom instinct" is necessary in order to raise a healthy child. In other words, Camille is not a good woman, and is unworthy of giving birth or raising a child. By understanding the Beverly Hills culture as wrong *but separate* from them, the posters are able to better articulate what their own world should look like.

Another way in which posters separated the two worlds was through their own stories. This post from *The Real Housewives* invokes the "money is bad" moral: this time through stating that privileged lives do not produce healthy children.

> When we were thinking of adopting, the cost made it unobtainable. So nowadays when I see the famous "buying" a child, it burns me. Having 4 nannies and a barely visible mom and or dad, doesn't make for happy, secure kids. Something tells me Camille has her dance floor and makes time for her dance but when does she schedule time for the kids. Didn't she ask the Nanny how her son was the previous night? She couldn't have looked in and checked or heaven forbid, been there. Can you imagine how many children don't

> get adopted because of the cost, and we weren't looking for a newborn as seems de rigeur for the stars.

Once again, *the mothering in Beverly Hills is bad*. As a reminder, the behavior exhibited by these rich people is bad. Combining the above moral lesson with the statement from the viewer that adopting was too expensive, the implicit claim is that *there are good, worthy parents that do not have money.* Further, viewers would talk about their own parenting practices. For example:

> My daughter is nineteen and I still occasionally listen through her door while she is on the phone She tells me a lot, but I just want to make sure all is well.

This sneaky behavior, while on the outset appears to have crossed a moral boundary about privacy, is thought to be good parenting by some viewers. Another poster replied:

> You just have to. You have to know what's going on and that everything is okay. You just don't know nowadays. I am totally with you on this.

The viewer implies that we live in a time of uncertainty, and good mothering involves monitoring children's activities. In contrast to the perceived immoral behavior of the show characters, viewers construct their own behavior as good. Viewers asserted themselves as expert moral authorities and were much clearer on the boundary of good mothering than with the subject of appearance.

The last three posts are a few examples among many that illustrate agency among viewers. Revealing moral lessons through personal stories on message boards, viewers actively engaged in a discussion about right and wrong. Even though what brought these viewers to a message board is an interest in mundane reality shows, these kinds of posts demonstrate moral sense-making. No matter what my moral evaluations of *their* moral evaluations are, viewers on these message boards are not passive viewers wasting time:

they are working to define a moral universe through interaction with each other and the programs they watch.

DISCUSSION

Morality is work, and moral work is done through reality programs. Furthering Lamont and Molnár's (2003) work on boundaries, it is clear that the viewers participating on *The Hills* and *The Real Housewives* message boards construct moral boundaries around program content. Much like Lowney's (1999) findings on talk shows, internet comments on reality shows illustrate that people watch not only to enjoy the spectacle of people behave badly. They watch, and then participate on a message board, partly to help themselves articulate their own moral boundaries and to confirm these boundaries by discussing them with other viewers. Whether it is expressed through ridicule of something they find out of the norm, through explaining what is in the heads of the people engaging in bad behavior, or through moral lessons people can take away, the reality shows help viewers make sense of their own world.

This work is needed in part because our current era in American society. There is a loss of faith in religion, tradition, and authority. In addition there is increasing heterogeneity and moral fragmentation while available media outlets are also increasing. Thus, there is a practical problem that individuals do not necessarily have a moral framework from which to live their lives and make moral evaluations of themselves and others (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985). This study demonstrates how moral work can be done and is done through what is generally thought of as base entertainment.

Nevertheless, the moral sense-making was not a simple process. Viewers first pointed out what they viewed as wrong. What followed was not a single voice that constituted a counter narrative to the one depicted on screen that explained why it was wrong or how things should be. Rather, posts were disjointed, complex and sometimes contradictory. There was no authority directing the action, and no one offered a summary at the end of each thread or idea that encapsulated the moral platform of the viewers. These viewers care about the construction of their moral universe; and it is clearly a malleable one. People approached complex issues like what it means to be a good mother and what good plastic surgery looks like and did not argue, threaten, ridicule or disrespect each other as they defined and refined the boundaries. In other words, moral sense-making was a messy business, yet viewers actively and regularly engaged in this work.

Generally, viewers present themselves as morally superior to the characters. Overall, they present themselves as if they have clear ideas of how to live properly, and collectively, their comments express their moral universe. These main findings define the boundaries viewers claim we ought to live by. In general they express a conservative, traditional morality. Those who have acquired wealth through marriage and seek fame operate outside acceptable moral boundaries as a whole. In other words: Beverly Hills is bad. Even though there are two tales associated with how relationships happen, both are problematic. Relationships are heteronormative; and any trouble within existing relationships is because of women, otherwise the submissiveness of women to men's agendas is criticized. Showing off social class through appearance crosses a moral boundary, especially through the use of overt bodily changes through plastic surgery.

Good mothers give birth to and raise their own children, and practices such as listening in on children's private conversations make up "good mothering."

That viewers accomplished moral work is an indication that they attempting to practice agency. Through talking about what is wrong with the characters and the situations they have gotten themselves into, viewers crafted a moral framework. However, this moral framework operates within the current structure of American individualism.

For example, there were no calls against the structure of gender inequality, but there were calls for individuals to avoid personal harm. When viewers talked about younger women characters' romantic relationships, such as with Heidi, there was no structural feminist critique calling for a change in the dynamics of relationships. Instead, it was Heidi that needed to change. For the older women characters on *The Real Housewives*, viewers' empowering messages operate within the current structure: a woman should leave a man that treats her badly. It is a basic feminist critique, and yet the solution is an individual one. Viewers wrote about ways they can *avoid* getting into similar situations instead of arguing against the structure of hegemonic masculinity. Their posts suggest that individuals can sidestep the pitfalls of life, yet there were no messages calling to remove structures of inequality together.

Moral boundaries are classed and gendered, but because the posters were not required to identify their race, I was unable to know the differences in moral boundaries based on race of the posters. However, this is a picture of white morality. As Brekhus (1998) writes, an unmarked identity displays privilege, in this case whiteness. The absence of discussion about race by posters suggests their moral framework is one of privilege – whiteness. In my data, as viewers do not mention race, and thus race remains unmarked, whiteness is therefore assumed. The dominant culture in America is white middle-class, and when race is mentioned it is usually done so to mark something as "not as" white, or as Other (de Beauvoir 1952; Brekhus 1998). As moral work around race would be a worthwhile future project, I wonder if there are ways to question other constructs that make up topics within social justice. A project that analyzes reactions to stories that feature men instead of women would be fruitful, for example. Because poster data is anonymous in my study, it would make sense to devise a follow-on project that allows for naturally occurring data like this to be generalized across a population. Knowing basic demographic information of posters on these programs would help with knowing more about whose morality is being constructed. Viewers have the opportunity to become active constructors of the meaning of these programs, for themselves and other message board participants. Understanding more about what dominant moralities exist and also how morality is constructed in our given moment can help those of us interested in structural change

REFERENCES

Baruh, Lemi. 2009. "Publicized Intimacies on Reality Television: An Analysis of Voyeuristic Content and Its Contribution to the Appeal of Reality Programming." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53: 190-210.

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1952. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Bondebjerb, Ib. 1996. "Public discourse/private fascination: hybridization in `true-life-story' genres." *Media, Culture and Society* 18: 27-45.

Bratich, Jack Z. 2006. "'Nothing Is Left Alone for Too Long': Reality Programming and Control Society Subjects" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30: 65-83.

Brekhus, Wayne H. 1998. "Sociology of the Unmarked." *Sociological Theory* 16: 34-51.

Brenton, S., & Cohen, R. 2003. *Shooting people: Adventures in reality TV*. New York: Verso.

Calhoun, Craig, ed. 1994. *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Cato, Mackenzie and Francesca Renee Dillman Carpentier. 2010. "Conceptualizations of Female Empowerment and Enjoyment of Sexualized Characters in Reality Television." *Mass Communication and Society*13: 270-88.

Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2008. "The media as moral education: mediation and action." *Media, Culture & Society* 30: 831-852.

Cohen, Jonathan and Gabriel Weimann. 2008. "Influence of Reality Shows and the Concern Over Their Social Effects on Who's Afraid of Reality Shows: Exploring the Effects of Perceived Willingness to Censor." *Communication Research* 35: 382-397.

Connell, R.W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Connell, R.W. and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” *Gender & Society* 19: 829-859.

Cooper, Evan. 2003. “Decoding ‘Will and Grace’: Mass Audience Reception of a Popular Network Situation Comedy.” *Sociological Perspectives* 46: 513-533.

Crawley, Sara L, Lara J. Foley and Constance L. Sheehan. 2008. *Gendering Bodies*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield.

DiMaggio, Paul. 1997. “Culture and Cognition.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 263-287.

Dovey, J. 2000. *Freakshow: First person media and factual television*. London: Pluto Press.

Ewick, Patricia and Susan Silbey. 1995. “Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative.” *Law & Society Review* 29: 197-226.

Ferris, Amber L., Sandi W. Smith et al. 2007. “The Content of Reality Dating Shows and Viewer Perceptions of Dating.” *Journal of Communication* 57*: 490-510.*

Gamson, Joshua. 1995. "Do ask, do tell: freak talk on TV." *American Prospect* 44-50.

Gamson, Joshua. 1998. *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Grindstaff, Laura. 2002. *The Money Shot: Trash, Class and the Making of TV Talk Shows.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Kavoori, Anandam P. 1999. “Discursive Texts, Reflexive Audiences: Global Trends in Television news Texts and Audience Reception.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 43: 386-398.

Lamont, Michèle and Virág Molnár. 2002. "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 167-95.

Loseke, Donileen. 2011. “The Empirical Analysis of Formula Stories.” Forthcoming in James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (eds.) Varieties of Narrative Analysis. Newbury Park: Sage.

Lowney, Kathleen S. 1999. *Baring our souls: TV talk shows and the religion of recovery*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Lundy, Lisa K., Amanda M. Ruth and Travis D. Park. 2008. "Simply Irresistible: Reality TV Consumption Patterns." *Communication Quarterly* 56, no. 2: 208-25.

Mast, Jelle. 2009. “New Directions in Hybrid Popular Television: a Reassessment of Television Mock-Documentary.” *Media, Culture and Society* 31: 231-250.

Press, Andrea. 1991. *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Radway, Janice A. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Reiss, Steven and James Wiltz. 2004. "Why People Watch Reality TV." *Media Psychology* 6, no. 4: 363-78.

Skeggs, Beverly. 2009. “The Moral Economy of Person Production: the Class Relations of Self-Performance on ‘Reality’ Television.” *The Sociological Review* 57: 626-644.

Tragos, Peter. 2009. “Monster Masculinity: Honey, I'll Be in the Garage Reasserting My Manhood.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42: 541-553.

Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1996. “Lumping and Splitting: Notes on Social Classification.” *Sociological Forum* 11: 421-433.

Zoonen, Liesbet Van. 2001. “Desire and Resistance: Big Brother and the Recognition of Everyday Life.” *Media, Culture & Society* 23: 669-677.