

Does television influence young people's career choices?

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Robbie Coltrane has a lot to answer for. Because it is gutsy TV cop dramas such as *Cracker* that hook students on to the science of how the mind works - particularly the criminal variety. (Williams, 2002)

Since *Cracker*, the idea that young people's career choices are influenced by the media, and by television drama in particular, has become widespread. In 2005 North East Wales Institute of Higher Education (2005) made headlines blaming *Coronation Street's* Mike Baldwin's abrasive management style for a lack of factory recruits. More recently, *CSI* and *Waking the Dead* have been linked to increased enrolments in forensic science degrees (Meikle, 2007).

Research also supports this link. For example, the study by Louise Archer and Becky Francis (2006) on British Chinese pupils found that TV was the second most named source of aspirations after parents, more so than careers advice or work experience. However, there is surprisingly little research that looks directly at how depictions of work and workers in television drama influence young people's career choices and aspirations. This was what we set out to explore in a study funded by the British Academy.

We were concerned that journalists produced a simplistic idea of the relationship between television images and viewers' identities. This is one that Stuart Hall (1973, p.5) observed is common in research too:

Though we know the television programme is not a behavioural input, like a tap on the knee-cap, it seems to have been almost impossible for researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing back into one of other variant of low-flying behaviourism.

Hall wrote this in the context of the controversial relationship between screen violence and 'real' violence. He stressed that he did not want to deny any significance to TV violence but instead:

...to insist that what audiences were receiving was not 'violence' but messages about violence. Once this intervening term has been applied, certain consequences for research and analysis follow: ones which irrevocably break up the smooth line of continuity offering itself as a sort of 'natural logic', whereby connections could be traced between shoot-outs at the OK Corral, and delinquents knocking over old ladies in the street in Scunthorpe. (p.8)

Similarly, we worked with the understanding that what people receive when they watch *CSI* is not 'forensic science' but messages about forensic science and, in so doing, we hoped to disrupt 'commonsense' connections between attractive, glamorous Americans with test tubes and chemicals in *CSI* laboratories and young people applying to study forensics in the UK.

We were also troubled by the assumption that everyone watching a particular programme understands it in the same way. This constructs the audience as homogeneous and undifferentiated. However, we know that career choices and aspirations are proscribed by social class, gender and race/ethnicity (Ball *et al.*, 2000), and that these influence the ways that people watch TV (Ruddock, 2007). In particular, we wanted to explore whether the characters and narratives of TV drama can provide the kind of connection and 'hot knowledge' (Archer *et al.*, 2005) necessary for young people to make non-traditional career choices.

Thus we started with three questions:

- How do young people read the narratives of work and workers in TV drama?
- How do these readings intersect with their identity work?
- How are these processes of *reading* and *identity work* classed, raced and gendered?

The term *reading* captures how watching TV is 'an active process of decoding or interpretation, not simply a passive process of 'reception' or 'consumption' of messages' (Morley, 1992, p.76). Similarly, the term *identity work* captures the idea of identity as something we do (and are done by) rather than something we are. Central to this approach is that our notions of who-we-are are always storied: 'Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self' (Hall, 1991, p.49). It is those stories through which people construct themselves in relation to work that we explored in this study. With the growth of the 'reality' TV and docudrama genres, the boundaries of TV drama are increasingly blurred; drama techniques are being used in previously distinct areas such as advertising and TV acts as a hub for multi-platform programmes such as *Big Brother* and *The Apprentice*. This 'offers the opportunity to examine the ways in which television drama – in all its diversity and complexity – can be theorised as a source of public narratives' (Thornham & Purvis, 2005, p.28).

Research Methods

We carried out 18 focus-groups and 31 individual interviews with students in their final two years of compulsory schooling in three schools that we have called Lawndale, Shermer and Liberty. All are mixed comprehensive schools in England. Lawndale is in a rural location in the South, Shermer in London and Liberty in a small city in the Midlands.

In focus-groups:

- We showed participants eight TV images of work (in homes, hospitals, offices and criminal investigation) and asked them whether they recognised the shows, if they wanted to work in these environments and what they thought of the jobs.
- We asked participants about their consumption of TV drama and of TV more broadly, focusing on what they thought about people working in the programmes they watched.
- We asked participants about their experiences of work (through school work experience and part-time work), their career aspirations and the influences on their employment choices.
- We showed participants extracts from *CSI*, *The US Apprentice*, *EastEnders* and *Commando*. We asked them what they thought about each, whether they had watched these shows, whether they liked or identified with anyone in them and what they thought of the characters and their working environment.

In the interviews, we asked participants:

- About what, when, how, why and with whom they watch TV, including their TV likes and dislikes.
- To discuss what they think would be happening in two pictures, featuring groups of people at a meeting and involved in construction, if they were stills from TV shows.
- To invent their ideal TV show featuring work.
- About their career aspirations and the influences on these.
- To choose what they do and do not want from work from the following list of factors: money, travel, status, creativity, friends, making a difference, helping people, interest, enjoyment, variety and routine.
- To describe themselves.
- To describe their social class and ethnicity and to discuss whether these and their gender make any difference to their life.

We analysed the focus-group data thematically using NVivo and the interview data using a narrative approach. More detail of our methodology and findings can be found

on the project website (www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/ipse/research-projects/current-projects/p75.cfm). In this article we concentrate on providing an overview of our findings by looking in turn at the three research questions with which we started.

How do young people read the narratives of work and workers in TV drama?

Young people use TV as a learning tool, a source of information, particularly about social relationships and unfamiliar lifestyles. TV is not their sole source of information, but is treated as equally credible to unmediated sources, and the 'real' and the 'mediated' are often blurred and paired in their talk. For many, TV offers more than entertainment, it offers a way to visualise 'other' lives both in terms of work and broader society and the opportunity to 'try on' different environments, including possible careers. Although, as in this quotation from Paul Macock (participants chose their own pseudonyms), they rarely draw causal relationships between their viewing and their aspirations:

[The Bill] doesn't really make me like want to be a police officer. But it's just good to see like how it works and stuff like that so like if like your GCSEs don't work or something like that it's like have an idea of how things work as well. So it's just like so if you did want to go into [police work], you know how things work and stuff like that really. [Int: Right. So you do actually watch TV to think about how different lives are?] I don't think you like watch TV to think about it, I think you watch TV for like the fun of it and you just automatically like think about how things work and stuff like that really.

(Paul Macock, Lawndale, White, male, middle-class, focus-group)

The ways young people read narratives are based in: assessments of *authenticity* and processes of identification. As other studies have shown, young people's search for TV authenticity is really important to them (Hill, 2004). They are aware of genre, channels, format requirements, narrative devices and other conventions. Using this knowledge, they calibrate their response to representations of work, judging their 'truth' and 'reality'. For example:

It's not what it seems [the army]. ... Because on the adverts they show that more fun stuff, but in real life it's not. [Int: So how do you know the difference between the advert and real life?] Because you see like in videos of it. Some people taking photos of it, in war, like in Iraq. ... [Int: So what do you think about that kind of difference?] It's wrong. They should show the real stuff and see what's really going on.

(Petrov Jerkoff, Liberty, British, male, working-class, focus-group)

They also compare unmediated (from part-time work, work experience, friends' and family's employment) and mediated experiences of occupations and some draw distinctions between TV and real-life careers, stating desires to be a TV, not a real, doctor or to work in an office only if Ricky Gervais is your boss (Williams & Mendick, 2008).

Identification and dis-identification are associated particularly with soaps and soap-like programmes (such as reality-gameshow *The Apprentice*). In these cases the job-role and instances of the job within the show blur. The main points of identification are around the contrasting positions of being ordinary and so authentic, as discussed above, or being someone who stands out, as in this extract:

[Prison Break's] good because like it's just sort of different kind of way [Michael Scofield] thinks. It's not like a typical gangster guy who doesn't know what it's like. He's sort of clever. It's like, you just need to watch the whole series to understand it ... It's not like oh you know what he's going to do next.

(Dean, Shermer, Serbian, male, middle-class, focus-group)

The main points of dis-identification are around age, North American-ness, social class and perceived freakishness. Thus, being distinctive is positively valued but being too distinctive and/or distinctive in the wrong way is negatively valued.

How do these readings intersect with young people's identity work?

TV as a learning tool, mediated through assessments of authenticity and processes of identification, is linked to identity work. TV is used to make evaluations of other people and of self-in-relation to others which involve value judgements around class, race, nationality, gender and sexuality, and about what is normal and like us. TV sets expectations that include and exclude. For example, for Emily-May TV sets up expectations about businesswomen that she feels would rule out less confident women from this area:

Especially when you watch lots of telly, you probably think all businesswomen are pushy women. If they're quite shy or something, even though they might be really good at it, they might not want to.

(Emily-May, White British, female, middle-class, interview)

This extends beyond careers and onto social groups. Emily-May explains how her perception of stallholders is related to their TV portrayal and particularly to Stacey in *EastEnders*:

Like sub-consciously you pick up quite a lot I think. ... like Stacey works on the market stall and stuff like that, so if you see someone on a market stall then you might like presume that they are like the character in *EastEnders*, whereas they're obviously not. [Int: Like in what way do you think?] Well not like she is anymore, but like she used to be a couple of years ago, like would get around and chav.

Stacey Slater is read in classed and gendered terms; the phrases 'getting around' and 'chav' feed into constructions of working-class women's sexual and behavioural excess (Skeggs, 2004). This link between her appearance, sexual behaviour and career prospects is also made by Shanz (Shermer, British Asian, female, interview) who describes Stacey as 'not going anywhere. She's just working and some of the stuff she wears is like, wow'.

However, TV is not entirely reproductive; when some connection and authenticity is felt, it allows for the 'trying on' of different selves and lives. This is important for career choice since young people want work to provide both 'traditional' factors such as money and status and factors such as enjoyment, interest, creativity, variety and making a difference which suggest a fashioning-of-self through work. This tying of lifestyle to work is related to neoliberal demands that work be a site of self-actualisation (Rose, 1999). Within this context, TV is resource for deciding if you 'fit' particular jobs. For example:

I've wanted to be a vet since I was 3. ... my nan went and got me a dog and I remember the first trip to the vets, I was really excited because I'd never been there before. ... and then I used to watch *Animal Hospital*. That was on with Rolf Harris presenting it. And I always found that really interesting to see all the animals and stuff and it looked quite exciting, stuff like that. So I've always wanted to be a vet, really.

(Philop, Lawndale, White British, male, middle-class, interview)

Similarly, when asked to imagine her ideal TV show featuring work, Ruth (Shermer, Ethiopian, female, intermediate-class, interview) invents a version of *The Apprentice* for stockbrokers, her intended career, in which 'the experienced person creates activities and stuff for other people who are starting to do stockbroking, and then through them other people like me watching it can see how'.

How are these processes of reading and identity work classed, raced and gendered?

Young people's identifications are often linked with characters' class positions and job statuses. They are keen to position themselves as 'normal' and 'in the middle' in

relation to class indicators. Although they are aware of status differentials and resist low status work, as in the reactions to Stacey Slater discussed above, they also reject the snobbery, arrogance, 'posh'ness and excessive wealth of businesspeople like *The Apprentice's* Alan Sugar and Donald Trump. With one exception, our participants aspire to professional careers. TV drama contributes to the normalising of middle-class trajectories for 'repetitive patterns of representation have the ideological effect of naturalizing certain perspectives on the world' (Ruddock, 2007, p.75).

Race and ethnicity remain unspoken in many focus-groups. A few minority ethnic participants identify with characters from similar backgrounds such as Indian James Caan (*Dragon's Den*) or Colombian *Ugly Betty*. At Lawndale, a predominantly White rural school, anti-American feeling is quite intense. Students position themselves as English and culturally opposed to what they deem American arrogance and stupidity. In the interviews, many ethnic minority participants spoke of television viewing as part of their cultural identity work (watching sport, films, news and soaps from their 'home' country), as a way of connecting with parents and of being part of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983).

Identification is rarely cross-gender. The two focus-group instances involve young women identifying with camp men (*Ugly Betty's* Justin and Marc). Women identifying with male characters are more common in interviews. For example, Sandra Slater (Lawndale, White British, female, middle-class, interview) identifies with male characters Gregory House and Will Smith, female character Temperance 'Bones' Brennan and the mixed gender staff of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Intelligence rather than gender matters to her. Cross-gender identification is more common among women than men and women's aspirations were less 'stereotypical' than men's in line with other research (Francis, 2002). Childcare, nursing and fashion are still seen by young men as 'feminine' and, rather than seeing TV examples of men in these jobs, such as nurse Charlie in *Casualty*, as offering a counter-position, they question their hetero/sexuality.

Our data indicate that TV drama is one resource among many that makes cross-gender choices possible, through imaginative identification, the 'trying on' of selves. The strongest example of this was in aspiring police officer Anything's (Shermer, British Bengali, female, intermediate-class, interview) discussion of *The Bill*. She likes DI Sam Nixon's power: 'she's the woman in the actual field, it's like the most in charge. She's actually got the most power basically over everyone. ... you know how usually they say men are higher up, but in there she's like the highest ... I would definitely be happy with that.' However, her favourite character is PC Sally Armstrong: 'she's completely like us but then she's working for the police force so really, it's like she's two different people'. Identification with Sally seems to make it possible for Anything to see herself as a police officer.

Conclusions

In summary, young people use TV drama as a learning resource, alongside unmediated material, to make evaluations of other people and of their self as they relate to others. This is important for career choice since young people want work to provide a lifestyle that suits them. Thus, TV is a resource for deciding if you 'fit' particular jobs. However, young people's relationships to TV drama are complex: the processes of identification and of trying on of selves and environments differ between people, characters and programmes and interact with other aspects of identity. TV has a role *both* in normalising middle-class professional lifestyles and excluding other lower-class groups *and* in helping people to aspire to non-traditional occupations.

In light of this we would suggest that careers education and counselling engage with the multiple sources of information that young people use to explore their career possibilities. In particular, TV and other media could be helpfully incorporated into this process. But this needs to be done critically in ways that engage with how these representations contribute to processes of inclusion and exclusion (see Buckingham, 2007).

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