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'EastEnders': Texts of female desire and of community

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Biographical Notes

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'EastEnders': Texts of female desire and of community

Abstract

This study investigated narratives obtained from 45 participants about their watching of EastEnders. The first aim was to understand why people watch this program. The second aim was to identify the kinds of social object dominating their accounts as a way of revealing the forms of cultural debate catalyzed by the show. Material was generated via an open-ended e-mail questionnaire and analyzed qualitatively using grounded theory. Two major themes constituting social objects were identified; female desire and community. These themes were made-up of seven categories each of which helped explain why our participants watched EastEnders; reduced troubles, gender, relaxation, social activity, community, realism, and Britishness. We discuss these results in relation to past research but also argue that, as our findings suggest some participants gained a therapeutic effect from watching EastEnders, there is a fruitful and little explored link between such comfort viewing and research on psychotherapy.

Keywords: EastEnders, soap opera, grounded theory, television, mass media, therapy, comfort viewing, discursive psychology, feminism, audience response.

Research into soap opera has increased in recent years as sociologists, anthropologists, and those with a background in communications and broadcasting attempt to understand its immense popularity. In this study we focused on the most popular soap produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and asked; 'Why do people watch EastEnders?'. The mass appeal of the program makes this an interesting question to pursue, particularly as soaps are commonly thought to be at the bottom of the aesthetic heap (Brunsdon, 1990). However, we also asked a second more challenging question; 'What are the forms of social object dominating our participants' accounts of their viewing?'.

A social object is a discursive formulation, or linguistic construction, which evokes a complex network of cultural meanings, associations, and values, e.g. 'sexuality'. The meaning of specific social objects are often hotly contested as they can be linked to the interests of particular groups. Hence, we argue that identifying the forms of social object embedded in accounts of viewing EastEnders provides insight into the kinds cultural debate catalyzed by the program. This is consistent with Nguyen-Duy's (1998) statement that 'in basing their plots on controversial issues of the day, soap operas illustrate collective debates' (p.1). Therefore, this study contributes to a growing literature that respects such shows as having a role in the evolution of public values. This was first documented by Brunsdon (1981) who argued that the main business of the soap Crossroads was the construction of moral consensus about the conduct of personal life.

EastEnders is a British soap opera which was launched in 1985. It is set in Albert Square, Walford (a fictional district of the East End of London) with the drama centered on the local market and 'Queen Vic' pub. It contains characters that encompass a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and occupations and conforms to the

genre conventions for British soap opera in the social realism tradition (Dyer, 1981). As such, EastEnders portrays strong female characters, a nostalgic respect for working-class life, and a serious attempt to deal responsibly with contemporary social issues.

In an early study, Buckingham (1987) used focus groups to understand the appeal of EastEnders to young people in a sample consisting of sixty 7-18 year olds. He contended that the popularity of the show was due to features such as its cliff-hanging narrative. Buckingham also reports that the originators of the program thought that the appeal of EastEnders was its social realism, although audience opinion has varied on the extent to which the show has been considered realistic (Middleham & Wober, 1997).

Within communication studies, Livingstone (e.g., 1988) has been instrumental in the development of research into why people watch soap opera. Free-form written responses were obtained from 52 British viewers to the question 'Why is soap opera so popular?'. Using a quantitative, content-analytic approach she concluded that these responses could be conceptualized on eight dimensions; the role in the viewer's life, entertainment, realism, emotional experience, relationship with characters, problem solving, escapism, and critical response (i.e., being able to critique the plot development and story-line).

More recently, Middleham and Wober (1997) polled EastEnders fans to find out what encouraged their viewing. Analysis of 500 completed questionnaires revealed that estimates of program appreciation related to amount of viewing. Moreover, certain aspects of EastEnders appeared to predict program appreciation; comfort (e.g., humor), dramony (e.g., quality acting), and contemporaneity. However, shock (e.g., violence) and narrative destabilization detracted from viewer enjoyment.

The present study is informed by ideas articulated within discursive psychology (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992). This is a developing field that stresses the role of language in the construction of knowledge and in the mediation of subjective experience. It is argued that human understanding is an interpretative enterprise enabled by a storehouse of linguistic resources into which we are encultured and that provide us with ready-made, but continuously evolving, meanings. From the perspective of discursive psychology, watching television is considered to be an active process in which the viewer draws on their store of cultural knowledge to interpret the texts presented. Hence, as a popular institution, television is a prime medium through which cultural meanings are perpetuated, challenged, and evolved as viewers recognize, dispute, and debate what they see (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984).

Discursive psychological theory has an interesting corollary with Brunsdon's (1981) early suggestion that soap opera demands certain competencies of its audience including cultural knowledge about acceptable personal conduct. However, she also argued that 'our world' and the 'world of the soap' come together in the blurring of public and private repertoires (Brunsdon, 1984). In contrast, some discursive psychologists take the perspective that public and private repertoires interpenetrate to such an extent that it is unhelpful to make a distinction between them. For instance, Billig (1987) argues that the boundaries of private thought are set by the terms of public debate. This is the position that we shall take in this paper as it avoids the problem of trying to assess the extent to which soaps reflect extra-textual reality, such as attempted by one early strand of feminism (see Brunsdon, 1987). We argue that as long as EastEnders conforms to the conventions of realism, at least in its treatment of interpersonal relationships, the fact that it is fiction need not detract from its ability to

provoke viewers into an examination, or reaffirmation, of the moral values into which they have been encultured.

The literature on discursive perspectives raised our interest in social objects as a way of identifying the kinds of cultural debate catalyzed by EastEnders and we shall now examine this concept in more depth. Foucault (e.g., 1972) provides the theoretical underpinnings of this idea in a body of work in which he examined several social objects including madness, sexuality, and selfhood. What makes these social objects, Foucault argues, is that they have <u>come into existence</u> through the debates in which they are situated although appear to denote phenomena with objective status. Social objects are therefore discursive formulations which can be constituted in and through different discourses that cast the object within often conflicting meaning and value systems. This is illustrated, for example, in Hollway's (1989) identification of how the social object 'sexuality' can be situated within at least three different discourses; to-have-and-to-hold, male sexual drive, and permissiveness. Foucault's controversial step was to give priority to the discursive realm. Hence, he argued that our linguistic construction of reality need not be predicated on what is actually 'out there' but, on the other hand, that discursive formulations can have a profound impact on material reality (McNay, 1994). This is evidenced, for instance, in the unfavorable treatment of those classified as 'mad' or as 'sexually deviant'. So, in the present study of EastEnders and our participants' accounts of their viewing, we consider ourselves to be working in the realm of representation but respect representations has having massive implications for the living of everyday life.

Soap opera within the social realism genre, as is EastEnders, provides an ideal catalyst for provoking debate about the meaning of specific social objects. First, its characteristically open text invites the viewer to use their own life experience to

understand what is going on (Dyer, 1981). Second, the genre of social realism requires that the text conform to the conventions used to understand everyday life and hence resonates with the clusters of meanings with which its audience is familiar. For both these reasons, the viewer is positioned as an expert in relation to the soap and is free to critique, identify, or just play with the meanings presented (Livingstone, 1988). Gunter (2000) concurs and offers a pertinent example; 'Audience reactions are always strongest when violence or sex involves well established characters in realistic settings, or in programmes where such portrayals are rare. Thus, even a brief kiss between two male gay characters in EastEnders caused considerable outcry' (p.196). This must be balanced, however, with an acknowledgement that other aspects of soaps may have the effect of disempowering its audience, e.g. it is a format which provokes identification with many different characters who are usually in conflict and without the promise of final resolution (Modleski, 1995).

Textual analysis is not new in research on soap opera. For example, Modleski (1982) compared the text of soap opera, romance novels, and heroine-centered film. An aspect of such studies was to theorize the possible audience reaction to the text under analysis. Hence, a subsequent strand of research turned to the audience itself to, along with other aims, test the theory that had developed (e.g., Ang, 1985, 1990; Lee & Cho, 1995; Press, 1991; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner & Warth, 1989). Moreover, there was a shift towards qualitative methodologies. These developments were facilitated by a growing popularity in postmodern theory which considered meaning to be produced in the act of <u>reading</u> a text, as Fiske (1989) states; 'If we conceptualize popular culture not as the consumption of images, but as a productive process, then our theoretical focus and analytical object shifts from representation to semiotic activity, from textual and narrative structures to reading practices' (p.142). Likewise, our interest here was the

analysis of audience response to EastEnders, as opposed to the text of the soap itself, as we wished to identify the issues raised for viewers through their engagement with the program. This mirrors Brunsdon's argument that a distinction should be made 'between the subject positions that a text constructs, and the social subject who may or may not take these positions up' (1981: p.32). However, we move beyond the act of watching the show (audience reception) to study also accounts of the interactions between people that are provoked by the program (catalysation of public debate). It is interesting, that, from within media studies, Brunsdon (1997) admits a reticence to become involved in audience research. But it is just here that the discipline of psychology, within which the present study is situated, with its emphasis on the empirical investigation people has much to offer.

We used e-mail to collect our data. Analysis of internet communication has been utilized successfully within television research, perhaps most notably on the 'X-Files', where busy web-sites dedicated to the program of interest exist (Lavery, Hague, & Cartwright, 1996). In a variation of this strategy, we e-mailed open-ended questionnaires to potential participants via web-sites dedicated to EastEnders. Hence, we explored a fairly novel avenue of data collection supremely suited to research into audience response, particularly that of fans.

We chose to analyze our replies using the qualitative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is a discovery-oriented approach in which categories and the relationships between them are developed from a close inspection of the material gathered. Therefore, a conceptual understanding (theory) of the phenomenon under investigation is derived from a bottom-up (grounded) analysis of the data. There is some debate about the extent to which categories in a grounded theory emerge from, or are an interpretation of, the text (e.g., Glaser, 1978). We take

the contextualist position that our categories are an interpretation of the data, yet grounded in it. That is, whilst allowing that another researcher may have developed alternative codes, we maintain that our particular analysis is justifiable with reference to the data and provide quotes, within the limits of space restraints, substantiating our interpretation (see Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000).

Grounded theory has become a popular alternative to the hypothetico-deductive method in sociology and psychology. To our knowledge, there have been few grounded theory studies within broadcasting research even though it is ideally suited to research into audience response as it seeks to identify the ways in which participants make sense of their own experience. De Bruin (2001) appears to concur and used the approach to analyze four group interviews with ethnically diverse girls about a Dutch soap opera. Alongside this novel application of the method, we selected grounded theory as it could capture the inter-relationships between themes within our participants' narratives and so retain some of the richness that Livingstone (1988) acknowledges was lost in her quantitative content-analytic study of soap opera.

In summary, the present study investigates narratives obtained from participants about their watching of EastEnders as a way of understanding why they watch the program and of identifying the kinds of social object dominating their accounts. Material was generated via an open-ended e-mail questionnaire and subjected to qualitative analysis using grounded theory.

Method

The questionnaire Our questionnaire gathered some basic demographic information but was aimed primarily at prompting narratives about the participant's watching of EastEnders. It focused on topics of interest to the researchers, however the open-ended

nature of many questions provided space for participants to include additional

information relevant to their own experience. The questions were as follows:

1. Please indicate your age.

2. Are you male/female?

3. The watching of soap opera is sometimes a social event, for example, a time for

family or friends to get together. How would you describe the way in which

you watch EastEnders?

4a. How much time per week do you devote to EastEnders apart from when it is

broadcast?

4b. Can you describe some of the ways in which you actively spend this time?

5. What do you personally gain from watching EastEnders?

6. Is there a particular character or situation in EastEnders with which you can

identify?

7. How does your identification with this character or situation impact your life?

8. Under what circumstances would you miss an episode of EastEnders?

9. If you had to miss an episode how would you feel about it?

10. Either : As a male, what do you think female viewers gain from EastEnders?

    Or   : As a female, what do you think male viewers gain from EastEnders?

In order to inform participants about the implications of returning a completed

questionnaire and to obtain appropriate consent from them, the following statement was

placed at the beginning of the e-mail:

If you agree to participate and respond to the questions, I will understand you have

agreed to the following:

- You are free to choose not to answer a question without having to give a reason

    why.

- You are free to ask me any questions you may have about the study before you attempt to answer any questions.

- You grant permission for extracts from your answers to be used in reports of the research on the understanding that your anonymity will be maintained.

- You are 16 or over.

<u>Obtaining participants</u> Web-sites were selected for inclusion in the study using three criteria; (1) the web-site was dedicated to interactions between fans of EastEnders (e.g., exclusion of purely merchandising sites), (2) the web-site encouraged e-mails, and (3) was linked to a newsgroup. Of the web-sites identified, three were British and eight were North American (including one Canadian site). The webmaster of each web-site was e-mailed with the questionnaire and each voluntarily forwarded the questionnaire to the newsgroup associated with that particular web-site.

<u>Participants</u> A two-month deadline was set for replies to be included in the research during which we received 45 e-mails; 10 from webmasters, 7 from colleagues of the webmasters or writers of other EastEnders publications, and 28 from various newsgroups or from friends of the webmasters. Of the replies, 32 were from women and 13 from men; 10 were British and 35 were North American. The age range was 18-74 years (although one man did not provide his age). Replies ranged from half a page to four pages of single-spaced text, with most around two pages long. Participants tended to respond in a chatty and informal style conveying their passion for the program.

The advantages of gathering our material via an e-mail questionnaire were the direct targeting of a relevant population, inexpensiveness, and ease of reply for the participant. One disadvantage was that participation in the study was limited to those who regularly make use of the internet. It is therefore likely that the information we collected was influenced by their engagement with EastEnders' websites and that our

findings are specific to this type of fan. Our sample could also be considered rather small, although it is similar in number to that of other studies on soap opera (i.e., Buckingham, 1987; Livingstone, 1988). As occurred with the 500-strong participant-base of Middleham and Wober (1997), female viewers were slightly over-represented at 71% compared to reports that the typical EastEnders' audience is considered to be about 52-64% female (Middleham & Wober, 1997). However, both studies targeted 'fans' of the show and it could be that women more heavily dominate this specific population. Seventy-eight per cent of our participants were North American and it is likely that this effected results in that North American viewers were watching EastEnders under social conditions that are in many ways different from those in which the show is produced (see Ang, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1987).

Analytic procedure E-mail replies were printed out and allocated a reference number (1-45). Replies were analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This entailed three stages, although the first two were conducted in tandem for much of the analysis. First, the content of the e-mails were coded systematically where the categories used were derived from participants' own descriptions. Categories consisted of themes observed to re-occur within the interviews. Specifically, the constant comparative method was used whereby RG continuously checked and adjusted derived categories against successive paragraphs of text. Sub-categories were created when minor themes worthy of note were identified within the data allocated to a particular category. Where appropriate, a portion of data could be coded as belonging to more than one category. As a result, some sub-categories were shared by more than one category. Second, memos were written by RG noting links between categories from the perspective of a deep immersion in the material. Third, when category content and titles had been stabilized and links determined between categories, RG and AM

identified two super-ordinate themes through clustering together derived categories with thematic similarity guided by the memos.

Results

Two themes, each representing a social object, were found to permeate the data; **texts of female desire** and **texts of community**. **Female desire** had four categories; **reduced troubles**, **gender**, **relaxation**, and **social activity**. **Texts of community** shared the category **social activity** and incorporated three further categories; **community**, **realism**, and **Britishness** (figure 1). In the following paragraphs we describe systematically each of the categories and provide example quotes from our data. Category titles are followed by indication of the number of female and male participants contributing to that category and their country of origin (NA = North America). Quotes are followed by indication of the participant's e-mail number, age, sex, and country of origin.

-----------figure 1 about here-------

Theme 1: Texts of female desire The following categories cluster together under the theme **texts of female desire**; that is, they all relate to the notion of 'what it is that women want'.

Reduced troubles (3 males, 6 females; 1 UK, 8 NA)

Some participants reported that the ongoing surge of depressing story-lines on EastEnders made their own problems appear minor in comparison. For example, one participant was relieved that her own 'troubles aren't nearly as bad as some of these folks' (e-mail 13: 46 years, female, NA).

　　Reduced troubles linked to two sub-categories; **prevail against odds**, and **similar situations**. The first of these relates to those participants who felt that watching EastEnders gave them the strength to overcome their own hardships; 'If they can find

happiness in the Eastend, I can find my point of happiness too' (e-mail 11: 30 years, female, NA). Some also identified with the problems presented, finding consolation in seeing others face **similar situations.** For example, the character Michelle resonated with one participant; 'My late best friend (RIP) was just like Michelle, smart and stupid at the same time, clawing her way out of an economically deprived situation' (e-mail 37: 48 years, female, NA).

Gender (9 males, 14 females; 4 UK, 19 NA)

This category featured heavily in the data. In particular, female participants related to the strong women that predominate in EastEnders. It is perhaps with some relief that one participant was able to note that 'a coarse looking woman like Pat still has relationships and believable ones at that' (e-mail 11: 30 years, female, NA). Some male participants appeared aware of this aspect of female viewing, although often contextualizing it as fantasy; 'Pure escapism associated with the characters and especially the situations whether the situations are ones with which the woman can relate to or with which she fantasizes' (e-mail 25: 40 years, male, NA).

Connection: Reduced troubles and gender Female participants, in particular, related to the problems faced by the female characters in EastEnders. Moreover, for some, this extended to learning new ways of coping and hence **reducing their troubles**. For example, one participant explained how she was helped through her identification with a particular character; 'Sometimes I feel like Carol Jackson, working and working with little to show for it. However she rarely complains whereas I feel like I'm hard done by. She makes me see that I must accept things the way they are' (e-mail 18: 40 years, female, NA). One perceptive man summed it up; 'Women can see they're not alone with misbehaving kids, unfulfilled love lives, legal troubles, drunken relatives. They

may receive the inspiration to carry on when everything around them is turning to crap'
(e-mail 30: 40 years, male, NA).

Relaxation (5 males, 14 females; 4 UK, 15 NA)

Many female participants suggested that they watched EastEnders as a way to relax and
unwind; 'I make sure the kids are fast asleep, all household chores come to a full stop.
There is to be no noise when mom is watching her EE. No phone calls, no
interruptions. Full attention is devoted to the T.V. anyone who knows me knows not to
phone or stop by when EE is on' (e-mail 27: 35 years, female, NA). Descriptions such
as this highlight the importance of regular, identifiable **relaxation** time for women as
an escape from otherwise constant domestic responsibilities.

Connection: Relaxation and gender The categories **gender** and **relaxation** are both
linked to the sub-category **entertainment**. Interestingly, whereas the female
participants reported EastEnders as a formalized **relaxation** period, the show was
regarded as having primarily **entertainment** value for men. For example, one male
participant stated that; 'I think men watch the show to be entertained while they're
having a T.V. dinner or something' (e-mail 42: 38 years, male, UK). However, both
male and female participants reported their use of the **internet** to chat about the show
as a **relaxing** experience. As one participant explained; 'I spend a lot of my spare time
hosting the chat group and it is a way for me to relax after a hard day's work' (e-mail
36: 41 years, female, NA).

Social activity (All participants)

Many **social activities** associated with watching EastEnders centered on the notion of
family. Participants often watched the show with family and friends, providing them
with a common activity and means of bonding; 'My wife watches EastEnders with me
in the same way I pick up on her mostly inane favorite T.V. shows like Macgyver.

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Sometimes our 3-year-old son Jake joins us' (e-mail 10: age not provided, male, NA).

Viewers not only watch the show as a family but also relate to the families portrayed.

For example, the Mitchell brothers were selected for comment by one participant; 'The

Grant/Phil relationship reminds me of the relationship I have with my brother, sticking

together through thick and thin' (e-mail 32: 19 years, male, NA).

Another central **social activity** connected with the watching of EastEnders was

the enjoyment of discussing story-lines with others so that the program itself became a

topic of conversation. For example, one participant reported that 'when something

really interesting happens, I usually call my friends the next day to discuss it' (e-mail

20: 43 years, female, NA). Conversations also occur via the **internet**. The participants

in this study all belong to chat groups on the internet where total strangers can discuss

EastEnders with one another. Although there is no face-to-face contact, 'chatting'

across the internet is experienced as an enjoyable social interaction; 'I really enjoy

spending time on-line conversing and posting to boards regarding the show' (e-mail 18:

40 years, female, NA). In all, our participants reported a mean of 2.5 hours per week

spent in EastEnders related activities over-and-above their watching of the show.

Theme 2: Texts of community The following categories, plus **social activity** above,

cluster together under the theme **texts of community**; that is, they all relate to networks

of shared social identity.

Community (3 males, 11 females: 1 UK, 13 NA)

For some participants, the attraction of EastEnders was feeling part of a **community**.

The communal aspect of EastEnders is aided by its public settings. Much activity takes

place in the Queen Vic pub, the launderette, and the market. These are public spaces in

which the viewer does not feel like an intruder. EastEnders also provides a sense of

community through being a world that remains intact when everything else is

changing. This feeling is captured poignantly in the following description; 'EastEnders gives me a sense of community and continuity. We move every 4 years to a new state. Albert Square is my neighborhood that I take with me' (e-mail 16: 42 years, female, NA).

Family is also a sub-category of **community**. Many participants felt that the community portrayed in EastEnders was almost like a **family**. For example, the above participant also commented that if she missed an episode she became 'depressed like I had missed a visit with the family' (e-mail 16: 42 years, female, NA). Participants also enjoyed watching the interaction of **people** on EastEnders. They were interested in seeing how characters resolve problems like one might within one's own immediate **community**; 'I particularly enjoy watching their interactions with one another. It's fascinating' (e-mail 14: age given as 40-60 years, female, NA). In particular, North American participants appeared to crave a sense of **community** that is often missing from American soaps (**U.S**. **vs. Britain**). As one explained; 'I love the familiarity, I feel like I could be a next-door neighbor! (or a relative). I don't feel like I am intruding on in an unfamiliar place' (e-mail 22: 33 years, female, NA).

Realism (4 males, 7 females; 1 UK, 10 NA)

Some participants appreciated the **realistic**, if traumatic, issues that are incorporated into EastEnders' story-lines, e.g., teenage pregnancy, AIDS, and rape; 'I gain a satisfaction of knowing that real people are seeing a dramatization of real choices people might make, good and bad and how they can play them out' (e-mail 11: 30 years, female, NA). More specifically, the **realism** of EastEnders was contrasted to the unreality of American soaps (**U.S. vs. Britain**). One disgruntled female participant described this colorfully; 'Soaps in America are populated with 'beautiful' people. None of the females in the cast, no matter what their age have ever worn a double-digit

dress size. Few times in my life have I worn a single digit dress size. Their makeup is

perfect no matter what trials or tribulations they're currently enmeshed. Their clothing

is the latest and most expensive. They wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of jeans. They

have no frame of reference for me' (e-mail 41: 51 years, female, NA).

<u>Connection: Community and realism</u> The link between **community** and **realism** lies in

the fact that, for many participants, EastEnders provided the feeling of being part of a

very **real community**. Participants suggested that the characters were portrayed so

realistically that they felt like people they knew. Although able to discriminate between

fiction and reality, participants enjoyed entering the story in a whole-hearted manner

and relating in an empathic way with the EastEnders. This paradoxical experience of

deliberately suspending reality in order to enter a 'fictional reality' is captured by one

participant; 'I vicariously live elsewhere with characters who seem real' (e-mail 36: 41

years, female, NA).

<u>Britishness</u> (6 males, 9 females; 1 UK, 14 NA)

This category refers to the fact that many of the North American participants described

watching EastEnders because they desired a sense of **Britishness**. For one participant

this was a craving for 'Britain's rich sense of history. Our history here in America is

too shallow. I am attracted to the heritage, mystery and intrigue' (e-mail 30: 40 years,

male, NA).

There are three sub-categories of **Britishness**; **place**, **culture**, and **US vs. UK**.

Place centers around the setting of EastEnders; the city of London. Some participants

expressed a desire to be in London, either because they have already enjoyed being

there, or because they wished to visit for the first time. For example, one enthusiastic

participant stated that 'I have been to London several times and really love this city. I

enjoy EastEnders because it reminds me of the times I have been there' (e-mail 19: 39

years, male, NA). North American participants also expressed an interest in British **culture.** In particular, some were fascinated to learn about working-class life and many e-mails implied an interest in the differences between the **US and the UK**; 'I think just watching the portrayal of a different culture and social class are interesting' (e-mail 3: 45 years, female, NA).

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

This study investigated narratives obtained from 45 participants about their watching of EastEnders as a way of understanding why they watch the program and of identifying the kinds of social object dominating their accounts. Two major themes constituting social objects were found; **female desire** and **community**. These themes were made-up of seven categories each of which helped explain why our participants liked to watch the show; **reduced troubles**, **gender**, **relaxation**, **social activity**, **community**, **realism**, and **Britishness**. These categories are similar to those identified by Livingstone (1988), however our primarily North American participants revealed additional information about the attractions of **Britishness** to many such viewers. We shall now discuss how our findings refine and expand former research into why people watch soap opera and link this to cultural debates potentially catalyzed by EastEnders as revealed by the major themes of our analysis.

Modleski (1982) makes a comparison between soap opera, romance novels, and heroine-centered film. She argues that all three genres portray a world in which values traditionally associated with women are given space and expression. So, social constructions of **female desire** - what it is that women want - are highly pertinent to the genre of soap opera.

In our analysis, the issue of **female desire** was allied with the cluster of meanings around the category **gender**. Addressing our question about why people

<div align="center">20</div>

watch EastEnders, **gender** was associated with different patterns of viewing linked to the traditional division of labor between the sexes. The evening screening of EastEnders allowed men to construe their viewing in terms of **entertainment**, implying the 'filling-in' of time. In contrast, as domestic duties continue indefinitely, women were more likely to use the program as an indication of legitimate **relaxation** time (see also Morley, 1986; Tulloch & Moran, 1986). Similarly, but more radically, Radway (1983) theorized women's reading of romances as 'an act of defiance - a defense of personal time against the claims of the family' (p.53). This gendered distinction therefore refines and expands Livingstone's (1988) original identification of these two categories. However, in contrast to the results of Livingstone's study, many of our female participants <u>did</u> relate to the strong, but ordinary, women portrayed in EastEnders. Their identification with certain characters was associated with the experience of **reduced troubles**; a phenomenon that <u>was</u> noted by Livingstone and which will be discussed in more detail below.

So, how might a soap opera contribute to the ongoing social construction of **female desire**? Our participants identified the program as a **topic of conversation** or **internet** communication, and the potential for gossiping about the program itself was an important feature of our participants' enjoyment of the show (**social activity**) (see also McGee & Macindoe, 1999). They also focused on the empathy between women (**reduced troubles**), which is particularly evident in EastEnders as it portrays strong but complex relationships between the female characters. Hence, our study tapped two particular aspects of the way in which EastEnders may contribute to the ongoing social construction of **female desire**; (1) the show facilitates a reading of women as desiring mutual empathy and solidarity with others, and (2) this is sustained and perpetuated through oral networking, or gossiping, both on the screen and off.

Gossip is often denigrated as a predominantly female activity (Brown, 1990; Livingstone, 1990). However, it can be understood as an important form of oral networking offering people in subordinate social roles a forum in which to construct meaningful identities (Brown, 1994). So, although women's friendship networks do not all operate in the same manner, they seem to perform a similar function in providing a space for women to construct the world in their own terms. Conversations about the plot and characters of a soap demand a common knowledge of the developing narrative and offers a mutual pleasure in the pooling of information and debate over questions of interpretation (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). In general terms, such discussions offer the sharing of ideas on personal relationships, emotional dilemmas, and identity raised by the story-line (Barker, 1997). Hence, soap operas can be used to establish a common perspective, negotiate the solutions to problems, and testing out of attitudes.

The accounts of our participants provide evidence for Brunsdon's (1981) speculation that the soap's audience 'join in the debate' and continue the endless weaving of discourses about the personal and familial. Such activities motivated our participant to watch the program and we now have some information about how such public debates are conducted (**social activity**). Our participants specified that they liked to watch the program with friends and family so that discussion of the storylines and their implications can be conducted during and after each screening (see also Lee & Cho, 1995). However, telephone calls, with the deliberate aim of discussing the program, were also mentioned and our particular participant base provided details on the use of internet technology to hold discussions about the show, often with complete strangers. Hence, not only is the soap being interpreted by the individual viewer, the topic of audience reception research, screenings often enter a public arena in which viewers discuss its text while still on air and modern technology, used as much by

women as by men, allows those debates to be continued indefinitely - an average of 2.5 hours a week in our sample - and without geographical boundary. Our findings therefore demonstrate that, a section of EastEnders fans at least, engage with the program through a variety of media and hence that they have multiple relationships with versions of the text. Further research is required to examine the content of these different modes of communication directly and to investigate the processes by which public debate is conducted in these situations.

Within the context of EastEnders, the social construction of **female desire** as a need for empathy and solidarity with others overlaps with that of **community**, enjoyment of which appeared to contribute to our participants' motivation to watch the show. Consistent with our results, most feminist analyses see the revelation of the personal, i.e., a focus on the family, relationships, and friendships as one of the soap genre's main appeals for women. But what kind of **community** is presented in EastEnders? Or, as Hall (1980) would theorize, what readings are preferred by the text?

In EastEnders it is the older women who are the heads of their extended families and guardians of the **community**'s tradition. This matriarchy is aided by the construction of the **family** as an open institution (Brown, 1994). Such extension of familial relationships into the **community** enables groups to be brought together which might otherwise be split by the conflicting interests of age, gender, and class (Geraghty, 1991) (**family**). These features contrast with U.S. soaps which offer a patriarchal version of the family as a unit requiring protection from the outside world and in which the battle for control centers on the male hero (Dyer, 1981; Rogers, 1995) (**U.S. -v-Britain**). However, the social construction of the **family** in British soaps does not challenge patriarchal authority. They bypass it in handing emotional and practical control to the mother. This bypassing of patriarchal authority is reflected in the

avoidance of outright political discussion within the narrative of the soap (Mumford, 1995). However, although soaps tend to present a socially conservative text (Lindsey, 1995), they cannot help but make statements about the position of women in society. This is particularly so in the communal nature of the British soap which erases the traditional boundary between private and public life (Buckingham, 1987). Women are not invisible in their homes. **Family** life and relationships (**people**) are opened up to public scrutiny and become **topics of conversation**.

Community is not simply present in the soap itself. It is also experienced in the interaction between viewers (**social activity**). Watched alone or in the **family** circle it can be discussed with friends, acquaintances, and strangers at work, in the pub, or on the **internet** (see Baym, 1997). However, the social construction of **community** embedded in the text of EastEnders, which appears so attractive our participants, is clearly an aspiration. It is based on an ethos of sharing, an acceptance of each other's individual characteristics, and a recognition that everyone has a role to play if the **community** is to continue. The paradox is that some of our participants applauded the world presented within EastEnders for its **realism** although, as Ang (1985) suggests, this may actually be a result of the emotional realism of the situations and relationships that are presented, or what Lovell (1981) terms prevalent 'structures of feeling'.

Similar issues are raised in relation to our finding that many North American participants noted their enjoyment of the **Britishness** portrayed in EastEnders. The discursive position we take allows us to avoid the problem of trying to assess the extent to which soaps reflect extra-textual reality as social objects are conceived of as brought into existence within the discursive realm; i.e., that the text creates the object which it proports to represent. People living in the UK can, of course, claim that their version of **Britishness** is the accurate one as they have first hand experience of living in the

land. However, there are many competing and contested texts of **Britishness** even within this home population (e.g., Cohen, 2000). Moreover, discursive psychology would maintain that the same individual is likely to draw on different versions of **Britishness** in different contexts. What is interesting is that EastEnders evidently portrays a plausible and attractive version of **Britishness** for North American viewers and it would be useful to explore the content of that exported image in more depth, the ways in which it is discussed online, and its contribution to why sections of the audience watch the program.

To summarize this section, in asking our participants about their viewing of EastEnders, we tapped a social construction of **community** enmeshed with a traditional image of **female desire** as a need for empathy and solidarity with others. This may be considered an empowering construction in that women are portrayed as potent authorities and indispensable linchpins within the family and immediate neighborhood. The retrogressive element to this, though, is that it recycles, and may reify, female power as legitimate only within the traditionally defined areas, i.e., the domestic and emotional spheres. This resonates with early feminist criticism of soap opera which struggled to avoid reproducing patriarchal denigration of the genre whilst expressing distaste with its seemingly conservative text (see Rogers, 1995). However, Brunsdon (1984) offers an optimistic perspective in suggesting that it is by working within ideological norms that the soap provides a site for viewers to engage with contemporary issues. Moreover, Barthes (1975) recognizes that there is also pleasure ('plaisir') in conforming to the dominant ideology when, for instance, it benefits one to do so.

The pleasure of watching soap opera was also conveyed by some of our participants through the implication that their viewing of EastEnders was often

therapeutic (**reduced troubles**) (see also Lee & Cho, 1995; Livingstone, 1988).

Interestingly, Livingstone and Liebes (1995) have articulated some of the parallels

between the institution of soap opera and that of psychotherapy. The majority of

consumers of each are women (e.g., see also Geraghty, 1991; Ussher, 1991). The

subject matter of both are typically mundane life, personal problems, and relationships.

Both are constituted, to a large degree, by the processes of conversation and confession,

and by the invocation of emotional intensity. And, more politically, each has been

criticized for reproducing conservative values (e.g., Lindsey, 1995; Pilgrim, 1992).

While Livingstone and Liebes (1995) focus on a psychoanalytic reading of soap texts,

in the following paragraphs we explore what our data reveals about the ways in which

viewers may receive a therapeutic effect from their viewing of EastEnders.

Our participants described the benefit of **reduced troubles** through finding

strength in seeing the EastEnders overcome problems (**prevail against odds**) and/or

consolation in seeing characters facing **similar situations** to their own.

Psychologically, these benefits suggest a process of identification which works through

the projection of one's self onto others (Freud, 1971); in this case, the characters and

story-lines of the soap. This allows viewers to gain vicarious satisfaction when

problematic situations reach conclusion and, presumably, cathartic pleasure in the

emotional ride even when things do not work out (see Lee & Cho, 1995). Modleski

(1995) has described a similar process in relation to the character of the villainess; 'The

spectator, it might be thought, continually tunes into soap operas to watch the villainess

as she tries to gain control over her feminine passivity, thereby acting out the

spectator's fantasies of power' (p. 352).

Some of our participants also mentioned feeling as if the EastEnders were like

people in their own **community** with whom they might share their problems, and that

the program acted as a form of social support and forum for vicarious learning (**family** and **realism**). Similar features have been identified as general curative factors in group therapy; catharsis, universality, cohesion, altruism, installation of interpersonal learning, recapitulation of the primary family, identification, self-understanding, and guidance (Bednar & Kaul, 1994). The process of being accepted and understood has also been identified as central to individual therapy, first theorized by Rogers (1957) in terms of the facilitative conditions; unconditional positive regard, authenticity, and empathy.

Of course, one major difference between watching a television program and seeing a therapist is that, in most therapies, the interaction is two-way. However, our participants described how they often watched EastEnders with friends and **family** and Lee and Cho (1995) have demonstrated how such viewing can promote discussion about personal problems related to those shown on the screen. Moreover, our particular sample revealed the ways in which their **social activities** included chatting to other EastEnders viewers via the **internet**. This technology is providing a new form of social support for many people (McGee & Macindoe, 1999) and the application of computer-assisted therapy (e.g., Finfgeld, 1999) and internet psychotherapy (e.g., Stein, 1997) are being explored.

Social isolation can be both a cause and an effect of psychological distress and the literature on psychotherapy notes the benefit of meaningful interactions with others (**social activity**). For example, increased social contact is often a goal of behavior therapy and explained in terms of acquiring positive reinforcement from one's environment (Emmelkamp, 1994). **Internet** communication and watching a soap with friends and **family** can be a good way of acquiring such reinforcement. Our viewers' enjoyment in communicating about the program with others may also be understood in

relation to alliance theory which suggests that the productiveness of therapy is achieved through the client and therapist sharing of goals, tasks, and bonds (Bordin, 1979). This might translate to the shared goal of maximizing viewing enjoyment, the shared tasks of watching the program and being prepared to discuss it (through signing onto the internet or telephoning a friend), and the shared bonds to the show which establishes or strengthens bonds between the viewers.

Shared bonds were also reflected in the way that our participants gained a sense of belonging to a **community** through watching the program and using it as a catalyst to promote interactions with others (**social activity**). However, some participants also appeared to rely on the regularity of the program scheduling and knowledge of the characters to provide them with a sense of security not found in their own lives (**community** and **realism**). This is particularly interesting in light of Modleski's (1995) position on formula stories and, what she refers to as, the 'compulsion to repeat'. She argues that 'the spectator constantly returns to the same story in order to identify with the main character and achieve, temporarily, the illusion of mastery denied him or her in real life. But soap operas refuse the spectator even this temporary illusion of mastery' (p.352). It may be that the characteristically open text of the soap denies the viewer mastery in the sense of the full resolution of conflict story-lines, and yet some of our participants did appear to be using their watching of EastEnders as a form of comfort viewing.

We suggest that, in psychological terms, a favorite television program, particularly one with a predictable format and sympathetic characters, may at times become a 'secure base' for the viewer and, hence, as a means of managing anxiety. This idea is drawn from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) which suggests that in early development, if sensitive enough to the child's needs, the primary caregiver provides a

safe place from which the child can begin to explore their environment. Some children

can also become extremely attached a thing such as a blanket or toy. Winnicott (1971)

called these 'transitional objects' and understood them also to fulfill the function of

defending the child against anxiety and anecdotal evidence suggests that many adults

still make use of transitional objects. This has been studied in relation to adult clients in

psychotherapy in which context transitional objects have been theorized to embody the

safety and comfort of the therapeutic relationship in a way that the client can retain

beyond the boundaries of the therapy hour (Arthern & Madill, 1999). It is likely that

comfort viewing fulfills a function similar to that of the primary caregiver or

transitional object in that a favorite program is familiar, predictable, and available at

known times. As such, it may be that, as a genre, soap opera particularly lends itself to

such a therapeutic effect.

In conclusion, the main themes of our discussion have been the social objects

female desire and **community**, which were made relevant to our participants in their

watching and discussing of EastEnders, and the ways in which these objects linked to

their enjoyment of the program. The matriarchal and communal nature of the British

soap is well documented but these themes are not usually theorized as social objects.

This theorization allowed us to move beyond audience response and to begin to

identify the kinds of cultural debate catalyzed by the program. Our findings replicated

factors known to motivate soap viewing but also tapped the relatively unexplored

enjoyment North American fans have in capturing a sense of **Britishness** through the

show and the important therapeutic effect EastEnders has for some of its viewers. We

also provided evidence for the extent to which contemporary information technology is

used by fans and how this facilitates discussion about the show across geographical

boundaries. More research is required to develop our understanding of the soap as

comfort viewing, to see if further social objects representing other disputed areas of

cultural meanings could be found using different samples of viewers, and to examine

the content of the different modes of communication about the show to explore just

how public debate is conducted.

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