Extraordinary acts and ordinary pleasures: Rhetorics of inequality in young people's talk about celebrity

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Abstract

In this article, we start from the problem of inequality raised by the existence of a class of celebrities with high levels of wealth and status. We analyse how young people make sense of these inequalities in their talk about celebrity. Specifically, we revisit Michael Billig's *Talking of the Royal Family*, and his focus on rhetorical strategies that legitimate inequalities of money and power. As he argued, in comparing their lives with those of the rich and famous, young people are making sense of the massive disparity between the two, often replacing envy or anger with pleasure in being 'ordinary'. We extend Billig's work by looking at a larger class of public figures than royalty, including those with a more permeable border between 'them' and 'us'. In so doing, we expand his categories and attend to the relationship between the gender of celebrities and contemporary rhetorics of inequality.

Keywords

Celebrity, discourse analysis, disgust, drugs, gender, inequality, ordinariness, philanthropy, rhetorical strategies, royalty, social class, young people

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Introduction

'A public fascination with a family possessing incalculable wealth should itself signify an interesting academic puzzle' (Billig, 1992: 14). Michael Billig wrote this over two decades ago about the British royal family. This puzzle has particular pertinence in our current 'age of austerity' with high levels of youth unemployment, growing child poverty and cuts to welfare and social security across much of the world. In this article, we revisit Billig's puzzle in relation to a class of people who possess apparently incalculable wealth and significant power: celebrities. We do this by drawing on a large-scale qualitative study of the role of celebrity in young people's aspirations in England.

Celebrity culture is often positioned in mainstream media and policy discourse as a potentially 'corrupting' influence on young people's aspirations (Allen and Mendick, 2013). However, young people's voices are often absent from discussions about popular culture and aspirations. While there is much sociological research exploring youth inequalities (e.g. Archer et al., 2010; Ball, 2010), talk about poverty and inequality (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013) and youth cultures (Nayak and Kehily, 2007), existing research has not examined the role of celebrity culture in young people's talk about inequality.

Our research set out to explore how young people use celebrity in imagining their own futures. Within this study, we noticed a lack of 'radical' critique of inequality within young people's talk about celebrity, paralleling a wider 'popular acceptance of inequality' (Billig, 1992: 14). This absence sparked our curiosity and was the starting point for our article. Like Billig, we address this by looking at the rhetorical strategies young people use when talking about the wealthy and powerful, interrogating the justifications and judgements they make as they compare their own lives to those of celebrities.

This article offers an extension of Billig's work in three ways. First, we attend to how talk of being extraordinary and ordinary works in relation to a broader range of mediated public figures, including people whose lifestyles and status appear more accessible than those of the royal family. Second, we extend and modify the rhetorical strategies Billig identified, looking at the place of disgust, authenticity, risk and vulnerability in the way that people speak about the pleasures of ordinary life. Finally, we explore the gendered dynamics within these strategies.

The common-sense of inequality

Discourse analysts from a range of theoretical and methodological approaches have long been concerned with the construction, legitimation and negotiation of inequality in talk (e.g. Bennett, 2013; Fairclough, 2010; Fallon, 2006; Van Djik, 1994). Such work has drawn attention to the role of structures of talk, discursive strategies and patterns in the discursive construction of different social groups in the reproduction and maintenance of inequality. Sociological and social psychological work has pointed in particular to the function that comparisons play in naturalising inequality. For example, in the context of UK welfare reform, Jensen (2014) argues that binaries such as 'strivers' (those who are seen as hard working) and 'skivers' (those who are seen as not working enough) work to position problems of poverty and economic inequality as individualised issues of

'welfare dependence' and 'irresponsibility'. Such comparisons circulate in the context of neoliberal discourses of meritocracy, which present inequality as resulting from differences in skill and work, rather than structural inequalities (Smart, 2012). Similarly, recent discursive work on contemporary discourses of unemployment in England has examined how participants draw on discourses of 'choice' in poverty and worklessness, exploring how these can be mobilised to construct class differences between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

Young people themselves are often at the centre of policy rhetoric about the relationship between choice, meritocracy and poverty. Youth are frequently presented in policy discourse as suffering from a 'poverty of aspirations' (Spohrer, 2011). In a discursive analysis of governmental speeches, papers and reports, Spohrer (2011) argues that policy discourse positions 'low aspirations' as a cause of social disadvantage, thus presenting the solution to poverty as 'raising aspirations' at the level of the individual. Young people's talk about their own social location and understanding of inequality thus needs to be understood in the context of wider discourses of poverty, meritocracy and aspiration. This article seeks to make a contribution to the analysis of the role of popular culture in young people's understanding and talk about inequality, and make a theoretical contribution to the rhetorical study of ordinary people's talk about celebrity. In the next section, we will outline Billig's (1992) analysis of talk about royalty, and outline our own contribution to this understanding in the context of the rise of celebrity culture.

Rhetorical strategies, coupon-filling and the pleasures of ordinary life

In his analysis of ordinary families talking about the royal family, Billig (1992) found patterns of 'common-sense' across different social groups as they evaluated the monarchy. He argued that the families he spoke with did not see the royal family as ruling by divine right; rather they were often positioned as 'down to earth', but simultaneously extraordinary in this ordinariness. Billig posited that this rhetorical commonplace confirms the position of royalty as extraordinary, and positions the speakers as both refusing their 'subservience' to a superior royalty and also reinforcing their position as ordinary/royal subjects.

Consequently, Billig argued that when people make claims about the royal family, they are not just talking about royalty, they are also talking about their own lives, and in doing so, making sense of the differences between them. He conceptualised this 'double-declaiming' as a form of 'coupon filling', in which participants are able to reconcile their everyday lives, comparing, for example, the wealth and status of royalty with their own freedom to go shopping, clean their own homes and buy fish and chips. He argued that this rhetorical strategy keeps envy at bay, as calculations based on 'common-sense' affirm that ordinary life is preferable and that the world is just:

> The uncalculated calculations of common-sense's double-declaiming can be used to compare 'their' misfortunes with 'our' gains … Speakers are to be heard depicting the pleasures of 'ordinary life' in general, and affirming, in a personal way, the credits of their own particular lives. (Billig, 1992: 119)

Billig's study was conducted at a time when royal celebrity was on the rise, in which the everyday lives of royals were regularly reported. He was concerned with the continuing interest in royal lives and persistence of the British monarchy, arguing that apparently trivial talk about the royal family, including mockery of royal scandals, served to legitimate the continuation and wealth of the royals.

While the royal family are increasingly mediated in ways similar to non-royal celebrities – for example, through regular media reporting of their private lives – royalty remains distinct from most types of celebrity because it is an institution of (almost exclusively) inherited privilege. In contrast, celebrity increasingly presents itself as an open and 'democratised' space offering forms of status and power to 'ordinary people' – particularly since the advent of Reality Television (Couldry, 2004). Celebrity and stardom have always been suffused by notions of meritocracy and individual success alongside an emphasis on the celebrity's typicality and ordinariness (Dyer, 2003). Contemporary celebrity thus generates a slightly different 'academic puzzle'. Thus we are asking – How is inequality constructed in young people's talk about celebrity? Do young people use similar rhetorical strategies to those of Billig's families in 1992? What can this tell us about young people's understanding of inequality? In doing so, we develop Billig's framework to explore the particularly affective and gendered nature of young people's celebrity talk.

Method

The article draws on a qualitative study of the role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom (http://www.celebyouth.org). The wider study combines group and individual interviews with 148 young people (aged 14–17) in six schools across England, with textual case studies of 12 celebrities. In this article, we use a close reading of the data from the group interviews with young people to unpick the rhetorical strategies used to make sense of inequality. The group interviews offer an ideal site for such an investigation, in which it is possible to observe people arguing and formulating thoughts in the 'cut-and-thrust of discussion' (Billig, 1992: 15). We specifically designed the group interviews with this in mind, encouraging schools to select a diversity of participants across gender, class, ethnicity and attainment, and allowing young people to lead the discussion on themes including their liked and disliked celebrities, routes through which people acquire fame, what defines a celebrity and their relationships to celebrity lifestyles. These group interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using the computer package NVivo, for analysis. In the next section, we elaborate on the process of data analysis.

Making discursive sense of celebrity

We draw on the tradition of discursive psychology, initiated in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) now-classic text. They offered an approach that challenged the notion of fixed,

underlying attitudes, arguing that evaluations made in talk are context-specific. They contended that examining the detail and organisation of talk enables researchers to see the functions that particular evaluations perform. We also use developments of this work in relation to discursive–affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) and rhetorical strategies (Billig, 1996; Potter, 1996). These share an attention to both the fine-grain and patterning of talk, and its relationship to wider social relations of power and inequality. This enables a focus on *both* the detail of participants' utterances *and* broad 'forms of intelligibility' (Wetherell, 1998: 388; see also Gill, 2009) across our data.

Following this, we analyse young people's talk about celebrity culture not as transparent reflections of attitudes or emotions, but rather as part of contextual and collective meaning-making practices. We are interested in the patterns and tensions in celebrity talk that produce particular categories of social subjects and mark out what is seen as 'legitimate' in social life (Hall, 2002). Thus, we examine the interactional, argumentative nature of talk about celebrities, asking 'Why this utterance here?' (Wetherell, 1998: 388). When young people talk about celebrities' lives, they negotiate the 'common-sense' of social life, arguing, making judgements, taking up and justifying positions on particular issues (Billig, 1996). By taking a detailed look at what participants say and do not say, we can see what is remarkable or ordinary, what is taken for granted, what needs further explanation or justification and where there are sites of tension between different versions of 'common-sense'.

Analysis and discussion

The young people who took part in the study did not uncritically accept celebrity wealth and status. Talk about celebrity wealth was often accompanied by explicit or implicit criticisms and justifications, as participants grappled with the inequality between their own lives and those of celebrities. As shown in Table 1, we mapped five rhetorical strategies young people employed when making sense of the wealth and power of celebrities, finding similarities to and differences from those that appeared in the talk of Billig's (1992) ordinary families. Participants positioned some celebrities as *extraordinary* – their wealth and status justified by their difference to ordinary people and extraordinary characteristics, talents or behaviours. Conversely, participants presented some celebrities as *ordinary in extraordinary circumstances*, with their very ordinariness a remarkable fact. Like Billig's families, the young people also foregrounded the pleasures of ordinary life. They achieved this by positioning their own lives as preferable to those of certain celebrities, and in doing so, avoiding becoming *disgusting and inauthentic* and avoiding *risk and vulnerability*.

The article will explore each of these strategies in turn with the exception of 'celebrities cannot do ordinary things in ordinary ways', which replicated the patterning in Billig's data. The other four are reshaped when they move from royalty to celebrity. Furthermore, in this move, we argue that the gender of the celebrity takes on a particular significance. While Billig (1992) did not attend to the 'targets' of each strategy because their royal status rendered gender less important, for celebrity, we suggest that it is a crucial part of the puzzle.

Table 1. Rhetorical strategies.

Rhetorical strategy	Examples	Relationship to Billig (1992)	Role in legitimating inequality	Gendered dimensions
Celebrities do extraordinary things	Eradicating polio Giving one's salary to charity	Celebrities *do* extraordinary things; the royals *are* extraordinary people	If celebrities do extraordinary things, they deserve their wealth and status	Predominantly male celebrities
Celebrities are ordinary within extraordinary circumstances	Refusing to diet Falling over at the Oscars Going to war and having a laugh as a royal	Expanded to include those (women) who resist pressures of the celebrity industry	If celebrities maintain their ordinariness in the extraordinary circumstances of fame, they deserve their wealth and status	Ordinariness is exemplified by different acts for men and women: war and 'having a laugh' against resisting strictures of feminine beauty
Celebrities cannot do ordinary things in ordinary ways	Being subject to media scrutiny Not being able to do ordinary things, e.g. buying takeaway food	Operates similarly to royals	Celebrity life is undesirable because of what is proscribed	Presented as worse for female celebrities because of their greater media scrutiny
Celebrities are disgusting and inauthentic	Having cosmetic surgery Being arrogant and not 'true to yourself'	Pleasures of ordinary life, but did not apply to royals, because of their elite positions	Celebrity life is undesirable because it is fake and disgusting	Predominantly female celebrities linked to their bodies; including some feminised male celebrities
Celebrity lifestyles are risky and vulnerable	Becoming addicted to drugs and/or alcohol Being a 'crash and burn' child star	Pleasures of ordinary life, but did not apply to royals, because of their elite positions	Celebrity life is undesirable because it leads to losing control of your life	Applies to men and women, but strongest cautionary tales were of women who became famous at a young age

'He was like helping eradicate polio from the world': Celebrities do extraordinary things

As Billig (1992) writes of attitudes to the royal family, 'two sets of common-places – "they" should behave better than "us"/"they" are only human like "us" – pose a continual dilemma which frames each royal action and each royal personage' (p. 96). These also framed each celebrity action and each celebrity personage, though there is a sense that, while the royals are extraordinary through being, celebrities become extraordinary through doing. In this section, we focus on the ways that young people constructed celebrities as *better than us*. This happened through the rendering of some, predominantly male, celebrities' philanthropic acts, achievements and hard work as extraordinary. We explore this strategy by focusing on philanthropy since this was the most common domain of these extraordinary acts and was central to how participants presented celebrities as deserving of their wealth and status.

We start with an analysis of talk about the businessman Bill Gates, whose extreme wealth is part of his extraordinariness as a celebrity. In three of the four group interviews in which his wealth was discussed, it was mentioned alongside talk of his philanthropy. We can see this conjunction in the extract below:

> Heather: Okay well if you were going to design a perfect celebrity …
> Homer: Oh what's his name, the guy who made the computers, [some laughter] Bill Gates.…
> Ryan: Oh he's like a beast, he's got loads of money.
> Jack: He's good as well.
> Homer: He gives it away for free. (London, aged 14–15)

Ryan's use of the word 'beast' to describe Gates distances him from 'us' by conjuring a large, powerful, wild and mythical creature. The term 'beast' also carries negative animalistic meanings, which is perhaps why Jack directly follows it up with 'he's good as well' and Homer makes a reference to him 'giv[ing] it [money] away for free'. Other interviews contain references to Gates' extraordinary philanthropy. For example, Bob talked about how 'he was like helping eradicate polio from like the world' (South West, 14–15) and Tim about how 'every year he gives like a 100 million to charity' (London, 14–15). Bob, Tim, Ryan, Homer and Jack use extreme-case formulations to strengthen their claims (Pomerantz, 1986; Potter, 1996). It is hard in this conversational moment for anyone to argue with the extraordinariness of 'eradicating polio from the world' or giving away the unimaginable amount of '100 million'. Thus, Gates appears as unlike ordinary people, and so his position as the world's richest man (*Forbes*, 2014) can be calculated and reconciled.

Footballers' salaries were subject to particular scrutiny within the young people's talk, positioned by some as unfair. Here, extraordinary charitable giving and hard work could be used as a counter-claim. This is evident in Bruno's talk about footballer David Beckham, who like Gates, above, was identified as an 'ideal celebrity':

> Heather: David Beckham, did you say he was the ideal celebrity?
> Bruno: Yeah.… You can't argue with him.… like he wasn't born with talent, there are so many people that are born with something, he had to work for it, like every day, day in, day out. And

he would be playing at the time when he would get like £10, and now, £10 a week, and now people get 100 k a week. And since then, even now he's giving, three like three, three million pounds to charity for five months, and he's playing for a Paris club, but he's not taking the money, he's going to give it to charity straight away. I don't think he's a wrong person, something you can tell like, he's done nothing wrong. (London, 16–17)

Beckham is presented as having worked tirelessly 'day in, day out' in order to progress from £10 a week to £100 k a week. This emphasis on hard work was reflected in participants' evaluations of different routes into celebrity, in which particular celebrities were judged more 'hardworking' and thus deserving of wealth and fame (Mendick et al., 2015). The use of an extraordinary 10,000-fold salary multiplier emphasises Beckham's trajectory from ordinariness to extraordinariness, to a place in which it is possible for him to hand his entire pay packet 'to charity straight away'. Beckham is implicitly contrasted to those who are 'born with talent' or money – he has *earned* his wealth (and skill) and *given back* thus legitimating his wealth. This is confirmed when Bruno sums up, 'he's done nothing wrong', staking a position in a point of contestation (the size of footballers' salaries). Such evaluations can be understood in the context of the regular reporting of celebrity philanthropy. Celebrity-fronted events such as the *Live 8* and *Chime for Change* concerts present the solution to complex social problems through the lens of the 'extraordinary' acts of wealthy 'heroic' individuals. In the data presented, we can see how the role of inequality in the persistence of such problems disappears in a rhetorical flourish.

'On the red carpet, and she was ordering McDonald's': Celebrities are ordinary within extraordinary circumstances

Following Billig's findings, a pattern across young people's talk was an emphasis on the ways in which celebrities maintain ordinariness within the extraordinary circumstances of extreme public visibility and renown. This was done through emphasising mundane behaviours or 'embarrassing' actions that indicated the celebrity's ordinariness via 'resistance' to the norms and pressures of the celebrity industry, and evidence that they had remained 'true to themselves'. As in the last section, we do not have space to explore all these instances, and instead focus on analysing a few in detail in order to unpick the patterns of sense-making that characterise this strategy. We argue that this rhetorical strategy works to legitimate inequality through the assertion of authenticity. Specifically, because celebrities can maintain their ordinariness (and be 'like us') in the extraordinary circumstances of fame, they deserve their wealth and status.

Ordinariness was 'evidenced' through different acts for men and women. For women, this oriented around their bodies with several female celebrities celebrated for sustaining their 'ordinariness' by refusing to submit to media pressures placed on women in the public spotlight to look a certain way. In the extract below, Ginny discusses musicians Jessie J and Miley Cyrus shaving their heads for charity:

Ginny: Cutting off their hair for charity, which I think is quite like- like personally I am obsessed with my hair … So I feel like, even though they are these big celebrities that are meant to care about their appearance they did- Well Jessie J's going to do something so like outrageous, so like kind hearted. (London, 14–15)

Here Ginny marks out head shaving as a sacrifice. In her account, it is the 'outrageousness' of the hair cut that marks it out as an act of generosity. Ginny produces this as 'abnormal' through a contrast (Potter, 1996) with her own 'obsession' with her hair, a perhaps more normalised position of bodily femininity. However, what renders this act significant and worthy of comment is that it is carried out by 'big celebrities' in the context of all-pervasive media scrutiny that demands that female celebrities 'care about their appearance' and vilifies those who transgress certain ideals. In such a context, positioning Jessie J as *not* obsessed with her hair marks her out as extraordinary.

The archetypal celebrity who was remarked on for being ordinary in extraordinary circumstances was actress Jennifer Lawrence. This was manifest through talk about two key acts: her televised fall at the 2013 Oscars ceremony, and her stated 'love of food' and refusal to diet (Peterson, 2014):

> Strawberry: She's just normal. Like she was on the red carpet, and she was ordering McDonald's, and I thought that was cool, coz like all the rest of them are like starving themselves, and she was giving out a positive message. And then she tripped, and just laughed at herself. (London, 16–17)

The construction of Lawrence as ordinary was positioned as central to her popularity and value. Lawrence is rendered 'just normal' despite the fact that the very need to remark on her 'ordering McDonalds' (the McDonald's burger being particularly symbolic of her 'everydayness', akin to the 'fish and chips' in Billig's study), falling over and laughing at herself marks these events as very much out of the ordinary. Jennifer Lawrence's ordinariness (and thus extraordinariness in celebrity terms) is constructed through contrast with a more extreme description of 'all the rest' of the female celebrities, who are 'starving themselves'. As Billig (1992) writes of the royal family, their 'ordinariness … is a popular object of desire', and 'this desire is framed by assumptions of the extraordinariness of this ordinariness' (p. 72).

While for women, bodies were a key terrain upon which ordinariness was read, for male celebrities, evaluations of 'ordinariness within extraordinary circumstances' centred around personality and actions. For example, UK royal Prince Harry was consistently positioned as ordinary through reference to both his involvement in the military and 'having a laugh'. The extract below is typical of the group interview talk about Harry, including a reference to him 'fighting for the country' and the infamous Las Vegas holiday during which he was photographed playing strip billiards with his male friends:

> Joe: Even if he is in the royal family, he's just a normal guy. He fights for our country. He's just trying to be a normal bloke, he wants to go out and have a good laugh. [Paris: Yeah] That's why he goes on like holiday, and he does stuff like that. He just wants to be normal.
> Paris: Yeah. He's young. Like, I'd say that's like what every young person would be doing. Just because you're famous, or you're a celeb, or you're part of the royal family, doesn't mean you can't have a life, like, or have to act-
> Joe: Even if you are a role model to millions, it shouldn't affect you having a good time, and-
> Paris: He's still got to have a life, can't live a life of misery
> Britney: Coz people, people like him for what he is, and not for what he like pretends to be. (South West, 16–17)

In this extract, we see how working in the military and going on a 'boys' holiday' appear as forms of 'escape' from the stifling confines (or 'misery') of royalty and the paparazzi, in which he can 'be normal' and 'have a laugh', an act long-associated with laddish masculinity (Willis, 1977). Harry's behaviour is positioned as both abnormal for royalty, yet justified through Paris' claim that it is 'what every young person would be doing'. Harry is thus able to claim an altogether more ordinary kind of extraordinariness through these highly mediated acts. Joe and Paris present Harry as *just like them* – ordinary young people, who just want to have a good time. With both Harry and Lawrence we find not just sympathy for them having to live up to certain images, but a celebration of their capacity to resist these pressures. In imagining them in this way, participants are reversing the conditions of the inequality and so affirming it.

As Billig (1992) showed, ordinariness also featured within a third rhetorical strategy: that asserting the pleasures of ordinary life. In our final two sections, we outline two sub-strategies within this that significantly extend his work. We did find examples of participants mobilising this strategy in similar ways to those highlighted by Billig in relation to the royals – for example, through discussion of press intrusion and the impossibilities of doing 'ordinary' things. However, in relation to celebrity, the desirability of ordinary non-celebrity lives was manifest in two further ways: through positioning celebrity lives as *either* disgusting and inauthentic *or* as risky and vulnerable. As we will demonstrate, these have different affective registers and functions. While the first set are characterised by contempt, blame and a desire for levelling via humiliation, the second are characterised by empathy towards celebrities. Yet what they have in common is that they render celebrity lives as spaces of risk and danger to the notion of 'authentic' selfhood, thus positioning young people's own lives as preferable.

'Some of their body parts just aren't real': Celebrities are disgusting and inauthentic

In the next rhetorical strategy, celebrity life is deemed undesirable because it is associated with inauthenticity and positioned as an object of disgust. Here, participants expressed contempt for celebrities who they deemed 'fake' and 'arrogant'. These were contrasted with celebrities who were seen as more 'ordinary' or 'down to earth'. Becoming a celebrity was presented therefore as carrying the risk of changing, both in terms of personality and bodily modifications. This strategy exemplifies what Billig (1992) refers to as 'the paradox of desire'. While 'we' might desire celebrity privileges, and certainly our participants did express such desires, if 'our' wish were granted 'we' would not be 'us': 'we' would be 'them'. 'We' would be privileged but risk betraying our-selves in the process. In an age when authenticity is deemed as a central marker of successful personhood, such a risk is great indeed (Allen and Mendick, 2013). This strategy was highly gendered, focusing almost exclusively on those female celebrities whose fame is associated with their bodies, but also including a few 'feminised' young male celebrities such as musicians Justin Bieber and One Direction (see Harvey et al., 2013).

This strategy was most evident in young people's talk about 'extreme' celebrity body modifications and cosmetic surgery, which universally provoked disgust and contempt, and were presented as signs of fakeness:

Kim: So Katie Price?
OrangeJuice: She's so fake.
Kim: Why don't-
Eleanor-Marie: She's too fake, and she's so up herself.
Joanna: It's the plastic surgery and stuff that make me dislike her
(London, 14–15)

Kim: You use the word fake. What do you mean by that?
Kirsty: Not their-selves.… Literally not themselves, like some of their body parts just aren't real. [laughter] (Manchester, 14–15)

Lewis J: How are you going to know if she's a good person? She's [Nicki Minaj] hiding behind an image that makes her look like a good person, then she must be a bad person. (London, 16–17)

The extracts above highlight how 'fakeness', through plastic surgery, was evaluated as 'bad' – if a celebrity is not 'themselves' then 'they' must be 'a bad person'. Importantly, the combination of being 'fake' and 'up yourself' appeared in contrast to celebrities who were seen as 'authentic' – those who had not let fame change who they 'really' were.

As in the comment above, one of the main targets of these accusations was musician and *American Idol* judge Nicki Minaj:

Mike [female]: Another reason I hate her, one of my friends, she's like, oh my god she annoys me, but um, she's like, my best friend, she has like a poster of Nicki Minaj in her room. And she's like and I go 'Why the hell do you have that in your room, it's disgusting?' And she say like, 'Oh it's because she's beautiful'. I'm like, 'No … She just really isn't'.
Teresa: She wants to look like her. That's like really bad because then, if she wants to look like her, is she going to get butt implants? …
Mike: Yes, she influences like every single girl. Yes, to be beautiful you have to look like this, it's like 'No she really isn't'. Do you find her attractive male species?
Herbert: No.
Mike: Exactly. [laughter]
Ryan: Um, if what she looked like, If I looked at her and knew that she wasn't fake then yeah, but knowing that's like, rubbery, plasticky. [laughter]
Mike: I wonder if she does feel like rubber, it would be great, you can bounce her. [laughter] Roll her down a hill. Who wouldn't want to do that? [laughter]

Mike locates Minaj as powerful, 'she like influences every single girl', positioning herself as *outside* of this influence, and rejecting the expectation that 'to be beautiful you have to look like this'. The group collectively constructs Minaj as 'disgusting' and 'fake' through her 'rubbery, plasticky' body with its 'butt implants', repeatedly denying the possibility of her being beautiful, with Ryan allowing this *only* if he 'knew that she wasn't fake'. The talk is infused by violence and graphic imagery, in this extract exemplified by Mike wondering if 'you can bounce her … Roll her down a hill'. The laughter accompanying this plays an important role in the group's meaning-making, acting 'as a means of preserving everyday social order' (Billig, 2005: 235).

Billig sees public mockery of members of the royal family doing embarrassing things as a way to claim the desirability of ordinary life. We suggest these instances represent something more than mockery. The undesirability of Minaj's celebrity is further claimed through taking delight in (imagining) humiliating and even destroying her. In this and other examples, it is *Schadenfreude* rather than mere mockery that is operating, where levelling comes through expressing contempt for celebrities' inauthenticity or arrogance and through taking cruel pleasures in their failures:

> Laura: So you'd rather meet someone that you disliked?
> Shane: Probably.
> Rick: Just so I can abuse them.
> Shane: Yeah … You know, like it's like when people say erm [pause] you know, it's like they've got such a big ego, you just want to take them down a couple of pegs. That's why … Just because they think so highly of themselves, and they haven't really done anything so. (London, 16–17)

Cross and Littler (2010) locate *Schadenfreude* as a 'trans-individual affective process of resentment' and response to the contemporary political conjecture of neoliberal capitalism, where individuals have a 'desire for equality but [are] unable to think of anything other than levelling through humiliation' (p. 397). In these extracts, certain celebrities are presented as seeing themselves as superior to everyone else. The 'abuse' of celebrities is thus justified as a way of challenging this hierarchy, which is presented as unfair as 'they haven't really done anything'. We argue that deeming celebrity lives inauthentic, unfortunate, disgusting and failed permits both resistance to the wealth and status of celebrities, and levelling which neutralises the inequalities between 'us' and 'them'. However, such 'abuse' was most often directed at working class and black and minority ethnic celebrity women, such as Katie Price and Nicki Minaj. This abuse is also found in online spaces, which enable more public, ritualised and archived expressions of this (Allen, 2013; Jane, 2014). We contend that while generated from conditions characterised by a growing disparity between the haves and the have nots, collective expression of celebrity *Schadenfreude* 'overwhelmingly works to express irritation at inequalities but not to change the wider rules of the current social system' (Cross and Littler, 2010: 395).

'It must be really hard': Celebrity lifestyles are risky and vulnerable

In this final section, we look at how participants asserted the desirability of their ordinary, non-celebrity lives through positioning celebrity as risky and vulnerable, where fame and wealth can lead to terrible things including losing control of yourself. This strategy was manifest in discussions of celebrity addictions to drugs and alcohol, attracting excessive fans and 'haters', and giving in to 'peer pressure'. Rather than the contempt and hate that suffused the talk in the last section, this celebrity talk was characterised by empathy and sympathy. Gender and age intersected, with young female celebrities being mobilised as cautionary tales.

Cautionary tales appear often in the data, with their most prominent subject being film actor and child star Lindsay Lohan, a 'train wreck child star', as exemplified in this extract from an all-female group interview:

> Georgia: And even when I think about, yes, I'm going to say *Herbie Fully Loaded*, because that's an amazing film.… When like you see her now you just think, why would you do that to yourself? …
> Female: They grow up like, they're already pressured from when they're kids because they're famous and then as they grow up they just give up caring any more.
> Daniella: Yes. I do I know like more celebrities that have had drug problems than like people that I've heard of that aren't famous. And I think like part of the fame, you will be faced with drugs, stuff like that.
> Female: Because it's just like a ready source, like everyone will try and give it to you. And also like I suppose like being famous you get a lot of stress, so that that is to like calm you down and stuff. (South West, 14–15)

These participants mobilise a voice of authority within their talk about what it is (rather than might be) like to be a child star, for example, in the following statements: 'part of the fame, you will be faced with drugs' and 'you get a lot of stress, so that is to like calm you down'. Daniella's comment about celebrities' drug problems makes a claim about the greater vulnerability of celebrity lives compared to those of ordinary people. As Projansky (2014) identifies, age and gender are crucial to the construction of what she calls 'crash-and-burn' girls, who each start as a 'can-do girl who has it all, but who – through weakness and/or the inability to live with the pressure of celebrity during the process of growing up – makes a mistake and therefore faces a spectacular descent into at risk status' (p. 4).

Other 'train wreck' celebrities – all female – who generated empathy included Britney Spears, Demi Lovato, Whitney Houston and Amy Winehouse, discussed below:

> Naomi: One person that I like, really think is an amazing singer, is Amy Winehouse. It was really sad that she died, but I think that people think that, celebrities should not take drugs and all of this. And obviously there's one thing that you shouldn't do, you should just not get into that sort of crowd where you take drugs. But I think it must be really hard for, for people like that, because they're influenced and even though they do have fans they are still humans, they still make mistakes. Whereas people give them, they say it's worse and stuff, when really everyone, who's, anyone might go through that. (Manchester, 14–15)

Like the girls discussing Lohan, Naomi speaks with authority. While she states that she does not condone drug-taking ('there's one thing that you shouldn't do'), this does not lead to a negative judgement of Winehouse. Instead, Naomi asserts the difficulty of resisting peer pressure. In constructing Winehouse as 'still human' and asserting that 'anyone might go through that', Naomi diffuses the differences between her and Winehouse, 'us' and 'them', simultaneously constituting celebrity status as something to be avoided. To be *human* is positioned as a vulnerable, fallible existence. The expectation for celebrities not to make mistakes appears unreasonable – this would make them alien, inhuman. Here, as with the extracts earlier, we see how, through emphasising the

negative things that celebrity brings, its desirability is challenged or even refuted: fame may bring wealth but it is also 'hard... for people'.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the rhetorical strategies used by young people as they make sense of the differences between their experiences and those of celebrities. Exploring the patterning of such talk provides a lens through which to explore some of the 'common-sense' understandings of wealth, status and inequality in contemporary young people's lives. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that in 'austerity Britain', young people do not always uncritically accept the power and affluence of celebrities. Our data show that talk about wealth and status was accompanied by justifications, with the hierarchies of 'them' and 'us' needing to be explained by celebrities' extraordinariness. What we think is particularly interesting is how such differences were often framed within neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and individual extraordinariness, for example, in the discussion of David Beckham working 'day in, day out', and Bill Gates' wealth as a businessman. These narratives of meritocracy were not confined to talk about celebrities, with young people's discussions of their own aspirations, imagined futures and potential barriers to achieving their dreams also infused with the language of individualism, hard work and triumph over adversity (for a more detailed examination of this, see Mendick et al., 2015).

The claims, criticisms and justifications that young people make about celebrities also operate discursively as evaluations of themselves and the world in which they are growing up. As young people fill in the 'coupons' of their own lives, in comparison with those of celebrities, we contend that rhetorical strategies that emphasise and value ordinariness can offer a sense of agency in the face of social inequality. Going to McDonald's, not having to deal with the paparazzi and living an ordinary life can be positioned as choices that are made to avoid the risks, inauthenticity and vulnerabilities that the wealth and status of celebrity bring:

> As the columns of credits and debits are summed, so the accounts are settled to arrive at the conclusion that there is a 'just-world', at least so far as [celebrities and the rest of us] are concerned. (Billig, 1992: 124)

At the same time, the anger, ridicule and violent imagery around some celebrities' wealth and status highlight the visceral way in which inequality can be discursively managed through a classed, gendered and racialised rhetoric, in which some bodies, some forms of 'success' and some careers are positioned as authentic, while others are denigrated as 'disgusting'. The role of humiliation and *Schadenfreude* in these moments of anger echoes the discourses of disgust and revulsion often levelled at marginalised groups (Tyler, 2008, 2013). We would argue that the disproportionately large representational space such discourses about celebrity occupy may, among other things, draw scrutiny away from other cultural power-holders – particularly the financial and political elite (Negra and Holmes, 2008). The wealthiest in the world are those who command corporations in the telecommunications, retail and energy sectors (*Forbes*, 2014), whose wealth does not seem to attract the same level of anger and discursive humiliation. In

terms of our celebrity case studies, Bill Gates' wealth, for example, could be justified through claims about his entrepreneurship and philanthropy, while celebrities such as Nicki Minaj and Katie Price were often positioned as disgusting and inauthentic, evaluated in particular in relation to their bodies.

The analysis of young people's talk about Bill Gates in particular suggests some of the ways in which young people make sense of such corporate wealth, often evaluating it against individualistic, gendered and classed notions of meritocracy, hard work and success. Our data thus echo Smart's (2012) research, in which young people drew on neo-liberal interpretations of economic inequality in their understanding of wealth and poverty. Celebrity talk is an important space, therefore, in which young people make sense of their own place in an unequal society. Our analysis thus contributes to a socio-logical understanding of how young people talk about inequality, and the role of celebrity culture in this collective meaning-making, developing Billig's (1992) analytical framework. While the rhetorical strategies we have explored in this study certainly offer some agency for young people in thinking about their futures, we would argue that they also work to naturalise and justify social inequality.

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