Women's Work? *Wife Swap* and the reality problem

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The optimistic viewer may have expected Channel 4's ratings success *Wife Swap* to reveal something about women's evolving roles in society and perhaps even exude some positive messages about feminism in the twenty-first century, after all, the programme is structured around the examination of gender roles within the domestic sphere, but regrettably, no such messages were revealed.

Hence, the following will address the place of women within such shows, the deployment of class and the notion of television as a vehicle to change lives.

Factual programming has undergone profound changes since the idealistic phase of the talk show and the emergence of reality TV has altered the landscape of television almost beyond recognition. Despite widespread critical disapproval, reality TV appears to have been embraced by audiences, and has become a popular and inexpensive form of entertainment. Concurrently, there is a new trend within television that purports to change people's lives and the notion of producers conducting experiments with "real" people is an alluring concept for audiences.

Consequently, there has been a growth in reality shows that focus on heterosexual sex, relationships, and marriage. *The Farmer Wants a Wife*, *Mr Right*, and *Would Like To Meet* provide significant examples. There are numerous issues for feminism here and the seemingly endless popularity of these programmes necessitates detailed examination of the representation of the female participants.

Regrettably, *Wife Swap* is simply another in the increasingly long line of "car crash" reality shows along with *Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, and *Mr Right*, where women are either portrayed as commodities, desperate individuals obsessed with marriage, or in *Wife Swap*'s case, entirely measured by their success in the domestic sphere. Now in its second series, it is evidently capturing the imagination of the British public with audiences of over five million per episode (Plunkett 2003).

*Wife Swap* and its antecedents have received much criticism in terms of voyeurism, humiliation, and the oft-cited "dumbing down" debate, yet little of this condemnation has addressed the crucial issues relating to the representation of women. Early criticism tended to focus upon the debasing and corruption of public sensibilities as Richard Kilborn has noted:
The audience can sometimes be manoeuvred into eavesdropping positions and allowed to witness events in ways which pander to less desirable traits in human nature. There is in other words, a quite understandable fear that reality programming if taken to the extreme, embodies the worst kind of common denominator TV. (Richard Kilborn 1994, p. 427)

This is also evident more recently in the broadsheet press:

These “humiliation shows” have re-ignited the debate over standards in television. Ministers, psychologists and even some programme-makers have condemned them as “sick-making”. Producers and directors admit the shows are sadistic but say celebrities and members of the public are “queuing up” to take part. (John Arlidge 2003)

Such criticism is part of a long tradition of cultural commentators bemoaning the effects of television and expressing a parental concern for the audience. Conversely, in the 1990s, feminist critics such as Jane Shattuc (1997) championed popular television and talk shows in particular as a positive forum for the examination of women’s issues. Unfortunately, after the quantifiable progress that has been made in terms of the representation of women within visual media, a programme such as *Wife Swap* is intrinsically negative and even threatens to undo this progress due to its harking back to an outdated and conservative representation of wives and mothers.

*Wife Swap’s* premise is a vicious one, staged so that the women are positioned against each other from the outset, and naturally the situation is exacerbated to make “good TV.” The programme makers have clearly designed a format to create conflict but surreptitiously hide behind a seemingly observational mode. Predictably, the couples are chosen in terms of their social status and class issues are the unspoken basis for selection. The female participants are often represented as pushy, domineering or stupid. Most episodes conclude with the husbands looking on innocently as their wives attack each other’s lifestyles and furiously defend their own. For instance, series one saw Kate, a housewife and mother of six, sneer at Tracey, her career-focused counterpart “for a woman to fail as a housewife is ridiculous.”

Compelling as this may be, *Wife Swap* achieves nothing except to further emphasise the fact that women should be natural homemakers by virtue of their gender and confirms the notion that there is little positive about these types of outmoded gender stereotypes.

The questions that *Wife Swap* calls forth are many. Not least, are the participants really representative of the way most couples still operate, with the men portrayed as doing little of the domestic work and often emerging from the programme as heroes, whilst the women appear as either impossibly controlling or exploited doormats?

The premise of the series is based exclusively around the women’s place in the home and any reference to careers and the workplace is inconsistent and alarmingly limited. Indeed, the programme makers have an incoherent attitude towards the women by representing only half of their lives. Allusion to the women’s jobs is often portrayed as troublesome, an interference in the lives of those who have to live with them. In the first series, one woman’s career was unashamedly used as an attack on working mothers and appeared to confirm the belief that women simply cannot have it all. This episode was particularly troubling and highlighted further the continued struggle that women still
have to negotiate at home, at work, and within society at large. It appears that according to television producers, the division of household chores, personal habits, taste, and parenting are the new battlefields in which women are contesting their homes, marriages, and self-esteem.

There is occasionally, a weak attempt at highlighting the oppression of women by their domineering husbands. In series one, Michelle swaps with Carole, whose husband Peter appears as an enlightened “new man.” Michelle is married to Barry, a difficult, insecure, and domineering individual. Humiliation is key, and admittedly, Michelle’s husband Barry is amusingly officious, but the overt humiliation of Michelle’s decision to live with this man smacks of middle-class snobbery. This humiliation is concealed in a veil of self-discovery for the participant and presumes that the audience will learn something from watching the misery and embarrassment of others.

Yet *Wife Swap* has become something of a cultural phenomenon which has galvanised the press, not due to its negative portrayal of wives and mothers, but because of the overt class warfare on display. Indeed, class appears to be an increasingly popular theme within reality TV. Recent programmes including *Dinner Party Inspectors*, *Holiday Showdown*, and *Take My Mother-in-Law* use class as the underpinning force for conflict. The premise of these shows is an arrogant one which invites the viewer to delight in sneering at the working classes in a way that hasn’t been acceptable since the 1950s.

This class conflict appears to be key to the success of *Wife Swap*. What becomes clear is that the lower middle classes are positioned as educating the earthy, raucous working classes about social etiquette and the working classes often exhibit more emotion and warmth for their children than their aspirational counterparts. Or as Guardian journalist Zoe Williams asserts, “It’s an old-school morality tale that starts off with how frightful the working classes are, then winds us round to the inevitable conclusion that, hey, they may be poor, but they’re good and they’re happy” (Zoe Williams 2003).

The range of class fractions on display is palpable, the lower middle-class women are often portrayed as seeking to distance themselves from the working-class women and this is of course where conflict is fashioned and played out. Indeed, the representation of wives and mothers within this class war is repeatedly outdated and unnecessary.

Despite the misguided naivety that *Wife Swap* may be more than cheap entertainment, it ultimately reveals little about changing social attitudes towards men and women’s roles in the domestic sphere, is decidedly unconcerned with how gender is negotiated, contested, and reconfigured across media forms, and simply reinforces the outdated stereotype that a woman’s place really should be in the home. One can only hope that the overall message arising from *Wife Swap* is that feminism is not only relevant in contemporary society, but absolutely essential.

**REFERENCES**


*THE BACHELOR* (television series) ABC.

*DINNER PARTY INSPECTORS* (television series) BBC2.

*THE FARMER WANTS A WIFE* (television series) ITV.

*HOLIDAY SHOWDOWN* (television series) ITV.

*JOE MILLIONAIRE* (television series) Fox.
A distinctive sub-genre of reality television, makeover shows invite us to participate in a fantasy of physical and social transformation, the complex cultural origins of which connect to myths of American immigration, evangelicalism, and expansionism. Robert Thompson, Director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, summarizes these connections in a word:

If you had to describe the American mythos in one single word, “reinvention” really would not be a bad choice. One could argue that from the time of the Pilgrims’ arriving at Plymouth Rock, a lot of at least the European settlement story of America has been about reinvention, leaving the Old World for the New. It’s American culture as the annihilation of history, of the past ... In a very real sort of way, the history of the United States is one big fat makeover show. (Thompson cited in The Chronicle of Higher Education 2003, p. B4)

What Thompson’s observation does not explicitly account for are the gendered, racialized, and sexualized notions of self-realization, appearance, and pleasure that inform the “big fat makeover” otherwise known as American history. Makeover industries that address white middle-class women as their principal clients and offer feminine instruction and advice in physical appearance and lifestyle remained staples of nineteenth- and twentieth-century popular culture, from magazines such as Ladies Home Journal, to 1950s television shows such as Queen for a Day, to lifestyle gurus such as Jane Fonda and Martha Stewart. Of course, there are many exceptions to these structures of address and identification in makeover marketing, evident in the history of “Charles Atlas” (born Angelo Siciliano, an Italian immigrant) and the men’s body-building culture he helped spawn, the popularity of African-American lifestyle magazines such as Ebony, and the indeterminate number of men and women, gay and straight, who have enjoyed exercis-