

## **‘PERCEPTION IS A FUNNY THING’: A DISCUSSION OF TALK IN REALITY TV**

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*Abstract* – This essay addresses the issues surrounding different varieties of talk in a reality TV setting. Bravo’s *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* provides the text and case study scenes. Various scenes from the programme illustrate differing theories and practices of communication and impression management in a complex social environment. These theories include framing, secrets theory and co-management of information. The essay also discusses cultural differences which become apparent through talk and differing receptions of particular comments. Scenes from the programme and particular instances of talk have been chosen to give an understanding of how talk is used as a tactic and a way in which the characters position themselves in relation to each other and their own characters. In an environment which is under constant scrutiny, it is also of interest how disclosure and in-group information is managed. The essay finds that there is a genuine significance of talk in a reality TV setting beyond salacious comments designed for a viewing audience.

*Keywords* – Reality, Television, Talk, Interaction, Communication, Impression Management.

Reality TV bases its popularity on its ability to allow viewers to see into the lives of others and the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (RHOBH)* franchise taps into the ‘voyeuristic nature’ of the public (Nabi et al. 2003, 303). The premise of the franchise is that it ‘follows the lives of upper class housewives and professional women in the suburban or urban areas of several American cities’ (ibid.). The cast of each series is comprised of around six core women who socialise in the same circles, are longstanding friends and are sometimes linked by family and marriage. The characters do not always know each other prior to the show and are often antagonistic to one another.

The series in focus here is the *Beverly Hills* series featuring six extremely affluent women (and their husbands and friends) and follows their lives from the trivial, excessive and at times extremely personal. As a reality TV show the viewer only has what is said and done on screen with which to form his/her opinions; when the importance of reputation and image is considered, combined with the fact that the actors are perfectly aware they are being screened to the world, it is possible to see the importance of talk to those involved in the show. The programme itself is produced and initially broadcast by Bravo, but also by Bio and ITV2 in the UK and variations of the series are shown daily both in the morning and afternoon on ITV2 and ITV2+1, following *Jeremy Kyle* in the schedule. The programme was first aired in 2010 on Bravo in the USA and each series, of which there are currently

3, has 17-24 episodes and is between 50-60 minutes in duration.

Both the *RHOBH* and *Jeremy Kyle* programmes have voyeuristic, talk and gossip fuelled gratification for their viewers. As Fitzgerald discussed with reference to *Jeremy Kyle*, daytime programming often has an element of moral dictation and creation of categories for right and wrong. *Jeremy Kyle* presents daytime viewers with a situation to consider by presenting 'social transgression' (Fitzgerald 2012, 158); this is applicable to *RHOBH* as what is recorded and presented to the viewer is the transgression and talk relating to it both before and after. Losasso (2011) also referred to a study conducted using online responses via chat rooms to the *RHOBH* and viewers references to it as a point of contention with reference to morality and the 'good' and the 'bad' presented in various themes such as motherhood and richness but also as character evaluations of the cast.

This analysis is based on the study conducted by Thornborrow and Morris (2004) which was centred on 'Gossip as strategy' within *Big Brother*. Although *Real Housewives* is not a game show as is *Big Brother*, talk in various forms has great significance in the presentation of each character and their impression management. What is discussed and what is not also forms a large part of the show and talk leads to conflict, which in itself is formed of talk. Talk and gossip amongst the group, talk of others who are not present, disclosure and impression management and what is and is not deemed significant form the primary sections within this study. There is an interesting element to much of this, as there is significant conflict caused by a difference in talk and culture; of the six women, one is English and is often misunderstood in her communication.

Suls relates several definitions and functions of gossip; anthropologists have described it as a 'cultural device' (2006, 164), which allows members of a given community to circulate information with the gossiper often gaining more information than they disclose. Gossip can also serve to dictate differences between insiders and outsiders but also to 'state and reaffirm' boundaries and acceptability within a group (ibid.), a distinct form of gossip which will be discussed later. Suls asserts that another explanation for gossip and rumour can be to 'illuminate' ambiguous behaviour on which there is not yet a group consensus. With regard to gossip and rumour Suls argues that individuals often pursue second or third hand information on an 'other' as a means of social comparison whilst avoiding the 'problems associated with its direct acquisition' (2006, 165).

Thornborrow and Morris discuss talk and gossip as an integral part of 'human social activity' (2004, 249) and as *RHOBH* follows the social and private lives of six women this is also an integral part of

the show. As a mix of friends and acquaintances, the group are constantly renegotiating their relationships and their relationship with the viewing public. In order for gossip or an 'episode of talk' to occur 'at least two parties have to assume an alignment in relation to the subject of gossip' (Thornborrow and Morris 2004, 151) and in the context of *RHOBH* this can relate to the subject at hand (a person's actions or words), but also to the way those engaging in the talk wish to be perceived. Not only will those engaging in gossip on the programme be judged by the public but by their fellow cast members. Although the producers will presumably schedule or encourage some interaction those on the show have genuine relations and therefore what is said on the show both in segments in private to camera and in gossip talk are important on several levels, or what Thornborrow and Morris refer to as 'frames'.

The *Big Brother* study asserts that there is a case of 'double framing' occurring on the show. This is that the gossip and talk is done so through the frame and scenario of 'the local organisation of social relations' which occurs within the house and also 'presentation of a positive self-image to the viewing audience' (Thornborrow and Morris 2004, 249). Within *RHOBH* talk must be considered within both of these frames by the social actors involved. The social relations within the programme and the presentation of a positive image to the audience and the other women judging the interactions is as essential as it is in the *Big Brother* game show scenario.

Framing refers to the way in which something is presented affecting the way it is perceived and, in the instance of the *RHOBH*, the housewives are framing themselves through their interactions and as Kernochan notes it is 'an unavoidable part of human communication' (2004, online). Kernochan and Thornborrow's studies each refer to framing of a situation linking to the potential risk involved. Each time gossip and talk are engaged in within *RHOBH* relationships are renegotiated both within the show and for the viewing audience therefore adding risk to any talk the actors engage in.

A particular scene in which Yolanda (a new addition to the cast) frames herself within the group occurs in S3E18 at a large social function. Members of the group are also fully aware of the presence of a camera crew which may serve for the cast members as a physical reminder of the programme's transmission and therefore they will also be judged in the public sphere. In the same way that cameras in *Big Brother* mean that nothing is secret, it is known in the group that what is said between one set of people will spread to the others. Selected members of the social group are discussing a text message sent by Brandi (who is not present at the party but is a core cast member) to one of the women suggesting a way to improve her marriage. As this is a text message there is

debate amongst the group as to whether this was sent as a joke or as a genuine recommendation (the text suggested Marisa and her husband have a 'hall pass' meaning a free night to sleep with other people). Brandi is already a controversial member of the group due to her unfiltered attitude and her tendency to use expletives and discuss sex.

Yolanda remains physically removed from the conversation until she has something to add to the discussion in defence of Brandi's character. When she speaks, it is to frame herself as one informed by experience, unlike the others, so she infers, who are speaking from hearsay. Her utterances include the phrase 'I hate speculation', and a statement of personal belief: 'I believe'. The first time she interjects in the conversation, however, is accompanied by a distinctive gesture: she takes Marisa's head in her hands and addresses her directly: 'My advice, why are you asking us? Ask Brandi'. This gesture frames herself as someone who has integrity and will involve herself in a situation only if she feels it necessary. This scene shows that she is aware of her 'double framing' which maintains what she says in a piece to camera later on in the episode.

Linked to Yolanda's self-framing, and in the same scene, is an example of instigating that involves another member of the group, Faye. This kind of talk occurs frequently in *RHOBH*. Thornborrow cites a study by anthropologist Marjorie Goodwin (1991) in which she studied "'he-said-she-said" gossip events' (2004, 250) and termed instigating as the kind of talk that is about an 'absent, offending third party' (ibid.), which often leads to a confrontation between those involved; that is, between the third party, those offended and also those peripherally involved. Brenneis describes another form of this as *Talanoa*, a Fijian practice in which 'gossip consists of "oblique discussion of unseemly events, possible motives and likely character flaws"' (Brenneis 1996, 45) and serves, as instigation does, to air conflict issues but also to negotiate and affirm status within the groups.

In the scene, Faye enters the conversation part way through and proceeds to make jokes about Brandi (the offending third party in this case). As the other women discuss the suggestion that she made via text message, Faye interjects to suggest of Brandi's recent marriage: 'Well, that's probably why the marriage failed ... That might be why the marriage failed!'. Then, after Yolanda has held Marisa's face and addressed her, Faye suggests that Brandi may have a 'crush' on Marisa's husband, adding: 'Well, we all flirt a bit ... but not with married men'. This comment in particular is interesting as it is clearly said for effect. When she does so, furthermore, she noticeably leans towards the group, but otherwise stands side-on to the conversation and drinks from her glass. This gives the impression that she is not invested in the conversation and is engaged in other activity.

Faye's choice of language and organisation of her statements in this scene generally serves to assert herself in the group and as someone morally above Brandi. She proceeds to make a point of discussing that Brandi was allegedly caught with a man, not just in someone else's home, but in the ensuite of a child's room. Even though this is not the moral transgression being discussed, it adds to the denigration of Brandi's character, whilst Faye's rejection of it asserts her as, morally, a better therefore more valuable member of the group. It should be noted that Faye is not listed in the credits as one of the housewives and is recognised in the group as 'showing up' to cause conflicts and fight other peoples' battles, possibly as demonstrated in this scene. She was not in the conversation, nor was she filmed by the camera, until the topic turned to discussing someone she could speak badly of. This is an instance of what Suls would categorise as rumour as there is 'no factual basis' on which the gossip is based. Suls also states that gossip becomes rumour when 'traditional formal forms of confirmation and interpretation are unavailable' (2006, 165); as it may cause conflict to confront the subject directly, the rumour is circulated through talk to gain clarity on the situation (ibid.).

This tendency of Faye's to involve herself and act as an instigator reveals itself further in the same episode (S3E18) at another party when Yolanda (once again framing herself as direct and honest) asks Marisa and Brandi to speak to each other about what was said previously regarding the text message. Yolanda sets up the conversation in a non-confrontational way and explains to both of the women that she believes it is an opportunity for the women to speak to each other directly as she suggested at the time. Voices become raised, even though it is not an argument, and the other women are shown to notice the conversation. Kyle comments to Faye, for example: 'I don't wanna go over there. I don't think I want to be a part of this', to which Faye replies: 'I think that if we're not, Marisa stands on her own'.

The camera goes back to the conversation between Yolanda, Marisa and Brandi just as Faye joins the group. Brandi states: 'You're not involved with this you can go', to which Faye responds: 'I'm involved with everything'. She then proceeds to change the conversation topic by describing Brandi as a 'very bad girl' and telling Yolanda she has been 'misled' by her. She asserts that Brandi is to blame for the recently announced separation of one of the other women who is not present, Adrienne, and her husband. Here her instigating reaches new levels and her use of language again serves as an attempt to position herself as above the things Brandi is claimed to have done, for example she says: 'Do you feel good about yourself? Breaking up a family?'

The other women are shocked that Faye is suggesting this and Faye reveals that Adrienne and her husband are filing for separation. As she does this she, as before, concentrates on her glass and looks down as though she cannot face the situation that she is speaking about despite the fact she is only revealing the information to fuel further conflict. This aversion of her eyes and breaks in her speech as she makes these statements, yet her ability to snap immediately back to staring into Brandi's eyes as she confronts her may prove that she is not sincerely upset about what she is saying; rather, she was attempting to seem so to fuel the conflict and legitimize her position. Claiming to be defending a friend could mask her enjoyment of the conflict. This scene again depicts her as an instigator despite what her tone of voice and posture attempts to suggest. She purportedly became involved in this conversation to defend another member of the group, Marisa, yet when she began to speak it was against Brandi with content that was irrelevant to the conversation which she interrupted.

A further feature of talk within the programme which is worthy of discussion is humour, in particular a situation that affects two of the core housewives, Lisa Vanderpump and Adrienne Maloof. Maloof is originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, whilst Vanderpump is originally from London. Their surnames and backgrounds are important to remember when discussing the comments made, the exchanges and the long running misunderstanding and conflict that follows.

Maloof and her family part own The Palms Hotel, Las Vegas; Maloof states in one episode (S2E13) in a conversation with some of the other women that she took offence to the fact Vanderpump had not requested to hold her daughter's bachelorette party there, instead going to a competing hotel. Maloof confronted Lisa at a later party to say that she was hurt. Lisa is stunned that Maloof is upset by this, as she believes that it would have been an imposition on her friend to request the use of the hotel. Maloof responds to this by claiming that Lisa has asked for other favours in the past but had chosen not to support her in this instance. Lisa stands firm that she believed '20 girls for the whole weekend' would have been something she was not comfortable asking for. In a taped interview to camera (many of which are interspersed throughout the show) Lisa jokes that: 'I am sorry about the bachelorette party, but I do have a lot of dodgy relatives coming in at Christmas, maybe she'd like to host that'.

These scenes are re-shown to the audience and to the women in a reunion show, which takes place at the end of each series and is filmed after the previous episodes are aired. It features viewer

questions and comments. Issues or comments made outside of the show or off camera are often discussed. After this footage is shown, Adrienne says that she felt 'hurtful' comments were made for example to a comment made on Twitter by Lisa about her dog, Jackpot. Lisa had nicknamed the dog 'crackpot' which was intended as humour.

Adrienne Maloof, prompted by the show's host quoting her, then refers to 'snide remarks and classless comments' Vanderpump made regarding Maloof's shoe line. Vanderpump had jokingly referred to Maloof's shoes as 'the Maloof Hoof'. Again, Adrienne shows that she took these comments as offensive and says that the comments were 'not nice' and that it would not be acceptable for Maloof to make jokes regarding Lisa's restaurant's name giving the example of 'Villa CaCa' (actually called Villa Blanca). She speaks about how she has 'worked hard' and that it is her business and this shows that Adrienne took the comment to be derisive and with the intention of insulting her work.

Lisa then responds to explain that 'it was just a play on words [...].I mean, I'm sorry but that's a joke! I didn't think that was hurtful'. Lisa here has performed a reasonably classic British trait by using humour in a situation when others were being demonstratively supportive. As British comedian and writer, Simon Pegg, in an article for *The Guardian*, maintains there is not strictly a difference in the humour of British and American people, but in their fundamental view on life (2007, online). Pegg goes on to describe how American people are far more 'demonstrative' and quick to support others. Here, the ways in which Lisa's comments are taken are clearly different to the way in which they were meant. Camille, for example, interjects, also claiming she viewed this as a 'mean comment' and that 'hoof is not a nice connotation'. Lisa states: 'I like hoof, hoof is cute it's a little fat shoe. It's cute'. Uncomfortable laughter follows, with Lisa being the only one who does not see 'a little fat shoe' as being a rude and offensive comment to make. She repeatedly affirms that she believes her use of 'hoof' and 'fat' is cute and not meant to offend.

Pegg notes that if, in his experience, an American was to use irony or a joke they will often suffix this with 'just kidding': 'They just don't feel entirely comfortable using it on each other, in case it causes damage.' (2007). In terms of communication this demonstrates a difference in British and American every day communication. A joking comment was not expected by the other women and although she is a core member of the group, Lisa is singled out as the 'other' through this scenario as her response to her friend's achievement was not in line with what was expected. In a further article on the topic Ricky Gervais notes 'We [Britons] avoid sincerity until it's absolutely necessary' and that we

'mercilessly' joke and insult our friends; the words we chose do not mean as much as the person we say them to (Gervais 2011, online). A particular statement Gervais makes, perhaps, sums up this scenario: 'This can sometimes be perceived as nasty if the recipients aren't used to it. It isn't. It's play fighting. It's almost a sign of affection if we like you, and ego bursting if we don't. You just have to know which one it is' (ibid.). Also, in the instance of not asking to stay in Adrienne's hotel, it shows a difference in perception and culture as Lisa believed that to ask her friend to use her connections to gain a free party in a renowned hotel would be unthinkable; whilst Adrienne saw this, once again, as a lack of support and a transgression of the friendship.

With reference to reality television shows, Goffman's (1959) theories of performance, front and back stage, impression management and secrets are applicable to a particular scenario of talk in *RHOBH*, as is Pertonio's (2002) theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM). The scene involves the disclosure and discussion of core cast member Taylor Armstrong's abusive marriage.

S2E11 contains a scene, based at a tea party held by Lisa which all of the women are attending (minus Yolanda as she had not joined that series at this stage). Taylor arrives at the party last and soon begins an argument with Lisa, again based on a linguistic misunderstanding, however due to Taylor's fragile mental state as a result of her marriage, this escalates quickly. Taylor misquotes a previous conversation in which Lisa took Taylor aside at a party and explained: 'I'm not saying I'm masquerading as your best friend, I'm just saying, right now, if you need something sorting out, I'll help you'. During the argument at the tea party Taylor demonstrates that she read this comment as Lisa telling her that she is not her friend, whilst Lisa asserts that her comment was an offer of help. The argument seems to come to an end, however, Taylor then begins referring to Lisa as 'self-involved' and 'obnoxious' and claiming that the other women are being dishonest by not agreeing with this evaluation of Lisa's character. As Taylor leaves, the talk which will form the primary discussion here begins, this scene overlaps into S2E12.

Goffman discusses the front and back stage performance in relation to impression management; part of the appeal of reality TV is its access to the backstage aspect of people of interest. However, in the case of *RHOBH* the cast are fully aware they are under the gaze of cameras and viewers and therefore are performing by the definition that 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers' (1959, 22). Campbell notes that Goffman discusses the 'dark secret' as a potential threat to performance and the maintenance of image and revelation of a secret explaining that 'A dark secret consists of

information that the performers are aware of, but are expected to keep private in order to maintain the image the team wishes to project' (Campbell 2012, 6). Goffman describes dark secrets as 'double secrets' (1959, 141). Those aware of the secret must hide it from the audience as well as hiding the fact they are hiding anything (Campbell 2012, 6). In the case of this episode, the secret of Taylor Armstrong's severe abuse by her husband; the other women are all aware of this through discussions with each other and Taylor although they are not completely sure. They also accuse Taylor of giving them 'mixed messages'. Petronio (2002) theorised the maxims of privacy management one of which is the 'concept of shared boundaries' (Campbell 2012, 12). By Taylor discussing the information with the other women she made them the 'co-owners' of the information and as a group all those aware of the in-group information are responsible for 'co-managing' the secret.

The first scene is a case of gossip, or instigating, but in a different sense than has been discussed previously in this work. A conversation which takes place whilst Taylor is out of the room is what leads to the confrontation and this exchange leads to the subsequent conflict. The group begin to discuss the 'dark secret' without really discussing it; they each lay their claim that they are unsure of what to believe and, as they are clearly on camera, they cannot frame themselves as believing something they do not know about; or perhaps the group are sure but confirming it would alter the in-group information. Lisa states, for example: 'I'm not sure what's true. I don't know. I am unsure. And, you've all voiced the same opinion to me'.

In the following scene, the secret is broken by Camille and Lisa who use outright terms to describe the abuse whilst in the past it has been described as 'the situation you're going through with your husband' or other such veiled terms. Taylor begins this exchange: 'Everyone's just talking behind everyone's back and lets all just start being honest', to which Camille responds: 'But, everything Taylor? I don't think you want everything out there'. Taylor then mentions her marriage, and Camille gives specific detail: 'What you told us about your marriage. We've been protecting you. Because we don't say that he...hits you. Because we don't say that broke your jaw or that he...he beat you up and that he...he hits you. We don't say that but now we say that'.

This exchange breaks the 'veiled terms' in which the women have previously been discussing the issue. Although the audience are free to form their opinions the talk depicted in the show makes it clear that there is a secret to be kept and it is these veiled terms that are the means of keeping the information 'in-group' and a display of boundaries. The information is co-owned by the women as

they are aware of it but Taylor is depicted as the primary owner of her own secret (her husband's side is rarely depicted as, between filming and airing of the show, he committed suicide. The producers therefore decided to lessen his screen time in the interests of respectfulness).

Camille later reiterates that while Camille was telling Taylor to be careful and that she did not want what Camille had to say to be 'out there' that Taylor was nodding, 'goading' her to say everything yet was then shocked and described the outburst as 'uncool'. It is clear in the exchange that the issue was one the women were used to skirting around as Camille was the only one to speak, Adrienne had left the room, Kyle sat next to Taylor with her head in her hands whilst Lisa interjected in support of Camille at several points yet she did this quietly and was not captured by the cameras doing so, framing Camille as responsible for the disclosure. This mismanagement of disclosure, secrets and CPM in once sense proves the genuine nature of the relationships featured on *RHOBH* but also demonstrates that the women clearly put thought into their onscreen disclosures which supports that there is a performative aspect to the show rather than pure reality.

Although *RHOBH* is not a game-show, the programme records the affluent women's backstage performances and they are fully aware that it will be produced, edited and broadcast to the viewing public who will then form opinions and have an effect on the women's popularity, their persona and their businesses therefore what they say must be carefully put. As Thornborrow and Morris note, the programme's producers and editors would have us believe we are eavesdropping on an exclusive world although 'those engaged in the talk are knowingly interacting in the public domain' (2004, 269) and must manage their impressions and personas through what is available to those who will judge them, their talk. As shown above, this is done through characters framing themselves, either to remain in accordance with the impression they wish to give; as Yolanda does in the instance she does not want to appear duplicitous to her new friend, Brandi. Also those who are less involved in the show but perhaps who aim to be, such as Faye who, as evidenced in the scenes discussed, involves herself in conversation about others often claiming to be assisting those who cannot speak for themselves but was just as quick to speak about an 'other' not present when she believed them to be threatening.

The next incidence of talk which caused conflict was a linguistic and cultural misunderstanding between Adrienne and Lisa based upon the cultural understanding of imposition in the first instance which also leads to a conflict of humour and expectations in certain situations. Lisa's use of humour was incongruent to the situation as far as the rest of the women were concerned and in a group

preoccupied with impression and displays of support, a joke caused an on-going conflict between Lisa and some of the other women.

This same kind of misunderstanding leads to the final example of talk, specifically disclosure, secrets and talk managing in-group information. In this instance there is gossip, when Taylor leaves the room and the group discuss her and her marriage which leads to the confrontation in which Camille breaks the secrecy and opens the information to the viewers. This instance shows a break in the group management of talk however it provides us with an example, perhaps, proving that talk featured on the programme, what is agreed not to be and the way the women often speak is clearly thought about and is not as authentic as the audience may wish to believe. This instance of breaking an unspoken agreement about what may be discussed shows that the women have managed their talk and in some cases used it as strategy; not in order to self-manage and frame themselves to win a game show as is done in *Big Brother*, but to protect each other and themselves from public opinion and those of the other women.

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