

Undercover Boss's Travels: Comparing the US and UK reality show

For some time now, television studies scholars have found the global circulation of television formats to be a productive research site. How different countries choose to produce similarly structured television shows reveals much about country-specific industry practices, culturally-specific quandaries of format adaptation, and longstanding histories of global cultural circulation (see Aveyard, Moran, and Jensen 2016 for a recent introduction to the topic, and Lukacs 2010 for an anthropological approach). In turning to television formats, a range of disciplinary scholars are specifically focusing on “an interconnected parcel of particular knowledges that are activated in the production, financing, marketing broadcasting, circulation and consumption of a TV programme” (Aveyard, Moran, and Jensen 2016, 3). In general, however, anthropologists have not yet fully turned their attention to the production and circulation of television formats as a productive ethnographic site for exploring different cultural perspectives, which overlooks objects of study rich with potential for examining, among other things, cultural differences and problems of translation (for some exceptions, see Ball and Nozawa 2016, Ganti 2002 on film, and Mandel 2002).¹ The opportunity for anthropological attention to television formats could speculatively involve more focus on the imagined social organization depicted, and how people strategize within these social organizations. Additionally, such investigations could also involve attending to the myriad of social analysis that different versions of these shows model, comparing casts, linguistic practices, and performances, as well as production style and aesthetics to illuminate concepts of the self and sociality, visual and visibility. In short, this discussion proposes using an anthropological sensibility with its focus on epistemological difference and social organization as an entry point for a textual reading of reality shows. To capture one way to undertake this approach, I compare the US and UK versions of *Undercover*

Boss to demonstrate what can potentially be gleaned from closer anthropological attention to television formats, even if only examined as a textual analysis of narrative devices designed to appeal to different audiences.

Shown on BBC4 in 2009 in the UK, *Undercover Boss* is a reality show that was within a few months transplanted to the United States by Studio Lambert, the production company for both versions. To narrow the focus of this discussion of a model approach to anthropological analysis of television, this article draws primarily on the episodes produced in its early days between 2009 and 2011. Since then, it has been developed in at least sixteen different countries such as, but not limited to, Australia, Bulgaria, Chile, Israel, Japan, Norway, and so on. Interestingly, this reality show has run its course in various countries and is no longer produced in either the US or the UK. Because production of this program started towards the beginning of 2008's financial crisis, the different versions of *Undercover Boss* reveal how an assemblage of TV producers, camera crews, businesses, and broadcasters collaborate to portray corporate hierarchies in a moment when corporations seemed especially vulnerable as forms of social organization for workers to rely upon. Each episode is a carefully constructed text, created through similar editing techniques and rigid adherence to a narrative structure. Because of this construction they are not glimpses into an ethnographic reality. Yet a comparison of such texts can create an opportunity to engage with contemporary concerns in anthropology about the kinds of social analysis of neoliberalism and workplaces commonly available. Through this comparison, I address culturally specific approaches underlying the shows' social imaginations—imagination that offer viewers national models for interpreting corporate hierarchies.

Undercover Boss is part of a long tradition of visual format circulation and comparison between the UK and the United States. As early as 1916, J. M. Barrie, who is famous nowadays as the author of *Peter Pan*, had directed a silent film that parodied British and American approaches to Shakespearean performances. “The British emerge from the film with a marked preference for the modestly performed, the materially spare and the appropriately historical; [by contrast in this film] the Americans for the overblown, the sensationalized, the gory, the updated and, however improbable in plot terms, the happily resolved” (Buchanan 2009, 194). Yet what precisely is this transformation? Downes argues that when reality shows join this history of transnational format circulation, the shows are not so much translated as transposed, with familiar elements re-arranged in ways that resonate with national contexts and national industries’ infrastructures (2011, 23–24). I address the role social imagination plays in this transposition. Here, I am taking Lauren Berlant’s analysis of the imagination underlying contemporary American citizenship narratives in her book, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, as a starting point to compare nationally-specific differences in the “unpredictable effects of changes in longstanding habits of political subjectivity” (1997, 20).

In the case of *Undercover Boss*, the transforming political subjectivity is a capitalist one; indeed, this particular reality show format is part of a larger trend among reality shows that model how to engage with neoliberalism, with most shows exploring how to inhabit neoliberal selves. Nick Couldry has argued that reality shows in general naturalize many of the ways in which neoliberal logics coerce people into acquiescence, encouraging viewers to take for granted widespread surveillance, conformity to compulsory teamwork, authenticity, individuation, and positivity (2008, 9–10). As Ouellette points out, reality shows are circulating “the grammars of self-sufficient and enterprising citizenship” to encourage viewers to use an economic lens for

evaluating all their choices and practices, and thus view the self as a business that can, and must, be consciously managed (2014, 95). Indeed, much of the literature on how reality shows functions as a handmaiden for neoliberal logics emphasize that these shows represent “a model for a neoliberalism without resistance” (Windle 2010, 255). I argue that *Undercover Boss* is an exception to this by portraying discomfort with neoliberal logics, an alternative approach that is possible in part because its narrative arc hinges upon role shifting instead of competition or self-transformation.

Undercover Boss's narrative structure has familiar antecedents in folktales, popular films such as *Trading Places*, and novels such as *The Prince and the Pauper*. In folktales, a prince travels as a peasant in disguise and gains valuable humility and insights into how the kingdom functions on a daily basis. Or a husband is forced to change roles with his wife for a day, and, in the struggle to manage all her tasks, discovers how hard she works and how much he has been undervaluing her. At the core of these narratives is a set of assumptions about social analysis. Switching structural roles within a hierarchy supposedly sheds light on how these hierarchical relationships function, providing analytical insight previously unavailable to those in power, and transforming the powerful into a more skilled and sympathetic social analyst.

As a comparison between the US and UK versions of *Undercover Boss* reveals, not all role-switching leads to the same form of skilled social analysis. While both versions of the show offer similar repetitive narrative structures that rely upon the presupposition that a change in hierarchical roles leads to social enlightenment, the type of social imagination motivating these transformations creates a type of reality show with noticeably different messages for viewers about capitalism and workplaces. The US show relies upon a sentimental imagination—knowledge of the other is based on an emotional connection to the past, simultaneously the past

of a troubled childhood and a nostalgic past of job security and company paternalism. The UK show deploys an organizational imagination, in which the structural roles one plays in a company shapes what one knows of how the company functions. As a consequence, each version portrays distinctive approaches to three issues: 1) what can be known about people as social actors; 2) what is portrayed as ethical or appropriate workplace relationships; and 3) how best to be a capitalist.

Sentimental versus Organizational Imagination

The US version of *Undercover Boss* is a nostalgic exploration of what one can know about a workplace using a sentimental imagination relying on a longing for an earlier workplace that predates neoliberal re-structurings and on a hackneyed emotional connection as the source of any insights (Berlant 1997). There are some traces of neoliberal workplace structures visible through the occasional mention of part-time work, increasingly limited benefits, and just-in-time shift work. Yet generally the workplaces portrayed can tacitly be seen as the contrast class for the neoliberal ones that viewers experience. The show depicts workplaces that are organized as though older forms of capitalism that are still the norm, and forms that depend on workers' loyalty to the company and patron–client relationships between bosses and workers (see Jackall 1988). “Reality television stages, and reifies into commodity form, a utopia of work: a long-lost no-place in which capital has the qualities of labor . . . bosses are heroes, and toil leaves a meaningful—often physical—impact on the world” (Winant 2014, 69). In addition, each episode's narrative arc contains a hard-working yet traumatized subject recognized as deserving by their analogously traumatized bosses.

While the UK version has the same narrative conventions, the show is driven by an organizational imagination, in which the form of social analysis represented engages with dilemmas created by a company's organizational structure. At the beginning of every episode, a business problem is outlined, with many emerging from the financial crisis. For example, some businesses are expanding rapidly because they offer cheaper products for an economizing public. The scenario is framed by the question: Are the organizational systems in place adequate to handle such a rapid expansion? The boss is going undercover to find out the answer. Or, conversely, other companies are shrinking—closing stores and laying off workers. Is the company able to function effectively now that workers have an increased workload with no increased compensation? Again, the boss is going undercover to find out. Contrasting these imaginations reveals the different types of insights and implicit critiques of neoliberalism that a sentimental imagination or an organizational imagination allows in similarly staged and formulaic exploration of workplace hierarchies.

Narrative Commonalities

As is standard in a television format, in both versions, the narrative structure of *Undercover Boss* is quite similar. Either the CEO or another top official of a large company goes “undercover” for five days by posing as an unemployed worker being filmed by a documentary crew as the person receives training for several entry-level jobs. The boss's life history is discussed briefly, interspersed with scenes shot around the CEO's home (often more upscale in the US than the UK version) while the boss interacts with the family. The boss dons a disguise to prevent workers from recognizing a boss too frequently portrayed in company promotional

material. The boss is then shown at a cheap motel, a sharp contrast to their expensive homes, preparing for the first day as an entry-level worker.

The meat of the show follows when the boss is trained for different entry-level roles within the company that can range from either waiting tables, delivering packages, repairing equipment, or answering phones at a customer call center. The boss in disguise chats with the employee training them, while simultaneously observing them.² In the US version, training consists of dyadic interactions in which other co-workers rarely speak with the boss trainee. The UK version has a bit more variety since the boss trainee often chats with a number of other workers, especially during work breaks. In both versions, once five days is up, the boss returns to the head offices at the company, reporting back to the team of senior executives what they learned. The boss then reveals that they were in disguise to the four or five employees who unknowingly helped train the boss. Again, in both versions, during the big reveal, the boss offers the almost invariably deserving workers extravagant praise and a reward. Only rarely is there any criticism; in the few instances that this did occur in the US version, it became newsworthy.³

For the US as well as the UK shows, there are emotionally charged social interactions that are reliably repeated in each episode, a more general feature of reality shows. Part of the reality shows' allure is providing the viewers with emotionally charged repetition, and thus an explicit and repeated affirmation of certain insights into how the world is and should be (Couldry 2004). Both shows contain performances of emotion at predictable moments. For example, whenever the boss is going to begin their undercover work, the boss discusses a general nervousness: will they be able to sustain their disguise or be able to do the physically demanding work required?⁴ In the US version, unlike the UK version, the boss is invariably shown as a buffoon, failing both outrageously and humorously at the tasks they must perform.⁵ These are

often carnivalesque moments where those in power appear incapable of performing tasks that their employees perform with ease and grace (Winslow 2016, 1365–6). Lastly, when workers are called to company headquarters without an explanation, they often express concern to the camera—are they about to be reprimanded, fired, or rewarded?

Implicit Critiques of Contemporary Capitalism

The most compelling emotional moments happen predictably in the final scenes when a boss has revealed that they were disguised, and while undercover, noticed how good the worker was and how difficult their work was to perform. Here is a repeated moment in the UK and US versions that tacitly calls into question the contemporary neoliberal emphasis on quantifiable value. The workers often respond with tears and delight; finally a boss recognizes and acknowledges their efforts, rewarding them based on observation rather than metrics. In the same meeting, bosses will discuss workers' needs and promises that they will be addressed. In the same heady encounter, skills are valued and dissatisfactions addressed all because a boss does what may be fantasized about but rarely occurs—the boss observes what happens in practice, and in doing so validates the workers' perspective. A genuine performance review is conducted instead of the company's typical focus on quantifiably documented achievements. Indeed, the bosses are often explicitly critical that from their vantage point, they have a lens on the business constructed largely by quantified data. It motivates their decision to go undercover, as the US CEO of the racetrack company Churchill Downs explains: “the purpose of this is to cut through the spreadsheets and the powerpoints and it is a chance to be a fly on the wall” (Studio Lambert, 2010d). His UK counterpoint at the racetrack conglomerate the Jockey Club says: “Up until today, they have been names on spreadsheets to me, costs to the business. However, these people

aren't costs to the business, they are actually hugely valuable" (Studio Lambert 2010c). In both versions, the reality that the boss discovers is how dedicated their workers are, as well as how difficult their work can be—insights that the neoliberal fetish for metrics doesn't reveal.

There is still more tacit critique of neoliberalism. Both versions often mention how important company loyalty is, how much they want to nurture company loyalty in their employees—a stance that might appear nostalgic to US readers familiar with ethnographies of contemporary workplaces, in which company loyalty is so often described as a thing of the past (see Lane 2011; Kalleberg and Vallas 2017). In the US show, the CEO of the Great Wolf Lodge rewards a worker by helping train them to become a pilot.⁶ But she expresses deep regret that this means he might leave the company, and wants him to stay on for as long as the company can convince him to continue working there. There are even moments in which company loyalty might seem an unlikely quality to worry about, and yet it comes up repeatedly. In the UK episode mentioned above, a CEO of the Jockey Club, which owns fifteen racetracks in Great Britain, seeks to learn how good all the company's temporary employees are. This is an industry-specific concern. These temporary employees work only twenty days out of the year and, for all intents and purposes, fill every position in which a company representative interacts with the public. Quickly satisfied that these workers are talented and efficient, he learns to his chagrin that the workers not only have no loyalty to the Jockey Club as a company, they often do not even have name recognition when told Jockey Club employs them. Instead, these temporary workers feel a strong connection to their direct supervisor, or that particular racetrack.

Throughout the show, the CEO determines this is a major problem that the company has to tackle. "I've been slightly disappointed that the Jockey Club's name hasn't been mentioned as much as I would have liked. People's loyalty has been for the people they work for, and that's

the reason they turn up” (Studio Lambert 2010b). He even rewards one of his employees at the end of the show with a free pass to allow him to explore all the other racetracks that the Jockey Club operates, saying:

Steve, you are lifeblood of our sport, you are the lifeblood of our company. We rely on people like you an awful lot. I was really surprised when you said, “Who is the Jockey Club, what does it do?” Your lack of knowledge isn’t your fault, it’s a failing from us as an organization. So I am giving you two racecourse badges. The only people who normally got those badges are racecourse directors. They will get you into any one of our race courses free of charge any day of the year. And I would like you to get out and really understand what our brand is. (Studio Lambert, 2010c)

Even in a situation in which the employment conditions established by the Jockey Club appear to guarantee a lack of company loyalty, this absence haunts the episode’s CEO.

Both shows are ostensibly explorations of how companies have fared in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, yet the recession plays a significantly different role in each version. The recession is mentioned in the opening voiceover that establishes each show’s premise. In the first two seasons, the US show opened with the following sentences: “America is trying to shake off the recession. Public distrust of CEOs remains high. But more and more bosses are looking for radical ways to reconnect with their workforce.” Each season the British show offers a variant of the following opening from Season 5. Interspersed with short clips from the season as a whole—

Bleak economic times have spelt disaster for UK businesses. [Shot of Southwark Council Chief Executive saying:] “You don’t get to the end of a pay freeze without having an impact.” With many household names having been in administration, [a British term for bankruptcy] nearly 30 High Street stores are shutting every day. To survive, some bosses are willing to take extreme action and go undercover in their own organizations. [Shot of CEO of DHL saying:] “We have another customer whose problems we were not able to solve.” (Studio Lambert, 2013)

In the US version, the recession rapidly fades into the background. In the few moments that the recession is mentioned, it is almost an aside to explain why the company is losing customers. By contrast, in the UK version, the entire show centers upon specific organizational problems

generated by how the companies' specific niche vis-à-vis its competitors was affected by the recession. Some companies are booming because their products are cheap enough that thrifty customers are attracted while other organizations suffer from a myriad of reasons, including government cutbacks. Each site the boss visits will supposedly shed light on the specific organizational puzzle they are investigating—be it the best performing store in the country or the worst performing call center.

Partly because of the UK version's commitment to examining organizational responses to the recession, two of the UK episodes focus on members of the London City Council or Town Hall who are forced to reduce staff and close services because of the British government's austerity measures, organizations that in the past ten to fifteen years have increasingly been forced to behave like private corporations in how they demonstrate value. In these episodes, it is taken for granted that government organizations provide valuable services to a city's population, and that citizens will suffer when these services are reduced. Simply showing what a city council provides its residents becomes a political comment on the government's financial policies. This is a critique that is unavailable in the US version, in part because the two episodes that focus on mayors going undercover feature jobs involving maintaining infrastructure or security, not social services.

Social Actors

These shows contain different strategies for determining who is a good or bad worker, and why. In the UK version, in particular, because of the organizational imagination underpinning the show a large portion of the boss's stated mission is to discover when organizational problems result in undesirable behaviors. As a result, occasionally, the boss must

uncover something, be it people or behavior, which needs to be reformed. When this happens in the show, a tacit understanding of who or what is responsible motivates the solutions that the boss suggests during the final scenes of each episode, in which the boss reveals their true corporate identity and offers boons or reprimands. In these moments, the solutions and explanations the bosses offer reveal how crucial the imagination is in shaping how a problem is understood and addressed.

In the UK version, any failing is perceived as the responsibility of the worker's hierarchical superior in the organization. The worker is never viewed as a poor worker because this is fundamentally who they are, rather, their bad behavior is invariably portrayed as a response to a supervisor's actions. In one striking example, the boss of Quicksilver, a chain of stores filled with gambling machines, shadows Ian, a technician responsible for servicing machines in nine stores that day. Very early in the episode Ian explains that he likes his job because he sets his own time, and doesn't have to work too hard. He makes other comments about his commitment to inefficiency, explaining as he drives: "I like to go in circles—I don't like driving back on the same road." As the day wears on, the boss discovers that this worker had made suggestions for how to improve the repair work a year or two earlier, only to have his suggestions completely ignored. At the same time, he learns that Ian enthusiastically plays music as an impersonator at parties, a context in which Ian is a hard worker. For the boss, this is a revelation that this worker doesn't have a bad attitude, but rather that he has been actively demoralized by a middle-level manager's inability to recognize a good idea. This boss's response during his final scene of revelation with this worker is to reward him, explaining that his idea to have a workshop was "a bloody good idea," which the company will institute. He also sends Ian

to Memphis for a rock and roll vacation. And he concludes, as other UK bosses do, he is ultimately responsible for the problem.

In the US version, failures to perform work properly (however this is defined) are placed squarely as a personal failing of the worker. This happens vividly in the second episode in which the boss of the restaurant chain Hooters witnesses a floor manager forcing his waitresses to eat a plate of beans without using their hands. The woman who finishes first will be “rewarded” by being allowed to go home early without any pay penalty. When the boss reprimands the manager at the end of the show, he addresses respect for all employees and that the manager’s personal failing to treat his staff properly is a reform that only he can make. No mention is made of the fact that this is occurring at a workplace whose major draw is encapsulated in its name Hooters. The manager is only enacting the institutional ethos of the restaurant. Indeed, what Hooters stands for is in fact an issue at other moments in the show. In an early scene in this episode, the undercover boss is attempting to recruit customers by handing out flyers on a street corner. In this experience, they are forced to explain to a potential customer that he should go elsewhere if what he wants is a strip show. A general theme in this episode, created by the editing, is how to walk a posited line of objectifying women without demeaning them, a possibility the boss determinedly insists upon for his restaurant chain. Yet in his conversation with the manager, this dilemma is resolutely ignored. Instead, the discussion revolves around the manager’s personality and actions.

Intriguingly, this is also one of the few moments in which one valued form of capitalist interaction is shown to be in potential tension, or contradiction with another capitalist value. The manager responds by insisting this exercise was a result of a personality trait he clearly considered desirable—his competitiveness. “Now, if I’m too competitive, and if I’m too harsh,

man, it works. Shame on me if it's a bad thing being uber-competitive” (Studio Lambert 2010a). In this exchange, proper enactment of the employer–employee alliance is contrasted with a competitive search for profit. The boss will have none of this, but the tension is still explicitly laid out in this scene. In the end, the reason respect is ostensibly chosen as the winning value is portrayed as a hierarchical one. That is, the boss’s say-so wins the day because he is, after all, the boss.

In the UK version, one of the consequences of this patterned form of attributing responsibility is that the unseen villains of the British *Undercover Boss* are implicitly the middle managers. Some middle managers appear on screen literally in the background—the managers introduce the undercover boss to the worker who will be training the boss that day. But the managers of a company that labor in-between those who supervise the entry-level workers and the head office never make an appearance on the show. These managers, however, are the ones who ignore the workers with good ideas, and are the ones who are framed as having created the problems that the bosses uncover. While the bosses repeatedly assert that they are the ones responsible for poor infrastructure or poor communication, that, too, is a gesture pointing to a particular ethos of leadership.

Yet, it is generally understood that they were not the ones actively ignoring suggestions or developing the company policies that have such negative results when enacted. It is those anonymous mid-level managers who acted, setting performance goals and enacting company policies in a discriminating fashion. This becomes explicit in one of the few instances in which a middle manager in the UK version is openly called to task for their bad behavior. The CEO of Best Western, a hotel company that operates through franchises in the UK, discovers that a repairman actively works to deceive a Best Western inspector who will be arriving in a week to

determine whether this poorly-performing hotel is fit enough to remain under the Best Western name. The CEO is clear that it is not the repairman's fault. Instead, he blames the general manager and, most of all, the owner whom he discovers has been generally absent from the business. In the final scenes, he confronts the owner, not the repairman—a singular deviation from how these confrontations normally take place inasmuch as this is the only example in the UK show in which a new character (the owner) appears on screen for the first time during the denouement. In short, an organizational imagination opens the door for a different set of actors to appear as villains—ones set aside by their structural position within an organization—than the villains with bad personality traits that emerge when comparable interactions are interpreted through a sentimental imagination.

Becoming Socially Adept Capitalists

Both shows provide a tacit critique of some ways of participating in a capitalist system from a perspective deeply embedded within capitalist structures, in other words, an internal and reformist critique. Neither version suggests getting rid of companies or jobs as ways to coordinate production or allocate tasks. Yet the shows repeatedly address the kinds of social analysis one ideally should have as a worker, and as a manager. They provide a running critique of some ways of participating in a workplace while commending others. For instance, the UK version repeatedly cautions that there is a possible form of worker solidarity that can emerge if managers do not treat their employees appropriately. This threat is not mentioned in the US version, which instead frames whatever structural problems workers encounter (ones that historically sparked labor movements) as family problems. Similarly, the shows offer different responses to an ever-present dilemma for customer service—should one provide standardized

service or context specific service? Finally, the shows' different emphases on how best to participate in the workplace leads to different types of ritualized closures at the end of each episode. All these variations reveal how a sentimental imagination leads to a different take on appropriate ways to be part of a company than an organizational imagination does.

The differences between emphasizing structural social analysis and psychological analysis led UK participants to voice concerns over commitments to a particular form of community, a view of community the bosses in the UK version fretfully called an us-them mentality. Marxists might see this as the management's fear that workers were developing class solidarity, but in the UK series, this was presented as a nascent solidarity that could emerge only under poor management. The bosses portrayed were clear that the us-them mentality served as a dangerous possibility that workers will use to interpret the company relationships, but only if their ideas or efforts are mishandled by middle management, or if company policies become too onerous. Not surprisingly, the bosses repeatedly declare that their ideal would be to have every employee enthusiastically committed to the company as a whole, instead of seeing a divide between managers and workers. In the rare moments on the UK show when the workers are shown expressing this us-them attitude, it does quickly take on more complex resonances of class-consciousness. A construction worker in the show's second episode explains to his undercover boss that he has no recourse when threatened with widespread layoffs. When the boss asks him what he would tell management if he could, he replies: "I think they know better, we are just working-class, we just get on with it" (Studio Lambert 2010b).

This collective class-consciousness does not appear on the US show. Interpreting the individual struggles as primarily emotional in the US version allow the show to overlook patterned forms of inequality and frame problems as family dilemmas. As Brayton puts it: "The

nuanced experiences of poverty, physical labor, migration and caring for disabled children, for instance, are often reduced to what the boss generically describes as a ‘commitment to family’” (2014, 76). The US version thus allows bosses to frame problems in terms of work-life balance in a way that sidesteps structural antagonisms. Indeed, the only hint on the US show that the company represents a larger community with relations to each other, instead of a collection of individuals with relations to the boss, is seen dimly through a single boss’s reward at the end, when he suggests that his resort park will close for one day, and all the workers will spend the day re-building a co-worker’s home recently destroyed by floods. In the show, this is represented as a Christian value that supersedes a capitalist rationale for this particular boss. In short, while both US and UK bosses may voice a common concern that their employees are demoralized in the aftermath of the recession, the UK version’s emphasis on an organizational imagination also allows the UK bosses to be worried that their employees might also use an organizational imagination to analyze their work relationships, an imagination that could lead to an unwelcome us-them dichotomy, from the bosses’ perspective, if those in charge are not careful. The US bosses had no such concerns, if the US bosses had any worry, it was that the workers’ family lives would prevent them from being the most useful workers possible from a manager’s perspective.

One of the other differences between the US version and the UK version lies in the range of affect that workers are allowed to reveal when interacting with customers, which in these shows became a tacit way to comment on how best to engage with a neoliberal capitalist tension between standardization and localization. The sentimental imagination behind the US shows encouraged standardization, allowing for a very narrow range of appropriate emotional labor, despite its emphasis on emotional connection. By contrast, the UK version accommodates a

broader range, leaning towards localization. In large measure, the US emphasis on standardizing affect is a consequence of the nostalgic sensibility that underpins the US version. This is a longing for an earlier form of capitalism in which standardized displays of emotional warmth and hospitality were signature components of how one performed a job's emotional labor.

Hochschild defined emotional labor in an earlier moment of capitalism, explaining: "This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place" (1983, 7). As Hochschild describes, emotional labor is not supposed to reveal one's personality, rather it is a performance that allows one to disguise one's self through a generic performance of the good stewardess. This customer-oriented emotional labor is not about creating individual relationships between customer and employee, but rather is meant to create relationships between customer and company, in which the employee is a generic representative of a company, and made generic precisely through the standardized displays of specific emotions.

The standardized displays of emotion in the US version of *Undercover Boss* are part of its valorization of a 1950s idealized capitalism, in contrast to the UK version, which accommodates a wider variety of styles with which employees can interact with customers and still be considered talented at customer service. This way of managing social relationships fits in more with contemporary capitalism's emphasis on the unique individual (Banet-Weiser 2012). One UK boss of a utility company comments about two different employees he observes over the course of the program: "He is absolutely fantastic with the customers—he seems to flick this switch when he walks through the door from the geezer to the real courteous bloke" (Studio Lambert 2011). And, about the second technician he observes: "He's got his witty banter, most

people seem to quite like the cheeky chappy in him” (Studio Lambert 2011). In both these instances, the boss acknowledges that there is a contrast between the employee’s performance among co-workers and with customers, but views this strategic variation as successful. During a scene in which the npower boss reveals his true identity, the boss commends the worker for his ease with customers: “I was blown away by the way you interacted with customers, making them feel at ease. Charlie, it was absolutely brilliant, mate” (Studio Lambert 2011). This view is far more resonant with a view of the relationship between the neoliberal self and the marketplace, in which what makes a neoliberal entity into an effective market actor is its unique style of managing and enhancing itself. What is important is not a standardized way of doing something as is observed in the US version, but rather standardizing results. Customer service from this perspective can incorporate many varied styles as long as, in the end, the customer welcomes the interaction and is content with the products or information provided.

Lastly, a sentimental imagination has a different ideal resolution than an organizational imagination does, leading to two subtly different endings. Under a sentimental imagination, the resolution depends upon the flat analogy that emerges over the course of the show between the traumas in the boss’s abbreviated life history and the employee’s abbreviated life history. John McGlothlin points out that the affective narrative arc in the US version revolves around the boss discovering empathetic paths towards connecting to an employee through a relatively thin analogy between their life experiences:

The lack of complexity within these biographies allows the show’s life writing to conjure up personal intimacy between the executive and members of his or her workforce. . . . *Undercover Boss* identifies workers by first name only, and the few tidbits of autobiographical information they provide while on camera configure their lives as uncannily paralleled to the executive’s own. Parallel experiences in turn form the basis of executives’ feelings of sympathy for workers (2014, 127–8).

The relatively flat analogies between traumatic or difficult experiences in one's past becomes the basis for what counts as a happy resolution in the US version. The episode with Henry, the CEO of Roto-Rooter, introduced this narrative device, shaping the episodes that followed. At first glance, Henry is a straight-talking, hard-working and stoical man who fought his way to the top from working-class roots. Unlike other bosses, he seems at ease in the flannel shirt disguise he dons to go undercover. Yet the show reveals Henry is a weeper, easily brought to tears whenever he hears the sad stories of his employee's lives. This weeping starts a trend and most CEOs portrayed after this episode shed a tear or two over the course of filming. But Henry takes this one step further, troubled all his life by his ambivalent anger towards his drunk father, he claims to have finally forgiven his father after meeting a Roto-Rooter worker who tells him matter-of-factly about his struggle with drugs and his six years of sobriety. Supposedly given emotional healing through this encounter, Henry rewards the employee by asking him to be a company-wide advocate and spokesperson for sobriety.

Through these gifts, a US neoliberal version of how one best copes with trauma and setbacks enters this show. In the US, workers are advised that the best way to deal with medical crises or family setbacks is to use these as the basis to re-fashion themselves for the marketplace. If a woman has to leave work for a few years to take care of her child's life-threatening illness, she should return to work as someone who helps other parents navigate the medical system. This logic underlies the employee's reward when it is a new position in the company based on their past traumatic experiences. When a sentimental imagination motivates this show, an ideal sentimental resolution requires that the workers' hard work, despite setbacks, be openly acknowledged, while the boss's analogous painful life experiences are healed.⁷

In the UK version, by contrast, the ideal resolution occurs when people are able to provide ideas for the boss that he or she can then standardize throughout the company. The UK boss going undercover and other company executives openly state that people working on the front lines often have successful ideas for how to improve business—after all, they have local insights in what occurs on the ground. One worker in a pet supply store decides to have designated days to celebrate different types of pets; here, the undercover boss is able to observe how successful lizard day can be in attracting customers to the store. The ideal resolution in this instance is a very specific response to the familiar tension in capitalism between standardization and localization. Companies often want to standardize their products as much as possible for the products to move smoothly through the widest number of markets possible. Yet, at the same time, local markets require specific finesse and skill to navigate, and not all products and services appeal uniformly everywhere. In the UK version, the ideal resolution occurs when the local becomes the inspiration for new standardized practices. The worker's insights are appreciated and the boss discovers ways to improve business.

Conclusion

By comparing the same reality show format in different countries, anthropologists are able to reveal how different types of imaginations can shape what a media production deems possible to represent as persuasive and entertaining. Using an anthropological sensibility can shape the questions one asks of these media texts, and thus encouraging a focus on the moments one can trace epistemological differences broadly defined as well as drawing attention to how social hierarchies are depicted (Gershon 2011). Other disciplines encourage different foci—a sociologist comparing the same shows might be more inclined to contrast the ways life histories or specific class positions are depicted in these shows as instances of larger structural

transformations (Mills 1959). I am suggesting it is not only the methods that makes an analysis of media texts anthropological, but the discipline's historical interpretative engagements with social theory and social interactions that can be brought to bear upon these shows.

Undercover Boss is one of many reality shows providing a lens on how viewers should best engage with the quandaries of neoliberal capitalism, in this show's case, interacting across class lines when there is an underfunded and failing welfare system, an inadequate healthcare system, and increasing job insecurity (Ouellette 2014). Despite the similarities in narrative structure, the two versions of *Undercover Boss* offer substantively different lessons to viewers, and different internal critiques of capitalism. The US version highlights personal insights at the expense of structural ones, encouraging viewers to value individual compassion over organizational solutions. Thus, this version is underscored by a fantasy of uniformly shared and potentially wildly successful individual capacity, which is typically held in check by the extra-workplace family trauma. The UK version emphasizes how knowledge and structural roles are intertwined so as to suggest that functional communication channels are the backbone for maintaining successful capitalist organizations. It is not family trauma that puts a spanner in the works in this version, it is the middle managers who do not handle their responsibilities properly. And what does the boss know at the end of each show? In the US version, the boss learns how widespread familial trauma is among a company's employees, trauma that potentially connects people across barely remarked upon class lines. In the UK version, the boss learns that the class consciousness and potential resentment that is the undercurrent of every interaction can be misdirected and defanged through appreciation and consultation.

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Notes

¹ By focusing on television formats, I am not addressing the much larger literature on the culturally specific reception of television shows and films originating from other countries, such as soap operas, action films, and telenovelas.

² Walter Benn Michaels in conversation pointed out that all it would take to transform *Undercover Boss* into a television show deeply critical of capitalism would be to have the amounts both the worker and the undercover boss are earning minute by minute displayed on the screen.

³ It became news when Rick Silva of Checkers fires a manager who yelled at his employees (Cooper 2012), or an employee at Retrofitness was fired for cursing (Fastenberg 2013).

⁴ There is one exception in the UK version, in which a CEO declares that he is not nervous at all, merely curious about what he will find.

⁵ This theme was not established in the US version from the outset, but emerged reliably after the first seven episodes. In the UK version, when one boss does his job too poorly, his cover is blown.

⁶ This decision—to help someone improve their skills—is a fairly common neoliberal marker of being a good boss (for more elaboration, see Gershon 2017). What is not as neoliberal is that the boss expresses regret that the worker will leave.

⁷ This never happens in the UK version. While sometimes a UK employee's difficulties are described, either by them or their co-workers, it is also acceptable to tell the undercover boss on camera that you don't want to talk about your life at all.