Public Abstract

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Neoliberalism, an economic philosophy that promotes principles of the free market and private, individual responsibility, has become a pervasive way to organize cultural and political life. This study used neoliberalism as a framework to investigate television's representation of the working-class in contemporary American society by analyzing current working-class programs *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Duck Dynasty*, and by interviewing audiences of these shows.

The textual analysis of my study revealed, first, that working-class identity is a complex concept that takes into account not only socioeconomic variables (e.g., income, occupation, and education), but also the culture of individuals. Each text's representation of the principles of neoliberal capitalism influences the portrayal of the families' working-class identities.

The audience portion of my study investigated how audiences employed these representations to understand working-class identity in their own lives and in broader culture. Participants applied many of the same neoliberal tenets represented in the textual analysis to characters in a broad spectrum of domestic sitcoms and reality programs. In the programs about which they spoke, they valued hard work, individual achievement, and suggested that engaging in risky decision-making often justified the negative consequences that followed. Participants used the representations of working-class characters as comparisons to individuals they knew in their lives.