WORKING HARD OR WORKING CLASS?: NEOLIBERALISM AND WORKING-CLASS REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

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By
HOLLY WILLSON HOLLADAY

Dr. Melissa A. Click, Dissertation Supervisor
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

WORKING HARD OR WORKING CLASS?: NEOLIBERALISM AND WORKING-CLASS REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

presented by Holly Willson Holladay,

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

___________________________________________________
Dr. Melissa A. Click

___________________________________________________
Dr. Jennifer Stevens Aubrey

___________________________________________________
Dr. Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz

___________________________________________________
Dr. Rebecca R. Scott
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ABSTRACT

Class identification in contemporary America is undergoing a shift; while a vast majority of the population at one time identified as middle-class, more individuals in the post-2008 recession economic climate are self-labeling as lower- or lower-middle class (cite). At the same time, the domestic sitcom, a genre once populated by a number of working-class families, is now essentially void of working-class representation. Working-class portrayals on reality television, however, have experienced a surge in recent years, leading to the development of the “redneck” reality subgenre. Given that class belonging is often misunderstood, if it is even addressed, in political rhetoric and mediated representation, this project examined texts and audiences of these two genres to understand how the working-class is ideologically encoded on contemporary television.

I used neoliberalism as a theoretical frame to investigate television’s ideological construction of the working-class. Neoliberalism, which forwards ideas about individualism, “hard work,” and free-market capitalism, is an economic and culturally pervasive philosophy that structures virtually every aspect of modern American life (Duggan, 2003). My research was divided into two phases. First, I explored how neoliberalism structures the representation of working-class belonging in two domestic sitcoms (The Middle and Raising Hope) and two “redneck” reality programs (Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Duck Dynasty). In the second phase, I spoke with audiences of these shows to discover how they used the television they watched to make sense of working-class identity, as well as class in their own lives and broader culture.
The textual analysis of my study revealed, first, that working-class identity is a complex construct that takes into account not only socioeconomic variables (e.g., income, occupation, and education), but also the cultural capital accrued by individuals. Each text’s representation of the tenets of neoliberal capitalism influences the portrayal of the families’ working-class identities. The series deem public service as ineffectual, frame the characters’ success in terms of self-empowerment and individual achievement, address how the characters fail to manage risk, and valorize competition and profit in the labor market. In doing so, the particular working-class programs legitimize the neoliberal philosophy that prevents many working-class citizens, including these characters, from achieving upward mobility. Moreover, neoliberal philosophy ties into the identity categories of gender, Whiteness, and regional belonging in differing ways. In particular, women are tasked with self-surveillance and discipline through their bodies and choices, and they continue to be burdened by low-paying service work and an uneven distribution of domestic labor. A traditional masculinist conception underscores men’s role in neoliberal culture, as they are required to be financial providers for their families. White individuals are expected to perform Whiteness “right,” and those who fail to do so are seen as having had simply made poor choices. When situated in the “heartland,” which is always already imagined as White, an adherence to family and community values suggests that neoliberal tenets are applied not by individual members of a family, but that all members of the family work together to embrace or reject their success within neoliberal culture. “Rednecks,” who are de facto working-class, have often come to be associated with “White trash,” but this label may be transcended through appropriate work ethic and upward mobility.
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. However, they did articulate a deviation from the profit-driven success emphasized by neoliberalism, suggesting that personal connections with one’s family and community were just as important when labeling someone as “successful.” However, discussions about television’s gender depictions were relatively limited. Many of their comments reflected traditional gender norms: a male breadwinner and a household division of labor that unevenly burdened working-class women.)

Working-class Whiteness was made visible through both the “White trash” and “redneck” labels, though to differing ends; while both terms have pejorative roots, “redneck” certainly carries more positive valence for participants than “White trash.”

Participants used the representations of working-class characters as comparisons to individuals they knew in their lives, and often times, they drew comparisons to their own lives. Participants derided working-class characters on television for their failure to appropriately apply the rules of neoliberal self-governance, while simultaneously drawing comparisons between themselves and the characters in terms of class belonging (e.g., cultural and economic capital).
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ice Road Truckers, Swamp People, Hillbilly Handfishin’, Duck Dynasty, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, Moonshiners – these programs and dozens more like them have made “redneck reality” a staple of cable television over the last several years. Television critic Robert Lloyd (2011) contends that these are not shows about class, although most are set in the rural South (e.g., Duck Dynasty, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo) and Appalachia (e.g., Moonshiners), some of the poorest areas in the United States, and many focus on the dangerous, physical labor jobs performed by their subjects (e.g., American Loggers, Deadliest Catch). Unlike many rural Southerners and manual laborers, financial struggle is not a central theme of these shows because “by and large these are not people operating on the [economic] margins” (Lloyd, 2011, para. 6). Yet, media coverage and promotion of these programs consistently label them as “blue-collar” or “working-class,” indicating that, despite Bayou Billionaire’s real life Beverly Hillbillies rags-to-riches narrative, something about the ethos of “redneck reality” makes it difficult to identify these “characters” as anything other than working-class.

At the same time that blue-collar depictions abound in the reality genre, working-class representation in situation comedies, a genre historically lauded for its working-class portrayals in programs like The Honeymooners, All in the Family, and Roseanne, is largely absent. VanDerWerff (2012) identifies The Middle, 2 Broke Girls, and Raising Hope as the only examples of sitcoms currently on air that explicitly address issues of economic uncertainty. Television writers and critics have attributed this lack of representation to the escapist function of sitcoms; while viewers state that they want comedies to reflect the problems of ordinary, working people, financial struggles and
unemployment do not make successful sitcom fodder (Weinman, 2013). Middle-class portrayals are also increasingly out of sync with Americans’ real lives; D’Addario (2013) notes that many sitcoms reflect a fantasy world in which even middle-class characters live above their means. He cites critical and ratings success Modern Family as one such example, a show whose characters, unlike most contemporary Americans, live lavishly off of single incomes. That is, class representation on television does not necessarily reflect that 41% of Americans identify as either working- or lower-class (Dugan, 2012) and that 59% of American middle-class families with children are headed by dual-income couples (Bianchi, 2013).

In recent history, class belonging has been amorphous concept, and American citizens have struggled to articulate clear criteria through which to position their own class belonging. Citing data collected by the Pew Research Center, Rampell (2012) notes that earning close to the nation’s median income has very little to do with whether someone identifies as middle-class; when survey respondents were asked how much a family of four needs to earn to maintain a “middle-class lifestyle,” answers ranged widely and frequently reflected one’s own annual family income (i.e., Americans earning $30,000 a year suggest that $40,000 would afford a middle-class lifestyle, but families making $100,000 a year maintained that a middle-class position required an annual income of $100,000). Stevenson (2012) points out that, according to the White House’s Middle Class Task Force, Americans rely more on aspirations than earnings when determining class position. Stevenson suggests, “middle class families share an aspiration to own a home and car, to send their kids to college, and to take occasional family vacations, all while maintaining health and retirement security” (para. 4). He notes that
these aspirations are the key to understanding the variance in incomes for those who self-identify as middle-class; although a family might only earn $40,000 per year, if they aspire to own home and send their children to college, they often align their class status with their peers who have far higher annual incomes.

In a post-recession economic climate, the number of individuals identifying as middle-class, however defined, is shrinking. Although political rhetoric, including President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address, has primarily focused on rebuilding the middle-class, the percentage of Americans labeling themselves as middle-class has fallen, while those who identify as low- or lower-middle-class has increased by 15% since 2008 (Kochhar & Morin, 2014). The shrinking middle-class finding is substantiated by the repeated reports that income and wealth disparity in the United States continues to widen between the richest and poorest Americans (e.g., Bui, 2014). Further, Putnam (2015) maintains that low-income American families also experience an opportunity disparity when compared to their middle-class and affluent counterparts; not only do they lack comparable income, but their children lack the opportunities (e.g., quality education) often necessary for upward mobility in the future.

The current television landscape is a fruitful space through which to explore the representation of class in America. This analysis derives from the assumption that televisual representations of identity are “inherently political” and “help shape national norms tied to the power of one group of people to rule over the majority” (Mittell, 2010, p. 305). That is, the representation of working-class characters illuminates the expectations and assumptions we have about them as an identity group. As Mittell argues:
Representations of identity help define what a culture thinks is normal for a particular group, how behaviors and traits fit into a society’s shared common sense. Such representations also directly impact how we think about ourselves: when television constructs norms for a group we belong to, we might compare our own behavior to that representation; when it represents a group different from ourselves, television can shape how we view other people. (p. 306)

In turn, representations of what it means to be working-class have the potential to justify stereotypes and policy decisions that affect the upward mobility of working-class Americans.

In this project, I examine working-class ideological representation through textual analysis of domestic sitcoms (*The Middle* and *Raising Hope*), and “redneck” reality TV (*Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*). I investigate the first season of each text to explore how the programs discursively construct class belonging. Although the scholarship I outline in Chapter has described the portrayals of working-class characters on television historically, the first part of this project seeks to go beyond those studies to place these representations within the specific context of contemporary American discourses about class, and thus examine how working-class identity is discursively constructed in the current moment of pervasive neoliberalism. The second part of this study explores how the dominant ideologies of class in popular television shape the meanings television audiences make of class categories generally, as well as their own class belonging. I conduct focus group interviews with television audiences to examine how the dominant discourses of class are read by television viewers, and I explore the
role television representation has played in audiences’ construction of their own
definition of class. First, I turn to the importance of examining class belonging in
contemporary American culture.

**Class in America**

Current economic considerations have put class at the forefront of American
political discourse, particularly because of the experiences of “average” citizens (e.g.,
prolonged unemployment and loss of retirement savings) during the financial crisis
beginning in 2008. As previously indicated, income inequality, or the gap between the
richest and poorest Americans, is currently at its highest level since the Great Depression
(Lowrey, 2012); with more overall wealth concentrated with those at the top of the
income bracket, class mobility, or the realization of the American Dream, becomes
increasingly difficult for lower-income individuals (Corak, 2012). Statistics are especially
troubling for the working poor. In 2011, 32% of families working in low-income jobs,
often in the service sector with little opportunity for advancement, were unable to earn
enough money to pay for basic living expenses (The Working Poor Families Project,
2012/13).

Perceptions about class inequality in America are, indeed, rooted in the myth of
meritocracy and shape our willingness to support government programs that have
traditionally benefitted the working poor. As The Working Poor Families Project
(2012/13) reports, “There is a common misconception—magnified during the recent
presidential election—that low income families are ‘takers’ who do not work, instead
relying on government assistance to meet their needs” (pp. 2-3). In other words, those
who receive government assistance do so because they have not worked hard enough to
achieve success on their own, further perpetuating the myth of meritocracy and ignoring the structural inequalities, such as access to educational opportunities, that allow such class fracturing to exist.

Parker (1974) argues that despite its profound importance in American culture, class is one of the least understood terms in our cultural discourse. As Mantsios (2006) maintains, Americans avoid using language that distinguishes individuals along lines of class: “We don’t speak about class privileges, or class oppression, or the class nature of society. … Unlike people in most other parts of the world, we shrink from using words that classify along economic lines or that point to class distinctions” (p. 264). Yet, exploring the existence of class allows us to understand the ways it structures our society at the levels of political policy decisions and day-to-day existence. Parker (1974) contends that class has

immense influence over our lives...[it influences] freedom, the shape of power, the rights we have as individuals, members of groups, and as a nation...[it touches] on our everyday lives in fundamental ways, helping determine where we work, whether we go to college, who our friends are, even how we spend our weekends...without understanding what class [means], we forfeit the ability to understand our own lives. (p. 36)

Although economic measures, including income and employment, have traditionally been the most concrete way to understand our class climate and the resulting categories of identification, they only present a portion of the picture. As reflected in the representation of working-class characters in “redneck reality” programs, the manifestations of class extend well beyond these factors, taking into consideration
everyday, lived culture. Consequently, how we come to give meaning to class categories – whether someone is working- or middle-class – is necessarily informed by those markers of culture that are related to, but independent from economic considerations. Given that mass media play a significant role in disseminating the cultural markers that indicate higher class status (Schor, 2003), this study examines how those classed cultural markers shape our understanding of working-class identity through the everyday, lived culture of television.

Indeed, television characters themselves inhabit particular social class positions that are informed by economic, cultural, and political interests, as well as intersecting gender, racial, and regional identities. Moreover, televisual portrayals shape viewers’ understanding of cultural class divisions within our society, and they contribute to the ways that viewers make sense of their own class positions. Thus, in what follows, I provide further rationale for examining issues of class through television and, specifically, the suitability of exploring the domestic sitcom and family-based, “redneck” reality genres for this purpose.

**Television and Our Social World**

Especially when compared to other objects of culture, such as film and theater, television has spent much of its history denigrated as a “low-brow” form of entertainment. As Newman and Levine (2012) assert, “Television has been the chief representative of American mass culture throughout its existence. And mass culture has almost never been seen as a social good” (p. 15). Yet, scholars and critics argue that television serves an important role in understanding how culture is produced and circulated. In his effort to legitimate the role television plays in shaping culture, Fiske
(2011) suggests that television be viewed as a “bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society” (p. 1). In other words, the meanings and pleasures we derive from television shape our cultural context, which necessarily influences how we see and experience the world. Further, Newcomb and Hirsch (2000) point to the importance of arts in a contemporary culture’s understanding of itself, stating that “the arts offer a metalanguage, a way of understanding who and what we are, how values and attitudes are adjusted, how meanings shift” (p. 564). The analysis of television is an approach to examine the cyclical way members of a society influence and are influenced by their culture; in this case, televisual texts offer a way to see how class is represented in our culture, as well as how those representations influence understandings of class in our everyday lives.

Television’s place in culture is not limited to the benign role of simply representing the world as it exists; instead, theorists have concluded that television functions through the representation of ideological codes. Drawing on Althusser’s notion of ideology as a set of beliefs and values shared within a given culture, Fiske (2011) concludes that cultural ideology becomes naturalized through television’s texts, shaping our common sense perception of reality: “ideological codes work to organize the other codes into producing a congruent and coherent set of meanings that constitute the common sense of society” (p. 6). Mittell (2010) points out that ideology is particularly powerful because it does not require force or indoctrination to be accepted by members of a society; by making the dominant ideology of a culture seem unquestionable, ideological meanings encoded in television serve to reinforce the naturalness of the ideological
structure. By making the representations on television seem “real,” Fiske (2011) argues that “ideology is made to appear the product of reality or nature, and not of a specific society and its culture…this ‘real’ world becomes the validation of the ideology” (p. 36). Thus, because ideologically coded television seems like an accurate representation of our social world, it further contributes to our endorsement of the dominant ideology.

Importantly, though television is most often encoded to serve the culture’s dominant ideologies, there is little way to guarantee that an audience definitively accepts television as it has been encoded, even if it has been made to seem natural or unquestionable. As Gitlin (2000) argues, “Commercial culture does not manufacture ideology; it relays and reproduces and processes and focuses ideology that is constantly arising both from social elites and from active social groups and movements throughout the society” (p. 576). Because those who produce television may represent only some ideological version of reality, room still exists for alternative readings. Fiske (2011) proposes that polysemy, or multiple meanings, is a critical characteristic of television, which allows television audiences to read texts subversively. Drawing on Bourdieu’s metaphor of culture as capital, Fiske notes that the accumulation of popular cultural capital – those meanings and pleasures accrued through television consumption – offer a way for the disempowered to negotiate their cultural position through resisting, opposing, or evading dominant ideologies. For Fiske, the pleasure derived from television “results from the production of meanings of the world and of self that are felt to serve the interests of the reader rather than those of the dominant” (p. 19). Exploring television texts and their audiences offers a way to examine how working-class identity is made
ideologically meaningful through a dominant paradigm, as well as how audiences may subvert the dominant encoding to understand social class differently.

Ideological representations of class are, indeed, salient in a variety of television genres. It is difficult to discount the role of class in acclaimed gritty serial dramas like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, where class informs character relationships or the protagonist’s motives. Moreover, comedies set in the workplace are inherently evocative of how the power difference between supervisors and subordinates structures class. However, this study’s textual analysis explores the question of how our conceptions of class are informed by television through two subgenres that have relied on markers of class for both characterization and narratives: the domestic situation comedy, which has historically made class belonging a prominent feature of a family’s depictions, and reality television, which has increasingly taken blue-collar families as the subject of its narratives.

**The Domestic Sitcom**

In television’s short history, domestic situation comedies, or those comedies that use some version of the family structure as a vehicle for its narrative, have been prominently featured in programming line-ups. Between 1950 and 1990, 497 television series employed the domestic sitcom format, with subjects that included traditional nuclear families, extended families, and single-parent families (Skill & Robinson, 1994). Despite the range of family structures and circumstances represented on television, the majority of these families are middle-class. VanDerWerff (2012) concludes that few programs in the contemporary television climate address issues related to economic struggle. He argues,
Realizing how few working-class—or, for that matter, poor people—are on TV takes time, particularly because some shows give the appearance of being about people with jobs just like those watching them, but don’t depict any of the actual circumstances of having to live within a set of means. (para. 6)

That is, while some programs may take place within a working-class milieu, few explicitly address the societal problems associated with limited income.

Domestic situation comedies also offer a way to examine the relationship between a family’s class belonging and the broader cultural context in which they exist. Leistyna (2009), for example, suggests that middle-class ideologies of hard work and conspicuous consumption implicitly undergird working-class programs that feature characters that are lazy, anti-intellectual, and incompetent. He notes that shows like *The Honeymooners, Married With Children, The Simpsons* also reinforce the low-culture habitus of working-class “taste, lifestyle, and leisure…we don’t get the idea that working-class characters are economically deprived; rather, their low tolerance and limited access to ‘virtues of high culture’ are attributed to personal taste and choice” (p. 344). Such domestic sitcoms, then, reinforce the myth of meritocracy, allowing viewers to place blame on working-class characters who are not doing enough or do not have the cultural intelligence and taste to improve their lives.

Moreover, domestic sitcoms offer a space through which to explore the intersections between class position and other identity categories. For example, scholarship investigating the family on television suggests that middle-class men perform masculinity differently than do working-class men (e.g., Butsch, 2005), and studies of
television audiences of domestic sitcoms provide insight into the relationships between identification with characters based on class and race (e.g., Jhally & Lewis, 1992) and class and generation (e.g., Press, 1991).

Although ideologies of meritocracy suggest that social mobility allows individuals to transcend the class positions of one’s family, thus rendering one’s connection to his or her family irrelevant, scholarship suggests that the family plays a significant role in shaping an individual’s class belonging, especially when class constitutes more than economic variables. Drawing on Bourdieu, Tomanovic (2004) notes that the concept of habitus is grounded in one’s family’s economic, cultural, and social capital. Thus, the ways habitus manifests in an individual (e.g., appearance, speech, behavior, manners, and tastes) is rooted in the family structure. As Tomanovic argues, “Lifestyle appears as an externalization of family habitus, which in turn presents as the internalization of family lifestyle” (p. 343); a family’s habitus can be read in the way its members construct their subjectivities. Therefore, domestic situation comedies are an ideal format through which to explore the complexity of class belonging, particularly through the lens of a family’s habitus.

The Family in “Redneck” Reality

It is difficult to ignore the proliferation of reality television and its many subgenres on the television landscape over the last twenty years, so it should come as no surprise that scholars have increasingly turned to the format to make sense of television’s role in contemporary culture. Escoffery (2006) insists that the issue of representation and its role in presenting “truth” should be central to scholarly examinations of reality television. He concludes, “Understanding how audiences and producers negotiate the
tricky middle ground between representation and truth in reality TV gives us insight into many issues important to society at large – political, economic, and personal” (p. 2), and implores scholars to look to the specific types of representation of these shows, including the depiction of different identity categories. Moreover, Pozner (2010) points out that despite its pervasiveness on contemporary television, reality television is often dismissed as escapist schlock, even though reality programs “frame their narratives in ways that both play to and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about women and men, love and beauty, race and class, consumption and happiness in America” (p. 17). Given the role reality television plays in constructing our notion of what is “real,” as well the genre’s role in reinforcing cultural tropes, reality television offers a fruitful avenue to examine class representation.

Although content produced for the reality television format now runs the gamut from talent competitions (American Idol, Top Chef) to lifestyle makeovers (The Biggest Loser, Trading Spouses), and from dating programs (The Bachelor, Joe Millionaire) to displays of twenty-something debauchery (The Real World, Jersey Shore), its roots lay in the domestic sphere. Often cited as the first foray into the reality television format, PBS’ 1973 documentary An American Family chronicled the lives of the Pat and Bill Loud and their five children, an upper-middle-class family from Santa Barbara, California. The twelve, hour-long episodes of the series, culled from over 300 hours of video footage, were presented documentary-style and featured dramatic family issues, including Pat and Bill’s separation and their son’s openly gay lifestyle in New York. In reference to the program, anthropologist Margaret Mead concluded that it “could be the beginning of a new way to explore the complexities of contemporary reality, ‘maybe as important for
our time as were the invention of drama and the novel for earlier generations” (Public Broadcasting Service, 2011, para. 3), suggesting the profound importance this family drama played in the advent of reality programming.

Issues of class representation have become increasingly central to discourse surrounding reality programming. While VanDerWerff’s (2012) assertion that contemporary situation comedies seem wholly uninterested in exploring the working-class, reality television represents the working-class much more frequently, and, therefore, presents more opportunities to investigate how reality television contributes to our understanding of working-class identity. As Von Doviak (2013) points out, rural, working-class characters were once a staple of network television, but were replaced during the “‘rural purge’ of the early ‘70s, when the networks cancelled [those] now-irrelevant-seeming shows en masse in favor of socially relevant programming more in tune with the turbulent times” (para. 4). He further suggests that contemporary programming on the Big Three networks continues to trend away from working-class families toward workplace sitcoms and urban procedurals; programs that feature rural, working-class subjects are now typically found in the reality formats of basic cable networks like TLC, Discovery, and the History Channel. Skeggs and Wood (2011) maintain that “reality television has made [class] spectacularly visible across our screens” (p. 1), and point out several explanations for why working-class individuals have come to be associated with the format. As they argue, reality television has made “ordinary” individuals the focus of many of its programs, with “ordinary” operating as a euphemism for “working class.” They further conclude that working class individuals are often subjects of reality programs precisely because of their cultural and economic situations;
while reality participation is presented as a democratized space in which anyone may participate, the compensation many reality participants receive is tantamount to class exploitation.

The “ordinary” family has been central to “redneck” reality programming, which have been some of the genre’s most successful shows. A&E’s wildly popular *Duck Dynasty*, which follows the duck hunting accessory business of Louisiana’s Robertson family, drew an audience of 11.8 million viewers for its season 4 premiere in August 2013, setting the record for the highest-rated nonfiction program on cable television (Cohen, 2013). The much maligned *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which has continually posted respectable ratings and is one of network TLC’s most popular programs, explores the working-class family dynamics of titular character Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson and her “gleefully unbecoming kin” (Hickman, 2012). Similar to their scripted, domestic sitcom counterparts, reality television programs that feature families offer a way to explore the complex role class plays in structuring the family, as well as our ideological beliefs about the working-class.

Despite the role television plays in shaping our cultural beliefs, Hall (1993) indicates that it is impossible to ensure that audiences will decode messages exactly as the text producers intended. Rather, television viewers bring their social identities and previous experiences to the reading of texts, which, in turn, necessarily contributes to how they interpret the message. Therefore, I now turn to the justification of employing audience studies to further understand how television viewership structures the way we make meaning of class in contemporary culture.
The Television Audience

Although text-based studies of television programs allow scholars to explore the ideological messages encoded therein, many analyses stop short of illustrating how such ideologies are reproduced and circulated in broader culture. As Stuart Hall (1993) suggests in his foundational essay “Encoding, decoding,” the circuit of television production and consumption is incomplete if scholars do not explore how television’s discourses are made meaningful through the audience’s social practices. Consequently, Hall’s conceptualization envisions an active audience that exhibits agency in their interpretation of media messages, and, through the notion of articulation, he believes that no necessary correspondence exists between the ideological intent encoded by the producer and the meanings audiences derived from those messages. Instead, Hall proposes that audiences read texts through one of three possibilities: those who understand the message exactly as encoded by the producer adopt the dominant-hegemonic position, those who fully reject the message as intended engage in an oppositional reading, and negotiated readers interpret the message somewhere in between.

This is not to say that audiences have an unlimited range of possibilities when decoding a text; Hall contends that while the discursive codes used to construct and deconstruct a message are connotative, they are “structured in dominance” and thus not equal (p. 99). Hall argues that a culture “tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world…The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings” (p. 98). As Ruddock (2001) indicates in his articulation
of Hall’s model, ideology is structured through the semiotic relationship of signs and signifiers, and dominant meanings rely on the ability of message producers to make the relationship between the sign and signified feel like common sense. That is, media producers do ideological work to ensure that audience decodings will be consistent with the dominant cultural codes with which they have been encoded. Given that media’s messages are at once polysemic and inscribed with a culture’s dominant structural codes, reception studies are particularly well suited to explore how audiences resist, accept, and negotiate the ideological power of dominant messages about class on television.

It is from Hall’s initial work that cultural studies scholars have begun to employ audience studies to fully understand the cultural significance of a specific media text. In particular, reception studies address the agency audiences exhibit in their understanding of texts. Viewing reception work as a necessary complement to text-based analysis, Radway (1986) argues that the meanings assigned to a message are only meaningful insofar as they derive from an audience’s interaction with the text. She notes that “the content of any message, whether textual or behavioral, is not simply found in that message but is constructed by an audience interacting with that message” (p. 96). Radway acknowledges that mass culture critics may likely interpret a text’s meaning differently than its typical audience, and by exploring the “linguistic and conceptual forms used by real people to give order and meaning to the material situation in which they find themselves” (p. 118), cultural studies scholars are better able to understand the ways media audiences’ interpretations are re-circulated into their everyday lives.

The cultural studies view of the audience coincides with the communication discipline’s interpretive turn in understanding how communication processes become part
of individuals’ social realities. Ruddock (2001) concludes that audience research within
the cultural studies paradigm reflects a new way to understand a culture’s relationship
with media, accounting for what texts mean to an audience rather than what texts do to
them. Allowing audiences to be engaged with texts as a meaning-making process rather
than simply affected by them is akin to Johnson’s (1986/87) notion that texts and the
audiences who consume them are engaged in a circuitous relationship; texts both
influence audiences’ worldviews, and texts are shaped by audience readings as they get
circulated back into culture. Ruddock (2001) argues that audiences bring to bear their
subjective experiences to actively engage with the media they consume, which shows that
“reality, meaning and subjective experience are entwined. Reality is formed through the
ritualistic creation and dissemination of meaning. Hence, communication is culturally
specific and can only be understood as a process from the point of view of the people
involved” (p. 119).

Briggs (2010) echoes both Hall and Ruddock in his understanding that audiences’
relationships with media texts are primarily semiotic. He suggests that audience scholars
should neither “celebrate audience resistance, or exaggerate media power,” but instead
should understand that a complex relationship exists between “‘meaning potentials’
which are encoded in texts (in their semiotic, generic, and discursive modes of address, in
their narrative and ideational structures, in the pleasures and points of identification that
they offer) and actual audience responses” (p. 2). It is only through this relationship
between audiences and texts, he argues, that media texts are made significant. This study
explores both the encoded ideologies of class in contemporary television and the
audience interpretation to those ideologies, which illuminates the relationship between text and audience to determine how working-class ideology is made meaningful.

**Understanding Working-Class Identity through Television**

Despite the growing number of American citizens who identify as lower-middle- or lower-class, political rhetoric and media representation fail to reflect the class reality of many Americans. Given that television representations have the ability to significantly shape cultural beliefs and norms, it is imperative to investigate how these representations produce ideological beliefs about the working-class. The domestic sitcom is a genre in which the working-class has increasingly been underrepresented, and when working-class characters have been portrayed, they are presented stereotypically. Conversely, the reality television genre is predicated on the participation of “ordinary” (i.e., working-class) American families. The representation of many of these working-class families has led to the proliferation of “redneck” reality programming, a subgenre that has garnered some of the highest ratings in reality television. Consequently, both of these genres offer lenses through which to examine how class is ideologically structured in the current television culture. Because audiences may read the ideologies about class produced in television texts differently based on their identities, this study also examines how television viewers use television’s representations and their own social locations to make sense of class in American culture.

In Chapter Two, I ground this project in the relevant research on class generally, as well as on the study of class in television studies specifically. After providing scholarship regarding how class has previously been conceptualized, I then outline the ways class has been examined in conjunction with other identity categories in television
studies, including textual and audience studies of class, gender, race, and rural spatiality. Finally, because I aim to situate class ideology within the contemporary American cultural landscape, I discuss the theoretical construct of neoliberalism. I address the pervasive impact neoliberal ideology has had in structuring beliefs about citizenship in America, and how it is useful for making sense of the representation of class, gender, Whiteness, and rural belonging in modern working-class television.

Chapter Three provides the methodological framework for both phases of my study. I first articulate how my research fits within the broader project of television studies. I then introduce the textual analysis phase of this project by providing a rationale and description of my chosen texts, and my data analysis procedures. Finally, I discuss my justification for the methodological choices of the audience study. After delineating sampling and recruitment techniques, I provide demographic information about my participants and detail the structure of the group interviews I conducted. Finally, I discuss the data analysis procedures used in the audience portion of the study.

Chapter Four delves into the textual analysis phase of my research. In this chapter, I propose four research questions that investigate how working-class identity is made ideologically meaningful in contemporary working-class television’s domestic sitcoms (The Middle and Raising Hope) and “redneck” reality programs (Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Duck Dynasty). First, I explore the ways the characters and personalities are coded as working-class, both through socioeconomic indicators and cultural markers. I then turn to the characters’ and personalities’ employment of the “rules” of neoliberalism, and how the adoption of, or failure to adopt, these rules relates
to their working-class belonging. Finally, I investigate the ways that neoliberal “rules”
structure the intersection between class and gender, as well as class and rural Whiteness.

Chapter Five turns attention to viewers of the four programs analyzed in the
textual portion of the study, using three research questions to explore how audiences use
their viewership of *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Duck
Dynasty* and other programs to make sense of working-class identity. First, I consider the
ways viewers use the neoliberal rhetoric that frames the working-class in Chapter Four to
talk about the characters and personalities. I then investigate how they speak about the
relationship between gender, rural Whiteness, and working-class identity, and then
discuss the ways viewers use working-class televisual representation to make sense of
working-class identity in broader culture.

Finally, Chapter Six begins by offering a brief summary of results from the two
analysis chapters. Driven by the virtual erasure of the working-class in both media and
political rhetoric, next I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of
understanding how the working-class are represented in and understood by audiences of
two contemporary television genres. I provide limitations that existed in each phase of the
study, and suggest areas of future research that may further this line of inquiry. Lastly, I
present concluding thoughts about the study and the state of working-class representation
on television.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores the ways televisual representation contributes to the ideological construction of working-class identity by examining how characters and personalities have been portrayed on television in the domestic sitcom and the family-based, “redneck” reality genres. Given the role television representation plays in shaping cultural politics and norms (Mittell, 2010), investigating class representations in these genres has implications for our beliefs about the working-class in society. That is, these representations have the ability to contribute to the formulation of stereotypes, structure beliefs about who is deserving of upward mobility in society, and influence policy regarding social programs. Further, this study addresses the dearth of audience analyses by exploring how television viewers make meaning of class representations, as well as representations of gender, Whiteness, and rural identity, to shape discourses of class in their own lives and society at large.

The goal of this chapter, then, is to situate my project within the broader conversation of class and television research, and to demonstrate how this study extends scholarly understanding of class representation on television, an area that has received relatively little attention in media studies research. To this end, I review literature that has examined class in conjunction with gender, Whiteness, and rural identity independently; with the exception of very few studies (e.g., Bettie, 1995), media scholarship has neglected the connections among each of these identity categories, particularly as they inform our understanding about what it means to be working-class in contemporary America. I also frame the audience portion of this study through the limited scholarship on audience studies that explores multiple categories of identity. The studies that do exist
indicate that audience research offers a useful way to examine how viewers interpret their social world vis-à-vis their identities, and my research extends that body of knowledge to include a definition of class belonging.

As discussed in Chapter One, class is an important marker of identity that is salient for all Americans, even if they struggle to identify their class belonging. Given that class understanding through television is the guiding question in my research, it is key to first address how previous scholarship has conceptualized class. In what follows, I draw from a number of sociological and cultural theorists to describe how class has been previously been theorized to include identifiers beyond socioeconomic factors (e.g., income, occupation, etc.).

**Defining Class**

Contemporary cultural studies’ understandings of class have transcended the initial Marxist conceptualization that class consciousness can be reduced to economic position alone. Slack (1996) contends that by the 1970s, cultural theorists began to view classical Marxism as reductionist. Contrary to the Marxist position, critics argued that not all elements of a society were structured by economic modes of production alone, nor were all political and ideological practices tied to a particular class belonging. Instead, theories of articulation (Hall, 1985; Laclau, 1977) allow understandings of class to move beyond the traditional Marxist notions to consider how class is discursively constituted. Laclau’s (1977) theory contends that although meanings within discourses are always connotatively linked to a particular class position, articulation asserts that those links between concepts are non-necessary. Consequently, class should be viewed as fluid rather than fixed. Laclau’s theory accounts for variance in class discourses, or, as Slack
(1996) suggests, “not everyone believes what they are supposed to believe or acts in a way they are supposed to act, regardless of their class belonging” (p. 118).

The idea that class is discursively constituted allows for the notion that capital can be accrued through means other than economic. Bourdieu (1984) proposes a metaphorical view of culture as an economy; in this conceptualization, cultural practices and processes mimic economic resources, creating an unequal distribution of “wealth” and a privileged class. While the privileged class invests in and promotes an “official” culture of high cultural institutions such as education and the arts, the “proletariat” class’ lack of economic and cultural resources distinguishes their tastes from their high culture contemporaries. Importantly, Bourdieu notes that it is difficult to separate economic and cultural capital, and concludes that they work together to create and maintain status and privilege and enculturate an individual within his or her habitus, or the social milieu in which we develop our subjectivities. For Bourdieu, the habitus is a disposition that is always already constituted and is second nature for those who inhabit it. Incorporating Bourdieu’s metaphorical understanding of culture as economy into a definition of class supports the idea that that economics alone is not a sufficient way to define one’s class belonging. Rather, this metaphor advocates the inclusion of culture, taste, and habitus into defining class.

In postmodern culture, economic and cultural class become intertwined through commercial culture. Specifically, individuals perform their class positions outwardly through conspicuous consumption. Conroy (1998) notes that middle class belonging experienced a transition in the mid-20th century, shifting from a traditional middle class of landowners and entrepreneurs to a “new” middle class of corporate managers and
employees, whose social position was rooted solely in their income. She argues that this transition made the new middle class’ prestige “much more volatile and uncertain” (p. 73) and suggests,

This uncertainty reaches crisis proportions in the 1950s, engendering the phenomenon that C. Wright Mills termed “status panic,” wherein members of the new middle classes come increasingly to depend on the goods they consume to express their claims to social prestige and to enforce the status distinctions leveled by income. (pp. 73-74)

Schor (2003) contends that the increased consumption required to perform class is partly what structures class, and specifically, what has driven class inequality. She points out that consumer culture’s answer to income inequality is access to adequate income through redistribution and growth, which theoretically would allow more individuals to consume more goods. Schor asserts that “adequate” income only exists in relation to the income of others, and that failing to account for consumer desire and need results in a continued increase in what level of income constitutes “adequate.” She notes, “[This] argument underscores the social context of consumption: the ways in which our social standing and belonging comes from what we consume…[it suggests] that attempts to achieve equality, or adequacy of individual incomes, without changing consumption patterns will be self-defeating” (p. 206). Thus, while consumer culture allows individuals to perform their class belonging culturally, access to goods through income serves to reinforce class distinctions and inequality.

Scholarly conceptualizations of class echo the theoretical understanding that class is rooted in more than economic position. Rather than reducing class to socioeconomic
concerns such as income, occupation, and education level, Hodge (2008) advocates for viewing social class as a folk concept. Making sense of class in this way allows us to employ the “highly refined and sophisticated vocabulary” Americans have for discussing class, as well as taking into account how our class “anxieties and allegiances [are shaped by] our clothing, the cars we choose to drive, the neighborhoods we live in, and the schools we attend” (p. 359). Moreover, Conley (2008) argues that a folk class consciousness is driven by not only the tangible cultural and economic privileges afforded to some individuals and not others, but also by possibility and expectation. In other words, while Conley does not discount the role of socioeconomic variables such as race, income, and parental occupation in determining a child’s eventual class position in adulthood, he contends that mere exposure to those realistic privileged possibilities, such as the tacit expectation of higher education, shapes an individual’s class belonging.

Social class positioning influences the structuring of individuals’ daily life worlds, yet its complexity makes it difficult to fully articulate. Conley (2008) maintains, the very paradox of class is that the moment we are measuring some aspect of it adequately – say, income – and specifying a causal pathway of some sort, then we have taken our finger off what class really is…that unspoken—unspeakable even—thing that hangs in the air…that is the essence of social class. (p. 371)

Class, then, cannot be reduced to any one practical or theoretical element; instead, scholars should examine the myriad structures of everyday life that help shape how we come to define class. For the purpose of this study, class belonging is conceptualized as a complex construct that considers both socioeconomic variables (i.e., income, occupation,
and education level), as well as the less tangible elements of culture that mark an individual’s class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural markers of class include the everyday lived experiences that Hodge (2008) identifies, such as language use and how one spends his or her leisure time, as well how patterns of taste and consumption influence the reading of someone’s class belonging (Schor, 2003). In an attempt to develop a fuller conception of how class is understood in broader culture, this study seeks to explore one such ordinary element: how television representation and consumption contribute to our understanding of social class, and, specifically, working-class identity. Television studies literature provides justification for the examining the role television plays in shaping our ideological beliefs about class.

**Class and Identity Representation on Television**

This project is chiefly concerned with exploring how television discourses shape our understanding of class in contemporary America, but it also assumes that class can never be isolated and understood as just class. As a result, this research examines how class discourses are shaped not only by working-class representation, but also by representation of gender, Whiteness, and rural belonging in conjunction with class to illustrate how these categories of identity work together to create discourses about the working-class. I now turn to the ways that the relationship between class and television has previous been examined. This scholarship highlights how class is often studied in isolation, and how the meaning we make of class through television would benefit from the current study’s examination of multiple, concurrent identity categories.

Compared with other categories of identity, class representations on television have been understudied. Moreover, when scholars have examined these depictions,
research often focuses on class in isolation, which fails to account for how class is structured through gender, racial, and regional identities. This body of scholarship primarily explores the frequency with which working-class characters appear on television; it asserts that from the medium’s earliest days, working-class individuals and families have been largely underrepresented in proportion to the actual American population. Butsch’s (1992, 2005) longitudinal analyses of domestic sitcoms consistently reveal that working-class characters are few in number. Between 1946 and 1990, Butsch (1992) contends that only 11 percent of 262 family-based situation comedies had households headed by working-class individuals (e.g., blue collar, clerical or service workers), while 70 percent of those households were clearly middle class. Butsch (2005) indicates that the 1990s and early 2000s provided an upward trend of working-class representation; sixteen of the fifty-three new domestic sitcoms in the 1990s featured working-class families, and he notes that “a bounty of new black and working-class sitcoms were scheduled for prime time by the six broadcast networks” in the new millennium (p. 131). Yet, the increased representation of the working-class in sitcoms has not continued as the 2000s have advanced. A.V. Club contributor Todd VanDerWerff (2012) notes that although many early domestic sitcoms are working-class based, blue-collar sitcoms are few in the current television landscape. He cites Raising Hope, The Middle, and 2 Broke Girls as the only sitcoms airing in the 2012-2013 television season to “show a serious interest in questions of economic stability” (para. 2); Mom, which debuted in the 2013-2014 season, added another working-class family to the television landscape (Gorman, 2013). Thus, many successful programs, historically and contemporarily, have focused almost exclusively on the middle-class, and even many of
those set within a working-class milieu fail to address the financial concerns many real working-class families face.

Other textual analyses moved beyond frequency to consider the ideological images viewers receive regarding the working-class. As Leistyna (2009) contends, “network television has a long history of constructing tales about the lives of working people that reinforce classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes that serve to justify the inequalities inherent in capitalism’s class structure” (p. 340). That is, working-class characters, particularly men, have traditionally been presented as fools incapable of providing for their families, whereas both parents in middle-class sitcoms are presented as intelligent, sensible, and mature (Butsch, 2005). On the whole, working-class characters are represented as lazy and uninterested in either politics or education, stereotypes that “distract us from the structural realities, especially the unequal distribution of resources in public education that inhibit people’s lives” (Leistyna, 2009, p. 345).

There is also little breadth in class representation in reality-based programming, even though it is working-class individuals who are overrepresented in this genre (Skeggs & Wood, 2011). Reality portrayals are often exploitative, and middle-class viewers are often encouraged to distance themselves from the working-class. For example, family-based self-help programs such as Honey We’re Killing the Kids and Supernanny, which often feature working-class families as subjects, suggest that these families should be shamed because of their ineffectual parenting abilities (Ferguson, 2010). Daytime reality-based programs, like talk shows, offer an even more problematic representation of the working-class. As Gersch (1999) argues, guests on talk shows like The Jerry Springer...
Show and Sally Jesse Raphael are made into a spectacle for public consumption through their socially deviant behaviors. Deviant morality, in turn, becomes a marker for tastelessness, which is conflated with low social class. Further, Birmingham (2000) contends that the carnivalesque nature of daytime talk shows creates a sense of class cohesion, allowing the middle-class to articulate its values by policing the non-conforming behaviors of working-class talk show guests as “disgusting and perhaps socially dangerous” (p. 135).

Although working-class individuals are more widely represented in reality television than in domestic sitcoms, both genres paint a mostly negative portrait of working-class individuals. At best, they are presented as lazy and apathetic, and at worst, they are exploited as socially deviant outcasts. While there are exceptions to this characterization (e.g., Roseanne), this research demonstrates that working-class characters have not enjoyed the same range of representation as their middle-class counterparts. These depictions are not merely coincidental; conversely, they are deeply rooted in the economic interests and structure of the television industry. These concerns are examined through the other major trend in class on television scholarship, which looks at the factors that influence the range of class representations. Specifically, research indicates that the diversity of class representation on television is predicated on a number of factors that influence creative decisions within the industry. In an effort to connect sitcom production to the persistent images of working-class characters, specifically men, Butsch (2011) argues complex structural and cultural factors have continued to shape representation, even as the television industry changes in the post-network era. Butsch traces three reasons that help account for the consistency of working-class images: the
role of network domination of the industry, network decision making in program
development, and the work culture of the creative personnel who write programming.

Butsch indicates that the first factor that influences working-class representation
is network dominance in the industry. Although cable networks and multistation owners
began to compete with networks for viewers in the 1980s, Butsch points out that their
programming decisions were shaped by many of the same factors as the broadcast
networks. Specifically, both broadcast and cable networks faced pressure to deliver
predictable ratings and, thus, had to avoid risky programming. Programming has
consequently lacked innovation and novelty because stereotypical images of the working-
class have proven to be ratings successes in the past; Butsch argues “more diverse
programming appeared only in the early days of the industry when there were no past
successes to copy” (p. 104). As a result, he contends the same portrayals of class have
persisted throughout the history of the medium.

Given that the American television industry is built primarily as an extension of
the advertising industry, Butsch suggests that the second factor affecting the
representation of class is the need to produce content suitable for advertising. Lipsitz
(2011) argues that early television programming functioned as a way to address “the
anxieties and contradictions emanating from the clash between the consumer present of
the 1950s and collective social memory about the 1930s and 1940s” (p. 25). That is, post-
WWII prosperity had to contend with the memory of the hardships of the Great
Depression, and, consequently, commercial television’s most important economic
function “came from its role as an instrument of legitimation for transformations in
values initiated by the new economic imperatives of postwar America. For Americans to
accept the new world of 1950s’ consumerism, they had to make a break with the past” (p. 27). Thus, the dissemination of consumerist values played a significant role in shaping television content from the medium’s inception.

Butsch (2011) posits several ways this continues to manifest in contemporary television. The advertiser-sponsored networks of the broadcast industry must be careful to avoid television content that will offend or dissatisfy advertisers, a concern not shared by subscription networks like HBO. Moreover, Leistyna (2009) contends that during television’s evolution into a commercially sponsored medium, “producers and advertisers understood that associating products with middle- and upper-class lifestyles would increase both ratings and sales” (p. 340). Consequently, Butsch (2011) states that advertisers prefer programming that allows their products to be conspicuously displayed, which requires that television characters are believably affluent enough to afford them. In addition to middle-class characters who can buy and use advertisers’ products, the advertising industry seeks to ensure that television content will attract viewers who can do the same (i.e., a middle-class audience).

Finally, Butsch indicates that industry work culture, including production processes and creative personnel, contributes to the persistence of working-class stereotypes. For instance, he notes that the pressure of tight production schedules requires writers to produce scripts quickly, and that this often results in the use of stock (i.e., stereotypical) characterizations and plot formulas with which audiences will be familiar and can easily accept. Butsch further points out that “the vast majority of writers and producers come from upper-middle-class families, with little direct experience with working class life” (p. 107). Coupled with the tight time constraints of television
production schedules that leave little time to become adequately familiar with a working-
class milieu, Butsch contends that many television writers are simply writing what they
know.

Yet sitcoms are not the only genre where class representation is influenced by
industry practices; the proliferation of reality programming since the turn of the century
is predicated on the economics of production. As Slocum (n.d.) points out, reality-based
programming is cheaper than traditional programming in almost every capacity,
including equipment and crew needs, location costs, and the cost of paid performers. It is
this last concern – the casting of reality television – that influences class representation
on reality television, in which working-class participants are disproportionately
represented. Skeggs and Wood (2011) maintain that reality programs cast working-class
participants who are willing to engage in “class exploitation” in exchange for the
possibility of access to a “‘better life’ and even to celebrity,” which helps to “[reinvent]
the myths of social mobility that abound in neoliberal political culture” (p. 2). Thus,
despite low compensation, the reality television industry is often able to entice working-
class individuals to participate through the promise of celebrity and upward mobility.

Examinations of class on television are largely focused on frequency of
representation of working-class characters and participants. The studies that address the
ways those working-class characters are depicted emphasize the stereotypical
characteristics of specific characters, and other research sheds light on the industry
practices that inform these stereotypical portrayals. Yet, absent from this research is an
investigation into the ideological codes that mark characters as working-class; in other
words, what cultural signifiers are inscribed onto characters and their surroundings that
demarcate them as working-class? Before I begin to analyze characters and personalities in terms of neoliberal philosophy, my first goal is to establish that the characters are, indeed, working-class representations. Thus, my first research question asks:

**RQ1: What meanings about working-class identity are coded in representations on working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs?**

**Neoliberalism in Contemporary Culture**

To provide a theoretical guide for understanding how class is manifest in modern culture, and in entertainment television specifically, I explore class and its intersection with gender, Whiteness, and rural belonging through the lens of neoliberalism. Because it is explicitly framed through economics, neoliberalism has clear implications for studying class in contemporary culture; both in the United States and abroad, neoliberal policies are discussed in conjunction with a persistent culture of poverty (e.g., Houtart, 2005, Ruben, 2001). The poor and working-class experience the ramifications of neoliberal ideology through educational policies that emphasize pre-structured curriculum, standardized testing, and accountability measures that purport to aid “failing” (i.e., working class) schools allow the dominant class to produce “passive worker/citizens with just enough skills to render themselves useful to the demands of capital” (Hill, 2006, p. 1). Consequently, achieving middle-class belonging becomes less of a possibility for working-class individuals.

However, neoliberalism’s overarching cultural philosophies influence identity beyond class belonging. After providing an explanation of neoliberalism’s tenets, I address the ways that the ideology also impacts discourses of gender and race in
contemporary culture. I then turn to the ways that neoliberalism has been applied to the study of television, particularly reality programming, and then suggest what I hope to achieve by understanding class in domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality through the lens of neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalism: Theoretical Frame**

Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that has shaped cultural beliefs about class in the United States. Bockman (2013) refers to neoliberalism both as an approach to governance and as a contemporary political movement, which began to gain traction in the early 1970s in attempt to mitigate capitalist crises (e.g., the oil crisis, debt crisis, the widespread popularity of socialism). She argues that neoliberal philosophy posits that it is not government’s responsibility to create economic growth; by even trying, the government makes the world worse for everyone, including those they purport to help. Instead, neoliberalism encourages a reliance on private companies, private individuals, and free markets to generate economic growth and promote social welfare. In his *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Michel Foucault notes that neoliberal states are truly marked by the use of the market logic of efficiency, competitiveness, and profitability to govern. With these privatized technologies of governance in place, citizens are consigned control of their own lives without government interference. Simply, neoliberalism can be understood as the idea that “the ‘free’ market [is] the best way to organize every dimension of social life” (Ouellette, 2008, p. 140).

Rose (1996) provides a more complicated reading of neoliberalism, resisting the simple dichotomy between the market and the welfare state, and instead emphasizing the complex power relations between them. Similar to Foucault’s notion that governance
happens at a micro, individualized level, Rose maintains that neoliberal subjectivity is constructed through free choice and personal responsibility. Indeed, because neoliberal governance assumes free will of the individual, those who fail within the system are suggested to be the “author[s] of their own misfortune” (p. 59). Whereas the welfare state that began in the mid-century sought to govern citizens through society, Rose indicates that neoliberal strategies seek to govern without society. That is, they “govern through the regulated and accountable choice of autonomous agents – citizens, consumers, parents, employees, managers, investors – and to govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to particular ‘communities’” (p. 61).

Martinez and Garcia (n.d.) contend that neoliberalism has manifested in five recent societal trends. First, they note that the rule of the market takes precedence over other societal considerations; neoliberal philosophies advocate total freedom of enterprise, and suggest that a completely unregulated market will increase economic growth, benefitting everyone. Neoliberalism also emphasizes a reduction in funds to social programs like education and health care, and pushes for privatization of state-owned industries, the third major tenet that Martinez and Garcia identify. They suggest that while privatization of industries like railroads, highways, and schools is couched in a rhetoric of efficiency, “privatization has mainly had the effect of concentrating wealth even more in a few hands and making the public pay even more for its needs” (para. 10). The fourth main goal of neoliberalism is industrial deregulation, which Martinez and Garcia suggest allows corporations to maximize profits. Finally, they maintain that neoliberalism seeks to eliminate the concept of public good or community, instead placing responsibility on the individual. Similar to Rose (1996), Martinez and Garcia
indicate that those who do not thrive within the neoliberal system are blamed for their own failures.

Duggan (2003) maintains that neoliberalism’s overarching dominance can be attributed to the fact that it discursively constructs economic policy as “primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise” (p. x), which is separate from politics and culture. This rhetorical separation, she points out, makes neoliberalism immune from political accountability and cultural critique. The result is the concentration of power and resources in the hands of only a few, and because economics is understood only through technical terms, “neoliberal policies can be framed as due to performance rather than design, reflecting the greater merit of those reaping larger rewards” (p. x). In other words, neoliberalism justifies class stratification by emphasizing a merit-based distribution of resources, and it obfuscates the role racial- and gender-based marginalization play in economic inequality. However, gender and race do play a significant role in the implementation of neoliberal ideology.

Television scholars have found neoliberal philosophy to be a useful lens through which to examine the role television plays in circulating dominant ideologies in our social world. In what follows, I discuss how the theory has been applied in television studies at present, and I point out that examinations of neoliberal discourses are largely absent from the study of identity representation on television. My project, then, fills this gap by exploring how neoliberalism shapes our understanding of class in American culture in conjunction with other identity categories.
Neoliberalism and Television Studies

Scholars have increasingly turned to media technologies and texts to examine the ways that neoliberal philosophies are reified within our culture. Hay (2000) argues that domestic technology played an important role in the development of neoliberal governance in the late 20th century; new technologies (e.g., televisions and remote controls, VCRs, personal computers) allowed individuals more mobility within the home, and he maintains that “these devices became crucial to the installation of a region [domestic space] that actualized and organized other spheres” (p. 67). Although Hay acknowledges that the implementation of these technologies was especially instrumental in shaping the lives of members of the particular social class that could afford them, he suggests they also played a role in structuring the broader cultural milieu for everyone. He notes,

To the extent that the freedoms of the neoliberal household depended on the household’s spatial organization and the disposition of subjects to living (exercising power, managing their lives and their space) on a daily basis through these technologies, the household as arrangement became integral to the formation of a broader social arrangement. (p. 67)

Moreover, because neoliberalism asserts that government should play a minimal role in the lives of its citizens, Hay suggests that private industries like television, rather than the government, were necessary to reinforce beliefs about what constitutes appropriate citizenship. Thus, television’s ideological messages emphasize individualization and privatization in all aspects of citizens’ lives.
In addition to media technology, television industry and content also work to promote neoliberal philosophy. Couldry (2010) argues that neoliberal economics necessarily limits the voices within a democracy, and by examining our media structures and representation – “the domain where we often look to find voice” (p. 73) – we find that the mainstream media “normalize values and mechanisms important to neoliberalism and...embed such values and mechanisms even more deeply within contemporary cultures of governance” (p. 73). Rose (1996) echoes this assertion, insisting that the mass media is an apparatus that helps promote advanced liberal governance. He notes that media have “provided a plethora of indirect mechanisms that can translate the goals of political, social and economic authorities into the choices and commitments of individuals, locating them into actual or virtual networks of identification through which they may be governed” (p. 58). Media, then, act as a conduit for the hegemonic values of neoliberal society, but the insidious ways dominant messages are packaged encourage these values to be viewed through a lens of individual choice.

Overarching themes present in reality television make it particularly suitable for exploring how entertainment media contribute to promoting neoliberal ideology. Grazian (2010) lists a number of ways that reality shows exhibit free-market neoliberal philosophy, including contestants voting one another off of a program to protect their own self-interest, and competition shows that “[guarantee] that nearly all players must lose…inevitably emphasiz[ing] the moral failings of each contestant just before they are deposed” (p. 70). Further, popular reality television in the contemporary media climate addresses the viewer as “as an individual whose most pressing obligation to society is to empower her or himself privately. TV assists by acting as a visible component of a
dispersed network of supporting technologies geared to self-help and self-actualization” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 3). This private self-improvement and autonomy are both central to the development of neoliberal subjectivity, and the self-help genre is predicated on the belief that one is individually in charge of improving him or herself. As Rimke (2000) concludes, “It is a characteristic current assumption that all human conflicts are, to a significant degree, psychological problems and that they can, with enough reading, guidance, determination and industriousness, be set right at the level of psychical individual self-discipline” (p. 73). Thus, as a major manifestation of current reality programming, self-improvement shows promote the assumption that participants are harnessing power and are seeking to improve their lots in life in an individualized, private (i.e., without requiring governmental intervention) way.

Further, Couldry (2010) points out that reality television exhibits a number of parallels with contemporary work culture, including compulsory authenticity (i.e., one must be his or her “real” self) and surveillance by an external authority. Both of these characteristics foster a culture of judgment, often by large, unseen audiences. Couldry suggests that this element of judgment is primarily what separates recent reality television from other instructional and lifestyle programming, and what makes reality television fit neatly within the broader neoliberal project.

**Reality TV as Neoliberalism’s Secret Theater**

Couldry (2008) argues that reality television acts as a “secret theater” for neoliberalism in which “its playful inversions obscure their links to the labor conditions normalized under neoliberalism” (p. 3). Thus, the genre has been subject to a number of scholarly textual analyses that highlight how neoliberal conditions play out in media
texts. Central to many of these analyses is the suggestion that reality television participants and contestants are constructed through a neoliberal framework in such a way that our expectations about their subjectivity are hegemonic. In other words, many of reality television’s subgenres purport that neoliberal citizenship is common sense in our contemporary culture. Two subgenres in particular – self-help and makeover TV – have been subject to scholarly examination of the ways that neoliberal tenets of individualism and privatization are reinforced through reality programming.

As Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue, reality TV’s self-help genre is predicated on “life intervention” techniques, which “mobilize professional motivators and lifestyle experts, from financial advisors to life coaches, to help people overcome hurdles in their personal, professional, and domestic lives” (p. 63). The goal of these programs is to empower individuals to be self-regulating entrepreneurs of their own lives. Yet the authors argue that, paradoxically, these shows work as social workers by proxy by using “authoritarian governing techniques such as ‘home visits,’ hidden camera surveillance, pedantic lecturing, and close supervisory relationships in an effort to produce self-sufficient citizens” (p. 65) who are “free” only in the sense that they do not rely on state or institutional services. That is, they work to privatize state-sponsored services under the guise of creating individuals who are in control of their own lives.

Ouellette’s (2008) analysis of the daytime courtroom program Judge Judy offers one such example of how reality television privatizes self-help and emphasizes personal responsibility. Ouellette argues that Judge Judy reinforces neoliberal citizenship by privatizing justice and stigmatizing those whom she deems “a waste of the court’s time” (p. 145). She notes that by solving court cases in the 30-minute frame of a television
program, the show presents commercial television as having the ability to resolve conflicts more efficiently than traditional courts, thus rationalizing the “outsourcing” of state-owned institutions. Moreover, through Judy’s questioning and subsequent lecturing guests about their troubled personal histories, Ouellette suggests that litigants in *Judge Judy*’s courtroom are held responsible for failing to properly manage themselves and are thus “cast as inadequate individuals who lack the capacity or, worse, desire to function as self-reliant and personally responsible citizens” (p. 145). *Judge Judy*, then, promotes neoliberal citizenship by pointing out the inadequacies of both state institutions and risk-taking individuals.

Makeover television is another venue in which neoliberal ideology has shaped the reality genre. Ouellette and Hay (2008) conclude that this subgenre includes beauty/style shows (e.g., *What Not to Wear, Extreme Makeover*), and also talent/job search shows (e.g., *American Idol, Project Runway*) in which “experts, teachers, and judges seek to transform raw human potential into coveted opportunities for self-fulfillment through the realization and expression of talent” (p. 127). Because of the ritualized use of television and the proliferation of this genre in the television line-up, “TV brings the makeover more deeply into the fabric of daily life, and for that reason is able to circulate its logics and rules more broadly also more informally than books, magazines, the internet, or other media” (p. 102). In this way, makeover TV is especially adept at the neoliberal function of “governing at a distance” (p. 102); not only are viewers able to judge contestants and participants from their own domestic spaces, they are also encouraged to implement self-improvement techniques in their own lives.
As McMurria (2008) addresses in his analysis of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the application of neoliberal values extends beyond makeover TV focused on the self to also include what he dubs “Good Samaritan Reality TV.” Programs like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* perpetuate a neoliberal framework in that they emphasize corporate benevolence (i.e., privatization) rather than government intervention as a way to solve social problems. Moreover, McMurria notes that the families chosen for home makeovers are unlike many other makeover show subjects in that recipients “are presented as model citizens and deserving families whose problems are no fault of their own” (p. 320) rather than as personally responsible for their own misfortunes.

Neoliberalism has been a particularly illuminating analytical lens for illustrating the way free market philosophies of individualism, privatization, and self-improvement contribute to our understanding of contemporary reality television. However, despite the connection between neoliberal practices and the possibility for upward mobility through the dismantling of the welfare state, these analyses stop short of drawing out the relationship between participation in neoliberal citizenship and class belonging. Moreover, perhaps because of neoliberalism’s focus on the individual, scholars have largely neglected the presence of neoliberal structuring of family-based reality programming. Coupled with the family’s role in socializing class and culture (e.g., Baxter, 1987; Tomanovic, 2004), as well as the likelihood that the social class into which you are raised is where you will remain (Bourdieu, 1984; DeParle, 2012), my study’s exploration of neoliberalism in family-based “redneck” reality programs helps address the connection between neoliberalism and class.
The application of neoliberalism to make sense of identity is absent from the study of scripted programs, including situation comedies. Although other theoretical constructs of subjectivity, like post-feminism (e.g., McRobbie, 2008; Ouellette, 2002), have been employed to make sense of scripted television, the application of neoliberalism in entertainment television has been mostly relegated to reality programming. Thus, this study also seeks to apply a neoliberal lens to the understanding of scripted, domestic situation comedies to uncover if and in what ways this genre is another venue in which neoliberal philosophies are rendered hegemonic through their depiction of working-class families.

Neoliberal ideology necessarily impacts contemporary cultural understandings of class in America. It undergirds our beliefs about who is worthy or capable of upward mobility while ignoring the structural inequalities that make rising to the middle-class difficult for so many Americans. Television, and reality programming in particular, act as conduits to reinforce those ideologies by framing them as simply entertainment rather than a lesson in neoliberal citizenship. Family-based “redneck” reality programs and sitcoms that are family-centric provide an as-yet-unexplored avenue to examine how neoliberal philosophies are applicable to class structuring of the family. Given television’s ability to shape cultural beliefs through representation, as well as the pervasiveness and popularity of domestic sitcom and family-based “redneck” reality programming, this study investigates how neoliberalism helps shape our understanding about class in these genres. My second research question asks:

**RQ2: How do characters in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality shows apply the rules of neoliberal citizenship to their lives?**
Class, Gender, Race, and Rural Identity on Television

A limited number of textual analyses have been conducted that illustrate the ways class considerations intersect with representations of gender, race, and rural identification to develop a nuanced understanding of class identity representation on television. In what follows, I review relevant literature in which scholars explore the ways class representation intersects with other categories of identity. Although my research focuses specifically on representations of rural, working-class Whiteness, this section presents a more contextual, general picture of how class has been studied in conjunction with gender, race, and rural spatiality on television. Specifically, I first delineate how gender representation differs in working- and middle-class contexts, and how race, particularly Whiteness and Blackness, has been portrayed along lines of class. Lastly, I discuss how class identity has been analyzed in the context of rural belonging in television programs.

Class and Gender

Perhaps more than any other identity category, class and gender have been examined in conjunction in textual examinations of television, illustrating how representations of working-class women and men often stand in contrast to their middle-class counterparts. For example, Press’ (1991) analysis of work, family, and social class on television points to the ways depictions of working- and middle-class women have been in flux throughout television’s history. She identifies three periods of representation – pre-feminist, feminist, and post-feminist – and suggests that both working- and middle-class representations of women are incongruent with many of the realities real-life women face. Although Butsch (2005) notes that 1950s programs like The Honeymooners depicted “the working-class wife...as more intelligent, rational, sensible, responsible, and
mature than the man” (p. 116), Press (1991) argues that the power of working-class women within the family and society was exaggerated in pre-feminist television, causing working-class womanhood to be romanticized. Moreover, while middle-class families in the mid-1980s “returned to the superparent tradition” (Butsch, 2005, 123), Press maintains that these post-feminist era middle-class sitcoms (e.g., *The Cosby Show*) minimized the conflict between work and home life, “advocating newer work roles for women but also presenting an uncritical picture of older, more traditional family values” (p. 46).

Like Press’ assertion, other scholarship points to the notion that television portrayals and women’s real life class circumstances are often contradictory. For example, single-parenthood often results in economic hardship for women and their children in reality, yet programs that feature single mothers most often place those characters in middle-class occupations (e.g., *One Day at a Time, Murphy Brown, The Gilmore Girls*). Consequently, concerns about money on these TV programs are irrelevant (Leistyna, 2009). Yet, this may seem less surprising when one considers how infrequently issues of class circumstance are made explicitly the focus. The domestic situation comedy format emphasizes the family – a story vehicle in which the intersection of class and gender would seem to be paramount through issues such as the division of household labor and the necessity of a dual income home. However, Bettie (1995) observes that even when economic issues are thematically woven into a program, “class is nodded to but then obfuscated” (p. 131), making it difficult to critically address the realities of working-class characters in particular. Leistyna (2009) contends that programs that do depict women struggling economically place the responsibility on the individual
woman and her situation rather than broader social concerns. He concludes that programs like *Grace Under Fire* and *Alice* show “women who are simply down on their luck, they’ve lost their husbands, or they’ve made a really bad choice for a husband” (p. 343). Because these problems are portrayed as personal rather than institutional, it is the onus of the individual women to transcend their struggles.

However, the television landscape is not without texts that place identity politics of class and gender at the forefront; a number of scholars point to *Roseanne* as an exemplary program, and perhaps the only program (Leistyna, 2009), through which class position and its influence on gender relations is made explicit. Senzani (2010) argues that *Roseanne*’s narrative establishes a feminist slant by making both gender and class conflict central to the sitcom’s diegeses. Moreover, the confluence of Roseanne Barr’s media presence and her character provide a lens for examining the show’s gender and class commentary. Senzani contends, “Roseanne/ Barr’s body serves as a satire of gendered and middle-class notions of good taste, behavior, and beauty, challenging the consumerist and patriarchal definition of womanliness in quantifiable and technologically ‘improvable’ terms” (p. 242). Further, Bettie (1995) concludes that *Roseanne* envisions class as more than economic conditions, also considering familial relationships, social relationships unrelated to employment, and practices of female consumption as expressions of class. Consequently, Bettie suggests that *Roseanne* exists as a rare example of working-class female identity politics.

Televisual representations of masculinity in the sitcom genre are similarly divided along lines of working- and middle-class positioning. As Butsch (2005) points out, situation comedies work by turning negative stereotypes of minority groups into stock
character types, thereby reaffirming their inferior status. Through his longitudinal analysis of class representation on sitcoms from the 1950s through the early 2000s, Butsch concludes that working-class characters indeed occupy a marginalized space. He argues, “One of the most striking patterns in the fifty years of television situation comedy is the consistency in devaluing working-class men’s masculinity and thus confirming that class is a deserved lower status” (p. 112), despite the generally positive perception of working men present in 1930s and 1940s popular culture.

Indeed, early working-class series depicted their male leads as “more or less a buffoon, dumb, incompetent, irresponsible, immature, lacking good sense” (Butsch, 2005, p. 115), a negative representation that has been pervasive through television’s history. Leistyna (2009) echoes this observation, and notes that it has important implications for gender dynamics in the working-class family. Because of the male characters’ intellectual incapacity, he argues, “What we end up with is a reversal of traditional gender roles where these guys are essentially incapable of taking their place at the head of the household” (p. 345), representing a threat to traditional notions of masculinity. Sheehan (2010) points to the 1950s working-class sitcom *The Honeymooners* as one such early example of the central male character’s failure to inhabit the traditionally masculine role of sufficient family breadwinner. He notes that in the post-WWII context of consumer citizenship, Ralph Kamden’s inability to participate in consumer culture allowed Alice to undermine his patriarchal authority “by pointing to his inadequacies as a provider and consumer” (p. 573), consequently subverting traditional gender roles. Thus, while it manifests differently for male characters than for female ones (i.e., general stupidity or incompetency rather than simply poor decision-
making), working-class belonging is situated within a framework of individual inadequacy.

Yet, if situation comedies have spent their history collectively constructing a denigrated version of blue-collar masculinity, then research indicates that reality television has begun to turn the tide toward a more valorized view of working-class men and their role in their families. The proliferation of reality-based programs that feature blue-collar men doing work stands in contradiction to many of the aforementioned sitcom tropes of working-class men as lazy and incompetent; Mazzarella (2008), for instance, suggests that automotive industry docu-soap *American Chopper* celebrates working-class men’s work by discursively constructing its laborers as skilled craftsmen and, therefore, worthy of respect.

Other scholars maintain that portrayals of working-class men in reality programming function as a way to recoup masculine economic, political, and cultural authority in the feminized post-industrial service economy. Fleras and Dixon (2011) argue that working-class, male-centric docu-soaps, such as *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, and *Ice Road Truckers*, present their subjects as heroes in an attempt to re-assert working-class masculinity as hegemonic. By emphasizing that blue-collar jobs are dangerous, require perseverance, and are, quite literally, hard work, they also suggest that working-class masculinity is something to be admired. Moreover, in her analysis of *Deadliest Catch*, Kirby (2013) indicates that the appeal of the program is rooted partly in the representation of working-class “everymen” seeking to achieve the American Dream. She notes, “They work hard, spending long stretches of time away from their families, while struggling to provide for them financially” (p. 113), thus celebrating hegemonic beliefs
about the masculine sacrifice required to be adequate providers for their families. Caroll’s (2008) analysis similarly suggests that American Chopper exalts working-class labor and masculinity, while providing an endorsement for the American Dream. He concludes that although the family central to the program has enjoyed economic mobility through their labor, emphasis is often placed on the patriarch’s working-class roots, situating them as authentically blue-collar. In doing so, the show presents a sentimentalized version of working-class labor and “constructs a nostalgic world of blue-collar work in which the skilled manual laborer – always understood to be male – still reigns supreme, untroubled by the supposed defeats suffered by hegemonic masculinity in the post-civil rights era” (p. 280).

While there is certainly some variance in the representation of working- and middle-class men and women on domestic television, they have largely been constructed along lines of stereotypical, stock characterization. For working-class women, this has often meant a romanticized portrait of working-class womanhood. When juxtaposed with her husband, the incompetent, working-class buffoon, the working-class woman seems in charge of matriarchal family, which conflicts with the reality of many working-class households (Press, 1991). Scholars cite Roseanne (Bettie, 1995; Senzani, 2010) as the one working-class program that defies stereotypical representation, and instead places gender and class politics at the forefront.

Previous scholarship has identified characteristics associated with the class belonging of its characters, but the focus has been primarily on working-class men. Working-class portrayals seem to present contradictory messages regarding masculinity depending on the genre, which makes it difficult to articulate television’s ideological
message about what it means to be a working-class man. Moreover, with the exception of *Roseanne*, investigations into the experiences of working-class women in any genre are almost non-existent. Thus, this project will draw from classed televisial portrayals of gender to explore how working-class masculinity and femininity are ideologically encoded.

**Class and Race**

Representation of racial and ethnic minorities has increased throughout the history of U.S. television, which has led to an influx of scholarly analyses that explore how non-White racial groups are portrayed on television. Yet, far fewer studies examine the intersections of race and class, and how these categories of identity work in conjunction to construct ideological messages about marginalized groups. Scholarship that examines the intersections of race and class primarily focuses on the wholly negative representation of working-class characters; though it manifests differently for racial minorities and White characters, there is a dearth of positive working-class representations on television.

As Black characters became more prevalent on television, Jhally and Lewis (1992) argue that they also enjoyed significant upward mobility. Their analysis revealed that between 1971 and 1976, 30 percent of working-class characters on television were Black, yet between 1984 and 1989, none were. They conclude that, consistent with trends in White representation, most Black characters during the 1980s were middle-class. They point out, however, that these images were inconsistent with societal trends in which upward mobility for Black Americans was not increasing. Ultimately, Jhally and Lewis maintain that representation of the Black middle-class on programs like *The Cosby Show* “encourage the viewer to see the real world through rose-tinted spectacles…*The Cosby*
Show, we discovered, helps to cultivate an impression, particularly among White people, that racism is no longer a problem in the United States” (p. 71). Thus, similar to Gray’s (1989) assertion that Black middle-class success on fictional television can be attributed to individual virtue, The Cosby Show and Black middle-class images on television foster the idea that structural and societal factors no longer prevent Black Americans from achieving upward mobility.

Yet most genres in contemporary television do not depict racial minorities positively. As Grindstaff (2011) notes, “Race and class distinctions thus reflect and reinforce one another; their intersection seemingly ‘naturalized’ by the over-representation of people of color among the poor and working classes” (p. 200). That is, the conflation of “racial minority” and “poor or working-class” on television allows these identity categories to stand in for one another, which constructs White middle-classness as normative. Leistyna (2009) indicates that this is particularly apparent in the crime genre; because class is not used as a lens through which to view criminal behavior, deviance is framed in racial terms. He argues that programs like Homicide: Life on the Street, Oz, and The Shield do the ideological work of justifying why the vast majority of people in prison are African-American males and, importantly, the programs “are scripted outside of any analysis of racism and the poverty caused by capitalism” (p. 347).

Studies of Whiteness primarily explore the ways White representation deviates from normative depictions of the White middle-class, which has been the standard against which racial and classed others are measured. Leistyna (2009) contends that while Whites account for the largest number of poor people in the United States, their representational erasure gives us very little insight into who they are. He notes, “Because
Whiteness is associated with a dominant culture, poor and working-class whites are usually portrayed as cultural outcasts or a subculture” (p. 347). Grindstaff (2002) indicates that the cultural stereotype that defines lower-class Whites, “White trash,” is “the result of a complex racial history as well as the general failure to recognize social class as a central category of identity and consciousness outside the extremes of rich and poor” (p. 263). It calls to attention the relationship between Whiteness and poverty, which are usually separated in popular discourse, and points to the ways White trash individuals are not “doing Whiteness” appropriately (Bettie, 1995). Indeed, Grindstaff (2002) notes that the “White middle-class rely on the attributes embodied by White trash to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, in effect saying, We are not that,” (p. 264).

The depiction of the White trash stereotype exists in myriad television genres, but the regularity of working-class participants in talk shows and reality programs make those genres particularly susceptible to White trash imagery. Importantly, Grindstaff (2011) argues that the popularity and familiarity of the White trash performance on daytime talk “makes it readily adoptable as a television persona by virtually anyone willing to embody its codes. Jerry Springer…[is] like modern-day minstrelsy, with participants performing in ‘trash face’” (p. 200). Grindstaff demonstrates that the White trash image has become so tied to daytime talk that even though most daytime talk participants are poor or working-class Whites, they need not be to perform White trash. Moreover, the rise of “Hicksploitation TV” in contemporary reality television perpetuates stereotypes of Southern, working-class Whites; consistent with Leistyna’s (2009) assertion that depictions of White working-class characters are represented as cultural
outcasts, this subgenre is known for “taking on any subculture featuring eccentric, often dysfunctional white people” (Deggans, 2013, para. 9).

Variety in racial portrayals on television is limited. At present, Black representation is the only racial minority group with adequate representation to explore the intersection of race with class. While *Cosby*-era representation indicated upward mobility for Blacks on television, contemporary crime dramas gave ideological justification for the number of Black men in the criminal justice system; both examples provide an erasure of structural issues that prevented Black individuals from achieving middle-class status in society. White working-class portrayals, on the other hand, primarily depict socially deviant outcasts who fail to perform Whiteness successfully.

Because the current television landscape has very little racial minority representation in its domestic sitcom or family-based reality genres, this project examines how the depictions of White characters contribute to contemporary cultural understanding of working-class belonging. The analysis of Whiteness is virtually ignored in television scholarship. Further, unlike the working-class Whites analyzed in daytime talk programs, the recent rise of “Hickspolitation” TV (i.e., “redneck” reality) offers a space to explore working-class White families in a narrative that extends beyond an exploitative, one-shot appearance on a talk show. My research examines the portrayal working-class Whiteness in understudied television genres. When taken with portrayals of class and gender, depictions of class and Whiteness help provide nuance to working-class televisual representation.
Class and Rural Belonging

Working-class rural belonging has been the subject of media analysis ranging from “hicksploitation” film (e.g., Von Doviak, 2005) to “redneck” and “hillbilly” identities in Southern rock (e.g., Eastman & Shrock, 2008) and country music (Hubbs, 2011). However, although several working-class television series throughout the medium’s history, such as Roseanne, take place in rural settings, few studies have examined the relationship between working-class representation on television and rural spatiality explicitly. Extant scholarship regarding this relationship usually positions working-class rural belonging in one of two ways: either as a manifestation of Otherness (i.e., the “hillbilly” or “redneck”), or as an image of American pastoralism. Harkins (2005), for example, suggests that the mediated “hillbilly” trope in popular culture emerged in the context of modernity and progress in 20th century America, giving middle-class audiences a universal Other by which to contrast themselves. He further suggests, however, that the “hillbilly” identity is malleable, and has emerged as a group identity around which working-class Whites can rally. This, he notes, accounts for the popularity of working-class rural sitcoms such as The Beverly Hillbillies and The Dukes of Hazard.

Stereotypical images of “hillbilly” Otherness have been pervasive in television’s depiction of the rural working-class, particularly as it relates to Southern regional belonging. Referring to rural, working-class Southerners as the last social group of which stereotyping is acceptable, Slade and Narro (2012) provide a lengthy list of negative ways (e.g., as racist, as slow-talking and inferior) this group has been presented in a variety of television genres. Scholars point to the ways these stereotypical images may be harmful
to the working-class population, particularly when presented in the context of “reality.” Cooke-Jackson and Hanson’s (2008) work on CBS program The Real Beverly Hillbillies, a series that proposed transplanting a poor Appalachian family to live in California, questioned the ethical implications of using “hillbilly” stereotypes as reality show fodder, underscoring the economically exploitative nature of reality television and working-class individuals.

Other televisual representations of working-class ruralness highlight the complicated nature of “redneck” identification in contemporary culture. Most notably, “redneck” and blue-collar humor experienced a surge in the mid-2000s after the emergence of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour television specials and subsequent television programs (i.e., Blue Collar TV and The Bill Engvall Show). Hauhart’s (2008) analysis of Blue Collar Comedy illustrates the complex nature of class belonging for rural, working-class Americans. He contends,

Tour fans know that their social origins, their lifestyle, their attitudes and their tastes are not accepted by the higher social and cultural classes… they also know that they can likely never acquire the proper pedigree — nor likely ever comfortably inhabit the higher-elevation lifestyle — with its attendant focus on the “proper” way of doing things; indeed, the “proper” way of being. (p. 277)

Indeed, this representation of rural, working-classness points to the notion that class is a nuanced construct, particularly for those who embody a “redneck” stereotype that is always already conspicuously marked as without class.

When rural working-class characters are not regionally situated in the South or Appalachia, scholars have examined the connection between ruralness and working-class
identity in terms of heartland pastoralism. To frame the ideological construction of the American Midwest, or “flyover” country, Johnson’s (2008) work argues for the ways the myth of the Midwest as a pastoral safe haven has been reified through the television industry and programming. Johnson ultimately concludes that the Midwestern propensity toward enjoyment of “low” culture and cultural depictions of the heartland are simultaneously idealized as authentic, hardworking, and pastoral, and ridiculed as backward, narrow-minded, and conservative. Thus, working-class rural belonging in the heartland is constructed through the lens of ordinariness.

More specifically, Spangler (2014) analyzes the middle America belonging of the Heck family in *The Middle*, noting that they struggle economically throughout the series. However, unlike the potentially damaging stereotypes associated with rural, working-class Southerners, “the primary message is the same as it has been throughout sitcom history—family is important and people should be happy with what they have” (p. 486). In this way, rural working-class identity is romanticized as economic struggles are obfuscated by character happiness. While few domestic sitcoms featuring working-class characters, especially those living in rural places, remain on television, the rise of “redneck” reality programming provides a space through which to understand connections between rural identity – specifically Southern belonging – and working-class belonging.

**Neoliberalism and Identity**

In addition to neoliberalism’s clear implications in the understanding of class, neoliberal ideology also bears significant connections to contemporary discourses surrounding gender and race. Despite neoliberalism’s rhetorical separation between
economics and political and cultural life, Duggan (2003) indicates it is impossible to segment these areas in practice. She concludes,

In the real world, class and racial hierarchies, gender and sexual institutions, religious and ethnic boundaries are the channels through which money, political power, cultural resources, and social organizations flow. The *economy* cannot be transparently abstracted from the *state* or the *family*, from practices of racial apartheid, gender discrimination, or sexual regulation. (p. x)

Any attempt, then, to conceptualize neoliberalism in purely economic terms is reductionist, given that economic conditions are so intimately tied to every other dimension of social life. This study explores how the ideologies of neoliberalism not only help explain how class is represented on television, but also how the intersections of gender and rural Whiteness are influenced by our neoliberal culture.

Concerning gender in particular, neoliberal philosophies are manifest in postfeminist discourse, or the pervasive belief system regarding contemporary female subjectivity. Gill and Scharff (2011) maintain that the “powerful resonance” between neoliberalism and postfeminism operates on three levels. First, they contend that both philosophies are structured within a context of individualism, which rejects “notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves” (p. 7). They further argue that the “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism” is in many ways similar to the “active, freely choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism” (p. 7), indicating that postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism, but also partly structured through the
pervasiveness of neoliberal ideologies. Finally, Gill and Scharff conclude that the most important parallel between neoliberalism and postfeminism exists in their third connection, or the ways that women in particular are called on to be self-regulating, self-disciplining subjects. The authors ask,

To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism *is always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects? (p. 7, emphasis in original)

Thus, as Gill and Scharff point out, exploring neoliberalism’s connection to gender in a postfeminist culture allows scholars to interrogate how women and men experience the expectations of neoliberalism differently.

Scholars have also observed a relationship between neoliberalism and race. Duggan (2003) argues that both overt and covert race politics have been central to the project from its inception. Neoliberalism’s focus on personalized achievement has implications for racial inequality, as racism can be obfuscated under the guise of identity-blind meritocracy. As Davis (2007) suggests, neoliberal societies purport that “individuals are supposedly freed from identity and operate under the limiting assumptions that hard work will be rewarded if the game is played according to the rules” (p. 350). In line with Rose’s (1996) notion that neoliberal citizens are personally to blame for their shortcomings, Davis (2007) argues that “any impediments to success are attributed to personal flaws,” which “affirms notions of neutrality and silences claims of racializing and racism” (p. 350). Ultimately, neoliberalism acts as an erasure of
difference, crafting a society in which all individuals ostensibly enjoy the same chance of
success; as Roberts and Mahanti (2010) maintain, “neoliberalism effectively masks
racism through its value-laden moral project: camouflaging practices anchored in an
apparent meritocracy, making possible a utopic vision of society that is non-racialized”
(p. 253).

Given that the expectations of neoliberalism may be applied differently in terms of
gender and racial representation, my final research questions in the textual analysis
section of this project consider the implications of neoliberalism through the context of
gender and rural Whiteness. These questions ask:

RQ3: In what ways do the working-class characters’ performances of
neoliberal citizenship in domestic sitcoms and “redneck reality” differ along
lines of gender?

RQ4: What is the relationship between the characters’ performances of
neoliberal citizenship and rural, working-class Whiteness?

Identity and Audience Studies

In addition to the examination of identity representation on television, some
scholars have produced studies that explore how the identities of audiences influence
their readings of televisual texts. These studies move beyond the text itself to consider
how television programs actively structure ideology in society. As Press (1991) contends,
mass media “serve as important mechanisms for disseminating and reinforcing ideology
in liberal capitalist societies” (p. 173). However, the audiences that receive media do so
as active agents, bringing their own identities to the interpretation of the text. Taken
together, these assumptions highlight the powerful role televisual representation plays in
communicating dominant beliefs (e.g., Couldry, 2010), but reject the notion of passive audiences who are unable to actively construct meaning based on their own social locations. Thus, audience studies can serve as a complement to text-based analyses in that they explore how audiences read texts differently based on their own categories of identity.

Studies that explore television reception through the identities of participants are relatively limited, but those that do exist suggest that multi-dimensional identities influence the reading of texts. Realism is one such textual element that audiences read differently based on their social location. In her study of gender and class in television viewing, Press (1991) found that working-class women are much more likely than their middle-class counterparts to evaluate the plot, physical setting, moral issues, and lessons learned of the television they watch as realistic. She attributes this partly to the expectation that middle-class women are more “cultured,” and thus inherently “know” that television is not to be taken seriously. This sense of realism was paradoxical, however; as Press notes, working-class viewers evaluated depictions of middle-class life as realistic, despite the fact that it did not reflect a realistic version of their experiences. She concludes that television operates through a “class-specific” hegemony, which suggests “working-class women are particularly vulnerable to television’s presentation of the material accouterments of middle-class life as the definition of what is normal in our society” (p. 138). Ultimately, she warns that working-class women’s television watching may contribute to “a degree of alienation from the reality of their own material experience and potential or, at least, may contribute to a sense of personal failure women
experience for not achieving this media-defined norm and may thereby confound working-class women’s oppression” (p. 138).

Innis and Feagin (1995) also found realism to be a central element around which Black and White middle-class viewers read *The Cosby Show*. Their analysis revealed that Black audiences perceived the show as unrealistic. They suggested that the Huxtable family’s assimilation into White culture seemed contrived, and the show lacked any real racial problems inherent to the experiences of many Black families. Conversely, White viewers thought the Huxtables presented a realistic portrayal of Black America with which they could feel comfortable, primarily because of their assimilation into White, middle-class culture that allowed them to avoid being “too Black.” Jhally and Lewis (1992) note that Black viewers’ evaluations of authenticity differed from White and Hispanic audiences’ evaluations. They contend that Black viewers, like White and Hispanic viewers, mentioned visible signs of cultural difference (e.g., music, the political issues the show raised), but observed that for Black audiences “the most important indicators were those that an insider to the culture would recognize as defining that group: the language, the mannerisms, the ‘tone’ and ‘feeling’ of Black life” (p. 54). This sense of realism influenced the extent to which viewers were able to identify with the Huxtables, and perhaps unsurprisingly, upper-middle-class Black audiences exhibited the strongest identification with the family.

Audience scholarship that takes into account viewers’ specific identity locations is also a useful lens through which to explore how viewers read social issues. For example, Press and Johnson-Yale (2008) examined the way ambient television structured interaction among the women in an African-American hair salon. The authors found that
Oprah in particular was a daily fixture in the background of the salon, and while the patrons and employees were not always attentive to the show’s daily topic, the show did have the capacity to shape discourse about issues important to them on some occasions. Moreover, Press and Johnson-Yale discovered illuminating evidence regarding group identification along lines of difference; the shop owner and her patrons were able to express allegiance to Oprah Winfrey’s experiences through their participation in a Black female interpretive community in which their gender and race likeness to Oprah was more significant than class difference.

Exploration of social issues through the intersection of class and gender was also apparent in Press and Cole’s (1994) examination of women’s responses to abortion narratives on prime time television. The authors maintain that abortion is portrayed differently for working- and middle-class women on television; middle-class women only consider abortions under the most extenuating circumstances (e.g., in cases of rape or incest, to save the life of the mother, etc.), and it is most often poor and working-class characters who actually obtain them. Press and Cole identified their participants as all pro-choice and working-class; however, some participants self-identified as middle-class. After viewing an episode of Cagney and Lacey with an abortion storyline, the authors concluded that working-class identified women more strongly identified with the positive traits of the working-class character who received the abortion. Middle-class identified women, on the other hand, were far more critical of the character’s life choices. In their study, Press and Cole found that abortion narratives not only differ based on the characters’ class belonging, but also that participants’ class identification structured the way they read the narratives as well.
Because social identity influences the way audiences receive media, scholarship of television representation is made more complete by combining textual analyses with studies that examine how audience members read a given text. As Fiske (2011) concludes, television is able to “carry a socially convincing sense of the real” (p. 21), but that “reality is the product of people, and not a universal object that people merely observe from the outside” (p. 21). Indeed, as previous audience studies have indicated, the evaluation of a text’s realism is a product of the various identity categories that an audience member occupies. Moreover, audience analyses point to the way that mediated representations of social issues are interpreted differently based on gender, race, and class belonging. Fiske (2011) contends that “we have an extensive repertoire of discourses that we need in order to make sense of the variety of texts and social experiences that constitute our culture” (p. 15) and that television textual analysis “can identify the main discourses out of which [a program] is structured, but it cannot of itself identify the discourses that the viewer will bring to bear upon it to make it into a text that bears meanings for him or her” (p. 15). The studies reviewed above offer a way to explore how the variety of discourses available to an individual shape a viewer’s understanding of a text based on his or her social location. Thus, I draw from the findings of those studies to inform the current project.

In addition to text-based analysis, the current research employs audience studies to determine how television viewership contributes to class understanding based on viewers’ own identities. Examining the ways that the audience receives ideological messages about class will allow me to investigate the ideological encoding of rural, working-class characters and personalities in the contemporary television landscape.
Therefore, I propose three research questions for the audience phase of this study, which ask:

RQ5: How do audiences understand the relationship between neoliberalism and class belonging on television?

RQ6: How is audience understanding of working-class families shaped by the representation of the intersecting identity categories of Whiteness, rural belonging, and gender?

RQ7: How do audiences use the understanding of working-class families they glean from television to make sense of class in broader culture and their own class positions?

To explore these issues, I conducted a two-phase study that explores textual representation of and audience response to rural, working-class families on television. First, I provide a textual analysis of the first season of contemporary television texts from the domestic sitcom (The Middle and Raising Hope) and family-based, “redneck” reality genres (Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Duck Dynasty) that feature working-class characters and personalities. Through this textual analysis, I forward an understanding of how working-class identity is constructed through a neoliberal lens, and how that identity is further presented in terms of gender and rural Whiteness. Moreover, through discussions with viewers of these programs, I argue that these constructions contribute to an overall understanding of class in contemporary culture. In the next chapter, I discuss the methods of each phase of my study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Class representation on television has been understudied generally, and the role of gender, Whiteness and rural belonging play in shaping ideological messages about class on television has mostly been limited to particular identities (e.g., working-class men) and genres (e.g., daytime talk). Although the audience studies that do exist have indicated that reception of television’s ideological messages differs along lines of identity, there is a dearth of this type of research. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways television contributes to the discursive ideological construction of social class, and, subsequently, how audiences accept, resist, or negotiate the dominant hegemonic messages about class on television to inform their own understandings about class in society and their own lives.

In this study, I conducted analyses of both television texts and their audiences. I begin this chapter by briefly outlining television studies’ approach to analysis, which grounds this project. After justifying the role television plays in shaping culture, I justify the texts I used to explore how class is constructed on television, and explain the data analysis methods I employed for this phase of the study. I then turn to the second phase of my research and describe how the audience studies framework helped to explore the ways that viewers make sense of ideologies about class on television. I detail my recruitment and sampling procedures and data collection methods, including interview questions, before concluding with the analysis procedures for the audience portion of the project.
Television Studies

Television studies is an inherently interdisciplinary approach, influenced by social scientific, humanities, and cultural studies traditions. Gray and Lotz (2012) contend that the approach is a relatively new field of inquiry within the study of media; beginning in the 1970s, those interested in television worked within the areas of film and cultural studies to establish television as a legitimate object of analysis. The assumption of television’s legitimacy is predicated on the belief that as an object of everyday, lived experience, it is “a repository for meanings and a site where cultural values are articulated…it is one of our society’s prime storytellers, a resource and a tool for learning, deliberation, debate, and persuasion, and a site wherein power and ideology operate” (Gray and Lotz, 2012, p. 22). My interest in television, then, is rooted in the ideological power it wields as a medium of the ordinary. While television texts are relatively open in that they have the capacity to contain a variety of meanings (Hall, 1993), Fiske (2011) argues that television programs attempt “to control and focus this meaningfulness into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology” (p. 2). It is the goal of television studies scholars to interrogate how dominant ideology is circulated in culture.

Gray and Lotz (2012) point out that television studies is broadly divided into four areas of inquiry: programs, audiences, institutions, and contexts. The study of programs, rooted in traditions of literary and rhetorical criticism, explores how meanings are manifest in television texts. It assumes that nothing comes into a television program “by accident,” and, as a result, close readings of sounds, images, characters, and plot are all viable and important points of analysis. The study of television audiences recognizes that
while television texts are encoded with meaning, a program can only “do” or “mean” something insofar as it “does” or “means” something to an audience. Television studies draws from the cultural studies conceptualization of the audience as active and engaged, and assumes that studying audiences of “the multiple minutiae of the world of popular culture would reveal how power, social values, and ‘common sense’ were constructed and contested” (p. 62).

The third area of television studies, the study of institutions, takes into consideration the production of television texts, or, as Gray and Lotz put it, “how television gets ‘there’ in the first place… and why it is the way it is” (p. 89). Institution studies examine the processes and entities that shape television production and distribution, as well as the technologies used to view texts. Although though the tangibility of programs, audiences, and industries make them key sites for television analysis, Gray and Lotz suggest that all three are situated spatially, historically, and in relation to one another. The last area of television studies, context, takes into account the environments in which programs, audiences, and institutions exist. This research examines television’s medium, explores television history, and investigates television’s genres, flow, intertextuality and paratextuality.

As Gray and Lotz (2012) contend, television’s ubiquity in contemporary culture means that many disciplines may at times use television as an object of analysis. However, they argue that the television studies approach moves beyond a solitary interest in television’s programs, its audiences, its producers, or its history or context to consider how each of these aspects is integral in understanding television’s role in society. They note that television studies scholars do not analyze television simply for the sake of
understanding television, but to examine “the operation of identity, power, authority, meaning, community, politics, education, play, and countless other issues” (p. 22). They suggest that television studies presumes that “television is an important prism through which these issues are shared, and hence that a multifaceted and deliberately contextualized approach to the medium and its programs, audiences, and institutions will always help one understand those issues better” (p. 22).

This project is grounded by Gray and Lotz’ (2012) assertion that television studies research should investigate the medium’s role in shaping broader culture by examining how television texts and viewers interact with one another. In particular, I combined the analysis of programs and audiences within the contextual framework of wide-reaching neoliberal ideology to explore the meanings associated with social class, and how that meaning is shaped by the intersection of the identity categories of Whiteness, gender and rural belonging. The first portion of this study took television texts as its focus, and explored the dominantly encoded messages about class in contemporary working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality programming. In what follows, I outline first phase of the study.

**Phase 1: Social Class in Television Texts**

The first phase of this project was a textual analysis that investigated contemporary working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality programs to uncover the role they play in discursively constructing working-class ideology. I drew specifically on Fiske’s (2011) definition of “television as a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society” (p. 1), which
suggests that television’s narratives play a significant role in shaping societal meaning about a variety of concerns. Based on this assumption, the first part of this project sought to answer the following questions:

**RQ1:** What meanings about working-class identity are coded in representations on working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs?

**RQ2:** How do characters in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality shows apply the rules of neoliberal citizenship to their lives?

**RQ3:** In what ways do the working-class characters’ performances of neoliberal citizenship in domestic sitcoms and “redneck reality” differ along lines of gender?

**RQ4:** What is the relationship between the characters’ performances of neoliberal citizenship and rural, working-class Whiteness?

**Sample of Contemporary Television Texts**

As suggested in Chapter Two, this project assumes that restricting class definition to economic factors is a reductionist view. While providing a more nuanced understanding of class allows us to consider class belonging as much more fluid and subjective, it also necessarily complicates the selection of working-class programs for textual analysis. Given that a complex definition of class is difficult to ascertain prior to the selection of texts, I coupled the characters’ economic circumstances (i.e., occupation and perceived income) with the popular assessment of a program’s primary character’s class belonging to guide my selection of domestic sitcom and “redneck” reality texts for analysis. That is, for the purpose of selection, I evaluated a program as working-class
based on the way it has been read in popular discourse (e.g., in critics’ reviews, in interviews with program creators, etc.). Moreover, my specific interest in rural, White working-class representations further narrowed the shows available for selection. Hubbs (2011) suggests that the term “redneck” “is conspicuously classed, but its working-class valence is also marked in terms of race—white; locale—provincial; and sex—the ‘redneck’ label conventionally attaching to maleness and connoting a rough style of masculinity, often, but not exclusively, southern” (p. 47). Although contemporary working-class domestic sitcoms do not parallel “redneck” reality programs in their specific representation of identity, I chose ones that focus on White, rural families to most closely approximate analogous programs between the genres. Additionally, for both domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality programs, I also used ratings, reception, and the presence of family-based subject matter to guide selection. Using these criteria, I selected *The Middle* and *Raising Hope* as working-class, rural domestic sitcoms, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty* as family-based “redneck” reality programs.

*Domestic Sitcoms*

*The Middle* premiered on ABC in September 2009 and is currently in its sixth season. The series centers on the Hecks, a nuclear family with three children headed by mother Frankie (Patricia Heaton), a car salesperson, and father Mike (Neil Flynn), a manager at limestone quarry in their small, fictional Indiana town. Although it averaged a modest 6.10 million viewers in its initial season (Abrams, 2009), its audience has seen a steady increase; the series’ most recent episode (airing on March 25, 2015) was seen by
over 7 million viewers (Kondolojy, March 26, 2015). The series has been widely praised for its writing (Gay, 2009) and authentic humor (Bianco, 2012).

In his assessment of the contemporary television landscape, VanDerWerff (2012) suggests that working-class portrayals on contemporary television are minimal, citing ABC’s *The Middle* as one of only two domestic sitcoms on air in the 2012-2013 television season that makes questions of economic instability central to the storyline. Bibel (2011) further asserts that although both parents on *The Middle* have jobs that straddle the line between blue and white collar, the program is “the closest thing to a sitcom about a working class family” (para. 3). Others echo the notion that *The Middle* takes place within a working-class milieu. For example, Marshall (2010) points out, “*The Middle’s* homely mise-en-scene and grassroots-type themes resemble those of working-class sitcoms like *The Honeymooners, The Flintstones, All in the Family, Roseanne, The Simpsons, King of Queens, and According to Jim.* As a result, we should analyze it as such” (para. 2).

The program has been recognized by a number of critics for the ways it addresses issues of social class. Nussbaum (2013) concludes that, along with *Raising Hope, The Middle* is a comedy that is “no-nonsense on the topic of money; they dwell on social class, rather than ignore it like most network shows” (para. 2). *Entertainment Weekly’s* Ken Tucker (2011) suggests that even though the series is “a saga of a family struggling to keep their heads above the choppy economic waters” (para. 2), it should be praised for not relying on “self pity, tears, or sappiness” (para. 2) to tell the family’s story. Thus, while *The Middle* does not shy away from economic issues, its comedic frame makes the presentation of those issues seem relatable and accessible rather than dismal.
As noted above, both VanDerWerff (2012) and Nussbaum (2013) point to *Raising Hope* as one of the only other contemporary sitcoms that makes the struggle of working-class life central to its narrative. The series, which was developed by working-class sitcom veteran Greg Garcia (*My Name is Earl*), premiered in September 2010 on FOX. The story of the multi-generational Chance family is set in fictional Natesville; although the town’s state is never revealed, the location is obviously rural. *Raising Hope* drew 7.8 million viewers for its series premiere (Seidman, 2010), but has struggled to maintain sufficient ratings to ensure its continuation. Its third season episodes drew an average of 4.5 million viewers (Bibel, 2013), and after a move from Tuesday to Friday night, FOX announced in March 2014 that the currently airing fourth season would be the program’s last.

Perhaps unlike *The Middle*, *Raising Hope* is unequivocally working-class in its portrayal. An interview with creator Greg Garcia revealed that he draws on his working-class upbringing to populate the characters of his shows, including the experiences of his taxi driver father and family members in landscaping and the Postal Service (Itzkoff, 2010). Yet early critical response to the series’ depiction of working class characters was divided. For instance, TV blogger John Kubicek (2010) praised the show, dubbing Garcia’s work “sophisticated white trash” because of the way his shows, including *Raising Hope*, feature working characters “without much education who are still surprisingly bright and clever. Garcia doesn't look down at his characters, but instead he shows just how much love and affection he has for hardworking families” (para. 5). Conversely, Harris (2010) suggests that *Raising Hope* “mocks and parodies the poverty and ignorance of its subjects, even if it does it with some sympathy” (para. 8). Dyess-
Nugent (2011) noted that the show’s first season was a challenge in negotiating the “crass and contemptuous [portrayal] of its white-trash characters” and encouraging “viewers to feel sorry for its low-income, low-I.Q. heroes,” but that it ultimately “never lost its balance in its treatment of the Chances” (para. 1). *Raising Hope* presents an authentic working-class family that, although sometimes exaggeratedly comedic, is not mocked or denigrated in the same way as previous working-class families. Because of their critical and ratings success and their depictions of working-class families in a television environment in which such representations are few, *The Middle* and *Raising Hope* served as the working-class domestic sitcoms for this study.

“Redneck” Reality Programming

Though working-class sitcoms are all but absent in today’s media landscape, working-class portrayals have become a staple of reality television. Von Doviak (2013) contends that niche cable networks like TLC, Discovery, and A&E have featured working-class individuals on their reality programming, filling the void left by network television. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which follows child beauty contestant Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson, offers one such example of working-class representation in the “redneck” reality genre. In addition to Alana, who became an Internet viral sensation after originally appearing on TLC’s *Toddlers & Tiaras*, the show features members of the Shannon-Thompson family: Alana’s mother, June Shannon, a stay-at-home-mother, her father Mike Thompson, a chalk miner, and her older sisters Lauryn, Jessica, and Anna Shannon. The show’s narrative is structured around the Shannon-Thompson’s family life in rural McIntyre, Georgia. The *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* debut, which aired on TLC in August 2012, drew 2.2 million viewers, making it the
number one cable program in its time slot (“TLC’s Honey Boo Boo Scores,” 2012). Ratings have remained relatively steady through the course of its two seasons. The third season finale, which aired in September 2013 and featured the wedding of June Shannon and Mike Thompson, netted a series high viewership of 3.2 million (Kondolojy, 2013). The series has since been cancelled by TLC after allegations that mother June Shannon was engaged in a romantic relationship with a man who allegedly molested Anna Shannon as a child (Deggans, 2014), but media outlets report that the family may be pitching a reboot of their series to a different network (Rees, 2015).

Much of the critical reception of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is rooted in the program’s depiction of rural, working-class representation. The show is maligned for making an “exploitative mess” (Paskin, 2012, para. 3) of the family. As Goodman (2012) points out, “The show uses subtitles, because the apparent lack of education and the Georgia accents mesh together like some kind of indecipherable Scottish accent” (para. 14), indicating that the Shannon/Thompsons do not possess particular markers of class. Yet other critics defend its portrayals for the perceived authenticity with which it represents a particular subset of the American population. Yarrow (2013) argues that more than most representations on reality television, the Shannon/Thompson family hold a mirror to the reality of many Americans: “For many Americans, poverty, obesity, teen pregnancy, and unemployment are facts of life, just as they are for the Thompson/Shannons” (para. 8). Similar to the way Roseanne rejected notions of middle-class consumption and beauty standards (Senzani, 2010), the women of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo have been praised for their unapologetic deviation from the normative standards of middle-class appearance. Carpentier (2012) suggests that “none of the
women or girls who participate in the show seems to hate themselves for their poverty, their weight, their less-than-urbane lifestyle or the ways in which they diverge from the socially-acceptable beauty standard” (para. 2). Whether Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is exploitative or representative of the rural working-class, reception of the show suggests that it offers an example of family-based “redneck” reality programming in which economic circumstances and class performance are aligned. Thus, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is a useful program through which to explore how “redneck” reality programming constructs a definition of the working-class.

Von Doviak (2013) argues that while some working-class reality programs are tantamount to “hixploitation,” including Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, others resist the persistent stereotypes found in many working-class sitcoms from the 1950s and 1960s and offer a more nuanced portrayal of the rural working-class. Von Doviak offers Duck Dynasty as one such example. Indeed, while Ryan (2013) suggests that Duck Dynasty may “play around with rural and Southern stereotypes…[it] doesn’t condescend to them” (para. 21). Duck Dynasty follows the professional and personal lives of the Louisiana-based Robertson family. Phil Robertson, who became wealthy through his business creating duck calls for hunting, owns the family-based business, which is now run by his son, Willie. Since its premiere in March 2012, Duck Dynasty has become a ratings powerhouse for cable network A&E. Although it debuted to just 1.81 million viewers in season one, the program’s premiere for season four drew 11.8 million viewers, the largest audience ever for any non-fiction cable series (Kissell, 2013). Duck Dynasty concluded its seventh season in February 2015, drawing a modest 2.51 million viewers (Kondolojy, February 12, 2015). Moreover, the success of the program has parlayed into commercial
ventures; Wal-Mart, Target, and Kohl’s all have *Duck Dynasty* themed merchandise, which has raked in over $400 million in revenues (O’Connor, 2013). The program’s popularity also extends to the *New York Times*’ bestseller list, where Robertson family patriarch Phil’s memoir *Happy, Happy, Happy: My Life and Legacy as the Duck Commander* reached number one in May 2013 (Cowles, 2013).

Critics’ reception of the program reflects its status as a ratings success. Ryan (2013) suggests that *Duck Dynasty*’s popularity is partly rooted in its similarity to the domestic sitcom genre, calling it “an uplifting, zany comedy about a close-knit family that has its share of squabbles but still demonstrates intense loyalty…a TV recipe that seems to have worked out well for everything from *The Addams Family* to *All in the Family* to *Modern Family*” (para. 7). Additionally, the show’s style of humor draws comparisons other successful programs. Leading into the season four premiere, Hinckley (2013) called *Duck Dynasty* “the *Seinfeld* of reality television,” pointing out that “with its droll, deadpan style and large, loyal fascinated audience, it has an uncannily similar appeal” (para. 3). Although billed as a reality program, *Duck Dynasty* shares narrative structure, character types, and humor with many programs in the domestic sitcom genre, making it a suitable comparison to series like *The Middle* and *Raising Hope*.

Even though the Robertsons’ lifestyle has been identified as firmly within the rural, working-class ethos, their narrative offers an exemplary way to explore the disconnect between social class belonging and economic circumstance. Even before the immense financial security that came with the success of their reality program and subsequent merchandise licensing agreements, the Robertson family owned and operated a lucrative business built entirely by Phil. Even so, *Duck Dynasty* is consistently labeled
as a part of cable’s “blue collar boom” (James, 2013) of “redneck reality” (Von Doviak, 2013) that includes programs like TLC’s *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, MTV’s *Buckwild*, and History’s *Only in America with Larry the Cable Guy*. As Romano (2012) argues,

> Though the bearded, backwoods-appearing Robertson clan is richer than dirt, they don’t look or act like it. They live in a modest, if cramped-looking, house, go to work every day, and don beards thicker than the forests surrounding their homes. They crack wise, make fun of each other, and, most importantly, do everything together.

That is, while the Robertsons’ success puts their economic position at upper-middle-class or above, they perform class status in a way that signals blue-collar belonging. *Duck Dynasty*, then, provides a text through which to understand how working-class identity is shaped apart from economic factors. Thus, *Duck Dynasty* will serve as the second “redneck” reality text through which to explore the connections between class, Whiteness, gender, rural belonging and neoliberal citizenship.

**Data Analysis**

Fiske (2011) argues that television is structured through codes, or “a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture” (p. 4). He notes that viewers are only able to make sense of the “reality” they see on television (i.e., the appearance, dress, environment, behavior, speech, etc.) through the conventional codes of representation (e.g., narrative, conflict, character, action, setting, etc.), which are structured through the ideological codes of a given culture. These three codes of television – “reality,” representation, and ideology – work together, making
what appears on television “a coherent, seemingly natural unity” (p. 6). Semiotic or cultural criticism aims to deconstruct the relationship between these codes in a text, and thus question their naturalness.

To explore how the codes of class, Whiteness, gender and place are represented in conjunction with neoliberal ideology in working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and family-based reality television, I analyzed the first seasons of The Middle (24 episodes), Raising Hope (22 episodes), Duck Dynasty (13 episodes) and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo (10 episodes). Given that the first season of a program introduces us to its characters, establishes the plot, and suggests central themes, examining the first season of each text provided evidence for understanding how the ideologies of interest structure the “reality” represented on each program.

My investigation was guided by critical ideological analysis. As previously stated, television’s representational components work together to form and circulate a coherent, dominant ideological meaning (Fiske, 2011). Thus, to conduct the textual analysis portion of this project, I explored how the codes of class work together to form ideological messages about what it means to be working-class. I watched each season of each program in its entirety and recorded available information about the family structure (e.g., nuclear families in which all children belong biologically to both parents, remarriages, etc.), occupations, and education levels. Additionally, I made thorough notes regarding television’s representational components, including narrative, mise-en-scene, and dialogue, that structure meanings about class. I then reviewed these components to explore how gender, Whiteness and rural identity intersect to influence the meaning ascribed to a character’s class position. After I notated the representational components
of class, gender, and Whiteness, I developed themes to suggest how these elements of identity work together to represent class in the four programs that I analyzed.

Because of its ideological dominance in contemporary American culture, I also used neoliberalism as a theoretical framework through which to analyze the working-class narratives in each of the programs. Informed by previous literature that delineated the pervasive ways that neoliberalism manifests in modern society, I made a coding sheet that allowed me to investigate how these themes were present or absent from the texts (Appendix A). While some themes, such as risk avoidance, the privatization of public service, individualism, and a valorization of the competitive free market were prevalent in the series, other themes such as industrial deregulation were not prominent. Analyzing the series in terms of these neoliberal tenets helped place these representations of working-class identity class into a broader cultural framework, and allowed me to determine dominant ideological meanings about class, Whiteness, gender, and rural belonging in the working-class domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality programs I analyzed.

**Phase 2: Television Audiences and Meanings of Social Class**

While Gray and Lotz (2012) contend that the study of television programs is often the point of departure for conducting television research, they note that textual analyses on their own are not enough to constitute television studies scholarship. Instead, textual work should be supplemented with audience reception, production concerns, and/or contextual analysis to provide a more complete representation of the role television plays in shaping culture. To provide a more nuanced understanding of the role television plays in shaping discourse about class, the second phase of this project examined television
audiences and the way television viewership of working-class domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality programming informs audiences’ ideas about social class. Specifically, the audience portion of this study asked:

**RQ5:** How do audiences understand the relationship between neoliberalism and class belonging on television?

**RQ6:** How is audience understanding of working-class families shaped by the representation of the intersecting identity categories of Whiteness, rural belonging, and gender?

**RQ7:** How do audiences use the understanding of working-class families they glean from television to make sense of class in broader culture and their own class positions?

**Sampling and Recruitment Procedures**

In this portion of the study, I was interested in how audiences make sense of class through representations in working-class, rural domestic sitcom and family-based “redneck” reality genres, and how they apply that understanding to definitions of working-class more broadly. After obtaining IRB approval, I advertised the project by creating a recruitment flyer that called for those interested in talking about families on television who watch either *The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and/or *Duck Dynasty* at least occasionally. I obtained permission to hang recruitment flyers in high-traffic areas (e.g., churches, hair salons, libraries, community centers, etc.), and used my personal social network and Facebook to reach a broader range of individuals. I also posted flyers around a Midwestern university campus and in similar high-traffic spaces in the community in which I was conducting research, and I
disseminated my participant call through a Midwestern university’s listserv. Although I was interested in understanding how viewers understand rural working-class identity specifically, I did not limit my recruitment efforts to rural areas; regardless of a viewer’s spatial location, he or she would make meaning about rural working-class identity from his or her viewership of the programs I analyzed in my textual analysis. Thus, I recruited participants from a micropolitan university city in the Midwest, as well as rural towns in Illinois and Kentucky. Of the recruitment strategies I employed, three focus groups were comprised of individuals who contacted me through Facebook after seeing my recruitment call on either my personal page or the page of a mutual friend whom had shared it; the remaining four groups were formed from individuals who responded to the research call through the university listserv. Of the 28 participants, I knew three individuals personally prior to the interviews.

Recruitment materials directed participants to a link to provide information about their media use and demographic data (Appendix B). I sought participants 18 years or older who watched at least one of the programs I analyzed in the textual analysis portion of my study. Recruitment materials specifically asked for viewers of these shows, and familiarity was determined by responding to my call and indicating that they watch either *The Middle, Raising Hope, Family, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,* and/or *Duck Dynasty* at least “sometimes” on the media use survey they filled out if they expressed interest through a Midwestern university listserv link. Familiarity with these programs gave participants a common framework through which to discuss perceptions about class on television. I incentivized participation by providing food and drink during the focus group interviews.
Once I made contact with initial participants, I used snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2007) and encouraged the initial contacts to bring friends or family members who may also be interested in participating. In five of the seven interviews I conducted, all members of the focus group were friends or family who knew each other prior to our discussion. These five interviews took place in the homes of one of the participants. In total, I conducted focus group interviews with 28 regular viewers of at least one of the four shows analyzed in the textual analysis portion of the study, and many had watched more than one of the series at least occasionally. I interviewed 17 women and 11 men, ranging in age from 19 to 72. The average age of participants was 40 years old. Twenty of the 28 participants indicated that they either grew up in or currently reside in a rural location; the remaining eight listed some combination of suburban or urban residences. For nine of my participants, high school was the highest level of education received. Eleven stated that they had some college, while two had associate’s degrees, one had a bachelor’s degree, and five had earned master’s degrees. Fourteen participants reported that they were employed in manual labor or service-oriented jobs (e.g., manufacturing, construction, housekeeping) or jobs that required no advanced education (e.g., bartender, administrative assistant, bank teller). Six worked in occupations that required a degree, such as teacher, school counselor, or loan officer. Seven participants were full-time students, and one was unemployed (for full demographic data, see Appendix E). Despite the demographic information I collected from the participants, I resisted classifying individuals as working- or middle-class; given that my project sought to avoid reducing class belonging to socioeconomic measures, I did not feel that I had access to the information about their cultural capital (i.e., the markers of culture as a folk concept as
delineated by Hodge [2008] and others) that would warrant a label of class belonging. However, in Chapter Five’s analysis I provide demographic details about each participant to give information about their class belonging and thus contextualize their comments.

**Data Collection Methods**

Similar to Gray and Lotz’s (2012) assertion that television studies should be multi-faceted in their approach to analysis, Radway (1986) argues that “in depth, qualitative analysis of the way an audience encounters, interprets, and uses mass media should be included as a necessary part of a larger investigation into the manner of its production and distribution” (p. 99) because “the content of any message, whether textual or behavioral, is not simply found in that message, but is constructed by an audience interacting with that message” (p. 96). Engaging with viewers about the television they watch thus provided a way to see what texts mean to their audiences (Ruddock, 2001), and it illuminated how the ideological messages “structured in dominance” (Hall, 1993) are accepted, resisted, or negotiated by television audiences.

I chose to conduct focus group interviews rather that one-on-one interviews to explore how class understanding is developed as a part of social rather than individual life. As Lunt and Livingstone (1996) point out, researchers of media audiences have employed focus group interviews to discover the way that active audiences negotiate and construct meanings through their engagement with a given text. They suggest that in focus group methodology the audience is seen, not as an aggregate of atomized opinions or attitudes, but as individuals located in concrete social groups who construct meaningful social action partly through the discursive interrogation of texts. In this context, the
focus group is used not to identify the dimensions of complex stimuli that may have causal power in diffusion, but to examine the everyday ways in which audiences make sense of television. (p. 85)

Conducting focus group interviews, then, allowed me to see the ways that conversations unfolded, and examine whether audiences engaged in meaningful conversations to co-construct meaning about social class.

Interviews were semi-structured through the use of an interview guide (Appendix C), which Lindlof and Taylor (2011) indicate is appropriate for informal, flexible interviews that require less standardization. The interviews ranged in length between 50 minutes and 90 minutes. To build rapport between the participants and myself, I first asked introductory questions about their favorite programs and characters, and then moved to general questions about families on television, including an identification of families they would describe as “typical,” “traditional,” and “progressive.” I then turned to issues of class, asking participants about their perceptions of working- and middle-class families on television. Finally, at the end of the interview, I used promotional images of the families from *The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo, and Duck Dynasty* (Appendix D) that depicted members of each family to elicit descriptions of and discussions about the particular families I examined in my textual analysis. Given that all of the participants were at least occasional viewers of at least one of the series being discussed, they also drew on their previous viewer knowledge to describe the families. I asked participants to compare the families from the series to their own families, or others that they know. The visual prompts provided by the photos gave the participants a reminder of each of the families, as well as allowed them to use specific
language and examples to articulate their perceptions about the families. Moreover, following their discussion about the families from *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Duck Dynasty*, they were able to provide clear links between the families analyzed in the study and their own personal experiences; participants both identified with the families they described and used their descriptions to distance themselves from unruly representations of the working-class.

**Data Analysis**

After the interviews, I produced verbatim transcripts and provided each participant with a pseudonym so their comments would remain anonymous. I then developed an open-coding scheme based on the research questions that guide this study. Open-coding, which is the initial, unrestricted, coding of data (Strauss, 1987), is the process through which “categories are built, named, and have attributes ascribed to them” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 251). Using this method, I began analyzing the transcripts as the interviews were completed through the identification of emergent and recurring patterns using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007). As Lunt and Livingstone (1996) maintain, “Conducting focus groups produces a flood of ideas and information in the early groups, which is then reiterated by subsequent groups until (sometimes sooner than others) no new stories are told” (p. 92). Therefore, I conducted interviews until I reached saturation in the information provided by my participants.

From the recurring patterns identified in my focus group interviews, I developed themes to help answer the research questions posed in my study. Specifically, I looked for the common ways participants evaluated messages about class in the domestic sitcom and family-based “redneck” reality programs to examine how they employed neoliberal
ideology and messages about class consistent with or differing from the textual analysis. I then used participants’ comparisons of television families to their own families and others they know to determine how they used their understandings about working-class identity from television to make sense of class in their own lives.

**Toward an Understanding of Social Class through Television**

The first phase of this study is concerned with examining the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism that shapes class representation on television through the analysis of two family-based genres: domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality, both of which focus on the rural working-class. Because media texts inform cultural discourses (Fiske, 2011; Mittell, 2010), investigating the representation of the working-class illuminates the role television plays in the development of discourses about this group. The cultural beliefs that manifest through our immersion in television content have broader implications in that they have the potential to affect our treatment of marginalized groups through stereotyping and policy decisions. Thus, a detailed analysis of representation is the first step in investigating how television is implicated in our understanding of class.

However, Radway (1986) argues, “the critics who formally analyze mass culture texts may read and interpret them very differently from the ways they are read by their typical audiences” (p. 96). Coupled with Hall’s (1993) notion that television produces open, polysemic texts that have multiple meanings rooted in audiences’ social locations, understanding how hegemonic ideology about class functions in broader culture can only be complete through reception studies. As a result, this project was a two-phase study in which the second phase more thoroughly explores the findings and implications of the first phase by speaking with viewers of television. In what follows, I provide two separate
chapters of analysis: one that explores the texts described above and one that reports the findings of the audience study. In my concluding chapter, I further draw together the connection between the textual representation of class on television and the way audiences understand those representations to highlight the role television plays in shaping cultural meanings about class in contemporary America. Taken together, the findings of my research extend scholarly knowledge about both class representation as it intersects with identities of gender, Whiteness, and rural belonging in popular working-class, rural domestic sitcom and family-based “redneck” reality genres, as well as the implications regarding class understanding for the audiences who watch those genres.
CHAPTER FOUR: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

After years of growth and prosperity, the American economic system reached a crisis point in late 2008. Major financial institutions collapsed, the housing bubble burst, and millions of Americans took enormous hits to their retirement savings. The Economist’s analysis of the financial crisis’ origins point to a number of causes: irresponsible lending, risk-taking facilitated by competition among the financial industry’s major players, deregulation, and lack of oversight (“Crash Course,” 2013). Many of the reasons attributed to the economic collapse were linked to the sweeping neoliberal policies instituted over the last several decades that privileged a few large corporations at the expense of average citizens’ economic well-being.

The majority of average Americans were impacted by the most recent recession in some capacity, with nearly 45 million individuals living below the poverty line and many more of the working-class hovering near it (Gongloff, 2014), but political strategies for recovery have focused almost solely on the middle-class. Most recently, President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address centered largely on middle-class economics, a three pillar approach that consists of taxes and regulatory provisions that support middle-income workers, proposals to make workers more productive (e.g., allowances for community college attendance), and policies, like infrastructure spending, that increase overall economic growth (Barro, 2015). Failure to emphasize working-class aid through political measures may be an issue of lack of representation; while political representation of gender and racial minorities has increased the attention given to issues that affect women (Swers & Rouse, 2011) and Black and Hispanic communities (Juenke & Preuhs, 2012), representatives from working-class occupations are still few in number.
Political science research has found that legislators with business or profit-centered background have less liberal economic voting policies than those with backgrounds in working-class occupations (e.g., Carnes, 2012; Witko & Friedman, 2008).

Despite the slow economic recovery that has taken place over the last several years with emphasis on restoring the middle-class, Pew Research indicates that fewer Americans adopt this label than did just a few years earlier. While only 25% of Americans identified as low or lower-middle-class in 2008, 40% now self-label in that way; conversely, 53% identified as middle-class in 2008, but that number dropped to 44% in 2014 (Kochhar & Morin, 2014). The shrinking middle-class finding is substantiated by the repeated reports that income and wealth disparity in the United States continues to widen between the richest and poorest Americans. In fact, “after adjusting for inflation, income [growth] was basically flat for households in the bottom half of the economic ladder” (Bui, 2014, para. 3) over the last 40 years, a timeline that coincides with the implementation of many of the neoliberal policies ushered in during the 1970s.

At the same time that the working-class was being rhetorically erased from discussions about economic recovery, working-class representation in domestic sitcoms has also waned. The genre, one of the most frequently employed formats in the network television era (Skill & Robinson, 1994), has featured a host of working-class families in series from The Honeymooners to Roseanne. Indeed, while the working-class have been historically underrepresented on television proportionate to the United States population, by 2012 VanDerWerff asserted that only a handful of sitcoms, including The Middle, Raising Hope, and 2 Broke Girls, dealt with the reality of economic hardship for the
working-class. In their place, however, is a flurry of “redneck” reality programs that focus on the exploits of the rural, primarily Southern, working-class. Harkins (2005) notes that during times of economic hardship, such as the recent recession, mediated representations of rural hillbillies and rednecks allow the American middle-class to feel more secure in their own economic position; despite their struggles, at least they are not like that. Critics have described these depictions as tantamount to “hicksploitation,” and importantly, “many forget is that it can be just as easy to stereotype white, working-class folks, and just as hard to scrub those stereotypes off your TV screen” (Deggans, 2013, para. 13).

Guided by Fiske’s (2011) notion that television is “bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society” (p. 1), this chapter addresses how televisual representations aid in the cultural understanding of the working-class during this particular moment of economic instability and recovery focused on the middle-class. Examining representation through these two genres has implications for how the working-class is depicted in society; Mittell (2010) argues that these representations of identity “help define what a culture thinks is normal for a particular group, how behaviors and traits fit into a society’s shared common sense” (p. 306). Because working-class representations are few, they hold a great deal of cultural weight in shaping the “shared common sense” about a group that comprises a significant portion of the American population.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between the representation of working-class characters in domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs and the philosophy of neoliberalism, which structures many aspects of contemporary culture, to make
discursive sense about the working-class. Specifically, I examine how the working-class characters in these genres abide by neoliberal tenets of privatization of public service, individualism, profit-driven competitive labor, and risk avoidance, and how those portrayals are further structured by the characters’ gender and rural Whiteness. Ultimately, I argue that their unwillingness or inability to endorse these tenets legitimates their working-class belonging, providing a rationale for why they fail to gain economic capital. This chapter, then, offers insight into how working-class representation in domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs presents a mediated snapshot of who the working-class are in contemporary culture, as well as why they remain working-class in a society that values upward mobility.

To this end, I propose four research questions in my textual analysis of the first season of two contemporary working-class domestic sitcoms, Raising Hope and The Middle, and two “redneck” reality programs, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Duck Dynasty. Each of these shows premiered between 2009-2012, during the height of the economic crisis, and offers a portrait of working-class identity in contemporary culture. Given the tenuous definition of class belonging, my first research question establishes the characters in Raising Hope, The Middle, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty as working-class vis-à-vis a combination of economic and cultural capital. After positioning the families in these shows as working-class, I then investigate neoliberalism’s role in shaping the representations of the working-class characters in these shows, and how the guidelines of neoliberalism are enacted differently along lines of gender. Finally, I explore how neoliberal philosophies guide the representation of the characters’ rural Whiteness.
The first research question of the textual portion of my analysis asks:

**RQ1: What meanings about working-class identity are coded in representations on working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs?**

The purpose of this question is to establish, in essence, how televisual representation of the working-class shapes their discursive portrayal. Drawing from previous literature about social class and informed by Hall’s (1993) assertion that television texts are encoded with particular, cultural meanings by their producers, this question explores the ways that characters and their worlds are encoded as working-class, and how those characters exist in the televisual world.

Previous investigations conclude that markers of class are rooted in both traditional, easily identifiable notions of social status, such as occupation, income, and education level, as well as more ambiguous cultural indicators, including taste and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), consumption (Schor, 2003), and folk signifiers of class belonging (e.g., clothing, neighborhood, etc.) (Hodge, 2008). Understanding the meanings associated with working-class identity on television necessitates that both the traditional socioeconomic and cultural indicators of class are taken into account; thus, my first research question examines the working-class identities of families in the selected texts by thoroughly investigating characters’ stated or perceived occupation, income, and education levels, patterns of consumption, markers of taste and culture, and interactions with others, specifically characters coded as middle-class or poor. Informed by this analysis, I ultimately argue that while socioeconomics indicators do contribute to the representation of a family’s class position, considering those measures alone is reductive.
Instead, the sociocultural factors that mark a family as working-class provide a more nuanced understanding of the working-class ethos, and help account for the discrepancies that may exist between one’s present socioeconomic status and sociocultural background.

**Socioeconomic Indicators of the Working-Class**

One of the most historically common ways to place working-class designation on an individual, both in the diegetic television and broader cultural worlds, is through the objective measures of occupation, income, and education levels (Tse and Werschkul, 2005). These characteristics have been used in governmental and academic research, as well as in popular conceptualization, to classify individuals along a continuum of class. In television texts, occupation is often the clearest of the three characteristics to identify; the domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs examined in this project often highlighted characters’ occupations, frequently making them central to the narrative. For characters’ income and education levels, which were less often explicitly stated, I drew from overt and contextual statements to make assessments of those characteristics.

*Raising Hope*’s first episode (“Pilot,” September 21, 2010) opens with scenes of family matriarch and patriarch, Virginia and Burt Chance, working at their service-oriented jobs. Burt, who owns his own small landscaping business, and Virginia, who is employed with a local maid service, both have occupations that not only emphasize manual labor, but also differentiate them from the more affluent clients that they serve. In the initial moments of the series, Burt and his son, Jimmy, in a t-shirt that advertises their landscaping business, are shown skimming leaves from an in-ground pool and mowing an impeccably manicured lawn; it is apparent that the house at which they are working is
not their own. Similarly, Virginia, in a bubblegum pink maid’s uniform, is picked up for work at “Knock Knock Knock Housekeeping” in her boss’ company car. Throughout the series, we are continually reminded of Burt’s and Virginia’s working-class occupations, as each episode’s opening credits feature a cartoon rendering of Burt in a t-shirt with the caption “See Grandpa scoop,” referencing his pool cleaning job, and Virginia, in maid’s uniform and rubber gloves with mop in hand, with the caption “See Grandma clean.” The opening credits of the series, then, make their jobs as salient to their identities as their familial roles and “grandpa” and “grandma.” By emphasizing the Chances’ working-class occupations and contrasting them with their middle-class counterparts, the series underscores that they occupy a lower rung on the socioeconomic ladder within their community.

Although Burt and Virginia both have stable jobs in the service sector, Raising Hope firmly roots the Chance family in the working-class through discussions of their income and highest level of education attained. Neither Burt nor Virginia, who became pregnant at 15, finished high school (“Cheaters,” April 19, 2011), making them qualified for few jobs outside of the service positions they occupy (McArdle, 2013). Perhaps as a result, the series identifies the Chance family as explicitly lower income on several occasions. Because Virginia became pregnant as a teenager and has only had a series of low paying jobs, she and Burt have never been able to afford a home of their own; instead they live in a multi-generational household with Virginia’s grandmother, Burt and Virginia’s adult son, Jimmy, and Jimmy’s daughter, Hope. The family frequently mentions things they cannot afford; Burt and Virginia scoff at Jimmy for assuming the family has a health insurance policy (“The Sniffles,” November 9, 2010), and Jimmy
must pawn his personal electronics to afford baby items for Hope (“Pilot”). On occasion, members of the family use the label “poor” to describe their economic situation. For example, in “Blue Dots” (November 16, 2010) Jimmy and Virginia discuss Hope’s eligibility for a daycare scholarship, which Jimmy assumes is for “poor” families, not their “lower-lower-lower-middle-class” family. The scene then cuts to Burt sucking air from two-liter bottles to collapse and then recycle them, prompting Virginia to ask Jimmy, “He does all of that for $1.90 and you think we’re not poor?”

*The Middle* similarly establishes working-class ethos through a combination of the characters’ occupations, income, and education levels. While Frankie and Mike, the mother and father in *The Middle*, cannot be classified as service workers, they are heads of a two-income family who are both employed in positions of relatively low prestige (Smith & Son, 2014). In voiceover narration in the show’s first episode (“Pilot,” September 30, 2009), Frankie remarks that she works at a “job that [she’s] too smart for” at their hometown’s only remaining car dealership. Later, she laments aspirations for a professional career, noting, “When I was in college I wanted to be in banking or finance. But here I am. Selling cars,” (“The Fun House,” March 24, 2010). Frankie mentions in her narration that “Mike manages a bunch of boneheads down at the quarry,” a position we later find that he was promoted to because the former manager, Carl, “blew his arm off. Can’t type” (“Christmas,” December 9, 2009). Frankie’s observations about the intelligence required to do her job, as well as the reason for which Mike was promoted, indicates an awareness that they are both in roles in which they could easily be replaced; these are not positions that require special training or education. Further, although Mike is in a managerial role, his job security is tenuous and his previous work experience limits
his employment alternatives. During one episode (“The Interview,” January 13, 2010), Mike finds a dinosaur bone at the quarry, which must then be closed so that paleontologists can dig up the rest of the artifact. As he seeks another job, it is revealed that Mike has limited experience with the technological skills necessary to transfer his hard copy resume to an electronic copy, and his job applications are for manual labor industries, such as grain production and plumbing.

Less explicit mention is made of Frankie and Mike’s educational attainment; although Indiana University apparel and paraphernalia are regularly featured in the series, Frankie reveals in “The Fun House” that she never finished college. Mike’s educational history is not addressed, though his focus on manual labor positions in his job search may be indicative of little or no post-secondary education. Unlike the Chances of *Raising Hope*, the Heck family’s income is a bit more ambiguous, but can be deduced from the way they spend and talk about money. While shopping for groceries local “Frugal Hoosier” Frankie tells her children, “We’re not poor, we’re just thrifty. We’re trying something new called ‘living within our means’” (“The Cheerleader,” October 7, 2009). This decision to “live within their means” results from having a number of deferred-interest purchases come due at the same time, and importantly for the Heck’s class belonging, “living within [their] means” requires shopping at a discount grocery whose motto is “Indiana’s #1 expired food store.” Moreover, the Hecks struggle to pay basic bills when both parents are not working full-time. During Mike’s employment furlough from the quarry, the family has their electricity shut off for being three months behind on the bill (“TV or Not TV,” April 14, 2010). Thus, the family’s financial situation, and relatedly, class position, suggests that they do not enjoy the securities of the middle-class.
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo offers a different model of working-class families in that only the family patriarch, Mike “Sugar Bear” Thompson, is employed outside the home. In the first episode of the series (“This is My Crazy Family,” August 8, 2012), “Mama” June Shannon states in her pseudomonologue interview that Sugar Bear “works seven days a week.” It is later revealed that he performs a manual labor job as a chalk miner while Mama stays at home with her daughters. Perhaps because of the show’s emphasis on the titular personality, Sugar Bear’s daughter, Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson, there is less focus on Sugar Bear’s job; he is only shown leaving for and returning from the mines. Sugar Bear’s highest level of education is not mentioned, but similar to Mike Heck in The Middle, his manual labor job may indicate a lack of educational qualifications necessary for a professional, white-collar career. Mama, however, does mention that she dropped out of high school after becoming pregnant, much like Virginia in Raising Hope, but later received her GED (“Gonna Be a Glitz Pig,” August 8, 2012).

Discussions the Shannon-Thompson have about their family income are mostly rooted in their attempts to save money, specifically so they can afford the costs associated with daughter Alana’s pageant career. Mama takes pride in her extreme couponing abilities for saving money, a practice in which “discount devotees” spend a vast amount of time amassing paper and digital coupons and “go from store to store buying items in quantity, getting stuff free of charge” (Martin, 2010, para. 3). After one extreme couponing trip in which Mama stockpiles non-perishable foods and household items, she shares in an interview that she reduced her grocery bill from $130.02 to $27.40 (“I’m Sassified!” August 15, 2012). Mama’s extreme couponing alone is not sufficient
evidence of a low family income; in fact, nearly a quarter of extreme couponers earn $75,000 or more a year (White, 2011). However, the family’s other spending habits lend credence to the fact that the family is couponing out of necessity. Similar to The Middle’s “Frugal Hoosier,” the Shannon-Thompson family attends a weekly auction to buy discount household goods and food. About the items sold at the auction, Mama remarks, “I know some of it’s close to expiring and some of it fell off the truck, but psssh, it’s cheap” (“Gonna Be a Glitz Pig”). In “Shh! It’s a Wig” (October 5, 2012), Mama shares that the family is about to “head down to the local department store,” which turns out to be a dumpster the family sifts through to find salvageable garbage. She then earnestly tells the camera about a surround sound system they had previously found: “only thing not working was one speaker.” For the Shannon-Thompson family, then, a marked indicator of their income level is the way they consume without spending money at all.

Duck Dynasty features the extended Robertson family, who run a duck call manufacturing business in rural Louisiana. Although most members of the family are given relatively equal screen time, they are each identified through their relationship to Duck Commander CEO Willie, who appears to be the series’ lead. Even so, the family operates as more of a collective unit with similar incomes, educational attainment, and occupational roles. All male members of the family are employed with the Duck Commander hunting franchise in some capacity: father Phil founded the company forty years prior, Willie is currently in charge of the company’s functioning, and Uncle Si and brothers Jep and Jase all make the duck calls sold by the company. Although Willie credits his wife, Korie, as his business partner, the women, including mother Miss Kay and sisters-in-law Jessica and Misty, appear to serve supporting roles, making, packaging
and shipping auxiliary products for the Duck Commander company. While it is not immediately clear how income is distributed within the family respective to their different roles in the company, Willie’s voiceover states in the opening moments of the series, “The backwoods of Louisiana is now home to a new breed of millionaire: my family” (“Family Funny Business,” March 21, 2012), indicating that the money belongs to the family collectively rather than as individuals. Thus, in contrast to the Chance, Heck, and Shannon-Thompson families, the Robertsons are undoubtedly financially secure. Further, the majority of the family members received higher education. Phil says of himself and his siblings, “There were seven kids in the Robertson family and after all the smoke cleared, all of them but one have a college degree” (“CEO for a Day,” March 21, 2012). While each of Phil’s children has earned college degrees as well, it is a particularly salient aspect of how others perceive Willie. In “Family Funny Business,” Phil observes that “Willie went off and got educated,” and his family often uses his education as a source of good-natured teasing. Unlike his brothers, Willie’s education, perhaps because of his role as CEO, belies his working-class performance in way that is not the case for his brothers.

At a basic level, the objective, socioeconomic factors of occupation, income, and education level provide evidence of working-class belonging for the families in The Middle, Raising Hope, and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo. To consider these measures alone, however, makes clear that the Robertsons of Duck Dynasty occupy a social class position that is at least upper-middle-class, and more likely described as nouveau riche. Yet, popular press analysis has consistently labeled Duck Dynasty and its Robertson family as the poster family of reality television’s recent “blue collar boom,” suggesting it
is the “undisputed ratings champ” (James, 2013, para. 1) of a “whole truckload of reality shows that make fun of working-class, white Southern culture” (Deggans, 2013, para. 1). This contradiction points to the reductive nature of the objective socioeconomic measures of class in determining social class belonging. As Rubin, Denson, Kilpatrick, Matthews, Stehlik, and Zyngier (2014) argue,

SES refers to one’s current social and economic situation and consequently, it is relatively mutable, especially in countries that provide opportunities for economic advancement. In contrast, social class refers to one’s sociocultural background and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations. Hence, it is possible for a working-class person to have a relatively high SES while remaining in a stereotypically ‘blue-collar’ occupation (p. 196).

Thus, though the Robertsons may have been upwardly mobile in terms of their socioeconomic status due to the growth of their business, an examination of their sociocultural background is necessary to understand their placement in working-class culture. Next, I turn to the cultural indicators that code the families in The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty as working-class.

**Working-Class Culture**

If socioeconomic measures fall short of capturing what it means to be a working-class family on television, sociocultural markers illustrate a fuller conceptualization of this ethos. The programs’ mise-en-scene, the characters’ relationship with arts, leisure, and food, and their linguistic habits thus establish the families in The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty as working-class.
**Working-Class Mise-en-scene**

Originating in theater and adapted for film studies, *mise-en-scene* refers to all aspects of a text that appear on camera to help establish believability and authenticity of the narrative. Indeed, an effective way that the domestic sitcoms and reality television programs examined in this study present a realistic representation of working-class life is through two specific elements of *mise-en-scene*: setting and costuming. Setting and costuming reveal information not only about characters’ aesthetic tastes, but also the ways that characters are enabled and constrained to consume vis-à-vis their class position. Because “legitimate taste” is conferred by those in higher social strata (Bourdieu, 1984), the inability to consume in socially legitimated ways suggests a lower class belonging. In *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Duck Dynasty*, working-class ethos is established through these elements of *mise-en-scene*.

The homes in which the characters live on *The Middle* and *Raising Hope* are similarly styled with outdated furniture and appliances. Both families’ living rooms contain shabby couches in patterns and colors that evoke the design aesthetic of the 1970s and 1980s, but are worn and thus not well kept enough to be considered desirably vintage. Like in *Roseanne*, the Heck family’s couch is draped with a multi-colored afghan throw, signifying the family’s ordinariness through their décor that is more practical than tasteful. Neither home has a formal dining room, but instead the families eat at tables in the kitchen, which are equally dated; the Chances have meals around a red Formica table, and the Hecks only have a four-top, which necessitates that youngest son Brick must eat his meals while sitting in a folding lawn chair. Rather than contemporary stainless steel or colors like black and white that dominated kitchens in the 1980s and
1990s (Hall, n.d.), both families have olive green major appliances (e.g., refrigerator and oven), further contributing to the notion that neither the Hecks nor the Chances can afford to regularly update their spaces. In fact, when the Heck family’s dryer breaks in the “The Cheerleader” and they fret about how they will be able to purchase a new one, they serendipitously find a new dryer has landed in their yard after a major storm. Throughout the rest of the season, shots of the laundry room show the obviously newer, white dryer next to the olive green washing machine, which the family apparently cannot afford to replace.

Elsewhere in the Heck home, obsolete electronics similarly construct working-class *mise-en-scène*. When Mike applies for a new job in “The Interview,” he does so on a computer with a CRT rather than a flat screen monitor, and a small television with knob controls is a central focus in the family kitchen in *Raising Hope*. Given that American families tend to upgrade their television sets every seven to eight years (Madrigal, 2012) and computers every three to four years (Lam, 2012), these older model electronics in the Heck and Chance homes suggest that these families lack the disposable income to regularly upgrade commodities that are unnecessary to their daily lives. The outdated nature of the homes in *The Middle* and *Raising Hope* points to the fact that the Hecks and Chances are unable to consume large ticket items, like updated electronics and new automobiles, that are often cited as a hallmark for middle-class belonging (e.g., Naidu-Ghelani, 2013).

Unlike the fictional worlds created for families in domestic sitcoms, reality television sets are not constructed from scratch to house their characters. Put differently, the homes in which *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty* take place are
assumed to be the actual homes of the Shannon-Thompson and Robertson families. Thus, the settings of these programs further underscore the authenticity of the families’ working-class belonging. The Shannon-Thompson family’s home is small for their large family; all four of their daughters, including one who is pregnant, appear to share one bedroom. Similar to the sets designed for the fictional Heck and Chance families, the real Shannon-Thompson home features outdated furniture and appliances, shabby, worn carpeting, and kitchen cabinetry made from particle board. Apart from the scenes that take place in the home, B-roll footage used to transition throughout the series situates the family as working-class with poor taste. Shots feature rusted, inoperable vehicles in their yard, and Christmas lights that adorn the home during the summer months. Transitional footage repeatedly shows a train running on a track beside the Shannon-Thompson home, signaling a literal manifestation of the “wrong side of the tracks” idiom used to describe working-class and poor families (Ammer, 1997). Other stock footage is used to contribute to the representation of the world the Shannon-Thompson family inhabits; a number of scenes are introduced with non-contextual images of animal carcasses that were apparently hit by passing cars, lawns with minimal landscaping and dry grass, above ground swimming pools that have not been properly maintained, and stray dogs that roam the streets of the town.

The Robertsons’ homes do, to some extent, reflect the family’s upward mobility due to the success of their business. Willie and Korie’s home, for example, can best be described as opulent, with a large circle drive and fountain in front and a spacious kitchen with modern, stainless steel appliances. However, the eldest Robertsons, Phil and Miss Kay, have lived in the same home for nearly 40 years, a relatively modest house that
appears to be a double-wide trailer with additions built onto it. When appliances begin to break in their home and Willie suggests they look for a new home in his subdivision, Phil seems uninterested in engaging in such conspicuous consumption to reflect his economic wealth. In “A Big Duck-ing Call” (April 11, 2012), Phil and Miss Kay meet a realtor who shows them a house that contains, among other features, a $25,000 chandelier, a “spa area,” six kitchens, 12 bedrooms, and a pool. Phil, incredulous at the extravagance of the house, tells the realtor, “This might be a bit much. It has a Vatican look to it. Does the Pope come with it?” Ultimately, Phil and Kay decide not to purchase a new house; although they could likely afford any of the homes presented to them by the realtor, their desire to remain in their current home suggests an allegiance to the more simplistic life from which they came.

Another element of mise-en-scène – costuming – also contributes to the construction of the characters in these programs as working-class through their taste in clothing and adornment. Far from designer and name-brand apparel, members of each of the families in this study wear clothing that may be classified as shabby, generic, or, on occasion, tasteless by middle-class standards. Raising Hope and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo often show their characters in this type of clothing, including air-brushed and novelty t-shirts, such as Burt’s “I’d rather be in Virginia” double entendre tee. An entire episode of The Middle focuses on the economic struggle the Hecks face in buying Sue a pair of $112 designer jeans (“The Jeans,” January 6, 2010), which suggests that their normal apparel choices are much more thrifty. Moreover, a number of the characters wear uniforms or utilitarian clothing to reflect their occupations. Virginia is often depicted in her pink maid’s uniform in Raising Hope, and the men in all four programs are similarly
suited for their manual labor jobs: Burt, Mike, and Sugar Bear, from *Raising Hope, The Middle*, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, respectively, all primarily wear jeans, t-shirts, flannel, and work boots. For their jobs in the duck call manufacturing plant, the men of *Duck Dynasty* often don jeans and camouflage; the exception is CEO Willie, who occasionally wears a dress shirt and tie to reflect his executive position.

The costuming of the women of *Duck Dynasty*, however, serves as a stark contrast to the men in the series. Korie and Missy, Willie and Jase’s wives, respectively, regularly wear contemporary trends of skinny jeans and fashionable accessories. Whereas *The Middle’s* Frankie and *Raising Hope’s* Virginia have unremarkable hairstyles and Mama June of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* washes her hair in the sink with off-brand shampoo (“This is My Crazy Family”), Korie’s and Missy’s hair are styled in on-trend haircuts. Recently, the “Duck Wives” partnered with luxury handbag brand Dooney & Burke to create a line of accessories inspired by the series, featuring, for example, camouflage- and duck-print purses (Walano, 2014). Thus, rather than Virginia’s maid uniform and the ordinary, off-brand clothing worn by Frankie and Mama June, the women of *Duck Dynasty* exhibit high-brow tastes through their costuming choices; even Miss Kay, though styled in a more mature way, often wears fashionable, trendy clothes. While the men of the series are styled to connote rural, working-class authenticity, their wives contradict this representation through their expensive style. Yet, by designing handbags that feature patterns associated with rural, working-class leisure (e.g., camouflage), they attempt to recoup their identity as authentically working-class.
Working-class Arts, Leisure, and Food

As Bourdieu points out in his foundational text on sociological class, *Distinction* (1984), class belonging can be structured through two broad categories of accrued capital: economic and cultural. Like economic capital, cultural capital is also accumulated and expended, and includes the consumption of goods associated with culturally appropriate good taste, the acquisition of skills and education, and individuals’ moral dispositions. Taken together, economic and cultural capital work to produce an individual’s or family’s class belonging.

In both the domestic sitcoms and family-based “redneck” reality programs, issues of cultural capital manifest through the families’ broad rejection of high-brow culture, particularly through the ways they navigate arts and leisure, and through their culinary preferences. In contrast to the rest of his family, *Duck Dynasty* CEO Willie repeatedly tries to position himself as a “sophisticated” consumer of high-brow culture. For example, as a member of the local country club, Willie enjoys playing rounds at its golf course; when Jase asks when Willie plans to take him to “that fine country club,” Willie scoffs at the idea, noting, “Looking like that? I don’t think you’re country club material. … They got a dress code up there. Look at you. You look like they let Charles Manson out and he went hunting” (“Frog in One,” March 28, 2012). By likening his brother’s appearance to both a hunter and murderer, Willie recognizes that belonging in a space reserved for middle- or upper-class individuals requires a performance of cultural capital, which is, in this case, designated by appearance and attire.

Etiquette also becomes a central subject in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* as Alana attempts to increase her success on the pageant circuit, specifically as it relates to her
performance of the disciplined, middle-class femininity that has historically been the hallmark of beauty pageants (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006). After her failure to place in the opening pageant of the series, Mama June hires Mrs. Hickey, director of the Etiquette School of Atlanta, in an attempt to make Alana more refined in front of the judges (“Gonna Be a Glitz Pig”). During Mrs. Hickey’s lesson, Alana and her sister Jessica constantly chew with their mouths open and pass gas at the dinner table, exasperating the etiquette coach with their unwillingness to follow her instructions. In an interview with producers, Mrs. Hickey observes that the Shannon-Thompson family has “some habits they’ll have to break. The bodily function thing? We don’t do that.” After Mrs. Hickey leaves, Jessica opines in an affected, faux-British accent that she “learned about table manners and all that”; her mocking impression indicates that manners are the hallmark of “classy,” high-brow people, a label not to be applied to the Shannon-Thompson family.

Later in the season, Mama and Alana meet with a former Miss Georgia titleholder, who also attempts to correct Alana’s manners in an effort to make her a more successful pageant contestant (“Ah-choo!” October 19, 2012). In an interview following dinner, Miss Georgia shares,

Alana’s manners, I think they could definitely be worked on a little bit. … She did have a little incident where she told us she farted and that’s where we kind of need to talk about manners, I guess, at the table. It’s even weird to say the word ‘farted’ on camera. That’s something I never thought I’d say.

In both instances, Mama is relatively dismissive of her daughters’ inability to perform the etiquette standards of middle-class femininity. After Mrs. Hickey’s visit, Mama observes,
“Nobody can be proper and etiquette-ly all the time, I don’t care who you are.” Both Mrs. Hickey and Miss Georgia offer clear examples of the performance of middle-class expectations of etiquette; despite Mama’s assertion that no one can adhere to “proper and etiquette-ly” standards all of the time, the Shannon-Thompson family dismisses these standards even in the public sphere, underscoring their working-class ethos.

These texts also use the families’ inexperience with and disavowal of middle-class and affluent leisure and cultural activities as both a source of humor, and as a way to signal their working-class belonging. For instance, Raising Hope’s Burt refers to yoga, which has largely come to be associated with white, upper-middle-class women (Carmon, 2011), as “slow karate on that mat” (“Everybody Flirts…Sometimes,” May 3, 2011). In another episode (“Baby Monitor,” May 10, 2011), Burt builds rapport with his neighbor by pointing out that they “both have brown hair and hate museums,” indicating a distaste for a leisure activity marked as cultured. The Hecks demonstrate their discomfort with markers of cultural capital in “The Scratch” (November 18, 2009) when a social worker comes to check on the welfare of Brick after his school mistakenly assumes his parents have been physically abusive. In her attempt to present themselves as a “good” family, Frankie worries that they “don’t have a real book anywhere, just People magazine.” She further instructs Mike to “turn all of the TVs to PBS” for the social worker’s visit, but they immediately realize that neither of them know on what channel to find the network. Later, when the social worker asks Frankie what the family does for fun, she says, “Biking, canoeing, visiting ancient Native American historical sites and looking for arrowheads”; in their independent interviews with the social worker, however, all other family members answer “watch TV” as their primary leisure activity. In this case,
Frankie’s ideal of a “good” family means participation in leisure activities associated with accruing or displaying cultural capital and middle-class identity. In reality, though, their free time is spent watching television, an activity perceived as a waste of time on a medium consistently labeled as low-brow.

Similar to his country club belonging and his performance of classed etiquette, Willie in *Duck Dynasty* also stands out from the rest of his family through his desire to become versed in high-brow hobbies. In the opening of “Sauvignon Beard” (April 18, 2012), Willie brings his family along to an art gallery because he is “looking to diversify his portfolio by spending some money on some art work.” Although he asserts that he “like[s] the finer things in life,” he notes that he “didn’t get the sophisticated gene of [his] family”; rather, he says he “started the sophisticated gene of this family.” This recognition illustrates the difference Rubin et al. (2014) point out between SES and social class; while the family can certainly be classified as affluent in terms of their financial success, cultural capital has not been prevalent in their family background. Jase, however, questions the authenticity of Willie’s participation in high-brow leisure. In an interview, he mentions, “To say I was forced to come to this art gallery against my will would be a correct assertion. … And what’s worse is Willie trying to prove that he’s sophisticated. Willie has way too much facial hair to rise to the next level in society.” Later in the episode, Willie tries to further prove his sophistication by purchasing a vineyard with hopes of producing his own line of “Willie’s Wines.” Jase derides Willie for his naming choice, pointing out that it fails to evoke an appropriate air of classiness: “You look at most people named Willie, they’re either in prison or on the arm-wrestling circuit.”

Despite his attempts to transcend the low-brow leisure activities associated with his
family, Willie’s lack of authenticity is further solidified when he visits the winery with the vineyard’s sommelier and repeatedly mispronounces the name of the grapes grown at the vineyard.

In addition to their failure to participate in leisure activities associated with middle-class or affluent populations, each of the families becomes marked as working-class vis-à-vis their relationship to food. Throughout *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the families primarily consume processed, nutritionally bankrupt food. When Frankie announces, “I’ve made dinner!” in the pilot of *The Middle*, she follows her pronouncement by tossing greasy bags of Meaty B’s burgers takeout onto the kitchen table. As the Food Research and Action Center (2010) found, low-income families often choose less healthy food options because of their access to a large number of fast food options and a lack of full-service grocery stores and farmer’s markets in low-income communities. Poor food choices are also present among the Chances of *Raising Hope*, who have made microwaveable TV dinners a staple in their home, and are shown regularly consuming other highly processed foods, such as white bread. Further, they make a number of questionable choices regarding baby Hope’s nutritional needs, including mixing strawberry syrup into her baby formula, and teaching her to crawl by having her chase sugar cubes.

In *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the family similarly subsists on junk food like pork rinds, cheese puffs, and oatmeal creme pies. Yet, the Shannon-Thompson family displays a more explicit relationship between their food choices and their economic capital than the families in the other series. Because the food sold at the local auctions must retain a long shelf-life to be transferred from the grocery store to the auction house,
all of the items Mama bids on and wins are highly processed, including miniature bundt
cakes, bags of chips, cookies, and candy. Further, Mama’s extreme couponing behavior is
the subject of another episode, “I’m Sassified!,” and she again uses thriftiness as a
rationale to spend hours of her time clipping coupons and shopping in the store. Like the
food the family purchases at auction, Mama uses coupons to purchase ramen noodles,
chocolate milk powder, and Snickers bars; she prides herself on the amount of money she
is able to save, detailing her items’ original retail value of $130.02 and her out of pocket
cost of $27.40. Indeed, while Mama’s economic hardship seems consistent with the
motivations of some of the individuals featured on fellow TLC program Extreme
Couponing (Click, 2012; Curnalia, 2014) the coupons she and others redeem are most
often for nutrient-poor foods. Later in the first season (“Time for a Sketti!” October 12,
2012), Mama points out, “Everybody’s got their own type thing they feed their family.
I’ll feed them on about eighty dollars a week, and that is just buying cheaply,” indicating
that price takes precedence over nutrition.

It is not only what the families in these programs choose to eat that marks them as
working-class, however, but also what they reject. Duck Dynasty matriarch Miss Kay’s
cooking is such a prevalent fixture in the home that the Robertsons decide to take over a
family friend’s local fine dining restaurant in “Leave it to Beavers” (April 11, 2012) so
Miss Kay can feed the town’s residents the battered and deep-fried foods she makes for
her family. Yet when the men of the family are tasked with serving as waiters for the
event, Jase particularly takes issue with his family’s foray into fine dining culture,
mocking several of the customer’s dietary needs in an interview: “They’re ordering stuff
that I’ve never even heard of. ‘Oh, I’m a pescatarian and I’m running low on my gluten
and what do you have for that?” How about a kick in the pants?” Jase’s sardonic impression of the customers suggests that he views their needs as pretentious, not legitimate, and he thus is able to differentiate himself from what he perceives as their high-brow tastes.

The relationship between food and economic resources is well documented. Tiovonen (1997) lists several motivations for food choices, including “money or its equivalent,” arguing that “people eat what they can afford” (p. 331). Miller (2010) suggests that this notion is true now more than ever, calling current American culture a “place of extremes …what you eat for dinner has become the definitive marker of social status; as the distance between rich and poor continues to grow, the freshest, most nutritious foods have become luxury goods that only some can afford.” Thus, in the face of the continuing economic struggle for low-income Americans, Jou (2014) contends that families with tight budgets are constrained in their ability to buy healthy food, turning instead to the calorie-dense, low-nutrient foods that are often cheaper. For the families in The Middle, Raising Hope, and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, their almost exclusive consumption of these types of foods helps contribute to the reading of their working-class belonging. Yet, financial resources are not the only motivation for food consumption; food is also used as an ostensive tool to claim social status for oneself or limit the social status of others (Tiovonen, 1997). In Jase’s case, he views the food needs of their customers as elitist when compared to his family, further solidifying their working-class position.
Working-class Linguistics

Finally, language operates as a way to designate the characters in most of these programs as working class, either by signaling their lack of education or by using linguistic features associated with the working-class. In Raising Hope, Virginia, who lacks a high school education, consistently mispronounces and misuses even common words. For example, she asks Jimmy in the pilot episode about his “philostrophical journey for the meaning of life,” and cautions him that having a baby will “dramastically change” his life. Similarly in Duck Dynasty, Uncle Si, who is revealed to be the least educated of the Robertson family, interchanges the word “pacific” for “specific” (“Too Close for Comfort,” April 4, 2012), and suggests that his idea to lure beavers out of their dam with music is “scientistic” (“Leave it to Beavers”).

Mispronunciation is not the only way these characters are marked as under-educated, however; the misuse of words also indicates that characters lack an expansive vocabulary associated with higher education. In the “Dream Hoarders” (October 5, 2010) episode of Raising Hope, Jimmy’s friend Sabrina asks him to offer a synonym for “ostentatious” to use in a story she is writing for her creative writing class. After a long pause he replies, “Delicious? Tired? Obnoxious? Lamp shade? I really don’t know that word.” Later, Jimmy provides “high-falutin’” as a synonym for ostentatious. He says he found the word in something call “the saurus,” which “is like the dictionary’s cousin.” Although these instances are presented for comedic effect, previous research has demonstrated a vocabulary gap between wealthy and low-income individuals. Bergland (2014), for example, argues that the children of poorer-income parents often enter school with poorer language skills than their more affluent peers, due to both parenting styles
and home environment. Given the characters’ lower levels of education, their misuse of language signifies their working-class belonging.

Working-class linguistic properties are also used to orient viewers of Duck Dynasty within the family’s working-class milieu. At the beginning of each scene, screen titles are used to orient viewers to the Robertson’s world, and these labels consistently highlight the Robertson family’s speech patterns by “dropping the ‘g,’” to include activities such as “beaver huntin’,” “tree trimmin’,” and “pitchin’ a tent.” As Romaine (2000) points out in her research investigating the relationship between sociolinguistics and social class,

The lower a person's social status, the more likely he/she is to use a higher percentage of alveolar rather than velar nasal endings. This is often referred to popularly as ‘dropping one’s g’s,’ and is a well-known marker of social status over most of the English-speaking world. (p. 69)

That this feature is present not only in the actual speech of its characters, but is also purposefully inserted in the visual components of the show, illustrates the added emphasis used to situate the Robertson families as authentically working-class.

The goal of this first research question was to first establish that the characters in the shows analyzed should be classified as working-class. The socioeconomic factors, including occupation, income, and educational attainment, presented in most of the shows might alone be enough to label the characters as working-class; many of the characters were employed in low-paying, manual labors jobs that did not require advanced training or education. However, following Bourdieu’s (1984) suggestion that both economic and cultural capital structure class belonging, I argue that sociocultural factors are equally as
important when attributing a working-class designation. That is, the enactment of working-class *mise-en-scene*, arts, leisure, and food, and linguistics are cultural markers that shape the representation of the Heck, Chance, Shannon-Thompson, and Robertson class belonging.

Drawing from these portrayals, I maintain that televisual representation of working-class identity is encoded through both socioeconomic and cultural signifiers. The working-class is primarily employed in low-income, manual labor positions, and they often lack the educational attainment necessary for professional jobs. Perhaps more significantly, however, are the cultural codes used to signal working-class belonging. These domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs indicate that the working-class have poor taste and revel in low-brow activities; from nutritionally bankrupt food choices to an eschewal of “cultured” leisure, they embrace “junk culture” and are either unable or unwilling to appreciate the more refined tastes of their middle-class and affluent peers.

Importantly, these working-class representations are often encoded as individual choices that the characters in these texts have made – these characters make the decision to work in a low-paying career, to demonstrate poor etiquette, or to prefer to watch television rather than visit a museum. Similar to Harkins’ (2005) assertion that comedic rural programs like *Beverly Hillbillies* obfuscate social and economic inequality by making poverty a part of rural folk culture, the poor taste and lack of cultural capital in the programs analyzed are presented as simply a part of who these families are. Economic disparity is addressed only insofar as working-class families are juxtaposed culturally with others in their community; inequality is made a matter of taste rather than wealth. Census and General Social Survey data primarily use income figures to
substantiate those who self-identify as working- or middle-class, but for those families who label themselves working-class in post-recession contemporary culture, it is worth exploring further how issues of culture and taste influence one’s class consciousness.

Given that rational choice structures many of the tenets of neoliberalism, examining the individual choices of the characters in these texts aids in understanding the relationship between the rules of neoliberalism and working-class identity. Thus, I now turn to my second research question, which asks:

**RQ2: How do characters in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality shows apply the rules of neoliberal citizenship to their lives?**

**Neoliberal “Rules” in Working-Class Television**

Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that has shaped cultural beliefs about class in the United States and abroad. Bockman (2013) argues that neoliberal philosophy posits that it is not government’s responsibility to create economic growth; instead, neoliberalism encourages a reliance on private companies, private individuals, and free markets to generate economic growth and promote social welfare. This emphasis on privatization, particularly as it relates to private individuals, has implications for how we understand working-class families, and, more specifically, how we understand their inability or unwillingness to transcend their class positions and become upwardly mobile. Because of neoliberalism’s overarching dominance in shaping society writ large (Duggan, 2003), the ways a working-class family follows the “rules” of neoliberal citizenship necessarily impact how we make sense of their working-class belonging.
A number of scholars have identified trends of neoliberalism, both from theoretical and pragmatic perspectives. Taken together, I have used these to develop a framework through which to analyze the portrayal of neoliberal citizenship in the domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs examined in this study. First, given neoliberalism’s tenet that the free market is preferable to governmental intervention, resulting in a lack of funds for public social programs (Martinez & Garcia, n.d.), I delineate the ways that public services are deemed ineffectual or unappealing for the families in these texts. Yet another prominent manifestation of contemporary neoliberal rhetoric, specifically in media, is the notion of individual self-improvement, empowerment, and the value of hard work (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Rose, 1996); I show the ways these self-help rhetorics are employed by and shape our understanding of the characters in these series. Because neoliberalism assumes that free will is paramount, Rose (1996) further contends that it is up to the individual to make prudent decisions, lest they be the “author of their own misfortune” (p. 59). Thus, I also explore how the characters avoid or embrace risks, and the implications of those risks for their working-class belonging. Finally, I explore the relationship between neoliberalism and capitalism, and describe how the business owners in two of these texts embrace capitalistic tenets of competition and profit-driven success.

**Privatization of the Public**

Central to contemporary neoliberal philosophy is the reduction in funds to social programs like education and health care, and the push for privatization of state-owned industries as a primary trend of neoliberal policy (Abramovitz, 2010; Martinez & Garcia, n.d.). This trend has further manifested in the privatization of charitable giving, both on
the individual and corporate levels (McMurria, 2008), which requires private citizens and businesses, rather than the government, to work to correct social problems. In these domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs, the privatization of the public is demonstrated by presenting public resources as ineffectual at solving the problems they are intended to fix, and by suggesting that private, working-class characters are themselves responsible for raising funds to supplement what the government contributes to its public services.

*The Middle* and *Raising Hope* both address the shortcomings of public resources through situations in which government services fail to adequately serve their intended purposes. After Frankie accidentally hits Brick with a beer bottle cleaning up for trash day during *The Middle*’s (“The Scratch”), Brick tells school personnel, “My mom was mad, and my dad was mad, and my mom hit me with a beer bottle. She says I always get in the way.” Rather than inquiring about the context of the event herself, Brick’s teacher reports the incident and a government social worker visits the home. Frankie finds out that the social worker is someone whom Mike used to date, and assumes that she will be vindictive and place Brick into foster care, highlighting the assumption that the government is tainted by the individuals who occupy it. The situation suggests that governmental resources that intervene in individuals’ private lives are often reactionary and absurd; Brick’s school personnel invoked their mandatory reporting responsibility, stating that “Once a teacher hears something like [Brick’s claim], he’s legally required to report it,” but failed to address the situation with Frankie and Mike before inviting governmental interference. In this instance, governmental mandated reporting is presented as superfluous and even damaging to the Heck family; it offers a general
solution without consideration for the individual. In the Hecks’ case, this resulted in the waste of taxpayer resources through the dispatch of a social worker when the incident in question was accidental.

*Raising Hope* also offers commentary on the ability of public services to effectively meet the needs of the citizenry. Because the Chances do not have jobs that offer insurance benefits, Jimmy takes Hope to the free clinic when she gets sick in “The Sniffles.” The receptionist tells Jimmy the doctor will be able to see Hope “next Tuesday, at 11:00 a.m.,” nodding to the frequent criticism that government-run medicine will only result in backlogs and lengthy waits for services (e.g., Pipes, 2011). In a later episode, it is revealed that Burt was required to register as a sex offender at 17 because he had sex with 15-year-old Virginia (“Blue Dots”). Now in his 40s, he struggles to wipe this permanent and misguided designation from his record, suggesting that government’s sweeping policies leave little room for context and exceptions.

When public services such as these are presented as ineffectual, particularly through the experience of working-class individuals who often take advantage of their resources, it suggests government-funded entities are to be viewed critically. Thus, if these institutions are represented as failing to effectively provide the services they claim to provide, it is easier to perceive them as wasteful of tax-payers’ support, and, consequently, easier to endorse the privatization of government resources. Indeed, several of these programs address this trend toward privatization through private funding of public goods and through privatized charitable giving.

Consistent with the expectation of many contemporary public school children, Axl, Brick and Sue Heck in *The Middle*’s are regularly required to fundraise money for
their schools. “The Trip” (October 21, 2009) opens with Frankie’s voiceover remarking, “Here in the middle, we have a great tradition of kids raising money for their schools by selling their neighbors crap they don’t need.” The Heck’s daughter Sue attempts to sell $3,000 worth of cheese and sausage; her success would result in a free trip to Indianapolis to the state capitol for the family, and Mike drives her across Indiana to sell the items. Similarly in “Block Party,” parents are tasked with raising money to buy the public high school football team’s new jerseys. This serves as an indirect privatization of a public institution because, rather than drawing solely on government funding, private individuals spend their own money to provide supplemental support. Families with children in public schools, then, are doubly and unduly burdened with funding their own schools; not only are they responsible for the taxes that contribute to public education, they are also tasked with selling items to other private individuals vis-à-vis private companies who then contribute a portion of the proceeds back to the public institution. Working-class families are particularly affected, given that they often have less time and financial resources to supplement to the privatization of public education than their middle-class counterparts.

Further, under neoliberal conditions, charitable giving is privatized on an individual level. In the “Dream Hoarders” episode of Raising Hope, Virginia and her fellow maids spend time after work sifting through household goods a family intended to donate to charity to take for themselves what the family no longer wants. Virginia observes, “One of the only perks of cleaning houses is getting all the crap that rich people don’t want.” In this instance, charity is privatized by individuals who pass along the items they no longer want to the “less fortunate” working-class laborers whom they employ.
Even working-class individuals are encouraged to be charitable in neoliberal culture, as seen in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*’s “What is a Door Nut?” (August 22, 2012). The Shannon-Thompson family has a “Christmas in July” event at their home to raise money for a local charity, taking donations of toys and canned goods and distributing them to people in the community. In the episode, Mama June comments, “We do it to help whoever’s in need,” emphasizing that all community members, no matter their class belonging, can contribute through privatized charitable giving.

As Martinez & Garcia (n.d.) suggest in their delineation of the major trends in neoliberal culture, public services are routinely outsourced to private companies to become profit driven enterprises. In these working-class programs, this practice is justified by positing that public services from community health centers to social workers, though well intentioned in theory, often fail to perform their intended functions. Moreover, private citizens are tasked with charitable giving; benevolence is required for even those working-class characters who are reminded that, no matter their economic struggles, the private act of “giving back” is required for good neoliberal citizenship.

**Individualization, Self-Improvement and the Rhetoric of “Hard Work”**

Neoliberalism is complexly interwoven with ideas about the individual, and the individual’s responsibility to succeed within the free market system. As Clarke (2005) argues, “The market [is] not just an economic, but also a moral force, penalizing the idle and incompetent and rewarding the enterprising and hard-working, for the greater good of society as a whole” (p. 51). Consequently, working-class belonging is also shaped by those characters’ individual efforts to succeed; those who work hard will be rewarded through the transcendence of their working-class position. *The Middle, Raising Hope,*
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty utilize the discourses of individualization, self-improvement, and “hard work” to frame their characters and shape their class belonging.

Recent analyses have pointed to a clear relationship between neoliberal philosophy and the rise of self-help discourses. Specifically, in neoliberalism, each individual is responsible for prioritizing the improvement of him or herself privately, and with enough will and industriousness, each individual is capable of achieving this goal (e.g., Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Rimke, 2000). A significant theme in each of these programs is the optimism associated with aspiration and the resulting success of hard work. Conversely, the texts also present the punitive consequences of an unwillingness to work hard, which has necessarily implications for our reading of these families as working class.

An ethos of hard work underscores Duck Dynasty and the Robertson family, who, as we learn in the pilot episode, have built a thriving enterprise through tremendous effort and business savvy. In “Family Funny Business,” CEO Willie shares, “Forty years ago, my father, Phil Robertson, invented a revolutionary kind of duck call that changed the duck hunting industry and our way of life forever. … As CEO, I’ve turned my dad’s one man operation into a booming family enterprise.” It is no accident, then, that the Robertson family has succeeded; Phil’s ingenuity and Willie’s business sense have made the Robertson family a household name in the hunting industry. Further emphasizing the Robertson family “rags-to-riches” narrative, Phil laments the resulting effect on the family’s wealth on his grandchildren, telling the audience in “CEO for a Day,” “The Robertson family went from poor to rich. So now I’m dealing with little rich kids. … I’m
just trying to help them see their core values.” Viewers learn quickly that “core values” is synonymous with “hard work,” as Phil has his grandchildren clear off a lot that he then turns into a football field for the family’s football game. When the kids arrive thinking they had cleared off a spot for a garden only to see a football field, they are awestruck. Phil says, “Look what all that hard work did for you. Y’all thought you was making ol’ Papaw a garden spot. … Y’all see what a little hard work and a little sweat will get ya? Paid off, didn’t it?” Thus, Duck Dynasty suggests that hard work does not end simply because someone has material rewards, and that one will continue to be successful if they live in accordance with their “core value” of hard work.

Indeed, the Robertsons are exemplary of the “Protestant work ethic” ethos, a cultural myth that ties together the religious values of Christianity and capitalist economic success (Wingard, 2013). While discourse of religion is absent from the other series investigated in this project, the family in Duck Dynasty makes their religious beliefs central to both their on-screen world and their life outside the series. In fact, the family’s devout Christian faith often becomes shorthand for explaining how they employed the rules of neoliberalism to become economically successful, while still retaining their particular brand of “redneck” working-classness. Each episode of the series concludes with the extended Robertson family gathered around the dinner table sharing a meal, while one of the family members prays over their food. After the prayer, Willie offers a voiceover of the “lesson” to be learned in the particular episode, which often emphasizes the value of family and hard work. In “CEO for a Day,” for instance, Willie observes,
When a family binds together, there is no limit to how much you can accomplish. Competition and sibling rivalry, that’s just how we challenge each other to be the better. And after a while you come to realize that working hard and having fun ain’t that much different.

In this specific example, Willie underscores the importance of neoliberal tenets hard work and competition, and simultaneously suggests that these goals can best be accomplished through family dynamics. Moreover, the entrepreneurial success of the Robertsons, who have and continue to “work hard,” allows Willie to make “hard work” synonymous with “having fun,” as they are able to take risks that will not diminish their economic capital.

For those who have not yet reached financial success despite buying into the rhetoric of hard work, another individualized discourse must be present to help explain the lack of success. For example, a recurring storyline from the first season of The Middle is Frankie’s relative incompetence as a car salesperson. Despite incentives to sell and punishments for failing to close deals, Frankie’s sales numbers remain at the bottom of the dealership’s employees. Frankie’s boss hires a motivational consultant to help employees become better salespeople and, in turn, increase profit. Late in the episode, the speaker engages in a one-on-one motivational conversation with Frankie:

*Motivational speaker:* Empower yourself to be who you want to be and love that person. Because right now, you’re living paycheck to paycheck, and the sad thing is you’re working really hard.

*Frankie:* I am. I’m working really hard.
Motivational speaker: I know. You have a choice. You can say, ‘I get up every morning, I deal with a mean boss, the economy sucks, no one is buying cars,’ or you can say, ‘I get up every morning, I deal with a mean boss, the economy sucks, and no one’s buying cars, but that’s what gets me up in the morning, because I’m Frankie Heck and I can do it all. I get my family dressed and fed, and send my kids off to school with a science fair volcano and find missing car keys in a Lego fort, and I get the PopTart stain out of a football jersey. I walk in the door of the dealership, pow! Bring it on! I can sell 10 cars today! I’m not scared. I’m a mom! I can do anything!

Frankie: I can. I can do anything! (“The Fun House”)

Using self-help buzzwords such as “empower” and placing the agency of “choice” on Frankie, the motivational speaker underscores the importance of the individual to decide to succeed. Within this framework, hard work is not enough; the speaker acknowledges that Frankie is “working really hard,” but she must also reach self-actualization and believe that her hard work should pay off.

In Raising Hope, hard work is further supplemented with the idea that one must believe in him or herself to achieve success. The episode “Dream Hoarders” features multiple storylines that underscore the aspirational nature of success, but ultimately concludes that aspirations must be augmented by hard work. In one storyline, Burt and Virginia discuss how their life will be better when they win the lottery, which they play regularly. Burt suggests his luck keeps getting better, telling Virginia, “I got one number a couple weeks ago, and I almost got two the week after that. I think it’s about to break wide open.” Virginia then asks, “What’s it up to this week?” to which Burt replies, “46
million.” Virginia is pleased that Burt’s luck has held out for a larger jackpot because their “success” in winning more money will lead to a greater material reward: “I’m glad you didn’t win last week. Now we can get a house and a boat.” In this instance, Burt and Virginia aspire to achieve material success, but that success is not predicated on hard work, but instead on luck. Given this philosophy, perhaps it is not a coincidence that the characters’ family name is Chance; by relying on luck and, consequently, chance, in their efforts to succeed, they are the embodiment of the cultural imagination of a working-class individual who hopes to “strike it rich” with a quick-fix, like the lottery, rather than invest the hard work necessary to become upwardly mobile.

However, the episode’s other storyline indicates that aspirations are only rewarded when one is willing to invest the labor necessary to achieve those dreams. When Jimmy’s coworker at the grocery quits her creative writing class because her professor describes her story as “blah,” Jimmy encourages her not to quit, telling her, “If you really want to be a writer you can’t just give up. If you give up you’ll never know what could have been. … Anything is possible unless you quit. You can’t win if you don’t play.” Inspired by his own advice to Sabrina, Jimmy tells Hope later in the episode:

We didn’t have the best life, but that didn’t stop us from hoping one day we would. … I may not be able to give you the perfect life, but I want you to live in a house that makes you believe that one day you can get it. That’s why I’m going to make sure you never see your daddy stop dreaming. Because if you stop dreaming, you’re just sleeping.

Saturated in a neoliberal environment, Jimmy is a working-class character that who has internalized the belief that working hard and dreaming for the future will eventually lead
to a better life. By failing to reward Burt and Virginia’s aspirations of the easy route to success and instead marking Sabrina’s hard work as laudable, *Raising Hope* promotes success through a desire and willingness to achieve.

*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* offers a similar endorsement of hard work, but from an alternate perspective. That is, the Shannon-Thompson family fails to engage in the work necessary to be successful, and this offers evidence for their failure to transcend a working-class belonging. In the pilot episode, Mama June describes a day in the life of her family: “If we don’t have nothing to do that day, I guarantee we’re in the bed till 12:00, 1:00 sometimes 2:00 in the afternoon.” The accompanying images show Mama leisurely getting out of bed late in the morning, and struggling to wake her daughters. The family, then, embodies the “lazy” and “unmotivated” stereotype associated with working-class families (Leistyna, 2009), and this serves as a validation of their working-class belonging; their unwillingness to work hard suggests that they deserve their economic struggles.

Later in the first season, the family gauges the results of a summer-long weight loss competition that began in the first episode. Mama promised her daughters a trip to a local waterpark as a reward if all members of the family lose weight by the end of the summer. At their weigh-in during “A Bunch of Wedgies” (August 29, 2012), it is revealed that Mama and Jessica only lost one and three pounds, respectively, and Alana and Lauryn gained weight. Mama June states in her interview that even though they were not successful in their efforts, she plans to take the girls to the waterpark anyway to celebrate “their hard work this summer.” After consuming junk food and failing to
exercise, Mama June’s definition of “hard work” is inconsistent with the normative definition that emphasizes the steps required to achieve the intended goal.

Individualization and hard work structure the representation of the working-class families in this analysis. Framed through neoliberal self-improvement rhetoric, those who have the willingness to work hard will naturally succeed, while those who are dismissive of this principle are destined to fail to be upwardly mobile. Ideas about luck, good fortune, and reaping rewards without the necessary work rejected as ways to create success. Perhaps one of the most central tenets to neoliberal thought, the notion that hard work necessarily results in success, helps justify working-class characters’ lack of economic success. Portraying these characters as lazy or foolishly optimistic rather than hard working helps legitimize their working-class belonging.

**Risk and Neoliberalism**

Undergirding the ideal of free choice and personal responsibility is the assumption that “good” neoliberal citizens will make calculated choices and avoid risk, thereby suggesting that those who make these “good” choices will be rewarded within the neoliberal system. The families featured in the texts I examined, however, consistently make risky choices, many of which directly contribute to the financial components of their working-class status. For example, both *Raising Hope* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* illustrate the financial struggles associated with young and single-parenthood, and in both instances, the single parents are represented as having made poor choices in terms of their sexual partners. *Raising Hope*’s Jimmy has unprotected sex during a one-night-stand with a beautiful serial killer in the back of his van; when the baby’s mother is sentenced to the death penalty, the Chance family is left to raise baby Hope. Similarly, Mama June
offers her opinion about her pregnant daughter, Anna’s, former partner in “She Oooo’d Herself” (August 15, 2012): “Anna’s baby daddy ain’t in the picture. You think that boy’s gonna love and care about you? Negative. All that boy wants is to get in your little biscuit and get a little piece and he’s runnin’.” Indeed, Jimmy’s and Anna’s decisions to have unprotected sex are framed as irresponsible, in part because each family, already struggling financially, will now have another member for which to be accountable.

Teenage parenthood is portrayed as cyclical in the Chance and Shannon-Thompson families; early episodes of the Raising Hope reveal that Virginia gave birth to Jimmy the night of her prom, and in “Gonna Be a Glitz Pig,” Mama June shares, “When I found out she was pregnant I wasn’t happy, happy, joy, joy because I know how bad I struggled when I had her at 15. I had two kids by the time I was 17 and it was very, very hard.” This representation is consistent with Meade, Kershaw, and Ickovics’ (2008) findings that daughters of teenage mothers were 66% more likely to become teenage parents themselves. Although Raising Hope’s situation is a fictional one framed by comedy, and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo presents the true struggle of the Shannon-Thompson family, both offer cautionary tales about the risks associated with teenage and single-parenthood.

A number of instances in these texts point to the poor decisions working-class families make regarding how they spend money. The Raising Hope episode “The Sniffles” reveals Burt’s gambling problem, a reoccurring issue throughout the series that has caused him to sell personal items to satisfy his addiction. In The Middle, Frankie and Mike’s economic struggles are regularly the result of poor financial planning. For instance, “The Cheerleader” centers around the family’s previous decision to take
advantage of interest free financing on several purchases throughout the years. A montage shows Frankie and Mike entering the home with various electronics, exclaiming, “No payments ‘til 2009!” They are disappointed to realize they now owe money on a VCR they had sold some years earlier in a garage sale. Rather than saving enough money to purchase these nonessential items or foregoing the purchase, the Hecks take part in a deferred payment plan on consumer credit, a practice that has historically been predatory for working-class families (Durkin, Elliehausen, Staten, & Zywicki, 2014).

A later episode of The Middle focuses on Mike’s temporary unemployment and the ways the family must cut back on unnecessary expenses (“TV or No TV”). After visiting a financial advisor who suggests ways to trim costs, including the luxury of Frankie’s daily gourmet coffee that the family cannot afford, the family wins $1000 at a church Bingo night and must decide how to spend the money. Frankie first mentions, “There’s so much we can do with this. Like pay down our credit cards, like our financial advisor said,” but she and Mike also discuss the more attractive, albeit irresponsible, decision of paying for their cable, which has recently been shut off due to nonpayment. Hoping to validate their desire to pay for cable instead of paying credit card bills, the parents allow the children to give their input on how the $1000 should be spent; Axl, Sue, and Brick give financially irresponsible answers that benefit themselves personally. Ultimately, Mike sends in a $1000 payment to their credit cards, while Frankie simultaneously pre-paid their cable bill for the entire year. When they discover that their failure to communicate has put them in an even direr situation, Frankie tells Mike, “You’re not a real American. Because real Americans are raised on instant gratification
and the optimism that if they mess up, things will work out. That’s what makes America
great!” Immediately after Frankie tries to legitimate her poor financial decision, they
learn, on their newly paid for cable, that the quarry has reopened and Mike is going back
to work. Thus, while the Hecks certainly struggled to make ends meet during Mike’s
unemployment, Frankie was unwilling to sacrifice unnecessary luxuries to make
payments on their credit card. Although this is initially framed as a risky decision that, in
some manner, justifies their working-class position, Frankie’s “instant gratification and
optimism” was legitimated since Mike’s re-employment would provide them greater
financial security.

Risky financial decisions also influence the Shannon-Thompson family’s
working-class position in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. The family openly struggles
economically, and in numerous episodes, they mention a variety of ways they try to save
money (e.g., extreme couponing, “dumpster diving,” and buying expired food at the local
auction house). Despite these measures, Mama June also regularly mentions the amount
of money the family spends to prepare Alana for her beauty pageants. In the series
premiere, Mama remarks, “We work hard and we invest a lot of money.” In later
episodes, she details exactly how much the family “invests” in Alana’s success, revealing
that her hair and make-up for pageant “can cost upward of three, four hundred dollars”
(“Ah-choo!”), and that “top glitz dresses can go up to three or four thousand dollars”
(“Shh! It’s a Wig”). Moreover, the women of the family receive beauty treatments like
massages and pedicures (“This is My Crazy Family”), all within the rhetoric that the
money spent on these services are further investments in Alana’s success, even though
each member of the family receives them. While Mama June’s attempts to save money
are a clear focus of the series, it is unclear where the family earns the money to spend on the seemingly unnecessary expenses associated with Alana’s beauty pageants. Given that they lack financial resources and still choose to spend unwisely, the Shannon-Thompsons’ working-class belonging is further justified by their risky spending habits.

Like the other television families in this study, the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* also engage in risky financial ventures that are often unsuccessful. When the Robertsons rent out a restaurant to fulfill Miss Kay’s hopes to open her own business in “Leave it to Beavers,” the effort is a failure. In his closing voiceover, Willie questions his insistence on buying into his family’s “stupid ideas,” as they are rarely successful. Similarly, Willie’s decision to purchase a winery, even though he has no experience with vineyards or wine, ended poorly. After the sommelier tells Willie it will be over a year before they have a wine product, the Robertsons spend money to buy grapes from the grocery store to make their own wine. Three weeks later at the venue’s wine tasting, the customers’ response to the wine indicates it is a failure; Willie states in his interview, “The wine that we’ve created kind of tastes like a cross between doe urine and jalapeño juice. And it smells like coon pee.” The Robertson family winery failure is not mentioned through the rest of the first season.

While the risky decision-making of these working class families is often emphasized for comedic effect, there were also instances in which characters reversed their poor decisions, thus more closely abiding by the rules of neoliberalism. For instance, *Raising Hope*’s pilot shows both Virginia and MawMaw smoking, and Jimmy, who has just discovered he will be parenting Hope, tells his mother that she should not smoke in front of babies. After Virginia replies, “That’s only when you’re pregnant,
stupid. Anyway, I don’t believe that. I smoked with you and you’re fine,” Jimmy rebuts, “Fine? I had asthma the first 17 years of my life. I’ve got seven permanent teeth that still haven’t come in, and I’m allergic to fruit. Fruit.” This exchange reveals the consequences of Virginia’s risky decision to smoke while pregnant with Jimmy, and underscores how careless it would be to smoke in front of the infant. In the following episode, Virginia recognizes both the risks to Hope’s health and the financial strain imposed by buying cigarettes; she decides to stop smoking so the family can spend the money that she would have spent on cigarettes on Hope’s daycare (“Dead Tooth”).

The Hecks and the Shannon-Thompsons also implemented small changes to mitigate their risky spending practices. In the same episode of The Middle in which Frankie buys daughter Sue $112 designer jeans, an incredulous Mike asserts that he could purchase a car for son Axl at the same price. He is successful in finding Axl a car for $110, which Axl drives for the remainder of the season (“The Jeans”). This instance highlights both the absurdity of Frankie’s risky financial decisions, as well as Mike’s ability to be more reasonable and live within the family’s means. Moreover, although Mama June is unwilling to completely forego the risky financial decision of spending their limited funds on Alana’s beauty pageant career, she does implement strategies to reduce the overall cost of enrolling in the pageants. In “Ah-choo!” Mama takes lessons at a hair school in an attempt to learn to do Alana’s pageant hair and make-up, which she estimates will save them “upwards of three, four hundred dollars” per competition.

The working-class families in these series do, indeed, engage in risky personal and financial decisions inconsistent with “good” neoliberal citizenship. The relationship between working-class belonging and financial risk-avoidance is further complicated by
the role of consumerism in neoliberal capitalism. Perez and Esposito (2010) contend that one feature of the free market under neoliberalism is an “insatiable consumerism”; the willingness to consume makes an individual a “good” neoliberal citizen because of their participation in the capitalist system. However, this presents a double bind for working-class individuals who are trained to be active consumers within neoliberal culture, but who lack the resources to fully engage in this practice. With the exception of the Robertsons, who have the economic capital to feel little impact from their risky consumption choices, the television families in this study often consume beyond their means, which further entraps them within working-class belonging. Put differently, the programs present the idea that while consumption is an important part of neoliberal culture, only those who already have the resources to consume can make risky economic choices without threatening their financial security. Unsurprisingly, the working-class families do not always make poor decisions; as evidenced above, instances of responsible decision making were evident, but were perhaps not enough to counteract the risky financial and personal decisions made previously.

**Competition, Profit, and Neoliberal Labor**

Neoliberal philosophy suggests that the free market should structure all aspects of life, and that “good” neoliberal citizens protect their own self-interests within the competitive marketplace (Grazian, 2010). The ultimate goal in a free market economy is to increase profits, and, in a capitalist economy, those profits mark the success of the business. In this way, the goals of neoliberalism and capitalism are clearly linked. The philosophy of competition and self-interest that undergirds both neoliberalism and
capitalism is enacted through the representation of businesses and workers in these
particular texts.

Business owners are featured in The Middle, Raising Hope, and Duck Dynasty,
and their success is often predicated on how they embrace capitalist tenets of
neoliberalism. In The Middle, Frankie’s boss at the car dealership, Don Ehlert, is a
caricature of the modern neoliberal business owner; his office is outfitted with markers of
traditional rugged masculinity, such as a taxidermy deer, golf clubs, photos of prominent
Republican politicians, and whisky. He celebrates both sports and conservative politics;
he describes a college championship basketball game as “the best day of my life,
including my wedding day, the birth of my children and the day we liberated Iraq” (“The
Final Four,” March 31, 2010). He prohibits his employees from bringing personal items
to work to decorate their spaces since those items would seemingly interfere with what
should be their sole focus – selling cars for him – and his business practices emphasize
the lengths to which he will go to increase profits. In “The Scratch,” Don writes and
shoots a commercial for the dealership in which he advertises, “Need a vehicle? Got bad
credit? We don’t care.” Thus, he is willing to engage in predatory lending to benefit his
company, regardless of whether his customers can actually afford the automobiles he
sells to them. Later in the season, Don institutes a 365-day work schedule to strengthen
sales, which requires Frankie to work on Thanksgiving (“Thanksgiving,” November 25,
2009). During her holiday shift, Frankie learns that Don is so invested in the success of
his business because his personal life is in shambles; previously portrayed as a heartless,
ruthless businessman, this new information about Don humanizes him and softens the
representation of his investment in the car dealership and legitimates his neoliberal, profit-centric business practices.

*Raising Hope* also offers commentary on the idea of success within a neoliberal business climate. In “Cultish Personality” (March 8, 2011), Burt attempts to seek common ground with his brother, Bruce, by appealing to the fact that they are “both business owners.” Bruce, who owns a mattress store, scoffs at Burt and his lawn care business, telling him, “I was voted Mattress Man of the Year three years running, okay? I have priority check-in at several commuter airlines. I drive a late model crossover. You and I are not even in the same league.” Though framed comically, Bruce’s evidence of being in a different “league” than Burt is predicated on markers of successful entrepreneurship, including awards for dominance in sales competition and perks for frequent air travel.

In *Duck Dynasty*, Willie’s primary focus as CEO of Duck Commander is to increase productivity and profits in the company. He implements a number of strategies to accomplish this goal, including diversifying the company’s products beyond duck calls to include CDs, DVDs, and apparel. He suggests that he is “trying to keep this multi-million dollar operation running. …these are the things a company has to do to grow” (“High Tech Redneck,” March 28, 2012). Further, competition underscores the relationship between CEO Willie and his brother Jase, and their competitions are often rooted in which brother can produce more profits for the Duck Commander business. When Willie asserts that Jase does not have the skills necessary to fulfill the CEO role, Jase accepts the challenge to be “CEO for a day.” In this role, he institutes a competition between his employees to make the most duck calls. He states, “My plan as a CEO is to
inspire. They get excited and all the sudden you look up and they’re doing things they never dreamed they could do.” Although framed as a healthy rivalry between brothers, the goal and ultimate result of this competition is to create more ducks calls per hour, and thus, more profit, for the Duck Commander business. Regardless of the difference between Willie’s and Jase’s management styles, success is ultimately measured monetarily, which fits squarely within the tenets of neoliberal capitalism.

Within a capitalist, neoliberal culture, success of a business is measured through its ability to protect its own interests and, in turn, increase profit. The small businesses in *The Middle* and *Raising Hope* and the family-owned enterprise in *Duck Dynasty* all reflect these values; business owners are portrayed as taking the steps to achieve success, including exploiting their employees and customers and changing leadership to increase productivity. In this way, neoliberal competitive self-interest and capitalism become yoked, suggesting that those who follow this rule of neoliberalism become successful within the capitalist marketplace.

This research question explored how the characters in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs applied the rules of neoliberalism to their lives and how the application of those rules, in turn, shaped their class belonging. These texts endorse several major tenets of neoliberalism, suggesting, for instance, that public services would be more effective if privatized, and working-class individuals could be upwardly mobile if they made the agentic choice to work hard for their own self-interest. On the contrary, the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* still embody a working-class cultural ethos, yet they enjoy the economic benefits of playing by neoliberal rules. This, then, suggests a non-necessary correspondence (Laclau, 1977) between the economic benefits
of neoliberalism and cultural working-class identity; *Duck Dynasty* reveals that individuals can be at once economically affluent and culturally working-class, further complicating clear demarcations of class identity.

These programs offer a telling example about the contradictory way neoliberal philosophies have played out in recession-era contemporary America. Neoliberal policies put into practice by industries, such as deregulation and free-market competition, are cited as largely responsible for the financial collapse in 2008 (“Crash Course,” 2013); as the domestic banking, automobile, and housing industries struggled to stay afloat, public opinion revealed that the majority of Americans did not support a government bailout of private industries (McManus, 2008), indicating that the industries should take responsibility for their failures. Even though neoliberal strategies employed by major American institutions have had questionable success and, in 2008, nearly caused the country’s financial ruin, neoliberal rules still structure citizenship on an individual level in contemporary working-class televisual representations. That is, while major industries, like mortgage lenders and investment banks, are vilified as greedy or predatory in the public imaginary for being competitive and taking advantage of free market and deregulation, the working-class characters in these texts who fail to live by these rules are presented as foolish and unwilling to try hard enough to succeed. This may reflect a privileging of middle-classness in contemporary culture; the middle-class knows how to engage the rules of neoliberalism to be economically successful, but not to such exploitative excess that they create economic disparity between working-class and poor Americans and affluent citizens and corporations.
Although neoliberalism came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, scholarship has failed to address the ways the representation of rural working-class men and women in contemporary domestic sitcoms has been shaped by neoliberalism. Moreover, the recent surge in reality programming, and, specifically, “redneck” reality programming, offer another avenue through which to explore how rural, working-class gender representation is structured through neoliberal policies. Consequently, my third research question asks:

**RQ3: In what ways do the working-class characters’ performances of neoliberal citizenship in domestic sitcoms and “redneck reality” differ along lines of gender?**

**Gender and Neoliberal Performance**

To answer this question, I examine the relationship between working-class belonging and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as how those gender performances incorporate or eschew rules of neoliberal citizenship. First, I demonstrate to how these texts situate feminine discipline within the framework of neoliberalism. In particular, I address notions of self-discipline and self-surveillance, in relation to the body and good decision making. Next, I investigate how neoliberalism structures parenting practices and the gendered division of labor within the home. To examine the role of traditional masculinity in a neoliberal state, I delineate how individual responsibility rhetoric reinforces the status of “male provider” in these working-class programs. Finally, I suggest the implications these performances of neoliberal gender identity have on the portrayal of the characters’ working-class belonging.
The Self-Disciplined Female

A number of scholars have maintained that the culture of self-discipline and consumption central to neoliberal philosophy has different implications for women than it does for men (e.g., Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). Gill (2007) relates contemporary postfeminist sensibility to neoliberalism by suggesting that, in popular culture discourses, “women are called on to self-manage and self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen” (p. 164, emphasis in original).

“Good” citizenship, then, requires that women embrace these practices of self-surveillance, and they are consequently rewarded within the neoliberal system. The women in the texts I examined are often portrayed as disregarding the neoliberal rules of feminine self-surveillance, which acts as further evidence of their working-class belonging.

Perhaps the clearest example of undisciplined femininity exists in the bodily representation the Shannon-Thompson women of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, all of whom are overweight, and their fatness is made central in the family’s portrayal. Although Mama June recognizes she’s “not the most beautimous out of the box,” she additionally points out that, “there are a lot of people fatter than me, that have five hundred chins. I only have two or three.” Yet when her daughter, who weighs 175 pounds at age 15 and is nicknamed “Chubbs,” expresses that she would like to lose weight, Mama June agrees to also go on a diet for moral support. To begin the weight loss competition, each member records her starting weight; when Mama steps on the scale,
the display shows an error message and Alana laughs, “It won’t weigh Mama because she’s too big!”

Mama June’s unruly body is continually presented as a visual spectacle of excess. In “A Bunch of Wedgies,” Jessica and Lauryn struggle to remove an inner tube that has become lodged around Mama’s too big body. Later, two lifeguards must help Mama sit down in an inner tube to ride down a waterslide, as her large body limits her mobility and makes sitting down gracefully difficult. Mama is unapologetic about her body, however, choosing to label herself as “voluptuous” and repeating a mantra of self-acceptance and loving one’s self no matter her size. Even so, the Shannon-Thompson women, and Mama in particular, are framed through a lack of self-control. Their diet challenge fails because of their inability to engage in the self-discipline necessary to lose weight; instead of consuming smarter choices and smaller quantities, they eat cake, cheese balls, and oatmeal creme pies. As Alana says about her mother, “I hope Mama don’t eat Glitzy [her pet pig]. She eats everything else” (“Gonna Be a Glitz Pig”). Although Alana’s fears that Mama is so unbridled that she may, in fact, eat Alana’s pet pig are certainly hyperbolic, her comment underscores, when coupled with the visual representation of Mama’s body, Mama’s unwillingness to discipline her body along lines of conventional femininity.

Mama June’s large body is not only a rejection of the disciplined female form that has come to be expected in the neoliberal climate, but it is also a marker of how that lack of discipline can translate to class belonging. Bettie (1995) describes a similar correlation between the body and class in Roseanne, pointing out, “In Roseanne, the socially ‘low’ is marked by Roseanne and Don Conner’s large bodies, in striking contrast to the thin and normatively beautiful characters of middle-class sitcoms. In the U.S., where weight is
inversely correlated with socioeconomic status, fat, itself, becomes associated with ‘lowlowbrow’ status” (p. 137). Although Bettie suggests that fatness, in general, is indicative of the socially low, the added pressure of self-surveillance for women within neoliberal culture makes Mama June’s body a emblem of working-class womanhood.

Undisciplined femininity is also highlighted in *The Middle* through the representation of the Hecks’ neighbor, Rita Glossner’s (Brooke Shields) unruly femininity and her failure to adhere to the rules of neoliberal femininity. In “The Neighbor” (January 6, 2010), Rita is the mother of unkempt children who terrorize neighborhood. When Mike goes to the Glossner home to confront Rita about her children, she answers the door smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer in the middle of the day. Wearing only a bra with her denim shorts, the single mother’s make-up is excessive and her hair is cut in an unファッションable mullet style. Her appearance is so exaggeratedly tasteless that she appears to have a disregard for the “constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline” required “to conform to ever-narrower judgments of female attractiveness” (Gill, 2007, p. 149) that are central to neoliberal femininity.

In addition to her over-the-top appearance, Frankie describes Rita’s risky choices for romantic partners, stating, “Her first husband was a meth dealer who left her for a high schooler, and then she was with that Dave guy. I don’t know what he did but he kept weird hours. And I think she worked at that nursing home where they had that shoot out.” Rita’s exaggerated version of a poor woman without class acts as an embodiment of what Fiske (2011) refers to as excess as hyperbole. Fiske contends, “Excess as hyperbole works through a double articulation which is capable of bearing both the dominant ideology and a simultaneous critique of it…excess allows for a subversive, or at least
parodic, subtext to run counter to the main text” (p. 91). Rita’s lack of feminine discipline is, indeed, a double articulation in that it appeals to viewer stereotypes of poor women, but through the excessiveness in representation, it is also acts as a parody of those stereotypes. Rita makes bad choices not only in her appearance, but also in both partners and careers. Both neoliberal and feminist thought underscore the importance of good choices for women who wish to be upwardly mobile; inequality is legitimated for those women who make bad choices because of their bad choices (Chambers, 2011; Ouellette, 2008).

**Neoliberalism and the Gendered Division of Labor**

Barclay (2014) traces the historical trajectory of the household division of labor, pointing out that social reproductive labor (e.g., caring for young, preparing meals, etc.) has become industrialized in the neoliberal economy of the last four decades. Although the service sectors have created new jobs, women occupy most of these low-paying “pink collar” occupational roles. Now that so-called “women’s work” has become monetized, many women who work in these jobs are paid for their daytime labor, but not for the exact same labor they perform in their own homes in what Hochschild (1989) calls their “second shift.”

Virginia’s position as a maid exemplifies her placement with the “pink collar” service industry, as well as her general rejection and eventual embrace of these second shift duties. In the *Raising Hope* episode “A Germ of a Story” (February 15, 2011), Jimmy becomes obsessed with convincing his family to clean and rid their house of germs for baby Hope’s health. When he runs a black light over their couch, remote control, and other items, Virginia says, “So what? It’s a little dirty. If you think I’m
gonna clean houses all day and then come home—” She trails off as she realizes how dirty their house truly is, and retracts her initial comment: “I never thought I’d say this on my day off, but get me a bucket and a mop!” While Virginia first rejects the idea of doing the same work at home she does in her paid employment, she eventually leads the whole family in cleaning their home. Jimmy and Burt also pitch in to help, but Virginia’s leadership role and declaration of “give me a bucket and a mop!” suggest that, given her experience in the housecleaning industry, she is the “expert” at this type of household labor.

Although Frankie’s paid employment in *The Middle* involves selling cars, which technically falls outside the “pink collar” service industry, her role at dealership becomes feminized in a number of ways. She is tasked with making coffee at the office on multiple occasions, and when Frankie tries to reject this role in “The Trip” (October 21, 2009), her boss replies by saying, “The day I ask a man to make coffee is the day I put a bullet in my head.” After Frankie complains to daughter Sue about her boss’ comment and Sue asks if she plans to actually make the coffee, Frankie maintains that it’s “not worth the fight,” thus deemphasisizing the gendered constraints being placed on her at work. In yet another episode, Mr. Elhart promotes Frankie to the dealership’s “customer relations representative,” in which her only responsibility is to write birthday cards to all of the cars the dealership has sold in the last 10 years (“The Bee,” March 3, 2010). Frankie’s boss concludes that, as the only woman in the dealership, she is best suited for the relational maintenance role required by the “customer relations” position. Most obviously, Frankie is feminized through her strategy in selling cars. Mr. Elhart reveals that he hired Frankie because he had heard that women like to buy cars from other
women, and he asks Frankie to develop a reliable “sales technique.” After a number of failed tries, she finally relates to another overworked mom’s struggles, and concludes that she is “Frankie Heck, salesmom” (“The Front Door,” November 4, 2009). Frankie’s job, then, is not marked as service-oriented in the same way as Virginia’s maid position, but her role at the car dealership is not only feminized, but also made maternal. Through the responsibilities she’s given to the tactics she uses to sell cars, she takes on a service and caretaking job, which feels markedly similar to the domestic jobs industrialized in the neoliberal climate.

In addition to the gendered differences in these series’ workplaces, the gender divide is also apparent within these series’ homes through both the reinforcement of “women’s work” and the continued challenge of adequate childcare. In *Duck Dynasty*, Miss Kay is consistently framed within the confines of traditional domestic femininity. Unlike Frankie and Virginia, she does not work outside the home, and instead spends most of her time cooking for her family. Phil seems to perceive this to be Miss Kay’s greatest asset, sharing, “There ain’t nothin’ I love more than Ms. Kay’s cookin.’ She ended up cookin’ better than my mama. If your woman cooks better than your mama, then you got one. You better hold on to her” (“High Tech Redneck”). Further, he offers this advice to his grandson:

My first prerequisite for marrying a woman is, Can she cook? … She doesn’t have to be a pretty girl. Just ‘cause she looks a little homely, that’s alright. It’s hard to get a pretty one to cook and carry a Bible anymore. (“Family Funny Business”)
This traditional notion of the gendered division of domestic labor presents a generational rift among the members of the Robertson family. For the younger generation of Robertsons, labor in the business and in the home, at times, seems much more egalitarian. In the opening episode of the first season, Willie states in an interview that his wife Korie “helps him run the entire business,” and Korie’s beliefs about relatively equal partnering in her marriage come through as the family shoots Miss Kay’s cooking DVD in “Family Funny Business.” During the filming, Phil continually refers to the assumed audience of the DVDs as “ladies,” which prompts Korie to chastise him: “You keep saying ‘ladies,’ but men are cooking, too. It’s not just gonna be ladies watching the DVD.” Phil, reemphasizing his beliefs about domestic gender norms, replies, “Girly men.”

Childcare is another domestic responsibility that is primarily the burden of women in the home, even in two-income families in which the mother also works outside the home. In The Middle’s “The Floating Anniversary” (October 14, 2009) episode, Brick calls Frankie at work when he is sick and needs to be picked up from school. Because Frankie cannot take off of work or risk losing her job, she takes Brick to the dealership and has him sleep in the back of their car. Later in the episode, Frankie turns off her phone to avoid her children who constantly try to reach her, and consequently does not get the call that Axl has been in a minor car accident. The policeman at the scene scolds Frankie for avoiding her children, to which she replies, “I just needed a break.” He then asks, “From what? Being a mom?” Coupled with the children’s assertion that they did not call Mike because “he hates it when they call him at work,” this situation emphasizes that
it is the working mother, rather than the father, who is expected to make concessions for her children.

As evidenced in the analysis of *The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Duck Dynasty*, traditional gender dynamics are reflected in these working-class portrayals; the women are primarily responsible for domestic duties such as housework and childcare. Although Bettie’s (1995) analysis of *Roseanne* revealed a relatively egalitarian arrangement between the central couple in the working-class series, these contemporary working-class portrayals, for the most part, revert back to a stereotypical gendered division of labor. Moreover, the working-class women in these series are exemplary of the ways in which women’s bodies and sexuality are policed in neoliberal culture as sites of discipline. Although this is also true for their middle-class and affluent counterparts as well, working-class women must contend with the added burden of disciplining their bodies in a consumer culture that places them at an economic disadvantage.

In a neoliberal environment that values individualization, hard work, and the resulting consumption from financial gain, women are unevenly burned with the task of contributing to public corporate culture and the private domestic space. Despite the fact that fathers have increased their childcare and household responsibility hours since 1960, “the arrival of children tilts the household division of labor back towards mothers when compared with fathers” (Barclay, 2014, para. 10). As Hochschild’s (1989) work on women’s “second shift” reveals, while some men do, indeed, contribute in the home, there are few apparatuses outside the confines of the traditional nuclear family that provide support for working mothers. Thus, working-class women not only struggle in
low-paying jobs and bear the brunt of the household labor, they also often lack institutionalized support, such as corporate sponsored childcare and paid maternity leave, to provide them with security in their economic positions.

**Rugged Masculinity and the Neoliberal Man**

Neoliberal ideology dovetails neatly with traditionally hegemonic notions of masculinity, particularly as it relates to a man’s ability to be a familial “provider” within the capitalist system, and to how that economic success is predicated on notions of rugged masculinity. As Fleras and Dixon (2011) argue, mediated representations of working-class men have sought to recoup masculine economic, political, and cultural authority in the feminized post-industrial service economy. Unsurprisingly, then, the men in all of the series I examined engage in manual labor associated with working-class masculinity to provide for their families. For example, in “Shh! It’s a Wig,” *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*’s audience learns that Sugar Bear works seven days a week as a chalk miner to provide financial support for their six-member family. Although *The Middle*’s Mike begins the series a managerial role, it is revealed to be only a recent promotion from the manual labor position he held previously at the quarry (“The Cheerleader”). The men of *Duck Dynasty*, despite working warehouse positions involving relatively low bodily impact, are constructing devices for hunting, which allows hunters to literally provide food for their families without having to exchange economic capital.

*Raising Hope* underscores the bodily component of manual labor, and how, for working-class men, the body functions as a tool for economic success. In “Everybody Flirts…Sometimes,” Burt insists that a part of the lawn and pool business is that female
customers do not just expect clean pools, but also want “eye candy.” When Virginia suggests that he just likes being a sex symbol, Burt replies,

It’s not about that. It’s about putting food on the table. When it comes to being a hunter gatherer, I don’t have a lot of weapons. I’m not that bright, I’m not that smart, and I don’t have a lot of intelligence. So believe me, I know how lucky I am to have these guns [referring to his biceps].

Although framed humorously, Burt suggests that his body is literally responsible for “putting food on the table,” or for the financial success of his landscaping business. Further, his comment suggests that in traditionally masculine manual labor jobs, the body takes precedence over the mind.

Deviations from rugged masculinity are subject to scorn and ridicule in these televisual representations. While we never see Sugar Bear in his work environment at the chalk mine, he is presented as relatively incompetent at the masculine household tasks he is asked to perform. When Sugar Bear buys an above ground pool for the family, Mama questions his ability to successfully construct it. She notes that Sugar Bear “don’t like puttin’ shit together,” and he hasn’t “put nothin’ together in probably ten years.” Alana’s sister Pumpkin adds, “If he had to build a barn he’d probably kill hessimelf.” The portrayal of Sugar Bear as incompetent with manual labor generally suggests his failure to adequately provide for his family, further justifying the family’s working-class identity.

Similarly, the success of the Robertson family business is predicated on masculine toughness and ruggedness. In episode “Willie Stay or Willie Go” (May 23, 2012), Willie takes the Duck Commander employees, including his family, to a team building camp rather than their normal yearly retreat of hunting in the woods. He is ridiculed for the
“softness” of the team building exercises, which causes Si to remark that they should be “sittin’ around a campfire holding hands singing kum-ba-ya.” The Duck Commander employees frustrate the counselor when they refuse to take seriously the activities he has had planned, and he chastises them for teasing each other, saying, “Guys, if we could really try to be encouraging.” By mocking the self-help nature of the retreat, the family reifies the notion that, in the context of working-class masculinity, the neoliberal rhetoric of mental and emotional self-improvement is feminized and should therefore be avoided. Willie expresses his displeasure at his family’s reaction to the retreat, and reveals he brought him to the team building camp because he was offered another job with “workers who actually work.” Jase tells him, “Calm down. You’re acting all emotional like a woman,” further contributing to this belief that emotional expression is a feminine characteristic.

Similar to the representation of working-class women, these series depict working-class men in ways that dovetail with traditionally normative masculinity. Rather than contributing to domestic duties, working-class men engage in manual labor to act as financial “providers” for their families, even though several of the series portray dual-income homes. Failure to perform this traditional form of masculinity resulted in ridicule; from Sugar Bear’s technical incompetence to Willie’s feminized emotions, working-class masculinity incorporates the hard work and competitive rules of neoliberalism in a traditional way.

Rules of neoliberalism are, indeed, structured along lines of gender in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs. For working-class women, expectations self-discipline and self-surveillance require them to make good choices in
every realm of their lives. As evidenced in *The Middle* and *Raising Hope*, in the
neoliberal capitalist economy, “women’s work” becomes industrialized, creating a “pink-
collar” service workforce that limits the upward mobility of working-class women and
creates a “second shift” of the exact same labor during the day and each night at home.
The series also depict that in this culture of dual-working households, domestic
responsibilities of cooking and childcare are still women’s primary responsibilities.
Working-class men, then, should focus on their roles as financial providers, embracing
manual labor jobs that require rugged, masculine body labor.

My third research question considered the ways that working-class characters’
performances of neoliberal citizenship differed along lines of gender in the domestic
sitcoms and “redneck” reality genres. For members of the professional middle-class,
neoliberal philosophies are perhaps employed in egalitarian ways; access to higher
education and white-collar jobs may mean that avoiding risk and “working hard” in a
competitive marketplace looks similar, though not identical, for men and women.
However, the answer to this question reveals that for the working-class characters in this
analysis, neoliberalism manifests in traditionally gender normative ways. Manual labor
jobs occupied by the characters are gendered (e.g., women are housecleaners and men
work in lawn care and mining), and domestic duties in the home are still unevenly the
responsibility of women. Even for the economically affluent but culturally working-class
Robertson family in *Duck Dynasty*, women are relegated to supporting roles in the home
and the business. Intentionally or unintentionally, however, working-class women in
these series often fail to adhere to the rules of disciplined femininity required for their
neoliberal citizenship; their bodies can be unruly sites of excess and tasteless styling,
simultaneously serving as a subversive rejection of normative beauty and a justification for their working-class belonging.

Gill and Schraff (2011) argue that our current cultural climate is both postfeminist and neoliberal; they note that both postfeminism and neoliberalism “appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints, or influences outside themselves” (p. 7). This has important implications for working-class women in particular. In an environment that is postfeminist and neoliberal, the struggle of working-class women, who are doubly burdened as underpaid domestic workers who also bear the brunt of their own household labor, is dismissed as a personal issue. Rather than provide political apparatuses to support these women, such as affordable childcare and unionized labor forces, women are expected to overcome their working-class struggles on their own. Given the collective nature of both class and feminist politics historically, neoliberalism’s focus on the individual limits the possibility of working-class women to organize and combat the structural inequalities they face.

Similar to the previous research question’s exploration of the role of gender performance in the incorporation of neoliberal ideology, the final research question investigates how rural Whiteness shapes these families’ adherence to rules of neoliberalism. Specifically, it asks:

RQ4: What is the relationship between the characters’ performances of neoliberal citizenship and rural, working-class Whiteness?
Neoliberalism and Rural, Working-Class Whiteness

There exists a complex relationship between Whiteness and rural belonging, especially given that rural belonging in the texts I examined is further divided into the Midwestern “heartland” and the Southern “redneck” identities. In particular, Whiteness remains mostly invisible for Midwestern Whites, as other cultural markers, such as family values and community, are used to stand in for the “good” neoliberal citizenship of Midwestern Whites. Conversely, the “redneck” lifestyle allows Whiteness to come to the forefront. As Hubbs (2011) suggests, the term “redneck” “is conspicuously classed, but its working-class valence is also marked in terms of race—white; locale—provincial; and sex—the ‘redneck’ label conventionally attaching to maleness and connoting a rough style of masculinity, often, but not exclusively, southern” (p. 47). The relationship between working-class, White, and rural Southern identities shapes the understanding of how neoliberal citizenship rules are applied to “redneck” identity.

In the texts analyzed in this project, the relationship between neoliberal citizenship and rural, working-class Whiteness is addressed in a number of different ways. First, consistent with previous research about working-class Whites, the Chance family in Raising Hope fails to “do Whiteness right.” In The Middle, Whiteness is used as a totalizing description of Midwesternness, and is reiterated through the focus on the individual values of the nuclear family. Finally, Southern working-class Whiteness is embraced through the term “redneck” in both Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Duck Dynasty, yet the application of this identity is constructed differently for the Shannon-Thompson and Robertson families.
Not Doing Whiteness Right

Two primary tenets of neoliberal thought, meritocracy and individualism, are narratives of success that “[mitigate] fluctuating economic and political conditions that affect working-class whites” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 111). As Levine-Rasky points out, “if all Whites benefit from the belief that personal merit and innate talent promote economic well-being, the implications of ‘downward mobility’ are more likely to oppress members of the White working class than the White middle class” (p. 112). Beliefs in meritocracy and individualism provide justification for Whites who have not achieved upwardly mobility, and consequently, who are not “doing Whiteness” appropriately. Grindstaff (2002) argues that the “White trash” cultural stereotype brings attention to the relationship between Whiteness and poverty, which are usually separated in popular discourse. Moreover, “White trash” offers one way that working-class Whites are not “doing Whiteness” appropriately (Bettie, 1995). Indeed, Grindstaff (2002) notes that the “White middle-class rely on the attributes embodied by White trash to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, in effect saying, We are not that,” (p. 264, emphasis in original).

*Raising Hope*, with the most racially diverse cast of auxiliary characters of any of the texts in this study, offers characters of color against which to position the Chance family. Through comparisons to and relationships with characters of color, the series highlights the Chances’ failed performances of Whiteness. For example, in “Blue Dots,” Virginia brings home a brochure for a private daycare for Hope. When Jimmy suggests they cannot afford to send Hope there, Virginia tells him to “turn to the page with the Black kid and the Hispanic kid,” which are on the page for the school’s scholarships.
Virginia’s observation that the brochure features “a Black kid and a Hispanic kid” highlights the assumption that scholarships are reserved for racial minorities; “good” White families who, through the neoliberal rhetoric of meritocracy and hard work, should, however, be able to afford to pay for private pre-school out right.

Further, “Romeo and Romeo” (February 8, 2011) presents commentary on the intersection between work, class, and racial belonging. In the episode, Jimmy meets a Black single dad, Justin, who is a customer at the grocery store where he works, striking up a friendship over their mutual experience as single dads. During a play date at Justin’s house, it is revealed that Virginia’s maid service is hired to clean the obviously upper-middle-class home in which Justin lives with his extended family. Justin’s mother suggests that Virginia should not clean their home as she normally does, but should instead sit down to visit with Jimmy, Justin, and Justin’s mother. Rosa and Carmella, Virginia’s Latina co-workers, continue to clean Justin’s family’s home with an obvious resentment of Virginia’s social mingling; Rosa tells Carmella in Spanish, “I read in Newsweek that by 2028 we’re going to outnumber all these people.”

This episode addresses the relationship between race and service work in a neoliberal industrialized economy. Even though Barclay (2014) contends that “most workers who have found jobs in the industrialized housework sector are female, and, in addition, disproportionately women of color” (para. 8), Virginia is a White woman who cleans a Black family’s home with Latina co-workers. Grindstaff (2011) contends that “poor or working-class” and “racial minority” often become conflated in media representations; in one regard, the positive representation of an affluent Black family in Raising Hope resists this representation, yet Latina women in the series are naturalized in
their working-class identity. Grindstaff further argues that the conflation of “racial minority” and “poor or working-class” on television allows these identity categories to stand in for one another, which constructs White middle-classness as normative. Given that Virginia’s class belonging is parallel with Rosa and Carmella’s, she fails to perform normative, middle-class Whiteness. However, Virginia is distinguished from Rosa and Carmella through her Whiteness, which is emphasized when she spends time in Justin’s family home as a peer to Justin’s mother, suggesting that the performance of upward mobility is more fluid for White Virginia than Latina Rosa or Carmella.

**Whiteness and “Heartland” Spatiality**

Through its appeal to Midwestern “heartland” values, Whiteness in *The Middle* is primarily constructed symbolically rather than explicitly. Johnson (2008) contends that we should consider geography in addition gender, class, and sexuality when analyzing the powerful role Whiteness plays in shaping U.S. culture. She argues,

…the persistent association of “midwesternness” as “white” is critical to the region’s revaluation…as “home” of “authentic” cultural populism and traditional U.S. values. In such moments, the Midwest is recuperated as a “white,” heteronormative, familial space, in “a strategic deployment of power” that invests the region with identifications that have functioned historically to “universalize [the region] into Americanness (p. 18, emphasis in original).

The Midwest and middle-class Whiteness not only become conflated, but they come to stand in for Americanness in the public imaginary. Thus, Whiteness itself may be invisible, but it is signified through the “heartland” values of family and community.
The opening sequence of *The Middle*’s pilot episode establishes rural Midwestern spatiality as universally undesirable through Frankie’s voiceover. Amidst images of corn fields and two-lane roads, she states, “Some people call this the middle of nowhere. You know, one of those places you fly over on your way from somewhere to somewhere else, but you wouldn’t want to live here?” She goes on to list her hometown of Orson, Indiana’s most notable attractions, which range from the bizarre (“Demolition Derby for the homeless”) to the mundane (“the world’s largest polyurethane cow”). Orson, Indiana functions as a generic Everytown meant to resemble rural spaces throughout the Midwest; as such, it is, as Johnson (2008) suggests, “universalized into Americanness.” Despite the relatively negative way that Orson is introduced to the audience, throughout the remainder of the season the series positions the ordinariness of the rural Midwest, and, in turn, the Whiteness of its residents, as normative and even desirable. Specifically, it does this through the discourses of family values and community.

Scholars identify the traditional nuclear family as central to neoliberal capitalism (Duggan, 2003). In her voiceover that introduces “The Final Four,” Frankie observes, “Out here in the middle, family rules. It’s engrained from the day you’re born: you do for family.” The family unit, which is central to domestic sitcoms generally, takes precedence in *The Middle*. Members of the Heck family are expected to make concessions for one another, and to always put each other first. In “Final Four,” for example, Mike must forego a trip to an important basketball game, a leisure activity that becomes closely identified with Mike’s character throughout the first season, to attend the funeral of a distant relative he has never met. In another episode, Axl, who is often characterized as the most dismissive of family values, recognizes the importance of his
relationship with Sue and presents her with his old football jersey, a gesture meant to signify Axl’s fondness and acceptance of his sister (“The Block Party,” October 28, 2009).

Moreover, the importance of family in The Middle obfuscates the working-class position of the Heck family, as many of the family’s economic struggles are dismissed when the family recognizes the importance of their time together. For example, in “The Cheerleader” when the family’s dryer breaks, their deferred interest payments all come due, and Frankie is on the cusp of losing her job, Frankie and Mike spend much of the episode both worried and exasperated. At the conclusion of the episode, however, the family huddles together during a storm and eventually finds a neighbor’s dryer has landed on their lawn. After this shared experience with his family, Mike is optimistic that “we’ll get through.” Happiness, satisfaction, and being “in it together” with one’s family, then, come to stand in for economic success; if the Hecks have each other, financial security is deemed less important.

Importantly, the “family values” of The Middle are structured around the White, nuclear family that has become synonymous with the Midwestern heartland (Johnson, 2008). Frankie’s repeated mantra of “you do for family” underscores the importance of family above all else. By drawing the family together as one unit, we view the Hecks as a collective entity that can be understood through the individualistic frame of neoliberalism. In other words, the family comes to stand in for the individual, and each single individual must submit to the family’s greater good. Moreover, by making family paramount, the Hecks are expected to prioritize the family’s well-being over any other
considerations. Family-as-individual bridges the “heartland” values of the traditional nuclear family with the individualism associated with neoliberalism.

While family is central, *The Middle* does offer interesting commentary about the value of community in addition to that of family. This valorization of community happens at both the macro and micro levels. For instance, “The Cheerleader” features Frankie’s car dealership holding a “Ronald Reagan jellybean” competition in which customers must guess how many jellybeans fill a car in order to win it. This invokes both patriotism and nods to the president often credited with enacting broad-sweeping neoliberal policies in the 1980s. On a more local level, community support and social engagement are the focus of a number of *The Middle*’s first season episodes. “Block Party” and “Signals” (May 12, 2010) both offer examples of parties that unite the Hecks with their neighbors, with voiceovers at the end of the episode that stress the importance of “doing for others” and a community bond.

Although rural communities are becoming increasingly diverse, 82.6% of these communities still have a majority White population (Nasser, 2012). McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) contend that homophily, or the tendency to gravitate toward similar people, “limits people’s social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience” (p. 415). Moreover, they suggest that “homophily in race and ethnicity creates the strongest divides in our personal environment” (p. 415), indicating that when communities and social groups are homophilous, that homophily is structured by racial similarity more than any other identity category. Johnson (2008) asserts that the Midwest is imagined as White, and, in *The Middle*, the vast majority of the residents in Orson,
Indiana appear to be White. This homophily may, therefore, impact the community’s willingness to support social programs that help their neighbors, which contradicts the neoliberal tenet of individualism; while neoliberalism emphasizes the success of the individual, individuals may be more likely to support their community when other members are similar to them.

While the Chances of *Raising Hope* are marked through a failure of Whiteness, the Hecks’ racial identity is subsumed by their Midwestern belonging. That is, the Midwesternness and Whiteness are conflated, and, as Johnson (2008) argues, stand in for American identity generally. This American identity is underscored by the “heartland” values of family and community. However, as evidenced in *The Middle*, these values are illustrative of a particular kind of family – heteronormatively nuclear – and community – predominately White.

**“Rednecks” and Visible Whiteness**

In the last several years, the proliferation of rural, working-class Southern reality programs has led to the creation of a new sub-genre label for these shows: “redneck reality” (e.g., Von Doviak, 2013). The intersection between rural, Southern Whiteness and working-class belonging manifests clearly in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*, albeit to differing ends. In *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, “redneck” becomes synonymous with “White trash.” Similar to *Raising Hope*, the family is represented as not “doing Whiteness” appropriately, and, in turn, their working-class belonging is justified. Conversely, the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* use the “redneck” label to situate themselves within the identity of rural, working-class, Southern Whiteness. In essence,
they become downwardly mobile through the label, which allows them to remain “authentic and true” to their working-class roots.

In the pilot episode, the Shannon-Thompson family debates their status as “rednecks” before attending McIntyre, Georgia’s annual “Redneck Games.” Sugar Bear asserts that the family should, indeed, be classified as “redneck,” which prompts Jessica to ask: “We all have our teeth, don’t we?” Sugar Bear responds by addressing their participation in what he deems “redneck” leisure activities, asking, “We ride four-wheelers and play in the mud, don’t we?” We see the family engaging in these activities in “What is a Door Nut?”; Mama mentions, “This is what we do for fun all time,” and Alana offers that she “likes to get down and dirty, redneck style.”

Later in “This is My Crazy Family,” the family does attend and participate in the “Redneck Games,” which Mama asserts is “all about Southern pride. It’s like the Olympics, but with a lot of missing teeth and a lot of butt cracks showing.” Later in the episode, Mama passes judgment on many of the spectators at the games, stating, “There are some broke down people out there. Please, women who are of voluptuous size. All that vajiggle jaggle is not beautimous.” Mama June’s judgment is particularly ironic given that Mama’s unruly body is portrayed in the show in the same way as the women she criticizes.

Apart from their “Southern pride,” the Shannon-Thompsons’ exaggerated embodiment of the “redneck” culture of Southern Whites has led the popular press to describe the family as “White trash” (e.g., Juzwiak, 2012; Lavine, 2013). The program is edited to draw attention to the family’s crass nature; in the opening credits, Mama June passes gas, and every member of the family routinely belches, blows their noses loudly
on camera, and sneezes into the open air. Sugar Bear is often shown spitting tobacco into an old plastic soda bottle. In “Time For Sketti!” Pumpkin patronizes the neighborhood gas station barefoot, which is apparently a normal occurrence. The store manager shares, “When I see Pumpkin come in, I call that the Bamm-Bamm look ‘cause there’s no shoes on.” Moreover, despite speaking English, the family is regularly subtitled, as if to indicate their particular vernacular of Southern English is another language entirely imperceptible to the audience who views the show.

The “redneck” stereotype is deeply rooted in the relationship between race, class, and regional location. Using the term “hillbilly” instead of “redneck,” Dean (2012) concludes in her analysis of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,

The hillbilly figure allows middle-class white people to offload the venality and sin of the nation onto some other constituency, people who live somewhere—anywhere—else. The hillbilly’s backwardness highlights the progress more upstanding Americans in the cities or the suburbs have made. These fools haven’t crawled out of the muck, the story goes, because they don’t want to (para. 4).

Similar to the notion of failing to “do Whiteness” right, the stereotype of “redneck” or hillbilly is associated with choice; “rednecks” are, essentially, poor “White trash” because they have chosen to perform a lifestyle of working-class taste that is separate from their economic capital. In a climate of neoliberal meritocracy, these individuals simply have not worked hard enough to become upwardly mobile. The Shannon-Thompson family’s disavowal of societal norms further indicates moral impropriety. That they do not “act right” according to middle-class standards makes it easier to legitimate their working-class position.
Even so, the term “redneck” has been reappropriated by Southern Whites who, like Mama June’s description of the “Redneck Games,” wear it as a badge of rural Southern pride, as is the case with the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty*. Dubbing themselves “high-tech rednecks,” the second generation of the Robertson clan (i.e., Willie and Jase) mix modernity with the pastoralism of the rural South. The Robertsons run a very successful hunting business that is predicated on a willingness to embrace neoliberal business sense; they are continually trying to find new ways to expand the company’s offerings and increase profits. Phil remarks in “High Tech Redneck,” “I’m a low tech man in a high tech world. Willie took the whole thing way further than I ever would,” suggesting that Willie’s use of modern technologies has helped grow the business.

However, Willie is consistently portrayed as at odds with his rural, Southern, working-class roots and his family’s desire to “remain true” to the place from which they came. In “Frog in One,” Willie must rescue his family when security guards apprehend them trying to catch frogs in the golf course pond at night. After Willie expresses his disdain with his family’s behavior, Si observes in an interview, “Will is going through an identity crisis. He’s done forgot who he is.” Jase says about Willie later, “What has happened to my brother? Either be proud of who you are or shave that stuff off your face and buy you a 3-piece suit.” To respond to claims from his family that he’s “forgotten what it’s like to be a redneck,” Willie drives his truck off-road through the mud, which he describes as “going crazy redneck up in here.” In this instance, rural, working-class leisure is juxtaposed with responsible, business sense. Willie must prove his “redneck”ness to recoup that identity and thus remain an authentic member of the Robertson men.
This tension manifests further through the constant struggle Willie faces to get his family to participate in the business when they would rather be in the wilderness. While Phil, Si, and Jase desire to spend leisure time hunting, catching frogs, and blowing up beaver dams, Willie maintains that spending time building the business is necessary. Even when Willie does participate in his family’s leisure activities, the family derides him for his inability to perform the manual labor associated with blue-collar masculinity. In “Redneck Logic” (April 4, 2012), the family works together to construct a deer stand out of an abandoned RV. Willie claims to have an injury that prevents him from participating, which prompts Jase to share, “Willie doesn’t like manual labor. He doesn’t like to sweat.” Phil goes on to say, “It’s been my opinion that once you get the title ‘CEO,’ if you interject manual labor, injuries begin to occur.” Again, the contemporary Willie is contrasted against the remaining members of his family, who represent the true nature of “redneck” manhood.

Because the Robertson family has built a successful business and, thus, has amassed economic capital, they must engage in authentic performances of working-class, “redneck” identity to legitimate their positioning in this culture. In addition to their leisure activities and general preference for “living off the land,” they position themselves as “regular” folks who understand the value of money, and, for the most part, do not spend frivolously. Before they build the deer stand from the old RV, Phil points out, “What people need to realize about the South is that everything is usable. One man’s junk is another man’s treasure” (“Redneck Logic”). In this way, he appeals to both rural Southern culture, as well as the working-class belief of being resourceful. In “Too Close for Comfort” (April 4, 2012), Jase observes that, “In the South, road kill is a redneck’s
paycheck. … Just because I have money in my pocket doesn’t mean I’m too good to stop and pick up a $5 bill that’s laying in the middle of the road.” Jase’s insistence that he is not “too good” to pick up road kill or a mere five dollars reinforces the family’s rural, working-class habitus.

Unlike the Shannon-Thompsons of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, the Robertsons are an exemplary “redneck” success story. Couched within the neoliberal rhetoric of hard work, the family repeatedly states that they “came from nothing” and have built a “multi-million dollar empire.” The Robertsons are an example that suggests that, if the Shannon-Thompsons wanted it enough, they could, too, transcend their “White trash” label. Further, through their continued willful association with the “redneck” label and the lifestyle that goes with it, they are still able to embody the working-class ethos of the rural South. Their “redneck” identity is a performance that underscores their continued working-class belonging.

The final research question in this study examined the relationship between domestic sitcom and “redneck” reality program characters’ performances of rural, working-class Whiteness and neoliberal citizenship. The representation in these texts suggests that Whiteness is not a monolithic identity category, but is instead fractured along lines of class belonging and regional identity, which are shaped by neoliberal philosophy. In particular, an endorsement of neoliberal beliefs, such as hard work and individualism, accounts for the working-classness of Whites and, in particular, “White trash” individuals. Those designated as “White trash,” then, simply have not properly played by the rules of neoliberalism. This philosophy also shapes the relationship between Whiteness, working-classness, and regional identity. While the Midwestern
heartland’s nuclear family, through its pastoral ordinariness, is the centerpiece around which neoliberalism is built (Duggan, 2013), the rural Southern spatiality is more complex in its relationship with neoliberalism. For Southern White “rednecks” who align more closely with the “White trash” label (e.g., the Shannon-Thompsons of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo), the disavowal of neoliberalism’s tenets offers a way to justify working-class Whiteness, particularly in a part of the country that faces high rates of economic disadvantage. On the other hand, upwardly mobile “rednecks” serve as an exemplar of how cultural working-class Whiteness and neoliberal rule following can be congruous; the Duck Dynasty family continues to perform cultural working-class identity, yet through hard work, individualization, and participation in the competitive free market, are upwardly mobile and financially successful. The contrast of these two “redneck” families is illustrative of the success that may be afforded if one abides by the principles of neoliberalism.

**Conclusion**

Class consciousness in the contemporary United States is undergoing a shift; in the wake of the Great Recession, individuals are identifying as working- and middle-class in equal number, whereas a majority of Americans previously used the middle-class descriptor. Even so, political policy and mediated portrayals ignore the experience of the working-class in favor of appealing to and representing the middle-class. Although working-class representation on television is limited, investigating the portrayals that do exist of this population provides a framework to understand how the working-class is mediated in contemporary culture. By creating a “shared common sense” about the working-class’ willingness to play by neoliberal rules, these representations provide
justification for why so many working-class individuals have been unable to transcend their financial struggles and move into the middle-class.

This chapter investigated the relationship between working-class belonging and neoliberalism in domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs. Drawing from the understanding that social class is not only marked by economic belonging, but also by cultural indicators (Bourdieu, 1984), I first positioned the families in *Raising Hope, The Middle, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty* as working-class. Through working-class *mise-en-scene*, arts and culture, and linguistics, and in line with cultural studies scholars (e.g., Leistyna, 2009), I argued that each of these families, consistent with or despite their economic belonging, exhibits working-class tastes and, therefore, may be understood as working-class. I further argued that working-class identity should be understood in the context of the contemporary neoliberal moment as it structures economic, political, and cultural life. Each text’s representation of the tenets of neoliberal capitalism influences the portrayal of the families’ working-class identities. The series deem public service as ineffectual, frame the characters’ success in terms of self-empowerment and individual achievement, address how the characters fail to manage risk, and valorize competition and profit in the labor market. In doing so, the particular working-class programs legitimate the neoliberal philosophy that prevents many working-class citizens, including these characters, from achieving upward mobility. With the exception of the Robertsons, who have the economic capital necessary to enjoy many of the fruits of neoliberalism, the Hecks, Chances, and Shannon-Thompsons are rooted in working-class belonging because of their failure to “play by the rules.”
However, neoliberal philosophy ties into the identity categories of gender, Whiteness, and regional belonging in differing ways. Gender, for instance, impacts how one is expected to adhere to these rules. In particular, women are tasked with self-surveillance and discipline through their bodies and choices, and they continue to be burdened by low-paying service work and an uneven distribution of domestic labor. A traditional masculinist conception underscores men’s role in neoliberal culture, as they are required to be financial providers for their families. Finally, I demonstrated that the identity of rural Whiteness structures the televisual portrayal of the working-class and their relationship to neoliberalism. White individuals are expected to perform Whiteness “right,” and those who fail to do so are seen has having had simply made poor choices. When situated in the “heartland,” which is always already imagined as White, an adherence to family and community values suggests that neoliberal tenets are applied not by individual members of a family, but that all members of the family work together to embrace or reject their success within neoliberal culture. Moreover, the homophily of the region contributes to their willingness to embrace community. “Rednecks,” who are de facto working-class, have often come to be associated with “White trash”; the Robertsons demonstrate how to transcend this conflation through a neoliberal work ethic.

Taken together, the analyses of these questions demonstrate a clear connection between mediated representations of working-class identity and the neoliberal philosophy that has structured American culture for the past several decades. Its tenets have become naturalized within the American imaginary, influencing political, cultural, and economic policy (Duggan, 2003). A hegemonic ideology that suggests that hard work, self-interest, and risk avoidance are the necessary ingredients for upward mobility fails to account for
the structural challenges, such as time and economic resources, that may aid in that mobility.

While the relationship between representations of working-class identity and neoliberalism did diverge at some points in the investigation of these series, the characters were portrayed relatively consistently as economically disadvantaged due to their inability to employ the rules of neoliberalism in their lives. The Center for Economic Policy and Research (2014) asserts that the monolithic portrayal of the working-class is reductionist, maintaining, “both the media and politics need to catch up with how Americans really think of themselves in class terms, and do a better job of representing the diverse nature of today’s near-majority working class” (para. 8). When mediated representations of the working-class show, on the whole, a disregard for the neoliberal philosophies engrained in the American cultural fabric – an unwillingness to play by the rules of neoliberalism – their struggles are legitimated. This is particularly true given the proliferation of “redneck” reality shows like Duck Dynasty in which individuals become materially wealthy through “hard work,” while simultaneously retaining their working-class culture (e.g., Backyard Oil, Bayou Billionaires, Black Gold).

Although the consideration of television representation is instrumental in developing Mittell’s (2010) notion of a “shared common sense” about working-class identity on television, textual analysis cannot alone account for the ways that meanings about working-class identity are circulated back into culture. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how audiences of these programs understand class belonging through their
television viewership, and how they use the language of neoliberalism to make sense of working-class representation in contemporary television.
CHAPTER FIVE: AUDIENCE STUDY

As class consciousness in America shifts toward a more equal division between working- and middle-class self-identification (Kochhar & Morin, 2014) and as working-class representations on television are both stereotypical and fewer in number, it is also worth exploring the connection that audiences make between class identity and the representations on television. Hall’s (1993) foundational work suggests that meanings in television texts exist through a circuitous process; although texts are ideologically encoded by the producers of media, it is only through viewers’ decoding processes that the texts are actually made meaningful. Specifically, Hall suggests that audiences adopt one of three decoding positions: they may fully accept the dominant-hegemonic encodings, they may form oppositional readings of those encodings, or, most frequently, they may adopt a negotiated position in which they derive some meaning consistent with the producers’ encodings, and call into question other aspects of the dominant-hegemonic position. While Hall’s categories are limited in their ability to account for the complex and often contradictory ways audiences interact with texts, they do provide a useful theoretical framework to consider how audiences exhibit agency in their relationships with those programs. Moreover, Radway (1986) notes that texts are only made ideologically meaningful when scholars consider how the audience interacts with them; thus, this chapter investigates audience evaluation of the relationship between class and neoliberalism in rural, working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality. Because audience studies provides a way to examine what viewers do with the media they consume (Ruddock, 2001), I also explore how viewers use that understanding to construct meanings about their own class belonging and class identity in broader culture.
To explore how television audiences make sense of cultural ideologies of neoliberalism and how this philosophy intersects with the identity categories of class, Whiteness, gender, and regional belonging, I conducted focus group interviews with 28 regular viewers of at least one of the four shows analyzed in the previous chapter’s textual analysis, and many had watched more than one of the series at least occasionally. I interviewed 17 women and 11 men, ranging in age from 19 to 72. The average age of participants was 40 years old. Twenty of the 28 participants indicated that they either grew up in or currently reside in a rural location; the remaining eight listed some combination of suburban or urban residences. For nine of my participants, high school was the highest level of education received. Eleven stated that they had some college, while two had associate’s degrees, one had a bachelor’s degree, and five had earned master’s degrees. Fourteen participants reported that they were employed in manual labor or service-oriented jobs (e.g., manufacturing, construction, housekeeping) or jobs that required no advanced education (e.g., bartender, administrative assistant, bank teller). Six worked in occupations that required a degree, such as teacher, school counselor, or loan officer. Seven participants were full-time students, and one was unemployed.

Interviews were semi-structured, and lasted between 50 minutes and 90 minutes. Participants answered introductory questions about their favorite programs and characters, and then responded to general questions about families on television, including an identification of families they would describe as “typical,” “traditional,” and “progressive.” I then turned to issues of class, asking participants about their perceptions of working- and middle-class families on television. Finally, at the end of the interview, I used promotional images of the families from *The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes*
Honey Boo, and Duck Dynasty that depicted members of each family to elicit descriptions of and discussions about the particular families I examined in my textual analysis. Given that all of the participants were viewers of at least one of the series being discussed, they also drew on their previous viewer knowledge to describe the families. I asked participants to compare the families from the series to their own families, or others that they know. The visual prompts provided by the photos gave the participants a reminder of each of the families, as well as allowed them to use specific language and examples to articulate their perceptions about the families.

Following the interviews, I used an open-coding scheme to develop themes based on the research questions that guided this study. Specifically, after the interviews were completed, I analyzed the transcripts through the identification of emergent and recurring patterns using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007). From the recurring patterns identified in my focus group interviews, I developed themes to help answer the research questions I posed. I looked for the common ways participants evaluated messages about class in the domestic sitcom and family-based “redneck” reality programs to examine how they employed neoliberal ideology and messages about class consistent with or differing from the textual analysis. I then used participants’ comparisons of television families to their own families and others they know to determine how they used their understandings about working-class identity from television to make sense of class in their own lives. Following their discussion about the families from The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty, participants were able to provide clear links between the families analyzed in the study and their own personal experiences; participants both identified with the
families they described and used their descriptions to distance themselves from unruly representations of the working-class.

The previous chapter’s textual analysis explored how ideological markers of neoliberalism are encoded in the rural, working-class domestic sitcoms *Raising Hope* and *The Middle*, and “redneck” reality programs *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. While the participants in my study did speak specifically about the representation in these texts, they also drew from their overall television viewership to develop a robust picture of how neoliberal beliefs structure their readings of class on television generally. Thus, a number of the particular examples given transcend the four shows of the textual analysis, pointing to the notion that neoliberal ideology proliferates television writ large.

In the first research question of my audience study, I explore how viewers make sense of the ideological messages about neoliberalism encoded in television texts. Specifically, I ask:

**RQ5: How do audiences understand the relationship between neoliberalism and class belonging on television?**

**Audiences, Neoliberalism, and Working-Class Identity**

In my focus group interviews, questions about markers of a successful lifestyle provided fruitful ways to examine the reading of the relationship between neoliberalism and class, including “What fictional television characters would you call ‘successful’? What reality television stars would you call ‘successful’? What makes them successful?”; “Which television characters have jobs you would most like to have? What about their job is appealing?”; and “Which television characters live lifestyles you would most like to live? What about their lifestyle is appealing?” In what follows, I explore how viewers
employed the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism and hard work, competition and neoliberal labor, risk avoidance, and privatization of the public in their understanding of television characters’ class belonging

**The joy is busting your ass for it: Individualization, Self-Improvement and the Rhetoric of Hard Work**

Neoliberal philosophy is guided, in part, by a central tenet that citizens must take responsibility for themselves, and, in doing so, are individually accountable for their abilities to transcend difficult circumstances. In other words, if one is willing to work hard enough, he or she should expect to reap the rewards of that success, such as upward mobility. This philosophy, so deeply embedded into the contemporary American cultural fabric, structured participants’ readings of television characters. Specifically, they lauded characters and reality personalities whom they believed “worked hard” for what they have, and called into question those who seemed to enjoy success without putting in the necessary work. Moreover, they suggested that even when characters enjoyed economic prosperity, continuing to work hard was necessary to maintain the legitimacy of the characters’ success.

Using their own interpretations of the term, participants were asked to list the television characters and reality personalities they would describe as successful, as well as to delineate the characteristics about those characters that qualified them for this distinction. Many participants relied on monetary success as their definition. Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban\(^1\)), for example, mentioned that the Taylor family’s middle-class belonging in *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-1999) was a

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\(^1\) This designates how participants describe the town in which they grew up and the town in which they currently live, respectively.
marker of success, noting, “They seem well off…they're not struggling to make ends meet and all that sort of thing. That makes them successful.” Taylor (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban) offered a similar example in How I Met Your Mother’s (CBS, 2005-2014) Barney, concluding, “He's always wearing a suit and he seems like he has money because he's always drinking expensive drinks and he's going out to bars and stuff.” Conversely, Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) concluded that the Bundy family from working-class sitcom Married With Children (FOX, 1987-1997) lacked success because of their limited financial resources: “[The Bundys] don’t have it their way, they don’t enjoy life, they don’t have a lot of money, [which are] several key components to what would be successful. Money and being able to choose your lifestyle. To me, that’s success.” In these instances, interviewees articulated a definition of success that reflected not only financial security, but also the greater agency that comes with having the economic resources to “choose your lifestyle.”

Often, though, that financial success was directly attributed to the hard work the characters invested in improving their class positions. Ann (49, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) invoked the familiar narrative of George Jefferson in The Jeffersons (CBS, 1975-1985), who “was movin’ on up. He was a drycleaner, a business owner…He started in Harlem and then he went up to the high-rise,” praising his transcendence into upward mobility that could be directly attributed to the expansion of his dry-cleaning business franchise. A number of participants spoke in a similar regard about Duck Commander founder and Robertson family patriarch Phil in Duck Dynasty. Nick (33, factory worker, some college, rural/rural), for instance, described Phil as “the old hippie. He's been through a lot of shit. He'll tell you about drugs, everything. I think
he really is the one out going in the woods to make [their products].” Nick’s comment revealed that although Phil experienced hardship earlier in his life, he made the conscious decision to change the way he lived his life, which, in turn, allowed him to build a successful business. Stephen (30, unemployed, associate’s, rural/rural) further suggested that he felt the Robertson family business and television show was “not about the money” that they made, but instead was about the value of hard work to the grandchildren. He notes, “[Phil] gets [his grandchildren] outside. …He doesn’t just get them out there to do work. There’s always the reward showing that it’s worth doing the hard work because you’re going to get something out of it.” Indeed, participants both recognized financial security as a measure of success, and endorsed hard work as the way to achieve it.

Once television characters or personalities demonstrated some level of monetary success, however, viewers expected that their representations continue to reflect principles of hard work and individual achievement. Discussions of Duck Dynasty in particular raised questions about the authenticity of the personalities’ continued work ethic, particularly as it related to the new generation of Robertson men currently featured as running the company. Although she noted that running a business must be difficult, Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) suggested that that was not reflected on Duck Dynasty: “I'm sure they have deadlines to meet, and I'm sure there is a lot of stress, but at the same time the way they portray it on TV it's a job where they all just sit back.” Justin (35, construction, high school, rural/rural), however, offered a more incendiary evaluation of the Robertsons’ work style. He shared:

You can’t tell me they still make their own duck calls. They don't make them.

You never see them making duck calls. They're made in a factory. That’s where
they’re made. …If they were making all their money off what they did [in the
factory], they would be broke because they don't do anything.

Other members of Justin’s interview group echoed this sentiment, with Megan (30,
counselor, master’s degree, rural/rural) joking that they are “probably only making 25
[duck calls] a week.” Thus, while it was obvious to participants that the Robertsons
initially engaged in hard work to build their business, they perceived that a continued
display of hard work was not necessarily reflected in the Duck Dynasty series.

Further, participants questioned the realism of televisual representations in which
characters were not shown to have demonstrated the hard work that leads to success, but
whose success was an assumed part of the series. Those participants in their teens and
early twenties mentioned a number of Disney Channel series, which, as Rachel (20,
student, high school, suburban/suburban) describes, were “always like the teenage kid
who was in between twelve and eighteen who was a world famous star.” Daniel (19,
student, high school, suburban/suburban) affirmed Rachel’s idea, stating, “A lot of [these
Disney Channel families] are very middle classy and trying to be the most like an average
family, but … the kid for no reason is this superstar. It never shows them starting off or
anything … always been a superstar.” Others suggested that many current reality series
are predicated on presumed successes that do not translate to the program. Elizabeth (28,
academic advisor, master’s degree, rural/suburban) mentioned watching a number of the
series in the Real Housewives (Bravo, 2006-present) franchise, but questioned the
deservedness of their financial success: “They all live in these giant mansions and a lot
women don't really have jobs. They do ‘charity work.’ I am like, ‘You don't do a thing.’”

Britney (27, bartender, master’s degree, rural/suburban), who was also an avid viewer of
the *Housewives* franchise, suggested that to call many of the women on series “successful” would be to “give them [too much] credit because they don’t do anything.”

The Kardashian family (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, E!, 2007-present), often cited as “famous for being famous” (e.g., Parr, 2014), also drew ire from participants who felt that their wealth and success was not merited through hard work. Nick (33, factory worker, some college, rural/rural) described them as “want[ing] to look good and have money and not work.” While Morgan (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban) acknowledged that the Kardashian family now has successful business ventures, she suggested that their celebrity status preceded their hard work: “Because of their start, I’m like, ‘How did you get famous?’ Then all of a sudden, they’re getting all this attention. It's like, ‘Wait. You're just a pretty face. What have you [done]?’”

Even though many of the reality personalities about whom participants spoke were perceived to have come into success without the requisite demonstration of hard work, conversations about these personalities revealed a conflict between the participants’ desires to emulate their lives and the devaluation of how they became successful. While Jenny (30, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural), Britney (27, bartender, master’s degree, rural/suburban), and Ashley (30, loan officer, bachelor’s degree, rural/rural) discussed how they envied the Kardashians’ lifestyle, Kyle (34, warehouseman, high school, rural/rural) pointed to the fact that the family members’ success did not adhere to neoliberal discourses of hard work:

Jenny: Who wouldn’t want to be a Kardashian? You can wake up and do whatever you wanted. Don’t work at all and travel all over. It all seems very glamorous. It’d be so great.
Britney: Yeah, in that aspect, the reality TV stars that are really rich and do whatever they want, that would be great.

Ashley: Just being able to have what you want when you want it and doing things on your own schedule as opposed to running a rat race.

Kyle: Then I think that takes the joy out of it. The joy is having to work for it.

What’s something worth? What did you do to get it?

Jenny: Yeah, if you didn’t bust your ass for it.

Indeed, Kyle’s comment suggests that the financial success enjoyed by reality stars like the Kardashian family members are not “worth” as much as those who have worked hard, and Jenny reframed her comments to agree with his assertion. Through the use of the word “joy,” he places values on the sense of pride one feels when they feel they have earned their success. Thus, participants argue that monetary success on its own should not be celebrated, which underscores the importance viewers placed on the neoliberal ethos of “hard work.” Financial success is only merited and respected when viewers feel television characters and personalities have “earned” it.

Participants’ evaluations of individual success were not limited to characters’ and personalities’ economic accumulation; a fewer number of participants also invoked neoliberal self-improvement rhetoric to suggest that success could also include making oneself better. As Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) contended, “If I were on Biggest Loser [NBC, 2004-present] and even if I didn’t win, if I lost 100 pounds I would feel like I was a big success.” Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) echoed this notion, extrapolating on Tammy’s comment:
Not just on *Biggest Loser* but *Extreme Weight Loss* [ABC, 2011-present], they not only deal with their weight loss, they deal with their problems of eating. They deal with weight along with what other issues they have. At the end of that they can't help but feel successful.

Tammy’s and Brenda’s comments reflect reality television’s trend that positions contestants as rational, self-governing subjects “whose most pressing obligation to society is to empower her or himself privately” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 3). This private self-improvement is foundational to the development of neoliberal subjectivity, and the self-help genre, including shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, is predicated on the belief that one is individually in charge of improving him or herself. By extending the definition of successful citizenship to include bodily self-improvement, their conversation acknowledges the neoliberal rhetoric that structures these makeover programs. However, their discussions about these programs also reflect findings in Sender’s (2012) work regarding the role of self-reflexivity in audience understandings of makeover TV. She argues that the “self-reflexivity encouraged in makeover programming invokes a much older, Romantic model that values interiority, authenticity, and expression” (p. 137). Rather than an outward display of self-improvement, “the contemporary self is reflexively produced as a moral and mediated accomplishment, for which makeover shows are one of a number of resources” (p. 137). Indeed, this discussion about *The Biggest Loser* points to the ways these interviewees frame successful citizenship in terms of inward self-reflection and improvement; Brenda’s belief that the series asks contestants to address “other issues they have” points to the moral improvements required of contestants on makeover shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Makeover*. 
Participants’ understanding of “success” as the financial gains reaped through hard work fits squarely within neoliberalism as an economic and cultural philosophy; those who were willing to work hard were rewarded, and those who achieved success seemingly effortlessly were perceived as either undeserving or unbelievable. Participants did not speak exclusively about the programs analyzed in the previous chapter’s textual analysis, but rather offered examples of the “hard work” ethos of neoliberalism more broadly across a variety of television programs, indicating that this belief may be culturally engrained to the extent that it provides a universal way to evaluate deservedness of financial success. However, while participants attributed financial success to hard work, they problematized the notion that success was necessarily synonymous with upward economic mobility, and they questioned the role that unfettered competition plays in economic success. In the section that follows, I reveal how participants judged the decisions characters and personalities made to reap financial success within a competitive marketplace, while simultaneously broadening their definitions of success to extend beyond monetary.

**They’ve got money, but what else is there?: Competition, Profit and Neoliberal Labor**

Another key principle of neoliberalism is that the free market should structure all aspects of life, and, ultimately, competition between individuals and corporations allows those with merit to reap economic rewards. Grazian (2010) points out that those who protect their own self-interests in the neoliberal economy to accumulate wealth are “good” neoliberal citizens who should, indeed, receive economic rewards. Neoliberal rhetoric also often suggests that successful individuals are the ones with a willingness to
work hard and engage in the competition necessary to succeed within the profit-driven economy. The previous chapter’s textual analysis suggested that neoliberal ideas about competition and labor did, in fact, structure working-class representation. In particular, the success of a business in the capitalist, neoliberal culture is measured through its ability to protect its own interests and, in turn, increase profit. The small businesses featured in *The Middle* and *Raising Hope*, and the family-owned corporation in *Duck Dynasty*, all reflect these values. In these series, business owners take the means necessary to achieve this success, including exploiting their employees and customers and changing leadership to increase productivity.

Although the neoliberal tenet of competition suggests that any way of increasing profit is, in essence, fair game, viewers indicated that some ways of enhancing one’s economic success were more legitimate than others. While they lauded the Robertson family of *Duck Dynasty* for their business sense and their ability to monetize a vast number of products associated with the Duck Commander brand, they were less accepting of the ways some other reality stars accumulated wealth. Although Hannah (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) acknowledged that Farrah Abraham of *Teen Mom* (MTV, 2009–2012) fame had “made millions,” she qualified Abraham’s success by emphasizing, “but it was from some porn videos,” suggesting that her financial gains were not reputable. Hannah then contrasted Farrah with another *Teen Mom* personality, who became successful through what she perceived as more legitimate means: “I know Kailyn Lowry, she is on the season now, has a book now. … She definitely had a good experience with that. A good outcome. A lot of the *Teen Mom* moms have started brands.” In contrast to Farrah, Hannah perceived that Kailyn and the other *Teen Mom*
personalities who wrote books and developed personal brands (i.e., being paid for speaking engagements, media appearances, etc.) accumulated wealth in a legitimate way; conversely, she delegitimizes the profit Farrah made through more illicit means, choosing not to describe Farrah as having “a good outcome” as the other *Teen Mom* personalities have had. Thus, despite the importance placed on wealth accumulation through promoting one’s self-interest in neoliberal culture, Hannah suggested that this wealth should be accumulated in a socially sanctioned way.

Similarly, a number of participants chastised the Shannon-Thompson family of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* for what they viewed as the exploitative way they used Alana’s fame to make money for the family. Indeed, viewers concluded that the family had little in the way of skills necessary to engage in hard work and, thus, be upwardly mobile. Several participants discussed the Shannon-Thompson’s employment record. Taylor (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban) recalled, “Like, *Honey Boo Boo*. I don't think any of them even have jobs. I think Sugar Bear does, but they just make money from the show. They have money just from being on the show, being themselves,” while Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) remembered that, “[Mama June] got a job this year as a cook in a bakery and she just couldn't handle it.” Debbie (61, bank teller, high school, rural/rural) further explained, “I know [Sugar Bear] works, I've seen him going to work, but I don't know he what does.” Given that little emphasis is placed on how the family members made money prior to their reality program, and the lack of work Mama and Sugar Bear engage in on the series, the rhetoric of hard work was absent in participants’ reading of the Shannon-Thompsons; conversely, descriptions like
Norma’s assessment that Mama “couldn’t handle” her job at the bakery suggest that they are unwilling to put in the effort necessary for economic success.

Instead, Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) commented on Alana’s role in making money for the family, pointing out, “Honey Boo-Boo is the one making the money for the entire family. The other girls, they're like, ‘You pose like that, we're going to get your money.’” Lisa (44, administrative assistant, high school, suburban/suburban) further offered that Mama June “has made so much money off that kid,” to which Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) replied:

[Mama June and Sugar Bear] didn’t have the beauty, they didn’t have the talent, but they’re going to try and force their child to do what they couldn’t before the child learns that [she] can’t either, and unfortunately, it sets a child up for very hard life circumstances later on in life.

Stephen (30, unemployed, associate’s, rural/rural) also feared that Alana’s role on television could perhaps have negative consequences in the future. He argued:

They’re willing to exploit that child to make money for themselves. This money is not for her. Their sole reason was to make money for themselves. They had no problem with exploiting that little girl, which she doesn’t know what they’re doing. She’s being exploited. She’s going to have a drug or drinking problem dealing with things that were never dealt with properly in her life.

These viewers' comments serve a dual function. First, they suggest that Mama June and Sugar Bear were incapable of making money for themselves and that the Shannon-Thompson parents were failures within a neoliberal framework that emphasizes
meritocracy. Thus, their working-class belonging was, in essence, justified because of their unwillingness to endorse neoliberal philosophies of hard work. Secondly, several labeled the parents’ decision to enter the neoliberal marketplace by capitalizing on mediated interest in their daughter as unacceptable. Through their discussion of these reality show personalities, viewers suggested that there are legitimate and illegitimate ways to operate within competitive neoliberal culture.

Moreover, many participants rejected the notion that success was synonymous solely with the accrual of financial capital, instead offering a definition that stressed a less material version of success. A number of participants invoked themes of family and happiness to counteract the ideology of competition and profit-driven neoliberalism, idealizing working-class representation that emphasized other markers of a successful life. In a general discussion of working-class families on television, for example, Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) maintained, “I think most of them are successful in the fact that they're all families and in the end they all stick together and they still love each other no matter what.” Similarly, Brent (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) spoke about the Hecks in The Middle, whom others in his group mentioned struggled financially. He concluded that he “would be fine with that because I feel like they were all happy with each other. In the end of every episode, they still had each other and that was of more value to them.” These comments do not suggest that the working-class should seek to increase their economic capital, but rather that their struggles matter less when they have the emotional support of their families. That is, viewers perceived that these families provided a representation of success contrary to neoliberal values of profit-driven outcome. This may be a disavowal of this tenet of
neoliberalism, or, as Spangler (2014) notes, it may be an articulation of the Midwestern value that “people should be happy with what they have” (p. 486).

Lisa (44, administrative assistant, high school, suburban/suburban) further pointed specifically to the Chance family of *Raising Hope*, offering another example of working-class characters that stand in contrast to the neoliberal desire for upward mobility. She noted:

On *Raising Hope*, I would consider them as a successful family just in that my definition of success is to have a happy marriage and my family around me. For them, getting married as pregnant teenagers and still being married and having their family together, to me, that’s successful … They’ve got a rundown house and not that much money, but they’re happy and that to me, that’s what makes success.

In her evaluation of *Raising Hope*, Lisa not only offered an alternative version of success – a happy marriage and being surrounded by one’s family – but also placed this in direct contrast to the neoliberal value of wealth accumulation. Specifically, she mentioned the Chances’ “rundown house” and their lack of money, which suggests that she recognizes that a typical definition of success includes both wealth and a nice home. However, by placing family and happiness centrally in her reading of the Chance family, she broadens the scope of success beyond profit and wealth accumulation.

Other participants noted that, for working-class families, success is simply a matter of making it through any given day. Megan (30, counselor, master’s degree, rural/rural) noted that on *The Middle*, “their idea of success is to make it through whatever crisis of the moment and be able to go on. …They're not looking to be
millionaires. They're shooting for paying the bills.” Rather than aspiring to limitless material wealth, Megan argues that the Hecks of *The Middle* are more focused on making ends meet. She goes on to point out that this representation is “more everyday life than most other shows,” indicating that she feels many working-class families struggle with day-to-day expenses.

Finally, participants indicated that those characters or reality personalities who, under the guidelines of citizenship that require individuals to participate in the competitive capitalist marketplace, were economically successful may also lack the moral virtues afforded to working-class families. Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) and Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) discussed the Kardashian family in particular; Tammy observed that, to her, success was not “a money thing,” but that it might be “to the Kardashians. I think their idea of success is probably money. To me, it’s not.” Brenda replied that the Kardashians “haven’t got anything else. …they’ve got money, but what else is there?” Ashley (30, loan officer, bachelor’s degree, rural/rural), speaking more generally about televisual representation, questioned the possibility of being both financially successful and embodying the nonmonetary markers of success about which many participants spoke: “I think for them to come out with a TV show that showed somebody that made ungodly amounts of money and had perfect kids and a perfect wife, and everything is just completely perfect. I don’t think that’s even possible.” These comments revealed that participants viewed individuals and families focused on wealth accumulation, or those identified as “good” citizens within a neoliberal framework, as lacking the version of success that audiences constructed in their alternative readings. In other words, the representations of those vested in their own self-
interest and accumulation of wealth were also viewed as incapable of enjoying the moral successes of family and viewers’ perception that the families were happy with their lives.

While participants seemed to endorse neoliberal philosophies of competition and hard work to increase individual profit, they suggested that some means of wealth accumulation were more legitimate than others. In particular, they chastised reality personalities whom they believed became upwardly mobile not through personal merit, but by exploiting themselves or others. Moreover, unlike in the marketplace structured through neoliberalism, which guides the previous chapter’s analysis of media representation, participants also offered a more nuanced reading of the television texts of which they were viewers. In this reading, success did not always equal profit acquired through competitive participation, but instead included the nonmonetary success of close family ties and what they viewed as a general sense of happiness. Moreover, they questioned whether financial success and moral definitions of success could coincide. In the next section, I turn to the ways audiences invoked rhetorics of risk and decision-making and the privatization of public services in their evaluations of how television characters and personalities enacted the rules of neoliberal citizenship.

**Bad parents and Vigilante Justice: Risk, Privatization and Neoliberalism**

Two final ways neoliberalism is ideologically encoded in television texts is through the representation of risk-avoidance and prudent decision-making, and the privatization of public services. In the domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs analyzed in the previous chapter, privatization of the public is demonstrated by presenting public resources as ineffectual at solving the problems they are intended to fix, and by suggesting that private, working-class characters are themselves responsible for
raising funds to supplement what the government contributes to its public services. Moreover, the families in *The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,* and *Duck Dynasty* make risky decisions in both their personal and financial lives, making their behavior inconsistent with “good” neoliberal citizenship. While these themes were prevalent in the textual analysis of working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs, participants focused little on these tenets in their discussions. In what follows, I briefly detail the ways risk informed the participants’ readings of television’s working-class characters and personalities, particularly through the framing of the working-class as “dysfunctional,” and how neoliberal discourses of privatization structure audience understanding of televisual texts.

Given the emphasis the philosophy of neoliberalism places on the individual, “good” neoliberal citizens are indeed required to be self-governing, and those who fail within this system are perceived as the “author[s] of their own misfortune” (Rose, 1996, p. 59). Consequently, it is assumed that “good” neoliberal citizens will make calculated choices and avoid risk, and those who make appropriate choices will be rewarded within the neoliberal system. When considered in conjunction with class belonging, risk-avoidance helps structure the understanding of working-class individuals’ failure to be upwardly mobile. Specifically, neoliberal ideology suggests that working-class individuals often struggle financially because of the poor choices they have made.

Participants readily discussed how poor decision-making factored into their readings of middle- and working-class families on television. In particular, they regularly used the terms “dysfunctional” and “chaotic” to describe working-class families, and the belief that those families made poor relational decisions undergirded their assessments of
working-class dysfunction and chaos. Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) described *The Middle* as “funny, but…too contrived. Nobody’s that dysfunctional. … Every week there’s some new drama.” Megan (30, counselor, master’s degree, rural/rural) agreed with Tammy, pointing out that “in a typical family, that same problem’s going to continue” rather than be resolved at the end of a 30-minute episode. Tammy continued, “Sue's not going to be happy with her dad at the end of an episode in real life. In real life, she's going to marry a man just like him and be miserable.” Tammy and Megan’s conversation connected *The Middle*’s exaggerated aspirations for middle-classness to what they perceived as dysfunction, concluding that dysfunction was related to family drama that, in “real life,” would not be so easily resolved. Indeed, Tammy’s evaluation that daughter Sue would end up marrying someone like her working-class father indicates that poor decisions perpetuate dysfunction in working-class homes.

Hannah (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) offered a similar assessment of the working-class personalities on *Teen Mom* and what she perceived to be their risky reproductive choices: “I mean, almost all of them have two kids now with two different people. Then the baby daddy has his own family now and has other kids, too.” Taylor (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban) provided a rationale for what she viewed as the connection between unplanned pregnancies and working-class identity:

> I think there's a statistic that says lower classes, poorer people are very uneducated, more uneducated, about safe sex, all of that. About making right decisions, going to school, getting a job, being stable, before you can have a child. Children are expensive and if you are not stable financially or anything, they're way more expensive, so it's harder.
This justification suggests that working-class individuals are perhaps predisposed to make risky decisions due to their presumed lack of education. This attribution further works to naturalize the connection between the working-class and poor decision-making, thus legitimating the working-class belonging of those who fail to be upwardly mobile.

Other participants suggested that poor parenting decisions were partially to blame for the dysfunction in working-class families. In his group’s discussion of *The Middle*, Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) castigated the Hecks for the unruliness of their children. He observed, “You can’t let a teenager have their way. You’ve got to set boundaries. You let them run amuck for 15 years and when they do become an adult and they’re out on their own, and they’re making bad decisions.” Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) and Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) comparably discussed Mama June’s lack of control of her children:

Brenda: [Mama June] looks like the woman you see in the grocery store screaming at her kids, “No, you can’t have that Tootsie Roll.”

Tammy: It’s ironic, though, because she never tells them they can’t have anything.

Brenda: Yeah, I was gonna say, but then gives up and says, “Well, just go buy the whole bag.”

As Butsch (2005) notes, on television, middle-class parents are consistently portrayed as intelligent, sensible, and mature when compared to their working-class counterparts. In line with this, participants’ evaluated working-class individuals as unfit parents who were unwilling to provide discipline and structure for children, emphasizing their poor decision-making.
Lastly, some viewers spoke of the privatization of public services consistent with neoliberal beliefs that governmental institutions are ineffectual, and, thus, should be run in accordance with philosophies of the free-market and individualism. While this was not a pervasive theme across focus group discussions, participants in two focus groups lauded television characters and personalities who privatized justice and charitable giving. In a discussion about their favorite television characters, Stephen (30, unemployed, associate’s, rural/rural) and Kyle (34, warehouseman, high school, rural/rural) argued the merits of rogue law enforcement officers such as Dexter Morgan of *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013) and Raylan Givens of *Justified* (FX, 2010-present), who often work against the wishes of their employers to seek a vigilant form of privatized justice. Stephen contended that these characters deserve praise because [they’re] badass but [they’re] still doing the right thing. Bending the rights of a criminal, is it that really bad of a thing? Especially in today’s world where criminals go to prison and never serve full time or never serve appropriate time frame. Is violating their rights really that bad of a thing? 

Billy (63, safety officer, associate’s degree, rural/suburban) offered a similar assessment for the way television personality Judge Judy (syndication, 1996-present) provides a privatized version of justice, stating,

> When you go to court these days, there’re so many technicalities out there. You get the bad guy, you know he’s guilty as sin, but yet something happened and he goes free. With Judge Judy, she doesn’t have to have guilty beyond the ponderance (*sic*) of a doubt, she can weigh the evidence and she can see right
through all the lies and the crap and I like that. In the society today, nobody’s accountable for anything.

In both of these instances, viewers expressed dissatisfaction with the justice system’s inability to adequately serve its intended purpose. Consistent with Ouellette’s (2002) analysis of *Judge Judy*’s privatized form of justice, viewers’ comments suggest that they agree that that private citizens could more adequately and efficiently serve societal needs than the governmental services currently in place.

In addition to the privatization of the justice system, participants also addressed the ways private individuals may stand in for public services. During a discussion about the financially struggling Chance family in *Raising Hope*, Billy (63, safety officer, associate’s degree, rural/suburban) concluded that Mawmaw, Virginia’s grandmother, probably owns the home in which they live, and expresses the likelihood that “a lot of the household bills are paid off her social security check.” Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) replied that he “doesn’t have a problem with that because she’s worked for that social security. She can throw that check into a fire and burn it if she wants. If she wants to help these people with that, she can.” This example offers an interesting assessment of the relationship between public services and private citizenship; although social security is a public service into which individuals are required to pay, Randy places emphasis on the fact that the money now belongs to that private citizen, and she can do as she pleases with it, including support her family. His qualification that he “doesn’t have a problem with it because she worked for it” indicates that he would prefer the family’s bills be paid by a government service that had been earned rather than, for instance, welfare benefits that might be viewed as underserved.
As I argued in Chapter Four, working-class texts are encoded with ideologies of neoliberalism, including the value of hard work, the role of competition to become upwardly mobile, the avoidance of risk, and the privatization of public services. Participants often articulated beliefs consistent with the representations discussed in Chapter Four, suggesting that contemporary portrayals do perpetuate the notion that the working-class are, indeed, the authors of their own misfortunes. Participants, for example, overwhelmingly endorsed the neoliberal ethos of hard work and, in turn, meritocracy. Yet, their viewpoints did not universally suggest a complete endorsement of all aspects of neoliberal philosophy; they rejected the notion that success is necessarily synonymous with financial security, concluding that success may also be achieved through personal happiness or connection with one’s family.

Changing the focus of success serves as a partial rejection of neoliberal belief, which is normally focused on profit gains and economic success. However, it also ignores the fact that, despite their personal fulfillment, working-class individuals are still struggling financially. On one hand, participants’ evaluations of working-class characters’ inability or unwillingness to perform “good” neoliberal citizenship justifies the working-class’ economic struggle; if they were more willing to work hard, avoid poor decisions, and operate within the competitive marketplace, they would be more likely to enjoy economic upward mobility. Yet participants also offered an alternative understanding of success that placed greater importance on personal happiness and fulfillment than financial reward. While this framework differs from the profit-focus of many neoliberal tenets, and can thus be seen as a partial rejection of neoliberalism’s cultural dominance, it may also obfuscate and romanticize the working-class reality of
financial insecurity. That is, changing the focus from economic success to personal fulfillment may ignore the fact that economic hardship affects the quality of life of working-class individuals in material ways.

Rather than existing in isolation, working-class identity is shaped by the intersecting categories of Whiteness, rural belonging, and gender. To investigate how each of these structures audience understand of the working-class, the second research question of my audience study asked:

**RQ6: How is audience understanding of working-class families shaped by the representation of the intersecting identity categories of Whiteness, rural belonging, and gender?**

**Audience Perceptions of Gender Representation and Rural Whiteness**

This question guides my exploration of the ways that viewers discussed these representational categories to provide a more nuanced understanding of working-class representation on television. To uncover how gender representation and rural Whiteness structured participants’ readings of working-class belonging, I asked a number of questions that probed for how “typical,” “traditional,” and “progressive” families were portrayed in sitcoms and reality television, and how these families were similar to or different from their own. This led to discussions about gender roles generally, and the gendered division of labor in work and in the home. Participants were either reluctant to talk about Whiteness, or did not view it as a salient point of discussion through most of the interview. However, the photo elicitation exercise did prompt conversation about the role of Whiteness and rural identity in these programs.
Driven by these questions, participants employed the familiar trope of “poor White trash” to suggest that many working-class Whites failed to perform Whiteness properly. Moreover, they discussed the ways rural belonging helps constitute working-class authenticity, particularly for those who may have been upwardly mobile, yet still embody the cultural markers of working-class belonging. Finally, participants articulated relatively traditional gender depictions in televisual representations generally, although they suggested that working-class mothers are often doubly burdened by the expectations of both work and family more so than their middle-class counterparts.

Importantly, discussions of Whiteness were mostly absent from those families whom participants perceived were emulating, or at least aspiring to, middle-class standards of taste and decorum. When asked to describe the Hecks of *The Middle* during the photo elicitation portion of the interview, participants used the terms “normal” and “typical” as descriptors in place of the terms “White trash” and “redneck” that were used to describe the families in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*. Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) observed that they were, “White middle-class, if there is such a thing.” Norma’s qualifying remark “if there is such a thing” both acknowledges that the Hecks aspire to a middle-class identity, and also naturalizes the connection between Whiteness and middle-class belonging. Morgan (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban) referred to the Hecks as a “pretty generic family,” and Hannah (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) observed that “everything about them is just average, like their clothing and the wall paper and the ugly couch.” Elsewhere in the interview participants certainly used language to identify the Hecks as working-class, but their seeming ordinariness as a Midwestern, nuclear family made their
Whiteness invisible. Johnson (2008) contends that this is central to the construction of the Midwestern Heartland, which, she asserts, “is not couched in overtly raced terms, but, rather, through a spatial imaginary that posits the Heartland Midwest as a shared, national ‘home’ wherein the presumptive ‘invisibility’ of race implies ‘universal’ value” (p. 19). Thus, because nothing about the Hecks seemed particularly subversive or exceptional, their racial identification was not addressed.

**They’re poor White trash: Visible Whiteness**

Previous scholarship has argued that the representation of Whiteness becomes visible through television characters’ and personalities’ inability to perform acceptable standards of Whiteness properly (e.g., Grindstaff, 2002), and the previous chapter’s textual analysis echoed this representation of Whiteness in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programming. Participants reiterated this position through their discussions of working-class families on television, repeatedly using the pejorative term “White trash” to signify a departure from what they perceived as normative middle-class Whiteness. Moreover, some participants drew comparisons between the families they labeled as “White trash” and Black families they knew, in turn, evaluating Black families as monolithically working-class or poor. Finally, participants neglected to identify Whiteness as an overt marker of identity for the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty*, instead using the term “redneck” to stand in for the intersection between Whiteness and working-class belonging.

Bettie (1995) argues, “Since Whiteness most often goes as an unstated but assumed racial referent (that is, when race is not mentioned Whiteness is assumed), when it is present it reveals much” (p. 140). Race was not a prevalent point of discussion during
the focus group interviews, but participants did overwhelmingly use the “White trash”
oniker to describe the Shannon-Thompson family in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo.*
Debbie (61, bank teller, high school, rural/rural) noted that the family was “White trash
for sure,” because of “the way they live. …They show them going to bed and they just
crawl into bed with their clothes on and not take a bath or anything, just crawl right in
and get up the next morning, crawl right out.” Madison (21, student, some college,
rural/rural) further offered that “the way they fart and burp” contributes to her
understanding of the family as “White trash,” and Brent (20, student, some college,
suburban/suburban) concluded that their lack of intelligence or formal education was a
marker of the identity: “They’re someone that wouldn’t know very much information.
Not someone I would ask help for on a math problem. I don't know. They didn't go to
college.” Stephen (30, unemployed, associate’s, rural/rural) went further, describing the
family as the “class below White trash.” He also described at length the difference
between what he considered “poor” and the Shannon-Thompson’s label of “White trash”:

I don’t consider myself to be rich. I’m not saying I’m poor, but I’m not rich. I
would associate with poor people. I’m not going to not hang out with you because
you don’t have money. It’s not even money issues. You don’t have to be classless
when you’re poor. You could have a great personality and you be poor. You don’t
have to be rich to have nice things. But those kind of people I wouldn’t associate
with. I don’t judge people who don’t have a lot of money. [The Shannon-
Thompsons] are an embarrassment to America. This is the stuff, when you go to
foreign countries, this is the stuff that they say, “Oh, stupid Americans. They’re
fat.” [Mama June] thinks she deserves everything for free.
Taken together, participants indicated that the “White trash” label was, perhaps, less about a lack of financial capital, and more about the performance of “class,” or in other words, standards of middle-class White taste. As Grindstaff (2011) maintains, Class is more than one’s relation to the site of economic production. Especially in the context of television, class is also a performance, a social script involving, among other things, language use, mannerisms, comportment and dress. …In the US, the working classes are said to be unrefined, indiscreet, and visceral in their pleasures and tastes. (p. 199)

The attribution of the Shannon-Thompsons as “White trash,” then, is structured in part by their disavowal of middle- or high-brow tastes, as well as a disregard for the enactment of White, middle-class aesthetic and moral qualities. While Debbie and Madison mentioned issues of hygiene and decorum, Stephen (30, unemployed, associate’s, rural/rural) posited a more incendiary assessment. His label of “embarrassment” for being “fat” and “think[ing] she deserves everything for free” indicates a failure to perform both neoliberal self-discipline and a willingness work hard, thus suggesting that “White trash” is either a rejection of or inability to embrace neoliberal ideology that is instrumental in creating and sustaining middle-class and affluent Whiteness.

A number of participants also questioned Mama June’s parenting decisions, indicating that her failure as a “good” mother further added to their “White trash” designation. Hannah (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) concluded that the family was “poor and disgusting,” offering that, “[The daughters] are all from different dads. The youngest girl, Honey Boo Boo, does pageants. I don't know how they afford pageants when they live, you can just see how gross the house is.” Ashley (30, loan
officer, bachelor’s degree, rural/rural) remembered, “[Mama June] gives [Alana] a mixture of Red Bull and Mountain Dew before she does her beauty pageant. The Go-Go Juice they call it to keep her ‘on.’ When [producers] asked her why, she’s like, ‘It could be worse. I could be giving her alcohol.’” Lisa (44, administrative assistant, high school, suburban/suburban) also mentioned the exploitative nature of the Shannon-Thompsons’ life being documented on television, “Just knowing about them and the show, that’s what I’d call White trash. Being willing to be so stupid on TV and doing that to your kid.”

Consistent with neoliberal rhetoric of risk-avoidance, participants viewed Mama June’s presumed poor parenting through the financial and health risks she placed on her children, which further solidified the family’s label as “White trash,” and thus, failures at performing Whiteness.

In addition to the descriptions above, the “White trash” label was placed in relationship to participants’ personal experiences with racial minorities, particularly Black families, to further inscribe “White trash” as failing Whiteness. Jenny (30, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) described the Shannon-Thompson family as “country ghetto,” invoking a derogatory term commonly used to refer to the economic and racial segregation of Black individuals. She compared the family to those in the predominately Black school district where she is a teacher:

If I imagine, knowing where I work, I have maybe seen parents that are like this but are African-American and not necessarily Caucasian. Just in terms of parents that in my building that I’ve seen or in other areas where I’ve worked in [my predominately Black school district]. You would expect someone like that to not be White. That’s really horrible. I’ve seen parents sending their kids to school
with bags of cookies and jugs of soda to take to lunch. Sometimes I think that it
doesn’t necessarily make them bad parents, but the parents are doing the best that
they can with what they have. They can’t afford to go and buy their kids English
muffins or a box of cereal, it’s cheaper to go to the gas station and buy junk.

In a reply to Jenny’s comment, Stephen (30, unemployed, associate’s, rural/rural)
observed, “Okay, but they got their bags. They got their hairdo. They got their long
nails.” Although Jenny notes that the Black families she interacts with “are doing the best
that they can with what they have,” her assertion that “you would expect someone like
that not to be White” reveals that she holds White parents to a higher standard, suggesting
they know how to parent better than Black parents. Moreover, Stephen’s follow-up to
Jenny’s point engages the stereotype of the “bad Black mother” (Boylorn & Hopson,
2014) who makes risky decisions, included those related to finances and placing their
own desires above the wellbeing of their children.

Hannah (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) drew a comparison
between the Shannon-Thompson family and the “White trash” families who frequent the
pool where she is a lifeguard. She began by noting that she could “describe [White trash]
for sure,” stating,

I lifeguard, so I see it my area, where all the White trash people come. They just
don't care. They are gross. Their clothing is not appropriate or you can tell it is
old. You can also [tell by] how they act. They are not happy with each other.
They are rude or they will be, not abusive to their kids, but like dragging them or
screaming.
Although she spoke generically about the “White trash” families for which she was a lifeguard, when asked if she could think of a specific example of families she knows to compare to the Shannon-Thompsons, she commented, “Actually, there is a family that comes [to my pool]. It’s this huge Black guy, and his kids are gross and will all follow each other around.” Thus, although she was describing the term “White trash,” the example she provided was that of a Black family, indicating a propensity to make a default connection between the “trash” label and negative stereotypes of poor Black families. In their interviews with viewers of *The Cosby Show*, Jhally and Lewis (1992) found a similar connection between class and race. Jhally and Lewis acknowledge that, historically, Black families are more likely to be working-class or poor than White families, and the emergence of a Black middle-class was a recent phenomenon during the *Cosby* era. As such, their interview participants lacked a way to discuss the relationship between race and class, instead using the descriptor “White” to stand in for “upper middle-class” when talking about the Cosby family. While comparisons of “White trash” to Black families were not prominent in my interviews, both Jenny’s and Hannah’s observations underscore expectations for performing Whiteness properly. When families such as the Shannon-Thompsons fail to do so, they are labeled “White trash,” a term that can, in this instance, but used interchangeably with Blackness, further perpetuating the belief that Blackness is analogous to working-class or poor class identities.

For the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty*, viewers did not focus overtly on their Whiteness. Instead, they spoke about them through the lens of their rural, “redneck” identity. As I discuss next, “redneck” identity offers a way to explore the intersection of the Robertsons’ raced, working-class performance.
Down home people: Rural Belonging and “Redneck” Performance

Hartigan (1997) argues that by the late 1980s, terms previously used to pejoratively describe working-class Whites, such as “redneck,” “hillbilly,” and “country boy,” were labels of “prideful identification” that “had become virtually interchangeable with each other in connoting a working-class lifestyle and consciousness. Thus, using any of these terms was tantamount to evoking working-class consciousness” (p. 329).

Important, then, to the identification as “redneck” is a conscious performance of working-class ethos; as illustrated in the previous chapter’s textual analysis, the Robertsons use cultural markers of mise-en-scene, linguistics, and arts and leisure to embody the working-class “redneck” lifestyle, despite their nouveau riche economic position. In the group interviews, the Robertson family of Duck Dynasty offered a tool for participants to discuss and debate the performance of “redneck” identity, and the tension between economic success and working-class cultural belonging.

The Roberston family runs a successful business enterprise, which classifies them as middle-class or affluent in socioeconomic terms. However, they also self-identify as “rednecks,” a term that invokes “working-class valence” marked in terms of race and provincial location (Hubbs, 2011, p. 47). While rural, working-class audiences may not find the Robertsons’ wealth relatable, they did identify with the Robertsons through their performance of their working-class, rural “redneck” identity that structures much of the family’s mediated presentation. A number of the participants who regularly watched Duck Dynasty identified cultural markers as contributing to the family’s authentic representation of “redneck” identity. Bob (52, orthopedic technician, some college, rural/suburban), who described the Robertsons as “down home people,” compared the
family’s leisure activities with those of his own family, which he described as both “backwoods” and “redneck”: “We like to fish. We don't do much hunting or shooting, but we like to fish, just go out and do stupid stuff like they do.” Lisa (44, administrative assistant, high school, suburban/suburban) indicated that the Robertsons’ physical appearances also contributed to their “redneck” authenticity and, in turn, their relatability. She shared, “If you had a family with suits and ties and fancy dresses, I wouldn’t want anything to do with them.” Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) further observed that their “camo and ZZ Top beards scream ‘redneck.’” Tammy’s ZZ Top comparison is particularly interesting, given Eastman and Schrock’s (2008) analysis of southern rock musicians’ construction of “redneck” identity. Indeed, they argue that “rather than deflect or defend themselves from the stigma and stereotypes directed at poor, rural whites, southern rockers celebrate being white trash, rednecks, and hillbillies” (p. 210), partly through their embrace of rugged, rural masculinity and “skills symbolic of frontier manhood: hunting, fishing, and farming” (p. 211). Despite having accrued the financial capital to be considered either middle-class or affluent, southern rock musicians act as “cultural ambassadors of poor, rural, whites,” (p. 209); in the same way, the Robertsons’ cultural performance makes them relatable and recognizably “redneck” to their viewers.

A number of participants also mentioned the family’s devout Christianity as an influential part of their rural, “redneck” identity. Megan (30, counselor, master’s degree, rural/rural), for instance, pointed out that, “In Duck Dynasty you still get their sense of family and you still get their sense of their beliefs. You still get their major values.” Similarly, Debbie (61, bank teller, high school, rural/rural) called them “a wonderful
family,” and stated “I like the fact that they're religious and they won't back down from that. They have prayer, in every show they do the meal around the table as a family and they say a prayer.” Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) further praised them for her observation that they “don't leave God out of their family.” Harkins (2005) notes that organized religion, and Christianity in particular, has long been a hallmark feature of the rural, Southern “hillbilly” culture. Given the Robertsons’ overt expressions of their faith in both the series and media coverage of the show, it is unsurprising that viewers use the family’s Christianity to authenticate their “redneck” belonging. Similar to the representation of the Robertsons’ “Protestant work ethic” in Chapter Four, the conflation of Christianity with “redneck” identity suggests that Christianity serves as an important marker of a particular type of working-class identity; when explicit references to class identity are absent, “redneck” and “Christian” work in conjunction to connote working-classness.

Importantly, several participants mentioned the Robertsons’ financial position, but quickly dismissed their wealth in favor of their believability as “rednecks,” suggesting that the family’s performance of “redneck” identity was authentic despite their financial security. Nick (33, factory worker, some college, rural/rural), for example, contended that, “They go out hunting and fishing. They don't worry about anything. They have all the money in the world, but they still live like they want to, not how people want them to live.” Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) similarly spoke about the tension between the Robertsons’ business success and rural representation, arguing that their humility contributed to their authenticity: “They’re very humble people. They
have decent money, but they don’t flaunt around town that they are rich. … They don’t dress up. They don’t talk about fancy things because they have money.”

Sender (2012) argues that reality television operates at a “precarious position at the interstices of fact and fiction” (p. 107), and that often times viewers’ enjoyment of reality shows is predicated on the perceived “realness” and authenticity of the contestants. While she was speaking specifically about makeover reality programs, the ways the Robertsons navigate their mediated presentation certainly impacted viewers’ ability to see them as “authentically redneck”; despite their economic success, they attempt to embody a culture (i.e., “redneck”) that is marked as working-class. In particular, some participants struggled to negotiate the Robertsons’ financial success with their “redneck” performance. Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) maintained, “I would say [they’re] imitation redneck. … They’re all college-educated and it’s a pretense,” a comment consistent with Eastman and Schrock’s (2008) assertion that southern rockers devalue education as a way to establish “redneck” or “hillbilly” identity. Wayne (72, coal miner, high school, rural/rural) agreed, pointing out, “With the money that you know they have you just can't identify with it … What makes me think it’s fake, I saw [a photo of] them all with the beards shaved and out on the golf course.” Brent (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) also rejected the term “redneck” for the Robertsons: “I wouldn't say they're rednecks. I think they're really smart. One of them I think has an actual degree,” again using family members’ formal education to disassociate them with the “redneck” label. After Justin (35, construction, high school, rural/rural) used the term “fake” to describe the family, Brenda (54, secretary, some
college, rural/rural) remembered “seeing photos where they were wearing white polos and ... all clean shaven. Very yuppie-looking people.”

Nick (33, factory worker, some college, rural/rural), further complicated the relationship between the Robertsons’ financial success and the “redneck” label, pointing out that affluent “rednecks” are still required to perform a particular version of consumption to believably embody the identity. He argued,

Willie and Jase’s houses are just ridiculous. They live in the subdivision with a homeowner’s association. [The homeowner’s association] tells them what to do. Real redneck backwoods people would not have that. If you've got that kind of money, buy 10 acres of land and build a house where nobody can tell you what to do.

Megan (30, counselor, master’s degree, rural/rural) followed his comment by noting that “real redneck people are going to live like Phil and Kay, with a little trailer in the woods with a pond in your backyard.” Thus, the designation of the Robertsons as “yuppie” or “imitation ‘redneck’” had less to do with how much money they had acquired, but rather the ways they chose to spend it. Moreover, each of these comments revealed that, much like Whiteness, there is a correct way to perform “redneck” identity. By invoking their college educations, participation in highbrow leisure activities, and “yuppie-looking” appearance, participants suggested that their inauthentic presentation made it difficult label them as “rednecks.”

Grindstaff (2011) maintains that viewing class in terms of cultural capital is both “more wide-ranging and mobile than class-as-socioeconomic status.” Class-as-culture relies on an individual’s embodiment of “aesthetic qualities and moral/behavioral
dispositions…regardless of actual material circumstances” (p. 200). This notion was reflected in the tension between the Robertsons’ working-class presentation and their financial success, which speaks to the relationship between rural authenticity, upward mobility, and continued performance of working-class ethos. Participants noted that it was paramount for the Robertsons to embody particular markers of rural “redneck” culture (e.g., leisure activities, religious values) to be believable “rednecks” and remain relatable to working-class viewers. When viewers acquired knowledge from the series or popular press coverage about the Robertsons that was discordant with this presentation, they questioned their “redneck” authenticity and, by mentioning cultural markers of middle-classness (e.g., college educations, “yuppie” appearance), their belonging in the working-class. While financial success was not alone enough to discredit the Robertsons’ working-class “redneck” identity, cultural indicators of middle-class or affluent belonging caused participants to question that designation, further underscoring Grindstaff’s (2011) argument that culture offers a clearer way to understand class than does financial circumstance.

She’s always overwhelmed: Gender and Domesticity

Gender representation in domestic sitcoms has received scholarly attention throughout television’s history, and previous research addresses how such representations have consistently differed along lines of class; while middle-class sitcoms present more well-developed characters and relatively egalitarian depictions of gendered division of labor in the home, working-class sitcoms have relied on tropes of laziness, anti-intellectualism and, in particular, the stereotype of the working-class buffoon father (e.g., Butsch, 1992; Leistyna, 2009). Moreover, a recent turn toward reality television
representation reasserts traditionally hegemonic notions of working-class masculine strength (e.g., Carroll, 2008; Mazzarella, 2008). The previous chapter’s textual analysis explored the connections between neoliberalism and gender in contemporary working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs; I argue specifically that the rules of neoliberalism are, indeed, structured along lines of gender in these programs through the industrialization of women’s “pink-collar” service work that limits the upward mobility of working-class women and creates a “second shift” of domestic labor. Women continue to bear the brunt of these domestic responsibilities, while working-class men focus on their role as financial providers, embracing manual labor jobs that require rugged, masculine body labor.

Much like the discussions surrounding neoliberal success, participant conversations about gender representation in television texts spanned beyond the series selected for textual analysis. Audiences drew comparisons between middle-class and working-class programs, as well as historical and contemporary series, to make sense of the relationships between gender and class they observed on television. Although they spoke about a relatively robust selection of television texts, their conversations echoed many of the representations found in previous literature. Further, they raised questions about the believability of neoliberal encodings of class and gender.

When asked to describe the typical television family, participants most often offered depictions of normative middle-class gender representation. Taylor (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban), for instance, concluded that, “Mom stays home, dad's off to work during the day, comes home for dinner. Dad has a desk job, cubicle job where he has to wear a tie and everything.” Britney (27, bartender, master’s degree,
rural/suburban) offered a similar evaluation, stating, “The dad goes to work. He’s a strong figure. The mother is very homebound and does a lot of stuff with the family,” while Elizabeth (28, academic advisor, master’s degree, rural/suburban) viewed a typical television father’s role as “mak[ing] the money and that’s about it.” These traditional roles were observed in *Duck Dynasty*, as Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) commented, “I would say Kay is more of a homemaker. I don't think she did much outside the home.” Even those examples that were both specific and contemporary included a traditionally gendered division of labor; Tammy’s (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) discussion of Cameron and Mitchell’s same-sex marriage in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) revealed that even “progressive” families rely on familiar gendered divisions of labor: “The gay couple, you've got the one guy, Cam, who's the housewife and his partner is a lawyer who brings home the money. You traditionally cast men as the role of breadwinner, but they don't both work [in *Modern Family*]. Cam is definitely the housewife.”

As Barclay (2014) argued, social reproductive labor (e.g., caring for young, preparing meals, etc.) has become industrialized in the neoliberal economy, leading to new jobs in the “pink-collar” service industry that are primarily held by working-class women. As evidenced in the previous chapter’s textual analysis, working-class women on television are often charged with a “double-duty” of the same types of domestic labor. Recognizing this, participants pointed to how the television landscape has changed with regard to the division of labor in the home. Debbie (61, bank teller, high school, rural/rural), for example, argued that, “It's changed so much since *Leave It To Beaver* (CBS/ABC, 1957-1963) when June would put on heels and a dress, and now the mothers
all have to work and it's kind of an equal, you know they bring in carryout food home.”

In a conversation about Modern Family, Megan (30, counselor, master’s degree, rural/rural) further questioned the reality of the single-income home model: “You have the daughter and her husband, and then the gay couple. They all each have one breadwinner. You look at family dynamics now, there's not very many people who can afford for one person to stay at home.”

Some participants spoke specifically of Frankie’s depiction in The Middle, identifying her representation as exemplary of an overworked, working-class mother. Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) described the Hecks as “definitely working class… They work, but they don't have a lot of money.” Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) observed that Frankie is “always overwhelmed. She has three kids, and the dad doesn't want to help her out.” Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) mentioned that his wife, Ann (49, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban), related to Frankie’s role in the series, sharing, “Yeah, you relate to Frankie because your lifestyle is hectic and overburdened and a lot like hers because the kids want you to do everything.” Taylor (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban) also related her own mother to Frankie’s representation: “[Frankie] is kind of like [my mom], where she's always trying to make everyone happy. Trying to make everything run smoothly, and she's on her feet all day. She works.”

Participants also drew comparisons between the traditional authoritarian fatherhood that dominated early television and the uninvolved father that exists in contemporary representations. Wayne (72, coal miner, high school, rural/rural) recalled the sitcoms he grew up with in the 1950s and 1960s: “In our day the fathers were
authority figures. What they said went in the family. There was no argument at all about it and if it didn't, there was a big ass-whipping going on, I guess you call it.” Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) agreed, remembering, “They all said, ‘Wait till your father gets home,’ even in *The Jetsons* [ABC, 1962-1963]. Mr. Cleaver had to come to home and talk to Beaver every day.” Lisa (44, administrative assistant, high school, suburban/suburban) made explicit the connections between historical representations and today’s television fathers, whom she noted are “just made out to be kind of like idiots.” She stated, “The husbands are often portrayed as the morons and they’re getting run over by their wife and kids. It’s [not] like *Little House on the Prairie* [NBC, 1974-1983] and *The Waltons* [CBS, 1972-1981], the man was the head of the family in the older shows.” Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) mentioned that *The Middle*’s Mike fit this depiction of an apathetic, uninvolved father:

> I think he's a pretty stereotypical lower-class sitcom dad. He doesn't help out around the house. There's the episode where Brick finds a box full of [homemade] coupons [redeemable for activities together] he's given his dad for birthdays, and his dad hasn't cashed any of them in, and he makes him do them, and he's like, “Oh my God.” He does them, but he doesn't want to do anything. He's like, “I'm not doing any more.” Typical, “I'm done. This is stupid. I'm not doing it.”

Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) agreed with Tammy’s comment, concluding, “[Frankie] usually winds up cleaning up after everyone without complaining. [Mike] is kind of aloof and distant, and only steps in when somebody forces him.”

Coupled with this recognition of the requirements put on working-class women in dual-earning households, the participants’ assessments underscore that the father’s
primary role in contemporary television is that of financial support; the burden of discipline, while previously the father’s domain, has also been shifted to mothers. Thus, although the struggle of working-class mothers is relatively limited on television, given that working-class sitcoms are few in number, participants both recognized and identified with Frankie’s representation in particular. In line with the neoliberal positioning of women’s labor, participants concluded that Frankie was responsible for both contributing to the family’s income, as well as taking on the burden of domestic and emotional labor. On the whole, however, participants’ discussions about television’s gender depictions were relatively limited, suggesting perhaps that these representations have become so naturalized on television that viewers found them unremarkable. Their readings of working-class characters’ and personalities’ gender performances were depoliticized; rather than question why working-class women were “overburdened,” participants accepted this description as a natural fact of women who work out of the home, which for working-class women, is often a necessity. In a neoliberal culture that promotes privatization and individualism, structures to help economically struggling working-class women ease this burden are increasingly limited.

This research question considered how audience understanding of working-class families is shaped by the representation of the intersecting identity categories of Whiteness, rural belonging, and gender. The previous chapter’s textual analysis revealed that Whiteness was made apparent in working-class programs through the “trash” representation of failing Whiteness, a Midwestern belonging that is always imagined White, and Southern “redneck” culture. Participants invoked the term “White trash” to describe the Shannon-Thompsons and their egregious violation of appropriate taste and
decorum associated with Whiteness. The invocation of this label is particularly problematic given that previous scholarship suggests the cultural use of “White trash” casts poor and working-class Whites as morally inferior, and, especially pertinent in a neoliberal culture, personally responsible for their own poverty (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002).

For the other families analyzed in the textual analysis, overt discussions of race were disregarded in favor of discussions about their rural, “redneck” belonging and the “normalcy” of White, middle-class aspirations. Participants spoke largely about the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* in terms of their “redneck” identity, although they disagreed about the authenticity with which the family performed “redneck” belonging. Viewers perceived that the Robertson’s status as “redneck” and, in turn, working-class, was predicated on their authentic performance of “redneck” culture. When highbrow tastes in leisure, arts, and education were made apparent, the Robertsons’ “redneck” identity was called into question, thus underscoring the importance of cultural capital, or lack thereof, for working-class belonging. Finally, participants evaluated the gendered division of labor in working-class homes as relatively traditional, while simultaneously acknowledging that mothers perform even more emotional and relational labor tasks in today’s dual-income families. Even for dual-income families, they articulated the traditional position of father-as-provider, and suggested that the burden of discipline further added to already overwhelmed working-class mothers.

Given that a goal of this project was to determine how viewers used televisual representation to negotiate meanings associated with class, the final research question asks:
RQ7: How do audiences use the understanding of working-class families they glean from television to make sense of class in broader culture and their own class positions?

Class in Broader Culture

This question explores how participants employed their understandings of the working- and middle-class families on television to make sense of class belonging in their own lives and in broader culture. I asked participants to identify television families they would call middle-class or working-class/blue collar, and what led them to identify those families as such. Questions during the photo elicitation exercise were also especially helpful at illuminating how participants understood the meanings of working-class identity; these questions asked participants to describe the family based on their photos, the stereotypes they would associate with the family, and how the family resembled their family or others they knew.

Participants’ discussions about class on television revealed that viewers often conflate working- and middle-class labels. Yet, the terms do hold meaning for them, given that they are able to clearly distinguish class belonging along lines of both socioeconomic factors and cultural indicators. Further, viewers used representations on television to understand their own class relationships, and provided insight into why working-class representation is limited on television.

The working class is middle class, isn’t it?: Distinguishing Between Middle- and Working-Class

As evidenced throughout this analysis, clearly demarcating individuals as either working- or middle-class often proves difficult because class belonging is structured by
both socioeconomic measures as well as cultural indicators. Coupled with the fact that many Americans still identify as middle-class either because of their aspirations (Stevenson, 2012) or the stigma associated with working-class identity (Dugan, 2012), it is unsurprising that participants regularly conflated working- and middle-class belonging. When asked to describe sitcoms or reality shows that contained characters they would describe as “middle-class,” many participants defaulted to programs such as *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, and *Roseanne*. Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) offered *Married...With Children* and *That 70’s Show* as examples of middle-class shows, both of which featured patriarchs in low-skilled jobs. The interchangability of the terms “working-class” and “middle-class” was revealed as participants articulated the ways they could identify the characters as working-class. As a follow up to Norma’s identification of *Married...With Children* and *That 70’s Show* as “middle-class,” Debbie (61, bank teller, high school, rural/rural) pointed out that the characters “aren’t rich. You can tell that they work to make a living, so they're not poor either. You can tell by their house that they have a decent income, but they're not rich.” Additionally, Bob (52, orthopedic technician, some college, rural/suburban) suggested that there were no shows on television that would match his definition of middle-class, sharing that “They're all better off than the middle class is right now. …Financially, the very first thing. [Characters on television] have their own homes. A lot of people don't own homes anymore.”

After describing middle-class shows, participants were then asked to list series that contained characters they would label as working-class or blue collar. In many of the interviews, the groups listed the same families they had previously described as middle-
class, indicating that they thought of working- and middle-class identity as synonymous. As Wayne (72, coal miner, high school, rural/rural) commented, “The middle-class is working-class, isn't it?” Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) agreed, “There's not much difference, really.” Wayne elaborated that what he referred to as the middle-class was less likely to be featured on television because “there's nothing exciting, you know, in that life. It's either lawyer shows or doctors.” Wayne’s comment suggests that the representation of average, working people, whom he refers to as “middle-class,” is limited in favor of characters with more financial capital and “exciting” jobs, like lawyers and doctors. This merging of class identity was also reflected in Madison’s (21, student, some college, rural/rural) comments about Mike in The Middle: “The way he dresses, it shows they're middle-class, with his flannel button up he looks like a working man.” By using the term “middle-class” to describe what she recognizes as the casual attire of a “working man,” Madison suggests that the working- and middle-class labels are interchangeable.

Although there was conflation of the labels middle- or working-class, some participants could clearly articulate the socioeconomic and cultural markers that shaped class belonging. While discussions about financial struggles are certainly limited on television (VanDerWerff, 2012), Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) perceived that working-class characters were more likely to “discuss their bills. How are we going to pay this? This is broke. What are we going to do to afford it?” Daniel (19, student, high school, suburban/suburban) offered a similar evaluation, citing series such as The Simpsons and Malcolm in the Middle: “they both have all the time stuff is that is broken or beat up, and they always have full episodes about just dealing with money and
stuff.” In his description of the Connor family of *Roseanne*, Billy (63, safety officer, associate’s degree, rural/suburban) observed, “They always seemed like they never had a nickel to do much of anything.” Brock (28, housekeeping, high school, rural/suburban) suggested that, similar to the family in *Raising Hope*, the *King of Queens*’ multi-generational family structure and financial struggles marked the family in the show as working-class: “He has his father-in-law live with him. There's always something up with their financial situation. It's not every day, ‘Oh my gosh, we’re going to lose our house,’ but it’s always something.”

Elizabeth (28, academic advisor, master’s degree, rural/suburban) relied on the occupations of Burt and Virginia in *Raising Hope* to describe them as working-class, recalling, “He owns his own lawn care business and then Virginia cleans houses. It is not like jobs that you go sit in an office for. They are both working jobs where you put in labor for it.” Consistent with the discussion of nutritionally bankrupt food as a marker of working-classness in the previous chapter’s textual analysis, Madison (21, student, some college, rural/rural) mentioned the “way all of them eat the microwave meals” in *The Middle* and *Raising Hope* as signifiers of their working-class belonging.

Others contrasted such representations with the financial security and occupation levels of middle-class characters. Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) spoke about both *Modern Family* and *The Cosby Show*, in which “you realize how much more money those people had. … The Huxtables were well off, but I would classify them as upper-middle-class, because they weren't loaded. Five kids, for God's sake. You can't be rich with five kids.” Rachel (20, student, high school, suburban/suburban) mentioned that *Teen Mom* personality Chelsea was middle-class because “her dad is a dentist,”
suggesting a professional career that required advanced education marked her family as middle-class. Kyle (34, warehouseman, high school, rural/rural) summarized middle-class representation by indicating “at least one of the parents is reasonably financially successful so they can live in the lifestyle they need to.”

Importantly, however, participants also invoked the cultural cues encoded in televisual representation to differentiate working-class characters and personalities from their middle-class counterparts. Specifically, they detailed the ways that mise-en-scene, costuming, and appearance, and other markers of lowbrow taste marked the families as working-class. Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) maintained that the working-class homes he sees on television usually have “dirty clothes lying all around, the dishes haven’t been done, they’re not as well kept.” Brent (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) further commented that working-class characters wear clothing that “doesn’t look new, like just jeans and old tennis shoes. I guess very generic t-shirts and not anything fancy. Not any name brand stuff.” Justin (35, construction, high school, rural/rural), for instance, remembered

the episode of Roseanne where she tells somebody how to make meatloaf and how to do it really cheap. She says, “You need to buy a box of Corn Flakes. You put the whole box in with the meatloaf,” and she said, “There's not a whole lot of meat in there, but you can call it meatloaf.” She didn't use Corn Flakes, either. She had one Corn Flakes box, got a generic thing, and refilled the Corn Flakes.

Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) similarly suggested that the Chance family’s penchant for “eating TV dinners” indicated that they lack financial resources, while Hannah (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban)
recalled how the Shannon-Thompson’s “hunt a lot for their food. They'll go on the freeways and find dead animals on the ground.” Consistent with dominant encodings of the working-class as having poor taste, participants used these examples to illustrate how working-class characters failed to meet middle-class standards.

Participants also compared the leisure activities of the working- and middle-class. Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) noted that while “Roseanne might go bowling…the Huxtables would go to a play.” Others pointed to the Robertson family in *Duck Dynasty* and the emphasis placed on “redneck” leisure activities such as hunting and fishing, suggesting that participation in those activities marked the family as working-class. Taylor (19, student, some college, suburban/suburban), for instance, struggled to reconcile the family’s working-class performance with their economic capital. She stated, “I don’t know. Just the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they look. …I mean, they’re into hunting and stuff. But it’s weird, because they make a lot of money.” While she instinctually described the Robertsons as working-class based on their cultural markers, Taylor complicated that reading through her acknowledgement of their financial success. Taylor’s comment thus demonstrates the complex nature of class identification, making it necessary to read class belonging holistically; while socioeconomic factors are certainly important, it is reductionist to conclude class belonging on these markers alone. Instead, viewers recognized that class identification is also predicated on taste in cultural indicators such as arts, leisure, appearance, and ways of speaking, as I argued in Chapter Four’s textual analysis. In the next section, I detail the ways that participants use conversations about class on television to make sense of class in broader culture.
Participant evaluations of working-class representations in television were not limited to diegetic worlds; instead, participants regularly drew connections between characters and personalities to understand how class functioned in their own lives. Specifically, they used their knowledge about working- and middle-class television characters to situate their own class positioning, and also used those representations to differentiate themselves from others. Although participants noted similarities between the working-class series they discussed and their own lives, they also observed the overall lack of working-class representation on contemporary television.

Several participants mentioned that they related to the financial struggles of television’s working-class characters, specifically identifying with the Hecks in The Middle. Elizabeth (28, academic advisor, master’s degree, rural/suburban), for example, recalled, “We’re definitely below middle class where I’m from. There was just me and my brother so, not with three kids, but you know, dealing with all that money stuff.” Norma (67, home health aid, high school, rural/rural) also drew a comparison to the show, because of its resonance with “real life”: “They've covered everything. College, high school, grade school, what kids go through, lack of money, losing jobs. They've pretty much covered real life.” Additionally, viewers used comparisons of their own lives with middle-class and affluent televiusal representations to identify themselves as working-class. In a conversation about the Kardashians, Brenda (54, secretary, some college, rural/rural) observed, “They’re so wealthy. And that house. That's out of the normal person’s realm. I mean, who goes shopping in an afternoon and drop 28,000 dollars?” Tammy (45, teacher, master’s degree, rural/rural) echoed this perception and
joked, “I can barely afford 28 dollars right now. Much less thousand.” Brent (20, student, some college, suburban/suburban) noted that, growing up, television families made him come to terms with his own family’s financial hardship: “I came from a not very well off family. My dad was in and out of work, laid off all the time, so I guess my perception, I always thought I was very comfortable and everything. But not like most families on TV.” Participants’ comments, then, revealed that comparisons to both working- and middle-class television representations influence how television viewers read themselves and their own families in terms of class belonging.

Participants suggested that television’s limited working-class representations stem in part from the awareness that economic struggles are not glamorous and, in turn, do not make “good TV.” Lisa (44, administrative assistant, high school, suburban/suburban) observed that, “There’s no shows where they have bed bugs, where they’re food stamps, where they’re waiting for their welfare check. …But all of that happens.” Despite recognizing economic challenges as a reality for many people, Billy (63, safety officer, associate’s degree, rural/suburban) replied, “But nobody’s going to pay to watch it,” emphasizing that the problems of the working-class would not reflect the economic interests of the advertising-driven television industry. Kathy (58, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) further suggested that she did not mind that television did not reflect her reality: “[Television viewers] don't want to see what reality is, that's a part of it, but again like I said, I want to be entertained. I want to escape from my problems. The hope that maybe someday I could be sitting there living comfortably.” Brock (28, housekeeping, high school, rural/suburban) offered a similar sentiment, sharing, “For television to have these dark, depressing worlds, you don't want to watch it because
you’ve got your own problems. You don't want to take on theirs.” Both Kathy’s and Josh’s comments reveal that television representations often portray the lives of those who have “made it” under the rules of neoliberalism; providing representation of those who have not been upwardly mobile may not serve as a cautionary tale so much as a stark reminder of working-class viewers’ own struggles. Thus, middle-class representations offer, as Kathy suggests, an escape from the experience of working-class life, but also instruction for those hoping to learn to play by neoliberalism’s rules and be one day “sitting there living comfortably.”

For others, the lack of working-class representation on television served as a sobering reminder that “real life” for the working-class bears very little resemblance to mediated representations. Randy (47, maintenance, some college, suburban/suburban) pointed out that many families on television, including the Pritchets on Modern Family, “have rich people problems that [I don’t] have.” When prompted for an example of a “rich people problem,” Randy’s wife Ann (49, administrative assistant, some college, rural/suburban) chimed in, “I actually have no idea what their problems are.” Their exchange indicates that, whatever problems “rich” people have, those problems do not constitute the same struggles as working-class individuals. Wayne (72, coal miner, high school, rural/rural) also lamented the failure of television to address the tough issues working-class individuals face:

We don’t see it on TV but we see it in real life. The people that are out actually working, and working hard, are not getting the wages that they deserve. There's people around here that work two jobs, like McDonald's and the grocery store. If
they have to have less employees and they have to work harder, at least the people there ought to have a living wage.

Justin (35, construction, high school, rural/rural) similarly concluded, “There's 300,000 shows out there and very few ever deal with [economic hardship]. And that's one of the main issues for lower income families, is just trying to get by.” Lack of representation of the working-class’ day-to-day struggle resonated with these participants; by failing to depict “real life,” the working-class’ collective voice continues to be marginalized.

This final research question asked how audiences use the understanding of working-class families they glean from television to make sense of class in broader culture and their own class positions. Although participants could clearly provide both socioeconomic and cultural descriptions of what it meant to belong to the working-class, they often used the term interchangeably with “middle-class,” an ideologically important conflation of terms in contemporary American culture. While “working-class” identification may carry stigma (see Garcia, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 2007), the middle-class is at the forefront of current political and cultural rhetoric. Thus, including the working-class as members of the middle-class may help viewers position working-class struggles as significant.

Moreover, it is clear that television viewers draw connections between the representations on television and how class belonging manifests in their own lives; participants provided numerous examples of the ways working-class television characters and personalities were like themselves or others that they knew. While they acknowledged that working-class representation is perhaps less desirable because it may be too similar to working-class viewers’ financial situations, their comments regarding
the “real life” struggles of many viewers point to the notion that working-class struggles may be more easily justified within neoliberal culture when they are not adequately represented in television texts.

**Conclusion**

At the end of 2014, the median income in 81 percent of America’s counties was lower than it was 15 years ago (Cameron & Mellnik, 2014). Globalization and technological innovation have greatly reduced the availability of manual labor jobs primarily occupied by working-class men. In fact, “The more ‘blue collar’ you are, the more likely you are to be unemployed” (Snyder, 2012, para. 7), suggesting a dearth of low-skill and labor intensive jobs. Working-class women, on the other hand, have seen increased employment opportunities in the booming service sector. Yet, many of these industries (e.g., domestic work, homecare work, nursing, etc.) are included in the deunionized 88 percent of American workers, which means working-class women’s labor “continue[s] to be undervalued, virtually unregulated, and precarious” (Jaffe, 2013, para. 4). Middle-class aspirations and upward economic mobility seem unlikely for workers who are, at best, underpaid, and, at worst, unemployable.

This desire for upward mobility into the middle-class is rooted in the myth of the American Dream, which, as Weber (2011) concludes, has functioned as a code to talk about class in the United States. The narrative of middle-class achievement represents an aspirational fantasy of the everyman, “a common man invested in living comfortably and non-ostentatiously within the middle class” (p. 160). Echoing McNamee and Miller (2009), Weber points out that the trappings of middle-class belonging over the last several decades have been denoted by “college education, home-ownership (and
mortgages), heteronormative families, and an expression of taste and deportment that constitute the bourgeois” (p. 160). Membership in the middle-class within the context of the American Dream, then, is intertwined with both consumption and cultural capital; middle-class achievement is symbolically expressed through the things now afforded to individuals who have realized the American Dream and become upwardly mobile.

Upward class mobility is not a reality for many Americans; Edna (2012) notes that “it is not always easy for children born into poverty to move up the economic ladder. Rich people, more often than not, remain rich, and poor people, more often than not, remain poor” (para. 2). Yet sociological surveys indicate that endorsement of the American Dream remains strong, even in spite the 2008 economic downturn and widening gap in income distribution. In a recent Washington Post-Miller Center poll, 61% of respondents reported that the term “American Dream” still held real meaning to them personally, and a vast majority (68%) indicated that they believed they would be rewarded for hard work (“Washington Post-Miller Center poll,” 2013). Even the majority of jobless Americans (56%) believe that they have already achieved the American Dream, or that it is still within reach (Bradford, 2012). Fallows (2013) suggests that retaining a belief in the American Dream and the possibility of a thriving middle-class is positive for our society, even in the face of increased inequality of resources and opportunities; while it may make it more difficult to discuss those inequalities, he argues that elements of middle-class identity, such as the hope that personal economic goals are still within reach, have positive cultural implications.

As a framework for how we read class in contemporary society, the American Dream is a myth contextualized around meritocracy, which positions all citizens on equal
footing and ensures that those who work hard will achieve class mobility. The cultural tide of neoliberal economic and political policies has necessarily made the reality of how citizens realize that dream more complex. Specifically, neoliberalism has ratified the individualistic commitments of the American Dream myth, while simultaneously forwarding policies, such as cuts to social programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Dean & Rosenbaum, 2013) and Medicaid (Hopkins, 2015), that makes realizing that dream more difficult for low-income Americans who struggle to meet their day-to-day needs.

Perhaps, though, there is no longer a “middle-class” belonging to which to aspire; as Meyerson (2013) points out, “The middle has fallen out of the American economy—precipitously since 2008, but it’s been falling out slowly and cumulatively for the past 40 years” (para. 8). As the income gap between the richest and poorest Americans becomes wider, it is possible that the demarcations between working- and middle-class have become insignificant. For the majority of the interviewee groups in this project, working- and middle-class identities were virtually synonymous; participants either overtly stated that the two terms were analogous, or used both terms to describe the same televisual representations. Participants were able to use both socioeconomic and cultural markers of class and taste to clearly differentiate between the working-class families analyzed in this project’s textual analysis and families that might typically be referred to as middle- or upper-middle-class (e.g., The Cosby Show, Home Improvement, Modern Family); however, they often used the terms “rich” and “wealthy” to describe these families, making a similar class belonging seem unattainable.
For those individuals I interviewed who conflated working- and middle-class belonging, contemporary political rhetoric that invokes an improved quality of life for the “middle-class” is understood to be addressing the working-class as well. In fact, President Barack Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address seemed to speak directly to working-class individuals who aspired to middle-class belonging; in what he dubbed “middle class economics,” President Obama promised policies that would “[help] working families feel more secure in a world of constant change. It means helping folks afford childcare, college, health care, a home, retirement” (Ydstie, 2015, para. 2), all issues of concern for both working- and middle-class Americans in contemporary culture.

President Obama’s policies seem contradictory to the neoliberal culture that deemphasizes governmental support and places paramount importance on competition, individualized hard work, and the rule of the free market. As evidenced in Chapter Four, the domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality series examined in this project do, in fact, place the working-class families within the context of neoliberalism, providing rationale for the families’ failure to be upwardly mobile, with the exception of *Duck Dynasty*’s Robertson family. The participants in my interviews expressed a tension between their endorsement of the cultural tenets of neoliberalism and their ability to transcend their own economic hardships; while they valued hard work, privatization, and thought individuals should exercise prudent decision-making, many participants also empathized and identified with working-class families who struggled financially. Yet, because neoliberalism places the onus of upward mobility on the individual and ignores structural challenges that those individuals might face, a failure of working-class families on television to play by the rules of neoliberalism necessarily means so, too, are working-
class viewers the “authors of [their] own misfortune” (Rose, 1996, p. 59) if they also struggle to be upwardly mobile. Finally, other participants suggested that they would rather not see their own struggles reflected on television, instead choosing to escape into a fantasy of upward class mobility as reflected in television’s middle- and upper-class families.

In Chapter Six, I conclude by offering a final summary of this study’s findings, and I draw further connections between the textual analysis and audience study, illuminating the benefit of using both methods in conjunction with one another to develop a holistic understanding of the role of television in shaping and circulating culture. I then provide both theoretical contributions and practical implications of the project within the current economic and political climate. Finally, I discuss the conceptual and methodological limitations of this project, as well as directions for future research.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the fall 2012 season, the A.V. Club’s Todd VanDerWerff discussed the dearth of working-class sitcoms across the current television landscape. He argued that, while the genre had been a staple in building early network schedules, TV comedies were now populated with characters who are either economically secure or whose narratives largely ignore issues of economic struggle. VanDerWerff attributes this, at least partially, to the fact that many of today’s sitcom writers were influenced by programs such as Frasier, Friends, and Seinfeld, which were “all on NBC, a network that specifically targeted young, white, urban professionals living in a time when the American economy seemed to be expanding well out into eternity” (para. 10). During the 1990s when economic prosperity reigned, narratives about financially successful characters were reflective of many Americans’ financial positions; although economic hardship certainly was a reality for a segment of the country’s population, the overarching cultural narrative was one of broad-reaching economic success.

Conversely, contemporary reality television is awash with blue-collar representation. In a 2013 article, Scott Von Doviak, also a television critic for the A.V. Club, detailed the rise of “redneck reality,” a genre of reality programming which he notes has begun to serve as a replacement for working-class sitcoms. Von Doviak suggests that, “While the networks have no room for rural, working-class Southerners (or rural working-class anyone, really), cable outlets like Discovery, TLC, and History are more than happy to pick up the slack—if not with scripted programming, then with reality shows” (para. 7). He further points out that redneck reality programs, including Duck Dynasty, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, Moonshiners, and Swamp People, among
others, allow rural, working-class audiences to see a bit of themselves depicted on television, and “redneck reality is more apt to acknowledge the social and economic ills of the subcultures it depicts” (para. 10). Thus, although working-class portrayals are increasingly limited in scripted comedies, these specific representations have permeated the reality television landscape in recent years, giving viewers a glimpse into the “real life” of a particular subculture of rural, working-class Americans.

Struck by these two popular press pieces, this project was borne from the desire to not only explore working-class representation on contemporary television, but also to uncover what is meant by “the working-class” in the contemporary television landscape. Parker’s (1974) assertion that class is both understudied and misunderstood, despite its resonance in structuring virtually every element of our day-to-day existence, is as relevant in contemporary American culture as it was in the 1970s, as evidenced by the way that “working-class” is spoken about in modern society. That is, in a society in which an equal number of Americans self-identify as working- and middle-class (Krugman, 2014), politicians still consistently espouse policy rhetoric that offers plans to increase the quality of life for the middle-class, while the term “working-class” has all but disappeared from our cultural landscape. Even so, the income gap between the richest and poorest Americans continues to grow (Matthews, 2014), and those who self-identify as middle-class increasingly face economic setbacks, such as loss in retirement savings (Stanley, 2013) and continual threat to government programs like social security (Palmer, 2009). These realities suggest that more families are struggling economically, and the term “middle-class” fails to capture the experience of modern Americans as it did when
the term gained prominence in the post-WWII economic boom of the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Mills, 1951).

While my specific research questions investigated the role of television in shaping and circulating ideas about working-class identity in contemporary society, this project was also framed by several broader questions regarding the importance of understanding class belonging in this particular cultural moment. Given the relative erasure of the working-class in political rhetoric, I wanted to explore how popular media represented working-class identity, and how average television viewers articulate this identity. Secondly, I wanted to consider class as a complex concept that is structured by economics, culture, gender, and race in an attempt to move away from reductionist notions of class as simply socioeconomic. Lastly, I hoped to explore the relationship between class and neoliberalism; as I established in Chapter Two, neoliberal philosophy is at once economic, political, and cultural, and the endorsement of neoliberal tenets necessarily influences the understanding of class belonging in contemporary American culture.

Guided by these overarching questions, I first examined contemporary television’s representation of the working-class, and then investigated the ways audiences of the specific programs I examined in my textual analysis – *The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *Duck Dynasty* – understood working-class identity through their viewership of these and other television programs. In what follows, I first summarize the findings from my research questions in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, and then place the textual analysis and audience studies findings in conversation with one another to articulate the discourses surrounding working-class identity in contemporary American culture.
television. Next, I articulate the theoretical and practical contributions of this project, and then address the limitations of both phases of the study. Finally, I provide suggestions for continued research and offer concluding thoughts in which I maintain the importance of using television as a way to investigate the ideological construction of the American working-class.

Representation of Contemporary Television’s Working-Class

This study explored the role contemporary domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs play in shaping discursive meanings about the working-class in modern American culture. To investigate the representations of working-class characters on television, I first conducted a textual analysis of two domestic sitcoms, *The Middle* and *Raising Hope*, and two “redneck” reality programs, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*, that was guided by four research questions. Given the nebulous nature of class belonging in contemporary American culture, my first research question asked:

**RQ1: What meanings about working-class identity are coded in representations on working-class, rural domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs?**

I argue that while socioeconomic indicators such as occupation, income, and educational attainment certainly structure working-class belonging, these series reflect the ways objective measures fail to capture the complexity of class. Following Boudieu’s (1984) understanding of class as consisting of both economic and cultural capital, I maintain that working-class identity in domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs is inscribed through a number of cultural markers, including *mise-en-scene*, arts, leisure and food, and linguistics. Taken together, these cultural indicators suggest that class is represented on
television as a matter of taste and consumption; although *The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* portray congruity between the families’ economic and cultural capital, the Robertsons’ working-class cultural ethos in *Duck Dynasty*’s belies their economic affluence. This indicates that that working-class identity is a performance, and that cultural markers of working-class taste can be more significant than economic factors when considering how to label one’s class belonging. Indeed, including *Duck Dynasty* as an example of reality television’s “blue collar boom” as have many popular press critics (e.g., Deggans, 2013; James, 2013) only makes sense if cultural capital is weighed more heavily than economic capital in their evaluation of the Robertsons’ class position.

This notion of consumption as a hallmark of neoliberal citizenship leads to my second research question, which asked:

**RQ2: How do characters in working-class domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality shows apply the rules of neoliberal citizenship to their lives?**

In a capitalist culture in which consumption is valued, the working-class are presented with a double bind; if they fail to consume or aspire to consume high-brow items (e.g., clothing, automobiles, home décor, arts and leisure, etc.) that indicate “good” taste, they are marked culturally as having poor or no taste, further inscribing their working-class identity. On the other hand, poor and working-class families who consume “luxury” items and still struggle to make ends meet are vilified as poor decision makers who, if they receive government assistance, are abusing government programs (e.g., Rector & Sheffield, 2011; Schechter, 2011).
Portraying the working-class as risky decision-makers is one way the relationship between class and neoliberal ideology manifests in contemporary culture, and my textual analysis sought to examine this relationship further by investigating working-class representation and the enactment of the cultural “rules” of neoliberalism. Originally an economic philosophy that relied on the free market and private citizens rather than the government to generate economic growth and promote social welfare, neoliberalism has become the hegemonic ideal for how to organize every dimension of social life (Ouellette, 2008). In other words, citizens in contemporary American culture may be judged by how well they perform as individualized, self-disciplining, personally responsible, freely choosing subjects (Rose, 1996). This philosophy has clear implications for the working-class, who are viewed as responsible for their economic shortcomings and thus personally accountable for their inability to become upwardly mobile. The representation of working-class families in the domestic sitcoms and “redneck” reality programs in this study provides mediated exemplars of working-class failure; overwhelmingly, the characters and personalities in *The Middle, Raising Hope,* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are presented as individuals who make not only economically risky decisions, but also poor decisions related to sexual partners and child rearing. The Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* are not immune to being portrayed as making risky financial decisions, but because they are economically successful, those decisions do not carry the same punitive consequences as those experienced by the Hecks, the Chances, and the Shannon-Thompsons. For example, the Hecks’ financial irresponsibility in *The Middle* is underscored by Frankie and Mike’s decision to purchase a VCR with no-interest financing, while Willie Robertson purchases a vineyard without experience in
the wine industry. Thus, while the economically struggling working-class take advantage of financing programs that aid their ability to consume and are represented as foolish, affluence grants others the ability to consume as they see fit, regardless of the risk. Business Insider’s recent list of “The Coolest Things Bought By Rich People This Year,” including everything from extravagant homes to exotic animals (Zeveloff, Galante, & Polland, 2012), undergirds this notion: risky financial decisions are only condemnable if one has not already succeeded under the rules of neoliberal risk avoidance.

Neoliberal rules also extend into the representation of individualization, hard work, and self-improvement, and the willingness to engage in the competitive labor marketplace. My textual analysis revealed that in these working-class representations, hard work is celebrated as a personal achievement, while those who sought to reap economic rewards without the necessary work investment were represented poorly. This representation perpetuates the American Dream myth, which DuRand (2013) argues is obsolete under the conditions of the neoliberal global marketplace. Until the 1970s, when neoliberal policies began to permeate the national economic and political landscape, rising wages made financial success, no matter your economic origin, a possibility. However, neoliberal policies, such as deregulation and free trade agreements, outsourced many jobs previously occupied by the working-class. Thus, the continued insistence that hard work and perseverance will lead to upward mobility fails to account for the structural obstacles that prevent the working-class from realizing this success.

The representations of the rural, working-class communities in The Middle, Raising Hope, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, and Duck Dynasty also reflect the neoliberal notion that privatization of public services will make society function more efficiently;
these programs indicate that public services often fail to perform their intended functions, and, in a neoliberal climate, charitable giving should be the responsibility of willing private citizens, not the safety net of the governmental welfare state. Yet, the endorsement of this particular value may have detrimental consequences for rural communities. In the current post-recession climate, Chinni (2014) maintains that local, state, and federal governments invest in rural communities because they have to, yet “the private sector has no such mandate. Private companies see rural communities that are aging, with lower education levels and that are very spread out. There may not be much reason for those companies to invest in those places” (para. 14). Thus, the support of policies and philosophies that value the privatization of public services works against the best interests of rural, working-class communities seeking economic prosperity.

My third and fourth research questions considered how performances of gender and rural Whiteness framed the representation of neoliberal citizenship of working-class characters. These questions asked:

RQ3: In what ways do the working-class characters’ performances of neoliberal citizenship in domestic sitcoms and “redneck reality” differ along lines of gender?

RQ4: What is the relationship between the characters’ performances of neoliberal citizenship and rural, working-class Whiteness?

For the working-class characters in this analysis, neoliberalism manifests in gender normative ways. Manual labor jobs occupied by the characters are gendered in a traditional way (e.g., women are housecleaners and men work in lawn care and mining), domestic duties in the home are still unevenly the responsibility of women, and working-
class women are employed in nonunionized industries that restrict their ability to
collective bargain and improve their pay and working conditions. Thus, in a postfeminist
and neoliberal cultural milieu of individualism, the collectivity of class and feminist
politics are erased, and working-class individuals are supposed to succeed on their own.
Moreover, working-class women in these series often fail to adhere to the rules of the
disciplined femininity required for their neoliberal citizenship; their bodies can be unruly
sites of excess and tasteless styling, simultaneously serving as a subversive rejection of
normative beauty and a justification for their working-class belonging.

Moreover, the representation in these texts suggests that Whiteness is not a
monolithic category of identity, but is fractured along lines of class belonging and
regional identity. Neoliberal beliefs shape the representation of “White trash, “ who have
not played by the rules of “hard work” set forth by neoliberalism, and the Midwestern
heartland’s nuclear family, whose pastoral ordinariness is the centerpiece around which
neoliberalism is built (Duggan, 2013). For Southern White “rednecks” who align more
closely with the “White trash” label (e.g., the Shannon-Thompsons of Here Comes Honey
Boo Boo), the disavowal of neoliberalism’s tenets offers a way to justify working-class
Whiteness, but the “redneck” Robertsons of Duck Dynasty serve as an exemplar of how
cultural working-class Whiteness and neoliberal rule following can be congruous.
Through hard work, individualization, and participation in the competitive free market,
the family has been an entrepreneurial, neoliberal success story.

The Robertsons of Duck Dynasty stand in contrast to the rest of the families
examined in the textual analysis portion of this research. They provide evidence that one
can “come from nothing” and, with hard work and willingness to embrace the ideals of
free market capitalism, have the ability to be financially successful while retaining their claim to rural, working-class culture. When compared to the Hecks, Chances, and Shannon-Thompsons, who are portrayed as unwilling or unable to fully embrace the rules of neoliberalism, the Robertson family is a model of success, suggesting that upward mobility is a matter of personal responsibility and free choice. This, in turn, makes class belonging a matter of choice and positions those who fail to succeed as “the author[s] of [their] own misfortune” (Rose, 1996, p. 59). In other words, if the Hecks, Chances, or Shannon-Thompsons only chose to do so, they could transcend their working-class belonging and become upwardly mobile. Labeling the Robertsons as “blue collar,” both in the popular press and through their performance of rural working-class culture, reinforces the notion that class is a choice, and dismisses many of the structural inequalities and lack of resources economically working-class families face.

Textual analysis alone, though, falls short of capturing the role television plays in shaping contemporary discourses about social class. Following the textual portion of this study, I conducted seven focus group interviews with 28 viewers of each of the four programs to understand how they used working-class representation on television to make sense of working-class identity generally, as well as class in their own lives. This portion of the study was guided by three research questions, which asked:

**RQ5: How do audiences understand the relationship between neoliberalism and class belonging on television?**

**RQ6: How is audience understanding of working-class families shaped by the representation of the intersecting identity categories of Whiteness, rural belonging, and gender?**
RQ7: How do audiences use the understanding of working-class families they glean from television to make sense of class in broader culture and their own class positions?

The first research question revealed that 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. However, they did articulate a deviation from the profit-driven success emphasized by neoliberalism, suggesting that personal connections with one’s family and community were just as important when labeling someone as “successful.” Although it is an overstatement to conclude that they rejected this neoliberal “rule,” particularly given their endorsement of the hard work and individual achievement ethos, it does offer an interesting deviation from the idea that the result for hard work is necessarily a monetary reward.

Discussions about television’s gender depictions were relatively limited. Many of their comments reflected traditional gender norms: a male breadwinner and a household division of labor that unevenly burdened working-class women. While some participants spoke about this in frustrated terms (e.g., women who compared their “overwhelmed” and “frazzled” lives to working-class female characters), they did not articulate that these representations could or should be any different. Thus, these depictions have become so naturalized on television that viewers found them unremarkable.

Whiteness is often rendered invisible, both in televisual representation and broader culture, but is brought to the forefront through its intersection with working-class
identity. Through the “White trash” label, participants differentiated the Shannon-Thompsons in particular from normative standards of middle-class White decorum. Participants neglected to identify Whiteness as an overt marker of identity for the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty*, instead using the term “redneck” to stand in for the intersection between Whiteness and working-class belonging. According to my participants, the Robertsons navigate a precarious line in their “redneck” performance; if they are too forthcoming with their affluence and participation in high-brow leisure, their “redneck” authenticity is called into question. Indeed, both “redneck” and “White trash” identities seemed to be understood as performative, predicated on how the Robertson and Shannon-Thompson families, respectively, behaved in their world. Yet, while both terms have pejorative roots, “redneck” certainly carries more positive valence for participants than “White trash,” further underscoring the notion that “redneck” identity has been recouped as a desirable identity for a particular segment of the rural, working-class.

Participants did use the representations of working-class characters as comparisons to individuals they knew in their lives, and often times, they drew comparisons to their own lives. Participants derided working-class characters on television for their failure to appropriately apply the rules of neoliberal self-governance, while simultaneously drawing comparisons between themselves and the characters in terms of class belonging (e.g., cultural and economic capital). While this might indicate a lack of self-reflexivity on the part of the participants, given their general propensity to espouse ideologies consistent with neoliberal philosophy, the participants may be distancing themselves from the perception that they would qualify or need government programs associated with working-class individuals who struggle economically.
Overall, despite reporting that they watched the shows analyzed in Chapter Four in relatively equal numbers, participants in the focus groups were more evaluative of reality television personalities’ class positions than that of the fictionalized depictions in sitcoms. It is possible that even individuals who did not watch *Duck Dynasty* or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* felt as if they “knew” these personalities, given their pervasive presence in the popular press; as Gray (2010) notes, paratexts, or the texts that surround the text proper and help create meaning, “hold considerable power to direct our initial interpretations, telling us what to expect and establishing genre, gender, style, attitude, and characterization” (p. 79). The popular press coverage of both of these families acts as “entryway paratexts,” giving audiences information about how these families could be interpreted before they view the actual texts. Thus, because these characters are “real” and more in the news, viewers might not need to watch the shows to comment on their class positions.

Taken together, the textual analysis and audience study illuminate the ways that mediated representation works to shape discourse about the working-class in contemporary culture. Although this study did not seek to explicitly categorize audience positions within Hall’s (1993) framework of dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings, my work does point to the ways audience readings are influenced by pervasive cultural discourses. Tenets of neoliberalism are hegemonically rooted in our culture, as are the closely related upward mobility myths of meritocracy and the American Dream; thus, it is unsurprising that, in the textual analysis I conducted, working-class belonging was often justified as a failure of personal responsibility, and that, in the audience study, these sentiments were echoed by participants. Conducting
both a textual analysis and an audience study of viewers revealed that neoliberal discourses are present in the representation of working-class characters, and are employed when audiences speak about those characters. My textual analysis revealed that the encoding of working-class programs is driven by the dominant discourse of neoliberalism; rather than question the impact these portrayals have on societal understanding of the working-class, participants predominantly read the texts in line with the dominant-hegemonic position. However, they did critique the notion that success is necessarily synonymous with economic capital, providing an alternative reading of success as personal and relational fulfillment. It is possible that their identification with working-class characters influenced this reading as a way to recoup their status within a neoliberal climate; if participants were not economically successful, redefining success allowed them to take pride.

Moreover, the relationship between the text and audience studies reveals a tension between holding the televisual working-class responsible for their failure to be upwardly mobile and participants’ own identification with many of the characters in the study. As stated above, participants evoked a number of neoliberal tenets when evaluating working-class characters’ class belonging (e.g., failure to avoid risk, unwillingness to work hard), and, during other portions of the interview, identified so readily with the characters that they concluded, “That is my family.” Although I did not ask participants to self-identify as working- or middle-class, such close identification with the families in the textual analysis would indicate that many of them feel they are, indeed, working-class. If this is the case, it follows that participants’ own working-class belonging is of their own making. However, given participants’ alternative reading of “success” as personal
contentment and the importance of family, financial upward mobility may be a less significant goal for them.

**Scholarly Contributions and Practical Implications**

Class belonging is, indeed, a complex notion; using socioeconomic measures to demarcate individuals into categories such as middle-class, working-class, and poor is reductionist and fails to capture that complexity. To understand class, scholars must explore economics, politics, and culture, and the ways each of these compounds with working-class individuals’ intersecting identity categories. Mediated representations of working-class identity offer one avenue through which class can be understood, and my research provides a number of theoretical contributions to television studies of identity and practical implications for the study of working-class belonging.

Theoretical examinations of working-class belonging are limited, but a number of scholars have explored how this identity group is represented in popular media. I drew from these scholars’ previous work in conceptualizing my study, and hoped to extend scholarly understanding of the working-class in today’s media climate. Butsch’s (2002, 2005) analyses have primarily pointed to the lack of working-class portrayals in television sitcoms, especially when compared to the proportion of working-class people in the United States population. Indeed, working-class representation continues to be limited in the domestic sitcom genre. Butsch’s work also concludes that working-class portrayals in the sitcom format reinscribe traditional gender roles; this project extends that finding to working-class representations in “redneck” reality programming, suggesting that gender role normativity is a feature of working-class portrayals on a broader scale.
Further, Leistyna (2009) has suggested working-class representation has been historically both negative and stereotypical; he concludes that these individuals are primarily depicted as lazy, apolitical, and anti-intellectual, and, as a result, their economic failures are attributed to their personal failures. This project reiterates Leistyna’s argument that the working-class is primarily depicted negatively, and extends his analysis to provide context for this representation. That is, framing working-class portrayals in the cultural context of neoliberalism not only gives further rationale for why they are represented in this way in contemporary television, but it also suggests the ways that hegemonic beliefs about neoliberal ideology may be harmful to our perception of the working-class in broader society.

This project contributes to the scholarly conversation regarding audiences and identity. Specifically, it offers an extension to Press’ (1991) conclusion that class identity influences how viewers read the realism of middle- and working-class characters, in which she specifically notes that working-class women identified middle-class portrayals as more “real” despite the fact that these representations did not reflect their own realities. She further maintains that television operates through a “class-specific” hegemony, which suggests that “working-class women are particularly vulnerable to television’s presentation of the material accouterments of middle-class life as the definition of what is normal in our society” (p. 138). In my study, I found that many of my participants evaluated working-class portrayals as similar to their own lives. This finding reflects the idea that viewers do perceive working-class portrayals as “real.” Moreover, while some participants idealized the material benefits of affluent reality program personalities, these consumption patterns were not universally lauded. Instead,
participants spoke about these displays of wealth as “unrealistic” in “real life,” suggesting that these portrayals are not necessarily something to which to aspire. Although the neoliberal culture values material consumption, my participants indicated that there were limits on the ways that wealth should be conspicuously displayed.

This research also points to a number of practical implications. While working-class narratives on television are declining, fewer Americans are self-identifying as middle-class. Krugman (2014) cites a 2013 Pew survey that reveals that close to 47 percent of Americans now call themselves “lower-middle” or “lower” class. He notes that the changing trends in self-identification mean that public policies (e.g., social programs) that have previously been associated with the “poor” may now be more palatable to “average” (i.e., those who previously identified as middle-class) Americans:

The whole politics of poverty since the 70s has rested on the popular belief that the poor are Those People, not like us hard-working real Americans. This belief has been out of touch with reality for decades — but only now does reality seem to be breaking in. But what it means now is that conservatives claiming that character defects are the source of poverty, and that poverty programs are bad because they make life too easy, are now talking to an audience with large numbers of Not Those People who realize that they are among those who sometimes need help from the safety net. (para. 3)

As Krugman points out, the neoliberal tendency to blame an individual’s “character defects” for his or her class position is being problematized in the current cultural moment. However, in this study I argue that contemporary mediated representations and

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2 Pew does not have a “working-class” designation.
the audiences who view them still largely depict the working-class as subjects who have failed to play by the rules of neoliberalism and free market capitalism. Thus, one theoretical contribution of this research is an illustration of the dissonance between contemporary representations of the working-class, and the changing perception of the working-class in broader culture.

While neoliberalism’s pervasive cultural influence structures the representation and reception of these working-class texts, the audience members in my study did resist a full endorsement of the neoliberal tenet that equates individual success with profit. Although a number of participants mentioned that the most successful characters in programs were those who made money and could thus be exemplary consumers, others offered an alternative reading that turned the focus of success toward personal happiness and close family ties. Within a capitalist economy driven by citizens-as-consumers, this conceptualization of success, though likely not completely independent of consumption, is a subversive way to live in a neoliberal climate.

In addition to the theoretical contributions of working-class representation on television, this research points to a number of practical implications that may be derived from both increasing the number of working-class characters and personalities on television, as well as presenting them in a more nuanced way than they are currently depicted. While the television landscape that has been historically populated by White, middle-class characters, the tide is beginning to turn as networks have recently started to court minority populations through minority representation. Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation’s (GLAAD) annual report found that LGBT representation on television has continued to increase since the organization began tracking progress in
Moreover, Black representation on programs such as *Scandal* and *Empire* has translated to enormous ratings among African-American women; in fact, 71 percent of all African-American women between the ages of 18 and 49 who were watching television during *Empire’s* time slot for its March 11th, 2015 episode were watching the program (Adalian & Woocher, 2015). As television representation begins to more accurately reflect the American population, an increase in socioeconomic diversity would add further complexity to the television landscape.

However, television is a capitalistic industry. LGBT audiences, who are often reported to have a disproportionate amount of disposable income (e.g., Becker, 2006), and middle-class Black audiences fit within the economic goals of the television industry to encourage consumption through its advertising partnerships with media content. As Butsch (2005) argues, producers and networks may see little financial benefit in authentically representing working-class characters who cannot realistically consume the large-ticket products (e.g., automobiles, electronics) that they wish to advertise. Although some of my participants did suggest that they used television as entertainment to escape from their own economic struggles, others lauded working-class programs, like *The Middle*, because of the realistic ways these programs replicated their own experiences. Indeed, television ratings play a significant role in determining advertising partnerships; if more viewers seek out programs with which they can identify, networks have an economic incentive to create series with working-class characters, even if, as Paulson and O’Guinn (2012) note, the advertisements targeted toward the working-class feature ordinary household goods rather than luxury items.
Finally, an increase in the number of working-class characters stops short of helping change discourse about working-class members of American society. Leistyna (2009) asserts that working-class characters have overwhelmingly been cast as lazy, anti-intellectual, and apolitical, and my research concludes that they, overwhelmingly, fail to play by the “rules” of neoliberalism that foster upward mobility in a society shaped by myths of meritocracy. If, as Mittell (2010) maintains, “representations of identity help define what a culture thinks is normal for a particular group, how behaviors and traits fit into a society’s shared common sense” (p. 306), then it follows that these negative discourses shape how we speak about the working-class in society writ large. Indeed, whether borne by television representations or reinforced by them, stereotypes about the poor and working-class persist in American society to such an extent that scholarship must exist to combat them: working-class individuals are perceived as lazy, despite working longer hours on average at more labor-intensive jobs than their middle-class counterparts (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004); although they are no less committed to their children’s well-being than middle-class individuals (Lareau & Meininger, 2008), they are labeled as inattentive parents; and the working-class is said to devalue education, even though “there simply is no evidence, beyond differences in on-site involvement, that attitudes about the value of education in poor communities differ in any substantial way from those in wealthier communities” (Strauss, 2013, para. 17).

One such reason for these persistent stereotypes may be the limited mediated representations of working-class belonging in terms of racial and gender diversity. The Center for Economic and Policy Research contends that, “the actual working class is still often conflated in media and political discourse with the ‘white working class’” (para. 5).
That is, when the term “working-class” is used, it evokes the image “a retired white factory worker living in a swing state, while low-income people of color, single mothers, and others who don’t fit the conventional paradigm of the working class are more typically described as poor or lower class” (para. 5). Indeed, the texts chosen for analysis in this study were selected because they are among the few mediated representations of working-class identity on contemporary television. With the exception of the Shannon-Thompsons of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo who portray a blended-family with children by several different fathers, The Middle, Raising Hope, and Duck Dynasty are all representative of the White, heteronormative working-class family cited in the Center for Economic Policy Research’s report. Representation that transcends this limited view of the working-class experience will allow a reimagination of media and politics’ popular conceptualization of the working-class as always imagined White.

Narratives that show the complete range of the lives of working-class individuals – both positive and negative – may help create a richer representation of the working-class experience in modern American culture. Though idealistic, these more nuanced portrayals may change the course of the persistent stereotypes mentioned above, and may propel discussions about the working-class struggle to relevancy in political rhetoric; the idea that the working poor are personally responsible for their economic struggles is beginning to dismantle (Krugman, 2014), which provides support for the notion that Americans are increasingly willing to speak about class consciousness in our society. If more diverse representation prompts support for social programs that create an even playing field and, ultimately, better quality of life for working-class individuals, it will increase the economic security of our country as a whole.
Limitations

This study was not without limitations, both in overall conceptualization of the project and the execution of each phase of the study. First, although they are clearly distinct, my conceptualization of the project tied “rural identity” and “Whiteness” together in a way that made them seem interchangeable. Driven by “redneck” as a term marked by both ruralness and working-class Whiteness, these identity markers became conflated in both my textual analysis and audience study, which did not allow me to talk about them separately when one took precedence over the other. For example, in both the textual and audience studies *The Middle*’s Heck family and the Orson, Indiana setting is much more marked by rural belonging, and Whiteness is rendered mostly invisible. For the Chances of *Raising Hope*, on the other hand, “White trash” ethos is the paramount way they are represented and read by audiences. Similarly, though each of the families examined in the study lives in rural locations, previous literature suggests regional identity influences the ways that working-class identity manifests; the term “redneck” is, for the most part, a regionally specific term to describe Southern working-class Whites (Eastman & Schrock, 2008), while Midwestern ruralness is imaged as pastoral (Johnson, 2008). Thus, though my research revealed that there are certainly commonalities between rural Southernness and Midwestern identity, these spatial locations are not interchangeable.

The conceptualization of my project as “phases” also resulted in limitations. I conducted all of my focus group interviews after I had completed viewing the series used in the textual analysis. I perceived that this completing my textual analysis first would allow me to become familiar with the texts, which would help me refine my focus group
interview protocol and strengthen the follow-up questions I asked in the interviews. While I did have greater mastery of the series’ content to ask probing questions during my interviews, my questions were guided by the analysis I had already conducted. If I had performed the textual analysis and conducted the focus groups concurrently, it is possible that this more fluid exchange would have brought up topics of conversation that I had not considered, as well as prompted me to read the television series from alternative angles as suggested by my participants.

Two final conceptual limitations existed in how I recruited and labeled the individuals in my focus group interviews. First, the methodological choice to conduct focus groups was predicated on Lunt and Livingstone’s (1996) notion that focus groups act as “a simulation of those routine but relatively inaccessible communicative contexts that can help us discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk” (p. 85). Thus, I hoped to uncover the ways meaning about class identity was socially negotiated as participants reached agreement and expressed dissent about the shows they watched. In a vast majority of the conversations, however, participants seemed to echo one another’s comments about class meanings; even during a discussion in one group about how desirable the leisurely life of the Kardashian family seemed, one dissenting member’s comment about hard work’s necessity in economic success led the other members of the group to reach agreement with him. This may suggest that neoliberal values are hegemonic in our culture, but it is equally likely that participants’ familiarity with one another meant that they had already reached consensus on many of the topics we discussed.
Secondly, the choice to not ask participants to identify their class belonging, and my resistance to classify them as working- or middle-class in my analysis was a conceptual limitation of my study. This choice was both theoretical and practical; given that one of my primary goals in this project was to establish class as a complex concept that considers both economic and cultural capital, I did not think that I could adequately capture participants’ class belonging without a much more detailed investigation into their cultural capital. That is, while a number of my participants had earned master’s degrees and were employed in professional careers, I did not feel comfortable labeling them as middle-class without knowledge about the culture of their daily lives because socioeconomic markers alone fail to create a holistic picture of their class belonging.

From a practical perspective, individuals apply different criteria when it comes to choosing to identify as working- or middle-class, including their income compared to their peers, lifestyle, and aspirations (Rampell, 2012; Stevenson, 2012). Given that these criteria are not applied universally, it would have been difficult to know that one participant’s definition of middle- or working-class was comparable to another’s. However, asking participants to identify as either working- or middle-class would have given greater context to their comments about working- and middle-class characters. For example, as participants discussed the lack of financially struggling families on television, knowing whether those participants identified as working- or middle-class would have allowed me to delve deeper into their ability to relate to working-class characters. My failure to ask for self-identification or label them is a limitation in this regard.
I also experienced limitations related to the execution of my research. The first difficulty existed in drawing connections between scripted, domestic sitcoms and reality “redneck” programs to make a holistic statement about working-class representation on contemporary television. Although their representations are certainly mediated, the families in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty* are “real,” which influences the reading of that representation. For instance, in my textual analysis I struggled to draw comparisons between the mise-en-scene in *The Middle* and *Raising Hope*, which was selected by the set and costume designers for each series, and the mise-en-scene in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*, in which the personalities are ostensibly living in their own homes and wearing their own clothing. Although in both cases setting and costuming connote working-class belonging, it is possible that the reality of the Shannon-Thompson and Robertson families’ presentation makes their class belonging seem more “real” than in the scripted series.

Secondly, while my ultimate goal was not to make generalized claims about the portrayal of working-class identity on television writ large, my project is limited to portrayals of the rural, working-class and is not reflective of suburban or urban representation. This limitation speaks to both the dearth of suburban and urban working-class representation in domestic sitcoms, as well as my specific interest in “redneck” identity, which is defined through its ruralness. Demographic and economic data suggest a growing divide between rural and urban populations along a variety of measures, including post-recession unemployment recovery, age, and educational attainment, with urban communities experiencing greater job growth and attracting a younger, more highly educated workforce (Chinni, 2014). Given that many of the socioeconomic
measures that drive class belonging differ among urban and rural populations, exploring how class is represented in urban texts and understood by urban audiences would further illuminate the ways that working-class identity functions in contemporary culture. This limitation was driven by both the individuals who responded to my research call, as well by as my lack of convenient access to more urban populations. Further, although the texts examined in this project did not overtly discuss political themes, the difference in political affiliation and voting patterns among urban and rural in the viewing population may influence both the understanding of working-class identity representation and the willingness to support the social programs that benefit working-class individuals.

A similar limitation regarding execution existed in the audience portion of my study, given that my interview participants were exclusively White, and the majority of them identified that they had either grown up or currently lived in a rural area. My recruitment of participants was a convenience sample and was limited by my financial and time resources, but the demographic characteristics could also be a feature of each of these programs’ regular viewers. Although demographic data about audience racial makeup is limited, some advertising firms release information that might indicate the race of the audience. For instance, Geraghty (2013) reported “that red or Republican-leaning counties, particularly rural and Southern, watched the season [two] premiere of Duck Dynasty, while Democratic-leaning counties generally tuned it out” (para. 2). Coupled with Hubb’s (2011) assertion that “redneck” is marked as both working-class and White, it is likely that the vast majority of Duck Dynasty and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo’s audience is White. The Middle and Raising Hope are less conspicuously identified by indicators of Whiteness such as “redneck,” but do feature White families. Zurawik (2007)
notes that reality television has “become common ground among Black and White viewers as producers carefully cast a multi-ethnic crew of contestants” (para. 17), but the same may not be reflected in scripted domestic sitcoms that are racially homogenous.

**Directions for Future Research**

The limitations of the study and working-class representation in other television genres present a number of directions for future research. First, an extension of this project could address the limitation of the lack of regional and racial diversity in the audience study. As I mentioned in the limitation section, this was driven by response to my call, my resources available to travel to other locations, and, potentially the viewership demographics of each of the series. While my participants did vary along a number of demographic characteristics, such as age, educational attainment, and occupation, they were primarily tied to rural regions and were exclusively White. One participant, however, was a University of Missouri college student originally from California; although he mentioned in his interview that his family struggled economically and he may have identified as working-class if asked, a number of his comments, particularly about *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, suggested that he did not relate to the experiences of either the Robertsons or the Shannon-Thompsons. A more purposeful recruiting strategy, then, could diversify the relatively homogenous sample in terms rural belonging and Whiteness, and provide a more nuanced understanding of how viewers perceive rural, working-class identity.

In both my textual analysis of *Duck Dynasty* and in viewers’ discussions about the series, it became apparent that the family’s Christian religious identification was central to the Robertson’s identity. Because I did not anticipate that this identity category would
so strongly shape rural, working-class belonging, the conceptualization of my project did not address religious identification in my analysis of the texts. However, Harkins (2005) contends that Christianity is a prominent feature of the rural, Southern “hillbilly” culture, and the “Protestant work ethic” mythos (Wingard, 2013) dovetails neatly with neoliberal tenets of individualism and hard work. This study reveals that Christianity, particularly as it relates to Southern “redneck” identity, is another identity category through which class is manifest. While a cursory review of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo did not reveal any overtly Christian themes, the prevalence of the “redneck” reality subgenre is a fruitful avenue through which to explore Christianity’s role in establishing rural, working-class identity.

Finally, while the domestic sitcom genre is limited in terms of working-class representation, the reality of economic struggles in the contemporary American climate is featured prominently in some dramas. Both Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008-2013) and Shameless (Showtime, 2011-present) are examples of programs that highlight the economic instability of families in a post-recession economy. Comedies, by definition, are designed to make light of issues, and consequently, few have featured serious discussions about the struggles of the working-class; dramas may provide an avenue through which these conversations can materialize. Moreover, as working-class depictions are increasingly limited in scripted television, their representation is burgeoning in reality television. These are indeed “real” families with a “real” class belonging. Future research, then, should consider how the “realness” of working-class reality television families in a neoliberal climate could potentially lead to more damaging perceptions of the working-class in American society than fictionalized depictions.
Concluding Thoughts

Throughout the past several decades, neoliberal ideology has achieved overarching dominance in American society, and Duggan (2003) maintains that this dominance can be attributed to neoliberalism’s ability to discursively separate economic policy from politics and culture, effectively making neoliberalism immune from political accountability and cultural critique. Because neoliberal economics are understood only through technical terms, she notes “neoliberal policies can be framed as due to performance rather than design, reflecting the greater merit of those reaping larger rewards” (p. x). As a result, neoliberalism justifies class stratification by emphasizing a merit-based distribution of resources.

Yet neoliberalism’s reach does extend beyond economics, and has political and cultural implications for how we understand class in America. As I have argued in this study, both economic resources and the everyday, cultural lived experience structure working-class identity. Not only do working-class individuals in the textual analysis, and participants’ evaluations of them in the audience study, fail to follow the merit-based rules of neoliberalism (e.g., hard work) that would allow them to reap greater economic rewards, their cultural performances of working-class identity are framed as a choice of tastelessness and the inability to perform the cultural expectations of middle-class identity. As Bourdieu (1984) concludes, class habitus is inscribed on individuals and belies the accrual of economic capital. Even if an individual transcends his or her working-class belonging economically, the cultural markers of this identity often remain; as evidenced through the Robertson family of Duck Dynasty, one can endorse the rules of
neoliberalism to become economically successful, while still retaining a working-class cultural identity.

Understanding class performance as a “choice,” however, leads to problematic implications for how citizens understand the working-class in broader society. As I have previously argued, political rhetoric discursively erases the working-class from conversations about economic recovery. While the middle-class is working hard and playing by neoliberalism’s rules, television represents the working-class as not only eschewing these rules, but also reveling in low-brow culture. Analyzing working-class representation through neoliberalism, then, provides an explanatory mechanism for the way that notions of “choice” are embedded in working-class representation. In other words, political strategies that help the working-class achieve upward mobility would be fruitless because of their poor choices, as is often heard in the discourse surrounding welfare reform (e.g., Hays, 2003).

Several theories that attempt to explain or conceptualize the uses of popular entertainment suggest that audiences often use media as a way to escape from their daily lives. So pervasive is this notion that both media effects and cultural studies scholars employ it to investigate media use; Green and Brock (2000) detail the ways viewers can be transported into a narrative world, while Radway (1984) suggests that readers can use media texts to literally remove themselves from the drudgery of their day-to-day lives. Fantasy and escape, then, are a broad appeal of entertainment media, and most often, audiences attempt to flee into a world more desirable than their reality.

From this perspective, the lack of working-class representation on television seems logical. Especially for those viewers who face their own financial hardships,
watching characters struggle to pay bills may do nothing more than remind them of their own circumstances. However, television is a powerful cultural storyteller, and has the ability to shape discourse about class in contemporary society. Viewers come to television narratives with both their own experiences and the hegemonic ideologies pervasive in culture; when working-class representation is guided by neoliberal philosophy and those characters are presented as citizens who have failed to live up to their end of the cultural bargain, the working-class experience is reduced to an individualized matter of free choice. The working-class experience is a tapestry of gender, race, and regional belonging, among other categories of identity, and it deserves an adequately nuanced televisual portrayal.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: TEXT ANALYSIS CODING SHEET (NEOLIBERALISM)

Theoretical tenets and applications of neoliberalism

**Individualism**

1. Personal choice
2. Self-improvement/self-empowerment/aspirational
3. Self-disciplining subjects
4. Elimination of “public good”

**Risk-avoidance/Personal responsibility**

**Private enterprise/capitalist tenets**

1. Focus on free-market as the way to organize life
2. Emphasis on competition
3. Privatization of public services
4. Deregulation
5. Profit-driven competition
6. Consumerism

“Hard work”/meritocracy
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Demographic Questionnaire

Which of the following popular television programs do you watch?

Raising Hope
Never  Sometimes  Often  Always

Duck Dynasty
Never  Sometimes  Often  Always

The Middle
Never  Sometimes  Often  Always

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo
Never  Sometimes  Often  Always

What is your age? _____

What is your sex? (Please circle)
* Female  * Male  * Other

What is your racial identification? (Please circle)
* White/Caucasian  * Black/African-American
* Hispanic/Latino/a  * Asian/Asian-American  * Other

What is your annual household income? (Please circle)
* Less than $25,000/year  * $25,000 - $50,000/year
* $50,000 - $75,000/year  * $75,000 - $125,000/year  * Over $125,000/year

What is your occupation? (If retired, please list previous occupation)
_______________________________________________________

What are/were your parents’ occupations?
Mother/Stepmother ___________  Father/Stepfather ________________
What is the highest level of education you have completed?

* High School  * Some College  * Associate’s Degree

* Bachelor’s Degree  * Master’s Degree

* Professional Degree (J.D., M.D., etc.)  * Ph.D.

How would you classify the town you currently live in?

* Rural  * Suburban  * Urban  * Other (please specify)

How would you classify the town in which you grew up?

* Rural  * Suburban  * Urban  * Other (please specify)
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

General questions about television viewership
What types of television programs do you watch most?

Tell me about your favorite television shows (fictional or reality). What do you like about them?

Tell me about your favorite television characters (fictional or reality). What do you like about them?

Family on television
How would you describe the typical sitcom family? The typical reality family? (Prompt for: family make-up, occupation and lifestyle, gender roles)

What television families are most like yours? Which ones are least like yours? Which ones do you wish were like yours? (Prompt for: family make-up, occupation and lifestyle, gender roles)

Class on television
What fictional television characters would you call “successful”? What reality television stars would you call “successful”? What makes them successful?

Which television characters have jobs you would most like to have? What about their job is appealing?

Which television characters live lifestyles you would most like to live? What about their lifestyle is appealing?

What shows can you think of that have characters that you would classify as middle-class? What about them makes them middle-class?

Which shows do you think have the most realistic depiction of what its like to be middle-class? Which shows do you think have the least realistic depiction?
What shows can you think of where you would call the characters working-class or blue collar? What about those characters makes them working-class or blue collar?

Which shows do you think have the most realistic depiction of what its like to be working-class? Which shows do you think have the least realistic depiction?

Think of one of the shows you’ve identified a middle-class show and another you’ve identified as a working-class show. What similarities do you see in the characters? What differences do you see?

Show specific questions
Prompt with pictures of television families from textual study
- How would you describe this family based on their photo?
- What stereotypes would you associate with this family?
- Are they like your family in any way? Are they like other families you know? How?
- Can you think of other shows that have families similar to this one? If yes, what makes them similar?
APPENDIX D: CHARACTER PHOTOS

The Middle

Raising Hope
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo

Duck Dynasty
### APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Shows Watched&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td>Ann</td>
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<td>RH</td>
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<tr>
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<td>DD</td>
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<td>DD, TM</td>
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<td>TM</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<sup>3</sup> RH designates *Raising Hope*, DD designates *Duck Dynasty*, TM designates *The Middle*, and HCHBB designates *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. 

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

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VITA

Holly Willson Holladay is a graduate of the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri with a graduate minor in Women’s and Gender Studies (B.S., Organizational Communication, Murray State University, 2006; M.A., Communication Studies, Ball State University, 2008). Her research focuses on the ways individuals use media texts, primarily television, to negotiate aspects of their identity. Her dissertation is a critical examination of how television informs our understanding of class, and the role gender, race, and regional identity play in class consciousness.

During her time at the University of Missouri, Holly has taught Public Speaking and Television Criticism, as well as serving as a teaching assistant for Media and Society and a co-facilitator for the Journalism and Communication Freshman Interest Group. Holly was awarded the Loren Reid Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award in 2013, iCOM’s Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award in 2014, and the Missouri Students Association’s TA Choice Award in 2015. She also served as an Academic Advising Graduate Student Intern for the College of Arts and Sciences during MU’s Summer Welcome from 2012-2014.

Holly has presented single- and co-authored competitively selected papers at numerous conferences, including the National Communication Association, Central States Communication Association, and Console-ing Passions International Conference on Television, Video, Audio, New Media, and Feminism. Her co-authored work has been published in Popular Music and Society and Television & New Media, and she currently has manuscripts under review at Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception.