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Media and Class-making: What lessons are learnt when a celebrity chav dies?

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### **Abstract**

Class is often overlooked in sociological studies of death just as studies of class overlook death. The controversial media coverage of the death of Jade Goody provides a useful focus for exploring contemporary class-making. Recent sociological analyses of class representations in popular culture have demonstrated how denigration and humiliation serve as mechanisms which position sections of the white, working class (chavs) as repositories of bad taste. We argue that these are not the only (or even the most prevalent) affective mechanisms for class-making. In this paper, we explore how cultural imperatives for 'dying well' intersect with what could be perceived as more positive or even affectionate representations of Jade to produce 'good taste' as a naturalised properties of the middle class. As such, we demonstrate that the circulation of inequalities through precarious and dynamic cultural representations involves more complex affective mechanisms in class boundary work than is often recognised.

Keywords: Celebrity. Chav. Class. Death. Jade Goody. Reality Television.

### **Introduction**

This paper takes as its focus the death and dying of Jade Goody. Jade, a 27 year old working-class mother of two and a reality television star, died on Mothering Sunday in 2009 from cancer. She was considered one of the first celebrity chavs<sup>1</sup> in the UK (Tyler and Bennett, 2010). Jade found her fame and notoriety through Channel 4's 2002 *Big Brother* and a number of celebrity reality shows including *Celebrity Wife Swap*. Despite only coming fourth in the competitive reality show that 'discovered' her, she nonetheless carved out a lucrative career from the production of fitness DVDs, perfume and autobiographies to amass a personal fortune estimated in the region of some 2-4 million pounds at the time of her death (Kavka and West, 2010). Jade first heard of her cancer while on 2007 *Big Brother India* and her televised devastated response marked the start of a reality-documentary filming that was to follow her illness and the process of her dying. As Walter (2009) observes, what is interesting about Jade is not so much the mass mourning *after* her death, such as the response to Michael Jackson's passing three months later, but that her *dying* was cast as a public spectacle: She is quoted as saying "I've lived in front of the cameras. And maybe I'll die in front of them' (Percival, 2009). After some public concern about the potential spectacle of a public death, her publicist, Max Clifford, promised that

the cameras would withdraw as Jade slipped away: yet, to a great extent Jade had a reality television *death* (Woodthorpe, 2010).

Jade's tragic and untimely death offers a useful entry point into critical debates centred on the changing nature of celebrity (Kavka and West, 2010), and those surrounding the sequestration thesis (Walter, 2009), and the commercialisation of death (Woodthorpe, 2010). However, our emphasis is on class. Until relatively recently, the critical study of death and dying has been largely dominated by psychological and medical accounts (Kellehear, 2007), but emerging sociological accounts have widened the field to place death within its wider social, economic and cultural context. This work suggests that far from being a great leveller, death, dying and their social rituals may reflect, symbolise and re-circulate sharp social distinctions (Ergin, 2009). Despite this awareness, Howarth (2007) notes a marked tendency to ignore class dynamics as a major influence upon the social nature of mortality. She attributes this lacuna to both the isolation of sociologists specialising in death from concerns addressed by the wider discipline and to the research agendas of mostly middle-class academics. In light of this, Howarth calls for future work to 'reinststate class' in critical accounts of death, dying and mortality.

Accordingly, our focus is primarily concerned with pursuing the media spectacle of Jade's dying and death as way of exploring some of the complexities we feel are inherent in the process of class-making; a term, discussed below, that refers to the boundary construction and accompanying acts of symbolic violence that seek to define and distinguish status in a social-economic class hierarchy. That Jade's story offers a useful means to do this is suggested by Walter (2009) who points out that many of the media responses to Jade's death invoked and discussed social class. He identified how middle-class commentators derided Jade for 'providing an unmeritocratic role model to young girls: They need not study or develop their talents simply gain entry to a reality television show' (6.1.4). He also observed what he called a middle-class snobbery in newspaper accounts detailing her death. What is clear across academic writing on Jade's death, is that 'class wars' (Walter, 2009) are observable and remarkable. However, so far, these wars have only been noted - almost in passing; they have yet to attract critical attention. This paper aims to examine the constitution of these 'class wars' and explore what, if any, symbolic function they may play.

Jade's death is of interest because celebrity deaths can be considered 'cultural flashpoints', moments where societal 'norms, hopes and fears' are reappraised and reasserted (Kitch, 2000: 173). Kitch's analysis of journalist reportage of celebrity death identifies a specific 'instructional tale' through which journalists mediate the larger cultural process of a rite of passage from life to death which involves the community as well as the deceased. This begins with separation (as death suggests a rift) and ending in reincorporation (the community's acceptance of the death and reaffirmation of group values: a healing). No matter who the deceased was, Kitch argues that certain themes appear across media of celebrity death: namely, that the celebrity is presented as 'one of us' while representing our greatest hopes; the celebrity is presented as having *meaning* to the broader culture; and finally, there

are ‘lessons’ to be learnt in his or her passing. She claims that death is an unstable public moment in which “people feel compelled to assess their identities and beliefs – to the meaning any major celebrity holds for any social group’ (2000: 174). In sum, her argument is that the stories that the media tell, and which audiences come to know and expect, are moral tales about how people might live their lives individually and collectively. If Kitch is right, then the coverage of Jade’s dying and death is complicated by the pedagogical function Kitch’s analysis foregrounds. This leads us to ask what meanings are produced at the sad passing of a ‘celebrity chav’? What ‘meaning’ about class relations is produced from accounts of Jade’s death and what lessons may be learnt from her passing?

### **Jade as a Celebrity Chav**

It is instructive to start by discussing how Jade was represented *as* a celebrity chav. Although class is rarely directly spoken as such in popular culture, it is nonetheless coded – often through lack. As Tyler and Bennett explain, a celebrity chav can be defined as a member of the working class, often a woman, who has earned celebrity, most often notoriety, through Reality Television, glamour modelling, or the music industry (2010). Further, the celebrity chav has experienced a rapid raise to wealth and visibility and ‘is represented as constitutionally unable to manage this change of circumstance with dignity, sangfroid or prudence’ (Tyler and Bennett, 2010: 379). By extending this focus upon ‘lack’ to media coverage of Jade, it is possible to identify two main themes that work to construct Jade as a chav. The first of these are Jade’s ignorance and bigotry; the second, Jade’s family background.

Jade found her fame in 2002 *Big Brother (BB)* and there is a suggestion that she was selected for her comic appeal. If this was the case, producers and audiences were not disappointed as Jade, often drunk, was the first to engage in excessive behaviour:

Big Brother's Jade bared her all to the cameras when she stripped completely naked during a late-night drinking game. Her fellow housemates looked on in disbelief as she first went topless, then whipped off her knickers in front of them. (*Mail Online, 2002*)

Her subsequent drunken outbursts soon became aggressive enough to shock *The Sun* into urging their readers to vote Jade out of the *Big Brother* house, with their ‘Get the Pig Out’ campaign. Readers of *The Sun* were instructed of Jade’s ‘destructive influence’ and told that she was undeserving to win the BB cash prize. *The Sun* repeatedly described Jade as ‘one of the most hated women on British TV’ (Bizzare, 2002). *The Sun* and other UK newspapers were particularly enraged by the stream of *faux pas* and ignorance that was to characterise Jade and her career: ‘Jade was the girl who thought Portugal was in Spain, who talked of being made an ‘escape goat’ and whose party trick was to put her fist in her mouth’ (Ennis, 2009). Even some years into her fame, Jade’s violence and ignorance made the headlines. In

2007, on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Jade was involved with two other housemates in the racist bullying of fellow housemate actress Shilpa Shetty. A record 30,000 complaints were made, questions raised in Parliament and main sponsors of the show suspended their association. Newspaper coverage echoed *The Sunday Mirror's* Kevin O'Sullivan's (2007) description of Jade as an 'ugly human being and as a 'nasty faker'. Jade's tearful apology did little to offset public moral indignation.

However, Jade's class was as likely to be coded in stories of her humble origins as it was in stories of her outbursts. *The Mirror* described Jade as having a 'grim childhood' (Ellam, 2009), which left her 'woefully uneducated' (Mangan, 2009). Newspaper accounts detailed how Jade was the only child of drug-addicts. *The Daily Mail's* A.N. Wilson provided the more lurid account of Jade's father dying after 'injecting heroin into his penis' but stories of Jade's father hiding guns under her crib and his death in a fast food restaurant's restroom appeared in most newspapers during her time in 2002 *Big Brother* and in the news accounts of her dying. After her father's death, newspapers moved to describe Jade's mother's disability, lesbianism and subsequent dependency on the State and upon Jade, who was a full time carer from the age of five (Hudson, 2008). Narratives quickly moved from Jade's background to her own misdemeanours – such as being 'evicted from a Rotherhithe council flat in south-east London' (Jeffries, 2009) and 'facing jail for an unpaid council tax bill' (Freeman, 2009). The narrative arc suggested that Jade's poor behaviour and lack of responsibility were natural outcomes of her chaotic family life. That this causal relationship between family and destiny is classed is explicitly illustrated by *The Spectator's* description of Jade as the 'uberchav':

unapologetic uberchav- coarse, fabulously ignorant, common, crushing low of brow both physically and metaphorically, overweight, sexually incontinent, famously racist – spewed out from a home not so much broken as smashed into little pieces, a home of smackheads and crackheads  
(Liddle, 2009)

### **Class making and the function of humiliation**

These depictions of Jade are, we argue, examples of 'class-making', a set of cultural labours that preoccupies recent sociological analysis of class representations in popular culture. Scrutiny of Reality Television (McRobbie, 2004), news reportage (Lawler, 2005) comedy sketch shows (Lockyear, 2010), and children's comics (Author B), amongst others, demonstrate how specific sections of the white, working class, often referred to as 'chavs', are represented in denigrating and humiliating ways. More specifically, this work charts how sections of the white, working class are constructed as a 'known' social group in terms of 'their' dishonesty, laziness, fecundity, recklessness and ostentatious consumption practices (Skeggs, 2004; Hayward and Yar, 2006). In this regard, the celebrity chav is hyperbolic, holding an exaggerated visibility and who seems to embody and enliven many of the negative class traits that constitute the 'chav' in the cultural imagination. As Skeggs argues,

celebrity chavs are often represented as ‘repositories of negative value, bad taste’ who shock and entertain through their ignorance, tasteless lifestyles, and bigotry (Skeggs, 2001: 298). Additionally, Tyler and Bennett (2010) have argued that ‘celebrity chav’, is, in the main, a cultural re-working of class and femininity. This suggests a contemporary spin on the ways that femininity has been aggressively constructed along the lines of respectability. Such constructions have been argued to maintain respectable femininity as a middle-class property (Skeggs, 1997). The long reach of these labours of cultural production are evident in Skeggs’ historical analysis which charts the ways working-class women are culturally coded as ‘the sexual and deviant other against which femininity [is] defined’ (2001: 297). Certainly at the time of writing there is a marked distinction between celebrities like Jade and the other ‘ordinary figure’ who has become recently rapidly visible and wealthy – Catherine Middleton – who, with her family on the event of her marriage to Prince William, was distinguished by her ability to embody dignity, ease, deference and respectability.

What we see in the descriptions of Jade thus far are essentialised views of sections of the white, working class who are ‘known’ for their excessive appetites, state dependency and their casual regard for responsibility. As such, Jade and her family are assumed to stand for a wider and known social type. There are strong resonances here with representations that circulate through other forms of popular culture and in a cultural imagination that scaffold strategies like *SureStar*; there is a circular logic in which degeneracy is understood to breed degeneracy, a causality that demands government surveillance and intervention. However, as Lawler (2005) argues it is a mistake to simply regard denigrating class representations as ways in which the middle-classes can look down on their class inferiors. It is more instructive to regard class representation as part of a general process through which the middle class can define their interests, tastes and lifestyles as ‘the normal, indeed, the *social*’ (Savage, 2003:536). That said, it is helpful to ask if popular culture and specifically for our purposes here – *celebrity* is a means through which reactionary class attitudes may be vigorously circulated in ways that attract scant critical comment (Tyler and Bennett, 2010). The resultant ‘chav hate’ (Lockyear, 2010: 11) of these circulations is of grave concern because it has been argued that consumers of popular culture are being enticed to reject the (working-class) self ‘one shouldn’t be’ to embrace and embody a ‘generalized and normalized bourgeois’ selfhood (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008: 227). Indeed this enticement is steadily shaping up as the way that respectable citizenship and personhood are imagined both in popular culture and in the cultural imaginary (Author A). Accordingly, sociologists make use of ‘class-making’ to identify a process that attempts to forge a complex discursive and affective equivalence between sections of the white, working-class and a ‘life not worth living’ and to the ways fictions of ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ pass as naturalised properties of the respective middle and working classes (Skeggs, 2004). Significantly, it is possible to see class-making not only in the ways Jade was represented but in the attacks made against the very medium that afforded her fame – reality television .

### **RTV and Class-making**

*Big Brother* may have rescued Jade from obscurity but newspaper accounts were nonetheless scathing about her saviour. Reality Television is something of a sprawling genre, but is largely characterised by its attention on the ordinary; often ordinary people living ordinary lives; Couldry (2003: 102) observes that 'ordinary people have never been more desired by, or more visible within, the media' as they are in RTV. This focus on the ordinary often means RTV is cheap to produce, when compared with dramas, news and documentaries (the ordinary is easily accessed and ordinary people do not usually require agents fees and so on). The cheapness of RTV leads to its proliferation not only in scope and range but in its dominance of Western airwaves. This colonisation has spawned concern about the loss of more 'high-brow' programming (Skeggs et al, 2008). That RTV is considered 'low brow' owes a great deal to the fact that it creates melodramas out of aspects of life that are normally considered private; this visibility of the private is considered unsavoury as it tempts a 'voyeuristic curiosity of the audiences' (Montemurro, 2008: 88). The democratisation here (anyone can be on TV), the opening of the private and the voyeurism that may be encouraged, have led RTV to be associated with tasteless 'car crash' programming, lurid displays of immorality and to be accused of a general 'dumbing down' of television content. Interestingly, these were the very aspects that fuelled condemnation of Jade's rather public death. The perceived reality TV spectacle raised questions as to whether it was 'ghoulish voyeurism equivalent to a picnic at a public hanging' (Bunting, 2009), a 'gruesome peep show' or a 'public circus' in which death comes perilously close to being entertainment (Lansdale, 2009).

It is not only the medium of RTV that attracts scathing criticism, but the 'ordinary celebrities' it produces. That Jade was constantly referred to as an 'unusual type of celebrity' (Mangan, 2009; Hegerty, 2009), 'an emblem of a new era of celebrities' (Sturgis, 2009), was due to Jade's Reality TV fame (Kavka and West, 2010). Certainly, Reality TV is understood to trawl masses of ordinary people to pluck some to reside at the bottom of a hierarchy of celebrity 'D' listers (Palmer, 2005). Unlike a fame based on a talent or skill, 'unusual celebrity is based on the ability to be *oneself*' (Cashmore, 2006). As *The Guardian's* Libby Brooks states, Jade was 'famous for being famous, a manufactured creature whose only talent was relentless self-exposure, the dismal product of a country in the thrall to the cult of celebrity' (Brooks, 2009). As Skeggs notes from her analysis of RTV, it is helpful to regard 'ordinary' as the working class. Class-making in this case, attaches classed stereotypes to class-identifiable bodies, becoming the only things that Jade and other 'unusual' celebrities can trade for their qualified fame.

Unusual fame is expected to be momentary to allow room for the next *Big Brother* winner or villain of *Wife Swap* (Turner, 2004). As nature of reality celebrity is temporary, Palmer notes how the media condemn those who try and prolong their fame. He argues that the *respectable* thing to do is to return back to one's old life with 'dignity' (2005: 45). He concludes that the quick rise and quick fall of reality celebrities carries with it a cautionary tale of 'knowing one's place'. However, Jade

Goody's own biography bucks the trend of short-lived fame – she fought against 'knowing her place' and instead battled to remain 'out of place'. Indeed there is a certain circular pattern to Jade's story as she bounces from infamy to fame to infamy and back into the Nation's affections through her dying and death. With each turn she flirts with the risk of being returned to an unmediated 'ordinary': Cashmore (2006) argues that Jade experiences a 'kind of afterlife' (p.193) on each return to celebrity fame. That Jade did not know her place, did not retreat into the ordinary with dignity (Palmer, 2005), but fought to stay on the the D list created certain tensions and unease in the media reportage of her dying and death.

It is clear from our discussion so far that we can identify the middle-class snobbery that Walter (2009) alludes to. We have doubt of the class antagonism circulating in accounts of Jade. We are also aware of the harms of such representations in shaping commonsense knowledge about groups and individuals (Joffe and Staerkle, 2007). We are also keenly aware of the relationship between worth, citizenship, 'cultural mis-recognition and material inequalities' (McDowell, 2006: 828), and of the relationship between cultural representations and what Butler (2009) calls liveable lives. However, our intention is not to pit more 'positive' representations against the negative ones. Our aim is to further tease out the complex relations involved in what McRobbie calls the 'boundary marking practices' (2004:102). It is in extending a grasp on the practices of class-making that lead us to consider what more may be said if we move past the focus on humiliation and denigration that has largely guided sociological work to date (see McRobbie 2004; Tyler, 2008). Such work may sideline some of the complexities involved in class-making. Jade's celebrity death provides an opportunity to explore these complexities on relatively simple grounds. The first is that there may be different representational spaces opened by simple virtue of a general consensus against speaking ill of the dead (Walter, 2009). In Jade's case, this potential is enhanced by a reluctance to speak ill of the dying: Seale (2002) notes that it is more acceptable and culturally appropriate to deploy heroic narratives when describing those facing terminal illness. This combination may lead us to expect that Jade in the last stages of her life and death would elicit a more favourable media representation than she expected or received as one of the UK's 'celebrity chavs' in her life (Tyler and Bennet, 2010).

### **Complicating Representations of Jade**

Both journalists (for example Mangan, 2009) and academics (Walter, 2010; Kitch and Hume, 2008) alike noted the rapid turnaround in newspaper coverage of Jade during her diagnosis and subsequent death. As Matthew Norman from *The Independent* (2009) writes, 'She is Brave Jade now, where once she was Vile Jade. The process of sanctification has matched the speed with which the cancer spread through her body'. Similarly, writing in *The Guardian*, Beresford (2009) commented that 'the media outpouring of support for Jade Goody, as she lies dying, can only be preferable to the vitriolic outpourings before she became ill'. The tabloids were not exception, *The Daily Mail's* Jan Moir notes that Jade's illness 'wraps Jade in a cloak of respectability and public affection that was never quite hers when she was in good

health' (2009). Walter (2010) has described this as a 'redemption' of Jade's character, arguing that it is a common feature of post-mortem constructions of celebrities' lives (also see Kitch and Hume, 2008). These apparently more 'sympathetic' depictions of Jade jostle uncomfortably alongside depictions of her working class 'chav' persona. We focus on two key aspects of these more benevolent positionings of Jade: Firstly, we focus on Jade as a loving mother who overcame her 'humble' origins, and secondly, we examine Jade as an ordinary and honest reality TV star who was without guile. What we are interested in here is how this redemption serves to reveal and expose alternative mechanisms of class-making.

### **Redemption through Respectability**

Motherhood and the overcoming of an adverse early life in a meritocratic rise to wealth and success were central to more benevolent representations of Jade. Feminist analysis of the institution and cultural representations of motherhood have long noted that the desire to be a mother is a central feature of hegemonic femininity (Dworkin and Wachs, 2004), but that some women, or rather some 'types' of women, are repeatedly constructed as unsuitable, bad and even 'dangerous' mothers (Cassiman, 2008). It may be unsurprising then, that working-class mums are overrepresented in Reality TV shows that feature failing family health and poor child discipline, nor that poor parenting and inadequacy as mothers marks the contemporary celebrity chav (Tyler and Bennett, 2010). However, being a good mother was central to Jade's redemption (Walter, 2010) – and not for the first time. Holmes (2009) notes how following the 'race row' on *Celebrity Big Brother*, motherhood was tied to Jade's identity with a particular emphasis on her being a 'working mum' and thus self-sacrificing and responsible. In the lead up to her death, motherhood again played a crucial role redeeming Jade's character - albeit unevenly. Jade became re-imagined as 'an adoring mum who gave everything for her sons' (Francis, 2009). The vulgarity of commercialising death and earning money from exploiting her suffering was re-worked by Jade and journalists alike as selflessly providing for her children's future: 'I am doing it for the money. But not to buy flash cars or big houses. It's for my sons' future if I'm not there' (Ennis, 2009). Those who abhorred the spectacle of death served up for public entertainment, or the vulgarity of making money by the exposure of personal suffering, were themselves criticised for failing to understand the lived reality of a working-class girl from Bermondsey. For example, TV presenter Trisha Goddard, a cancer survivor herself, was quoted in *The Observer* as saying:

For Jade Goody, the only way she can make money is by being Jade Goody, so what choice does she have? All these people harping on about her dignity should remember that no bank manager writes saying 'Dear Ms Goddard or Dear Ms Goody, we've heard you have cancer so we won't be taking your mortgage this month.' I feel for her and I think there is a lot of snobbery around. You want her to keep her dignity? Sling her a quarter of a million then and she can close her front door. (quoted in Mcveigh, 2009).



We are mindful that the story of Jade's 'background of ignorance and poverty' (Ennis, 2009), serves as the necessary precursor to a well-rehearsed rags to riches narrative that helps construct celebrity. In Jade's case, gritty comparisons were drawn between Jade's ruined childhood and that which she was aiming to provide for her own children. For just as Jade's background was laid bare, circulating a certain cultural knowingness of the abject and wasted lives of the socially marginalised, what quickly emerged across a number of articles was the use of her background as a justification and sympathetic explanation of Jade's adult behaviour. She was regarded as the 'real victim' of life who sought to displace a miserable childhood with a new family she sought in the *Big Brother* House:

'Goody has been a victim all her life: of her family's poverty, which meant that from the age of five she had to look after her mother, partially paralysed in a motorcycle accident; of poor education; of unhappy relationships; of horrifically bad luck' (Freeman, 2009)

This represents a different understanding of Jade. She is not simply written off as rude and ignorant – there is a recognition that her caring role meant that she missed out on much formal education. There is a sidestepping of the usual mockery aimed at Jade, instead there is some movement towards sympathy or at least an awareness of the contextual factors over which she had no control. This casting off of the irresponsible lifestyle of the working-class, the not-so-subtle moral enforcement of meritocracy and responsibility, are all swept up and into normative accounts of the selfless mother, as demonstrated by this extract from *The Independent*

It is the ambition of every normal parent that their child's life is better than their own, and the means to that end are trivial in the extreme. In her final days, she has gone a long way to exploding the repellent stereotype of the feckless, feral, self-absorbed, instant gratification-obsessed underclass with which she was once made synonymous. She defeated incalculable odds to escape the shackles of her upbringing, by lavishing on her boys the maternal love she survived being denied herself. If that isn't a glorious expression of the human spirit and a true definition of courage, I can't begin to imagine what is. (Norman, 2009)

What emerges are two constructions of Jade: as identifiably 'one of them' and mocked for this belonging - and Jade as product of a socially shameful environment, and regarded as a victim. While it may seem that there is an observable re-interpretation of class at play here, working-class life is still condemned as a life to be worked away *from*, and cannot be shrugged off, but one should be rewarded for the attempt to do so, if not for themselves but for their upwardly mobile children. In Jade's case, her bravery to face the cameras at the hardest times of her life is rendered praiseworthy as it secures the finances for her sons' significantly *private* education.

### **Honesty and Authenticity in Reality TV**

Holmes (2009) has argued that the narratives of fame which frame reality TV rest on the blurring of on-screen and off-screen personas into one unified consistent selfhood in which sincerity and authenticity is valued. Drawing on Gamson's (1994) description of two competing discourses of fame - a meritocratic discourse which emphasises the unique and innate talent of the star and a discourse of fame as manufactured through media hype and exposure – Holmes argues that Jade was constructed as becoming famous because of her unique essentialist characteristics. In the ups and downs of Jades popularity – including in the lead up to her death – her ignorance has often been reworked as innocence or lack of guile. In this way, her decision to let the cameras capture her demise is presented as part of her inability to manufacture a public persona. Jade's congruence, authenticity and 'artless, friendly and open' nature (*The Times*, 2009) are commented on time repeatedly in the newspaper accounts of her impending death which laud the 'realness' of the reality TV star, with one journalist even going as far as to suggest that she was 'incapable of artifice or evasion' (Mangan, 2009). Jade's 'straight-talking' became central to accounts of her death and in the construction of a publicly consumed version of dying in which this candidness enabled the breaking of taboos about publically acknowledging death:

But the most significant result of Jade's cancer is that, because of her honesty and the openness which she's shown in telling people what had been happening, the British public have been discussing death and dying – and dying from cancer – in a way they have not done before (Devane, 2009)

Jade's 'openness' is re-packaged not only as an essential and (now) valuable personality trait, it is also re-worked as something which has an educational rather than simply entertainment value. Jade was touted as 'an unapologetic and unadorned symbol of all sorts of uncomfortable truths' (Mangan, 2009), who was 'endearingly frank about her condition' (Hardman, 2009). This also, to some extent, allowed for a redemption of reality TV as a mechanism for her fame since it enables the minute-by-minute realities of death to be known:

There were those who could not stand what she was doing, and couched it in terms of 'dignity': could she not go away and die quietly, with dignity, as so many other people did? Yet this is very far from how death comes to most people. Death from illness, especially, is not very dignified. The details that we learned from Jade – about the constipation, the sleeplessness, the overwhelming pain – are how it really works (Edemariam, 2009).

These different representative strands came together to provide what could be seen as a more benevolent picture of Jade – as straight-talking and honest, as revealing the realities of dying, and as being a reality TV star who educates rather than entertains. We are not suggesting that these replaced or even overshadowed those representations which rested on mockery and humiliation. Rather we argue that these oscillations within class-making might manifest in an uneven, perhaps contradictory class representation, and which serve to indicate something of

culturally specific anxieties about class. We explore, then, how these oscillations evoke and invite different kinds of class-based affectivities and positioning.

### **Benevolence and Class-Making**

We should not be content with the idea that there are negative and positive representations. There are strong suggestions that the kinds of ‘benevolent’ representations we can identify in Jade’s media coverage may play an important role in the reproduction of prejudicial relations (Jost and Kay, 2005). Flattering, ‘positive’, even affectionate representations of socially marginalised groups may still circulate essentialist, hegemonic views by preserving ‘good’ representations for the groups/individuals who with deference ‘know their place’ and fulfil expected social roles (Good and Sanchez, 2009). In lay accounts over class, the awareness that one is born into class privilege – which Sayer (2005) calls natal luck -is offset, or can jostle alongside, a deeply held belief that an individual’s efforts, hard work and determination justify those privileges. There may then be an awareness of the structural injustices of class and simultaneously a distancing from it by justifying one’s one luck as a result of hard labour (Sayer, 2005). This idea finds support elsewhere; studies on compassion note how many are unlikely ‘to understand poverty as a consequence of ‘bad luck’’ and that ‘this reluctance might be linked with dominant social attitudes concerning personal responsibility, as well as those regarding personal initiative and hard work as determinants of economic success’ (Williams, 2008: 10). More recently, Barker (2010) has identified what she calls the ‘volitional imperative’ in her respondents’ accounts of their lives. The volitional imperative encouraged her respondents to tell their lives through markers of personal success, individual responsibility and enterprise (p. 198), in ways that recast structural problems as obstacles to be *overcome* through personal merit and sheer determination.

This recasting places an individual’s inability to emerge from structural disadvantage very much as a personal one. Stories of drugs, poverty, crime, sexual deviancy – all cast Jade’s parents *and their kind* as culpable and responsible for their own fate. Newspaper accounts of Jade’s background shows an awareness that class structural relations and poverty can determine one’s chances and outlook: that it is ‘unsurprising’ that Jade emerges as deviant and dysfunctional, suggests an embryonic critique of the structural positions she had the ‘misfortune’ to inherit. Yet, the overdrawn, at times lurid accounts of her parents’ behaviour undermine this critique. The reader is hurtled from matters of social organisation to personal culpability as the parent’s misdemeanours fill as many column inches as any other aspects of Jade’s life: her business successes, in comparison were often limited to a single-lined list. To our minds, the culpability of the working-class is underscored because to some extent Jade *escapes*. As newspaper accounts propel the reader from her murky childhood to the moment when she is ‘plucked from obscurity’ through reality television, we are not witnessing a chronological record of Jade’s life, but an important reassertion of personal determination and will. Here the violation imperative forms part of wider social imagining of meritocracy, where effort can

secure upward social mobility. However, while Jade was plucked from obscurity into celebrity, she was not plucked clean of her class. That class ‘sticks’, and is ‘fixed’ upon bodies, as Skeggs (2004) helps us understand class to be, is clear in descriptions of Jade’s ‘instinctive, unreflective nature’ which explained her success appeal in being her ‘genuine’ self. Indeed it was Jade’s ability to remain *herself*, a fact repeated through her unique taste (described as tacky and tatty by Moir of the *Daily Mail*), and despite her successful businesses and media fame, that is lauded as the secret to her success. Her ability to harness the ‘chav’ with ‘celebrity’ helped spin Jade’s life as ‘honest’. This widespread stereotype of working class people as being ‘poor but honest’ may be part of how people maintain a belief in a just world (Kay and Jost, 2003), and it is possible to suggest, following Good and Sanchez (2009), that overdrawing Jade’s authenticity and honesty are more benevolent ways in which Jade is kept in ‘place’ (in terms of class hierarchy). She is an authentic ‘chav’ – those essentialised traits cannot be shrugged off through wealth or fame, but are manifest in the feckless partner (released from prison for their wedding) the tacky marriage and funeral and the vulgar display of death: as Jan Moir writes in the *Daily Mail* ‘whatever happens, it won’t be a stylish marriage, though she can afford the carriage’ (2009).

Exploring more ‘positive’ representations of class boundary making may allow some critical purchase on the increasing number of popular cultural products, such as the makeover show, that increasingly rely less on ‘trash talking’ and present as benign, positive and empowering (Papacharissi and Fernback, 2008; Author C). Sayer (2002) suggests that class-distinction is not singly motivated by a need to distinguish one’s self from a ‘lower order’, as a focus on humiliation might suggest, but is complicated by intersubjective awareness of one’s class advantage. His analysis of lay accounts of class identity and class relations notes that a recognition that class is ‘accident of birth’ can provoke feelings of ‘guilt, resentment and defensiveness’ which may take many forms (p.202). While these can prompt class antagonism, they suggest a complex affective dimension to class boundary-making, which may make direct hostility and condemnation of others unsavoury to middle-class imagined sensibilities (Author B). For those in more privileged class positions, there may be unease about the injustice of this natal lottery. The notion of ‘honesty’, for example, may well go to the heart of perceived middle-class self-consciousness and sensitivity over any perceived snobbery that seems to follow when comparisons are made between ‘positive examples’ of cancer autobiographies and the ‘coarse and vulgar’ spectacle of Jade’s dying and death:

While it is perfectly acceptable for nice, educated middle-class people like Picardie and Diamond to detail the worst and best of their condition, it is apparently not Ok for a supposed upstart like Goody to follow in their path. Yet in many ways, hers is the more honest approach (Moir 2009)

What was noticeable in some of the media accounts – especially in the broadsheets – was a distinct unease about the class-based flavour of some of the commentary. Jade’s working-class vulgarity and honesty was, for example, contrasted with middle-class ideas about dignity and respectability. That these representations sit alongside

one another – sometimes in the same article – indicates something of the complexities and, we suggest, affectivities of class-making.

## Conclusion

The emergence of class within popular culture has led to its re-conceptualisation of past relations of economic exchange to an more nuanced approach that allows the sociologist to engage in ‘a kind of forensic, detective work’ that enables the ‘normality of the middle class...to be carefully unpicked’ across the sites of the everyday (Savage, 2003:537). One aspect of the everyday is death and dying. We have responded to Howarth’s (2007) claim that class dynamics have been ignored in critical accounts of death, dying and mortality, by doing our own forensic investigation on how class is woven into everyday media reporting of celebrity death. Initially, class-making seems the right theoretical tool at hand. However, the focus on denigration belies some of the complexity and contradictions within the media coverage. We have argued that contemporary theorists on class-making also need to pick up on class unease, benevolence and sympathy as mechanisms for class-making. Our own analysis suggests something of the dynamic nature of class and begs attention to the circulation of inequalities through cultural and symbolic domains which tend to represent life as a result of individual exercises of self-management, discipline and willpower – and to some extent, luck. In asking what lessons are learnt when celebrity chavs die, we have demonstrated how by moving away from denigration we can explore how processes of redemption emerge through Jade’s dying. This redemption aligns Jade with the good neoliberal citizen is, however, partial, for Jade’s manifestation still ensures a boundary-marking/class-making function. Even in death the working-class life is not a life.

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<sup>1</sup> Chav is one of a number of terms used to describe sections of the white working class