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# Examining the role of television programmes in legitimising inherited wealth and privilege for the super-rich in a society that values meritocracy

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## ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen the proliferation of television broadcasts that focus on the lavish lifestyles and consumption of “rich kids.” However, flaunting inherited wealth is an accountable activity within UK society that claims to be based on meritocratic values. Whilst wealthy individuals are a source of public spectatorship, they are also attributed with contributing to economic inequality and inhibiting social mobility. This study draws on social psychology to examine media representations of wealthy heirs accounting for their wealth in popular programmes about the “super rich.” Forty-one and a half hours of non-subscription UK television data from 2016 that included the term “super-rich” was analysed. Drawing on Discursive Social Psychology, heirs were found to be managing an ideological dilemma of accounting for their inherited privilege while in a (supposedly) meritocratic environment. Heirs use four interpretative repertoires to negotiate their unmeritocratic position: (1) having a fair go, (2) unintentional privilege, (3) constructing wealth as “family money” and (4) sharing wealth with loved ones. These interpretative repertoires downplay privilege by redefining ownership, highlight any work they do, construct them as aspirational and present them as lacking agency. The presentation of heirs in entertainment documentaries maintains the illusion of meritocratic conditions.

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## Introduction

The super-rich are increasingly visible as a result of the proliferation of entertainment documentaries about super-rich individuals (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017) such as *The Rich Kids of Instagram*. This type of documentary programming focuses on the lifestyles and consumption of the extremely wealthy. The presentation of “rich kids” within the entertainment documentary genre contradicts the presentation of the UK as an allegedly meritocratic society, as their privilege is unearned. People are viewed as accepting inequality within a meritocratic environment as this ensures that wealth is distributed

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fairly (Mijls 2023). Inequality becomes a reflection of differing work ethics as opposed to structural practices such as inheritance. In the British Social Attitudes Survey, 78% of respondents view inequality as undesirable (Clery and Dangerfield 2019) and this figure has remained relatively stable since the 1980s (Cooper and Burchardt 2022). However, the discussion of policy aimed at redistribution and improving social mobility, such as increased tax on wealth, remain controversial (Schifferes and Knowles 2023b). Entertainment documentaries provide an opportunity to explore how heirs are constructed in the UK, a country that claims to place great importance on meritocratic values. This paper explores how heirs in entertainment documentaries negotiate their unmeritocratic position and draw upon meritocratic ideology to account for their privileged positions.

During the cost of living crisis, where people are affected by rising inflation and prices with wages decreasing in real terms, Jake Berry (Conservative Party Chair) advised people struggling “to get a higher salary, higher wages, go out there and get that new job” (BBC 2022). Placing individuals as responsible for coping with rising living costs assumes that people are operating in a meritocracy and all have access to the same opportunities to prepare them for work and ignores the contribution of inherited wealth and privilege. Therefore, accountability for social mobility is placed on the individual (Walkerdine 2011), neglecting the role of practices such as inheritance and intergenerational transfers of privilege.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified wealth inequality as the super-rich gained the biggest increase of wealth documented (Chancel et al. 2022). The UK and in particular, London is a preferred destination for the super-rich affecting the supply and affordability of housing for other groups (Forrest, Koh, and Wissink 2017). Social mobility has declined in the UK since the 1960s and this is partly related to the increased scarcity of housing (Exley 2023) as property is presented as an investment as prices increase (Schifferes and Knowles 2023a). Across the economic, political, and social scientific disciplines, academics have debated the extent to which the practice of inheriting wealth produces and reproduce economic and social inequality (Atkinson 2018; Prabhakar, Rowlingson, and White 2008). Hood and Joyce (2017) state that people who inherit more than £250,000 during their lifetime have a 60% chance of being in the wealthiest 20% of individuals in the UK. Family inheritance as a proportion of national income has been rising since the 1980s (Piketty and Zucman 2015). Intergenerational transfers take place throughout an individual's lifetime, not just upon their death, maintaining the family's wealth (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). This practice arguably acts as a form of favouritism; ensuring affluence is retained within the family. Moreover, its presence within the economic fabric of the UK undermines the idea that the country is truly meritocratic. This creates dilemmas for heirs, who risk accusations of not earning their wealthy status.

Merit (M) is defined in Young's (1958) satire of the British educational system as being the result of intelligence (I) and effort (E) (“ $I + E = M$ ,” 84). Under the post-war education system, people were given access to differing types of education on the basis of their merit which resulted in opportunities and as a consequence, increased wealth. More recently, meritocracy has been termed as “equality of opportunity” (Martin et al. 2014, 5). However, meritocratic ideology has been criticised for maintaining inequality and holding the poor accountable for their lack of wealth and status (McNamee and Miller 2014). Increased income inequality is correlated with a rise in meritocratic beliefs (Mijls and Savage 2020). Meritocratic values in the UK do not result in equality for all and the

increased focus on individual effort masks the embedded structural advantages of an upbringing in a wealthy family. For example, in 2009, 84% of UK participants believed in meritocracy yet their belief in structural inequality decreased from 43.9% in 1987 to 34.8% in 2009 (Mijs 2021). Despite people's belief in meritocratic values, access to opportunities in society are not available to all (Kim and Choi 2017) and the pretence of a meritocratic society ignores the importance of family background and inheritance on achievement (Granaglia 2019). In England in 2019, 16 year old pupils on free school meals, a means tested resource used as a proxy to measure poverty, are 18.1 months behind other pupils in their GSCE English and Maths abilities (Hutchinson, Reader, and Akhal 2020). The educational achievement gap persists and is related to socio-economic status (OECD 2016) as opposed to individual effort, which suggests that inheritance rather than ability accounts for inequality. However, individual belief in meritocracy in Western nations increase as economic inequality increases as due to the growing distance between differing economic groups so people view less inequality in their everyday life (Mijs 2023).

Inheritance practices means countries such as the UK cannot claim to be wholly based on meritocratic principles. The ideology of meritocracy in capitalist societies such as the UK renders financial inequality as the "fair" result of differential levels of talent and effort (Allen 2011). In this context, accounting for inherited wealth creates an ideological dilemma, where two conflicting ideological positions are present (Billig et al. 1988), regarding wealth and fairness. The working rich are generally less affluent than individuals whose status is derived from inherited capital or assets (Medeiros and de Souza 2015). Wealth derived from capital as opposed to employment is less transparent, as assets and earnings are channelled through Trusts as part of complex tax arrangements (Beaverstock and Faulconbridge 2013). Hence the super-rich are sometimes called the "hidden rich" (Firth et al. 2014). The recent rise in the televised broadcasting of super-rich entertainment documentaries offers an insight into the "hidden rich" and an opportunity to examine how they account for their wealth within this ideological context.

### ***The return of elite studies in sociology and the reproduction of wealth inequality***

Sociologists have questioned the benefits of researchers studying poorer groups as problematic, allowing for a renewed focus on elite studies (Cunningham and Savage 2015; Serafini and Maguire 2019). The revival of elite studies takes a qualitative approach allowing discourse to be examined to explore how the unequal status quo is maintained and reproduced (Machin and Richardson 2008; Thurlow and Jaworski 2017). Extreme wealth becomes visible through people's actions and narratives particularly in locations where the super-rich cluster, such as London (Knowles 2022). Knowles (2017) highlights the importance of exploring inequality at a micro level to view how spaces are shaped by wealth to exclude less affluent groups and for the super-rich to restrict access via their staff.

The exploration of discourse about the public school system demonstrates how extreme wealth inequality is sustained through the transfer of privilege. Restricted access to resources such as education limits social mobility (Taylor 2010). Boden, Kenway, and James (2022) state that public schools' charitable status is protected through legal and parliamentary processes to ensure their continuing advantage

through tax breaks funded by the taxpayer. The public education system further supports the maintenance of wealth inequality by providing the children of the super-rich with a shared culture (Khan 2010) allowing pupils to become members of a global elite (Kenway and Lazarus 2017). Activities such as fundraising for charitable causes allow students to develop international networks with pupils from other public schools (Kenway and Fahey 2015). The development of global networks and cultural capital allows students to feel comfortable in differing environments (Khan 2010). Students can negotiate with authority figures such as teachers that places them at an advantage in professional environments (Taylor 2021). Public schools place an emphasis on students' moral identity through talk about meritocratic values (Khan 2012). By using talk about merit, public schools minimise the role of privilege when accounting for their pupil's achievements (Kenway and Lazarus 2017). Talk about public schools provide an example of how a discursive approach can be used to examine practices that challenge meritocracy and maintain extreme wealth inequality.

### ***Mediatisation of economic inequality, poverty and the super-rich***

While there has been a focus on programming about poverty and extreme wealth, there has been no significant documentary series addressing economic inequality (Mack 2023). Coverage is focused on individual stories and does not explore structural factors although the public are dissatisfied with the treatment of economic issues (Schifferes and Knowles 2023a). Measures that could result in greater wealth distribution such as the use of tax havens are under reported (Roberts 2023). Mack (2023) documents the decreased focus on factual broadcasts to have an educational function and the role of reduced production costs since the 1980s leading to the individualisation of people's economic positions within programming that ignores the role of structural factors. The rise of streaming channels has further reduced the requirement for factual television to be educational and to explore structural issues that support wealth inequality. Within fictional programming such as soap operas in the UK, working class characters are placed in a dilemma between upward social mobility or belonging within their community (Liebes and Livingstone 1994). Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) state that the representation of the super-rich in the media normalises the status of the super-rich and extreme inequality. Increased representations of the super-rich have familiarised the general public with the lifestyles of the extremely wealthy (Serafini and Smith Maguire 2019). Increased inequality in society means that individuals are further physically and socially separated with less awareness of structural factors (Mijs 2023) such as inheritance and privilege gained by the children of the super-rich. There is a need to explore constructions of the super-rich in the media as television provides an opportunity for the less affluent to view extreme wealth.

Representations of the super-rich construct individuals as having a vulnerable side (Kets de Vries 2021) allowing the extremely wealthy to be constructed as genuine to blur their enhanced privilege (Mapes 2021). The emphasis on authenticity underlies a contradictory narrative in the construction of the super-rich as both "tragic heroes" and "celebratory" (Jaworski and Thurlow 2017). The increased mediatisation of the super-rich from the global South is seen through a middle-class lens ridiculing individuals for their excessive tastes (Smith Maguire 2019). The packaging of the super-rich as entertainment acts to hide the environmental factors that maintain entrenched inequality (Serafini and Maguire

2019). Savage (2015) has identified the term “super-rich” as a rhetorical device meaning that there is a need to explore how this is used discursively (Koh, Wissink, and Forrest 2016). Exploring language use and how extreme wealth is legitimised provides an opportunity to challenge dominant discourses and their underlying ideology (Goodman, Carr, and Abell 2022). There is a need to explore how the construction of the children of the super-rich in entertainment documentaries account for their privilege.

### ***Cultural representations of inheritance in the media***

Cultural studies approaches have explored how the children of the super-rich are represented within broadcast media, such as through *The Rich Kids of Instagram* series, and its social media platform on Instagram. On Instagram, hashtags are used to identify and search for terms such as #richkidsofinstagram. Marwick (2015) describes *The Rich Kids of Instagram* as “both a critique of income inequality and a celebration of it” (154). The construction of heirs on television is dilemmatic as they are positioned as both being aspirational figures and caricatures for the audience’s amusement. Heirs’ use of Instagram involves presenting themselves as celebrities through the use of staged photographs with their purchases (Marwick 2015). This chimes with the findings of Littler (2018) when researching “plutocratic elites” (14). She notes plutocrats on television have been portrayed as three types of characters; “normcore plutocrat,” “kind parent” and “luxury flaunter” (115). These representations draw upon meritocratic values that are advantageous to the wealthy. The “normcore plutocrat” is presented as ordinary onscreen. In contrast, the “kind parent” is characterised as a well-meaning philanthropist such as in *Downton Abbey*, a historical drama. The third archetype of the “luxury flaunter” is represented by programmes such as *The Rich Kids of Instagram* that feature excessive spending. However, this flaunting of luxuries is accompanied with a focus on their heightened work ethic to suggest that their purchases are the result of their labour (Littler 2018; Marwick 2015).

### ***Using Discursive Social Psychology to analyse super-rich entertainment documentaries***

Discursive Social Psychology (DSP) (Wetherell 1998) as a form of critical social psychology provides the opportunity to build on research in other fields such as Sociology and cultural studies. DSP has been used to analyse entertainment documentaries as a form of political communication examining how programmes draw upon neoliberal ideology (Carr 2020) allowing for wealth inequality as an everyday assumption to be challenged (Carr 2023). DSP merges Discursive Psychology (Edwards and Potter 1992) and Rhetorical Psychology (Billig 1991) to allow the analyst to explore how speakers manage their accountability and draw upon ideology. A DSP analysis of entertainment documentaries examines how editing and narration are used to construct varying discourses about the super-rich (Carr 2020; Carr et al. 2021). The editing uses “strategic ambiguity” (Condor, Tileagă, and Billig 2013) to challenge the accounts of the wealthy in a vague manner. Humour is also used through the editing and narration to provide a further challenge to the presentation of extreme wealth as mundane (Carr 2020). Using comedy questions people’s competence (Goodwin 1990) providing a challenging discourse on extreme

wealth that questions their abilities and deservingness. DSP can involve identifying interpretative repertoires (Edley and Wetherell 1997), talk that is formed of shared social knowledge that is taken for granted. For example, a wealthy speaker in a programme used a “rags to riches” interpretative repertoire to account for their extreme wealth by presenting themselves as driven and hard working (Carr et al. 2021). Poorer people are presented as lacking traits held by the super-rich such as drive and resilience that accounts for their restricted social mobility. However, heirs do not come from a poor background and their inheritance jars with meritocratic values, and so they provide the opportunity to explore how they account for their position in super-rich entertainment documentaries.

A rhetorical approach has demonstrated how even the most non-meritocratic of social institutions, the monarchy, can be legitimised through meritocratic arguments (Billig 1992; Kondo 2000). Billig (1992) found that the privilege experienced by the British Royal Family was justified by ordinary British families on the basis of their work ethic and the national economic benefits obtained as a result. Hence, the privilege and wealth accorded to royalty on the basis of birth right were both justified and criticised in meritocratic terms. However, royal families are an exceptional case of the inheritance of wealth. What is yet to be understood is how transfers of wealth through family inheritance and privilege are legitimised more broadly by non-aristocratic rich individual recipients.

Given the negative impact of wealth inequality on poorer individuals, and the role of wealth inheritance in its reproduction, it is useful to explore how those positioned as super-rich account for their privilege resulting from inheritance in the media. Awareness and understanding the discourses of the super-rich legitimising intergenerational transfers of wealth, via broadcast media, provides an opportunity to recognise, challenge and disrupt such reifications of social inequality. This paper draws upon social psychology to explore how heirs account for their non-meritocratic privilege in entertainment documentaries in the UK. In particular the analysis will address how privileged individuals present the source of their wealth and how heirs legitimise their wealthy position in an unequal environment.

## Method

### *Data*

The corpus was 41.5 hours of non-subscription UK terrestrial entertainment documentaries broadcast throughout 2016 that featured the term “super-rich” in their title or footage. Fictional programmes and any featuring historical accounts of wealthy individuals were excluded as were broadcasts that used the term “super-rich” to refer to biodiversity. When using DSP researchers need to be aware of the context in which their data is generated (Goodman and Speer 2016), television broadcasts can be viewed as a form of natural data, obtained without the researcher’s intervention, that is compatible with this approach (Potter 2004). In 2015, BBC2 had a super-rich season of 5 programmes establishing the use of the term, super-rich to refer to extremely wealthy people in documentaries (Mumford and Wardell 2015). The corpus is formed of entertainment documentaries broadcast the following year highlighting the popularity of super-rich to describe

wealthy people in this genre of programme. Carr (2020) argues that entertainment documentaries can be analysed as a form of political communication using DSP as they draw upon neoliberal ideology to present wealth inequality as an everyday assumption. The time period chosen also includes the period before and after Theresa May's (British Prime Minister, 2016–2019) keynote speech to the Conservative party conference, "Britain the Great Meritocracy" on 9 September 2016. She claimed that establishing transparent meritocracy was an aim of the Conservative government: "I want Britain to be the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow" (Department for Education 2016). Given that Theresa's May talk positioned the UK as working towards being meritocratic, the presence of the super-rich heirs in entertainment documentaries presents a dilemma that requires exploration.

### **Analytic procedure**

A simplified version of the Jeffersonian transcription conventions were used (see Appendix). An additional notation was included placing the text of voiceovers in italics to differentiate from speakers shown speaking onscreen when transcribing television documentaries. This simplified transcription prevents preoccupation with micro details, to focus on the broader context of the interaction. However, details are provided about how the speakers are situated within the segment of the programme featured. Extracts were selected that focused on individuals identified as heirs by the programme. Next, the corpus was analysed for how heirs talked about their wealth and privilege, and how these segments were edited. Visual features, such as whether focus was placed on the speaker to the camera or if other footage was used, were incorporated into the analysis. A further stage of analysis explored interpretative repertoires (Edley and Wetherell 1997) that drew upon individualistic and meritocratic arguments in the extracts and how they oriented to the wider meritocratic environment in the UK. A closer reading then explored how ideological dilemmas were managed within the programmes.

### **Findings**

The programmes present heirs as managing a dilemma between meritocracy and privilege to account for their position. In the corpus, heirs use four interpretative repertoires to account for their privilege: (1) having a fair go, (2) unintentional privilege, (3) constructing wealth as "family money" and (4) sharing wealth with loved ones.

#### ***Having a fair go***

The heirs featured within the corpus do not deny their privilege although they do treat themselves as accountable for benefitting from privilege in a meritocracy. In Extracts 1 to 3, the heirs featured note the accidental nature of their status and downplay the positive aspects of it by emphasising the negative. Further, these children of super-rich parents depict themselves as forging a career for themselves. Extracts 1 and 2 feature the Narrator (N) and Cuppy (C), who is introduced as an "heiress to a billion-dollar fortune" on the Channel 4 documentary, *Lagos to London: Britain's New Super-Rich*.

Broadcast on 7 June 2016, this programme explores the lives of super-rich Nigerians residing in London. Cuppy's father, Femi Otedola is described as a "multi-million-dollar oil tycoon." In Extract 1, Cuppy is DJing at a televised show in Nigeria and talks about the difficulties in establishing her own identity. Extract 1 is immediately followed by a commercial break and is proceeded by Extract 2. Here, Cuppy is featured after returning to London and is reflecting on her career.

### Extract 1

1. N: *Watching tonight's show is Cuppy's dad, Femi Otedola.*
2. C: *I just want to go on stage as DJ Cuppy, but, of course, the fact that*
3. *people feel like, "Why is she DJing?" or, "oh, you know, this DJ is*
4. *blah-blah's daughter." It is annoying but I don't think it hurts me*
5. *any anymore, because I love what I do. I just worry that I'm not*
6. *going to make this impact I want to make (.) or I'm scared of (.3)*
7. *I'm scared of always being Femi Otedola's daughter. Like not*
8. *getting sort of past that, that's like a fear of mine. And, for me, that*
9. *means not being successful enough (.) too cos I can be successful,*
10. *but, you know, let's be honest, at the moment, I'm still, you know, a*
11. *little bit masked by my dad's success. If I didn't try and make it*
12. *outside Nigeria, I would be unhappy.*

### Extract 2

1. C: *I'm really optimistic, actually. I think that I'm a great DJ. I*
2. *think that's what it comes to. And I've already been asked*
3. *back to one of the clubs. Um, you know, networking comes*
4. *into it but, actually, you know, if I don't play well, I wouldn't*
5. *get asked back no matter who I know and whose daughter I*
6. *am. Actually, it's a good feeling, it is a fair, fair chance.*

In Extracts 1 and 2, Cuppy negotiates the difficulties of being positioned as an heir given the benefits of her privileged status. Using active voicing (Wooffitt 1992), Cuppy reports the perceptions of others that her success is based on her privileged background (1: 3–4), an argument heirs are required to address. Cuppy's counter-claim is that being an heir is professionally and personally problematic. Professionally, it is a barrier to establishing her own identity ("*this DJ is blah-blah's daughter*" (1:3–4)). By presenting generalised others categorisation of her as "*blah-blah's daughter*" (4) and using talk about masks, Cuppy warrants herself as a victim of her privileged circumstances. The negative personal impact this has on Cuppy is characterised in her use of emotive language ("annoying," "worry," "scared," "fear," "unhappy"). This includes not being seen as worthy of recognition in her own right and remaining in her father's shadow. Her father's success is undeniable and unavoidable ("*let's be honest*" (1:10)). When Cuppy is not speaking directly to the camera in Extract 1, footage is shown of Cuppy at an event with her father where he is introducing her to others. This footage challenges Cuppy's presentation of herself as wanting to be independent of her father.

Cuppy acknowledges one of the advantages of her upbringing in a super-rich environment as having access to networks ("*Um, you know, networking comes into it*" (2:3–4)). This example of stake confession (Potter 1996) is delivered with hesitation ("Um") indicating the delicacies of acknowledging possible claims of benefitting from family networks. However, Cuppy follows this up with an emphasis on the requirement that she must strive to be good at what she does, despite her privileged background (2: 4–6). Her

success and continuation as a DJ are based on the meritocratic principles of effort, work, and merit and an explicit orientation to fairness (*"it is a fair, fair chance"* (2:6)), based on adherence to the principles of meritocracy. Whilst Cuppy is shown DJing in a club at the start of Extract 2, she is also shown in a taxi, and someone else carries her bag; an indirect nod to her wealth and status.

### **Unintentional privilege**

In the next Extract, Vikram Chatwal (VC), a "44-year-old playboy and hotel empire heir" orients to the desire to establish his independent identity despite his position. Extract 3 is from the Channel Five series *Eamonn and Ruth: How the other half lives* (series two, episode one) broadcast on 13 September 2016. The presenters, Eamonn Holmes (EH) and Ruth Langford (RL) talk to Vikram about his art collection and lifestyle. Eamonn and Ruth interview Vikram whilst sitting on sofas in his living area in his apartment.

#### **Extract 3**

1. EH: Tell us about your experiences as (.) a very rich, privileged (.)
2.     playboy. How good is it?
3. VC: It's very flirtatious, it's very er (.) you know, attractive, and it
4.     just falls upon you. I think if you ask anyone who's gone
5.     through it, they'll also tell you that there's another side to it, a
6.     darker side.
7. RL: And did it have a dark side for you?
8. VC: I would work hard, play even harder (h). At the end, you kind
9.     of settle into what you think is a more realistic lifestyle for you.

In this Extract Vikram presents some of the more superficial aspects of his status ("flirtatious," "attractive" (3)) when asked to account for how "good" it is to be a "very rich, privileged (.) playboy" (1–2). However, this is immediately followed up with a description of his wealthy status as unintentional (*"it just falls upon you"* (3–4)) and involving a "darker side" (6) which others in his position would attest to. Vikram avoids documenting the specifics of the "darker side" of his life, and instead uses the instead "work hard, play even harder" (8) repertoire. This "work hard, play hard" interpretative repertoire is a recognised form of organisational discourse to normalise work cultures with long working hours and to place leisure activities such as drinking alcohol as a payoff for working hard (Hoedemaekers 2016). In Vikram's case, the play outweighs the work, but he warrants his wealth as being deserved as a hard worker. However, the statement is delivered against the backdrop of a domestic scene, which showcases Vikram's luxurious home.

### **It's not mine: constructing wealth as "family money"**

Extract 4 is taken from the *Rich Kids of Instagram* (episode two); a series broadcast on E4 that explores the lifestyle of super-rich heirs who identify as "the Rich Kids of Instagram." This Extract involves the Narrator (N) who provides the initial voiceover, Tim (T), a "23-year-old heir to an American fortune," and Dor (D), an "Israeli guy," Tim's friend. Tim had been previously introduced in the documentary as "Trust Fund Tim," a term used throughout the narration. Dor minimises his position as presenting his privileged status being the result of "family money" and not his own. In the Extract, Tim and Dor are

discussing the contents of Dor's wardrobe in his room. From line 9, Tim is talking directly to the camera in a room on his own.

#### Extract 4

1. N: *Tim and Dor are discovering that not all rich kids are alike.*
2. D: *I'll tell you the truth. I am not wealthy at all. I'm working very*
3. *hard, I have my business, I started from nothing. I'm getting*
4. *somewhere, it's starting. Starting to feel it. But I'm not*
5. *wealthy. Not yet. I live a good life, I work hard to play, to play*
6. *but I work harder than I play. So yeah, it is family money. I'm*
7. *working for it, right?*
8. T: *Right. Apparently, according to my followers, I don't work.*
9. *((alone)) I'm just like a best-dressed homeless person (h) I don't*
10. *know.*

In Extract 4, Tim and Dor discuss their differing images as *Rich Kids of Instagram*. The narrator contextualises the following exchange between Tim and Dor as a discovery that “*not all rich kids are alike*” (1). Public perceptions of hard-working Dor are contrasted with non-working Tim. Dor constructs himself as a hard-worker and denies being rich (“*I'll tell you the truth. I am not wealthy at all. I'm working very hard, I have my business, I started from nothing*” (2–3)). He adopts an honesty tag to support his claims regarding his “effortfulness” (Gibson 2009) and humble beginnings. This is a narrative that chimes with meritocratic ideology. Dor presenting himself as “start[ing] from nothing” (3) involves a twist to a “rags to riches” interpretative repertoire that is further contradicted when he acknowledges “*So yeah, it is family money*” (6). Dor is required to manage an ideological dilemma between individualistic ideology that supports inheritance and meritocratic ideology that requires individuals to work. The footage used within the programme supports the contradiction by displaying Dor in leisure environments, socialising with Tim and going to parties and restaurants. A visual contrast provides an ambiguous challenge to his narrative through the editing process (Condor, Tileagă, and Billig 2013). Talk of working for family money against the documentary's visual backdrop of him socialising arguably undermines the authenticity of the meritocratic claim put forward by Dor.

Tim adopts active voicing to represent others' perceptions of inherited wealth (“*Apparently, according to my followers, I don't work. ((alone)) I'm just like a best-dressed homeless person*” (8–9)). In the present example Tim uses irony, delivered directly to the camera, to confront his followers. In very different ways, Dor and Tim present themselves as hard working and deserving. However, the visual editing of the programme offers an unspoken challenge to their claims.

#### Sharing wealth with people you love

A differing strategy to accounting for privilege as an heir is to construct wealth as something you share with people you care about, friends and family. Extract 5 is taken from another episode of the “*Rich Kids of Instagram*” (episode two) series shown on E4. This Extract features Bryan (B); a 22-year-old heir to a Latin American fortune, discussing his night out in Frankfurt with his best friend and former Playboy model Bunny (BF). The Extract is introduced by the Narrator (N) and an unknown person (UP) who cannot be seen but is heard during the segment.

**Extract 5**

1. N: *There's only one thing that Brian loves more than Bunny.*
2. B: The love for champagne within us is just insane. *It's very classy and*
3. *glam to have always a glass in your hand (h) (.4) ((Footage of Bryan*
4. *and Bunny drinking from a champagne bottle)) Well, we had about*
5. UP: Eighteen
6. B: Eighteen
7. BF: We love it now.
8. B: Eighteen bottles of champagne. We had maybe 12 of Veuve
9. Clicquot and we had the rest of Dom Perignon
10. BF: Yes
11. B: Plus, the six Litres of Belvedere. I'm very blessed [to have the]
12. BF: [I know.]
13. B: wealth that I have and I love to share it to share it with the people
14. that I love the most. The only thing that bothers me the most is when
15. people just see me without knowing to get me. They think, 'Oh, this
16. arrogant kid, [stupid kid]
17. BF: [Baby, baby,] baby, listen
18. B: But then [they get to know me]
19. BF: [These are haters]
20. B: No.
21. BF: These are haters

Unlike the other speakers, Bryan and Bunny do not talk about work to account for their privileged status. Instead, Extract 5 is focused on the consumption of champagne and the enjoyment of privilege. This narrative is accompanied, in part, with clips of footage of Bryan and Bunny drinking in a nightclub (1–6). This editing emphasises the expensive brands of drinks consumed which are displayed on the screen in writing to highlight ostentatious spending. Bryan describes himself as being “blessed” to have wealth and to be able to distribute it to his friends (*“I’m very blessed to have the wealth that I have and I love to share it to share it with the people that I love the most”* (11–14)). This is evidenced in the programme by taking his friend Bunny on an expensive night out. Blessed is used as a hashtag on social media to flag luxury consumption and to promote individual accounts without appearing to show off (Saqueton 2019). By presenting himself as blessed and able to share, Bryan engages in stake inoculation (Potter 1996, 125) to negotiate potential claims about him showing off about his privileged status. Bryan is presented as lacking agency in his acquisition of privilege as it was not earned through his actions. Notable in this Extract is the absence of any attempt to legitimise this wealth and spending as deserved in any way. As Bryan states, he is perceived negatively by others (*“arrogant kid, stupid kid”* (17)) but Bunny dismisses such perceptions as being based in jealousy (*“haters,”* (20–22)). Through the use of talk about haters, Bryan positions himself as a victim of others resentment particularly as he warrants himself as lacking agency for his wealthy status.

Heirs need to manage an ideological dilemma between meritocracy and privilege. The interpretative repertoires used by the children of the super-rich within the programmes draw upon individualistic ideology. By presenting themselves as having a fair chance, heirs legitimise excessive wealth and spending as deserved. However, heirs also present their position as accidental and focus on the disadvantages of being wealthy and privileged. Talk about choosing to share wealth with people you love allows privileged individuals to minimise their accountability for their wealth. Constructing privilege as accidental allows heirs to present themselves as victims of their circumstances and lacking agency. These strategies are situated against a backdrop of programme editing

which sometimes indirectly counters speakers' narrative of being hard working by situating them in leisure environments.

## Discussion

DSP allows for the notion of meritocracy to be examined as an ideological dilemma against which inherited wealth is discussed. In the analysis, we explored how heirs use four interpretative repertoires to warrant their privilege: (1) having a fair go, (2) unintentional privilege, (3) constructing wealth as "family money" and (4) sharing wealth with loved ones. These interpretative repertoires are used to manage the dilemma of inherited wealth and privilege in entertainment documentary programmes featuring the term, "super-rich" broadcast in the UK, an allegedly meritocratic society. In Extract 4, an heir is required to manage an ideological dilemma between meritocracy and individualistic values that are used to legitimise the transfer of wealth through inheritance. Additionally, using a "work hard, play hard" interpretative repertoire allows heirs to present themselves as having a strong work ethic and aligned with meritocratic values. Despite heirs presenting themselves as hardworking, the reality programmes presented speakers in ostentatious leisure environments to challenge their position. Similarly talk about having a fair go presents privileged individuals as prepared to conform in a meritocratic environment despite this being contrasted with footage of leisure environments. A differing strategy to managing the ideological dilemma of extreme privilege in a meritocracy is to use an interpretative repertoire of unintentional privilege, allowing speakers to emphasise the negative aspects of their status and minimise their good fortune as a result of birth. Another approach is to talk about sharing wealth with loved ones. By presenting themselves as misunderstood by others, heirs are not required to orient to talk about hard work and ability, key components of social mobility in a meritocracy.

### *Work hard, play hard*

Speakers orient to Gibson's (2009) notion of "effortfulness" adopting a work hard, play hard interpretative repertoires to present their privilege as earned or deserved in some way. Being constructed as a worker provides individuals with a moral status (Billig 1992) allowing them to warrant their position as fair (Tileagă 2010). Yet, others also work hard but do not receive the same level of privilege as the children of the super-rich. Heirs are presented in leisure environments in the entertainment documentaries, a backdrop that questions their positioning as a worker and alignment with meritocratic values. The use of leisure environments in the broadcasts demonstrates how editing produces constructs "strategic ambiguity" to challenge speakers' arguments producing an unclarified dilemma that is difficult to question (Condor, Tileagă, and Billig 2013, 36). In the current example, the use of verbal and visual elements of the broadcast are edited to offer a tongue-in-cheek challenge of heirs claims to the viewer, rather than to the heir themselves. By presenting play as hard work, privileged individuals downplay the enjoyment they receive. A differing argument is to present wealth as owned by the family rather than the individual. Moreover, the individual has to work to receive it. In the UK, a society that claims to be a meritocracy, privileged individuals are required to orient to talk about their position as an heir forming an ideological dilemma. Talk

about fear is used by speakers to present themselves as active and assertive (Kitis 2009). By using fear as a discursive resource, speakers are constructed as being driven to be effortful, downgrading the benefits they have received through birth. Such strategies distance heirs from the problematic super-rich identity that is undeserving, unfair, and unjust; which runs counter to meritocratic values.

### ***Using talk about sharing and agency to minimise accountability for privilege***

The presentation of sharing with friends within the programmes allows heirs to minimise their accountability for their extreme wealth. Gifting can form an important part of relationships with significant others allowing the giver to present themselves positively (Robles 2012). Heirs use gifting and hospitality to present themselves positively and to orient to potential criticism about their spending. As hospitality is considered aspirational (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000), heirs warrant themselves as performing behaviours that others would engage in if they were also in their position. Talk about “haters” when heirs are engaging in aspirational behaviours on screen allows privileged individuals to present themselves as “tolerant” and reduce the need for explanation of this position as they construct themselves as superior (Wetherell 2012, 166). Challenging the super-rich is problematic and has been achieved through the use of humour in entertainment documentaries (Carr 2020; Carr et al. 2021) reflecting discourses around other forms of inequality explored with a discursive approach. Despite the presence of a taboo against racism (Goodman and Burke 2010), speakers warrant themselves as rational and their behaviours as positive to counter any allegations (Goodman and Johnson 2013). White fragility discourse is used to present white people as victims to maintain existing inequality (Bucholtz 2019). Similarly, claims of misogyny are countered in YouTube videos that present accusers as unreasonable (Pettersson et al. 2023). Whilst the children of the super-rich are constructed as lacking agency as their privilege is not intentional, they are constructed as agentic to position themselves as reasonable to share their wealth through gifting and hospitality to others.

## **Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates how the presentation of the children of the super-rich in entertainment documentaries draws upon meritocratic arguments to legitimise wealth and downplay privilege as a birth-right to appeal to the dominant ideology of meritocracy. In the UK, wealth is deemed to be the reward for ability and effort in an allegedly meritocratic society, therefore being an heir creates an ideological dilemma for those born into privilege. There is limited public support for economic inequality although heirs are presented as aspirational within reality television programmes. Within the corpus, the presentation of heirs draws upon meritocratic values such as their work ethic. Yet, practices such as inheritance and private education maintain the position of the children of the super-rich. These practices prevent downward social mobility for heirs and upward movement for others as would be expected in a meritocracy with the impact of COVID-19 and cost of living crisis exacerbating the challenges of living in an unequal society. The triviality of entertainment documentaries should not be dismissed as trivial as they support

the illusion of the UK as a meritocracy and restricted social mobility. It offers political commentary through the lens of entertainment.

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Appendix. Transcription guide.

(.)	Micro pause
(.2)	A longer pause measured in tenths of a second
(h)	Laughter
(unknown)	Audio indecipherable or unclear
((context))	Contextual information such as speaker actions, footage on screen or use of camera angles
[interrupt]	Speakers talk overlaps
<i>italics</i>	Voiceover or narration where speaker is not present on screen*

Taken from Jefferson (2004) except for notation\*.