

'You are not alone': the discursive construction of the 'suffering victim' identity on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

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Abstract: *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is widely recognised as the leading television talk show worldwide (Garson, 2004) and its appeal lies in its exploration of issues which have universal currency, such as relationship problems, gender-based violence and stories of survival. The *Oprah Winfrey Show* exploits the television talk show as a forum for public therapy where ordinary people and celebrities alike divulge their problems, successes and the intimate details of their private lives (Marshall, n.d.). In an attempt to understand how Winfrey has blurred the boundaries between public and private to create a modern-day public confessional, this paper explores a recurring theme on the show, the theme of suffering as it is exemplified in discourses used by guests, by Winfrey herself and by viewers. The study uses the APPRAISAL system (Martin & Rose, 2003) to analyse how the attitudinal language of the talk show constructs an identifiable victim whose narrative centres on overcoming suffering. The analysis reveals that expressions of Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are powerful mechanisms for legitimising the identity of the suffering victim. This paper argues that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* capitalises on the universality of suffering to promote therapeutic self-help for everyone, both 'suffering victims' (the guests on the talk show) and 'potential victims' (the viewers).

'If there's a thread running through each show we do, it is the message that 'you are not alone'. Entertainment is the last thing I am looking for ... My goal is to try to uplift, encourage and enlighten you in some way. I'm looking for the moment that makes you say, 'Ah ha, I didn't know that.'" Oprah Winfrey

Introduction

The Oprah Winfrey Show, recognised as the most successful television talk show of all time, has, in the 22 years of its existence, achieved massive global popularity and success (Garson, 2004; Illouz, 2003). The show is broadcast to 107 countries worldwide, transcending national and cultural boundaries (Garson, 2004). Its profound appeal appears to lie, at least in part, in its capacity to explore socially relevant topics which appeal to viewers from diverse backgrounds in terms of their age, nationality, ethnicity and religion. The show explores a wide range of topics from the titillating 'Sex – does size count?' to quotidian topics like 'Celebrity diets and weight loss'. It also tackles social issues like gender-based violence and drug abuse; typically featuring personal stories where the narrator bares their soul and describes how they survived the abuse/violence.

Winfrey herself is an important icon and *Time* magazine ranked her, alongside influential leaders like Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II and Bill Gates, as one of the 100 most influential figures of the twentieth century. Her influence may lie in her role, not only as an entertainer and media mogul, but as a therapist to the masses. Building on the talk-show therapy genre pioneered by Phil Donahue in the 1970s, Winfrey capitalised on the television talk show as a forum for public therapy, where ordinary people air their problems and receive advice from 'experts'. In her role as therapist, Oprah Winfrey has been labelled 'daytime's queen of empathy' (*Newsweek* report cited in Garson, 2004: 3). Another talk-show host explains the success of the show as relying in part on Oprah's willingness to reveal personal things about herself and her associated ability to empathise with viewers (Povich cited in Manga, 2003). She has made public her abusive childhood, her teen