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Behind the scenes: uncovering the structures and manipulations of tabloid talk show workers, guests and audiences

Kelly Thompson Losch Deshotel

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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BEHIND THE SCENES:
UNCOVERING THE STRUCTURES AND MANIPULATIONS OF TABLOID TALK
SHOW WORKERS, GUESTS AND AUDIENCES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Kelly Thompson Losch Deshotel
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful husband and family. Through their encouragement and patience, I was able to realize my dream of working for a talk show and lived to write about the experience.

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This thesis could not have been completed without the collaboration of many people who helped me succeed. Thanks to Dr. Ralph Izard for being extremely patient and helpful from my initial interest in Louisiana State University Graduate School to meeting the deadlines for graduation. Thanks to Dr. David Kurpius for his continued encouragement and advice. Thanks to Dr. Lori Boyer and Dr. Ronald Garay for serving on my committee and giving me the insight and support to complete the research.

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ABSTRACT

How talk show workers, guests and audiences behave behind-the-scenes is largely a mystery to the public. This research focuses on the behind-the-scenes workings of a daytime syndicated talk show to better understand the motivations of talk show guests and how talk show workers manipulate guests and audiences. While researchers have conducted studies of talk show guests using formal interviews and questionnaires, no researchers have posed as covert observers to study talk shows.

The researcher conducted participant observation to study the behaviors of those involved with the on and offstage talk show structure. The researcher interned for the show without revealing she was conducting a study. She anticipated the workers', guests' and audiences' behaviors would not be affected by her presence. The researcher was able to participate in the talk show environment, ultimately being accepted by those under study.

This study found that talk show workers manipulate guests and audiences to engage in onstage behavior that potentially increases ratings. This research also determined additional reasons why guests appear on talk shows. Due to those under study perceiving the researcher as an intern, they behaved as if she was a natural part of the environment, not an observer recording their actions.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The audience points and snickers as the three-foot-tall man dressed in a genie costume wobbles onstage and climbs into his chair. The “mini genie” (as he likes to be called) collects his thoughts and begins, “Women have always used me for money and now I’m getting revenge by secretly video-taping their most personal, intimate moments and broadcasting them on the Internet.” The crowd boos, and the man rushes into the audience, ready to fight anyone who mocks him. The host of the interlude appears to signal a commercial break as the man runs backstage. “How’d I do?” the genie eagerly asks the show’s producer. “Was I mean enough like we rehearsed?” Despite the negative reaction from the audience, the man’s primary concern is making the producer content with his act. This example illustrates the employee’s ability to manipulate their talk show guests.

This thesis focuses on extending understanding of the structures and manipulations of workers, guests and audiences of daytime talk shows.

1.1 What We Want to Know

This research is a participant observation case study of how television talk show guests behave offstage and how show employees manipulate guests’ behaviors behind-the-scenes at a nationally syndicated daytime television talk show. This study hopes to supplement previous research on talk show guests’ behaviors, by exploring motivations and reactions from guests who appear on talk shows.

1.2 What We Already Know

Research studies have found several motivators for guests to appear on talk shows, including: to dispel stereotypes, to be in the spotlight, to get revenge on an offender, or to

advertise their business or product (Priest, 1995). Other studies on talk shows, including how talk show content is created, found that talk show producers and hosts manipulate the content of talk shows. Talk show audience research provides evidence that these shows may influence audiences' perceptions of the world and people living in it. These research findings are placed in the context of the historical development of talk shows in the United States.

1.3 Importance

This research is important because it further investigates what previous research on talk shows and talk show workers, guests and audiences does not encompass. First, talk show guests' behaviors offstage is not a widely explored topic. Secondly, this research may determine extensions for mass communication and psychological theories by evaluating talk show guests' perceptions and behaviors in their own environment. Third, whereas previous research relies on formal interviews and questionnaires to determine guests' attitudes, this research uses covert observation of guests in a talk show setting. The study's significance lies in how television content potentially affects viewers of talk shows. Trouble may arise when talk show audiences believe what they see on television is real because it creates a sense of altered reality for the viewer (Gross & Morgan, 1985). The social comparison theory, the social learning theory and Gerbner's cultivation theory demonstrate that television viewing affects audiences (Frisby, 1998; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Gross & Morgan, 1985). Television viewers can become more aware of what they see on talk shows potentially being inaccurate, thereby not being affected by what they previously deemed real. This study is important because it will contribute to other

research in determining to what degree audiences are being fed distorted information about people in society and help predict the talk show genre's future.

1.4 How We Can Know It

This study employs participant observation as its core methodology. The researcher interned for a talk show to be an active participant observer of the happenings at a daytime talk show. As an intern, the researcher participated in the environment being studied, becoming known as an accepted part of the context under observation.

Observational techniques included casually questioning the guests immediately after appearing on a show, discussing their lives outside of the show while touring the city and studio and observing techniques the staff used to mold guests' behaviors on-air. The researcher developed questions to ask guests and relied on previous researchers' questions (Appendix).

To understand the findings of this study, we must first place it in the context of the historical development of daytime talk shows in the United States.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Talk Show History

The history of the talk show follows a downward slope of morality; talk show topics have morphed from babies' births (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 16) to "Promiscuous Teen-Daughters" (p. 2). The trend towards ludicrous talk show content may contribute to understanding the structure of today's talk show format and the people involved in producing the programs. The foundation of the talk show lies in the development and evolution of drama, leading to the present day trend towards decreased morality of talk shows. A glimpse at the history of communication, from its infancy in 5th century B.C. theatre to its evolution to talk shows of the 21st century, allows for a chronological presentation of the influences on daytime tabloid talk shows.

On a broad level, an appreciation of the evolutionary trend of the talk show format parallels the longer history of societal communications. Ancient theatre, the penny press, radio programs, the telegraph and circus sideshows have had a significant influence on the birth and history of the talk show, possibly contributing to the content decline in tabloid talk shows. While the science and art of social communication has progressed (*i.e.*, the Internet), the content of the talk show has regressed; for example, one daytime talk show aired "My Boyfriend Turned Out to Be a Girl" in 1994 (Gamson, 1998, p. 253).

On a more narrow level, tabloid talk shows demonstrate the downward spiral of the talk show industry since its inception in the 1960's. Whereas some talk shows (*i.e.*, *Donahue*) were initially conceived by some as a sort of electronic town meeting in which the host would devote an hour delving into the lives of newsworthy guests, today's talk

show (e.g., *Jenny Jones*) is simply a stage for the bizarre and the barbaric, including sexual deviants, dysfunctional families, and transsexual strippers.

Throughout history, communication has been essential to relaxation and entertainment, as individuals have sought out the company of others. The Coliseum in Rome was the stage for fierce gladiator battles fueled by the cheers of the throngs. Jousting was the staple of medieval entertainment, and the court jester was a fixture in long ago kingdoms. Indeed, according to Gamson (1998), informal talk formed the basis for today's talk shows, but the largest factor in their formation was "organized, participatory public leisure" (p. 32).

Similar to sporting events, theatre (mostly Shakespearean and often bawdy) brought together the different classes for the common purpose of entertainment. Well before interactive video, the theatre encouraged the audience to be a part of the show, resulting in "a blurring of the line between performer and audience" (Gamson, 1998, p. 35). According to Gamson, "The rambunctious participatory behavior [of the theatre], the quick and immediate responses to happenings on stage, much as it does on talk shows, made the audience part of the show" (p. 35).

It was eons before the invention of the printing press, the discovery of radio frequencies, and the development of television and talk shows that drama first emerged as a form of entertainment and status (Jacobus, 1996). Rambunctious gatherings of less privileged and uneducated individuals with their more cultured contemporaries serve as a model for the modern day talk show. Dance halls, sporting events and the theatre drew huge crowds, with the latter allowing the best opportunity for audience expression.

A series of theatrical styles, reflecting the social events of the times, emerged in each successive historical period. In the 3rd century B.C., Roman drama focused on brash comedy and crude behavior; Roman society grouped theatre with sporting events and slaughtering animals for public spectacle (Jacobus, 1996, p. 8).

According to Jacobus (1996), the ancient Egyptian and Greek populations relied on rituals that signified the bond of the public and their gods (p. 2). These rituals evolved into passion plays in ancient Egypt (p. 2). The Greek drama followed, providing “powerful artistic experiences” for the people (p. 4). From the 5th century B.C. to the 3rd century B.C., Greek drama was a “cultural necessity” (p. 5), not an entertaining escape for the people; the Greek civilization embraced scholarship and oratory, exemplified by such esteemed figures as the playwright Sophocles (p. 5).

Drama shifted its focus to religion (mainly stories from the Bible) during medieval times (Jacobus, 1996, p. 8). Throughout the 16th century, slapstick comedies and Shakespeare’s plays dominated Renaissance theatre. All social classes attended and enjoyed theatres, which were often located in the more impoverished areas of the city (p. 10). During the Restoration, theatre going became a social-status event, as theatre’s emphasis shifted to social manners and satire. In the 19th century, after the Industrial Revolution produced a larger middle class, audiences demanded entertainment, rather than the previous focus on being “displayed” at the theatre (p. 11). As the population increased, neighbors no longer lived over the mountain but instead dwelled just beyond the fence. Workers now lived in more urban areas – such as next to the factories where they worked, and audiences grew. Brockett (1996) noted, in London, two of three

theatres quickly grew to more than twenty (p. 149). With a massive audience, “catering to a mass taste led to a decline in the quality of theatrical offerings” (p. 150).

During this time, a larger working-class audience compelled the more civilized upper-class audience to abandon the theatre (Brockett, 1996, p. 149) and pursue other interests. Philosophy and the arts emerged as the central topics for discussion among the intellectuals who frequented the English coffeehouses in the 17th century. Literary organizations and fraternal associations formed for the sole purpose of encouraging the members to collectively delve into lofty academic subjects. As Gamson (1998) explained, these gatherings were an opportunity for the formal exchange of ideas, which became the model for the earliest talk shows, such as *Donahue*. Serving as a self-appointed group facilitator or moderator, host Phil Donahue would identify a provocative issue, cast it out to the audience, and listen to anyone who volunteered their opinion on the issue.

The traveling circus and, in particular, the politically incorrect “freak show,” impacted the development of the television talk show. P.T. Barnum achieved legendary status for propelling the freak show to its impressive peak of popularity and is credited with coining the fittingly and infamous phrase: “there’s a sucker born every minute.” Gamson (1998) notes that talk shows, like circus sideshows, target poor, uneducated people and observes the similarity between Barnum’s strategy and talk show hosts’ strategies. For example, on one program host Geraldo Rivera proudly exclaimed, “Today you are going to see something that will shock and amaze you” (p. 40). Barnum and Geraldo are both showmen who strove to excite the audience by promising, and later delivering in a

flourish, the unexpected and bizarre. Both the freak show and the talk show elevate the odd, peculiar and bizarre to the status of entertainment.

After the freak show era, newspapers contributed to the prevalence of sensational topics on talk shows. In the 1830's, penny newspapers arrived and portrayed sensational information as news. The *New York Sun* and the *New York Herald* shunned political news and focused on "crime and sex" (Postman, 1985, p. 66).

The telegraph followed suit, prompting a discourse in "the language of headlines-sensational, fragmented, impersonal" (Postman, 1985, p. 70). Suddenly, trivial information for entertainment was popular. The telegraph, the revolutionary invention that translated messages into electromagnetic impulses, allowed individuals across the country to share mundane news with one another at a then unheard of immediacy. Since the telegraph as machine is inherently nondiscriminatory, whether the telegraphed message was or was not newsworthy was irrelevant. The focus was on the speed the telegraph produced, not the quality of the messages.

According to Postman (1985), "The telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence . . . [T]elegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information" (p. 65). Postman explained why tabloids and talk shows appeal to vast audiences; as the first means to permit transmission of trivial information across great distances, the telegraph may have been a primary catalyst for the popularity of tabloid talk show programs today (p. 80).

Radio was the next major contributor to tabloid talk show's content. The first listener-participation radio shows originated in the 1930's and 1940's. It was a time when men

dominated the airwaves, hosting talent shows and performing comedy sketches. One notable example from that era is *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour*, which featured amateur performers who were hoping for a big break. By the 1950's, talk show mania was spreading into the burgeoning visual medium of television. Late night shows first emerged onto the scene with Sylvester Weaver's popular *Broadway Open House*. By the end of the decade, dozens of hosts littered the television landscape. At the same time, the format split along gender lines, with certain shows aimed at women and the others at men.

In the coming decade, one man would dramatically impact the talk show format and change the future of the program by allowing his audience, primarily women, to be seen and heard. The talk show format would never be the same.

In the 1960's, Phil Donahue made an indelible impact on the talk show nation when he tweaked his talk show, *Donahue*, to cater to both men and women (Gamson, 1998, p. 43). Donahue allowed his audience to take center stage, transforming the program into a forum for the "ordinary person," who (by no coincidence) was also the average talk show viewer. In the middle of the women's liberation movement, Donahue shrewdly targeted women between 18 and 49 years of age (p. 45), broke down preconceived barriers and notions and aired the female opinion before a national audience. Advertisers reaped the benefits of the target audience, which remains today.

It was the year 1967 that Donahue transformed the format from the interview format with active host in charge to active audience in charge and host as facilitator. In so doing, Donahue granted the audience the stature and visibility to influence the viewers' perceptions of the topic, the guest, and each other. According to research by Heaton and

Wilson (1995), the audience became an important component of talk shows, forever changing the face of talk shows. Heaton and Wilson conclude, “Like so many others in America, the women watching Donahue finally had a place in the conversation, and they were determined to be heard” (p. 18). Donahue believed in show topics that sparked audiences to voice their opinions or inquire more about the issue at hand (Mincer & Mincer, 1982, p. 66).

Dinah’s Place, hosted by Dinah Shore, aired in 1970. The show targeted women, strayed from religious and political topics and mainly featured “talk, music, home improvement, and cooking tips” and advice “on how to stay attractive, young, and beautiful” (Timberg, 2002, p. 105). Shore, as “America’s girl-next-door” and domestic “hostess,” proved that women hosts could be successful (p. 106).

In 1986, another female host arrived on the scene. Oprah Winfrey entered the talk show arena, giving Donahue unprecedented competition. Whereas Donahue’s technique was to “uncover and explore,” Oprah’s was to “share and understand” (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 25). By revealing her personal life in a public forum and forming an intimate bond with the audience, Oprah reeled in the audience. According to Gamson (1998), Oprah and Donahue instigated the television trend toward admission and treatment. “Talk shows took the ‘talking cure’ and, combining it with the tabloidism of the ‘true confessions’ magazine genre, moved it in front of the cameras” (p. 54).

Although self-disclosure grew in popularity in the 1980’s, it first arrived on the television scene in the 1950’s. On the 1950’s radio and television show *Queen for a Day*, women won gifts such as washing machines after telling stories of their struggles (Priest, 1995, p. 2). In the 1980’s and 1990’s, self-disclosure littered television talk shows; Oprah

contributed to its prevalence when she confessed to being sexually abused, addicted to food and having used cocaine (Kurtz, 1997, pp. 70-1).

According to Gamson (1998), telling all to the viewers suddenly became “good for you” (p. 54). As the therapeutic style grew, hosts began to heighten the “debate-the-issues structure” (p. 56), pitting one view against its opposition. The audience openly bashed the guests, as the host remained a facilitator for the brawls (p. 56).

Next to emerge on the increasingly crowded talk show scene were Sally Jessy Raphael and Geraldo Riviera. Sally and Geraldo personified the serious, therapeutic talk shows being driven out by “freak shows and exaggerated emotional displays” (Gamson, 1998, p. 31). Indeed, Geraldo’s persona was “fist-fighting-investigative-reporter-with heart” (p. 55). Suddenly, no topic was taboo, and there was no respect for the guest’s “private” home. As a result, personal lives poked and provoked the public eye in unparalleled numbers.

As guests used talk shows as an outlet to disclose their private lives on national television, society did not blame television or talk show hosts for the invasion, but rather the guests. Talk shows remained popular despite negative reactions to the guests.

By the 1990’s, spurred mainly by the unprecedented growth of cable television, nearly thirty talk shows cluttered the airwaves (Gamson, 1998, p. 32). Ricki Lake, a young and formerly obese actress, stepped into the limelight and “younged” the talk show audience by focusing on personal relationships. The goal of *Ricki Lake*’s producers was to target an untapped resource, 18 to 34 year old black, Latino and urban men (p. 58). Talk show hosts Jerry Springer and Jenny Jones mimicked Lake’s tactic to succeed in the face of declining talk show ratings and cancellations. At the end of the 1990’s, *Oprah*

and *Jerry Springer* were the most popular daytime talk shows, proving society's preference for a "trashy" program and a "classy" program (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 27).

The aforementioned components shaped tabloid talk shows into what they are today. Whereas once talk shows were a forum for discussion, now they are a platform for debate, yelling, fighting and fame. "It is quite plain that an increased circus atmosphere has, on many shows, meant that 'freak' treatment has increased" (Gamson, 1998, p. 63). Grindstaff (2002) wrote, "Whereas talk shows used to tackle serious issues in a more or less dignified manner, now they were more raucous and theatrical, with 'sleazy' topics and younger, less-educated guests" (pp. 7-8).

2.2 Talk Show Content

The content of talk shows potentially affects audiences. Aside from how the producers and directors create and decide the content, mass communication theories demonstrate the potential effect of talk shows on audiences.

Daytime talk shows thrive on the outrageous (Gamson, 1998, p. 63) because producers seek a sensational show with high ratings. Kurtz (1997) believes the "oh-so-serious programs" have diminished in superiority (p. 11) and the way to be triumphant in talk, "is to shout, to polarize, to ridicule, to condemn, to corral the most outrageous or vilified guests" (p. 13). Grindstaff opines early talk shows resemble "the rational, public-service model of talk," while today's talk shows mirror a "carnival freak show" (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 54). The consensus is today's talk shows rely on shocking guests, rather than quality talk content.

Producers use various tactics to seek out extreme (often troubled) guests and thus increase ratings. Producers first determine how they want to portray the guests and then

search for people to fit into their preconceived cast (Gamson, 1998, p. 77). One ex-producer explained, “You book whoever you can, and it’s just cheaper to tell them what to say” (p. 77). Producers are looking for drama, for the “money shot,” as they ask talk show guests to describe their private lives in a way that captures “joy, sorrow, rage, or remorse expressed in visible, bodily terms” (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 19).

Producers promise the guests special treatment that guests rarely receive once they arrive for the show. Producers of the *Gordon Elliot* show promised Jenny Sayward (director of a lesbian organization) and her family an all expenses-paid trip to New York to discuss how closed-mindedness about gays affects their families. Sayward never received compensation for parking fees incurred at the show and felt the producer’s promise of a luxury hotel was misleading. In a letter to Heaton and Wilson (1995) after the show, Sayward wrote, “they [the producers] manipulate the participants to promote the producers’ own agenda for the show” (1994).

Had Sayward refused to be a guest, the producers would have strongly persuaded her into appearing. The producers must quickly ease any fears the guests may have about appearing on a talk show. Heaton and Wilson (1995) believe, “fast talking and instant intimacy are often required” (p. 186). Producers tell apprehensive guests to calm their nerves, instead of addressing their hesitation to discuss their private lives on national television (p. 186). The producers ensure the guests they will not be labeled as “freaks” (p. 186). Producers try to excite the guests before the show by placing guests in different greenrooms and going from room to room, telling guests about comments other guests are making about them (p. 187). Grindstaff (2002) believes producers “fluff” guests to ensure they will give a big, climatic performance onstage (p. 121).

When the cameras begin rolling, the talk show host and audience ask the guests whatever they desire; no topic is off limits. This may increase ratings, but it can potentially harm the guests. Talk shows give the appearance that revealing all is therapeutic, “the more public the confession, the greater the absolution” (Gamson, 1998, p. 96). Often guests are not ready to answer a question, but feel forced to do so; the bold questions throw the guests off guard. “Producers probe for the most vulnerable aspects of guests’ lives” (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 187).

It is this “probing” that can lead to more problems for the guests. The guests who have significant problems often do not know how to handle their troubles. The producers recognize these individuals’ malleability and book them on their shows (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 177). A guest’s mental health is not properly screened prior to his or her appearance on the show. Guests may not know of choices that could lead to improving their mental health (p. 181) and “there is no way to confirm the nature of the problems being presented” (p. 182). Inexperienced producers have not been properly trained in assessing mental health problems; producers cannot adequately determine the guests’ risk factor (p. 182).

Producers who are not equipped to solve guests’ problems may attempt to portray the guests’ problems being resolved in the time allotted for the program. Some talk shows have led audiences to believe guests’ problems, often of great magnitude, can be worked out in less than one hour. Viewers are tricked into thinking self-disclosure is the proper way to deal with heavy emotional issues, such as rape (Heaton & Wilson, 1995).

The potential for hurting guests is often compounded in various situations. For instance, guests are in danger when mental health experts appear on the shows.

Sometimes, even “nonexperts” with titles such as “sex educator” fills the role of mental health professional (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 208). The producers constantly prod for the meat of the story, often making smaller problems seem more detrimental than they are (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 183).

Critics of talk shows argue that exposing secrets on television is not suitable treatment. “Therapy is not a spectator sport,” contends sociologist Vicki Abt. Airing dirty laundry on national television is “like defecating in public” (Kaplan, 1995, p. 12). Featuring therapists on programs gives false impressions of true mental help for the guests, causing more serious issues for those involved (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, pp. 203-4).

Guests with true mental problems put themselves in danger, while other guests are merely actors searching for fame. Tony West is a recurring talk show guest pursuing an acting career who is representative of a fake guest (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 148). The debate continues about real versus fake television talk show guests. Heaton and Wilson (1995) believe, “since many of these people have very real trouble, the potential for real harm, not just staged harm, is great” (p. 175).

While “real” guests may be traumatized after the show, the audience does not hear much about the negative experience for guests. The audience is led to believe the talk show experience is a positive one (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 176). Audiences and guests receive a distorted view of the effects of appearing on talk shows when they do not think anyone suffers. As a result of their optimistic anticipations, viewers might volunteer to be talk show guests.

2.3 Talk Show Guests

Previous research studies determined and expanded on different motives and reactions to appearing on a talk show. Researchers interviewed guests in fixed settings, often weeks or months after the guests appeared on the show (Priest, 1995).

After researchers interviewed and observed guests in staged settings, researchers asked guests why they appear on talk shows. Priest (1995) concludes that people are motivated to be guests on talk shows to uncover misconceptions and stereotypes about guests and prove them wrong (p. 46), while others desired to try new things (p. 40).

After interviewing previous *Donahue* guests, Priest grouped the guests into four categories of talk show participants: evangelicals, moths, plaintiffs and marketers. The primary goal of an evangelical is to, “address injustices and remedy stereotypes” (p. 46). Priest found their focus, “...engulfed other considerations such that any hesitancy about disclosure was outweighed by their perceived benefits to society and to the standing of each one’s marginalized group” (p. 46). The second category, moths, was used to describe guests who are drawn to the celebrity of being on television. Priest states moths are, “[I]ured by the flickering light of the screen” (p. 47). One guest told Priest, “If I’m on TV, I’m worthy of something, because there’s a lot of people watching me” (p. 47). Another guest said, “I always wanted to be [on television]” (p. 47). A third “moth” told Priest, “I’ve wanted to be in show business and... Well, this is the closest I can come to being on stage” (p. 48). The next category of guests is plaintiffs, who “...stepped forward...to plead their cases against people who had victimized them” (p. 46). The last group, marketers, is comprised of “...those who eagerly seized the chance to hawk a book or business venture” (p. 46).

Grindstaff (2002) examined a broader range of shows and found additional motivation for guests to appear on a talk show (p. 153). The guests' motivations included: a combination of motives, persuasion (by producer or family member), volunteering (such as actors), closure in an argument (pp. 153-159), a free trip, or fame (p. 162).

Onstage, guests are prompted to be honest about their lives, while offstage they are told what to say, even if they do not feel it is accurate (Gamson, 1998, p. 70). Some viewers feel they have what it takes to be a guest because they know exactly what type of person the producers hope to book. They have seen numerous talk shows, and know the qualities of a "good" guest. Once onstage, "they are parodies of themselves," says ex-producer Mike Kappas (p. 87). Some guests find the lights, cameras and audience as a call to act, the "cues" necessary for their performance (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 126).

Kurtz (1997) asserts that although guests voluntarily humiliate themselves on talk shows for a moment in the spotlight, it is still a disheartening form of "mass exploitation" (p. 63). Some guests learn to expect the stigma that is associated with talk show guests. A transsexual lesbian named Kate recognizes the negative reactions from most of society. She says, "I've just come to expect general ridicule and hostility. It's real interesting. And when I don't get that I'm very surprised...I've learned to assume that everybody looks at me and goes, 'What the fuck is that?'" (Priest, 1995, p. 35).

When Sayward appeared as a guest on *Gordon Elliot*, her comments were often cut from the television broadcast and several other incidents were edited from the final broadcast (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 184). In an interview with Heaton and Wilson, Sayward (1994) said, "The show was a fiasco! Every one of us was exploited and

trivialized to the point of caricature...I was cut off and my kids never had a chance to tell their stories.”

Guests appearing on talk shows have a moment in the spotlight, and then audiences and producers focus on the next show and a new crop of guests. Heaton and Wilson (1995) believe guests “are especially easy to forget” (p. 176). Producers are interested in guests prior to their appearance on the program because of their misfortunes. After the show, “the producers who were so attentive before aren’t worried about those problems any more – or the ones they might have caused for guests” (p. 192). The guests are quickly escorted to their transportation home after the show, leaving no time for an unhappy guest to complain to the producer.

2.4 Talk Show Workers

The talk show host attracts audiences because audiences feel they know him or her “under conditions of apparent intimacy” through his [or her] extensive television “exposure factor” (Munson, 1993, p. 128); additionally, he or she appears to be for the people’s cause (p. 128).

Talk show producers use their powers of persuasion to attract audiences and guests. According to Munson (1993), workers “must ‘be creative’ and show ‘moxie’ in their persuasive efforts” (p. 66). During weekly meetings before each show, executive and supervising producers dole out show topics to producers (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 85). To find guests, producers use different resources, such as searching Internet databases, contacting actor unions or hospitals, responding to guest phone-ins and employing “stringers” or “freelance bookers” (p. 93). The producers speak to potential guests over the phone to ascertain their credibility and worthiness to appear on the show (p. 98).

Once producers approve a guest, they may promise haircuts and makeovers in exchange for appearing on the show (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 106). In their quest for drama between guests, producers sometimes enlist people to act out parts, based on the producer's need to fill a slot for the show (Lowney, 1999, p. 28). This practice often makes the staff appear "callous and manipulative" (p. 28).

2.5 Talk Show Theories

Theories on television's effect on audiences help illustrate the significance of this study. The social comparison theory, the social learning theory and the cultivation theory demonstrate television's potential to shape viewers' beliefs.

2.5.1 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory explains people's need for comparison. Festinger believed that people usually compare themselves to others who are somewhat similar to them because people want true self-perception. Sometimes, however, people compare themselves to those people inferior to themselves; because of the comparison (as in the case of audiences comparing themselves to daytime talk show guests), they increase their confidence and self-esteem.

Festinger advises that conducting "unchallenging comparisons" to those seemingly less fortunate lead to unfavorable results. For example, if audiences of talk shows such as *Jerry Springer* or *Jenny Jones* compare their abilities against those guests who are subordinate, they will be unlikely to attempt to improve themselves. Because of comparison, audiences feel they do not have to improve themselves because they are apparently superior to the less fortunate talk show guests. "For the audience," says Kurtz (1997), "watching the cavalcade of deviant and dysfunctional types may serve as a kind

of group therapy, a communal exercise in national voyeurism” (p. 62). While audiences insult the guests, “[p]erhaps the sight of so many people with revolting problems makes some folks feel better about their own rather humdrum lives” (p. 62).

The social context of the comparison affects the pleasure and pain associated with comparison (Brickman & Bulman, 1977). Downward comparisons are favored because they make one feel better about himself or herself. Upward comparisons are avoided because they can be threatening. Thus, it is unlikely a talk show guest would compare himself to the seemingly rich, affluent, educated host.

People have different motives for engaging in social comparison (Martin & Gentry, 1997). One study focused on girls’ motivations for comparing themselves to models. The motive for comparison affected the outcome of the subject’s self-esteem. When a young girl makes an upward comparison to a model in a magazine, she might experience a decreased self-esteem; however, if a young girl actively seeks a downward comparison to a model, she increases her self-esteem, because she has determined areas in which she is superior to the model.

While finding the correlation between the social comparison theory and talk shows, Frisby (1998) hypothesized that “self-enhancement or feeling better about oneself and one’s life may explain why people watch what some consider to be trashy, morbid TV programs.” According to Frisby’s research, watching those people with greater misfortunes allows the audience to feel better about themselves. Frisby tested audiences of talk shows before and after watching a taped program; she found that subjects scored higher on life assessment tests after viewing talk shows (and making downward comparisons to the talk show guests).

Because talk show guests “tell all” about their personal lives on national television, an audience member may benefit by feeling better about himself or herself after watching guests with misfortunes.

A talk show host may use the program as an outlet to feel better about himself or herself, while pretending to be concerned for the guest’s best interest. Gamson (1998) asserts,

[The talk shows]...are filled with...hosts who wear their hypocrisies on their tailored sleeves, shedding tears for the people whose secrets they extract for profit while attacking them for revealing secrets on national television, riling up their guests and then scolding them for being so malicious (p. 4).

Some talk show hosts are quick to defend their reasons for interrogating seemingly troubled guests. Host Jerry Springer states, “As long as they [the guests] speak the King’s English, we say it’s OK. But then you get someone who isn’t wealthy, who doesn’t have a title of position, and they come on and talk about something that’s important to them – all of a sudden we call that trash” (Chidley, 1996, p. 53). Springer claims he is giving those unfortunate people, “access to the airwaves,” says Kurtz (1997), “as if embarrassing them before millions were some kind of public service” (p. 61).

2.5.2 Social Learning Theory

Aside from increasing the audience’s self-confidence, a talk show may have other effects on viewers, due to its medium of transmission, television. From infancy on, children learn more about society from TV than from school, their parents, or any other source. Gerbner cited, “Television today is the central cultural arm of American society. TV’s role is like that of religion in the preindustrial society – TV is today’s religion” (Lerner, 1984, p. 104). To illustrate, television is the primary entertainment and

educational activity for Americans; it is considered the main form of entertainment in America's households (Signorielli & Lears, 1992).

Audiences spend approximately 3.43 hours a day in front of the television, and the television is on for an average of 7.2 hours per day. Audiences watch the most television during prime time; the greatest number of prime time viewers comes from large, low-income households with children under six years old (AC Nielsen Company, 1994). The sheer prevalence of television makes its effects far reaching.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory states that people learn from experience or observation. People can learn antisocial or prosocial behaviors based on what they see on television or in movies. According to Severin and Tankard (2001), the majority of mass media effects occur through social learning. For example, from watching an episode of a talk show about dating, one might learn a technique for kissing based on interactions between couples on the program. The social learning theory relates to Gerbner's beliefs; he believes that television is possibly the most pervasive lifestyle factor in today's society (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1981).

2.5.3 Cultivation Theory

The cultivation theory posits that spending more time watching television, witnessing inaccurate representations of society, leads to misconceptions of reality (Gross & Morgan, 1985). Talk show audiences may begin to believe talk shows guests are an accurate representation of society. Therefore, heavy viewers of talk shows may be more likely to believe in a higher occurrence of instances that are typically portrayed on talk shows. For example, if audiences are constantly exposed to sexually active teenage characters on daytime talk shows, audiences may infer that these characters are the norm

and that the majority of teens in America are sexually active. If people are basing what they know about the world on what they see on television (Lerner, 1984), they should be informed as to whether the characters on the programs they watch are reflective of the people living in America. This study aims to determine the accuracy of the portrayal of guests on talk shows.

Gerbner's "mean world" cultivation theory determines the effects of heavy viewing of TV on perception. According to Gerbner, "TV's world is more violent than the real world – a mean and dangerous place." Furthermore, "heavy viewers are more likely to think they will be victims of violence in real life" (Lerner, 1984, p. 108). For example, an overrepresentation of gangs or thugs on talk shows may lead television audiences to believe there are more violent groups in the country than actually exist.

Goldsen (1984), who agrees with Gerbner that television cultivates homogenous perceptions of television viewers, believes, "Because of the pervasiveness of television, characteristic images of the world become the most familiar aspects of the shared cultural environment within which minds are fertilized and matured" (p. 106).

As reality television clutters television channels, audiences must learn how to differentiate between what might be exaggerated, and sometime staged (*i.e.*, talk shows) and what could be a true representation of society (*i.e.*, news, documentaries). Audiences are being fed a diet of the Hollywood formula for successful television ratings - sex, nudity and violence, packaged and delivered as reality talk show television.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview

This thesis employed participant observation as the means of gathering qualitative data (*i.e.*, field notes) and analysis. Participant observation was used as this study's core methodology because the focus of the research was studying talk show workers, guests and studio audiences in their own environments without their awareness of a researcher being present. The researcher's status remained hidden; as a result, the subjects' behaviors were uninfluenced by the presence of a known observer.

In participant observation, the researcher is immersed in the culture of interest. In this case, the researcher relocated to a large, metropolitan city from August to December 2002, to work as an intern for a nationally syndicated talk show. The internship allowed an insider's view of the happenings of the program, both in front of and behind-the-scenes.

This methodology contains a case study of ten episodes of the show, including the persons (usually 10-12 guests and three producers) associated with each weekly taping. After getting to know the workers and guests extensively (through walks, casual conversations, dining, visiting, shopping and other activities) and reviewing the field notes, the researcher concluded the case study was an accurate representation of talk show guests and workers of the program. Additionally, the show under study was a representation of daytime tabloid talk shows because of the time of day it aired, the show's atmosphere (in which insults from the audience are encouraged) and the apparent "sympathy" of the host. Since the researcher's main duties as an intern occurred behind-

the-scenes of the talk show, the researcher had direct access to the guests and workers, and limited access to the audience.

3.2 Participant Observation

The participant observation technique was inappropriate for studies of quantitative research, this method was useful for, “exploratory studies, descriptive studies, and studies aimed at generating theoretical interpretations” and for an assessment of existing theories (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 13). Previous researchers have not had behind-the-scenes access to a talk show, other than as a known observer. This research aims to provide the missing link, the researcher as a covert observer.

The researcher did not use quantitative methods, such as surveys, to conduct the research; doing so would impose using a scientific device that subjects might find to be an inaccurate measurement of their perceptions (Bruyn, 1966). Furthermore, surveys and questionnaires would sabotage attempts to be a covert observer. Based on other research on talk shows, qualitative methods are adequate for revealing motives and attitudes of those associated with talk shows (Gamson, 1998; Grindstaff, 2002; Priest, 1995). Previously, research on talk show guests focused on using interviews and contacting guests after they returned home to obtain data rather than covert observation of guests due to inaccessibility to behind-the-scenes at a talk show.

Denzin (1970) notes three necessary qualities of participant observation: fully engaging in the subjects’ affairs, sharing of the subjects’ symbolic environment and creating an identity. The researcher fulfilled these requirements. First, the researcher relocated to the city where the program was filmed, allowing her to be accessible to the guests and workers at all times. Second, to share with the world of staff and guests, the

participant observer dined with the guests and staff and partook in events such as trips to the salon and mall to add merit to the study. Finally, the researcher informed the talk show workers and guests of her position, a graduate student at Louisiana State University, but not as a participant observer of their actions.

Building trust was very important to the research because positive communications with the subjects allowed access to their real lives (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 70). The researcher gained deeper understanding of the subjects by building relationships with them, supporting them, listening to their complaints and offering them comforts (*e.g.*, cigarettes for the guests).

Direct observation and experience were the principal means to gather information in this study, but the researcher also used documents, recordings, artifacts, interviews and casual conversations (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 22). The insider used greenroom lists, show scripts, guests' luggage (be it a plastic bag or suitcase), guests' clothing and guests' accessories (*e.g.*, did the guest carry cigarettes or alcohol with them during tours of the city?) to gain clues about the guests' lives outside of the talk show experience.

The researcher kept detailed field notes, interviewed potential guests, attended staff meetings and answered phone hotlines at the show. The field notes were recorded in the insider's language (*i.e.*, their slang). The researcher noted things that were important to the guests, what these things meant and guests' public and private conversations and language. The researcher reviewed the field notes as a means for determining what additional questions needed to be asked during the guest and researcher's next meeting. In analysis, the field notes developed into autoethnography, which involved recording

and reflection when “action, feeling, thought, and language” were revealed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 209).

The researcher did not become overly involved by befriending any guests or by appearing as a guest on a talk show as doing so may have lead to skewed results. The researcher was exposed to all viewpoints (guests’, audiences’ and co-workers’) without being swayed by one particular group.

3.3 Previous Research

Major contributors to talk show research were Gamson, Grindstaff and Priest. These researchers relied on observing and interviewing guests; however, their status as researcher was known. Gamson (1998) relied on interviewing staff and guests and attending tapings (as an audience member) on which he took field notes (p. 228). Grindstaff (2002) spent more than one year working at two daytime television talk shows. She took field notes and conducted interviews with producers and guests, who were aware of her position as a researcher (p. 282). Grindstaff initially planned on not revealing she was a researcher, but felt that exposing herself was in the best interests of the study because one year was a long time to hide her research intentions. Priest (1995) contacted past guests of *Donahue* because of the show’s extensive history.

Contacting guests and access to behind-the-scenes proved to be a problem for the previous researchers of talk shows. Priest (1995) notes the most common hindrance to finding guests was unlisted phone numbers; furthermore, the *Donahue* staff was unable to legally assist Priest in locating or contacting previous guests. Priest claims the focus on using “key players” was difficult because of limited access to them (p. 207).

Because Priest (1995) conducted interviews, she faced the guests' "high self-monitoring tendencies" when answering questions (p. 210). "Their well-honed skills of impression management make them particular capable of crafting and executing a socially acceptable rationale for their television disclosures" (p. 210). Results were different than those in controlled environments, because subjects act differently outside of their natural environments. For example, Jorgensen (1989) observed that animals behaved differently in environments controlled by researchers, such as a zoo cage or laboratory (p. 15). Priest also faced the "challenge" of "redirecting [the guests'] thoughts to their prior views of the situation" because time had elapsed since they appeared on the show (p. 204).

Priest conducted formal interviews with guests after they appeared on the program; therefore, this research would supplement her study by observing how guests behave in natural settings during their talk show experience.

3.4 Gaining Entry

The researcher received her bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University (LSU) in December 2001 and enrolled in graduate school at LSU in spring 2002. The researcher wished to intern at a nationally syndicated news program or talk show. She applied for numerous shows across the United States. The internship coordinator from the show under study contacted the researcher in June 2002 to begin the process of placing the researcher as an intern for fall 2002. The researcher submitted the necessary forms to complete the process.

The researcher rented an apartment one half mile from the talk show studio. She lived there for the duration of the internship. The intern would walk to and from work, often lamenting on what was to come or what had just happened that day at the talk show.

The researcher signed a consent form the first day, agreeing to not divulge any information about the show that was not public knowledge. Therefore, the researcher was not able to give the name of the program or program's workers, guests or audience members. The thesis, in particularly the results section, contains pseudo-names for anyone associated with the talk show.

3.5 Gathering Data

Questions to ask guests, workers and audiences were based on Jorgensen's (1989) suggestions, Priest's (1995) open-ended questions, Gamson's (1998) interview questions and the researcher's anticipation of the talk show experience (Appendix).

Initial feelings were recorded before and during the researcher's first day as an intern; a researcher's view may quickly become altered once he or she is more comfortable and accustomed to the new environment (Jorgensen, 1989, pp. 56-57). Premonitions, hunches and instincts were also recorded (p. 99).

The researcher was eventually accepted as an integral part of the pre- and post-production elements of each talk show taping. The researcher empathized with the guests, always providing support when guests were unhappy with their treatment at the show. Whenever they needed advice or gathered to go out, the guests would contact the researcher. The workers relied on the intern to perform various tasks. The audience members recognized the intern as an authority at the talk show and listened to her instructions for entering the studio.

The researcher purchased a small “chubby notebook” in which to discreetly record notes while at the studio or around town with those involved with the talk show. The researcher frequently kept notes while “interning,” running to a cubicle or bathroom stall to record notes that required immediate attention such as quotes. On one occasion, the researcher used a changing room in which to sit and secretly record notes, while a guest tried on dresses to wear onstage.

The researcher often did not have time to expand on the issues she was able to quickly scribble in her notebook while no one was watching. She would later add more detail from abbreviations and symbols she recorded during the fast pace of the show. For example, when one guest got her hair cut, the researcher drew a picture of a woman’s face with words she brainstormed while waiting for the guest. Using separate pages of her notebook, the researcher recorded her perceptions of the guest (“raunchy, dirty, demanding, princess”), words and phrases she heard the guest using (“cheap, whatever, I need more color”) and words and phrases from others at the salon (“who does this girl think she is?”). That night at home, the researcher connected the words and phrases and tried to find a theme emerging from the data.

The researcher found it useful to observe the publics’ reactions to the workers, guests and audiences as well. The researcher kept notes on how passer-bys and workers at shopping malls, hotels, restaurants, hair salons and coffee shops reacted to a flashy or showy guest. The researcher usually could not hear what the public was saying, but she noted their mannerisms and body language. For example, the researcher witnessed a group of policemen at a coffee shop whispering, pointing and laughing at a little person

guest ordering a pastry. Finally, the men approached the guest as the spokesman for the group said, “You must be one of the guests on [the talk show].”

3.6 Analysis

After collecting field notes and documents (photographs, production notes and show schedules), the researcher faced the dilemma of how to interpret the material. Lareau (1989) believes that when using qualitative methods, researchers must accept the results such as vagueness. Like Priest (1995), the researcher used Glaser and Strauss’s method of constant comparison to fit “data into evolving categorizations that are strengthened or discarded as the analysis proceeds” (p. 205).

Priest (1995) grouped the guests into four categories of talk show participants: evangelicals, mothers, plaintiffs and marketers (p. 46). This research aimed to add to Priest’s research, identifying additional categories or subcategories of guests, because Priest’s presence may have prompted guests to say what they thought she wanted to hear.

When analyzing the data, the researcher relied on the constant comparative method of grounded theory, looking for emerging patterns, themes and relationships based on the recurrence of words or concepts. The researcher was able to see the “similarities and differences” of the emerging categories to determine and explain behaviors (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 36). The relationships among guests’, workers’ and audiences’ thoughts surfaced and were grouped based on repeated themes. The categories were supported by guests’, workers’ and audiences’ quotes: this allowed the subjects’ interpretations, not the researcher’s, to emerge. The researcher used coding such as keywords she found. Spenders tended to use “I want” and “Why not?” advisors opted for “You should” to dispense advice and investors often used “I hope.” Some subjects were mixture of

different categories. The guests that fit equally into more than one group were not categorized in the analysis. For example, a guest who was a babysitter for a family in which she slept with the husband appeared because her story was real and she wanted to meet the host, but she also brought a friend to have a good time at the show.

The researcher grouped the guests into three separate categories in addition to Priest's four categories. Each category is supported by examples of the guest's behavior or with quotes the researcher recorded while conducting research. The researcher ceased grouping categories when she felt that she exhausted the possibility of additional categories emerging.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

According to Jorgensen (1989), participant observation is focused on "dependable and trustworthy findings" (p. 37) and produces "highly valid concepts," with a "decrease in reliability" (p. 36). Reliability, however, is not a concern because it "generally does not involve measurement" (p. 38). To prevent the researcher misrepresenting subjects, this study used numerous "standpoints and sources" to result in a lower probability of inaccurate portrayals (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 53).

3.8 Research Questions

This thesis studies the behaviors and manipulations of talk show workers, guests and audiences based on observations and how they see themselves and their appearances.

The research aims to answer the following questions:

3.8.1 Guests

1. How do guests decide to appear on the program?

2. What is the difference in guests' behavior from when a producer is present to when another guest is present (*e.g.*, give different reasons for their motivation to appear on the show)?
3. How do repeat guests behave differently than first-time guests?
4. After the show, do guests think the experience was a negative or positive one?
5. Do guests feel they are misrepresented on talk shows through producers' manipulations?
6. Aside from Priest's (1995), are there additional categories of talk show guests?

3.8.2 Workers

7. Do producers behave differently when a guest is present?
8. Do producers manipulate guests' behaviors and presentations?

3.8.3 Audience

9. What is the audience interaction with the guests offstage? Does the audience behave differently towards guests outside of the studio?
10. Does the audience ever sympathize with the guests?
11. Does audience loyalty to the host remain after the cameras stop rolling?

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

4.1 Traits of Talk Show Guests

Prior to the program's taping, most of the talk show guests are excited and energetic about appearing on the program. The guests arrive in the city, eager to meet the host and the security guards. The guests anticipate the makeovers the producers promise when trying to book them on the show. Often, a guest's excitement levels surge, then drop as the experience progresses. After waiting in greenrooms most of the day, the guests become tired or doubtful about appearing on the program. The show staff quickly brings guests energy drinks and cigarettes, while the producers pop in each room yelling, "Get excited, it's almost time!"

The guests usually arrive with a significant other or family member who makes them feel comfortable. Most guests think appearing on a talk show is worth the opportunity for a free trip to a big city, all expenses paid. The majority of the guests have very little luggage, due to the rushed experience of being booked on the show; most guests are booked the day before the show is filmed and have only a few hours notice to pack their belongings. The guests with the most luggage (two suitcases) bring everything they own with them because they are homeless at the time of the show.

Only one of the guests from the ten shows observed is a nonsmoker. Cigarettes are often used as rewards for guests who promise to exhibit energy onstage. When the producers call the guests at their hotel rooms and ask them what they need, the guests usually respond "cigarettes and alcohol," but the producers will not supply the latter.

By the end of the show experience few guests are happy. Many leave feeling duped into appearing on the show because they are promised special treatment that they never

receive. The guests who are given attention and catered to before the taping are rushed to their transportation immediately after the taping ends. Additionally, the guests are not portrayed on the program as they initially anticipate. The guests leave with sour attitudes toward the show and host because during the course of the experience, the event swells into a great disappointment for the guests. This overview is expanded through a chronological account of the researcher's observations, beginning with the participant observer's first day as an intern.

4.2 Field Notes

4.2.1 The First Day

The building that houses the studio is located in the center of downtown. The first floor has a gift shop for show paraphernalia, including bumper stickers and t-shirts with the host's face prominently displayed. There is an abundance of security personnel, guarding all entrances, exits and elevators. There are security cameras in every corner. Everyone wears an identification badge for access to any part of the building. Posters of the network's other shows line the walls. The audience excitedly stares at these posters, wondering if these very shows are produced in the same building. The anxious crowd clamors pleas to the security guards to enter the studio. The buzz of the audience abruptly stops when a transvestite in a short skirt prances by, as security admits "her" into the studio.

The internship coordinator, "John," greets the researcher. He is dressed in slacks and a button-up shirt. John leads the researcher past security and upstairs to a busy hub of activity, the show's business office. There are approximately two-dozen cubicles surrounded by a few corner offices reserved for the executive producer and other senior

staff. The host is also in one of these offices, directly alongside the many cubicles filled with eager twenty-something's shouting expletives over the phone, trying to book guests.

John leads the researcher through a quick tour, introduces her to the employees (many of whom do not even have the time or the inclination to give a half nod) and sends her to work. The researcher is soon running around like anxious intern, performing duties that range from booking guests' travel arrangements to dashing to Walgreen's to buy denture paste for a nervous guest who fears her dentures might fall out if she yells onstage.

As an intern, the researcher's duties are the same as a production assistants: booking guests and handling the guests throughout the talk show process. During the three-month course as an intern for the show, the researcher laughs, cries, is humbled by the duties she has to perform (*e.g.*, escorting a scantily dressed guest to dinner at a nice restaurant), and comes close to shouting at one producer who encourages a pregnant teenage guest to charge into the audience in response to an insulting comment from a female audience member. The girl is instructed to flash her chest and reappear topless in the last segment, despite repeatedly begging the producer to return her shirt. The girl complies after the producer urges her to stop complaining.

The guests and workers are unaware the intern is conducting research. To illustrate, in a guest's greenroom before one taping, one guest tells another guest (who fears exaggerating his story for the sake of the show's ratings), "It's not like anyone's doing their master's thesis on this."

The researcher is present during all stages of pre- and post-production; the interns have access to how the staff persuades guests to be on the show, and how the guests' behaviors relate to their environment and who is present. To illustrate, the researcher

observed how the host and staff intimidate the guests. The workers coax the guests into acting however they wish them to behave on the show. To illustrate, one producer encourages a guest to cry when her lover reveals she is cheating on her. The guest comes to the show to have a good time with her friends, but cries onstage because the producer wants her to appear upset.

4.2.2 Meet the Staff

“Mary” is a production coordinator. She has been working for the show longer than almost anyone else, six years. Six years is a lifetime for employment at the program; most workers last a few months to a year. Mary has a master’s degree in finance, but decided something more exciting and daring was her forte’. She is the “babysitter” of the ever-changing twenty-something’s that are 99.9 percent of the talk show workforce. She picks up after everyone, before and after every show, steaming clothes, collecting borrowed wardrobes and finding matching shoes for the guests. She is proud of her involvement with the show, her longest running job to date.

“Carla” is the devil in disguise. She is a producer and very proud of herself, her career and her four years with the show. She’s feisty, bossy and likes to smoke a cigar after every show she produces. She wears sharp heels and dark lipstick. She likes to send production assistants on errands for energy drinks and cigarettes. She worked in sales during college, making six figures as a nineteen-year-old. She does not let anything or anyone get in her way of making it to the top. In her mid-twenties, she has a successful, well-paying career. She is tough, ruthless and does not have time for nice.

“Cindy” is a peppy, loud ex-sorority girl fresh out of college. She weaves “shit” and “fuck no” into every sentence. She is fast on her feet and even quicker to wake up a

fellow staff member who does not appear to be as alert as she is. Guests love her and always want to meet her for a drink after the show. She graciously declines saying, “I’d love to, but shit, I have so much paperwork to finish.”

"Jay" is the unfortunate guy who does not move up the corporate ladder. He has been at the show for one year. “I’m an old man at this place, one year’s a long time for the show,” he boasts. He is the nice production assistant given jobs such as making copies and running errands to Starbucks.

"Brian" is the lovable and lucky assistant to the executive producer; he quickly advances jobs after a semester-long stint as an intern. He happily shows up at the executive producer’s office every morning, carrying her breakfast and gazing longingly at someone whose job as executive producer he believes will someday be his.

“Lucy” is the vixen receptionist who twirls her platinum blonde hair, files her nails, snacks on pretzels, flips through magazines, and occasionally answers the private phone line throughout her 9 to 5 o’clock day on the job. She is the only one in the office who leaves before dark.

People at the show work hard, spending grueling hours convincing guests to appear on the show or making them feel special. They did not get their jobs because of their looks or education. They are working for a top-rated nationally syndicated talk show program while still in their twenties because of their strong attitude and gusto. These are the people who do not take “no” for an answer, especially when trying to manipulate a potential guest to appear on the show. One producer convinces a heavy-set woman with sagging breasts and stretch marks across her stomach to “flash those assets” to a studio

filled with people eager to rally together and insult any guest who parades naked onstage.

The producers have the ability to persuade and intimidate guests into any behavior they feel is beneficial to the program's ratings. One associate producer (AP) tells the guests that they will be portrayed as cowards if they do not defend themselves during the last segment when the studio audience is given the opportunity to voice opinions or ask questions about the guests on the program. "Get mad, get out there into the audience, they'll respect you more if you fight back," this AP exclaims. Directly following the commercial break, the guests jump out of their chairs and dart into the audience after every audience comment.

Men are a minority in the show hierarchy; they sometimes fill such positions as production assistant, but rarely ever advance to the next higher position, associate producer. Some of the show employees believe that women are better at convincing people to appear on the show; they have that "something extra" useful in getting their way. One of the few heterosexual male employees (besides the security guards) begins as an intern for a semester, graduates to production assistant and is still a production assistant after a year on the program. In comparison, one female associate producer was an intern for only one week before being hired on as a production assistant. Another female intern advances to associate producer at 20-years of age. The executive producers are all female, except for one male, who many claim "does things a little differently." The male producer uses tactics such as spreading rumors about guests to one another to encourage fighting.

The staff often works seven 14-hour days a week. Yet, while the employees work rigorously for several weeks, they then enjoy a concentrated vacation period for two to three weeks. They receive more than one month vacation for Christmas and summer holidays.

Workers need rather thick skin and a “go-get-‘em” attitude to succeed at the show. The employees who are not tough enough last only a few weeks. One intern quits because a producer screams at her, “Run, already!” in the stress of pre-show. With a turnover rate similar to the brief length of a Hollywood marriage, the show relies on weekly memos to announce the newest additions and releases.

Most of the producers have college degrees and ambitions of a career in television. While they do not have aspirations of working for the talk show, they feel it is a stepping-stone to other jobs in television and news.

The workers are excited, determined and always looking out for number one. Sometime the staff uses gift certificates and phone cards reserved for the guests. They use “petty cash” to buy themselves lunch or coffee. They often remind themselves to stay centered on producing a great, sensational show. Many members of the staff have motivational quotes taped on their cubicle walls. One reads, “Focus, relax, work hard.”

The employees adore the talk show’s host, giving the host full attention when [he/she] pauses to speak at their cubicles. They laugh and compliment the host on [his or her] witticisms and accomplishments.

The audience respects the staff, and the staff members respect one another. During one show, an audience member gets excited talking to a guest and her microphone slams the bodyguard’s head. She is immediately escorted from the studio; meanwhile, the

concerned audience crowds around the bodyguard, while someone rushes to find ice for his head.

While the staff is a priority at the show, apparently guests are not. “Tanya” was a sweet, sad looking 250-pound woman who came on the show after her husband told her he had a secret. She sat backstage biting her nails repeatedly asking, “Why did my husband bring me on the show?” She wore a brace on her arm; she’d fractured her hand after slapping her husband across the face a few weeks before the show. The researcher asked the woman where she was from and what she liked to do in her spare time. The woman replied, “I like to cook cornbread, green beans, fried chicken, mashed potatoes...” her voice trailed off onto tales of cooking and cleaning until it was time for her to go onstage. After the show the woman stood in the hall holding her arm. “What happened?” the researcher asked, “Why don’t you have on your brace?” The guest said she had tried to hit the woman who was sleeping with her husband and her hand was throbbing. She had a large swollen purple bruise on her hand. The researcher left to locate something to ease the pain, asking everyone for medication. One producer told the researcher that the guests needed to sign a release form before they could receive medicine. Another intern set off to find a release form as the researcher approached the assistant producer for some medicine. “Look around,” he replied, “but don’t make it a priority.” At the talk show, guests are not a priority.

Because happy guests are easier to persuade how to act onstage, before the taping employees attempt to make every guest feel special. One producer tells a guest, “You’re so cute and sweet.” When the guest leaves the studio, the producer insults the guest by pointing out the guest’s “cottage cheese stomach” to another producer. The producers

think they are tricking the guests (by seemingly looking out for the guests' best interests), yet the guests think they are tricking the producers (by having a free trip to a big city). It appears the guests and producers manipulate one another.

4.2.3 The Audience Experience

The show staff coaches the audience to control their responses. The audience coordinator stands near the stage and instructs the audience through hand signals; the audience is seated one hour before the show to learn the hand signals. The host arrives to tell jokes and excite the audience. Then the audience members waive some of their rights; for example, their responses may be used out of context on another show.

Friends and family of the staff receive special treatment because of their connections to people who work at the show. They are treated as the "royalty" among the audience. The staffs' friends usually sit on the front row. The host's nephew attends one taping and is given a one-hour tour of the offices and studio. The nephew and his friends wait in the "staff only" café while the rest of the audience "loads" into the studio.

The production crew encourages verbal fighting and nudity. Any audience member who does not conform will be ejected from the studio. One man in the audience attends the show alone. He says, "I didn't want to shout [the host's name] and pump my fist, but they're putting on this show for you and it's the least I can do to not be a jackass. Plus I didn't want to get kicked out [of the audience]." The audience member is curious about how much information the guests know beforehand and says only one guest seems truly nervous. "This guy's hands were trembling and he looked truly upset about his situation," he said.

The majority of the audience appear to be in their thirties. They seem to believe they are superior to the guests when they insult the guests for being poor, fat, ugly or stupid.

The audience coordinator exclaims, “We run a tough show!” There is no loyalty to guests or the audience. If an audience member says something that the staff deems “stupid,” the audience, led by the audience coordinator, taunts him or her. The show provides a safety net for guests who want protection when they reveal secrets since the brawls are supervised by security guards. One audience member notes the guests do not start physically fighting until bouncers nudge between them.

While the staff leads the audience to taunt the seemingly unfortunate guests or other audience members they deem deserving, they respect the apparently privileged host and cheer and applaud when [he/she] takes the stage.

4.2.4 Meet Your Host

The talk show host basks in the attention from the staff, the audience and the guests. The host arrives and walks through the waiting audience, rather than through the private basement entrance. The host sings old college rival songs and flirts with the employees, while laying the charm on thick (like the make-up).

The host is similar to a politician, being cordial to everyone, trying to make each person feel the host truly cares about him or her. The host visits staff offices as the guests rehearse with the producers, knowing flustered guests will not believe the host is actually talking to them.

Guests wait in the greenroom for hours before the show taping, becoming increasingly aggravated. The host enters the greenroom to have makeup spray-painted on, as a worker asks guests to leave the bathroom. One difficult guest transforms into a

loving fan, “I would be honored to give up my seat for [the talk show host],” she sighs. Other instances demonstrate the guests’ awe of the host; guests are grateful when the host gives them a signed t-shirt if they have a particularly scandalous story. The guests make excuses for the host’s startling behavior during the taping and support the host even after the host embarrasses them with on-air comments; the guests exclaim, “[The host is] just doing [his or her] job!” or “[The host] really started digging!”

The host and the producers appear to care about the guests, but they have an audience coordinator to ensure the guests receive numerous insults. This also happens at another daytime talk show, which the researcher attends as an audience member. When the audience insults and “boos” the guests, the host chastises, “That’s not nice, don’t do that.” The host’s assistant stands directly behind the host and waves her fists to encourage the audience to continue insulting the guests. The audience coordinator is also behind the host, prompting the audience to boo, as if on cue from the host.

4.2.5 The Guests

The researcher appears to befriend the guests, because most of the guests are from the southern United States (like the researcher). The guests and researcher discuss places to dine in Louisiana, fun bars in Baton Rouge, and how Northerners “talk funny.” Grindstaff (2002) notes that show workers play a lot of “good cop, bad cop.” Grindstaff believes that because an employee at a daytime TV talk show “had listened to the KKK guests with a sympathetic ear earlier in the green room and had thus established a personal bond with him, [he] was eventually able to calm [the guest] down when no one else could” (p. 10).

The researcher gains the guests' trust; as a result, guests tell the researcher their perceptions about appearing on the talk show and how they are often disappointed with the talk show experience. Guests anticipate an exciting, carefree talk show experience. They envision arriving for the taping, spending an hour or two at the studio and having the remaining hours or days to explore the city or to go out to dinner or dancing. They are let down when they spend the majority of their "vacation" in the confines of a greenroom. The guests tell the researcher they are bored, tired and ready to go home.

Guests may leave the talk show experience disappointed, but they arrive for the experience expecting a great time. Guests become more outgoing after being around the other guests. Arriving at the airport, they are quiet and shy but begin to relax as they have their hair done and their wardrobe selected for the show. By evening, when they dine with other guests and share their stories for the show, they seem much more confident and at ease.

The experienced guests explain the "dos" and "don'ts" of how to behave on and offstage, while the new guests mentally take notes. "Drama, my life is nothing but drama," a transvestite guest mutters while "she" glances around to ensure everyone is still captivated by her speech. The conversation turns to alcohol, clubbing, sex and then drugs. Everyone has stories and experiences to share. The group decides to go dancing. The next morning at the studio, they excitedly share their wild experiences of the previous night with their newfound friends. It is as if they are in first grade again, a time when friendships are blind and form instantly and the "warm-up" period for getting to know someone takes only a few seconds.

At dinner the night before a taping, several guests compare their stories. They are not embarrassed but rather pleased at the secrets they will reveal the next day on national television. One guest, a transvestite from New Orleans, boasts “she” has been on two different daytime talk shows. The other guests listen attentively as she describes which hotel she stayed in for another talk show and recounts her experience there. She advises the guests how not to be nervous, and how to feed off the energy of the audience. She naively believes the producers adore her, because everyone is always trying to book her on their programs.

Although the staff advise them not to, the guests always talk about why they are on the show. They boast about their experiences. When another guest asks, “Why are you on the show?” some guests are mysterious, answering only, “You’ll just have to wait until tomorrow to see.” They smile, and everyone wants to know their “secret.”

Guests sometimes do not realize how negatively they are portrayed on the program. “Allen,” a little person, stumbles across stage, and then brags about his stinging one-liners to a woman in the audience who has a gap in her teeth. “I told her she had a bigger gap in her face than a picket fence...I really got her.” He does not realize the staff has turned off his microphone, making his speech inaudible and leading everyone in the audience to mock him. He initially comes on the show to disprove a previous guest, in hopes to show that not all little people are bitter. On the show, he appears slow and dopey when he behaves in accordance with the instructions given by the producers backstage.

The guests begin to give the researcher advice on her life. “Kristy” is a stripper who aspires to study law. She tells the researcher she is wise for interning at the show; she

says many opportunities will arise as a result of working for the program. The researcher is pleasantly surprised; this stripper seems like a genuinely nice person. Moments later, however, Kristy takes her spot onstage, and immediately reveals to the host and the audience how she likes to sleep with other women while her husband watches. The image of the intelligent, potential law student grows fuzzy as her producer-prompted persona emerges. Onstage, she is the stereotypical, sexy “lipstick lesbian,” as the audience urges her to take off her dress. Backstage, she had been a mannerly, sweet girl with dreams of using her brains, not her body, for money. Kristy wished to emit a positive persona to the audience, but through the producer’s persistence, she allowed herself to be portrayed as trashy and simple-minded.

Kristy’s case is an example of how producers have the ability to mold guests to fit into their talk show guest “ideal” in their quest for approval and ratings. The producer suggests the guest will benefit by behaving a certain way, when in reality the guest sabotages any attempt to appear intelligent or classy by fulfilling the producers’ demands. The guests wish to please the producers, while at the same time relaying a favorable image on television. Since the guests’ and producers’ wishes contradict, the producer wins, and the guests appear foolish on television.

4.2.6 Guests Making Comparisons

Guests making comparisons are behaviors associated with the social comparison theory. Guests prefer to make downward comparisons to less fortunate guests because the comparisons make them feel better about themselves. The guests, like the workers and the audience, shy from upward comparisons because they are potentially harmful to the guests’ self-esteem (Brickman & Bulman, 1977).

Guests' self-esteem levels seem to suffer as a result of being negatively portrayed on television. Sometimes guests can not believe the audience reacts negatively to them by calling them "fat," "trashy" or "dumb." The guests compare themselves to "lower" guests to make themselves feel better. For example, employees and guests joke about Allen's appearance on the program, seeming thankful they are not also three feet tall. In another instance, one severely obese female guest sits in the greenroom waiting for her turn onstage. As she watches the monitor displaying the live feed of the show, she jokes about the naked man's appearance onstage, calling him fat and unattractive.

Backstage before the show, guests discuss an episode of another daytime talk show. The guests on this show had brought family members on the program to reveal they could not read. The guests reach the consensus they are happy they are literate, "I could not bear to be so dumb," one guest concludes. Another guest says, "I can't imagine not knowing how to read."

At dinner one evening when a transvestite excuses "herself" to use the restroom the other guests joke, "What bathroom is it going into?" and, "Is it a man or a woman?"

In the world of talk shows, seniority is not always favorable. While repeat guests boast, "I've done this before, and I've been on other talk shows as well," other guests convince themselves they are not as crazy as the transvestite who made the proclamation. Some guests are mortified by the other guests. They do not see themselves as being negatively branded as a "talk show guest," but rather regard it as a fun way to see a big city free of charge. They reassure themselves they are not dysfunctional by pointing out how other guests' stories are more outrageous than their own. This practice calms them.

They reason their purpose is a paid trip to a big city, not exposing their problems on television.

On another episode, one guest wants to look “classy,” unlike the many “trashy” guests she sees on the show. She recoils as she recalls times when women flash the camera after they fight while wearing a skirt or dress. She is adamant about wearing pants because if she engages in a fight with her boyfriend on the show, she “didn’t want [her] butt hanging out.”

4.2.7 Difficult Guests

Many guests are not treated as well as they think they will be once they arrive at the studio. A heavysset guest orders steak from room service, charges hundreds of dollars of merchandise to her room that is billed to the show and gets a \$195 haircut she claims is “cheap.” She initially thinks the haircut will cost thousands of dollars and is disappointed the show has not spent this amount of money on her. She rides in a taxi around town for free because she claims she “earned” the chauffeured ride. She appears confident; after her haircut she says, “I just need blue contacts and I could look like Heather Locklear.” She complains her transportation is a mere cab when she was promised a limo; she anticipates “star” treatment. According to the producers, she is a pain and a “prima donna.” She dons a tight, short leopard print dress with fuzzy pink slippers in the most expensive hotel restaurant in town and wears this attire to the ritzy hair salon. She bribes her stepmother to attend the show, who claims to be disgusted by her stepdaughter’s ways and orders an extra bed for her room so they will not have to sleep too close to one another. The stepmother claims her stepdaughter is abusing the show, trying to get whatever she can out of them. The audience calls her “Miss Piggy” when she takes off

her shirt. During a commercial break, she stares at herself in the mirror and says, “I just need to remind myself I’m gorgeous.” The producer receives a call from the guest’s hotel that the guest has charged \$700 to the show at the hotel gift store earlier that day. A few members of the show staff wear rubber gloves to clean the guest’s room, returning the merchandise. Her stepmother bawls, claiming she is too embarrassed to go home. A show security guard escorts the guest to a cheaper hotel. The daughter stands in sheer clothing in the lobby, calling the hotel “crap” and insulting the staff.

Another difficult guest gets drunk and rowdy and punches a painting on his hotel wall. He is rushed to the emergency room the morning of the show taping. The talk show producer tells him to, “Take it like a man, you’re not in the circus!”

4.2.8 Fake vs. Real Guests

When one of two brothers appearing on the show cannot get his hair braided at a salon before the show because the show “does not have the money,” he calls the host cheap and mocks him. He says, “[The host] sounds like George Bush, it’s not in his budget?” These are repeat guests who appear on the show for the perks – a free trip to a big city, free hotel, etc. The brothers dupe the producers into believing one of them thought he would just be in the audience. Eventually, it is too much of an effort to keep up that fabrication, and the producers learn of the brothers’ scheme. There is no time to book more guests, so there is no discussion about the issue of a fake guest. It is as if the producers and guests are saying to one another, “I know you know and you know I know, but let’s just pretend neither of us knows for the sake of the show and the ratings.”

The “secrets” (*e.g.*, the individuals who are being revealed to scorned lovers) appear to be the most self-confident. The guests who are brought on the show to be told a secret

by another guest appear scared and nervous, but sometimes do not appear affected after the show. One woman is nervous before her husband reveals he is cheating on her with the babysitter. After the show, she seems to be taking the revelation in stride, but still will not leave the show with her husband.

More than the opportunity to be on national television, the guest enjoys an all-expenses-paid trip to a big city. Many guests are from small towns in the southern United States. The guests enjoy relaxing with other guests, free of their usual responsibilities. One guest views the trip as an opportunity to have fun without her children. “I’m going out dancing tonight,” she says, “the babysitter has the kids.” A pair of married guests uses the trip as their honeymoon, since they could not afford one after their wedding.

The guests who are most negatively affected from appearing on the talk show are those with real stories. Not only are they unfortunate because their stories are real, but they put their familial relations and jobs in jeopardy for the show. When they receive a call from the show, they risk everything to appear on the show the next day. These people are usually poor and the promise of a “night on the town” or a “day at the spa” is enticing. They idolize the host, claiming the host is a professional whose job it is to “dig” or insult them on television. After one episode, a guest worries, “I hope I didn’t disappoint [the host]...should I have been more upset onstage?” Many guests are fans of the show and watch it religiously. The guests sit in the greenrooms and laugh about their favorite episodes of the program. Occasionally the guests appear to feel privileged to use the talk show as an outlet to reveal their problems. They also try to find similarities between themselves and the host. One guest travels from Florida because he believes he

will meet the host before the show and be able to play checkers with him; he never gets that opportunity.

The guests are disappointed when the talk show experience fails to live up to their preconceived ideal. Some guests worry how people in their towns will react to their being inaccurately portrayed on the show. The guests feel they appear emotionally unstable and “trashy” on the show. Producers spend hours on each guest’s hair, make-up and wardrobe to achieve the perfect effect for the show. Heavy make-up and tight clothes can transform the guest into a low-class spectacle.

There is a strict “no jeans onstage” policy at the show; if guests arrive at the studio in jeans, the producers order them to change into attire from the show’s wardrobe. One guest wants to wear his own jeans and shirt; the producers bring him khaki pants and a shirt, explaining they do not want him to appear sloppy onstage. The wardrobe coordinator steam irons his attire. Within moments of appearing onstage, the guest fights and rips the clothes.

4.3 Answers to Research Questions

4.3.1 Guests

1. How do guests decide to appear on the program?

One question people have about appearing on a talk show is, “Why do it?” Uncovering how potential guests hear about the opportunity to appear on a show or how much thought a person has given to being a guest prior to their talk show appearance reveals how seriously they view the experience. By determining that most guests decide to appear on a program at a moment’s notice shows their spontaneous nature, but not their desire to humiliate themselves on national television. Guests have a reputation for

willingly shaming themselves on talk shows; this research proves this is not the guest's intention. Producers often seek out guests; guests do not usually actively pursue the opportunity to be a guest.

Guests often decide the day before the program to attend the taping the next day. Seldom do guests know more than a week in advance they will appear on the talk show. The producers do not book guests too far in advance; the more time the guests have to think about the show, the more time they have to change their minds. When a producer contacts a guest who appears dramatic enough for the program, she says, "pack your bags, you're coming to [the talk show's city], baby!" The producer tells the guest a limo will arrive at his home in a few hours to take him to the airport. In the rush of excitement, he commits to being on the show with just enough time to throw a few clothes in a bag.

Producers devote much of their work day to making calls. First, producers call people who leave messages from the show's hotline number; however, most of these messages are jokes. "Is Shamika there?" one producer asks the person who answers the phone number on the hotline call log. "Who?" asks an aggravated mother. "Shamika, she wants to be on [the talk show] because she's involved in a love triangle, right?" The weary mother sighs, "I have told your show to stop calling my house. It's the kids at my child's school. They must think this is real funny. Goodbye." People who leave legitimate messages are surprised when a producer from the show calls their house. "I can't believe this, [the talk show host] wants me on the show. I am going to be on television!" the excited guest screams into the phone. More than likely, this guest will be on the next day's show.

The producers make a lot of cold calls to different businesses. The show has a large binder with the names, numbers and locations of hundreds of gentlemen's clubs in America. A producer will spend hours calling each club, asking a manager if they have any employees entangled in "lesbian love triangles." Often, these calls agitate managers who claim they are not running a freak show. "My girls would never be on your show!" asserts one strip club manager.

Sometimes a guest will be a friend or relative of a previous guest. Producers rely on an exciting previous guest who gave a great "performance" for the show. "Hey, Kenny, do you have any friends who want to be on the show? You did such an awesome job here, are any of your friends wild like you?" The flattered guest quickly enlists several friends who are interested in the chance to be on the show. Because the producers have a good relationship with Kenny, the guest is happy to comply.

2. What is the difference in guests' behavior from when a producer is present to when another guest is present (e.g., guests citing different reasons for their motivation to appear on the show)?

The way a guest behaves depends on who is present. Priest (1995) noted that guests constructed "socially acceptable" reasons for appearing on talk shows due to the presence of a researcher (p. 210). If it is true that guests behave differently for researchers, it follows that the presence of others will also influence how guests behave.

The guests' behaviors vary, depending on the atmosphere and who is present. Onstage, guests appear loud and uneducated; offstage, their behaviors range from shy and vulnerable, to fun and extroverted. Overall, guests are submissive and pleasing for producers and rowdy and loud with other guests.

The guests felt that producers had “pulled strings” to get them booked on the program. The guests felt as if they “owed” it to the producers to observe the producers’ demands. “Vicki got us tickets to play games at the arcade, that was nice of her,” one guest told another guest. “Rebecca said the show would pay for my hair highlights. I haven’t been able to afford those in years,” another guest said. A third guest told the group of guests at dinner, “Are y’all going to be crazy on the show tomorrow? I am so excited!” Among other guests, this guest was outgoing; with the producers, she seemed intimidated. When a producer asked if the guests had fun at dinner, the guest answered, “Yeah, it was nice,” but did not tell the producer the wild life stories she shared with the guests the previous night.

The guests are somewhat serious and reserved with the producers, but appear comfortable and lively with other guests. The guests become friends with one another, due to their bond of “telling all” on national television. The guests converse about their families, friends and hometowns with one another. They discuss personal material they would never relay to a producer. “I got shot when a guy found out I was a transvestite,” one guest told another guest. “Look at my scar,” she said, pulling down her shirt to reveal a bullet wound. The guests often have stories the next day about all the fun they had with each other the previous night. The guests also befriend each other after the show, usually to insult the show staff due to the way they were treated disposable after appearing on the program. “They promised me another night here, they lied to me and to you,” one guest told another. The guests occasionally take pictures with one another; however, the researcher never witnessed any attempts at establishing lasting friendships (*e.g.*, guests exchanging addresses or phone numbers with one another).

3. How do repeat guests behave differently than first-time guests?

Uncovering how repeat guests behave differently than first-time guest illustrates that a guest's experience on the show influences his or her willingness to appear on the talk show again. Repeat guests demonstrate that some guests have a positive experience; an experience so pleasing that it validates their reason for appearing on the show a second or third time. Repeat guests also prove that not all guests distrust producers after appearing on the show; some guests have a good relationship with producers because they are willing to return and spend time with the producers.

Repeat guests appear more confident than first-time guests. They demand attention from producers, other guests, studio audiences and people walking down the street. "I'm going to be on [the talk show] for the second time! They just love me at [the talk show]!" one repeat guest exclaims to a passerby on a busy city street. "Ooh! I look good," another guest says as she gazes at her reflection in the mirror during a commercial break. "Didn't I do good, aren't y'all so proud of me? Those girls in the audience are bitches!" the same guest says after the show.

Repeat guests do not appear to suffer from the audience's comments. They laugh or call the audience names, behaving as if they are superior to the audience for appearing on the show in the first place. "You're just scared...you wish you were up here," one guest tells an audience member who insults the guest.

The repeat guests have fun at the show and do not take the experience seriously. They take the first-time guests clubbing the night before the show. In the greenroom the next day, a transvestite guest talks about looking for "booty" the night before and being successful in her search. The other guests remember the experience, joking that the guest

is wild and crazy. The guests appear to look to the repeat guest as an older sibling, listening to their advice, but not always heeding it. While repeat guests consistently talked about reappearing on the show a third time or appearing on another show, most first-time guests vowed they would never be on a talk show again. Repeat guests have a good experience at the show; therefore, they wish to be a guest on the show again.

4. After the show, do guests think the experience was a negative or positive one?

It is important to note the guests' perceptions of the talk show experience after the taping to determine if the show matched the guests' expectations. If a guest anticipates making new friends at the show, but leaves with nothing but emotional scars, guests should be more aware of the potential consequences of appearing on a talk show.

Frequently, the show does not live up to the guests' preconceived images of what the talk show experience will be. Before the show, guests anticipate fame from appearing on the show. They hear of the wonderful treatment they will receive and dream of being hometown heroes upon their return from the show. However, guests usually do not receive the wealth of compensation they thought they would, and they question their reasons for agreeing to the talk show. "Why did I do this...it was such a bad idea...never again," laments one guest.

The audience usually insults the guests. While the guests appear to be unaffected onstage, offstage they try to build up their confidence by insulting the audience or telling themselves they are beautiful. Before one taping, a guest imagines the audience reacting positively to her make-up and hair; however, during the taping the audience quickly lashes out at her. They insult her "cheap" wardrobe and her "stringy" hair.

Often, the guests project an image onstage that does not represent them. The guests often exaggerate their stories to contribute to the sensationalism of the talk show. They wear more outrageous clothes or yell more onstage. The audience insults a guest wearing a tight, sequined skirt, “Sit down, whore!” The guests are appalled at the abundance of negative feedback they have not previously experienced in their daily lives. When the audience insults two brothers who appear on the program one of them says, “That audience sucks. What is their problem?” The guests leave the show emotionally hurt due to the audience’s negative comments.

Before the show, the producers do not tell the guests when they are to go home; they hint that if the guests do a good job onstage, they will be rewarded with a night on the town. To save hotel costs, producers usually book the guests on flights a few hours after the guests finish taping. Guests leave the show disappointed they are not going to be able to stay longer; therefore, the guests usually leave upset with the producers.

Occasionally, guests leave the experience very pleased with the show and the audience. The audience compliments one stripper, telling her she is attractive and fit. She leaves the experience feeling more self-assured. The audience tells another guest to dump her no good cheating boyfriend. She laughs backstage after the show, “Did you hear what they [the audience members] were telling me out there? They are so funny, they must’ve liked me,” she boasts.

5. Do guests feel they are misrepresented on talk shows through producers’ manipulations?

Determining if guests feel they are led to be portrayed a certain way onstage shows that guests behave differently onstage and offstage. The research uncovers the motives of

producers to prompt behaviors they feel will sensationalize the show, regardless of who is affected.

Guests feel they are inaccurately portrayed on talk shows. Guests behave more dramatically and angry onstage than off. Producers direct the guests to behave a certain way, even if the behavior does not represent the guests. Guests feel like they are acting in order to come across as more irate or uneducated onstage than they are offstage. One guest appears on the show to reveal to her husband she is a stripper. The producer has the guest wear stiletto heels, a skin-tight leopard print skirt and a constricting top that accentuates her pudgy belly. She had prepared to wear a sundress onstage, but the producer feels tighter clothes really drive home the message to her husband.

When she takes the stage, the audience calls her “fat” and “trashy.” The guest appears bewildered. The producer told her the audience would think she was hot; the guest wondered why the audience members reacted the way they did. “Okay, you know what you have to do to look good now...flash them,” the producer urges. The guest reappears onstage after the commercial break and lifts her shirt. The guys hoot and holler; apparently the guys are now on her side. Backstage, the guest asks why the audience was so ugly to her. She said she came off looking like a “flake,” and claimed she was not a stupid person. In the quest for ratings, the producers did what had to be done to make the show outrageous.

Some guests feel the producers want them to say things on the show that are not a reflection of what the guests believe. A guest will tell the producer, “I don’t feel that way, why do I have to say that?” The producer replies, “You’ll look bad if you don’t say it, that’s why.” The guests take the producers word for it, but are heartbroken when their

wardrobe or actions do not achieve the desired reaction from the audience. Guests leave the experience feeling they were duped to behave a certain way; they blame the producers for their pain and suffering. “They promised tons of things I never even got. They flat out lied to us,” one guest said of a producer.

6. Aside from Priest’s (1995), are there additional categories of talk show guests?

Drawing from the field notes, answers to research questions and previous research, the researcher determined three additional categories of talk show guests. Some guests fit multiple categories, but for the sake of research, the researcher grouped them into the group they best fit, based on their primary motivator to appear on the talk show. Those guests that equally fit multiple categories were not categorized.

The researcher confirms Priest’s categories of guests and contributes three additional categories Priest may not have reported due to inaccessibility to the guests behind-the-scenes.

- **Priest’s Categories**

1. Moth – Priest found that moths are drawn to the fame and celebrity associated with television. Lily and Jenna, lesbian sisters, appear on the talk show for a chance to be “discovered.” They believe they have what it takes to be models or actresses and hope the show will boost their fame. They expect acting and modeling agents will want to use them for photo spreads and television appearances. The sisters anticipate agents will contact the show producers to obtain more information about them. The girls kissed onstage because they thought it would be good for their image.

2. Evangelist – Priest determined evangelists wish to “remedy stereotypes” (p. 46).
Allen, a little person, appears on the program to show that little people do not have trouble finding love; his girlfriend, a stripper, vouches for him. Allen brings his girlfriend on the show to prove that little people can have tall, beautiful girlfriends if they are charming and genuine. He claims that a previous little person guest helped spread the damaging stereotype of bitter little people by appearing mad at women because he could not succeed in love. “I am here to set the record straight, once and for all,” Allen promised the audience.
3. Plaintiff – Plaintiffs want “to plead their cases against people who had victimized them” (p. 46). Maria, a transvestite, appears on the program to show the audience how she has blossomed since high school. In grade school she had been awkward and quiet. When she is on the show, she is confident and excited. Maria spent several years taking female hormones to grow breasts and working out to improve her figure. She rehearsed backstage to look straight at the camera and make a plea to the at-home audience. “Don’t ever give up...don’t let someone bring you down, they’re just jealous,” claimed Maria.
4. Marketer – The marketer’s focus is “to hawk a book or business venture” (p. 46). Bill has a Website that showcases his pornographic videos. He hopes his appearance on the show will bring more public interest in his products. He appears to be a relentless businessman in the pursuit to make outrageous videos, whatever the cost to his image. He promises his Website has the best looking women on the Internet and touts it will not disappoint the curious adventurous soul who gives his Website a try.

- **Researcher's Categories**

1. Spender - Spenders are guests who take advantage of the talk show experience, utilizing every opportunity to seize new clothes, gifts, food and vouchers. They agree to appear on the show for a free honeymoon, to have fun with their friends or family, to be without their children, to steal items from the hotel, to demand the best treatment, to explore a big city, to be pampered or to make new friends. The producers persuade them to be on the show with free gifts and makeovers. Spenders demand cigarettes, VIP tickets and shopping sprees. The producers describe them as demanding and aggressive. They react to the show in one of two ways. Either they have a great time at the show and vow to be back, or they are disappointed they did not receive more from the talk show and become upset, demanding more money or gifts.

Examples of Spenders

- Prima donna – The “prima donna” comes on show and gets her hair done, has a limo transport her through the city, charges hundreds of dollars of gift shop merchandise to the show and orders the most expensive dinners (two entrees at each meal). She wears tight clothes and a faux mink coat.

“That was a cheap haircut, why doesn’t the show spend more money on me?”

“A cab? You’ve got to be kidding me, I was promised a limo.”

“Why doesn’t the show buy me more than one pair of shoes? I deserve more.”
- Strippers – These women promise to give a good “show” for the audience if they are rewarded. They require new clothes, expensive haircuts and a tour of the city.

“Can I get more than one dress? I don’t want to look fat on television, I want

to look good for you guys.”

“These boots are only \$100. Why can’t I get them from the show?”

“That restaurant food was disgusting. We need more food vouchers.”

- Brothers – The brothers use the trip as an excuse to party with one another and one of their girlfriends. They get their hair done and try to persuade the show to buy them alcohol (which the show can not and does not do).

“Why can’t I get my hair colored? It’s only \$65.”

“I’m going to be so popular back home when they see me on television!”

2. Advisor - Advisors are repeat guests who coach the others on how to behave on and offstage. They advise the first-time guest which talk shows give the best compensations or how to react from negative comments from the audience. An advisor might be a guest who had a friend on the show before and convinced them to appear. They are considered the older siblings of the talk show circuit. Advisors want to appear on as many shows and wear each talk show experience like a merit badge. More than fame, the guests want to feel accepted among the other guests, who seem to look up to them; this is why they always return for more. Producers consider advisors to be fun and outrageous leaders. Like spenders, they react to the talk show experience in one of two extreme ways. They are either content with the experience or dissatisfied because they feel another talk show treated them better.

Examples of Advisors

- Jenny – Jenny is a transvestite who is famous on the talk show circuit. She brings a large suitcase filled with costumes for the show. She stays out until the

early hours of show day. She gives the other guests advice on how to behave during the talk show experience.

“This is more fun than when I was on [another talk show].”

“Relax, have fun and don’t listen to the audience. They are cowards.”

- Kiwi – Kiwi is a lesbian stripper who has been on other talk shows, beginning when she was a child and appeared with her dad. She does not take the audience seriously, and giggles when men ask her to flash the audience.

“I’m going to have fun in this city.”

To another guest, “Do you need me to cut your hair? It’s going to look bad tomorrow on television.”

3. Investor - Investors truly believe in the show and put their lives, jobs and marriages on the line. They attend the show to help out a producer who needs to book a guest, or believe a trip to the big city may prompt amends with someone they bring on the show. Investors wish to meet the host, and often neglect to care for themselves or their family once they are consumed with the talk show excitement. They hope the “secret” (to be revealed on the show) will not be detrimental to their lives. They often feel nervous about exposing secrets and frequently ask for medicine to calm their nerves or soothe their stomachs. Producers describe investors as nice and shy. After the show, investors are usually upset because they worry how they were portrayed. Once the talk show excitement wears off, investors are suddenly concerned about their lives outside of the show. They are usually sensitive to the audience comments, and cry or fight with the audience members as a result. Sometimes guests are upset by an

unexpected revelation from someone who brought them on the show. The “victim” guest and the revealer often leave the show in separate transportation for the ride home.

Examples of Investors

- Carol – Carol is a teacher who brings her husband on the show to reveal a secret to him. She wears a wig, which she feels will disguise her from her students who watch the show. She is nervous and sick before the show and vomits in the hotel lobby.

“I hope my students don’t recognize me. I could lose my job.”

“The only reason my husband agreed to come with me is to meet the host.

This is his favorite show. He watches it every night.”

- Bill and Jill - These guests are homeless wanderers. They plan on going to a shelter after the show. They bring their infant son to the show because they have no one to baby sit him. They enjoy the opportunity for free food and a makeover. They momentarily forget they are poor and homeless. They make amends after they reveal their marital problems onstage.

“This [show] was a nice break. Now we’re back to traveling.”

“Honey, I’m sorry, don’t be upset with me [for what he reveals on the show].”

- John and Linda – These guests are involved in a love triangle. The husband tells his wife he has been sleeping with their teenage babysitter. The woman trembles and vows their marriage is over.

“Can I get some stomach medicine? I feel so sick about all of this.”

“Go home with her [the babysitter]. He is not going home with me.”

4.3.2 Workers

7. Do producers behave differently when a guest is present?

How a producer behaves in front of a guest may be largely accountable to why guests appear on a program. By determining producers treat guests with respect and admiration while the guests are present, one might conclude that guests appear on shows for the special treatment. Audiences will become aware that that guests do not necessarily appear on shows to “air their dirty laundry” or humiliate themselves on national television, but because the guests heard from previous guests that talk show workers are nice and accommodating and the talk show experience is a positive one.

When a producer tries to book a guest, they are boisterous and excited, telling the guest about all the fun they will have on the show. Once they book the guests and the guests arrive the day or morning before the taping of each talk show episode, the producers cater to the guests and appear to care about them. When a guest is present, a producer will tell the guest how “cute” they are, or what a great body they have. One producer told several guests they had the “best breasts ever!” and others they were “hot.”

Producers act excited to have the guests in the studio and ask them several questions about their trip to the talk show. They lean forward in their desks, appearing to listen attentively. They make the guest feel important and special by showering the guest with compliments and attention.

Producers talk enthusiastically with the guests, telling the guests all the fun they are going to have together. One producer always promised guests she would go out dancing with them after the show. The producers behaved as if the guests were someone they

would be friends with outside of the show. “Want to borrow my shoes? I’ll take them off my feet for you,” one producer said to a guest.

Once they have established a friendly relationship with the guests, the producers can mold the guests into whatever persona for the show they deem necessary. Often, behind closed doors, the producers behave differently than if a guest were there. The producers promise guests fun and excitement over the phone, when convincing a guest to appear on the show. Once they hang up the phone, the producers show their real thoughts about the potential guest. “She’s crazy, that’s why she’d be great on the show,” one producer said after talking to a stripper.

Producers draw on what they know about the guests to develop strategies on how to have the guest behave a certain way, or how to deter a guest from demanding expensive gifts such as haircuts or makeovers. A producer might say, “I know she loves to shop, so let’s buy her shoes and maybe she’ll cooperate and flash the audience during the show.” Another producer said, “Let’s tell her she can have a haircut or highlights, but definitely not both. Let’s tell her it’s too expensive since we’re sending her to the best salon.”

Some producers appear to respect a guest when the guest is nearby, but once out of earshot, the producers mock the guests. One guest wanted to discuss a board game with the host. The producer acted as though it was a reasonable idea. As soon as the guest left the studio, the producer found another worker to joke with about the guest’s quirky behavior.

8. Do producers manipulate guests’ behaviors and presentations?

It is important to discover if producers manipulate guests’ behaviors and presentations; doing so will give clues to the guests’ attitudes offstage. Determining that

producers prompt guests to behave a certain way onstage reveals the motivations of guests and producers.

The producers want a dramatic show to increase ratings. The producers seek out guests who are versatile in their ability to act angry, sad or sexy. The producers instruct the guests to never say “whatever” onstage. The guests should elaborate and tell stories of heartache or anger, just to be dramatic. The producers demand the guests be loud and over-the-top.

Before the taping, the producers continually practice with the guests what they will say onstage. “Try again, this time get angrier,” one producer instructs. “I don’t really feel this way,” the guest replies. When the producer sighs and appears aggravated the guest relinquishes and gives a bolder performance.

The producers tell the guests what to wear onstage. When one guest dresses in a nearly knee-length skirt, the producer quickly steps in and gives the woman a micro-mini-skirt, claiming the guest will look great onstage. Another female guest wants to wear pants because she has a deformity in her leg and is uncomfortable showing it on national television. Eventually, the producer is able to convince the woman to wear a skirt because it is “sexy” and she will look “more feminine,” asserts the producer. The producers do not want the female guest wearing pants because a skirt might add more drama to an onstage brawl.

The employees prompt guests to get angry so the guests will be more dramatic onstage. To excite a guest before they appear on the show, producers run from greenroom to greenroom, telling guests, “He said you’re a bad mother,” or “She said she wants to sleep with your boyfriend.” Guests are not aware that such statements are not

true, so they often insult the guest who allegedly voiced the comment. The guests get “fired up” to appear on the program after hearing these insults.

The producers also intimidate the guests, who in turn try to please the producers. The producers appear confident, professional and intelligent to the guests. The guests feel the producers are “worldly” because the producers are sharp dressers who live in a big city. The producers tell the easily influenced guests how to behave, based on what will add drama to the show. The producers pretend to care about the guests’ best interests, even while the producers’ suggestions are intended to negatively portray the guests on television. The vulnerable guests behave however the producers want them to because the guests feel it is an honor to be on the program. One little person tells a producer, “I can be mad, I can cry...I can do whatever you want me to do out there.” The guests are selling their souls to the producers because they are not used to receiving so much attention and initially enjoy the star treatment. “Everyone is so friendly here,” one guest remarks when he arrives and receives cigarettes and food.

The producers intimidate the guests with legal issues as well. The show employs a full time lawyer who has the guests sign agreements to not hold the show responsible for the consequences of their appearance on the show. The well-groomed, sharply-dressed lawyer beckons the guests to enter a greenroom by small groups and has them agree to the items contained in the forms. The guests enter the room quietly and emerge moments later, sullen and serious. The researcher does not know what exactly takes place behind the closed doors because she was not granted access to these meetings; this fact illustrates the importance and delicateness of legal issues at the program.

4.3.3 Audience

9. What is the audience interaction with the guests offstage? Does the audience behave differently towards guests outside of the studio?

On television, one can see how daytime tabloid talk show audiences insult talk show guests most of the time. The researcher discovered what the at-home audiences do not see, what happens when the guests arrive, what happens during commercial breaks and what happens after the show finishes taping. This research uncovered how guests respond to the audiences' insults on and off the air.

Overall, interaction between audiences and guests is minimal before and after the show. The guests usually arrive before the audience, and are in greenrooms when the audience loads into the studio. There are about five security guards outside the studio and five security guards inside the studio to discourage interaction between guests and audience members. Any audience member who tries to pull a prank and go through the security zone will be dismissed from the show immediately. Blockades deter audience members from entering the guests' greenrooms. There is a sign on the public bathroom door that leads to the greenrooms; it reads, "Emergency Exit Only."

Offstage, the audience is in awe of the guests, asking them if their stories are "real." If a guest arrives while the audience is waiting to be admitted to the studio, they stop talking and stare at the guests. Some audience members whistle at the guests, "Hey, sexy." Other audience members laugh and poke fun at transvestites and little people, saying, "They must be on the show."

Onstage, the security guards serve as a safety net between the guests and the audience. Security guards forbid audience members from taking the stage; however, on several

occasions a female audience member was allowed onstage to flash the audience. The security guards block the guests from charging the audience. Once, however, a guest and audience member blazed past the guards, giving one another scratches on their necks and chests.

After the taping ends, the security guards escort the guests through a different hallway than the audience to discourage fighting. When the guests exited after one episode, the female audience member (who fought with the guest during the show) attempted to reach the guest and yelled threats at her. Both women vowed they would “kick some ass” outside of the building. The guests are escorted directly to their transportation after the show, so the women never did meet again.

10. Does the audience ever sympathize with the guests?

Because the researcher recognized the potential for guests and audiences to fight on and offstage, it is important to note that not all audience/guest interactions are negative and aggressive. Sometimes, as the research proves, audiences sympathize with guests.

When a guest appears on the show so that another guest can reveal a “secret,” the audience often sympathizes with the victim. One man who cheated on his wife faced the wrath of an unforgiving audience. The audience called him, “stupid” and “dumb.” The guest appeared to not be bothered with the audiences’ comments. He appeared smug, saying, “whatever, whatever, you don’t even know...just shut up!”

While the audience insults the guest who reveals a secret, they compliment the victim. The cheater’s wife received offers from the audience for dates and requests for her phone number. One female audience member said, “Girl, you’re way too good for that loser!”

When guests cried, the audience would behave in one of two ways. On one hand, if a guest asked for forgiveness for cheating on their lover (or another unscrupulous act), the audience would mock the guest, saying “Aww...” If a guest cried because another guest hurt them, such as a stripper crying when her lover left her for another stripper, the audience would console her. The audience told the guest she was a pretty girl and should forget her lover, she could do much better.

11. Does audience loyalty to the host remain after the cameras stop rolling?

It is important to note the audiences’ views of the host offstage to determine if they respect the host and take the host seriously. The research determined while the audience might think the show is “silly” and “fun,” they think the host is a mastermind, claiming, “How does [the host] find these guests? What a genius!”

Rarely does the audience get upset with the host before, during or after the taping. People who attend the show feel fortunate to be in the audience. They buy the talk show paraphernalia from the gift store and beg the host for an autograph. They can all recall a favorite episode and talk about the show while waiting to enter the studio. Some audience members arrive hours early to assure they can sit in the front row. Many members of the audience admire the host and the host’s humor. They encourage the host when the host makes jokes or comments before and during the show. Some audience members have been in the audience several times because they adore the host and the program. While the audience makes downward comparisons to the seemingly unlucky guests, the audience does not make an upward comparison to the host because he appears smart and wealthy.

The audience does not feel like the show experience is a disappointment; many

feel privileged to have sat in the audience. Audience members ask show workers, “When is the show going to air?” or exclaim, “I can’t wait to see the show on television...it was so good!” When the audience unloads the studio, they attempt to find the host or security guards to tell them what a great time they had. Some guests are vocal in their excitement, claiming, “That sure was fun!” or “We are definitely doing that again!”

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Conclusions & Significance

This research aims to portray accurately the workings of a talk show and its workers, guests and audience. Through participant observation, the study finds that what happens behind-the-scenes may be different than what society expects.

This study aimed to uncover the workings of a talk show by revealing the workers', guests' and audiences' attitudes offstage. The research became more focused on the guests due to the breadth of opportunities the researcher was able to share with them. The researcher was only able to observe the workers and audience at the studio. The researcher was able to study the guests at the studio, restaurants, malls, hair salons, subways, parks, cafes, diners, city streets, taxis, hotels, amusement parks, arcades, clubs, dressing rooms and backstage. These occasions provided a wide range of opportunities for the researcher to record how the guests behave when apparently no formal researcher is present.

This study reinforces the social comparison theory, recognizing the prevalence of the theory among the guests, audiences and workers. Overall, people associated with the program attempts to make themselves more self-confident by comparing themselves with those less fortunate. The audience insults the guests, the workers manipulate the guests and the guests compare themselves with any guest seemingly worse off than they are. The audience calls one guest "a cheap whore," the workers poke fun of a guest (*i.e.*, a little person who appears "slow") and the guests reassure themselves at least they are good looking, unlike other guests.

This study aims to enlighten the audiences who have misconceptions about talk show guests and engage in the cultivation theory or social learning theory. This thesis hopes to create more understanding of guests among society and the realization that these shows are for entertainment. Audiences will learn that not all guests are as they appear on television. Audiences are affected by the cultivation theory; therefore, they should watch talk shows knowing that stories are often exaggerated and not interpret the guests as being an accurate representation of society. According to the social learning theory, audiences learn prosocial or antisocial behavior based on what they view on television. Audiences knowing that behaviors on tabloid talk shows are not the norm may not be affected from negative attitudes displayed on these programs. An audience member who does believe what they see on tabloid talk shows to be real may think that cheating on a spouse or kissing a sibling (guests' actions the researcher observed during the talk show experience) is adequate behavior.

In addition to the benefits for audiences, researchers and talk show guests and workers may find the results of this thesis helpful. Researchers will have a starting point for determining the offstage attitudes of guests when there is no overt researcher present and guests are unaware they are being observed. One of the research assumptions is that guests tailor their answers to researchers' questions based on what they anticipate the researchers want to find; the guests are too intimidated to answer the questions a specific way.

Talk show guests and workers will benefit from the study's findings. The guests have lives outside of the show, which may be negatively affected as a result of their appearance on a talk show; for example, when a teacher agrees to be on a talk show, she

puts her professional life in jeopardy and risks damaging the perceptions of her students who watch the show. Talk show staff will have a better understanding of the guests' expectations when appearing on a talk show. They will learn what the guests need and what motivates a guest to reappear on a talk show. Talk show producers will learn how to rebook a guest or persuade other guests to appear on their programs.

5.2 Interpretations

The research determines that producers booking guests is a sales job, with producers trying to “sell” the experience of the show, often making it sound more appealing than it really is. This study may shed light on the stereotypical image of talk show guests as trashy and careless by providing evidence that some guests behave differently offstage. The findings demonstrate how guests are led to believe appearing as the producers instruct is in their best interest. The “small town” guests are intimidated by the “worldly” producers and attempt to please the producers before and during the program. After the show, however, the producers abruptly stop treating the guests like celebrities; the producers send the guests back home immediately after the taping. Whereas the producers spoil the guests before the program and shower them with compliments, after the show the producers avoid the unhappy guests, while an assistant hurriedly ushers the guests to their transportation. If a guest demands to know why they have to leave early or why they are not being paid, the assistant shrugs and says, “I don’t have the authority to do anything for you, I’ll have the producer call you.”

The producers may not be to blame for their behavior (after all, the guests *do* agree to be on the show), but they persuade the guests to act negatively, which results in insults from the audience. One taping of Jenny Jones, which never aired, featured Scott

Amedure, a homosexual, who revealed his gay crush Jonathan Schmitz, a heterosexual male. Days later, Schmitz murdered Amedure after he received a love letter. Schmitz asserted the *Jenny Jones* experience shamed him (Gamson, 1998, p. 6). Gamson claims the “talk show irresponsibility” (p. 210) was not to blame for the murder because other daytime talk shows ran stories on homosexual crushes in previous seasons; the talk show was guilty of “scandalizing and normalizing” homosexuality, which played a part in the murder (p. 212).

Despite problems guests may face after appearing on a program, producers sometimes take little or no responsibility for the effect of the talk show broadcast on guests. When a guest blames the show for problems caused from an appearance on the show, these programs criticize the guest’s attitude, accusing the guest of wanting attention. Thus, the producers do not feel guilty when the guests provoke the negative reactions (Heaton & Wilson, 1995). Were it not for the guests’ attitudes, however, the guests would have never been booked on the show in the first place. In a personal interview with Heaton and Wilson, investigative journalist Tom O’Neill (1994) said, “[t]he producers walk a fine line and cross it with increasing ease, telling themselves that these people ask for it and get something out of it.”

Adding to the problem of talk show appearances potentially damaging guests, talk shows are not constrained by the principles of informed consent. Shows tout free speech rights and claim they are merely giving the people what they want (Heaton & Wilson, 1995, p. 186). Talk show workers claim their purpose, alleging they “are democracy at work” that allows the common man to prove his point to “elite authority” in today’s society (Gamson, 1998, p. 6).

The majority of the workers are young and inexperienced. Twenty-year-old producers lack the life experience and education necessary to handle troubled guests. If a guest becomes mentally unstable, the producers are not equipped to handle the situation. The older employees of the program cannot be relied on to fix the problem either; they have other duties, such as travel or wardrobe. The only “mature professional” behind-the-scenes is the show’s lawyer, which demonstrates the program’s main concern - lawsuits.

5.3 Future Research

These findings supplement the work of other researchers in the talk show field. Where other research focuses on the history of talk shows, guests’ motivations for appearing on talk shows and the repercussions of appearing on a talk show, this study deals with observing workers, guests and audiences in their natural, unaltered environments. This study does not form any new theories, yet it does provide additional categories of talk show guests’ motivations. Because the bulk of this study’s findings relates to guests, more research should be done on the motivations of talk show workers and audiences. The categories developed from the research findings are limited to guests because while the producer had full access to the guests, she had limited access and time with show workers and audiences.

One with more financial resources and a team of assistants might engage in covert participant observational research of talk show programs by working for other daytime talk shows for several months, thereby not altering a guest’s natural behavior. Other researchers’ results can be compared to this study’s to determine the correlation among talk show workers, guests and audiences of other daytime talk shows.

While outrageous guests may increase talk show ratings, their prevalence on television may spread stereotypical images. One could conduct a quantitative study of audiences' and other guests' perceptions of the reality of talk show programs to determine the effect of talk show programs on people's perception of reality and stereotypes.

5.4 Limitations

Due to financial, time and accessibility constraints, the researcher interned and conducted participant observation research at only one tabloid television talk show. The researcher interned for three months, when a longer term might have yielded more thorough results. The internship was for graduate school credit, so it spanned one semester. The researcher could not afford to live in the city to conduct research longer than three months. There was no behind-the-scenes access to other daytime tabloid talk shows of the same genre. The experiences with the talk show under study may be used in conjunction with access at other talk shows to further understand the motivation for appearing on, working at or attending a talk show.

This study was conducted without a team of assistants. A team of researchers posing as "interns" could have studied more cases, broadened the scope of the research and made it more open to generalization of talk shows. However, the researcher's lone presence was sometimes comforting to the guests, and thus too many other "interns" may have skewed the results.

Due to legal issues, the researcher did not contact guests after they returned home from appearing on the talk show; the researcher signed a confidentiality agreement form that limited contact with guests after the program. This was not a major impediment to

the research because the study's focus was on workers', guests', and audiences' *immediate* reactions to the talk show experience.

The researcher wished to conceal her researcher status; therefore no recording devices were employed when questioning guests. The researcher used pen and paper recording device and transferred the notes to a word processor after each show taping. Using an audio recording device would have been grounds for dismissal from the internship. Furthermore, as is the case in previous research, a recording device might cause subjects' formal answers and intimidation.

Once each episode began filming, the researcher remained in the greenrooms with the guests, while the audience sat in the studio and the producers ran from the greenrooms to backstage, escorting guests to their show positions. The researcher spent the majority of the time before, during and after the show with the guests. The researcher worked forty hours in the three to four days the guests were present. When the producers attempted to book guests for the next show on the remaining three days of the week, the researcher was not present. There was unlimited access to guests, with smaller amount of access to producers and minimal time spent with audiences.

Since the researcher enjoyed major access to guests in and out of the studio, the guests seemed to trust the researcher, viewing her as being on their "team." The guests asked the intern what to do about saying something that misrepresented them on television, or why the producers negated their promises. The researcher did not wish to alter the natural workings of the talk show, so she often avoided these questions by answering, "I don't know what you should do...Why don't you talk to [the producer]?"

Through constant interaction with the guests there loomed the dilemma of the researcher potentially befriending the guests. The researcher had to remain neutral, but found that she wanted to sympathize with the guests and their children, or that she was turned off by the producers' behaviors.

Due to the unique study of covert observer as participant observation intern, the researcher recorded several angles from those under study (e.g., while in the studio, while shopping, while in the hotel lobby). The researcher collected a wealth detailed field notes.

While the exploratory study gave the researcher freedom, it possibly allowed too much of it. There was no clear-cut path of research. When the researcher began interning, the goal of the research was not evident because there was not much previous research before conducting this study. The researcher could not give attention to one aspect of the show more than another until the research focus became clearer.

If the researcher had the opportunity to conduct the research differently, she would be more involved with the producers and audiences in and outside of the show. She would participate in additional activities with the producers inside and outside of work. She would remain at the studio on weekends and after hours. She would attempt to attend meetings with the executive producer. The researcher would go dancing with the producers to learn more about their behaviors away from the talk show. The researcher would also attend several episodes of the show as an audience member to have a firmer grasp on what happens in the studio from the audience point of view, and to learn what the audience members say to one another when they think no one is observing them. The researcher would pay closer attention to scripts, guest consent forms and the overall

workings of the talk show. While the researcher feels she has an accurate picture of the talk show experience, she wishes to have the opportunity to immerse in the talk show culture again, perhaps next time at a “classy” talk show program.

...After the show, the mini genie gathers his belongings, smoothes his hair and tosses his bag over one shoulder. There is a knock at the door. He smiles when he sees a woman he allegedly “videotaped” standing at the door. He walks up to her, shakes her hand and winks. In an instant, he is gone, leaving the researcher to question just what kind of trickery is the magician conducting?

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APPENDIX. SAMPLE GUEST QUESTIONS

- 1 **Researcher's questions:** To determine how talk show guests behave offstage, the researcher recorded:

- How do guests behave when they are with their friends and family? In public? With the show producers? Backstage?

The researcher recorded notes on the following topics:

- What is it like to be a guest?
- Why did you qualify to be a guest?
- Why do it?
- What do you gain from appearing on the show?
- Are you nervous, excited, and/or scared about appearing on the show?

At these times:

- During the initial meeting
- After meeting the other guests (usually at the hair salon or dinner)
- Directly before the guests appeared onstage
- Immediately after the guests appeared onstage
- As the guests exited the studios and were escorted to their transportation, after they were given packets that contained parting gifts and compensations
- If they stayed in a hotel in town overnight after appearing on the program

- 2 **Jorgensen's (1989) questions:** The observer should record descriptions of the physical setting and ask questions such as:

- "What kind of space (or building) is this?"
- Is it typical of other buildings of this sort?
- Or is it somehow unusual?
- How is the space organized?
- Is the space usual or somehow strange?
- What kinds of things are in this space or buildings?
- How is the space organized?" (pp. 82-82).

The observer described the people by recording initial impressions of them, asking questions:

- "How many people are there?..."
- What are their ages? Genders? Ethnicity?
- How are they attired?
- Can you see signs of social status and rank or visibly discern whether or not people are coupled or married?
- Is there anything unusual or striking about these people?
- How are the people in this space arranged or organized?
- Can you on this or some other observational basis discern connections or relationships among those present?

- Are people, for instance, arranged in couples? In cliques? In family groups? Or in some other recognizable patterns (such as age or gender)?
- What are people doing?
- What kind of gathering is it?
- Is this state of affairs somehow typical? Or is it discernibly unusual in some way?
- What feelings do you get in this setting?
- Do you have a sense of things that you are unable exactly to account for observationally?" (p. 83).

3 **Gamson's (1998) sample guest interview schedule**

- "General background: age, work, education.
- Do you like to watch talk shows?
- The story of talk show appearance(s): recruitment, producers' pitch, motivation, preinterview, preparation, taping-day arrival, prepping by show staff, preshow activities, activities during commercial breaks.
- Impressions of host, audience, other guests.
- Whom did you imagine you were speaking to (the studio audience, people like you at home, straight people, etc.)?
- Was the show what you wanted it to be? What you expected it to be?
- How did you come across, do you think, compared to the way you see your life outside of the show?
- Would you do it again?" (pp. 231-2).

4 **Priest's (1995) interview guide**

- "[Reconstructing the decision experience:]
- How did it come about that you were on *Donahue* [on other shows]?
- What incentives – if any – were given by the show's staff?
- What line of reasoning was given to convince you to participate?
- As you tried to decide, what did you see as the pros and cons? [Any others?]
- Was it difficult to make up your mind?
- What were some concerns?
- Did you have second thoughts after you agreed to participate? [If yes:] What were they?
- Did you ever think seriously about backing out? [Why?]
- Were there people who tried to influence you to be on the show – or who tried to convince you not to participate? [Who were they?/Why?]
- What were your expectations about being on the show would be like?
- When you thought of the audience who would see you, who did you picture?

- Were there certain people you felt uneasy about, knowing they might see the show? [Why?Who were they?]
- Had you disclosed this information in other places/shows? [Where?]
- How was your life going at the time you were asked to be on the show?
- [Demographic information:]
 - Age, education level, occupation, marital status.
 - What role has religion played in your life?
- [Television viewing habits:]
 - How does television fit into your life?
 - Are there programs you try to watch regularly? [What are they?]
 - Are there shows you clear time for, that you really settle in to view?
 - Do you have a general pattern of viewing during prime time?
 - How about daytime viewing?
 - How would you feel if your television was taken from you for a month?
- [Television talk show viewing:]
 - What were your feelings about *Donahue* before you appeared on the program?
 - Do you watch other daytime talk shows? Are you a fan? Do the shows seem different from one another? [In what ways?]
 - Would you be willing to participate in these other shows if asked? [Why/Why not?]
 - Has being on the show changed your viewing habits of daytime talk shows?
- [Prior opinion of the host:]
 - Think back to your feelings about *Donahue* [or other hosts whose shows they had appeared on] before you were on the show. Would you consider yourself a fan?
 - What were your feelings, before going on, about their abilities as hosts?
 - Their sincerity? Their therapeutic expertise?
- Radio listening? Any talk/advice shows?
- [Relationship information:]
 - Are there other people you can talk to about this issue?
 - Can you describe the level of emotional support you received from people before you discussed this topic on the show?
 - Let's briefly talk about the relationships you have with people like your spouse/partner, family, friends, and co-workers. How would you characterize these relationships?
- [Counseling background:]
 - Have you ever talked to a counselor or therapist about the same thing you discussed on the show?

- [Describing the experience:]
- Was there much contact with the producer before arriving for the taping?
- Could you describe the day of the show taping?
- What was it like being in the studio?
- What kind of briefing were you given?
- What effect did the presence of the studio audience have?
- What was it like to see yourself in the monitor?
- What effect did the camera have?
- Did you say more than you expected to say? Did you feel you were able to get your point across? Was it difficult to hold yourself together?
- You don't have to tell me what they were, but were there things you decided to hold back?
- Were there times you felt like crying but you felt it would not be appropriate?
- How would you evaluate Donahue as a host?
- How would you evaluate the staff?
- Do you feel you were treated fairly? Taken advantage of?
- [Describing outcomes:]
- Did you watch the show when it aired?
- What was it like to see yourself?
- Who was with you when you watched the show?
- Did you contact anyone and suggest that they watch the show? [Why?]
- Did you tape the show?
- What feelings do you have when you watch the program?
- What has happened as a result of being on the show? Any life changes? Any new insights?
- Have people treated you differently? [In what ways?]
- How have people close to you responded? Have there been changes in your relationships with your family or partner/spouse?
- How do you feel about your life now?
- [Overall evaluation of the experience:]
- So how would you summarize the advantages and disadvantages? [Probe may be necessary if only one part of the question is described.]
- Would you recommend this experience to others if they had the opportunity to appear on the show to discuss a sensitive topic? [Why?Why not?]
- What would you do differently if you had it to do over again?
- Would you appear for other topics? [What topics come to mind?]
- Are there topics you would not go on to discuss? [What topics?]

- Is there anything else you would like to mention about your experience?” (pp. 213-16).

VITA

Kelly Thompson Losch Deshotel is the wife of Michael B. Deshotel, daughter of Jill and David Losch, older sister of Amanda Pie Losch and granddaughter of Aline Nobile Thompson. Kelly graduated from Louisiana State University (LSU) in 2001 with a bachelor of arts degree in mass communication. She received her degree of Master of Mass Communication in December 2003. While at LSU, Kelly worked at the campus newspaper, and the campus radio and television stations. She participated in LSU theatre, LSU in London study abroad program and held several local and one national television production internship.