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## **The Politics of Third Way TV: Supernanny and the Commercialization of Public Service TV**

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Inspired by a review of the political theories of Anthony Giddens, particularly his question of whether or not there can be a Third Way politics of family, this essay examines the TV show Supernanny as an example of what we call “Third Way TV.” Tracing the program’s roots to a collection of British programs offering advice to parents in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as to the longer-standing British tradition of public service broadcasting that sought to “better its audience,” we argue that the program departs from that legacy in its commercialization. Supernanny is a hybrid form of pedagogical television: Third Way TV – a commercialization of the public service model. In a time when public subsidies and the delivery of services like child care have all but disappeared, the institution of commercial television easily fills the gap. Supernanny readily demonstrates how reality TV contributes to social governance through disciplinary discourse. Although it achieved international success as a global franchise and treated a supposedly universal subject matter, childrearing, it is at first surprising that the program was not localized for the Australian market when the US and UK versions did well in Australia. Analyzing the US and UK shows, we consider how discourses of nation, class, and empire coalesce in Supernanny to make localization irrelevant for the Australian market and audience.

## **Global Supernanny**

In its debut Australian season in 2005, Supernanny (Ricochet) appeared on commercial, free-to-air television, screening a combination of the UK and US versions of the program.<sup>1</sup> After its spectacular prime-time success that year, the program only saw one more season in the evening slot. By early 2008, only the US version screened on Australian free-to-air TV, while new episodes of both the UK and US versions continue to screen on the subscription TV service, Foxtel. As Supernanny lost momentum on free-to-air prime time, it was shuttled to weekend afternoons as an apt lead-in to the Dog Whisperer (MPH Entertainment Productions, US, 2004-).

Supernanny's brief success nevertheless left behind lasting impressions. The Supernanny brand has been widely applied. In New South Wales, a government help line for parents was named the "Supernanny Hotline," and several child-minding and nanny services throughout Australia have incorporated "Supernanny" into their names and marketing schemes. In 2005 and 2006, several parenting magazines reviewed the program's instructional content and offered expert assessment on the merits of the techniques. They unanimously credited the program with "putting parenting on the public agenda," despite some criticism for the way in which "love" is sidelined in the behaviorist paradigm. Even Teacher: The National Education Magazine featured an article written by a senior education officer explaining how to apply Supernanny

techniques in classrooms.<sup>2</sup> Such a wide range of references to the program suggests the reach of its influence and the public's familiarity with the brand.

As the possibility of an Australian version of the hit show was being negotiated in 2005, "Supernanny" Jo Frost told a Sydney-based newspaper, "I'd love to work with Australian families who are pulling their hair out, who need help. I've had an amazing response from the Australian public. . . . It's universal. You could put every nationality in a room, and it's the same thing going on."<sup>3</sup>

When Frost made this remark, the program was gathering an Australian audience approaching 2 million viewers and easily winning its evening time slot. Frost's remarks reveal a predictable interest in deriving the greatest gain from the show's format and distribution in a global market. But if indeed child-rearing challenges are universal, as she suggests, why then would we need an Australian version of the program? Considering the global success that the UK and US programs have achieved and the shared language advantage for them in the Australian market, the practice of localization is not always a necessity.

As it happens, Australia never got its own Supernanny. Despite Frost's claims of universality, we contend that nationality is an issue for the program. Although the format and the program's overt content remain the same in both the UK and US versions, they allow different discourses to emerge. As we will demonstrate, the US program in particular engages with national discourses about identity and a range of related distinctions because the Supernanny is English and the families are not. On the other hand, in the absence of such national difference, the UK program allows the

audience more easily to see how issues of class are mobilized in reality TV. For Australian audiences, recognition of national difference provides the pleasures of both “ritualistic animosity” and envy, as Tom O’Regan has observed.<sup>4</sup> And, in this particular case, Australia obtained a privileged position with access to both versions and the opportunity to exercise a sense of superiority vis-à-vis that very difference. Perhaps the pleasures provided to Australian audiences by Supernanny UK and Supernanny USA make a localized version unnecessary.

Cutting across these markers of difference, the global Supernanny franchise promotes a hegemonic, middle-class project that disregards national boundaries and marks reality TV wherever it originates and wherever it screens. The program simultaneously addresses national concerns and transcends them. It is able to perform these seemingly contradictory functions precisely because it is what we term “Third Way TV.” Specifically, by invoking concepts associated with Third Way politics and the theories of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, we seek to position Supernanny as a form of public service, but one that resides in the institutional setting of globalized, commercial television, as distinct from the tradition of public service television. While the public service television tradition in the UK has explicit links to pedagogy and to educating “the public,” in Third Way TV the pedagogic and entertainment functions collapse into one another. Supernanny educates while entertaining and vice versa. The concept of Third Way TV demonstrates how commonly assumed binaries like education/entertainment and public/private are not fixed, and it helps point to the ways in which television participates in disciplinary regimes.

### **The Third Way and a New Politics of TV**

In The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy, Giddens explains that neither classical social democracy nor neoliberalism is equipped to deal with the circumstances of globalization. “The third way argues that what is necessary is to reconstruct [the state] – to go beyond those on the right ‘who say government is the enemy,’ and those the left ‘who say government is the answer.’”<sup>5</sup> Giddens argues that the failings of socialism and the rise of neoliberal governments are generating a revision of social democracy. Rather than the old left and the old right, we have a Third Way – a new left typified by Tony Blair’s Labor. While the old left is noted for, among other traits, “pervasive state involvement in social and economic life,” “a confined role for markets,” and “cradle to grave” protection from a welfare state (the so-called “nanny state”), the new social democracy, the Third Way, engages individualism in a way that can appeal to the right (7).

Social cohesion can’t be guaranteed by the top-down action of the state or by appeal to tradition. We have to make our lives in a more active way than was true of previous generations, and we need more actively to accept responsibilities for the consequences of what we do and the lifestyle habits we adopt. The theme of responsibility, or mutual obligation, was there in old-style social democracy, but was largely dormant, since it was submerged within the concept of collective provision. (37)

Giddens asks, “Is there a politics of the family beyond neoliberalism and old-style social democracy?” (89). That is, is there a Third Way politics of family? As a key institution of civil society, the family and family life are fundamental to Third Way politics because the family is the site through which a balance between state and civil society is articulated. “The democratic family” is a pillar of Giddens’s “third way programme” and of the “renewal of civil society.”

The democratic family, however, is the product of a certain disciplinary regime. As Michel Foucault explained in his lecture titled “Governmentality,” governance of the state relies on governance of the family: “The family becomes an instrument rather than a model: the privileged instrument for the government of the population and not the chimerical model of good government.”<sup>6</sup> So it is through disciplined families that governance of populations is possible.

Equally – television, an institution that grew up alongside the suburban expansion of the postwar era – maintains strong ties with concepts of the family.<sup>7</sup> Even as the structure of family and its engagements with media and technologies continue to shift and change with social and technological developments, Supernanny demonstrates the sustained centrality of the family to television. Television continues to present, represent, and reflect families. Moreover, TV fully participates in the development and maintenance of global markets, and Supernanny’s worldwide distribution provides an example of TV’s transnational reach. Australian television has always aired a large share of imported programming because it is cheaper to buy programming than to produce it and because Australia shares a common language with

the world's two largest producers and exporters. Even the Australian television awards, the Logies, have acknowledged the Australian success of imported programs since their inception in 1959 when both Perry Como and Perry Mason (Columbia Broadcasting System, US, 1957–66) won awards.

Supernanny is emblematic of Third Way TV. It packages content reminiscent of public service broadcasting (instruction and advice to parents), delivers it in a commercial format (replete with celebrity and entertainment value), and distributes it worldwide. More pointedly, Supernanny explicitly deals with family governance, techniques of discipline, and the role of the governess (nanny). While the program's roots are readily traced to a body of UK public broadcasting programs both past and present that offer advice to parents for the renewal of families, Supernanny mixes market and interventionist approaches to deliver this particular public service in a time when traditional public services, like child care, are diminishing and the reach of other institutions, such as television, is expanding.<sup>8</sup>

We want to associate Third Way TV with the global reach of a public service tradition delivered in a commercial paradigm. Prominent features of this commercialization are celebrity; the ability to entertain beyond the explicit pedagogic function; and, of course, commercial viability. The Supernanny franchise delivers on all these counts. To argue our point, this essay examines Supernanny's formal qualities and narrative structure. This allows the comparison and contrast with the Reithian tradition of public service broadcasting to distinguish Third Way TV and to point to its political functions.



### **The Reithian Legacy and Third Way TV**

Supernanny employs generic tropes common to reality TV, and it is, essentially, a makeover show: now that we have bought the house (real estate shows), renovated it (DIY), and landscaped the yard (garden makeover shows), it is time to have the kids and make them over too. Critically, however, Supernanny also follows in the path of observational documentary programs like An American Family (US, 1973) and, in Australia, Sylvania Waters (1992). The provenance of Supernanny is additionally based in the long-standing yet evolving British broadcasting tradition of education and advice to the public – what is referred to as “the Reithian tradition” of broadcasting as a public service with an explicit goal of social betterment.<sup>9</sup>

In her discussion of contemporary lifestyle programs, Charlotte Brunsdon looks back at the “forgotten history” of BBC programs aimed at hobbyists and characterizes these early predecessors of reality TV as evidence of the BBC’s “strong impulse to improve its audience.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Deborah Philips describes interior design makeover programs as offering “a form of a Reithian legacy that has negotiated with the Thatcherite legacy of the commodification of popular taste.”<sup>11</sup> In a discussion of fashion makeovers, Gareth Palmer argues that “the concepts of both lifestyle and surveillance are part of a new discursive formation in which appearance is of paramount importance – a concern that is also central to those strands of Reality TV in its regular explorations of proper behavior in public space.”<sup>12</sup>

Supernanny, however, is not centrally concerned with public space. It primarily focuses on the relationships that govern domestic space and domestic relations. To that end, power hierarchies within the family unit and the role of the family in wider society are complementary aspects of this renovation project. It is not the place of family, the home, that is redesigned, but rather the placement of family, its reach and its participation in wider society outside the boundaries of the family home. The family is, as Foucault establishes, “the instrument for the government of the population,” and it is tactics, not laws, that work to regulate proper behavior.<sup>13</sup> Watching Supernanny, viewers’ attention is focused on errant behavior and its modification (of both children and parents). The broader social context within which these acts of containment are executed, however, is not given much consideration.<sup>14</sup> The social outcomes of such disciplinary tactics are camouflaged by the focus on family.

As the Blair and Brown governments in the UK supported and invested in a variety of social and educational endeavors intended to “strengthen” families for the public good, Supernanny emerged.<sup>15</sup> While Supernanny can be understood as yet one more makeover program in the reality genre, it must also be seen both as part of a much longer history of British public service broadcasting and within its more immediate political context.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the US, which does not have a strong tradition of “government television,” the UK has and continues to produce TV shows with serious and explicit pedagogic functions that participate in what Bill Nichols has called “discourses of sobriety.”<sup>17</sup> While acknowledging that Supernanny fits Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette’s description of reality TV as a “fusion of popular entertainment

with a self-conscious claim to the discourses of the real," its pedagogic intent has historic and generic links to British public service television and a documentary tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Emerging in 2004 on Britain's commercially funded public broadcaster, Channel 4, Supernanny was part of a larger movement of parenting advice shows that included many from the public service sector: the documentary series Child of Our Time (BBC1, UK, 2000), the TV series Little Angels (BBC3, 2004–6), The House of Tiny Tearaways (BBC3, UK, 2005), and Who Rules the Roost (BBC3, UK, 2004–5) brought to us by Supernanny's production team Ricochet. As Third Way TV, Supernanny sharply contrasts with these comparable programs. Although they share pedagogical intent, they perform teaching differently and deliver their lessons to distinct audiences. It is therefore appropriate that Supernanny screened on Channel 4, the publicly owned but commercially funded British broadcaster. It is important to note that Channel 4's commercial profile was considerably improved in the early 2000s with successful reality programs like Big Brother. In July 2010, a typical weeknight schedule included three hours of reality programs at prime time, followed by serial drama or situation comedy.<sup>19</sup>

BBC's Little Angels provides a good contrast to Supernanny. Although the show shares many of the child-rearing techniques, the presentation of this material differs considerably. In Little Angels, the program's aesthetic purposefully avoids making celebrities of the experts without undermining expert authority. Three qualified psychologists rotate in the role of expert from episode to episode. The psychologist is

not present during the parent-and-child interaction that the audience sees on-screen. Instead, the expert observes from another room and provides instruction to the parent through a radio earpiece. The expert is not part of the *mise-en-scène* during parent-child interactions but appears on-screen via parallel editing. Moreover, there is no direct address to the camera or the audience from the expert. These differences mean that the hosts of Little Angels cannot easily achieve the type of celebrity that has been bestowed on the Supernanny Frost. In Little Angels the power dynamics between audience, host, and family under observation differ completely from what we experience when watching Supernanny. Audience members are not openly invited to sneer in superiority at the families on TV or to position themselves as experts on a par with the host as they are in Supernanny. Little Angels at the beginning of the show describes the behavior to be remediated, rather than showing it as part of the program's spectacle. The show prefers an observational mode. The audience is aligned with the family on the program, as it shares the same amount of narrative disclosure. The audience learns the techniques at the same time as the family on TV does. While authority is still invested and ascribed to the expert, it is authority tied to benevolent pedagogy. This is precisely the practice of discipline that the Reithian tradition imparts.

One of the Little Angels's hosts, Dr. Tanya Byron, subsequently developed and presented another show, House of Tiny Tearaways. Rather than elevating her as a celebrity, this program even further disguises the celebrity apparatus. Here families with more severe problems (violent behavior in children, serious sleeping disorders, etc.) are brought together in a Big Brother-style house, observed, and coached without

the presence of the camera crew or host/expert. They are encouraged to explore individual problems and solutions in more detail than with the one-size-fits-all approach of Supernanny, and each narrative runs for two one-hour episodes. Byron gave up the award-winning show because, according to Fiona Millar, the British journalist and a former advisor to Cherie Blair, she was concerned, in part, about the “direction of the reality TV programmes, in particular a recent ITV offering, I Smack and I’m Proud.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Supernanny: Format and Function**

Supernanny’s Third Way approach has a structure that readily serves the needs of the US marketplace where reality TV substitutes for absent state services in a neoliberal climate of self-governance and discipline.<sup>21</sup> It is a careful mix of confessional and consensual surveillance. In the confessional, parents reveal their anxieties and frustrations about parenting and ask for help. In the ensuing segments, family interactions are revealed in observational documentary style for the nanny, the home audience, and the parents through surveillance, to which the parents have agreed.<sup>22</sup> The confessional and observational elements are joined together by an instructional address; the host assesses what we have seen and demonstrates for the parents (and for the viewing audience) preferred parenting techniques: this is the makeover.

Frost, the Supernanny, is an expert in family management. Notably rejecting any appeal to discourses of child psychology to justify her authority, Frost demonstrates techniques and strategies that are best described as behaviorist. She trains parents.

Input yields output and routine equals discipline. Even bridges between segments, achieved through Frost's voice-over, do not offer explanations of how or why the principles work effectively. Instead, the voice-over insists that the techniques must be applied. Frost demonstrates how to perform the techniques so that their implementation (by parents) and the response (by children) become habitual. The effect is a performance of class and taste; what is taught is how to appear to be middle-class.

Each week, Frost rides to the rescue in the back of a London taxi. We watch with her as she reviews a clip of the hapless parents introducing themselves in direct address to camera. This introduction is intercut with footage of the children and the parents running amok, yelling, throwing tantrums, and so forth. Inevitably, we hear the words chaos or control. Typically, in a tightly composed talking-head shot, one parent calls to the camera, "Supernanny, our life is chaos."<sup>23</sup> And Frost responds with, "This family is out of control" or "Who's in charge here?" and thus confirms the need for intervention.

After this standard plea for help, Frost soon arrives at the front door, introduces herself to the family members, and the segment titled "Observation" begins. This has been set up for the parents as a form of neutral activity; Frost will not, in this part of the program, intervene in unfolding events. While she observes from within the home, the chaos continues around her. At this point, several textual strategies are employed to establish a power hierarchy and to position Frost as the expert. We watch the nanny, carefully placed within the *mise-en-scène*, as she observes the family in action. Her voice-over commentary points out the behavior soon to be modified. "I cannot believe that Dad puts Molly and Michael down for a free hour nap [sic], when they've only

been up for two hours. It's ridiculous. It's obvious he does it because it's convenient for him and his work schedule."<sup>24</sup> For the audience, this observational phase is anything but neutral and in fact provides one of the more pleasurable highlights of the show. As events unfold, Frost delivers a series of horrified looks and knowing remarks to the camera. The audience is invited by the Supernanny to pass judgment on the family with her: "I can't believe . . .," she says, and neither can we.

Intercut with this "observational" footage are studio talking heads in which Frost offers more sympathetic and analytical commentary: "I thought that was quite peculiar, that the children were having breakfast so late," and "Michael is putting an enormous amount of pressure on himself." In contrast to the surveillant gaze, the address in these talking-head segments deploys a classic interview aesthetic in which the Supernanny's glance is slightly off camera, and the formal composure of the shot bestows expert status on Frost.

The second segment, "Parents Meeting," situates Frost at the kitchen table with the parents, telling them what is wrong with their family routine and their parenting practices while reviewing the evidentiary video footage with them. The parents take her assessment seriously, and this feeds into the program's dramatic structure. She first compliments the parents for having such lovely children but then quickly points out how their parenting is jeopardizing the children's futures. The parents often cry as they agree that they are poor parents (confessing the error of their ways). Such demonstration of sincere emotion is, of course, a staple of television spectacle.

Alternatively, one parent sometimes challenges Frost's assessment, and this response

positions the parent as an antagonist. Either way, the Supernanny is positioned as the hero. Moreover, as critical as these confessional scenes may be to the dramatic structure, they are surplus to the pedagogic agenda that the program shares with the less commercial programs in the Reithian tradition, as we have noted above, and yet completely in keeping with the formats of popular reality TV. The Supernanny's authority is reinforced in the act of submission that marks the confession.

With Frost's authority firmly established, the third segment, "Teaching Begins," starts. Significantly, this is where the parents take lessons from Frost. She implements a schedule for the family and explains the moment-by-moment management of household duties, including children's activities (naps, meals, play, bathing, etc.). We see the Supernanny instruct parents in how to play with the children (sit on the floor with them and participate), how to feed the children (scheduled meals and sensible portions), how to wean the children from clinging behavior, or, most often, how to manage unwanted behavior through the use of the "naughty chair." The techniques amassed serve as a disciplinary plan to reform parents, children, and family homes, including those of the viewers. As we watch the family interactions, the pace of editing increases to elevate the feeling of chaos. The audio mix amplifies the children's screams. Frost is on hand, within the *mise-en-scène*, to advise and model the ideal behavior for the parents. The child might refuse to get dressed, scream, and carry on, and the Supernanny tells the parent how to respond. She usually ends up demonstrating the appropriate parenting behavior. Then the parent practices the technique. Intercut with the demonstration is a talking head-piece in which the parent reflects on how he or she



felt in the process – either delighted with the potential of the new tool or uneasy with the technique and not yet convinced of its merit. Eventually, we see the parent succeed in implementing the technique, and Frost praises the him or her. The Supernanny treats the parents as all child-development experts would advise we treat children: tell them what you are going to do, model the behavior, have them practice it, and then reward their positive efforts.

In “Family Test Run,” the parents are left to practice the techniques. Under surveillance by video camera, in an interesting inversion of Nannycam (Parentcam, perhaps?), Frost watches the parents as they try to implement her lessons. The coupling of surveillance and discipline are interesting and amusing here as the parents are put under surveillance to be scrutinized in their application of the Supernanny’s disciplinary tactics. The voice-over now records Frost’s critical commentary on how the parents are failing. Although we know they have little chance of success, the Supernanny always performs shock at their failures, and this facilitates the next pedagogical phase, when she returns to the household to implement a remediation session with the parents, not the children. It has now become clear to the audience that it is the parents who are being watched and disciplined. This, in itself, is amusing and entertaining because it inverts the normative power relations between teacher/adult and student/child.

Again at the kitchen table with Frost, in “Parent Evaluation” the adults review the DVD and see how they behaved in the test run. As they watch their own performance, Frost compliments them on their successes and then shows them where

they have fallen by the wayside. Sometimes the DVD is shown in one frame while we see Frost and the parents reacting to what they observe in another. At this moment the modes of discourse and governance converge in a distinctly televisual event. The audience watches the parents watch themselves as they were previously observed under surveillance.

The final pedagogic session is "Reinforcement," in which Frost explains the importance of following her recommendations because, without them, the parents' inattentiveness to technique has led to failure. Ultimately the parents succeed once they become disciplined. What is most obviously reinforced, however, is the view that the Supernanny knows what is best.

Since she offers no explanation about the philosophies that inform her techniques, their merit is only evident in their execution. The parents have nothing more than Frost's word that the techniques will work until they are enacted successfully. By withholding the logics on which the techniques are based, the Supernanny becomes the "one who knows," and the viewing audience is encouraged to align with her through the telling remarks and knowing glances to the camera. We witness the effectiveness of her strategies as the parents try and fail and try again to succeed. Each episode concludes with the camera crew revisiting the family, and we hear from the parents how improved their life is. Each family member remarks on how influential Frost has been and on the effect of the transformation. With the family now disciplined, the makeover is complete. The helpful product that we "buy" is the Supernanny herself. The viewing audience, like the consenting family who subjects

itself to surveillance, is already predisposed to the authority of television through both commercial models and the benevolent pedagogy of the public service tradition.

### **From Expert to Celebrity**

With its strident success, the UK program was quickly remade for a mass market with US families – Supernanny USA. The mythological and iconic markers of Britishness embodied by the nanny are, however, integral to the program and foregrounded in numerous ways. The opening credits bring Frost to the US households in a London taxi, and the Union Jack is a prominent motif in the graphic design. The Supernanny's accent and her uniform emphasize her nationality for a US audience. The transformation of the great American institution of the postwar nuclear family is, paradoxically but predictably, facilitated by a Brit. Unlike other reality TV programs localized for different markets, with Supernanny only the families are localized, while the expert remains unchanged. Britishness is so significant that the rival Nanny 911 (Granada Entertainment, US, 2004–) goes to great lengths to develop its own distinctly British tropes. The power of these iconic markers was evident when South Park (Comedy Central, US, 1997–) satirized these programs, relying on the instant recognition of the iconography and mythology for its humor.<sup>25</sup>

US popular culture has, of course, paved the way for these tropes. The British nanny figure and its mythology are best known to the US audience through popular culture in Disney's *Mary Poppins*. The figure of the nanny, whose function is to transform through a combination of magic and discipline, can be found in P. L.

Travers's series of *Mary Poppins* books as well as Disney's film adaptation. Both bring the issues of class and nation into play in ways that set the stage for our reading of Supernanny. Frost is, in fact, promoted as the "modern day *Mary Poppins*" on the back cover of the DVD jacket.

Travers, born in Queensland, Australia, found her way to England and Ireland in the 1920s before publishing *Mary Poppins* in 1934. Her famous character is depicted as a lower middle-class woman who takes her young wards on excursions into a magical working-class world. This is, of course, a concoction that reflects Travers's diverse literary influences, including mythology, rather than the actuality of an upper-class Edwardian childhood. Still, class remains a finely articulated theme in the books. It could be argued that Travers's perspective is that of an outsider and her presentation of Poppins' class, in particular, anachronistic. The presentation of difference, however, is more important than the authenticity of any particular class representation.

In the film *Mary Poppins* (dir. Robert Stevenson, US, 1964), the finer distinctions of class dissolve into a generic Britishness that signifies Otherness. Class is reduced by Disney to a carnivalesque series of inversions: dancing chimney sweeps, jolly cooks, floating fat men, and so forth. The Banks family, including the domestics, operate more like an American family, without the rigid upstairs/downstairs divide of privileged Edwardian life. In the books, no transformation of the family occurs; the children certainly experience a sense of wonderment that nourishes them as individuals, but the essential dynamics of this Edwardian family remain unchanged. The film, in contrast, clearly marks this achievement by predicating Poppins's appearance and departure on

a successful reformation of the nuclear family; there are “lessons to be learned.” This is also the narrative trajectory of Supernanny.

The nanny figure in a UK context evokes particular historic and even current experiences of class. Nannyng, in the UK, is a profession.<sup>26</sup> Only very well-to-do people in the UK would have a nanny, and she would be of a class position more similar to theirs than distinct from it. Lady Diana, for instance, was a nanny before her own Disney-like transformation into princess. In this context, it would seem that Frost is miscast. She does not hail from the class that would traditionally provide nannies; her accent marks her as working-class London. Famously, she says, “asseptable” instead of “acceptable,” “free” instead of “three,” and “one anover” rather than “one another.” In one episode, she even asks a child, “What was you given to look after?” In this sense, she seems to fit the Travers model of an errant transformational figure.

As a makeover show, the program has as its preferred audience the aspiring middle class and the working class – people who are like those we see in the show. As several scholars have noted, reality TV’s project is improving the lower classes by showing them how to behave, what to buy, and what to wear.<sup>27</sup> The families that appear in the British shows, however, are not people who would ever have a nanny, and for the US families, it is more likely that in-home child care would be provided by Latin American women, not by Europeans.<sup>28</sup> Supernanny UK effectively gears down the class relations between nannies and their employers. British audiences will, of course, recognize this slippage, but it does not matter. This class-making activity is evident in Supernanny as she instructs parents in techniques designed to train their

children into particular patterns of behavior. This practice is well situated in the tradition of British public service television and its remit to educate the lower classes.

In Supernanny USA, on the other hand, the families are middle-class and the nanny need only be British to suggest class difference. While the US homes are new, large, and spotless, the children are untidy and unruly. The children need to be contained and controlled, at first by their parents and later, once they have internalized the routines and habits, by means of self-management. Following Pierre Bourdieu, Palmer explains that the expert is now part of the techno-managerial class or *petit bourgeoisie*. He might describe Frost this way because she is “more approachable than the traditional middle class” and “can communicate at the same friendly level” as the parents under observation.<sup>29</sup> In the US context, however, the distinctions of class that Frost’s performance evokes would be invisible under the gloss of Britishness, just as class disappears in the Disney film. The Supernanny’s task is to civilize the vulgar ex-colonials into an ideal family, perhaps best represented by families in Leave It to Beaver or The Brady Bunch—families that occupy a mythological middle-class status rather than being real families.<sup>30</sup> As one father puts it in the Supernanny DVD extras, “Britain tried to control us hundreds of years ago and we got free from that. Now they’re coming in and trying to do it again.”<sup>31</sup>

Mythologies of nation, class, empire, and nannying coalesce in Frost’s authority as an expert on child rearing: She is the Supernanny. She is not presented as a child psychologist, a trained educator, or a similarly qualified professional. In the makeover of Supernanny for the US market, she is presented as a celebrity, albeit with “numerous

years of experience” in child minding. This is a significant point of departure from the public service tradition in which we earlier placed the show. While the hosts of public broadcasting’s instructional TV were (and are) credentialed experts in child rearing, the *Supernanny*’s expertise is magnified by her celebrity. She is a function of Third Way politics and Third Way TV. Her tactics for disciplining households by training parents are consistent with postwar technological and managerial strategies – also hallmarks of Third Way politics and principles of governance.

In addition to other outgrowths of the industrial revolution, the twentieth century is noted for a Fordist approach to household management and a medicalization of childhood, resulting in the rise of accessible and popular advice to parents on how to raise their children.<sup>32</sup> In the post-World War II era, this reaches an apex with the shift to suburbia and a copy of Benjamin Spock in every household. Of course, this process is ongoing, and, by the end of the twentieth century, the scrutiny is so focused that, in the words of Catharine Lumby and Duncan Fine, parenting is now “characterised by incredible performance anxiety.”<sup>33</sup> This performance is then reenacted as spectacular entertainment in *Supernanny USA*.

Most of the US families that Frost visits are firmly middle-class, often self-employed, running their own small businesses or seemingly employed as middle managers. The homes are all in neat suburban tracts, each one looking pretty much like the ones on either side of it. The interiors are decorated in the latest flat-pack furnishings; that is, rarely do we see an heirloom item or any sign of inherited wealth – everything matches, everything is new. The homes have the “muchness” that marks US

consumer culture, its associated aspirations, and its position in a global economy. The show foregrounds these features with sweeping crane shots that create panoramas of the immaculate house from the exterior, usually with a strategically placed, upturned child's bicycle in the front yard. These shots pepper the episodes as transitions and bumpers. The external appearance of orderliness belies the chaos inside. The families lack the discipline of the middle class, in a Foucauldian sense, and the Supernanny has to come to establish order. This is foreshadowed in the opening credits (of the first US season) in which a series of objects and individuals come flying toward the center of the frame until Frost arrives and, with a wag of her finger, the unruly elements fall neatly into boxed frames within the frame, suggesting "a place for everything and everything in its place" – children included.

While the iconography of *Mary Poppins* exists in the UK version, by the second season it is downplayed. The London taxi and Union Jack motif, markers of Britishness, are obviously unnecessary for the UK audience. Neither does Supernanny UK make a feature of displaying the homes and their decor. There are no external crane shots. More important, the show features families from a variety of classes, including those who live in public housing. In these ways, it clearly sustains its relationship with the Reithian tradition, although Frost is steadily becoming more well-known as a celebrity in the UK.

For Australian audiences, the pedagogic and political dimensions of these programs do not hold any critical significance. These are not our problems and they are not our families; we enjoy watching the cycle of corrective discipline in a way that



seems driven by “ritualistic animosity.”<sup>34</sup> For an Australian audience there is pleasure in laughing at the US families who seem to have so much but are so incapable of managing. While we might be somewhat more sympathetic to the British families, we enjoy noting our relative privilege. Watching Supernanny allows us to reinforce elements of our own national mythology: a relaxed lifestyle and purported egalitarianism. At the same time we can appreciate our spacious homes and their sun-drenched gardens.

### **Third Way TV and the Politics of Child Care**

Supernanny USA achieves its US success in a political climate marked by increasing cost for child care and greater scrutiny of the undocumented labor force — the class of workers who have provided a great share of in-home child care for the past thirty years. Although many of the families requesting the Supernanny’s help have three or more children under school age, the option to secure child-care services is never raised in the program. Only once have we seen an episode address in-home assistance. At the close of the show the husband summed up his experience: “The most significant thing that I have gotten is that my wife has actually let her guard down a little bit. She’s willing to allow an outsider to come into the house and help us out.”<sup>35</sup> More than a metaphor for television’s penetration of the family home, this is a rather telling remark about the insulation and isolation of the modern-day nuclear family, but like the rest of the series, it avoids contact with a political fact that has been on the public agenda since the Clinton presidency. We remind readers of the two failed 1993 nominations for the US

attorney general: Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood. Both women were nominated and then withdrawn from consideration when it was revealed that each had employed “illegal immigrants” as nannies. Rather than these events signaling a need for the reconsideration of child-care options, the public had little sympathy for the elite women who violated the law by employing undocumented workers as in-home child-care providers. Their privileged class position cast a shadow over their status as working mothers. As we have suggested, the UK audience would be aware of the slippage around the representation of the British class system in Supernanny, but the US audience might not be. The question is, are the US viewers aware of the equally significant elisions around the politics of domestic labor in their national context and of what it says about the US class system?

Supernanny's appeal rests on its reference to a series of mythic structures articulated through popular culture. Giddens says, and we agree, that, “when rightist critics speak of the traditional family, they don't in fact mean the traditional family at all, but a transitional state of the family in the immediate post-war period – the (idealized) family of the 1950s. The traditional family by this point had all but disappeared, but women hadn't yet entered the labour force in large numbers and sexual inequalities remained pronounced.”<sup>36</sup> Disney's *Mary Poppins* leaves the Banks household once the family has learned to function as a self-contained unit. The families we see in Supernanny are struggling to function in isolation, without in-home help or child-care services. The families say that they have made conscious decisions not to send the children to child care, but repeatedly we see that the results are disastrous. The

nuclear family is shown to be lacking. They do need help. This begs the question: what practical child care options exist for these families and the viewers?

Week after week, we wonder why Frost never suggests that some of the children under five might attend nursery school or child care to ease the burden on the frazzled parents. Instead, the solutions to their problems are meant to be found within the family home and nuclear unit. Frost shows the parents how to manage without assistance, how to do it yourself within the confines of their home – without help from the government, the local community, or commercial services. Third Way television provides a commercial response to a lack of public services: limited access to affordable child care.

## Notes

1. Australian television services are delivered as “free-to-air” and “pay TV.” Free-to-air includes terrestrial broadcasting and pay TV refers to the subscription cable and satellite services (about 33 percent of households subscribe). In the current transition to digital television, the free-to-air networks are converting their signals and expanding the number of channels (Channel 7 now also provides 7Two, for example). Free-to-air television has always been a mix of commercial and public broadcasters. See the respective Web sites, [abc.net.au](http://abc.net.au), [sbs.com.au](http://sbs.com.au), and [freetv.com.au](http://freetv.com.au).
2. Brian Brennan, “Supernanny Rules!,” Teacher: The National Education Magazine, August 2006, 34–35.

3. Danielle Teutsch and Rachel Browne, "Supernanny Backs Her Instinct over Expert Critics," Sun Herald, 1 May 2005.
4. Tom O'Regan, Australian Television Culture (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 86-87.
5. Anthony Giddens, The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 70.
6. Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, trans. C. Gordon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 100.
7. Significant works on television, the domestic realm, and family include David Morley, Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure (New York: Routledge, 1990); Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Marybeth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs," in Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 111-141; Roger Silverstone, Television and Everyday Life (New York: Routledge, 1994).
8. See also Laurie Ouellette, "Nanny TV," 2005, FlowTV, [flowtv.org/2005/03/nanny-tv](http://flowtv.org/2005/03/nanny-tv); James Hay, "Overhaulin' TV and Government (Thoughts on the Political Campaign to Pimp Your Ride)," 2005, FlowTV, [flowtv.org/2005/02/overhaulin-tv-and-government](http://flowtv.org/2005/02/overhaulin-tv-and-government); and their jointly authored Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-welfare Citizenship (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). We note, however, that Ouellette and Hay concentrate on the US context and we are emphasizing the very distinctive British tradition that spawned Supernanny.

9. John Reith (1889–1971) is credited with founding public service broadcasting in Britain. His view that broadcasting could and should educate the public was influential in the BBC and in similar systems following this model, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).
10. Charlotte Brunson, "Lifestyling Britain: The 8–9 Slot on British Television," in Television after TV, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 75.
11. Deborah Philips, "Transformation Scenes: The Television Interior Makeover," International Journal of Cultural Studies 8 (2005): 226.
12. Gareth Palmer, "The New You: Class and Transformation in Lifestyle Television," in Understanding Reality Television, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (London: Routledge, 2004), 173.
13. Foucault, "Governmentality," 1991.
14. Ouellette, "Nanny TV."
15. Fiona Millar, "For the Sake of Children," British Journalism Review 18 (2007): 46.
16. See essays in Dana Heller, ed., Makeover Television: Realities Remodelled (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
17. Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
18. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, introduction to Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture, ed. Murray and Ouellette, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.
19. See channel4.com.

20. Millar, "For the Sake of Children," 49.
21. Ouellette and Hay, Better Living through Reality TV, and Ouellette, "'Take Responsibility for Yourself' Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen," in Murray and Ouellette, Reality TV, 223-242.
22. Children would not be able to give consent for their participation, but their parents do so on their behalf. This does raise questions of ethics and children's rights, but these issues remain unaddressed in this program and most others.
23. "Burnett Family," episode of Supernanny Season 1, writ. Nick Powell, exec. prod. Craig Armstrong, 18 April 2005.
24. "Burnett Family."
25. "Tsst," episode of South Park, writ. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, dir. Trey Parker, Comedy Central, 10 May 2006.
26. The French term au pair means "on a par" or "equal" and the au pair is meant to be a temporary member of the family rather than a professional employee, as a nanny would be.
27. See particularly Palmer, "The New You"; Ouellette and Hay, Better Living through Reality TV; and Ouellette, "Take Responsibility for Yourself."
28. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), and the second edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Valerie Polakow, Who Cares for Our Children? The Child Care Crisis in the Other America (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2007); Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie

Hochschild, eds., Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy (New York : Henry Holt, 2002); Mary Romero, Maid in the USA, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002); Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prugl, eds., Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More (London: Routledge, 1995); and Roger Sanjek and Shellee Cohen, eds., At Work in Homes: Household Workers in World Perspective (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1990).

29. Palmer, "The New You," 178.

30. Derek Kompare "Extraordinarily Ordinary: The Osbournes as 'An American Family,'" in Murray and Ouellette, Reality TV, 100-119.

31. Super Nanny Season 1 (three disc set), Ricochet, 2005.

32. The classic scholarly work is Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts' Advice to Women (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978).

33. Catharine Lumby and Duncan Fine, Why TV Is Good for Kids (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2006), 270.

34. O'Regan, Australian Television Culture.

35. "Burnett Family."

36. Giddens, The Third Way, 92.

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