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"One rule for MPs, one rule for ordinary people": using discursive psychology to explore how class-based assumptions of "ordinariness" and "exceptionalism" are negotiated in political entertainment shows

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ABSTRACT

To date, an estimated 14.4 million people in Britain live in poverty - a situation exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis. This has caused moral panics about who should and should not have access to public money to increase again. By returning to a case study of the 2009 UK Parliamentary Expenses Scandal, this article shows how politicians use class-based ways of speaking to sidestep financial and moral transgressions. Discursive social psychology was used to analyse five hours of *Question Time* and shows how two categories of *ordinariness* and *exceptionalism* were used. These categories were embedded with notions of status, deservingness and disposition, and were used dynamically by speakers. Ultimately, speakers drew upon class-based ideological assumptions to negotiate who can, and cannot, use taxpayers' money. This article shows how our everyday talk around money can challenge, uphold, or perpetuate social class inequality.

Political scandals are a regular feature of the political landscape in the United Kingdom (UK), often tied to financial and moral transgressions (Graffin et al. 2013). Scandals and exposures highlight a tension between democratic expectations from elected politicians and how these behaviors are treated as a breach of said expectations. The implication of these scandals increases mistrust toward politicians (von Sikorski 2018) and political institutions broadly (Bowler and Karp 2004). Therefore, negotiating accountability is an important requirement of a politician's position (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Edelman 1977). This links to an expectation in democratic societies for politicians to appeal to their audience and to seek their approval (Billig 1995; Litchfield et al. 2024).

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With this in mind, Britain is currently living through a "cost of living crisis," caused by high inflation rates and an increasingly high cost of energy bills, exacerbated by years of neoliberal policy and by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Singh and Uthayakumar-Cumarasamy 2022). To date, around 14.4 million people live in poverty, with 2.5 million of these people not earning enough money to buy food (Francis-Devine 2024). This means if people living in poverty need to access extra money, they have limited options, including state support, which can be a punitive and discriminatory process (Barr et al. 2012; Day and Shaw 2022; Day, Rickett, and Woolhouse 2014); bank and payday loans, which are typically means tested and have very high interest rates; or options with high risks associated with them, such as gambling (Loibl, Jones, and Haisley 2018).

This is occurring during a time when the richest people in the UK, some of whom are politicians, have made mainstream news for their tax avoidance. For instance, in 2021 the Pandora Papers (Aristodemou 2024) revealed that many politicians globally had offshore accounts and shell companies as a means of avoiding tax. UK politicians such as Ben Elliot (former Conservative Chairman) and Tony Blair (former Labour Prime Minister) were held to account for their unethical, but not illegal, use of financial loopholes. Similar documents, such as FinCEN in 2020, the Paradise Papers in 2017, and the Panama Papers in 2016 have highlighted that many rich and high-profile British nationals have used these loopholes (Aristodemou 2024) to accumulate wealth. Therefore, it is important to understand the link between a financial scandal and class-based inequalities because the richest people in society, who earn the most income, exploit loopholes in systems with little to no consequence; whereas, conversely, the lowest earners in society do not have access to these same systems, often risking personal, financial and social harm when using the financial options available to them (Loibl, Jones, and Haisley 2018).

Britain's income inequality gap is widening (O'Neill and Croal 2023) and the decreased spending on state-funded services only further widens this gap (Macdonald and Morgan 2020; Taylor-Gooby and Mitton 2008; Walsh et al. 2022). The dynamics of the current political context has many similarities with the dynamics after the 2008 Global Financial Crash, themed around the moral panics surrounding benefit claimants, particularly in regard to disabled and chronically ill people (Day and Shaw 2022; Disability Rights UK 2024) and households in poverty (in 2011, three years after the Financial Crash, 14 million people were at risk of living in poverty [Office for National Statistics 2015]). Of course, the circumstances are different between 2008 and the cost of living crisis today,[1] but there are notable comparisons in the way social class and class-based inequality is discussed.

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[1] The 2008 Global Financial Crash was associated with financially risky mortgage loans (Lal 2010).

A return to the 2009 Expenses Scandal will illustrate our point: This case study highlights a serious question of why members of Parliament (henceforth MPs), who are some of the highest earners in the UK, can access this public money for personal benefit, which does not aid their parliamentary duties, when public expenditure has been cut dramatically. There is a call, therefore, to understand why such unjust behaviors are treated as acceptable or condemnable in a public arena. In doing so, this can provide insight into the discursive mechanisms used to perpetuate and maintain class-based assumptions that sustain an unequal society. In our contribution to this special issue on social class, we demonstrate how class is made relevant through category uses of *ordinariness* and *exceptionalism*. Within the context of a broadcast program, in which politicians were under scrutiny for their attempts to account for their moral transgressions of financial mismanagement of public money.

We begin our article by introducing a case study (Billig and Marinho 2017) of this highly contentious political scandal in the UK, reviewing how researchers have previously conceptualized notions of political accountability. We then move to reviewing social psychological bodies of work to understand the methods we can use to capture how social class inequality is sustained. Within our analysis, we present evidence to support the ongoing body of discursive psychological literature that suggests that class-based assumptions are discussed in our everyday talk and can be used to carve the parameters of who should, and should not, use taxpayers' money (Carr 2020; Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019; Gibson 2009).

Case study: the UK parliamentary expenses scandal, 2009

The UK Parliamentary Expenses Scandal of 2009 involved numerous MPs across all political parties. Those involved ranged from prominent party leaders, such as Gordon Brown and David Cameron, and backbenchers[2] such as Margaret Moran and Ann Winterton. Many MPs, across all political parties, wrongly claimed on their expenses. This system was designed to aid parliamentary duties; however, these claims fell beyond the means of this. Some MPs claimed low-cost items such as bottles of gin and adult movies (Flinders and Anderson 2019), whereas other MPs made more expensive claims such as duck houses, moat cleaning, and second-home allowances—some of which contributed to mortgage fraud (Maitlis 2019).

This became public information following a detailed list of expenses claims published by the *Daily Telegraph* and *News of the World* (Flinders and Anderson 2019; Ladd and Lenz 2009; Pattie and Johnston 2012). This scandal

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[2]Backbenchers are elected officials who have an important role to represent constituents, by raising concerns from their local area, in Parliament. They also have an important role at holding government ministers (i.e., frontbenchers) accountable for their accounts and parliamentary decisions in a debate (UK Parliament 2024).

became particularly controversial, not only for the scale of unreasonable claims, but because the expenses system was funded through taxpayers' money. When we take into account the fact that the average MP salary in 2010 was £64,766 (Kelly 2010),[3] we may begin to question why a claim, per MP, was between £62,265 to £138,718 in expenses (calculated over a three-year period from 2001 – 2004; see Besley and Larcinese 2011).

For wider context, this scandal occurred after the Global Financial Crash of 2008 (Office for National Statistics 2018), which financially impacted millions of people's lives, leading to sharp rises in wage cuts, redundancies, and unemployment (Gennard 2009; Stuckler et al. 2011). The impact of this recession also led to the implementation of austerity measures in 2010. These measures reduced government expenditure in the public sector (Barr et al. 2012), increased tax payments, and introduced cuts to welfare benefits and tax credits (Life on the Breadline 2018). Negotiating who should have access to taxpayers' money was a heavily debated topic. Therefore, as this scandal mirrors similar levels of economic and class-based injustices to the present day, it is important to understand how these injustices are justified at the time.

Given this context, public opinion about the Expenses Scandal was emotionally charged (Barkham and Rachel 2009; Grice 2009; Maitlis 2019) as it exposed injustices between the treatment of "elite" politicians and the general public. Research concerning the Expenses Scandal focused on the impact of the upcoming British general election of 2010. This research typically used surveys and statistical models, such as multiple regression analyses (Besley and Larcinese 2011; Eggers 2014; Pattie and Johnston 2012; Vivyan, Wagner, and Tarlov 2012) to capture whether this scandal impacted voting behavior and to what degree. Such research has suggested that this political scandal had minimal impact on British politics, despite predictions suggesting otherwise (VanHeerde-Hudson 2014).

Conclusions about a "minimal" or "real" impact on politics can be misleading because electoral votes are only one way of measuring accountability. Flinders and Anderson (2019) explored both the long-term and short-term impacts of the Expenses Scandal following its ten-year anniversary. They reviewed survey data and conducted interviews to explore why this scandal had a more significant long-term impact than short-term. Survey data indicated that discourses of "expenses fiddlers" and "pigs" (Flinders and Anderson 2019, 30) were used to describe MPs and had increased in frequency of usage since 2009. This research highlights how the words we use to describe unjust situations have real-world implications.

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[3]For context, the average income of a person working full-time in the UK in 2010 was £26,100 (Office for National Statistics 2012).

To gain more insight into how discourses mediate and manage the accountability of MPs, it is more analytically fruitful to explore how words such as "expenses fiddlers" and "pigs" are used in a context in which they evoke accountability. Bowen (2021) analyzed an episode of *Question Time* (henceforth, QT), in which Margret Beckett (member of British parliament at the time) was held to account for her expenses claims by members of a live studio audience. Using conversation analysis (henceforth CA), Bowen identified many linguistic features[4] that were used by Beckett to navigate her accountability. Bowen found that Beckett employed categorization techniques to manage the blame. By using polarizing group identities of "people" and "MPs" (Bowen 2021, 13), she shifted the blame to the (faulty) expenses system in general, suggesting that it is something *everyone* does, especially when busy. By inciting her behavior as something everyone is capable of, it manages the moral assumptions surrounding the claim, positioning her claim as unintentional and not an abuse of her position.

Bowen's research importantly demonstrates how qualitative methods can be used to identify the interactional mechanisms that afford a negotiation of expenses claims. These mechanisms highlight two main features: first, accountability is a comanaged activity between MPs and the audience, not only measured through electoral votes; second, MPs use discursive techniques to mitigate the impact of their expense's claims. This shows that our words and what we do with them need to be the focus of the research.

Social psychological approaches to social class inequality

In social psychology, there are multiple ways to interpret and understand what people's words *mean*. Some traditional approaches conceptualize people's words as evidence of beliefs and attitudes. These cognitive approaches argue that beliefs and attitudes are something individuals have "inside" them (Hepburn 2003), where behaviors and expressions of said beliefs are conceptualized as stable and consistent with the individual, regardless of the social context (Tileagă 2014). However, we argue that an approach focusing on social practices and how these perform psychological work (see Edwards and Potter 1992a) offers us valuable insight into accountability and the "doing" of social class. In essence, then, social class is identifiable through a negotiation of one's psychological disposition via negotiations of what class they are and what class others are in.

Research from Phoenix and Tizard (1996) shows the relationship between people's self-defined socioeconomic status and how they are dynamically expressed. Using interviews, they found social class is an important aspect in

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[4]These sociolinguistic methods are used to understand the linguistic features of talk-in-interaction, from speech acts to extralinguistic acts, to the sequential pattern of talk (for a more in-depth definition of each method, see Bowen 2021).

our identities but is usually discussed in a way that does not explicitly draw upon categories of "working class" or "middle class." Instead, people typically draw upon divisions of "us" and "them" when discussing class, with these categorize typically drawing upon money, housing, and standard of living within their discussions. This highlights how negotiated aspects of social class allow for an expansive understanding of it, showing how it is treated in everyday discussions.

Research from Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler (2001) builds upon this notion, showing how the stereotypes people have about class can inform us of how things, such as public opinions, can influence political power. Their research revealed how American ideologies—including a belief in a Just World (Lerner 1980), the Protestant work ethic, and authoritarianism—influence harmful classed views. For instance, stereotypes such as being lazy, stupid, and immoral were used to categorize "poor" people, significantly more than people who are "middle-class." Alongside this, characteristics such as criminal, immoral, unkind, and inconsiderate were also significantly associated with stereotypes of "poor" people. This suggests that ideological notions of class are embedded in how people of various social "standings" are talked about and in this generalized sense can contribute and uphold certain ideologies and values.

This research shows the importance of incorporating the social context into research and exploring classist assumptions in situ—that is, in discourses. Understanding the social context is important, as it captures how these ideological notions are woven into everyday usage of social class. If class is ideological, as we argue it is, then one must recognize that it is *lived* (Wetherell and Potter 1992). In other words, incorporating the social context back into research shows how people themselves orient to social class and how social class is constituted: "the "lived ideology" is, as usual, much more fragmented, piecemeal, and contradictory, caught up as it is in the kaleidoscope of common sense" (Wetherell and Potter 1992, 201). The discursive psychological approach that we advocate is designed to capture this. This approach moves away from treating social class as a static entity and focuses on how people respond to and negotiate class within a specific instance.

Large bodies of research in this discipline have identified that *ideology* is an integral ingredient in a concoction of class-based assumptions (e.g., Billig 1982; Day, Rickett, and Woolhouse 2014, 2020). We understand ideology as lived and as "shared stereotyping and common-place social explanations, that are framed in language" (Billig 2002, 184). Ideology is something people bring into their everyday conversations, as they discuss, negotiate, and argue what it means to do something that is classed based. This approach is less concerned with understanding the stereotypes individuals *think* about but rather *how* they use these when they talk.

When researching the assumptions of working-class people, it has been widely documented that television shows have been a site where these ideological assumptions are constructed and negotiated (Allen, Tyler, and De Benedictis 2014; Jensen 2014). This discourse "invites the judgment, surveillance, regulation and control of working-class people" (Rickett 2020, 102). What this highlights is how discourse can be used to pathologize the lifestyle choices of working-class people and treat their behaviors as something not to do (Beresford 2016; Jensen 2014; Sandle, Day, and Muskett 2018).

For example, in Jensen's (2014) research, she argues that entertainment shows, such as *Benefits Street*,[5] highlight how commentary about welfare recipients have harmful narratives constructed about them, relating to notions of "personal failure" and a condition of "wilfully workless" (Jensen 2014, 3). Jensen highlights how this commentary embeds notions of "commonsense" into debates of who should and should not have access to the welfare state. This brings attention to the powerful influence of television media—in this format, notions of meritocracy are packaged as a "norm," where people acting outside of these ideals are constructed to be behaving in a "wrong" way. Jensen argues that media representations of working-class people perpetuate the idea that class injustice exists only because of a lack of individual effort, where there is little to no room to encompass the unequal social conditions these people exist in.

Research exploring the behavior of super-rich people and the ideological assumptions is emergent. The research that has been conducted in this area has highlighted that media representations of super-rich people convey notions of meritocracy as a means to justify expensive and luxurious lifestyles (see Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019). This will be explored in more depth in the next section.

Social psychology has demonstrated that ideology is an important component in maintaining class-based injustices through what we might call *doing class* in discourse. This research has highlighted that media discourse is a site in which the lifestyle choices and behaviors of working-class people are constructed as "wrong" (Day 2020b). These behaviors are treated as such for not fitting into a neoliberal ideal. By extension, this implies there is something "right" about the way middle- and upper-class people behave. By understanding how ideology (such as meritocracy) can shape our discourse, we can begin to understand the class-based boundaries of what is considered a "normal" way to behave (Day 2020b). To understand this further, we must explore the everyday language people use, in the context it is used in.

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[5]*Benefits Street* was a documentary program that followed the lives of people living on James Turner Street, Birmingham, most of whom were unemployed (Jensen 2014).

Discursive social psychology and categorization

This article uses discursive social psychology (DSP) to analyze the data. DSP (Potter and Edwards 2001) uses a combination of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter 1992a) and rhetorical psychology (Billig 1991) to explore the discursive techniques and ideological assumptions that underpin speakers' arguments.

DSP is an anticognitivist approach to social psychology (Potter 1998). Our article does not aim to understand what is happening in the "minds" of a politician (Edwards and Potter 1993) but rather what is happening within the interaction as it unfolds (Gibson 2009). DSP is inspired by the "turn to language" between the 70s and 80s, when many studies in psychology were found to be not replicable (Humă and Sikveland 2021; Potter 1998). Instead this approach to social psychology returns to the use of naturalistic data to closely focus on what resources are used within the social interaction to perform said social interaction (e.g., Edwards and Potter 1992a). A significant benefit of this is that the analytic focus moves away from trying to abstract thoughts from talk and, instead, looks to that talk as a primary site of social action in and of itself. Discourse becomes "a prime phenomenon worth studying on its own terms, rather than treating it as a mere conduit, proxy, for other phenomena" (Demasi 2020, 2).

DSP applies four core principles from discursive psychology (DP) to understand what interactional features are used within the discourse and what this *does* in terms of understanding how people negotiate the use of taxpayers' money. First, discourse is constructed and constructive. It is *constructed* through the words and phrases speakers use and *constructive* of different realities, through the way the speakers use these words and phrases (Wetherell and Potter 1988; Wiggins 2017). This article does not aim to "uncover" any "truth' but rather to highlight the discursive resources used to construct an account as truthful (Demasi 2019, 2020) or honest. Second, discourse is always *situated* within a context, both within the turn-taking sequence (Edwards and Potter 1992a) and within the rhetorical context (Humă and Sikveland 2021). As a political debate implies controversy, the panel will be oriented to appeal to the audience (Demasi 2019)—meaning, one politician will construct one version of events to undermine another speakers' (Edwards and Potter 1992a) based on the reaction (whether this is an acceptable account or not) of the live audience. In this sense, discourse is a *social action*. What politicians say and how they say it is used to achieve a goal (Goodman and Speer 2007). This could be to manage accountability for their behavior in a way that protects their self-identity (Burke and Demasi 2019; Tileagă 2010). Lastly, DSP also draws upon rhetorical psychology (Billig et al.

1988) to understand how these accounts draw upon commonsense ways of speaking. In their accounts, speakers may infer ideological assumptions of social class.

This approach to discourse has been used extensively when exploring the super-rich, social class, taxpayers' money, and accountability (e.g., Carr 2020, 2023; Carr et al. 2021; Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019). Talk about tax can be used as a way of understanding economic inequality because arguments typically centeer around who does, and who does not, have the right to use this money (Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019; Gibson 2009; Goodman and Carr 2017). This research demonstrates that entertainment shows can be a space where social class inequality is maintained (Carr 2020; Carr et al. 2021).

There is a large body of research showing that speakers in these shows adopt individualistic and neoliberal ways of speaking when discussing people who receives welfare. For instance, Gibson's (2009) research showed that repertoires of effortfulness were drawn upon when discussing the legitimacy of welfare recipients. These repertoires construct a version of reality wherein people are responsible for the amount of effort they put into their employment. By virtue of this, people who are unemployed are characterized as "lazy," with their claims to the welfare system constructed as illegitimate and undeserving because they could just put more effort in. In the context of Gibson's research, the effortful repertoire is used to convey commonsense assumptions of individualistic ideology. These assumptions contribute to who can, and should not, use taxpayers' money to receive welfare, positioning the government as having an obligation to monitor this.

Goodman and Carr's (2017) show how repertoires of a "just world" were used to a similar end. Arguments based on a Just World suggest that "people get what they deserve" (Lerner 1980, 11) and are typically used to criticize and blame recipients of welfare for their circumstance. Goodman and Carr highlight that in instances when effortfulness was drawn upon within the just world argument, these arguments were more persuasive within the context of an entertainment show. Therefore, the use of individualistic ideology is embedded with repertoires of effort and are typically used to delegitimize those who depend on state welfare.

Similar ideologies around effort were also used within discourse around the super-rich. In Carr et al.'s (2021) article, they analyzed entertainment documentaries portraying the lives of the super-rich. They found in these documentaries, that the super-rich draw upon individualistic notions of meritocracy as a way to present themselves as being psychologically different from other people. Here, the super-rich present notions of "extraordinariness" to justify their wealth. Research from Goodman and Carr (2017) and Carr et al. (2021) show that effortfulness can be used as a powerful rhetorical resource to maintain and perpetuate ideas surrounding money.

Although repertoires are a great resource for understanding the broader cultural ways people talk about things, this article will focus on the use of categories. Categories are features that people use in their everyday talk, to talk about the world around them (Edwards 1997). They are used to assign membership to things in particular contexts, such as people, events, identities, and social expectations (Edwards 1997). When speakers use categories, they allow for inferences to happen because they evoke "conventionally understood properties" (Edwards and Potter 1992b, 175), or supposed knowledges, about the world around them. This does not mean there are preloaded resources that people bring to the conversation, rather, categories are something people "orient to in their talk" (Edwards 1997, 236), shaped by the sequential and local context spoken in (Edwards 1997). In addition to this, "categories are never just neutral descriptors" (Goodman and Speer 2007, 167) and are used as to achieve different social actions.

In the context of morally contentious debates, categories can be used to deny, (de)legitimize and invoke qualities of (un)welcomeness. For instance, Goodman and Speer's (2007) research explored public media debates about asylum seekers. In their article, three things are germane to the current article. First, in some contexts, the use of the category "economic migrant" (172) was used in an interaction that evoked discussion concerning "us/them." Here, "economic migrant" was used when talking about people seeking asylum, to further categorize this group as "them" with the implication that this category construction was morally wrong. Rhetorically, this was used to delegitimize their asylum status. Second, speakers can contrast the use of categories meant to highlight the prejudiced views of other speakers. In doing so, they orient to positive orientations to themselves, which can be used as an accountability management tool. For instance, in Goodman and Speer's article, this allowed one politician's political party to be distinguished from those of the current government's policy. Third, two opposite terms (namely, "asylum seekers" and "illegal immigrants" [176]) were used interchangeably, which can function to categorize the two groups as one. In the instance of Goodman and Speer's article, rhetorically it functioned to present both group memberships as an economic burden to the UK.

This article exemplifies that a discursive approach offers a dynamic understanding of categorization, as it can focus on how people make sense of things, afforded by the interactional context. This means that category use might, at times, be contradictory or contrastive. This research highlights how the use of categories are not brought into the analysis but, rather, are built-up, oriented to, and topicalized by the speakers themselves (Edwards 1997). Finally, when we consider the discursive practice of "categorizing" it is also worth bearing in mind that it is possible to do its opposite: to particularize (Billig 1996). This is important when we note politicians' morally exonerating self-categorizing (accounting) can be resisted by the audience. Equally, members of the

audience can resist politicians' behavior by the opposite maneuver: to categor-
ize when a politician is particularizing themselves—the point being that no
rhetorical practice is inherently embedded to a particular topic or accounting.
Other discursive resources, such as accountability management and category
entitlements, were also used when speakers invoke categories to aid their
rhetorical action.

This analytic focus was determined by how the social actors themselves
speak about taxpayers' money in the unfolding data, therefore, the current
article intends to build on how the categories "ordinariness" and "exception-
alism" are used to justify and illegitimize speakers' wealth (Carr et al. 2021).
We do not intend for these categories to be synonyms for social class or treat
these as anything "more" than a social action, nor are they intended as a tool to
measure social class. What we do aim to contribute is how the speaker's usages
of categories perpetuate ideology that effectively maintains class inequality.

Method

Data

The data used in this research is taken from a corpus of five hours of UK
televised nonparliamentary political broadcasts, selected from *Question Time*
(henceforth, QT). All data analyzed were broadcast between 26th March 26,
2009, and December 10, 2009, and were selected due to their discussions of the
expenses scandal. Within these episodes, discussions of the expenses scandal
occurred during the whole episode length or were featured as part of a 15-
minute slot of discussion, among other current affairs. The data we have
drawn upon are taken from four separate episodes on March 26, May 21,
October 29, and November 8.

QT is a live political debate show broadcast of the BBC, wherein British
members of Parliament (MPs) and political commentators offer real-time
commentary, by responding to questions from both a live studio audience
and the presenter. QT is a flagship BBC political discussion program (Bowen
2021), offering a space wherein the viewers themselves can share their views
and debate while watching the show (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2011). QT has
been used extensively within discursive and rhetorical psychology (e.g.,
Demasi 2019; Gibson 2011; Gibson and Booth 2017; Litchfield et al. 2024;
Marsh 2023). The audience members are invited to interview and challenge
MPs and political commentators as the commentary unfolds (Bowen 2021),
allowing the audience to convey, for example, outrage and disagreement
directly to the MPs and political commentators (McKeown and Ladegaard
2020). The presenter moderates discussions by taking questions from the
audience and selecting members of the panel to respond accordingly. It is
standard practice that the panellists are not given advance notice of what

questions will be asked of them. During 2009, this show topped the BBC's viewership numbers, with the topics discussed also consistently making headlines across major newspapers (Bowen 2021). For these reasons, QT data were selected to be analyzed for this research, as this television show was a staple arena for discussion as the scandal unfolded in real time. Televised media, such as this show, provides a space wherein different opinions and political positions are negotiated and wherein social class and what constitutes it is discussed (Day 2020b). Therefore, this program functions as an important site for understanding the ideological assumptions surrounding how MPs justify their use of taxpayers' money.

To echo Billig and Marinho's (2017) point; by analyzing QT debates on invocations and negotiations of class, we seek to demonstrate a wider point: how practices that indicate social injustice and moral transgression are defended or justified by those held accountable for such conduct. Indeed, "case studies can carry a wider significance because, in social life, the general flows through the particular" (Billig and Marinho 2017, 190). What we show, then, is more than a political-financial scandal. We also showcase the justification of social inequality in British politics, which, to this day, has not fully recovered from the 2008 recession. In 2024, Britain has similar levels of poverty as was experienced after the 2008 recession (Francis-Devine 2024; Office for National Statistics 2015), the risk in turn magnified by Brexit (Rowntree Foundation 2018), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Blundell et al. 2022). Indeed, Britain is forecast to be one of the poorest performing countries across advanced countries (Siddiqui 2024).

Analytical procedure

The analytical procedure was conducted in accordance with the principles of DSP (Carr et al. 2021; Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019; Potter and Edwards 2001). The first part of the analytic procedure began with watching every episode of QT that discussed the expenses scandal during 2009 in order to see the ways these claims were negotiated as the scandal unfolded. After this, we transcribed all the data into a playscript format. A more detailed transcription of the extracts was carried out later, for areas of potential analytic showcasing. As the discussions themselves were oriented to airing debates of how politicians justified the use of taxpayers' money, these discussions were closely followed through the transcription process. When this debate occurred, it was noted on a separate document, detailing the dynamics of the debate: What arguments were occurring, how long these debates were, and who the social actors in these discussions were were some of the details noted.

The document provided an overview of the nature of debates from each episode. If a debate particularly focused on class-based dynamics, this was highlighted on the document. These clips were rewatched and reread for the

process of coding to occur. This process requires annotations on the play-scripts with information of what was said, when it was said, and how it was said (Wiggins 2017). The process describes the interaction, which began to map out the discursive and rhetorical resources social actors in the interaction used to justify their claims to the expenses and propose that a claim (or politician) has been unjust.

These clips were transcribed using a Jefferson Lite transcription system (Jefferson 2004). This transcription system adds symbols to represent the phonetic features of talk (e.g., see Wiggins 2017) to bring attention to notice-able features within the interaction, such as overlapping talk, word intonation, and extralinguistic details such as hand gestures (Jefferson 2004). This tran-scription system is commonly used within discursive psychological approaches (Carr et al. 2021; Wiggins 2017). Through this process, the authors identified repeated attempts by the speakers to categorize behavior. Ideological assumptions about what it meant to be "ordinary" and "extraordinary" were drawn upon within the context of accountability management (Carr 2020).

Analysis

The analysis comprises four extracts, which demonstrate the ways in which social actors in QT use "ordinariness" or "exceptionalism," as a way to criticize or justify claims to the expenses system. This category of "ordinary" was used in two distinct ways: One way "ordinary" was used in accounts was when MPs were held to account by members of the audience. Here members of the audience typically evoked their membership as "ordinary" to sanction MPs for their wrongful claims. As the analysis unfolded the use of "exceptionalism" was also focused upon, as the authors observed that in some extracts, "ordin-ary" was used by the politicians to particularize (Billig 1996) their behavior. For instance, in some of the extracts MPs orient to being hard-working (Carr et al. 2021) or having a good disposition in an attempt to categorize their behavior as a "normal" act to justify an expenditure.

Extract 1 QT 29/10/2009, 20:36–21:01

We will begin to explore how audience members position themselves in a way that demonstrates there is a difference between the behaviors of people who are MPs and people who are not MPs. The fragment below comes from a *Question Time* episode broadcast on October 29, 2009. It features presenter, David Dimbleby (DIM), along with MPs from the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat[6] parties, and other political commentators. Prior to this, the panel had discussed the individual expense claims of Labour MP, Jacqui Smith, and an audience member discussed what sanctions would be appro-priate for such MPs who had wrongfully claimed this money. After this

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[6]Center-right, center-left, and center parties, respectively.

another audience member (AU1) asks the panel why there are differences in sanctions for politicians and *ordinary people* when they both, wrongly, claim from an expenses system. The moderator (DIM) then selects the next speaker, Lembit Öpik, the leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats, to respond.

DIM:((points to audience)) The woman in red ↓there

AU1:Erm (.) my husband works for a ↑housing association in ↓Wales (.) and °°if°° he: got=his expenses wrong (.hhh) as as=a qualified accountant he would lo:se his job (.h) he would lo:se his professional qualification=and he'd possibly end up in <pri̱son>; (.h) and why is it one rule for MPs and one rule for[ordinary °°people°°]

AUD:[((Clapping for 9 seconds))]

DIM:[Lembit Öpik]

LEM: ↓Well: I'm thinking that he who is without the blame casts the first ↓stone (.) ((smacks teeth)) and I think that it would be an act of (.) <frankly>; (.) madness (.) just plain crazy for=err <one MP to:> slam another on this one (.) because (.) there are very few MPs ((raises eyebrows and shakes head)) ↑who weren't part of the conspiracy? of ↓silence that got us here (.) ↑lets remember actually (.) this was set up in 1983 as a kind of secret salary? by Margaret Thatcher?=cause she didn't want to give her: Tory MPs a ↑pay rise during the recession? and we've all:: gone along with it (.) for twenty six ↓years (.) now: (.) the answer to your question Madam is (.) that it ↑just wasn't a real expenses system? (.) it was a kind of pretend expenses system so that MPs got paid a li'le bit more because part=°°meant°° lots of people were too scared err=to give MPs pay rises and so=on ↑THREE things need to change number ONE? we need to have a re:a:l expenses system not one (.) which pretends to be one thing and is=another (.) ↑NUMBER TWO: we've got to have the same level of=°°err°° scrutiny that your husband has to have (.h) and number three: (.) we've got to recognize that in order to get public faith back (.) both those first two things have to happen (.) ↑in fairness I don't think most MPs come into politics for the money a lot=of people take pay cuts to be ↓MP:s (.) but it is: a distraction and my >personal feeling incidentally is we should sweep away the entire expenses system apart from the travel<; (.h) >and just let< an independent err review body give us a salary and=and the travel and leave the it at ↓that

['cause that seems simple]

AUD:[((clapping for 7 seconds))]

This extract shows how morality and "ordinariness" are used to negotiate normative accountability for expenses claims. Firstly, the extract begins with AU1, who asks the panel why there is a difference in treatment for MPs and "ordinary people" (line 7). The audience member begins the extract by invoking a personal, yet hypothetical, scenario (Demasi 2019), used to carve out the parameters of how an ordinary person behaves, noting the consequences they would face. She argues that, if her husband acted in a way that MPs have, her husband would "lose his job" (lines 4–5), his, "qualification" (line 5), and "possibly end up in prison" (line 6). This constructs a reality wherein a so-called ordinary person, such as her husband, would face multiple

consequences for wrongly claiming on the expenses system, with the possibility of being sanctioned by the justice system. By referring to her husband, this gives her an entitlement to speak and ask this question (Edwards and Potter 1992a), as by proxy she, herself, is also an ordinary person. The use of a three-part list to describe the level of consequence rhetorically bolsters her argument (Jefferson 2004), to show the life changing and damaging reality that false claims to the expenses *should* have. As this account is used to highlight what her, and her husband's reality could look like, a moral order from her argument is evoked (Billig 2009). This has the implication that people outside of this category of ordinary, in this case the transgressing MPs, do not experience these problems, highlighting an injustice between how people acquire their money.

By asking the rhetorical question, "why is there one rule for MPs and one rule for ordinary people?" (lines 6–7), AU1 highlights a moral dilemma and a discrepancy: in a democratic and fair society there appear to be politicians who are exempt from consequences of financial mismanagement and fraud. The very act of asking this question constructs this discrepancy and constructs it as a problem wherein the fault lies with the nonnormative category: politicians. In essence, the argument is that MPs exploit a system in which they *should* be penalized, just like ordinary public. The clapping by the audience on line 8 indicates audience endorsement of this point.

Dimbleby selects Lembit Öpik to respond to AU1's account. He responds in a way that attempts to repair the accusation of this moral transgression, by admitting personal and collective responsibility (Tileagă 2012) for these faults. He firstly acknowledges this injustice, admitting responsibility indirectly through a Biblical reference to John 8:7 (lines 10–11). He then moves to a wider reason for why the expenses system was corrupt, explaining that the system was formed by "Margaret Thatcher" (line 18) during the 1980s. This was to provide MPs with a pay raise (lines 18–19) specifically during a period of economic recession (line 19). Öpik uses the term "secret salary" (line 17) highlights the tensions of morality, while also shifting the blame to the systemic decision of a controversial prime minister.

This system allowed for ordinary people, who do not come into the job for money (lines 31–32), to turn "exceptional." Invoking qualities of secrecy (line 17), silence (line 15), and scariness (line 24) further bolsters how the work environment allowed for morally questionable financial decisions to be allowed. His response also receives a round of applause by the audience (line 38), which suggests this justification is supported by the audience.

This interaction shows how morality is bound to "ordinariness." To be "ordinary" is to first act in accordance with these normative ethical judgements. Then it is to be sanctioned appropriately by the justice system if you breech them. This suggests that "exceptionalism" is the opposite of both factors, whereby individuals do not act in accordance with correct moral

decisions and are not sanctioned for them. Between the audience member and Öpik, this ordinariness is negotiated, where Öpik blames a corrupt system for allowing politicians to behave *exceptionally* and abuse this system. Exceptionality, here, is rooted into a system rather than treated as coming from disposition —the image of the person having transgressed is almost victim-like due to the external influence.

Discussions of morality and money have class-based implications. This is present in the accountability management within this interaction. Firstly, AU1 suggests that politicians acted exceptionally because there are separate rules they behave in accordance with (lines 6–7). It shows that one group of people, who already have large amounts of wealth, are allowed to act in financially risky ways and another group of people would be criminalized for attempting this behavior. Wealth inequality is legitimized through psychological invocations of morality.

The next two extracts will demonstrate how MPs manage accountability for their expenses claims by situating their job as different from "ordinary" people. This includes MPs constructing their job as harder, requiring more effort. By doing this, the category of an "exceptional" person is used to attempt to legitimize their expenses claims. By situating themselves as harder working, this attempts to mitigate their claims as an honest or acceptable mistake given the context of having worked so hard. These next two extracts will highlight the ideological dilemmas (Billig et al. 1988) involved with using this category: MPs will still draw upon these categories of "ordinariness," but use it to a different ideological end, where in doing so, construct themselves as "exceptional." So, while "everyone" works hard it is the politicians that work *exceptionally* hard and are, thus, excused from their transgressions. These arguments, as we shall see, were not well received.

The second extract is taken from another episode of QT, broadcast on March 26, 2009. This extract shows Eric Pickles (PIC), the chairman for the Conservative party, defending why he claims an allowance for his second home in London. The audience (AUD); presenter, David Dimbleby (DIM); Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrats foreign affairs spokesperson (DAV); and the leader of the Green Party, Caroline Lucas (LUC), all resist Pickles's construction of exceptionalism as a justification for his expenses. Prior to this extract, he reveals to the audience that his permanent house is also based in London and is only 37 miles from the House of Commons, a commute time of less than an hour.

Extract 2, QT 26/03/2009, 44:26–45:55

PIC:↑then let me explain why: and I 'ave actually had experience of commuting that distance, (.hhh) err when my wife? w-w-was was ↓ill she's fully recovered now. but for a month, I did it (.hhh) and ↑it wa:s: (.) it was an extre:mel:y >diff°icult°< experience AND ↑I'll explain why? (.) because the House of Commons. <wo:rks on clock work>; (.

hhhh) you have to be there ↑if you're on a committee, you have to be there. (.) precisely (.) >↑particularly=°if° °°you're°° someone like me< I was a

[NUMber number two (.h) LET ME EXPLAIN: >MY CHAIR<]

AUD:[(((booing))]

PIC:LET ME EXP:LAIN: >let me=just< plea:se just let me (.) explain for a moment. (.) I Had to (.) I °h°ad be there y=y°ou° I was[number]

DIM:[like a] JOb (.) in other words

PIC:[it was like a prop]

AUD:[(((laughter and clapping and cheering))]

PIC:yes exactly, like a job. (.) if I=if you're on number two in >in=the opposition<; (.hh) ↑essentially we're in the committee? (.hh) so I need to be there at >nine thirty< to move those amendments?

AUD:[(((laughter))]

PIC:[it's alright for=IT] doesn't matter if a Liberal Democrat

AUD:[(((heckles))]

[isn't] the↑re. but it matters[if i'm there]

DAV:[oh now that's] cheap

PIC:i=i=it very matters if i'm? there (.) I HAve to be there (.) so: (.) ↑when I was doing this prop=when I was doing it this(.hhh) I was leaving home. at fi:ve thirty >in the morning< to GUArantee that ↓I was going to be there, (.hh) and I wasn't coming back until about twelve (.hh) and one in the °morning°? (.hh) now you can DO that once or twice (.) you can do that for a whi:le (.hh) but when (.) >you've gotta understand<; (.) the House of Commons runs (.) like (.) clockwork

DAV:[E=ERIC]

LUC:[so does] the rest [of the world]

PIC:[I have NEVER EVER]

LUC:actually

PIC:claimed my full allowance (.)[I have always claimed the]

AUD:[(((an audience member boos))]

PIC:amount (.) ↑well I've

AUD:[(((audience boos))]

PIC:[published them (.) I've always published them]

In lines 1 and 2, Pickles begins by defending why commuting is not a viable option for him. He introduces his defense by invoking an emotionally laden experience (Edwards 1999) in which his wife was unwell (lines 2–3). During this time, of commuting and caring for his wife, he positions this experience as "extremely difficult" (line 4) and one that could not be maintained long-term. This sets up the foundation of his argument, of needing something to support his ability to perform his job, to ensure this "difficult experience" (line 4), of commuting, does not occur again.

Pickles begins by positioning himself as exceptional by stating "if you're someone like me" (line 8), that being second on the committee for the Conservative party (lines 17–18), he cannot commute because he has to arrive to work on time (line 27). To bolster this claim, he then compares his job title and its requirements to another panel member, Davey. He states: "It doesn't matter if a Liberal Democrat isn't there, but it matters if I'm there" (line 22). This category entitlement (Potter 1996) of a hardworking, an effortful (Goodman and Carr 2017), and an important person is further bolstered by Pickles's evocation of time. Pickles states that because the House of Commons works like clockwork (line 6), he must arrive precisely at nine thirty in the morning (lines 6 and 19). He constructs a reality in which waking up early (line 19) and arriving home late at night (line 31) is a demanding aspect of the job.

However, despite Pickles's attempts to justify his claim, his attempts to particularize (Billig 1996) these requirements as his exceptional position, are heavily contested by the presenter, other panelists, and the audience. For instance, both Dimbleby and Lucas resist Pickles's claim of arriving to work on time by portraying it as an expectation of every job (line 14), characteristic of everyone, and not just someone like him (line 8). If Pickles is trying to particularize his work in order to justify his expenses, then his reasons are not accepted and these are, in turn, recategorized as ordinary— most explicitly by Dimbleby, in line 14, who interrupts by saying

"Like a job in other words." The fact that a presenter can safely challenge a speaker, against a backdrop of institutional neutrality, is a further emphasizing factor on the sanctionable claim by Pickles. Additionally, at line 18, the audience boos Pickles's remark of "someone like me" (line 8), indicating a lack of identification with his position, implying they reject his assertion of exceptionalism.

Notably, after having faced resistance from the moderator, another panelist, and the audience, Pickles is not given further opportunity to justify himself. What is striking about these reactions to Pickles is the element of censure and ridicule involved in them. Aside from the booing (line 10), responses to him are either ironic (lines 14, 21, 36) or laughed at (lines 16, 21). All of these serve to delegitimize Pickles's attempt at constructing his circumstance as

exceptional, and the explicit reaction from Dimbleby in particular (line 14) explicitly normalizes Pickles's position. Laughter serves as a means of censuring Pickles, of refusing to treat his claims as serious and endorsing Dimbleby's response. While laughter is not unusual in political debates (Demasi and Tileagă 2021), it is also a nonserious means of shutting down a serious assertion (Demasi and Tileagă 2021)—in this instance, Pickles's attempt at discursively reinforcing his distinct class status.

This extract demonstrates an attempt to construct a job as particularly effortful, important, and entitled—all by virtue of being exceptional. This is used to defend a series of claims to the expenses system for a second home allowance; however, this account is rejected by the panel and audience, and they construct this as an ordinary expectation of any job. The implication being that Pickles *is* accountable for financial mismanagement.

The third extract is taken from an episode of *Question Time* broadcast on May 21, 2009, in which an audience member (AU2) and MP William Hague (HAG) negotiate what is considered fraudulent behavior. AU2 accuses the Conservative leader at the time, David Cameron, of fraud, following his claims to the expenses system. However, Hague resists this accusation, and in defense of Cameron, states that because Cameron had paid back the claimed money there was no issue.

Extract 3, QT 21/05/2009, 4:51–6:02

AU2:>er=mister< Hague there you said about fr:aud? (.) ↑would your own party ↑leader↓ (1.3) ↑would he be guilty of fraud? seeing he spent six hundred pounds? clearing wisteria? (.) from his chimney? (.) ↑would you be happy to see him go down for fraud?

HAG:no: £I doubt£ whether he would be: (.) falling into that category? (.) and=that's >money °of course he has° repaid≤HE: of course is the one who has <set the °pa:ce°> what to DO °about this° what he of course announced last week (.) and on=the MO::ST important thing of all (.) i-imme:diate <onli:::ne> ↓publication of expenses claims (.) t-↑that (.) ↑by the way is the <s:↑ingle> most helpful thing (.) to do because s:unlight it is the best disinfectant on a:ll of this he has

HAG:[set the pace on that]

AU2:[it's a criminal's charter]

HAG:sorry

AU2:that was a criminal's charter. you said he said he pa:i:d it back (.) if he: inappropriately used ↑tax payers money (.) to clear ↑wee:ds from his ↓chimney (.) ↑clearly not in the public in↓trest (.) and he pays it back. (.) tha' is a charter for ↑every criminal in the country (.4) to say '↑I-I will pay back what I ↓stole' (.) there's the plasma ↑t↓v (.) there's the money I made from drugs (.) have it back and we ↑open the prisons? and the prison overcrowding crisis is solved overnight (.) on

[the basis of your argument]

AUD:[(((clapping and cheering for 7 seconds))]

In this extract, an audience member invites a discussion about what counts as fraudulent behavior. The audience member begins by explicitly asking Hague if the Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, would be guilty of fraud (line 2), for wrongfully claiming £600 to clean weeds from the chimney of his personal home.

Hague denies the claim that Cameron has committed fraud, through his use of laughter to say "I doubt" (line 5). The use of laughing voice undermines the seriousness of such a question (Demasi and Tileagă 2021; Romaniuk 2016). Hague then states that he would not be "falling into that category" (lines 5–6), which opens up a discussion of what a criminal would behave like, into the interaction. Interestingly, on line 5 there was a brief micro pause where it seems Hague was about to utter an alternative before stating "falling into that category." It seems feasible that he was about to say that Cameron would not "go down for fraud." This is a very quick adjustment to prevent further disagreement from AU2 and other speakers in the show and avoiding a response that would be unlikely to be well received.

Hague suggests that Cameron is not guilty of fraud because he has set the standard for transparency of claims (lines 9–10)—an element that was allegedly missing prior to the scandal. Hague constructs an account wherein Cameron's actions do not bare any similarity to that of a criminal because he has immediately rectified his behavior. Hague draws upon psychological characteristics of trustworthiness and honesty. By positioning Cameron as a reliable and honest person, he attempts to mitigate the accusation that he is guilty of fraud. However, Hague's account is interrupted on line 14 by AU2 who disagrees with the principle of this argument. AU2's response contrasts between Hague's account of what a criminal does not behave like to other types of people who would be considered a criminal, for example, someone who steals a "plasma tv" (line 21) or makes money from dealing drugs (lines 21–22). AU2's account is a hypothetical (Demasi 2019), which is used to construct a comparison wherein there *is* a difference between the behavior or MPs and other people. AU2 treats their example as factual evidence that Cameron should be committed of fraud (Demasi 2019) by highlighting that Cameron's conduct does not align with normative expectations of financial mismanagement. This suggests that Hague is trying to argue that Cameron has some kind of a "special status," whereby the mere mention of such a discrepancy highlights that there is a problem at hand. The use of the hypothetical by AU2 criticizes the constructed exceptionalism of politicians.

AU2 draws upon the examples that may be associated with blue-collar crime, also known as crimes associated with people from a lower socioeconomic status, such as stealing a TV or selling drugs. As the debate is an

interplay between what counts as a criminal action, these examples are used to highlight how Hague's principle, of just paying back the money (lines 16–17), is treated as illogical for these types of criminal actions. Under the guise of this hypothetical, if *these* types of criminals were to act in a similar reparative way to Hague's hypothetical, "the prison overcrowding crisis" would be "solved overnight" (line 23). This exaggeration is used to highlight the absurdity of Hague's suggestion (Antaki 2004) and, in turn, tells us important ideological information of what counts as being exceptional according to the audience member: being exceptional, in this sense, is a moral transgression. To steal and be associated with drugs is to be an "ordinary" criminal, and these types of criminals are treated by the legal system as deserving of their punishment (Billig 1982), as in this rhetorical context, a "just world" is at play[7] (Goodman and Carr 2017). This means, according to AU2, MPs are treated differently from ordinary people because MPs can navigate the justice system in ways ordinary people cannot. The implication of this hypothetical is that there is something unegalitarian about the politicians' justifications of financial mis-management. This unegalitarian position is treated as a deeply problematic matter by all parties, for being seen as breaking the egalitarian principle in a democratic society is to show a poor political image to the electorate—a failure of a public figure to identify with their audience.

The analysis provides evidence for how exceptionalism is managed when speaking about what counts as fraud. In this interaction laughter, hypotheticals, and psychological reasoning were used to negotiate what fraudulent behavior is and is not. Through these discursive techniques, class-based assumptions of how a criminal behaves are embedded into the accounts of both speakers. This is drawn upon both to accuse and resist an accusation of fraud resist. Exceptionalism is an implied but prominent assumption in the interaction, highlighting how a status of an MP can be used to mitigate wrongful claims to the expenses system.

The fourth and final extract was taken from an episode of *Question Time* originally broadcast on November 8, 2009. In this extract, presenter David Dimbleby (DIM) invites questions and opinions from the live audience, around the topic of MPs expenses. One of these remarks was from an audience member (AU3) who shared her experience of expenses in the business sector. Commentary from former MEP, Robert Kilroy-Silk (KIL) and writer and comedian Natalie Haynes (HAY) occurs throughout the interaction.

Extract 4, QT 08/11/2009, 44:30–45:07

DIM:[°And and the woman in the second row?°]

AUD:[(((sporadic clapping))]

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[7]The "just-world" hypothesis is an interpretative repertoire that speakers use that draws upon neoliberal ideology to blame people for the consequences of their behavior by, simply put, implying that good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people (see Goodman and Carr 2017).

AU3:Expenses (.) I've worked in the commercial sector a:nd I've noticed in my working environment that (.) <u>all</u> people who are in the business <u>do:</u> push ou- do try and push expenses (.) it's not only MPs that do it its done in the business sector as well

DIM:well=t=everybody's cheating you mean?

AU3:well (2) it's

KIL:endemic (.) ((laughs))

AUD:[((laughter))]

KIL:[it's human nature]

AU3:there: there are

AU3:expenses have generally been considered as a way of subsidising one's salary

DIM:oh:kay

HAY:that's with your [money]

DIM:[okay] now we're gonna move on now because err we're we're we're (.) time is not on our side

In the example above, we have a case where an audience member (AU3) is defending the financial actions of the politicians and seeks to normalize their behavior under question. She builds consensus (Potter 1996) of wide use of expenses, treating it as something that "all people" (line 5) do, and presents the matter as morally neutral by the absence of negative descriptives. This normative presentation in a context of discussing the controversy of expenses claims is a means of pushing against the notion of expenses claims as a negative practice. By treating it as a common practice, AU3 frames the matter of MPs' mismanagement of expenses as less of an issue. The invocation of the business sector in particular cites a significant source. To treat expenses claims as normal by people in business is a more authoritative way to reduce the particularized (Billig 1996) political controversy under discussion.

AU3's construction of expenses claims as normal also carefully manages her own neutrality in the matter, so as not to be seen as advocating expenses for her own benefit. This is done by rhetorically reinforcing her argument as evidence based (e.g., "I've noticed," line 4) but not as something she has participated in. The invocation of observation is a means of reifying AU3's position as a neutral one by treating the cause of her argument as one that is external to her (Edwards 1997). This is further emphasized by treating expenses claims as a common matter in the impersonal phrasing (lines 14–15), where opportunistic expenses claims are considered widespread without specifying who does this considering and speaking of "one's" salary.

Whether AU3's comment was in defense of MPs or to treat the problem as widespread remains unclear due to reactions from other people between lines

8 and 12, which interrupt the flow of AU3's turn. In the first instance, Dimbleby's question of whether everyone cheats problematizes AU3's assertion. He is removing the opportunity to frame AU3's point as normalizing it and, rather, explicitly framing it as a widespread problem. This question prompts laughter from the audience and from Kilroy-Silk, the laughter itself suggesting that such a notion is beyond serious consideration (Demasi and Tileagă 2021). Whether AU3's assertion on the commonality of using expenses is so on account that it would threaten the face of many more people than the MPs under scrutiny or because it is treated as beyond the bounds of a reasonable assertion in this debate remains unclear. However, both options in this instance would signal a departure from the hitherto established course of argument in this episode of QT and the reactions from Dimbleby, some panelists, and the audience reflect a resistance to this. What this resistance does is push back against an implication that the MPs' behavior counts as ordinary. Therefore, the category use of ordinariness, is rejected in favor of an argumentative climate that particularizes politicians' financial mismanagement as an exceptional *and* negative matter.[8]

Discussion

The findings show that class-loaded terms were used in a political debate program to negotiate, mitigate, and avoid responsibility for financial and moral transgressions. In our data, politicians, politically relevant commentators, and the live studio audience all used ways of speaking that discussed what it means to behave in an "ordinary" and "exceptional" ways. These ways of speaking were used to upgrade or downgrade the moral accountability of politicians' financial misconduct. These rhetorical workings drew upon ideological notions of deservingness, status, effortfulness, and morality to evoke an entitlement to talk about expenses claims. Throughout the analysis of four extracts, we provided evidence for the dynamic usage of ordinariness and exceptionalism.

In Extract 1, we show how an audience member used the class loaded phrase "one rule for MPs and one rule for ordinary people." By claiming there are separate rules for MPs and for ordinary people, the audience member rhetorically highlights the exceptional entitlement of politicians. Applause from the audience, for example, indicates a general agreement with the accusation that politicians behave in an exceptional way.

In Extract 2 ordinariness and exceptionalism were used in different rhetorical ways. In this extract, MP Eric Pickles defended his entitlement to use the expenses system, by evoking qualities of deservingness. By stating "particularly if you're someone like me," this phrase becomes class-loaded because

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[8]See Billig (1996) on the rhetorical aspect of particularizing and categorizing.

ideological notions of hardworking here imply a level of deservingness for his affluent status. This was, however, resisted heavily by the panel and live studio audience, who characterized the basis of his argument as ordinary. Phrases such as "like a job" and "so does the rest of the world," were used to counter this assertion because of the typical circumstances he drew upon. For example, getting to work on time is typically for everyone working a job. Categorizing Pickles as ordinary in this interaction was used as a rhetorical strategy to deny the justification of his expenses claim.

In Extract 3, categories of ordinariness evoked by a politician were morally bound, in an attempt to sidestep the accusation with "good behavior." MP William Hague defends the politician under question by stating "I doubt whether he would be falling into that category," evoking a suggestion that "good behavior" grants him an exceptional entitlement to have adequately repaired the situation. An audience member responded to this using hypothetical scenario, of how a "typical" or "ordinary" criminal would have been treated, which identified a flaw in Hague's account. Similarly to Extract 2, this resistance highlights how a politician acted in an extraordinary way but should have been subject to ordinary consequences. This received a round of applause by the audience, highlighting a general consensus. This interaction highlights how category-based distinctions in behavior orient to class-based implications.

In Wxtract 4, an audience member evoked categorizes of ordinariness through her argument, stating, "It's not only MPs that [claim expenses]." By claiming MPs are not exceptional, she attempts to normalize the behaviors of accused politicians. Different panel members resisted and/or aligned with her argument. Those who aligned with the "ordinary" quality evoked a universal dispositional desire for money. Those who disagreed with her claim highlighted an "exceptional" quality to the dynamic. This audience member's argument did not receive approval (Heritage and Greatbatch 1986) by way of a round of applause, as we have seen in other extracts. The implication of this in this context suggests that the audience member's comment has been treated as "exceptional." In other words, regardless of whether other people might also falsely claim expenses, this behavior is not justifiable, given the contentious context.

What these accounts show is that the use of *exceptional* and *ordinary* is rhetorically flexible, dynamic, and subject to negotiation rather than a fixed matter that exists "out there," independent of how it is expressed. In this political and interactional context, these results also show how MPs negotiate an ideological dilemma (Billig et al. 1988) of being exceptional while performing ordinary activities, such as needing to be at work on time. Politicians treat their behavior as ordinary or exceptional depending on the interactional context. We must note here also that these negotiations of ordinariness and

exceptionalism evoked by politicians were by and large unsuccessful; they were frequently resisted by other people present. On the contrary, when an audience member attempts to treat the politicians' actions as ordinary, she is met with resistance. If we are to understand the ideological assumptions in justifying financial misspending, then these resistances also tells us of an ideology of accountability that does not allow a politician to resort to normative notions of ordinariness to justify their moral transgression—and the same resistance applies to when an audience member tries to justify said transgression. At least as far as our data is concerned. What we can observe here, then, is that there is an ideological tension between the MPs and the democratic audience regarding what types of people have an entitlement to use taxpayers' money and what types of behaviors are understood as fraudulent and sanctionable.

What is of interest here is the hierarchical dynamic between what we might term as the elite and the general public. Discourses of ordinariness and exceptionalism were used as rhetorical maneuvers by the MPs to try to resist accountability for financial mismanagement. Perhaps in a nondemocratic hierarchical context these rhetorical maneuvers may have sufficed. The matter of unsuccessful resistance begs a further question. Why defend financial misconduct when this defense is clearly not going to be publicly endorsed? One suspects that the answer to this has to do with public image. To outright refuse to account for one's financial mismanagement has the potential to have politically disastrous consequences (e.g., not being elected in the subsequent elections) by acting in a politically unpalatable manner. Justifying one's transgression, even if unsuccessful, is less damaging for one's face than to not justify oneself at all.

Ultimately this article contributes to an ongoing body of discursive research that captures the class-based ideological assumptions behind broadcast shows (Carr et al. 2021; Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019; Gibson 2009; Goodman and Carr 2017), with a focus on public accountability in relation to the financial mismanagement of public money. A discursive psychological focus on social class allows us to study in situ how people categorize, or particularize (Billig 1996), themselves and others. This approach is used to unpick the nuanced and contextually embedded ways that people talk about class (explicitly and implicitly). The language usage around people's financial behavior informs us of important historically, socially, and culturally located information (Day 2020a); talking about social class usually involves a dynamic of who "we" and "us" are and who "they" and "them" are (Goodman and Speer; Phoenix and Tizard 1996). This article contributes to a wider pool of social psychology research that has shown the rhetorical work used when talking about class in everyday contexts in Britain and the British media (Carr 2020, 2023; Carr et al. 2021; Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019; Day, Rickett, and Woolhouse 2014; Gibson 2009; Goodman and Carr 2017). This offers rich insight into how class-based assumptions when expressed through categories

of ordinariness and exceptionalism are a rhetorical resource for members of a certain (political) class who have committed a publicly accountable moral transgression.

Conclusion

The UK Parliamentary Expenses Scandal of 2009 was used as a case study to understand class-based rhetoric. Analysis from the BBC show *Question Time* showed how politicians, politically relevant commentators and a live studio audience invoke "ordinariness" and "exceptionalism" to negotiate wrongful usage of taxpayers' money. These categories at times contradicted each other and showed how ideological notions and dilemmas interlink with negotiations of class inequality, political importance of financial management, and how these negotiations are delivered and resisted. This article contributes to a wide body of literature in discursive psychology that shows how our discourse can challenge, uphold, and perpetuate social class inequality.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

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