

Stories of Race and Nation in the *Up! Series*

Susan E. Bell, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine USA

sbell@bowdoin.edu

<http://www.bowdoin.edu/faculty/s/sbell/>

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“The visual domain allows the researcher to gain insights, sometimes blinding in their power and vivacity, to representations of social relations and codes of meaning” Pryce 1996

This paper focuses on the discourses of race and nation in the *Up! Series*. Its argument is first, that a visual sociological approach to the series can illuminate shifts in the salience and meanings of racial and national identity and inequality in the UK across the films by looking and listening to what goes on in the background as well as foreground and by unpacking the visual codes, frames, and use of sound and images. Second, by taking a visual approach narrative scholars can connect the lives of individual children/adults with the changing social and political contexts in which they move through school, into the labor force, and make families. The paper uses a 15-minute compilation from *Seven-Up!* to *49 Up* (1964-2006) about three of the children, Bruce, Lynn, and Simon. The compilation highlights issues of race and nation in the UK. The compilation also underscores narrative scholars’ focus on the relationship between “how” stories are told and “what” stories are produced in the telling (see Riessman 2008, Bell 2009). The clips about Bruce tell a story about global political and economic changes that began during the 1960s and situate his life experiences in the context of this historical period (Mills 1959). In *Seven Up!* 7-year old Bruce says he wants to go to Africa to help “civilize” people. Bruce spent the early part of his life – before he was 7 – in Rhodesia where his father managed a country club and later worked as a civil servant. Rhodesia was a British colony that gained independence in 1965, the year after *Seven Up!* was broadcast, and since 1980 has been known as “Zimbabwe.” Bruce, like so many children of British colonialists, was sent to England where he began boarding school at age 5. Lynn’s story illustrates how a transformation in educational and immigration policies for the past 40 years has affected the lives of children and teachers in London’s East End. . Over the years there have been changes in the type and location of her library work as well as in her students’ race and ethnicity. These changes mirror those in Britain’s immigration and education policy. The clips about Simon join together the changing historical context in terms of its meaning for an individual’s external career inner life (Mills 1959: 5). Simon is the only “person of colour” among the 14 children in the series. His father was black and his mother was white. Paying attention to Simon’s hair styles provides insight into ways that he engaged with a discourse of race and racial identity. Simon’s hair styles (like other styles) can be conceived of as “skirmishes of appropriation and commodification” (Mercer 1994: 120) or “semiotic guerilla warfare” (Mercer 1994: 123).

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