

# An (*EastEnders*) education: Social interventions, collective proselytising, male fandom and *EastEnders*

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## Abstract

Previous studies of *EastEnders* (1985-present) have focused on important feminist and queer scholarship or topics including class and ethnicity. Likewise, previous quantitative and qualitative analyses of the programme have been largely skewed towards female spectatorship. The significant male viewing demographic within audience research has been comparatively underrepresented. Taking an autoethnographic approach which seeks to triangulate previous ethnographic studies with the extant body of theoretical literature on *EastEnders*, this article seeks to fill important gaps in the *EastEnders* literature. Via autoethnographic discourse, this study focuses on the vital educative function (what we term ‘collective proselytising’) that *EastEnders* offered to the authors as well as its potential ongoing, longitudinal influence. In doing so, it exemplifies the role that the programme played in conveying education on issues such as class, sexuality ethnicity and, most prominently of all, gender inequality. With an emphasis on *EastEnders*’ early years (the mid-1980s onwards), this article illuminates the social and educative function of the programme. In a period in which *EastEnders* offered a soap that was vital and dynamic to young male audiences, and before the programme deliberately targeted a male demographic with ‘tough guy’ archetypes, it also presented a form of masculinity that challenged rebarbative stereotypes. The article likewise works to highlight how individual and collective televisual memory plays a central role in underlining television’s socio-cultural importance.

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## Introduction

Given the aims and intended audience for soap operas, it is fitting that they should have become such a fertile ground for feminist theory and discourse, as well as a meaningful arena for discussing queer audiences and representation (Bradley, 2012). *EastEnders* (1985-), in particular, has tackled subjects in a way that other popular, mainstream television programmes have struggled to emulate and has been a vital shop window and point of visibility for numerous marginalised voices.

What is sometimes bypassed in soap opera analysis is a consideration of straight male fandom, a strange occlusion considering the reach and popularity of the serial's viewership since launching, and the clear attempt to court a male audience through the 'tough guy' characters such as the Mitchell brothers, Grant (Ross Kemp) and Phil (Steve McFadden). As Geraghty points out, both *Brookside* (1982-2003) and *EastEnders* 'sought to engage an audience which included those not normally attracted to soaps – young people, men, those concerned about political and social issues' and 'challenged the secure gender positions of traditional soaps by giving men a greater role' (2002: 66 and 79) while televisual roles, even in action television tended to be more sensitive and emotional than their cinematic counterparts (Jeffords, 1993). Furthermore, as Deborah Jermyn indicates, feminist TV studies was instrumental in 'setting agendas' for intellectual discourse (2016: 380), while Mollie McCabe and Bridget Kies suggest that this has expanded into studies of masculinity (2016: 367–8).

Glen Middleham and J Mallory Wober's work identifies a sample audience demographic of female viewers for *EastEnders* which is above the average demographic routinely measured: 71% compared with the 52% national demographic of female citizens and 64% from sample viewing figures (1997: 539), which is also reflected in other studies, producing a gap in soap analysis. This article aims to address this gap in understanding male audiences for soaps by considering the way *EastEnders* has made a social intervention by introducing taboo topics that serve to provide a collective education for male audiences through what might be termed 'collective proselytising'. This article will therefore seek to demonstrate how important the programme was for introducing these topics to mainstream male audiences. It seeks to affirm, through ethnographic testimony, that a demonstrable social intervention can be identified in terms of what Judith Franco describes as the 'pedagogic intention' (2001: 454), echoing the BBC's own remit to 'educate' while concomitantly situating our work within the theoretical discourse on *EastEnders*.

This article takes an autoethnographic approach by the authors, for whom the show provided not just entertainment and a space for reflexivity but also a consistent education

on topics that men were traditionally discouraged from engaging with. While Rebecca Feasey (2008) and others discuss male representation and televisual stereotypes generally, this article seeks to elucidate demonstrable effects, indicating the efficacy of collective proselytising and offering an underexamined perspective which also illuminates the longitudinal resonances of the show. Furthermore, in the spirit of autoethnographic enquiry, we seek to validate the reflexivity of mapping personal growth and education in alignment with aspects of popular culture.

## Methodology

Before embarking on sustained autoethnographic analysis, it is worthwhile considering the background and rationale behind the method and explaining, (i) why it is suitable for an analysis of *EastEnders*, (ii) what empirical research has so far been conducted on the series and (iii) how an autoethnographic approach might help to fill important gaps between the critical literature and previous studies of the series. The so-called autoethnographic turn in research has its roots in sociology and anthropology in the 1980s, and, in particular, was a response to colonial-centred study and the postmodern turn in sociological methodology – the ‘crisis of confidence’ as summarised by Carolyn Ellis et al. (2011: 1). They argue that there was a broad acknowledgement that anthropological studies had always inculcated an insider and outsider status, with a tendency to view the ethnographer as the purveyor of accepted knowledge and the ethnographic subject as the exotic ‘other’. This became increasingly untenable as white, patriarchal and colonial discourses were increasingly challenged. Likewise, it was felt that researchers persistently entered a cultural domain and exploited cultural members for professional and monetary gain (Ellis et al., 2011: 2).

In response to this, the concept of the autoethnographer sought to reduce the distance between academic knowledge and reality and collapse these artificial distinctions that had arisen through fieldwork and were underscored by myriad power imbalances. It sought to place academics themselves back within the field of inquiry, rather than holding them separate from it. In a wider sense, it was a challenge to the positioning of knowledge and authority by openly acknowledging ‘the ways that knowledge is imbricated with power and subjectivity’ (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1662).

The autoethnographic method was more than simply a challenge to unequal power balances but also became a way of inserting a researcher’s own emotional responses to the subject. This is particularly useful with regard to the study of soap opera and its admirers, given the subsequent application of theories of emotional intelligence and competencies to studying the genre (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003: 486). The importance of stories and storytelling was also part of a methodological reappraisal. According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner, researchers ‘realised that stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that taught morals and ethics, introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others’ (2011: 3). The focus on ‘stories’ as a pluralised noun is especially germane to the study of soap narratives which traditionally features ensemble casts and multiple storylines and encourage multiple, as opposed to homogenous viewing responses.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner likewise describe the process of autoethnography as ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (2011: 1). In doing so, the process of research becomes more self-reflective, and it is especially suitable to the study of a text that has been theorised as exemplifying ‘structures of feeling’ (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003: 486). The approach has also been described as a ‘systematic effort to analyse their [academics’] own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena’ (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1660) and a ‘self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher’ (England, 1994: 82). Norman K Denzin coined the term ‘Personal Experience Narrative’ (1989) to describe the way this approach ‘incorporates affect and emotions into their analysis’ (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1665).

## Ethnography and fandom

As audience research has developed in media studies, many of the ethical and methodological challenges inherent in studying fan communities within the creative industries have been debated, including those which arise in autoethnographic approaches. Matthew Hills suggests that autoethnographies could help reveal ‘the possible absences in discourse, and the potential gaps in both academics and fans’ reflections on their own identities and cultures’ (2002: 42) while the term ‘aca-fans’ has been suggested to identify the slippages between academics and fans (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017). As a mainly historical, longitudinal and self-reflective study, this research differs somewhat from the ethical issues manifest in other ethnographic and autoethnographic studies of fans by academics currently embedded within fan communities. This research is historically distanced and is more akin to Line Nybro Petersen’s 2017 study of the fans of *Gilmore Girls* (2000-07) as they age alongside the programme.

## EastEnders and audience research

Empirical studies of *EastEnders*, and soap opera in general, tend to mirror those conducted by the programme makers themselves in attempting to define what makes the programmes so popular. Academic literature clearly and understandably takes a more theoretical queer, feminist or class-conscious approach (to be found in Paul Newland’s work for example), while Ien Ang’s seminal study *Watching Dallas* (1985) remains instructive in terms of the plurality of responses to a single text. Others, such as Nancy Baym’s study of online soap fan communities, suggest that soap viewing promulgates rich subcultures: ‘Soap viewing had become the base on which witty, sociable women and men had built an interpersonal realm rich with strong traditions and a clear group identity’ (1999: 2), something reflected in this study.

Other empirical and audience-centric studies have either looked specifically to youth audiences (Buckingham, 1987) or have tended towards a female-centric demographic (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003); this may partly be because female fans are more likely to respond to surveys. The one exception may be Lamuedra and O’Donnell’s investigation into *EastEnders* in relation to public service and neoliberal ideology which sampled

11 men to 10 women (2011: 62). With this in mind, an autoethnographic account may offer an opportunity to provide a more longitudinal response as well as a more sustained male perspective on the programme. Furthermore, in keeping with the rationale of the approach, it allows an approach to the text that will ‘systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis et al., 2011: 1).

## Masculinity

Finally, framing this specific ethnographic research is the context of masculinity. Feasey outlines the evolution of soap operas from a traditionally female-focused genre to one that increasingly integrated complex portrayals of masculinity, viewing this shift as both a response to changing viewer demographics and a reflection of broader social transformations regarding gender roles. Drawing upon previous studies, Feasey declares an examination of performative masculinity in soap opera to be crucial ‘due to the fact that a relationship can be said to exist between the representation of men in the domestic drama and the status of men in the wider population’ (2008: 7). Within a late 1980s context, Feasey highlights this as a ‘conscious effort to negotiate [inherent] masculine stereotypes’ (2008: 9). Before this shift, such stereotypes were acutely apparent to adolescent male viewers as Adrian’s ethnography illustrates.

Jane Root offers a clear but almost equally reductive demarcation of the range and type of male soap characters ushered in by *EastEnders*’ arrival and emphasised by the ethnographies within this article. Writing at the time of its initial popularity and heightened publicity, she suggested the majority to be ‘sorry problem-boys ripe for nurturing or shallow, glamorous, matinee idol types’ (1986: 7). As we shall see, it is hard to see beyond that assertion but what *EastEnders* clearly did was to offer its male audiences different types of problem-boys who reflected changing demographics and social mores.

It is here that the authors turn to their own responses, embedded as we are as agents in the broader contexts of its production and reception in an attempt to describe the effects of *EastEnders* as a longitudinal narrative. As Butz and Besio describe, we are ‘researchers [who] use themselves as primary research subjects, as they strive to understand some aspect of the world that involves but exceeds themselves’ (2009: 1665). In that spirit, we offer these personal accounts.

## Autoethnography part one – Mark’s story (academic, heterosexual, cisgender, mid-40s)

I cannot recall precisely when I started watching *EastEnders* as I was very young, but it must have been either when it first aired or very shortly after. I can confirm this as my grandfather passed away in 1986, and instead of making my sister and I attend the funeral at that young age, a distant family member babysat us for the day and indulged us. We were allowed to choose a video to rent and we selected a ‘best of *EastEnders*’ compilation video, for which I was mildly ridiculed by the carer for exclaiming every few minutes – ‘I remember that!’ – which suggests I had viewed it habitually for a good time period before

this and, as the video selection indicates, it was clearly one of the most important aspects of my young life.

It seems strange now, looking back, that I was allowed to watch this as my mother had forbade watching *Grange Hill* (1989-2008) at an early age due to its content and my parents would not have been unaware of its content and position within tabloid and other discourse. However, I watched it habitually, twice a week, at least for its first 9 years and more sporadically for the next 10 years. This was done as a family, with myself usually lying on the floor, hands propping up my head, and parents and sister on the sofa and chairs. We would talk about it, laugh about it and I was always full of questions for my parents as to what specific words meant or themes and concepts I was unfamiliar with (with them answering with caution and diplomacy at times, depending on the content). It was an integral part of our 'family time' together and an opportunity to learn about new concepts.

I was introduced to all manner of scenarios that I hadn't encountered before such as gay characters, rape, incest, AIDS, infidelity, domestic and psychological abuse, drug taking and Global Majority perspectives. When I encounter these things as an adult, I often recall my first encounter with them on *EastEnders*. The show became a ritual – I would watch it twice a week and again for the Sunday omnibus – either if I had missed an episode or simply to rewatch as there was not much on to interest children on a Sunday.

Some of the storylines and characters that had a big impact on me were Nasty Nick's heroin addiction and cold-turkey withdrawal (it confused me that Pete Beale would help him with this, but for the sake of his mother Dot, not him – but it helped me to understand the concept), Den and Angie's tumultuous relationship, the murder of Eddie Royale, Dirty Den's 'death' and the terrorisation of Little Mo Slater by Trevor Mitchell.

Another significant early storyline for me was the rape of Kathy Beale by James Willmott-Brown – but especially the subsequent trial. I vividly recall Kathy being aggressively cross-examined by the defendant's counsel, suggesting that their 'small' client could not have possibly forcefully held her down, and then James smirking from the stands. It shocked (and angered) me that a woman who had endured that would then not be believed at trial. It was an important education and emotional and empathetic encounter, as I subsequently learnt that not only was this overwhelmingly the case, but that it was a rarity in actually reaching court in the first instance. Although many years later, and watching from a young adult's perspective, the same occurred during Little Mo's abuse storyline. By positioning me encountering it from Little Mo's perspective, I witnessed how a toxic and violent male could not only control someone through physical violence but by psychological abuse as well. This aided identification of the themes and patterns and educated me about this common concept in the real world and the need for urgent attention and change.

Another important educative encounter was through the character Colin (Michael Cashman) who was my first exposure to a gay character. I must have asked my parents a lot of questions for which I probably got slightly guarded responses, but it was an important entry point and quasi-education for me (I would likely have seen the first gay 'kiss' but cannot specifically recall it).

The Mitchell brothers intrigued me as supposed ‘hard men’ and I recall a cryptic line uttered by Grant Mitchell (Ross Kemp) which my father found especially amusing: ‘he thought he was top man, so I sorted him’. Dad used to pull Grant Mitchell faces when he wore his leather jacket which amused us all.

One last storyline that really affected and educated me was Mark Fowler’s (Todd Carty) AIDS revelation. The storyline, particularly whereby Mark married his HIV-afflicted ex-girlfriend Gail shortly before she dies, touched me emotionally and was didactically important insofar as I learned how AIDS can affect people, and more importantly that it was not simply something associated with the gay community at the time.

As a related aside, I recall watching *EastEnders* probably around 1987 and attempting to write down dialogue mentally and trying to do so before the next character spoke, and I had to also mentally transcribe their speech and tying myself in mental knots attempting to do so! I considered this a private oddity. Discussing this with my sister as a teenager, she confided to doing exactly the same thing, so I realised my quirk wasn’t unique. Years later it became apparent to me that this was an early manifestation of neurodivergence and OCD which was to take on a more intense dimension when I was an older teenager/adult, but again, these intrinsic personal characteristics are traced back to my formative viewership of *EastEnders*.

I stopped habitually watching the show in 1994 – after a summer storyline with Pat Butcher (Pam St Clement) and her estranged son which I found particularly depressing – and eventually, the show overall. As a 16-year-old dealing with burgeoning depression myself, I didn’t want to put myself through other people’s woes so much anymore. I would still occasionally watch the show and became more active again between 1998 and 2002 to witness the Little Mo (Kacey Ainsworth) and the Slater family incest storylines which stood out for me. After this, for whatever reasons, I stopped watching or following the show altogether.

Looking back, I am convinced that *EastEnders* had a demonstrable formative impression on me in a variety of ways. It opened my eyes to difference and injustice – to alternative conceptions of gender, sexuality and to a number of otherwise ‘taboo’ subjects. By the time I was a teenager, I was a much more empathetic individual, certainly in comparison to the vast majority of my male peers (although, often feeling the need to disguise these impulses) and my viewership of *EastEnders* was instrumental in that. I learnt that masculinity *could* be a broad church. It certainly influenced my chosen career as an educator who recognises the power of plural representation and the role that media plays in collective education.

## **Autoethnography part two – Adrian’s story (academic, cisgender, heterosexual, early fifties)**

For me, *EastEnders*’ launch was eagerly anticipated. Traditional patterns of viewing were followed in our largely, traditional working-class, council-housed family of three. My mother was a homemaker, and my formative years played out to the backdrop of daytime ‘women’s programming’. After tea, we watched the living room set as a family, and I devoured Monday and Wednesday’s fix of *Coronation Street*.

Our tiny family unit lived from payday to payday, and sourced clothes, books and toys from jumble sales. This imposed lifestyle fuelled a desire to vicariously live wider life experiences through investable characters in fictional worlds, ostensibly 'ordinary' people and places.

As 1985 dawned, brief teasers of a rival BBC soap opera appeared with the incumbent 'Voice of God' BBC continuity announcer inviting us to '...Meet the EastEnders...' I witnessed Naima and Saeed and their open-fronted shop, Ali leaning on his taxi, his wife Sue in the doorway of their café and immediately marked this out as different to my usual fix of life-affirming soap. Ethnic minorities were prevalent here. It did not look like *Coronation Street* with its almost exclusively older Caucasian cast. *Corre* rarely featured children or teenagers in regular roles. I recall actor Susan Tully [who played Michelle Fowler] appearing on Saturday morning TV discussing *EastEnders*' launch, noting the mention of younger cast members. It heightened the excitement.

It did not disappoint. After the cosy apprenticeship *Coronation Street* had given me, *EastEnders* changed the way I saw soaps. Although no stranger to programmes of action, curt dialogue or social concerns, these were the paean of other genres – with characters I would rarely, if ever, see again to become invested in on a deeper level.

Everything about this episode was different. The cinematography seemed almost breathless as the camera moved around the characters and set and the perpetual diegetic sounds of a hectic market, traffic and emergency vehicles helped immerse me into this world of people who, like me, didn't pronounce the letters 'h' and 't'. The set also looked 'lived in'.

The first thing which stood out was the language. I was almost embarrassed to hear Den Watts exclaim 'Look at my shirt, look at my bleedin' shirt...' in front of my father. And Turkish Cypriot Ali fighting back made me realise there was more to this than accepting it as 'just the way it is'. It made me think of the inner-city riots from a few years previously which I had seen on the news but recall hearing them dismissed as immigrants causing problems. Maybe it wasn't as simple as that, and *EastEnders* was showing me this through characters I was becoming invested in.

Ali's miscegenetic marriage to Sue was the first I recall and aided my understanding of the prejudices faced by such couples. Not always a harmonious partnership, they clearly loved and supported each other until their first major joint storyline – the sudden death of their baby, Hassan. Sue withdrew into shock with Ali projecting hysterical emotion as the news sunk in. This was new because I'd grown up to socially accept that women were at the mercy of irrational emotions and men were expected to be stoic. But it was the later effect upon Ali that struck me further. Whilst most of the Square's residents rallied around Sue, Ali was marginalised as he tried to support an increasingly withdrawn and depressive wife, maintain their business and keep his emotions in check. Yet, despite what we witnessed at home, the focus of wellbeing from the square's inhabitants remained upon Sue, as Hassan's mother. This struck me as unfair. Ali had also lost a child, and his wife too but the natural course of action depicted was to rally around the mother as he struggled without receiving the same support.

*EastEnders* exposed strands rooted in ideological ideas of masculinity which resonated very strongly. That first episode included news for middle-aged Pauline Fowler that she



was expecting her third child, 15 years after the birth of her last. What was usually considered happy news instilled fear in Pauline and husband Arthur as the dread of telling Pauline's mother the news cowed the couple. Lou Beale was clearly the head of this family. This familial hierarchy was new to me. I was used to households where the senior male was the chief arbiter. Arthur's redundancy was clearly unacceptable to Lou who berated him for the situation, rather than supporting him. Irrespective of her ire towards her son-in-law, Lou made it clear that first episode that 'the cow in number 10' was the real root cause. This also resonated. I had already formed opinions of the Thatcher administration through my parents' attitudes to her and her policies. My favourite musicians were anti-Conservative in their ideals so it felt good that characters whom I could identify with were endorsing my views. The stigma of unemployment for Arthur amidst fruitless searches for work escalated into theft, prison and a nervous breakdown as he struggled with the loss of his reputation and ability to financially support his family. My own father moved jobs many times, usually a victim of redundancy too but was always positively supported by family and friends and quickly re-employed.

The catalyst for Arthur's criminality was his inability to fund his daughter's wedding to Lofty Holloway. Lofty was another character I could identify with, not simply because he wore the same oft-ridiculed round-framed NHS glasses as me. He was earnest and mild-mannered with a nervous disposition – the antithesis of his employer Den Watts. His first big storyline was his engagement to pregnant Michelle Fowler and subsequent jilting at the altar. The nation became absorbed with the secret that it was 'Dirty Den' who had impregnated Michelle, the 16-year-old school friend of his own daughter; but I rooted for Lofty who proposed marriage and accepted the unborn child as his own. With hindsight I suspect my affiliation with Lofty, as it was with Arthur and Ali, was connected to undiagnosed ADHD symptoms of a strong justice sensitivity and saviour complex. A late diagnosis aged 51 explained many facets of my adolescent relationship behaviour including why I chose to invest in down-trodden underdog characters. These men were not arrogant, violent or imposing, but honest, quiet and supportive – values that attracted me. Lofty was me. Never part of a particular group and certainly never part of the boys who spent their time chasing female classmates. I was happier spending time platonically discussing soap storylines with those same girls.

Another intergenerational conflict narrative encouraged me. Pete Beale, Lou's son and Pauline's brother, made no secret of his intention that Ian, his fifteen-year-old son, was expected to ultimately take the family market stall on himself. Ian however wanted to become a chef which riled Pete into demanding he get a more 'manly' job. Pete further dealt with the situation by teasing and berating his son, believing this kind of tough love would straighten his boy out. Undeterred, Ian continued with cookery despite further bullying at school. I recall how I silently cheered him on for persevering despite the pressure to comply with masculine ideals. Again, I was watching and learning that pride mixed with anachronous ideas of masculinity did not necessarily provide solutions but were more likely to worsen situations.

*EastEnders* introduction of a gay character, Colin Russell, was viewed with a certain amount of indifference, but largely because of his status as a 'yuppie' rather than his sexuality, which he kept secret. This puzzled me and, again, piqued my sense of

unfairness. Born after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, the residual attitudes to gay men and women were still prevalent culturally and in my upbringing. Familial attitudes, inadvertently malicious, liberally used the colloquialisms and slurs readily seen and heard in the media or in public. Again, newspapers illustrated to me the wider discourse surrounding the Earth-shattering event of the first gay kiss in a British soap opera. I recall the unfavourable build-up and the anticipation. The reality was somewhat different than the disgraceful images the scandal-baiting tabloids were anticipating. Colin merely gave his boyfriend Barry a fleeting peck on the forehead before he left for work. This did not quell the rage baiting from the tabloids the following day with the headline of 'EastBenders'. This was one of my first instances of understanding how the media can manipulate or present something to appeal to a certain demographic, irrespective of fine details or alternative sensibilities. To my pubescent mind, this outrage was nothing. Gay relationships were nothing new to me and *EastEnders* had also been instrumental in making less enlightened characters look silly by ridiculing their attitudes to same-sex relationships. Storylines, including Dot Cotton refusing to share Colin's teacups for fear of contracting AIDS, held such ignorance up to scrutiny, so soon after the national 'Don't Die of Ignorance' campaign.

The obsession with and didacticism of the programme arrived and receded at benchmark times for me; beginning halfway through my first year at high school and ending as I left education and entered the workforce in Summer 1988, aged 16. My life experiences now widened with older work colleagues. Illicit evenings in the local pub and staff room conversations introduced me to issues and storylines only previously witnessed on screen. Although I remained loyal to the show and did not miss an episode for the first 37 years of its existence, it lost its impact and influence upon me as the 1990s dawned. I was no longer invested in every character, every storyline. I felt I no longer needed it as its realism morphed with pantomime villainy of 'hard men' and gangsters, and issues seemingly presented for effect. However, the lasting effect of its flawed images of masculinity through the lenses of intergenerational conflict laced with attitudes of homophobia and race from those first few years were most welcome.

## Analysis

The above autoethnographies can now usefully be compared to other research in the field in a process of 'comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research' (Ellis et al., 2011: 4). Moreover, this practice creates an opportunity to analyse existing research as 'questions and comparisons' as opposed to an objective 'measure of truth' (Kathy Charmaz, cited in Ellis et al., 2011: 6).

In this instance, a number of points from our autoethnographies appear to support or at least intersect with previous empirical research on *EastEnders* as well as more general theoretical writing. In the first instance, it is notable that Mark was watching the show at the same time as Buckingham was conducting his own research on responses to the show from young audiences. Likewise, Adrian's patterns of viewing took their cue from an earlier soap opera (*Coronation Street*) and previously established patterns of character identification but also provide evidence of how the programme offered more diverse and

perhaps even more identifiable pleasures alongside the centrality of spectatorship in his personal and familial lifestyle (the more detailed ethnography reflects this).

Adrian's sense of anticipation for the programme's launch differed from Mark's through his personal awareness of his own entrenched relationship with cultural products. Given Adrian's older age and awareness, the stories themselves were made sense of in relation to newspapers and television adverts as well as other cultural forms, suggesting that the show offered a way of triangulating experience and making sense of attitudes to race riots and HIV, among other subjects. This intersects with Franco's account of how 'the abundant press coverage testifies to the popularity of the genre in terms of its ability to open up emotional and domestic issues for public discussion' (2001: 452).

These two accounts diverge from studies of audiences like that of Madill and Goldmeier's in which male participants tended to typify the soap as 'inane' (2003:481) or the viewing habits of the programme as 'filling in time' (484). Instead, the results tend to match those of the female respondents who saw a chance for mutual empathy and an opportunity to immerse within both real and imagined communities. Furthermore, these accounts fit Franco's conclusion that 'soaps engage in a process of enculturation that promotes a sense of community and identity' (2001: 453) and exemplify the 'the 1980s trend of placing more emphasis on complex male characters' (464).

It is notable that, although certain modes of masculine behaviour were in some ways seen to be aspirational in a patriarchal context, the comic interactions with Mark's father do suggest that these are essentially performative. Adrian's awareness of expected patriarchal 'norms' was also a point of comparison with his long-running relationship with *Corre*, as they also were between expected and unexpected characterisations of masculinity within *EastEnders* itself. Adrian saw this played out in his responses to and identification between the apparently contradictory forms of masculine types in *EastEnders*. In both of our accounts, the hyper-masculine 'hard man' was seen as comic, performative or simply unappealing. This appears to intersect with wider notions of the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' in western culture in the eighties and nineties (e.g. Lemon, 2022) and the tension between the hyper-masculine archetype of the 1980s and the 'sensitive' male in the nineties outlined by Jeffords (1993).

In both our accounts, the ritual and habitual pleasures of watching the show at a young age does perhaps echo Wober's research of the 'twisted yarn', borrowing from cognitive psychology, in that the unresolved narrative, like the interrupted task, was better recalled than the completed/resolved alternative (cited in Middleham and Wober, 1997: 531–2). Similarly, it supports the notion that *EastEnders*, or indeed any text, is mediated through individual cognition and discussion with friends and family (532). This is also supported by Madill and Goldmeier's use of discursive psychology to position television viewing as an 'active process' (2003: 473) in which viewers draw on their own cultural knowledge to interpret the text. In Mark's case, as a child viewer, this cultural knowledge was necessarily limited so, in fact, the show itself became a foundation of this cultural store that was then used to make sense of other cultural texts and the world at large.

Similarly, Adrian's suggestion that the text continued to educate him as he entered the world of work supports this interpretation. This may be one of the key takeaways from this triangulated autoethnography. There is furthermore the possibility here to augment

Petersen's research into generational fandom, which suggests that fan's identification with fictional characters as they age also shapes fan's own synchronous ageing, and 'mould and bring meaning to their own life' (2018: 217). Indeed, our own research offers a male perspective on Petersen's study of *Gilmore Girls* fandom which tends to focus on positive identification with female characters. The educative function of *EastEnders*, alongside its ritual pleasures, continued as the characters in the serial aged and continued to shape both respondent's perspectives in a positive manner, strengthening the possibility of its social intervention. This is a key revelation from this research, attesting to the less tangible aspects of soap viewership.

In both instances, the storylines involving gay and ethnic minority characters may also have been efficacious in their proselytising. The feeling of overwhelming gloom that the programme eventually had, coinciding as it did with 'difficult' teenage years for Mark, is something of a counterpoint to previous studies that indicates that identification with the travails of the characters made them feel better about their own situation or a means of mediating anxiety (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003: 489), but instead acted as something of a 'trigger' for these unwanted feelings.

The introduction to the personal lives and worlds of minority characters is particularly interesting as it points both to the collective and personal education of an individual viewer but also shows how, much as the text is open-ended and perpetually mediated, so, in fact may be the reaction to it. As outlined, it is indisputable that the show opened different perspectives and ways of seeing the world to Mark and Adrian, but also, with hindsight, the problematics and limitations of these.

Adrian's desire and identification of the show's 'realism' is an important part of its appeal, and his ability to distinguish this from *Corre*, which, when it launched, offered its own sense of realism also indicates the metamorphosis and fluctuations of the serial form and of perceptions of 'realism' in respective time periods. Adrian's sense that the realism declined in later years perhaps echoes Middleham and Wober's research in the 1990s that 92% of respondents felt that the show did not resemble their own neighbourhood (1997: 535). Realism itself is a charged and much-disputed term (Lamuedra and O'Donnell, 2012: 63). Nevertheless, the representation of working-class characters initially offered an important sense of identification for Adrian – especially in relation to the manner of speaking which helped to ground a sense of personal identification, even if 'realism' was a relative assessment. Identification with working-class characters echoed his own life experience and circumstances, and his and Mark's interaction through the show underscore Franco's assertion that *EastEnders*, and other British soaps, 'centre on specific working-class communities, thus inviting the audience to understand the programme from that class perspective' (2001: 460) even if this was predominantly white.

The striving for realism included widening participation in character representation and audience, but there were clear limitations to what a serial drama could realistically achieve. As Geraghty points out, many gay and lesbian viewers found the gay characters 'bland and two-dimensional' (2002: 67–8) and similarly Black and Asian characters were also accused of conforming to and even perpetuating national and cultural stereotypes (2002: 68–74). The portrayal of heterosexual characters with HIV can be seen as progressive or regressive and even the portrayal of women, often considered a positive

attribute, has been seen to be limited (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003: 486), yet the show clearly, and at the very least, offered both Mark and Adrian a space to question and critique gender, sexual, class and ethnic stereotypes.

Thus, the educative function of watching *EastEnders* was limited and required mediation in hindsight, but it inarguably created an internal space for this to take place; it may be noted that original creators Tony Holland and Julia Smith suggested that the imperative was to raise important questions rather than to provide definitive answers (Buckingham, 1987: 83). Crucially, this also tends to support Middleham and Wober's conclusion that 'studies on long-running serials should not necessarily be taken as valid beyond their fieldwork periods' (1997: 533) although it also raises the question of whether an autoethnographic account may be considered as different because of its longitudinal benefits. Overall, both autoethnographies exhibit the worth of such an approach by reflecting how personal experience of the show assisted Mark and Adrian in making sense of themselves and others, to understand cultural experiences and, in limited ways, illuminate larger social and cultural phenomena. Coincidentally, the personal revelation of neurodivergence evident in Mark and Adrian's viewing habits, indirectly or otherwise, does add a male perspective on Madill and Goldmeier's conclusion that the revelation of personal stories and experiences are a primary appeal of the programme to female viewers in the United States (2003: 485). One final aspect which this type of work may add to is the body of work on television and memory, following the work of Amy Holdsworth. Personal, memorial testimony of viewing habits of *EastEnders* and its social and educative function specifically, may provide a site of remembrance; a 'resurrection' that defies the ephemerality of television (Holdsworth, 2018).

## Conclusion

On the surface, it may seem perverse that the perspective of two middle-aged white men relating to a cultural artefact may be the one that is missing but research often provides anomalies, and as discussed throughout, the critical and analytical literature on *EastEnders* is largely skewed in certain directions that don't necessarily and adequately account for its viewing demographic. Likewise, the original and ongoing purpose of the autoethnographic method was in part to allow for diverse perspectives which again, may seem anomalous given the status of the researchers/autoethnographers. Yet, as this article hopes to have demonstrated, this method has allowed the researchers to share their personal experiences as fans, viewers and researchers as part of a wider culture in which a nuanced and diverse reflection on a widely popular cultural artefact has been facilitated. It has assisted in contextualising previous fan studies, particularly with regards to the affective significance of the show's social intervention and proselytising function, especially around gender relations, divergent sexuality, AIDS and other social issues but especially the educative effect of recognising tropes and performances of masculinity at key developmental stages.

It is our hope that sharing our experiences has been to demonstrate the positive effect/affect that a show at times derided as sensationalist, lowbrow or even deleterious had on our roles as individuals – as a text that positioned us as viewers able to educate ourselves on

multiple topics, encourage us to share our feelings and experiences, promote familial and other interaction and time spent together, to develop secure routines, to challenge and question hegemonic thinking/perspectives, be part of multiple communities of fellow fans/viewers and perhaps most of all, to hone and develop our emotional intelligence and powers of identification and empathy.

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