



## ***Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty***

**Kristy Canfield**

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The human soul has the capacity to deal with hardships if they directly correlate to society's standards of what is acceptable. But what happens to one's spirit when unfortunate circumstances cause one to face a life full of abnormalities? How is one expected to maintain a positive outlook on life when one is constantly viewed by others as different and shunned because of it? Many individuals have experienced oppression based on issues of difference and depending on their sociological perception of their own identity sink or continue to swim against strong waves.

Social theories have paved the way for people's understanding of human interaction. As humans we view ourselves as experts of reasoning, when in reality one cannot interpret logical explanations of other's actions until having walked in their shoes. "The grass is greener on the other side" until one takes the initiative to search within one's self for improvement. Oppression is a social construct of this society but ultimately our social standing depends on our will to rise above others' actions and words.

Since early times, human beings have sought to seek out protection from harmful situations. The defense mechanism of isolation may offer a quick resolution to one's

fear, but, overtime, is the outcome comparable to a slow form of self-depravation? Recalling my experience, the act of isolating myself from human interaction because of fearing rejection from others for my difference transformed into fearing life itself. The question is: Why did I turn out to be my own worst enemy in the sense that I believed I was unworthy of acceptance?

I was born with a rosy complexion and full red lips; with that image, it was no wonder why many loved me. God had blessed me with a loving family that fulfilled my needs and beyond, and with external beauty. From a sociobiological standpoint, though, I defy the myth that being blessed with the gift of attractiveness equates to having a perfect life. The transitions of life cycles were supposed to go smoothly and true heartache was to be scarce. But this notion turned into a fallacy as a result of having a stroke at age two—leaving me to navigate through life with speech impairment and a right Humphries.

After years of speech therapy, it became clear that this problem would improve, but never vanish. I recall my mother crying everyday for one year, not because she was disappointed in having me but as a result of knowing the cruelty of society. I was a little girl possessing a difference in a world that centered on uniformity.

Low self-esteem was a direct result of being ridiculed and shunned by numerous peer groups, who viewed my difference as weird. The devastation continued as the ongoing process of cruel comments persevered. I felt as if I was fighting to stay afloat and each cruel word was a current desperately trying to pull me under. How long would I endure this pain before someone would throw me a life line?

Entering high school, I formulated a plan of protection against the cruelties of the world. I was going to use the defense mechanism of isolation to ensure that my days of getting hurt were in the past. Little did I know that this method of protection

would later lead me down a detrimental path. The four years went by with my being silent, refusing to let anyone know my true character. I hid behind a hostile mask ready to spout off verbal aggression to those who I felt deserved it.

Could this repetitious act of isolating myself be put to rest now that I was in college around “mature” adults? The term “isolation” may have various meanings in the sense that one can reside in solitude, or partake in activities that purposefully drive individuals away. Isolation soon coincided with intoxication; how can one get emotionally hurt when one has entered into a state of ambivalence with respect to their surrounding occurrences?

The presence of the gift of beauty has resembled a double-edge sword in that I can cover up my true pain from the outside world but simultaneously everyone receives this impression from me that I have a perfect life. All my life I have felt as if I was living a lie as a result of my appearance radiating the impression that living life was fun, when for a long time living my life was dreadful. The preconceived notion that attractive individuals are secured from obstacles is a fallacy.

My first two roommates were Hispanic and from the inner city. They were very stubborn to acknowledge that a white suburban girl also experienced discrimination. Their words after a lengthy conversation were “white bread, you haven’t experienced a real problem.” It was then that I realized humans are inexperienced at stepping out of the box long enough to recognize that others have issues that create conflict in their souls. For issues to be categorized as important they must be experienced in individual life situations. In a world where discrimination is socially constructed, the idea that we could live in a state of equality despite differences remains an untouchable dream.

There are various forms of discrimination ranging from hateful comments to

crimes. The thought has crossed my mind that scars from physical abuse would be easier to handle, in the sense that they could be seen and then healed versus verbal abuse that stings your soul and has the potential to never heal.

Through isolating myself I have always been able to believe in granting people the benefit of the doubt for their unpleasant actions. I always told myself that peer pressure to conform to a group was the force that drove people to partake in unkind actions but once again my perception of the workings of this world proved to be a fallacy. The incidence that first sparked this awakening was when I experienced utter humiliation when I discovered my floor mates receiving pure amusement from listening to a secretly composed audio recording of my voice. I thought that I would never be subjected to that kind of pure cruelty again but I was. The other day a so-called “friend” brought to my attention that people still view me as weird based on my impairment. Upon her telling me this, a sense of pity began to come over me. For the first time this emotion that I felt was not directed at myself, but rather at her for possessing so much meanness in her soul. At first I attributed it to her going through a rough transition, but then I thought of times when misery was a recurring theme in my life and I would never have received gratification for derailing an innocent human being. My response to her was: “Misery loves company so go seek it out someplace else, because I have relinquished mine!”

The defining moment that fueled the fire for self-destruction actually granted me to learn a valuable life lesson, that obtaining success does not transfer over to having been blessed with the gift of sympathy. The two main reasons for residing in isolation were not only to protect my heart but also my image. I deeply feared that people would assume that I was of less intelligence if they heard me speak. When a professor of

World Religion voiced his stereotype on how possessing a speech impairment directly correlates to residing in a state of mental retardation, I fell into darkness. My worst fear had come true, or had it? Three days later I left Oneonta and signed into Four Winds for treatment of depression and anxiety.

My soul was shattered and I experienced an emotional breakdown. Altruism, the unselfish regard for others, was a trait that I had felt was lost. Did the blame rest upon various actions of individuals or lie within my inner responses? Could I ever be repaired and reside in a world that is so apt to stigmatize humans based on differences?

Sociological theories and concepts aid the process of discovering the forces that drive individuals to participate in various forms of social interaction. These concepts examine the intra-psychic processes of cognition, attribution, and learning that underlie social behavior (DeLamaster and Michener 5). Sociology enables us to internalize a theory and apply it to both our micro-social lives and the macro-social world in which we live. Struggles transform into crisis when one lacks the knowledge to see that human interaction is greatly influenced by the society as a whole. Is human behavior predictable or creative? In my situation, some would state that I would have had struggles anyway given on my difference; but the uniqueness lies in the way I chose to cope with the struggles. My behavior was self-constructed based on the micro-social experiences that I have encountered. As I examined each theory, I was able to put to rest the question of why I had foreseen isolation to be in my best interest. Metaphorically, society had acted as a whirlpool by trying to absorb my inner light, but in reality I am the one who decided to dive into the circle of darkness.

The theory of structural functionalism believes that society is composed of interrelated parts that reject any form of isolation from its whole. A metamorphosis in the

system creates a degree of imbalance and causes reorganization. This macrosociological theory views any variation from the norm as a deviant act. According to this perspective my defense mechanism of isolation sparked an imbalance in society as a result of undermining the importance of socialization. Violating this norm of interaction was supposed to protect me from being viewed as different, but the fact that I had rejected socialization was distinctive in itself. Emile Durkheim's concept of social solidarity evokes an ideal state for a society, but how can one feel unconditional unity when in reality integration into a given society is done through conformity? In the United States the macro structural elements produces social facts that are biased in nature and directly influence the qualities of lives. The life that I have led can be described as embodying the concept of anomie; unfortunate circumstances led to residing in a chaotic state.

The theoretical development of neo-functionalism has allowed conflict to be incorporated into functionalist perceive of society. Jeffrey C. Alexander, author of *Neofunctionalism and After* (1998) states that this theory supports the premise that micro sociology must be incorporated into the study of society to accurately measure both levels of analysis. Neil Smelser stresses the notion of ambiguity in order to understand others actions. This concept of viewing humans from different standpoints seems to be a good solution to societal problems, but when one applies the concept to themselves, confusion may erupt. I have always had stress concerning my difference; how could I obtain a positive self-image despite the fact that external factors state that I was of an inadequate nature? The depressive state appeared because of constantly trying to acknowledge my identity. I felt as if society constructed a scale to measure humans' worth, and if I was viewed as an outsider by some, then it must have been true. My mother set me straight on that thought by

saying, "If someone called you a chair would you turn into one?" This question implies that just because someone speaks the words, they do not come true.

Conflict theorists state that society resides in a state of chaos, antagonism, and hostility. Power is the core of social relationships, and values and ideas held by individuals are viewed as weapons against others. I have always experienced inner conflict and felt powerless as a result of having difficulties establishing social relationships. As people's ideas about my being weird escalated into verbal expressions of rejection, I remember feeling powerless because of standing alone. The act of being a "one woman army" soon became strenuous and detrimental to my spirit and ego. I truly believed that I was pre-destined to experience pain and cruelty because of possessing a difference.

Karl Marx's theory is centered on the notion that there is a direct correlation between power and one's class position. In my opinion the true determinant of power is one who possesses a solid inner foundation that is capable of maintaining strength even in the midst of external conflict. Max Weber has held the belief that one's economic position was not the sole determinant of who would have power and success. I would agree with his belief because I grew up in an upper class family and the position that I held in the community did not grant me respect. In my opinion, the nature of human's attitudes is the most influential determinant of power. Throughout my high school career one girl had the power to persuade various individuals to reject me. I have spent many times trying to figure out why she had that power over others as she did not embody beauty and came from middle class standings. After reading Max Weber's theory on how there are three main foundations for successful claims to authority, I realized that she possessed a charismatic authority. Her powers of persuasion revolved around her

ability to deceive others into thinking that her personal qualities were extraordinary, based on her high level of confidence. I had always wished that I were granted respect by others, but later realized that I had to find it within before others could offer it.

C. Wright Mills has been criticized for insisting that the true measure of one's power is the ability to carry out one's will despite resistance; this is contrary to the dominant ideology of equality. He also constructed the idea that humans should possess a sociological imagination. His work provides us with one of the defining twentieth century statements concerning the nature of intellectual life. He states that examining the relationship between the macro and micro social elements will enable us to view the effects that "institutions of an historical society" have on personal interpretations. In relation to my issue, there was a clear connection between the microscopic difference that I felt was of pertinence and my knowledge of the macro sociological issue of discrimination. I was fortunate though that I gained the insight of the sociological imagination, which allowed me to formulate the correct knowledge that humans do possess the capacity to rise above the macro-social element of discrimination and deal with their unique micro-social situation.

According to Talcott Parson's evolutionary model, differentiation is the key to the evolution of social systems while inclusion signifies the adaptation of humans into the society's workforce and schools despite their physical attributes. In my experience, I have been discriminated against when it has come to occupations so I can relate the stigmatizations that follow people with difference. Parsons states that we as a society must unite to make this process possible. According to Karl Marx's social stratification theory, society has been driven by class struggle, which also tends to hold individuals down. It fails to recognize that people with unfortunate circumstanc-

es also possess talent.

Charles Horton Cooley stated that the self is shaped by our interpretations of how others see us, which in turn shapes our ability to contemplate our existence and to project ourselves into the past and future. "Humanness" is socially created by our interactions with others. The looking glass self is the process by which we define ourselves. It contains three elements: we imagine how we appear to others, we interpret other's reactions, and we develop a self-concept (Henslin 102-104). The development of self does not always coincide with accurate interpretations and these negative mental cognitions can lead a person down a dark road. The notion of the looking glass self and I have been in direct correlation since I was a young girl. This process of self-interpretations of others has coincided with my depression because not only did I internalize concrete notions of myself being less than, but also as time went on those outside voices transformed into internal thoughts. If people put you down enough you start to believe it. My internalized voice soon ceased my thinking rationally and I believed that I had no reason to live.

In the movie *Norma Rae*, Norma too believed that her value depended on others' interpretations and that she did not serve a useful function in the society. I can relate to how she had to overcome her feelings and experiences in order to become complete again. I had admiration for her; and how she was able to rise above her hardships to make great strides in her community. Similar to myself, her transformation began with Rubin, a person that told her that she was good enough despite what people thought. Charles, a therapist at Four Winds was also my guiding light out of the darkness.

George Herbert Mead distinguishes between the "me" and the "I" in the development of the self. The "I" acts as the subject and the "me" is the object. He concluded that the human mind is socially

constructed by symbols. I have a tendency to overreact to situations before collecting all the evidence and allow words or others to control my reality—to the point that I feel words are like knives piercing through my soul. The reality of freedom does not come from one's surroundings, but is determined by one's mental cognition. The movie *Billy Elliot* is a perfect example of how a young person that experienced difference had to rise above the way society viewed him and listen to his inner voice in order to find strength. The fact that he preferred dance to boxing made him an outcast but because he stood up against the forces of discrimination, he was able to achieve success.

Herbert Blumer signifies the importance of interpretation regarding one's daily interactions. Humans have evolved beyond the animal species in regards to how we handle stimuli. When an event occurs, humans are likely to relate a specific meaning to the situation instead of acting on primary instincts. Humans act in a manner that is related to A's interaction with B and then B defines the situation in accordance to his own interpretation. In relation to my life, the event of people not calling led to the thought that I was worthless. Without knowing the concrete reason for their failure of not calling, I would react in a snooty manner and in return, they did not want me in their presence. In the depressive state, I would attribute the normal gesture of people's making eye contact to their thinking that I was abnormal and weak; I realized that the thoughts that I were experiencing were internal not external. Blumer explains that humans handle situations differently depending on their interpretations. I avoided social situations because they raised anxiety levels because of remembrance of past negative experiences. I therefore allowed my interpretation of rejection to oppress my ability to communicate properly. The second premise revolves around the idea that the meaning of things

evolve from experiences. As I noted, the fear of having others hurt me again stopped me from wanting to interact with anyone. I have always held the notion that people's laughter was in direct correlation to hearing my speech, therefore I would reside in silence because of paranoia.

Dramaturgy studies the presentation of self in everyday life. Erving Goffman formed a new notion in microsociology; he stated that social life is drama-like. He meant that individuals perform on stage according to their place in life. The self lies at the center of our performances and we wish for others to view us in a certain light so we perform certain roles when communicating to others (DeLamaster and Michener 1965). The roles that we ascribe to necessitate efforts in impression management which take place on front and back stages. I always feel as if I need to put on the air of perfection to mask the feeling of complete and utter imperfection regarding my difference. This is something that I must work on because no one is perfect and when I do make an error in life, I feel like a failure and am hard on myself.

The back stages of people's lives are very personal and are role free. Role conflict is experienced when the various numbers of roles that we play do not correlate with one another. As I explore, my depression was a result of role overload. I was so determined to be the perfect child that I tried to ignore the fact that I had a difference; I would always focus on my appearance and school, but would never accept the fact that I was categorized as different. As a result, I experienced role strain because I was feeling inner stress in recognizing the complete me. In this world, hardships are universal and people can enact face saving behavior to hide flaws but in my case, I cannot and the point of isolating myself was to protect myself from exploitation.

Peter Berger suggested that the "social construction of reality" depends on our

subjective interpretations and relies on the way society impresses its portrayal of us. There are three "moments" to this process; externalization is the act of human's creating their own social world by adapting a new mode of interest. The second point is objectivity; this is where language plays an important part, in that it is the main way that humans socially construct reality. Internalization is the process of absorbing every word that individuals speak or perform and transforming them into social norms and values. In my experience, I internalized every negative word that individuals spoke, and thought that individuals determined my emotional stability. I mastered the process of reifying a situation and it was comparable to residing in a prison because I relinquished my micro abilities to clearly think and relied on the constantly changing macro approaches of society.

Berger & Luckmann's three-step process of "social construction of reality" can be linked to the films *American Dream* and *Affluenza*. In the *American Dream* some of the factory workers truly believed that they had to accept the wage cut because they were socialized to believe that they are of lesser value based on their status position. In *Affluenza*, society reconstructed the definition of prosperity by transforming their content of basic goods into their desire for material items. This is another example of reification, in which people allow for the macro world to override their micro feelings.

Ethnomethodology, founded by Harold Garfinkel, is the study of how people use commonsense to make sense of life, how they use basic assumptions to interpret their everyday worlds. Our ideas about the way life is and how it should work are known background assumptions and these lie at the core of one's life. Through isolating myself, I found that I was becoming out of touch with reality because one cannot lead a normal life without proper communication.

George Homans signifies the importance of rationality that humans possess when it entails decision making. Humans may not always do the right thing but they are in control. I agree with his theory because the outside world may have influenced my depression, but if I had better coping skills to deal with my difference, I would have not resided in darkness. I always said that harmful accusations were my worst fear, but now I realize that my fears rest with my not being strong enough to conquer my demons.

Symbolic interaction allows one to interact properly in society based on the feedback one receives during previous interactions. According to this theory the nature of a man is shaped by how well he can communicate to others. I agree with this assumption in that an individual's nature can only be truly measured by their character, and without the proper communication skills one's character would be unidentifiable.

George Homans simultaneously agrees that while sociological theories are crucial for explaining external influences in society, the true explanations for social phenomena lie within one's cognitive developmental process. The Rational Choice theory states that people rationalize their courses of action based on the rewards, but frequently never stop to weigh the ending costs. When I discovered the defense mechanism of isolation, did I not use the Social Exchange Theory to measure the benefits and cost? I became blinded by the protective benefits and didn't fathom the possibility that it could have harmful costs.

To follow Phenomenology we need to take the sociological perspectives that we have acquired and discover on what level we internalize the actions in everyday life and how have these theories influenced our reactions. Thomas Szasz has explored the medicalization of mental illness. He stated that mental illnesses are neither mental nor illnesses; they are physical processes that

result in unusual perceptions and behaviors. Depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain that can be treated by drugs. Troubles are universal and will continue to be as we journey through life but the trick is to find a way to carry on. A wise woman once said that the hardest thing to do in this world is to live in it. What do you believe?

In conclusion, I would like to thank you. You have socially constructed a reality that defined my speech as being different and not abnormal. I enjoyed your class and the world should have more compassionate humans.

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