Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgments

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We are all absorbed in a constant struggle to find ourselves. From the time we are born, every experience becomes a piece in the puzzle that may or may not eventually integrate into the whole person. Both society and ourselves play a major role in deciding what kind of people we will be. It is through our interactions with others that we form opinions of ourselves. Throughout my own personal struggle to find myself, society has had an effect on both micro and macro levels.

A significant problem in my life arose at about the time I entered middle school. At this point in my life, I began to more than before take into account the opinions and attitudes of others. The situation was escalated by the fact that I became overweight and had to start wearing glasses, both of which caused me to become tremendously self-conscious. My self-consciousness stemmed from my increasing attention to how others thought of me. Now I see how **symbolic interaction** affected my self-identity formation. It seemed as though all at once I had become the fat, four-eyed girl. For the other children, my weight and the glasses acted as symbols for how they should treat me. They felt that based on these symbols, it was acceptable to treat me with less respect and dignity. This treatment was well illustrated in the movie, ***Erin Brockovich***. When Erin begins working in the lawyer's office, she is not accepted by her co-workers because of her style of dress. Her clothing becomes a symbol for the other workers' cruelty towards her. They ignore her, and are rude and unhelpful to her at every opportunity. However, Erin does not let their negative opinions of her stand in her way, and in the end she earns their respect through her hard work and great accomplishments. As can be seen, there are certain symbols in society, such as weight or provocative clothing, which signal to others the opportunity to judge and to behave in certain ways. According to George Herbert **Mead**, "Our actions are always engaged with the actions of others, whose responses to what we do send us signals as to their approval or disapproval" (Farganis 159). I also looked toward others for their opinions of me, and then allowed their reactions to gauge how I felt about myself. As is common among children of middle school age, my classmates were quite cruel toward me. This led me to believe that their harsh comments were true, and that I was truly worthless. These events, in turn, triggered the gradual decline of my self-esteem and overall self-worth.

As time went on, my conceived notions of others' opinions gradually became a part of me, and came to shape my overall self-concept. As hard as I tried to ignore the cruel comments of others, they eventually became subconsciously embedded inside my mind. This was especially the case when this harsh attitude came from my own **significant others**. In particular, I can recall one of my cousins who used to derive pure pleasure from making fun of me. This specific cousin was several years older than I, and she was someone whom I had always looked up to and strived to be like. Charles Horton **Cooley's "looking-glass self"** concept helps explain this. The idea is basically that we judge ourselves based on our perceptions of other people's opinions of us, which in turn, affect our feelings about our-

selves. In her article, "Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty," Kristy Canfield adds that the looking-glass self, "shapes our ability to contemplate our existence and to project ourselves into the past and future" (Canfield 24). Another concept put forth by Mead is **reflexivity**, which is defined as "the capacity to use and respond to language, symbols, and thoughts" (Farganis 159). This has to do with how we manipulate our actions in order for them to fit the expectations of others. Mead goes on to state, as quoted earlier, that "Our actions are always engaged with the actions of others, whose responses to what we do send us signals as to their approval or disapproval" (Farganis 159). Because of the fact that my cousin was a role model for me and I highly valued her opinion, her comments had a major impact on my self-image. Therefore, I attempted to change myself in order to meet her standards and earn her respect. This relates to W. E. B. **Du Bois**' notion of **double**-**consciousness**. Du Bois describes this phenomenon as, "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Farganis, 187). In this way, I was constantly struggling to keep my personal values and attitudes, while at the same time attempting to fit in and adopt the values of others.

Throughout my quest for popularity I was very concerned with **status.** Peter **Blau** defines status as "the common recognition by others of the amount of esteem and friendship that someone receives" (Wallace and Wolf 330). In my case, the other children were of a higher status than I, as they were more highly respected and recognized. Blau goes on to make the point that, "people whose status is not very secure are most threatened by being seen with lower-status people" (Wallace and Wolf 330). This was certainly the case among many of my classmates. The reason for this was that shifts in status could occur very rapidly and unexpectedly among the children. Therefore, they were very uneasy about associating with classmates of lower status, as they could quickly be reduced to the level of the lower-status person. In my situation, it was extremely difficult to achieve high-status, but once you had reached that level, it was very easy to slip back down the ladder.

Now that I look back I have realized that in many ways the people who would pick on me were using me as a stepping stone in their own quest for popularity. The more they made fun of me, the more the other kids looked up to them and respected them. This ties into the ideas of **Rational Choice Theories**, which "assume that people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals" (Wallace and Wolf 294). Therefore, the other children, who were in pursuit of popularity, saw cruelty as the most effective route to their goal. This idea also fits well with the ideas of **Exchange Theory**, which explains the rewards and punishments that are involved in social associations. Exchange Theory is a rational choice theory, as it encompasses the idea of the means to ends rationality of human behavior (Wallace and Wolf 294). According to this theory, "the gratifications experienced by individuals are contingent on actions of others" (Farganis 298). Basically, people are rewarded either extrinsically or intrinsically. In my case, **extrinsic rewards,** which Peter Blau defines as "tangible things, such as money" (Farganis 295), were not a major factor. Rather, when children made jokes about me, the action of laughter from other children encouraged them to continue with their cruel behavior. Therefore, the other children's laughter acted as an **intrinsic reward,** which Blau defines as "intangible, such as love or respect" (Farganis 295). My feelings of pain and hurt as a result of this cruelty are congruent with another of the ideas of Exchange Theory,

which states that, "the rewards individuals obtain in social associations tend to entail a cost to other individuals" (Farganis 299). This fits with my situation, as the cruel kids were being socially rewarded by the attention from other kids, while I was being punished by the same reactions by the children. Further, Blau states that, "processes of social exchange, which may originate in pure self-interest, generate trust in social relations through their recurrent and gradually expanding character" (Wallace and Wolf 331). Therefore, as the other children worked together and participated in social exchange, they became closer and more trustworthy of one another.

Another possible reason for the children's behavior is the issue of **power**. "In discussing friendship and conformity, Homans identifies social approval as the good people offer when they have nothing else desirable to exchange" (Wallace and Wolf 317). It is possible that the more powerful children, who had more to offer, were able to give the other children rewards. In exchange for these rewards, the children followed the powerful kids, therefore compensating them with social approval. This fits with **Homans**' idea that social approval can explain group conformity (Wallace and Wolf 315). The powerful kids were rewarding the others with social approval, among other rewards, which gave them power. Further, "individuals tend to cope with impending imbalances of attraction by seeking to prove themselves attractive to associates they find attractive in order to establish friendly relations and become integrated among them" (Farganis 307). In this way, the children attempted to make themselves attractive to the powerful kids in order to be accepted. Therefore, they stayed together as a group via power and social approval. Throughout this whole process, it seemed that I was never rewarded, but only punished.

Another sociological point of view which somewhat disagrees with the ideas of Exchange Theory, is **Symbolic Interaction**. A basic premise of this theory is that people analyze and evaluate situations, and then make decisions based upon their own interpretations of the situation. If this is true, the other children were picking on me simply of their own will and their own cruelty. Essentially, they judged the situation, and then acted cruelly toward me for their own gain. The concepts of symbolic interactionism are illustrated by the movie, ***Twelve Angry Men***. Throughout the movie, each of the men reacted to the same situation in different ways. Basically, they individually summed up the situation, and then reacted based on their own interpretations and their own wishes. For example, the sports fan is anxious to achieve his end of going to a baseball game, and so he attempts to convince the other jurors to rush their decisions. On the other hand, the architect wants to take his time and make careful decisions, as he views the situation differently. Although these men all have different ideas, the world that they live in "already has a structure, and people who occupy that world share meaning structures that make social interaction possible" (Farganis 311). This is illustrated by the fact that the men are all on the jury for the same purpose, which is a part of the society in which they all live. This is true of my situation, as the other children made the decision to make fun of me but they were also influenced by the culture surrounding them.

My reactions to the cruelty of other children can be summed up by the concept of dramaturgy put forth by Erving **Goffman**. He believed that in different social situations people tended to play a variety of different roles (Goffman 351). **Dramaturgy** is the study of everyday life as drama. In this way, individuals are better able to control the situation and exert influence over others as in a play. P. Heim provides support for this idea in her article "Alien Nation" when she says, "each and every

person has many different facades, which can also be thought of as having a society within oneself" (Heim 36). Throughout her article, Heim describes the different roles that she played, especially within her family. In my case, when other children would make fun of me, I would usually become quiet and attempt to ignore them. This was different from my behavior in other situations. I had hoped to control the situation through my action of ignoring them, assuming that they may become disinterested and give up. However, this just made them harass me even more in most cases. Realizing that my quiet act was not working, I attempted a different role. In this role, I attempted to laugh with the other children, hoping that it would make them accept me. This also turned out to be a failure, so I tried yet another new character. In this new role I would get mean and nasty toward the other children, hoping that they may begin to understand what it was like to be the victim. However, this role also proved to be a disappointment. At this point, I felt that the situation was hopeless.

This idea of the many different roles and personalities that people assume is illustrated in an extreme sense in the documentary, ***Multiple Personalities: The Search for Deadly Memories***. When I switched roles in order to manipulate the other children's behavior, I was showing different parts of my personality. People who have Multiple Personality Disorder actually have several different personalities within them. This is true of everyone to an extent. However, Multiple Personality Disorder is an extreme case of this. In the documentary, the people would switch personalities depending on the situation and the people involved. This behavior can be observed frequently in everyday life, as with my actions toward the bullies.

Another illustration of this concept comes from the excerpted writing of G.I. **Gurdjieff** entitled "About the Author" the concluding chapter of the first volume of his work *All and Everything* (1950). Throughout this piece, the author discusses the idea that we have many different personalities, which come together to develop our "I." Gurdjieff uses the analogy of a carriage to explain this concept, and describes how the parts of a man work together yet are still independent of each other. The three parts of a man that are described by Gurdjieff include the physical, intellectual, and emotional selves. Basically, these three parts each affect man in different ways, yet they all are supposed to come together to form a complete person. This analogy is true for my situation, as my different personalities, although they are all unique, are supposed to come about at different times in different situations to form my "I."

Although so far I have considered many micro social processes that had an impact on my development, there are also macro social forces which have played a role. A major social factor that has contributed to my image of and feelings toward myself has been the rural setting in which I grew up. Georg **Simmel** devoted his article "The Metropolis and Mental Life" to a comparison of rural and metropolitan life and how they affect the interaction of individual and society. Simmel begins his writing with the following observation: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life" (Farganis 149). Simmel goes on to discuss how people in **metropolitan** areas are more likely to lose their individuality due to the impersonal nature of the environment. However, in my personal experience, Simmel's deductions do not hold. The area that I grew up in was very much rural. My school was so tiny that my graduating class consisted of 25 people. Since there were so few people and everybody knew everybody else, it was difficult to keep secrets at all. Furthermore, if one

person was different in any way from the majority, they were viewed as an outcast. This was the case for me, as I did not fit into the perfect category. It is my belief that in larger areas differences are more acceptable. This is probably due to the fact that there are so many people that it is impossible to analyze and judge everyone.

As a result of my situation, I developed an extremely negative self-concept. This is partly explained by George Herbert Mead's idea of the **generalized other**, which "means that individuals internalize the norms and values generated by the dominant institutions" (Wallace and Wolf 202). A very common attitude of the American people, which is learned very early on in life, is the importance of physical appearance. Basically, "the modern belief that one's body can be constructed is associated with an equally strong belief that the shape one is relates to one's inherent worth" (Wallace and Wolf 373). This was a value that I, along with the other children, had been exposed to for most of my life. Based on this value, I came to see myself as a failure even without the other children's input.

My situation can be further examined using a **functionalist** perspective. "The major distinctive contribution of functionalism has been its view of social order as a consensual agreement reflecting shared values and norms that bind a community together" (Farganis 225). Emile **Durkheim**, inspiring functionalism, emphasized the notion that society creates values which all members are supposed to attain. He believed that, "there are 'social facts' that exist outside of us and that compel us to behave in conformity with norms that are not of our making" (Farganis 59). The idea that women should have certain body types is a norm in today's society. As with other norms, non-conformity leads to social sanctions, such as laughter, stares, and other sources of embarrassment. Through these actions, conformity with the norm of typical gender roles is produced.

This **phenomenon** had a profound effect on me. In my case, I was breaking the **socially constructed** norm of the way that females are meant to look like, and I was punished by the other children's laughter and jokes. However, there was not really anything that I could do in order to conform to the norm. Alfred **Schutz** uses a related concept, which he refers to as the **common stock of knowledge** (Wallace and Wolf 255). He defines the common stock of knowledge as, "social recipes of conceptions of appropriate behavior that enable people to think of the world as made up of 'types' of things" (Wallace and Wolf 255). In this way, people all share similar ideas, and are better able to communicate in social situations. In my case, the other children all felt that it was appropriate behavior to be cruel to me in particular social situations, such as when in the company of certain other children. According to Anthony **Giddens**, "We have a 'generalized motivational commitment' to sustaining the routine and tactfulness of ordinary social intercourse" (Wallace and Wolf 257). Basically, we all strive to keep our lives as routine and simple as possible. For the other children it became **routine**, and almost habit, to be cruel to me whenever in my presence. In this way, their social interactions were standard and did not require a lot of effort.

Friedrich **Nietzsche** adds to the consideration of norms and specified ways of acting by describing "the struggle that an individual must endure in order to break out of societally sanctioned roles and to reject externally imposed values" (Farganis 93). This effort is illustrated in the movie *Billy Elliot* which describes the struggle of a young boy who wishes to be a ballet dancer, rather than a boxer as society expects of him. Despite objections from his family and others, Billy keeps working at ballet with his teacher. In the end, Billy follows his dreams and, breaking with society's ideals, becomes a professional ballet dancer. *Billy Elliot* is an example of one

boy's triumph over society's strict gender role norms. The great effort that is required in order to break with society is almost impossible for most people, as society's ideas are so deeply ingrained within each individual.

Further evidence for this phenomenon comes from Talcott **Parsons**, who describes the **"glamor girl"** model (Farganis 238). He states that females have "a strong tendency to accentuate sexual attractiveness in terms of various versions of what may be called the 'glamor girl' pattern" (Farganis 238). Basically, Parsons is describing the socially constructed image that females are supposed to project in today's world. Through the media, and other sources, young girls pick up cues as to how they are expected to act. Women on television are projected as having perfect bodies and being glamorous all the time. The movie *Affluenza* demonstrates this point through its exploration of materialism in today's society. It describes the various ways in which products are marketed toward young children at a very early age. In particular, items such as the Barbie Doll, which is specifically marketed toward young girls, emphasize the "glamor girl" attitude. By adopting today's materialistic attitude, young girls are reinforced to believe that they should look and act in a certain way, which is in most cases impossible. In fact, "Billions of dollars are spent annually on cosmetics, physical fitness, and weight reduction advertising with messages encouraging thinness" (Felts 374). As a result, it eventually becomes ingrained in many young people's minds that if they do not fit this description, then they are worthless as a person.

As stated by Bryan **Turner**, **"to control women's bodies is to control their personalities"** (Wallace and Wolf 380). These ideas that are presented in the media come to shape the views that young people hold regarding self worth. In fact, Parsons also points out that, "The glamor girl pattern has certain obvious attractions since to the woman who is excluded from the struggle for power and prestige in the occupational sphere it is the most direct path to a sense of superiority and importance" (Farganis 243). Although this is less true today than it was in the past, the idea that being glamorous leads to respect and power still acts as a major influence on the attitudes of young girls. In fact, even in my situation, which took place in a school setting, the pretty and glamorous girls were always the most popular. Further support comes from **Berger and Luckmann**, who believe, in the words of Wallace and Wolf, that, "how we view and how we experience our bodies is entirely a social construction" (371). Basically, the culture that we live in shapes our views of how we should appear. These views become ingrained in us and affect every aspect of our lives, including our personal self-image. However, these images that are portrayed within society, as to how we should appear, are often impossible for people in the real world to achieve. This conflict is represented by **Merton's** definition of **anomie** (in contrast to Durkheim's), in terms of "a discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means available for reaching them" (Wallace and Wolf 56). Merton's definition can be utilized to explain the socially constructed gender roles of today's society. Women strive to achieve socially created goals, but are faced with conflict and anxiety as their means of reaching those goals are blocked. This could be the reason behind Talcott Parson's belief that, "The period of youth in our society is one of considerable strain and insecurity" (Farganis 244). Young girls learn early on what is expected of them; yet, these expectations are, in many cases, impossible to realize.

In considering my problem, it is important to understand the other children's motivations and reasons for being cruel. Merton's ideas of **manifest and latent functions** come into play at this point. "Manifest functions are the consequences

people observe or expect" (Wallace and Wolf 52). In my case, the other children's laughter and fun, and my sadness and pain served the manifest function of reproducing gender and power dynamics at school, as they were easily observable and understood. "Latent functions are the consequences that are neither recognized nor intended" (Wallace and Wolf 52). In this case, the group cohesion created by the other children was a latent function. It was not easily observable, but was happening nonetheless. Merton provides support for this point when he states that, "Through the systematic application of the concept of latent function, apparently irrational behavior may at times be found to be positively functional for the group" (Farganis 249). The other children's cruelty created tight-knit friendships and cooperation within their group. Therefore, latent functions were at work in creating group cohesiveness, and reinforcing many socially constructed ideals among the children.

In many ways, in my situation at school, both micro and macro forces were at work. My individual personalities and behaviors and those of the other children brought about the micro level of functioning. At the same time, **macro** forces, such as the basic ideas and values of our culture were strongly influencing our actions. C. Wright **Mills** introduced the important concept of **sociological imagination**, which involves the ability to see the interaction of **personal troubles** and **public issues** (Wallace and Wolf 106). The distinction between these two items helps to link the concepts of the micro and the macro levels of functioning. According to Mills, "personal troubles are troubles that occur 'within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu' and relations with other people" (Wallace and Wolf 106). Therefore, personal troubles relate to the micro level of functioning which occurs among individuals. Mills goes on to define public issues as "matters that have to do

with the 'institutions of an historical society as a whole,' with the overlapping of various milieus that interpenetrate to 'form the larger structures of social and historical life'" (Wallace and Wolf 106-107). So, public issues deal with the problems of the masses, and the macro level of functioning within society.

In my case, my pain and anger resulting from the other children's behavior engendered a personal trouble within myself. However, if we consider the macro level, the situation is a public issue due to the fact that this was not a problem only for me, but also for many thousands of other children around the world. According to Rebekah Heinrichs, "75% of school-age children report being bullied at least once during the school year" (Heinrichs 200). In this way, it is possible to see the link between the micro and macro levels of functioning in today's society. Generally, micro issues impact the individual, but these issues are themselves shaped greatly by the macro forces of the surrounding culture and conditions. Similarly, the micro level also has a compelling effect on the functioning of the macro level. As can be seen, the individual and society as a whole impact each other simultaneously, and affect the overall functioning of one other.

For a long time, I was very negative and self-conscious, due to perceptions of my physical appearance. According to Samara Cohen, "Our personalities are shaped by interactions we have with people as individuals, and as groups in society" (Cohen 9). This was very true for me, as my relationships with my classmates had a major impact on my personality, and on my view of myself. Suddenly, right before I entered high school, I lost a lot of weight and started wearing contact lenses. It was as if I was a completely different person in the eyes of my classmates. They suddenly accepted me, and wanted to spend time with me. I started ignoring those people who were always friendly to me and stood up for me,

and instead became one of the "popular" kids. At the time, I loved my newfound popularity and my acceptance among my peers. I still do enjoy these things, but I now see them in a different light. I realize now that the people who liked me only when I started to look "acceptable" to them were not really my friends at all. They were my friends for a while, but the relationships soon faded away. In the end, I found that only people who were there for me and who stood up for me when I was being bullied that really mattered. Fortunately, my true friends were willing to forgive me, despite my actions toward them. Today these people continue to be my best and closest friends. I cherish them wholeheartedly, as they taught me a valuable lesson that I put to use everyday in my interactions with others. That lesson is that it is never alright to judge people based upon their physical appearance. Rather, people should be valued for their inner beauty and beliefs.

As I look back, I can understand somewhat why the other children acted so cruelly toward me, as there were many forces acting upon them as well at both the micro and macro levels. However, I have found that despite these same forces acting upon me, I have learned to accept others for who they are, and not judge them based upon what they look like. I still sometimes catch myself thinking poorly of a person at a first glance. However, based upon my experiences, I am able to realize my fault, and change these thoughts. In fact, I often find that after meeting the person and getting to know them, their outward appearance does not mean a thing and they are really a wonderful person.

My friends, through their actions, proved to me that what is inside a person is what matters the most. In the end, my middle school experience taught me that true relationships are not based on physical characteristics, but rather the feelings that come from within a person.

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