



The Tension of Opposites: **Exploring Issues of Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in My Identity Formation**

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Having grown up in the inner city, I feel as if I have come a long way from where most of my peers are at right now. Many of my friends from elementary school did not graduate from high school and many of the ones who did now have children and seem to have their life set. I am a twenty-one year old female, now a junior in college, with many goals that I have yet to reach in my lifetime. Although I do not have any children and plan to get my B.A. from UMass Boston I feel that outsiders still consider me a “girl from Chelsea.”

What exactly is a girl from Chelsea? She is someone who grew up in a low-income home with poor educational skills and who is going to college, but will still end up like all the rest of the girls, married with children. Inside my home it seemed as if my parents were raising me to become a homemaker and to break out of that meant breaking the norms of my family. The identity I ended up achieving inside my home, strong, not very lady-like, confident, and assertive does not seem to be an identity that is accepted outside my house. I think about all the “successful” women I see on

the television, and they seem like they have money, are beautiful, have the perfect bodies and they always seem to have a man by their sides. Many of the women whom I know of that are actually changing things in the world are barely talked about and do not seem to be surrounded by riches.

Exactly what am I working for by attending school? Will I end up with a job that pays me a decent salary and end up with kids and a husband to take care of? In this world that seems to favor those who have riches and money, do I actually have a chance of making a lot of money without hurting other people? Should I waste my time trying to gain my rights as a woman when this movement has been taking place for so long and women are still paid less than men and this struggle for the equality of the sexes is still so prevalent? In my analysis of my identity formation many of the concepts described by Dorothy Smith, Erving Goffman and George Herbert Mead have helped me understand society and how individuals live it.

How did I come to understand how my social world functions? Examining the theory of **social construction of reality** by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), I am able to see how I broke the expectations of society and my family and created my own to fit my needs and desires. Inside my house my mother cooked and cleaned for our whole family. My father worked and when he came home his meal was ready for him and all he did was sleep. While growing up the only chores my brother had were to take out the trash, and shovel the snow, while my sisters and I had to wash the dishes, clean the table, mop, sweep and wash clothes. When I was young I saw this as **objective reality**, a social order that I was to follow because my mother did this, her mother did it and every other woman alive also did it. Although I obeyed my mother and father I hated doing chores, cleaning and cooking. I did not understand why I had to stay home while my brother was out

playing until the late hours. As I grew older I was determined to change my life and that is where I started rebelling against my parents, trying to make my reality **subjectively meaningful**, in distinction from how society imposed its means on me “objectively.” In the beginning it was very difficult for my parents to accept my decision to go out and have fun with my friends. Already they felt **alienated** when they arrived at the United States from El Salvador. They felt that their beliefs went against the beliefs of other people in the U.S. and that if they did not have control over their children they would grow up to be drug addicts or that the girls in the family would end up pregnant at a young age. By not becoming the “respectable wife” they wanted me to be, I was breaking the traditional norms in my family. It took a very long time and many days of arguing for my parents to realize that I was not going to follow in their shoes. The need to question my decisions and criticize my behavior still persists, creating an uncomfortable environment between us.

I have to say that although my parents came to terms with many of my decisions, my father still acted as if I, as an inferior being, had to listen to him in order to succeed in life. From Dorothy Smith’s **standpoint theory** I learned how even in the professional world women are discriminated and made to feel as subordinates. It was not as if my father was the only person who felt this way. Visiting my cousins and friends, many of their fathers dictated what took place and what did not inside their homes. From the media I learned that the male was dominant and strong and the female was beautiful and passive. In my own home my mother never said how she felt and nobody ever questioned my feelings. We either did what my father said or else we would suffer the consequences. At one point I came to believe that men were smarter than women. The **dramaturgy** I presented was the one I thought was more proper. I became

very shy in my classes but I felt that that was the way I was supposed to be. Boys were louder and more active, like my brother, and girls were quieter and obeyed others like my sisters and I. It seemed as if the **ruling apparatuses** in society was meant to keep girls doing girls jobs and boys to succeed in life. In school when the teacher asked what we wanted to be and one of the girls said she wanted to be a firefighter, one of the boys said, “When have you seen a girl fire fighter?” and since that day on I started to notice how society functioned. On television, doctors, lawyers, and those who worked in law enforcement were mainly men. Women were always sexy, fit and with make-up. I became very self-conscious and started questioning my own goals and desires in life. Was I capable of becoming something other than a mother or a wife?

As I began to question my abilities, I developed what DuBois called **double consciousness**—though in this case regarding gender issues. I could not help but to compare myself with the women I saw on television. I really did not have any role models in my own culture. Most of the Hispanic women I saw on television were provocative and were always trying to seduce men. My mother was a hardworking woman who took care of her husband and family. I have to say I did not want to be ugly, as shallow as that may sound, but I also wanted to be smart. It seemed as if smart women could not be beautiful, according to the way women were portrayed in the media. At one point I did not want people to think I was smart, because being smart would have made me ugly. Once I began to learn about the stereotypes portrayed in the media I gained an understanding of who creates these images and for what purpose. Girls at a very young age are pressured to fit an image that is not real, an image that is created by those in power who set standard of beauty and femininity. Although I do not like labels, I would have to identify with

the concept of **liberal feminism** and the fact that women could achieve equality by proving themselves at work and school. When I graduated high school I felt like I had the key to change the world. I felt as if I could become anything I wanted as long as I tried. Once I entered college and interacted more with people of all ages I felt like I had been kidding myself all along. There were arrogant people who felt that women still belonged at home. It seemed as if some professors favored the opinions of males over females. I do not know if it was the **looking glass self** that made me imagine others' opinions of me but there came a point where I was not very confident of who I was.

In the development of the self, George Herbert Mead distinguishes between the "me" and the "I." The "I" is the self as subject and the "me" is the self as object. "I," being active and creative, sought to understand the behavior of others as well as my own. Through cultivating my **sociological imagination** I was able to see my private troubles in relation to public issues. By talking to other students I identified with them and saw that I was not the only one who felt this way; the perspectives of other students and peers who had experienced what I had experienced in my classes as a minority woman influenced "me" in turn. It was very difficult to ignore certain biases and stereotypes that some people have. When I became self-conscious about myself I was introverted and acted as if I did not care about school. When I began to apply myself and got really good feedback from my professors I felt like "I" had been working all along. I felt like I had gained control of my own life and what I wanted to do, or actually what I was capable of doing.

After reading, "Anti-man to Anti-patriarchy," written by Emily Margulies (2002), I was able to gain an understanding of how the world around me has been **externalized** by others, in this case men. Women have relied on men for a very long time. It wasn't

because they wanted to but because many times they had to. It was not until the early 1920s that women were actually able to vote in the U.S. Before that, many women could not work and their job was to stay home taking care of the family. Many women continued to do this because this was all they knew. The reality of their worlds was **objectivated**, and many, like my mother, felt that this was the way things were and had to be. The **internalization** of norms and values by many women in society often takes place in ignorance of the fact that our society has been patriarchal for a very long time. It is often forgotten that any type of society, whether patriarchal, socialist, or democratic, has been a product of humans, not an "ordered" reality.

As I stated earlier, while growing up I did not want others to view me as a smart girl because that would mean that I was ugly. The **impression management** I was engaged in was done so that others would see me as a beauty symbol next to my friends. By having friends who were "pretty" and "cool" I too would be seen that way and I would gain acceptance amongst my peers and others would want to be my friends because they would also be seen as "cool." When reading the article, "Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty" written by Kristy Canfield (2002), I noticed how beauty seems to be a recurring theme in the lives of women. Being a woman, a minority, and low-income, being beautiful and accepted should have been the last thing on my mind. But Kristy, a white woman with speech impairment, could not help but want to feel beauty, both in and out. When she discovered the defense mechanism of isolation in order to feel "worthy" and experience beauty in her own way, she used the **Social Exchange Theory** to consider the **benefits and costs**, isolating, and blinding herself from everyone, not seeing the negative consequences it would have for her. I also exchanged the knowledge I had and labeled myself as a

cool, dumb, person in order to gain friends, failing many of my courses because I was missing classes.

Phenomenological sociology asks us to challenge our culturally learned values and ideas by questioning our way of looking at and our way of being in the world. I have gone through many phases in my life and know that I have a long way to go before I actually come to terms with who and what I am. By questioning my own familial roles and realizing that my family was constructed and not predetermined to be this way, I was able to form an identity different from my mother, breaking the traditional role. In my realization process I have come to understand why my parents were not able to “prosper” but unfortunately some people still cannot put themselves in other “poor” people’s shoes to even begin to understand what *they* might be going through. In the article, “Struggles, and Predicaments of Low Income Families” (2002), Jennifer VanFleet states that some low-income families do not want to take the help others offer them. Coming from a low-income family, I can understand where those feelings come from and how badly I did not want people to see that I did not have enough of the materialistic goods as all the other kids in my class. I could not help but feel like people pitied my family and me when we were in need. Having brand name shoes and clothes mattered, especially when it seemed as if that is all the other “cool” kids looked at when selecting their friends. Now that I am older I have been able to move past that and have focused on my education as my number one priority, although this was not always the case. Now that I have made it this far I feel as if I have to become “somebody” in order to gain respect from society and even my family.

Theories of rational choice assume that people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals. The **norms** of my family are: go to college, get your degree

and become a lawyer or a doctor, anything that will bring you status, but most importantly, money. Since I did not choose to become a lawyer or a doctor my parents disapproved even more than my decision to go to college. I have chosen a career that, according to them, will not benefit me in the future and will have been a waste of time. According to them, college is supposed to bring you a degree, that degree will get you a good job and then you will have money to buy all the materialistic things that make one happy.

In the video *Affluenza*, people from all classes spent countless hours at the mall in order to buy the materialistic things that would make them happy. It reminds me of my parents and friends who think that money will bring you happiness. My pursuit in a career that will enable me to help others really does not mean much to them. My parents, like many other people in the U.S. have been socialized to feel that the more they have the better they are. This can also be seen in the movie, *The Matrix*, where all the things that Neo had were luxuries, creations of a fake world that did not exist. The “real” world was a dark, complex world. Instead of helping other individuals, such as the poor or the homeless, people in our society are very individualistic and only look out for themselves. In Simmel’s words, “all contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence” (Wallace and Wolf, pg. 295). Their self-interests will come above all else; buying the latest cars or the latest appliances will keep them content. Since there are no rewards in giving, many people will not concern themselves with giving their time and money “for free” to help those in need.

Social status in society says a lot about who you are. In the movie, *Twelve Angry men*, the eighteen-year old boy was automatically labeled “scum” because he came from a poor neighborhood, also known as the “slums.” Nobody wants to be associated with the ghettos, projects, or anything

that will make them seem poor. That is why there is a great need to achieve status and gain **social approval** in society. I guess that if I analyze my own hometown it would be called a “slum” according to someone from the suburbs. But as a woman of color and low-income I should be proud to have made it this far, and if I had really internalized the views of mainstream society I would have ended up dropping out of high school, following my friends and I would never have made it college, never mind start thinking about graduate school.

To study the social development of the individual, Herbert Blumer proposes that it is necessary to consider the “nature of the equipment with which the human infant begins life” (Wallace and Wolf, pg. 190). Although I have made it this far, I often feel like the only way I will have succeeded would be by having a prestigious career and making my parents proud. My parents came to the United States in the 1980s, fleeing poverty. Not knowing the language and not having the resources to “prosper,” they went through many hardships to get to where they are now: owning a house, having two cars and being able to attain all the “materialistic” things everyone always wants. My father took a job as a chef and my mother worked as a seamstress for many years in a clothing factory. As a young girl, I barely got to see my parents because they were working day and night. My parents were never involved in my life and I was never able to experience what the “American” family experiences: taking your children to school, parent-teacher conferences, summer vacations, helping your children with your homework. I felt ashamed of my parents, ashamed because they could not speak English and because I could not tell my friends that my parents were doctors, nurses, firefighters, or something “important.” I was also very angry with my parents for not buying me nice, expensive clothes, or brand name shoes like all the other children at school. “Why

couldn't they just learn English and get a good job to have a lot of money?” I wished my parents had really good jobs so that I would be proud of what they did, but I was not, I hated the fact that they were immigrants.

In **Talcott Parson's functionalist perspective**, socialization is a powerful integrative force in maintaining social control and holding a society together. Through primary and secondary **socialization** members of society internalize values, making them their own. I was becoming socialized by the cultural values of America; if you live in America, work hard and really try, you will be able to succeed. I did not understand that my parents did not have all the resources to “make it” in this country. I just figured they were not trying hard enough. I did not want to associate myself with my parents for fear that others would look at me as an immigrant who was inferior and unknowledgeable. So, I became determined to follow the “rules of the game” to pursue my goals by fulfilling the normative expectations. I was committed to applying myself to become “better than them.” Considering Parson's notion of **latent pattern maintenance-tension management**, I felt the pressure to play my part in the system. By being ashamed of my parents and conforming to the values that were being presented to me, I was becoming fully socialized as an active member in society. My **values** were **shared** with those of society, although I did not share the **collective conscience** of my own ethnic community, my Salvadorian immigrant parents who came from a “third world” society. Once my parents found out what I wanted to study, they supported me and encouraged me to pursue a law degree.

Unlike the **Functionalist Perspective** which sees societies and social institutions as systems in which all the parts depend on each other and work together to create equilibrium, **Conflict Theory** states just the opposite. Conflict Theory sees society as an

arena in which groups fight for power, and the control of conflict simply means that one group is able, temporarily, to suppress its rivals. According to Wallace and Wolf's interpretation of Marx's views, "all people have an essential nature and clearly defined interests...if people do not behave in accordance with these interests it can only mean that they have been deceived about what their true interests are by a social system that works in others' favor (Wallace and Wolf, pg. 71). Is this why when the time came for me to study law it did not feel right, but I still felt I had to do it in order to "fit in" society? The **ideologies** I was following were not my own. Once I reflected on my beliefs, I understood that these were ideas and **social facts** developed by a "ruling class," a ruling class that once examined had caused a lot of damage to a poor, vulnerable country like El Salvador.

When learning about Marx's class analysis and watching the movie, *The Big One*, directed by Michael Moore, I could not help but think about a book I read, *Miguel Marmol*, written by Roque Dalton, which demonstrates the consequences of imperialism in El Salvador and the struggles of the Salvadorian people who fought to overcome the social and economic injustices that followed it. This book represents the poor masses in the 1900s through the first-hand experience of Miguel Marmol, a man who suffered the life of a peasant and grew up to become a communist in a country that persecuted any "peasant" who was slightly educated about his social position and the political corruption which caused it. In the 1900s, the coffee cultivation and industrialization was giving the power to the landowning oligarchy and foreign investors, such as Germany and the U.S., and in turn dispossessing the majority of the population of their lands, making them slaves in the coffee plantations or becoming exploited in the factories that barely paid them for the work they produced. In Coser's view, **external conflict** sets boundaries

between groups within a social system by strengthening group consciousness and awareness of separateness, thus establishing the identity of groups within the systems (Wallace and Wolf, pp.130). There was a **class struggle** between the peasants/proletariat and the wealthy military government, and this conflict, as Marx would argue, made the peasants, as a class, self-aware. In 1932, there was an insurrection against imperialism in El Salvador, but Marmol and his comrades were defeated because they did not understand what the government and the landed oligarchy was willing to do in order to maintain their **socioeconomic status** in society and restore **social equilibrium** to serve their interests. When my parents fled El Salvador in the 1980s, a Civil War had just begun. The government and the military were backed by the United States because the U.S. feared the spread of "communism" and the **deviants**, the revolutionaries, had to be stopped and punished. The only reason workers and peasants began a revolutionary movement was once again to fight against the political repression and poverty in a country devastated by greed and power. This war lasted about twelve years and left many women, children and men dead or missing. Today, El Salvador still faces many issues of poverty, hunger and human rights abuse caused by those in "power." The movie, *The Big One*, demonstrates how the U.S., a modern, great, country, is still exploiting people in other countries in order to make profits, while so many people in the U.S. are in need of jobs. How can I share the values of a country that helped kill so many Salvadorians?

The main reason why I wanted a successful career was because of fear, fear of being labeled as "backward" in such an individualistic and thriving country. The United States is a "modern," **capitalist** society where every individual is supposed to be capable of pursuing his/her own interests if they are motivated enough to do so.

At one point I felt that everyone who was smart and successful believed in this model of “modernity.” During the course of this class, I realized that there are many intellectuals and well-known theorists who disagree with this notion of modernity as “innovative” and “prosperous.” According to **Max Weber**, modern rationality could be an “iron cage,” creating a narrow, “disenchanted” world of bureaucratic officialdom” (Wallace and Wolf, pg. 73). In a world organized by fixed rules and authority, certain people are able to secure domination over others and claim the right to be obeyed. To **Michel Foucault**, the prison and the asylum exemplify the modern world. They embody discipline, deprive those involved of liberty, and exist to serve the interests of those in power (Wallace and Wolf, pg. 408). “We are in the society of teacher-judge; the doctor judge, the educator judge, the social worker judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based” (Farganis, pg. 432). The “scientific view” in our society means that people naturally see things a certain way. The **judges of normality**, the experts, are constantly defining what is normal or not, and the rest follow an order that keeps many of the population disadvantaged. At one point I thought that ideas like the ones expressed by Weber, Marx, and Foucault were ideas of the poor and underdeveloped cultures. My stereotypes came from my association of any “non-white” culture as “backward, inferior, undeveloped, illiterate, and poor.” I did not want to be Salvadorian, therefore I did not want to know anything about El Salvador. By isolating myself from my family I felt superior being ignorant of the social and economic reasons as to why my parents were inferior in El Salvador and in the United States.

It is inspiring and motivating to know someone like the sociologist Morrie Schwartz, who led a great life without seeking wealth in a country that encourages individuality, competition and power.

Watching the movie and reading the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, written by his student Mitch Albom, I felt as if everything Morrie was saying was directed towards me. As Morrie said, “Life is a series of pulls of back and forth. You want to do one thing, but you are bound to do something else, the tension of opposites” (Albom, pg. 40). Once I learned about my parent’s history, human rights abuses all over the world, poverty, child abuse, AIDS, and so on, I said I wanted to have a career that would allow me to fight against these things. The more I told people the more they discouraged me because that was not a career that would bring me a lot of money; on the contrary I would be dealing with a lot of “unhappy” people. What if in the end I choose something else and I end up being the unhappy one? What meaning do I want to give to my life?

Being at a stage in my life where I have to decide what I want to do, I can see how easy it is to get discouraged and lose sight of what was once so important. According to Morrie, “Love is the only rational act.” Morrie, a 78-year old man who was dying of Lou Gehrig’s disease never let go of his desire to live. Even though he knew he was going to die he kept teaching others how to live. He taught Mitch to let go of his fear, fear of dying, fear of living, loving and pursuing what made him happy. If you internalize the beliefs and values of others, and let go of your own, you will lose sight of what is most important to you. Mitch lost sight of his love for music and gave it up for a job as a sports editor. In the movie, Mitch did not want to marry his girlfriend of seven years because he was afraid of commitment. It was not until he lost her and Morrie that he realized how important family and loved ones are. Only then did he make an attempt to actually settle down with her. Instead of thinking about the now and what we have, we are constantly thinking of what we could have, ignoring the fact that there may not be a tomorrow. In-

stead of enjoying classes that interest me, I am thinking if these classes are going to be useful for me in the future. So many times I hear my friends saying that they hate their major but they will be able to find a job once they graduate. I look at them and quite truthfully, they look miserable. Do I want to be like that as well?

In my own search for a career I began with a very materialistic view of what I wanted to be, a lawyer, and that was until I found out what they did. As Morrie mentioned the “tension of opposites,” I am caught in between a career choice that will enable me to help others, or one in which I will be making a lot of money at the expense of other people. I have learned that my parents did not have all the skills available to them, and even if they wanted to they would not have been able to get them so easily. In a country so divided and unequal, there are many resources that few individuals in power are not willing to give up. In learning the history and the past of El Salvador, I know that it is not the people’s fault that the majority of the population is living in poverty. That country is a true example of the consequences of greed. There is a constant need to classify yourself and differentiate your own “kind” from the rest of the people. Society is **stratified**, organized according to **classes**—people who share the same position in economic life—and **status groups**, groups whose distinctiveness lies not in their shared economic position but in their shared mode of life. Unfortunately, “Status will get you nowhere” (Albom, pg. 127). No matter how hard you try to be “somebody,” there is always someone else better than you, and you have to compete and work harder, and perhaps even do things you never thought you were capable of doing, in order to keep that power and status.

Phenomenology asks us to question our way of looking at and our way of being in the world. In order to find a career that I am truly satisfied with I have to keep chal-

lenging the ideas of the majority and problematize the factors shaping my past. Throughout this paper I have expressed my concerns with my career development as my priority. What I have come to notice is that my concerns are not focused on the fact that I will actually have a career with an annual salary but that my job will enable me to help others. It is often difficult to resist the pressures from society, but once you become aware of how institutions, values, beliefs and “norms” are created, you have an opportunity to find yourself amidst everything else. In a culture that values money and power, the key is not to lose sight of what matters. Like Morrie said, “Our culture does not make us feel good about ourselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn’t work, don’t buy it” (Albom, pg. 35).

Hopefully, my journey towards my educational attainment will keep being a learning experience, not just on an academic level but also a personal one. What I do know is that whatever I decide to do, I will try my best to make sure that my contributions will be geared towards changing something in the world, even if it is just one life at a time. For now I will continue with my sociology major, taking classes that actually interest me. Recently, I have become interested in volunteering at community centers in Chelsea, where I will be able to learn about the issues affecting people in my own community and develop an understanding of the factors that are affecting people at a local level in the city. I used to volunteer when I was younger, but that ended once I began working at a “real job” and did not have the time for it. Next fall I will be studying abroad in Spain. I will have an opportunity to experience living in a different country and actually being the “outsider” just like my parents once were in the United States. I hope this experience will be very meaningful and will motivate me to work in the international community against so many atrocities that seem to be ignored even by the greatest countries.

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