



Sociology of My Anger

A Single Mother's Struggles to Survive in A Patriarchal World

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Abstract: I have a laundry list of social problems but the one which currently most threatens my goals of upward social mobility and psychological well-being is my anger. In this article I use sociological theories and concepts to explore my anger. My anger is the rage of a mother unable to protect her children from poverty and social stigma. My anger is fury at a society which throws obstacles in my path and calls them my fault. My anger erupts out of alienation, an "experience of isolation and misery," (Macionis 303) from living in a patriarchal society which first encourages powerlessness in women then condemns them for relying on aid from the state. At the same time this same society condones their husband's or boyfriend's right to walk out on them and their children if he judges her too fat, too old, too much the *same* as yesterday. My anger despairs at the norm-starved state of chronic anomie gripping the modern American society. Depression is most often a sign of repressed anger, and anger usually signals repressed fear. These are also classic hallmarks in the stages of grief over the loss of a marriage as well as loss through death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I did not take the traditional path in regard to my loss perhaps because I began with denial, then moved on to bargaining, followed by depression and then anger. But I think I now have found a path to the acceptance which will set me free.

*you fit into me
like a hook into an eye
a fish hook
an open eye*

—Margaret Atwood

I have a laundry list of social problems but the one which currently most threatens my goals of upward social mobility and psychological well-being is my anger. My anger is the rage of a mother unable to protect her children from poverty and social

stigma. My anger is fury at a society which throws obstacles in my path and calls them my fault. My anger erupts out of **alienation**, an "experience of isolation and misery," (Macionis 303) from living in a patriarchal society which first encourages powerlessness in women then condemns them for relying on aid from the state. At the same time this same society condones their husband's or boyfriend's right to walk out on them and their children if he judges her too fat, too old, too much the *same* as yester-

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day. My anger despairs at the **norm**-starved state of—what Emile Durkheim, the progenitor of **Functionalism**, called—**chronic anomie** gripping the modern American society: the ceaseless deterioration of unequivocal rules, definite expectations, and simple comforting norms in modern industrial societies (Wallace and Wolf 22).

Anger is a feeling which I have scrupulously avoided all my life out of fear. I feared what would happen if I acknowledged it and let the world see it. I feared that others would abandon me if I ever told them what I really thought. Most of all I feared what I could be capable of if I ever lost control of it. I am 36 years old and I have a lifetime of repressed rage that I cannot and will not hold in anymore. **Conflict theory**, especially Marx's ideas, inspire me to break out of my state of **false consciousness** and come to value not what my husband wants or my lawyer wants or what society tells me but finding instead where *my* true interests lie (Wallace and Wolf 88).

Everyone is a product of multiple agents of **socialization** such as family, schools, religion, media, government, employers, laws, and norms. etc. (Wallace and Wolf 266). One agent of socialization I will accent in the discussion of my alienation and anger is the media. The media in the form of the nightly news on television, newspapers or news magazines, shape our perceptions of what is real and important in the world today. It tells us whether we should panic about some new illegal drug or avian flu epidemic and most Americans believe every word reported by these news sources as fact. The problem is that we do not think to question whether their true motive is concern for our well being or a concern for better ratings, wider circulation, or greater government funding. The mass media has certainly done more than its share to make me feel bad about my body and the process of aging but the specific media I am choosing to accent for this essay is one which both challenges and

soothes my mind: the literary media of books, poetry, and song lyrics.

Undeniably this media form aided in originating many of the romantic misconceptions that made me so bitter and dissatisfied. However, this type of media also helps reduce the feelings of social isolation I experience as a result. This happens whenever I read a poem, or line from a book, or hear a song which expresses, often better than I could, what I have been thinking and feeling. Therefore, while I attempt to come to terms with my anger and it's sources in the course of this essay, I will also insert quotes from some of my favored poets, authors, and musicians which have touched me as I find them germane to my discussion. I plan to explore the negative bias I feel in relation to men, so I can release these particularly dysfunctional elements of my anger before I poison my sons' minds against themselves. I need to internalize what C. Wright Mills called the **sociological imagination** so that I can truly grasp all the components that built this anger. Otherwise, the heart disease and stress caused by this anger, if the medical literature are right, will destroy me quicker than the risk factors associated with my poverty or depression.

And all I loved; I loved alone.

—Edgar Allen Poe

My inner experience seems to parallel what transpired in the course of the storyline of the film *12 Angry Men*. All the jury voices also seem to be present in the midst of my inner investigation of who or what caused the crime. My **prejudices** and fears lie undetected by my conscious mind deep in my tortured psyche. Even though I may still be looking for a character such as the one played by Henry Fonda to instigate such states of catharses within other selves in me, I can exert my own efforts in order to understand and deal with this fury by confronting and forgiving those who I feel

have done me harm. I thereby hope to prevent future demons by learning to identify and fight the injustices in my present.

I must do this if I am to find the closure necessary to lay the nightmares of my past to rest—nightmares that are not merely figurative but also literal for me. The process of unearthing the buried pain beneath the anger may bring forth the kind of lingering bad dreams which remain with me into the day. However, as disturbing as this may be, experiencing such feelings tell me that issues which I thought I had recovered from are really just patiently lurking in my subconscious mind waiting for the right trigger to escape.

*Herr god, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.*

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

—Sylvia Plath 1

Functionalists have a considerably more conservative view of the macro-social structures of society than do my favored conflict theorists. However, although I do not support their preference in maintaining the status quo, their theory is useful for analyzing how issues fit within the context of the current system. Functionalists think of society as resembling a biological organism whose parts are all interrelated and interdependent and thus no part can be understood without considering how it fits in the whole. They believe there exists a natural state of equilibrium in society and when that equilibrium falls out of balance different parts of the system will attempt to restore the system by reorganizing “to bring things back to normal” (Wallace and Wolf 17).

Despite its negativity, my anger does serve a positive **function**: it energizes me to empower and educate myself for both the good of my family and for the greater com-

munity which will benefit from my improved skills. But my anger also has its **dysfunctional** elements—elements which prevent me from relating with others as well as I would like. These often stem from my self-protective, probably overzealous, standpoint in support of women’s plight that arises from a Marxian conflict perspective on society which insists on how women are **oppressed** by men (Wallace and Wolf 83).

Conflict theory views society as one based on the conflicting agendas of those who have the power to further their interests and those who do not. This conflict becomes manifested in the struggles of the oppressors and the oppressed. Men who oppress women do so by exploiting, abusing, and undervaluing them and their labor, particularly at home, for their own gain (Wallace and Wolf 86). This way of analyzing gender relations in society, on one hand, has caused a handicap for me because I now have trouble **empathizing** with men. I cannot put myself in the shoes of men as long as I feel the need to guard myself from their abuse. On the other hand, if I let this guard down I fear leaving myself open to further exploitation, accompanied by alienation and an **acute** sense of **anomie** brought forth by abrupt changes or crises in life. This is not good for me because it reduces my ability to function and because that kind of alienation and emotional upheaval has in the past caused major depressions for me which I have tried to recover from. I have two sons who need me, I cannot give up.

I have the right to feel good about myself
—“My Bill of Rights” (Love Unlimited)

When I partook in a support group for survivors of domestic violence we often talked about self-esteem and why we seemed to think it was fine for our partners to treat us without the same respect and caring which we treated them. This is when

I began to wonder why if it was not alright for the husbands, boyfriend, or partners of these women to treat them abusively, why did I accept my being treated the same way? What made me feel less worthy, less important than the people around me? What instilled this false consciousness in me? I have come realize that this feeling was a result of a combination of factors including the messages (or lack thereof) I received from my dysfunctional family of origin, from my people-pleasing attitude, from the media images of the supermodel I could never be, and from a society which taught that the ideal female is subservient to her man.

Relationships are like a dance, with visible energy racing back and forth between the partners. Some relationships are the slow, dark dance of death.

—Colette Dowling

When children are born they do not yet possess a **self-concept**. Self-concept is comprised of the feelings an individual develops regarding himself or herself and the idea of his or her value to others which emerges as a product of social interaction (Henslin 62). Charles Horton Cooley described how such a self-concept is often formed through a process he called the **looking-glass self**. Cooley defined the looking-glass self to include three elements: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Wallace and Wolf 203).

According to Cooley a person’s self-concept is formed not only by environmental influences but by her or his own imagination of what others are thinking and communicating verbally or non-verbally (such as through body language). For instance, if a person enters into a conversation with someone she believes to be smarter, more attractive, or more authoritative

than herself, she may come out of the interaction feeling inferior. This may have nothing to do with anything the other person actually said or did but with how one imagines oneself being judged in comparison with the other. Therefore, one positions oneself in a hierarchy based on both objective and concrete as well as imagined responses one receives from others. One then **internalizes** such feelings about one’s status, coming to accept it as real and valid, and use it to determine one’s position when relating to others.

Therefore, I am arguing that more factors shape a person’s self-concept than what can be accounted for in his or her environment. Besides, **Sociobiology** even considers factors of genetic predisposition also to be contributive factors, not only to a person’s risk for cancer or other physical diseases, but to their personality and psychological attributes. Putting a one-sided emphasis on **nurtural** factors such as a parent’s responsibility in socializing their children, would not—sociobiologists would argue—adequately consider the significance of **natural** factors in forming human psyche.

Natural or biological/genetic differences are important in explaining how siblings who come out of the exact same home can have entirely different means of coping with stress, relationships with other people and society as a whole, and/or disparate value systems. I support sociobiological theories which propose there to be a genetic link, but also consider environmental factors to be important in contributing to a person’s heightened probability of becoming, for example, a drug addict (as my ex-husband and father of my sons became at 41years old) or of suffering from mental illness (as I do from recurrent major depression). This makes sense considering my ex-husband and I both had parents with histories of mental illness and addiction.

An individual’s values regarding personal responsibility will also affect the outcome of the pressures put on him or her by

the combined whims of nature and nurture. I have a bi-polar friend who uses her mental illness to excuse all her actions—including her becoming addicted to crack, repeatedly cheating on and leaving her third husband, and abandoning her three children. She respects my refusal to allow the challenges presented by my depression to stop me from doing what I have to do to remain functional; however, while she occasionally acknowledges that her actions harm those she supposedly loves the most, she never allows that acknowledgement to interfere with her incessant narcissism and hedonistic behavior.

*I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.*

—Stevie Smith

I think viewing mental illness using a medical model helps reduce the social unacceptability or stigma that usually accompanies the illness. In his 1999 report on mental health, the Surgeon General David Satcher acknowledged the stigma that is still attached to mental illness in the U.S. today, and attempted to lessen this prejudice. Satcher considers mental illness—and substance abuse is also classified as a mental illness—to emanate from “the interplay or interaction between biological, psychological and sociocultural influences” (Satcher). In other words, there is no one causal connection but a complex web of factors which cause mental illness or the public perception of what is defined as being mentally ill.

Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz “sees a psychiatric diagnosis as essentially a measure of how far the individual deviates from the social norm, and treatment as something forced on patients in an attempt to bring them back into line” (Wallace and Wolf 390). I personally prefer to have a medical diagnosis as a **label**, to support me when dealing with people who think that mental illness is something one can “just snap out of.” The success of psychiatric medications

in the treatment of mental illness for myself and others also supports the premise of it having physical causes as well as emotional and cognitive components. However, since what is considered “mentally ill” varies greatly by culture, Szasz has a definite point in arguing that mental illness is at least in part a social construction.

Daddy, Daddy you bastard, I'm through.

—Sylvia Plath 2

Neither nature nor nurture theories take into account whether or not parents are capable of providing the security or encouragement required to raise a fully functional, psychologically healthy child. They do not consider financial position, cognitive disabilities, inexperience, or substance abuse, etc., that may erode parents' best intentions. Nevertheless, if a child experiences negative feedback and they lack a strong emotional resilience, they often become psychologically harmed.

I unfortunately lacked the more practical and less emotional personality type my sister was blessed with, and therefore could not deal with the dysfunctions of our parents as well as she did. My sister adapted and made thoughtful choices which has led her to a stable, financially secure, happy marriage and family. I, on the other hand, went on a decades-long hunt for the approval I inadequately received as a child through unhealthy codependent relationships which left me emotionally isolated, with a low income, and unhappy children.

My sister and I have a very typical family of origin story. My parents divorced when I was five. My father was an alcoholic and my mother was emotionally unavailable. I did not have the happy stable home environment I wished for so I came up with my own idea of what a “normal” family was like and went after my goal with a vengeance. Katherine Heller, in “My Choice of a Lifetime: ‘Finding True Love’ in a Sociological Imagination” (2004/2005) writes

that she was bought into the Western societal view of romantic love and never questioned its validity (21). I did the same.

*Yeah we walk through the doors, so accusing
their eyes
Like they have any right at all to criticize,
Hypocrites. You're all here for the very same
reason.*

—Anna Nalick

Using the term coined by phenomenological sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, I **constructed my own social reality** by internalizing the messages I received from my family and the media in terms of a desperately felt need for male approval. I fashioned my own patriarchal prison matrix that was supposed to provide a “secure” family of my own conducive to what I thought was fair **social exchange**. Blau suggests that there is more to love relationships than “affection and companionship” but that status, financial and physical attributes are just as important when considering a mate (Wallace and Wolf 341). In what I thought was an “ideal” model of family, women were subservient to their men and took care of them, the home and the children, while in return the men supposedly provided for the women financially and did not abandon them.

I built this patriarchal prison in my mind through **reification**, abiding by the “social laws” I had unconsciously created or accepted until they became so real for me that I forgot their artificial origin. I chose a man to marry who appeared to fit my assumptions of what qualities a good family man possessed and then **externalized** (Wallace and Wolf 285) the beliefs and expectations of my social world onto my relationship with him. My world was one of male privilege where I never talked back, where my opinions were secondary to my husband’s, where I did almost everything I was told. For years after he left me, I still could not envision a world that could be

better without him. I could not imagine any world that could possibly compete with having my family intact. I am still not sure that I can and that makes me angry at myself.

*The sky is torn across
This ragged anniversary of two.*

—Dylan Thomas 1

I would have taken the blue pill offered to Neo in the movie *The Matrix* when my ex-husband first said those fateful words “I have feelings for someone else.” That way I could have continued to live my fantasy of a happy family, but only if the blue pill could erase my memories of his infidelity and cruelty. But I chose the red pill and vaulted nauseatingly into the offensively real future. To my detriment, I cannot let go of something once I learn it, particularly something so devastating that I felt my heart had been ripped out of my body.

The red pill helped me awaken and realize that a man’s standard of living on average increased following a divorce while the woman’s and thus her children’s as well, decreased 37% (Henslin 323). This is part of the reason for what sociologists call **the feminization of poverty** (Maconis 34). No fault divorce and the equal splitting of assets that is en vogue today in no way considers that the gender gap in earnings has yet to be remotely bridged (Kottak 176).

“Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage.”

—Smashing Pumpkins

I was told that my two sons and I were entitled to \$67 plus 28% of what my husband made a week, even though when he left me I had been unemployed for years, could not afford childcare on my earning potential, and there were 3 of us to one of him. This does not even take into account that he changed his income considerably by his own choice after he left our home. He

went from having a thriving business working 5-7 days a week to lowering his income by half through not working so much in order to spend time with his girlfriend. This evolved later to spending all his money on drug for the two of them and further forfeiting his income by losing most of the builders who employed him when he was arrested on drug charges.

In no way was my ex-husband's choices my or my sons' fault but the judicial system is not interested in fault. Even though we "technically" live in a fault-divorce allowing state, my lawyer informed me that filing fault only irritated the judges. My child support is based on what my ex chooses to make, how much he feels like working and how much work is available to him now that he has the stigma of a drug addict and accused criminal. Also since he is in the construction trade it is based on how much he *chooses* to report.

*I am your opus
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby*

*That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great
concern.*

—Sylvia Plath 1

In his book *The Sacred Canopy* Peter Berger writes of how "worlds are socially constructed and maintained" and that "the interruption of these social processes threatens the (objective and subjective) reality of the worlds in question" (Wallace and Wolf 286). Berger and his colleague Thomas Luckmann call this loss of meaning **alienation** (Wallace and Wolf 286). Berger and Luckmann's definition of alienation is a little different from the economically derived meaning of alienation as found in Marx. This alienation emerges from the loss of my primary identity as a good wife and mother through the combined loss of my marriage,

intact family, and financial security. Alienated and enraged is definitely how I felt when society condoned my husband's leaving his family because "he didn't feel right" even though I fulfilled my end of the patriarchal bargain. I was faithful, I let him be master of the house, I was grateful for his providing for us, I organized my life around his schedule, his needs, and his wants.

*If you look back in history it's a common
double standard of society.*

—Christina Aguilera

The right of the individual in American society to put themselves before their children and prior commitments flies in the face of every claimed "family value" our society possesses. This is, according to sociologist Dorothy E. Smith's Feminist Standpoint Theory, the **line of fault** "between what (women) know and experience in their everyday/everynight lives and what is official knowledge, as expressed in the symbols, images, vocabularies, and concepts of the patriarchal culture" (Wallace and Wolf 294). What made me very angry was how I was treated when I had to ask for financial aid following my husband's departure. Suddenly the fact that I had been waiting for my children to get out of preschool to continue my education and that I had been planning to get full-time work when they no longer needed day-care was a crime against society. The same "mothering values" that were applauded when I had a husband/provider were called into question when they meant that I would need money to help support my family while I got the education necessary to procure a family wage job.

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still like air, I'll rise.*

—Maya Angelou 1

I feel the same as the welfare mothers who went to clean their governor's office in Michael Moore's movie *The Big One*. I want to *work*, I do not want a *handout*, but, I need a job making a **living wage**. As Moore so poignantly demonstrated over and over in his film, living wage jobs are being outsourced to developing nations for people who then do not even receive a relative living wage in that country. The service jobs which are left over in the U.S. do not pay enough for single people to live on and are certainly inadequate to support a family with. Even when working two or three jobs, the working poor is barely scraping by but the ever more conservative government refuses to acknowledge this lack of opportunity. Mothers and fathers on social welfare are called "lazy parasites" and have their benefits taken away without regard to whether their circumstances and ability to provide for their children have improved in order to fit a time-line formula. This is despite the fact that, as noted in *The Big One*, the federal government spends over three times as much, 170 billion dollars a year, on corporate welfare is completely ignored.

*You say you want a revolution
Well you know
We all want to change the world.*

—Beatles

As noted by Wallace and Wolf, Marx prophesied that the **dialectical** nature of capitalism, i.e., its contradictory claims of equal opportunity at the same time as its endless pursuit for greater profit, would bring about its demise. In his theory of capitalism and social revolution Marx accurately predicted how the loss of small businesses to big corporations, an ever more exploited and alienated workforce, the growing gap between rich and poor with a shrinking middle class, and an increasingly cutthroat capitalist competition would "force the capitalists to cut prices and wages" while the profit margin actually de-

clined (Wallace and Wolf 163). He also believed that the exploited masses would then revolt and overthrow capitalism in favor of communism which appears unlikely at this juncture. Workers are not as well organized to bring about such a change as he presumed they would be, nor is this class yet liberated from the false consciousness that we live in a land where all men and women have the same life chances to succeed. Neither are they free from the sedating influence of religion as he hoped, that great **opiate of the masses**, which promises to reward worldly suffering with a heavenly paradise. According to Wallace and Wolf, however, there are few people today who would dispute Immanuel Wallerstein's contention that our current global system "is held together by economic, not political or military, ties" (165). For all our claims that the U.S. is concerned with the freedom of others our bottom line for intervention in foreign countries is what resources they have that we want.

*Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?*

—Maya Angelou 1

There is a distinct degradation of spirit which accompanies the humiliation of having to admit one's failure in maintaining one's husband's interest; add to this the humiliation of having to acquire aid as a member of the **worthy poor** (Ambrosino, Hefferman, Shuttlesworth 8). Not to mention the reams of paperwork, phone calls, loss of privacy, and required documentation that have to accompany the above. This debasement of one's value as a person in America's consumer society guarantees that pride is the first item to drop from the small bundle of possessions of the poor.

I naturally considered going to work instead of school when my husband first left but I had never made more than \$7.75 an hour in my life and that would have barely covered the cost of childcare for my sons

who were 4 and 7 years old at the time. As Barbara Ehrenreich writes in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* "Americans of the newspaper-reading professional middle class are used to thinking of poverty as a consequence of unemployment" (219). But when she tried to survive on the cleaning jobs, or restaurant and retail work of the working poor, she could not make ends meet for herself as a single woman—let alone as a mother needing childcare and having 2 extra mouths to feed. The income needed to rent a 2 bedroom home on Cape Cod in 2002 according to the Cape Cod Center for Sustainability web site is \$55,200 (Larson). Do I even need to point out the impossibility of a housewife with only 7 college classes completed and no discernible skills making that kind of money?

*Didn't have a care in the world
With mommy and daddy standin' by
But "happily ever after" fails
And we've been poisoned by these fairy
tales...*

—Don Henley 1

Then there is having to explain to your children the lifestyle changes required by a divorce to survive in our consumer oriented society. As the movie *Affluenza* points out our society promotes materialism and children are encouraged to find self-esteem through what material goods they possess. Poor children who cannot afford the latest fad are made fun of by other children. Children do not have natural empathy for others; it has to be taught by their parents and is often neglected as parents attempt to shelter their children from the social problems of others. Losing my husband, having to beg for aid, taking away my children's feelings of security, eventually losing my house, moving to a homeless shelter unit then, and moving on to a housing authority complex, were all things out of my control and that led me to the phenomenon which is also considerably more prevalent among

the poor: major depression.

All these life altering events have led me and two sons to the low-income housing complex we now live in. We moved in from our homeless shelter unit to this complex against the advice of our social worker who had 3 families in here as clients out of a 10-unit complex. She informed us substance abuse and domestic violence were rampant. Some mothers do not allow their children to come over and play with my sons here, so now I am embarrassed to ask other parents if their children can.

The Director of the Housing Authority I live in himself decided to inspect my unit after I informed him I was missing a screen from my upstairs bathroom window. He told me to look on my roof, he sounded annoyed, then he told me he found it "hard to believe" that it was not there when I moved in. He implied I was lying and I most certainly was not. I had even waited until the weather was warm to ask him for the screen because I did not wish to bother him. On his leaving my apartment, following his inspection, he informed me to call him "when my boyfriend broke the door down." I do not have a boyfriend nor would I have such a man in my life and especially my children's. When I protested that he was mistaken about the nature of my family he replied "It happens here all the time, just call me."

*Your money thinks you're something
But if I'd learned to curse,
I'd tell you what your name is
But there just ain't nothing worse...*

—Maya Angelou 2

My humiliation and fury at such unfair and unwarranted prejudicial and **discriminatory** treatment cannot be properly expressed. My ex-husband's arrest for drugs, which had nothing to do with me—for which I actually took him to court for to restrict his visitation with our children—has also added to my stigma as providing an

unsafe environment for children. Sociologist W.E.B. Dubois wrote that there is a “peculiar sensation, [a] double-consciousness, [a] sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Macionis 77). Dubois was speaking of being an African American in a country dominated by whites, in my case it is my perceived social class that comprises my sense of a **double-consciousness**.

In her essay “‘Housing Project’ in Comparative Perspective: Opportunity or Stigma” (2004/2005), N.I.B. compares the **manifest function** of low cost housing with the many **latent functions** it produces. “First of all, the manifest function, anticipated and apparent purpose, of public housing is to assist unprivileged people and provide them opportunity. Nevertheless, the system is overwhelmed by its latent function.... The aspects such as stigma, stereotype, and criminalization of people in the projects seem to overshadow the original purpose” (88-89). N.I.B. goes on to explain how the latent functions of living in a housing project serve to further isolate the residents from the rest of society at the same time as they are charged rent based on a portion of their income too high for them to be able to save enough money in order to move to a more mainstream neighborhood (89).

*God forbid you ever had to walk a mile in his shoes
'Cause then you really might know what it's like to sing the blues.*

—Everlast

The sociologist George Homans, when studying the concept of **group norms** at a housing project for married students at M.I.T., also discovered an interesting correlation between the attitudes of tenants towards the tenants’ organization and which court they belonged to. Tenants in the same court

tended to share the same opinion and the opinion varied by court. Homans surmised this to be the outcome of repetitive interaction due to physical proximity which led to friendships and thus mutual social acceptance, resulting in conformity with a group norm. This is similar to Randall Collins’ theory of **mutual surveillance**. Collins claimed that “the more people are in the physical presence of others--the more they accept the culture of the group and expect conformity with others” (Wallace and Wolf 151). Those deviating from this norm, according to Homans, “were especially likely to live in the corner houses that faced away from the court center” (Wallace and Wolf 324).

This study was interesting to me because I live in the end unit of my housing complex and I have been able to effectively distance myself from the other tenants because of my location. I have deliberately chosen to not fully assimilate to my neighborhood since I do not plan to remain in reduced circumstances. This may seem to be an example of **classism** but I feel that the issues my neighbors have with drugs and domestic violence combined with the situation my children are dealing with in regard to their father would not represent a positive influence for my sons. Other tenants complain that everyone knows everyone else’s business but I am often ignorant of their personal dramas until the police cars come. I do not fight with my neighbors nor have I made any strong bonds with them. My children (now 8 and 11) have a more difficult time with this idea. They have made friends in the neighborhood but likewise have, by necessity, had a crash course in social problems associated with poverty and how they may influence the behavior of their new friends and their friends’ parents.

*I'm learning to live without you now
But I miss you sometimes
The more I know, the less I understand
All the things I thought I knew, I'm learning*

again.

—Don Henley 2

My refusal to assimilate into my current surroundings and my pursuit of a college degree are some attempts I am making to redefine my reality and build myself a new **lifeworld**. There is little I can do currently to provoke a change in my circumstances at a **macro level**. I cannot elect a more liberal social welfare model of government on my own or alter people's attitudes on poverty and patriarchy on a broad scale societal level. Instead I must work at the **micro level** through my personal social interaction with others. With this in mind I am thoughtfully and purposely engaging in what I call "social reconstruction."

I have **problematized** those behaviors and thought patterns which I identified as having caused me to end up poor and socially ostracized, such as my submissive attitude, having friends only with serious emotional and/or substance abuse problems, feelings of worthlessness, lack of education, etc. I want to improve my life and am becoming more aware of the need, using Erving Goffman's theory of **dramaturgy**, to partake in **impression management** in the community. I emphasize my academic goals, grades, ability to overcome adversity, and the love of my children when thoughtfully presenting myself to others. I am more confident in the **front regions** of my interactions with people, though in the **back regions** I still suffer at times from self-doubt and a definitive insecurity regarding my physical attributes.

My emotions used to rule my life and I felt powerless against them. My intellectual ability was constantly impeded by my psychological state. As I have slowly empowered myself through hard work and academic success, I have also done my best to keep this overly trusting and loving aspect of myself in check. All the traumatic events of the last few years, emotional and financial betrayals, harassment, discrimination, and fear, have had the same effect on me as

George Simmel surmises the "intensification of nervous stimulation" has on residents of metropolitan areas. I make my choices now, for the most part, using my brain, "the organ which is least sensitive and quite remote from the depth of personality" as opposed to my traitorous heart (Simmel, quoted in Farganis 130).

*I could have died if I wanted to--
Slipped over the edge and drowned
But, oh no baby, I won't give up so easy...*

—Don Henley 3

Like Rachel A. DeFilippis, as reported in her essay "Intersections of My Lesbian, Feminist, and Activist Identities: Problems and Strategies in Everyday Impression Management" (2004/2005), I have also experienced a "shift in consciousness" towards a feminist perspective. "The implication of this is that I am dissatisfied with many institutions, attitudes, and actions within myself and especially the outside world" (DeFillipis 67). I am angry, very angry, that I bought into patriarchal attitudes which have cost myself and my sons the stability and security I wanted above all else to provide for them. As a proud graduate of Independence House (a center for survivors of domestic violence) I have chosen Patricia Hill Collins' alternative vision for African American women as a framework suited to women of all races and as my own: "African-American women have overtly rejected theories of power based on domination in order to embrace an alternative vision of power based on a humanist vision of self-actualization, self-definition, and self-determination" (Wallace and Wolf 258).

My original thesis for this essay was the feminization of poverty. I thought it was my greatest obstacle to self-actualization and that it defined the boundaries of my life more than any other. With a little hint from my professor and some grave soul searching I came to realize that it was instead this

anger—which I wedded as I divorced my ex-husband—that is truly the greatest cause of dissonance in my life today. I am stronger and more independent than I have ever been but I am still imprisoned. I have exchanged a submissive patriarchal prison matrix for an angry feminist one and it limits me just the same. Both prisons I built in my head with a foundation of fear. The patriarchal matrix was built out of a fear that I could not take care of myself and that I could not be alone. The feminist matrix is built of a fear of letting anyone else care for me and of not being alone.

*And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears,
I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

—Dylan Thomas 2

When I read the novel *Tuesdays with Morrie: an old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson* I cried through almost the whole story. Morrie reminded me of my grandmother Gill who I respected and wish to emulate above all others. She never had a bad word to say about anyone, she loved and accepted you as you were and her family was everything to her. I garden like her, I feed and watch the birds like her, I bake like her, I could not keep my family together like her. She died of cancer in a slow but inexorable decline like Morrie's ALS. I do not have cancer, I do not have ALS, I have a bad case of rage which will kill me just as inexorably if I do not heed their lessons to let go and forgive.

Like the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom, I have "buried myself in accomplishments, because with accomplishments I believed I could control things" (Albom 17). Control is a big issue for a woman who has allowed herself to be verbally, emotionally, and financially abused all her life. Having control for me is like a drug, abuse is all about power and control,

and I never want to give my power away again. But ultimately control is just an illusion. The only predictable thing about life is that it will change and it is the ability to adapt and bounce back that determines who will survive.

I believe utterly in Morrie's words about the meaning of life: "The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning" (43). I know that I can find meaning in my chosen major and career path in Applied Sociology. I know that I will find satisfaction when I can help someone to help themselves or when I advocate for the disenfranchised who otherwise would have no voice. I know I can have a love and respect for humanity as a whole and can labor in general causes for human dignity.

It is on the individual level that I run into my roadblock. How do I love and respect others when I do not trust them to love and respect me back? My psychologist said that it is not merely a question of whether or not I can handle it but that I deserve it. I deserve to love and be loved in return but I am very afraid of what that means. What if I lose myself again and become just a shell playing the roles given to me as supporting actor to others, wife, mother, lover—and Jennie is lost to the world again? Can I trust myself not to betray myself? Am I angry at men and how they have treated me in our patriarchal society or am I really angry at myself for allowing them to degrade me?

I wrote a poem the year my husband left me and I believe it vividly illustrates the root of my fear and anger and it ends like this:

*Who am I now?
Now that all my dreams were stolen away
Everything I was turned to dust
Wife and mother to happy family*

*All gone.
Just Jennie again
The queen of self-destruction
Riding my white horse back into Hell.
Love and security never meant for me
God is a man and looks down laughing
I give him the finger
And struggle through another endless day.*

The secret to releasing anger is forgiveness. I have forgiven my mother for what I perceived as her overly critical treatment of me and lack of empathy with what I felt because I honestly believe now she did her best and never intended to hurt me. I needed to forgive my father for not being there for me, for putting alcohol before us. I had to forgive him for the way that I hurt myself so badly looking for a substitute male to take his place. Now that he has passed on, I realize he also lost his chance at having a daughter as well so I have forgiven him too. I still need to forgive myself for believing I was worthless and acting accordingly with all the negative consequences suffered. I still need to forgive my husband for being too weak to do what he acknowledged was best for his family and for continuing to hurt his sons and myself with his addictions.

The key to forgiving myself lies in my ability to forgive my ex-husband. To do that I have to fully stop enabling him. I have taken him to court, I have his child support ordered through the Department of Revenue (DOR) so although he still is not paying me, the debt to our children is not disappearing. DOR threatened to take his license away unless he makes a payment and I have refused to release the order which legally protects us from his non-payment. I have taken away his unsupervised visitation unless he passes a hair follicle drug test which he refuses to do.

However, I have loaned him money which he has only mostly paid back. I give him money to take my children places so they can get some time together and as a caring mother I believe the ends justify the

means for that. I have had to give him a cell phone to use because all his, his fiancée's, and his parents' phones were shut off and I want to be able to reach him but I resent it. I also resent the fact that he does not want me to sign over the car I gave him in the divorce because I inherited my dad's old car. I paid the insurance, the dump sticker, the excise tax and the registration and he gets to drive it and use my sticker for free. I do this because I know he cannot afford to fix what it needs to get a new inspection sticker or get it registered, etc., and he begs me not to be "mean" and take away his vehicle. I want him to be able to drive to work and to pick up our sons to visit with him. He lives with his parents now so his visitation has automatic supervision built in. I just do not think it should be my problem, I do not think I deserve it to be.

*I've been tryin' to get down to the heart of the matter
But my will gets weak and my thoughts start to scatter
But I think it's about forgiveness
Forgiveness
Even if, even if you don't love me anymore.*

—Don Henley 2

My ex-husband and I play a tug of war where I assert my independence and desire to be free of any responsibility for him while he tries to claim we are friends and that is what friends do. I will only be able to fully forgive him when this war of wills over what respect for each other means is over. I will only be able to forgive myself when I stop letting him do things which I view as taking advantage of me. He knows I have a hard time saying no to people, that I want to help people when I can and he tries to use that to his advantage. He claims to respect me and value my kindness at the same time that he uses it to help himself. I cannot trust myself with other men as long as he still holds the power to make me subvert my own best interests.

This is what I need to work on in order to reduce my feelings of alienation from men so I can achieve what Patricia Hill Collins calls self-actualization. I must break those financial ties that keep me from trusting my ability to protect myself and my sons from my love for a man. I must give myself all of my power back but not at the price of my soul. I must be able to love others but with boundaries that include taking care of them only so far as it does not infringe on caring for myself.

Depression is most often a sign of repressed anger, and anger usually signals repressed fear. These are also classic hallmarks in the stages of grief over the loss of a marriage as well as loss through death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I did not take the traditional path in regard to my loss perhaps because I began with denial, then moved on to bargaining, followed by depression and then anger. But I think I now have found a path to the acceptance which will set me free.

*Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of
stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She is gone
forever!*

—Shakespeare

This essay has taken me through every stage of my life and challenged me to look critically at what made me who I am and what determined my vision on the fundamental “truths” of life. However, like **post-modern theorists** I am less certain now that anything is real and true. Perhaps everything is socially constructed, just a product of mind control of the masses, but that does not make me feel helpless as it would seem. On the contrary, it gives me hope because now that I understand that the norms of society are socially constructed then they can be changed or ignored. Anomie loses its power to strip away meaning if you refuse to give norms dominion in your worldview.

If I do not fit the supermodel mold, so what? Some other culture in some other time thought women like me are beautiful and others believed that age brings wisdom to be revered. So why should I let current American social norms define my value? I am more than the product of public opinion. I am more than the sum of my roles as mother, student, ex-wife, daughter, granddaughter, friend and social activist. I will choose my future based on a full consciousness of what is right for me as an individual and I will not buy into any dependence on others which will lead me back on that dark road to alienation and despair.

I reject the patriarchy and my submission to its will which led me to this extreme unhealthy anger. As a reminder to myself of where I never wish to return I will post Margaret Atwood's words in *The Handmaid's Tale* on my wall: “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (69)—don't let the bastards get you down. However, that is a defiant sentiment full of angry power so I will also post the balancing words of Morrie Schwartz: “Devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning” (Albom 127).

I am more than an angry person, I am many things to many people on any given day. My true interests are in being able to express all these aspects of myself without fear of rejection or abandonment. My true interests lie in surrounding myself with healthy people who will allow me to love them and will love me in return without taking away my individuality or my personal power. My true interests lie with future friends and lovers who tolerate my right to be angry when they have, inadvertently or not, offended or hurt me so that my anger can provoke positive change and then be released as it is supposed to be. My true interests lie in being able to communicate all my feelings freely, to use my anger to fight for my rights and those of others in

our imperfect political system, and finally to achieve a masters degree so that I may procure a job capable of lifting my family out of the degrading state of poverty we exist in now.

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