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A Futile Struggle?

Power and Conformity in High School and the Society at Large

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Abstract: George Simmel describes small groups as being “closely coherent,” allowing “its individual members only a narrow field for the development of unique qualities and free self-responsible movements” (Simmel 2004:133). Throughout my experience in high school I witnessed this first hand, struggling with a need for acceptance, and being swept into conformity. What I have come to realize is that this drive acts as a sort of competition. In this competition a social ladder develops that is vague, but still significantly shapes the lives of the members of the group. It shaped my attitude toward other members of the group as well as myself, in turn influencing much of my actions. Moral judgments in turn were replaced by group-determined rules of what is acceptable, or “cool.” I in turn explain how similar patterns possibly form in class-based stratifications, influencing the identity and attitudes taken among individuals of the lower, middle, and upper classes, where morality and trust may be set aside in order to promote one’s status.

In his essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” George Simmel describes the nature of different sized groups. He states, “The earliest phase of social formations found in historical as well as in contemporary social structures is this: a relatively small circle firmly closed against neighboring, strange or in some way antagonistic circles. However, this circle is closely coherent and allows its individual members only a narrow field for the development of unique qualities and free self-responsible movements” (Simmel 133).

No statement so clearly reflects the structure of Natick High School. High

schools like mine and those neighboring it are typically small, mine having about three hundred individuals in each class. Our school pitted against its neighboring schools by way of rivalry. And from the day I entered it I confronted a foggy yet specific view of what was considered cool.

Now, if one were to look back and examine the nature of coolness, he or she would find, like all cultural phenomena, that it is always changing. The finer points of coolness tend to also vary from group to group or from school to school. For example, after arriving in my freshman year at Northeastern University, I found many of

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the same styles of dress and musical taste while finding others that varied greatly from those I had seen among students coming from New Jersey and LA. Even other students from neighboring towns in Massachusetts didn't match the expected schema of coolness that I was used to. Therefore, it is important to interpret my high school experience in terms of a confined, relatively small group structure that was influenced by all kinds of outside and internal factors. As a result, it may be regarded as a useful sample for the study of human interaction involving social hierarchies and competition for acceptance.

Upon entering the high school I noticed the system at work. Some individuals just seemed to be superior to others. These individuals comprised actually a very small percentage of my classmates, but they seemed to have a presence in the school which rewarded them more of my attention than others. This provided them with a higher **social capital**, which are "the aspects of social structures which make it easier for people to achieve things" (Wallace and Wolf 372). But how did these individuals come to have such **power**? George C. Homans describes power as the "ability to provide rewards that are valuable because they are scarce" (Wallace and Wolf 326).

These students seemed to possess little to offer the rest of us in terms of material rewards. Rather, what these students seemed to possess was the ability to punish rather than reward. Highly confident, these students were just a bit surer of themselves. In turn they had the ability to punish others for not meeting their set of criteria for normalness. If a fellow student found himself or herself on the radar to be put-down, their social status would in turn suffer. Their power, therefore, was based on their self-confidence and others' fear. These students were cool, more or less because they decided that they were. They could then dictate their norms to everyone, offering punishments if we did not comply. From

the first day of high school, the so-called "popular kids" were more or less decided upon, and they continued to be so until graduation.

From that first day, I searched for various strategies in my head in order to gain acceptance and move up on the social ladder. While I found that my personal ideas of coolness was very much different from others, I would often compromise these ideas, seeking a balance between my own and other people's standards. As soon as I became used to acting a certain way I noticed that my own style and ideas changed to match those of others. The process perfectly demonstrated what Charles Horton Cooley called the "**looking-glass self**," comprised of three elements which are "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). Cooley's concept describes well my strategy of behaving according to how I imagined others perceive being cool and acceptable, reinforcing my feelings of satisfaction with myself.

The reason I was doing this, however, was out of a drive to actively gain similar powers in relation to those above me. Such a strategy illustrates George Herbert Mead's view of "**the self**" and how it relates to Herbert Blumer's **Social Interactionist** perspective. In Mead's perspective "individuals are viewed as active constructors of their own action, rather than as passive beings who are impinged upon by outside forces" (Wallace and Wolf 199). Social interactionism stresses not only the influence of society on an individual, but also of the individual's own unique interpretations of social situations. My active pursuit of acceptance was done in search of a higher status, and was therefore also self-motivated. By making the achievement of this power a goal I utilized what I would later learn to be a basic proposition of the **Rational Choice Theory**, which states that

“people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals” (Wallace and Wolf 303). Even though I disliked and distrusted most of those students in power, by pursuing a similarly high status I acknowledged them to have the power to disapprove and halt my progress.

UMass Boston student Keyon Smith presents a similar situation in his article, “Lifting the Fog: Finding Freedom in Light of the Sociological Imagination” (2007). He states, “With the universality of these sequence of events, coupled with my humanity, I had my mind set on following that prescribed order, even if that meant not being myself, whatever myself was, whatever being myself meant” (74). Here Smith describes the way conformity controls us. People become more concerned with “getting ahead” and often don’t consider what they are doing or changing about themselves in order to do so, simply because it is generally accepted as the correct, or in my high school’s case, the cool, thing to do. Not doing so can be met with the anxiety that you are more or less falling behind.

The solution that Smith offers is for the individual to step back and examine the workings of society or the group as a whole and evaluate its problems, thus illustrating the value of what phenomenological sociologists encourage us to do. **Phenomenology** is “a method in philosophy that begins with the individual and his own conscious experience and tries to avoid prior assumptions, prejudices and philosophical dogmas” (Wallace and Wolf 262). This method advocates adopting an unbiased view to look at each social situation, an attitude that I did not have during this time. Rather than questioning my practices, I took my past experiences for granted, automatically seeking what I viewed as being success in the past. **Ethnomethodology**, as defined by Harold Garfinkel, is the study of “how people make sense of everyday activities” (Wallace and Wolf 269). My efforts here in

observing how I and my peers behaved and made sense of our everyday high school lives is an example of ethnomethodology at work. I had previously never really considered whether my strategies were making me happy or not; I just did them. Now I am making sense of them. I seemed to live a make-believe world before.

The film *The Matrix* describes a world which is in actuality an illusion. People go about their days living in a society they think is real and tangible. However, to the main character, Neo, it is revealed that his world is actually an illusion and a virtual reality, the real world being one in which people’s bodies are used as an energy source to run a world ruled by robots. Once one awakens from the virtual world, the flaws in the real world are revealed and the domination of humans by robots become apparent. In a way *The Matrix* illustrates how the world is constructed in such a way that products of human activity become objectivated, taking a life of their own, coming in turn to rule human affairs instead. **Objectivation**, according to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, involves “apprehending everyday life as an ordered pre-arranged reality that imposes itself upon but is seemingly independent of human beings” (Wallace and Wolf 288). In the same way my perceptions of what I should be as an “empowered cool student” were just examples of how I have interpreted others’ **externalized** point-of-views as **objectivated** facts, and have **internalized** them, believing them to be my own illusory values, rather than considering them as what they actually are.

A similar strategy of reality altering is demonstrated in the documentary film, *Affluenza*. This film demonstrates the extraordinary degree of power the media and corporations have in controlling how we spend our money. As a result of affliction with affluenza, “the disease of consumerism,” the average American spends way more on way too many products, far be-

yond what is necessary for survival. At the same time, through the same process of objectivation, individuals are led to believe that consumer goods are and have always been necessary for survival and what brings them real happiness. This is similar to how I perceived competition for power over peers and acceptance by them as my route to happiness in high school. Just as I feel only a short rush of excitement after buying a new pair of jeans and then move onto my next buy, with every moment of acceptance as a “cool kid,” I only had the next to look forward to.

Though perhaps the ability to utilize my strategy in copying with my school environment may have come easier with maturity and experience, an understanding would have saved me much anxiety throughout my interactions in school. The extent to which I let others control my actions in most aspects of those four years is astounding.

It even reached a point where I would avoid bathroom breaks in order to not give anyone the impression that I was actually using the school’s restrooms. This simple bodily function was surely performed by all my peers, and the toilets were specifically designed for such a function. However, I found some disgust in others’ doing so. Erving Goffman’s **dramaturgy**, or “the art of dramatic composition and theatrical representation” (Wallace and Wolf 238), comes to mind here. I could simply act as though these biological limits did not apply to me between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. And this illustrates Erving Goffman’s discussion of **impression management**.

Impression management is defined as “the ways in which an individual guides and controls the impressions form of him or her” (Wallace and Wolf 238). In other words, throughout my day at school I did my best to control how other people thought of me. Goffman identifies two concepts, the **front stage** and **back regions**. The front stage was where I interacted with

others, including the part of me that I made visible to my peers. I would therefore try to present myself as being as acceptable to the rest of the group as possible, thereby securing my place. The back region consists of what I don’t let people see, which not only included performing vital bodily functions but also any other practice that I felt would not improve my social stance.

Throughout high school I found just enough reinforcement for my actions to keep pursuing higher status. With every positive comment I was given an immediate dose of satisfaction. I found, however, that in conforming, these temporary highs were short, plentiful and addictive. Every time I felt I did the “coolest,” most acceptable action possible, I felt happy and successful in my mission to become as “popular” and moving forward. However, I never went anywhere. Rather, I stayed in my position. The irony of this manner of competition was that as competing individuals many of my peers and I strove to distinguish ourselves through attempting to do what had in the past proven successful. This meant meeting the norms of the few in power, in essence becoming more similar, and rather doing the opposite of what we set out to do.

Though not one of the elite, I don’t consider myself to have been rejected socially either. Instead, I believe I was generally well liked and accepted. I was able to interact casually with virtually everyone in my high school, but without the respect I saw possible. In my pursuit to move upward, however, I discovered myself having an unfortunate view of those I saw as less cool than myself. For whatever reason, perhaps these individuals did not concern themselves with the same standards that I did. Some found themselves having lower social status opposite to the few in power. I quickly acknowledged that these few were not of use to me in my quest for higher status. As a result I did as most other did, I paid little attention to them. What those in

power felt over me, I did over these individuals. I did not want to be associated with them because they belonged to a class lower than my own, and association seemed to only bring me down to their level, which was the opposite of my goal.

This interaction between groups in power is not unlike that of the jurors in the motion picture *Twelve Angry Men*. This film features a group of twelve jurors deliberating on the guilt of a young man accused of killing his father. In the beginning of the film all but one juror votes the accused man guilty, as all the evidence seems to clearly point to him. However, as the lone juror, Juror #8, begins to break apart the evidence against him, it becomes more and more apparent that the evidence is foggier than the jurors had previously thought, and all eventually vote "not guilty." In fact, the reason that many thought the boy was guilty was more based on their prior prejudices against the boy since he was of lower class and lived in a rough neighborhood. This in turn rewarded him with a lawyer that for whatever reason put little effort in the case. In this situation the accused represents the lowest tier of social status. Several of the more vocal jurors against the accused show a similar status to those I recognized in my high school as the popular attention-getters. The rest of the jurors represent those in my situation, attempting to go along with the status quo, in order to maintain or improve their position. At first all but one wouldn't give the accused boy the time of day because he would have little to no impact on their position.

In his article, "Looking Inside Out: A Sociology of Knowledge and Ignorance of Geekness," UMass Boston student Johnny Yu provides a unique perspective highlighting individuals in the same lowest tier of social power. He uses the popular term "geek" to describe this group stating, "People who aren't in the 'in' group find it impossible to break out of their ascribed identities. They find they need to conform and

change what their interests are to avoid being labeled as anti-social or geeky, even if the terms are not accurate descriptions of their characters" (Yu 42). Here, he describes the seemingly hopeless position for some not to be accepted, and describes the unfortunate steps one must undergo to move out of this position. He describes the importance of **coalition building**. This is a strategy in which individuals of similar interests form a sub-group in order to gain more power. In his case the sub-group is that of individuals who get together and play "Magic: The Gathering." If his characteristics put him on the bottom of the social ladder, he seeks a new group that accepts him, thereby rejecting the culture as a whole that he is a part of. Though others may consider him to be a "geek" on the bottom of their social ladder, he considers himself to be a part of some other ladder, thereby escaping the negative popularized perspectives towards his behavior.

Johnny Yu's perspective gives me new insight into my own situation in high school. It is that determining one's identity as part of a group is very much also up to the individual. My desire to be part of Yu's "in" crowd made me a part of it. However, my acceptance to that group is completely up to the rest of the members. By following my interpretation of the norms of this particular group that made up my high school, I was participating, but not necessarily succeeding. Many other individuals, who may be seen as "geeks" or outcasts, are only so by that one specific group, while those individuals seen as "geeks" may see themselves as actually very powerful in the separate group to which they actively participate.

Upon leaving high school, I was slowly introduced to the universality of what could be considered cool. As I cringe at the dance music my friends from Los Angeles listen to, I remember how I forced myself to tolerate Jam Band music for the past four years. I agree with the perspective of Sim-

mel, that in the presence of a larger group, I am more able to break out of my previously established ideas of coolness. But even in the largest of groups there are still societal norms to be grappled with as described by the SUNY-Oneonta student R.F.A. in his article "The Capitalist's Cuckoo's Nest." The question he means to answer is, "is it worth the problems I face not to conform to conventional customs and values?" (1). He uses the examples throughout the novels, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Fight Club*, along with the life of John Lennon, displaying the struggle to be different as one in which the rewards are not immediately obvious. But behaving as such is what is required for exercising self-actualization. R.F.A. writes, "Society oppresses people like me, and therefore it is my job to be different" (6). As I now delve deeper into my college years, I fully agree, noticing that as one gets older norms are more general and obvious, but in some ways more imperative. This is because most of these norms start at the need to feed and shelter oneself, through the acquisition of resources. The most prevalent example of this is money and the power struggle that occurs between the haves, the have-somes and the have-nots.

The manner in which I have experienced social interactions as a middle class white male in the United States seems to fit well with Karl Marx's **conflict theory**. Wallace and Wolf generally define society from a conflict perspective 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" (68). In other words, different groups, especially those of differing economic status (upper, middle, and lower classes) compete in order to gain power. **Power**, as defined by sociologist and social exchange theorist Peter Blau, is "the ability of persons or groups to impose their will on others despite resistance through deterrence either in the form of withholding regularly sup-

plied rewards or in the form of punishment" (345). It is out of the collision of these competing interests that various forms of **social stratification** arises. I have witnessed this power struggle first hand, and not just in the confines of my high school, but in broader society as well.

In capitalist society, just like in my high school, the upper class attempts to maintain their status, while those lower attempt to better it. This creates the most prevalent conflict between the upper and lower classes, as the upper class seeks to maintain great control over the lower classes. This position of power is well exposed in the documentary *The Big One*, directed by Michael Moore. The film features the filmmaker on a book tour across the U.S., in which he makes stops at corporations seeking to expose inhumane business practices of outsourcing amid globalization and its effect on working class people. What he demonstrated was that throughout the United States, despite the fact that companies were turning record profits, they were closing factories and moving manufacturing to other countries where they could pay workers much lower wages, thus **exploiting** them. As a result the workers in the successful—yet apparently not quite successful enough—factories in the United States were losing their jobs.

From the standpoint of middle class individuals, the struggle is much more ambiguous, as they have both much to gain and much to lose. The middle class represents a group with perhaps the most prevalent **internal conflict** since, as Marx argued, it is often in the process of polarization between the two major classes of the bourgeoisie and the working class. With ready access to higher education, the middle class may much more readily than the working class move up into the upper class. At the same time, the upper class still holds control over the middle class, though having much control over their employment as well. As a result the middle class may mis-

trust the upper class, but generally suppresses conflict with the group they wish to join. As Wallace and Wolf suggest, “a general approach to organizations is to view them as arenas for struggle in which superiors try to control their subordinates” (Wallace and Wolf 144). The upper class seek to coerce the middle class to support them through illusions of necessity and the attractiveness of their situation, keeping the middle class docile in conflicts between the upper and lower class.

This is similar to my experience in high school; even though I ultimately didn't trust those I thought to be my superiors, I followed them out of the want of acceptance and a desire to be like them. Interactions between the middle and lower classes are similarly skewed. Just like I attempted not to be associated with the “out-crowd” in high school, members of the middle class wish to distinguish themselves from the lower class. And though they may ultimately mistrust the upper class more, their desire to be promoted into the upper class, redirects their conflict toward the lower class, similar to how I conformed with the upper echelon of my high school against the lower strata. As a result, much of the blame for problems in society gets placed on the lower class.

For example, many blame unemployment partially on illegal immigrants, who work for less money than citizens would. Less often demonstrated through the media is the effect outsourcing of jobs has on unemployment, as demonstrated in *The Big One*. Another example may be the blame middle class people put on lower class individuals on welfare for raising their taxes, while much of the unemployment which causes people to be on welfare may also come from not only outsourcing, but also from the taxes upper class people are more than able to pay, but don't. In my experience, I chose to ignore the atrocities of my envied peers, focusing on my distaste towards the unenvied.

The position of a middle class person is well described in the film *Tuesdays With Morrie*, through what the title character, Professor Morrie Schwartz of Brandeis University, described as “the tension of opposites.” Morrie believed that the individual was constantly being pulled in two opposite directions, as if by a rubber band. In this case middle class people are often caught between both other groups. In his article, “Taking Sides and Constructing Identities: Reflections on Conflict Theory,” for instance, Guenther Schlee provides a similar explanation for how individuals of a group, such as the middle class, take sides on an issue, and offers an equally relevant explanation. He states that one's reason for choosing a side “concerns the advantages and disadvantages that may arise...from the costs and benefits of taking sides” (136). His other reason relates to which class the middle class identifies with. He states, “Wishing to be or not to be something is not enough; one also needs a plausible claim to an identity or a plausible reason for rejecting it” (136). In other words, Schlee means to convey that individuals side with the group they find themselves to be more related to. He goes on to say, “If plausible reasons are lacking, one might be forced by one's own logic and the expectations of others to join the fight on a given side” (136). In the case of the middle class, individuals may not readily see themselves as being related to either the lower or the upper class, but side through conforming to what others in their group have done.

The problem with this trend is the way that the lower class stands alone in this struggle and must more or less fend for itself. An example of this can be pulled from the problems of impoverished people in California. In the edited book, *California's Social Problems*, author Robert Enoch Buck states that “the poverty rate among households headed by women with less than a high school diploma is more than three times the national family poverty rate”

(218). The reason given for this is that “most participants lack the human capital (education, training, and experience)” (Buck 218). Buck also describes the state of the wealthy stating, “a series of tax reforms in the 1980s...greatly reduced the federal income tax rate for the richest Americans” (184). He goes on to state that, “California has tended to rely on taxes that hit the poor and the middle class the hardest” (184). From these examples it becomes clear that the upper class is able to stay in power through the indirect support of their middle class rivals, who seem to act as a sort of buffer between the lower and upper class. As a result the lower class suffers greatly, as the poverty rate in California increased by 30% in the 1990s (Buck 189).

Another reason for the relative stability that is able to exist in this society despite the conflicting interests of the classes is that people generally often remain in the same class. In their book *Using Conflict Theory* Otomar J. Bartos and Paul Wehr describe injustice as both, “if we receive less reward than is appropriate” (33), and as “what we get now as to what we were getting in the past” (34). Though people in the lower class may feel exploited by harsh labor jobs, through the **reproduction** of social class these conditions become all they know and all their parents knew, making social mobility less possible. This also keeps the upper classes reluctant to budge some of their wealth, as they may feel it would be an injustice for them to make less than they have always made. This presents a huge problem for the upper class if a depression was ever to hit again, as a dissolution of the middle class to the lower class could potentially lead to the call for mass reforms, perhaps even an upheaval of the capitalist system, as illustrated by the experience of the “New Deal” amid the great depression.

The above macro model similarly sheds light on my experience in the high school. As a former mid-level cool kid and an always middle class individual, I found

myself inept when choosing which side to place my support. Throughout high school I sought after emulating my own oppressors, hoping to receive acceptance and what now seeming insignificant power. At the same time I devoted myself to countless hours of television, watching ads, and purchasing unneeded products, many of which were made outside the United States by factory workers in downsized factories abroad.

So what is the remedy for this? The first step is simply to be self-aware. Being self-aware means to ask myself “Am I only doing this for myself” and if so “is it doing damage to others.” Self-awareness is even more needed in the presence of **social density**, a term coined by the sociologist Randall Collins, that indicates “The greater the degree of **mutual surveillance**, the more [people] accept the culture of the group and expect precise conformity of others” (Wallace and Wolf 151); it is easy to lose oneself to the crowd to which one belongs. In high school my support gave power to the upper tier, thereby damaging those who would get picked on or neglected. Everyday I do these things without even considering if what I am doing is supporting the very literal pain and suffering of others. I therefore held what Marx described as a **false consciousness**, when I falsely thought and behaved in such a way that actually ran against my own interests in terms of the need to develop my own identity as an individual and side with those not following the crowd. Similarly, in class terms, I behaved in such a way that violated the interests of those being exploited by the capitalist economy. Now, things as simple as deciding to purchase a pair of sneakers seems exacerbating to me, since I realize that by doing so, I am contributing to what Michael Moore showed in his film to be the downsizing by companies like Nike, involving the outsourcing of huge numbers of American jobs.

The next step is to keep myself well in-

formed about the world. It is not always clear who is the “good guy” in a conflict. It is up to me to get to know both sides and come up to a position. This is sometimes difficult to recognize this easily in society, however, since media outlets often present biased information to back special interests. Cultural droning is also a danger given the way pop-culture can itself be a means of manipulation, as Max Horkheimer points out in his **Critique of Mass Culture** (Wallace and Wolf 105). However, varied enough information are around to look at all sides of any issue, and I should therefore do my best to develop a well-rounded view of what is going on in the world.

Once I have made a decision about how not to follow the crowd as usual, the final step for me would be to always and continually re-evaluate my position, never letting my stance succumb to what Pierre Bourdieu calls **habitus**, “a system of durably acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action, engendered by objective conditions, but tending to persist even after an alteration of those conditions” (Wallace and Wolf 115-116). What is important is to be take sides based on knowledge of issues than attachment to groups.

As illustrated well by the movie *The Matrix*, our views of the world and our selves may appear to be truthful but are in fact illusions. Like Neo when deciding to take the red or the blue pill, I can make a choice to know myself and the world as I really am rather than as how others in high school or society at large think I am and how the world should be.

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