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Accepting Myself Negotiating Self-Esteem and Conformity in Light of Sociological Theories

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Abstract: The need to fit in and be recognized continued to influence me as I grew older. As a child, it seemed I wanted more than anything to be noticed and admired by both my parents and my teachers. I wanted to be the one in the class who got recognition from the teacher for being intelligent or artistic. I would compare myself to those children who were good at the things that I was not good at, and as a result suffered from low self-esteem, and a poor perception of myself. In this article, I use various sociological theories and concepts in order to explore where this need to be recognized and fit in came from and what was going on in my life to cause me to have a low self-esteem and need recognition from others to feel good about myself. I realize now what I truly wanted was social acceptance.

For as long as I can remember I have struggled internally with fitting in among my peers. I have felt emotionally inferior to others, and have always wanted to be recognized for being good at something. My first memories of feeling inferior started in kindergarten. Thinking back to my childhood, I realize two things, first that I have always felt awkward in social situations, especially among children my own age, and secondly, that I craved attention. I wanted to be as smart and as pretty as the blond girl in kindergarten. I wanted to be as artistic as the two Asian girls in my first and second grade classes. I wanted to be popular and be friends with the in-crowd in fifth and sixth grade.

This need to fit in and be recognized

continued to influence me as I grew older. As a child, it seemed I wanted more than anything to be noticed and admired by both my parents and my teachers. I wanted to be the one in the class who got recognition from the teacher for being intelligent or artistic. I would compare myself to those children who were good at the things that I was not good at, and as a result suffered from low self-esteem, and a poor perception of myself. I want to explore where this need to be recognized and fit in came from and what was going on in my life to cause me to have a low self-esteem and need recognition from others to feel good about myself. I realize now what I truly wanted was social acceptance.

Sheerin Hosseini is an undergraduate student at UMass Boston, majoring in Sociology. She wrote this article when enrolled in the course "Elements of Sociological Theory," instructed by Mohammad H. Tamdgidi (Assistant Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston), during the Fall 2005 semester.

I

Environment is crucial to ensuring that children grow up to have high self-esteems and positive perceptions of themselves. Children in fact need a proper, positive, loving environment to grow and develop into stable adults. There are many stories of the neglected child who struggles emotionally and mentally from not receiving the love and attention of parents and relatives. As a result of not having a stable environment, children will begin to either lash out angrily or become withdrawn, creating an invisible shell between their internal world and the world around them. We know that environment has a huge effect on the emergence of self and the way a child develops and perceives herself. The self is a “person’s conscious recognition that he or she is a distinct individual who is part of a larger society” (Thompson & Hickey, p. 93). The **nature/nurture debate** has reached a compromise in **sociobiology**. Sociobiologists acknowledge that both heredity and environment affect an individual. A child may inherit certain talents, strengths and weaknesses but it is her environment and life experiences that has the power to shape her perception of herself, or her self-esteem.

From a very young age children learn that they can seek the approval of others to gain physical or emotional rewards. This is the beginning of the realization that children can in fact manipulate their environment through the choices they make. Without knowing it, children are taking part in what the **Rational Choice Theory** seeks to explore. This theory assumes that “people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 303). Children also learn that the process of **social exchange** is very important to getting what they want. Social Exchange theorists, “conceptualize social interaction as an exchange of **tangible or intangible goods** and services, ranging from food, and shel-

ter to social approval and sympathy” (Wallace & Wolf, p.304, boldface added). After learning this as children, we continue to manipulate our environment in many ways. For example, children learn if they do something that is **rewarded**, they can easily manipulate the situation by continuing their positive behavior, to get desired rewards. This is what Homans, a social exchange theorist was explaining with his, **success proposition**. This can be explained in the following way: “For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 316). Another important concept to the Social Exchange Theory is the **value proposition**, which states “the more valuable to a person is the result of his actions the more likely he is to perform the action (Wolf & Wallace, p. 315). The kind of rewards that I was looking for as a child was positive recognition from the people most important to me: my parents and teachers. It is true that I was trying very hard, and not succeeding in my tasks, and as a result of not getting recognition that other children were getting I was feeling angry and frustrated. This is apparent in Homans’ **aggression-approval proposition**, which states that when “a person’s action does not receive the reward he expected, or receives punishment he did not expect, he will be angry: he becomes more likely to perform aggressive behavior...” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 316). Perhaps I was not getting the kind of positive feedback that I needed as an individual when interacting with some of the important people in my life, such as my parents and teachers. This caused me to act in an aggressive way to gain attention, but internally it caused me to have a poor perception of myself.

People often have told me that the way I see myself is vastly different from how others see me. When hearing this I feel frustrated and misunderstood. I feel that no one can judge me until they experience the

world from my eyes. They could not possibly know what I feel and struggle with internally. Until they can do so, I am adamant to believe that the way I see myself is realistic and the way that they see me is in fact an illusion that I am trying to make them see. I am engaging in what Erving Goffman called **impression management** every day of my life. Impression management refers to “the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her” (Wallace & Wolf, p.238). By engaging in impression management and not showing my true self, I feel somewhat dishonest. I know that almost everyone engages in impression management at one time or another, to influence society. Still, I feel that something is wrong in our society that everyone has to alter their true selves to show themselves in a more favorable light.

Goffman was concerned with the way people present themselves to others. He drew a comparison to actors on a stage and the way people behave in their everyday lives. Goffman calls the comparison to people in society to actors on a stage, **dramaturgy**. Dramaturgy, “analyzes social interaction as through participants were actors in an on going drama (Thompson & Hickey, p.135). He noticed that people behaved one way when they were alone, and another way when interacting with people in society whom they felt a need to make a good impression. He called these the back and front regions. The **back region** is where people prepare themselves to face the world, just like actors preparing their lines backstage before performing. Goffman defines the back region as, “the palace closed to and hidden from the audience where the techniques of impression management are practiced (Wallace & Wolf, p.239). The **front region** is where the actor actually presents himself the way he wants to be seen by others. The front region is, “that part of the individuals’ performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe

the performance” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 238).

In the movie *The Matrix*, Neo felt always that something did not feel quite right about his world. He finds out that he was right to trust his instincts because it turns out that the life he thought he was living was an illusion, a computer program that he was being forced to believe was reality. In the film there is a back region and a front region. The back region is the true world that Neo experiences when he has been separated from the “Matrix.” He can prepare himself for whatever experience he has to face, such as download whatever knowledge he needs to use when entering the “Matrix” again, which is the front region. This is where he is being monitored and controlled by the machines which he has to somehow fool into not trying to eliminate him. Likewise, I constantly feel that I control my actions and speech depending on my situation. In the back region of my home I prepare what I am going to say, how I will dress and behave to control and manipulate my audience in the front region when I am interacting with the outside world in order to make sure that people are judging me favorably. However, the truth of the matter is that because the opinions of society are so important to me, society is in actual fact controlling me.

Saving face is also an important concept in relation to Goffman and the self. I find that the concepts of saving face and impression management go hand in hand. The concept of **face** can be defined as, “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Rogers, p. 113). By saving face (i.e., protecting my reputation and self-image), I can ensure that people are judging me favorably. Saving face allows me to avoid the negative emotional feelings that accompany embarrassment and judgement from others. If one identifies with oneself in a certain way, if one is unable to save face, then the embarrassment one feels would cause one to be

very harsh on oneself. This automatically reinforces the negative perception one has attached to oneself. I have somewhere down the line attached a negative label to myself as being inferior to others, and must try to save face by hiding certain things from others.

Another concept of Goffman's, that I will discuss more later is that of **conformity**. I feel that I conform to all of the norms that society has deemed desirable, and respectable, even if deep down I may question their value in terms of advocating materialism and maintaining social order. Mary F. Rogers, an expert on Erving Goffman's work, connects saving face to conformity. She writes,

Since 'fitting in' is the rule of interaction, deviation from it is cause for special attention, which can often result in the revelation of more information about the individual and his or her motives than would otherwise be the case.... Thus social order... generates a pressure toward conformity which derives in part from the need and/or the desire for privacy as well as the desire to maintain face. (p.115)

In order to maintain face, one must conform to the values and norms set by society, therefore this may explain why I feel the need to conform to society. Perhaps I have something that I am embarrassed about, and I feel that if people know about it, then I will be judged or looked down upon negatively.

To truly understand and justify a person's behavior and concept of self, one has to **step into his or her shoes** to fully experience what the person is experiencing. By doing so one can see the world from that person's perspective. C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist, also felt that in order to understand a society and the people within it, one has to take into consideration

two factors, history and biography. In order to do this one must employ what Mills calls the **Sociological Imagination**. This is a quality of mind that one develops that enables one to see society in two ways. Mills writes that the "sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society (Mills, p. 349). The first is to be able to analyze society from a **macro** level, to see the big picture. This means to understand the particular history of a society, to understand how people behave presently as opposed to in the past. It means to understand how the past has affected the way we live today. The sociological imagination also means seeing society from the eyes of the people within it, from a **micro** level, which is to see the smaller picture. Some people go through their whole lives unable to see the world from another person's perspective. Another important concept that relates to seeing the world from another person's perspective is **Phenomenology** which "asks us not to take the notions we have learned for granted, but to question them instead, to question our way of looking at and our way of being in the world" (Wallace & Wolf, p. 262). Only by combining these three approaches (i.e., putting ourselves in others' shoes, developing a sociological imagination, and questioning what we take for granted) can we begin to truly understand ourselves and others. The notions that we take for granted refer to the values and norms that we internalize during the process of socialization.

It is important to take into account that one's unique life experiences have a huge effect on one's development. George Herbert Mead, an influential contributor to the **Symbolic Interactionist** perspective, was very interested in how one develops and realizes that he or she has a **self**. Symbolic Interactionism, is a perspective which analyzes the daily interactions between people and the effect these interactions have on the individual. Mead writes, "The self, as that

which can be an object to itself is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience" (Mead, p.145). One learns to internalize these norms and values through interacting with the people around him or her. The family is the most important and first institution for **socialization**. There are two types of socialization. **Primary socialization** which "refers to what individuals undergo in childhood when they encounter the significant others with whom they identify emotionally (Wallace & Wolf, p. 290). **Secondary socialization**, is "any subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society" (Wallace & Wolf, p. 290). This means that the individual goes on to later accept other aspects of her world as influential and important to her.

II

For me, there were certain things that happened during my childhood that left a lasting impression on me as an individual. These can only be understood if I analyze the most important interactions that I engaged in that took place between me and my family. Later, during the secondary socialization when I entered school, I can understand further about my experiences by examining the interactions that took place between me, my teachers, and my peers. These interactions directly shaped my concept of self.

To truly understand me and the way I came to view myself, one has to be able to see my life from both a macro and micro perspective and take in both my personal biography, as well as the values of the society in which I live. I will explore the latter later on. If someone met me for the first time, it could not be immediately detected just from looking at me that I struggle with some issues that have left a lasting impression on me both emotionally and psychologically.

First, I was born prematurely and have dealt with some learning and physical challenges as a result. Second, I have struggled with being of two cultures, Iranian and Italian. There have been times that I do not feel that I fit into either side of my family, and struggle to make them see that I am in fact a part of both cultures. In her article, "The Tension of Opposites: Exploring Issues of Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in My Identity Formation" (2004/5) Claudia Contreras, a UMass Boston student, explored similar cultural issues facing her. Having parents from El Salvador who were very set in their ideas of gender roles and what was expected of a girl, Claudia struggled with what it meant to be both El Salvadoran and maintain that part of her identity as well as what it meant to be American, and the independent role of some North American women who both have successful careers and raise families.

There were many times when I felt stuck in the middle of the conflicts that arose between my parents, and between my father and grandmother on my mother's side. There were many times that my mother's perception of how a young girl should be raised was different from my father's more traditional ideas of how a girl should behave. Although my father was more liberal than the fathers of my Iranian cousins and friends, still I do not think I met up to his expectations of how I should be. The need to fit in with the Iranian culture was for me a way that I could further connect with my father and gain his acceptance. This caused me to spend much time in learning about the Iranian culture and language to somehow finally make up for not always being interested in it as a child. I know that there were times that my father felt that I did not accept him and that I was closer to my mother's side of the family. Also, I have sometimes felt that the difficulties I was experiencing with learning mathematics and other subjects that I could not excel at frustrated him. He was in some

ways very demanding and rather strict when I was a child, and his opinion was very important to me. I wanted to please him but had genuine difficulties with certain tasks and I was not having difficulty because I was just not trying, or being lazy. I realize now that I wanted his approval and acceptance. The fact that I did not receive it, influenced how I felt about myself as a child.

The truth is that in fact as a child, I did feel closer to my mother's family than to my father's side of the family. My mother has always been ill, and has a serious case of juvenile diabetes. She often spent weeks and sometimes months in the hospital because she was dealing with many different health issues. I remember struggling emotionally with having to accept her going into the hospital. For me my mother was the person who was involved in every aspect of my life, gave me the most support emotionally and took the time to understand me and the difficulties I was experiencing. She took an interest in my education and emotional development. She tutored me every day and helped me with my homework even when she was ill. Sometimes her helping me made me feel even more inferior because I resented the fact that she was often doing the work for me that I was not intelligent enough to do. Sometimes even she would get frustrated with my inability to do math, even after she spent hours tutoring me, but this was very rare. She wanted to instill in me good study habits so that one day I would be able to do my work without help. Today, I am able to do well in my studies many times without her help, although she is still a guiding force in my life. Perhaps it was hard even for her to accept that I was having difficulty with the things that seem so easy to most people. However, she was perhaps the only one who taught me in my life, who tried to step into my shoes to understand where I was coming from.

Similarly, the learning issues that I

struggle with, have caused me to feel frustrated and as if I am in fact split into two separate people. This is somewhat, though not exactly, similar to what Dorothy Smith called a state of **bifurcation of consciousness** as "two modes of knowing and experiencing and doing, one located in the body and in the space it occupies and moves in, the other passing beyond it (Smith, p. 374). One is a person who is intelligent, has good language skills, and particular strengths with music. This person feels confident and successful. The other person is someone who struggles with elementary tasks that other people take for granted, such as being able to perform simple math, follow directions, remember where one puts things, and struggle with vision problems and fine motor skills, as a result of being born prematurely. This other part of me feels ashamed, and inferior to the people who do not struggle with these very things. These matters may seem trivial and unimportant to some people, but for me, this bifurcation consciousness, caused me to feel inferior and not worthy. People assume that because I have some particular strengths that I will be proficient in all areas. However, when people see that I struggle with some very basic elementary concepts that they take for granted—and assume that everyone should be able to do unless they of course have some deformity that can be seen—their reactions influence my self-concept. It was not until I was evaluated and had done research on my difficulties, that I truly began to see why these difficulties arose, and found that it was all connected to being born prematurely.

Every once in a while, when I am in a certain situation, and my learning disability causes me to struggle with something basic that everyone takes for granted, I worry that my learning disability will hinder me from being successful in proving to people that I am in fact intelligent despite the fact that I struggle with some basic concepts. It is hard for people to under-

stand my difficulty because it is something that they can not see. There is what Dorothy Smith refers to as the **line of fault**. Although Smith is dealing particularly with what women “know and experience in their everyday/every night lives and what is official knowledge, as expressed in the symbols, images vocabularies, and concepts of the patriarchal culture” (Wallace & Wolf, p.294), I feel that this concept can apply to my life. Dorothy Smith is saying that women begin to experience how their experience is not often considered valid and in line with how society treats them. Similarly, what I know and experience in my everyday/every night life and my abilities do not always correspond to what the majority accounts for as what should be common knowledge and known by all.

Charles Horton Cooley, one of Mead’s contemporaries, introduced the idea of the **“looking glass self.”** This concerns the idea that a person bases one’s perceptions of herself on how she *imagines* other people are reacting towards her. There are three elements of the looking glass self, according to Cooley, “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Wallace and Wolf, p.203). I am a person who assumes that people are judging me negatively, and then base my perception of myself on these judgements. Am I just imagining this, or are there real reasons that made me arrive at this conclusion?

I know that I was not imagining that I was appearing negatively to my classmates. I know that children in school will always find fault with other students and it is common for students to be made fun of. As we mature and grow, our self-esteem, confidence level, and the perceptions we have of ourselves in relation to others is constantly changing and subjected to our environment and the larger society in which we live. I imagine that other people

who struggle with physical or learning challenges may also have self-esteem issues as well. In her article titled, “Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty,” Kristy Canfield, a SUNY-Oneonta student at the time of writing her piece, struggled with a speech impediment that could not be detected by just looking at her, because she is attractive. She knew first hand that society can be very cruel, especially in the school setting. She made a direct connection to self-esteem and the school setting when she wrote, “Low self-esteem was a direct result of being ridiculed and shunned by numerous peer groups, who viewed my difference as weird (p. 20). I can personally relate to Canfield’s difficult experiences trying to make friends and feel like one of the crowd. As a child, my classmates were truly acting negatively towards me, judging from their comments to me personally. Perhaps they would not have acted this way if I had been diagnosed with a learning disability earlier—and knowing this, they may have been more understanding.

Until the middle of the eighth grade I did not know I had a learning disability, I just felt that I was somehow different and was struggling emotionally with these differences. I did know my history of being born prematurely, however, and assumed that my problems had something to do with this. Even when I had the psychological tests to determine if I had a learning disability I was very upset, because I knew that in some areas I was proficient in and did not want to accept being labeled as learning disabled. The psychological evaluations I had first in eighth grade and again in college both show that I am in fact split in my intelligence and this exactly confirms the way I feel about my abilities. I am proficient in language but have serious math difficulties and need more time to do any kind of problem-solving task, even writing an essay. I have a special talent for music, which developed when I was only about

three or four years old. This talent was the one thing that made me feel good about myself, one that I clung to throughout my life. Whenever possible, I kept my learning disability a secret unless I was truly experiencing difficulty because I felt that people will think that I am less capable and intelligent.

I have fooled many people into thinking that I never had any difficulty at all, thus engaging in impression management. I realize it was not until eighth grade that I began to engage in impression management. As I got older, I would do my best to act and talk as intelligently as I could. Music is my particular strength and I would use my talent for composing, playing instruments, and singing to try to show people that in fact I did have something, and that I could do well. In college, I did much research on the type of learning difficulties that I have and the causes of these difficulties. I just need to become more comfortable with myself and learn how to explain the difficulties I have to people so that they will be aware of what I struggle with—and know that under the right conditions, I can excel and have a lot to contribute to society.

As soon as we enter school, we begin to realize how important the opinions of others truly are and that from these opinions we can either benefit and gain desired rewards or fail and receive some kind of punishment. In high school, for example, young adults realize how important it is to be popular and place high importance on maintaining connections to gain social rewards. Popularity become connected to possessing material goods and being young kids find attractive and desirable. Possessing the right clothes, for example, and using the right language allow one to make these social connections. Physical appearance also plays a role in people forming connections with others. **Sociology of the Body**, is a term used to refer to the concept that “the body and physical experiences are of central importance to the individ-

ual and social life” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 383). Growing up with some physical challenges that were not extremely severe, but still hindered the way I felt about my appearance in relation to my peers, I can see why people take such great pains to alter their appearance. Many people judge others solely on the way they look, and inconsiderately make it known that they find others unacceptable dating or marriage partners. Plastic surgery is becoming increasingly more common and something that many people consider to improve their self-esteem. The media also sends negative messages to young people about what is beautiful and acceptable. This preoccupation with the body can be seen affecting young people beginning in elementary school. Kids who are overweight, for example, especially young girls, may develop eating disorders as teenagers to conform to the notions of what our society finds beautiful and desirable.

Judging that people in the U.S. are so concerned with appearance, it is no wonder that materialism has become almost like a disease that has taken over the sensible minds of the American people. In the movie *Affluenza*, one can see how important materialism is to the American culture. Relating materialism to my life, I noticed very early on that not having the right connections can cause a child to be looked down upon by her peers, making her feel inferior and rejected. In *Affluenza*, one young boy asked his mother for a ninety dollar pair of shoes that were popular at the time, one that she could clearly not afford. These shoes, or lack thereof, were a direct reflection of the mother’s social and financial status and the boy’s peers were basing his popularity on whether he had these shoes or not. I can relate to this because I too have been influenced by society to think that material possessions are a representation of one’s station in society. Elementary school children and teenagers are constantly dealing with the need to possess certain materi-

al things to maintain valuable social connections with their peers to gain acceptance.

Harold Garfinkel, who coined the term **Ethnomethodology** based on an experience he conducted with jurors in 1945 who somehow knew how jurors were “supposed act.” He was interested in “such things as jurors’ use of some kind of knowledge of the way in which the organized affairs of the society operated—knowledge that they drew on easily, that they required of each other” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 269). Ethnomethodology refers to “people’s methods of making sense of their social world. Ethnomethodology’s interest is in how people make sense of everyday activities” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 269). Without being experienced in the workings of law and the justice system, where did these jurors learn and adopt the specific language and the actions of members of a jury? In other words, how do they know what role a juror is supposed to play without any prior experience? Garfinkel’s interviews with the jurors revealed that they gained their knowledge in various places from reading the juror’s handbook, from watching television and movies, and from what they learned from court personnel in teaching the jurors what was expected of them (Wallace & Wolf, p.276). However, by interpreting the situation in a given way by acknowledging the behaviors that are required of them, they are constructing a particular social reality that is very similar to the one that is constructed and maintained during the school experience—involving its own language, dress code, and behaviors.

In the movie *Twelve Angry Men*, the jurors were acting the way that they felt jurors should act. Jurors have a responsibility to convict the accused person as guilty or not guilty. They know that all twelve jurors must come to an agreement. In the movie, there was a man who took charge from the very beginning. He was acting according to the **definition of the situation**. This is the

idea that “when people define situations as real they become real in their consequences (Thompson & Hickey, p.134). He was setting the tone by taking charge, behaving in a responsible yet democratic way, using language that he felt a juror *ought to* use, conducting the group in the way that he thought the group *ought to* act. He was drawing on the body of knowledge that he knew or stipulated and was making that knowledge something valid and real.

Katherine Heller, a UMass Boston student, wrote in her article, “My choice of a Lifetime: “Finding True Love” in a Sociological Imagination” (2004/5) that when dealing with her particular problem of trying to chose between two men that she loved she had a hard time dealing with making the choice between them because she did not want to lose either of them or have them look negatively upon her. In the movie *Tuesdays With Morrie*, Morrie talks about the need that people have for love, and without that they feel empty inside. Perhaps Katherine Heller was trying to fill a sense of self-worth, love and acceptance that she did not have for herself with the love of two different men, and if she loved herself more, perhaps she would feel more secure to make a decision between them. Perhaps, I am also trying to find acceptance to fill a void within me that is empty because I do not feel a sense of love for myself as a person. Perhaps if I had more self-respect then I could be more secure in the decisions that I make in my life, and the way I view my abilities as a competent individual.

III

The perspectives that I discussed up until this point all had to deal with microsociology. The **microsociological** perspectives were “concerned with person-to-person encounters and the details of human interaction and communication (Wallace & Wolf, p. 5). There are also **macrosociologi-**

cal perspectives as well. These perspectives are concerned with analyzing “the large-scale characteristics of social structure and roles” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 5). I feel that both macro and microsociology are interconnected. For example, when we are children, our family and immediate relatives make up our first institution of socialization; it is for us our entire world. Emile Durkheim, one of classical sociologists from whom Functionalism later drew many ideas, defines an institution as “the beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 21). As we get older we realize that there is an outside force affecting our family that dictates to them how they should behave and interact with one another. This force, which confronts us in the society in which we live, imposes on us a culture that we accept and internalize. **Culture** is defined as the “learned set of beliefs, values, norms, and material goods shared by group members” (Thompson & Hickey, p. 617). When we are very young our first introduction to the culture is through our family. One way one receives acceptance from society is by internalizing culture and interacting with others in the way that our society deems appropriate. The research question I am concerned with regarding the macrosociological perspectives is, *How does the society in which we live affect our sense of self-worth and our need for social acceptance?* Both the Functionalist and Conflict perspectives view social acceptance in a different way.

The **Functionalist** perspective holds that society is made up of different parts, and all these parts must work together in order for the society to function as a whole. Wallace and Wolf write, “Because it is concerned with the overall characteristics of social structure and the general nature of social institutions, functionalism has a macrosociological focus (p.17). I feel that many of the concepts that are associated with Durkheim show that it is important for people to feel that they fit in and are accepted

by those around them. I can use these concepts to show how for an individual, feeling the need to fit in is deemed normal, and how conforming is mostly encouraged by society and can be linked directly linked to self-acceptance. One of Durkheim’s important concepts is that of *integration*. Integration is the “incorporation of individuals into the social order” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 20). This means that when people have internalized the norms, beliefs and values that make up our culture, they have been integrated into society. When one is properly integrated into the society in which he or she lives, he or she will feel bonded to the society and have a greater sense of satisfaction with oneself because by conforming to the culture one gains acceptance. As a child and young adult, not feeling as if I fit in with my peers caused me to feel a sense of unhappiness but also contributed to my not feeling accepted among them. Therefore conforming to the expectations of society to gain acceptance is deemed necessary, and often society as a whole rejects those who are in some way stray from its expectations. Durkheim, writes in his work, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, “If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce although in an attenuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word” (Durkheim, p.61).

Robert K. Merton, a influential theorist in the Functionalist perspective viewed conformity as a form of **deviance**. One concept that is relevant here is the concept of **anomie**. According to Wallace and Wolf, Durkheim used the term to mean normlessness, “a situation where rules or norms are absent” (p.22). Merton, however, uses the term differently to mean, “a discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means available for reaching them” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 55). Merton comes up with five modes of adaptation or types of devi-

ance. Deviance according to Thompson and Hickey is the “violation of a social norm” (p. 617). Conformity is when one accepts one’s goal and accepts the means that society deems appropriate to achieve that goal. When I conform to the expectations of society to achieve a goal, I am in fact being deviant. For example, I want to gain acceptance from those around, my teachers, parents, and peers, so I try to show that I am studying hard to get good grades; I show I am responsible by working at part-time jobs that are deemed appropriate by society. My goals are to one day have a full time job, a house, and a family. These are all things that society deems appropriate, respectable goals for a person, and when a person achieves these respectable goals, they gain acceptance from those around him or her. I noticed that my parents are proud that I am responsible, and as an adult I have gained their acceptance. When I show my teachers that I am working hard and get good grades, I gain their respect.

Conformity can also be considered a form of deviance. For example, if a person always conforms to the norms society places upon him or her, then he or she may lose his or her sense of self. By this I mean that people can be influenced by many different groups they encounter in their lives. Perhaps if a person feels pressured to conform to a group that is taking part in something that goes against a person’s first inclination of what is right and wrong, the person may be at risk of conforming to something that is not necessarily right in their eyes. There were times as a teenager that I may have been at risk for conforming to something that I did not feel was right simply to fit in and be accepted among my peers.

Talcott Parsons, another important contributor to Functionalism, introduced the concept of a **system** that is very important to his theory. According to Wallace & Wolf, Parsons’ Theory of Action which explains his theory on “how societies are structured and fit together, includes four

systems: the cultural system, the social system, the personality system, and the behavioral system” (p. 26). The **cultural system**, is a system “in which the basic unit of analysis is “meaning,” or “symbolic systems” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 26). Examples of symbolic systems include, according to Wallace and Wolf, “religion, beliefs, languages, and national values” (p.26). These examples of symbolic systems remind me of the definition of culture, which also includes all of these things as well. Parsons’ definitions of the cultural system and symbolic systems shows why some people feel that some things are important over others. For example I find it is harder to gain acceptance from my peers. As a twenty-one year old, it seems some people my age and in their teenage years, do not find it so important to conform to the expectations of society that I have conformed to. I have found that I would rather have the respect and acceptance of those in society who share the values that I share, rather than those who do not. According to Wallace and Wolf, “Parsons says that people internalize the values of a society; that is they make the social values of the cultural system their own by learning from other actors in the social system what is expected of them” (p.28). Similar to Durkheim’s view of integration, society is held together by the process of socialization “whereby societal values are internalized by a society’s members” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 26).

Conflict theory views acceptance in a different way. Conflict theory according to Marx and Weber’s interpretation is that society is composed of different groups that compete with each other for power, wealth and prestige. However, Ralf Dahrendorf, shares Weber’s definition of power. **Power** is the “probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 122). **Wealth** can be defined as a “person’s or

family's total economic assets (Thompson & Hickey, p. 210). **Prestige** is the "respect and admiration people attach to various social positions" (Thompson & Hickey, p. 211). It seems that power, wealth and prestige, all are related. Generally, when one is wealthy, power follows, and with power one can gain prestige in society. It seems that the term **socioeconomic status** is also related here. This term can be defined as a "ranking that combines income, occupational prestige, and neighborhood to assess people's positions in the stratification system" (Thompson & Hickey, p. 213). One who has power, wealth, and prestige is generally considered to have a high social status and is admired and accepted by those in the circle that they attend. Weber writes, "status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific styles of life is expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle" (Weber, p.120).

Social Differentiation can be defined as a "process in which people are set apart for differential treatment by virtue of their statuses, roles, and other social characteristics (Thompson & Hickey, p. 207). In society people rank people in terms of power, wealth, and prestige, and judge people on racial characteristics, occupations, and economic income. Dahrendorf, acknowledges that "different jobs are treated as superior or inferior to one another. There are both "social differentiation of positions...and social stratification based on reputation and wealth and expressed in a rank order of social status" (Wallace & Wolf, p. 123). **Social stratification** is a "form of inequality in which categories are ranked in a hierarchy on the basis of their access to scarce but valued resources (Thompson & Hickey, p. 207). Bourdieu's concept of **cultural capital** which can be defined as "the way tastes, and perceptions of what is beautiful or valuable differ between different classes," is relevant here (Wallace & Wolf, p.113).

Dahrendorf argues that stratification, "is caused by norms that categorize some

things as desirable and some things as not. In every group, norms defining how people should behave entail discrimination against those who do not comply (Wallace & Wolf, p.123).

According to the conflict perspective, the reason that I want to comply to the norms that society has categorized as desirable is to compete for the scarce resources that I know if I gain I will be able to achieve some sense of a higher social status than someone who does not comply to the norms set by society. I know that simply by being in college and getting good grades that upon graduation I will have a better chance of finding a good paying job than someone who has not done what I have. By continuing on to graduate school I can ensure that my master's degree will allow me to gain more respect and admiration from my colleagues, friends and parents, and an even better paying job than someone who only has a bachelor's degree. This respect and admiration from others will give a higher self-esteem and a sense that I am accepted by those around me.

In the movie *The Big One*, one of the main points that Michael Moore was trying to make was that some big corporations are making a huge profit but in order to remain competitive with other corporations, they are laying off many workers who are in desperate need of jobs to live and support their families. C. Wright Mills argues that "America is ruled by a power elite made up of people who hold the dominant positions in political, military, and economic institutions (Wallace & Wolf, p. 109). It is terrible that some people in our society are making so much money, while others are working two or three minimum wage jobs without any of the necessary benefits one needs such as health insurance. Another important point that Michael Moore was trying to make was that some big corporations such as MacDonald's, as we saw in the film *Supersize Me*, are taking over the globe, with restaurants all over the world. Wallace &

Wolf write that there are critics of “globalization who believe that large corporations, and specifically American corporations (including those who supply the defense industry), increasingly dominate the globe, and serve only their own interests” (p. 110). Many American corporations are stationed in other countries and the people who the companies employ work for very little money, in dangerous conditions, and with no benefits.

Americans, as we see in the movie *Affluenza*, are too much concerned with obtaining wealth and material possessions. In the film *Tuesday's with Morrie*, we also see a similarity in the main character's, Mitch Albom's, being too much involved in his work as a sports writer. Mitch is very well known and respected in his community. He puts work before his relationship with his girlfriend whom he loves very much, and almost loses her completely. We learn that Mitch is afraid to let himself love and commit to someone because he is afraid of loving someone and then losing them. Mitch learns a valuable lesson from Morrie, his dying sociology professor, who teaches Mitch that there are more important things in life than work, and material possessions, which we associate with power, wealth, and prestige. These things are substitutions for internal happiness with one self and one's life. In the book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, by Mitch Albom, Morrie says, “It's all apart of the same problem Mitch...We put our values in the wrong things. And it leads to very disillusioned lives” (p.124).

It is very important for people to step away from the American materialist culture dictates that money and objects will make us happy or successful or well-liked. Perhaps Karl Marx would apply the concept of false consciousness to our society being hypnotized and drawn into doing things specifically because people on television commercials tell us to. **False consciousness** is “a form of ideology whose main purpose is to legitimize the position

of those currently in control. Such ideology stands in the way of other people realizing what their real interests are (Wallace & Wolf, p. 88). Morrie comments on something very similar to this. He says, “We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country...They repeat something over and over...Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good...We repeat it—and have it repeated to us—over and over until nobody bothers to even think otherwise” (p.124).

Morrie tried very hard to not conform to what the culture said simply because the society said to do so. As a result perhaps people thought him a little bit odd at times, but truly Morrie was a much happier person and felt a sense of satisfaction with himself as a person. In the end of his life, Morrie had many admirers, and respect from people for his knowledge and capacity to love, not because he was very wealthy or possessed many material possessions. In the book Morrie says, “Wherever I went in my life, I met people wanting to gobble up something new...These were people so hungry for love that they were accepting substitutes. They were embracing material things and expecting a sort of hug back...Money is not a substitute for tenderness.”

One of Karl Marx's concepts that has influenced me is the concept of **class**. Marx defined class as made up of people who are alike in their relationship to property. Morrie mentions people wanting to gobble up a new car or a new piece of property. I have a tendency to think that if someone has a nice car or house, as being someone who has status, and who is on the right track in life. Perhaps I think that it is a form of security. I also notice that my father views society in the same way so perhaps he passed on his ideas to me. Although I agree with Weber and others who do not think that property is the only means to determining class, when one thinks about it, property is a cat-

egory that makes up a big portion of what people use to define themselves. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of **class reproduction** is also important. According to Wallace & Wolf, this is how one generation of (economic) class ensures that it reproduced itself and passes on its privileges to the next generation" (p.114). My father knows that the American culture and even his Iranian culture value social status and that is important for one to have a good occupation and possess property to show that they are doing well and are successful economically. Even though I know that these things are not important, I sometimes have to remind myself—when I catch myself admiring someone else based on their property, occupation, or material possessions—that although our culture may place an emphasis on material possessions, it is not something that is important.

Perhaps the most important thing we have to be aware of in our lives is that our society does influence us at all levels even when we do not realize it. According to Wallace & Wolf, Edmund Husserl employed the concept of **lifeworld**. He was referring to "the most fundamental levels of consciousness, levels of which we are not aware. These levels of consciousness structure all our perceptions and determine how we actually experience reality" (p.181). People must be aware of the fact that in many ways we are controlled by our society. We are socialized to be shaped in a particular way.

However, when one realizes that the very ways one behaves and thinks are influenced by the society in which one lives, one can make a choice whether or not one wants to conform to the norms society has set as desirable. Perhaps one becomes more aware of this fact as one matures and realizes what is truly important and develop one's own rules for doing what they do. In *Tuesdays With Morrie*, Mitch and Morrie discuss the culture of American society. Morrie suggests that it is important for one to develop one's own ideas on what to think and

how to act. It is true that environment affects and shapes humans in a particular way, but the wonderful thing about being human is that we can change. Nothing is ever really set in stone. Morrie's says, "Here's what I mean by developing your own subculture...I don't mean you disregard every rule of your community...But the big things—how we think, what we value, those you must choose yourself. You can't let anyone—or any society—determine those for you" (p.155).

IV

I have discovered through writing this paper that there are certain aspects of myself and the way I view society that need to change. *First*, I need to trust myself. I notice that as I am writing, I am afraid that my thoughts or ideas are not valid or correct. *Second*, I need to trust my intelligence and remind myself that mistakes are inevitable. I can learn through my mistakes and if I make a mistake, it is not the end of the world. The fact that I am someone who has a lot to offer society, despite some difficulties that I have faced. Perhaps because of them, I am a better person. I have learned a lot from these life experiences and will continue to learn from them. I am not less of a person because of them. The things that have happened in the past I have gained valuable insight that I can draw on throughout my life from these experiences, but I must let them go to make the most out of new experiences. *Third*, I need to change the way I view society. Although society stresses power, wealth and prestige as three factors that determine one's social status, these three factors are not important in the long run. Yes, it is important to pursue a career that one is interested in, and it is important to be responsible and have a job in order to survive, but social status is not important. What is more important is how one lives one's life.

Whether I possess certain material pos-

sessions or not, or gain recognition or acceptance from others does not mean I am any better than someone else, or someone else is any better than me. I must put jealousy and envy behind me. What is important is that I am living my life and interacting with people in a positive and meaningful way. I need to look to the people most important to me and make sure that I am getting the most out of the time I have with them, and showing them that I appreciate the fact that they are in my life. And lastly, I must forgive myself and those around me, so that I can heal and be a better person.

Films:

- “Affluenza.” Bullfrog Films, 1997.
- “The Big One.” Miramax Home Entertainment, 1997.
- “The Matrix.” Warner Brothers, 1999.
- “Supersize Me.” Roadside Attractions, 2004.
- “Tuesdays With Morrie.” Touchstone, 1999.
- “Twelve Angry Men.” MGM, 1957.

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