



My Image Struggles in Capitalist Society

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In our culture, women try so hard to be the ideal congenial beauty queen. We believe that there is only one standard of beauty and if we don't look that way then we are ugly. We compare ourselves to each other and especially to the size 0 models in the magazines. I have struggled with this since elementary school when girls start learning that they have to appear attractive to the opposite sex. Even in my fourth year of college I continue to stress over what image I want to portray.

When I was younger I was not aware of the constant effort I put towards achieving the perfect image. As I matured, I realized the impact it had on my life. I allowed people and culture around me to categorize me into groups according to my popularity and choice in clothes and friends. Any distress I experience because I am unable to achieve the ideal image can be somewhat blamed on society. Our culture has created this unattainable ideal which the majority of women do not resemble at all. I also see that society has shaped me and influenced the way I perceive myself. In order to better understand my experience, therefore, I need to explore the impact society has had on my life. Sociologist C. Wright Mills calls this mode of inquiry the **sociological imagination** (Newman 8).

A few months ago I became acquainted with a new girl who seemed like a potential

friend. When you first meet somebody that you like you try to put your best self forward. I tried to be pleasant, talkative, and fun; in other words, the kind of person other people want to be around. I tried to figure out and read this girl in order to present myself as a person she would want to be friends with. Even at this early stage, I was performing **impression management**, a concept used by the sociologist Ervin Goffman (Newman 134, 138). Several months have passed since our first encounter and we are both learning new things about each other which may or may not coincide with our original impressions of one another. As time elapses we have remained friends and are much more comfortable with one another. However, I still find myself concealing information about my identity that may not necessarily fit into the person I want her to think I am. I have also had to decide how to handle some news I received about her that has conflicted with the image she had conveyed to me. I chose to accept the surprising information and not judge her. Knowing where this girl worked and looking at her clothes caused me to judge her in a certain way. Since she was attractive, I believed she was popular, confident, and sociable. To some degree, most of this was true but I automatically assumed it because she was attractive. I am happy to say that we've begun to let our guards down and we continue to be friends.

Through impression management, we expose certain characteristics to people in order to get a desired reaction. Certain identities are used in appropriate situations to whatever audience is present. There is usually an identity that an individual works on presenting the most in a given situation. In addition to changes in behavior, we tend to change our appearance to make ourselves feel worthy and to have other people think we are worthy enough to get their attention. This is where my struggle with image comes in. I buy clothes that fit an image that I believe people will be im-

pressed with. On a larger scale, fashion is fed to us by designers who want to sell their products. If we weren't up on the trends we become fashion victims. I am programmed to believe that if I wear clothes everyone else is wearing I will be liked.

One relationship that has ended but is fresh in my mind is a romantic one. Just like any new relationship, we try to appear desirable depending on what we think the other person is looking for. The male person was under the impression, maybe because of my physical appearance or demeanor, that I was a sweet, innocent, pure, angel. He put me up on a pedestal and believed that I could do no wrong. I tried my best to act the way this "angel" should act and played along for a while. I pretended that I had never sinned in my life and I always acted like a lady. Goffman would describe me as an actor on a stage (Newman 144). The study of social interaction as theater is called **dramaturgy**, also a term invented by Goffman. When I was in his presence and portrayed myself to have particular characteristics, I was acting on the **front stage**. Here I tried not to say or do anything to jeopardize the favorable image he constructed of me. **Back stage**, though, when I was around my closer friends or family, I could act any way I pleased even if it were the opposite of the good girl image presented to him.

Eventually the person I was dating realized that I wasn't an angel especially after he had heard some gossip. He wasn't too happy with what he was told because it dramatically conflicted with the angel image he had of me. He felt betrayed and foolish for believing the false ideas about the person he thought I was. In contrast to the new friendship I have previously described, the information that I attempted to conceal caused deterioration in the relationship. One of the reasons this relationship ended was due to my, what Goffman calls, **spoiled identity** (Newman 151).

Newman writes in *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, "Even those of us who pride ourselves on our individualism follow most of the time a pattern not of our own making" (80). As a college student, as much as I try to be myself and dress in my own style, I find myself wishing I looked like one of the perfect girls around me. I start to feel that I have to act like them to attract friends or the opposite sex. The party girl persona emerges when the social setting requires it while the quieter, sweet persona is used when the time is right.

Through our **nonmaterial culture**—anything nonphysical such as customs, values, beliefs—we learn what is considered appropriate behavior and end up being products of our society. We are expected to go along with this master plan and the better someone can do this the higher the status they receive. Clothing, music, and literature are part of our **material culture** and have had a large impact on my life. Since a young age material items were very important especially clothes and music. The choices you made about your appearance would make or break you in social circles. I remember rebelling against my surrounding norms of dressing. I was stared at and ridiculed by my peers. My mother almost broke down in tears begging me to dress like a normal girl. It's tough swimming upstream. **Subculturally**, college, especially one where most of the students dorm, has its own unwritten rules and regulations. From my own experience, partying, having an outgoing personality, and dressing in proper bar attire are a must if you want to have friends and be known. My concern with material things and popularity contradicts the values that my parents taught me. According to them these concerns were trivial. My struggle deciphering priorities probably has a lot to do with what I was taught.

We have acquired information concerning how to behave in a given situation. Cultural expectations and keeping **social**

order may explain why I portray myself as a person with, what I believe are, preferred attributes. Even though I personally worry about living up to personality and appearance expectations, this is a manifestation of society's values instilled in me. Culture tells us how to behave in public and how to behave in front of elders. Every group is **stereotyped**. Teenagers have to be rebellious and head-strong and college students party and drink. I deal with trying to live up to the image and everything that goes along with it. The pretty, outgoing girl image that I'm expected to strive for and keep up is something my subculture has shown me is the suitable way for a woman my age to act.

An academic version of **ethnocentrism** has become rampant on our campuses. Essentially, ethnocentrism means a group feels that their beliefs and values are the best and superior to others (Newman 91). Similarly, fraternities and sororities largely control the popularity and norms of the students. They create rigid sets of standards and do not allow much leeway. Involuntarily, I have internalized their standards even though I am not a part of their organization, and when I don't measure up I feel inferior.

Socialization is the process through which society's values and norms are internalized by the individual (Newman 106). The ultimate goal for a society is to produce a member who follows its guidelines. A person needs to become familiar with how things are done and this allows them to function well in society. My decisions and feelings are affected by society's goals as a whole. My decision to follow the crowd or to feel inferior when I don't is a result of society's shaping my identity.

Perhaps my sense of not measuring up to the perfect image began during my **acquisition and differentiation of self** (Newman 107). Our special personalities and characteristics create a self which develop as we grow up. Maybe I did not develop a

strong sense of my own identity and that's why I try so hard to be like other people I view as more desirable. I am not confident in my own identity or doubt it is acceptable enough, so I look to others for approval and ways to improve myself.

Friends, after a day of shopping, will tell me that they saw an item of clothing that made them think of me. I always ask how it reflected me and they reply by saying that I have my own style and that particular piece screamed "Anna." Occurrences like this fuel my perception of myself as the "different one." Sociologist C. H. Cooley calls this process of how our self-perception are shaped through our interpretation of others' views towards us, the **looking-glass self** (Newman 109). My interpretation of a peer's opinion of me affects my own self-feeling and perception. Peter Dai also uses this concept in his article "Why is P Afraid to Love a Woman?" (2002), where he explores how his social anxiety towards women was a result of his perception (due to certain earlier events in his life) of how girls viewed him. Our anxieties towards achieving the perfect image makes us vulnerable to internalizing others' opinions, according to Dai.

Recently, while in the presence of a group of twenty-something year old men, I was dribbling a basketball. One of them, a sexist pig in my eyes, told me the action of bouncing the ball was unattractive. I was stunned and stopped playing with the ball. Sports were a big part of my life since the second grade and no one had ever put me down for it. In fact I was praised. Yet in the year 2003, from a supposedly young adult, I internalized a self-perception that I was unattractive over something I thought had nothing to do with image. In another instance, again involving a twenty-something male, he observed that I wasn't wearing earrings and my fingernails weren't painted. Thinking this was so out of the ordinary and unacceptable, he asked me why I didn't have these things done. I be-

came defensive and answered, "I'm sorry I'm not girly enough for you." I was angry and thought up a few good names for the person; however, what he said got under my skin. I internalized his view of what my **gender** was supposed to look like. Similar to the expectations that boy placed on me, society allows only two genders and variations are discouraged. Showing athletic talent strays from the typical and accepted behavior of a woman. Society paints a specific picture of both a male and a female and each must portray this distinct image.

Human nature forces us to live in groups. Group connections are assumed to be the best guarantee for an individual's well-being (Newman 198). I am torn between being an individual and following the crowd to avoid alienation. In "I Only Thought I Knew It All: Society and the Individual" (2002), Samara Cohen discusses her plight with alienation due to her battle with Hepatitis. People avoided her because of her illness. She links the problem of alienation with the movie *Patch Adams* and draws up a good lesson. Patch went against the grain and had different views on how medicine should be practiced. Many of his peers didn't agree with his methods and as a result he was not welcomed among the other doctors and students. But when he persisted and people finally accepted his style, he was no longer detached from the group.

One way to deal with social pressures is to develop alternative selves. In the film *Multiple Personalities*, the people who suffer from this disorder create alternative personalities as a way to deal with their inner demons and issues that were never resolved. Many people including myself use different personalities in separate setting. It may not be as severe as the disorder but we feel the need to bring out specific traits at certain times. My personality in front of a boyfriend is not the same as that in front of a roommate.

As long as I continue to live society will

affect my actions and the opinion I have of myself. I have to learn how to be comfortable with my real self and to be aware when I am acting different to please others. I'm sure there are people who are still dealing with these problems at the age of fifty but I'm hoping to work through it by then. On the other hand, different identities and personalities are needed in life especially in the workplace. Switching personalities is probably inevitable but I am going to try to be as true to myself as possible.

Newman discusses the idea of **bureaucracy** which occurs on many levels. Usually it is seen on the broader social level, but I think it can also occur on a smaller scale such as among a group of friends or a clique. Members of a clique, for instance, are also usually ranked in a **hierarchy of authority** (Newman 246). I have encountered various groups where there were one or two leaders and the rest were followers. I would have to categorize myself as a follower since I went with the flow of the group. Depending on rank your opinion may or may not have mattered. As I recall my opinion was taken into consideration but I rarely expressed it because I was afraid to say the wrong thing. Being judged as weird or different was a big fear of mine. Important information or gossip trickled down the hierarchy. I was always a little jealous of the leaders because I thought they were more popular for specific reasons. I viewed them as prettier and funnier than I when in actuality they were just outgoing and I wasn't.

When dealing with people or problems a bureaucracy can be very **impersonal** (Newman 245). For instance if a new student enrolled at school or a new person was trying to get included in the clique, their presence were not welcomed. They were talked about in a negative way both to their face and behind their back. Their imperfections and mistakes had to be brought to everybody's attention. They were harshly criticized and I sometimes wondered if the

girls doing the talking had a conscience. As I grew older and more secure in myself, I learned to talk back and stand up for the victims. I regret not doing this sooner but I was too fearful of being kicked out of the group. It was hard for me to imagine not having friends and being labeled as a loser.

People in lower level positions try to find ways to succeed in social circles. In a sense this is related to **institutional pressures toward similarity**. On a larger scale organizations attempt to improve their productivity by following similar patterns initiated by the more successful organizations. They will not try to accomplish this through finding better methods but by imitating another company's ideas. Similarly, on a micro scale, if a person is not happy with their lower status they may begin to mimic the behavior of a higher ranked individual. Most of the time, in the same circle of friends, this will not work. Other members will notice the change in behavior and most likely will not accept it. This imbalance can cause others to ridicule the new characteristics of that person. They will probably even be seen as a copycat and no one will appreciate her or him anymore. Blinded by the urge to reach the top, people don't realize that a real relationship shouldn't be a struggle. The friends you surround yourself with should appreciate your true personality. Competition is not part of a healthy relationship.

By experience I have seen, even though it is a small sample, young Americans focusing entirely too much of their energy on popularity and the acceptable image. Other cultures and societies place much more emphasis on education. I think we need to do the same so our youth worry more about learning and less about which car they rather be driving. A friend of mine is a kindergarten teacher who had her kids draw pictures of whatever they wanted. A few of her students drew symbols of various car brands. Children as young as five years old are already preoccupied with material

things. We need to put more emphasis on schooling and education. Perhaps, then having certain clothes and expensive cars won't be such a big priority.

Diverse **Stratification systems** still exist in the world today, including the American society (Newman 278). They may not be as extreme as slavery, the caste system, or the feudal system but equivalents are evident in the present world in open or subtler ways. Our **social class** depends partly on how much money we earn (Newman 280). When you are born into a family you become part of the same social class. This can change if you are disowned by the family, they become untimely deceased, or you decide to lead your own life and earn your own income. The link between social and economic status is so strong they are inseparable. The more money you make the more prestige you obtain. Many people will not socialize with anyone outside their own socioeconomic class, especially if they are from a very wealthy, powerful family. The mere association with a person of a lower status can damage their reputation.

I consider my family and myself to be a part of the working class. In the neighborhood where I grew up, there were many families that were middle to upper class. I attended school with their children and I am still friends with a few of them. Being around richer, popular peers was not always a fun experience. They owned more material things than I did and I always envied them for it. I learned to live with it because my parents couldn't afford to give me all the same things. At first I felt deprived but I learned to appreciate I do have things that many people don't. When I find myself comparing my life to other people's I try to remember how comfortable I am and all the things I have that can't be bought with money. It is hard not to get caught up in the cycle. My parents worked hard to send me to two private schools and college. Their hard work is what for exactly? It's for my education so I can earn more money and

buy more things. We are just playing into the American Dream of owning a big, beautiful house and a big, expensive car. The struggle to have everything is passed down from generation to generation.

Since I always wanted to display the perfect image to my peers, my parents worried about me. They have lower status jobs than other parents and I didn't want them embarrass me. The **media** does not show favorable **images of the working class** (Newman 283). Al Bundy, the character from *Married with Children*, and Homer, the character from the *Simpsons*, are just two examples of how badly the working class male is portrayed. I was afraid my friends were going to see my parents as stupid people who couldn't afford to buy me better things. I rarely brought people home to spend time with my parents but now I realize that you shouldn't judge people by their financial earnings and job status. A person's opinion of your parents shouldn't affect your relations with them and if it does that person is not worth having as a friend.

Inequality in the United States causes individuals in the lower classes to have less access to opportunities due to their socioeconomic status (Newman 290). Parents who have upper class status are able to indulge their children. My parents have indulged me to an extent but I was never as privileged as my peers. My parents worked very hard to give me all the opportunities available. They were able to do this but many children aren't given the same opportunities. Newman uses the example of SATs. A family with higher income would live in better neighborhoods therefore their children attend better schools that offer SAT preparation courses. Those children will have a higher score on the SAT just because they were privileged enough to be better prepared.

My father has Irish and German heritage. Most ethnic groups have been **oppressed** and treated **unequally** at one time or another in history (Newman 334). Stereotypes usually develop about a racial

group and we become very aware of them (Newman 339). For example, "All black men are illiterate and bound for prison," "All Chinese people are bad drivers" and "All Spanish women have children at a young age and out of wedlock." The Irish were seen as drunkards who spent all their time at the bar. In addition to other factors, I believe my father internalized this stereotype. Stereotypes are meant to oppress people by making them believe that it's all that they are. The opportunity for jobs and wealth is threatened by any new group that comes along. The United States was founded on the idea that everyone is welcome to make a better life for herself or himself, but when a person from another culture tries to do this Americans resent it. We are not comfortable with anyone that is different from us and we feel that they are just more people to compete with. We are threatened by the idea that a person of another race has the potential to gain wealth and success that supposedly belongs to us. The intense effort to constantly gain more comes from beliefs in this country such as **competitive individualism** (Newman 308). The sign of success is money and the goal is to make as much of it as possible. The more material things we own the more successful we are and it doesn't matter who we have to trample on to achieve it. We have become so greedy that we forget about those less fortunate than us. We also forget that there are more important things in life. Our society depends on money to be happy. I know my parents feel guilty that they can't afford to buy me a car and sometimes I think I would be happier if I had one.

Prejudice and discrimination can come in many forms (Newman 341). Racism and sexism are two examples but for now I am concerned with these issues in terms of socioeconomic class. We know that you can be judged by the color of your skin but we are also judged by how much money we have. There are other aspects of a

person than what tangible and visible objects they have acquired. We assume things about someone's personality or life from what clothes they are wearing. I'm sure there have been times when people didn't get a job because they couldn't afford to buy a nice suit for the interview but were otherwise qualified. A male peer saw me on two occasions. One time I was dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt with no make-up on. The next time I had nicer, more expensive clothes on and I was wearing jewelry. Which occasion do you think he was more receptive towards me? He didn't want to be associated with and wasn't interested in a girl who didn't possess a high socioeconomic status.

Women struggle harder than men to achieve the perfect image. We have to endure **sexism** in all stages and aspects of our lives (Newman 374). Since we live in a **patriarchal** society, women are not valued as much as men (Newman 374). We work twice as hard to prove ourselves and don't enjoy the same rewards. We have to live up to high standards which include being skinny, beautiful at all times, intelligent, kind, and domestic just to name a few. There are many contradicting characteristics we have to possess—which gets very confusing. For example, women should be virgin-like and virtuous but at the same time men want us to be sexual creatures. I was dating a boy who implied in many ways that girls who sleep around or talk to a few guys at one time are slutty. Ironically, I found out later that he was having sexual relations with more than one girl. This was acceptable because he is a young male. If I had done the same thing I would have been labeled as a slut.

Newman cites Laura Miller's work (1997) exploring the issue of females in the military (Newman 377). According to Miller and Newman, the reason this is such a controversial issue is because a woman in the military doesn't portray the normal image of a feminine woman. It portrays the

image of a strong, disciplined woman who is capable of representing and fighting for her own country. The idea of a woman being equal to a man intellectually and physically is threatening to many people.

Women try to look feminine to attract a mate. We wear jewelry, make-up, and tight clothes but when we are raped it's our fault. **Rape as a means of social control** is another way women are oppressed. I have never experienced sexual assault first-hand but a friend of mine was pulled into a van and raped repeatedly. Once this happens we feel our image is tarnished. We feel dirty and see ourselves as damaged goods. The woman is blamed for the attack. She asked for it. She was dressed like a slut. These are common responses but she was probably dressed to attain a potential romantic relationship. Rape shows women they are sexual objects who can be controlled by men.

Depending on the culture you live in, women are forced to live up to certain expectations. A woman's role varies across race and class. The **global devaluation of women** is apparent and when women fail to express themselves as the correct image they are ostracized or even killed (Newman 401). Indian women who commit adultery are killed by their own family members because they are disgraced. In the U.S., it is difficult for women to live up to a desirable image because we are given mixed messages as to what that is. You can't be too powerful or else you're a bitch. If you wear certain clothes and make-up to make yourself appear attractive you're a slut. It seems to be a lose/lose situation.

Cohort and period effects can have major impacts on what is expected of us throughout our lives (Newman 416). During the 1990s the economy was doing relatively well. My peers and I were attending college and working to educate ourselves in order to have a better life. My role as a student is to study, do well in school, and eventually take advantage of the opportunities to come. Now, since the economy is

being harmed by the war on top of recession, opportunities that were once available will no longer be. When I graduate, there are even more factors against me. What will I have to come up with to make myself a desirable candidate? My college degree is not going to be enough now that jobs are scarce. What additional qualities do I have to acquire to find a decent job? Conforming to the image the employer wants is more important these days. When my sister first entered the workforce these extra obstacles didn't exist. She was hired out of necessity and because of her education and experience. She had it a little easier because she didn't have to prove herself so much.

The consumption epidemic portrayed in the documentary *Affluenza* is another perfect example of how the obsession with having it all has affected me and my generation. My struggle with image is the result of our society never being happy with what they have and the insatiable need to always want more. Happiness lies in the newest trend and the obsession with material things is an epidemic. I have come to realize that possessions aren't the source of happiness. I haven't figured out exactly what is, but I know I need to focus on other things that don't have to do with money. I have learned not to care so much about what other people think of me. I likewise try not to base my opinions of others on the clothes they wear.

There is a saying, which is a statement of fact, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." The documentary *The Big One*, by Michael Moore, shows just how obsessed we are with wealth. The owners of companies like Nike will have their products made in other countries by people who are all being exploited to make a bigger profit—not to mention taking jobs away from Americans. The image of power and wealth is so important that the exploitation of other humans is not a problem. We will step on anyone to get to the top.

In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, the

professor discovers a genius who surpasses most intellectuals but seems to have an attitude problem. The professor doesn't understand why Will won't use his knowledge to acquire fame and fortune. It's not a priority to Will to gain from his intelligence. Cashing in and reaping the benefits shouldn't always be important. Pursuing love was more important to Will.

It seems that society creates its own reality. It dictates what is right and wrong and how people should live. In the movie *The Matrix*, Keanu Reeves' character Neo believes he is living in reality until he is shown otherwise. We are born into a way of life and everything we hear and see is taken as the truth. How many times have we heard, "That's just the way things are"? There is a world outside of our own and even though different ideas seem strange we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss them. We can change the things we don't like. We don't have to live the way we are told to live.

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