



My Life's Tapestry: **Casting Theoretical Lights on the Social Threads That Tie Me Down**

D. M. Rafferty

UMass Boston

I view my life as a large and ever changing tapestry. I am cut from a bolt of very strong, durable, and coarse working class material. Being born female certainly factored into the pattern of this design. However, woven deeply in my foundation are also threads of limitation resulting from the classist and sexist attitudes that still persist in today's society. Socio-economic **class** and **gender** roles constitute the two most influencing social **stratifications** that have shaped the outlines of my life. Reviewing personal experiences in light of the classical, contemporary, and postmodernist theories in sociology will hopefully reveal new hues and textures in the ever changing tapestry that is my life.

My mother dropped out of high school during her senior year to help financially support her siblings. Her mother had run off and left my mother, her younger sisters and brothers with their aging paternal grandmother. Working as a clerk in a department store my mother helped raise her sisters and brothers.

My father was her first boyfriend. They were married on my mother's eighteenth

birthday and a month before my father's eighteenth birthday. My father, also in his senior year, quit school. Working to support his new bride became a priority. My brother was born seven months later. I was the second child of June and Joe Rafferty born thirteen months and eight days after my brother.

My parents assumed the traditional social roles of husband and wife. My mother was to maintain a clean and orderly household, assume full responsibility for the children, and provide for all my father's needs. My father was to work and financially support his family. Unknowingly true to the **theory of Functionalism**, my parents believed that their interdependent roles provided the best avenue for achieving shared goals and desires.

Owning a home in the "burbs" was their ultimate dream. Sending my brother to college was also a goal. It was believed that higher education was for the males because they would have to provide for a family of their own someday. The goals that were set for me were far different. I was to graduate from high school, get married, and have children—hopefully in that order. And I was supposed to be happy and fulfilled with that **functional role**.

Moving to the suburbs meant providing a better life and better choices for their children. To my father it also meant moving out of the working-class lot to a more acceptable middle-class life-style. My father was well aware of the increasingly polarized **class structure** that we lived under. He claimed to be fueled by justifiable working-class anger. He often spoke of the inequitable services that our social institutions doled out. Affordable housing, quality education and decent health-care should be the right of every citizen and not benefits that only some can afford.

My father was an activist. He campaigned for political candidates that he believed would make a difference. He recognized social ills and strived to correct

them. I listened to my father and took on some of his perspectives. His truth became the beginning point for my personal **stock of knowledge** at hand. I began to form my opinions based on what my father said. My perspectives of society and life in general were viewed through a poor working-class lens. To this day my life experiences have only reinforced some of these beliefs.

Unfortunately my parents' goals were never realized. When my father was thirty-three years old he had an aneurysm burst at the base of his skull. His brain was submerged in a pool of blood. The necessary life saving surgery left him partially paralyzed and with brain damage. For years he was in and out of hospitals, mental institutes, and various training programs. As the dutiful wife my mother now had to arrange her schedule to include daily hospital visits. Visiting hours were 2-4 and 7-9 in the afternoon. It was by their gender-hued "**rational choice**" that I was determined to be the one excused from school early to enable my mother to meet the strict visiting policy of the hospital. Watching my younger siblings and preparing supper became my responsibilities. When my mother returned from the afternoon visit, supper was on the table by 4:45 p.m.; at 5:30 p.m. the table was being cleared. My mother would spend about an hour with the younger children while I cleaned up the kitchen. Then she was off for the evening visits with my father. My domestic duties would end when I put the children to bed. This pattern of **anticipatory socialization** was preparing me for my future roles as housewife and mother. At that time my brother moved in with my aunt so he could continue to dedicate his time to his studies. He was in his junior year at an exam school preparing for college.

When the insurance ran out and all social services were exhausted my father was sent home. And there he remained. He stopped going out. He stopped washing. He stopped getting dressed. He stopped

eating properly. He sat around all day and night in his dirty underwear and robe, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and watching T.V. He became verbally abusive to anyone within earshot and physically abusive toward my mother and younger siblings. I became my family's protector. I made my father fear me.

Being raised in Roxbury, a working-class ghetto in the city of Boston, prepared me for this **role**. I was fourteen years old and a ninth grade student at a Boston public junior high school. I had street smarts and was considered quite wise for my age. I knew life wasn't easy and sometimes you had to fight for your rights.

After living on the "house savings" for two years my family was forced to go on welfare. At that time it was called "Aid to Financially Dependent Children" (AFDC). Although most of our neighbors were also "living on the system" my mother felt degraded. She never thought this could happen to her. She was thirty-three years old, a high school drop out, and the mother of four. Depression set in. The women in my neighborhood were very supportive of one another.

The **blase'** attitude in the metropolitan lifestyle that Simmel speaks of (Farganis, 132) somehow did not exist in the mid-sixties on the streets of Roxbury where I grew up. Due to the obvious lack of money my neighbors created a rather tight community. The "**reciprocal relations, or exchange, within social associations**" (Farganis, 263) was a daily phenomena. My mother's girlfriends watched my younger siblings so my mother could run some errands. Running errands was a valid excuse to get out of the house for a while. In exchange my mother would pick up things like milk or bread that one of the neighbors may have needed. They drank tea and listened to one another. The **intrinsic rewards** resulting from such exchanges of solidarity added texture to my life's tapestry.

The Federal Government had a food

program. On the fifteenth of each month most families in my neighborhood would walk down to a storefront at Roxbury Crossing. There they would collect staples such as butter, peanut butter, cheese, corn meal, oat meal and canned meat. You could not pick and choose. You had to take it all or you would receive nothing. The food was passed out by a couple of white men in shirts and ties. There was a noticeable difference between us. They became our **generalized others** for they represented “the system,” the government. They also represented white middle-class America, a sector of the population that saw us as less than them. They spoke to each other about wanting to beat the traffic out of the city. They were concerned about their cars that were parked unattended in the back lot. They barked orders at my neighbors, the children and my mother as we lined up to receive our rations. The way they spoke to us and treated us led some of my neighbors to feel ashamed.

My mother would hold my hand a little tighter and assure my siblings and I that there was no need to feel badly. “Your father and both of your grandfathers worked for years and paid into the system. This program is here for people who have fallen on hard times. We need some help and the social welfare is here to aid us,” my mother would say. We refused to accept the social attitudes of the generalized others. But we all **internalized** them nevertheless.

When Max Weber speaks of the **capitalist** and **bureaucratic** forces that “oppress and dominate individuals in modern society” (in Hurst 39) I immediately think of the food program and those state workers. Durkheim's vision of a more enlightened society where there was a common humanity (Hurst 28), the belief that we are all part of something interconnected and greater than ourselves was certainly lacking in the **collective conscience** of these social workers.

My grandfather used to say, “How you

view an issue all depends on where you sit.” It seemed the dominant view in Roxbury proclaimed that if you had two parents living at home, your father had a job and you attended a parochial school you were definitely a better person than one who was raised by a single mother, or on welfare and attended a public school. These factors were major contributors to how one was seen. They determined your **social worth**.

Attending public schools, it was not uncommon to run out of paper before the school year was even half-way through. New books were not the norm. Sharing old, tattered books with your classmates was very common. In my elementary school if you lost the two pencils you were given at the beginning of the school year you were destined to finish the year writing in crayon. Of course points were lost when your penmanship was illegible.

During my junior high school graduation the principle began his address by announcing that, “this would probably be the last graduation for more than half of you.” This attitude and the limited amount of extended **social capital** damaged many young people's psyche. However it strengthened my ribbon of resolve.

Recognizing **unequal opportunities** in education at an early age gives me a deeper understanding of the **iron cage** that Max Weber spoke of (Farganis 91). The bureaucracy continues to support public education with real estate taxes. Although this has proven to be grossly unfair it continues. We are trapped in this cage despite our intelligence and creativity. Ironically, it is the educational system that hinders our individual advancement. While charter schools, parochial schools, montessory schools and other privately funded schools prosper, our urban public schools continue to disintegrate. This certainly leads to conflict among the masses. This conflict should be dealt with in the political arena. For this is a perfect example of what Jean Jacques

Rousseau calls “**moral or political inequality**” when he discusses the “two kinds of inequality among the human species” (Fariganis 2). Yet having the same types of politician (rich, white men) as our candidates of choice I'm not certain peaceful change is possible. Perhaps Marx's **social revolution** is yet to come.

In her essay, “The Struggles and Predicaments of Low Income Families and Children in Poverty” (2002) Jennifer VanFleet shares her perspective of the low income families in her hometown. She speaks of a family that lives in an old ice cream stand in the middle of town and how they scrounge through other peoples' garbage looking for things that could serve them. She states that “some people like this don't want to help themselves or are happy living the way they are.” (39) This young woman from a middle-class family is attending college to become a social worker and help people like this. Reading her essay I was very sensitive to her perspective of the “low-income families and children in poverty” that she hoped someday to help. It appeared to me that she was viewing them as a **stereotyped** generalized other, devoid of first hand knowledge and understanding about why people live as they do. However this is very common. It is definitely a perspective that must be changed in order to bring about significant changes in the social services industry that she someday hopes to serve. Realizing that we are all members of the same society is a good first step toward achieving a more **equitable society**. We live in a country that maintains an hourly wage that keeps people below the **poverty line** when they work forty or more hours a week. Poor working class people who are unable to secure better paying jobs for a multitude of reasons take what they can get or not. This is their choice. This is their “iron cage,” a non-living **minimum wage policy** legislated by the Federal Government. And today's iron cage also has a “glass ceiling,” a silent understanding com-

monly held among top executives at large corporations that limit the advancement of women beyond a certain level.

As a young, divorced mother of two I spent a brief period of time accepting Transitional Aid (TA). That was the current name for AFDC. During that stint I had several social workers that were very well intentioned. However they were not prepared for the lack of support the government provides for poor people. They were not prepared for the anger and defeat that are common emotions for families that have suffered through generations of poverty. They were not prepared for the deep rooted depression that many poor people suffer. **Phenomenologically** speaking, as the client of several young, white, idealistic case workers I witnessed on a daily basis their burn out. In a matter of months they became totally disillusioned and discouraged because their college degrees did not prepare them for the reality of the injustices committed within the **social constructs** of the welfare system.

Henry Fonda starring in *Twelve Angry Men*, a movie made in 1957, was the only juror who had a reasonable doubt concerning the guilt of the defendant, a young, poor, non-white boy from the slums who had been charged with the stabbing death of his father. In his quiet manner Fonda managed to change the minds of the other eleven jurors. All he did was continue to recall the evidence and the facts of the case. **Prejudices** and preconceived notions were addressed and questioned until finally all the twelve men concluded that the possibility of innocence did in fact exist. The inability to form an **objective** opinion hindered the jurors. Initially they were operating from a purely **subjective** base. One man viewed all people from “that part of town” as “those people” while another man had a bad relationship with his son and projected those negative feelings on all young men around the age of his son. Perhaps if more people took the time to critically re-evalu-

ate the “**shared values**” and beliefs that were handed down to them society could more quickly evolve toward another period of enlightenment.

“Inadequate Programs Assisting Mothers in Poverty” written by Jessica Udice (2002) begins to question the programs that our government established to supposedly help women and children out of poverty. She speaks about the work program that is to aid in the transition of stay-at-home moms to working-moms. There is little to no support in the way of child care, affordable after school programs or even transportation vouchers to get the children home from school or the mothers to work. The anger that some people feel towards welfare mothers and their children is touched upon in this essay. The feelings of shame, guilt, despair and low self-esteem that welfare mothers experience are also addressed. Udice ends her paper with some worthwhile ideas about alternative programs that could and should be better supported.

When Rousseau wrote about the social inequalities and class privilege that should have changed when science became the “critical instrument in the pursuit of truth” (Farganis 2) did he realize how deeply rooted the aristocracy was in the constructs of social reality that he criticized? Here we are in the twenty-first century still being governed predominately by white, upper-class men practicing patriarchal beliefs and establishing a capitalist, profit-driven, value system.

When Morpheus claims in the movie *The Matrix* that, “This is the construct, Neo, residual self imagining. Free your mind! Unplug!”, I believe there is an element of truth in that statement. Questioning what you see is the theme of this film. If **self** is a “social product” as Mead claims it is (Farganis 144) how can the truth be determined about our “self” living in a society that constantly gestures falsely. What societal constructs support equality for the masses?

America is considered the land of equal opportunity, but our native tongue is double speak. We must “unplug” to get in touch with our true “self.”

Then we have the film *Billy Elliot*, in which a young boy who knows what he wants to be is ready to do almost anything to make that dream his reality. He is a coal miner's son who wants to become a ballet dancer. This is definitely not the **norm**. In this two hour film the young, motherless boy is able to overcome all sorts of prejudices from town folks as well as his father and brother. Due to sheer determination, perseverance and belief in himself Billy achieves his ultimate dream. Movies are enjoyable because they are an escape from our everyday reality.

In “A Precarious Balance: Views of a Working Mother Walking the Tightrope” (2003), Jennifer S. Dutcher shares with us her ever changing views as a woman who became a mother, a student, an employee and a wife. Dutcher shares that maintaining traditional roles has worked for her and her husband. Gender-based roles determine who cooks, cleans and provides most of the child care. She admits that most of the domestic work is her responsibility. She also speaks of the **bifurcation of consciousness** that she experiences daily. When she is at the office her mind is sometimes busy with other functions that need to be tended to at home. This working consciousness as described by Dorothy Smith (Farganis 375) is very common among women. Dutcher ends her essay recognizing some changes that could be made on her domestic front that would make her life easier but all in all she is happy and successful in all her roles. I believe self-reflection and constant re-evaluating are necessary steps for self actualization.

Erin Brockovich is a movie about a self actualized woman. Here is an extraordinary story about a woman who started out unemployed, penniless, and stressed out. She is a single, working-class mother of

three desperately seeking employment and feeling more like a loser with every rejected job offer. Hollywood portrayed Brockovich as a provocative dresser with a quick temper and a foul mouth. She uses creative license to plant herself as an employee in a lawyer's office as a last ditch attempt to find meaningful work. The lawyer breaks down and gives her the job and so the story begins. The main theme of this movie is how an average person can overcome multiple odds, make a difference and become rich and famous. Brockovich becomes the driving force that finally brings down a large gas company that was slowly poisoning hundreds of families. With a multi-million dollar settlement everyone lives happily ever after.

Subliminally the movie reinforces the gendered notion that women take better care of others than we do of ourselves. During the entire movie all the star ate was fast food. She worked long hours and didn't get enough sleep. Her relationships with her children and boyfriend suffered miserably. In one scene her son is angry at her for working so much. She patiently tells him how she's helping all these sick people. The little boy doesn't care and is still mad because all he knows is that his mother isn't around as much as she used to be. He's not interested in her other roles. He just wants his mother. The "mother" realizes this but feels there is nothing she can do. It is this **gendered social structure** that causes the bifurcation of consciousness that most mothers are familiar with. Until society starts taking the raising of children seriously and our government starts providing more affordable, good quality day-care, better educational opportunities, and a more supportive social welfare system women will continue to suffer socially and psychologically.

"Bureaucracy is the means of transforming social action into rationally organized action. Therefore, as an instrument of rationally organizing authority relations, bureaucracy was and

is a power instrument of the first order for one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus." states Max Weber in a piece titled "The Objective and Subjective Bases of Bureaucratic Perpetuity" (Farganis 105). But as far as class and gender are concerned, we seem to be still continuing to follow our forefather's **charismatic** and/or **traditional authority**. We are still being governed and controlled by the patricians. I believe education, and not **rational-bureaucratic authority**, is the first step to improving the human condition.

Inequities that presently exist are there for reasons that were best expressed by Wallace and Wolf (1999:82) when detailing the three propositions that lay at the foundation of Marx's **class conflict theory**. The first is that people of the same economic position will support one another. The second states that economic classes are the most important groups as their history has shaped the history of human society. And last is that these groups are mutually antagonistic. I believe our government perpetuates these class conditions. By experience I have learned to distinguish between classes by the benefits bestowed. In my neighborhood there was a belief that you could tell from a person's teeth where he stood in terms of class. If he had straight, nice white teeth he must have money because dentists cost money. The only work my neighborhood dentist did was fill or pull. Medical attention was costly, health insurance was a benefit most of my working neighbors did not have. So it had to be something extreme to generate a visit to the dentist or doctor's office. Health care, in other words, was a class issue. It pulled at my threads of injustice.

Patriarchy and class systems separate people and divide society. Believing that there is not enough wealth to go around creates an atmosphere of fear. That fear is passed down to us through various media. And that fear fuels capitalism. "The more things we possess the happier we'll be" is a common way of thinking. So we buy and buy and buy but we are not any happier. We are only deeper in debt. The film *Affluenza* illustrated this very well. It was inter-

esting to see the anti-commercials that a group of activists had created which graphically portrayed how our greed was detrimental to our planet. They talked about how much trash and garbage our nation creates and the uncreative ways we use to dispose of it. Yet none of the major television stations would run the anti-commercials because their message did not support capitalism.

As I am learning more about social theory and all the concepts that we covered this semester I am pleased to be able to bring language to action. Having recognized and applied the six major perspectives of sociological theory, I believe that social change can best be made by one's own example. Working to create alternatives to the patriarchal and class systems that governs us is a worthy cause. I believe our power begins in the personal realm. As I have grown, I have changed. Raising consciousness has broadened my perspectives. I choose my issues carefully and decide where I will use my time and energy. Social theory helps me make those decisions. "Things don't change, we do" is a well known platitude that also helps me make worthy decisions. With education people can modify their behavior and that is an action that certainly produces change. It is our responsibility to make quality education affordable for the people if we are to reach our full potential as human beings. Our elected officials should fully support higher education and lobby for the necessary funding to support a class "A" education system. Social theory needs to be a necessary part of that education because it helps us, by exercising our **sociological imaginations**, to understand the tapestries of our selves and broader society in relationship to one another—"if we can name it we can change it."

The tapestry of my life has been enriched and strengthened with the new language and understanding of social theory that I have gained.

REFERENCES

- Dutcher, Jennifer. (2003). "A Precarious Balance: Views of a Working Mother Walking the Tightrope," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring. Endicott, NY: OKCIR.
- Farganis, James. (2000). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. Third Edition. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Hurst, Charles E. (2000). *Living Theory: The Application of Classical Social Theory to Contemporary Life*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Udice, Jessica (2002). "Inadequate Programs Assisting Mothers in Poverty," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Vol. I, No. 1, Spring. Endicott, NY: OKCIR.
- VanFleet, Jennifer. (2002). "The Struggles and Predicaments of Low Income Families and Children in Poverty," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Vol. I, No. 1, Spring. Endicott, NY: OKCIR.
- Wallace, R and Wolf, A. (1999). *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition*. Fifth Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Films:

- "The Matrix." (1999). Warner Brothers.
- "Twelve Angry Men." (1957). MGM.
- "Affluenza." (1997). KCTS-Seattle and Oregon Public Broadcasting.
- "Billy Elliot." (2000). Universal Pictures.
- "Erin Brockovich." (2000). Universal Pictures.