The "Difference" A Red Face Makes: A Critical Sociology of Bullying in Capitalist Society

Deborah D'Isabel

UMass Boston

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"It is getting worse, it's getting higher. 90 degrees, 100 degrees… everyone count, lets see how high the thermometer will go." The thermometer was me. The "game" was to have every kid in my fifth grade class turn their chairs to stare at me in an attempt to make my face as red as possible. The mastermind behind the game was my fifth grade teacher, Mr. Grady. Every week we played.

At first, my face, which can turn an unusually hot sweaty, bright red, cooperated. It didn't take long for the teacher and students to get the desired effect. However, towards the middle of the year, I became accustomed to the stares and counting and my face only turned a light shade of red. The kids then began to play the game in earnest. They realized that calling out taunts of "tomato" or the name of the boy I liked would make me embarrassed and uncomfortable and my face would react accordingly. Mr. Grady never stopped the jeering and teasing.

Phenomenologists draw our attention to the "taken-for-granted" world and problematize it. An adult would realize that Mr. Grady's sanctioned teasing was out of the **norm**, that he used his **authority** as a teacher in the worst possible way, to victimize and discriminate. An adult would interpret the situation and call for intervention. However, as a child, I did not know that this was wrong. I thought there was just something wrong with me. The **definition of the situation** was that my strange face that so easily turned red meant I should be stared at and mocked. In his essay, "Children: The Unheard Society," Aaron Witkowski notices that, "Children do not always know what is right. So, they do not question actions that adults take" (Witkowski 112). I took Mr. Grady's bullying for granted, **internalized** it, and did not problematize it. Until now.

The starting point to problematizing my situation should begin with my lack of complaint, my acceptance of Mr. Grady's treatment. In her **feminist standpoint theory**, Dorothy Smith gives a voice to women's everyday experiences and how they think and feel about those experiences. Although she discusses the experience of women in a **patriarchal** society, her standpoint theory as a method of inquiry has value for other subordinated individuals, even children. Children are rarely given a voice. Even the adage "best seen but not heard" underscores just how society views the opinions of children. Children are talked to and talked about by adults. They are managed, instructed, taught, and in my case, bullied. Children are rarely heard. As a parent, I can testify that there are too many times when I should have listened to my son and did not. Worse, when I did "listen," I sided with authority: "You need to listen to the teacher. Don't speak out in class. It is no wonder you missed recess." This repeated discounting of a child's experience and opinion has the enormous and unfortunate consequence of effectively silencing them. In fifth grade, like most children, I had internalized the understanding that a child's voice, which might have complained and

objected to Mr. Grady's treatment, had no power. I'm sure Mr. Grady recognized that also.

Mr. Grady also had us turn and stare at a girl who worked extremely slowly. She sat in the right back corner of the room—an attempt, I believe now, to minimize the exposure of her slowness to Mr. Grady. When he noticed that the class had finished the assignment and that she was still working, we were instructed to turn our chairs to face her and to count loudly as she struggled to finish, hands shaking. Erving Goffman points out that "Power…is often a means of communication, not merely a means of action" (Goffman 360). Mr. Grady communicated to us that difference, in a red-face or painstaking slowness, is abhorrent and shameful.

Before fifth grade, I was a well-liked, outgoing girl. After fifth grade, I took on a new identity and self. **Symbolic interactionism** is concerned with **gestures** and the meaning we place on those gestures. I did anything I could to avoid garnering attention. I kept my eyes downcast, furiously taking notes, employing any gestures that would make a teacher assume I was too busy to be called on. I even dropped my pencil at strategic points in class discussion. In her essay, "Let Me Introduce Myself: My Struggle With Shyness and Conformity," Sherry Wilson uses similar **props** and techniques to draw less attention to herself, to remain unnoticed (Wilson 2003).

I easily started the process of **impression management**. My goal, like Wilson, was to put on a façade of shyness and reticence to fade into the background, to become unnoticed. Wilson points out that by bringing less attention to herself, negative actions are forestalled. Shyness acts as a survival mechanism. Although I had never been shy, acting this way enabled me to hide. So complete had Mr. Grady's "teaching" been, that I no longer felt I deserved to be heard. My face, a **thing** of embarrass-ment had, through the experience of my 5th grade class, turned for me in my own **self-interaction,** into an **object** of shame. In my self-interaction, my shyness was a survival mechanism, the impression I managed in order to avoid teasing by hiding what I learned was a shameful attribute. Most importantly, my shyness showed how I viewed myself. I felt I deserved to be marginalized.

My experience had changed more than my need not to draw attention to myself, it had tweaked the fundamental concept of how I saw myself. When Charles Horton Cooley explains the **looking-glass self**, he notes that we see ourselves first in our imagination of our appearance to others, second in our imagination of the judgment of others of that appearance which leads to a "self-feeling of pride or mortification" (Cooley, quoted in Wallace and Wolf, 195). The participation of all the students in Mr. Grady's class had led to the development of a **generalized other** in me which viewed my red face with a sense of uncomfortableness and aversion. In my looking glass, I imagined the harsh judgments of all individuals. My self-esteem, my "self-feeling" lacked all pride and resulted in overwhelming mortification.

Throughout the course of my schooling and my life, the structures of such a looking-glass self in me have been reinforced. I can't remember how many times gym class was stopped and I was ordered to go to the nurse's office. There, the nurse would take my blood pressure, which was always normal and I would return to gym, embarrassed and humiliated. Even the "concerned" question, "are you ok? Your face is really red" only served to remind me that I was different, not ok, not like everyone else.

Erving Goffman, in his study of dramaturgy and the interaction order explains his concepts of **frontstage** and **backstage** and its application for the individual. He uses a theater metaphor to illuminate our **interac-**

tions with ourselves and with each other. On the frontstage, an individual manages the impressions of others, and guides and controls the impressions others receive form of us. On the backstage, "he [sic] can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (Wallace and Wolf 231). In other words, when we are backstage we can be ourselves. But, what happens when our backstage is visible on the front stage? Goffman termed that occurrence "fateful" and recognized that although "we want to be the one who defines the situation for the other individuals present," when backstage becomes frontstage, "the tables are turned, as the actors have the situation defined for them by the audience" (Wallace and Wolf 233).

With a face expressive of every nuance of embarrassment, nervousness, anger, stress, sadness, awkwardness, my backstage is not only visible, but also highlighted. Instead, often to my detriment, the "audience" defines the situation for me. For example, I once applied for a job at the YMCA to work at the front desk. In this scenario that exemplifies the need to manage impressions, I am defenseless. It is fairly universal that individuals feel nervous in this type of exchange. Employers often capitalize on this to assess an individual's response to stress by firing out difficult questions. Although I did get the job at the YMCA, at my review where my boss was giving me accolades for my service and the highest rating for employees, she confessed that I had been her last choice for hires. I got the position only because there was no one else acceptable of the people she interviewed. Her reservations stemmed, she said, from my red face.

My boss had the job to manage the impressions people received when they came to the YMCA. The front desk gives customers their first impression of the facility. Upon seeing my face, which can turn so red it makes people uncomfortable, she had to make the decision whether I would be a li-

ability as a representative of the YMCA. Goffman's work highlights how very important this skill of impression management is. My life experiences with the lack of ability to guide impressions have reinforced how many people take this very skill for granted.

In the movie, *Twelve Angry Men*, it was fascinating to watch the impression management each man employed and what their gestures told about their personalities. One man was fidgeting with his fingers, pushing up his glasses, speaking in a high shaky voice. It was clear that he was nervous, uncomfortable in a group. Another man was quick to respond in a loud voice, shouting, invading body space, highly aggressive. By contrast, the voice of the character played by Henry Fonda was calm, controlled, and reasonable. He sat back from the table, his legs crossed, confidently.

These gestures speak loudly. The **subjective meanings** we place on them characterize how we react to the person employing them. Picture Henry Fonda's character—voice calm, thoughtful—with a hot sweating red face. Would he have "packed the same punch?" He had the lone non-guilty vote, but with a face that belied his confident manner, would he have been able to sway anyone else in that room? I can testify that an unusually red face becomes an unintentional **breaching** exercise, as practiced in phenomenological sociology. Having voiced my opinion in a small group when I am a red-faced, I can confirm that the focus ends up not on my words, but on my face. Do I need to lie down? See a doctor? And even, am I having a hot flash? In that jury room, the other jurors would have been "concerned" that Henry Fonda's character was having a heart attack. They may have called the bailiff and halted the proceedings. After all, everyone wanted to get home. Henry Fonda's words of wisdom would have been lost in the reaction to his face.

Rational Choice theorists emphasize

our assessment of the costs and benefits of participation before we act. In the Matrix, Neo must decide between taking the blue pill and the red. The red pill leads him to truth and authenticity; the blue gave him the option for existing in the status quo. In "Why is P Afraid to Love a Woman," Peter Dai grapples with the self-reverberations from a formative experience of humiliation in Junior High when his love note to a girl was rejected and made fun of by both her and his friends. Dai must make the difficult choice between allowing his socially anxious, afraid-of-rejection "little P self" to exert undue influence on his current actions or to face the uncertain path of moving forward in a relationship and developing a "New P" (Dai 22).

There comes a point of rational decision-making when the looking glass self of the past needs to be reevaluated. When Neo, in *The Matrix*, makes the decision to take the red pill and begins to be unhooked from the artificial reality of the Matrix, he looks into a mirror. The self he sees reflected back is the self of the artificial world, "the imagination of his appearance" (Wallace and Wolf 195). He touches the mirror; the mirror liquefies, takes hold of him, and travels through his body. He *becomes* the mirror. He has believed in this self, has been defined by this image of himself, for his whole life. Once Neo is unplugged, he must confront the misconceptions he believed of his previous self. He must create, as Peter Dai put it, a "New P." The belief in the imaginary world of the Matrix and his looking glass self reflected in and constructed with that imagination is destroyed. He discovers that what he takes for his "real" self is his Matrix-based looking glass self. In the movie, this process and discovery almost destroys Neo.

As *The Matrix* illustrates, the depth of difficulty in challenging the deep-seated beliefs of the looking glass self should not be discounted. Yet, in studying Cooley's understanding of the looking glass self, I re-alized that in confronting my own looking-glass self, there was one key part holding me back. Cooley talks of the "imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Wallace and Wolf 195) as the elements of the looking glass self process. I believe that given my red face, the looking-glass self process has become even more internalized; the "other" whom I imagine seeing and judging me is "me"—resulting in constant self-judgment.

This self-judgment reminds me that because my face makes people uncomfortable, I should hide, "become" shy. This self-judgment gives my red face prominence over every other aspect of who I am. Even though I am outgoing, opinionated, friendly, when I look into the mirror of myself all I see is the tomato-face of fifth grade. And the shame and the judgment of myself that results, silences me.

In *Twelve Angry Men*, if Henry Fonda's character had been silent, a boy would have died. Martin Luther King, Jr., a black man who had to deal with being discounted based on his appearance, said "The ultimate tragedy is not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people." Perhaps even if Henry Fonda's character had my affliction and they had carried him, red-faced, out on a gurney, he may not have still been swayed in favor of a guilty vote—that he would have still had the courage to speak. If I allow Mr. Grady to continue to define how I see myself in the mirror, to silence my voice, then he has won and I'd be taking the blue pill to remain as I have been. My goal, however, like Neo, is to take the red pill, shatter the old mirror, and move to a "New D" and a more authentic definition of myself.

Functionalism explores "social and cultural phenomena in terms of the functions they perform in a sociocultural system" (Wallace and Wolf 18). Functionalists see society as a system of "interrelated

parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole" (Wallace and Wolf 18). This lens of functionalism can serve a purpose in understanding the role public school system plays as an interrelated part of the whole of society. Moreover, to then add *conflict theory* to this understanding, this may serve to examine why teacher bullying is a functional, if counterintuitive, part of that school system.

In his writings, Emile Durkheim emphasized the importance of the public school system in modern society. In traditional society, people were self-subsisting and didn't have to interact with each other for their livelihood. Religion imposed *solidarity* and led to a strong *collective conscience*. However, with *modernization* came ever increasing *differentiation* and *division of labor*. Although people's lives became interdependent economically through differentiation, Durkheim remarks on the isolating effect of modern society, creating excess *individualism*. Adding to this crisis of individualism is modernity's state of constant and rapid change leading to what Durkheim terms as *chronic anomie* or a state of "normlessness, a situation where rules or norms are absent" (Wallace and Wolf 23). Durkheim notes that this individualism and anomie come at a cost. For some, the cost can be as high as suicide.

In order to rectify this problem, Durkheim felt that there must be a replacement for the highly important role religion played in traditional society in "developing common values" (Wallace and Wolf 25). The most compelling modern replacement, he found, is the public school system as part of a growing role played by the modern state:

> Durkheim's search for an equally strong integrative force in modern society led him to see the public school system as the functional alternative to religion for the transmission of values in modern society. (Wallace and Wolf 25)

Durkheim emphasizes the enormous influence the public school system exerts as a functional and necessary part of the whole modern life in transmitting *shared values* and bringing about the full *integration* of the child into society. The power of the public school, similar to the power religion held, is indisputable. However, the "lessons" of the public school must also be scrutinized if we are to understand society. In understanding the "teachings" of the public school, we shed light on society.

When Durkheim remarks that the "…aim of education is, precisely, the socialization of the human being…" (Farganis 61), he is in fact commenting on the latent function of the school system. Robert K. Merton, a *middle-range theorist*, looks at *manifest and latent* functions as a central way to force "sociologists to go beyond the reasons for… the existence of customs and institutions; it makes them look for other social consequences that allow these practices' survival and illuminate the way a society works" (Wallace and Wolf 52). The manifest functions of an *institution* are the "consequences that people observe or expect" (Wallace and Wolf 52). The manifest function of public school system is the education of the children in terms of math, reading, spelling, history, and science. Our expectation is that fundamental mastery of these subjects must be gained through the instructional process. We observe this through reporting of grades on report cards.

However, latent functions are "consequences that are neither recognized nor intended" (Wallace and Wolf 52). Durkheim's proposition to use school as a socialization device to integrate children into modern society by transmitting *values* and *norms* is a consequence of our educational system that is not intended or normally recognized, but is nevertheless effective. Closely examining what is transmitted to students

and how those messages are transmitted means that we can "illuminate the way [our] society works" (Wallace and Wolf 52).

Teacher bullying is a prevalent, if hidden, aspect of our schools. There is little research because "administrators generally do not allow researchers to ask these types of questions" (Heins 172). However one study, "Teachers Who Bully Students: A Hidden Trauma" done by Dr. Stuart Twemlow found that 25 percent of teachers surveyed admitted to bullying (Heins 172). Teachers teach hundreds of students over the course of their careers. If 25 percent of teachers bully (note that this study relied on self-reporting by teachers; a measurement done by observation might yield a significantly higher result) and children stay in the public school system for twelve years, they will undoubtedly be affected by teacher bullying.

Mr. Grady had a long, illustrious career in my hometown. An informal survey that I did of other students in different years reported that Mr. Grady's bullying was not limited to my experience. Each person I spoke to reported that he targeted students in each class, each year. Interestingly, even if they weren't the targeted student, they vividly recalled the experience of watching a fellow student be victimized—even to the point of 20 years later being able to provide names and details. Bullying impacts not only the victim, but also affects the bystanders. In addition, because of its nature derived from institutional, **legal and administrative authority**, the impact of teacher's practice of bullying can be much stronger and widespread.

Teacher bullying in schools, by its very prevalence and persistence, serves a latent function for society. In the microcosm of school, it begins to expose and initiate children into the acceptance of exploitation and victimization. Children are powerless in a situation where teacher initiated bullying is a part of their institution. Children are physically weaker, less mature and have no voice in our society. Parents often discount "tales" and reinforce teacher authority. What you cannot change, you learn to accept. Routinizing exploitation and marginalization in the classroom makes it less visible and less shocking when viewed outside the microcosm of school. Acceptance of this practice is a part of integrating the child into our society, which is, as Karl Marx points out, founded on oppression and exploitation.

Karl Marx, a **Conflict Theorist**, argued that the best way to interpret society involved focusing on its economic organization. He saw the social structure as being comprised of opposing **classes**. Capitalism, according to Marx, consists of the **bourgeois** class of property owners and the **proletariat** who perform the labor. Unlike Functionalists who focus on shared values, Marx looks at these groups as having different and opposing **interests**. The bourgeoisie by owning the **means of production** and controlling the proletariat, extracts surplus labor in the form of profits. "… if one class makes economic gains, it must be at the expense of another" (Wallace and Wolf 83).

Marx saw our society with its capitalist orientation as founded on exploitation, bullying taken to its extreme. Marx wrote that "an oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes" (Wallace and Wolf 83). In other words, our society as it stands cannot operate without oppression. The movies *The Big One* and *Erin Brockovich* vividly illustrate the practice of oppression and corporate bullying.

In *The Big One*, Michael Moore shows corporations from Nike to Proctor and Gamble where "management" routinely and cavalierly makes decisions without regard to the welfare of its workers. Moore exposes corporations like Leaf, the makers of the Pay Day bar, which can net 20 million dollars in profit and then subsequently "downsize" and leave hundreds without work. Moore calls such practices acts of

"economic terrorism when at a time you are making a record profit, you would throw people out of work just so you could make a little bit more." Moore also describes the devastation that loss of economic livelihood can cause: "… they'll die from suicide, they'll die from spousal abuse, they'll die from drugs and alcoholism—all the social problems that surround people when they become unemployed." Yet, Corporate America finds these details of people's lives and livelihood inconsequential in the quest for profit. In the eyes of the bourgeois management, it is perfectly acceptable, and even offensive, to question the motive of profit.

Erin Brockovich also illuminates Corporate America's practice of profit at all costs, even when the cost involves human life. In the movie and in real life, Erin fights an enormous battle to give voice and justice to workers and a community whose health has been severely impacted by PG&E's irresponsible dumping of hexavalent chromium in local water. The bourgeois owners of PG&E built a web of deceit and lies to cover up their involvement in harming hundreds of lives to avoid the fiscal retribution that would inhibit their profit margin.

Interestingly, Hollywood, in making *Erin Brockovich,* shows how applicable and encompassing Marx's theory is currently. In combining Functionalism's concept of "shared value" with Marx's understanding of society as based on economic organization, it is illuminating to look at how the shared value of profit at all costs is accepted and working on our subconscious minds. In *Erin Brockovich*, the "happy" ending comes when Erin's boss upgrades to a new, prestigious and costly office, and hands her a check of an enormous sum, not to mention, most tellingly, the joy that is apparent when a member of the community receives a settlement of five million dollars for her lost uterus. We walk away from the movie feeling happy for Erin and for the community whose health has been destroyed be-

cause they have received money to buy whatever they want. We somehow forget that this drive for money and profit was what originally started the problem. This drive for profit led the company to make the decision to cover up their role in creating this devastation. Accumulating buying power in our society is the end, the accepted highest goal, no matter what the cost.

Erich Fromm notes that "Modern man *has* everything: a car, a house, a job, "kids," a marriage, problems, troubles, satisfactions… he *is* nothing…" (Wallace and Wolf 103). Using a symbolic interactionist approach, he looks at how even in our use of language we favor "having versus being" (Wallace and Wolf 103). He stresses that we are becoming **alienated** from our true selves as human beings, driven farther from **the living man** by the alienation complicit in capitalism. He believes that not only are we alienated as workers, we are alienated in terms of consumption because we "acquire possessions whether or not… [we] use or appreciate them" (Wallace and Wolf 103).

The documentary, *Affluenza*, highlights this alienation and terms this drive towards over consumption a "disease" affecting our lives. *Affluenza* shows how this disease is spread through a targeted marketing message linking happiness to having. The marketing department's function is to increase company sales and thereby increase "profit." By refining and endlessly repeating the mantra linking goods to personal happiness and that we are not acceptable unless we consume, sales increase and profit is achieved. Even if this message is false, when profit is the shared value, there is little outrage.

Targeting children is also effective because as receptors they are more malleable, less cynical. If a consumer is created at a young age and sustained, companies stand to gain considerable profit. *Affluenza* shows a conference of marketing executives teaching how to shape children into consumers.

The marketing presenter advises that creating "antisocial behavior [in children] in quest of a product is a good thing."

Affluenza also shows the effects of this culture. From having more malls than high schools to bankruptcy, depression, physical stress, and environmental stress, overconsumption takes us farther and farther from "the living man." True happiness is not achieved; profit is.

Exploitation and victimization are central features of our class society where wealth and profit are accepted ends. This ***ideology*** is created through our public schools, through marketing, and through parenting. Through repetition and routinization it moves within and becomes a powerful unconscious force that shapes our actions. In order to make a profit in capitalism, exploitation must occur and this "class oppression translates into nonclass oppression" (Wallace and Wolf 93). In order to justify this victimization of another human we must see them as less.

"Difference," in a red face, a disability, a skin color, or a gender in a society whose functioning rests on oppression is a visible place to begin. Difference becomes amplified in a capitalistic society to serve as a way of determining whom is "less" deserving of profit. Women do not make as much money as men for the same job, the disabled have to wage a legal battle for the right to have a parking space near a public building, minorities have to fight for equal access to education. So prevalent is the ideology that emphasizes difference means less that Van Ausdale and Feagin in their study of preschool children's racial and ethnic identities, observe that even "Young children … learn that different racial and ethnic identities are not equally valued, and some learn to draw upon their privileged racial identities to control others" (Van Ausdale and Feagin 36).

Van Ausdale and Feagin also note how "preschool age children adopt the racial and ethnic identities and characteristics others attribute to them as their own" (Van Ausdale and Feagin 36). When I was teased and bullied by Mr. Grady, I adopted his view of me as my own. I was taught that my difference meant I should be marginalized. I never tried to become a leader—I quit every job I've ever had when they offered me a management position. The noxious effect of this externally imposed identity on oppressed groups involves not only the internalized acceptance of this definition, but the limiting of actions and of voice that results. It stunts the human potential of the individual.

Occasionally there are those who do not accept this externally imposed definition. Michael Moore challenges actions taken for the sake of profit. Erin Brockovich fought for justice for those whose health was destroyed due to corporate greed. And, Morrie Schwartz, a sociology professor, who discovered he was dying from Lou Gehrig's disease, refused to accept the extrinsic definition society puts on the disabled and the dying. We put the dying in nursing homes, away from sight. We don't see them or hear them. Their weakness and decline makes us uncomfortable. Morrie, however, looked at it a different way. "Since everyone was going to die, he could be of great value, right? He could be research. A human textbook" (Albom 10). Morrie refused to let his voice be silenced or be ashamed of his disability. He accepted (although not without grief) his dependency and his disability that required him to need help with everything, including going to the bathroom. He did not view his "difference" as shameful, but embraced it, acknowledged both it and the reactions it caused in people.

This paper is part of the journey that I have already begun to traverse in deciding to accept my own difference, acknowledge the reaction it causes in people, and, like Morrie, refuse to be silenced because of it. Morrie spoke of meeting Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher, who told him to "ques-

tion all your presuppositions about life and living—about… your society, yourself, and what you expect and accept. The world is not a given" (Schwartz 113). My questioning of why I felt my face was so shameful led me to examine the role that Mr. Grady played in my understanding of myself—and then, most importantly, to reject that view.

Morrie does not allow "the world to be a given." He shapes his world, refuses to hand over the reins—even to disability or death. He tells us "When we have an injury to the body, we tend to think it's an injury to the self. But it was very important for me to make clear to myself that my body is only part of who I am. We are much greater than the sum of our physical parts" (Schwartz 14-15). Morrie makes a choice, perhaps "the" choice, to live every moment his body dies. He recognizes that he is more than his disease that ravages, as I am more than my red face. Even if I cannot control my red-faced response, I *can* choose to control my reaction to it. Even if I can't control other's discomfort, I can choose, like Morrie, to accept and acknowledge it without shame. I have a much easier choice than Morrie—the choice of a red face.

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