



Why Do I Not Like Me?

Sociological Self-Reflections on Weight Issues and the American Culture

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Abstract: Back home in the Philippines I was very active and I was always playing outside with my friends. We would explore the seas and its inhabitants by jumping from corals to corals; the sea was practically my backyard back when I was a kid. We would swim in the sea every chance we got; and we would play whatever game there was to play outside. And because of these activities weight was never such a big issue to me. I loved being outside when I was young, but when I immigrated to the U.S. about 11 years ago I was confined to the house we were staying at. My parents would not let me out since it was such a different place for us. I also didn't want to go out because I had no reason to and because I didn't know any other kids that were willing to play with me. Therefore, I stayed at home watching TV and eating whatever there was I could find in the fridge. I turned to sweets such as ice cream, chocolate, cake, etc., as a form of comfort. I substituted my old friends in the Philippines for food here. In this essay I explore how the American culture, media, and consumerism influenced my self-perception and self-esteem surrounding weight issues, and how various micro- and macrosociological theories have helped me to understand and deal with the problem.

Back home in the Philippines I was very active and I was always playing outside with my friends. We would explore the seas and its inhabitants by jumping from corals to corals; the sea was practically my backyard back when I was a kid. We would swim in the sea every chance we got; and we would play whatever game there was to play outside. I could list over a hundred things that I did when I was a kid; but I am not going to. And because of these activities weight was never such a big issue to me.

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young, but when I immigrated to the U.S. about 11 years ago I was confined to the house we were staying at. My parents would not let me out since it was such a different place for us. I also didn't want to go out because I had no reason to and because I didn't know any other kids that were willing to play with me. Therefore, I stayed at home watching TV and eating whatever there was I could find in the fridge. I turned to sweets such as ice cream, chocolate, cake, etc., as a form of comfort. I substituted my old friends in the Philippines for food here.

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It was very hard adjusting to this place for me when I was young. So, after the years since I arrived in the U.S. I started packing on quite a lot of pounds. I never realized this, however, until one of my relatives called me a pig in my dialect. My whole childlike innocence was shattered when I got here. I never knew what a big deal physical appearance was until I was constantly insulted and made fun of most of the time in my family gatherings.

The insults and cruel jokes that I received led me into a state of depression for more than four years. I would always ask myself what was wrong with how I look? Am I really that ugly? Am I really that fat? Am I being punished for looking the way I do? Do I deserve to get hurt like this because I am ugly and fat? These questions and many more were always haunting me throughout the depressed stage of my life. Through the years I grew to believe what everyone else was telling me about myself and I grew to believe that I was deserving of all the pain and agony that was being inflicted upon my soul and my being. Even now the emotional abuse and trauma that I have encountered still lingers within me. I still don't believe that I am attractive enough. I still don't believe that being me is good enough for anyone and for me. I still have a hard time not disliking myself.

I have been like this for so long now that I have taken this part of myself for granted and have perceived it to be a normal part of my life. Now, however, I will question this part of my self. **Phenomenology** encourages us to problematize what we hold to be normal. Phenomenologists would ask us to be strangers to ourselves and our environment so we can better analyze and question our norms. Phenomenologists believe that we take things for granted in our everyday lives and that we are not aware that these things were socially constructed and thus can be changed. In their book, *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (2006), Ruth Wallace and Alison Wolf

state that the "basic proposition [of phenomenology is] that everyday reality is a socially constructed system of ideas that has accumulated over time and is taken for granted by group members" (262). Berger and Luckmann also state that "people continuously create, through their actions and interactions, a shared reality" (Wallace & Wolf 285). This encourages us to question our reality and implies hope by suggesting that we can change it. **Ethnomethodology**, according to Harold Garfinkel who coined the term, studies people's methods of making sense of their everyday activities (Wallace & Wolf, 269). Phenomenology and ethnomethodology are **microsociological** traditions in sociology, exploring one-on-one interactions individual have with one another. Symbolic interaction is another microsociological tradition to which I turn while exploring my issue.

According to Herbert Mead, human beings have a self and that "**the self**" is an active organism that behaves in his or her own way depending on how he or she interprets the behaviors of others towards him or her. The self is the central subject matter studied in **symbolic interactionism**, focusing "on the interaction between a person's internal thoughts and emotions and his or her social behavior" (Wallace & Wolf 205) in the context of the broader interactions he or she has with others. When I gained weight and my relatives' insults started occurring the self that I had when I used to live in the Philippines changed. The issue of my weight and the insults that came with it was so new to me that I interpreted it as something that was wrong with me. I interpreted this problem as my fault and since I interpreted it this way I became depressed.

One of the basic premises of symbolic interactionism is that **the meaning of things arises out of the social interaction one has with one's fellows**. This suggests that the meaning of objects are socially constructed and that the only way one can

knows what the real meaning of something is through interaction with other human beings. I learned through my interactions with my relatives that being fat or overweight means being hideous. The meaning that I learned that was associated with being fat led me to interpret to myself that I was ugly and that it was all my fault. Therefore, I do agree with Sheerin Hosseini's statement that a child's "environment and life experiences... has the power to shape her perception of herself, or her self-esteem" (30). Hosseini was always trying hard to be noticed by her friends and family. She would compare her abilities with her other peers and see that she wasn't better than them. These comparisons, however, led to low self-esteem because she thought that she wasn't good at anything like the other people around her.

Another concept that is part of symbolic interactionism is "**the looking-glass self**," coined by the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. Cooley identifies the three elements of the looking-glass self as "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 & Wolf 203). This is when an individual imagines how he or she appears to others and imagines how others are judging him or her. The feeling that the individual gets is the result of this process. As I continued to gain weight I became very aware of my physical unattractiveness and I started being paranoid and insecure. I worried all the time about how I looked. I would start imagining how other people see me and base on that assumption I would imagine how they would judge me. I imagined that they saw a really fat girl and that they judged me to be unattractive, so I started to feel mortified about how I looked. I realized through media and entertainment that being super skinny was to be attractive and because of these implicit and explicit messages I wanted to be skinny so badly and

hoped that maybe if I became skinny I would be happy too. I agree with Anna Schlosser's point in her article, "My Image Struggles in Capitalist Society," that "our culture has created this unattainable ideal which the majority of women do not resemble at all" (34). Schlosser wrote about the struggle she had to face in society as a woman. She mentioned that as women in a capitalist society we try to live up to an ideal image and when we don't live up to it we suffer consequences such as being ostracized.

Erving Goffman, another important contributor to symbolic interactionism, compared people in society to actors in a theater. This approach to understanding everyday human behavior came to be known as **dramaturgical sociology**. Goffman states that individuals seek to guide and control the impressions that others form about them. He called this **impression management**. Goffman believed that the way an individual manipulates their impression given to others is by distinguishing two regions in their everyday interactions. The **front region** is "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance;" this region is usually conducted in front of an audience. The **back region**, however, "is the place closed to and hidden from the audience where techniques of impression management are practiced" (Wallace & Wolf 239). As I was constantly being picked on I realized that I had to give an impression to my relatives that I was not bothered by their insults. I was afraid to be seen as being unattractive as well as being weak. Before family gatherings I would constantly prepare myself in my bedroom to expect cruel jokes about my weight and I would tell myself to just laugh along with them as well even if I was emotionally in pain due to their comments. By doing this I controlled how my relatives saw me. I made them be-

lieved that I had some strength and was not bothered by their jokes.

However, upon deciding to mask my pain with smiles and laughter I was hurting myself even more internally. I became anxious when it came to losing a lot of weight that I began to inhibit a minor event of eating disorder. It wasn't as extreme as stated in M.D.'s article "Body Image: A Clouded Reality" where she talked about her illness, anorexia nervosa; however I can still relate to it because she struggle with her image. M.D. wanted to be accepted in our society, and she thought that being skinny was a big factor in that societal acceptance. Because everyone complimented how she looked all the time she continued to suppress her hunger in order to keep her image in society so that she can be adored all the time. One year in my high school life I also decided not to eat except once a day. I was doing this for a year and I lost about 30 pounds. I felt sort of better about how I looked but it still wasn't enough for me. I wasn't happy still. As M.D. stated she felt as though she was in control when she wasn't eating and that's how I felt too. This feeling was probably one of the main factors that make anorexics go on with their disorders. I didn't continue with this method because I felt as if it wasn't working faster for me so I turned to diet pills and other dietary methods and products for a few years.

It is amazing to me how our society implicitly and explicitly gives us the message that physical attractiveness is the basis for being human and one of the big factors that many of us base our physical appearance on is our weight. Our media tells us that being skinny is the ideal and coveted weight by constantly showing us through music videos, movies, games, magazines, etc., women who are really skinny. The models depicted on these media outlets are symbols of what is attractive in our society. This technique that our media chooses reminded me of a point brought up by Mar-

nia Lazreg on March 27th during the fourth annual Social Theory Forum held at UMass Boston. Lazreg stated that colonialism was a system that was based on violence. She stated that the techniques for obedience to colonialism are symbols, sounds, music and pain. These techniques are clearly apparent in our culture especially throughout the media manipulating our generation. She also states that colonialism has different effects on different individuals. This also goes to explain why some in our society accept the idea of skinny being part of an ideal beauty and why some are fighting against this idea stating that there shouldn't be a particular ideal body type that women should be held up to. Part of America's colonialism was to define masculinity and femininity and its definitions are conveyed constantly on our television screens. Even though it is seen to be accepted for women to be part of the workforce in our economy, we are still held to be "nuclear objects and desires, you know, 'dishes' and 'bombshells'" (Gordon 12). We would like to believe that we all are equal in our society, but how can we even believe this if the media constantly favors "patriarchal paternalism" (Gordon 12). Author and sociologist Avery Gordon sees the world to be hard for women because they live in a society that favors men. Even though women have fought to be seen as beings equal to men they cannot escape the perspective that many hold against them such as being attractive.

Obsessing about how attractive I look and about my weight is an evidence of my participation in our patriarchal society. It is therefore important that I study the issues I have with my self image on a **macrosociological** level as well, which concerns the larger picture of social roles and social structures shaping our everyday lives. C. Wright Mills, in his book about the **sociological imagination** (1959), suggested that there is a connection between the macro and micro social processes, and therefore

our sociologies should take their interrelation into account. Exploring the causes of my distorted image through both macro and micro lenses is important. In the film *Matrix*, Neo chose the red pill to uncover the truth of his problems. Neo felt that there was something wrong with his world and he wanted answers to questions he had about this realization. He knew that his life was being affected by the world around him. Just like Neo I realize that my personal problems are affected by society at large. I want to know why most of us, including me, have this distorted self-image, one that makes us live in a fake, yet real, world of unattainable beauty ideals.

It seems that I have **internalized**, that is, accepted as **objectively factual** others' social values and ideals in society as part of my own personality. I have come to believe that being overweight is very unattractive, a notion which is socially constructed by others in society. Using Berger and Luckmann's concept of **objectivation**, it seems such values and norms had already become objectivated and established long before I arrived on the scene. Ever since I came to the U.S., in particular, I started to realize that reaching the ideal physical body was a big part of American life; therefore, watching your weight has become a common behavioral pattern and getting to that ideal is wrongly thought to be attainable by all Americans. Our **subjective realities** have thus become part of the larger socially constructed realities pertaining to unattainable beauty standards. The concept of "subjective realities" is one that helps point to why I became obsessed with the ideal body type. It had come to mean a lot for me to become skinny in order for me to be happy. This reality also offered me the hope that if I became skinny my relatives would stop picking on me. I believed that if I became skinny I would become socially attractive and therefore become socially accepted by everyone. People would want to interact and become friends with me more. Accord-

ing to **Social Exchange Theory** social interaction is an exchange for tangible or intangible goods and services, which mean that being skinny, a tangible good to society, can bring in more social acceptance and friendships during my interaction with others. To attain such intangible good as social acceptance, then, it would be necessary to **assimilate** into the American way of life. I tried to assimilate as fast as I could during my high school years by not eating for a whole year and by taking diet pills to lose weight.

Studying the micro and macro perspectives empowers me to act like the man in *Twelve Angry Men* who was the only one who said not guilty in the beginning. He was questioning the evidence that was presented to the jurors and questioning the held beliefs of the witnesses. He was courageous enough to problematize the reality that was given to him by the prosecutor and witnesses. And here I am problematizing an internalized view of myself which I have come to believe to be part of me. I am now even more aware that I can escape from the negative reality that I have made for myself and that society has encouraged.

I find that a way for me to escape these self-destructive thoughts of myself is to look at the society that I live in and question it. A macrosociological perspective that could help explain why I obsess about my weight and self-image is **conflict theory**. Conflict theorists see the world as an arena where people in different groups or category fight for power (Wallace & Wolf 68). According to Randall Collins, a conflict theorist, "there are certain goods...that people will pursue in all societies... [He also assumes] that people have certain basic interests wherever they live and that they will act accordingly [in order to achieve those interests]" (Wallace & Wolf 139). The **goods** that Collins was talking about were wealth, power, and prestige. Being a woman in a patriarchal, capitalist society I come to realize that in order for women to have power

they would have to be not only smart and successful but more importantly attractive. I saw that being smart and successful were factors that one could attain through hard work and effort. So those elements of power didn't really concern me as much as the one about being attractive. As a woman who does not believe in cosmetic surgery, I had no option to achieve attractiveness. I saw that my weight was one of the major things that was holding me back from looking attractive and therefore also holding me back from attaining power. Like many other women in our society, being skinny was a basic interest that I had to achieve so I could attain some power in society. Therefore, I acted according to this perceived necessity by dieting through the methods of pills and disordered eating habits. According to a recent study, "over half the females between the ages of 18-25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat" (Gaesser 1996). Just from that statement it is apparent that in our society women realize that being fat is not valued in our society. They fear being fat so much that they would rather die than live in a fat body.

Randall Collins argued that the more "**mutual surveillance**---[that is,] the more people are in the physical presence of others---the more they accept the culture of the group and expect precise conformity in others;" this is where "automatic, mutual reinforcing nonverbal sequences will develop" (Wallace & Wolf 151). When I first came to America I lived with my family and with my relatives in a small house. There were many of us so I was constantly in the presence of others who were already exposed to the American culture. I tended to accept the culture of the group that I was living in because I was always in contact with them. Through the culture that I was exposed to in the house I lived in I saw that being overweight or fat was unacceptable and a target for insults. Attacking me with insults was almost automatic to them. Eventually, they did not even need to try to

say anything to hurt my feelings. All it took was my imagining them doing so. As I continued to gain weight during my adolescent years I came to internalize the nonverbal insults that my relatives were always giving me. It was hard to ignore so I always battled with myself and my weight. Being laughed at was one of the "nonverbal sequence" that I always faced continuously. It traumatized me so much that even now when I hear people laugh behind me or in front of me, even though I do not know what they are talking about, I cringe because I fear that they are laughing at me because I am still not as skinny as they hope for me to be. Collins adds that "**the stronger the emotional arousal, the more real and unquestioned the meanings of the symbols people think about**" (Wallace & Wolf 151). Since I was constantly being laughed at by my relatives I became emotionally aroused by it and concluded that laughter is a nonverbal action that people make when they make fun of me or other fat people. This is the reason why I become paranoid even now when people laugh. This symbol of laughter became so real to me that I do not even consider that people might be laughing because of something else other than me and what I look like.

The **Frankfurt School** is another sociological tradition in conflict theory. Theorists in this tradition analyzed society with two propositions. They proposed that "**people's ideas are a product of the society in which they live**" and that "**intellectuals should maintain a critical attitude toward their own work**" (Wallace & Wolf 102). Adorno, a conflict theorist, and his colleagues criticized popular culture. They believed that popular culture manipulates the people who live in it. They attacked "**popular music for its standardization, for distracting people and making them passive, and therefore strengthening the current social order**" (Wallace & Wolf 105). The idea that being skinny is an attainable beauty ideal has always been promoted by our popular

culture. When the word supermodel is mentioned everyone automatically thinks of pretty, very skinny models. The reason why this is automatic is because we are always bombarded with images of skinny models in magazines and other forms of media. Weight is such a growing concern for women and girls nowadays that “42% of 1st-3rd grade girls want to be thinner” (Collins 1991) and that “46% of 9-11 year olds are ‘sometimes’ or ‘very often’ on diets” (Gustafson-Larson & Terry 1992). The media is affecting younger women even more now because they look to popular media for what is acceptable in our society. Major influences on them are music video, popular music artists, and celebrities. Most of the women musicians and celebrities they look up to are skinny and since the media always portray them to be beautiful, little girls just want to be like them. My battle with my weight became hard due to our popular media. Like many girls I saw that skinny women were praised by the media outlets, such as television, magazines and radios. It seemed to me that our society prefers women this way and that if you are not as skinny as your idol then you are not one of the women that society admires and therefore it seems that you’re worth nothing to society. Being fat is such a fear in our society that almost all popular media advertise diet pills and other diet methods. A recent study showed that “the diet and diet related industry is 50 billion dollar a year enterprise” (Garner & Wooley 1991).

The diet industry has been feeding off of other people’s misery by promising consumers that their products would make them happy because they could make them thin enough for our society to accept them. After watching the movie *Affluenza* I have come to realize why the diet industry makes billions of dollars. The film portrayed how Americans are consumer addicts and that because of it many Americans are in debt. This necessity to

consume all the time comes from a few factors such as the need to have new things constantly; the need to look good; and the need to be happy. What many American consumers don’t know is that their massive consumption does not truly make them happy. The rush that they feel after buying certain goods is only temporary and their debt will only continue to go up. And for those who feel the need to be thin in order to be happy goes to the diet pills or other diet methods that they see on TV or other media outlets so that they could be socially accepted. Since many Americans desire to lose weight they compete in buying the latest diet pill or weight loss video that are advertised to them. They would try hard to lose weight fast so that they can feel happier. They believe so strongly that these industries are trying to help them when in fact what they are trying to do is get their money. And many people fall into this superficial need. I was one of them.

Like many American consumers I thought that certain material goods would make me happy and that looking good is an important attribute to have if you want to be part of the American life. For many years I struggled to be happy in this society. I have looked for many ways to win the battle with my weight. I tried diet pills and not eating. These methods worked but only temporarily and therefore the happiness that I was trying to achieve was never accomplished. Through these failed trials I also found that I wasn’t truly happy when I lost some weight. I was still beating myself up. And I was still crying myself to sleep at night. It took me a while to figure out that what I wanted the most was to be happy with what I look but to be happy with myself. Throughout my emotional trauma during childhood, I learned not to love myself for who I truly am and to not see myself as a human being.

It was hard for me to learn to love myself. I have trained myself for so long to hate who I was that loving me became so

difficult. However, I did not stop trying because I knew that the first step for me to become truly happy in the life is to learn to love and accept myself. Through **role-taking** and putting myself in others' shoes, I am coming to understand why people who are happy are happy, and I realize that they are happy not because they are slim. They are happy because deep within themselves they love who they are. And most importantly they accept their flaws.

I had some difficulty accepting my flaws and I wasn't surprised that this was so. I finally decided that I need to seek help from a therapist to learn to forgive myself and to learn to accept who I am and be content in the body that I live in. Even now, sometimes it is difficult for me to accept a few flaws that I see about myself but I have come to realize that loving me is an ongoing process. Ever since I started therapy my self-esteem has gone up and I hold my head up high more often than a few years ago.

Tuesdays with Morrie, both the film and the book, confirmed what I believed to be true about life. I especially could relate to one of Morrie Schwartz's sayings. He said, "Money is not a substitute for tenderness, and power is not a substitute for tenderness. I can tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feelings you are looking for, no matter how much of them you have." I saw thinness as a source of power so I thought that by achieving it I would substitute my self-hatred with happiness and tenderness. It dawned on me, after meeting people who are better looking than I or had more goods than I, that these people are not always happy. They just look like they are. I saw that even though they have the things that many people want they still are looking for something and I concluded that what they are looking for is love, not just love for themselves but love from other people that surrounds them. I have devoted myself in love, particularly the love for who I am be-

cause I know that in the end I will not measure my life with wealth that I acquired or the methods I chose to lose weight. I know that I will only prosper when I give love to me and to others around me.

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