Socialization and Identity Essay
Quantifying Identity: Self-Reflection in the Checkout Line

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While many people have helped shape my identity and sense of self, I cannot think of anyone more qualifying to write about than my mother, and how she has molded me into the person I am today. I have now lived without mother longer than I ever lived with her. She has been dead now eighteen years, and died when I was only thirteen years old. Even in my mother’s absence, I find her to be a source of encouragement. While her absence continues to bring me grief, I can reflect on the short life she had and what we shared together which has constantly given me insights as to how utterly amazing she was and how she plays a significant role, still, in who I am today. “According to theories of Mead and Cooley, we are constantly engaged in internal self evaluation based on our ideas about what we think others expect of us” (O’Brien 2011:108). In Cooley’s theory “The Looking-Glass Self” he establishes that the perceived judgment of others on us mean more when we consider that person significant in our lives. “This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, make all the difference with our feeling” (Cooley 2011:126). That significant person in my life is my mom. While I always realized that my mother has had a major influence in my life and was no doubt instrumental in the fostering of my identity—this was not fully realized until I went through the process of my own “identity work”(which is ongoing) and through social interactions with others, that I truly developed my own self-concept. I consider myself to be a compassionate, happy, healthy, quick-witted, conscientious, critical, and resilient person. I value close friendships and quality of life—and I value quality of life almost above all other things, not just for myself but for others as well. This is what motivates me.

I sometimes have a hard time separating what the generalized other thinks about me with how I view myself or how my mother—someone very significant to me, views and values me. I
often use the generalized other when trying to evaluate myself. The generalized other are our internalized social expectations—“The images and ideals you hold in your mind about proper behavior that represent the attitudes and values of your culture” (O’Brien 2011:111). What my mother or I would value in me is not exactly quantifiable. My wit, my compassion, and my resiliency do not necessarily raise my status in the world or garner me more earning power. As long as I am happy and healthy, I have no doubt that my mother would be proud of me. However, when I do internal self-reflection, I start by trying to quantify my success and this is where the problem lies. I am left feeling raw and gutted with nothing to show for it--no degree, no career, no marriage, and no house payment. What is even more puzzling is that I do not even want all these markers of success (some but not all) and yet, I am left feeling like I have somehow disappointed those around me. It is almost as if I had forgotten I am an independent woman, working and going to college full-time with many redeeming qualities.

It took a seemingly inconsequential interaction to realize how significant and how much my mother’s perceptions of me really mattered. Roughly seven years ago I was cashiering at the Co-op on Mother’s Day, a day I usually dread because one customer after the other asks if I have called my mother yet, asks what my Mother’s Day plans are, or asks if I bought flowers for my mother. I don’t blame them. This is completely normal and polite conversation in the costumer service world akin to asking someone what they are doing for any holiday it might be. I generally politely respond with “I haven’t called” or “no plans” and we move on in conversation and finish the transaction. I imagined that customers just assumed I was not very personable or that I was rude, perhaps both. “Cooley made an important distinction in this process: We are not equally sensitive or persuaded by the views of everyone we encounter” (O’Brien 2011:113). I was not much bothered by the fact that this is probably how they perceived me. Sometimes I felt guilty
and considered lying about my prospective Mother’s Day plans so I would not come off as rude. This Mother’s Day went a little differently.

A mother of two came through my line with her children, who were maybe four and five. As everyone else did, she asked if I had called my mom, and I gave my usual “haven’t called” response. She inquired further, remarking that it was late in the day and that I better call my mother to let her know how much I appreciate her. I never do this but her prodding led me to inform her that my mother had died many years ago but that I always think of her. She then said to me “You are brave and so beautiful, and your mother would be very proud of you. May I give you hug?” Uncharacteristically, I told her she could (I never let customers touch me). I came out from behind the register for what I thought would be a quick hug and she hugged me in front of her children and the other patrons waiting and I completely broke down. I sobbed in this woman’s arms that knew nothing about me, except that my mother had died. She extended her motherly love in a way that only a mother could. I had to close down my lane and step away. I was completely embarrassed that I had reacted this way. I did not expect it but her sincerity and her tenderness caught me off guard. I imagined this mother did not just see me as a cashier but that she saw me as someone who could have been her own daughter in a different life and she responded as such. I was beside myself, I felt significant and loved (by a stranger no less). “The self is a social construction that takes shape through interaction—interaction outwardly with others and, especially, internally through the conversations we have with ourselves about those interactions” (O’Brien 2011:111). With this in mind, I was taken aback by this mother of two. She seemed so genuine with her words and her actions. Yet there was this nagging voice in my head thereafter. I spent the rest of the day wondering—would my mother be proud of me?
This story is a long segue into the fact that it was the first time I very consciously and actively started to think about the way in which my mom viewed me or rather—would have viewed me, were she still alive. My mother was a cheerful, energetic, diligent, and loving person who was diagnosed with cancer when I was seven and fought a long battle; succumbing to her inevitable death by the time I turned thirteen. She was her best self more often than it was reasonable for any human to be. An admirable quality I cannot necessarily say I possess myself, though I try. During her time of illness I took on more statuses. I was not only my mother’s daughter but by the time I was eleven, I was her caretaker as well. I fulfilled these roles conscientiously. She had become so ill that she depended on me for even her most basic needs. O’Brien explains that “statuses” are a position a person occupies at any given time and “roles” are the behaviors associated with that status (2011:114). With my older siblings not living at home anymore, it was for the most part, just my mom and me. I fed her, bathed her, and lay in bed next to her while she moaned in pain because at times, I did not know what else to do. If she was well enough, we watched our favorite shows together or I brought her outside in the wheelchair to get some fresh air and sunshine. I did well in school and was a good kid. “When we become socialized into a role, we learn how to perform in ways that are consistent with the situation or event associated with that role” (O’Brien 2011:178). During this time in my life I felt that I dutifully fulfilled my role. In hindsight, I realize my mother would be very proud of me. I imagined she saw me as a sensitive, responsible, and mature child, who took on more than the average kid. Her imagined perception of me led me to feel valued, appreciated and loved.

At the time, of what I will deem the “register-hugging incident,” I was in my early twenties. I had lost sight of the experiences and activities that confirmed my self-concept. I attributed my low self esteem and how I lost sight of my self-concept, to the fact that I was not
successful in any conventional sense: I did not have a degree, I was not married, I had no children, I did not own a car or a home, I did not have a career, I had no talents to speak of, musically, artistically, athletically—I did not even graduate high school in the conventional sense, and instead, I tested out. I had a fairly negative self-image due to depression, and I did not view myself as a successful or deserving person. In O’Brien’s “Learning the Script: Socialization” she explains that we internalize society. By this, she means we learn norms, values, and cultural rules that are characteristic of our society. These social expectations structure the ways in which we behave and are a way in which we garner consistent social interactions (2011:174-175). O’Brien further explores how we internalize society by noting that “We pay attention to experiences and activities that confirm our self-concept” (2011:175). There were no milestones or markers that society would recognize. These markers were part of an internalized social attitude that I associated with what it meant to be successful and when the mother of two told me, among other things, “your mother would be proud of you,” I really had to dig deep and do some identity work. Who was I? And why would my mother, or anyone for that matter, be proud of me?

I had to cast aside how I internalized society and reorganize my self-concept and give recognition to the parts of myself that not only had value to me but also carried value to others who were significant to me—specifically my mother, in this case. I have overcome many obstacles in my life, including but not limited to, the death of my mother. Given my past and present circumstances, I can confidently say yes, my mother would be proud of me. Without her even knowing it, I cannot deny that the woman who hugged me in the checkout line on Mother’s Day aided me in this process. In my own experiences, I have found that it is seemingly the smallest gestures that have had the greatest impact. On that day, it was a hug.
REFERENCES

