
The Denial of Self and Belonging: Exploring Disability Identity and Society Using Classical Sociological Theory

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ABSTRACT

Researchers of disability studies define *disability identity* as intertwining disability with a sense of connection to the disability community. However, with continued social and spatial barriers, people with disabilities may not always form a *disability identity*, resulting in issues that may span throughout the lifespan, ranging from ostracization, a decline in psychological wellness, and difficulties collectively pushing back against stigma. As contemporary academia and society expand their documentation of the challenging experiences people with disabilities undergo regarding identity formation and community belonging, it poses a unique opportunity to explore the nature of disability during modern social analysis. Therefore, outlining Harriet Martineau's work as a deaf female social analyst presents space to examine George Herbert Mead's hope for a "universal society" critically through the insights of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and W.E.B. Du Bois to address how to create a society that is equitable and diverse.

From a social analytical perspective, people's humanity lies in the ability to engage in creative labor, create identity, and develop a sense of belonging to a community (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). However, what are the outcomes for people who struggle to experience these developments? In the contemporary era, academia and society have expanded their documentation of the challenging experiences people with disabilities undergo regarding identity formation and community belonging. For instance, Muller (2021) found that as primary and secondary educational spaces failed to normalize disability in the teaching pedagogy (reflecting a disinterest in disability within the social epistemology), children with disabilities did not have adults with disabilities to model after or learn language relevant to their lived experiences. Expectedly, Muller's (2021) participants expressed shared experiences of schools encouraging them to deny their

disabled identity and not create a community with other students with disabilities, suggesting the lack of *disability identity*. Conceptually, researchers understand *disability identity* as “a sense of self that includes one’s disability and feelings of connection to, or solidarity with, the disability community” (Dunn and Burcaw 2013:148). Significantly, the problem of people with disabilities not forming a *disability identity* can translate into more severe issues throughout their lifespan, ranging from a decline in psychological wellness to difficulties collectively pushing back against stigma (Muller 2021). Considering the current state of concern, it raises the need to explore its social analytical beginnings in the era of modernity.

Markedly, Harriet Martineau, a deaf social analyst, explored the difficulties she and other deaf people encountered in developing identity and belonging in her work, *Letters to the Deaf* from 1834. In this writing, she explicates some of the realities regarding the ablest behaviors of society during her lifetime, which often forced herself and other people with disabilities into social isolation and a deteriorating sense of belonging (Bohrer 2003; Naples and Valdez 2020). For instance, she outlined how the adverse reactions she and other deaf people endured when they communicated and utilized assistive technology led to a “willful” social exodus to avoid social faux pas and stigmatization (Naples and Valdez 2020). Once pushed to the outskirts of society, Martineau notes, deaf people also experience a dehumanizing form of interdependence through practices of paternalism (Bohrer 2003). Unfortunately, regardless of her contributions to making sense of the social world in modernity, social analysts of Martineau’s time regularly questioned the reliability and validity of her work, citing that people with disabilities and women could not interact with the social world proactively (Bohrer 2003). They further libeled her character through the outward belief that her rejection of femininity and domesticity led to her neurosis of health (i.e., invalidism) (Bohrer 2003). One outcome of this scrutiny is that her works experience infrequent epistemological discourse compared to other modern social analysts in the contemporary world (Bohrer 2003).

With context about disability and social analysis in the modern and contemporary worlds, it creates a more prominent

concern regarding the stagnant action to address the concerns of people with disabilities, implying and reinforcing their ostracization from identity and community building. As such, their plight leads to questions about the nature of the strained relationship between identity and belonging when holding a marginalized identity and how inquisitively thinking about other modern social analysts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and W.E.B. Du Bois presents concerns about George Herbert Mead's hope for a "universal society."

To begin, Mead used symbolic interactionist methodological approaches to showcase the intrinsically dialectic relationship between the self and society. For instance, he highlighted how the self is created through language to convey how people view themselves as the subject and object when using perceptions others create. Additionally, Mead conceptualized the "play stage" and the "game stage" to explain the development of the self (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). He believed that as children age, they shift from internalizing the attitudes of discrete, disconnected others to simultaneously internalizing the attitudes of multiple others. From the "game stage," Mead coined the term "generalized other" to describe the phenomenon where societies develop general attitudes all ascribe to as people assume their roles and the roles of others (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). However, in applying these concepts to people with disabilities, unique problems arise where they cannot healthily achieve these social developments due to perceived inferiority, which Du Bois notes with "the veil" and "the double-consciousness."

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) explored his conceptualizations of "the veil" (experiences of subjective and objective estrangement) and "double-consciousness" (a separation of self) that Black Americans experienced as a byproduct of colonization, slavery, and segregation in the United States. Though Du Bois created these concepts to discuss race relations, they are universal in design and can apply to various experiences of oppression (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). For instance, by focusing on Du Bois's research question of how those who are "the problem" navigate society, the social analysis of individuals with disabilities reveals their forced separation between their disability and humanity. With the knowledge that

they cannot be disabled and human simultaneously, people with disabilities recognize how they are perceived by the able-bodied world and respond accordingly, as Martineau previously showed. In turn, they experience an increased risk of experiencing estrangement from society and creating a distorted sense of self. Therefore, Du Bois presents a fascinating concern for Mead's theoretical orientation regarding the development of the self. If those who are "the problem" grow up experiencing the use of language and modeling that emphasizes their inferiority and need to interact with the world accordingly, they grow up to become adults who internalize the attitudes of a generalized other who does not value their marginalized identity, increasing the risk of a negative sense of self.

Notably, this micro-level concern culminates into concerns about Mead's macro-level utopian hope, which he called the "universal society." Mead believed that for a "universal society" to exist, people needed to engage in universal discourse, the ability to take on the attitudes of the abstract, distant other, to understand the rippling effect of personal behavior (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). From a speculative approach, this raises the question of whether the distant other is symbolically (not physically) distant, as the "generalized other's" collective sentiments can normalize the dehumanization of those who do not meet social expectations, as shown by Gilman and Martineau.

First, Gilman explored women's experiences with disability (i.e., post-partum depression) within the context of patriarchal rest cures that intensified symptoms, rather than alleviated, in her semiautobiographical work, *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1892. Despite never addressing disability issues overtly, her work touches on how the experience of disability can be intensified by oppression, specifically the intentional practice of denying a person their communicative autonomy due to their marginalized identity (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). Likewise, Martineau noted how she and other deaf people often experienced physician inadequacy due to the latter's reservations about communicating the state of their disability and treatment solutions (Naples and Valdez 2020). Second, another point of interest from Gilman is her 1898 work *Women and Economics*, where her use of the corset metaphor underlines how the patriarchy "chokes"

women into conformity until they internalize their oppression while also fearing liberation (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). As Gilman notes this metaphor extends beyond gender inequality, it quickly finds applicability in Martineau's observations on the creation, internalization, and acceptance of oppressive attitudes towards deafness stemming from popular scientific fields of the time, such as phrenology (Bohrer 2003). Third, though Gilman's exploration of disability ends with *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she and Martineau both highlight the effects of denied power due to oppression.

From Gilman's perspective, women are perceived by their gender first and their humanity second (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). For instance, in *Women and Economics*, Gilman famously analogizes women to domesticated horses as the gendered division of labor forced women into the economic dependency of men due to the former's domestic labor generating no compensation. Adding to this, Martineau expands the thought process by exploring how deaf people are also forced to exist within the confines of domesticity but are denied gendered expectations as a reflection of their believed biopsychological and intellectual limitations (Bohrer 2003). Notably, Martineau offers substance to Gilman's understanding of Social Darwinism as the latter attempts to redefine who is the fittest to survive based on biological distinctions to generate social equity, while the former highlights the impact of focusing on biological distinctions on the lived experiences of people with disabilities. To Gilman, gender denied people their humanity. To Martineau, disability denied people their gender and humanity.

Considering the insights of Gilman and Martineau, here lies a unique concern for Mead's vision of society; he did not account for marginalized identities forgotten through intentional practices of minimizing language. Instead, he focused on the notion that despite people experiencing a natural inclination to engage in self-protective and self-preservationist behaviors, they would realize that engaging in pro-social activities (e.g., cooperation) would allow them to maximize their desires (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). Additionally, he believed that as society organizes to reach universality, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts will arise and find resolution through reconstructions and

modifications made through communication. Further, his expectations for conflict resolution do not account for power dynamics, which creates the invisibilization of language to describe the experiences of marginalized individuals and can prevent successful communication. Although Mead held an optimistic perspective of conflict as a symbolic interactionist, he did not explore the nature of resolving power imbalances (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). Therefore, a final exploration of Du Bois's theoretical orientation offers space to explore the work needed to create Mead's "universal society."

Du Bois argued in his essay *The Souls of White Folks* from 1910 that the inability to move past conflict stems from the privileged not realizing their privileged consciousness (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). Moreover, he presented the issue that regardless of historically marginalized people's attempts to claim their humanity, conscious and unconscious processes of dehumanization will ensure the preservation of their lower value, ensuring the privileged can continue their practices of exploitation and profit. Using this perspective, Du Bois presents a critical concern for Mead's conceptualization of a "universal society," especially in the context of disability. Specifically, Mead was a white, non-disabled man alive during the early stages of Reconstruction U.S. (Edles and Appelrouth 2021), which raises a positionality question about whether his conceptualization of a "universal society" prioritizes assimilating people into the white, Western world or offers dignity, equity, and inclusivity for diversity. Despite the inability to answer these questions, Du Bois's analysis suggests that developing a "universal society" must be intentionally critical. As social analysis is a byproduct of the human survival skill to predict the behaviors of an environment (Lemert 2021), Du Bois presents one more note about the talents of those experiencing marginalization and its use to build a better society.

Interestingly, Du Bois believed experiences of oppression allow people to develop the "gift of clairvoyance," the ability to recognize the actual operations of society (Edles and Appelrouth 2021). Markedly, this gift is highlighted in the writings of Martineau (Naples and Valdez 2020) as she details how people with disabilities describe the turbulence experienced in

developing a sense of self and belonging to society at a nuance other social analysis did not fully address at the time. Alongside this clairvoyance, Du Bois advocated for the privileged to become aware of their consciousness and its impact on historically marginalized individuals and communities. Principally, achieving these ends requires a willingness to intentionally incorporate people of marginalized identities by increasing the value of their “gift of clairvoyance” to ensure people reevaluate the nature of power dynamics to move towards self-actualization, community advancement, and the merging of previously separated identities.

For contemporary examples of attempts to shift epistemological power imbalances throughout the life course, there is a growing demand for special education to update their teaching pedagogy to become more pro-disability and foster students’ disability identities (Muller 2021). Scholars highlight the importance of institutions of higher education providing queer and disabled students with online and in-person venues to improve their community building and student development experiences as they become adults (Miller 2017). Tangibly, strikes led by the 2022 University of California graduate students strove to address obstacles disabled graduate students experienced in their media and bargaining stances (Salanga 2022). Additionally, disabled parents from Ohio made national news as they challenged state laws allowing the use of disability for family courts to remove a child (Staver 2022). Their activism reached fruition in 2023 as Ohio passed SB 202, which not only ended the use of parental disability as the sole determinant to limit or deny parental/custodial rights but emphasized the right for parents to access supportive services deemed reasonable and necessary (Szilagy 2023).

Finally, in comparing cultural differences from Martineau’s deaf experience during the age of modernity to the contemporary world, Padden and Humphries (1988) highlight the distinguishment between “lowercase deaf” and “uppercase Deaf.” Specifically, “lowercase deaf” refers to the inability to hear due to an audiological condition, while “uppercase Deaf” refers to the deaf people who use sign language as their shared, inherited language and share a culture that generates their sentiments about themselves and relationships with society at large. This relates to

current deaf culture, where deaf individuals experience more opportunities to generate their Deaf identity by attending Schools for the Deaf, attending Deaf-friendly universities (e.g., Gallaudet University and California State University, Northridge), and associating with resource and community-building agencies (e.g., Greater Los Angeles Agency on Deafness).

So, while Mead's theoretical expectation for a "universal society" has not yet come to fruition, work to normalize universal discourse through classical influences from Martineau, Du Bois, and Gilman generates hope for people with disabilities (and people of other marginalized identities) to participate in society authentically. Moreover, the evaluation of classical ontology emphasizes the importance of contemporary developments about identity and society. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins's (1986:118) *Black Feminist Thought* argues that the theoretical understandings of society hold more depth and complexity when they originate from individuals whose standpoint exists at the intersections of oppression, who she calls the "outsiders within." For "outsiders within," their status allows them to analyze society from a lens that often goes disregarded by those who do not hold the same standpoint, and to trust the validity of their personal and cultural epistemologies to analyze and solve social problems. Unsurprisingly, the themes within Collins's work paradigmatically align with the works from modern sociology as she intertwines their scholarship and her positionality to further the value of epistemological heterogeneity in sociological thought and equitable societal formation.

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