Identity, Difference, and Scholarly Narrative:
Redefining a Poor, White Trash Childhood

By Cynthia I. Gerstl-Pepin

When I was growing up, I spent a lot of time staring at my reflection in the mirror. I guess I thought that if I stared long enough, I might be able to see some clue as to who I was and who other people saw when they looked at me. No matter how hard I stared, though, all I really ever saw was someone trying to figure out who she was. Who was the image that I saw staring back at me? I did not know. My experiences, at home and school, were telling me that I was perceived as being somehow "different," and I slowly became aware, at a very young age, that appearances were important to people. When someone saw me in a negative way it affected me internally — I felt worthless. They seemed to see "different" people within me even though, when I stared at my reflection, I saw that I resided in one body.

In this paper I will explore my experiences growing up of being defined as "different" due to my class background. I use the term "difference" here to mean how the concept of the "other" is defined and under-

Cynthia I. Gerstl-Pepin is an assistant professor with the Department of Educational Studies and Educational Leadership of the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.

stood in our society. The "other" in this instance are individuals or groups who have existed on the margins of our society; those whose concerns and perspectives have been shrouded in "silence," left out of the discourse of the dominant culture. By exploring how the experiences of my home life, teachers and school organizations collided to designate me as "different " on many levels, I will attempt to show how conflicting internalized conceptions of self can develop. This interaction was intersubjective, in the sense that my physical body did not change but my subjective perceptions together with the subjective perceptions of others saw different people within me.

My narrative exploration owes a great debt to a body of theory known as the sociology of knowledge, which posits that society and the interactions among people are social constructions, i.e. that reality is created by people through interaction with each other (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Dant, 1991; Wexler, 1995). For this paper, I will make the assertion that beyond small but obvious physical variations, people are not born with "differences," and that the assertion of "difference" can be a negative and thus, dangerous construction. Specifically I will examine how my "difference" was defined and continued to be redefined as I developed; and how negative designations as "different" were externally and internally stigmatizing.

I hope that by sharing my story others who may have had similar experiences will not feel alone or at fault for things that happened in their life. I also hope that others who may have never felt the pain that I felt growing up will be able to understand a little better how poverty and a dysfunctional family can affect a person. Relying on memory is not an exact representation. Instead, my process of reflection will be a piecing together of events from my past that have contributed to my identity formation. It is interwoven with theory as well as memory. This will be predicated on the assumption that identity is socially constructed, created in the process of interaction between individuals. By sharing my story, I hope to offer a critique of the current hierarchical structure of societal organization which requires that some succeed while others fail.

Postmodern/Feminist Conceptions of "Difference"

I have chosen to use narrative form because of the current interest in uncovering personal experiences of marginalization evidenced in the work of Noddings and Witherell (1991) and others (Beverley, 2000; Pfeil, 1994; Phillips, 1993; Pignatelli & Pflaum, 1994; Stone, 1995). This perspective helps ground current theoretical but abstract understandings of "difference" within individual experience. Specifically, narrative provides a way uncovering how everyday experiences affect the formation of self.

> Narrative ways of knowing have been devalued in Western science, precisely because of their serendipitous ability to integrate the seemingly paradoxical. The power of

> narrative is that it allows the individual to continually locate and relocate his or her own voice within a social and cultural context. (Brody, 1991, p.263)

Narrative analysis acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and values the perspectives of individuals. Traditional research epistemology (theory of knowledge) historically marginalized the experiences of those not fitting white, elite male norms such as women, the poor, persons of color, and persons of nontraditional sexual orientations by not including or valuing their "ways of knowing" (Collins, 1990; Gamson, 2000). Narrative research provides a way of addressing postmodern concerns with oppressive research epistemologies by valuing individual subjective experiences.

Narrative analysis is grounded in postmodern approaches that argue that "differences" need to be studied and valued; that the modern attempts at constructing grand theory rest on the assumption of that grouping and categorizing people according to assumptions of sameness is necessary. Postmodernists conclude that this positivistic belief is dangerous because it imposes structure on society and in turn makes difference problematic. Stone (1994) defines the postmodern reformulation of "difference":

> Difference in viewpoint means that there is no move towards consonance, no "minority," or merely marginalized view. All opinions, ideas, and even "facts of matter" remain marginal, partial, ambiguous and tentative. And, they remain all that there is. (p.60)

In postmodern thought, "difference" becomes the norm, instead of aberrant.

My use of narrative analysis is also a response to the critique that postmodern theorists lack a grounding in the experiences of those who have experienced life on the margins of society. As Rocco (1990) notes:

> The notions of 'difference,' of 'plurality' and of the 'other' remain primarily abstractions, ungrounded in the structure of everyday life of those 'others' on the margins of dominant society. As they are conceptualized now, these terms function as 'sliding signifiers', with no stable content or empirical reference. The pluralism that is constitutive of reality is situated above the realities of power and privilege. (p. 229)

In addition to offering a grounded definition of "difference" through my own narrative, I will also show how conceptions of "difference" need to be reconceptualized in a way that celebrates diversity.

Constructed as "Different"-Negative

My earliest memorable experience of feeling "different" occurred in the second grade. The students in my school were from distinct neighborhoods. Some were middle- and upper-middle class and others were working-class and working poor. I was an only child that lived with her mother in a cramped one-bedroom apartment. We had very little money since my mother had trouble holding a regular job. She

did everything from being a waitress, office assistant, to serving samples in grocery stores. My mother was an alcoholic and consequently she was very distant and took little interest in my schooling. We didn't always have a lot of food in the refrigerator but we had no shortage of liquor bottles on the kitchen counter. Every time I turned on the kitchen light I prepared myself for throngs of cockroaches scurrying around. I never knew my father but I always hoped that he would show up one day and rescue me from my life. It wasn't until I was about 10 that I learned he was dead and it wasn't until much later that I learned he had impregnated my mother and then married another woman. He never set eyes upon me or claimed me as his own as far as I know. I would come to think of myself as an unwanted bastard girl.

At school we were always supposed to bring in things for show-and-tell. I don't really remember what I brought, and perhaps that is significant in and of itself, but I distinctly remember what another student brought in one day. It was a camera that she had made with her mother. I was amazed, first of all, that her mother had taken the time to help her, and second of all, that she had made a camera, something that I thought as a second-grader was impossible. The incident made me feel very inadequate, since my mother never asked me about school and she never offered to do anything with me. I felt that there was something wrong with me, that I was "different" from this other girl with her homemade camera and beautiful pictures. I was less. She was better. This curricular/institutional tradition of show-and-tell can be what I will term a "difference" identifier. My experience was that it often becomes a competition to see who can procure the most interesting item. Children with little money or home support, such as myself, may find it difficult to locate interesting items and thus compete.

At the time I don't think I had any conception of class differences until I went to play at another girl's home and I saw that she had her own room and lived in a lovely house. While I wished at the time that I could live in such a nice house, I was not bothered by the difference until the girl came to play at my house. She was noticeably disgusted by our apartment, couldn't wait to leave and she never invited me over again. I realized early that the world was not an equal place.

My next most memorable experience with "difference" occurred later, in the fourth grade. At the time my mother worked late at night as a waitress and had trouble getting me to school on time. I was constantly late and my teacher got angrier with me each passing day. Other than my lateness, I am not sure why the teacher did not like me. Perhaps it was my clothes which were often mismatched. Perhaps it was my hair which often needed brushing. Perhaps it was my cleanliness since I did not take regular baths. Perhaps it was that I was quiet and introverted. Perhaps it was merely that I did not fit the norms of what she expected from her successful students-mostly two parent families who lived in the right neighborhood and were involved in school. One day I was told that I was going to be going to another class. At the time I suspected that my teacher was happy to see me go. The class I went to was filled with kids in different grade-levels from all over the school. I now know that it was

a special education classroom. My new teacher was wonderful. She brought rabbits into class and she wanted us to put on a play for Thanksgiving in which I got one of the lead parts. I was so proud of myself on stage and I did not forget any of my lines. I was truly happy with my accomplishment. Soon thereafter, my new teacher told me that I was going back to my regular class. I felt great that I had somehow done something right to be sent back to my regular class. I had accomplished something that meant I no longer had to feel "different" in negative terms.

My feelings were short lived. Upon arriving back at my old class, the teacher, who I felt did not like me, asked me to multiply two double-digit numbers. Since I had only multiplied single numbers before, I started to work the problem incorrectly. The teacher stopped me before I finished and told me that that was enough and that I should go to the other side of the room with the other teacher and group of students. I knew because she did not let me finish the problem that I was going to the side of the room for the students who could not do that problem. I felt that something was lacking within me. I felt that I was somehow worth less than the kids on the other side of the room. And I very much felt that the teacher was not happy to see me. I knew that she did not like me. My feelings of accomplishment disintegrated and disappeared within five minutes of returning to my old classroom.

Again, I was the student that did not get very many positive marks, "Excels," on my report card. Somehow I was less than the other students who would show me the numerous "Excels" on their report cards. My teacher's external designation of me as less than the other students made me internally feel less. In the special education classroom, the teacher saw a girl who could succeed and under her guidance I did. She helped me redefine myself in positive ways. I was no longer "different" in negative terms. The teacher in my regular classroom saw a "different" Cindy, one that was not as good as the other students she taught for reasons not necessarily related to my actual abilities, but to her perceptions that I was "worth less" than her other students.

Redefined as "Different"-Positive

The following year, my mother found out about a government program that would provide assistance so we could move to a cleaner apartment, which meant I would attend fifth grade at a new school. My new school was in a more working class neighborhood. Most kids lived in small houses, so our little one-bedroom duplex did not seem so out of place. Although going to a new school can often be a trying experience, mine was wonderful. The class size was smaller and my new teacher was Mr. Jones, an African-American male, a rarity in an elementary school even today.

Mr. Jones threw open the world of learning that had been partially opened by my special education teacher the previous year. He treated me like someone who could learn. I remember spending an entire lunch hour with him and a few other

students, so that he could teach us long division. Having someone show me how to do it, I picked it up right away. Here was my teacher treating me like an intelligent person. I realized that it was not that I couldn't do it, but that somebody hadn't shown me how. All the students in the class loved him because he seemed to treat each student as though they were "special." Unlike my other classroom in which I sensed which students were valued and which ones were not, this classroom seemed more supportive and caring. I don't remember any of my other teachers' names in elementary school but I will never forget Mr. Jones or the kindness he showed me. My memories of him as a teacher are vibrant — he was energetic and kind to all of his students not those he deemed were worth caring about.

When I looked in the mirror now the same face was staring back at me, but somehow internally I had changed. Although outwardly I was the same person, my teacher saw something else. I was reconstructed, and redefined; a new person emerged, although I was still encased in the same shell as before. In terms of my intelligence, I no longer felt "different" in negative terms. Although I still did not have a father, live in a house, or have a room of my own, at least school did not make me feel like a failure. From that point on until I went to college, externally, in terms of academics I no longer felt "different" in a negative sense.

Internalized and Externalized "Differences" Collide

I learned a very important lesson; that it was very important how people saw you. The same skin covered the same bones, blood and beating heart, and yet to two teachers I was two different people trapped in the same body. Now that my identity at school changed, my identity at home was also redefined. I started to have a voice of my own, and I started to believe that I was intelligent and that I could do something with my life.

This discovery made home a more difficult place to be. My home life became less acceptable and more embarrassing, just as my mother's alcoholism was reaching its peak. I was no longer the silent daughter who blindly followed my mother's constant and suffocating tirades about how I did not measure up — too chubby and disheveled. I started to resist and rebel because I believed that she was the reason that I had been designated "different" in the first place. She showed no interest in my school studies, drank constantly, went through multiple boyfriends, had trouble holding a job, and we were often on welfare. She resented me having friends and often found ways to make me feel guilty for trying to be independent. I decided that I would need to be responsible for myself if I was ever going to go to college. I in turn redefined my home life as "different" in a negative sense. At home I had a negative identity, as a poor overweight awkward girl, and at school, a positive identity, as a smart girl. The economic and cultural (home support for schooling) differences between myself and my peers was very real. Yet, my identity was not singular. My postmodern experiences of difference do not fit neat critical theory analyses about societal inequities. By all

accounts I was supposed to fail since I did not have economic or cultural capital. While I felt different in negative terms, I also managed to be successful in terms of my academic identity.

My next institutional run-in was the following year, in the sixth grade as I started middle school. My mother said that I could get a free lunch at school. I had also gotten them in elementary school but I did not remember anything about having to designate myself as someone receiving a free lunch. That changed in middle school. The first time that I went in the lunch line, the cashier said that I had to always identify myself as receiving a free lunch when I picked up my food. The first time I did it I felt strange, "different." No one else that I knew had to say it when they received their lunch and I felt as though I was being singled out. I was jealous of the students whose parents prepared their lunches for them. I begged my mother to let me make lunch but she said that it was free and that I was going to take advantage of it. Eventually, I stopped eating lunch. I could no longer deal with having any student that was near me look at me funny for not needing to pay. I did not want to be "different" from the other kids; I wanted to fit in. I became obsessed with the popular students at school with their designer clothes, for they certainly never had to identify themselves in the line as recipients of a "free lunch". My first semester, I made the Honor Society where all the popular students hung out. I volunteered to spend my lunch hour selling candy, so it was easy to hide the fact that I was not eating.

The internalized pain of my difference from the fourth grade stayed with me: I had learned the importance of not being perceived as "different." In middle school, the demarcations between successful students and failures were organizationally structured. Grades became another difference identifier. The honor society was the purview of the smart kids. Even though I did not always dress in polo shirts and pressed clothes like the other students in the honor society, I gained entry to their world through my grades. Yet I was still the outsider. I did not live in the same neighborhood as the honor society students, and my experiences from second grade told me what would happen if the other kids knew where I lived. Consequently, outside of school I hung out with kids from my neighborhood but again had few friends.

My scholastic success in school had given me a positive feeling of belonging, but the home life that made me "different" was something that I carried around with me. It is something I still carry around with me today. Many times I have seen the way people look at poor people in the street; with loathing and contempt. I did not want to be looked at in that way, but when I went home those feelings were reinforced by a mother who didn't seem to care, and a small one bedroom apartment crammed with boxes, papers, and collected junk my mother did not want to throw out. When my mother would fight with a boyfriend, leave me at home alone at night, or start fighting with me, the flood gates on my feelings of being valueless would open wide. I became a walking dichotomy: one person at home, another at school. My split identity stayed with me through the years, even through high school, and later in

college, where I felt increasingly different on the inside, and fought harder to appear normal on the outside.

Like middle school, in high school everyone in my college preparatory classes seemed to have two parents and live in a house, so I distanced myself from other students so that they would never come to my house and see my other identity. It was my greatest fear that they would discover that I was a fake, a forgery, that they would see a poor, white trash, bastard girl and seen as "different" in negative terms. Unlike the honors kids who had their own cars, we had a big, old car (filled with trash and newspapers). Sometimes if I had to be driven to school I would beg my mother to drop me off before school so that I would walk the rest of the way. My mother always chastised me for that by saying that I did not think that she was good enough, although I never told her that she was right. I believed that the successful identity that I had carefully constructed would vanish if teachers or students knew what kind of home life I had. I feared that the failure of the fourth grade would emerge to reclaim me. High school was an oppressive space. Although I was considered a "success" by making good grades and being elected as senior class president, I hid who I was and had few friends. I was known simply as the "smart girl." I spent my lunch hours hiding out in the science lab and working on my homework. I rarely went out with classmates or attended after school events. I dealt with feelings of loneliness at home by watching television and escaping into the lives of fictional characters that I watched nightly. I wanted to go to college so badly that I ignored the financial difficulties involved in paying for college. Luckily, I was accepted by a small private college where all financial aid was based on need.

At college and free from my home life for the first time, I still hid my "difference" from the other students. I thought that they were all middle- or upper-middle class (I deduced from their clothes, cars, and money), and had a mother and a father. My internal feelings of "difference" stayed with me, and I continued to hide who I was inside and where I came from. It was not until I developed strong friendships that I began to come to terms with who I was. The love of my friends allowed me to attempt to reconcile my internal and external selves, although, there still remained negative feelings of "difference" that I could not unload. I continued to hide much of my experiences growing up from my friends.

It was not until graduate school, that my internalized "difference" was redefined. I became immersed in feminist literature, which expounded the importance of individual experience. The feminist technique of "consciousness raising," raises and examines the processes by which women's feelings of "difference," the reality of being female in everyday life is constructed. These can be cathartic, as MacKinnon, (1989) notes:

> ...it affirms that there both is and can be another reality for women by doing nothing but examining the current society's deadest ends. Effectively, the process redefines women's feelings of discontent as indigenous to their situation rather than to themselves as crazy, maladjusted, hormonally imbalanced, bitchy, or

> ungrateful. It is validating to comprehend oneself as devalidated rather than as invalid. (p.100)

Although the method traditionally focuses on gendered experiences of women, it allowed me to uncover my negative feelings of poverty as well. I learned that my story was an unusual norm breaker on many levels: being in a special education class and then going on to the college track, having a positive experience in a new school district, being poor and going to private college and then to graduate school. I also learned that my negative feelings were not unusual but that they could be valuable as evidence of societal oppression. Once redefined as positive, they became a source of strength; a testament to my perseverance.

To have professors that valued diversity and celebrated it, and to read literature that did as well, for the first time turned my negative feeling of "difference" into a positive, a strength. I was once again redefined, but this time, I was redefining myself. With the aid of the language and literature on oppression a new, more holistic individual emerged. I rediscovered the part of myself that had been submerged and tried to integrate it in to a more total understanding of my identity. It was difficult because I had hidden a very large part of who I was for a long time.

The subjective-objective dualism that pervades our society, and that I experienced, often ignores personal experience and emotions, the inner workings of the mind-body as a whole that are not quantifiable.

> A central concern in discussions of the nature of the self during this century has been the legacy of the mind-body dualism...The notion that there are two distinct realms of reality—one of the matter "out there," without consciousness or purpose; the other of mind "in here," the realm of consciousness and selfhood—has left its legacy in debates about the relationships between subject and object, self and other, knower and known, intellect and feeling, masculine and feminine, and always the mind-body problem. (Witherell, 1990, p. 83)

Due to this split, emotional responses to oppression can often be rationalized as resulting from some psychological flaw rather than any form of societal injustice. In my childhood, I often thought that there was something wrong with me, my poverty and dysfunctional family was a source of embarrassment and emotional anguish. As my narrative shows, there is value in examining personal experiences of domination and the worthlessness arising from inequitable power relations. This type of analysis will be an important step in redefining difference in positive terms, if it ever has a chance to be brought from the margins of our society to the center of discussions. For me, the purpose behind telling my narrative is not to condemn the teacher who was mean to me, a culture that values wealth, or individual acts of cruelty, instead the purpose is to value my experiences in all their diversity.

Reconceptualizing "Difference"

Historian Joan W. Scott (1988) makes the important point that in feminism and feminist political strategies there needs to be attention to the operations of "difference" and an insistence on "difference:"

> The only requirement, it seems to me, is to refuse to oppose equality to difference and insist continually on differences — differences as the condition of individual and collective identities, differences as the constant challenge to the fixing of those identities, history as the repeated illustration of the play of differences, differences and the very meaning of equality itself. (p. 46)

The danger lies in replacing difference with sameness that negates other experiences. Instead, we need to create a new definition of equality, one that rests on differences which have the potential of problematizing and preventing fixed binary oppositions. The exercise of power often requires that some group or individual must be oppressed for the "common good." To buy into the political assumption that sameness is a requirement for equality, negates the fact that power is constructed on the grounds of difference and therefore must be challenged on those grounds. Redefining difference in this way has the potential for transforming society:

> When the various "minority" experiences have been described and when the significance of these experiences as a ground for critique of the dominant institutions and ideologies of society is better recognized, we will at least have the tools to begin to construct an account of the world sensitive to the realities of race and gender as well as class. To paraphrase Marx, the point is to change the world, not simply to redescribe ourselves or reinterpret the world yet again. (Hartsock, 1990, p. 172)

The work of Iris Marion Young (1990; 2000) offers an interesting and positive possibility for future directions. She critiques what she terms the ideal of community; that is the desire for unity and homogeneity that pervades our culture. She argues that "a desire for unity or wholeness in discourse generates borders, dichotomies, and exclusions"(Young, 1990, p.301). Instead Young offers an alternative, an ideal of the unopressive city which could be created by a "politics of difference;" a reconceptualization of "difference" which embraces heterogeneity. As she posits:

> Assuming that group differentiation is a given of social life for us, how can the relationships of group identities embody justice, respect, and the absence of oppression? The relationship of group identities and cultures in our society is blotted by racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, suspicion, and mockery. A politics of difference lays down institutional and ideological means for recognizing and affirming differently identifying groups in two basic senses: giving political representation to group interests and celebrating the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups. (1990, p. 319)

As my personal narrative has shown, "difference" can be used as a justification

for unequal power relations; that some people fail in school and others succeed. I still think back to my negative experience with my forth grade teacher who saw me as valueless. Negative constructions of difference can be emotionally damaging. Who has not thought to themselves that they were rewarded while others failed because they were just somehow better (rather than any set of privileged power relations)? Isn't that the justification for why certain people are admitted to elite colleges and graduate programs, hired for powerful jobs, and why some students fail in our educational systems while others succeed? While difference does not necessarily create inequities, it is used as a justification for failure, ignorance, and poverty. If it had not been for my fifth grade teacher's redefinition of me as a student with potential, I don't know if I would be sitting here writing this article. Seeing poverty as an injustice that I have struggled against, allowed me to see my own strength and the value of my experiences.

When I stare in the mirror now, I see one body; internally and externally whole. That person staring back at me can put on different costumes, the professional, the I don't care what people think, the woman, the wife, the mom, the academic; but it all comes down to the same flesh and bone that ages, evolves, but is still part of the same body that I was born with. I see myself as a metaphor for possible new directions in theory. Redefining my identity in positive terms allowed me to integrate my inner self and outer self, which allowed me to be comfortable with who I am as a whole person: mind/body, emotion/reason. By sharing the painful aspects of my story, I believe that I have provided an example of how negative definitions of "difference" can be redefined in positive, hopeful terms.

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