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Theories of Understanding Essays  
May 2025

### **Critical Theory of Social Inequality**

My theory of social inequality started with my belief that inequity exists today because too many people are complacent to make social change and they rely on those experiencing inequity to fix their own problems. In the story I used, I described myself as a 14-year-old when I expressed to my eighth grade history teacher that I was feeling stuck for not being able to catch up to the rest of my classmates. She was unsurprised and expressed that she was wondering when I would approach her, signaling that she knew I was doing poorly in academics and it was out of my control, but she waited for me to bring it up and then expressed to me that I may want to consider getting tested for learning difficulties. It raised a frustration in me because it is a part of teachers' responsibility to help raise up their students when they are struggling, not leave it to the children having trouble to figure out what is wrong with them. That night, I spoke with my parents about what my history teacher said. It turned out that my parents had conversations with other teachers of mine over the years of my schooling to ask if they thought I should be tested, but each teacher reported back that, despite me consistently handing in work past the due date, I still submitted great work, and therefore they were not worried about me. I functioned well enough for my teachers to decide I did not require attention for improving. I connected this to social inequality because I believed a core reason for social inequality is because many people who are in positions of power and privilege often choose the path of complacency because circumstances are fine enough to get by for the time being or because they fear that a domino effect will follow into other systems in society. Reflecting on my critical theory of social inequality before I began my praxis project, I fear that the connection between my experience of discovering my learning difficulties and social inequality in the world may have been too far of a

jump, despite my belief that it is true to education spaces based on what I have learned in education courses.

After completing my praxis project, my critical theory of social change has shifted. My project was to bring some form of bullying education to the Community, Youth, and Education Studies program, which required research about why bullying exists. Through reading many research papers, articles, and other literature, I discovered Social Dominance Theory and Social Cognitive Theory. Social Dominance Theory (SDT) argues that social dominance occurs due to an inherited trait from our ancestors who had to use social dominance to retrieve scarce resources for survival (Sherrow, 2011). SDT does not suffice as a complete explanation for why humans revert to social dominance today since resources are much more available now than they were thousands of years ago. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) states that humans perform behaviors based on behaviors they have seen and the aftermath of them to determine if they will adopt those as learned behaviors (Schunk & Usher, 2019, 11). With the combination of SDT and SCT, I argue that those who practice social dominance now do so because they see the benefits it brings others. For example, saying a mean comment toward someone causes that person to feel poorly about themselves, leading you to have the upper hand over them. Now that we live in a world that we do not need to establish social dominance for survival, which we have been living in for centuries now, we have an option to continue to be compliant with the social dominance trait and reinforce social inequalities and hierarchies, or we can use SCT to realize that learned behaviors can also be derived from meaningful benefits, like creating connections and hearing “thank you” after holding the door for someone. While inequality is a learned and inherited behavior, kindness and rejection of social hierarchies and inequalities is also a learned behavior that can be used to prevent social inequalities.

## **Positionality and Identity in the World**

The final days and weeks leading up to freshman year of college are stressful for the vast majority of students, and I was no exception. The car ride to Massachusetts was full of anxiety buildup that was all encompassing. I felt like I was five years old again being dropped off on the first day of camp and anticipating the inevitable when my parents would hug and kiss me goodbye, and I would be left waiting for the end of the day when I would be sheltered by their love and protection. But, alas, Mom and Dad were not waiting for me at the end of that day on the pickup line. Rather, there were hundreds of strangers to meet and explain who I am and where I come from:

I am a white and Ashkenazi Jewish woman, and on this first day of freshman year, I was still an orthodox Jew: something that not another single person in my year could relate to.

In my three-quarter sleeve-length shirt and knee-length skirt, I carried my belongings and fears of acceptance into my standard double room. All day, my roommate (and friend) and I organized and reorganized our sides of the room and spoke about our day. Us and a male student we met earlier that day were hanging out in the room and getting to know each other. When the conversation began to dwindle down, I waited for him to leave so that I could take off my skirt and hang out in a t-shirt and sweatpants for modesty reasons. Eventually, he did, and my roommate and I were exhausted after an awfully busy first day, and I fell asleep. The next morning, I woke up, brushed my teeth, did the rest of the usual stuff, and put on a long sleeve shirt and a skirt that covered my knees and began my day, still wondering what people thought of me when they saw me.

The same way that Judaism is different for each Jewish person, Orthodoxy is different for each orthodox Jew. Orthodox Judaism involves maintaining the practices and traditions in

Judaism that have been passed down by our ancestors beginning with Abraham and Sarah, hence the Jewish people being an ethno-religion. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks described Modern Orthodoxy as, “Judaism engaged with the world” (The Rabbi Sacks Legacy, 2017), and that is how my community identifies. Nonetheless, between school during the week and services on the weekends, my life was still fully embedded in Jewish life, and I loved it. I loved the education I received about my people’s beautiful and complicated history and using it to inspire us to improve our and other communities to create a happier future for as many people as possible. Thus, secular university was a big switch from my Modern Orthodox upbringing.

I struggled greatly with the orthodox part of my identity for the first few months of college. I did not, still do not, know who I am without Judaism. That’s why I talk about it in all of the identity-based essays I have been assigned while at college—so much so that I’m self-conscious about whether or not I sound like a broken record, but to be fair, it is the most important part of who I am. As much as I loved being an orthodox Jew, I chose to let go a little bit of certain commandments that are much more enjoyable when being observed with a community, such as Shabbat or dressing modestly, because I was missing that specific Jewish community, but I held on tightly to the other aspects of my Jewish identity and remained conscious of how my roots in a traditional Jewish upbringing has impacted the ways in which I interact with world.

As a white, Ashkenazi, formerly Modern Orthodox Jewish woman, I have a foot in multiple worlds. That might be the most complex sentence that encompasses some of the most influential parts of myself. As a white person of Eastern European descent, I experience white privilege. As a Jewish person, I am a part of a minority that comprises .2 percent of the world population. As an Ashkenazi Jew, I experience more privilege than Jews of color, including

within Jewish communities. As a previously observant Jew, I have a deeper connection and understanding of Orthodox Jewish circles than an average Jewish person. As a college student, I have been thrown into a new world with each of these identities pulling me in different directions, and yet they each go hand in hand because together they are me. I have a foot in multiple worlds.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Dr. Lord Jonathan Sacks are three of the most influential people in Modern Orthodox Judaism, let alone modern-day Judaism as a whole, and they were each geniuses in every sense of the word. Rabbi Hirsch was the founder of neo-Orthodox Judaism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Soloveitchik “was the outstanding figure of modern Orthodox Judaism in 20<sup>th</sup> century America” (Plen, 2018). Both intellectual giants struggled with and welcomed the dichotomy of leading a halakhic lifestyle and involving themselves in secular culture, or rather they welcomed the notion that there does not need to be a separation amongst the various parts of their lives. The different identities we have as individuals can coexist because they already do. They taught that it is of the utmost importance to accept and embrace the complexities of our personal identities.

Additionally, Rabbi Hirsch and Rabbi Soloveitchik recognized the importance of being close to one’s personal community, as well as being welcoming, open and eager to know other communities. I feel just as strongly about my Jewish identity now as I was when I first arrived on Clark University’s campus. I remain passionate about studying Judaism and Jewish history and sharing with others in Jewish environments. I am constantly learning about other cultures and communities, and I search for connections and recognize differences.

Being Jewish and growing up in a Modern Orthodox community has influenced me in every way I interact with the world around me through teaching me to actively maintain a

connection to the Jewish community, and I intentionally do not limit myself to only being connected to my community.

### **Personal Theory of Social Change**

Prior to starting my praxis project, I had a conversation with a close family member about bullying and that the education programs I am enrolled in at Clark University did not offer direct education about bullying or bullying intervention. The person's response was, "Sometimes kids just want attention, and they don't know how to get it. Sometimes the best thing is to ignore." I disagree. I replied that this is not a proper solution and does not offer children an opportunity to learn from their actions. When students are being harmed by other students, it does indeed call for attention from the adults. My praxis project was focused on individuals' experiences with bullying and actions adults took that helped them. Through listening to their stories of bullying interventions that worked, I gathered tools teachers can use in their own classrooms to intervene and prevent further bullying. Teachers can utilize or adapt the bullying intervention tools to decrease the likelihood of bullying and its effect in the future by listening to past students' perspectives. Teachers who may feel lost in how to approach bullying with their students can feel more supported with the insights shared in my data. Change comes through listening to others and their stories to learn how to best support them and others with similar experiences. Change happens when people are willing to listen and evolve.

There is a commandment in Judaism called *Tzedakah*. Many people translate this word to mean charity, but it means righteousness. The root word of *tzedakah* is *tzedek* meaning justice, and a person may be described as a *tzadik* meaning a righteous person. The philosophy behind giving *tzedakah* is the same as that of the Jewish value *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. It is constant encouragement to do all we can to make the world a better place. There is an additional

commandment known as *ma'aser* which instructs individuals who have the means to donate 10 percent of their income. While there are certain causes that people are more encouraged to give to, it is up to individuals to decide where they believe their money will bring the most good. The question then arises, how do I choose which area requires my attention first? The Yoreh De'ah, a section from the Shulchan Arukh which is a book compilation of the Jewish laws put together by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, discusses that when one is unsure, one should begin with those closest in proximity to them (Sefaria). This method is how I chose to approach bullying– it is highly unlikely that I can fix bullying all over the world, at least not at this point in my life, but bringing bullying education to Clark University is needed and something I can do. *Tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* are based on action from listening and paying attention to what you can do for others to help make the world a better place.

My greatest role model for combating bullying and any other kind of injustice is my mother. She works tirelessly to improve everyone's lives in any way she can. She does not sit idly by and wait for someone else to take action. She sees injustices, she listens for what she can do for others, and she chooses action. My mom has a saying. She takes my hands, kindly smiles at me, and cheers "*Tikkun olam*, baby!" It is her way to communicate that we all have a responsibility toward one another, and there is always a way to bring positivity to the world.

Stories allow us an opportunity to listen to each other and gain insight, sympathy, and empathy for others. Change can only happen if we *listen* for what we can do to support and raise each other up. Sometimes, listening is enough. Other times, it may be taking action on behalf of someone who is not in the position to take action themselves, like a child who experiences bullying and a teacher or guardian of that child who has a responsibility to speak up for them and educate children how to treat one another with respect so they are less likely to encounter bullying in the

future. No matter what, change comes from carrying those stories to inspire us how to make the world kinder, more welcoming, considerate, patient, better than it was before.



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