Case Study

Growing up I was the oldest of three siblings, and the only girl among all the family members in my generation. But it is always difficult for me, actually, to answer the question of, “How many siblings do you have?” Do I answer, “Two,” or, “Three”? I am naturally inclined toward the first because I have such strong relationships with my younger brothers, but I do have a half-brother, Patrick, who is eleven years my senior. He has always lived in a separate household from us, so I don’t know him well. No one in my family ever really talks about the distance between Patrick, now a grown man, and the rest of my family, but for me it has always felt uncomfortable. I know that my father had him unexpectedly when he was very young, and that he and Patrick’s mother did not get along well when she was first trying to raise him, but because Patrick is the oldest sibling and has another family with which he actively engages, I always wonder whether he has made the conscious choice to avoid us.

Similar threads of thought have permeated my every relationship—family, friends, boyfriends. Instead of realizing that conflicts are sometimes not centered on myself or something I have done, or that a fizzling of a relationship is sometimes just a consequence of life events, I have always concluded that there is something wrong with me, that maybe, I didn’t deserve that relationship in the first place. I found it difficult to realize that there were friends and family around me who were always there, even when I made a mistake or annoyed them.

My first close friendship was with a girl who lived directly across the street from me. Her name was Allyson, and while she was a year older than me, we spent nearly all of our time playing together. In the summer after first grade my family moved away to a town a couple hours away, and I missed my old playmate. I found it difficult to make new friends in Hyannis,
because by second grade I began to feel more uncomfortable with “girly” things. When girls brought in dolls to play with at recess, I played along reluctantly. Though for three years of my life I had refused to wear anything but dresses handmade by my mother, I now cringed at the idea of wearing dresses or skirts, which disappointed my mother endlessly. My old diary entries read things like, “Why are all these girls pretending to ‘like’ boys already? Why does everyone have to grow up so fast?”

At the time I also had a prolonged “enemyship,” as one might call it, with my next-door neighbor, who was also in my class. In school we always bickered and tried to be the best student; when he believed that his work was better than mine on an art project, he would tell me so. I’m sure I did the same to him, and eventually our problems became unbearable for our teacher to handle. We were sent to the guidance counselor to sort out our issues, and if I remember correctly we were simply informed to stop spending time together, because then the fighting and disruptions would stop.

In third grade, finally, I met Kayley. We became “best” friends quickly, meaning that we spent most of our free afternoons and weekends playing at each other’s houses. But it always seemed to me that Kayley had a lot of best friends—sometimes when I called she had other things to do, or she wanted to do something that she didn’t think I would enjoy. I was confused by this. What, I thought, Don’t you like me? By the time fifth grade rolled around Kayley and I were still friends, but she was no longer in my class, and I was forced to build new friendships with the people who surrounded me. I struggled to do this because many of the girls who I attempted to befriend seemed to seek problems in friendships, or to intentionally exclude other girls for the sake of it.
So I started middle school on rough footing. Sixth grade was an awkward year where I felt like I didn’t have any friends, and I cried to my family about this every day. This was partially brought on by the reality that Kayley hadn’t answered my phone calls in months; it seemed she didn’t have time for me anymore. This was also the first year that I really started to fight with my parents. I would instigate lengthy and brutal fights with my family about nothing of importance, and assume that they meant everyone in my family hated me. I was asking for attention, maybe, or possibly I was testing their loyalty to me. It was almost as if, with every unnecessary blow-up I started with one of my parents, I was asking them, “So what else can I do? Will you still stick around if I say this hurtful thing?” It seems that I didn’t really understand that a conflict didn’t need to be the end of a relationship. When my parents got into a minor everyday tiff, I would declare, “So you guys are getting divorced now?”

Later in middle school I tried to make friends with a couple groups of girls, the first of which was made difficult by the fact that I never tried to initiate any get-togethers with them. I was afraid that they would simply refuse, or that they would just ignore me. Honestly, I think I was embarrassed by the second group of girls. They proudly burped in public and had explicit conversations about sex that I didn’t understand. I just wasn’t sure how to relate to them, and though they never judged me and I think they really did like me, I was unable to recognize that they were good friends.

I was very quiet during this period in my life, and most other students took this to mean that I was sad. Boys constantly called me a Debbie Downer, asking why I couldn’t smile more. When I made the choice to read quietly by myself instead of engaging in conversations riddled by gay jokes and swears, a boy named Lucas started calling me “The Soulless One,” a name that, unfortunately, stuck.
When I got to high school I joined the band, which was both a class and an after-school activity. Music had always been important to me, but suddenly I considered being a member of the school band to be the main component of my identity. This was probably because I found a community of students here, especially older students, who wanted to ensure that everyone fit in and enjoyed their time in high school. As a freshman I befriended a number of seniors, and though I often fear that these friendships were formed solely out of pity for me, I still appreciate them.

The beginning of my high school career was also characterized by my incredible shyness, because in larger groups I became quiet and reserved. When I was with groups of two or three, I tended to open up more, but I lacked the ability to say anything that wasn’t sarcastic. I was proud of my biting wit, but while other students would always be laughing at the things I said, they would also say, “Wow, Alicia, so negative!” I had a teacher who would ask me every day, “Hey, why don’t you gimme a smile?” which was endlessly exhausting and confusing. I knew then that I needed to pretend to be happy even when I wasn’t, because this made other people feel more comfortable.

After freshman year the majority of my friendships with girls were, quite simply, unhealthy. I became close to Kaiya during sophomore year, but she eventually got a boyfriend—who she is still dating—and essentially dropped off the map. I remember one Saturday we had plans to hang out, and she called me to say, “Sorry, Mike just said he wants to do something today so I have to do that!” Oh, I wondered, you have to? I tried to be friends with a group of girls who were kind to me during school, but mysteriously neglected to invite me to anything outside of school. But then again, I recognize now that I never really tried to initiate any plans myself, because I was terrified of rejection or of being ditched like Kaiya always did to me.
These girls always gossiped about each other when the victim of the gossip wasn’t in the room, mentioning things that bothered us but never directly addressing these issues with the person who might be able to fix the problem. If there was an even larger looming issue, we would use the most passive-aggressive tactic available to us: the silent treatment. I recognized that the way we were dealing with conflicts was problematic and unhealthy in itself, but at the same time I wasn’t sure how else to confront them.

Looking back, I realize that much of my inability to deal with conflict healthily was probably influenced by my mimicry of my mother’s approach to relationships. My mom would constantly rant to me—but never my brothers—about her coworkers, family, friends, and even my dad, but rarely addressed these issues directly with the person with whom she was upset. Today she still does this, and sometimes when I’m home on breaks I just can’t wait to get away. *Can’t she think of anything positive to say?*

In high school I also started to have crushes on boys; boys started to have crushes on me. But oddly enough, I never wanted to date boys who actually liked me—even if I had liked them initially, I was scared when I discovered that they liked me back. It was almost as if I didn’t believe it, or if I no longer found the potential relationship interesting when they liked me. Instead, I chose to pursue boys who already had girlfriends, or who were clearly not interested in me.

In high school I did have some healthy friendships—it’s just that I didn’t prioritize or pay attention to them at the time. I had a friend named Trini who was always asking me to hang out, but for some reason I didn’t see that as enticing. I had a number of friendships with boys, but I didn’t see those as fulfilling, either. For some reason I was always seeking to impress those
people who simply weren't prioritizing me as a friend, and found it difficult to recognize that I already had people who really cared about me.

My senior year of high school was probably the most relaxed and fulfilling year of my career as a student. I didn't necessarily form more close friendships, but the fact that I would be leaving the school soon gave me the confidence to be myself. I simply talked more and had a lot of fun, which made graduation somewhat devastating. I cried the entire summer leading up to my first year at Colby, terrified that I would never feel like I belonged to a community again.

As I entered college I was in a new social setting lacking in familiarity either of the people around me or of the culture itself. The first couple weeks, I was relatively happy, though incredibly homesick. Most of the other students seemed ready to be away from home, but this was the first time I'd ever been away from my family for longer than a couple days. All of the freshmen in my dorm seemed to be becoming best friends, but excluding me. They all liked to drink and smoke excessively, which I was less than interested in, and I think they thought I was judging them for their partying. By the time Fall Break was approaching, I was so lonely that I was ready to transfer.

My relationship with my roommate was probably the unhealthiest relationship I have ever had. She would whisper about me to her friends while I was sitting on my bed across the room, and assumed that I was trying to infiltrate her friend group when I joined a club to which she belonged. I talked about her with anyone who would listen, but we never dealt with our issues constructively.

I'm glad I never made the ultimate decision to transfer from Colby, because during my first Jan Plan I took Multicultural Literacy, which was an eye-opening experience. I had taken an anthropology class so I had been exposed to most of the issues we discussed, but before this
class I had never needed to relate diversity to my own personal experience. During class we simply talked about our lives; everyday was a two-and-half-hour conversation that I never wanted to end. Here I found a forum to talk about my emotions and experience, even if it was within a theoretical framework. I finally learned to speak up and to feel pride in my own experience, because it had made me who I am. I learned that most students at Colby had struggled to fit in at some point in their lives, especially at Colby. I discovered that I was not alone.

By the end of Jan Plan I had made one good friend, Carly, who was also struggling to make friends at Colby. She had more experience talking about emotions and dealing with conflict in general, so from the start our relationship was much healthier than my former friendships. While the rest of my freshman year wasn’t flawless, having a stable friendship like this one helped me to feel secure with branching out and to feel less isolated than I had before.

Sophomore year I had made a number of friends, and I wasn’t as lonely as I had been the year before. But while having close friendships should have been a respite and relief, instead it produced new struggles for me. When I was spending more time with people to whom I was close, I began to recognize things they did that bothered me, and I wasn’t sure how to open up about those things. I also began to feel left out or jealous if my friends made plans but forgot to let me know, but I wasn’t sure how to handle these feelings.

Eventually it got to the point where I allowed my internal emotions and struggles to consume me—even when I realized that there were positive things in my life, I always prioritized the negative events in my thoughts. Even now, I find it difficult to recall the happy memories from this time in my life, though I know they happened. I was depressed, but every time somebody asked me, “How are you?” I felt the need to lie. “I’m fine,” I said, or,
“Everything’s good, just a little stressed about this paper I have to write.” I imagined that people didn’t actually care how I was feeling or that if I shared how depressed I was, I would be placing an unnecessary burden on them.

More than anything, I was afraid that if I was open and honest about my depression, people would begin to see me differently. For one thing, I knew at this point that I had an emotional disorder, and I didn’t want my “crazy” emotional complex to become the identity with which my friends and family referred to me. The fear that this negative stereotype would become my identity was only exacerbated by my acute awareness that as a woman, it was more likely that I would be labeled as “overemotional” or “overreacting,” and therefore “crazy.”

But by avoiding talking about how I was feeling, I only made the problem worse. I couldn’t focus well on my work, and I started skipping meals so that I could lay in my bed and cry. One day I was in the bathroom at 4 am, crying and hyperventilating uncontrollably, when Carly walked in, and asked me what was up. We talked it out for hours and while neither of us slept much that night, she eventually convinced me that I needed to go to counseling.

When I got to therapy the counselor simply asked, “So why are you here today?” I wasn’t sure how to answer him, so I just said, “Oh I don’t know, I guess I’m like, depressed . . .” As he probed me for more detailed answers, I became both more comfortable and more uncomfortable—I had never talked to anyone like this before, and while it was cathartic, it was also confusing. After that first meeting with Todd, I realized that therapy was a safe space where I could talk about problems in my life and work out solutions to those problems, whether it was I or someone else in my life that ultimately needed to make a change.

As I continued in therapy, I began to open up more about how I was actually feeling in other contexts, too, and I realized that when I did this, people generally weren’t as turned off as I
anticipated that they would be. Instead, they sometimes felt honored that I had chosen to talk to them about my problems. I even worked up the courage to ask a professor for an extension on a paper during a particularly anxious week, and when she agreed and mentioned that Colby was a very supportive community where she believed that she and anyone else would help if they could, I was overwhelmed with emotion. Shortly after our meeting I started crying—both from joy, because I realized that people actually did care about me, and from sadness, because I realized that I had lived such a large portion of my life being unable to see how much the people around me cared.

Now, in my junior year of college, I am doing much better than I was a year or even six months ago. I have a number of friends with whom I am more comfortable discussing conflicts and issues, and while I realize after reading this piece that I apparently don’t see my father as having played an incredibly active role in my life, I am also more comfortable with conflicts in my family. At the same time, I still struggle to trust that my friends, family, and boyfriend are in relationships with me because they truly want to me, and not because they have an ulterior motive or nothing better to do. As I continue to develop as a human being throughout my life, I hope that I can eventually overcome this struggle and come to see myself as a thoroughly worthy and valuable person.

**Analysis**

**Introduction**

In the case study which I present above, I am the individual under evaluation. Though my story covers a large portion of my life, I chose to focus on the major familial, platonic, and romantic relationships in my experience, because for me, the social aspect of my life has caused
the most stress and discomfort. In the analysis that follows, I will attempt to understand my social development first through Erik Erikson's model of the "Epigenesis of Identity," as I feel that his framework helps to make sense of the low self-worth that characterized much of my childhood and adolescence. I also recognize that my entire life experience has been directly influenced by my identity as a woman, and therefore I will address how stereotypes and gender roles have affected my actions and perceptions by evaluating my experience through the lens of Lyn Mikel Brown's "hardiness" concept and through Claude Steele's understanding of stereotype threat. I will conclude by suggesting how I overcame my struggle to foster healthy relationships, and thereby a healthy sense of identity and self-worth, by finding "hardiness zones" and "nonjudgmental responsiveness" in relationships with particular individuals and groups during my early adulthood (Brown 6; Steele 625).

Conflict and Relationships: Mistrust and Silence

Erik Erikson claims that a "healthy personality" is that which "actively masters his environment, shows a certain unity of personality, and is able to perceive the world and himself correctly" (92). Until recently, I don't think I could claim to have a healthy personality as Erikson sees it. As my case study suggests, I had trouble "mastering" my social environment and I was unable to "perceive the world and [myself] correctly" because I had trouble forming and maintaining healthy relationships. I idealized relationships, and did not realize that having a balance of healthy relationships, of which conflict is a part, was necessary for my healthy social development.

Erikson lists the basic necessities and stages for healthy personality development as: Trust vs. Mistrust; Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt; Initiative vs. Guilt; Industry vs. Inferiority;
Identity vs. Identity Confusion; Intimacy vs. Isolation; Generativity vs. Stagnation; and finally, Integrity vs. Despair (94). "Each item," Erikson claims, "is systematically related to all others, and they all depend on the proper development in the proper sequence of each item" (93). So, for example, one cannot have autonomy without trust, and one may not develop identity without a combination of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry. Because in so many relationships throughout my case study I cite the fear that friends could disappear from my life at any moment, I would like to expand on the potential that my trust concept was lacking from an early age, and this has continued to hurt my relationships into early adulthood.

Though I don't believe that my relationships with either of my parents led to my lack of a trust concept in adolescence, I think it is possible that my relationships with friends in my early childhood could have led to a devolution of any trust concept of which I had a hold in infancy. For example, Kayley, Kaiya, and a number of other friends who I did not name in my case study had made the decision to stop being my friend, and I assumed that this was how all friendships would be: at some point, there would be a conflict, or the other person would conclude that I was not worthy of his or her friendship, and the relationship would fall apart. Of course this was an incredibly dismal lens through which to look at relationships, but for some reason I was blind to the people in my life that did not leave. My sense of self-worth was so low, I believe, that I did not trust or believe that those people—my family, Trini, male friends in high school—were present in my life with honest intentions.

Since I found it difficult to trust in other people, so, too, I found it difficult to trust myself. If no one else could be trusted, I reasoned, how could I? And thus any opportunity to function autonomously in the social realm was difficult for me; I depended on other people's reassurance and encouragement to begin friendships or to place value on friendships that I
already had. Thus I both doubted my ability to form new friendships and was ashamed of friendships that I had already formed. Furthermore, I found it difficult to initiate any plans with new or old friends, as I assumed that they would be rejected, and when plans changed or I found myself unable to initiate activities, I felt guilty for the predicament in which I found myself.

Not only did I find it difficult to trust others around me and to value my own emotions and opinions, but I was also unsure how to express any of those emotions or opinions productively in the first place. As Lyn Brown would argue happens to a number of adolescent girls, at some point in my development I lost my voice. In my case, I think this happened somewhere in elementary school; I really started to silence myself and deal with my emotions passive-aggressively in the sixth grade. Brown argues that in order for girls to maintain their voices through their adolescence, they need the opportunities to develop “hardiness,” which is characterized by “control, commitment, and challenge,” described here below (6).

*Hardiness control* refers to a girl’s capacity to make choices in stressful circumstances, her ability to understand her stresses within a larger context, and to have a repertoire of positive coping skills. *Hardiness commitment* describes her individual belief system, sense of purpose, connection to others and recognition that there are resources for her to draw on. *Hardiness challenge* is a relationship to change in which she feels challenged and mobilized rather than defeated . . . Such girls know where to go for support, and they are flexible and persistent (Brown 6).

During my childhood and adolescence, I and the girls around me lacked a “hardiness zone” in which we might learn how to foster healthy relationships, and therefore our friendships were often unnecessarily tumultuous and unhealthy.

First of all, I certainly did not feel a sense of a control within my social environment; if anything, I felt completely out of control. I feared, at all times, that friends could end their relationship with me, because I put others in control of myself and my relationships. I could not
see that my girl friends acted in a larger social context, and that their actions may have been influenced by stereotypes of “catty girls” who are incapable of handling conflict productively, but who engage in conflict continuously all the same.

Secondly, I did not have a sense of commitment in my life growing up. Though I may have had a vague belief system which derived from my parents’ and a sense of purpose rooted in schoolwork, when it came to my connection to other people and my recognition that I always had access to resources which could help me, I was at a loss.

Lastly, because I had no sense of control or values to commit to growing up, I knew neither which challenges I wished to face, nor how I would go about facing these challenges. When in a conflict with a friend or family member, I did not know how to approach the situation, and I didn’t know who to turn to help me solve the problem. In college, when I felt depressed and lonely, I still wasn’t sure how to face the situation—though I had a vague idea that my friends and family members might be able to help, I didn’t know how to start the conversation, and though I was aware that therapy might also help, I didn’t have the initiative to go without being egged on by a friend.

**Depression and Isolation**

When I reached my sophomore year of college and was finally beginning to form healthy relationships with my friends, I still struggled to appreciate these relationships and to value my own voice within them. For example, I describe my unwillingness to express grievances with my friends and cause a potential conflict. I think much of this was learned from the adults and peers who had surrounded me growing up. I had learned from many peers and at least one teacher, for example, that smiling and being happy were preferential to any form of
negativity. My mother, too, exemplified how to internalize emotions, and I discovered that I would be more positively perceived if I presented myself positively.

Therefore, constantly, I held my emotions inside because I feared fulfilling the stereotype of the overemotional girl. Claude Steele would describe this experience as “stereotype threat,” which is

a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists . . . . Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the domain is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening (614).

I recall being constantly afraid to express the fact that I was depressed, as is obvious when I describe how

every time somebody asked me, “How are you?” I felt the need to lie. “I’m fine,” I said, or, “Everything’s good, just a little stressed about this paper I have to write.” I imagined that people didn’t actually care how I was feeling or that if I shared how depressed I was, I would be placing an unnecessary burden on them.

When I admitted to myself that I had depression and that this was a serious mental health issue that I needed to resolve, I became terrified of being open about this with the people close to me. I had the impression that mental illness is stigmatized in American society, and that if I expressed my identification with the community of those afflicted by mood disorders, this suddenly would become who I was. I anticipated that by expressing my concerns and negative emotions, I would frighten away my peers. I am not sure if I fully believed that mental illness was worth the prejudice it received at the time, but I certainly believed that there was something wrong with me.

Of course, Steele would argue that this phenomenon proved his theory that “members of prejudiced-against groups often internalize the stereotypes, and the resulting sense of inadequacy becomes part of their personality” (617). When I allowed myself to believe that these
stereotypes were true and that I was indeed flawed as an individual, I constantly sought to distance myself from proving these stereotypes by denying myself the expression of any negative emotion. These emotions, of course, became overwhelming, and I was eventually forced to seek help to maintain my mental and physical health.

Resolution and Continuing Struggles

Though I have struggled in the past to create and maintain healthy relationships with the people around me, today I have a number of healthy relationships with my family, friends, and boyfriend that I regard as proud accomplishments. I have to wonder, though: How did I overcome my earlier struggles to deal with conflict, and to trust that the people in my life really did like, or even love, me? In my case, overcoming my most difficult struggle would involve first learning to trust the people around me, then learning to overcome the stereotype threat which prevented me from expressing my emotions, and finally, finding the voice that would allow me to deal with problems productively.

I think that, more than anything, my eventual involvement in healthy relationships would have been impossible had I not chanced upon people who understood that I was struggling, and had the patience to get to know me and help me through my struggle. The relationships I developed with these people were characterized by a “nonjudgmental responsiveness” to my emotions and actions—both of which, at times, were unreasonable and misguided—which helped to “build a sense of competence and self-efficacy” and to create a “hardiness zone” wherein I felt comfortable to raise my voice (Steele 625; Brown 6).

Though Claude Steele suggests his concept of “nonjudgmental responsiveness” for struggling students who may be negatively affected by academic stereotypes and who are
"weakly identified with the domain, who are threatened by a poor reputation and who probably hold internalized doubts about their ability," he also argues that stereotype threat may affect a person of any group, and therefore I would argue that it may apply to my case (625). Steele argues that "nonjudgmental responsiveness" must involve "securing a safe . . . relationship in which there is little cost of failure and the gradual building of domain efficacy from small gains" (625). This, in turn, will help to "build the [individual's] sense of competence and self-efficacy," which is also necessary for a healthy self-concept and subsequent achievement (625).

In my case, I encountered a number of individuals who were willing to help me sort out my issues non-judgmentally and patiently. For example, my friendship with Carly was incredibly helpful, in that she never declared my feelings "wrong" or unacceptable, but encouraged that I express them, and helped me to understand when I might be able to perceive or approach a situation differently.

Additionally, when I went to therapy in my sophomore year of college, I was able to express my feelings and describe my actions while also being aware that Todd would not judge me or inform me that something I had done or felt was "wrong." Though he would occasionally suggest that a different tactic might help me to achieve my goals of conflict resolution, or that I was potentially perceiving a social situation incorrectly—a phenomenon I describe earlier in this analysis—I always felt accepted and welcome in his presence and his office.

These relationships helped me to realize not only that the people in my life are trustworthy, but also helped me to realize that I am trustworthy and that the things I say and do are generally real and true. When I felt that I could trust other people and myself, it was much easier to express my emotions and to realize that the stereotypes that I had internalized were not
actually true of myself. Being an emotional human being, then, was not necessarily a negative aspect of my personality, and in fact was natural of every human being.

Then, finally, when I recognized that my emotions and opinions were justified and important, it was imperative that I learn to express them productively and strongly. I think my development of a voice through which to express my thoughts can best be described with Lyn Brown’s concept of the “hardiness zone,” which I described above (6). I believe that my first hardiness zone was in the Multicultural Literacy class which I took my freshman Jan Plan. Here I found a group of core values with which I strongly identified, and a safe space where I could talk about my experiences and values and expect respect from the people in the group around me. When I was given the opportunity to critically evaluate my world and experiences and question how they might have been improved, I realized that I had more control over my life and experience than I had earlier believed. This, along with a newfound commitment to a set of values to which I had just been exposed, enabled me to have the courage and stamina to face the challenge of depression that would come later in the year.

Conclusion

Though my journey through life up until this point has been as complex as any other, it has been incredibly helpful to look at it objectively through some of the many theoretical perspectives on human psychosocial development that we have read thus far in Children and Adolescents: Cases and Concepts. By evaluating my former and current relationships through an objective lens, I am better able to understand how my behaviors and perceptions of the world led to my depression and lack of supportive relationships in my life.
Works Cited

