Cultural Psychodynamics
The Audit, the Mirror, and the American Dream
by Jeannette Mageo

Based on dream and life-history data and research on American families in the US Northwest, this article argues that a contemporary US middle-class model that I call the Close Family prescribes child-rearing practices that alternate between adulation and audit. Adulation and auditing are forms of social mirroring that make what Lacan calls “the mirror phase” an enduring feature of American cultural psychology and produce feelings of porosity and dependence that compel defensive assertions of independence. Because these assertions are therefore common, they too take the form of a cultural model—the bounded person intrinsically separate from social context that Geertz and others associate with the West—yet this individualistic model is secondary, helping people deny and dissociate a more primary reaction. Models and defenses together, I argue, constitute cultural psychodynamics. The case study of a young woman I call Ruby further suggests that for aspirants to class mobility, what is a balance between adulation and audit in the middle class tips toward audit, magnifying feelings of shame and inadequacy and imposing one of the most formidable barriers such aspirants must overcome.

A Brief History
First, let me nest this argument in a brief history of psychological anthropology to more fully explain my approach, to distinguish it from that of others and to show its relevance to a broad anthropological readership. In psychological anthropology, we generally credit the existence of cultural models, which are how-tos: how to conceive of and act in a domain of experience (D’Andrade 1995:151–181; Shore 1996). We also credit certain ideas from psychoanalysis, most significantly, that internalized childhood relations and figures influence feeling and behavior throughout life (LeVine 2010:117–238). At least since the millennia, psychological anthropologists have wondered how to bridge these two disparate streams, for me personified by D’Andrade and Spiro. Anthropologists of both stripes investigate motivation, which suggests a possible bridge. While psychoanalytic anthropologists ask how childhood internalizations motivate people in adult life, cognitive types grapple with motives as praxis theorists do: by tracing them to cultural fields in which some efforts are more rewarding than others. In analyzing motivation, psychoanalytic anthropologists have often ignored power relations, and cognitive anthropologists have often overlooked ways of thinking and feeling at odds with self-interest. These approaches also offer variant contributions to understanding the self; cognitive theorists describe the form agency takes in a cultural field, and psychoanalytic theorists aim to discover what it feels like to be a subject in such a field.

2. For examples of cognitive anthropologists’ and psychoanalytic anthropologists’ diverse approaches to motivation, see D’Andrade and Strauss (1992) and Spiro (1970).
3. For psychological anthropologists who investigate agency in a cultural field, see, e.g., Holland et al. (1998), or for psychological anthropologists who investigate being a subject in a culture, see Groark (2009) and Kracke (2012).

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This disconnection between streams of thought in psychological anthropology parallels a larger one between anthropological approaches that focus on strategic forms of agency and those focusing on the experiencing subject (Mageo and Knauff 2002). Finding a confluence of cognitive and psychoanalytic streams, therefore, can contribute to a more unified cultural theory. Such contributions from psychological anthropology, however, confront the ghost of a former age—the Culture and Personality school and its idea of National Character. This twentieth-century school hypothesized that "a culture, like an individual," to quote Benedict, "is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action" (1934:46) and that people in culture exhibit a "modal personality" consisting of a cluster of more or less predictable traits (Du Bois 1944). No such predictability exists; personalities vary as much within cultures as between cultures (Shweder 1979–1980).

Cognitive anthropologists' idea of cultural models and psychoanalytic anthropologists' idea of defenses offer viable alternatives to a modal personality for understanding cultural psychology. Cultural models are complex metaphors that people use to map a domain of experience (Quinn 2005). Thus, what I call the US Close Family model (Mageo 2011, 2013b) takes closeness—biological, social, and emotional—as a trope for what the family fundamentally is (Schneider 1968). Subject to a multitude of personal interpretations, such metaphors suggest a wide variety of behaviors.

Models are also normative (LeVine and Norman 2001). Hence, they direct people's energies into activities that tend to reproduce an existing socioeconomic order. Based on her long-term study of US families, for example, Lareau (2011:31) finds that the middle-class version of US Close Family practices directs parents, particularly mothers, to attend closely to children (see also Hays 1996), producing expectations of entitlement to others' attention. Lareau (2011) argues that these expectations endure and in adulthood support bourgeois professional stirrings likely to reproduce parents' socioeconomic status. However effective, such family practices do not necessarily make children happy. Lareau's middle-class children were less vibrant than her working-class and poor counterparts who were freer from surveillance (see also Jung 2007:35–36, 45). This "less" suggests that models have anxious undersides—like the angst of an overly monitored youngster. When a shared model elicits anxiety, it is also likely to elicit a shared defense.

In psychoanalytic theory, defenses are ways individuals deny and dissociate anxiety (Freud 1926 [1925]). Spiro (1961:482–490) proposes that some defenses are culturally constituted. A defense is cultural, I propose, when it provides ways to deny and dissociate anxiety created by a shared model. In the US Close Family model, for example, narrow dependence on parents for attention makes it difficult to seal them out of the self; developing children learn to deny this porosity by acting independent. Together, models and defenses predicate dynamic contradictions, which Nuckolls (1998) sees as constitutive of culture. A case study of a young woman I call Ruby will also suggest that such internalized contradictions are particularly puzzling and hurtful for young Americans who aspire to class mobility; they threaten to pose seemingly irrevocable double binds and impose abject identities. I enlist a number of powerful cultural theorists—Giddens, Lacan, Bateson, Butler, Althusser, and Fanon—for insight into these binds and identities.

Bridging cognitive and psychoanalytic streams in psychological anthropology also raises questions of method. Cognitive anthropologists see ways people model a cultural field in discourses. Strauss (2012), for example, traces relations between models and what she calls "utterances" and "rhetorics" with which different American demographics make sense of immigration and social programs. Discourse analysis, however, is not as useful for revealing defenses, which are by definition unconscious; self-explanation tends to portray people's thoughts, feelings, and actions as intentional and sensible within their circumstances. Although defenses may be inferred from discourses, my data suggest that they are central stage in dreams.

Contemporary psychologists see dreaming as a process of memory consolidation and thus of thinking, albeit thinking about activities flagged by emotions that indicate a need for further mastery (Cartwright 2011; Domhoff and Schneider 2008; Strauch and Meier 1996; van de Castle 1994:298). If models are our collective how-tos but bring with them anxieties that make us feel less than masterful (e.g., angst about porosity), it makes sense that what we think about in dreams, at least in part, are models and our discontents therewith. Again, like culture in Nuckolls's (1998) words, models are "a problem that cannot be solved." People are likely, therefore, to work on them in dreams. Dreamers' fantastical dialogues with dream characters, along with life-history reports and person-centered interviewing, can reveal people's discourses with models and also ways they react to these discourses. Models play out differently in different socioeconomic positions. The poetry of dream images expresses better than words how a cultural model actually feels and hence what it means for people in these different positions.

Let me now introduce my study and show how the US Close Family model and the defense it generates appear in the life histories and dreams of middle-class young people, contextualizing my findings along the way in other research on American families. I then ground these investigations in Ruby's case and situate her dreams and life history in other cases from my study. Throughout, I use purposeful rather than random sampling of this material, which Maxwell (1992) shows is fundamental to qualitative theory building (see also Quinn 2005a).

My Study

The data for this study were collected between 2004 and 2009 at Washington State University (WSU) in a general

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4. When a denied feeling is expressed via an opposite attitude and behavior, Freud (1926 [1925]:77–178) called it a "reaction formation."
education course titled "The Self in Culture." Students studied dreaming across cultures and techniques of dream analysis that aimed at eliciting life-history associations. We shared what Lohmann (2010) calls a "discernment theory" of dreaming: special insight is available to an able dream interpreter. Students kept dream journals from which they selected dreams to analyze for a final paper. I circulated consent forms that they filled out in my absence as to their willingness to let me use their journal and paper in my research (IRB 5921 and 10578-001). There was no reward for participation, as I promised not to look at who consented until after submitting grades.

One hundred eighty-four undergraduates participated, contributing 1,469 dreams, with 508 including dream analyses. In 29 cases, undergraduate interns or I conducted follow-up interviews. This study, then, was not ethnographic in the classic sense; I cannot position what my subjects say within the ongoing lives of their families nor solicit other family members' viewpoints. That said, I have worked among this research population for over 20 years, observed their practices, and listened to their discourses and stories in many different contexts.

For most of the year, WSU students represent the preponderance of local residents in a small college town situated in a vast expanse of sometimes undulating, sometimes shorn fields of wheat, peas, and lentils. Matriculates come from all over the Northwest and are mainly young and white, although there is a significant percentage of Asian Americans and a growing number of Hispanics, along with a few African Americans and American Indians. Some students' families are solidly middle class, but for many, divorce, drugs, unemployment, reallocations, prison terms, post-traumatic stress, and other major problems compromise family life and income. Students often face paying for much of their education themselves. WSU students represent an intermediate US socioeconomic group; like many Americans (Freie 2007), they identify as middle class even when their families are only questionably or unstably so. While far from homogenous, furthermore, they represent only strands of what is becoming an increasingly varied American tapestry.

Northwest Model-Defense Connections

I begin by more fully previewing my argument. The US Close Family model prescribes intimate attending to infants and children, teaching them to expect "you're special" adulatation; the message is that they are unique, "one of a kind," in American parlance. A resulting attention dependence means that children remain interpersonally porous and vulnerable to the sting of negative attention—which, following Strathern (2000), I call auditing. Children learn to deny/dissociate porosity and secure further attention by acting independent. Acting independent is a performance rather than a social or psychological fact. Thus, in a six-culture study, Whiting and Whiting (1975) found that American children scored only in the middle range for independence despite its high cultural valuation. In the Close Family model, children's ability to act independently expresses their unique abilities, and parents, therefore, applaud such performances. Acting independent is thus both defensive and normatively nurtured and authorizes another major US model: the quintessential individual as independent of social contexts. In the middle class, a balance between adulation and audit, plus children's developing sense of entitlement, tends to impel them toward individual achievements that reproduce class status. For descendants of less-than-middle-class families, however, especially when fathers do not share the Close Family model, a tendency to audit the self outweighs internalized adulation, which can be disabingly painful, especially for those who aim at class mobility—the proverbial American dream.

A Close Family Cultural Model

I call my students' model of home life the Close Family because this was the term they used to characterize it. One girl said, for example, "My mom and I were really close. We would spend a lot of time together." A boy remarked, "So my sister and I are really close, and my parents and I are really close," and another girl said, "I would consider myself close to my family, especially when I was younger." Even when family relationships were alienated or frustrating, closeness was the value against which students measured them.

Interviewees, however, more commonly remarked on intimacy with their mothers. One student said, "I could just tell my mom anything…. I knew I could talk to her and trust her, and she's just a really good person that I looked up to…. She was really involved in my life." "When I am discouraged and overwhelmed by stress," another remarked, "I usually turn to my mom for comfort and support." And yet another: "I really, really like to talk to her out of everyone; I think she is one of my most favorite people to talk to." Closeness to these young people meant that their mothers attended closely to the events and feelings of their personal lives. Indeed, many students had stay-at-home moms who believed in devoting attention to infants and children, a conviction common in the middle-class United States (Hays 1996) and core to the Close Family model.

Evidence suggests that the Close Family model arose in the 1950s. This model favors governance through emotional bonds rather than rules and punishment—a shift in family relations that Giddens (1992:98) and Rogoff (2003:130) date to the 1950s. Attachment theory came to powerfully affect academic psychology at this time (Mageo 2011:27, 2013b; Vicedo 2013). Making an evolutionary argument, Bowlby (1958) postulated that healthy psychological development required a close mother-child bond, legitimizing the Close Family model. Attachment theory soon came to inform pediatric advice to parents (Casillas 2012; Vicedo 2013). Kusserow's (2004) and Lareau's (2011) US East Coast studies suggest that in the middle class, this advice insured the Close Family model's hegemony.

In this family model, "close" is not only a trope for deep feeling but also represents an economy of attention. In a
small midwestern city and adjoining suburb as well as in the Northeast, Lareau (1991) studied US middle-class mothers who attended closely to their children, arranging and witnessing a host of improving activities—from piano lessons to soccer games—that she called “concerted cultivation.” Middle-class fathers also arranged their schedules around witnessing children’s performances. Such witnessing, Lareau (1991:61, 97) believes, persuades children that they have a right to others’ attention, which equips them to compete in school and later in employment (see also Ochs and Izquierdo 2009). Working-class and poor children, in contrast, were left to develop “naturally”: parents had neither time nor energy to play the part of an attentive audience. Similarly, in the New York area, Kusserow (2004) found that middle-class children were trained in “soft” individualism: attentive parents guided a gentle unfolding of individual talents that might equip children for a career. Poor children were encouraged to display “hard” individualism to protect them from a harsher social reality.

Both studies also featured intermediate groups where parents were less involved in children’s lives but took pride in their achievements and upward striving. Lareau’s and Kusserow’s work, along with my Northwest study, suggests a degree of consistency in class-based practices from different American locales.

My northwestern students mainly reported parental attentiveness that ranged from middle-class to intermediate cases. Scarlet’s middle-class parents, for example, were intimately involved in her education, taking her on spring break trips to Mexico to broaden her conceptions of cultural difference. She showed the easy confidence and inclination to look you in the eye that Lareau (2011) sees as resulting from concerted cultivation. In many other students’ families, however, parental involvement amounted to mom “hanging out” with children—say, watching a television program with them. Fathers could be absent or unpredictable, as we will soon see. American children from intermediate groups, while lacking the socialization that Lareau and Kusserow associate with middle-class status, often attempt to achieve this status. My students’ dream and life-history data provide insight as to why doing so is emotionally difficult.

Close Family Dynamics

Dependency is the condition of infancy, and dependency needs are universal, but how cultural practices shape dependency is highly variable (Quinn and Mageo 2013). How, then, do Close Family practices shape dependency? Particularly when mothers stay home, relative isolation focuses babies’ needs on one person. Yet, after the first few months, sometimes even before, the mother’s presence is punctuated by occasional or frequent absences. The attendant frustration tends to sharpen infants’ and later children’s dependency feelings—feelings likely to linger. A boy in my sample, for example, dreams he is back home: “My mom said that she would make us breakfast and that both my mom and dad would make us dinner every day.” A girl I call Sue dreams she is back at her elementary school but at her present age; her arms are “beginning to get skinner to the bone.” Sue turns to look at her reflection in a window; the skin “tightening around my shrinking arms . . . looks tinted green.” Her mother works at the elementary school. In a “rush of panic,” Sue starts screaming for her mother and begins to sob.

In the middle class, what begins as maternal attentiveness becomes adulation; mothers tend to see their child as “special” (Lareau 2011:111). As babies become toddlers, they continue to secure adulation for a host of large and small self-care tasks, from walking to tying their shoelaces (Mageo 1998:58–59; Quinn 2005b). Parents often give children sole credit for such accomplishments even when they have been greatly assisted (Ochs and Izquierdo 2009:399). This adulation teaches children that they can remain (covertly) dependent by soliciting attention for “independent” activities (Weisner 2001; Whiting 1978). Acting independent allows children’s dependency symbolic expression through behaviors that appear opposite to clinging and other forms of proximity seeking through which it is initially expressed (Bowby 1958). In the dream mentioned above, Sue said that she was “sad” rather than “angry” because “I should have been able to help myself.”

In the Close Family, one-to-one attending presupposes what Foucault (1979) calls surveillance. As Weisner says, US parents encourage “a close relationship . . . along with . . . individualistic autonomy . . . monitored by the parent” (Weisner 2001, 2009:184). Thus, the fathers of two boys Lareau observes constantly shout directions at soccer games: “Hold the ball,” “Look behind you,” “Get back,” “Take a run,” “Watch your feet,” “If you need a rest, ask for it” (1991:61–62). These interventions are intended as supportive but imply that these boys’ efforts fall below the mark. Later, school actualizes this implicit commentary by telling many children some of the time and some children much of the time that they are not special but average or below average. US grade inflation notwithstanding. Even where teachers continue Kusserow’s (2004) soft individualism, frequent tests and graded assignments make developing children aware of the possibility of negative oversight and stinging audits. Acting independent also serves to defend against such scrutiny. One might object, but learning always entails audits! In Polynesian societies, however, children learn mostly by observation, executing an activity when they feel ready (Levy 1973; Ritchie and Ritchie 1979), which obviates adult interventions.

My marginally middle-class students’ dreams and life-history reports indicate that what tends among solidly middle-class children to be a balance between parental adulation and audit in their cases often tips toward audit, which makes a defensive desire for independence painfully strong. A boy I call Bill, for example, dreams that his single mom declares, “No you don’t get your keys; you can’t drive; you have missed the bus.” Bill literally misses a bus in the dream. Missing the bus, Bill believed, was a metaphor for his failures and disappointing his mother; his car represented his “freedom,” without which he was “trapped.”
A girl I call Shelley dreamed that her mother insisted she move back home for her senior year, even though there was no university where they lived, because “I got sidetracked at school and parted too much.” In the dream, Shelley counters, “I have a 3.8, I work hard and do well—so who cares if I let loose every once in a while?” Her dream parents offer her “a few thousand dollars” to go to WSU (an inadequate sum) if she will join a “super-religious, really strict sorority.” Shelley responds “Hell no” and walks away but worries about running out of money and wonders if she can contribute enough plasma at a blood bank to cover her expenses, realizing that it will be impossible to study abroad in the spring semester as she had planned. “I am furious at my parents, especially my mom.”

If Shelley is furious at her mother, her father judges her too. Indeed, it was fathers’ judgments that students most feared. Thus, Frank dreamed that his dad was “upset with me”: “I can’t figure out why. My teeth start to hurt . . . I’m still trying to listen to my dad. I taste blood and my teeth start falling out; first my incisors, then molars. My dad doesn’t seem to notice and keeps lecturing me . . . I start crying, there is a lot of blood . . . I can’t do anything but stand there and cry; I’m really scared.”

In the Close Family, fathers’ ideal role is to balance maternal dependency by creating transitional space where children can safely practice risk-taking (Benjamin 1988). In the United States, risk-taking is a metaphor for exercising independence (Mageo 2011:46): doing what one wants even when it feels scary, as it probably does to a person who is emotionally dependent. Among my marginally middle-class Northwest undergraduates, however, fathers were often physically or emotionally absent or, in the above dream, so critical as to undermine maternal adulation. While some interviewees, particularly boys, had a “strong” relationship with their father, others commented, “I didn’t know how to relate to him,” “He was just kind of the provider over the family,” or in the case of divorce, “I’ve never been quite as close to my dad as my mom . . . because I don’t live with him.” Another said that in “ninth grade I decided I didn’t want to see my dad anymore.” And another: “My dad is a Vietnam vet and suffered from PTSD. . . . When I was young . . . he would usually be yelling about something. . . . We all had to deal with that every day. . . . I remember being super scared about it. . . . My dad was pretty judgmental.” A married student said of her husband, “His father would yell about everything and . . . had a very powerful voice. . . . As soon as he heard his father yell . . . chills raced up his spine.” Bill, Shelley, and Frank’s marginally middle-class families were in fact not that close and did not offer the ongoing adulation predicated by the Close Family model, although they all thought that emotionally close was what a family should be; this was their family model too.

Mirror-Phase Cultural Psychology

For all those who share the Close Family model, attention-dependence creates a habit of looking to others to discern how well one is doing, whether one is, in Garrison Keillor’s terms, “above average” or not. This habit, seeing the self in the mirror of others’ regard, traces back to what the psychoanalytic thinker Lacan (1968, 1977) calls “the mirror phase,” a developmental phase that can help us comprehend adulation-audit cultural psychology.

Lacan posits three forms of mind that also represent developmental stages: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The first is the immediate and fragmentary awareness of the infant. Around the age of two, image-based thinking emerges. This emergence is evinced by Lacan’s (1968) mirror phase: children recognize their image in mirrors and in mothers’ regard; mothers see their child as “a person,” and the child infers this identity. In many cultures, however, multiple adults and children care for infants and hold them facing the family rather than interlocked with the mother’s gaze (Greenfield 2009; Keller 2007). These children are likely to recognize their image in caregivers’ regard. Lacan hypothesizes that reflected self-images are compelling because they offer children an integration of previously fragmentary experience: “This is happening to me,” meaning the figure in the mirror, which is misrecognized as the “real” self. The body therein reflected, moreover, becomes a self-symbol. As children learn language, Lacan (1977) believes, image-based thinking retreats into dreams and fantasy. What I see in my Northwest students, however, is a robust persistence of mirror-phase psychology: as in the mirror phase, for these young people, the body is a crucial self-symbol, and the self is subject to transformation through others’ regard.

In her dream transformation into a shrunken green body, Sue, for example, like mirror-phase toddlers, discovers herself as a reflection (in a window). Sue thought, “My dream depicts my lowered self-esteem through my transforming body”; her body reflects a (negative) self-image. She screams for her mother, presumably because mother is the person who can stop her mirrored transformation by reflecting a positive self-image. In Frank’s dream, his bloody teeth are a bodily image for his deteriorating state. Another student, Marlene, in a dream recurrent since childhood, walks through a house of broken mirrors until she finds one that is not broken, but her image is splintered and distorted; she begins running, driven by “blinding fear.” This fear is a reaction to her mirrored transformation. Hollan (2003) sees dreams as representing people’s “selfscape,” in Marlene’s case symbolized by her mirrored body.

In her dream, Karla, too, undergoes a mirrored transformation. She returns to the high school where she did student teaching to teach a second time, wearing a beautiful brightly colored silk turban and “a fringy, wraparound skirt.” She feels “glamorous” and “wanted people to notice me . . . I walked around the school, aimlessly, but I held my head high.” A woman behind a desk criticizes her and tells her to go home and change clothes. She pulls the turban off in front of a bathroom mirror and discovers that her normally long hair is gray and short: “I appear to have aged 30 years,” she reported. “I feel ugly now, looking at myself.” The danger of mirror-phase cultural psychology is that others’ gaze is often auditing and
can, when one is interpersonally porous, deform one’s self-image.

Preoccupation with one’s image is narcissistic and, Giddens (1991) holds, generically modern: in modernity, the self is “reflective.” Leaving aside the question as to whether, globally, all “moderns” have reflective selves, I believe Giddens can help us understand US mirror-phase cultural psychology. According to Giddens (1991:75, 153), reflective selves are full of moral feeling but are compelled by shame rather than guilt. An earlier generation of anthropologists distinguished between Western “guilt cultures” and non-Western “shame cultures” (Kirkpatrick and White 1985:5–6). Westerners were assumed to have moral rules, for example, the Ten Commandments, and when they violated them, to feel guilt. Non-Westerners were assumed to have a public persona, “face,” and when their actions or those of others (e.g., arrogant rivals or philandering wives) besmirched that face, to feel shame. Giddens reverses the passé anthropological distinction.

I argue elsewhere (Magoe 1998:58–80) that guilt and shame are always compelling emotions in cultures. Giddens persuades me, however, that a relative weighting of these two emotions fluctuates through time. In social worlds governed by tradition, he opines (Giddens 1991), failure to abide by moral imperatives results in guilt—like Raskolnikov’s haunting guilt in Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment. Raskolnikov’s moral anxiety is private and interior—a secret to be discovered or confessed. In modernity, self is no less fraught with moral anxiety, but this anxiety concerns public performances with the potential to threaten self-esteem, as Karla’s self-esteem is threatened by another’s reaction to her costume. As is also evident in Karla’s case, shame comes from failure to replicate bourgeois ideals; one is supposed to have a profession (Karla had an “intense desire to have a meaningful and successful career” but in the dream fails to look professional) and also a nice house, to be attractive (for one’s age at least), to have an attractive significant other and fancy toys (cars, computers, smart phones).

Giddens (1991:153) believes that this perpetual threat to self-esteem undermines basic trust in self and the surrounding social milieu. Corroded trust, however, begins in “the child’s failure to . . . clearly separate out its own psychic boundaries” (Giddens 1991:178), which I call interpersonal porosity. Frank’s dream particularly evinces this failure; his father’s lecture breaches his body as if there was no boundary between them, but for Sue, Marlene, and Karla, too, the social world represented by the mirror has terrifyingly invasive effects on the self.

Freed from tradition and its moral imperatives, Giddens (1991) further argues, the reflective self is permissible. I suggest that, as in Close Family governance, here self-governance is supposed to be based on emotion rather than rules—specifically, in empathy for others. One gives to charity, for example, because one gazes into the eyes of a starving child on the nightly news and “feels their pain.” One refrains from disreputable or malicious acts such as adultery or gossip because these would “hurt” others. Permissiveness means that this self has little defense against impulse and, Giddens (1991) says, tends to become hedonistic. Thus, the ethos of modern advertisement is “thou shalt please thyself” (Baudrillard 1988). In turn, reflective selves identify with the source of impulse—the body—as does the child in the mirror phase when the body becomes an image of “me.”

Shame, according to Giddens, is a sense that “others do not see me as I see myself” (1991:66, 178). I would revise: in mirror-phase cultural psychology, shame is, “I see myself as (not necessarily sympathetic) others see me.” An emphasis on seeing also implies juxtaposing self-images to idealized images from the world (e.g., advertisements and movies). When self-images compare well, the result is a sense of self-worth; when they do not, comparison creates a sense of worthlessness. The reflective self, then, has two moments: a self-admiring moment that fits the meaning of “narcissism” as it is commonly understood (think of Karla parading around the high school) and an auditing moment (Karla looking ugly before her bathroom mirror), which is equally self-preoccupied, if the opposite of admiring. Ruby’s case confirms that for groups on the verge of the middle class, this sense of worthlessness and tendency to self-audit tend to outweigh external and internalized adulation, which makes the American dream of class mobility costly to realize.

Ruby

Ruby was from the rural mountain Northwest. With hesitation, Ruby said that she and her mother were “close” but added that her mother was “overly emotional.” Ruby’s father did not play with the children when they were little; he did not take them anywhere. He never said “I love you,” although now that she is an adult, sometimes he does. Ruby explained: her dad grew up with brothers in North Dakota; he had no family experience relating to girls; his own father never expressed emotion. Like the marginally middle-class fathers discussed above, while Ruby’s dad provided financial support, he did not provide the emotional support more solidly middle-class students usually got from fathers.

Ruby’s father and mother went to college, but neither had a career. Both worked, but her mother was the primary caretaker; she had an occupation she could pursue at home. In Ruby’s early years, her father was always looking for a better job. The family moved frequently, and Ruby had no enduring relationships outside it, which isolated her with an antagonistic older sister and her unstable mother. As Walkerdine (2006) observes, capitalism often necessitates relocating to where the work is; it demands transportable families and selves. The portability of the nuclear family can isolate members, throwing them back on one another, as it did Ruby, her mother, and her sister.

Ruby’s dad finally found a steady job in a rural Northwest town where people lived beneath the poverty line. Family income remained modest. They lived in a trailer. Yet Ruby
saw herself as different from her high-school cohorts; like their parents, they married early and immediately had kids, which made leaving and upward mobility impossible. At 16, Ruby had to go to high school only a couple days a week to finish her degree. Her school was 30 miles from home. She decided to take a job in a town another 30 miles away, where she rented an apartment. In the Close Family model, interdependence is supposed to generate intimacy, but Ruby’s antagonism toward her sister and disapproval of her mother suggest that this is sometimes a compensatory ideal; ambivalence is a likely result of the cloistering and interpersonal scrutiny of small-group living, often aggravated by the close quarters of poorer families. Ruby’s ambivalence prompts her to assert independence. She becomes an even smaller unit, living alone and nomadic, commuting to work, school, and family. Ruby was proud of this history; she identified as independent. Yet her dreams show that her dependence on others’ approval remained powerful.

Does Ruby’s extreme independence constitute a failure of the Close Family model? Ruby tries to describe her relationship with her mother as matching Close Family values, even if she cannot fit her father and sister into the mold. Yet her criticisms evoke this model as an ideal against which family members are defined, just as more glowing portraits would. Thus, models lend interpretations to many performances that are apparently nonconforming. Close Family cloistering or control that provokes assertions of independence, furthermore, represented a common pattern in my data, as in Shelley’s dream above.

At 18, Ruby moved to Pullman to attend WSU. My Self and Culture class trained her in collecting the kind of ethnopsychological data on which I rely. When she had the dream presented below, a teaching assistant read and graded her work. A year later, she and I worked on a common project and frequently chatted in my office. She had a ruddy heart-shaped scar in the center of her chest where a pendant might have been but not knowing where you are going. . . . The surroundings have changed, but that feeling still persists.

Ruby conversed with a character she called her Dream Self. Drawing on this role-play and dialogue, dreamers interpret their dream and guess its relationship to their culture (Mageo 2011:62–91).

Ruby began role-play with the road, which she saw as "life as a one way road," meaning "experiences you’ll have along the way are completely unpredictable.” Ruby lacks basic trust, which Giddens (1991:178) attributes to reflexive selves’ permeable psychic borders. Speaking as the road, Ruby continued:

**Road:** Look at your own life and where you started. You came from pretty humble beginnings in the middle of nowhere, Montana. That is why the road is at first a dirt road. Because in some of the earliest memories, you are riding on the tailgate of an old pick-up, watching where you’d been but not knowing where you’re going. . . . The stretch of the road is supposed to generate intimacy, but Ruby’s future is also an absence: then and now, Ruby does not know where she is going. Roads suggest directions and transits. Ruby’s road implies a wished-for transit from a tailgate to houses with manicured lawns but also a feared transit to a shack on the outskirts of those lawns. The mirror-ditches parallel the road; they repeat the road image and thus map the same wished-for/fearful transit, but what is bizarre and hence particularly dreamlike about them is that they reflect nothing. Elsewhere I argue (Mageo 2004, 2011:93–122) that dream images duplicate images from waking life, but with an absence that marks them as different from their waking-life originals and in which their meaning resides. As if compelled by this absence, Ruby next asked her Dream Self why there was no reflection. “Dream Self: . . . there is no reflection because you don’t know what to think.” While others might “know their own mind”—an American synonym for independence—Ruby does not.

After children internalize the image they first encounter in others’ eyes, they “look” into their imaginal mind to “see” their experiences in the form of a road. Ruby’s road parallels the road to the future, where she lived in an apartment.

To analyze her dream, Ruby chose a method of my devising called Dream Play (Mageo 2001, 2011:62–89). In Dream Play, the dreamer picks dream characters or objects to role-play. They close their eyes, go back into a dream in imagination, zoom in on a chosen object or character, let it expand, and when they have become it, open their eyes. In this way, dream objects, too, become characters. Dreamers then describe themselves as the character and enact a dialogue with it. Often, they improvise on the method. Thus, Ruby conversed with a character she called her Dream Self. Drawing on this role-play and dialogue, dreamers interpret their dream and guess its relationship to their culture (Mageo 2011:62–91).

Ruby began role-play with the road, which she saw as “life as a one way road,” meaning “experiences you’ll have along the way are completely unpredictable.” Ruby lacks basic trust, which Giddens (1991:178) attributes to reflexive selves’ permeable psychic borders. Speaking as the road, Ruby continued:

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their self-image. What the absence of images in Ruby’s stream means, I suggest, is that she lacks self-images that would tell her to think well of herself, images middle-class children get from parental adulation but also from the continuity between their idea of themselves as “special” and their bourgeois circumstances. While continuity between remembered images and current surroundings yields a sense of entitlement, absence of continuity, Ruby’s dream and dream work will indicate, instigates queries about one’s ability and worth. This absence is symbolized repeatedly throughout Ruby’s dream (overdetermined, in psychoanalytic terms) and may be one reason why she feels “disturbed” when she sees the beautiful houses. Ruby next asked her Dream Self, “Why do you avoid the nice houses and go into the shack?”

Dream Self: The shack is where you feel the most comfortable . . . where you grew up and what you’re familiar with.

Ruby: Why is there no floor in the shack?

Dream Self: The lack of a floor . . . represents the hole you feel that you’re in. Financially, socially, and geographically . . . Falling in the black hole is an obvious metaphor for despair and entrapment.

Is the shack comfortable because of its continuity with Ruby’s remembered past? But the family trailer wasn’t that bad. The trailer is resigned, moreover, to represent yet another absence (no floor in the shack?)

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Shame is a negative form of self-recognition that identifies Ruby with a “low” social identity. “A certain narcissism,” Butler (1997:104) opines, leads us to embrace abject identities because they confer social existence, yet this is an “alienated” and “self-colonizing” narcissism: alien, perhaps, to the validating “primary narcissism,” the sense of goodness that comes fromintrojecting early care on which babies build an initial sense of self (Freud 1964a [1930]), self-colonizing in the sense that it leads the person to internalize limiting and inherently oppressive ideas about who she is or should be, thus admitting a social gaze she would rather repel. Ruby next asked, “What’s with the paper?” Dream Self: “You’re going to school for 4 years just to receive a piece of paper. . . .

Bills come on paper; parking tickets, homework, exams. Even books don’t equate [with] pleasure or enjoyment anymore because they are mandatory. The paper is blank because . . . there are many unidentifiable (blank) culprits.”

School is supposed to be the way Americans travel between classes, but “a piece of paper,” meaning a diploma, may not be the ticket. Education may only result in bills and insures ongoing evaluation, an “audit self” I call it, always on trial. The papers being blank, moreover, represent yet another absence, one that is “everywhere,” redundantly signified throughout Ruby’s world.

Ruby: Why do you smile at the end of the dream?

Dream Self: Because for you, pain is sometimes a relief. Ask any cutter, and they’ll say it’s about control over one’s pain. And sometimes, it’s necessary for us to exchange one pain for another, if one pain is more bearable. You find a release in the cuts, and that’s why you smile and close your eyes. Your body has found a way to be content.

As for Walkerdine’s (2006) subjects, for Ruby, the border between classes is a site of pain—pain she iterates in her own body.

The dream houses/lawns are what Freud (1964b [1900]) calls a condensation; they unite discordant memories and meanings—beautiful bourgeois homes that make Ruby think of Edward Scissorhands, a movie about a man-made boy who begins to rise on his merits but is a misunderstood misfit who cannot help cutting himself and others. Dreams are intertextual with other stories circulating in a culture (Mageo 2002, 2011:23–58); when dreams draw on such intertexts, their images condense not simply personal memories but also larger stories from the social world and deploy these stories’ cultural meanings, thereby linking personal problems to social contexts. Ruby’s dream intertext (Scissorhands) implies that the homes it envisions, so different from where she grew up, represent a bourgeois ideal that feels like a cut; just like the papers, these homes wound Ruby. Next she asked the papers, “Why do you hurt me?”

Papers: We don’t hurt, we save, we provide a release for the unbearable. Why do you deny us?

Ruby: Because society tells me that cutting is wrong. Just because I did that in the past doesn’t mean I can’t change.

Papers: This is true, but your mind and body remember it as being the easiest and most attainable release, and that is what is echoed in your dream.

Too-porous boundaries, experienced as a thousand cuts, predicate a lack of agency symbolized by Ruby’s dream paralysis. Ruby told me she started cutting because her roommate did it. Cutting, then, was not only an enactment of pain but an example of it: her openness to in

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perceiving subject as a locus of personal thoughts and feelings. Butler reframes this view: many thoughts and feelings we experience result from ascribed social identities, as in Althusser’s (1971) idea of interpellation. Social identities are names—baker, banker, or Samoan chief—and hence discursive. Yet, as in Althusser’s (1971:162–163) famous scene of the hailing policeman, they are first sites at which we are seen—sites of recognition where others’ regard reflects an identity back to us, sites at once on the street and in the Imaginary. It is thus that ideology takes image form. For Ruby and for all whose self-worth is reliant on the mirror, then, subjectivity is also an imaginary site of injury—which is not to say that this injury is only imagined if any more than that only sticks and stones are real.

Butler (1997:104) further asks how we are “animated and motivated” by the injury imposed by an abject identity “such that our very attachment to it becomes the condition for our resignification of it.” Such resignifications, Butler maintains, offer ways of becoming: as an autobiography might obsessively repeat while also changing the meaning of injurious events in the author’s life, resignifying a reductive identity can alter its personal and public meanings and lend new significance to the injuries it inflicts. Ruby’s cutting symbolically and also obsessively repeats her sense of injury and thus demonstrates her attachment to it. Yet her cutting is also an attempt to claim authorship of this injury, which in turn demonstrates her deep need for expanded agency—a need that conjures a succession of dream images (the road, the shack, the paper), each of which recasts her identity in a new key (as a journeyer-aspirant, as basement class, as wounded). These images inflect the meanings of public symbols in Ruby’s social world with her personal experience and also represent new attempts to answer the existential question the dream poses: if Ruby is subject to invidious social reflections, how can she be an agent? We will soon see that such questioning begins to turn her sense of affliction into an evolution of self by offering a way of becoming: becoming more conscious of her dilemma.

The dream raises the question of agency through reversal: Ruby, a person supposed to have agency, experiences paralysis; the papers, objects supposed to lack agency, act. Jung (1972) and Perls (1971) see dreamed objects as representing parts of the self. If the papers represent part of Ruby, it is her dissociated agency; in life, Ruby regains agency by acting like the dream papers, violating her own boundaries, transforming pain into release. If, for the reflexive person, the body is a self-symbol, cutting would seem to repudiate narcissism by injuring the body’s appearance. If cutting repudiates narcissism, does it also repeat it?

In narcissism, one treats one’s body and indeed oneself as an object mirrored in others’ eyes (that is, one objectifies the self). By cutting, Ruby treats her body and herself as an object (that is, as a thing). These two senses of “object” are not equivalent, but I suggest that for Ruby, the latter represents the former: by treating her body as an object, she feels, however evanescently, that she is the inscriber, not others; ritualistically repeating narcissistic self-inscription, she attempts to reclaim agency in the act. Yet, Ruby’s repudiation-repetition dilemma sounds like a double bind.

**Double Binds and Troubled Relations**

Gregory Bateson (1972) defines the double bind in relation to what he calls the “schizophrenogenic” mother. Such a mother beckons her child, but her body is stiff and her mien uninviting. This mother’s ambivalent messages (come here/go away) are combined with a third: should the child question the contradiction, the mother responds as if her child is unfairly criticizing her. This third message, Bateson believes, when repeated throughout childhood interferes with children’s developing ability to interpret social reality. Bateson’s double bind is a confusion of messages that interferes with information processing; Ruby’s bind, I suggest, is a confusion of meanings that interferes with her ability to relate to others. Let us examine this bind and consider how it interferes with Ruby’s personal relations.

First, Ruby feels victimization, which her dream represents as feeling paralyzed in the face of attack. Second, she expresses and thereby transforms victimhood into agency and pleasure through cutting. Third, “society” tells her cutting is “sick”—evidence of inadequacy and thus shameful. As in the writings of Fanon (1967) on colonial subjects’ response to “white” status and privilege, Ruby’s reactions against inequality are socially defined as her individual shortcomings. This is the double edge of psychologizing suffering: doing so provides a language with which to speak of it (“sickness”) at the same time that it makes sufferings appear merely personal. Ruby is not blind to the politics of inequality, but inasmuch as she sees her cutting as “dumb” and “stupid,” she defines it and the suffering it proclaims as a personal failing. Suffering bereft of political implications becomes an embarrasment, a pollution, or irremovable dirt, symbolized in Ruby’s dream by the filthy shack, the next character to speak.

**Shack:** You feel like you can blend in with multiple crowds: the rich, the poor, the whatever. However . . . it doesn’t change the fact that you still see yourself and those others as . . . different people. Because you still very much identify with the lower class, you’re bound to the image of the shack. But it’s more than being bound to the image . . . there is nothing unfamiliar to you. It’s almost like having the best bed in the world and being in prison. You know you’re not in a good place, but you are very comfortable.

Ruby’s Imaginal mind reflects not her experience but perfect lawns, in comparison to which her past self is a shack with a hole; like her mirror-ditches or the blank papers, it is
an absence at her center rather than reliable ground. Ruby thought that the hole in the shack signified what she called “disparages” between herself and her cohorts.

I’ve been alone and on my own since I was 16. Meaning, I’ve had no financial help from anyone in almost 5 years. Putting myself through college has proved to be one of the most trying things I have ever done, especially as an out-of-state student. I work over 40 hours a week, am a full-time student, and still am falling behind on bills. I look around campus and I see kids my age driving $40,000 brand-new cars or [wearing] clothes with designer labels. Even my own roommate, who is closer to me than any other, has her parents pay her rent, tuition, and other bills. How can I help but feel ambivalence . . .? This “hole” has felt even greater lately, as this will be my last semester at WSU for a while, simply because I can’t afford it anymore.

Ruby got a partial scholarship and said her father sometimes gave her money, but her self-worth is tied to her being on her own as victimization. Ruby’s consociates got compelling reasons to identify with her even while she experiences being on her own as victimization. Ruby’s consociates mirror back to her idealized images of bourgeois privilege to which she aspires. These houses are homes; “home” to middle-class Americans represents not just a dwelling but family feeling—in my view, it represents the middle-class version of the Close Family model with all the personal fostering and witnessing that entails, which helps children compete in a world that could be a thousand cuts. Ruby realizes her middle-class consociates got “you’re special” adulation and a sense of entitlement from their families that she did not that, along with ongoing financial and emotional support, allows them to act independent while she feels (and is) needy. Ruby is proud that she supported herself while finishing high school, which makes her envy of others’ parental help a particularly acute (self-)contradiction. In the above passage, Ruby says that this contradiction incites ambivalence toward others—call it class antagonism—which troubles all her relations and further deprives her of a sense of continuity—of being at home.

For Ruby, negotiating the relation between socioeconomic classes is also negotiating the relation between internalized images from her personal past and idealized images from her culture that are too far apart, too discontinuous. This difficulty was probably magnified by having this dream in 2008 at the beginning of the sharp economic slowdown that preceded the Great Recession of 2009. Beginning in 2006, the bursting of the housing bubble brought home to many a deflated American dream symbolized by foreclosed mortgages on manicured houses and lawns (Rosenberg 2012). Ruby believed that the shack represented “increasing class differences within America . . . I now am curious if it even is possible to travel between the classes. The ‘poor boy makes good’ scenario seems . . . dated.” Ruby fears that the US aspiration myth is stretched to the breaking point, breaking people apart rather than knitting them together in an imagined community:

The rich are oblivious to the poor. This has been the way of the world for a very long time, but in America, where equality is supposed to be dominant, I have a problem with this. There is a secret desire within the dream and many of my dreams . . . for a redistribution of the wealth, or better yet, a complete annihilation of the monetary system . . . the destruction of money.

This last desire is so transgressive that Ruby does not claim it as her own, asserting “there is” rather than “I want.” Ruby’s ambivalence is not just her dualing emotions of self-worth versus shame but also her attraction to others versus an antagonism she inflicts on her own body in defiance of the mirror and of the road that promises so much but leads only, she fears, to a hole: to ceaseless negative self-evaluation, disparaging comparisons, and alienation from a world, not of the gift but of the loan application. Transcending birth circumstances, realizing the American dream, is a fantasy of independence from social context that counterpoints real feelings like Ruby’s—the ever more acute angst of failed attempts to transcend the constraints of a defining past. Ruby’s dream, then, shows what it is like to be marginally middle class in an adulation/audit world rooted in the Close Family model.

Ruby and Others

Ruby’s securely middle-class roommate, we learned above, was a cutter, too. Why, when she did not feel “basement class”? I neither met nor interviewed her, but my larger study suggests that the porosity Ruby experiences cuts across poorer and middle-class students and, with a significant difference, across genders, too. I have space for only a few examples.

Even securely middle-class Scarlet, mentioned earlier, was “very upset” when her mother once gave her a SlimFast shake for breakfast. When her mother told Scarlet’s sister to “watch sweets,” the sister cried. These reactions to gentle motherly surveillance suggest that it was invisibly felt—like the lecturing words of Frank’s father that make his teeth fall out. Scarlet and her sister probably reacted so strongly to their mother’s counsels because they were constantly comparing their bodily images to idealized public images. Scarlet rose early every morning to work out no matter how late she had been up the night before. A constant juxtaposition of inner and outer (self-)images is the reflexive self’s experience of porosity.

Scarlet is an example of a white female dedication to dieting and exercise—US gyms are wallpapered with mirrors. Such “wallpaper” is a real-world manifestation of mirror-phase cultural psychology. In dreams, as in gyms, reflexive selves struggle with culturally and self-imposed body audits. Thus, Betty was from an upper-middle-class family, while Marilyn was from a poor and unreliable one, but both saw the specter of inadequacy in inner and outer mirrors. Betty was fat and dreamed of trying on sexy lingerie. Betty was also bright but,
because of her appearance, ashamed to call attention to herself by talking in class. Not only dress-shop mirrors but also the social world reflected back her deviation from embodied norms—a deviation she felt as general unacceptability. Petite Marilyn dreamt of not being able to fit into shoes in one dream; in another, she was in a boutique but too big for all the clothes. In yet another, her boyfriend’s mother watched while she ran to her car scantily clad. All these dreams represent her struggle with body audits that suggest general personal inadequacy. In this last one, a mother surveys and judges Marilyn’s body as a self-symbol; in life, Marilyn was afraid that this mother thought she was too low class for her son and insufficiently chaste.

Another student, Marlene, was working her way through school. Her parents had divorced; she grew up with her unmoneyed mother. Her father was wealthy, neglectful, and manipulative. She dreamt of trying to wash her hair in the most splendid of a rich man’s bathrooms, which reminded her of the bath in her father’s house. She began to undress, only to realize that one wall was a “sheer curtain and tons of students can see me”; she was exposed to unwelcome (bodily) regard.

In reaction to feeling porous, people attempt to seal bodily boundaries. Clark, from a once middle-class family broken by divorce, dreams that he cannot seal skunk fumes out of his mother’s house. Clark associated the skunk with his need to be clean. “I constantly wash my hands, use antibacterial gel, take up to three showers a day, and can only wear clean, just-washed clothes.” In his dream, skunk stink is a kind of pollution associated with his mother—it sits on her deck—and reminds him of compulsive purification practices through which he polices bodily boundaries. In many male dreams, however, a sense of porosity was displaced.

In waking life, Van, for example, was learning a martial art and said he often got “the crap beat out of me.” He had a recurring dream in which he “flicked” attackers off “like bugs.” Rather than someone violating his bodily boundaries and sense of self, which was actually the case, in his dreams, others suffered this vulnerability. Van was often a superhero in dreams—a figure common on the silver screen: Superman, Batman, Wolverine, Iron Man, Captain America—and the list goes on. While Ruby, Betty, and Marilyn identify directly with inadequacy via dream images, Van’s dream disavows the inadequacy he experiences in waking life and displaces it onto others. His preoccupation with self-image is evident, but his dream identifies him with an idealized image rather than suggests a disparaging comparison.

Like Van, Betsy felt inadequate in daily life. Her mom and sister were disciplined and goal directed; she was not. They served as a constant mirror where she saw her shortcomings; as a result, she was reactively rebellious. Betsy drove cars fast and spun them in snow as if driving was an extreme sport. Her car was a body image. In a dream she analyzed, she is pursued by a driver she has offended and whom she cannot outrace; she crashes. She saw the other driver as representing repudiated norms. In many ways, her dream is similar to Van’s, yet Van undergoes a defensive metamorphosis in his dream: there, he is impervious to others. In Betsy’s dreams, her sense of inadequacy and vulnerability is manifest.

Reflections

If porosity is an effect of close individual attending to babies and children, one might object that parental attending is universally desired by children. To answer, I turn to the contrasting case I know best: Samoa. Mead says of Samoa in the 1920s, “Ties between mother and child were diluted by ties to other females who could succor and breastfeeding the child” (1959:61). Family members of all ages cared for and carried the infant about. Children were in almost constant physical contact with another family member (Sutter 1980). The extended family and village watched over toddlers. Thus, Mead tells us, the child might wander among her extended family’s adjacent households—she was not held sure of finding “food and drink, a sheet to wrap herself up in for a nap, a kind hand to dry causal tears and bind up her wounds” (1961 [1928]:41–42). Any small children who were missing when night falls, Mead continues, were simply “sought among their kinsfolk” (1961 [1928]:41–42).

Samoa believed that dignity demands ignoring the activities of lower status groups, and after the age of two, elders transfer care to older children, shaming or beating any child who continues to demand personal attention (Mageo 1991, 1998:47–50, 61–66). When children misbehave, the children’s group is often punished (Sutter 1980). Oversight is of the group. Such collective child-rearing practices are characteristic of many small-scale cultures (Otto and Keller 2014; Quinn and Mageo 2013). In Samoa, an exception to this group orientation is a lovely girl with long hair—a singular mark of beauty. Elders attend closely to such a girl to ensure her refined conduct in hopes of marrying her to a high-status male. Girls may cut off their hair to escape this surveillance.

Let us return to my opening questions about a possible confluence of cognitive and psychoanalytic approaches in psychological anthropology. I have meant to show how the Close Family model elicits defenses that compel feelings and behaviors—a dynamic apparent in Scarlet rising at dawn to work out, Betty silencing herself in class, Clark continually washing his hands, and Van learning a martial art that means being beaten on a daily basis. In Ruby’s case, this model made her depend on a small group of emotionally dependable people, stimulated extreme assertions of independence, and at the same time left her vulnerable to audits and a barrage of bourgeois norms. In dreams, we consider our problems with models, as Ruby’s dream and analysis together consider her reaction to the reflexive regard attendant on the Close Family model and the shame this regard inflicts on her.

A confluence of cognitive and psychoanalytic anthropology, I also argued, suggests possible ways that studies of strategic agency and subjectivity might converge. I sought this convergence in dreams. Ruby’s dream reveals how and where cultural life touches her most intimately and shows...
her attempts at agency in response; it also shows how her preconscious intents are formed through an ongoing traffic in images within her, how these intents give meaning to her actions, and how they lead to an awareness of her sociopolitical situation.

Last, I argued that the Close Family turns what has previously been considered a developmental phase, the mirror phase, into a cultural psychology that moves Ruby to compare images from her past to images of the American dream cascading from ubiquitous movie, television, and computer screens and displayed by her more privileged consociates. These images are, in effect, norms that cut to the quick and make her feel abject—basement class. The self in the mirror is that self who is always the object of the gaze. Inasmuch as gazing is a power relation, in mirror-phase cultural psychology, the gazer herself inscribes social standards and values on herself—a self that is likely to be symbolized by the body. Ruby’s cuts dramatize such inscriptions’ pain and violation. Ruby’s case further suggests that those who do not grow up middle class but nonetheless pursue the American dream face an amplified version of feelings prevalent in mirror-phase cultural psychology: shame, a sense of inadequacy, insecurity, lack of trust in the self, and alienation from others. Such feelings may pose one of the highest barriers young people pursuing this dream must surmount. Ruby craves homes emblematic of middle-class status and personhood; she is like-wise compelled to reject and excise these images in the world and in the self.

As in *American Idol* or popular best-chef shows, both adulation and audits come from performing before the mirroring eyes of audiences. This experience of self, I believe, has also come to transform cultural theory, perhaps without our being aware of the source of this transformation. Giddens (1991) theorized the reflexive self at the same time as Butler (1990) was articulating performance theory. Indeed, the mirror is a major trope for the relation between culture and the self in Butler’s * Bodies That Matter* (1993:71–91), where once again the self is/is not the body we see in the mirror of others’ regard. Perhaps the ascendancy of performance theory in anthropology in recent years indicates the growing importance of the reflexive self in US culture and the mirror-phase cultural psychology that goes with it. If we as culture members are gazing more into inner and outer mirrors, performance theory may be what we learn there: that people’s imitations of cultural images never quite match the shared models implicit in these images. Models, like the social identities Butler considers, are ever signified in light of personal realities and aspirations; therein resides a deconstructive and creative potential.

However painful her past, Ruby is well on her way to the manicured home of her dreams, but what a price she has had to pay to get there, a price exacted by the American ideology of success. Like the scarlet A on Hawthorne’s Hester, worn in a very different time and moral universe, I suspect Ruby’s red heart-shaped scar speaks of this price; it embodies her past, her class, and her cutting, which, rather than conceal, she displays by wearing tee shirts that come just below it. The scar reveals her shame, her *jouissance*, and her defiance of the narcissistic self-model and bourgeois ethos evident in her dreams.

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Comments

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In "Cultural Psychodynamics: The Audit, the Mirror, and the American Dream," Jeannette Mageo persuasively argues for a linkage between the largely disparate traditions of cognitive and psychoanalytic anthropology by exploring the defenses elicited by the cultural model of what she terms the US Close Family. Mageo’s insight into these defenses is by way of the use of dreams as a window into unconscious processes: “In dreams, we consider our problems with models.” Whether or not one is psychoanalytically oriented, the theoretical work accomplished in this article speaks to and provides one answer to an enduring question for psychological anthropology: What is the relationship of the individual to culture? Through close attention to the dream world and reflections of one student, Ruby, Mageo illustrates how the cultural model of the US Close Family becomes interlaced with deeply personal feelings and actions. Drawing on the Lacanian construct of “the mirror phase,” Mageo argues that the Close Family model manifests and is reproduced through the social mirroring practices of adulation and audit that are characteristic of contemporary US child rearing.

What I find especially compelling about this piece is Mageo’s attention to the “hidden life of class” in the United States (Ortner 1998), in particular, her engagement with the affective dimensions of class. Following the work of others (Kusserow 2004; Lareau 2011), Mageo argues that solidly middle-class families produce entitled kids who go through the world expecting the attention of others (Lareau 2011). By contrast, in families aspiring to middle-class status, Mageo argues that the adulation-audit balance is tipped in favor of audit. The constitutive gaze of the “other” is one of evaluation and critique, engendering strong assertions of independence as a culturally constituted defense against the anxious under- sides of feelings of shame and inadequacy. Mageo writes, “For groups on the verge of the middle class, this sense of
worthlessness and tendency to self-audit tend to outweigh external and internalized adulation, which makes the American dream of class mobility costly to realize.” Manifest in Ruby’s dreams of ditches, papers, and shacks without floors is her moment-by-moment struggle with the Close Family model, simultaneously striving for middle-class “manicured homes” while remaining deeply ambivalent and feeling out of place and unworthy. Mageo contributes powerful insight into how class inequalities are inscribed in ephemeral wisps of self-doubt that hold the potential to insidiously erode efforts toward the American dream.

Ruby imagines that the support—emotional and financial—her middle-class peers receive from parents “allows them to act independent while she feels (and is) needy.” She, in turn, is envious of such support, even as her own self-worth is tied to her fierce independence. What seems to go unrealized for Ruby is that what she perceives as the independence of her well-heeled peers is a kind of sham—a play-acting of independence as they cruise around campus in $40,000 cars. Interestingly, Mageo does not take up the shadow side of adulation, only minimally nodding to experiences of “audits” among more solidly middle-class students. Yet for the middle class, who have been largely shielded from adversity and saved from “real-world” consequences, the sting of the audit may be especially disorienting and jarring, revealing the fragility of the “special” self and distorting the threat such that everything becomes risky (e.g., a lower than expected grade portends future failure). Looked at from this vantage point, it is difficult to see Ruby as “needy,” and perhaps such reframing could disrupt the nagging self-doubt that endangers her efforts toward class mobility. Having spent countless hours behind closed doors with families from a range of backgrounds in my own ethnographic work, I also know that the close attention and “cultivation” (Lareau 2011) characteristic of more middle-class families does not necessarily equate with warmth; “closeness” is in the eye of the beholder.

I offer this perspective in the spirit of adding another contour to Mageo’s nuanced portrait of the embodied consequences of scarcity and abundance as they are enacted through everyday discourses and practices of adulation and audit in US families.

Japanese mothers, like American mothers, are expected to attend closely to the events and feelings of their children, yet there are also striking differences. Here I list three points that may seem strange to outsiders of American culture. One is the degree of what Mageo calls “adulation,” such as mothers saying “You’re special” or “You’re one of a kind” to their children. Japanese mothers naturally praise their children and are proud of their achievements but are less vocal about adoring them, especially when others are present. The second is that, despite the emphasis on closeness, dependent behaviors such as clinging and other forms of physical proximity with mothers are discouraged; American children are encouraged to be on their own and thus be independent. The third point is that, despite their emphasis on being “independent” and “unique,” Americans, both children and adults, seem very anxious about how they are evaluated by others (Fujita and Sano 2001).

Mageo’s argument for the Close Family as an American cultural construct solves these puzzles and puts them on a cohesive cognitive map. Child-rearing practices have not only an adulation component but also an auditing component that causes children to develop a sense of entitlement, but this also creates a porosity in interpersonal relationships, causing them to become vulnerable to the sting of negative attention and evaluation. Mageo’s argument that acting independent can be a defense mechanism is interesting as well. As she says, “children learn to deny/dissociate porosity and secure further attention by acting independent.”

The use of dreams to discern the nature of unconscious “defense” is an innovative method and a good addition to the discourse analysis often used in cognitive anthropology. The data collected are voluminous: 184 undergraduates contributed 1,469 dreams, with 508 including dream analyses. Mageo briefly describes how the students selected and analyzed the dreams. I would also like to have known whether there were dreams that do not fit into the Close Family model and how they were analyzed.

I have two questions. First, to what extent is the Close Family model shared by Americans? Is it a general norm or unique to the white middle class? Mageo mentions the Samoan collective child-rearing practice as a contrast to the Close Family model in the United States. In this practice, not only the mother of the child but also family members of all ages care for the infant, so that the extended family and the village watch over the toddlers. Similar collective child-rearing practices, where a child has multiple mother-like figures, can be observed among some ethnic groups, such as African Americans (Stack 1983) and Hispanics, even in the United States. Furthermore, because of the increasing number of divorces and remarriages, stepfamilies are becoming a standard family form across class and ethnic lines. When a child has multiple mother-like figures rather than a one-to-one relationship, does it follow that the child is freer from...
surveillance and becomes more vibrant and spontaneous, like the working-class and poor children that Mageo talks about, and thus becomes freed from the adulation-audit loop? Or is the Close Family model so strong and pervasive that collective child-rearing practices would be interpreted as inadequate and undesirable in comparison to a one-to-one relationship, imposing on the child feelings of deprivation and hardship, as was seen in the case study of Ruby?

This brings me to my final question, concerning the possibility of cultural change in the Close Family model. Mageo argues that this model is harder on marginally middle-class people such as Ruby. She suggests that “for aspirants to class mobility, what is a balance between adulation and audit in the middle class tips toward audit, magnifying feelings of shame and inadequacy and imposing one of the most formidable barriers such aspirants must overcome.” But Mageo’s other examples, such as Scarlet, Ruby’s securely middle-class roommate, or the upper-middle-class Betty, are also shown as trapped in the adulation-audit loop, with “a habit of looking to others to discern how well one is doing” and as full of anxieties and feelings of shame and inadequacy. If this is true, then no one is likely to be happy and satisfied with one’s achievements as long as the loop continues. However, no culture stays static. I would like to have known the author’s views on possible factors that might change this powerful cultural model.

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A cultural value pushed to an extreme generates a defensive reaction via its opposite, resulting in a double bind wherein both values exert pressure but neither can be fully realized. Family “closeness,” says Mageo, is a case in point. Being “close” makes it hard for young American men and women to seal parents out of the self. They react defensively against such “porosity” by acting independently. This “allows children’s dependency symbolic expression through behaviors that appear opposite to clinging and other forms of proximity seeking through which it is initially expressed.” Sometimes, the resulting double bind short-circuits the defense and produces the symptomatic responses Mageo describes, from dreams to self-mutilation.

Since the 1950s, dependence has been accentuated because of its association with the cultural model of family closeness. This model “prescribes intimate attending to infants and children, teaching them to expect ‘you’re special’ adulation; the message is that they are unique, ‘one of a kind.’” Children conform by (over)acting independently. That is what the model says they should do, and independent action helps overcome the boundary-attenuating effects of the closeness Mageo defines as porosity. Closeness, of course, requires monitoring. “Acting independent also serves to defend against such scrutiny.” As to the first, independence, this has been known as a core (but highly conflicted) American cultural value, from Tocqueville to Dumont. The idea that it is reinforced as a defense against porosity, however, is a new twist. But it assumes two things: that boundary-maintenance is a universal tendency and that threats to the integrity of the self will be met with defensive responses.

Both could be true. But how to know? Here Mageo resorts to the Lacanian “mirror phase” for explanatory direction. Children first learn to recognize themselves in the gaze of their caregivers. The body “therein reflected,” Mageo claims, becomes “a self-symbol,” and an important one, it turns out, for her undergraduate student informants. That is because for them, the mirror phase persists, making them forever vulnerable to others’ scrutiny and thus more likely to rely on reactive individualism (or what clinicians call “acting out”) as a defense. The existence of the mirror phase, even within Lacanian circles, has been much debated, but let us assume it is real. The notion that it persists suggests that Mageo believes such people to be developmentally arrested. There is an irony here: the author dismisses the personality studies of the 1940s, repeating the caricature of Kardiner and Linton as preoccupied with generalization and predictability. Yet the other image associated with culture and personality is that the observer is able to diagnose societies on the basis of pathognomonic categories and developmental hierarchy, some being more advanced and others stunted or regressive.

Mageo’s informants are undergraduates, inculcated with bourgeois ideals that, because of their lower-middle-class position, they are unlikely to achieve. Failure results in shame. This would be bad enough, but for late adolescents trapped in the mirror phase, shame is suffused by feelings of worthlessness and self-rage. Some resort to substitute means to guard themselves against the parental audit culture and thereby, paradoxically, reaffirm the dependence they seek to escape.

Mageo uses a variation on free association she calls “Dream Play,” wherein the dreamer selects dream characters or objects to role-play. One student, Ruby, imagines herself in conversation with her “Dream Self” and finds the interaction troubling: the Dream Self tells Ruby that she is like a road going nowhere. On the one hand, this represents a return to the mirror phase, but instead of seeing herself positively reflected (in, let us say, a road with a destination), Ruby sees no way to progress. The traditional term for this, but one Mageo declines to use, is neurotic fixation. On the other hand, the fact that Ruby imagines a road in the first place would suggest to me that the self, no matter how unrealized its expectations, is still struggling for direction and purpose.

Curiously, Mageo waits until late in her longest case study to reveal that Ruby also cuts herself. We are told she started in imitation of her roommate, “Cutting, then, was not only an enactment of porosity but an example of it: her openness to influence.” This is pretty thin soup. There is no evidence for imitative borrowing, and an alternative explanation—one that is more consistent with the literature—is available.
Her fixation on roads is an attempt to establish direction toward a goal, something Ruby lacks because of her background. Should she want the independence of the road or content herself with the Close Family audit culture she grew up in?

She probably wants both. Cutting helps establishes a sense of independent action over the one thing Ruby believes she owns, her own body. At the same time, the cuts she makes are visible to others and thereby serve as an invitation to (or demand for) social involvement, even dependency. Cutting is a compromise because it simultaneously expresses the desire for independence and dependence. So does the dream.

Although she does not claim the lineage, Mageo effectively confirms a theory that was formulated in its classic form by Robert Merton (1976; Merton and Barber 1963) and developed by others (see Connidis and McMullin 2002; Coser 1966; Grathoff 1970; Nuckolls 1996; Smelser 1998; Weigert 1989). What Merton called "sociological ambivalence" is the result of "conflicting normative expectations socially defined for a particular social role associated with a single social status" (1976:8). This is what Mageo's case studies reveal: people trying but failing to realize the cultural values of independence and dependence and defending against ambivalence with various compromises. George Devereux said much the same thing in his analysis of schizophrenia (1939, 1965).

But Mageo offers us something else, too: a take on sociological ambivalence in American class structure. By all accounts, America is losing its middle class as wealth migrates upward and an increasingly impoverished and precarious working class emerges. The resulting stresses are already apparent in Mageo's classroom sample, but the central conflict—between independence and dependence—will likely intensify as fewer normative opportunities for independent self-realization appear. It could even be worse. The close family, too, is probably in decline, as fewer and fewer people (especially men) achieve the education and regular employment status many see as necessary preconditions to family existence, close or otherwise. The mutually necessary but contradictory American values of independence and dependence become more and more unrealizable. To the extent that they remain cultural models, the behaviors Mageo describes will become more intense, more common. Perhaps it foretells the emergence of what Edgerton (1992) calls a "sick society."

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Who Is to Blame: Parents or the American Dream?

Jeannette Mageo provides a fascinating account of the effects of US child-rearing practices on the psyche of young adults. She also takes a rather provoking stance by arguing that the child-rearing principles of the Close Family model backfire, promoting independence in children at the cost of feelings of personal failure, shame, and anxiety. The much-applauded principles of middle-class child rearing that supposedly equip children with the necessary competencies for success later in life could instead have detrimental effects. I agree that it is about time to critically question today's child-rearing ideologies that govern not only US middle-class families but most modern bourgeois families.

Modern middle-class families constitute only a minority of the world's population, and their child-rearing principles are exceptional, both historically and across cultures (Lancy 2008). While the majority of the world raises children with the help of alloparents and thereby distributes child care responsibilities, modern middle-class families raise children relying on only one or few caregivers who devote their exclusive attention to the child. The theory behind this child-centered "mominess" is attachment theory (Bowlby 1969). It claims that a secure attachment relationship with a primary caregiver, mostly the mother, is fundamental for the healthy development of children. Attachment parenting constitutes the latest pinnacle in this line of reasoning. It commands mothers to be ever-present for their children, carry them, sleep with them, breastfeed them, and attune themselves totally to their baby's needs. Parents are thereby held responsible for their children's developmental outcome, while they are also pretty much left on their own.

Child-rearing ideologies are regarded as adaptations to contextual demands. In the United States, the American dream represents an influential ideal, that ideal being "if you work hard, you get the opportunity to become wealthy and successful." This emphasis on success is translated into child-rearing practices: the constant focus on children and the praise and applause for even the smallest achievement (adulation) boost children's self-confidence and foster the development of a sense of agency and accomplishment.

So, what went wrong for the adolescents in Mageo's study? Did their parents fail? To me, it seems that these parents were left without many choices. Attachment parents need to engage in full-time child rearing, sacrificing their income and careers. Rich families can afford to embrace attachment parenting, and if they do not feel like doing the job themselves, they hire a Mandarin-speaking nanny. Less privileged families face serious problems as stay-at-home parents without an income. The adolescents in Mageo's study came from lower-middle-class families; their parents were busy making ends meet while raising children. Based on the adolescents' accounts of their childhoods, their parents focused less on adulation and more on audit practices, in other words, closely scrutinizing their children's achievements. This seems typical for parents that are aware that their children will need to achieve more than their counterparts from upper social classes—for example, African American parents in the United States were found to put more emphasis on discipline and had greater educational expectations than Caucasian parents did (Harris 2011).
The American dream constructs norms and sets standards based on the foundational belief that hard work reaps success. This belief implies that if one fails, it is their personal fault. Two generations ago, this dream pretty much matched an attainable reality. The United States was a society with few barriers, and upward social mobility could be achieved through hard work. For example, good grades at school could indeed result in the attainment of a college degree and subsequent economic advancement. Reality nowadays, though, has disintegrated the American dream into an illusion; the United States has an extremely low level of social mobility compared to other affluent countries.

Due to social inequality, lower-middle-class parents may operate in a crisis mode, as it is impossible for them to fulfill the highly normative demands placed on them as parents. Their audit practices could represent adaptations to social realities and at the same time prepare their children for their future “failures”; once these children strive for individual achievements, their chances to secure themselves better prospects in life are extremely slim, and the disappointments may easily result in feelings of shame and inferiority.

The answer to “Who is to blame?” is pretty obvious to me: the American dream imposes powerful aspirations on US parents and their child-rearing practices; however, the American dream turns out to be a cynical and unattainable fiction for many families due to economic and cultural factors (Putnam 2015). The current parenting ideology may therefore be even more exceptional; it proves applicable to only the upper-class families who can afford it. For all the other families, it results in feelings of ineptness and shame, both for parents and their children. It may be time to abandon the idea of mominess and adopt a more practical, down-to-earth parenting idea—perhaps the ancient and foreign idea of distributed child care.

Reply

First, I thank all four commentators for their thoughtful readings and generous remarks. I lack space to address all their comments and so confine myself to those that help further clarify my argument.

Dr. Carpenter-Song asks whethersolidly middle-class children fare better in an adulation-audit culture than marginally middle-class children such as Ruby. She suggests that those children spared audits during their developmental years tend to stumble later when audits reveal the fragility of the “special self.” Carpenter-Song intimates that these children’s parents are often demanding in their insistence that their children replicate class status. For these families, too, “close” may describe only residential proximity growing up rather than the emotions that, ideally, are supposed to make proximity supportive and desirable. My only caveat is that many of my students sincerely described themselves as close to their families. Ruby’s family fails to conform to the model (albeit in fairly typical ways), which magnifies effects likely to be more subtly present when the Close Family model works as it is supposed to. She is therefore both more more exceptionally prone to and driven toward independence and has to face the contradictions inherent in the model. Her lack of normativity is what makes her case so useful.

Dr. Fujita-Sano nicely sums up developmental differences and similarities between child rearing in my US sample and in Japan. She also inquires whether there are dreams in my sample that do not fit the Close Family model. Let me clarify my theory of dreams, presented more fully in my 2011 book: dreams are at least in part about problems with cultural models and therefore precisely about life experiences that do not conform to models. By bringing remote associations to bear on model problems, dreamers endeavor to increase their expertise using them. Models tend to be eulogized in culture, as family closeness is eulogized in the United States, but they also predicate emotional difficulties, in this case, interpersonal porosity and dependence; dreams are about these difficulties too, as Ruby’s case demonstrates. Dreams I have collected that refer to family are precisely about material that to one degree or another does not conform to the Close Family model or that discloses its inherent contradictions. Of course, my dreamers dreamt about other models too. In my 2011 book, I explore a number of these: to name a few, models that I call Cinderella Femininity, Super-Masculinity, Choice-as-Agency, and the Traveling Self.

Fujita-Sano also asks whether there are alternative models of family in the United States similar to those that have been documented elsewhere. As Quinn and I demonstrate in our recent volume on attachment (Quinn and Mageo 2013), this nuclear mother-and-child-centric family represents a white middle-class model, albeit one canonized by US developmental psychology and promoted in pediatric advice. But it is a hegemonic model, which means that even though there is significant cultural variety in US child rearing, people often attempt to describe their family in terms of this model or see families as falling short or as “alternative” when they do not conform. Fujita-Sano also asks whether the prevalence of divorce and subsequent stepfamilies changes the Close Family configuration. In one case I considered in depth (Mageo 2010), the young woman’s parents divorced. She had a “girlfriend” relationship with her father’s second wife, calling her by her first name. I agree with Schneider (1968): in the United States, people tend to consider only genetically close relations “real” family, although with adopted children, the reality of this relation is often asserted against the grain. Last, Fujita-Sano asks what factors might change this model. As Giddens (1991) sees reflexivity, I see the Close Family as a concomitant of late capitalism. The covert porosity and dependence promoted by this model, along with the tendency to act in enterprising ways, support the adaptability late capitalism requires of workers, although these requirements differ to a degree by class. Following this argument, the model will change as the socioeconomic base of society changes.
as people, tired of the adulation-audit loop, change the socioeconomic base.

I argue that the child-rearing practices described in my sample and more broadly in the middle-class United States create what I call “mirror-phase cultural psychology.” Dr. Charles W. Nuckolls suggests that this means that I think this group is developmentally arrested. Let me clarify: I suspect that those developmental trajectories traced in Lacanian theory and other classic developmental theories best describe normative development in Europe and America up until around 1950. Just as there are different family models in other cultures, so too there are diverse developmental trajectories. It is likely that these as-yet-untheorized trajectories draw on and further develop “phases” described in classic developmental scenarios as a basis for self. In other words, the mirror phase predicates its own trajectory, one that many US middle-class children now actualize in their development. This is a direction, I believe, that my data and Giddens’s data on late-modern reflexive cultures suggest.

I agree that Ruby is struggling for direction and that the dream is about her struggles; it amounts to an analysis in images of how inequality is articulated in the Close Family model to inhibit her progress on the road of life. In that they struggle with cultural models, I see dreamers as incipient social critics. I also agree that Ruby’s cutting helps her establish a sense of sovereignty over her body, but cutting is not a real independence, and she does learn it from someone else. I further agree that cutting is a compromise; like Freud (1926), I see symptoms as compromise formations—that is, as self-punishments and expressions of desire at once. Nuckolls also asks whether Ruby’s problemmatic cultural model foretells the emergence of a “sick society.” I do not see cultural models as necessarily aimed at mental health but at social success, however that is locally defined. Analyses of such models can be useful if people are to gain insight into how cultural beliefs and practices direct their energies away from their best interests.

Dr. Hiltrud Otto rightly regards the attachment paradigm in US society and developmental psychology as at the root of the Close Family model. In recent years, attachment theory and the pediatric industry it supports have been subject to producing widespread features of the white middle-class version of its cultural psychology. In many socially oriented cultures, in contrast, responsibility for the child care is distributed, and the mother’s role in childcare is diminished. This alternative possibility maps a range along which there is great cultural variation. In some hunter-gatherer groups, for example, people favor the mother-child bond in some contexts and undercut it in others; they likewise tend to privilege self-reliance in some situations (far-ranging solitary gathering), while in others, they discourage individuality in favor of group identifications (Barlow 2013).

—Jeannette Mageo

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