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Sarah M. Stitzlein

*University of New Hampshire*

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FLEXIBLE HABITS: EXPLOSIVE TRANSACTIONS  
ACROSS RACED AND GENDERED SELVES

Sarah M. McGough  
University of Illinois

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Early in Disney's recent movie, *Remember the Titans* (2000), the Black and White football players of a newly desegregated high school meet for the first time. The scene is marked by White boys, walking stiff, chests puffed, chins out, in a dominating mass met by the penetrating stares of Black boys standing defensively, looking both frightened and angry. Smirks are exchanged and a few words are uttered, but only those that are perceived as insults are acknowledged. A short while later, the Black teammates have gathered in the gymnasium for a meeting, when a chubby, jovial White boy comes bounding into the room, arms bouncing leisurely at his side. Without even thinking, he introduces himself as a new student, Louie, a Navy kid freshly transplanted to Virginia. He shouts out a friendly hello through a cheeky smile and turns to make eye contact and wave to the crowd of Black guys around him. The other guys, accustomed to racial tension and friendships divided by the color line, stand flabbergasted and unsure how to respond.

This reality-based scene, though perhaps typically over dramatized by Disney, provides a useful example of an instance where habits of race and habitual responses to race affect the success of transactions across bodies marked by difference. The bodily comportment of the groups of White and Black students prevents communication from occurring and fosters increased tension. While, on the other hand, Louie's flexibility, knack at varying the customary style of conversing with students racially different from himself, and ease with speaking at the Black team meeting takes the players off guard and opens an avenue for more effective communication. Louie effortlessly fashions his self-presentation to meet the unexpected situation of a racially divided football team.

I contend that flexible habits, like those of Louie, should be cultivated by schools in order to promote more fluid transactions across raced and gendered flesh. In this paper, I will describe the ways in which habits are constitutive of selves and of the genders and races that shroud them. I will show how, when these habits are understood in the uniquely Deweyan sense as flexible as well as capable of being consciously scrutinized and altered, they can be tools for making flesh based distinctions more permeable. Thereby, better avenues for communication across difference can be forged. Finally, I will argue that schools can be one of the most fitting environments for cultivating flexible habits.

In the spirit of John Dewey, I believe students should best be understood as organisms. In his view, organisms are body-minds which form and are dynamically formed by transactions with the environment. These transactions

occur with other people, the physical world, and within elements of one's own identity. One's raced and gendered self is formed through transactions with social institutions and amongst these very indivisible aspects of the self. Large social systems construct and assign meaning to 'race' and 'gender', as well as guide the ways in which the individual enacts them. Though discrete entities shrouded by flesh, the organisms' distinctions from the world and each other are blurred by virtue of their co-constitution with their surroundings. The transactions, while not necessarily directed toward improvement, are often driven by human desire to enrich lived experience, including relationships with others. Within these relational exchanges, body-mind expresses the nonreductive continuum of mental and physical activity that is expressed in varying circumstances and is characterized by habits.

Habits, as I understand them by way of the Deweyan tradition, are the organization and meaning of one's bodily impulses which are formed through one's transaction with the world. They are also embodied beliefs that one obtains through inquiry into one's surroundings. The impulses and beliefs assemble into patterns or styles of being in the world which one performs effortlessly and largely without conscious reflection. They can be recognized as skills, attitudes, morals, communication systems, sensitivities, modes of response, gestures, dispositions, or bodily comportments and can exhibit culturally defined race or gender. When reflected upon, these habits acquire meaning. Together, continuity of habits can compose one's identity and individuality. Indeed, "the gendered and other habits that structure a person *are* that person."<sup>1</sup>

While they may vary from one person to the next, some habits or elements of habits are shared because they come about through similar transactions with the common world or are directed toward mutual objects in the environment. This is evident in the similar ways that the football players in the movie learned to act toward members of other races. As members of the same racist society, they all (except Louie) learned to behave similarly in situations of racial tension. However, feminist pragmatist Shannon Sullivan correctly warns, "one cannot assume that bodily habits, behaviors, and structures automatically provide a common ground for communication and community that has not yet been inscribed by differences and particularities."<sup>2</sup> These differences allow for uniqueness of the self and bodily distinction. Failure to recognize these can underlie misguided assumptions of commonality that inhibit successful transactions and communications.

As connoted by popular expressions such as "breaking a bad habit" or "stuck in a habit", habits can become stagnant and routine. Such fixity inhibits growth and, as I hope to show, blocks successful transactions between organisms. Following Dewey's suggestions and those of Sullivan, habits can more productively be understood as kinds of emergent activity and as will to change

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action. Dewey notes, “All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will they *are* will.”<sup>3</sup> Habits are “working capacities”<sup>4</sup> that, when disrupted by a change in the environment or conflicts amongst themselves, provoke the organism to actively solve the problem at hand by way of adjusting the environment and the self.<sup>5</sup> “A habit does not wait,” Dewey adds, “for a stimulus to turn up so that it may get busy; it actively seeks for occasions to pass into full operation.”<sup>6</sup>

While perhaps most obviously calls to bodily action, habits are not divorced from knowledge. Steven Fesmire clarifies, “Pragmatism views habit not in terms of a condition *reflex*, but in terms of intelligent reconstruction of problematic situations.”<sup>7</sup> When formed tentatively as hypotheses in light of intelligent foresight into future, unpredictable, circumstances, habits can be flexible agents of change whose form emerges as situations unfold.<sup>8</sup> Or, in Dewey’s words, “the intellectual element in a habit fixes the relation of the habit to varied and elastic use, and hence to continued growth.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, habits, as intimately tied to intelligent reflection, are projective and sites of agency.

‘Flexible habits’ can be understood in two ways. In one regard, they are habits characterized by flexibility: ease of adapting to unexpected situations, openness to new ideas, and the like. In another sense, paradoxical as it may seem given the common use of ‘habit’, the habits *themselves* are flexible. It is in this sense that Dewey’s unique understanding of habit is especially useful. In this case, habits allow themselves to be comfortably and willingly altered when they prove to be no longer satisfactory in a situation. They are tentative, though not to the extent of jeopardizing the entire self they constitute for they cannot be changed all at once. A dominant male student’s flexible habit of leadership, for example, would change easily when placed in a challenging group situation where his current leadership approach doesn’t prove successful. Hence, the very way in which he styles his leadership (possibly including its gendered elements) would change. While not a wholesale change of the self, employing flexible habits can promote particular, context-specific, change and foster growth.

Habits of flexibility include openness to others, imagination, developing new vocabulary, holding one’s beliefs tentatively, ease of meeting new people, conscious reflection on oneself, bodily comportment that welcomes communication, comfortably adapting to unexpected situations, and accommodating difference. As flexible habits, however, even those listed here must be held tentatively—capable of being reformed and replaced when they prove to be problematic. Though they may appear as perennially good habits, perhaps even virtues in some regards, there may be a few instances where the more appropriate or ethical response to a race or gender problem is to replace these habits with ones that are more resolute. This could occur when a white

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person is being persuaded or even recruited by a racial extremist. Rather than being open-minded and inviting of discussion, it may be more appropriate to resolutely turn one's back and walk away. Likewise, when black students encounter institutionalized racism in schools, resolute resistance may be needed.

Of additional note, habits “are adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, habits not only serve in developing human growth, but also in changing the conditions of the environment. In the context of racism and sexism, habits can serve to change these systematic institutions of flesh-based privilege by changing how we use race and gender and how we interact with others based on these categories. Hence, habits are tools of agency but not in the sense of an isolated individual's capacity, but as a relational ability, linking and affecting both the self and the world around it.

#### DEVELOPING FLEXIBLE HABITS THROUGH EDUCATION

Habits, largely developed through transaction with the environment, are most overtly cultivated within social institutions and in schools in particular. It is because of this that I draw your attention to schools as habitats where stable student identities based on flexible habits can and should reside. As purveyors of flexible habits, schools can nurture habitual sources that promote more fruitful transactions between students marked by racial, sexual, and other types of differences often read upon the flesh. Understanding student organisms as transactional blurs the flesh distinction while not erasing identity discreteness, thereby exposing the false dichotomy of interior and exterior as well as the raced and gendered boundary between the two. Dispelling the myths of radical individualism, symbolically marked by the containment of the flesh, allows for more fluid movement between body-minds. It also makes the Deweyan goal of a flourishing democracy more probable by unveiling the organic connection of individuals engaged in common pursuits.<sup>11</sup>

Schools should strive to develop dynamic habits within their students. Importantly, however, this task lies ultimately with the students, for the child develops habits if the conditions are right *and* the experience is satisfying. Though schools cannot cultivate flexible habits directly, they can provide a certain type of environment. This would be one in which, when flexible habits are employed, they lead students satisfactorily and, therefore, are persuasive enough to be adopted. Schools can also encourage the students *themselves* to adopt these habits by focusing student reflections upon their usefulness.

Dewey claims that for the child “The educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming.”<sup>12</sup> This process is best understood in terms of continually transforming habits, habits which are flexible. These habits not only allow for further change in the environment, but assume it will occur, and are formed in light of those potential, though indeterminate,

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changes. Flexible habits not only change to meet the environment, but alter the ways in which they use the environment to meet their ends of improving action and lived experience. Dynamic habits allow us to vary experience and hence experience novelty. Thereby, we can be led in new directions for learning and improving bodily existence.

A classroom cognizant and supportive of transactions relying on flexible habits is more likely to promote student allies in the project of improving lived experience and therefore student motivation to communicate across their differences—to permeate one another's bodies and minds in hopes of achieving communal growth. Paying attention to the ways in which one's gender and race-related habits constitute oneself, while acknowledging that others who fit the same identity category may be constituted differently due to different transactions with the world, can enable one to step to the edges of those habits, the flesh, and begin to imagine what it might be like to transact across that now semi-transparent divide.

Bringing one's habits into explicit contact with those of someone different from one's self allows them to be challenged, changed, or confirmed. Jim Garrison explains, "Habits are unconscious until something disrupts them. Dialoging across differences disrupts our habits of social interaction."<sup>13</sup> Classrooms which engage in this type of disruptive activity, would make the habits of race and gender, as well as students' reactionary habits to race and gender difference, no longer routine, but conscious and, ideally, intelligent. Thereby, they could become fluid and formed in light of future interactions across difference.

Of course, this activity would not and could not entail a wholesale questioning of one's own habits because they cannot all be brought out at once, nor are all habits easily called into consciousness. Some are deeply ingrained habits that are maintained in order to keep a sense of consistency about oneself. A teacher skilled at crafting delicate learning opportunities can draw out some of these most deeply held, and often most problematically sedimented, habits. One way of doing this would be to encourage the student to inquire into what about herself is preserved when she changes during a learning experience or transactive encounter. Focusing the student on a specific race or gender related problem which she has experienced would be of use here, for it is in the most dangerous and problematic of lived situations when habits are often revealed. She can be challenged to identify those habits that so thoughtlessly constitute her identity—perhaps habits of prejudice which may be impeding her transactions with others and which she may be stubborn about bringing to the forefront in her transactions with them.

Admittedly, this can be a highly difficult and risky introspection insofar as it makes our deeply rooted habits conscious and jeopardizes our very sense

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of self. One tool a teacher could use to aid this process would be to assist the student in viewing herself from without, perhaps by creating a hypothetical scenario for her to consider or urging her to describe how her actions may appear to a stranger. Approaching her situation from a third person perspective may help unveil her most inflexible and hidden habits. Once rigid habits are called into view, students can intelligently capitalize on them to change how they are raced and gendered over time by replacing those stagnant habits, particularly if students discover that those habits are responsible for promoting sharp differentiations between sexes, races, etc., and therefore limiting transaction.

For Dewey, “the acquiring of new habits is due to an original plasticity of our natures: to our ability to vary responses till we find an appropriate and efficient way of acting. Routine habits, and habits that possess us instead of our possessing them, are habits which put an end to plasticity. They mark the close of power to vary.”<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler explains that routine habits, regulated through repetition, form naturalized genders, races, and normative sexualities.<sup>15</sup> I contend, however, that dynamic habits of race and gender, while still allowing for continuity of identity, are more likely to prevent such sedimented formations whose naturalization often involves hierarchical categorization. Additionally, and more in accord with Butler’s view, specific habits of flexibility can be encouraged which vary those repetitions and thereby subvert the naturalized categories.

Teachers can encourage students to attend to their habits so that they will be able to recognize when their repetition needs to be altered or when the cultural structures influencing those habits need to be challenged. This can be a highly difficult task because some students who are members of dominant groups may not experience lack of communication or unjust interaction with members of oppressed groups as problematic. In fact, they may not even notice the problems of such relations at all. These situations have maintained their privilege for years and may not readily appear in need of being changed. In these instances, teachers need to effectively point out and explicate (without reinforcing or usurping) the experiences of the oppressed groups so as to bring them to light for the students of dominant backgrounds. Also, teaching students to attend to the fruitful transactions resulting from flexible habits will promote student questioning of stagnant social institutions that continue to problematically differentiate people on the bases of raced or gendered flesh, as well as the ways in which these institutions shape people’s habits.

The mutual relationship of human and institutional habits suggests an ability of human habitual alteration to effect change in institutions. Charlene Haddock Seigfried notes, “Institutions often appear to be impervious to change, but they are still complexes of habits and as such can be intelligently redirected. Truly radical change cannot be brought about merely through replacing formal structures, however, drastic as such substitutions are. Habits of thought and

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desire must also change, and this is best affected in young people who have not yet been fully imbued with established customs.”<sup>16</sup> Schools themselves must be aware of the possibility that the very habits they develop within students may be used to subvert or challenge the ethos of the school. In this regard, while the school provides structure for forming flexible habits, the structure itself must be relatively flexible and revisable, dynamically prepared to work through changes in the future amongst its student body or the environment at large.

#### COMMUNICATING ACROSS DIFFERENCE WITH EASE

Important for fruitful transaction, flexible habits include flexibility in the ways in which one communicates with others. This includes how one speaks and listens in context specific situations and relative to the habits of the other person with which one is conversing. For Dewey, communication is “the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership.”<sup>17</sup> Here, activity should be thought of as habits enacted by (and constitutive of) the body-mind of each participant which are engaged in transaction and therefore open to being changed by and through one another. When both interlocutors come together with a shared concern for improving life’s conditions and for communicating across their differences, it may be helpful, but not necessary, for them to consciously reflect on their habits. When their habits are characterized by openness, the responses that they make to one another can be sufficient causes for each to modify their respective responses in turn, hence altering themselves to better achieve a fruitful transaction.<sup>18</sup> Communication “modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it.”<sup>19</sup>

I suggest that a failure of students to dynamically adapt their habitual responses to one another at an important time of racial identity formation is evident in Beverly Daniel Tatum’s account of the establishment of the “Black table” in the school cafeteria. She writes, “Not only are Black adolescents encountering racism and reflecting on their identity, but their White peers, even when they are not the perpetrators (and sometimes they are), are unprepared to respond in supportive ways. The Black students turn to each other for the much needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else.”<sup>20</sup> While promoting fruitful group solidarity, this inflexibility in learning to transact across racial difference results in color line division and communication collapse. The development of the “Black table” (for which both black and white students, as well as the larger social structure, are responsible) prevents cross-racial growth. Habitual ways of enacting dichotomy and division begin to sediment.

Insofar as communication is (or should be) an activity of making common, it blends the flesh and breaks down identity dualisms while preserving individuality and avoiding homogenization. It negotiates new meanings, including new understandings of gender and racial difference. Within this

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communally pursued exchange, new vocabularies can be formed, providing new ways to envision relations and to provoke needed alterations of certain stagnant habits. Granted, however, these negotiations may problematically be usurped by the participant who embodies the traditional racial or gender role of privilege. Teachers must be attuned to this possibility and prepared to mediate in ways which not only assuage these inequalities, but effectively call them into question so they can be intelligently confronted by the students themselves. Moreover, teachers should call into question the very *need* for changing inequalities.

Changing one's habits when in communication with others or even willfully over time through one's environmental interaction, changes not only how one transacts, but how one is in the world, as well as the world itself. This is a risky endeavor; one made more worthwhile, more rewarding, and more efficient through the cultivation of flexible habits. Fluid habits promote a rethinking and reformation of rigid habits that demarcate firm boundaries between genders and races. To close with Dewey, "By a seeming paradox, increased power of forming habits means increased susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness. Thus, even if we think of habits as so many grooves, the power to acquire many and varied grooves denotes high sensitivity, explosiveness."<sup>21</sup> Flexible habits work through dangerous situations, clearing the way for growth and change. Explosive, indeed.

#### NOTES

1. Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 9.
  2. Sullivan, 74.
  3. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, MW: 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922 [1983]), 21.
  4. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 16.
  5. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 38.
  6. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 48.
  7. Steven A. Fesmire, "Educating the moral artist: dramatic rehearsal in moral education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 13, no. 3-4 (1994/5): 216.
  8. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 246. See also, Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 339-340.
  9. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 48.
  10. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 38.
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11. For more on democracy's link to social fluidity see Raymond D. Boisvert, "John Dewey: an 'Old-Fashioned' Reformer," in *The New Scholarship on Dewey*, ed. Jim Garrison (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).
  12. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, MW 9, 82.
  13. Jim Garrison, "A Deweyan theory of democratic listening," *Educational Theory*, 46 no.4 (1996): 441, 429-451.
  14. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 49.
  15. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33 and 140. Note that despite Butler's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's habitus, Deweyan habits are not unlike her understanding of repetitious performatives which are dramatic acts that stylize people and give them meaning, as well as provide for subversion of those meanings by way of varying their repetition.
  16. Seigfried, 252.
  17. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925 [1981]) LW 1:141.
  18. Here I am drawing heavily on Sullivan's understanding of habits in communication.
  19. Dewey, MW 9:12.
  20. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 60.
  21. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1925), 281.
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