

Harry Potter, Benjamin Bloom, and the Sociological Imagination

Joyce W. Fields
Columbia College

This paper is an examination of utilizing the J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter* series as a teaching tool for introductory sociology courses. Because of the ease in comparing the Wizard culture in which Harry lives with their own culture, students apply critical thinking skills and thus increase their ability to think beyond their own, immediate social systems carrying them to stages three and four, application and analysis, in Bloom's Taxonomy. Particular strengths of the *Harry Potter* series are illustrations of sociological theories and social processes; examples of social stratification; and explanations of basic sociological concepts such as norms, sanctions, and deviance. For this class, students are required to read the first two books or watch the movies adapted from these books. In addition, they must read the third and fourth books in the series as the movie adaptations omit significant sociological parallels. These books and movies increase abstract understanding of sociological concepts as they apply to the fictional world of wizards. These abstractions become concrete as students apply this understanding to the analysis of their own place in their social environments.

C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) wrote, "The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise" (Mills, 1959, p. 6). He further described social scientists as those who ask imaginative questions, seeking answers beyond the obvious, searching for the obscure, and the unexpected answer. In looking at the structure of any society he recommends three questions specifically aimed at jumpstarting this sociological imagination. These are:

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? Its components and the relationship between components? What is the meaning of continuance or change?
2. Where does this society stand in human history? What does it contribute to the meaning of humanity? What are its essential feature and how do they differ from those of its past?
3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? (Mills, 1959, p. 6-7).

Beyond the scope of the classical definition of the sociological imagination, Mills "conveys a sense of what it means to be an intellectual who concentrates on the social nature of man and who seeks that which is significant" (Elwell, 2002, slide 80).

It is this task, to "seek that which is significant" as it defines man's relationships to others and social structures, that creates relevance in the classroom. Schaefer (2002) introduces the sociological imagination as "an unusual type of creative thinking....that allows

us to comprehend the links between our immediate, personal social settings and the remote, impersonal social world that surrounds us and helps to shape us" (p. 3). One key to using a sociological imagination is the ability of viewing our own society as an outsider would. Divorcing self from the near (very well known and opinionated) environment is a difficult task for entry level undergraduate students.

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom published his taxonomy of learning behaviors. He addressed the order in which students attain, incorporate, and use knowledge. Bloom outlines three domains in which education takes place. These are cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. The first or cognitive domain involves the development of the intellect or the way in which we gain and integrate knowledge and therefore, provides educators with a guide for educational planning and assessment. The cognitive domain outlines six definitive stages or skill sets addressed in the educational process, each building on the one preceding it. Thus a student must first gain *knowledge* (be able to recall information) then progresses to *comprehension* (be able to interpret information). (S)he is then prepared for *application* (being able to apply information in a different context) and then moves to *analysis* (being able to distinguish between facts and inferences). The two most sophisticated cognitive skills are *synthesis* (being able to create a new meaning for the information) and *evaluation* (being able to make judgments about information and the way the information is used).

Typically, introductory courses are offered to entry level students, either those who are coming to college directly from secondary schools (traditional students) or those coming at a later point in life (nontraditional students). Typically, these students are at the

knowledge or comprehensive level of competence on Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive learning (1956). They can *know* the social structure of Harry's world and *comprehend* the underlying dynamics thereof, but the educator's goal is to provide a means for accessing more sophisticated learning through *application* and *analysis*. Through sociological pedagogy and a fictional parallel world, students must become competent in applying their understanding and then analyzing this understanding in different contexts. The final course project, interpreting *Harry Potter* through a theoretical lens, provides them with an opportunity to *synthesize* and *evaluate*. Not all introductory students are able to do this well early in their educational careers. Higher education is in the business of taking students from merely knowing to critical evaluation of that which they know.

Brookfield (1987) defines critical thinking as having four components, (a) identifying and challenging existing assumptions, (b) challenging the importance of context, (c) attempting to imagine and explore alternatives, and (d) exhibiting the resultant reflective skepticism, (p. 7-9). Integrating these concepts with Bloom's Taxonomy allows a fleshed out continuum for teaching and learning. The critical thinking components exist on a progressive continuum such that a student must first know the existing assumptions (Bloom's level one and two, knowledge and comprehension) well enough to challenge these assumptions. (Bloom's level three, application). They then move toward understanding the importance of context in learning (Bloom's level four, analysis). These tasks are accomplished by combining fact and fiction as proposed in this course. Context is primary in understanding and integrating sociological thought into meaningful learning. Through a challenging final project, I provide students with the opportunity to imagine and explore alternatives (Bloom's level five, synthesis) and then to skeptically reflect on their original assumptions (Bloom's level six, evaluation). My job as an educator is to provide the experience and means by which my students can develop higher cognitive levels of learning. In this sense, Vygotsky would define me as a facilitator of learning.

Brookfield's concept of critical thinking emerging on the Bloom continuum raise questions about the how and when such learning takes place. Vygotsky's (1978) ideas regarding circular zones of proximal development tell us that learning takes place when the student is in such a zone and creates fertile opportunities for the teaching professional to model and lead students to critically think along the continuum. Vygotsky reminds us that development is the internal process and learning is the external evidence of that process and that learning is most facilitated by example and social interaction. Harry and the instructor are partners in this quest. In

Vygotsky's terms, Harry Potter is the means whereby students observe development of another person and culture as the stories evolve and Harry and his friends move from childhood to adolescence. They become aware of the learning that takes place as Harry matures and evidences his unique position as a critical thinker. On another level, they learn about themselves as they develop insight into Harry's world, personality, and the interaction between the two. The very activity required for working through the Potter series assumes truth in Vygotsky's reflection, "What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow (p. 87). *Application* and *analysis* lead to higher order thinking and clear a path toward *evaluation*. Understanding the basic plot of the Potter series underlies success in this process.

Harry Potter is orphaned as a baby when his wizard parents are killed defending him against the forces of the evil Lord Voldemort. Harry is taken to the home of his maternal aunt, Petunia Dursley, an intolerant, rather befuddled, nonwizard, and is raised in her very traditional British family without any awareness of his special status of the lone survivor of Voldemort's sophisticated magic. Indeed, he has no knowledge that he possesses any supernatural talent and is unaware of the parallel existence of a wizard world. Treated as a servant in the Dursley household, he longs for family and emotional connection when, close to his eleventh birthday, he is magically summoned to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. After significant family struggles, Harry arrives at Hogwarts and is introduced to the world of wizards and his destiny to help preserve his world against the reincarnation of Lord Voldemort. He forms close friendships with Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger, classmates who support and defend him in his various trials and adventures.

The wizard world of Harry Potter and Company allows students the freedom of exercising their imaginations, applying sociological thought and theory to a parallel society, without obvious defenses or emotional roadblocks. In writing about the Potter series, Whited (2002) says that,

Surely any books that will be deemed 'classics' must reflect something about the values of the age and society that produce them. They must conjure a real world or one that parallels the real world in intriguing ways. They must use language in a way that calls readers' attention to language itself and to how language reflects culture and cultural values. (p. 9)

In this sense, and in concert with Mill's references to "what varieties of men and women prevail in society," J. K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series,

provides us with a sociological classic. After an examination of the wizard world, Harry leads students to a more critical analysis of their own social environments, an examination through which the explanatory lenses of theory may be applied. Harry's world aptly lends itself to the introductory study of sociology.

Most introductory sociology courses at the undergraduate level include five units of general study: the history of sociology and sociological research; sociological concepts including culture, society, and socialization; stratification and social inequality; social institutions; and social theory. The last four of these are particularly amenable to parallel analysis from the wizard world as described by Rowling in her *Harry Potter* series. Although Ms. Rowling has published seven volumes in the series, only the first four are used to supplement the introductory text used in my course. The American editions of these works (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*) are readily available and, in most cases, very familiar to my students. Students may choose to read the first two books or view movies of the same name because the movies are complete adaptations of the books. However, they are required to read the last two books as the movie adaptations of these volumes omit information that is applicable to our study. These sources provide students with sufficient information regarding Harry, his friends, his circumstances, and his environment to draw meaningful sociological conclusions and embrace the sociological imagination. This paper looks at each of these four areas as they pertain to teaching sociology.

Sociological Concepts

True to Bloom's taxonomy, the first unit of study requires the acquisition of basic knowledge and comprehension of social concepts. In order to understand human's relationship to others and to social institutions, it is critical to understand the structure of society. We define ourselves in terms of cultures and societies and use these definitions as determinants of social interaction, groups and organizations, and deviant behavior.

In his introductory text, Schaeffer (2002) defines culture as "the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behavior. It includes the ideas, values, customs, and artifacts of groups of people" (p. 51). In 1945, anthropologist George Murdock initiated a list of cultural universals, those elements common to every culture but expressed differently from culture to culture. Examples of cultural universals are the celebration of marriage, the

use of recreation and sport, and sexual restrictions. This is a natural departure into the wizard world. What is the place of sport at Hogwarts? How is food used to celebrate special occasions? How are students housed by virtue of their age and sex? As students study cultural diffusion (the process by which a cultural item spreads from group to group) and cultural innovation (the process of introducing something new into a culture) they distinguish cultural icons from the wizard world or from the Muggle (meaning non wizard) world that may be defined as diffusion or innovation. They begin *applying* information in dual contexts.

Elements of culture are reflected in language, norms, sanctions, and values. Identifying wizard language is an easy task for students as elements of Rowling's imaginations have seeped into our vocabulary. McCaffrey (2003) reports that the word "muggle" has been included in the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (an obvious example of diffusion) and Consumers' Research Magazine (2003) reports that the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services is using the example of Hagrid's secret about Fluffy, the three headed dog guarding the Sorcerer's Stone, being exposed while under the influence of alcohol as a warning of the over use of alcohol for young consumers. Other sources have thus, *applied* and *analyzed* sociological concepts in creating generalized social meaning.

A discussion of norms and sanctions used as Hogwarts leads to an interesting conclusion. What is the moral use of sanctions when norms are broken? Harry makes it fairly common to break the formal norms or rules at Hogwarts and rarely suffers the expected sanctions for this deviance. Thus, Harry becomes a model of Bloom's highest level of cognitive learning, *evaluation*. Harry must evaluate and make decisions, and as the archetypal hero, is responsible for the life and death of himself and others. Perhaps, this is one of the most valuable lessons available from Mr. Potter, his ability to risk after careful evaluation. Julian (2003), in reviewing Kern's book on the moral choices of Harry Potter, reminds us that by the fifth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is a boy "who usually fails to subordinate his emotions to reason" (p. 28). Kern postulates that Harry represents an "updated Stoic moral system whose primary virtue is old-fashioned constancy—resolution in the face of adversity" (p. 28). This is a wonderful jumping off place for classroom discussion on the use of norms and sanctions in shaping cultural values.

Katz (2003) addresses the use of Harry Potter's experiences as a victim of intergenerational trauma as a way of understanding such trauma in the context of today's children. Trauma is defined both culturally and socially and traumatic experiences, while universal in nature, are distinct to culture. What is traumatic in one

culture may not translate into trauma in another. What was traumatic for one generation, however, does translate into trauma for its antecedents. The example of Sirius Black's torture as a prisoner at Azkaban in constant contact with dementors, rings in Harry's own emotional emptiness as a child who has no roots because of the death of his parents. The tragedy of mistaken justice and resultant torture for his godfather emphasize this emptiness. Physical death is comparable to emotional death in Azkaban, allowing Harry a connection with Black that few others can understand. It is not only a personal connection, but also a culturally defined one and one that speaks to the differing emotional and cultural contexts in which we live.

Consideration of culture includes discussion of subcultures, countercultures, and culture shock, parallels of which are easily identified in the wizard world. Within the wizard world there are those who continue subverting the status quo and form a counterculture of followers of "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," the villain, Voldemort. Students easily identify the houses of Hogwarts as subcultures and then continue to discuss the various cliques of the school and culture as they affect the lives of the characters. The Order of the Phoenix, or those who protect others from the Dark Lord Voldemort, is a subculture and the particular subculture of which James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew were a part has grave impact on Harry's future, most obviously displayed in the disdain shown him by Severus Snape, himself a member of their student out-group. Harry's culture shock is painful every time he has to leave his adopted culture and return to the Muggle world of Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley Dursley. Further, the contrast of ethnocentrism as epitomized by the Malfoys and xenocentrism as epitomized by Mr. Weasley allows students easy identification of these concepts. Harry's magical gifts are evidence of the effects of heredity over environment although his inability to tap into these gifts without appropriate instruction is evidence of the effects of environment over heredity.

Harry's socialization into the wizard world is an obvious one. He reflects Erving Goffman's ideas about the presentation of self largely by managing his wizard self through impression management and the dramaturgical approach. Goffman, as an interactionist sociologist interested in how small groups and individuals interact, would find Harry a perfect case study as he watches what others do and then performs. We see him resocialized not only as a wizard but also as the Boy-Who-Survived, both of which are new roles for him. Sociologists define the main agents of socialization as family, school, peers, media, workplace, and the state. We see all of these at work in the life of Harry Potter as he progresses through early adolescence. An interesting assignment for students is

to determine which of these (or combinations thereof) are the most powerful in Harry's life. Frank and McBee (2003) use Harry Potter to discuss identity development with gifted adolescents. In this context, as typified in our own culture, identity development reflects socialization at its peak.

No study of social processes is complete without a discussion of social groups and deviance. As a product of the British Boarding School genre, Harry Potter falls in line with other school boy heroes who succeed because they flout the rules with an almost cavalier attitude. Smith (2003) tells us that in this genre,

The hero or heroine possesses this rule-breaking spirit, and the best

friend is usually complicit. Pranks, midnight parties, and unauthorized excursions off campus are all part of the protagonists' adventures. Occasional rule-breaking is in fact a test of the character's gumption and originality that the hero will presumably need in order to be a success in life. (p. 79)

Harry, however, wrestles with what he must accept as the necessity of breaking rules for the greater good. Harry struggles with the threat of expulsion from his new home, Hogwarts, while breaking rules to perpetuate the way of life he accepts as necessary for his progression. In classroom discussion, the outcome of his norm breaching frequently is laced with an awareness of positive deviance, doing something against the norm for moral or ethical reasons. For some of my students, this is their first departure into ethical and critical thinking, based on concepts more sophisticated than Kohlberg's conventional morality summarized in his work regarding the development of moral reasoning. In fact, Dumbledore, the Headmaster, sanctions these infractions with "messages about character and morality" (Smith, 2003, p. 79) superseding rules meant for ordinary wizards and reminiscent of Kohlberg's Postconventional Morality (Whited and Grimes, 2002). At the end of *Sorcerer's Stone*, headmaster Dumbledore sets a precedent of awarding house points for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who clearly break the rules and then are rewarded publicly for doing so. Observations of successful deviance reflect Harry's need for careful *synthesis of information* and the resultant *evaluation* for behavioral decisions. Students exposed to these ideas may model them.

Stratification and Social Inequality

The modern interpretation of stratification differs from Karl Marx's original ideas of classifications of individuals within society based on economy and

opportunity and has evolved into a multidimensional concept. It is best understood as a cultural universal by which members of society striate themselves by virtue of different criteria. In the western world, we think in terms of “isms,” racism, ageism, sexism, classism, to understand the socially constructed divisions between people who form societies. Certainly facing these issues in an open classroom is a new experience for some of my students. Opening discussions regarding such concepts forces them to rethink and thus evaluate what they think they know and come to a new enlightened understanding. In this way, much of this unit focuses on Bloom’s level one and two, *knowledge* and *comprehension*. Harry allows students to know things in an objective context with the opportunity to comprehend them at their internal level. Increased awareness in this case, is critical to the sociological imagination as we wrestle with contemporary issues.

Westman (2002) tells us that, “The wizarding world struggles to negotiate a very contemporary problem in Britain: the legacy of a racial and class caste system that, though not entirely stable, is still looked upon by a minority of powerful individuals as the means to continued power and control” (p. 306). This is true not only for British society but for Americans as well. It is this very legacy that underlies the social stratification of Harry Potter’s world. Westman tells us that Cornelius Fudge has “inherited harbors of social inequalities and injustices that masquerade behind the draperies of democracy” (p. 307). These inequalities then, are both fictional and very real.

Other authors have addressed these issues in the Potter series, Smith (2003) discusses classism; Ostry (2003) discusses racism; Carey (2003) discusses slavery; Anatol (2003) discusses ethnicity; Park (2003) discusses socioeconomic status; and Gallardo-C and Smith (2003) and Dresang (2002) discuss gender. One of the salient themes of these works is the acknowledgement of Rowling’s middle class biases and the reflection of her own upbringing on social constructs. Most authors agree that she exhibits an attempt of liberal acceptance between *mudbloods*, or those who are born of nonwizard parents, and *purebloods* as she portrays the pureblood Malfoys as classical representatives of upper class conservatism with all the negative intentions of a member of the middle class. She creates a school where race and gender seem to be unimportant but by their very unimportance, she obfuscates their very meaning to both culture and identity. Some stereotypical characterization is obvious such as the Weasley red hair and over abundance of children, their poverty and genial natures. This obvious reference to the place of the Irish in British tradition is classic and is furthered by Draco Malfoy’s patrician blonde, pale, rather fragile

stature. Malfoy says to Harry, “You’ll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there” (Rowling, 1997, p. 108). True to middle class values, Harry gives his earnings from winning the Triwizard Tournament to the Weasley twins, George and Fred, “again demonstrating a preference for socioeconomic equity and minimizing the distance between himself and the Weasley family” (Park, p. 181).

Park (2003) tells us that Hagrid, the Hogwarts groundskeeper and Harry’s first contact with the wizard world, is an example of the lower classes in British society; prone to drink, academic failure, and grammatical errors. He has a good heart but cannot be trusted to keep secrets vital to the security of Hogwarts students and is tolerated as a child by the wiser and kindly Hermione and Harry. Frequently, we see Ron in much the same light as Hagrid, again referencing his social status. Ron is brave but foolhardy. The social division between Hagrid/Ron and Hermione/Harry is reflected in the ethnocentrism voiced by the former.

Hagrid claims that the less one has do with foreigners, the happier one will be—‘yeh can’ trust any of em’—and Ron refuses to try bouillabaisse at the Tournament welcome dinner. In contrast, Harry responds to Hagrid that Viktor Krum is ‘all right!’, and Hermione not only enjoys the French dish but develops a romantic relationship with Krum as well. (Anatol, 2003, p. 169)

We see the lower class distrust of the unfamiliar juxtaposed with middle class tolerance and global outlook.

Perhaps the most obvious representation of social inequality is the references to slavery and the house-elves. Park (2003) reminds us that,

House-elves bow and scrape and flagellate themselves for even thinking badly of their owners. Rowling means to draw a parallel to slavery, but once again, because she frequently uses the elves for comic effect, she spoils her effort at social commentary. There is nothing funny about slavery, and the author’s depiction of an enslaved class as something to entertain her readers is reprehensible. (p. 185)

It is interesting to note that the house-elves themselves, outside of Dobby, do not wish any change in their status but prefer to remain in eternal servitude. This is alien to every portrait of slavery in every era of time. From the Biblical portrayal of Hebrew slaves to slavery genre American literature such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, passive acceptance of the social appropriateness of

slavery has escaped the reader's imagination. Accepting this as fact is a stretch for American students, especially on a racially diverse campus and is the topic of hot discussion. Hermione's ridicule at being the champion of the house-elves in light of Ron's disdain for her and Harry's very indifference, are reminiscent of classic women's roles as "bleeding hearts" and social reformers in the traditions of Jane Addams, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Mother Teresa.

Gallardo-C. and Smith (2003) suggest that gender, while less obvious in the series, and is never-the-less apparent as a definer of character. They remind us that, "Rowling's narrative reinforces traditional categories of labor, as it presents women primarily as wives and mothers" (p. 192) and illustrate their point with Petunia Dursley, Molly Weasley, and quintessentially, Harry's mother, Lily Potter, who sacrifices her own life for the life of her son. The one woman reported as working for the Ministry of Magic, Bertha Jorkins, is of such low stature that her disappearance is disregarded by the establishment in *Goblet of Fire*. Other working women teach or are reporters (and a fairly disreputable reporter at that) and while it is true that Minerva McGonagall teaches Transformation, the Defense Against the Dark Arts professors (the most prestigious academic appointment at Hogwarts) are men in these first four volumes. Even clear headed, intelligent, competitive, hard-working Hermione becomes tearful and sniveling in the face of danger and is there, at the end, to remind Harry of his brilliance and courage. The best example of this disintegration is when Hermione is confronted by the troll in *The Sorcerer's Stone* and Ron and Harry rush to her rescue. Dresang (2002) postulates that Hermione is the namesake of along tradition of women from literary works as diverse as mythology, Shakespeare, the Bible, and D. H. Lawrence.

Both the mythical and the Shakespearean Hermiones were at the mercy of the men who controlled their lives, yet they were strong women who used their wits and their position to seek their due in life. Their twentieth century heirs are much more in control of their own destinies yet still not entirely free of male dependence. (p. 216)

Why is it that Hermione, who knows all the answers in class, indeed, teaches them to Ron and Harry, loses her ability to think? It is easy to recognize that it is a "female thing," evident because even Professor McGonagall struggles to maintain her emotions. She is given to occasional emotional outbursts, tolerated by a stellar, constant Albus Dumbledore. For students who care to look beyond the surface story, stratification is alive and well in the wizard world and coming to accept this is rich ground for introductory students.

Social Institutions

Social institutions are those entities within society that shape our lives and give our existence meaning. Introductory courses review the family, religion, education, government, and medicine as institutions worthy of study in the social context. Most sociologists agree that the family is the most influential agent of socialization and therefore, the first and most deeply imbedded source of social information and attitudes for the individual. Because most students have fairly clear ideas about and experiences with family, Harry's story challenges their existing family paradigm and thus tickles their sociological imagination

As sociologists, we talk about family in distinct terms. We speak of nuclear families (the family of origin), extended families, patrilineal and matrilineal families, and pseudofamilies. Students find it easy to define his parents, Lily and James, as Harry's nuclear family, the Dursleys (his muggle aunt, uncle, and cousin) as his extended family, and his mixed blood status as a result of patrilineal and matrilineal descent. Interesting class discussion takes place when defining a pseudofamily, or that family which substitutes for blood relations in a society. While other academics have ignored the role of family in Harry's life, it presents interesting questions for my classes because it is coupled with the emotional meaning of the word, home, a term with intimate meaning for students. They travel from *comprehension* to *application* and *analysis* on an emotional as well as cognitive level.

The books are replete with examples of a Dickensian attitude toward relatives who abuse and neglect their kin. The Dursleys are the personification of evil in Harry's life. He is enslaved by their ignorance and intolerance and has literally, no option, but to follow Hagrid when invited to escape their bigotry. He begins a quest to find his family, most poignantly as he sees his desires reflected in the Mirror of Erised in *The Sorcerer's Stone*. The orphan boy finds the mysterious mirror while escaping capture during a midnight quest. He knows he is alone but as he looks in the mirror, he sees a group of other people.

"Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?"

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobby knees— Harry was looking at his family for the first time in his life. (Rowling, 1997, p. 209).

Dumbledore later tells Harry, "(The mirror) shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate

desires of our hearts. You who have never known your family, see them standing around you” (p. 213). Here, then we have the secret to understanding Harry Potter, his deepest desire is to know his family, to experience family, to be a part of family. Brookfield (1987) reminds us that the genesis of critical thought is in the ability to be “actively engaged with life” (p. 5). It is the link with his sacrificial parents that provides this engagement with life for Harry in an existence otherwise devoid of passion or joy. In *Chamber of Secrets*, we see Harry on his twelfth birthday on Privet Drive. “No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist” (Rowling, 1999, p. 7) and in the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, we see Harry literally escaping from Privet Drive for an early return to Diagon Alley and a certain measure of freedom. By the age of 14, in *Goblet of Fire*, we see the same ache in Harry, “What he really wanted (and felt it almost shameful to admit it to himself) was someone like – someone like a *parent*: an adult wizard whose advice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him” (Rowling, 2000, p. 22). And so, we trace Harry’s longing for family. My students feel something akin to obligation to fill the void in their hero’s life and tackle the job of finding a pseudofamily for Harry since his own is unavailable to him by virtue of death (his family of origin) or thick headedness (his extended family, the Dursleys). They enlist his friends, Hermione and Ron, but must acknowledge the lack of parental guidance in such an arrangement. They name the Weasleys although they exert no authority over Harry. They are happy when they find Sirius Black’s connection but it is too tenuous, too restrained by problems, and too brief to be a lasting solution to Harry’s dilemma. Some of my students enlist the professors and other students at Hogwarts into family for Harry but we continue to be aware of emotional distance and some combination of distrust and respect between Harry and his teachers. The meaning and necessity of family have allowed for some of the livelier discussions in the classroom. This exercise in Bloom’s levels of application and then analysis allows students to use the information they receive through the books to create new ideas and find new solutions for Harry.

As we broaden our look at other social institutions then, parallels are readily apparent. The medical institution makes use of gatekeepers to define wellness and sickness. When Gilderoy Lockhart, a teacher, mistakenly assumes the role as medical professional in *The Chamber of Secrets*, there are painful repercussions for Harry. There is a sick role at Hogwarts with a code of behavior expected for patients and an expectation for their own will to heal. The series indicates an interesting mind/body tie in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, with the kiss of the dementors resulting in life being

sucked out of their victims. This is reminiscent of losing your soul, suffering the depth of despair, as opposed to more organic, traditional means of death. It is a reminder of the results of depression and the rise of respectability of mental illness in the current medical community.

The education institution has been widely reviewed by other authors (Pinset, 2002; Lacoss, 2002; Hopkins, 2003; Smith; 2003). Common among these works is the reflection of the School Boy Hero in British literature and the belief of the importance of public school connections for life success. Certainly, Harry’s success on every level depends on his school experiences and this is also true for many of my first generation students. Smith reminds us that, “The Duke of Wellington conveyed the significance of the British public school most famously when he claimed that, ‘The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton’” (p. 73). For many of my students, the battle for life options is won in their college classroom. Booth and Booth (2003) address lessons American schools can learn from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They conclude that housing students of all ages in one educational institution has a positive effect on development and education, that the competition inherent between houses and students is appropriate and motivating, that the prefect system emphasizes leadership and group cooperation, and that the emphasis on examinations (e.g. O.W.L.S.) is not as adequate a measure of academic success as regular tests and papers. Discussion of these concepts draws parallels from Hogwarts to our own residential campus.

Students are encouraged to reflect on the manifest and latent functions of education as they pertain to Hogwarts. The manifest function, the transmission of knowledge, is evidenced through the pedagogy at the school. The latent functions of transmitting culture, promoting social integration, maintaining social control, and serving as agents of change are also readily identifiable for students. Transferring this understanding from Hogwarts to their own educational processes provides an opportunity for students to exercise critical thinking about what they are really being taught in American classrooms. Discussions regarding the roles of teachers and students and opportunities for alternative education for students such as Hagrid are lively and exciting. The way that Harry Potter is introduced into educational contexts (such as the present volume) is diverse and interesting. *Publisher’s Weekly* (2003) reports that the books were translated into Latin and Welsh in 2003 and Greek and Irish translations appeared in 2004. The hope is that being able to access Harry Potter in “dead” languages will elevate interest in both the study and culture of these languages.

Most of the criticism of the series has come from the religious right with concerns regarding legitimizing witchcraft in the eyes of young children and has led some communities to ban Harry Potter from school libraries. The ban went to the courts in Arkansas in a widely publicized case and Goldberg (2003) reports that the judge ruled, "Regardless of the personal distaste with which these individuals regard 'witchcraft,' it is not properly within their power and authority as members of the defendant's school board to prevent the students at Cedarville from reading about it" (p. 21). The argument has traveled the globe with the Russians deciding that Harry is not satanic (Goldberg, 2003, p. 1) and a report from the Vatican declaring of the books, "They are not bad or a banner for anti-Christian theology. They help children understand the difference between good and evil" (*American Libraries*, 2003, p. 20). Because my college is affiliated with a religious denomination, at the beginning of every semester I ask students if they are comfortable reading the series. None of my students have objected on religious grounds (some have objected because they do not want to do any supplemental reading of any kind, basically they may be classified as lazy). I have found several resources addressing Harry Potter's impact on religion and have these available for students. Killinger's (2003) *God, The Devil and Harry Potter: A Minister's Defense of the Boy Wizard*, Neal's (2002) *The Gospel According to Harry Potter: Spirituality in the Stories of the World's Favorite Seeker*, Griesinger's (2002) article from *Christianity and Literature* entitled, "Harry Potter and the 'Deeper Magic': Narrating Hope in Children's Literature and McVeigh's (2002) article in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* entitled, "Is Harry Potter Christian?" are readily available for students interested in more in-depth discussion on the topic of religion and its relationship to the Harry Potter series. Finding sociological interpretations of the religious in Harry Potter's life is a little more demanding for students. Rowling avoids specific references to what Durkheim, who published a definitive work on sociology of religion in 1912, defines as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Schaeffer, 2002, p. 309). What we see operating in the wizard world is an implied code of ethics that is difficult to decipher without context. My students have suggested that Dumbledore's wisdom comprises the code of wizardry that promises the most success for Hogwart's students and have enjoyed working on an assignment to write "Dumbledore's Words of Wisdom" as a frame for guidance on a higher or religious plane. It is valuable for students to evaluate the series based on their own religious ideals and the ideas of others. Critical thinkers learn to find new solutions to problems they might not have even considered problematic in their

own past. Some of my students would not have evaluated the books on their own but would have taken direction from their pastors or parents with regard to their material. Their determination to think for themselves is clear evidence of advancement in thinking skills.

The social institution of government has received attention from Rowling's critics and analysts. The sociological study of government and economy is concerned with questions of power and authority and political behavior to include political socialization, participation, and apathy. Children's literature is remarkable for characterizations of children in positions of great power or authority, a departure from what most children experience in their own environments. Anatol (2003) examines Harry Potter from a postcolonial perspective writing that, "Rowling's novels seem particularly influenced by the British adventure story tradition, which promoted 'civilized' values—resourcefulness, wits, ingenuity, and hierarchy headed by a *legitimate* democratic authority" (p. 166). She sees the inhabitants of Hogwarts and its environs as "morally enlightened, friendly, respected and respectful, and powerful in many ways" (p. 167). This powerful participatory citizenry is expected from a generation close to the threat of totalitarian domination so narrowly escaped by the heroics of the infant, Harry Potter. Hall (2003) sees Rowling's wizard world as,

Neither an anarchy nor a dictatorship and appears at first glance considerably more attractive than the Muggle world. However, one finds that it does not recognize the rule of law (in the Dicey sense). This absence of an understanding of the rule of law represents a fault line in the terrain of the wizard world on which the forces of chaos can apply maximum pressure. (p. 147)

She reports that A. V. Dicey (1908) defines a society that operates under a rule of law as meeting three criteria, (a) punishment for infractions of previously established rules, (b) equity of application, and (c) constitutional norms developed by representatives of the society for which the rules are established. The government of the wizard world does not meet these criteria and is thus vulnerable for forces of chaos such as those promulgated by the reappearance of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his followers.

Wizard government is composed of the Ministry of Magic comprising the legislative, judicial, and executive functions of a democratic model headed by a senior representative, in this case, Cornelius Fudge. Within the Ministry, are seven departments of varying levels of status and responsibility. On a global level, this Ministry seems to represent the wizards from the Empire for the larger International Confederation of

Wizards. “The ministry’s lawmaking role does not seem subject to any form of democratic scrutiny: Arthur Weasley, for example, is able to draft the law against enchanting Muggle artifacts with a loophole to allow him to pursue his own hobby unchecked” (Hall, 2003, p. 49). We see the ministry acting as judge and jury in many examples in the series. Given the opportunity to search out these examples, students often become indignant that the ministry has such sweeping power and then must redesign the responsibility and scope of governance with regard to Hagrid’s being sentenced to Azkaban or Buckbeak’s death sentence. Hermione’s failure to ignite outrage over the plight of the house-elves is evidence of the complacency of this populace with regard to those institutions they feel do not threaten their existence. Comparing Hermione’s grass roots efforts with the furor caused by Sirius Black’s escape from Azkaban illustrates the placement of meaningful power in this culture as well as in our own, where grass roots efforts are so often vulnerable to those wielding significant political power.

Mendlesohn (2002) finds Rowling’s work a departure from other children’s literature in the way she depicts power and authority. She refers to C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Wizard of Oz* series, and Nesbit’s *The Story of Amulet* as reflective of definitive political persuasions. She writes,

Superficially, Rowlings stands apart from these classics. There is no obvious political or evangelical intent other than relaying an oft-told tale about the battle of good against evil...While Rowling clearly does not intend to engage with ideology, its role in her work is inescapable. Rowling’s Harry Potter books are rooted in a distinctively English liberalism that is marked as much by its inconsistencies and contradictions as by its insistence that it is not ideological but only ‘fair.’ (p. 159)

Perhaps it is this contradictory nature of liberalism and classicism that creates a challenge for students to identify both government and religion in the series. While “fair” becomes the ideological guide for both governing and worship, readers recognize that not all of life is fair, as indeed, it is unfair to lose one’s parents prior to the ability to remember them. It is unfair to have expectations of greatness in a culture which is a mystery. In a world of elevated “fair,” social institutional support is tenuous, at best. It is difficult to be fair at an institutional level.

Sociological Theory

An introduction to sociology includes exposure to sociological theories. The metaphor of a pair of glasses

or set of lenses seems to resonate with my students. I explain that a theory is a way of framing the world, of gaining focus. To see things with one set of lenses is to account for society through functionalism. To change those lenses and see things with a different perspective allows for an understanding of society as explained by a conflict perspective. Trying on yet another set of lenses allows meaning of interactionist perspective to define social life. The capstone project for this course is to frame the wizard world in one of these theoretical contexts. This task requires the ability to synthesize material and then to evaluate it in a very personal way to determine which theory best represents Harry’s world for each student and thus, their own world. Because each theory provides possible explanations, there is no wrong answer for this assignment but choice is a matter of personal understanding and intellectual organization.

Most of my students select functionalism in the tradition of Talcott Parsons, the modern American father of social stability and survival. Schaeffer (2002) defines functionalism as “the way that parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability” (p. 13). The emphasis on stability with a combination of manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions resonates with students. The easy task of identifying functionalist elements of the wizarding world is, sometimes, too tempting to ignore requiring the highest levels of knowledge and comprehension. Beginning with Harry’s socialization process and working through the functions of stratification (to fill otherwise difficult positions such as surgeon or professor), continuing to the functions of social institutions and concluding with the argument that the wizard culture has survived hundreds of years, students travel a relatively easy functionalist journey through wizardry because it is largely grounded in *knowledge* and *comprehension*.

More insightful students tackle the conflict perspective. The very thematic struggle between good and evil, the class differentiations, the unjust poverty of the Weasley family, the hidden curriculum of Hogwarts, the wide gaps between the mudbloods and the purebloods are all evidence of conflict theory, as originated by Karl Marx and modernized by Mills, in Harry Potter’s world. I confess that this is my personal favorite and I silently rejoice when a student announces this as their theory of choice because it provides validation of Bloom’s third and fourth levels of cognitive thought, *application* and *analysis*. Schaeffer (2002) states,

Like Marx, contemporary conflict theorists believe that human beings are prone to conflict over such scarce resources as wealth, status, and power. However, where Marx focused primarily on class conflict, more recent theorists have extended this

analysis to include conflicts based on gender, race, age, and other dimensions. (p. 195)

Perhaps because conflict is the grandfather of feminism, it is rewarding to hear a student analyze the story from a feminist eye. It is equally rewarding to hear a student renounce slavery as an institution as it is reflected in Rowling's eyes. Students selecting conflict as the frame for the series evidence a deeper level of critical thinking, not accepting things as they are but looking for problems and thereby, solutions.

The least chosen theoretical option for my students has been interactionism. It may prove difficult for students to interpret a society through a micro lens and it is my belief that introductory texts are not as clear when it comes to microsociological theory. Schaeffer (2002) tells students that understanding of the social environment comes through analysis of everyday interactions. Thus, it is the responsibility of the student to detail and classify interactions on a personal level in order to make generalities about the way wizard culture operates. While they can grasp the importance of the common meaning of symbols accounted for in this perspective, the task of categorizing and interpreting human interaction seems overwhelming. All but the hardiest, fail to recognize that this how they create meaning in their own lives. Through their own judgments of the Dursleys or their perception of Snapes' antagonism toward Harry, they can come to the understanding of the underlying theme of fairness referred to by Mendlesohn (2002). This then, in the end, is the proof of the real ability to *synthesize* and *evaluate*. With less help from both text and without obvious references to the wizard applications, interactionism requires higher level understanding that is rare among my introductory students.

Perhaps LeLievre (2003) understands the differences between the theoretical lens best when she defines the action of the Harry Potter's world as,

Mutually exclusive paradigms of imaginative response to the environment within which human beings exist: one which constructs that environment as limiting and attempts to transcend its limits by gaining power over it, and one which attempts to adapt to existence within the limitations the environment imposes and thus to ensure survival. (p. 25)

Understanding Harry Potter through a theoretical perspective must be framed as a method of survival; of Harry, of his friends, of Hogwarts, and of life as he comes to know it. It creates one means for evaluating my teaching of the sociological imagination.

And so we return to C. Wright Mills. The question at the end of every semester is not can students answer

questions regarding wizard society, but through understanding that society, can they better answer questions regarding their own? For the educator, the question is, have students become better critical thinkers or developed higher levels of cognitive skills? Have I been a facilitator in the sense of Vygotsky, bringing students to an increased awareness and understanding? In the end, the creative thinking required of social scientists should ring as true for students in their own lives as in the life of their fictional protagonist. The real test will come as these students mature and seek that which is significant in their world, that which gives their own culture and society meaning.

References

- Anatol, G. L. (2003). The fallen empire: Exploring ethnic otherness in the world of Harry Potter. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.). *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Bloom, B. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. New York: McKay.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging alternative ways to thinking and acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Booth, M. Z., & Booth, G. M. (2002). What American schools can learn from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, 310-317.
- Carey, B. (2003). Hermione and the house-elves: The literary and historical contexts of J. K. Rowling's antislavery campaign. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Dresang, E. T. (2003). Hermione Granger and the heritage of gender. In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Elwell, F. W. (2002). *The sociology of C. Wright Mills*, Retrieved December 2003, from <http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Mills/index.htm>
- Frank, A. J., & McBee, M. T. (2003). The use of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to discuss identity development with gifted adolescents. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 15, 33-41.
- Gallardo-C., X., & Smith, C. J. (2003). Cinderfella: J. K. Rowling's wily web of gender. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Griesinger, E. (2002). Harry Potter and the 'deeper magic': Narrating hope in children's literature. *Christianity and Literature*, 51, 55-482.

- Goldberg, B. (2003). Russians decide Harry Potter isn't satanic. *American Libraries*, 34, 17.
- Goldberg, B. (2003). Judge smites Harry Potter restrictions. *American Libraries*, 34, 21.
- Hall, S. (2003). Harry Potter and the rule of law: The central weakness of legal concepts in the wizard world. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Harrius Potter et al. (February 10, 2003). *Publisher's Weekly*, 93.
- Harry Potter and the dangers of alcohol. (2003). *Consumer's Research Magazine*, 86, 40.
- Hopkins, L. (2003). Harry Potter and the acquisition of knowledge. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Julian, J., & Kern, E. M. (2003). The wisdom of Harry Potter: What our favorite hero teaches us about moral choices. *Kliatt*, 37, 28-30.
- Katz, M. (2003). Prisoners of Azkaban: Understanding intergenerational transmission of trauma due to war and state terror. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 8, 200-209.
- Killinger, J. (2003). *God, the devil, and Harry Potter: A minister's defense of the boy wizard*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Lacoss, J. (2002). Of magicals and muggles: Reversals and revulsions at Hogwarts. In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- LeLievre, K. A. (2003). Wizards and wainscots: Generic structures and genre themes in the Harry Potter series. *Mythlore*, 24, 25-38.
- McCaffrey, M. (2003). "Muggle" redux in the Oxford English Dictionary. *School Library Journal*, 49, 36.
- McVeigh, D. (2002). Is Harry Potter Christian?, *Renascence: Essays on values in literature*, 54, 196-226.
- Mendlesohn, F. (2002). Crowning the king: Harry Potter and the construction of authority. In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Mills, C. W. (2001). C. Wright Mills' Home Page. Retrieved December 30, 2003, from <http://www.faculty.rsu/~felwell/Theorists/Mills/index.htm>
- Neal, C. W. (2002). *The gospel according to Harry Potter: Spirituality in the stories of the world's most famous seeker*. Lexington, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Ostry, E. (2003). Accepting mudbloods: The ambivalent social vision of J. K. Rowling's fairy tales. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Park, J. (2003). Class and socioeconomic identity in Harry Potter's England. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Pinsent, P. (2002). The education of a wizard: Harry Potter and his predecessors. In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Rowling, J. K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the sorcerer's stone*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rowling, J. K. (1999). *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rowling, J. K. (2000). *Harry Potter and the goblet of fire*. New York: Scholastic.
- Schaeffer, R. T. (2002). *Sociology: A brief introduction*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Smith, K. M. (2003). Harry Potter's schooldays: J. K. Rowling and the British school novel. In G. L. Anatol (Ed.), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- The Vatican pontificates. (2003). *American Libraries*, 34, 20-21.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*. As edited by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Westman, K. E. (2002). Spectors of Thatcherism: Contemporary British culture in J.K Rowling's Harry Potter series. In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Whited, L. A. (2002). Harry Potter: From craze to classic? In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Whited, L. A., & Grimes, M. K. (2002). What would Harry do? J. K. Rowling and Lawrence Kohlberg's theories of moral development. In L. A. Whited (Ed.), *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

JOYCE W. FIELDS is an Associate Professor of Child and Family Studies at Columbia College, Columbia, South Carolina. She has published in the area of conflict resolution in families and second wave feminists. Currently, she is researching a book on the women's movement and leadership. Dr. Fields has used popular culture in her classrooms in a number of contexts incorporating movies, novels, and newspapers in her pedagogy.