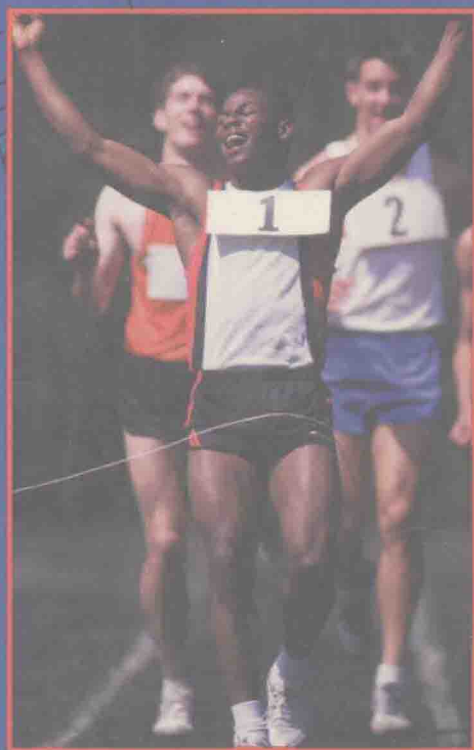
Measuring Up

The Performance Ethic in American Culture



JAMES M. MANNON

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The Performance Ethic in American Culture

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James M. Mannon

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

1 The Performance Ethic in American Society 1

Social Control, 2
The Social Roots of the Performance Ethic, 3
The Sociological Imagination, 7
The Performance Ethic as a Public Issue, 9
Key Terms, 11
Review Questions, 11
Discussion Questions, 11

2 Measuring Up in the Early Years 13

The Serious Childhood, 18
Intensive Parenting, 24
Stressful Family Ties, 29
Professional Mothering, 30
School: Beyond Toddlerhood, 32
Key Terms, 40
Review Questions, 40
Discussion Questions, 41
Activities, 41

3 Why Teens Try Harder: Adolescent Life in the United States 42

Peer Paralysis, 45
Looks: "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall," 49
Getting the Grades, 51

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The Sporting Life, 52
The SAT: The Future as Guesswork, 54
"Thin to Win," 58
Life and Death Matters, 60
College Life and Late Adolescence, 62
Human Capital, 64
Getting Grades, Revisited, 65
Anorexia: The Problem Returns, 67
The Résumé Builder, 68
Key Terms, 72
Review Questions, 72
Discussion Questions, 73
Activities, 74

4 The Measured Self in the Middle Years 75

The Masculinity/Femininity Dilemma, 80
Fit as a Fiddle, 87
Supermom/Superdad, 88
Status Achievement, 92
Excursus on Sexuality, 95
Performance Anxiety, 96
Sexual Anomie: Expectations Run Wild, 97
Key Terms, 99
Review Questions, 100
Discussion Questions, 100
Activities, 101

5 Losers, Weepers: Dilemmas of the Underclass 102

Women, 111
Black Americans, 114
Hispanics, 115
The Credential Spiral, 116
Empathy Failure, 121
Key Terms, 122
Review Questions, 123
Discussion Questions, 123
Activities, 123

6 Constructing a New Vision: The Emergence of the Productive Self 125

The Present Vision, 126
A New Vision, 129
The Productive Self, 130
Family, 131
Education, 133
School Inequality, 137
University Life, 139
The Economy and Work, 140
Key Terms, 143
Review Questions, 144
Discussion Questions, 144
Activities, 145

Notes 147
About the Book and Author 153
Index 155

1

The Performance Ethic in American Society

This book is about the performance ethic in American culture, about how it operates today in the lives of American adults, adolescents, and children, and about how it results in a particularly modern personality configuration that I call the "measured self." The performance ethic is applied early in our lives, subjecting us all to the constant measurements, evaluations, and appraisals of persons and organizations, and continues virtually to our grave, where others' assessment of our ultimate worth is determined by the expense and expanse of our funeral and burial arrangements. I contend that because of this relentless quest to measure up to the innumerable standards of health, wealth, competence, and so on, Americans are becoming less autonomous, less authentic, and less free.

It is my argument that American adults, adolescents, and children are finding their lives constrained, controlled, and manipulated by pressures toward conformity that are far less visible and direct than those of earlier eras. Because the mechanisms that enforce conformity are less visible and recognizable, Americans are often (but not always) in the uncomfortable and unfortunate circumstances of being controlled or of feeling anxious and constrained without knowing why. My goal is to examine how these recent mechanisms to enforce conformity—the "unconscious" social forces—are operating in American culture and thus affecting the lives of contemporary men and women.

What are the hidden forms of conformity in American culture? I would argue that they are, in part, found in the performance ethic, an ethic that forms the basis of social judgment in much, if not all, of the contemporary United States. Life today means having to measure up to an almost end-

less variety of performance standards. In all that we do, in all that we are or want to become, we are judged, measured, and constantly evaluated. We must meet socially mandated standards of performance, whether that standard is the age at which we are toilet trained, the level of our family income, or the number of dates we have as a teenager. We are controlled increasingly by the performance ethic and its attendant and myriad pressures to measure up. The self that results can best be described as the **measured self.**

Social Control

The performance ethic, that is, our cultural mania for measuring and evaluating people and virtually everything about them, is a form of what sociologists call **social control,** the mechanism that societies use to try to ensure that people adhere to or conform to basic cultural norms and values. One of the ways that social control operates in society is through the process called **internalization.** Internalization occurs as individuals "incorporate within their personalities the standards of behavior prevalent within the larger society."[1] Often these standards become so familiar to us that we no longer question their legitimacy. They develop a "taken-for-granted" reality; the standards are almost part of our nature.

As this internalization applies to the performance ethic, it becomes incorporated into our personality, and therefore it doesn't have to be imposed or mandated. No one is shot or fined for refusing to measure up or for refusing to subject him- or herself to unremitting evaluation. Informal means of social control, such as gossip, teasing, or ridicule, keep people in line and ensure that people will do their best to meet expectations and perform well. We feel bad about ourselves if we don't measure up, and we feel good when we perform successfully, whether measured by grades, promotions, popularity contests, or some other scale.

Much of this book is about the downside of the performance ethic. For although some adults, adolescents, and children enjoy the rewards of successful performance and derive much satisfaction in their pursuit of the measured self, many neither find personal satisfaction in such pursuits nor achieve societal approval and reward. Many pay dearly when they fail to measure up, or they attempt to drop out of the performance culture altogether. And we cannot be blind to the human suffering produced by the

worst excesses of the performance ethic, for surely there is a linkage between our cultural mania for evaluation and measured performance and our troubling suicide rate, for our drug-abuse problem, and for the prevalence of eating disorders among women and of alcoholism among men and women across several age groups. Performance anxiety, the fear of failing to measure up, has permeated our education, our home lives, our work, and even our leisure. And I believe a form of performance anxiety is connected to some of the more regrettable and publicized self-destructive behaviors exhibited by people in our society.

My focus in this book is confined to those segments of American life that seem most vulnerable to the performance ethic. Thus, I am taking a quasi-developmental approach, examining the performance ethic through what sociologists call the life cycle, from the earliest years of childhood and family life through adolescence and ultimately through the period of what we Americans now call midlife. The developmental analysis is augmented by brief excursions into the performance ethic in the world of sexuality and in the workplace. The book continues with a look at poverty and unemployment in our society and shows how measurement mania in the economy is producing a permanent class of people, mainly minorities, who have little chance now of "making it" economically in the United States.

The Social Roots of the Performance Ethic

Sociologists try to discover the social and cultural factors in human action and behavior. If it is accurate to say that many Americans are trapped in a performance culture and are constantly trying to measure up to objective standards of evaluation and performance, we still need to ask where these pressures come from. If part of the answer is that the performance ethic is rooted in American culture, we still need to ask how that ethic or value came to be. What is or was the social "soil" that allowed the performance ethic to be planted and grow?

We begin our search by looking at a central idea developed by the late-nineteenth-century German sociologist Max Weber, who undertook to explain the social transformations that gradually changed European society from a rural, feudal, religiously dominated society to an industrial, urban, secular, technologically run society. The transforming variable in all this for Weber was the growing rationalization of Western societies. Weber felt that the centuries-old bases for social order—tradition, reli-

gion or mystery, habits, and sentiments—were being replaced gradually by an increased emphasis on **rationality,** that is, by an emphasis on objective logic, demonstrable fact, and reason as the bases for action.

This growing rationality, which began to take hold in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was subtly reshaping European society and producing the new cultural values of efficiency, objectivity, calculability, and control. Let's look at each of these values briefly because they are important for an understanding of the performance ethic.

Efficiency requires searching for the most cost-effective (least expensive, fastest) means for producing a result. As populations increase, cost-effective means for organizing, producing, and administrating are favored.

Objectivity calls for people to be morally and emotionally neutral in their actions and evaluations. Rational thinking is valued over sentiments and emotional considerations.

Calculability, the susceptibility to quantification of human action, effort, and ability, is most highly valued. Numerically rating, assessing, and comparing people is thought to be a more precise and reasonable way to judge people than merely subjectively or intuitively judging them.

Control emphasizes plans, forecasts, performance appraisals, and so on to ensure that little of human action is left to chance or accident. Human actions should be controlled, predicted, documented, and assessed to make social order more stable.

Grading students, for example, involves each of these values. Millions of students must be evaluated in school each semester to determine who should pass. Letter grades are efficient (fast and inexpensive); they are considered objective (the teacher is emotionally neutral); they can be calculated in terms of averages (grade point averages—GPAs); and they effectively control students' behavior (students study hard to get high grades).

Weber's argument, then, is that as each of these values (efficiency, objectivity, calculability, and control) becomes increasingly enmeshed in the structure and culture of Western society, a gradual bureaucratization of social life results. Whether at work, at school, in church, or even at play, people's lives are gradually more highly organized and structured around bureaucratic principles and values. Hardly anything is left to chance. Let me cite a modern example: Whereas once boys had fun by

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getting together to play baseball in the streets by themselves, with improvised rules and equipment and no sense of schedule, today boys "learn" to play baseball by being coached by adults in Little League teams that are highly structured as to rules, schedules, tournaments, uniforms, equipment, and all-star consideration. Whereas once boys played to fill free time, they are now drafted into highly organized teams in league competition. (The analogy also applies to other team sports, such as soccer, basketball, or football.)

To return to my argument, early on the values of objectivity, calculability, efficiency, and control were of importance mostly to economic activity and were thus instrumental in shaping the industry-capital economic system. However, and as Weber suggested, eventually these values spread to all other social institutions, to all other human activity and social patterns. Thus, religious life, schooling, science, art, music, and even popular pastimes such as "eating out" have become imbued with these values: As George Ritzer has discovered, fast-food restaurants are now "rationalized" establishments leaving little to chance or personal custom.[2]

Sociologists maintain that once a value becomes embedded in a culture (whether through culture change, borrowing, or diffusion), it lives on as a "taken for granted" reality. That is, the value becomes accepted by most persons in the culture as an absolute, as an unquestioned truth, or as part of the eternal nature of things. The performance ethic, then, rooted in the values of control, efficiency, calculability, and objectivity, has come to be experienced as an absolute. Eventually we want to be evaluated, appraised, and judged because it is that sense of our self that is most comfortable in this culture. Look at the lives of young people in our society: The fact that children lead highly structured lives, tightly organized around school activities, sports, and structured leisure, is hardly questioned by parents. Children themselves seem to accept the structured routines put upon them. It no longer seems odd to college students that to keep track of their busy schedules they tote with them their appointment books, in which they pencil in meetings with professors, exam dates, jogging times, and so forth. I'm reminded of an old cartoon in which a busy corporate executive is asking his secretary to "pencil in" for him thirty minutes for prayer.

The rationality of social life not only forms the basis of organized, bureaucratic life, but it also stimulates the emergence of three other important twentieth-century phenomena: consumerism, scientism, and professionalism. In a sense, the cultural performance ethic undergirds consumerism, scientism, and professionalism.

Consumerism values having things that can be bought in economic markets. What one can buy often defines one's selfhood in American society. Sociologists maintain that the self is a social product, that is, that we become "selves" as we participate in society and interact with others. Consumerism encourages a concept of a self defined in terms of having things. You are what you have or can buy. Or to put it as Karl Marx did over a hundred years ago, in a consumer society "having replaces being." Rationality permeates consumerism in that shopping, purchasing, and owning depend on the worth of goods, advertising is thought to be objective truth, and economics tell people how to make efficient use of their money. All of us in modern society are raised to be wise and serious shoppers and are taught, albeit in subtle ways, that personal desires, such as for power, attractiveness, success, and even autonomy, can be purchased. We learn that the right product can give us the image or sense of self we desire. Our consumer self, then, has to do with all the ways we try to measure up in the economic marketplace.

Scientism, the value placed on scientific processes and thinking, also has its roots in rationality. Scientists are thought to be persons who reason objectively, who calculate things (mathematically or statistically), and who try to predict the outcome of events based on these objective calculations. This is true not only of the physical and natural sciences, such as biology or chemistry, but also of human and social sciences. For example, psychology purports to be an objective and calculable study of human behavior. Psychologists are thought to be able to predict (at least to some extent) how certain people will behave on the basis of measurements of such human traits as intelligence or drives or motives.

One of the modern effects of scientism is the idea that there are objective criteria of human and social performance. The measurement of human traits and the transposing of these measurements into scores that can be compared becomes a means by which people can be judged, evaluated, included, excluded, or deemed fit or unfit for social goods. Measures of intelligence, scholastic aptitude, and achievement potential infuse not only educational life but other areas of human social life. Work organizations often hire behavioral scientists to evaluate their employees' potentials and psychological assets. Again, the validity of these measurements is a taken for granted reality in our society. Such objective and scientifically derived measures of human ability support the idea of meritocracy in our culture. We want to think that there is an inherent fairness in who gets ahead in our society, in who succeeds and who doesn't. IQ scores, SAT results, achievements scores, and the like are thought to be objective and ef-

ficient predictions of who *will* and who *should* succeed and compete best in our society. After all, who can argue with test scores? And what student will have the courage to claim to school authorities or college admission officials that their particular abilities are not really measured well by SAT exams? Low scorers on such aptitude exams are encouraged to keep their performance to themselves.

Finally, **professionalism**, the valuing of expertise, wisdom, and erudition based on years of training and schooling in esoteric knowledge, a value that is closely linked to scientism, is also embedded in the value of rationality. Professionals are thought to be objective, precise, and scientifically infused. Medicine, law, and academics are examples of professions steeped in the tradition of objective knowledge and specialized expertise. Because professionalism is valued in our society, professionals are sought for their advice on matters of which the lay person—that is, the nonprofessional—is thought to be ignorant. Professionals claim expertise in telling persons how to lose weight, gain friends, or become popular. In a society where people are pressured to live up to standards of beauty, body size, achievement, and success, there are professionals in any number of fields, such as sociologists and doctors, to tell people how whatever it is can and should be done. We live in a society dominated by professional expertise and advice, in which lay judgment and knowledge is increasingly devalued.

The Sociological Imagination

Understanding how the American cultural performance ethic controls and shapes people's lives requires that one develop a "sociological imagination." This idea of a sociological imagination originated in the work of C. Wright Mills in the late 1950s, but it remains relevant and insightful today.[3] By **sociological imagination** Mills meant the ability to connect one's personal troubles with the public issues of the day. Personal troubles, Mills argued, are the private, immediate troubles that everyone faces at some point in his or her life. Personal crises may include flunking out of school, failing to obtain a job in the field one is trained for, or lacking sufficient income to supply one's family with basic necessities. Public issues, on the other hand, have to do with contradictions and crises in institutions or large-scale social arrangements. The economy begins to collapse or divorce rates soar or political terrorism abounds. Mills believed that many people feel trapped in their lives because they fail to connect their per-

sonal troubles with the major public issues or institutional crises of the day. Instead, they seek to understand and solve their personal troubles only within the most immediate environment and contexts of their lives. By failing to connect their personal troubles with the contradictions and major issues of the day, they fail in the kind of sociological imagination that can "untrap" their lives. Consider the following examples of failure to tap a sociological imagination.

A single parent's third-grade daughter consistently brings home from school poor grades and teacher warnings about other scholastic deficiencies. The single parent may blame herself for poor parenting skills and lack of proper supervision, fret about having passed on genes for lower intelligence, or berate her daughter for not trying hard enough. For both the parent and the third-grader, getting poor grades is a private trouble, a failure to measure up as a parent and as a student. The key public issues here, however, involve the institutions of both education and the economy. Perhaps economic realities necessitate that the single parent work full-time, so that she has little time to spend with her child. Most single parents in our society must work to make ends meet, as child support payments are rarely sufficient and often are not forthcoming in the first place.

Or consider modern schooling. Grades are a cost-effective means of evaluating large numbers of students in educational bureaucracies. Grades are thought to be objective measures of a student's knowledge and scholastic achievement. Students with "high" grades are thought to be doing better than those with "low" grades. The third-grade girl is considered deficient because of her low grades. But there is an institutional contradiction here in using grades as a measure of student performance. What evidence is there that grades always measure what a student has learned? Some students with high grades may have learned very little, and some students with low grades may have learned a lot. Nor are grades always an indication of how hard a student is working. Whatever the case, the sociological imagination requires this single parent to connect her troubles as a working mother of a child with poor grades to the economic and educational conditions of the era in which she is living.

Eating disorders among college women is another example. Each college woman with an eating disorder tends to see her "disorder" or problem within the context of her immediate life at college. That is, she focuses on the way her disorder is compromising her ability to stay in school, on the possible embarrassment she is causing for her friends, or on concern for her own health. But what are the public issues here? First, there are thousands of women students today on college campuses throughout the

country who are experiencing eating disorders. Eating disorders are not limited to a few, isolated college women or to a few colleges; the public that is affected here is quite large. Campus therapists and counselors are now recognizing that eating disorders among college women are among the more frequent problems they confront in their work. Second, eating disorders are related to our cultural obsession with thinness, especially for women. The cult of thinness is part of the performance ethic in our society, and it involves another basic contradiction of modern life. Modern high-yield agriculture and efficient transportation systems make it possible, at least, for everyone in our society to eat well, and our lifestyles encourage us to indulge in high-calorie snacks and fast foods. At the same time, technology has also reduced the need for people to expend lots of calories in day-to-day living: Machines do a lot of the hard drudgery work whereby people used to burn off the calories they took in. Thus, our cultural value of thinness is in contradiction to the economic and technological realities of our lives. It is very difficult for most Americans to remain thin today. The pressure on women to remain thin is enormous, though, and is a sure stimulus to eating disorders among college women.

The sociological imagination requires the individual college woman with an eating disorder to connect her private trouble to the public issues of the thousands of women with eating disorders and the cultural values that extol thinness.

The Performance Ethic as a Public Issue

The sociological imagination, the ability to connect private troubles with public issues, sensitizes us to the performance ethic as a public issue. The pursuit of the measured self is often antithetical to other cherished cultural values, such as human freedom and autonomy. We often feel caught or trapped in this contradiction.

One of our core cultural values (expressed, for example, in the writings of American authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau) is the idea of human freedom, of an individual's right to (in Thoreau's words) "keep pace with . . . a different drummer," to heed the inner voice of conscience in matters of individual decisions. Thus, a **cultural contradiction** is created—a societal tension between two cultural values that may be *incompatible*. The performance ethic, on the one hand, requires conformity to measures and standards determined by anonymous and remote others in institutional authority.

Standardized tests, merit pay systems, thinness norms, management by objectives, and so on are forms of social control to guide individual behavior toward conformity. On the other hand, the value of individualism or personal autonomy encourages a more inner- and self-directed orientation to satisfy personal desires and yearnings.

These cultural contradictions lead to ambivalences in the selfhood of many Americans. One part of a person's self-identity is the result of his or her unique and personal agendas, feelings, and desires, while other parts are expressed in the "measured self," that is, in the self that results from the desire to live up to and conform to anonymous standards of looks, success, and achievement. I contend that most Americans expend a good deal of energy trying resolve these ambiguities in their identities and that that resolution is not easily accomplished. Nowhere, and with no more comical results, is this ambivalence expressed than in the daily escapades of the cartoon character "Cathy" who graces the pages of most U.S. newspapers. In a recurring theme, episode after episode, Cathy is shown trying to cram her chubby little body into a miniskirt or bikini suitable for supermodels. As her frustration and disappointment mount, she comes to realize that her figure will never "measure up." Now angry, hostile, and bitter, she screams that men will just have to love her for her attractive personality!

Herein lies the dilemma for many in this society: Often our individual sense of self-worth and esteem is threatened or negated by what our "measured" self desires or fails to accomplish. For example, innately a student may feel that he or she is smart, may enjoy learning and work hard in school, and may be satisfied in that regard. But when the SAT results come back with a score of 950 and friends are averaging over 1100, the student starts to doubt his or her self-worth and competence. And our culture doesn't help much. On the one hand, we are told and we have learned that personal feelings are worthwhile and important and that if people do their best then the results don't matter. On the other hand, in the performance culture, how one scores in relation to others is as important as how one feels about one's effort, and realistically a low SAT score just might close certain doors of opportunity. One's GPA, another objective measure of potential and achievement, had better make up for a low SAT score if one is to have a chance to reopen those doors. Regardless of how we might feel about ourselves, these feelings are always subject to doubt when our "measured" self leads into fields of competition and performance where our ratings, scores, and standards reflect back on the kind of person we and *others* think we are.

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