

TAMAR MALLOY  
RESEARCH STATEMENT

Questions of identity, power, and justice have taken center stage in political life as participants use identity categories to define issues and alliances. My research focuses on the phenomenological, performative, affective dimensions of identity to enhance our understanding of how identity shapes our political engagement and collective democratic possibilities. I consider how institutions and individuals negotiate the expression of identity, especially when such expression challenges dominant norms of respectability. How do laws and public institutions accommodate or police these expressions of identity? To what extent can legal rights offer effective protection for minoritized groups, including the expressions of identity that can make group memberships feel most meaningful? How do minoritized groups and group members respond to the policing of their identities? What are the stakes, politically and ethically, to navigating tensions between assimilation and self-determination? What are the implications for public deliberation and democratic participation?

Across my work I seek to explore, understand, and contribute to answering these timely questions. As my scholarship has evolved, these foci have formed three main research agendas, representing the near-completion of an initial major project and two additional ongoing lines of inquiry.

*DISCIPLINARY RESPECTABILITY*

When the politics of respectability emerged from Black Baptist churches in the Reconstruction-era American South, they were intended as an assertion of humanity and dignity; advocates of racial uplift argued that the performance of respectability would lead to respect. Before and since, dominant groups have flipped that script and used non-compliance with respectability—those rules and norms that equate virtue and worth with chastity, cleanliness, modesty, temperance, and restrained affect—as a justification for misrecognition and exclusion. Even as civil rights and non-discrimination laws have helped minoritized groups gain ground in the United States, the strategic use of respectability norms as a legitimate basis for discrimination has been enshrined in laws, institutional policies, and social mores. For instance, it is illegal to fire an employee for being Black but not for being a “bad fit” in a predominantly White business, and it is illegal to discipline a student for being a girl but not for a non-respectable or non-normative performance of femininity. My book manuscript, *Disciplinary Respectability*, argues that disciplinary respectability creates legal and social loopholes through which dominant groups can penalize difference while still offering nominal rights protections and claiming to oppose discrimination.

In addition to coining the term “disciplinary respectability,” I begin the manuscript by laying out the historical and political context of respectability politics and establish an original framework to explain how disciplinary respectability functions. I articulate eight mechanisms of disciplinary respectability that identify instances where it is at work and distinguish it from “isms” that occur solely on the basis of a person or group’s membership in a protected class. I then turn to four U.S.-focused cases, described below, to demonstrate how disciplinary respectability works to make bodily, psychic, material, and political security and agency contingent on the willingness and ability to perform respectability.

*The Three R’s: Reading, Writing, Respectability*

Schools, as one of children’s first and most prolonged points of contact with the state, are instrumental in instilling norms and expectations. In this chapter, I draw from school visits, news coverage, popular guides for educators, and student and parent handbooks to present a three-fold argument about the transmission of respectability norms in schools. First, I demonstrate that and how schools are instrumental in inculcating and normalizing disciplinary respectability. Second, I use an original dataset of randomly selected U.S. public charter school handbooks (n=862, or 13.6% of charter schools nationally) to demonstrate that respectability requirements disproportionately affect students in majority-Black, majority-Hispanic, and poor schools. Third, I argue that these policies and their enforcement teach young people that affective and ascriptive difference is a just grounds for exclusion, with a number of potentially chilling effects for the future of a diverse, participatory democracy.

*Respectability at Work: The Limits of Anti-Discrimination Law*

Employers’ regulations set the terms of much of adult life, including governing the ways employees can or cannot explore and visibly express identity. I look to employment discrimination lawsuits, using case studies to elucidate the ways in which respectability norms and demands shape the lives of working adults who belong to minoritized groups. Building from these cases, and drawing on critical legal theory and critical race theory, I explore possible

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alternatives to the status quo. I conclude that shifting legal constructions of identity to include the expression, as well as the existence, of minoritized identities would be both possible and broadly beneficial.

*“Respectable” Reproduction: Compulsory Sterilization in the United States*

Over the last two centuries, U.S. governmental agencies at the local, state, and federal levels have compelled or coerced the sterilization of hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens. Drawing from historical documents and secondary literature, I demonstrate that respectability has functioned as a key criterion for sterilization across centuries and contexts. While historians have rightly noted that most of the people who were sterilized came from minoritized groups, it was not group membership alone that designated them as eligible for sterilization; rather, the history of evaluation for sterilization demonstrates that assessments of respectability played a determinative role in these decisions. I further contend that compulsory sterilization has intentionally disrupted the intergenerational transmission of ways of being that state agents considered disresponsible—first, by preventing disresponsible parents or potential parents from expanding their families, and second, by instilling a fear of sterilization and communicating that the surest way to avoid it was by adopting norms of respectability

*“Serious Politics and Joyful Living”: ACT UP and the Possibility of Disrespectable Politics”*

In the face of the AIDS crisis, many people with AIDS and their loved ones were desperate for ways to put HIV and AIDS on the political agenda, reduce stigma and discrimination associated with HIV+ status, and gain access to potentially life-saving medications. Yet they largely came from multiply-minoritized communities which were already politically, economically, and socially marginalized, and politicians were already largely reluctant to discuss and address HIV and AIDS, in no small part because both the disease and the people it first affected were associated with disresponsible groups and ways of life. HIV/AIDS activists nevertheless created a powerful social movement with tremendous and lasting impact—not by embracing respectability, but by refusing to do so. Using archival documents, contemporaneous video, oral histories, and secondary sources, I focus on the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) to explore the possibilities of a respect-worthy but disresponsible politics: one which relies on participants’ candor, transparency, affective investment in political action, and community ties to develop and pursue an agenda that’s responsive to acute human needs that are often inadmissible in the realm of respectable political discourse, but that might enrich and expand our democratic experiences, community, and goals.

Following these cases, I conclude by exploring the relationship between respectability and respect. I argue for the possibility of mutual respect without a reliance on respectability, particularly if we are willing to embrace curiosity, humility, and an openness to serendipity.

The manuscript has thus far received positive feedback from editors, conference participants, and reviewers at my book workshop. It is intentionally written to be accessible and useful across subfields and disciplines and to undergraduates and graduate students as well as experienced scholars. I have been especially heartened by comments on the manuscript’s novelty and importance as well as those characterizing the manuscript as “a pleasure to read” and “one of the most beautifully written academic manuscripts I’ve ever read,” and commenting that, for instance, “I kept screenshotting pages and sending them to my friends, it just explained everything I’ve been trying to say” and “now that I’ve read this, I can’t stop seeing it everywhere I look.” Most recently, an editor at a top-three press has requested the manuscript and I anticipate that it will be under review this fall.

*DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION*

Stemming from my book chapter on education and respectability, I am developing a new line of research focused on the relationship between schools as public institutions and the development of students’ capacity for and inclination towards democratic participation.

An initial article, co-authored with a CU Boulder doctoral candidate and currently a revise and resubmit at the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, builds from democratic theory and the original data set I developed for my manuscript, ultimately using text-as-data methods to demonstrate racial disparities in how schools talk about democracy and citizenship with different student populations. We show that majority-White schools are more

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likely to emphasize democratic values, while minority-White schools are more likely to emphasize obedience and economic productivity.

A second paper, currently in preparation for journal submission, focuses on how disciplinary respectability is used to justify and conceal carceral elements of school disciplinary policies. Drawing from news coverage, teachers' manuals, and contemporary theoretical frameworks, I contend that the enforcement of respectability requirements normalizes invasive disciplinary regimes and zero-tolerance enforcement practices.

Most recently, I have undertaken a collaboration with colleagues in education and American politics to better understand the relationship between school and classroom environment, race, and democratic attitudes and efficacy. An initial paper, which has been well received at conferences in psychology and political science, uses duo autoethnography along with narrative and pattern coding to develop core themes within school disciplinary and rhetorical practices around citizenship. Following the development of this initial set of themes, we fielded a pilot survey in Spring 2024 to further explore the relationship between students' demographic backgrounds, experiences of K-12 school environment and school discipline, and political behavior as young adults. We are currently analyzing this data with an eye towards fielding an additional survey, alongside ethnographic interviews and classroom observation, to better capture the experiences of people from minoritized groups and more broadly test our initial results. I am also overseeing a comprehensive review of theoretical literature focused on democratic virtues and deliberation to better ground our theoretical approach to democratic skill-building. In the long-term we hope to develop recommendations for how classroom praxis can better prepare students from many different backgrounds for robust participation in our pluralistic democratic society.

*CONTINGENT RECOGNITION*

Building on a previous publication, "Reconceiving Recognition: Towards a Cumulative Politics of Recognition" in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, this working paper argues that contemporary theoretical accounts of recognition often neglect the complexity of lived experience. Rather than treating "recognition" or "misrecognition" as an abstract status, I demonstrate how intersectional identities create overlapping and sometimes simultaneous experiences of recognition and misrecognition. I identify three core aspects of recognition that make it contingent rather than static: context-dependence, the multiplicity of identity, and performative aspects of recognition-seeking strategies, including the deployment of respectability. Through these distinctions, I extend my argument that minoritized groups and people are strategic and agential, able to respond to and interact with state decisions and depictions, and that our understanding of recognition and the politics of recognition is enriched by embracing the complex, multi-faceted experiences of identity.

Across these areas, my work centers several core themes: the relationship between institutions and individuals; how minoritized identities shape individual and group experience and engagement; how institutions create and sustain structural injustice; and whether and how it is possible to build a just pluralistic democracy. This is also reflected in my work on the executive committee of CU Boulder's newly-founded RACE Lab and my cross-subfield and interdisciplinary collaborations and mentorship. With an R&R, a book manuscript soon to be under review at a top-three press, and a robust pipeline including theoretical and applied work on a research agenda beyond the dissertation project, I am optimistic about the reach and impact of my scholarly work and its contributions to contemporary debates on democracy, pluralism, justice, and equity.