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## I Only Thought I Knew It All: Society and the Individual

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## ***I Only Thought I Knew It All:***

### **Society and the Individual**

**Samara Cohen**

Sociology is the study of society. This definition of sociology is widely known, and widely accepted. This definition, however, has multiple strata, and sociology as a science can be broken down and split up into different areas of study. In this paper, I will try to relate my personal experience with sociology to the global perspective of sociology.

The sociological perspective can make the study of human interactions personal. It asks two questions: "How do I affect society?" and "how does society affect me?" Our personalities are shaped by interactions we have with people as individuals, and as groups in society.

When I was fifteen, I became ill with the disease Hepatitis. There was a certain alienation towards me when I had Hepatitis. Immediately when people found out I was sick, they either became uncomfortable, or confused. Nobody knew how to react to somebody with Hepatitis. The disease I have is extremely misunderstood. The form of Hepatitis which I have is auto-immune Hepatitis, and it is very rare. Even doctors don't know too much about it. I did not catch it from anybody, and nobody could catch the disease from me. Doctors believe that the strain of Hepatitis that I

have is genetically predisposed, as many auto-immune diseases are, and that I would have gotten it even if I were doing nothing but lying in bed for months. But, people hear the word Hepatitis, and they become fearful. Having the disease is not fun to deal with, and in some cases can be deadly. Peoples' reactions to me—the girl with Hepatitis—were careful and reserved. Even after I would explain the entire disease to somebody, and try to make her understand that what I had is a generic term for "liver problem," with an unknown cause, she would say "thank goodness you got Hepatitis A and not Hepatitis B"—proving to me that she still had no idea what I was talking about, or what I was going through. Even the people that had Hepatitis before were clueless about my condition. Everybody seemed concerned for me, but nobody seemed to really understand what I was actually going through. I felt alone, and I was alone. People were honestly afraid to be near me. Even after I told them about the genetic predisposition, and that I was not contagious, people still were very reserved and careful towards me.

I came to hate the disease more because of the stigma attached to it than because of the physical deterioration it was causing in me. I was deteriorating emotionally as well as physically. I began to feel alienated from society. Nobody understood what I was going through.

Alienation is defined as the "removal from a group of ideals, a set of values, or a group of people." If somebody is feeling disconnected from society, or if one is feeling that nobody knows the real him, he is feeling alienated. This is how I felt when I was sick. Nobody knew the real me, they were just paying attention to my being ill. I was definitely feeling tired and irritable, but I was still myself. I still had the same interests, and the same personality. I tried not to let being sick get in my way too much. While I could not leave the house, I still did

things that could keep me entertained. But not even my doctor understood this concept that I was still me. He treated me like a person, and not a patient, and I will forever be grateful to him for that; but even he came to see me as “the girl with Hepatitis.”

In the movie *Patch Adams*, Robin Williams played a character named Patch. Patch had battled with depression for a couple of years, and during some time he spent in a mental hospital, he realized his dedication to fellow human beings. He became obsessed with helping people. Patch Adams studied to become a doctor, so he could spend his life helping the sick. He thought the best way to help his patients was by connecting with his patients. He really wanted to get to know the personality behind his patients. “You help the patient, you win, you lose. You help the person, I guarantee you will always win.” Patch said this as an argument for his unusual style of practicing medicine. He wanted everybody to know that when a person is made to be happy, and feel comfortable, it does not matter if the person lives or dies. Victory is had because the patient is treated like a human being. Even if the patient does die, he will have felt peaceful and content when he left this world. Patch felt alienated because nobody agreed with his unique style of doctoring. He almost got kicked out of medical school many times because of his unorthodox style of practicing medicine. In the end, everybody believed in him because they all saw how much good he was doing. Once everybody learned about what he was doing, they started supporting him. Once Patch gained the support of his friends and colleagues, he was no longer alienated.

There is a way to overcome alienation. An effort must be made to become connected, and to know. To get past my feelings of alienation, people needed to get to know me. They needed to understand what disease I had, and what the disease entailed. They needed to understand what was hap-

pening to me, while knowing that I could do nothing detrimental to them. I could not give them the disease, nor could I give them any other disease. All I could do was inform them about my condition, and hope they understood. So, that is what I did. I informed anybody and everybody that wanted to know. Even if one expressed the slightest bit of interest in my well-being, I made it clear to him that I alone was sick, and nobody else around me. I remained cheerful and upbeat, desiring that people would feel more comfortable confronting me about what I had. I wanted people to ask me questions, and to get to know me.

Today, there are still people from that period of my life that know me as the girl who was absent from school for three months, or the girl who got Hepatitis. But to many people, I became a symbol of strength, and willpower. People do not see me and see that sick little girl anymore. They now look past the disease, to see me. They look at me and see pure inner strength, and the power of the human spirit.

Another example of overcoming alienation is provided in the movie *Good Will Hunting*. Will Hunting is alienated from the ability to love, and his ability to let love into his life. He was abused as a boy; therefore, a strong defense mechanism grew, and his ability to receive love was lost. In order to overcome this, the character played by Robin Williams had to continually repeat that the horrific events of Will’s childhood were not his fault. This repetition of the single phrase “it’s not your fault” helped to break through his defense mechanism to reach the subconscious where Will was hiding all of his pain. Will finally came to *know* that the abuse from his childhood was not his fault. Sometimes subconscious barriers need to be broken before a person can become aware.

With sociology becoming so personal, one might begin to wonder what the difference is between psychology and sociology.

To answer this, one must go back to the definition of the word sociology. It is the study of society. Well, isn't it possible that there is a mini-society within each one of us? Doesn't one act differently towards his parents than he does towards his friends, and differently again towards his teacher?

Psychology is the study of inner-self. But this is part of sociology because each individual is made up of a mini-society. According to the author of *Self-Knowledge and the Self*, there are various parts of the self that are made up of "desires, beliefs, traits, and emotions that are central to the self's configuration" (Jopling, 2000). We control these desires, beliefs, traits, and emotions, to react to different situations in various ways. In the essay "Tears of a Clown," Jeff Alexander writes, "Perhaps people can accent some of these 'I's' while suppressing others" (Alexander, 1997). We are different people in different situations because we have moods and behaviors that express who we are at the moment. It is more appropriate, or more desirable, to act a specific way in a certain situation, or in front of a certain person. This is just how people reacted to me.

People thought that they needed to be extra-sensitive to me during my illness. So, when somebody would come to my house and pay me a visit, we would speak of things other than what was really on his mind. My friends would try to catch me up on the current events at school, and the adults would try to "cheer me up." To my parents, however, quite a different reaction was shown. My friends would continuously ask about my "real" condition, just in case I wasn't telling them everything I knew, or, if I did not know everything, and the adults would be surprised at how high-spirited I seemed. It turns out that sometimes the adults needed more cheering up than I did, and they were just putting on a façade so I would not feel so badly, or be too afraid. Around me, people acted one way, and around my parents they acted a differ-

ent way. It was more appropriate for them to discuss the medical issues with my parents. They had the job of cheering me up. Discussing my medical problem with them would not have helped me at all. My main goal was to get better, and for my friends and family that was all I needed to know.

Even my own parents had different selves for facing different people. When my parents were with me, they were extremely supportive, calm, reasonable, and straightforward with me. My parents never keep anything from me, and even then, they thought I needed to know everything about my disease so I could do everything in my power to get better. They told me every single thing the doctor told them. To their friends, my parents broke down, letting them know that they were really falling apart inside. To the rest of society, my parents were strong and collected, so as not to have the whole neighborhood think that I was on my deathbed. I was not on my deathbed. There are reasons for acting different ways to different people, and the mini-society living within a person helps one express these many "personalities."

Are people dependent on society? This question I am still trying to answer. We rely on these mini-societies we have within ourselves to help us interact with other people. But do we rely on interaction with other people to help us be ourselves? People have busy lives. When I was sick, my friends were at school, and my family still needed to work, so there was lots of time for me to be by myself. One would think that with all the time I had to sit and think, while all alone, I would have found myself. If the self didn't depend on society and interactions with others, it would be reasonable to suppose that I learned to understand myself, and to really get to know who I am during my period of solitude. Well, I did sit and think about myself throughout that time. By analyzing my reactions to everything going on at that period of time, I thought I knew myself better than anybody else

could possibly know me. Within the confines of my own home, I knew what made me happy, what made me sad, and what made me angry. Even when I stepped back into the real world of school, and classmates, I was a changed person. I was more myself; I was stronger, smarter, and more assertive than ever! By stepping back into society, I was given a new chance to be the person I had always longed to be.

“William James suggested a radical way of rethinking the self, arguing that a person’s self is as much made up of social and material components as it is of inner drives and traits.” This passage from *College and Society, An Introduction to the Sociological Imagination* (Sweet, 2001), suggests that the outer world influences the inner person. It was not until I came to college that I realized that society and the individual both depend on each other. When I came to Binghamton University, I realized that what I knew were my inner drives and traits. At college, however, I was being exposed to new social and material components that were going to change my self. There are still things out there that can affect who I am. When I was sick, I figured out what kind of person I was, what kind of people I wanted my friends to be. My friends from home were amazing. When leaving for school, we all gave each other the fullest, most unconditional love and support. We all knew that we would remain friends forever! We could not bear to leave each other, yet we knew that we were all embarking on the journey of our lives, and we had to let each other go. We all needed room to grow as human beings. As a girl, who had just gotten over Hepatitis, I thought I had grown as much as possible. There was no room for more growth. I was always mature for my age. Hepatitis had given me the maturity I needed to be an adult. I felt like I was already ahead of the age game.

But I found myself coming to college and being intimidated by my suite full of

sophomores. For somebody that was used to hanging out with people who were about a year older than me, these people were scary. They all seemed to know so much more than I did. That is when I realized that I was still a kid who had tons of growing up to still get accomplished. I had yet to experience many things. Life is experience. While I had already experienced illness and disease, I had not yet experienced college. College is a humongous learning experience, not just mentally, but also socially. I thought I could never find friends like the ones I had from home, the ones who had been there for me through it all. Nobody that I would meet here in Binghamton could have that same kind of connection with me. Then I met my friends, the juniors. Although I immediately felt comfortable hanging around twenty-year olds, (I felt like a twenty-year old myself,) I knew that no matter how much I tried to be older, I was still only eighteen. I still had a huge amount of myself to “find.”

Michael Moore explores big business in the same way that I must explore myself while at school. While I try to figure out why I do things the way I do, and what I want to get from life, Michael Moore tries to figure out why big business does the things it does, and he tries to challenge it. In America, the goal of big business is to make more money. This is a fine goal, until making money comes at the cost of decreasing the quality of life for many Americans. *The Big One* is a documentary about Michael Moore on a book tour. He was promoting his book *Downsize This! Random Threats from an Unarmed American*. In this movie Michael Moore goes after huge corporations. His goal is different from town to town. In the story of the first town he visits, hundreds of people that work in a PayDay factory are about to lose their jobs because the company decided to move out of the country. The current trend for big business is expansion outside of the United States of America. The move out of the country will

make the labor costs cheaper, and expand the business. However, while this is great for the company, the people who live in the town and who work in this factory, will all lose their jobs. Michael Moore does not understand why it is so important for the business to expand and increase its profits when the workers from this town are helping the company increase its profit margin by millions of dollars each year as it is. The workers from this town want their jobs back, and Michael Moore wants to help them get their jobs back. There is no sense in expanding this company when it is already as successful as it is. This is the same with many American corporations.

This ties in with a book we read entitled *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization*, by Immanuel Wallerstein (1999). In this book, Wallerstein states that a company will make more profit by lowering its costs of production, and expanding its market. The best way to do both of these things is to move the company's production out of the country. One can pay the work-force less in other countries than they can in America because in other countries, people are willing, and sometimes even compelled, to work for less. Also, by moving the corporation out of America, it is expanding its market. Profit rises a lot. But when a company is so successful here in America, why does it need to move? All expansion does is put Americans out of jobs, and make an already successful company more successful. It gives them more money than they know what to do with.

When I was sick, my friends wanted to cheer me up. Well, they are busy people, so they could not come visit me every day. They visited me when they could, usually about once a week. My friends always make random stops at the toy store in the mall, because they believe toys cheer everybody up. So, one day, on a mall excursion, they saw a toy that they thought would be perfect for me. It was a stuffed, yellow, smiley face. It had legs and arms. One of the

symptoms of Hepatitis is yellow skin. So, they thought of me, and decided to buy it for me. This commercial object, along with the other commercial objects (such as teddy bears) that I had received had a tag on it that said, "Made in Taiwan." This little tag is now a constant reminder to me of what Wallerstein says in *Historical Capitalism and Capitalist Civilization*, and what Michael Moore says in his movie. I, myself, am like one of Michael Moore's corporations. I am a successful person, yet, I must continuously decide if I am content with how successful I am. I wish to learn more about myself; however, I must choose how far I am willing to go to make these self-discoveries. Michael Moore still has his battle to fight against the large corporations of America, and I still have my battle to fight for self-knowledge and learning.

*Awakenings* is a movie based on a true story. Starring Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro, this movie depicts a moving story about a group of catatonic patients at a hospital in the Bronx, NY. These patients were victims of Encephalitis when they were children, and when they became older went into these catatonic states. They were aware of their surroundings, but they were unable to move, or show awareness of their surroundings. Robin Williams plays a doctor, Dr. Sayer, who finds life inside of these patients. He discovers an experimental drug that he hopes will cure the symptoms of these patients. Robert DeNiro plays Leonard, the first patient to have the drug administered, and the youngest of the people in a group with the same condition. Leonard shows a remarkable recovery. He is able to speak, and to communicate with others. He can move freely, and easily. He now has to make up for the thirty years of his life that have been lost to his disease.

This "miracle" drug is administered to the many other patients with the same symptoms in hospital. They all come back to life, and show an awesome recovery. Well, if this drug seemed too good to be

true, that is because it was. Not too long after the first administration of the drug, Leonard begins to have tremors, and bad reactions to the medication. He soon goes back to the catatonic state he was originally admitted to the hospital for. The rest of the experimental group ultimately follow Leonard. Today, the doctors continue to search for a cure. Patients have received periods of awakening, however, they have not received any as significant as they had that summer of nineteen-sixty-nine. From this experience, the doctors learned just as much as the patients did, if not more. The patients learned that people cared, and were trying to help them. The patients learned as much as was understood about their illnesses, just as I learned as much as was understood about mine. The patients tried to spread awareness about the illness, just as I tried to spread awareness about my illness. They learned the importance of spreading knowledge, and love. Towards the end of the movie, Leonard has some sort of a seizure. He begs Dr. Sayer to record this seizure on video, so people could learn from it in the future.

Doctors learned lots about the quality of life, and the importance of friendship. Dr. Sayer was the type of person that liked to be alone. He did not have many friends; he only had his love of botany, and his scientific research. He learned to become friends with Leonard. Through his friendship with Leonard, Dr. Sayer was able to see that human life is beautiful. Anyone who can voluntarily take a walk, process information, or even write his own name down on a sheet of paper is extremely lucky. The entire staff of the hospital could see this through the eyes of Leonard and this group of wonderful people. Leonard taught Dr. Sayer how to let people into his life.

Disease, while being terrible to deal with, can also bring about good. These catatonic patients brought out the best in everybody they had contact with. These people

went to the depths of people's hearts, and made everybody believe in humanity. My disease as well renewed people's faith a little bit. My strength and courage in fighting auto-immune Hepatitis gave them the strength and courage to do hard, unpleasant tasks. My friends and family looked to me for inspiration to be strong. In a way, I had become defined by my Hepatitis. My community now knew my spirit, and my will to live. My community now knew my strength, and my endurance. My community now knew who I was.

When I came to college, not one person had ever met me before. Therefore, not one person here knew of my past. Not one person understood my struggle, or my triumph. This was difficult for me. Who was I, without Hepatitis? Since the day I learned what I had, I had dreamed of getting away from my community, and going to college. Being sick was an awful time in my life, and I knew that going to college would help me leave everything that I went through behind. I would be able to start over again, and cut that entire part of my life out. In my community, everybody still remembered my three-month absence from school, my jaundiced/yellow complexion, my numerous visits to the doctor, and my incredible gain of weight from my medication once I started treatment. Everybody remembered everything. I just wanted that part of my life to be over. I felt completely better, and I was in remission. I didn't need the disease hanging over my head forever. So, when I came to school, I was happy to be given the chance for a fresh start.

Yet, when I finally got here, moved in, and started making friends, I felt there was something missing. As much as I needed to get away from my disease, it was reassuring to know that everyone from home understood why I suddenly became fat after being so thin, why I get scared when I am abnormally tired, and why I am constantly looking at my skin tone to make sure it is not too yellow. There was part of me miss-

ing when people around me did not know what place I was coming from mentally. It is wonderful to be separated from my Hepatitis at college, but at the same time I feel its absence. To have something that had had such a huge presence in my life suddenly disappear felt strange, and I missed it. Now, with my first semester of college almost over, my friendships already made, and my college career already on its way, I am not sure what I want.

I have told only a couple of people here about my bout with Hepatitis. However, it is not the same as having somebody here that has been through it all with me. Sometimes when I look in the mirror, and get depressed about my weight, it is nice to have somebody there who understands why it is not natural for me to be as heavy as I am. It is nice when I can remind somebody that life is what is important, and that school, or work does not matter too much in the grand scheme of things. While I want that part of my life to be finished, and to not come back, I am now realizing how much a part of me it really is. Hepatitis still plays a gigantic role in my life. While I am glad that it is not the only part of me while I am away, I do not really know who I am without it. It has helped me figure out so much in my life, but without it here with me in college I have started finding new parts to myself, and new qualities in myself that I never knew existed.

One of my biggest excitements, and also one of my biggest fears, about coming to college was the idea that I was going to be completely independent. I do not have my parents anymore to do my laundry for me, listen to me express worries for a friend, or even to just come home to at night. If I come down with a virus, or get a flare-up of Hepatitis, my mother and father will not be there to make me tea, and put cool-compresses on my head. I was excited about living my life completely on my own, but was also anxious. I had never done my own laundry before, and who was going to

take care of me if I got sick again? After being in school for a couple of months now, I realize that I was wrong. There is no complete independence, not even away from home. I am still dependent on my parents for advice, money, and support. I am dependent on my new friends here to help me get adjusted to this new life-style, and to help me grow into the person I am about to become.

John Walton brings up the idea of dependency in the book, *Sociology and Critical Inquiry* (Walton, 1993). He states that there are no autonomous independent countries. Every country is dependent on every other country. One cannot understand one country without understanding the other. Each dependency cannot be understood without the whole world system (Wallerstein, 1999). How does this relate to people? No autonomous independent people. Every person is dependent on every other person. One cannot understand oneself, without understanding others. Each dependency cannot be understood without society. Everything is interrelated. We are all economically, culturally, and politically integrated into one world system. If something affects one country, it affects other countries as well. If something affects one person, it affects other people as well. My being sick not only affected me. It had an effect on my mother and father. They were worried about me constantly. They barely got any sleep, they barely ate, and they could not concentrate on their work because all they could do was think about me. My illness affected everything they did. It also had an effect on my brother. While I was home, going through all that I was going through, my poor brother was away, studying as a sophomore here at Binghamton University. He could not see me; all he could do was speak to my parents and me over the telephone. He did not have a clear picture of what was going on, and he was worried. As a student, he led an extremely busy life, and his worry over me took a lot out of him. Who

knows, he probably would have done better in school if he did not have me as a distraction on his mind.

My friends and classmates were perhaps the most greatly affected by my illness. While I was sick, my doctor forced me to remain at home. I was not contagious to anybody, but I was too weak to be in school for almost seven hours a day. My resistance was low, and my body physically could not handle the exertion. I remained absent from class for three months. My absence made my sickness real to everybody at school. Classmates began to realize that things like this could actually happen to them. Getting ill was not just something that happened to other people. Here it was in their own school, happening to their own classmate. It is a scary thing when one realizes that he is not invincible. It leaves him feeling vulnerable, and frightened. Many of my classmates became worried for their own health, as well as for mine. Some became jealous of me for getting to miss so much school. Even the teachers, as parents themselves, became sympathetic towards my parents, and were secretly glad that it was me and not their own son or daughter. My illness became a reality to them as well. They understood that their own children could possibly get sick. It might be too much for them to handle if anything happened to their own children. They did not understand how my parents were coping so well. Everybody that knew at the time I was sick was affected in some way by it.

Of the many ideas expressed in this paper, there is one central idea. A person's self is defined by the experiences he or she has throughout his or her life. Since a person never stops having experiences, one can reasonably assume that the self is constantly changing. There is a mini society of selves living within each person of the global society. These mini selves all relate to each other, depend on each other, and work together to become individuals. These individuals all relate to each other, depend on

each other, and work together to become one national society. These national societies all relate to each other, and work together to become one global society. Hopefully, one day, we will live in a harmonious global society.

I knew it all. When I first came to school here at the end of August 2001, I thought I knew everything there was to possibly know about myself, and my relationship to society. Then, I came to the sociology class. The professor told me to look around, and to view myself with a critical eye. My whole world suddenly changed. Now, it is the end of my first semester as a college student. I am still myself, yet I am completely different. I am an independent person who depends on people from time to time for support, and friendship, and advice. I am a young woman who knows herself inside and out, backwards and forward.

Yet I am still finding new selves in me everyday. Things are constantly changing. I only *thought* I knew it all.

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