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The Boston Irish Male: A Self Study

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Abstract: This essay explores the personal struggles the author faces with regards to his career and educational choices. The author grew up in a predominately blue-collar Irish-American community. The community's opinions on work and career differ tremendously from those of the author. However, the community has also shown constant love and support towards the author; which creates conflict. This essay explains the author's reasoning with relation to key social theories and theorists.

A person's background can often dictate the type of life they will lead. The old coal mining towns are a good example of this. Generation upon generation worked in the mines. People were expected and encouraged to work the mine because it was part of the community ideology. Although most cities have a greater diversity in the work force, the type of work people do is greatly influenced by their **social structure**.

In the neighborhood I grew up, I was always encouraged to work hard and get a good job. However, the types of jobs that most of the people in my neighborhood do are not ones that I really find intriguing. Yet, still to this day, my friends and family try to influence me into taking such jobs. I grew up in the working-class neighborhood of Dorchester, MA. My cohort of friends and peers shared many things in common. We all went to Catholic school, we are all first or second generation Americans whose parents or grandparents came

from Ireland, many of us joined the military, and we all came from a middle-class background. The majority of my friends work in trades or city/state jobs. Although many of them make very good money, the majority of my friends are mostly blue collar/middle-class workers. By doing this work, they continue the working-class ethic that has been instilled in my neighborhood. Although my struggle is a personal one, it also has significance on the **macrosociological** level.

As noted before, I grew up in a working-class neighborhood. I always felt encouraged by my family while growing up. I bought into the whole "you can be anything you want to be" ideology. However, as I got older, that encouragement changed a bit. Instead of being whatever I wanted to be, I was encouraged to find a decent job. Some of these "decent" jobs were police officer, firefighter, trade/labor union, etc., positions. These jobs were encouraged for two

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main reasons. The first is because these were the types of jobs the people in my neighborhood did for a living. I had a lot of connections between family and friends, so it would be easy to slide into this type of work. Secondly, it was expected. Nobody I know discourages me from attending college, but rather discourages me from attending full-time instead of working full-time.

When thinking more critically, I wondered what has led my family to believe this way. In their work *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels state that "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other---**bourgeoisie** and **proletariat**" (Farganis 26). I am a first generation American. Both my mother and father were farmers back in Ireland. Farming was the family's work for as long as both my parents could remember. Ireland was under British rule until the early 20th century. This means that for years and years my ancestors essentially worked as slave laborers. The British profited off of their hard work. While Ireland gained its independence, it was difficult for my ancestors to lose their dependence on the British. Not knowing anything about business, they struggled to keep their farms up and running. This forced them into taking any type of work that would pay them a decent wage. This started the trend in my family of doing work that pays well, rather than work that satisfies oneself. This would also hold true for many of my peers, whose ancestors come from Ireland.

More times than I care to mention, I have been approached by friends and family to pursue certain areas of employment. I am a veteran and when I returned home from the Navy I was overwhelmed at how much I was being pushed to start a career. My friends encouraged me to take the firefighter and police tests, my brother and father encouraged me to join the pipefitters union to learn the trade, and my sister encouraged me to apply for a job with the security company she was working for. I use the word "encourage," but in reality it was not so encouraging. My friends said things like "you're an idiot if you don't get on the fire department." My brother told me "you need to start making some money." It seemed that everyone had a suggestion, but that no one wanted to hear what I had to say.

In many ways my friends and family made a lot of sense. Despite some of their criticism, they were sincerely looking out for my best interests. It is not mean or unusual to want someone you love to have security in life. I was very aware of this and often considered taking them up on their advice. However, while seeking **social approval** from friends and family, I was denying my own ambitions and aspirations. I had long dreamed of becoming a lawyer and was now ready to start working on achieving that dream. However, the pursuit of this dream created a **stigma** among my friends and family because to them, my ambition seemed illogical. In my **looking glass self**, I imagine my family and friends seeing and judging me as naïve, foolish, or as a dreamer.

In her essay, "Complexity of Naïve Acceptance of Socially Manipulated Beliefs," UMass Boston student Ayan Ahmed states "each generation… derives its principals and beliefs from the one that preceded it. It follows, then, that the influences the children in these societies obtain is social in nature." (2003/4). This is certainly the case in my neighborhood. This hard work ethic that my family and friends have comes from their Irish upbringing. My parents, as well as most of my friend's parents, were born and raised in Ireland. Most of them grew up on farms and had very little education. I always remember my mother telling me she had a day's work done before breakfast. When they came to the United States, our parents worked certain jobs be-

cause of their limited education. Most of the fathers worked as laborers, carpenters, and in other various trades. The mothers worked in various hospitality fields such as cleaning, waitressing, or elderly care. They in turn passed this work ethic along to their children. While I was growing up, my parents never put me down in any way, but they also never really made me feel as if I was great. In some ways, this was good because it taught me humility. However, in other ways I feel as if I was never encouraged to be the best. This is still the case in my life today as my family and friends still discourage me from prioritizing education before work.

Religion also played a big role in shaping the attitudes of my family. Everything I did as a child and teenager revolved around the Catholic Church. I went to catholic school, I played sports in catholic athletic organizations, I was an alter boy, I was a member of the Catholic Youth Organization, and I attended mass every Sunday. My parents encouraged me to do all of this. They deeply believed in the teachings of the Catholic Church. One of the main teachings of the Catholicism is that we are all God's children and no one is better than anyone else. Catholicism teaches that a person should be humble. This may be why my family and friends do the type of work they do, because they were taught to have humility in their lives. Perhaps it is more holy to work as a carpenter than as a banker.

The priests and nuns at my school stressed to me that God wanted us to be humble and I was told to never disagree with a priest or a nun. In her essay "From Alienation to Exploration: Breaking Free from the Iron Cages of My Life" (2003/4), UMass Boston student Annie Roper tells of her experience with catholic school; "we were made to study religious **dogma**; the catechism by rote, to not dare question any religious tenets or authority." This doctrine of humility was instilled in my parents

from such a very young age, that it became part of their **objective culture**. However, for me this presents a **conflict** because I believe there is no shame in wanting to strive for success. If I am driven to pursue a different type of career path or to finish a certain level of higher education, then I do not feel as if I am any less humble for wanting such things. I concur that it would be more favorable in God's eyes to give up most of my ambitions to help others, but we are not all Mother Teresa. Most people want to be successful in their lives and they try to attain that success through work. In their textbook, *Contemporary Sociological* Theory, Ruth A. Wallace and Alison Wolf state that "theories of rational choice assume that people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals" (p.303). When I use this definition of the **rational choice theory**, I see that work is an important part of my life and it makes sense to want to pursue a career that will make me happy even if it is in contrast to what others may think.

Religion was a big part of my life while growing up. Marx viewed religion critically. In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously stated "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (http://www.marxists.org/archivemarx/works/1843/critique-hpr/, 1). "For Marx, religion is something that the oppressed proletariat cling to and delude themselves with simply because they have nothing else in life in which to take comfort. When Marx wrote this text, opium was a very popular medicine and recreational drug. Marx says that religion is the only way the oppressed workers can convince themselves that their lives are worth living, though it is an illusion, simply a pretty fantasy, like an opium dream" (p. 1).

In the beginning of the movie *Twelve Angry Men*, the character played by Henry

Fonda stands alone as a juror who votes not guilty. None of the other jurors understand why he is doing so and only after quite a bit of convincing does he change their minds. Similarly, I often go through the same struggle when trying to explain my decision to devote myself to school. My family and friends are like the jurors, who are set on a certain philosophy and cannot understand why anyone would think differently. Like Henry Fonda's character in the film, I find myself having to defend my position. This continuing argument I have with family and friends does not sit well with how the Irish in Boston **construct their social reality** because in their reality, I am an Irish-American from Dorchester who comes from a hard working family and should get a job that will provide security. However, in my reality, I am a young college student who has an opportunity to be very successful in his career. **Georg Simmel** stated that "people sometimes become enslaved to the **objective culture**"; the objective culture being the things (money, property, work, etc.) that set the context for belonging to one or another class in society. The objective culture I seem to have belonged to is one of working middle class and it seems no matter how hard I try to escape this culture and class, there are forces holding me to it.

The objective culture that Simmel talks about seems to have been diagnosed with an illness in the United States these days. The film *Affluenza* showed how Americans are intrigued by materialistic things such as the ones Simmel described. These material goods become our way of showing our importance or status in life. I wish I could say I was above this, but unfortunately I can not. I have been influenced by America's obsession with wealth and power. I would like to say I believe everyone is human and no one person is better than the other, but if you asked me if I wanted to work as a janitor or a doctor, I will choose doctor. This choice has also been influenced by the media. Shows such as *ER* and info-

mercials such as the one for St. Jude's research hospital have portrayed doctors in a holier-then-thou way. We see this for other professions as well, such as for lawyers, businesspeople, judges, politicians, etc. We have been programmed to think that a suit and tie equals success. I am currently working as a security officer at a hotel in downtown Boston. I was recently promoted to supervisor. While I was an officer, I had to wear a security uniform. This uniform was not very flattering to say the least. I would often get ridiculed by the guests of the hotel because of this uniform. When I was promoted, I was allowed to wear my own personal suit to work. I saw an immediate change. If I were standing next to a uniformed officer, guests would ask me, rather than the officer, whatever questions they had. I was called "sir" by many guests, and I was treated with much more respect while responding to room complaints. Bronislow Malinowski's **social exchange theory perspective** explores "why and how people move from isolation to different forms of contact with one another" (Wallace & Wolf p.306), i.e., what costs and benefits accrue to taking one or another social role and what comes with the latter. This question held true when considering my transition from officer to supervisor. Because of my new position and new look, I was more comfortable around the guests. When addressing guest complaints, I was able to conduct myself with much more confidence. I experienced a personal change and growth in my personality, all because I was wearing a suit.

Maturity is determined by the degree to which you are able to put yourself in one's shoes. Wallace and Wolf write, "Mead explains that communication is 'a process by which each person takes the role of the other,' that is, each person 'assumes the attitude of the other individual as well as calling it out to the other." (208). What I want from my family and friends is to put them-

selves in my shoes and communicate with me with an understanding of the roles I have played and would like to play in society. By doing so, they will find out the **meaning** behind the decisions I make. It may not be easy to do so but, as it did with Neo, in the film *The Matrix*, the truth will be enlightening. In the movie, Neo has to accept a new reality which is completely different than the one he has always known. In order to do so, he has to give up everything he believed to be true in order to gain an understanding of the matrix. However, when Neo accepts his new reality he is enlightened by the truth.

In his book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom discusses a similar awakening Morrie Schwartz had had in his life. In the book, Morrie makes a very emphatic statement; he says "once you learn how to die, you learn how to live" (34). Though this statement can be interpreted in many ways, to me it means that when we know our time left on earth is limited, we can truly start to appreciate and enjoy the most important things in life. This includes family, friends, children, nature's beauty, etc. This statement had a profound effect on how I view my own life, and with regards to this essay. I have discussed the forces that affect my educational goals, but those same forces are the friends, family, and community that helped shape me into the person I am today. When I stop and think of what I really care about in life, I realize that above all I want happiness for my loved ones. I have been blessed to be surrounded by wonderful, caring people. That is what really matters in life.

Although I wish the best for my loved ones, though, I also have to do what is best for me. I hope to give back to the community that has given me so much. However, I plan on doing this through a profession in politics. I feel the best way to get into politics is through education, particularly law school. I feel that education can only make me a better politician. Morrie Schwartz

stated that "people haven't found the meaning of their lives, so they're running all the time looking for it. They think the next car, the next house, the next job. Then they find out that those things are empty too, and they keep running" (Albom 36). Right now, my pursuit of higher education is the central purpose of my life. I find it morally satisfying. I believe it is the meaning I have been looking for in life. I just hope that my loved ones will accept this as well.

My friends and family have a **blasé attitude** towards higher education. They feel that once you reach a certain age, it is time to start a career. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the Irish work ethic because even though our heritage traces back to Ireland, my entire community considers themselves Americans first and foremost. My friends and I joined the military after high school because we felt a patriotic duty to do so. Our parents created new lives for themselves in the United States because they believed in American equality. There is a true love for America spread throughout my community. What is interesting to me is that as much as my community believes in American values, they are indifferent towards one of its most precious values: education. Almost every organization stresses the need for education. It seems odd that my community, whom revel in being Americans, do not.

To add to this confusion is the fact that the most revered Irish-Americans from Boston are the ones who have gone on and been successful in higher education. Billy Bulger was a Boston College Law school graduate before he went into politics, former speaker of the house Tip O'Neill graduated from B.C. before entering politics, and Joe Moakley graduated from Suffolk Law School after his enlistment in the U.S. Navy. The reason I use these men as examples because they share two things in common with me: Boston-Irish roots and a love for politics. Looking at this, I can con-

clude that my choice to pursue higher education above all else is not a foolish one because as the aforementioned individuals have shown, it is possible to succeed despite coming from a working-class neighborhood.

If I am fortunate enough to be elected into public office, I hope to use my working-class background to my advantage. I had the honor of knowing Joe Moakley on a personal level and if you didn't know who he was, you would have never guessed he was a congressman. Moakley was always willing to help the people in his district. I believe this can be credited to his upbringing, where people relied so much on others. Everyone helped each other out. Moakley's upbringing also influenced his decisions on the national level. When dealing with issues such as health care and welfare reform, I am sure Moakley did not forget his childhood, growing up in the South Boston housing projects.

There may be subliminal reasons why I want to pursue law school and politics. If you asked me why, I would tell you that I want to get into politics someday and I feel a good law background will make me a better politician. I believe this to be the true reason why I wish to become a lawyer, but there may be others. In her essay "My Image Struggles in Capitalist Society," SUNY-Oneonta student Anna Schlosser states

> "the media does not show favorable images of the working class" (Newman 283). Al Bundy, the character from *Married with Children*, and Homer, the character from *The Simpsons*, are just two examples of how badly the working class male is portrayed

The movie *Affluenza* showed us the power that marketing and advertising has on people. The media has always portrayed occupations such as physicians, lawyers, and banking as occupations endowed with

social capital. The show *Roseanne* represented my life more so than a show like the *West Wing* ever did, but it is the characters in the *West Wing* that I want to emulate. It is possible that my career decisions have been persuaded by media influence, whether I knew it or not. In his work, *Class, Status, Party*, Max Weber describes **social stratification** as the way "different jobs are treated as superior or inferior to one another…based on reputation and wealth and expressed in a rank order of social status" (Farganis 123). In American society, we are judged by the type of work we do. For example, your local garbage man could be very kind and very smart. Perhaps he has had prior success in the banking industry or holds a master's degree. When comparing him to a lawyer or a doctor, we automatically assume that the doctor or lawyer is smarter, richer, and more successful than the garbage man. Even if this particular garbage man proves this theory untrue, it will not stop us from characterizing the next garbage man we meet the same way.

My goal of becoming a lawyer has nothing to do with money, but I cannot say that it has nothing to do with personal ambition. When I am finished with school, I want to be able to look back proudly at my success and look forward to my future. However, the more successful I get, the more potential trouble there may be. The amount of success a person has may present certain opportunities that were not previously available to that person. For example, Martha Stewart would not have been involved with an inside-trading scandal had she pursued another career. Martha Stewart came from a modest middle-class background and probably never imagined she would be as successful as she became. However, she also probably never imagined herself being involved in anything illegal. However, her status has changed tremendously since that during her childhood. Ralf Dahrendorf writes "the greater people's personal chances of leaving their

class---in other words, the greater the degree of '**intergenerational mobility**'---the less likely they are to identify actively with it" (Wallace and Wolf 125).

If I am successful in becoming a lawyer, I must avoid these circumstances. Otherwise, I am just insulting the loved ones who helped get me there. In his film, *Roger and Me*, Michael Moore shows the irresponsibility of large corporations. The film showed how corporations, such as GM, make decisions that have terrible consequences for many people. GM chose to save money and increase profits when they moved their factory from Flint, MI. However, the majority of Flint residents were employed in some form or another by GM. Therefore, GM had a responsibility to ensure the well-being of the people of Flint. After all, it was GM that created the jobs in the first place. The people of Flint provided a great service to the GM Company. However, none of that meant anything to the GM executives. GM brought the town of Flint together by creating a work environment that became part of the community. Everyone was involved with GM in some form or another. This created a distinct **social class**. However, when GM decided to leave Flint, it created many struggles for its citizens. This is what Georg Simmel referred to as the "**web of conflict**," which points to "the cross-cutting allegiances that can both bind a society together as well as generate struggles and confrontations" (Farganis p.131).

Morrie Schwartz was also critical of today's American society. Morrie stated that "the culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. We're teaching the wrong things. And you have to be strong and say that if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it" (Albom p.34). This holds true in my life. My family and peers have accepted a certain way of life. I have decided that this life does not work for me, so I don't "buy it." However, this is not to say that my community's culture is bad in anyway. I merely say that it is not right for me. Morrie's statement also holds true for the macro-society. In the film *Super Size Me*, Morgan Spurlock shows the tremendous health risks involved with consuming McDonald's food. Spurlock showed how McDonald's food is loaded with sugar, salt, fat, and grease. All those ingredients lead to a meal that is high in fat, calories, and cholesterol. McDonald's is a world-wide conglomerate, with restaurants in almost every country in the world. It is not like they don't have the money to create a healthier menu, they just choose not to. Spurlock's interview with Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, was especially frightening. Schlosser points out how McDonald's uses meat from various different parts of various different cows. He also told how McDonald's slaughter houses are so jam packed with animals, that the animals are forced to live in their own excrement. Meanwhile, pediatric obesity and diabetes is on the rise. Schlosser mentioned the In & Out Burger food chain in California. Although In & Out does not serve the healthiest food, they use fresh potatoes for their French fries and grade A beef for their burgers. They also provide health care and vacation time for their workers---something McDonald's does not. Like GM, McDonald's has shown tremendous corporate irresponsibility.

I now feel as though my career goals contrast my upbringing. I was raised to help others and give to those less fortunate. Simmel discussed the **small town life** in which people "rest upon more deeply felt and emotional relationships." Although my hometown of Dorchester is right in the heart of the city of Boston, we still share the characteristics of the small town. The people in my neighborhood care for one another and do whatever they can to help each other out. I sometimes feel like a stranger because I tend to look after my own interests rather than others in my community. This isolates me somewhat from

my community. I see myself finishing school in a few years and starting a life in public service. Once I start that life, I see my friends, family, and community accepting my decision to stick with education. I see myself as becoming successful in the work I do. What I strive for more than anything else in my life is to be successful. However, I want to be successful in public service and to do that I have to have certain educational goals achieved. My ambitions are not monetary, but rather personal. It has been a dream of mine to someday run for office and I want to pursue that dream. A man's success is not shaped by the size of his wallet, but rather by the amount of good he does in the world. The good I want to do is in the community I grew up in. This is how I see myself, but I am not sure if the forces working against me are too strong to prevent me from attaining such goals.

There are certain things I must do to ensure that my educational goals stay on track. First, I must understand my family's and friends' point of view and accept it. By accepting their opinions, I am not taking their advice, but rather understanding the reasons why they give it. After all, when it's all said and done, they will be the ones by my side whether I succeed or not. Morrie Schwartz said "the most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love and let it come in" (Albom 52). Fortunately, this is not a problem I have to face. Secondly, I must learn to accept and deal with the criticism I receive. I can not let outside forces distract me from my goals, however. This is difficult because the people criticizing me are the ones I care about most; however, I must do this in order to succeed. Thirdly, I must be persistent in achieving my goals. In the end, I am the one who paves the road to my future. I am solely responsible for my decisions. I cannot let the negativity stop me from my ultimate goal. Because once that goal is achieved, I can start to give back to the community I love.

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