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## *What Do I Want to Be?*

### **A Sociological Exploration in Choosing A Career**

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**Abstract:** This is an effort at applying some sociological theories and concept to the question of my major and career in life. I left this class everyday with my mind completely racing and had all these thoughts I wanted to put together. I guess it goes back to the importance of putting C. Wright Mill's *Sociological Imagination* on the back of the syllabus. Nothing really quite clicked until I could understand my place in today's society. It was about being able to understand the bigger picture and myself at the same time, and how world and I related to each other. I took things like my high school experience and there was a whole different view of what had gone on. I can now understand why people harp on high school being so influential on kids at that time. They absorb so much interaction and mold into whatever is going on at that time, but they don't notice it when they are in it. They kind of get lost within the environment that they are in. The sociological imagination makes us go back and consciously study our past and our present in a broader social context, so we can better shape our future.

When it was first brought to my attention that we should be coming up with an issue or problem in our lives as a topic to write this paper, many topics came to my mind. I wanted to do something that I really felt could give me a better perspective on life. It took me around a week, but I finally came to the topic about what I want to do with my life. This remains a constant question for every 18 to 20-something years old, and considering the fact that one are in college, one should know, right?

What about the people that do not know the answer to that question? They have talked to numerous career counselors, taken "career tests," and spoken with other professionals to get a feel for it. But what if

that doesn't do it for them? I have found myself trying to answer that question for the past five or six years, and this paper has finally forced me to come to terms with it.

I know that when you start out in college it's acceptable to not really be sure what you want to do, but after a while people start asking more questions. "How do you not know what you want to do?" "You have no idea what you want to do?" "What are you good at?" "What do you like to do?" The questions just keep coming, and most of the time they don't make things any easier. If anything, it seems like the more people ask, the more confused I get as I try to scramble for things I could possibly do with my life.

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Joel Bartlett is an undergraduate junior at UMass Boston, majoring in Sociology. He wrote this paper while enrolled in the course Soc. 341-1: "Elements of Sociological Theory," instructed by Mohammad H. Tamdgidi (Assistant Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston) during the Fall 2007 semester.

While trying to find and understand terms or concepts that I could possibly relate to my exploration, I came across the notion of the “rational choice.” **Rational choice theory** assumes “that people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals. In a world of scarce resources this means constantly weighing alternative means to alternative ends and choosing between them” (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 303). Up until now I had never really took the time to completely submerge myself into possible “rational” career choices. I had just assumed that what I had been doing and what I was settling for were completely rational. I had been going to school and “trying” to figure out what the best route for me was. Little did I know that there is much more out there.

## GROWING UP

When I was growing up, I was blessed to have a mother, father and three sisters in our household. I am the third oldest of four, and I have always considered where I grew up in to be a stable environment. My parents worked very hard to provide my sisters and me with the things we needed throughout my childhood. I remember being in elementary school and never having any problems with school, always maintaining good grades.

When I moved on to middle school, many changes came about that I never considered until now. As a child, you tend to neglect how much money your family has or what type of “status” your family holds. However, I remember middle school was the time when I began to gain some **class consciousness**. The term class consciousness is derived from Karl Marx’s view in **conflict theory**. Marx believed that the “degree to which members of a class recognize their interests will depend on [their] level of class consciousness” (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 85). Realizing that my family had four chil-

dren, and to provide them with expensive clothes would have been very difficult, it was not too hard to determine that my family was of lower-middle class. That idea became very apparent to me when I thought about the movie we watched in the beginning of the year, *Affluenza*, which portrayed how people try to keep up with the new fads. I now realize more how ridiculous such “disease of consumerism” really is.

I had a hard time meeting new people and never really attached myself to friends or a group. This led me to further examine my issue and I came across George Herbert Mead’s notions of the **self**, and the **I/Me**:

...the “me,” is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual. It is the answer which the individual provides to the attitude which others take toward him when he assumes an attitude toward them. Now, the attitudes he is taking toward them will contain a novel element. The “I” gives the sense of freedom, of initiative. (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 207)

I had gone through school without ever really meeting or keeping friends, but I began to grow up more when in the later years of middle school I took the *initiative* to meet new friends. I still had little notion of what I was planning to do with my life, but who does at 13 years old? When I went to high school, however, I felt things would be different and I would have a fresh new start.

## HIGH SCHOOL

Previously I had not put much emphasis on my years spent in high school, mainly because I did not think they had that big of an impact on my life. Little did I know that I was so very wrong with that assumption. I had been playing football for around four years at this time, and during the summer I

knew it was going to be an excellent season. Between football and trying to meet new people, school was completely on the back burner at this point. Like middle school, meeting new people and desiring acceptance among peers was very important to me. I had lost weight and made some friends in middle school so I felt pretty good about going to Lowell High School. It is only now, however, that I realize how relevant Erving Goffman's concept of **impression management** is to how I behaved during my years at that school. Goffman studied "the way individuals in their everyday lives present themselves and their activities to others," and used the term "impression management" for "the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her" (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 238). There were 1,000 entering freshman in the school that year, and there were many different people that I wanted to meet. So I had a particular need for impression management to make sure I appeared to others in such a way that I could make some friends.

My cousin and I often talk about the way we make friends and the extent to which we are real or fake with one or another of them. My cousin, who is also a sociology major, also brought to my attention Goffman's notion of **dramaturgy**, "the art of dramatic composition and theatrical representation" (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 238), and how everyday life can be like a theater and we its actors. I thought about how I had constantly acted throughout high school in a way that now seems to be completely stupid, always acting in order to please people. I could see how in the **front stage** we acted out particular selves, while in the **back stage** we acted differently. The more I thought about this, the more I could not believe that for four years at Lowell High I was preoccupied with acting out. Rarely did I ever study, and instead I acted stupid with the teachers I had, and when it came down to it, begged them to pass me at the end. I

continued this acting throughout and told my friends how easy the class was, and how I never did anything, and so on. The **back stage** roles I also played rarely seemed to come out, however.

I almost failed my senior year and barely graduated from high school, not thinking of what I was actually going to do for college. I took an easier route and went to a community college.

## COLLEGE

I had decided against applying to any colleges fearing rejection, so I enrolled in Middlesex Community College in Lowell which was not far from my house. I thought that I could easily finish in two years and then decide what it is that I wanted to do with my life. Again, I had been so very wrong in thinking that I would just cruise through this and come to an answer for what career I would pursue. The difference between **value vs. interest** that we read in class this semester was something that really caught my attention when I decided to explore this stage of my life in this paper. In their book *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, Ruth Wallace and Alison Wolf describe how various sociological perspectives can be classified in terms of how they regard people's motives for acting in society. Functionalists consider values as what motivates people to behave in society; from this perspective, what shaped and motivated my behavior in school was the shared "value" of going to school so as to find a job and move on to better things. However, conflict theorists "emphasize interests which include being free from subjugation, and being in a position of power" (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 8) as motivating factors influencing people's behavior. I guess you can say that I really was also motivated by seeking to find a job where I could be more in control of my life rather than following other people's orders.

Robert K. Merton's theory of **deviance**

was brought to my attention in class as well, though I did not quite understand it at first. After reading the material and discussing it further with my cousin, I felt that it also applies to the way I was feeling at the time. Deviance involves a “dissociation between culturally instilled goals and institutionally provided means of realization; discrepancy between ends and means is seen as a basic social source of individual frustration” (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 54). I felt I could relate to this concept of deviance because I felt frustrated that there was a separation between the culturally defined goals I wanted to reach (having a good job) and the problems I was having in my school work, which was for me a means to achieve that end.

My parents have always wanted me to finish school and keep the options open for whatever it is that I felt was right for me. My father has always wanted me to finish because he dropped out of college at my age and has regretted it ever since. My mother, on the other hand, has received her bachelor's and master's degree in the area of human services and finally this year has secured a job that she deserves because of all the work she has put in finding it. I'm not sure if I was angry and frustrated at the fact that in either situation my parents felt like they were being held back. In *Keeping Good Time*, author Avery Gordon writes, “Undergraduate education, as we all know, only tangentially produces disciplined students looking to enter the profession as equals” (pg. 77). But, even assuming that undergraduate education produced equally prepared students, why should you be an equal in employment? You have a degree in college; shouldn't that be more than just an equal? Why would I spend time studying and earning a college degree if my degree wouldn't earn me a better chance at a job compared to those who didn't go to college? These are some of the thoughts I had when faced with what I wanted to do after school.

I switched back and forth between Liberal Arts and Psychology and really could

not concentrate on Psychology so I switched to Liberal Arts again. The problem wasn't that I didn't have the means to do well in school and find a career path; the problem was that of not knowing what I wanted to do after I went through a four-year school. “What do you want to be?” I told myself. I took much time when I was finishing Middlesex Community College to really analyze who I really am and what I wanted to do and be. I can now see that the concept “**looking-glass self**” explains some of my thoughts and perceptions at the time. According to Charles Horton Cooley the looking glass self has three elements, “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Wallace & Wolf 203). It basically means your sense of self is influenced by how you imagine others see and judge you. At the time, I imagined that people thought I was a nice guy who otherwise doesn't really know what it is that he wants to do. When I think back about that time, I realize that that isn't the type of person I want to be in other people's eyes.

The group of people I hung out with knew I had lived in Lowell my entire life. They knew that I like to slack off, and that I had been dancing around the fact of actually getting my bachelor's degree. I felt at the time that I was trapped in this carousel of doing the same things everyday, and acting in this way because people liked it. But I wanted to change what I was doing and to finish Middlesex Community College and hopefully turn things around for myself.

I graduated from Middlesex after four years, and decided that things were going to be different. After reading the article titled “Exiting the Self-Destructive Highway: A Sociological Path Back to A Future Career” by UMass Boston student Paul Connor, I compared how he decided to listen to his father with that of my attitude toward my parents. He questioned what he had taken

for granted in his everyday life in terms of slacking off in school and considered how his father had wanted the best for him. Similarly, I thought not taking school seriously and going out and partying every night were not good. I needed a goal and a path to something, a change of environment seemed like just the right thing to do.

### TIME TO GROW UP?

I applied to UMass Boston about two weeks after I graduated from Middlesex Community College, and was very excited when I received my acceptance letter. Finally I could go to a school that would make me realize that I had to do better things with my life and find something that I could do later on. When it came to picking a major, I went out on a limb and selected sociology. Considering that I had only taken Introduction to Sociology, I really didn't know all that much about it. My lack of knowledge in other professional fields, and fear of commitment, had me think twice about my decision but it proved to be one that I most definitely do not regret.

Since I had only taken Introduction to Sociology, I was pretty much only aware of what I know now to be **microsociology** which is "concerned with person-to person encounters and the details of human interaction and communication" (Wallace & Wolf pg. 5). This was about all I had known up to the beginning of this class, and then was introduced to a very important concept, C. Wright Mills's notion of the **sociological imagination**. At first this was a very hard concept to grasp, but then I began to understand it more as the topic of this paper began to take shape in my mind. It made me look at my "personal troubles" in terms of how they relate to the bigger picture of social life, to the "public issues" about which I learned more when we studied the **macrosociological** theories. The way I was able to more clearly comprehend how C. Wright Mills defined this term was when I re-read

the excerpt from his book copied in the back of the syllabus. Having a sociological imagination, Mills wrote, involves "the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; it is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self and to see the relations between the two" (Mills, pg. 7).

The first time I read through the excerpt, I really had to try and make sense of what was in front of me. I just did not understand it. But increasingly I left class sessions with new ideas in my head and just basically began to think more about what really goes on in this world. I thought about things like poverty and how many people are poor in this country. The thought of racism and how some people today are still so racist and the stereotyping that goes along with it preoccupied my mind. Then it all seemed to make sense after we watched Michael Moore's film, *The Big One*. It may sound rather odd that this movie made this much sense to me, but it just completely clicked in my head. All those things I had been thinking about seemed to fit into what we were learning about macrosociological theories in class. I left classes thinking that I finally understood some of the problems that I had faced both as an individual and as a member of society.

Michael Moore's film focused specifically on the nature of **capitalism** in the U.S., and how business owners and CEOs of companies use their workers to maximize their profits and then, when they have reached a certain point, downsize their companies by moving to other countries with cheaper labor costs in order to "remain profitable." In our society people commonly associate the "American Dream" with capitalism. It made me so incredibly angry at the way many of the workers portrayed in the film were treated, the time and effort they gave for these companies and then how, in Marx's terms, they were **ex-**

**ploited.**

Early on in the year we watched a part of the film *The Matrix*, and the first time I watched it, I did not really get much out of it other than that it was a good film to watch. The thought that we could all just be essentially an energy source for robots and being controlled by them didn't seem to make sense. After we reached to the macrosociological theories, however, the film started to make more sense to me. In my philosophy class, we also had a discussion about *The Matrix* and how it related to *René Descartes's* saying "I think therefore I am..." Everyone seems to be going through the motions every day, and I seemed to be taking the same approach. When the quote from Descartes was brought to my attention it really got me thinking differently about the difference between being a robot, or merely an energy source to be exploited by others, and being a human that thinks, critically.

Halfway through the semester I started to brainstorm about what I would write when exploring my "issue" on the macro-level and what I wanted to do with my life. I read about the different theories like *Functionalism* which involves "The analysis of social and cultural phenomena in terms of the functions they perform in a sociocultural system. Society is conceived as a system of interrelated parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole" (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 17). I noticed that the understanding I had of my issue was that I was taking such a distant approach to it. I needed to mix myself into what I was studying and find out for myself what the real issue was. This particular quote made me think of the way some sociologists have approached their study using different theories. Robert K. Merton wrote that "Some sociologists are seeking a single unified theory—a generalized body of explanations as to what cements society together, how institutions fit into a social framework, how discrepant values arise

and work their changes upon a society, and so on" (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 46). However, he thought it is better to study society not on too abstract a level, but at mid-range, trying to theorize about specific issues of social concern.

I also brushed upon different concepts such as *Communicative Action*, and like most other terms we had gone over, I did not grasp it at first. This concept was presented by Jurgen Habermas, a German critical social theorist who argued that communicative action, "is not only a process of reaching understanding; communicative actions are at the same time processes of social integration and of socialization" (Wallace & Wolf, pg. 181). This again brought me to the point that I had not tried to fully understand what my parents and advisors were telling and teaching me, and had not fully used the school in a way that I could communicate with and understand others and the world. That is one reason why I felt **alienated** from my environment—a stupid kid who just took life as it came to him.

As I have slowly begun to learn more about the society at large and realize my place in it, this has also brought on other concerns that I have had throughout my whole life. I have always believed, and still believe, that you should be doing things that you like to do and that you enjoy doing. However, in America today, the focus of capitalism is about how to get richer and richer. Earlier in the semester we received a copy of an article as a hand out in class, titled "Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer?: A Focusing Illusion" (Kahneman et al). To be completely honest, I read over it briefly and then put it to the side. As I was approaching the final paper deadline and my constant concern to hopefully one day be able to provide for a family of my own I pulled it back out. The authors conclude that "people exaggerate the contribution of income to happiness because they focus, in part, on conventional achievements when

evaluating their life or the lives of others.” They refer to this concept as *the focusing illusion*. It is understandable to a point how unimportant money can be, but as I read the paper I thought in reality how happy are you if your child is screaming because he/she is hungry and your wife complaining that you should get a better paying job? It seems easy to justify always wanting to do things you love and enjoy, but looking at the bigger picture in America, how many people are poor? I do not look at this as being selfish or that I want to be a millionaire, because it’s far from that.

Then, recently I was reminded of the meaning of the term *reification*, which we covered early on in the semester as part of the readings in Phenomenology. What I took from that term was that a person does not question what goes on in their world or society and just takes things for what they are—completely forgetting the fact that we as a society have created this and therefore things don’t have to remain as they are. I then made the comparison, in the movie *Twelve Angry Men*, to the man who has tickets to the Mets game and just goes with the flow so he can get out of there. This is what I had been essentially doing with my own life, taking things and my own situation for granted, not realizing that I could influence and shape my own life and future.

When I was buying books for this class early in the semester, I picked up *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. Before this semester I had not read a single book since I was around 15 or 16 unless it had been required for school. Although this book was required, the syllabus had said that it be read before the end of the semester. On the cover of the book it said, “An old man, a young man, and life’s greatest lesson.” I was completely drawn into the book and become extremely curious. Considering the fact that I hadn’t read a book for a while, and that it was required reading, I said to myself that I would give it a shot. Not only did it bring attention to so many aspects of

my life, but it really summed up some of the questions I needed answered. Morrie has so many great things to say throughout the book, and this was the first time I actually read a book before seeing the movie. I finished the book, and now I can understand why people say the book is always better than the film.

The conversations Morrie has with Mitch, the way he forces Mitch to really dig deep into what he is doing with his life really struck a chord with me. I thought about my own life and what I had been doing all these years, and what I could be doing. Morrie mentions the idea of never working at his father’s workplace, where they will exploit the workers and doing something you really love. One of Morrie’s quotes that I really enjoyed and reassured me that what I thought was right was, “Devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to the community around you and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning” (Albom, pg.127).

I had a conversation with an older woman earlier this year, and we got into the subject of what is really important. We had thrown ideas at each other the whole time and we both agreed that the most important thing in this world is love. We discussed in class about love being the only real “rational act.” Morrie says that everyone needs to be loved, from the day you’re born until the day you die. He tells Mitch about how people lose sight of the nurturing we need and the barriers that we put up to protect ourselves. There is just so much going on in the world that we tend to forget the one universal thing that everyone can relate to in life, the need to be loved by someone.

## CONCLUSION

As I talked with another student in the class about the paper that we were both stressed about, we both found ourselves sharing the same feeling that it was worthwhile to explore our majors and career

choices. This was a topic that we both liked to do because of the fact that in today's society people get trapped with majors and careers they did not consciously choose and being to question them when they have already been submerged into them. I had been so reluctant to choose a major or career path because I did not want to be stuck in something that eventually I would not enjoy or realize that it was not for me.

Throughout this semester a constant question for me to answer has been, what do you want to be? As the semester has progressed and I've learned so much; I have come to realize that I really just want to help people. I met recently with an advisor and she asked me about my classes and how they went. After analyzing each one we got to "Elements of Sociological Theory." She asked me how it was going and I replied that there was a lot of information to learn and apply, and that I really did learn a lot—not only about different theorists and their concepts, but about me as well.

I left this class everyday with my mind completely racing and had all these thoughts I wanted to put together. I guess it goes back to the importance of putting C. Wright Mill's *Sociological Imagination* on the back of the syllabus. Nothing really quite clicked until I could understand my place in today's society. It was about being able to understand the bigger picture and myself at the same time, and how world and I related to each other. I took things like my high school experience and there was a whole different view of what had gone on. I can now understand why people harp on high school being so influential on kids at that time. They absorb so much interaction and mold into whatever is going on at that time, but they don't notice it when they are in it. They kind of get lost within the environment that they are in. The sociological imagination makes us go back and consciously study our past and our present in a broader social context, so we can better shape our future.

Going back and studying the feeling of being lost in the past five or six years and not having anything to really base them on opened up a new light for me and my journey in finding a career path. I haven't totally decided what it is that I want to do when I get out of college, but I know that I will follow sociology as a major and wherever it may take me from there I think will be great for me. Not too many papers that I have written really changed the way I have perceived myself, and forced me to confront an issue that I have been dealing with for quite some time.

I just want to do something that people will benefit from. That will be great. With all the people and potential that this world holds, I just don't want to miss out on anything or let it pass me by.

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