

6-21-2009

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Recommended Citation

Zheng, Minxing (2009) "Measures of Personal Success and Failure: A Self-Assessment, Applying the Sociological Imagination," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol7/iss3/13>

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Measures of Personal Success and Failure **A Self-Assessment, Applying the Sociological Imagination**

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Abstract: In this paper the author explores the meanings of personal success and failure as internalized from broader society in contrast to his own life, culture, and family background, professional aspirations, and emergent critical thinking and values. Using various sociological concepts and writings, he asks and seeks to explore questions such as: "How am I doing? Am I having a successful life so far or have I had more failure than success? How do I measure my personal success and failure? Was my success or failure based upon my own standards or other people's determinations? How do I decide my standards? Are they influenced by other people's perception? What is considered to be a success and what is considered to be a failure? Was my success really successful or were they considered successful only according to other people's considerations? Did I really fail in my failure or was I just locking myself behind another set of bars created by other people? Am I the only one who has been living in such a life pursuing this kind of success and avoiding that kind of failure or am I just one of many others whose eyes are blindfolded by the society's perception?"

I sometimes look back and ask myself a series of questions: "How am I doing? Am I having a successful life so far or have I had more failure than success? How do I measure my personal success and failure? Was my success or failure based upon my own standards or other people's determinations? How do I decide my standards? Are they influenced by other people's perception? What is considered to be a success and what is considered to be a failure? Was my success really successful or were they considered successful only according to other people's considerations? Did I really fail in my failure or was I just locking myself behind another set of bars created by other people? Am I the only one who has

been living in such a life pursuing this kind of success and avoiding that kind of failure or am I just one of many others whose eyes are blindfolded by the society's perception?"

As I am trying to search for the answers, I find one question leading into another one. The deeper I get into these questions, the more I find that some common senses aren't so common anymore, because I cannot tell whether my common senses represent the principles of how things are and why things are; maybe my common senses are just "**Islands of Meaning**" (Zerubavel 18-23) in Eviatar Zerubavel's words, I have "sorted my personal experiences into distinct categories"

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(Zerubavel 18-23). Or maybe I was “**born into a world already interpreted and organized by others**” (Zerubavel 18-23). Perhaps I should use the “**Sociological Imagination**” (Mills 1) described by C. Wright Mills, to do a self-research by linking my personal experiences with society and history.

I was born in a small town in China, grew up in an ordinary family, somehow managed to cross the ocean and come to the United States. Thirty one years old today, I have a respectable job with decent salary; thirty one years old, I have just had my American Dream come true, owning my first house. To a lot of people, they think I am having quite a successful life so far; but then I look even closely at myself: thirty one years old, I am still working on my first undergraduate degree; thirty one years old, I haven't done anything that is really meaningful other than just working and working to make money; thirty one years old, I still don't have a clear picture of what I will be in the next thirty years. To some people, to me at least, it is a failure.

Ever since China opened itself up to the world, although the thousand years long of traditions still root in most Chinese, western cultures have always been the exceptional ones in the perspectives of many Chinese. As China is blooming in economic and many other areas, western cultures have become even more dominant, American culture is the most prevailing one among them. Walking down the streets in China today, you find you are surrounded by American cultural symbols—Nike, Adidas, one store after another; McDonald, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, from corner to corner. You can see people are lining up in every one of them. They all believe what they get are much better products, because they all believe USA is better than China when it comes to anything other than the national pride.

I was, or maybe I am still, one of them. I came to the United States because I be-

lieved I would make a better living. Stories heard from parents or seen from TV about people who migrated to America are always wonderful; those people always come back with money and prestige and they all seem very successful. People envy them. I envied them. That was the reason I did not hesitate to make the decision to come here when I got the opportunity to participate in a student exchange program between US and China. My parents were very supportive too even though the application fee and other expenses were quite costly. My parents didn't have enough money to support me but they managed to borrow money from friends and family knowing that they would have to work twice harder and I would have to work just as hard as they did in the next few years; however we all believed it would be worth it at the end. The result was, I didn't see my parent and family until 10 years later, and they didn't see me until 10 years later. Yes. I bring back money, which seems to be much more than I actually make because of the currency exchange difference, but I realize I can no longer buy back the birthdays, holidays, and every other days that I could have spent with my parents and my brothers. I wasn't there when my brother was getting married; I wasn't there either when my grandpa passed away. Why? Because I had to work hard to make money and I couldn't go back until I could show others that I was successful, just like the people in those stories; otherwise it would have been a failure. So I finally did go back after 10 years; and yes I was cherished by other people because I bought them many fancy gifts and paid them a fancy meal in a fancy restaurant. However, I was lost when I saw my parents' grey hair; I was speechless when I saw all my stuff in my room was kept the same way as they were 10 years ago. All of a sudden I realized I had failed as a son.

Friends laughed it off when I expressed my mixed feeling. They said people

wouldn't see the other side of this; they would only envy your success and cherished your money and prestige; 10 out of 10 people would have made the same decision if they had the same opportunity. They were right. I look around and I find people are after nothing but monetary or possession because they represent the success in our society and it is a failure if you don't own them. You can see this in what Jeff Taylor, a successful businessman who is the founder of Monster.com, encouraged people to do: "to live the biggest life possible" (Yankee 1). It was the motivation behind Taylor's success and it has become the motivations to encourage other people pursuing the same success.

I thought I had detached myself from this "Glorified Self" (Adler 129-138) after I started being critical to this kind of success and failure but I found I am still being trapped in this kind of "**socially constructed reality**" (Berger 2-10), in a different place, in the US.

Everything today has a price. You need to have money to pay for every possession you own or desire to own. The more possessions you wish or have to have, the more money you need to have. Money rules and United States is no different than any other places in the world. It is so common in the US that people are working full-time during the day also go to school or classes at night for higher education degrees or professional certifications. I am one of them. So often I find myself "running out of time" (De Graaf 1994) just like the people in the documentary "Running out of Time" and coffee has become my best friend. Every day I am dragging my body in the one and a half hours of traffic to work, a few cups of extra bold coffee is the only thing keeps me functional to get through the date and still have the energy for the night classes. By the time I get home and finish eating, the day has passed by and in the next 6 hours in the next morning, the circle starts again. When there are deadlines needed to meet for job

or school, 24 hours a day is just not enough. Why do I work so hard? Because I know I have to extend my resume to get better pay so that I can afford the new gadgets coming out every day after paying the monthly automobile and housing expenses; because I know if I don't, I might be in danger of losing my job, not having enough money to pay for the mortgage, and losing everything that I own. High School diploma was a career guarantee years ago, an undergraduate degree nowadays is no longer enough to guarantee you to be extraordinary, not to mention I am still working on my first degree. The pressure from my job competitors makes me feel very insecure. The expensive living expense is even more frightening. Could I have chosen to not buy the new gadgets, the nice car, and big house? Maybe I could but then I will be "framed" as a loser or failure because in this society, they represent the success.

So why do we care so much about being successful and not being a failure? Why do we always have to be the number one? As Morrie Schwartz used to say, "What is wrong with being number two" (Tuesday 2003)? Gregory R. Copley once said, "Victory is the goal of life and therefore ultimately of the whole range of human emotions and skills" (A.D. 1). We constantly compare ourselves with one another to make sure we win every "personal battles" against others to proclaim our successes. Is it a human nature or a result of human experiences? This "**nature versus nurture**" (Handel 11-17) debate is so controversial that even biological and social scientists can't be one hundred percent sure what factors motivate human being to pursue these kind of successes. Perhaps it is the "**human socialization**" (Handel 11-17), "an ongoing process of social interaction" (Kasper 2008) between the human born-biological nature and human experiences; so that human being learns to be successful and learn not to be a failure. Being successful is a very important "self-images" (Goff-

man 110-118) for people to have in this society and present themselves to other during social interaction. This “presentation of self” (Goffman 110-118) of every individual reflects the expectations of others; it also “**influences as much how others view and respond to her or him**” (Cooley 26-30). In other words, I am just one of the million others who are trapped in this “being successful” self-image. At the same time, I am also one of the reasons that many other people who interacted with me have followed my steps. I came to the US because I envied those were before me, but I also set an example for those who are “behind” me. I work hard around the clock because I see people who work harder own bigger houses, nicer cars, and more gadgets; so I work even harder to not be framed as a loser or failure. In the process I have become one of those people who set the example for me at the first place.

Ironically, by writing this self-exploratory paper, I begin to understand what Louise DeSalvo means in *Writing as a Way of Healing* (Desalvo 2000). As she mentioned, “Through writing, we develop self-mastery” (Desalvo 2000). By writing these down, I look deep into my “**looking glass self**” (Cooley 26-30) and I become self-critical and therefore begin to understand what my role is in today’s “**Socially Constructed Reality**” (Berger 2-10). By understanding my looking glass self formation, I gain a better insight into how my feelings toward myself has been shaped by how I imagine being perceived and judged by others, even though they may not actually perceive and judge me as such.

Should we change the standards of how we measure our personal success and failure? The common sense is: Don’t fix it unless it is broken. Is how we are measuring our success and failure right or wrong? If it is wrong how come so many of us are sharing the same perceptions of success and failure and everything we do seems to be just “**Face-Work**” (Goffman 154) to

“maintain faces” (Goffman 155), regardless of the differences of genders, ages, and nationalities? If it is right, then why are we never satisfied with our success and so reluctant to acknowledge our failure? Most of the people will argue that there is nothing wrong with our measures of success and failure and there is nothing wrong with how our society is constructed in that regard. They would say, “Cars are running, ships are cruising, and planes are flying. People are working, schools are teaching, businesses are running, and the world is moving forward. What is wrong with that?” The answer to that question is that they are right; there is nothing wrong with that. There is no absolute right or wrong about how we measure our success and failure. What is wrong about that is that we are taking everything in this society for granted. We think there is nothing wrong with anything that has been labeled right and we think there is nothing right about anything labeled wrong. We pursue the success defined by the society without questioning and we avoid the failure set by the society with no hesitation. That is what is wrong with our measures of personal success and failure. A wise man once said, “In order for a person to be freed from jail, the person must first know he or she is actually in jail.” We are living in a jail of “**Social Structures**” (Adler 252) without even knowing it.

Take the measures of personal success and failure for example. From the minute we are born into this world we have started competing with each other. Parents have prayed for our success long before our first cries in this world. They wish we are healthier, stronger, taller, prettier, smarter, or happier because at some point in their lives they had experienced unpleasantness due to the disadvantages they had in health, appearances, or intellects. Humans are not perfect, therefore we carry this or that “deficiency” into the world. If we somehow couldn’t overcome any of these

“deficiencies” as we grow up, we will be labeled as failures or losers by others in society. Some of the “deficiencies” can be overcome more easily than the others; but many of them are almost impossible to be overcome because nothing in our society would give them a chance to succeed. For instances, if you were not as attractive as others you may still succeed in your life or career with your intellectual abilities that you learn as you grow up; it is also true vice versa. However, if a person was born with physical or mental disabilities, he or she will have great difficulties to be accepted and succeed in this society even after they managed to survive at the first place. The same happens to people being stereotyped. If a person was being stereotyped and put into a certain group, he or she will be assumed to have all characteristics the group is defined. The Adlers’ research on preadolescents showed that it would also affect his or her self-concepts and self-esteems if a child was stratified as the “Isolates” (Adlers 252) in the “**Status Hierarchy**” (Adlers 254) based on his or her popularity. That would then sentence them as losers in the “**Identity Hierarchy**” (Adlers 267). It is a completely different story if the child was in “the Popular Group” (Adler 252). You can also tell this when looking at the “parent-child relationships” (Best 202) in the modern history. The constant “**Negotiations Between Parents and Teens**” (Best 203) over cars indicate that cars symbolize success to the children. So it gets to a point that the measures of a person’s success or failure in our society are completely determined by either the person’s material possessions or social recognitions. People think there is nothing wrong with it because they think that is just the way things are or they think it is so inevitable that there is nothing they can do to change it. It is a sign of compromise and if we “get in a habit of comprising ... we are always compromised” (Yates 2005). We have got to do something to change that.

It is always easier said than done. In many ways, making such a change seems to be a very complicated and challenging task but sometimes it could be just as simple as an “awakening” (Awakenings 1997) call from someone or something. If you look at this from a broader sociological perspective, personal success and failure are just tinny corners of the “social structure” of our society. To change the perceptions of personal success and failure, we need to change our perceptions of the social reality.

There are many ways to accomplish it. Although the methods are different, they all share some common characteristics in the processes of working toward it. Louise DeSalvo’s *Writing as a Way of Healing* offers a step-by-step approach to accomplish the goal by writing. In her book, DeSalvo thinks that people suffer because of their past experiences and interactions with other people in the society. She thinks of writing as a method that goes through seven different stages that can heal one’s pains and suffers. In the process of going through these writing stages, you discover your true self and understand what your relationships with the society are; ultimately, not only you could heal yourself, but also you will succeed in gradually “awakening” yourself from ignorance. We don’t necessary have to write in order to heal. There are many forms of healing ways that will have the same results as long as you follow the same approach going through the seven stages of healing processes: the Preparing Stage, the Germination Stage, the Working Stage, the Deepening Stage, the Shaping Stage, the Completing Stage, and the Going-Public Stage (DeSalvo 108-150). In many ways, the way I worked on conducting this self-exploration and writing this paper followed DeSalvo’s proposed stages.

There is no clear boundary between the two stages of preparation and germination. DeSalvo describes the Preparing Stage as a stage when you will be “Formulating a

Writing Plan,” “Considering Our Intentions,” “Reading,” and “Finding Models and Mentors” (DeSalvo 108-150); and she says that after the preparation and planning, you begin to have a sense of the directions of your writings in the Germination Stage based on your planning, readings, and examining what you can learn from mentors although you might still be confused and unclear about the details. That is a very typical experience for writing but you can also see the meaning behind these stages for a broader purpose, that is, to change our perceptions on personal success and failure. Basically, to make such a change, you have to realize there is a need to do so at the first place. In the Preparing Stage, you make initiatives to observe things and people; you then begin to digest the information you observed with some kind of planning. As a result you begin to notice there are more in the every day life experience that may meet your eye at first. This is like an eye-opening process during which you prepare your mindset and determine to pursue such a change. Or, in other words, as I experienced when writing this paper, you may begin to discover that you are “in jail” without knowing it. This gives you a motivation to continue your exploration and writing your paper.

Then you begin to work on your writings in the Working and Deepening stages. According to DeSalvo, you begin to really sit down and make a commitment to follow the agendas you set in the preparing stage. You deal with all the difficulties and distractions and at the same time, you deepen your writings by “revising what you have written” and re-examine your ideas and thoughts. To apply this approach to my “getting out of jail” exploration, you perform a “Self-Disclosure” (Cameron 1) by using a more critical perspective to analyze your observations and your thoughts; more importantly you don’t let yourself be distracted by difficulties and distractions by using “**Emotion Management Strategies**”

(Arluke 339). You don’t take anything for granted. You question everything including yourself. As a result, you discover not only your successes but also your failures. You also begin to understand that the real success requires you to “balance strengths and weaknesses” (McDonnell 1).

DeSalvo also emphasizes the Going-Public Stage. In writing, the Going-Public stage involves making your writing public for other people so that you can share your ideas and thoughts. In changing the measure of personal success and failure, the ultimate goal is not only to change your own perceptions, but also the society’s perceptions. The only way to do that is to share your perspective with others and prove to them with the evidences you have collect during the previous stages; as a result, more and more people will learn what you have learned, and be gradually awakened to the situation they have lived in before. When there are enough people awakened, the society can be awakened as well. Then come the Shaping and Completing Stages. After you become clear about what your writing is all about, you start putting everything you have learned in order and shaping them into certain form that you can present them. The ideas and thoughts in your mind don’t necessary translate in your writings. You need to carefully work on your presentation of the writings so that you write what you mean and the readers understand what you mean in your writing. This is also as important as it is making the change in one’s perceptions of success and failure. After you critically analyze your observations and discoveries, you organize your thoughts and put things in order so that you can clearly understand the rights and wrongs behind the existing measures of personal success and failure, and understand what kind of standards the measures should really be. At the end one will, as I have tried to do, seriously change one’s perspective of how things should be in terms of personal success and failure.

I have tried in this paper to look at myself and the world in which I live with a more critical eye, using my “sociological imagination.” The key is to realize that the difficulties we face in our inner and broader social lives arise from realities and social structures that have been socially constructed through prior human inter/actions and behavior. Therefore, even though what constitutes personal success and failure is also shaped largely by these social structures, as human actors we can participate in reshaping these social structures and cultural values that are attached to them. As Gubrium and Holstein argue, **“No single discursive environment determines who and what we are”** (Cahill 426).

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