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Editor's Note: Know Thy—Student—Selves

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Abstract: This is the journal editor's note to the Spring 2011 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, entitled "Learning Transformations: Applied Sociological Imaginations from First Year Seminars and Beyond." The issue includes nine UMass Boston undergraduate student papers: seven from two sections of the first year seminar, Soc. 110G: "Insiders/Outsiders," one from the course "Youth and Society" (Soc. 201), and another from the course "Elements of Sociological Theory" (Soc. 341), all taken during the 2010-2011 academic year at UMass Boston. The authors cultivate their sociological imaginations of the link between their personal troubles and broader public issues by exploring topics such as: difficulties with writing; struggles with overachievement; adolescent depression; pessimism; obsession with body self-image; pornography and love; drunken driving; feminine identity formation; and coping with personal traumas amid parental, sibling, and societal dysfunctions. The editor concludes with a note on the significance of publishing undergraduate scholarships of learning and their sociological self-studies, highlighting the extent to which the origins of the present journal entitled "human architecture" can itself be traced to the editor's own "student selves" and early undergraduate education at U.C. Berkeley, and specifically to a seminar he took with his undergraduate teacher and advisor, the late "professor of design" and renowned painter, Jesse Reichek.

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exploring topics such as: difficulties with writing; struggles with overachievement; adolescent depression; pessimism; obsession with body self-image; pornography and love; drunken driving; feminine identity formation; and coping with personal traumas amid parental, sibling, and societal dysfunctions.

In his "Penning the Sociological Imagination: Writing about My Struggles with Writing," first year seminar student Thanh D. Pham critically reflects on his longstanding difficulties with writing, ones that go

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back to his high school years. He seeks to understand these difficulties beyond mere technical and formal issues having to do with grammar and composition, time management, learning “reading and writing skills,” or procrastination; for him the difficulties are rooted in substantive as well as contextual factors involving social psychological matters. In other words, it is one thing to have difficulty writing about one’s own and/or others’ insider/outsider experiences of alienation; it is another to realize that one’s or others’ insider/outsider experiences of alienation in society have caused one’s difficulties with expression and writing. Pham finds that factors such as one’s feelings toward writing, early socialization, parental attitudes toward one’s educational performance, the nature of course assignments and that of academia in general and its function in society—amid the socially constructed meanings of success and achievement internalized from one’s culture—also have significant impact on one’s attitude toward writing. He writes by way of conclusion, “...the difficulties that I face in writing were not caused by my inability to articulate my thoughts down on paper. The real problem was my mental attitude toward writing. I had little motivation in academics to begin with. But motivation alone is not the problem. Primary socialization and social expectations create academic pressure on every student. For example, under the pressure of meeting the parents’ expectations a student experiences regression and distress. ... These are the same pressures that all students face in their academic career” (p. 6). “By understanding my own problem with writing and how it is socially constructed,” Pham concludes, “it is possible that I can find a way to overcome it” (p. 4).

Iris M. Rivas, another first year seminar student, in her “The Race Against Oneself: Opening Up to Overachievement Using A Sociological Imagination,” explores her experience growing up as an overachiever.

Here, again, she is concerned with understanding learning as a social psychological process, rather than one involving merely technical challenges that can be easily dealt with through one or another workshop or tutorial session. “As a child,” Rivas writes, “I was a firm believer that it is better to go beyond expectations than to fall short of them. I have ever since carried this concept with me until today. I became morbidly afraid of failing, and found new ways to push myself to accomplish anything that was expected of me. ... Though I am no longer as hard on myself now, I still very much deal with the relentless, overachieving attitude that I carried with me throughout my childhood and teenage years” (p. 11). Relating her experience to ethno-racial issues, Rivas further adds, “I knew, even at a young age, that I would have to work harder and push myself farther to break free from the stereotypes that, I believed, others would subject me to because of the color of my skin” (p. 12). However, she also insightfully realizes a connection between her overachieving tendency and her experience of parental divorce on the one hand and her health issues on the other. Rivas observes, “An interesting realization that I recently made was that my parents divorced when I was fifteen years old....These years were when I pushed myself hardest, in and outside of school. My greatest accomplishments were completed within those years. Though I was unbelievably stressed and always feeling ‘stretched thin’ during those years, I took comfort in the ritual of overwork. I can see now that it really kept me focused despite the family struggle. To this day, doctors do not know what caused the bleeding but looking back now, I can see how it was related to the internal conflict I was struggling with” (p. 16). Appreciating in a new way the value of expressing and writing about oneself as informed by a sociological imagination, Rivas concludes, “The truth is that it takes more energy to

keep everything inside than it does to let it all out. Opening up about your struggles and conflicts is liberating; unfortunately, I had to learn that the hard way” (p. 17).

In her article entitled “What Drives a Teenager to Depression: An Insider’s Sociological Look into Its Causes,” first year seminar student Melissa Mejia offers an imaginative sociological understanding of her own experience with adolescent depression and how she overcame it. Finding that, “family is one of the main factors, not only in the development of adolescent depression, but also in the treatment, being a double-edge sword that can affect in both good and bad ways” (p. 19), Mejia chronicles her progress using various sociological concepts, readings, movies, and other materials studied in class, while benefiting from wider scholarly research on the topic. In the process of her study, Mejia arrives at a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of the role and the agency of the self in the dialectics of self and society, and how self-reflective writing and talking—in short, opening up in such a way that engages both one’s thinking and feeling faculties—can help in the treatment of depression. Mejia writes, “Even though I don’t suffer from depression anymore, one of the biggest changes I could ever make is expressing myself. Expressing my feelings and thoughts and emotions is important for me, since I have always been a very reserved person regarding my deepest thoughts. Kids can be helped a lot and their depressive tendencies reduced in so many ways by bringing about some changes in their relations with parents, like parents’ spending more time with their kids and asking them how they feel. By encouraging them to express themselves and their feelings in speech, writing, or through the arts, children can help heal themselves” (p. 24).

In his article entitled, “Half Empty or Half Full? Sociological Self-Explorations of An Aspiring Realist,” first year seminar student Ryan J. Canillas explores the roots

of his pessimistic attitude—which he observes to have at times labeled as “realism” for everyday, impression management purposes—using his sociological imagination. Thoughtfully relating to various concepts and readings in his exploration, Canillas finds that in the contrasting influences he has received from his pessimistic father and optimistic mother, perhaps for reasons having to do with gender, he has leaned toward the former rather than the latter, even though he appreciates aspiring to have a truly realistic attitude toward his life and society at large—one that can take account of both the negative and the positive sides of things when warranted. For Canillas, the experience of researching and writing his paper itself opened new questions and venues to pursue his education in the coming years and life in general—and he does this with a realistic attitude that is hopeful as well. Canillas is a thoughtful student and author, and having also had him as a student mentor for another first year seminar I taught this year, I know that he never says things lightly, just to conclude a paper; he means what he says. He writes, “I had never really looked at myself at a deep sociological level. I never really thought about how I am and why I am until the writing of this paper. My biggest worry is that I may not be able to change myself, let alone the world. I understand all of the concepts and ideas throughout my paper but really how do I go about putting them in practice? I can write this paper preaching about how I should change my life, but is there a way of actually changing it, and society? This will be the ultimate subject of my study in the coming years, to see if I can take what I learned in this paper and apply it to the real world. I might be labeled as a pessimistic person but perhaps things could change for me in the future. I can honestly say that my life has been impacted by this paper and this course, in terms of how I want to live my life. I guess that now makes me an optimist in this regard” (p. 35).

First year seminar student Michaela Volpe studies her struggles with body self-image in her article entitled “Beyond A Lifetime of Comparison: A Sociological Self-Exploration of Body Image Obsession.” Reflecting on the relevance of Herbert Blumer’s concept of “joint action,” Volpe insightfully writes: “What we perceive as a normal value or action is only because we believe in the collective action of our culture. Blumer writes, ‘In dealing with collectivities and joint action, one can easily be trapped in an erroneous position by failing to recognize that the joint action of the collectivity is an inter-linkage of the separate acts of the participants’ (2011:285). This societal, familial and personal demand to have a skinny and perfect body does not come from a larger power, but from the single acts of each person following this joint action. This is where I need to change my current perspective” (p. 43). Conceptually rethinking the notion of society into one which includes her own self agency, Volpe concludes, “I do not have to be a part of this joint action. My sisters, by acting in accordance with this societal demand, are unifying themselves with the collective action. By trying to not conform to these individual acts, it does not mean that I will abandon the health of my body but, instead, will focus on my body as my own, and not a part of a collective whole. ... In *Writing to Heal*, Pennebaker writes, ‘the ability to adopt alternative perspectives both requires and reflects a certain detachment from the subject’ (Pennebaker 2004:101). While I cannot change my family’s belief system, I can act as a force of my own” (p. 43).

In “An Exploration of the X-Rated World and Its Related Consequences,” first year seminar student Rose Bautista (pen name) explores “how our bodies influence our genders and that our genders shape our sexuality and finally how we interact with the opposite sex” (p. 47). Drawing on the literature dealing with the impact of the media on how we experience our bodies,

genders, and sexuality, Bautista writes, “Each choice we make to alter our bodies has been shaped by how we want to imitate an image that has been presented to us. Celebrity bodies are now our standards for beauty and we have lost our individual concept of what beauty is for ourselves. ‘Disciplinary practices have made the body a site for power struggles and, potentially, for resistance, as individual choices about the body become laden with political meanings’ (Weitz 2001:352)” (p. 51). Bautista continues, “Bodies are now saturated with meanings; bigger breasts are better, bigger penises are better, blonds have more fun, big lips are sexy, only real men have toned abs, and the list goes on and on. But the influences do not stop at the body, they even shape how we act based on our gender. ... The concept *body disciplines* refers to how we internalize and act on the ideologies that have been presented to us and consequently we aid in the subordination of our own bodies. When we lose the ability to protect our bodies we lose protection for our emotions, our gender, our sexuality, and finally our ability to relate to the opposite sex in a healthy way” (Ibid.).

In “‘Getting Stupid to Avoid’: My and Society’s Avoidance Problem with Driving While Drunk,” first year seminar student Jennifer Cervantes takes up seriously the notion of “Getting Stupid to Avoid”—explored by James Pennebaker in his book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (1997)—and applies it in her sociological imagination of driving while drunk as both her friends’ personal troubles and a broader public issue. But, she also observes that avoidance is also a trait she herself shares. In her words, “One of my personal issues—and looking back now I found I did it even in reaction to my friend’s death—is **avoidance**. Avoidance of all my problems, avoidance of situations I don’t want to deal with, avoidance of speaking about it, avoidance of things around me, and so on. But why did I do this?” (p. 58). Pennebaker

argues in his book that one of the ways we inhibit expressing our emotions about troubling and traumatic personal issues is by “getting stupid”—that is, avoiding the issue by indulging ourselves in superficial and mundane everyday tasks. Cervantes writes, “I find myself very telling of the kind of behavior I usually engage in, that is, **Getting Stupid to Avoid Pain**. When reviewing the results of one of his experiments, Pennebaker wrote, ‘By moving to extremely low levels of thought, the women were actively avoiding thinking about a potentially devastating event’ (Pennebaker 66). Like the women he was talking about, I find that I also make myself “stupid” to avoid any topic that could possibly bring up any unwanted emotions, thoughts, or topics that were difficult. This has been something easy for me to do. But my point here is to say that this isn’t just how I behave, but it is, according to Pennebaker, how many in society or even sometimes all of society behave(s)” (p. 60; bold in the original). It is therefore interesting to see how Cervantes applies the Millsian notion of the sociological imagination, in terms of its application to the problem of drunken driving as a personal trouble as well as public issue, and how she relates this to Pennebaker’s notion of how we, personally as well as societally, avoid dealing with such issues by “getting stupid.” Cervantes concludes, “As a future nurse who will encounter and treat many kinds of problems, my new understanding of myself and society will help me better serve my patients. Being more ‘sociologically mindful’ and helping others through nursing can help society make a change. Through gaining such knowledge I can enrich other lives in this world by educating them, promoting health, and encouraging others to be more ‘sociologically mindful.’ By caring for an individual you are ultimately caring for society as a whole” (p. 63).

UMass Boston undergraduate student Ann Barnes’ (pen name) “A Girl Amongst Men: A Sociological Analysis of My Identity

Formation and the Creation of My Personal Feminine Ideal” is a sociological self-exploration, in the Millsian sociological imagination tradition, of female identity formation amid a divorced all-male household. In her own words, “My adolescence was spent trying to navigate relationships in an all male household; my parents divorced when I was young, leaving me as the only female in a home with my father and two brothers. As the only female, I often felt alienated; I was considered an “outsider” in many situations. This “outsider” label led to other negative labels; not feminine enough, not obedient enough, basically not good enough and my self-image suffered” (p. 65). Barnes critically illustrates and enriches the Eriksonian stage theory of identity formation through a thoughtful and minute exploration of her own life-course and identity formation experience, demonstrating the extent to which her self agency played a key part not only in meeting the obstacles experienced early on in her primary socialization, but also in seeking in creative and proactive ways new channels of secondary socialization that helped in the formation of her acquiring a strong, feminine, self-worth. She concludes, “The search for identity is somewhat of a battle and it is a battle that I feel I have won, for now. I do not think I would be the same person if I had experienced adolescence differently. Because my adolescence was less than ideal, I think I have become a stronger, more resilient adult with a solid, deeply-rooted sense of self-worth and a well-formed identity” (p. 74).

In her “Shattering A Looking Glass Self: Building an Applied Sociological Imagination,” UMass Boston senior (and now also graduate student in UMass Boston’s 5-year Accelerated BA/MA Program in Applied Sociology) Melanie Maxham explores the intertwined, four-fold challenges of having grown up in an alcoholic family, experiencing the loss of her mother recently, having gone through a divorce herself, and dealing with siblings who are non-custodial parents

in conflict with the law. Using her sociological imagination in pursuing her study allows Maxham to see how what she had regarded as her personal traumas afflicting her inner life are intimately linked to her personal interactions with her parents and siblings in family, on the one hand, and, on the other hand and more broadly, to the public policies and attitudes toward “dead-beat dads” who are unable or unwilling to take responsibility in their non-custodial parenthood.

Despite the challenges, Maxham conducts a frank and deep-rooted sociological study of her life in social context, illustrating the extent to which she takes sociology and its application as not merely an academic interest, but one she passionately regards as a matter that can result in transformative experience. She concludes her study by stating, “Applied sociologies and social psychologies that intend to make a difference in the real world must begin with understanding and changing ourselves. I have come out to my family with the truth about my past dependence on alcohol and they are surprising me with their open responses. My looking glass self is shattered and my real ‘I’ is starting to connect again with people, learning to trust and stop carrying the whole burden inside. I have started to open up to myself, writing a journal of my dreams and interactions and suddenly all of the pursuits I’m involved in are lining up and answers are coming at me through the strangest of sources. Radio songs, signs, lines in a book, the integration of similar topics across my classes, all point to a future where I will understand why I am here and grow more every day” (p. 84).

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It takes a consistently critical phenomenological approach to recognize that how students make sense of their own everyday academic or personal lives is a very serious matter for both teaching and scholarship. The slogan embraced by UMass Boston Chancellor, Keith Motley, for the univer-

sity—to pursue scholarship with a teaching heart—is not to be taken lightly and treated as just a nice slogan. Nor should one forget the UMass Boston Provost, Winston Langley’s observation offered a while back that: “Teaching that begins with experiences distant from those of students devalues the personal experiences of students, and contributes to an uncertain self, and academically constructs a person who cannot reflectively judge. ... To teach students effectively, however, one must begin with some of their personal experiences so that they can have the sense that it is ‘safe’ to use those experiences as a basis for judgment in things considered important by persons (like professors) who are viewed as significant. ... Residing in those reflections on their experience, there may be something new in nature—something to be added to the human conversation” (p. 177).¹

UMass Boston students Thanh D. Pham, Iris Rivas, Melissa Mejia, Ryan J. Canillas, Michaela Volpe, Rose Bautista, Jennifer Cervantes, Ann Barnes, and Melanie Maxham have insightfully chosen to share in this human conversations their sociological imaginations of the link between their personal troubles and the broader public issues, in the hopes that their findings can help other students and teachers learn what it means to learn sociology in an applied way—one that can make real differences in real lives.

If those of us who are teachers and professors as well as administrators could recall the difference our own first year seminars made in our own intellectual and professional careers, we would perhaps be able to readily recognize the significant impact those courses made in establishing the basic contours of our thinking, learning,

¹ “Teaching, Learning, and Judging: Some Reflections on the University and Political Legitimacy,” in *Achieving Against the Odds: How Academics Become Teachers of Diverse Students* (Temple University Press, 2001), edited by Esther Kingston-Mann and Tim Sieber.

and teaching to this day.

I recall an undergraduate seminar on “Social Aspects of Design” that I took with my then undergraduate professor and advisor, the late Professor Jesse Reichek (1916-2005), in 1980 when I was pursuing a major in architecture in the College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley. One day in class, Reichek shared with us a conversation he had had in a previous seminar with a student; the student had argued, while learning what I regard as the essence of Reichek’s teaching philosophy, that what is usually regarded as “architecture” needs to be problematized. As Reichek tried to convey his student’s idea by drawing a diagram on the board, he spoke about how the traditional notion and practice of architecture take the social (including economic, political, and cultural) environment for granted as a given, focusing instead, and narrowly, on the physical aspect and the traditional requirements of “firmness, commodity, and delight.” In dealing with social and public issues such as low-income housing, Reichek said, we know the problem is not with the physical, but with the social aspect. We do know how to physically build whatever is needed to fulfill low-income housing needs. That is a *given*. The *variable* aspect that demands our attention for re-design and re-construction is the social aspect—that is, the economic, political, and cultural (including intellectual and scholarship) factors that continue to prevent structural solutions to social problems such as homelessness, and low- and inadequate housing.

That day and that class session in one of the early “first year seminars” I took with Jesse Reichek—who continued, and still continues in spirit, to baffle me with the strange way he conveyed and taught his ideas, at times without uttering a word, and other times by sharing funny stories and anecdotes that later I discovered to contain multiple meanings—was cause for my decision to shift my major from architecture to

sociology upon moving to graduate school, where I then rediscovered architecture, through further metamorphoses of my thinking, as a social and human (including self) design and construction process in which the micro and macro spacetimes are intricately implicated in a conceptual design and practice that I called “the sociology of self-knowledge,” one which has close affinities with what the sociologist C. Wright Mills called “the sociological imagination.” This led to the completion of my doctoral studies in sociology and the launching of the present journal in 2002, one which I called *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*. Reichek lived to serve as outside examiner on my dissertation committee, sharing with me many more of his invaluable pedagogical stories and anecdotes, and receiving several of the early issues of the present journal, the first issue of which was dedicated to him.