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## *An Unusual Immigration Tale*

### **Why I Am Miserable in the Land of Opportunity**

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**Abstract:** My general outlook on matters since emigrating from Peru has not changed since my arrival at the U.S. My discontent of being here imaginatively “against my will” has not worked in favor of pursuing a social identity I will be content with. I refuse to let the past eight years go being unaccounted for. I was deprived of so many things during that time, friends weddings, graduations, childbirths, precious moments with my family, etc., that turning around would seem now like a waste of my life. So I stay, hoping to find compensation for this journey. I realize that my animosity originates in my discontent for my life here. I am very conscious that I let my emotions control my opinions, but I really needed to take time to think and write about accepting that this is why I behave like I do. This self-realization is impossible without the appropriate analytical approach that the major sociological perspectives offered when writing this essay. By stepping out of the conventional way in which I interpret my actions, emotions and ideas, I was able to objectively identify the factors that contributed to my hostility. In this paper, using what C. Wright Mills termed the sociological imagination, I try to identify the factors that contributed to my discontent in spite of my compliance.

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My college application’s personal statement requirement gave me the option of choosing between two subjects: explain why I wanted to go to college or describe how I dealt with a major change in my life. At the time I had been living in America for two years after emigrating from Peru with my mom and older sister. I was reluctant to write about this “major change” because I figured that that was probably every other immigrant applicant’s choice for personal statement. Besides, I had nothing positive to say about moving to America. I chose the other subject.

Five years later and almost ready to graduate from school I am sad and some-

what disappointed to say that I would probably choose the second subject today for the exact same reasons. It is not that I have had an overall bad experience in America, it’s more like I wish I did not have to be here. A response to my feelings on my stay here would be “Take the next plane home” but it’s not that simple. My family is here, I have a steady boyfriend who most likely I will marry, I have become accustomed to the larger **social structures** of this country, in school, at work, etc. I now have the opportunity to take a serious look at my life and the approach I take towards my experience in America. Using what C. Wright Mills termed the **sociological imagination**, that

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is, relating one's personal realities to the larger social structures, I will try to identify the factors that contribute to my discontent in spite of my compliance. Mills made the distinction between personal troubles and public issues, noting that society and the individual have unavoidable influence on each other, and that exploring the relationship is necessary for comprehending our place and purpose within the period of history we are living in (Wallace & Wolf, 108).

The origins of my unhappiness date back to my refusal to move to America despite my mother's plans. I simply did not want to leave my country. I had friends there, my father would be left behind, I would have to say goodbye to some of my aunts who practically raised me, and I would have to leave everything I knew for a place I did not care to live in. I was rebellious and defiant and threatened to marry my then boyfriend to stay in Peru, but my parents would not have it. I was bound to come, no matter how much I pleaded, cried and yelled. At the time, I was blinded by my own anger to realize that my mom was *also* leaving everything she knew for the opportunity to provide a better education for her daughters. It is fair to say that from the beginning I had a bad disposition toward the move. Guadalupe Paz in her essay, "The effect of Immigrant Experiences on the Bifurcation of Women's Consciousness" (2003/4), recounts her own experience as an immigrant coming to America with her family and older brothers. She explains that because she was younger, it was easier for her to adapt her **emergent self** to the new society. Much like her older siblings, my personality and sense of who I am had already been formed and so, instead of adopting the **social norms** and rules of the hosting society, I had to re-adjust to my new settings.

Adjusting, as it turned out, was a complex process. I spent my first two months in America in our apartment, in my pajamas, crying and writing home to everyone I could think of. I did not want to go out and confront the reality of my imposed environ-

ment. I hated being here and blamed everyone around me for my misery, especially my mom. The strain I put in our relationship has yet to heal, but I do hope some day it will be completely restored. It's hard for me to admit it now, but looking back on that time, I realize nobody could be blamed for the circumstances, but that still did not stop me from attacking my own family. While my mother and my sister gradually became **acculturated** to the new society they were participating in, I resisted, and grew more and more resentful of my new situation.

In their article, "Immigrant women and counseling: The Invisible Others" (2005), Oksana Yakushko and Krista Chronister examine the variables influencing women's experiences in the United States. Their work identifies **Immigration Stress**, a phenomenon that occurs when immigration produces profound psychological distress, even among the most motivated and well prepared individuals in the most receptive circumstances. Rabi Bhagat and Manuel London in their piece, "Getting Started and Getting Ahead: Career dynamics of Immigrants," identified a similar occurrence that they call "**Acculturation Stress**." It refers to the instances when members of the acculturating group are not able to learn the values of the dominant **culture** easily, thus creating difficulties and contributing to the formation of sentiments of **alienation** and **margin-ality**. I know that my personal experience upon arrival was directly affected by these and other factors that made my conformity with American society much harder to achieve.

In anticipation for this move, my parents had sent my sister and I to a bilingual school so we could learn the language. Knowledge of the language right away represented an advantage. Berger and Luckmann identified **language** as the most important sign system in human society that has the power to bridge different zones of the reality of everyday life, integrating them into a meaningful whole. In addition, we came here legally and upon arrival had fam-

ily that took us in and helped us get settle. By most immigrants' standards, we actually had a smooth transition into our new life, without many of the difficulties that other immigrants have to face in their search for a better future and what is better, the alternative to go home and come back if needed, a luxury most immigrants cannot afford.

I could not stay in that apartment forever and I knew it. Claudia Contreras' article, "The Tension of Opposites: Issues of Ethnicity, Class and Gender in My Identity Formation" (2005), relates Claudia's struggle to break away from her family's pre-conceived gender roles and the projection of such expectations onto their children. Girls and boys were assigned different tasks and flexibility according to gender and Claudia felt that the traditional roles of her family oppressed her true self. **Sociobiology**, the study of the biological bases of behavior, explains that biology does play a role in the social behavior of men and women (Wallace & Wolf, 399). People in different cultures readily admit such differences in male and female behavior that date back to the origins of civilization. But my case is exactly the opposite: my family impressed in me from a very young age the sense of being my own person, independent, educated and original. Both of my parents attended college and for their kids not to do the same would be unacceptable. Education is seen as the only means for obtaining desired **socioeconomic status**.

I come from a family of educated people. The large majority of my relatives are professionals. College education is not only encouraged in the younger generations, it is also expected. My family suggested that I get a job if I felt I was not ready to apply to college, but to do something, anything. I took a job as a baby-sitter that eventually allowed me to become more involved in society and with its members. It was extremely hard for me to understand the way in which this society worked and how it was different from Peru and its customs. Pierre Bourdieu described "**cultural capital**" as a way of dif-

ferentiating people within as well as between societies. Coming from Peru I had my own set of norms and values that I had learned and adopted as socially accepted. In America, I had to replace what I understood as social standards with new **symbols** and **meanings** as agreed upon by this society.

One of the principles of **Symbolic Interactionism** is that "meaning is a social product; it is created" and as such is inconsistent from culture to culture (Wallace and Wolf, 218). For the acculturation process to be successful, the newcomer must learn to fully assimilate the culture of the host country (Bhagat and London, 352). I was simply not interested. Peter Berger termed the **Social construction of reality**, the process by which "people continuously create, through their actions and interactions, a shared reality that is experienced as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful" (Wallace & Wolf, 285). However, I simply could not define American values objectively. My frustration and resentment did not let me see past the negative aspects of my stay here. I hanged it without a trial. To me, American society seemed unattached, cold and repressive in comparison to the one I had grown up in, a communal **structure** that placed personal relationships first. America's **materialistic lifestyle** felt phony, a money-driven society that did not enforce any true values and one in which people always had an underlying motive for their actions, no matter how kind they seemed. It seemed as though people acted a certain way solely because it was expected of them, like the actors who rushed to Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina and made sure the press knew about it. I could not help but feel distrust and disappointment for this new cultural structure, like Neo in *The Matrix* after learning the truth of a world socially constructed by superior machines—except, no one was there to offer me a red pill.

Perhaps unconsciously, I did start to assimilate different aspects of the American way of life that I find hopelessly impossible to avoid. **Ethnomethodology** is defined as

the study of the methods people use to make sense of their social world. The simple participation in a society, whether active or passive, affords the means for understanding its social reality. I had become part of the society and as a component, I was unavoidably influenced by its ideology. I bought into the **capitalist** ideology that owning material things is a method of healing emotional scars. I guess it was my way of **conforming** to the larger structure, the only aspect I found thrilling and motivating: wanting to have more. The movie *Affluenza* illustrates the social epidemic that we suffer from in this country, where factors such as credit cards allow attainment of the most expensive and otherwise unattainable goods. We always want to obtain more and we are never satisfied with whatever possessions we have. We own more than we did fifty years ago and we just keep buying more. In America, behavior like this is not only encouraged but also promoted; I could not help but become absorbed in this structure. Buying pretty things did make me forget for a moment where I was and how I felt about it, much like the anti-depressants I took for couple of years. But as *Affluenza* demonstrated, no matter how much I had or how expensive they were, I was still not happy, because there was nobody here I wanted to share my possessions with. My real friends were in Peru and I was now restricted to seeing them in short trips back home. No matter how many times I came back here to my car, my stereo, my house, my expensive clothing and accessories, I still felt empty. If anything, being able to purchase things gave me that “**sense of belonging**” that I have rarely felt. Jorge Ponce-Capetillo in his paper “Defining the Other” (2003/4), states that concepts such as race, ethnicity, community and nationalism explain our obsessive concern with the other and this sense of belonging pursuit. Just like these constructive factors that help us associate with one another, a negative **collective conscience** (Wallace and Wolf, 20) like the subconscious impulse to shop and surround ourselves

with material, useless objects, brings us together as a community much in the same way. It’s just not as healthy.

I came to understand that I was here for good, I did not have to be happy about it, but I had to make it work. All I kept hearing from everybody was how lucky I was to be here and how grateful I should be to my family for this opportunity. I would just smile and keep quiet. Bhagat and London’s research gave evidence that even though immigrants leaned towards integration in the social institutions and daily activity of their life in their new country, they rarely incorporate in the cultural life of the same. They maintained cultural ties to their own countries, such as food, language and festivities (Bhagat and London, 351-352). Having such a large family living in the U.S. definitely helped me kept Peruvian traditions as part of my life here. My family drives great distances to find ingredients native to my country whenever necessary, and we instill such appreciation for our culture in the younger generations regardless of their American nationality. As Bhagat and London pointed out, adaptation does not mean acculturation and whereas I had decided to fulfill my family’s expectations, I was not necessarily comfortable or even content about it.

Erving Goffman illustrated the meaning of **interactive roles** as the way a person behaves when expected to occupy a certain role and having to come to grips with the general expectations held toward someone in his/her position (Wallace & Wolf, 220-221). My mother had made the ultimate sacrifice by leaving her country to provide a better future for her children, my family had helped her achieve this goal, and it was now up to me to live up to those expectations and at least try to make the most of it, even when the decisions I made to carry out this task were not necessarily my own or did not bring me personal satisfaction. Most of the time in school, I felt like I did well not because I wanted to but because I *had* to. It is not that accomplishments did not bring me pleasure, but that they seemed independent

from my desires. All I wanted to do was pack my things, go back home and take it from there.

I thought of my life here as a transition to a better social order in which I truly find *my* place within. I still live in this state of **cognitive dissonance**, in the perpetual disparity of the reality of my experience and what I really want it to be. Berger and Luckmann's concept of **objectivation** helps explain my apathy: the reality of my everyday life appeared already objectified, in which purposes had already been arranged and designated without my participation. I was simply there to **internalize** this reality in my individual consciousness, because I felt that is was the right thing to do. I was just going through the motions without being completely conscious of my actions.

In the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* Morrie Schwartz, a dying sociology teacher gives one of his old students the lesson of a lifetime in a series of visits in which they discuss meaningful and perplexing subjects leading up to Morrie's death. Morrie believed that the majority of people never learn how to live because, "most of us walk around as if we were sleepwalking. We don't really experience the world fully, because we are half-asleep, doing things we automatically think we have to do" (Albom, 83). I stayed in a job I was not happy in and got accepted to college, which I did not want to attend, and with no idea of what career path to follow. My disassociation and the feeling of not having absolute control over my own actions eventually let me to disintegrate the social relationships I have formed with different institutions and people. I started to change jobs frequently, place higher value on superficial objects and jump around from meaningless relationships in my pursuit of happiness and my place in this society. I had no luck.

I started to realize that I changed my "**here and now**," as Berger and Luckmann explained; I shifted my attention to a subjective meaningful focus to find personal satisfaction. That the changes produced were so

frequent and spontaneous was because I could not change who I was or my discontent with my being. "Part of the problem, is that everyone is in such a hurry," Morrie said to his student once; "People haven't found meaning in 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 those things are empty, too, and they keep running" (Albom, 136). I kept running and running, hoping to find something or someone that could fill my voids.

But how can we stop running when nobody else will slow down? Morrie Schwartz provided very insightful principles to lead a meaningful life, but can those truly be applied to this society? Is there a way to detach oneself from the capitalist ideology and pursue a dream? In a society based in **power, authority** and economic means, I find it hard to believe that individual aspirations will prevail over shared values. Sure we would all love to be doing what we love for a living, but passion cannot pay bills, cannot feed you, and cannot enrich you culturally. Our society simply does not allow choosing ideology over reality.

Max Weber's **conflict theory** saw people's activities as largely self-interested and placed great importance on the recognition of the importance of acquisition of wealth, goals and values specific to a society (Wallace & Wolf, 72). Karl Marx, a major Conflict theorist believed that economic and social forces create a wider gap between social groups and conflict arises because everybody's interests are compromised. Struggle and competition arise for the struggle between groups to pursue their own goals (Wallace & Wolf, 82). We are encouraged to be highly competitive and individualistic, to find our place among the higher ranks of **social stratification**. The media and society teaches us that more is better and that nothing is ever enough. We become obsessed with those principles and adopt the necessary **means** to fulfill our desired **ends**. We are trapped in what Weber termed the "**iron cage**" of bureaucracy, reduced to merely in-

struments of a social system that preserves an economic hierarchy. In the movie *The Big One*, Michael Moore shows the other side of capitalism, filled with greedy companies that justified exploitation and coercion for the sake of higher revenues. With total disregard of the needs of the working-class, these companies, who for the most part have complete control of the consumerist market, give up their integrity and break promises to the people they own their accrued fortunes to.

**Social capital** is just one of the resources that facilitates the achievement of personal desires. I think these are one of the main reasons why my parents pushed so hard for me to become everything I can be. I cannot deny that I like making my parents proud, even if my motivation is not in the right place. With the options offered here and a rewards system that may actually deliver what it promises, my family feels that there are no excuses for not trying. They feel as most Americans do, that a good education and hard work will prevent you from falling into the uncertainty of unskilled low-paying jobs, which places people at the bottom of the **class system**. It is not easy to deal with the pressure of keep getting “ahead of the game” while staying in control of your priorities. **Status** is highly valued in our society. In the movie *Twelve Angry Men* a boy from the ‘slums’ is stigmatized because of his skin color and socio-economic status. It takes the men of the jury to think of themselves in his position, or partake in some **role playing** to consider an alternative to judgment. We buy the latest technology, bigger houses and better cars, keep obtaining degrees, etc., just to remain with “our heads above water” as the requirements for a successful living keep increasing—but at the same time neglect friendships and family in the race for the top. Many times I felt like the most important people in my life never get the attention they deserve. Since I started college I have worked and studied full-time and my free time is spent reading or writing assignments. I had to cancel so many engagements, visits to my family, and trips

with friends because of school, that I often wondered if it’s worth it, and if I’ll ever get that time back.

The **Rational Choice Theory** assumes that people make rational decisions in their pursuit for goal achievement, and people are constantly weighting alternative means and ends. Their choices dictate their social behavior (Wallace & Wolf, 303). People are constantly relating with one another for different purposes. **Social integration** is the creation of bonds and friendship originated from the exchange. Undoubtedly, most people foster feelings of **solidarity** and unity in their communities and as part of the same social order; however, for the most part individualism prevails in our society.

As it happens, I could not stop the “natural” process of assimilation and found myself functioning as the immigration process is intended for. I had a job, I went to school, abide by the law, pay my taxes, etc. I had few friends and eventually found someone I did not feel like leaving after the first month. The **Functionalist** approach argues that society is a system of interrelated parts in which all components have a function that serves the structure as a whole (Wallace & Wolf, 17). I had become part of that structure in the natural course of assimilation.

I remember feeling very lonely when I first arrived here. It seemed like everything I did and everywhere I went I was by myself. Friends visiting from Peru represented a break from the monotonous alienation I experienced here, but their departure signified yet another reminder that I was stuck here, pursuing my family’s aspirations. My relationship with my father is now limited to emails, phone calls and short visits during trips back home. I feel robbed, with everything I cared about being taken away from me all at once. I tried not to be angry, but I could not help it. Three years ago, my grandmother passed away in Peru, a week after we came back from visiting her. My mother was the only one who could afford to return so suddenly and I spent that night wishing I were there with her. My grand-

mother was gone and I regretted not spending more time with her during my visit, but there is never enough time to do everything you want to do. The following year my aunt passed away from cancer and again I was not able to make the funeral. It was devastating. I could not handle another death so close to me and yet thousands of miles away. I was working when it happened. I was always working.

One year before she passed I had seen my aunt in New York where she went to spend a week with one of my cousins. I remember her holding my face between her hands and saying: "Make me proud. You're smart, you can do it. Finish school and make me proud...I love you." Her words kept playing in my head as I tried to accept that I will never get to see her again, she will never see me graduate or hold my children or let me take care of her. I blew kisses into the air to make up for the ones I couldn't give her before she died. For the next two months I cried her death on my way to work, sitting in traffic. It was the only time I had to mourn.

My general outlook on things has not changed very much. My discontent of being here imaginatively "against my will" has not worked in favor of pursuing a social identity I will be content with. No, I cannot just "take off" and leave everything behind; sure I want to, but it is not that simple. I refuse to let the past eight years go being unaccounted for. I was deprived of so many things during that time, friends weddings, graduations, childbirths, precious moments with my family, etc., that turning around would seem now like a waste of my life. So I stay, hoping to find compensation for this journey.

Often, I have openly spoken against the government of this country, the society, the customs and anything else I could attack. I realize that this animosity originates in my discontent for my life here. I am very conscious that I let my emotions control my opinions, but I really needed to take time to think and write about accepting that this is

why I behave like I do. This **self-realization** is impossible without the appropriate analytical approach that the major sociological perspectives offered. By stepping out of the conventional way in which I interpret my actions, emotions and ideas, I was able to objectively identify the factors that contributed to my hostility.

Symbolic interactionists identify abstract roles and institutions perceived as real as **reified lockstep mentality**, characteristic of such individuals who believe that there are no alternatives to their behavior, "I must act this way because of my position. I have no choice" (Wallace & Wolf, 292). Furthermore, Symbolic interactionists elaborate on the consequences of such frame of mind, minimization of choices available to people, and numbness to the authorship of the human world. I know I have convinced myself that there is absolutely no way I could ever be happy here, thus reduced my choices for exploring means to invalidate what I take to be my only fate. In the back of my mind I always knew, maybe subconsciously, that I was the main actor in the gloomy portrayal of my life, but it took serious social analysis of my person in relationship with the larger social structure to absorb this understanding. It is only now that I can constructively critique the approach that until now has been exclusive in my view of my role in this society.

I have still a lot of healing to do. I cannot reconcile with everything I have lost to move here, but I can understand the circumstantial factors that led to it. It's like Morrie said to his student, once you experience pain, love and grief, you recognize what those emotion do to you and detach yourself from it to fully experience life for what is it and not for what you are afraid it will be (Albom 104). I am able to see now that this negative outlook is reproduced in most aspects of my personal life. I am by nature suspicious of others and cynical, and question my religious background to the point of defiance. I am always able to pinpoint the faults in other people and institutions, and often



expect the worst case scenarios. It has been recently pointed out to me that even my career and work symbolized my perspective on issues; I do fraud investigations for a living and prior to that I audited a transportation company for non-compliant drivers' logs—a position that requires being permanently distrustful of the integrity of the drivers. Even my college minor, Criminal Justice is oriented towards finding culpability in people and the prosecution and punishment of the individuals who break the law.

I have come to realize that I projected my dissatisfaction issues and surrounded myself with aspects of my life that only reaffirm those issues. I have to “detach” myself from that cycle and make changes resulting from this “**looking-glass self**” exercise that has allowed me to determine that: I cannot change the circumstances that led me here. I cannot erase the past and bring back the people I lost physically, for I will never lose them spiritually. I must learn to embrace distance and how much better it helps me appreciate the people whom I do not have near. I have to learn to appreciate those who *are* near me, before I let them slip away and turn into memories like so many others. I have been blessed, in spite of my anger with a family, a good job, an education and a person who loves me and wants to marry me to show me that this is a great place to live and raise a family, a place in which I will find happiness and promises he will show me how. I have a long “To Do” list of things I need to amend, even if I do not do it for myself, but for the people who love me and who until now, have been holding their breath waiting for me to pull out of the shadows my heart has been hiding in for the last eight years.

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