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Altruism or Guilt

Applying My Sociological Imagination to Choosing a Helping Profession

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Abstract: In this autobiographical analysis of internalized guilt and social responsibility, I question why I choose to work in a helping profession. Why did I choose not to pursue a career as a visual artist? How are the two choices interrelated and/or exclusive of one another? I question whether my need to take care of others is in balance with my need to take care of myself. I feel as though my career goals originate more from guilt than a genuine desire to help others. How should compassion and empathy factor in the continuum between altruism and guilt? If so, where on this continuum does my motivation lie? I conclude by coming to appreciate what Anzaldúa writes in “Now let us shift...” (2002) that a “new paradigm must come from outside as well as within the system.” I will try to combine the creativity of my artist self with the powers vested in my teacher self to affect change in our social system. Perhaps my career will resemble the work of the “nepantlas [who] know their work lies in positioning themselves—exposed and raw—in the crack between these worlds, and in revealing current categories as unworkable” (Anzaldúa 2002). Or perhaps it will resemble the career of Morrie Schwartz the “Teacher to the Last” (Albom 1997).

In this autobiographical analysis of internalized guilt and social responsibility, I question why I choose to work in a helping profession. Why did I choose not to pursue a career as a visual artist? How are the two choices interrelated and/or exclusive of one another? I question whether my need to take care of others is in balance with my need to take care of myself. I feel as though my career goals originate more from guilt than a genuine desire to help others. How should compassion and empathy factor in the continuum between altruism and guilt? If so, where on this continuum does my motivation lie?

This significant and unresolved issue occupies my thoughts regularly, though with much less intensity than in the past. I am sure my being preoccupied with it is, in part, normal—I am in my mid-twenties, thus feeling the pressure to focus my energy on a career. The decision, however, is marked by excessive anxiety. In fact, until six months ago indecision would more accurately describe my decision to quit painting. My routine procrastination in submitting my portfolio was rooted in the same emotions: low self-esteem, lack of confidence in my ability, and anxiety.

Jennifer Kosmas examined these issues

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in her article “The Roots of Procrastination: A Sociological Inquiry into Why I Wait Until Tomorrow” (2003/4). Kosmas linked her feelings to an authoritarian father. I am able to empathize with her in that area. I can trace the majority of my irrational fears, lack of self worth, and other various unhealthy mental processes to his behavior when I was a child. In this case, however, I cannot recall any negative comment he made directly toward art. This is surprising to me. Art was the only endeavor *not* viciously regulated. Nonetheless, fear of rejection paralyzed me even after a successful interview with the school I wanted to attend. I felt certain that although the admissions advisor accepted my artwork, a formal submission would prove it inadequate.

These feelings may be better understood using concepts borrowed from the **symbolic interactionist perspective** in sociology. Symbolic interactionism focuses on “the creative way in which people interpret meaning during the course of an interaction” (Wallace & Wolf, 7). Charles Horton Cooley’s concept “**the looking glass self**” is particularly relevant here. The looking glass self is characterized by three elements: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Wallace & Wolf, 203). This concept articulates well the anxiety I feel over expressing myself through art. I became, still become, completely mortified at the thought of showing my work; I feel overexposed and vulnerable to the viewer and even to myself. I often have a hard time completing a project because I harshly judge the imagined finished product while it is still in progress.

Self Interaction is defined by George Herbert Mead as “the means by which human beings take things into account and organize themselves for action” and “is also the basis for role-taking” (Wallace & Wolf, 208). Such self interactions between “**me,**”

the socialized self, and “**I,**” the unorganized and innovative self, often determine whether or not I feel comfortable painting or teaching and why. When these different selves are interacting, a power struggle ensues. The “**me**” advocates a stable income, a work schedule that could accommodate motherhood, fulfilling my role as a caretaker, and social approval. The “**I**” advocates a life free from social expectations, norms free from the socially constructed “**me.**” This issue is of concern because “**I**” am aware that my past indecisions and recent concrete decision to donate all of my art supplies (save a pencil and paper) and focus solely on teaching (which I am passionate about as well) was made by “**me,**” not “**I.**”

Berger and Luckmann’s **phenomenological perspective**—the problematizing of interactions and questioning of perceived socially constructed realities—can be used to explain my reasons for choosing a helping profession. During **primary socialization**—which occurs when “the child takes on the significant other’s roles and attitudes, that is, internalizes them and makes them his own” (Wallace and Wolf 2005, 290)—I was taught by my mother through both her words and actions that the most valuable role of a woman is as a mother and caretaker. She was a proud homemaker until I was nine years old. At the time of her divorce from my father, however, she had no choice but to work to support six children. Her divorce had been a decision that she struggled with because of internalized religious beliefs and fear of **alienation**, involving the “disintegration of the socially constructed knowledge system” (Wallace & Wolf, 286). In addition to working her way up from a housewife with a high school diploma to an honors graduate student and subsequent Director of Nursing, she independently raised six children.

My mother illustrates what Dorothy Smith terms a **bifurcated consciousness**—“an effect of the actual social relations in

which we participate as part of a daily work life" (Farganis, 2004, 380)—a duality which resulted from her situation; she was required to fill the gender-typed roles of the homemaker/caretaker and the provider. I believe this duality was especially difficult for her because of how intensely she valued her role as a mother. This is due partly to socio-historical factors—growing up in the 1960s—and partly to **secondary socialization**, "any subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society" (Wallace & Wolf, 290).

In her article "Religion, Gender, and Patriarchy: Awakening to My Self-Conscious Resocialization" (2004/5), Sharon Brown writes about her experience of being raised in a Christian home. She writes: "My mother actually had a higher level of education than my father [...] and was planning to develop a career in teaching, but all those plans were placed on hold when they interfered with her role of being a full-time mother" (94). Her mother's value placement is very similar to that of my mother; both are influenced strongly by a **patriarchal** religion. My mother was raised, and subsequently raised me in the Mormon Church, which attaches a woman's caretaking abilities to her worth. Although she, my siblings, and I have since rejected the creed of that particular faith, she still impresses upon me two tenets very relevant to my questions. She stresses that a woman should be financially independent of her husband; however, she adamantly believes that a mother's place is in the home and that, in her words, the noblest profession is motherhood.

This **social stock of knowledge** sets the basic "relevance structure" for me, both concepts introduced by Berger/Luckmann in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). It is through primary and secondary socialization that I understand my location (role) in society, and that externalization, objectivation, and internaliza-

tion happens. I **externalized**—constructed my reality through action—by choosing to teach essentially based on the mother friendly school schedule and reliable income and reject a career as an artist based on the unreliable income and sporadic schedule (Wallace & Wolf). **Objectivation**—a socially constructed "objective reality that has consequences for the individual because it acts back on its creator" (Wallace & Wolf, 289)—occurred when I gained approval of my decision by my mother. **Internalization**, when "this same social world will have the social status of reality with in the consciousness" (Wallace & Wolf, 289) occurs every time when I am asked, "what do you do?" Each time, I stop identifying myself as an artist and start labeling myself a teacher. What complicates the matter for me is that I am not certain I want to have a children. I am positive that if I choose to I will be in my late thirties when I start, so why am I basing my career choices on non-priorities or priorities that are not my own?

In the film *The Matrix* Neo is presented with the choice of living slightly unsatisfied but comfortably in a computer constructed reality or taking a pill and releasing the binds of the artificial life to live uncomfortably but free. I have created a similar divide in my mind by polarizing the life of an artist and that of anyone else. I assume any non-artist profession involves choosing comfort over the more challenging life characterized by the freedom to move beyond social constructs and the courage and the oppositional nature of what it takes to do so (I must note here that I only polarize the two when classifying myself; there are no distinct boundaries in my mind when analyzing others). There is both truth and falsity in this assumption. It seems inaccurate to depict the two choices in terms of a choice between a "free spirited" artist one one hand, and a mindless automaton, on the other. There are progressive educators, activists, doctors, and lawyers who demon-

strate “free spiritedness.”

The only truth lies in the fact that for my personal situation it is arguable that the choice to teach is based disproportionately on the acceptance of a **reality** I have constructed for myself—the reality created and recreated through my “actions and interactions, a shared reality that is experienced as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful” (Wallace & Wolf, 285)—as the *only* viable reality. Unlike Neo, I may be able to balance the two lives—choosing both—accepting the roles of both caretaker and visionary. To do so I must first sort out my motives.

Looking at this dilemma through a **rational choice perspective**, based on the premise that “people repeat rewarding actions, respond to stimuli associated with such rewards, and act on the basis of the values they attach to things” (Wallace & Wolf, 316), I am able to better understand my motivation. Among George Homans’ propositions, three directly apply. Applying **the success proposition**—“For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action” (Wallace & Wolf, 315)—teaching is more often rewarded, socially (approval), economically (steady paycheck), and personally (job satisfaction), than painting which is less often rewarded socially (not always understood), economically (infrequent income), and personally (fear of rejection).

The stimulus proposition logically follows: “if in the past the occurrence of a particular stimulus, or set of stimuli, has been the occasion on which a person’s action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones, the more likely the person is to perform the action, or some similar action now” (Wallace & Wolf, 315). The present stimuli are teaching opportunities. Teaching has provided me with more rewards than creating art. Considering these factors, it is a rational

choice to continue to choose teaching.

The third, **the value proposition**—“the more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action” (Wallace & Wolf, 315)—is the core of my motivation. I find a great deal more social approval as a teacher than an artist does. Granted, my experience with both is limited and the approval I speak of is mostly familial, but nonetheless strong. I called home a year and a half ago to tell every one that I started working and pursuing a degree in special education, since then I have received more praise than I ever did for painting. I have heard “I am proud of you” and “I am proud of what you do” remarks very rarely coupled with my artwork. In my family, there are no artists or musicians only a few writers who chose careers in accounting, nursing, or sales instead. Perhaps the motivation to pursue art is to resist or rebel against family tradition.

In addition to these propositions there is also the matter of **distributive justice**—“reward should be proportional to investment and contribution” (Wallace & Wolf, 322). When I paint I invest all of myself, I unveil, I express non-verbal emotions, leaving myself vulnerable and open to criticism. The reward for this is inconsistent at best. In contrast, with teaching I invest a predetermined amount of money and time in to my education and receive compensation proportionate to my investment.

An important concept in this investigation is **altruism**—helping others with out concern for oneself—which is a component of **Social Exchange** theory, which “emphasizes the importance in social exchange of ‘**impression management**’, a Goffmanian concept, or how people present themselves to others. People want to be seen in two ways: as associates who promise rewarding extrinsic benefits and can therefore command favorable returns, and as companions whose presence is intrinsically rewarding” (Wallace & Wolf, 340). I do not feel that my company is a sufficient reward.

Consequently, I am always trying to prove my worth by doing or giving, by managing the impression of the “do-gooder.”

When viewing the film *Affluenza*, a documentary on the emotional and environmental impacts of consumerism, I related Americans' compulsion to consume to my compulsion to please others. In both cases, a person is driven by emptiness to satisfy an emotional need. People often buy stuff to fill empty space. I feel lost and am unsure of who I am or what I am supposed to be doing if I am not needed. When someone needs me, I know exactly what to do and who to be based on the situation. Therefore, I help others to fill an empty space within myself, to fill an identity vacuum. It is thus more accurate to call myself a **zealot** rather than an altruist. James Coleman theorized “one's efforts [may] directly help to satisfy one's interests (even if not enough to outweigh the costs of those efforts) and...also bring rewards from others [in the form of social approval] for helping to satisfy their interests. In some cases, the combination of these two benefits is far greater than the costs of the activity to the person. This is the rationality of the zealot” (Wallace & Wolf, 356). I use the social approval I gain from caretaking, professionally and personally, to build my self-worth and identity. Because it has become my primary source of self-esteem I have excluded any other option, including pursuing a career in art. This is also why I have deemed a career in art selfish for myself but admirable for others. I do not feel worthy unless helping others so I consider everything else I do indulgent.

In the film, *Twelve Angry Men*, twelve jurors quarreled over the guilt or innocence of the man on trial for murder. They had twelve different interpretations of the same facts and a person's life rested on their decisions. The film is designed so that the viewer can watch as an invisible observer inside the deliberation room for the entire debate, experiencing all the interactions

through the perspectives of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and social exchange/rational choice—not to mention other macro-theories. Some jurors felt **empathy**—put themselves in others shoes—more easily than others. Some were influenced by **stereotypes, symbolic racism, and ethnic prejudice**. Others were just interested in the **benefit** of finishing early (getting to the ball game on time) and the **cost** of deliberation (missing the first inning). When analyzing my choices I sometimes feel as though my consciousness is segmented, as was the jury in the film. The film also points to how macro social institutions and forces shape everyday interpersonal interactions. Therefore, it is important for me to proceed to use my **sociological imagination** to understand the interplay of micro and macro sociological influences on my life choices because my quality of life depends on my judgment. As if engaging in my own inner jury room, I anticipate this exploration requiring empathy toward myself—my artist self—and involving internal **role taking**.

Charles Chear writes about the effects shame has had on his life in his article “The Overdose of Shame: A Sociological and Historical self-Exploration” (2004/5). Analyzing motivations he contrasts shame and guilt. According to Lutwak, “shame typically involves an acutely painful experience that is overwhelmingly self-focused and more diffuse than guilt...Individuals experiencing shame might feel a sense of worthlessness, incompetence, or a generalized feeling of contempt for themselves, thereby demonstrating a reflection of overly harsh self evaluations” (Lutwak et al., 2001, quoted in Chear 2004/5, 49). Before reading Chear's paper, I identified guilt as a possible motivator for my choices. My self-worth issue I am now understanding is deeply rooted in a childhood psychological trauma that induce feelings better described as shame.

The details of the trauma have been

thoroughly explored personally so I will not address it any further in the paper than to note it is the root cause of my lack of self-worth. It could also be my motivation for developing what Judith Herman terms a “survivor mission.” Trauma survivors in the final stages of recovery sometimes pursue careers in social services in order to integrate or make sense of their particular trauma. By teaching crisis intervention and healthy coping skills to underprivileged, at risk students, I am hoping to prevent future violence. Charles Chear found a positive end to his struggle with shame, “Managing it, I have learned from it, especially humbleness and discipline. Sociological consciousness and historical investigation continue to reveal to me that shame is neither purely positive nor purely negative, but an emotion that has value in society and works with other conditions that determine its positive or negative nature” (57). My goal is to accomplish the same balance through further sociological and psychological inquiry.

I can use **Structural Functionalism**—which focuses “on the functional requisites, or needs, of a social system that must be met if the system is to survive and on the corresponding structures that meet these needs” (Wallace and Wolf 2006, 16)—to determine what function my decision serves society as well as me. Using my sociological imagination, I have begun to question if my decision to teach evolves out of a feeling of moving too fast and functions as a way to slow down.

The career path of a teacher is organized and predictable for the most part, in both investment and reward. The path of an artist is sporadic. The majority of the time I feel at odds with our culture despite its **organic solidarity**, giving rise to an individualistic modern society (Wallace and Wolf, 16). It is not the **collective conscience**, the “similar values and morals,” that I am looking for; rather, it is the slower paced existence and the **mechanical solidarity**—

characterized by spirited interdependence and defined by lack of specialized **roles** and functions (Wallace and Wolf, 20)—that seems to draw my interest. I do not agree with many of the assumed **social facts** of the American lifestyle—which are assumed to be “general over the whole society, but exist independently among each different person...[such as] laws, morals, beliefs, customs and fashions.” I prefer **functional alternatives** that explicitly reject “the idea that existing institutions are necessary and, by implication, good” (Wallace and Wolf, 53). For example, competition makes me uncomfortable. This affects how I feel about art. David Bayles and Ted Orland (1993) write in their examination of *Art and Fear*; “We live in a society that encourages competition at demonstrably vicious levels, and sets a hard and accountable yardstick for judging who wins. It’s easier to rate artists in terms of the recognition they’ve received (which is easily compared) than in terms of the pieces they’ve made” (71).

I also believe that in addition to competition the capitalistic, profit hungry, consumption-oriented culture we live in evokes a feeling of **anomie** within my self. “Durkheim states that anomie means normlessness, a situation where rules or norms are absent” (Wallace and Wolf, 22). Would it be logical to assume that the **chronic anomie**—“state of constant change, like modern industrial society” (Wallace and Wolf, 22)—that I am surrounded by would amplify the senses of **acute anomie** and trauma I personally experienced in the past, and as a result, make me nostalgic even to search for the stability of mechanical solidarity? In his advocacy of developing “**middle range theories**,” Robert Merton clarified Durkheim’s work on the study of suicide rates after the Industrial Revolution. Merton’s first two statements:

1. Social cohesion provides psychic support to group members subject-

ed to acute stresses and anxieties.

2. Suicide rates are a function of unrelieved anxieties and stresses to which persons are subjected. (Wallace and Wolf, 23)

apply to my concern here. First, I have found greater social cohesion and the support that I need when teaching, in the form of professional comradeship and family approval, than I do as an artist. Second, my artistic suicide—the purging of ten years of supplies, finished, and unfinished work—was a function used to relieve my anxiety.

I am still confused by aspects of my career decision. If I am so distasteful of dominant American culture and I choose not to conform in my personal life (rarely watch television, do not eat animals, will not purchase clothing that has been unfairly traded) then why am I conforming professionally? Referring to Merton's **Goals, Means, and Adaptations** classificatory system of deviance forms, am I just performing a **ritual**, running in the rat race, or am I or can I by teaching alternative functions somehow in order to be more **rebellious**—which involves “a combination of a rejection of societal goals and means and a substitution of other goals and means” (Wallace and Wolf, 56)?

Wallace and Wolf note that “Where functionalists see interdependence and unity in society, conflict theorists see an arena in which groups fight for power, and the control of conflict simply means that one group is able, temporarily, to suppress its rivals” (Wallace and Wolf, 68). According to Marx the capitalist society is comprised of the **proletariat**—people who only own one factor of production, their own labor—and the **bourgeoisie**—people who own multiple factors of production, their own labor and the surplus labor of others (ibid). I am worker and although I disagree with capitalism, I strive for a middle-class, bourgeois, status. This is because I am fearful of

not having enough money. I do not need millions or even thousands. I just want to feel secure—this is rooted in my anxiety over living in chronic anomie. I am concerned with **risk**—anxiety not needs (ibid: 185). This desire to gain the benefits of middle-class status, regardless of attainment, creates **moral dissonance**—my actual behavior clashes with my principles.

Michael Moore's film *The Big One* confronts capitalistic greed by documenting big businesses' decisions to downsize workers and out-source jobs to countries where labor laws do not impede exploitation and profit. “In Marx's theory any surplus value appropriated by someone other than the worker is by definition **exploitation** because only labor produces value” (Wallace and Wolf, 84). Moore brings a film crew with him on his book tour across America stopping in economically depressed cities and towns. He wrote his book about corporate downsizing, and challenged the **legitimacy**—“the belief that someone's position and the system incorporating it are right and proper”—of corporations presenting themselves as competitively threatened businesses while making record profits. Moore continually questioned, “How much is enough”? In a capitalist society, is it ever enough? By entering the field of education can I influence our next generation against competition and greed or is the shared **habitus** of capitalist behavior too strong, and too embedded to change? Pierre Bourdieu defines habitus as a “system of durably acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action, engendered by objective conditions, but tending to persist even after an alteration of those conditions” (quoted in Wallace and Wolf, 115-6). In his view, habitus “generates the regular, repeated practices that make up social life.” (Wallace and Wolf, 116).

If we lived in a different type of society, a “humanist society” supporting the free development of the “active creative ‘I,’” maybe then with pervasive competition re-

moved I would feel differently about painting. Marx believed that, [in a classless society] through labor, humankind could be able to realize its “**species-being**,” i.e., its potential for creative and purposeful activity through work” (Farganis 2003: 24).

The **postmodernist perspective** challenges us to reevaluate accepted beliefs and systems of inquiry. It problematizes sociological analysis using a **sociological eye**—“to bring into the open the ‘unexpected reality’ (others) are afraid to see” (Wallace and Wolf, 426). The movie *Tuesdays with Morrie* challenges our habitual **lifeworlds** (Wallace and Wolf, 180). Watching the film I was able to experience **intersubjective projection** and “what it would be like to be in someone else’s skin”—one man preparing to die from ALS and one coping with his imminent death (Wallace and Wolf, 180). Habermas’s **communicative action theory** which focuses on “interactions that develop, confirm, and renew, [individuals] memberships in social groups and their own identities,” is best illustrated by the ongoing dialogue taking place between professor Morrie Schwartz and his former student Mitch Albom. Morrie met with Mitch every Tuesday to discuss death, life, and everything in between. Morrie emphasized **human creativity** as being vital for healthy **social structure**—rules and resources reproduced by social interaction. He helped Mitch redefine himself by prompting him to ask “Is this what I want” and “What am I doing”?

Morrie’s advice fell on my ready, alert ears. Is this what I want? Now I am beginning to feel that it is. I do not feel the tension of opposites between what I want to do and what I ought to do as I did at the beginning of this semester. Dissecting the fear that led me to quit painting by bringing together and relating what Mills terms the **personal troubles** (troubles that occur “within the individual as a biographical entity”) to **public issues** (“institutions of an historical society as a whole [that interpen-

trate] to form the larger structure of social and historical life”) (Wallace and Wolf, 112), has been helpful. The micro and the macro are so much intertwined. I am now seeing that the phenomenon of competition at the macro level studied by conflict theorists is what also instigates the symbolic interaction between my “I” and “me,” and so on. This socio-autobiographical analysis had led me to appreciate what Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) calls **nepantla**, in terms of the ability to travel across dualized worlds, and to relate both to “identity-related issues and epistemological concerns [...] as opportunities to ‘see through’ restrictive cultural and personal scripts” Anzaldúa (2002). I have realized that my choices are not as limited as I thought. I polarized the lives and careers of the teacher and artist, placing them at such extreme distances from one another that balance felt impossible. A small paradigm shift has occurred within my self spurred by a deeper understanding of classism, exploitation, and chronic anomie.

Anzaldúa writes in “Now let us shift...” (2002) that a “new paradigm must come from outside as well as within the system.” I will try to combine the creativity of my artist self with the powers vested in my teacher self to affect change in our social system. Perhaps my career will resemble the work of the “nepantlas [who] know their work lies in positioning themselves—exposed and raw—in the crack between these worlds, and in revealing current categories as unworkable” (Anzaldúa 2002). Or perhaps it will resemble the career of Morrie Schwartz the “Teacher to the Last” (Albom 1997).

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