

UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECT FROM NOT UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

By Kimya

On one end of the breakfast table sat a plate with scrambled eggs, sausage, two slices of toast, and one tall glass of milk for my girl friend. On the other end there was a plate with one gram of heroin, a spoon, one cotton ball, a syringe, one home-made tourniquet, a Bic lighter, and one tall glass of water for me. Off and on for over 30-years that is the way I began my day. Heroin was my breakfast.

Through life I had no understanding of what C. Wright Mills' describes as the "Sociological Imagination." Nor did I realize its concept was impacting my life. The very behavior that I explain in this writing was apart of the behavior I saw depicted in others throughout my community, and I learned how to respond to society from it. Their behavior became my own. It was not hard to accept as the way things suppose to be, and/or as normal, because for the most part it came from family members and older adults that I looked up to in my community, my mentors.

Understanding the effect that derived from the lifestyle I lived is shocking to say the least. But the awareness allows me to see how some personal troubles can be inherited, and taken on as normal ways of life. When I think of my own upbringing I see how the inheritance of personal troubles shaped my behavior, and diverted my conscious away from what my position in society should have been. Not understanding how behavior can lead to personal troubles caused me to set myself on a course that held no alternatives beside death or the penitentiary. Therefore, the way my life would ultimately turn out was not obvious to me, but predictable for anyone that understood the concept of sociological imagination.

Robert K. Merton, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx each have written extensively on crime and poverty in which they explain the conditions that lead to anxiety, hostility towards authority, and antisocial behavior. Their writings enabled me to see the correlation between my learned behavior, the damage it help to cause my community, and to understand the eventual effect it has on the larger society. When I was younger I had no idea that personal troubles could spread through the behavior of individuals and become public issues, but that is exactly what took place in my life. If these writers intended to imply that some personal troubles are learned (inherited), and become public issues or not, the concept of the sociological imagination brings forth a deeper connotation that indicates they do.

For example, lets say there are five young girls being raised in poverty here in America in an area infested with "crack" cocaine. To add to their unfavorable condition they're in a single parent home where their mother has only a 9th grade education, and her life has been directly effected by the use of the drug. She has no idea of the concept of the sociological imagination, therefore, is unable to recognize that the very circumstances that surround her are the same circumstances that are shaping her perspective of life. Without this concept she's unaware that her children will inherit her circumstances through her behavior.

If she falls into prostitution as a way to support her drug addiction, it too will be recorded in her girls subconscious mind. It may not effect all of them, but during the course of their own adversity through life one might fall victim to its behavior without ever connecting it back to the personal trouble of the mother. If the mother had understood the concept of sociological imagination, she would have understood her circumstances differently, and been prepared to offer her girls a more promising future.

The negative behavior that exist today in society, especially in urban communities, can also be contributed to the concept of the sociological imagination not being realized by many of the young people there. They are not able to connect the way they behave and live to the circumstances of others, in a way that will allow them to understand their own so their responsibility as human beings will become clear. To gain such insight early in life enables a person to look beyond the chaos of their immediate experience, and recognize the promise that awaits them in their future. It is the one thing that determines who will become a victim of their circumstances, and who will not.

Sitting at the breakfast table with my plate filled with paraphernalia and my dose of heroin, was a personal trouble I inherited from the circumstances that existed around me when I was a child. Believe me I know. I remember acting out the behavior for the first time alone at my mother's house one morning after collecting everything I would need from my so-call mentors. And what hurts me the most today is knowing that I was only 14-years old. I did not aspire to become a heroin addict, criminal, or convict. These are troubles that I learned at a very young age. And without the authority of a father to tell me or show me something different, I embraced them as my own. Now that I understand C. Wright Mills' concept, it raises a new question in my mind: Has crack cocaine addiction been defined as a public issue instead of a personal trouble in urban communities?

In 1985 I use to frequent an area known as 'THE FRONT' in my Del Paso Heights neighborhood in Sacramento, California, and while doing so I would always encounter more heroin addicts than crack cocaine users. Then by 1987 everything had changed. When I visited the area again I found that from my estimation of approximately 500-people that strolled in and out of the night clubs, pool halls, and liquor store within the two block radius, at least 300 were "smokers" (crack cocaine addicts). Even the heroin addicts I knew had traded in their syringes for "crack pipes," giving into the new circumstances that so quickly arrived around them.

In the early 80s I would drive down any given street in the neighborhood to see no more than 1 or 2 people openly smoking the drug, but upon my return in 1987, the scene had drastically changed. In broad day light people ran to my car as I drove down certain streets attempting to sell me crack cocaine. On the surrounding streets I observed them in numbers running to and from vacant houses smoking the drug. In the night clubs both men and women filled the restrooms to get high together while some openly exchanged sexual favors for it.

I now understand that prior to 1987, and yes, this is to include my own limited use of the drug, it was a personal trouble for me and others. But from 1987 forward it's clear that the use of crack cocaine as I have described it in my Del Paso Heights neighborhood, had evolved into a public issue. I can say this with certainty because of what I discovered after I left in 1987, and returned again in 1991. The area known as THE FRONT was no longer there. In the few years that I was away

dealing with the repercussion from my own drug addiction, a public out-cry resulted in the area being bulldozed and replaced with new homes. Homes that was not sold back to the Black families that lived there, but instead had been sold to White families which turned that section of the neighborhood into what is considered today as middle-class.

In conclusion, Understanding The Effect From Not Understanding The Concept Of The Sociological Imagination has changed my entire perspective of self, and given me so much insight on human development and responsibility. I feel like I have suddenly awoken from a long dream. It's like I have only recently discovered who I am. To live so much of my life believing I knew me, and then realize that I did not, is a huge disappointment. The most difficult thing today is understanding how easy my life of incarceration could have been avoided, if I would have learned this concept earlier in life. With that said, two things come to mind. First, I wonder what impact it would have on the deterrence of crime in urban communities [if], C. Wright Mills' concept of the sociological imagination would be taught to our young people there beginning in middle school? Second, now that I know the value of what this means to the human development, I will share it with every opportunity, and this will not be the only time I write on this topic.