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## SEEING MYSELF: The Sociological Imagination

An Essay

by

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We live in an individualistically-driven society--or so it seems on the surface, and by its own claims--but evidence shows us something more along the lines of Nieche's "herd" mentality. Societies proliferate across the globe, and within each, we find a common factor: individuality by conformity. An accepted--and most likely unavoidable--consequence of our advancement from the hunter-gatherer to our current epoch, at the height of the newly dubbed Anthropocene<sup>1</sup>. If we are to understand ourselves, or our lot in life, we have to understand the group to which we owe our rearing and circumstance.

### SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

When I study, science stands out to me like "a candle in the dark"<sup>2</sup>, allowing me to better understand the world that has its ideologies so intrinsically impressed upon every choice I make. It's fields like psychology and sociology, supported with statistical data sets, that increase my chances at making sense of my own life, and my place within this nation that both provided, and guided, my lot inside of it.

I am currently a prisoner, serving a life sentence without the chance of parole; and with it, has come the stereotype of a criminal. Despite the



fact that I am not--nor have I ever been--a criminal. On the contrary, I lived a normal atomic-family-style modern life: married, five great kids, a new home, several cars (one being an SCCA Rallycross racer), a vintage truck with matching boat, a basset hound, cat, lots of exotic fish, everything I wanted (or needed) in life--I had, plus more. And right before all of my legal issues arose, I worked as a general manager for a successful franchise, and owned my own printing company; but other individuals with criminal mindsets, and meth addictions, decided to interfere with my life that made theirs look so bad, and the more I went to the cops for help, the worse it all got. And now, all I've got to show for my life is a lousy SCDC t-shirt.

Once a name is scribbled crayon-like onto a warrant, it's game on for cops; and the name of that game, is Numbers and Quota! So, yes, I'm a little disgruntled when it comes to the broken criminal "justice" system that placed me into a pre-made-pre-judged-stereotyped-mold of "defendant" tinsel, merely in place to close a case, make them look "competent"--and to save money. It happens to a lot of people, not just criminals; raising the question, of why? Because the blame, in a mishandled case like mine, spreads out to all involved.

We could say, that: "If we are not responsible for our life, who is?"<sup>3</sup> But that counter is too general. The responsibility of the choice, is with the chooser; but the responsibility of the chooser's worldview, and ideology that led to that decision, along with the creation of the situation itself, spreads out through society and those closest to the chooser. To consider all of this, costs money, and places empathy on accused criminals that courts don't usually like to render. And when a defendant tries to explain, it's labeled as self-deception, and seen as an indicator of criminality. True justice, takes a back seat to immediate gratification of the courts.



Psychology, and sociology in particular, can free us "from the simplistic belief that we alone are responsible for our life situations." (Macionis and Benokraitis, p.xiii) And to "learn to see sociologically is to have the world around you come alive as it never has before." (*Ibid.* p.xiii) This is a shared view of many psychologists and sociologists; but, I'd like to add, that it could be inferred that to see psychologically is to have yourself come alive as you never have before, with a new self-awareness--while the view of sociological imagination, is the understanding of societal influence on that so-called "Self".

The idea of such studies--for me; at first--were to advance my writer's craft, and hopefully give me better characterization techniques within my narrative ... excursions. However, along the way, I've made many discoveries that have indelibly altered my sense of Self. I am a societal product; but, at the same time, I am also a contributing factor to its future--for better, or worse.

We have come to know that every individual lives,  
from one generation to the next, in some society;  
that he lives out a biography, that he lives it out  
within some historical sequence. By the fact of his  
living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping  
of this society and to the course of its history, even  
as he is made by society and by its historical push  
and shove. (Mills, p.3)

With the psychological insight provided by sociological imagination,  
I'm able to better grasp this concept: that in my life, I am allotted my



one brief moment between generations--and of my generation--with which, I am to live out my *biography*, that will, despite my *individuality* or *free will*, and in part because of it--contribute, "however minutely," to the very society in which I have found myself, and its future. Just as those before me, and around me, have each contributed to the collective shape of this society that is my biography's present.

A Catch--22-existential-conundrum of unavoidable entanglement.

Would Schrodinger's cat be relevant to this? By looking inside the box that is society to observe myself, does my previous Self cease to exist as I step to a different--more informed--vantage?

The biography that is--THE JOHNNY MAHAFFEY STORY--makes claims, and contributions to the historical "push and shove" that I did not, and in some cases, would not, have intended:

1. The variety of man I have been throughout my moment.
2. The way in which I was selected and formed; or, more accurately, the ways in which I respond to how I was selected and formed.
3. The kinds of "human nature" I have exhibited, or denied.
4. How I differed from some; while mirroring others.

Some of these were within my control--or were they? Because, I would have most likely made different choices in another society--or, simply, a different time within my current society. A ten year difference in my age (in either direction), or a 100 mile difference in the location of my rearing, would have altered my bio (and Self) greatly, and even the biographies (and Self) of each around me.... This applies to all living people, in every corner



of the world, in all slices of time. Our actions effect (and affect), others either directly (or indirectly), whether we intend to or not.

The intelligence--and determination--of one individual can alter their immediate milieu; and depending upon their success, innumerable milieus within the current society, and its subsequent generation(s). Spreading out, person to person, like a butterfly effect. However small, or large, the change could be brought about by a job choice, a political leaning, an invention, an artwork, a class taken, or ... an essay. Good or bad, we impact the world around us, and the life-paths of others; and whether we acknowledge, or ignore that fact, makes its own kind of change.

Our country is FULL of drama.

Married people dating other married (or engaged) people, secretly, and then not so secretly. People shaming others to make themselves look better. We have materials, that give others impressions of us, and we're taught which materials to obtain for achieving specific images. TV shows like "Big Brother" teach the upcoming generation that drama is to be a mark of fame.

We shouldn't overlook that a choice--any choice--carries with it a set of consequences we may never see, that others have to live with.

Little (and big) dramas play out in every home, every neighborhood, every town, every county, and every state; that are unique to each, yet eerily similar most times, and mostly unknown outside their mileus.

What's important to an individual stems from the world they navigate daily, their immediate milieu holds great sway over their worldview, and rightfully so. It's part of what makes them who they are, and influences, if not determines, who they will become. Drama is not a mark of fame, but it is a part of life. It's how we deal with it that matters, because avoiding it doesn't appear to be an option.



Members of society are conditional by the accepted norms of the whole, and there are certain elements that can further conform, or decondition, a member--putting their "individuality" in question. Media and entertainment could very well be considered to be the strongest of these elements, with the power to acknowledge, downplay, outright ignore a drama, or, in some cases, create new kinds of drama.

Human emotions can be very dangerous.

A phone with a search history FULL of the voluptuous curves like those found at Instagram/@ArielWinter can lead to some awkward evenings between a couple, jokes, a fight, or perhaps shared fantasy; while too many call logs, or photos of a married coworker can trigger strife in an already contentious relationship--that could end in violence. And while violence is not an acceptable reaction to a cheating lover, fiancée, spouse--it is a human reaction common in such cases--and should not be taken lightly. But the dangers of cheating (and those that choose to do it) is best left for another essay. Entire libraries of books, and court case files (my own included), are written on that subject. The point is, that one person's choice of action, can alter the life-paths of all close to them, not just their own.

This happened with me.

A person that I trusted, that I thought cared about family and home, our family, our home--brought a troubled drug addict into our lives, and the whole world came tumbling down around us all. Everyone suffered, and life-paths changed beyond recognition. None of us would be who we are (or where we are) today, if it had not been for that initial choice: to cheat, to lie, and ultimately ... to destroy out of spite. It's an age old story. Books like "Anna Karenina", "Tess of the D'urbervilles", "Lolita", and others,



could've saved me from ever going to prison, if only I'd read them sooner. I just didn't know that such women existed; though, I should've, and it was naive of me to think I'd find true love. In retrospect, I can see that not only did I meet Tess, and erroneously devote my life to her—I met them all—and repeated the process. Each time with a similar result, and when my found-version of Anna came along, it was ME she threw under the train. A train I never seen coming, because I was blinded with lascivious fantasies, such as those of Ms. Winter on a pile of freshly discarded Coney Island whitefish.

Today, with what I know and what I've experienced—I'd be one of the world's best fathers and husbands. That's irony for you; because it's now what's forever out of my reach. It's the cliché we all say at some point (or many points) in our lives: "If I only knew then, what I know now!"

Would I have recognized the transitory tendencies of a Lolita, or the crotchety of a Tess? Would I have gone running at the sight of any veritable Anna Karenina? I don't know—because the odd thing is, I don't regret any of the women I gave my trust to. I can't imagine living in a world where I'd never met them, and been afforded the privilege of loving them, and even had that love reciprocated. Even if it was a world that didn't insist on my continued incarceration, if it meant not knowing those I love, it's a world I couldn't live in.

How messed up is that?

Another Catch-22-existential-conundrum of unavoidable entangling.

We all have them; we just interpret them in our own ways.

#### THE CONDITIONAL MEMBER

Opinions about the purposes of prisons differ greatly.



1. Some use them as a business, warehousing prisoners as tax-claim numbers for budget justification, indifferent to humanity, and without consideration towards any form of rehabilitation. The bigger the warehouse the better!
2. Some view prisons merely as a way to protect the public--keep the "bad guys" off the street. That it should run like a prison camp, not an educational center.
3. Some view prisons as a blemish on society. That's why many are built so far out of sight. Their locales not remote, but simply hidden, in some unsaid agreement that a large number of prisoners is not something any state, or country, should be proud of.
4. Some view prisons as an opportunity, a place meant to help those that have fallen on hard times, never had a good life, or just got mixed up in something outside their control. The prisons are tasked with the--moral and legal--responsibility of rehabilitating those held captive, so that when they are released back into society as everyone's long lost neighbor, they have a better chance of normality, or some semblance of it.
5. Some view prisons in a way similar to number four, except with a twist--they see them as reconditioning opportunities. A chance to retrain (or resocialize) the proposed societal member to meet the conditional criteria of an accepted denizen. Otherwise, they are condemned to remain behind the fences, alienated.



Whatever number from the list you agree with, things change, and fast. It's always been that way, and will continue as our own evolution(s) (e.g., biological, political, ethical, technological, etc.) move on despite any efforts to keep things as they are. As science progresses, psychology gets a better look at how our brains work, and so far we've been learning things that challenge and change our ideas of what makes: a criminal, a deviant, a bona fide good-doer, a self-declared good-doer, a holier-than-thou look-at-me good-doer, and the ideal societal member—who seems to be a contradictory combination of them all, to an extent. We're learning that the lines between every category, are very thin, if there at all; and, while this troubles some, it fascinates others. It's leading us through changes in policies (and Laws) to adjust accordingly with the new perspective(s).

We're more alike than different.

And for prisons across America—winter is coming.

"Humanistic psychologists assume that human nature is inherently good, and blame dysfunctional, abnormal, or aggressive behavior on society, not on the individual." (Oltmanns & Emery, p.35) There are, of course, biological factors—with predispositions—to consider. "Free will" operates within boundaries of deterministic neurochemistry that imposes itself upon the Self of every individual. (Search: behavior genetics) If we follow reductionism, we break ourselves down to the individual neuron, which does have a lot to do with what we do, and how we react. In a schizophrenic, large ventricles can be found in the brain; with Alzheimer's victims, the tangled and diseased neuron; in a stroke victim, we see blockage found in the Middle Cerebral artery; a list of brain alterations can go on, but my point is, that these smaller units of Self, can (and do) effect the whole of our being.



If we follow Holism<sup>4</sup>, we admit that we are more than the "sum of a nervous system, an organ system, a circulatory system, and so on." (Altmanns & Emery, p.37) And our physiology gives us proof of this, for the most part, since we can change out--potentially--any part of us, except our brain, and remain. As you've read these words, many transplant operations are underway, completed, or planned; and you, or someone you know may have a piece of someone else inside them right now. This fact doesn't reduce the physical importance of each interchangeable organ--but it does reduce its philosophical weight upon our Self. I say we expand the Holistic scope, and include the "cognitive behavioral paradigm" that views "abnormal behavior--and normal behavior--as a product of learning" (Altmanns & Emery, p.34). We can infer that despite our physicality, our environment plays an equal, in not greater, role in the making, and shaping, of who we are. (Search: Ivan Pavlow 1849-1936, classical conditioning; and B.F. Skinner 1904-1990, operant conditioning)

As for the purpose of a prison, our responses are intertwined with personal opinion, experience, and societal influence. And it's the latter that can cause problems of bias and misinformation--because, prisons, with self-preservational interests, are part of that influence. All the way up to the top of the Prison Inc. ladder, there's a scramble against changes that may lead to tax-fund cuts, and downsizing. But, in the face of all the facts, the statistics, and comparisons of our prisons' failures and immoralities to the successes and humanities of other prisons (especially those of European making)--we can discern that change is overdue.

Prisoners are members of society that in some way violated, or did not meet the minimum conditional requirements expected of each denizen. A prisoner must carry the burden of blame, until--if they are lucky--they happen across



an honest lawyer, prosecutor, judge, and jury, that can divide blame up accordingly. Looking to the cause of the effect in question, and not just the effect itself. Not to stop the guilty from being punished, but to avoid oversentencing that may stem from political or monetary reasons.

Humanistic psychologists "have questioned the conflict between the requirements for healthy psychological development and societal demands in our frenzied and competitive culture of materialism (Szasz, 1961)." (Altmanns & Emery, p.58) Social values imprint us, and direct--if not influence--our decisions, and all of the hype in media, where "winning" for material gain at the cost of another's loss is an accepted status quo--is a contamination of our values, and a misuse of media. Is this sanctioned subliminal messaging, or an unintentional product of the writers' (and other show creators or owners) race to win within the industry? A combination? Does any of it even matter? Should we be concerned? Is humanity more than the sum of its parts--each of us?

I am an American, and in theory, everything about my personal life, my successes (and failures), opinions, desires, needs, dislikes--all aspects of my Self are "deeply embedded within contemporary U.S. culture." (Macionis, p.59) But, that's not necessarily the whole case, because I've never been isolated from outside influences (i.e., foreign media); and, some of those "outside" influences lead to questions about the American status quo. I am proud to be in this country, don't get me wrong--but it has flaws. A lifetime of socialization within a country and its boundary, can blind us to many of its shortcomings. We must compare notes with other countries to see the truth as a whole, and gather proof of what works, what fails, and what is moral.

Society attempts to regulate its members' thoughts and behavior through



"social control" (Macionis, p.198), an often informal process, as the praising or scolding of children (or young adults) for their accepted (or rejected) actions and/or choices. When this fails, and a member steps outside the accepted norm--they're labeled as a deviant, or criminal, and made to carry the weight of a stereotype. For breaking societal expectations of normalcy, "sanctions" are imposed; punishments to DEMAND conformity by ostracizing (or incarcerating) violators regardless of race, age, or class. Except, money usually ends up playing a large role in our judicial system--effectively throwing any conditional member to the whims of a Kangaroo Court.

#### SELF-REHABILITATION

A prison is dubbed by sociologists to be a Total Institution: "a setting in which people are isolated from the rest of society and manipulated by an administrative staff." (Macionis, p.105) And "resocialization" is a term used for the prisons' rehabilitative efforts, defined as, "radically changing [a prisoner's] personality by carefully controlling the environment."

*(Ibid, p.106)*

I see myself better now than ever, just as I see others better for who (and what by psychological category) they are. But, this new me, is a result of my Self coping with the dismal impediments of imprisonment in a place that does not see or care for me or my family. I'm over the ten-year mark of my incarceration, and to this day there have been no efforts--outside of my own--to better myself. I came to prison, and immediately started on my education. There was no rule saying I had to, nor did any prison staff members suggest it--in fact, getting from my cell to the Education Department, was a daily hassle. Within a week, I found myself working for the Education Dept. as an English (and a science) teacher. I took a college correspondence



course, first in creative writing, then art, and now psychology/social work. I'd taken a college course in business management while in the county, no one else was doing anything like that--they were all playing cards, while I read textbooks. There's too many subjects of self-study to even list, things like science--all fields, especially physics--and literature, with just about anything else I can get my hands on. Education has been my tool. I feel that, with a higher form of education, I raise my chances of achieving freedom, whether it's physical freedom, or just intellectual. But, hopefully both!

"Epidemiological studies indicate higher incidences of mental illness in those areas where there is also a high incidence of impoverishment, discrimination, and illiteracy." (Sifers, p.66) There isn't much I can do about the impoverishment, or even the discrimination; but, I can help with the illiteracy. Though, it's not easy, and I'm always asking myself: why bother?

On occasion my family is able to send money to my Jpay.com account, using my SCDC number--my state name of 323863--that transfers to what is called my "Cooper Trust Fund", or prison account. I'm then able to purchase items like coffee, tuna, instant potatoes, Swiss cake rolls, pens, paper, typewriter ribbons, envelopes, toothpaste, soap, etc.. These things don't sound like much, but they are. Producing (and mailing) this essay has cost me a little over fifteen dollars, an amount I usually try to stretch out for two or three weeks for food--but, these pages have the potential of reaching countless readers with the truth of my situation; and if it opens the eyes of just one person, the sacrifice was not in vain.

My choice to learn MFA-style creative writing, turned out to be a life altering decision--one that's affected me, and every reader of my words. In a good way, or a bad way? Only time will tell. But, either way, writing



(like most forms of art) can be very therapeutic. So, even if no one reads my work, I benefited psychologically with the typing of each word. It's cured me of many mental pains, or at least eased them, and I feel a moral obligation to teach other prisoners, and anyone, how to write--so that they, too, can benefit from it.

My writing has spread out around the world, seeping slowly into the fringes of various societies. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, nearly ten years ago, welcomed me into a psychological experiment done by professor and student volunteers, who had created "Between the Bars" and made a blog for me at:

<http://betweenthebars.org/blogs/316/>

I mail them each typed "post" for scanning, the image of my handmade creation, then gets assembled into what has turned out to be a pretty good collection of pages. It's been the most influential thing for my rehabilitation. Ten years ago, I never thought I'd become so widely published, or a teacher whose students fill the seats, and stand (or sit) along the walls, hanging on to every word I say.

#### SO WHAT OF IT?

Rehabilitation--especially in the South--needs revamping. Education needs to be first and foremost! Since my arrival, I have radically changed the environment--but, I'm just one man, with no resources. This is a total institution, but that doesn't mean it has to be total destitution. The people in here are no different than those I knew outside of prison--they're just on a different side of the fence, forgotten, and hidden by the state.



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### Notes

1. Anthropocene, "a new epoch defined by the idea that humans have surpassed nature as the primary shapers of the planet." "Discover" magazine, November 2014 issue, p.52 ([www.discovermagazine.com](http://www.discovermagazine.com)) Print.
2. Taken from, and used in homage to the late Carl Sagan, and his influential book: "Science: A Candle in the Dark".
3. Quoted from an advertisement by the American Community Corrections Institute, ACCI, LifeSkills, for a correspondence course entitled: "Offender Responsibility" (W 119) ([www.inmatelifeskills.com](http://www.inmatelifeskills.com)) Print.
4. Holism: "The theory or principle of a tendency in nature to form or produce organized wholes which are more than the mere sum of the component units." As defined by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition, Volume 1 (A-M) p.1264, by Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP copyright c 2007