"It's Not My Fault":
Overcoming Social Anxiety through Sociological Imagination

Charles

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"A wise man speaks because he has something to say; a fool because he has to say something."—Plato

My name is Charles. I am a twenty year old, white male. My parents were and are middle class. For as long as I can remember I have felt a certain anxiety toward social situations and people as a whole. I have never actually enjoyed personal attention whether positive or negative. For years I simply accepted this as part of who I was. I am a shy, introverted, anti-social person. I don't like people, nor do I need them. I have trudged through twenty years of life with this attitude leading the way. I will attempt to explain the process of socialization through which I acquired these views.

Social structure is a human construct that organizes and guides our lives. I will show the ways in which social structure has shaped my life. I will employ the **sociological imagination** as a tool to explore my self. "Sociological imagination enables us to understand the larger historical picture and its meaning in our own lives" (Newman 9). I will explain the reasoning behind the views I hold and have held in the past.

Furthermore, I will explain the progress made to date in resolving the dominant issues in my life.

Being the youngest member of a military family (sometimes referred to as a "military brat"), I have faced a different path of socialization. The military "stations" its members where it feels they would be most useful. As it happens, my family and I were "stationed" in Germany for a large portion of my childhood. The military provides amenities and Americanisms through bases that are maintained where people are stationed. These bases are virtual societies in their own right. While on the base, the culture doesn't differ greatly from that of the United States. Were you to venture off of the base, though, there would be no mistaking the absence of familiarity. Despite the age of **globalization**, one cannot help but feel isolated on the base. This could be compared to an island surrounded by an ocean of uncertainty.

Although one could seek refuge on the base, it was not wise to become too attached to it. This applies to the people that reside on the base as well. Army tours of duty are three years long. After your three-year tour is done, you will most likely have to relocate to a different base, state, or country. This requires saying good-bye to any friends you may have made, and meeting new friends when you arrive at your destination. Needless to say, this can be a very stressful endeavor. One may think relocating often would provide exceptional resocialization skills. In my situation, the contrary took place. It seemed as though meeting new people was too much work, and the benefits were short lived. I had my immediate family, and that was enough for me. Because we live in a **postindustrial society**, I was able to entertain myself for the most part. I was able to take advantage of our information and high-tech based society to the fullest extent. Watching television and playing video games for hours on end were my two favorite ways to pass the

time. I also had a basketball hoop that could occupy my attention for the better part of a day. All this diminished the need or desire for friends. Over time, I became unconcerned and complacent when it came to meeting new people. This in turn would develop into an unbiased fear of people and loathing of social situations.

As I mentioned earlier, I have never desired any variety of attention directed toward myself. It always made me feel as though someone was passing judgment on me. The **looking glass self** has been an ever present element in my life. While referring to this concept in her essay Emily Margulies stated, "Whether taking a seat in class or getting ready to go out on a Friday night we are all constantly aware of how we may appear to those around us" (Margulies 7). This has been, at times, a debilitating affair for me. In an attempt to minimize this potential **embarrassment** (usually just a byproduct of my situational assessment), I would employ **role taking**—that is, evaluating myself from the perspective of others and behaving accordingly. Through constant role taking I could embark on **impression management** (acting in a way such that others will approve of oneself). This has made a difference in some situations. However, it is not an all-encompassing solution. Despite my amateurish **dramaturgy**, that is, treating everyday social life as a theater, the uncomfortable situations still far outnumbered the comfortable.

I was never the popular, outgoing person that I desired to be. What's more, in my own mind I perceived everyone else to be as Hunter "Patch" Adams was portrayed in the film *Patch Adams*. As far as I was concerned, everyone else was confident, outgoing, secure, and content with himself or herself. I took a number of messages from this movie. Perhaps the most relevant is to be yourself no matter what the cost. When the movie starts, Patch is depressed and is admitted to a psychiatric clinic. While in the clinic he finds his passion: helping peo-

ple. Patch checks himself out of the clinic and begins medical school. While he was attending school, he began to let the real, uncensored Patch surface. Throughout the movie Patch is repeatedly attacked for his outgoing, "be yourself no matter what" attitude. He doesn't let this stop him though. He continues to be himself. At the end of the movie, Patch has his own clinic where he heals people using humor. This came as a result of uncompromisingly remaining himself. For me, being myself has been hard at times. This reminds me of the song lyrics: "I find, sometimes it's easy to be myself. Sometimes, I find it's better to be somebody else" (Matthews 1994).

In her article, "Alien Nation," P. Heim states, "…we compare ourselves to others and determine our self-worth" (Heim 41). Such comparisons also often led me to feel as though I was less of a person than everyone else. Consequently, I felt alienated. Most of this originated from the group with which I attended school. These individuals were part of my **secondary group**, that is, they were as close to me as my immediate family. They were merely in the school to be educated, as was I. Thus, they were more or less strangers to me. Nonetheless, nothing frightened me more than their opinions of me. Being a negative person, my role taking with this group resulted in an incongruent, negative self-concept. As human beings, we tend to like people that like us, and vice versa. Due to the evaluation of others' opinions of myself, I believed that most people did not like me. Hence, I did not like most people. This cycle of fear, dislike, and hatred would fuel my opinions of the world for years to come.

Another "vicious cycle" is that of the stereotypical view pertaining to sex. In our **patriarchal society**, the division of labor places men as the primary "bread winner." Along with the expectation that a man should be capable and talented enough for this task, is the implication that he would need to be outgoing and confident with

himself. For how would a man satisfactorily perform the task of taking care of his family if he were not secure and outgoing? Secure and outgoing I was not. This lack of seemingly essential characteristics was to cause much doubt in my later years. People of authority would greet me with this stereotypical view in their minds (perhaps unconsciously) only to find me to be the exact opposite. Thus many times it was assumed that I was incapable of or not willing to perform required tasks.

According to David Newman (2002), being a white person I may hold **racially transparent** attitudes. He writes, "Whiteness is unmarkable and unexamined. It is so obvious and normative that white people's racial identity is, for all intents and purposes, invisible" (Newman 344). However, being that I spent a lot of time in Germany, things were different for me than for children who were socialized in the U.S. suburbs. On most of the military bases that I called home, white people were the minority. I can remember standing in the courtyard at W.A.M.S. (Wuerzburg American Middle School) with two or three of my white friends, waiting for the doors to open. As I looked around, I began to realize that we were the only white people in the courtyard (there were probably around fifty to one hundred people outside at that point). This was quite a surprise to me because it was incongruent with my inherent assumption that white people were the majority. I did not feel threatened or defensive; however, this incident did amplify the feeling that I did not belong.

On the issue of not fitting in, the movie **The Matrix** has some interesting parallels to my life. In the movie, the matrix is described as "a prison for your mind." Essentially what happens is that the human race creates artificial intelligence (A.I.). Because A.I. is able to think, it goes to war with the human race. Because A.I. uses solar energy, humanity "scorched the sky." For this reason, A.I. needs an alternative source of en-

ergy. It utilizes the human race for this energy. Humans are enslaved and used solely for the energy they provide. In the movie, this is depicted by endless cocoons that house the seemingly unconscious bodies of humans. The matrix is essentially an artificial reality that looks, smells, sounds, tastes, and feels like the real world. Your mind controls what happens in the matrix. This includes your perception of how you look, how you interact with other people in the matrix, and so on. If we boil all this down, we can say that essentially, in the matrix, "reality" is all in your mind. This is not unlike the world you and I live in. In my reality, I was not up to everyone else's standards. I could not fit in anywhere, or feel comfortable attempting to fit in somewhere. As mentioned earlier, this was merely my perception of reality. In fact, I could have fit in almost anywhere I desired to fit in. I was not terribly defective, and people would more than likely have accepted me if I gave them the chance.

Constant fear, awkwardness, dislike, and uncertainty are quite obviously not desirable states in which to exist. The way I found to escape these ailments was solitude. Although the next best thing to solitude was being with my family, their company still required a minimal amount of self-consciousness and acting on my part. Being that solitude provided relief from the pressure of social life, I sought it often. I remember faking illness frequently to avoid attending school. After the first semester of third grade, my teacher sent a letter home along with my "straight A" report card that stated I had missed, on average, about one and a half days of school a week. Of course, parental obligation tends to take precedence over constant illness. Most days I would make it to school on time, ready to grit my teeth through the agony. I vividly remember one morning during my second grade year. I had had enough of the people at school. I was not going. My mother had to literally drag me to school, kick-

ing and screaming. She brought me to my class, but I was not going in. Eventually, the principal became involved. I remember watching my mother walk down the hallway as the principal stood soccer-goalie style in the middle of the hallway to prevent me from following my mother. Finally after what seemed like hours of trying to get past my principal, I was accosted. She gave me a minute or two to clean the slime and moisture off of my face, and then shoved me in the door to my classroom.

Sometime in my fifth grade year, I began to receive migraine headaches quite regularly. In fact, I had prescription medication due to the severity and frequency of occurrence. This affliction was undoubtedly due to the stresses associated with social situations and the like. My prescription required that I visit the school nurse when I began to get a migraine. A good majority of the times that I had visited the nurse's office, I was sent home from school. I never had the need to fake a migraine due to the frequency with which they occurred. However, I had discovered an "out" if you will. The school nurse and I became quite familiar with each other. **Sick role** is basically the way people expect you to act when sick. I became master of the sick role. If I were having a particularly troublesome day, I would ask for a hall pass and invoke the sick role without hesitation or remorse.

Sick role was simply the means to an end. The reasons behind my desire to invoke sick role have to do with my character type. While discussing character types in relation to drug addiction, Chanan Rapaport quotes Horney as saying, "…and the third is moving away from people, detaching oneself from others and building up a more or less independent existence, with the effect of avoiding whatever threat may be contained in human relationships" (Horney, cited in Rapaport 14). I believe that Horney was right on in this categorization. I fit into this mold very well. The "threat" that is referred to is either a defensive or an adaptive threat. That is, either a built-in defense mechanism (resulting from natural threats to a person, i.e. assault, murder, etc.…), or something that the individual or society has evolved to include as threatening to a person. In my case, I acquired an adaptive threat pertaining to social situations and most of the people in life. Though not grounded in reality, this threat was no doubt figured into my everyday life. In her journal article "Alien Nation*,*" P. Heim tells the story of how she became bitter and sarcastic. She and her mother did not get along. Every time they spoke, it would result in an argument. She wrote about her dance instructor who would yell anytime the opportunity presented itself and would point out anything she had done incorrectly. This experience contributed to her development of sarcasm as a defense mechanism. I too developed sarcasm as well as the desire to isolate myself from others (both of these help to form my character type). These features enabled me to deal with the perceived shortcomings I possessed.

The main idea in the movie ***The Big One*** is corporate greed. Michael Moore is on a book tour. While he's touring, he stops at various corporations to ask them questions. He stops at the Nike headquarters and speaks to Phil Knight. Michael asks Phil why he doesn't have shoe factories in the United States. Phil's answer is, "American people don't want to make shoes." I personally can't tell you if Mr. Knight has used this answer before. However, I would venture to guess that this is his standard answer to this question. Though in my opinion this explanation doesn't have much integrity, it serves Mr. Knight's purpose—that is, to satisfy the immediate situation. I think the real reason Mr. Knight doesn't have factories in the U.S. is that he simply doesn't want to. It's much easier and more economical to have his factories in other countries. When I look to the past, I can compare my thought that "nobody is going

to accept or enjoy my company," to Phil Knight's statement. Perhaps, I knew this attitude to be unrealistic, but it was just easier that way. For me, it was a satisfactory way to satisfy the immediate situation I was in.

While reflecting on my life to this point, I came to the realization that I may, in a way, comfort myself with material things. The film **Affluenza** is about the American people's excessive consumerism. One of the definitions provided for affluenza in the film is, "The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Jones's." I myself have and still do, to some degree, suffer from affluenza. In the past, in order to facilitate a feeling of security with the way I looked, I would coerce my parents into feeding my affluenza. In my perception, my **birth cohort** had new clothes, shoes, and the like. Thus, my desire to be the popular one reinforced the need to have the same things everyone else had. This could perhaps be viewed as a **cohort effect**, or even a **period effect**, due to the overwhelming commercialism that tells the people of my generation they need certain things in order to fit in or be "cool."

Despite the fact that I didn't consider myself to be "cool," my life continued to be the same in my high school years. The only difference in my progression to high school was that I had access to automobiles. This eliminated the need for the school nurse. It was now much easier to find comfort and solitude by my own abilities. However, when I invoked the sick role without an authority figure's permission, neither my parents nor my principal thought it was good. High school, being part of the **social institution** of education expects certain social behavior and cooperation. I had been going against the culturally defined **norm** (expected behavior) that people socialize, smile, and are generally polite to each other. Furthermore I had violated the institutionalized norm of education systems that requires class and school attendance. This

tug of war match was concluded during my junior year in high school. I dropped out of school and promptly acquired my GED.

I had realized that my behavior was abnormal before I dropped out of high school. However, I hadn't dedicated much reflection to it. I suppose it was easier to forget what happened (or didn't happen) and keep pushing on. It was about this time that I began to analyze my behavior. I came to a conclusion similar to that of Peter Dai. While discussing "P's" anxiety in his essay, he states, "As individuals, we have the right to solve our problems and end our discontentment" (Dai 19). I was absolutely not content with my situation. So, with the influence of my father, I made a step in the right direction by getting technical training. After a few months of living in my parents' home without a job, my father required that I get a job or get an education. I chose education. Within a month of this decision, I was in St. Louis attending my first A+ (computer hardware and software) class. This gave me more confidence than I had prior to attending the class. I stayed in a hotel by myself. I had never been alone in a city the size of St. Louis. I fed myself, made it to class without insult or injury, and overall did a good job in the class.

The movie **Good Will Hunting** has some interesting content that can be compared to my situation. In the movie, the main character, Will, is a janitor at M.I.T. One night, he proves a mathematical equation that's written on a blackboard in the hallway. The professor that wrote the problem sees Will and seeks him out. The professor finds Will at a hearing for assault. Will is sentenced to prison for assault. The professor talks to the judge and takes Will out of jail on two conditions: that he should practice mathematics with the professor, and go to a psychiatrist once a week. Psychiatrists repeatedly dismiss Will until the professor contacts one of his old friends from college named Sean. Sean takes Will's

standoffish behavior with a grain of salt. Eventually, with patience, Sean is able to get to the real Will. It seems Will was abused as a child. This led Will to put on a front that prevented society from seeing the real Will. Sean begins to tell Will that it (the abuse) was not his fault. Sean repeatedly states that it is not his fault, until the real Will surfaces and hears the message. This process is not too different from the events that led to my decision to move to New York. All the situations in which I felt an ungrounded feeling of insecurity and fear could be compared to Sean's repeated words to Will. In essence, every uncomfortable situation in my life could be summed up in one statement; "it's not my fault." After the right self heard this message, I decided to make a change. I concluded that a move was in order. It would be a fresh start, a new beginning. I would move to New York by myself.

I decided it was time to rethink my career choice about eight months into my first job in the information technology field. I was not happy with the job I was performing. Furthermore, I had been used to existing in the social class that my parents belonged to. Due to **deskilling**, the career field I had chosen was not the most lucrative. I came to the conclusion that SUNY Oneonta would be a good place to facilitate my career change. This in itself was a titanic leap toward my further socialization. To knowingly make the decision to attend classes with my peers, who I had despised at one time in my life, was quite an accomplishment. The concept that I was "by myself" is an interesting one. Although solitude had been a refuge for many years prior to this point, this experience proved to be different. It was easy to avoid contact with people while living in my parents' home. But by living on my own, I was suddenly forced to put myself in situations that had terrified me for years. Such things as grocery shopping and speaking to an interviewer about a job served as a bit of a crash

course in social behavior. Still being a quiet, shy, and an ultimately insecure young man, I put my head down and did what I had to do. After a while I obtained a job in Albany, New York. I came in as a worker, one of the lower levels on the hierarchy of authority. This exposed me to corporate **bureaucracy** at its finest. Furthermore, I spoke to people on the telephone for forty hours per week. I was quite hesitant and worried when I began. Yet, a few months after I began working there, I could speak to people on the telephone quite easily. I suppose this was a "baby step" toward functioning as a "normal person."

I mentioned earlier that the concept that I was "by myself" was an interesting one. There is a theory that proposes we all have multiple "selves." To go further, we all have many different personalities equipped with different qualities that we can employ when most appropriate. I can subscribe to this theory. In my case, for example, there is the self that is employed when in a social situation and impression management is required. There is the self that surfaces when comfort is possible, but awareness is still required; this self may surface in the presence of extended family. There may also be the self that enjoys only its own company. These selves are not immutable however. As my life progresses, so too do the selves I possess. When things change in my life, so do the means of coping with them. Different selves, in this case, possess these means. Yet, some linger on despite my lack of need for them. *Multiple Personalities* is a documentary on multiple personality disorder. A male police officer is one of the three people featured in this film. This man has scores of different personalities that, by his account, surface when they are needed. One of his personalities takes over when he drives because that personality is best equipped for the situation. A childlike personality takes control while sitting on the couch in the comfort of his home. Peter Dai's "P" was a child in-

side. To overcome his emotional disorder (he couldn't love a woman), he set out to reconnect to that child and convince him that "he has become a good man" (Dai 22). I too must find the child I have inside and convince him that the world is not a bad place. He is not deficient in any way, shape, or form, and not all people are evil.

I learned by writing this paper that I was not the only one who had a fear of social situations. Thomas Richards gives the following account of someone who has symptoms of social anxiety:

> A man finds it difficult to walk down the street because he's self-conscious and feels that people are watching him from their windows. Worse, he may run into a person on the sidewalk and be forced to say hello to them. He's not sure he can do that. His voice will catch, his "hello" will sound weak, and the other person will know he's frightened. More than anything else, he doesn't want anyone to know that he's afraid. He keeps his eyes safely away from anyone else's gaze and prays he can make it home without having to talk to anyone. (Richards 2003)

A case study featured on the Anxiety Network portrayed a middle-aged man named Jim. Jim had Social Anxiety Disorder. He is married and has children. He works at a local music store. He has known the owner for some time. Jim's wife performed any task involving a social situation for him. She would make appointments, go to parent teacher conferences, and so on. All of this was done because of Jim's debilitating ailment. He had no friends except for those shared mutually with his wife. When at work, he struggled when he had to call people to let them know that their order was in. He would begin to speak, and then his voice would shake and crack. He would freeze up, and then expel the rest of the sentence as fast as he could. Eventually, the music store was sold to a large corporation. Jim was offered a promotion. This is when he decided to get help. At first he was shy and avoided eye contact. Jim learned that "the world didn't revolve around him." He learned that everyone makes mistakes, and "it's ok" to make mistakes. He gradually made progress and eventually took the promotion at work. He now conducts weekly meetings at his job. His days are not free from anxiety; however, Jim's anxiety has become manageable and he is now able to overcome it.

It may be unnecessary to point out the fact that I have my fair share of problems. It may, however, be necessary to draw attention to the fact that I have made significant progress in the latter years. I am still exploring my identity, but I am making progress. I have explained the circumstances of my socialization. I have traced the formation of my views. I have also shown the progressive steps I have taken toward resolution of my issues. Though I have come a long way, I still have a long road ahead. Despite this, I have every confidence that, as Jim did, I will overcome my anxiety and distaste for social situations. Furthermore, my hope is that this paper serves others as a means to self-understanding so that they will become a better person.

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