



## ***Questioning Motherhood: A Sociological Awakening***

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Having a child seems, for most people, to be a natural choice. For me, the choice translates into a simple question of desire: do I want to have a child? My answer, something I feel makes me different from many people, is no.

The idea of having a child is one that seems to go against my nature. Forming families seem to be the reigning desire for most women and men as they grow older and more mature. This need for procreation rips through especially women as a freight train through its rails. Having a child seems to be a natural process that many people feel is a major part of their lives' design. To me, the idea of having a child is more of an obstacle to what I can accomplish in my life—an end to the independence I have worked so hard to achieve. I am afraid that it would mean the end of who I am today, and I fear that being a mother would turn me into someone I do not want to be. Because of all this, I feel that making the decision to have a child would mean sacrificing my being. So when I choose not to have children, I am going against the social norms I have been taught to follow my whole life.

Whether we are consciously aware of them or not, **gender roles** are clearly de-

finied in our society. It is socially accepted that as a woman, I should be nurturing, I should not only want children but should plan for them as much as I would for my next meal. I cannot accept this role as a pre-determined fate for myself. I do not believe that this socially constructed role will work for me, and as a result I am going against not only what is biologically but also socially accepted as well.

Berger and Luckmann's concept of the **social construction of reality** primarily focuses on how the world is constructed and created, and how subjective meanings become realities in daily life. The social construction of women, as portrayed in the media and acted out by the majority in society, reinforces the stereotype that they will become mothers, whether or not that is their main desire. Most television shows portray women who are seeking a man to build a family with or who are already mothers. In my own family, the assumption that the girls would get married and bear children was an unspoken one, played out in the form of rhetorical questions. As a child, I remember saying things like "when I have kids" or "when my kids are older." Never once did I say "IF" I have kids, because it was a given. I truly did not believe there was anything else for me to do, because I was a woman. When I was little people always said to me, "When you grow up and have kids of your own ...." The problem with this was that no one actually asked me *if* I wanted to have kids or told me that it was possible to grow up and not have any children. It was through this socially constructed reality that I came to believe that being a mother was inevitable. I accepted this to be the truth without ever questioning until I was much older and began to open my mind to new ideas.

My sisters and I were **socialized** to believe that raising a family was the main thing expected of women. My brothers, on the other hand, were always asked what they wanted to *do* when they grew up,

posed in terms of a career. They were socialized to believe that they would find meaning for their lives in their work first, and perhaps family second. Interestingly, men are not usually asked about children. When my sisters and I were asked that question it came loaded with the expectation that a family and children would be a huge part of whatever direction our lives took. Our choices, it seemed, were limited. I then accepted what my **objectified** role as a woman was based upon the way life was planned to some degree for me, and as a result grew up to believe I was somehow less of a person if I chose a full time career as opposed to raising children.

I was one of seven children raised in a lower income household. As a result I did not receive the same advantages as those who grew up in more affluent homes. Pierre Bourdieu addresses this issue when discussing the notion of *cultural capital*. Bourdieu focused on how cultural capital is related to educational advantages. To help understand his theory I have looked at my own situation critically to see if there was a link. Since I grew up in a home with limited financial resources, my parents never truly encouraged college, and I wasn't really encouraged to become whatever I chose. There was always an unspoken expectation that I would graduate from high school and start a family shortly thereafter. My parents' economic status and low level of education prevented them from giving me a broader range of options. In reference to cultural capital, Bourdieu argues, what is essential for educational success is that one is able to be confident through all aspects of their lives including higher education, interviews, and meetings. He argues that children of higher- and middle-income families learn these skills, whereas children of lower-income families, like myself, do not have that confidence mastered. Existence or lack of such cultural capital resources and networks contributing to what Bourdieu calls *class reproduction*—to the

perpetuation of class differences across generations. As a result of my economic status, it has been a difficult struggle for me to make the decision to attend college, forge a career, and also to dispel the low expectations that were ingrained during my childhood. My parents believed that they were inferior because of their economic class and therefore, perhaps unintentionally, felt the same was true for all of their children.

*Erin Brockovich*, as portrayed in the film about her life, was poor, raising three children alone. When she obtained the position at the lawyer's office, which she had to beg for, she was able to find a way in which she could earn a living to support herself and her children. At the same time, however, she was able to help numerous people who were sick and dying get financial help to better their lives. Erin was able to find a connection between what she needed for herself and the bigger issues in the world around her. She is a great example to me of what can be achieved even when a situation seems hopeless. I wish to find a similar place in the world, one where I can earn a living but also make a difference in the lives of those around me. If I had children, I would be less able to effectively help others in need.

Erin was forced to sacrifice time with her children in order to help others, seemingly unable to balance the demands of both. In order for her to be able to make a difference, her own family suffered, and this is one of the reasons why I feel I do not want children of my own. With all her family problems, Erin found herself in the midst of a **social conflict**. Coser argues that "external conflict is essential in establishing a group's identity." Erin saw major deceit in PG&E, a major difference between what was being told to the victims and what was actually true. I think that she saw this conflict and saw herself and her children in the place of those families she was trying to help. She believed that it could have been her and her children just as easily as it was

these families. I could see in Erin's eyes that her heart was breaking from spending so little time with her children, but she also knew that if she did not help these people (and hold on to her job) then her children would pay a much higher price than just losing the time she was spending away from them. Undoubtedly, Erin accomplished in her public life while raising her children; but I am not sure, structurally, all poor women are that lucky.

**Mead's theory of the emergent self** helps explain how my decisions have been shaped throughout my life through socialization and by internalizing the values assumed to be held by a **generalized other**. For me the generalized other was mediated through my family, friends, and adult figures in my life. I have observed how each responded to having children and made decisions based on how others around me reacted. In her paper "Why I smoke: Sociology of a deadly habit" (2003), Emily Margulies discusses how her decision to smoke was made through a series of positive reinforcements while interacting with people around her, such as pretending to smoke with friends and "smoking" candy cigarettes. My view of having children was formed at a young age in very much the same way. When I reached what Mead calls the **game stage** of play, I began to play games with my sisters in which I would act how I thought they would expect me to. This stage was different than what Mead called the earlier **play stage** in which I was able to pretend I was a different character, but was unable to understand how I related to the rest of the characters in the games we played with. My sisters and I never played a game that did not include a mother and her children; we never played as businesswomen or superheroes. Much the same as Margulies never associated death or disease with a simple cigarette, I never thought it possible to become a woman without having children of my own. Now that I am older and able to truly see all my

options, I am able to say with certainty that I do not want children as a part of my life. As a child I had playfully **externalized** this reality and considered having children believing that I had no other option. Now that I have matured I regard this **anticipatory** identity as simply another option for my life, one that I believe I will not pursue.

I feel there are big issues at stake in our lives today. I have started learning about our government and how it really works in our capitalist society. I began to question not only my place in the world but what kind of a future the U.S. has with a government that lies and bullies others for solely the purpose of financial gain. Being that the United States was in a time of domestic peace for so long many citizens took for granted that we couldn't be touched, that we were safe. After September 11, 2001 all Americans seemingly stood up in a united front against terrorism. It was during this time that I truly began my questioning of all that I had been socialized to become. I started questioning what I could do in order to make this world a safer place for future generations to come. My entire life changed, though, when I started to realize that by forming this so called united front we were instilling hatred in the hearts of every United States citizen. The president instated the Patriot Act that in my opinion created this sense that it was now acceptable to racially profile a person as long as they "look" or "act" like a terrorist. Left up for interpretation by those in power, the rights of the entire Arab world was and is being threatened. After watching decisions such as these being made I was sickened by the state of our union and I finally realized that I wanted to be a catalyst for change and/or help others in an effort to make a better tomorrow.

Max Weber identified three types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal authority. **Charismatic authority** is based on the charisma of a person—Jesus is a good example. **Traditional authority** is

passed on through social traditions and customs, such as the passing of a kingdom from father or mother to offspring. Finally, there is **rational-legal authority**, based on socially defined and legislated rules of conduct for those elected for or appointed to government positions—the U.S. government with an elected president is an example. As Weber also suggested, however, one can question whether such an ideal-type of authority can actually exist in pure form. As an elected leader, the President can influence law making and is able to make major decisions about our world and country. However our president is not supposed to do anything unless it is in the best interest of the people. This is what “democracy” is about. However, we as a people have come to a point where we accept what we are told as truth without questioning its validity. To blindly accept what we know next to nothing about and allow someone to make major decisions for us is problematic. Simply put, if we allow someone else to make the major decisions in our lives, then when something goes wrong we can blame him instead of ourselves. I fight this idea with every fiber of my being. I believe that not only do we have the right but also the obligation to speak out against the decisions we do not agree with which are being made in our name. In his movie, *The Big One*, Michael Moore sets forth an outstanding example of this idea. Here is a man who challenges the world of corporate America. He questions why American corporations are moving their companies to places such as Mexico and Asia when profits are up and the company is doing well here in the United States. The film portrays a good example of how it is possible to question authority and fight some of the injustice in our world.

I aspire to dedicate my life to helping the cause of peace. I wish to see the end of wars. I would like to put pressure on political leaders to make decisions, which are just, and to hold them accountable for decisions that are not. I want to be part of social

reforms to help ensure equality for all, not just those living inside the four walls of the White House. I feel as though many Americans suffer from what Marx calls **false consciousness**. They are able to justify the decisions the President is making because he is promising a brighter future for America and the world. However, most do not see how dangerous the world is becoming, based in part on the President’s decisions. It is my hope that I will be able to help open the eyes of at least a few American citizens, so that they may be able to see the truth of the poor decisions the President has made while in office.

Considering the above and what I want to do in my life, I have been forced to confront my decision to not have children. I have made this decision based on experience. My family structure was not a strong one, and as a result, I saw many of the negative aspects of raising a family. In his paper “Defying the Sweatshop, Sociologically Speaking” (2002), Steve Sacco discusses why he decided to stop buying anything manufactured in a sweatshop. Sacco grew in up in a white-collar family where he learned the value of hard work. He discusses how different his parents were in raising him and then goes on to write about the school he went to. Finally he seems to conclude that he was lucky enough to be surrounded by the right combination of people who inspired him into learning about these sweatshops and ultimately end his personal endorsement of them. Like Sacco, I believe that I was lucky enough to run into the right group of people in my life who have inspired me to reach out and make changes. Friends, family, and teachers have all helped to shape who I am and not one specific event has led to my awakening.

**Critical Theory**, associated with the theorists of the Frankfurt School such as Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm, Max Horkheimer and others, is premised on a few basic ideas. The first is that any belief

you hold is influenced by society. The second is that people of intelligence should critically examine the world around them, as it will help them and others become aware of diverse viewpoints besides what is popularly expressed. Critical Theory speaks to me, for it provides me with a method to think about and live my life. I always argue the other side of an issue because I believe it opens the mind to new ideas. Critical learning is not only invigorating, but also very important to me. I intend to apply my critical thinking and social awareness when choosing and pursuing a career that I am passionate about and would make some difference in the world around me. I cannot ignore, but in fact feel obligated, to pursue a line of work that contributes to fighting injustice anywhere and everywhere. I am trying to plan and pursue the steps necessary to make my dream happen. My goal remains a socially uplifting career, one that is important enough to me that I put serious time and effort into achieving it. A college education has been the first hurdle of my journey. I am in college struggling to balance a full time job, classes, and a relationship, yet I refuse to let anything deter me from achieving my goal.

**Phenomenological Sociology** is concerned with taking prior assumptions, or assumed truths, and questioning them in order to better understand the way the world around us has been socially constructed. I was raised to believe that I should be a mother because it would give my life meaning—somehow make me whole. When I was a bit older, I began to question this idea, seeking to craft my own way of living. I thought about what my life would be like without the obligation raising a family would undoubtedly bring. I have weighed the advantages and disadvantages of being a mother, and have found the disadvantages to be too high for me. I feel my place is in the community helping to change legislation, helping to ease the

burdens of those who are less fortunate, and in contributing to bring about improvement and change in social programs. I want to be the key in easing some of the major problems facing our communities, including other families and parents today, in hopes that the next generation will encounter a world that is a little better than the one I grew up in. I think that for me raising a family would greatly impede this ambition. Just as in the movie *The Matrix*, I feel as though I have been awakened to a made-up world that I thought was reality, and have rediscovered a real world that gives me more than just one option. Just as Neo took the red pill and chose to see the truth, I too have chosen to break out of my socially constructed world and carve my own direction in life.

There are some real consequences I may inevitably face because of my decision. I will not have the bond and lasting relationship many say comes with being a mother. I may have trouble finding a mate, since most people do want to have children at some point during their lives. I may also always wonder if I have made the right decision, but I suppose everyone asks themselves that at some point during their lifetime. I have considered all these consequences and have decided to take my chances. I feel I have made a rational decision for someone in my circumstances. I looked at all the options, and based on what I believe in and what makes the most sense in my own life, have made up my mind about not raising children. I will not have the financial obligation that comes with having children. I am able to continue my education (formal or informal) without the difficulties posed by raising a child. I will be free to go where I want, when I want, and how I want. I will never face the worries of being a good mother, or the potential loss of identity which sometimes can occur in the fast-paced society in which we live.

My best friend has a baby, and I have

watched her entire life change before my eyes. She suddenly does not have the freedom to go whenever she pleases, she is always tired, and her life seems caught up in the ever-infantile world of Elmo and teething rings. The conversations I have with her now are less intellectual and more related to her child's food and movements. These things are all very important to her, but seem foreign to me. My friend never really made a decision to have or not have children, she simply had her son. I don't think she thought very much about the choice she was making and whether or not it would be good or bad for her or her child either. In fact, I often wonder to what extent women become mothers because they consciously choose to have children, and to what extent they become mothers because they are moving forward in their lives in a predetermined way, just as in *The Matrix*. The matrix is supposed to symbolically represent a world where, unless awakened, those living in it are completely unaware of its artificiality. The point really is not that of becoming mothers; the point is to what extent we consciously make such an important decision about our lives. I believe that most Americans live their lives in this same way. What we all need is what Herbert Blumer calls **interpretation**. Somewhere between impulse and action, we should all crave conscious thinking and choice. With this idea in mind, my decision to not have children becomes based, in part, on my observation and consideration of my friend's experiences. I am interpreting her situation as limiting, and therefore it acts as a deterrent for me. More than that, I have given this decision the same conscious and attentive thought I give every important decision in my life.

Homans, when discussing his notion of **distributive justice**, states that "what matters to people is that reward should be proportional to investment and contribution" (Wallace and Wolf). The amount of work put into something, such as a job, should be

adequately compensated. I believe that a mother works as hard if not harder than any career-oriented woman, yet the reward is not always guaranteed in the kind of society we live in. It is not guaranteed that children will love and respect their parents, and every parent runs the risk of not being compensated at all for the work they put into raising their children. I would much rather put my heart into something and be guaranteed some sort of compensation for it, even if the only compensation I get is of an intrinsic nature, of being able to say I worked hard and now I am at peace. I don't perceive mothers being guaranteed that sort of peace in their lives. I believe that if a child makes a poor decision, the mother will always blame herself as if she had failed in some way. I believe that distributive justice should apply to all, especially to mothers who perform essential work for society. Short of that, I want the education and hard work I put into social programs to bear results. I feel more assured of being successful in this way than I would if I was a mother. My hope is that the next generation will live in a better world than I did.

When I was a child, my mother stayed at home with my six siblings and me. I saw my mother lose herself in her role of a mother and a homemaker and become overwhelmed to the point of shutting down and under-compensating in order to survive. The depression then began to set in, and her entire identity is now completely distorted and barely recognizable. I often wonder if she regrets having children and whether or not she would have been happy with only a few, or perhaps even none at all. I suppose my biggest fear with having children is that I would lose myself as she has, and that is something I am not willing to risk happening. My mother's life was compromised due to the fact that she grew to see her situation as hopeless. She can't change her past actions, she can't make her children go away, and she can never go back to the way her life used to be. She was

a different person, one I have never met and probably never will. Her feelings fell somewhere between wishing we had never been born and feeling responsible for harming our emotional well-being. The guilt she must have felt undoubtedly is still with her. Her response to her situation has been expressed through a withdrawal from society and a life lived in seclusion. In my mother's everyday life **drama**, the **front region** compelled her to act in public as a good mother—one who loved and was there for her children in every way because this is what she believed to be socially acceptable. She was taught that this type of life would give her some sort of meaning and direction for her life. In the **back region** of her life, however, she was simply not happy with her role as a mother, and as a result she became emotionally unavailable and incapable of being an effective mother. She has spent most of her adult life as an actor in a play, not truly knowing that she was acting at all. I watched this for my entire life and saw no result other than pain in being a mother.

Writing these lines have helped me discover feelings I did not realize I had. Growing up in a home with an emotionally unavailable mother who regretted having children was a scarring experience. I see now how quickly my mother spiraled out of control, until she had sunk so deep that it became impossible for her to lift herself out of her situation. I often wonder who my mother would have been, had she not given in to outside pressures to have children. I try to imagine if she might have been pursued her education and found the cure for cancer, or AIDS, or maybe could have been a great painter. Unfortunately, I'll never know what she could have accomplished. It is possible that she could have done many things, but her life was diverted and she suppressed her inner feelings until she became someone she could no longer respect. Being a mother was an admirable thing, but she was obviously not happy

with it. As a result, she will never know what her future may have held.

I have reflected on all of the influences in my life thus far and have not seen anything that would make me interested in having children. Through his concept **the looking glass self**, Charles Cooley illustrated how we often know, and feel about, ourselves through our imagination of how others perceive us. I have seen my mother completely lose herself because of her children. I have seen my friend lose much of her freedom for her child. I have imagined myself in their shoes, and have felt fear. Such an experience changes completely how a woman views herself and the outside world. Suddenly, learning seems to cease and a woman's life is put on hold to raise her children. Only some of these women will ever accomplish any of their goals, and I am saddened by this thought. I wonder how it is that our **alienating** society has taught us that it is fine to stunt our education and halt our life dreams because a child has been brought into our world.

My decision is of course based on my own life experience. Those who have helped keep my spirit up, have kept me willing to put up a fight for myself and make a series of decisions to achieve important goals. I will not feel fulfilled to spend the most important years of my lifetime at home. I want to change lives and travel the world and give my life meaning. I cannot compromise my ideals if I want to accomplish them. Seeing my mother regret her decisions was a very sad thing, and I believe she made those decisions because she was socialized to believe that children would be the ultimate accomplishment she could have. She compromised her own life and sought to do the same to each and every one of her children. She will never be a whole person again. For this I am sad, mostly because it troubles me that she would sacrifice everything to create lives that I don't believe she ever really wanted in the first place. Unfortunately, I don't

think her story is uncommon.

I have decided that rather than potentially ruin the life of another human being that has not even been born, I will focus on helping those who are already alive and in need, including myself. There are many in need of something more than what they have, and I believe it will be better if I direct my energies to those already living. The exact direction I will take in my life is yet to be determined as I am furthering my education. I do know that I will be working with the public. For some time, I have considered going into the Peace Corp. I know that whatever I choose, I will succeed. I will not allow myself to be forced into making a decision, which will cause me to lose myself. My life's goal is to live it to the fullest, and I believe that I am gaining the skills I need to achieve that goal.

It is my sincere hope that everyone will be fulfilled in whatever way they choose to be. I believe that anyone can find meaning in whatever life they consciously choose, whether it be with a family or a career. I feel, for the first time in my life, that I have a better knowledge of who I am and what I want to do with my life. Every experience I have had, whether good or bad, has contributed in some way in bringing me to where I am today. I have struggled along the way but feel my eyes have opened to all possibilities. I still have the youth to believe all things are possible, and the wisdom to know that nothing in life is easy but the hardest things are always the most valuable. My decision is based on the circumstances and experiences of my own life, and what I feel can best accommodate the fulfillment of my goals.

I understand that becoming a mother does not in and of itself prevent one from achieving important goals in life. After all there have been many mothers, of many children, whose contributions to society have been exemplary—provided that they found a way to strike a balance between their private, personal troubles in the

sphere of their families and the public issues of their times to which they also deserved to make significant contributions as human beings:

*"I could not, at any age, be content to take my place by the fireside and simply look on. Life was meant to be lived.*

*Curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life."*

Eleanor Roosevelt

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