



Religion, Gender, and Patriarchy: Awakening to My Self- Conscious Resocialization

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“Sharon, Sharon ... can you hear me?” “Sharon if you can hear me squeeze my hand.” Slowly I struggled to open my eyes as I listened to my sister coach me towards consciousness. Finally I saw her familiar face smiling at me, and for that brief moment I felt at home, but I wasn’t. I started to look around the room, and endless questions started to fill my head: “Where am I?” “What happened?” Soon I would discover how my life had taken an unexpected turn. In June of 2000, I was in an accident that not only threatened my life, but redefined it as well. Even now as I reflect back on who Sharon Brown was then and who I am now, I feel as though when I awoke in that hospital bed I was not given just another chance, but was given a whole new life, completely different from everything I had known before. This new life has been a rebirth for me because it has allowed me to re-experience the process of socialization with open eyes, and to observe how who I am is very much a product of those around me.

Personally, I view **socialization** to be an ongoing process of development in

which people discover and define who they are as individuals in relation to the society in which they live. Many events and people have shaped who I am, and although their influence can be seen at the personal level, all these influences can also be recognized to be products of structural social forces shaping my life. By reflecting on various aspects of class, readings, discussions, films, etc, I am now able to see and analyze this relationship between the **micro and macro social worlds**, both of which have helped me to arrive at a sociological understanding of who I am as a social being.

Prior to the summer of 2000, my life seemed very average. My **social location** was that of an American teenager. I was part a working/middle **class**, Protestant, Caucasian family consisting of my mother, my father, and my sister. I was the youngest child, and being the youngest I was often sheltered and accustomed to following the lead of my other family members. This presumed conformity was seen in many aspects of my life, one of which was religion. I was raised in the Protestant Christian faith, and religion and church were always important aspects of my family life, which meant they were important personally for me as well. It was with religion that I experienced a form of **secondary socialization** because after becoming a participant member of society, I was then inducted into the specific world of the church, more specifically the world of my Protestant Christian church (Berger & Berger 19). As I child, I attended church and church-related activities faithfully, and the Christian doctrine was constantly being taught to me inside and outside of my house. Fundamental Christian concepts and ideology were taught to me by Sunday school teachers or youth leaders and were then reinforced at home by my parents. The macro world of the church as a religious institution was affecting the micro world of our family dynamics, my life and those of my parents, and our religious socializations.

When I was 13, due to economic difficulties, my father began to leave for months at a time in order to work as an engineer on different ships. The dynamics of our family completely changed, and my parents began to conform to the breadwinner/homemaker **roles** of the typical middle-class American family described by Phyllis Moen and Patricia Roehling in their book, *The Career Mystique: Cracks in the American Dream* (2005). Again, one is able to see the interaction between the micro and macro world because it was the dominant/popular values of society that were influencing the roles that my parents aspired to attain. “In the ideal world, men were breadwinners, working full time in careers that promised security, [and] women were the caretakers of the home and family supporting their husbands emotionally and socially” (Moen & Roehling 3). Striving to attain this ideal, the roles of my parents changed, now my father would solely earn money, and my mother would solely raise the kids. My father’s salary allowed my mother to stay at home and take care of me and my sister, and also allowed both of us to be able to attend a private Christian middle school and high school. The school was 45 minutes away from where we lived, and since there were no dorms, our mother would have to drive us to and from school every day, preventing her from pursuing and developing her **career**. Many would view this sacrifice as an expression of our mother’s love, but I would argue that the reasoning goes deeper.

After reading Richard Flacks’ article, *Growing Up Confused* (1979), I am able to see that in addition to her love for my sister and I, my mother’s decision was highly determined by the social expectations placed on her. Flacks describes how a mother is expected “to be a full-time mother and housewife ... [and]... is expected to accept this **role** even though her formal education before marriage and **motherhood** has made her qualified to perform other roles” (27).

My mother actually had a higher level of education than my father, a MA compared to my father’s BA, 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. I know that my mother in part definitely enjoyed being able to be there for me and my sister physically, being able to be part of our lives and take care of us. But I am also quite certain that she felt a little unfulfilled as well. Although my mom did get enjoyment from her role as the caretaker, she must have experienced frustration resulting from what Betty Friedan termed the feminine mystique. She describes the feminine mystique as the myth that marriage and motherhood are totally fulfilling, when in reality “many middle-class homemakers felt isolated, inadequate, alone and unhappy” (Moen & Roehling 4). Certainly my mother must have felt somewhat unfulfilled, isolated and inadequate assuming her role as the full-time mother since it deprived her of any “opportunity to use her education and talents” (Moen & Roehling 3).

Fatherhood, like motherhood, also had its expectations and sacrifices. Contradictory cultural demands demand that “men be dedicated careerists and, at the same time, good fathers” (Flacks 28). The complexity of these demands is so hard to fulfill that many times fathers must make a difficult choice between where they are going to truly strive for success—success in fatherhood or success in their career. In our society success has been defined by one’s job or career advancement, which explains why often times men choose to focus upon their career even despite the familial sacrifices. This career obsession was beautifully illustrated in Mick Jackson’s film, *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

In this film, one is able to see how careers are overvalued in American society, and how they can truly dominate a person’s life. Sport columnist Mitch Albom is totally consumed by his career, which then

alienates him from those closest to him. His career was his priority and this jeopardized his relationship with the woman he loved. It is only through the death of his teacher that Mitch is able to see the shallowness of his career obsession, and is able to reprioritize his life. This movie illustrates how American society has defined success through one's career, and unfortunately this was how success was defined for my father as well. My father was pressured to be dedicated to his career and to be a good father, and in the end he had to make a choice, a sacrifice. Although my father's choice to pursue his career provided for our family financially, he was unable to provide for us emotionally and unable to develop a relationship with my sister and myself. Although the decision to have my father work away from home and have my mother work as a full-time mom was costly for both of my parents, it was a sacrifice my mother and father had decided to make to ensure that their children would be able to receive a reputable education with religious guidance.

In high school, I was surrounded by other Christians all the time, which undoubtedly fostered my spiritual development. The teachers, administration, and other adult figures were all affirmed Christians who outwardly expressed their faith, and although these role-models did influence me, the most influential group of people within my school was my **peer group**. The majority of my classmates were Christians as well, and most of them had received a Christian upbringing similar to mine. This commonality provided me "friendship, acceptance and belongingness, staples of the peer group," as well as spiritual reassurance and security (Bensman & Rosenberg 80). Certainly all of these were influential factors in the strengthening of my faith.

The commonality and connection I felt with my peers characterized the environment in the classroom and school, but it

also defined another aspect of my high school life, the environment of organized sports. In high school I played three sports: field hockey, basketball and softball, and sports occupied a big part of my time and my life. I love playing sports for many reasons, one of which was the sense of community I received from my team. The dynamics of organized sports was explored by Michael Messner in his article *Boyhood, Sports, and the Construction of Masculinity* (1992). Messner explains that oftentimes sports bring "a sense of instant family ... [a] kind of closeness ... [and] a connection and unity with other people" (168). For me the connection I felt with my team was two-fold—my team itself was like a family, and since the majority of my teammates were Christians like me, they were part of my Christian family as well. As one can see, in high school I definitely received the religious nurturing my parents had hoped for, but unfortunately none of this could have fully prepared me for what was about to happen.

In May of 2000, I graduated high school, and for a graduation present my parents paid for me to go on a trip with other students to Australia and New Zealand. In Australia, we traveled along the eastern coast, visiting tourist attractions and partaking in different excursions that interested us. In New Zealand we traveled in the same manner, and one excursion that was offered was ATV (all terrain vehicle) riding through a mountain. I was excited because I had never been on a quad-bike before, so I quickly signed up. We were quickly instructed as to how to operate the machines, placed on a training course, and then led up the mountain. I was told later that as we were going up a steep incline, the girl in front of me started to have problems and started rolling back towards me. In order to not hit her, I swerved out of the way, and fell over a 40 meter cliff, about 120 feet. I was transported to Auckland hospital where I was placed in acute care and in-

duced into a coma. My family and my boyfriend flew to New Zealand, hoping I would still be alive when they arrived. The outlook according to doctors was bleak—I wasn't supposed to make it and if I did, I would be in a vegetative state or have the learning capacity of a two year old. Surely they would never believe that now, 5 years later, I would be graduating from college.

Although the ending to this story is happy, the road I have traveled along the way has been anything but smooth. I have encountered many difficulties since my accident, and one of the biggest would be the challenging of my faith. As discussed before religion had always been an important aspect of my life, but all of a sudden what I believed was under question. How could a loving god, who I had always obeyed and witnessed for, allow this to happen? The questioning of my faith allowed me to critically analyze the social factors that influence religious identification.

Most people are oriented to a specific religion in early **childhood**, usually the one taught to them by their parents. The religious teaching of the parents is highly influential because as a child, whatever the parents say is usually accepted as truth. This is very important to consider when discussing religious beliefs. If the parents already assume the **role** of instilling in the child a sense of what is right or wrong, then their influence over the child's **internalization** of religious doctrine would be guaranteed. If a parent is the source of ultimate truth, then the child will predictably incorporate the values of the parent within him or herself. The issue of religious socialization and the parental role in the process is thoroughly discussed in Berger & Berger's article, "Becoming a Member of Society" (1979).

Berger and Berger discuss the child's unawareness of alternative worlds, and when the parents "confront him with a world—for him, it is the world. It is only much later that he discovers that there are

alternatives to this particular world, that his parents' world is relative in space and time" (Berger & Berger 10). As a child and an adolescent I had internalized the beliefs of my parents as my own, but due to my accident and what followed I began to question what I had always believed, and realized that there were alternatives to what I was taught—wondering whether the god I once believed in really didn't exist. All individuals have a religious infancy, a time when they believe because they accept what others tell them as truth, but when they begin to discover their own beliefs and redefine themselves as spiritual beings in relation to how their spiritual world interacts with their world or society, this is when religious resocialization occurs.

Once I started questioning my faith I started to experience a strong conflict within myself. Part of me did not believe what I used to believe, but the other part of me was scared to admit that I had changed. Christianity was all that I had known; it defined me. If I wasn't a Christian what would I be? All of a sudden the questioning of my faith caused a serious questioning of my **identity**. Who was I, who was Sharon Brown without and aside from my Christian faith? As Crain describes in the fifth stage of Erikson's eight stages of life, I began to experience an **identity crisis**. In this stage, adolescents become disturbed by social conflicts and begin to try to establish who they are in relation to the larger social order (Crain 281). Like the adolescents described by Erikson, I was also confused and worrying about my future place in the social world.

The thing that had provided me guidance, direction and meaning was no longer certain. As sociologist Emile Durkheim would explain, I started to experience intense feelings of anomie, of complete normlessness. The former regulative power of religion was disrupted, and the old **norms** no longer applied (Ritzer 196). Before the

accident, the Christian **disciplines** I had learned, had always guided my actions and provided me with norms that governed how I lived my life, but without them what would I follow? As Michael Foucault discusses in his essay, "Panopticism" (1984), **discipline** "arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion." Likewise, a sudden loss of my Christian discipline would naturally elicit feelings of disorientation. I had based everything in my life upon Christian doctrine, so if Christianity was uncertain, then everything else would be also. On top of this worry about what is true and what is not, I began to wonder what my family might think. My family had always been influential in my spiritual development and spiritual socialization, so it is predictable that their opinion would be important to me.

The influence of family members on a person's socialization is understandable, especially when considering that it is usually the family members closest to an individual or who know the person best, that influence one's socialization. The influence of family members is a topic that is addressed by Berger & Berger in their discussion of **significant others**. Berger & Berger explain how in childhood, the most important others are the immediate family—parents, and brothers and sisters, and it is these "people with whom the child interacts most frequently, to whom he has an important emotional relationship, and whose attitudes and roles are the crucial ones in his situation" (13). Although my spiritual dilemma occurred later than childhood, my families' attitudes were still very important to me, and each member impacted my spiritual decision.

As I mentioned before, being the youngest I have always been accustomed to following the lead of others, and with no one is this seen more than with my older sister. I have always walked in my sister's shadow, and although at times this was frustrating to me, most of the time it was

done out of respect or admiration. The **role** of my sister in my socialization is two-fold—she is my role-model and she is my best friend. For this reason, I would say she is the person who has had the biggest influence on my life and on my socialization. I have always wanted to be like Julie, and when it came to religion, it wasn't any different.

In high school my sister was the school chaplain, so she was not only my spiritual leader at home, but the spiritual leader of the school as well. When she went to college she began to struggle with her spirituality as well. During the school year she went to Babson College, a campus dominated by the upper class, and during the summer she went on missions trips to Bolivia or Kenya in order to help people in poverty. It was during her first couple of years at college that she began to become overwhelmed by the economic contrast she was seeing between people she went to school with and the people stricken by poverty that she tried to help. She could not understand how the loving god that we were taught about would allow innocent children to starve to death while so many of her affluent friends wasted their money. Unable to resolve this struggle within herself, she decided to leave the church. Her decision would totally disrupt the dynamics of my family, and in the meantime would pave the road for my own spiritual rebellion.

In the work titled *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991* by Minnie Bruce Pratt, I was able to see how the spiritual rebellions in me and my sister paralleled the challenging of limitations described by the author. Pratt describes how throughout her life certain limitations were placed on her, and how these limitations acted as natural **boundaries**, limitations that were not questioned, but just accepted as a part of life (14). I had always accepted Christianity and considered what my parents taught me as absolute truth. It was an uncontested natural

part of my life. My Christian upbringing had placed certain limitations on me and my thinking, and it was my accident that allowed me to see these boundaries and then cross them. My sister's decision crushed my parents. They had always emphasized Christianity so much that hearing this was devastating. This devastation, however, was nothing compared to my mother's decision a year later.

After my accident, I was not allowed to attend college for the upcoming school year because the doctors thought I wasn't ready. I stayed at home for that year, living with my mom, while my sister finished college and my father was away working. It was just the two of us or perhaps I should say three. During that year my mother started acting differently, many times she would go away for a couple of days even some night just spontaneously not come home. She had reconnected with her old college roommate, and spending a lot of time with her. In the spring of 2001, my mother told me that my father and her were getting a divorce and that she was gay. Again my whole sense of reality was shattered. My mom wasn't gay! She gave birth to me, how could she be? She and my father had been married for 26 years and they had two children, she couldn't be gay, but she was/is. Along with contradicting what I had known as truth, that my mom was a heterosexual, her affirmation contradicted something else, the biblical lessons she had taught me. She and my father had instilled values in my sister and I, values such as considering homosexuality to be wrong. If she was contradicting the moral doctrine she taught us, what did that say about everything else she taught us?

After a few years, after coming to my own personal conclusion regarding Christianity, I was able to confront my mother about this seemingly hypocritical lifestyle. I asked her why she would outwardly condemn something that was a part of who she was. She explained that while she was with

my father, she was trying to be a good Christian by denying her homosexuality, viewing it as a sinful desire that she needed to suppress. After reading Arlie Hochschild's book, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life* (2003), I am able to see my mother's denial of her homosexuality incorporated a lot of **emotional management**. First of all, one can see how my mother's internalization of society's condemnation of homosexuality is another example of how the micro and macro social worlds are intertwined and influence one another, and also a perfect example of the **normative contextual dimension of emotional work**. "The normative dimension of a context refers to what feels appropriate or right" and points "to the relation between **feeling** and feeling rules" (Hochschild 81). My mother wanted to be with a woman, that was her **feeling**, but the socially established rule of Christianity, and most of society, was that homosexuality was wrong. The normative context developed a crisis within my mother between her inner **feelings** and how she would express them.

In order to try to resolve this conflict, my mother must have utilized different techniques of **emotional work**, some of which I could see in her response to my question. As she explained, she would often deny her homosexuality and try to convince herself that she should not feel that way—the **cognitive technique of emotional work** (Hochschild 96). She would attempt to internalize the idea that homosexuality was wrong, in the service of changing the feelings associated with them, her homosexual desires. Next, her marriage to my father was a way that she used the **expressive technique of emotional management**. Just like how a person smiles in order to try to change their own mood, so my mother was trying to change her inner feelings, her homosexual tendencies, by changing her expressive gestures, having a heterosexual marriage (Hochschild 96). Although the gesture of smiling and the ges-

ture of marriage are completely different, the intention behind them is the same, the attempt to change one's inner feelings.

After confronting my mother about her conflicting lifestyle and teaching, I began to ask her about her own personal beliefs. I asked her "so, do you still believe in everything that you taught us, do you still believe in the Christian doctrine or has that changed?" My focus here was now on the interaction of her lifestyle and her faith, not her teaching. She then told me something that has always stuck with me—she said "I have just realized that not everything is black and white." "I believe in some things, but I now am able to see that some things have been taken out of context and vulnerable to subjective interpretation." As a child, the type of Christian doctrine I was taught was always portrayed as an absolute truth, not as unclear. Since childhood however, and since my accident, I have also realized that there are many things in life that I previously viewed as absolute which are now questionable, things such as gender and sex.

Before I thought that just like Christianity, the issues of sex and gender were black and white also. If you were born with a penis you were male and were masculine, and if you were born with a vagina, you were female and were feminine. As Holly Devour explains in her book, *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* (1989), this assignment is also oftentimes unclear. She reveals that in certain situations, like the ones regarding hermaphrodites, transsexuals and transvestites, gender and sex are not black and white categories. For example, in the case of a hermaphrodite, a person having both male and female reproductive organs, the sex of the person is ambiguous and is often determined by the parents and doctors. Devour discusses how the obscurity behind sex and gender demonstrates that there are other factors besides one's biology that can influence how sex and gender are determined. One

theory that addresses such an influence is the Social Learning Theory which proposes that a person can learn gender through social interaction. "Social learning theory thus locates the source of sex typing in the sex-differentiated practices of the socializing community" (Bem 600). It is obvious that some things which I had previously assumed were clearly defined were in reality vulnerable to society's interpretation. Seeing this, I am now able to understand my mother's interpretation of the Christian doctrine, and am actually able to see a strong similarity between her understanding and mine.

My sister and my mother had already voiced their changed beliefs for different reasons, but my father remained fervently impassioned by our previous belief. I began to worry about how my father would react to change in my faith. What would he think? Would he disown me? I did not truly believe anymore, but could I leave the church being aware of his opposition? This type of conflict that began to rise inside of me is analyzed in William Crane's article "Erikson and the Eight Stages of Life" (2002).

Erikson introduced concepts to Freud's psychosexual stages, in order to develop a "general encounter between the child and the social world" (Crain 273). Erikson explains, in the general stage Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, that an individual begins to have a sense of autonomy, independence or ability to defy control, but it is here that they begin to experience shame also, "the feeling that one does not look good in other's eyes" (Crain 278). I was aware that I could acknowledge my disbelief, but I was still worried about what would my father think of me. Could I outwardly confess that I did not believe in the Protestant faith anymore, even though my father would fervently disapprove? Although I was much older than the age proposed for this stage, the principles are still relevant. I, like all individuals, reached a point in my

development where my desire to exercise my autonomy was in conflict with the shame that would come as a result of disappointing my father. This struggle is familiar to many and is captured well by the movie *Billy Elliot*.

Billy Elliot was experiencing the same conflict that I was experiencing—wanting to be true to his inner self, but not wanting to upset his father. Like me, Billy began to discover alternatives to the particular world introduced by his father. Boxing was valued by his father, like Christianity is valued by my father, and he discovered the alternative of ballet, and I found the alternative of disbelief. In reference to Erikson's general stage, Billy's sense of autonomy was telling him to pursue ballet, but his father and society were telling him that he must control this impulse and continue boxing. My impulses were my spiritual doubts and my father desperately wanted me to control them, persevere, and affirm my spirituality. Through Billy's struggle and mine, I am able to see how going through this general stage is a part of personal development and part of establishing a social self, "a self realized in its relationship to others" (Mead 204). Part of what has socialized me and helped me realize my true self is the relationship between me and my Dad. My decision to break away from the church and exercise my autonomy was differentiating me from my father and helping me realize a part of who I really am.

Many times I have wondered why my father's opinion has meant so much to me, compared to the opinion of my mother and sister. Part of me would like to say that it was because my father represented my only opposition. My mother and sister had already acknowledged the change in their beliefs, so surely they would not condemn me for mine, but what about my father? My father was the only family member who would be definitely opposing my decision. Although this did factor into my preoccupation with my father's opinion, I believe

that again, the reasoning still goes deeper. I believe the reasoning behind my preoccupation with my father's approval/disapproval can be attributed to two factors: 1) my father's role in the enforcement of reward and punishment in my life and 2) my internalization of male supremacy taught by my church.

As Berger & Berger explain, one reason why parents have a significant influence on children is because they have an overwhelming power over the rewards a child craves and the punishment the child fears (10). The association between the parent and what they provide is very influential to how a child then acts. Looking back now, I can see how this association was definitely part of my struggle in leaving the church. My father's career and role as breadwinner gave him tremendous financial power over my rewards and punishment. After my accident, I was completely financially dependent on my father, I was living in his house, he was providing the money used to feed me, and he even agreed he would be paying for my college education. If I left the church, would he take away those resources? As my disbelief became more certain, I found myself worrying about what the financial consequences would be if I told my father. My father's role as provider was surely inhibiting me from denouncing my faith.

Throughout my life, I internalized many aspects of Christianity and the church, and the supremacy of masculinity was one of them. The Protestant Christian church in which I was raised was a very patriarchal society, and certainly this influenced how I viewed my father. "Patriarchy's defining elements are its male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered character ...the valuing of masculinity and maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness," all of which defined the church environment that consumed my life (Johnson 25). My church never had any female leaders, and it was

only after I left the church that I met my first female Reverend. The male was seen as head of the church and the household, and the female was seen as his support. My father was the head of our household and my mother was his support, a dynamic that can be seen in the breadwinner/homemaker roles they acquired. Males were number 1 in my church (and some would argue in the Christian doctrine), and my father was number one in my house. For this reason it is understandable why I feared how father thought and would view my decision to disown my Christian faith.

About two years after my accident, I reached an inevitable point in faith—I had to make a choice—was I going to live a lie and act like I was a convinced Christian, or was I going to confess my disbelief and re-define who I was. I decided that I could not follow in the path I was going even though it was everything I had known. I had to be honest with myself and with everyone around me, including my family. I began my journey to find an alternative world that I could call my own. I am still on that road and still looking, but this time I am searching with open eyes. During the first stage of my socialization into the different worlds of school, religion, etc., I was naïve with regards to the different elements that would define me. This time, however, I am a conscious participant in the process of my socialization during which I am discovering and defining who I am as an individual in relation to the society in which I live. The accident and the coma paradoxically marked a reawakening to my self-conscious resocialization.

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