Not Just a Wave, But Part of the Ocean
Examining my Small Town Roots

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Abstract: In this paper I use various sociological theories and concepts, particularly those of Georg Simmel, to explore how my small town upbringing has helped shape the person I am today. I am particularly interested in examining the problem I have with branching out in new surroundings while still maintaining the same identity I have in the comfort zone of my hometown. At one time I thought unconditional love and attention were things I could only find in the family I had in my small town. The security I felt there had a lot to do with my only feeling comfortable as my small-town self surrounded by the people who have known me my entire life. I have always failed to realize that I am not just a part of a small community, but a part of something much larger, and that it doesn't have to be scary. I always felt that without my safety zone I would crash and become nothing, like the little wave Morrie talked about in *Tuesdays With Morrie*. When waves crash onshore and then retract, as they also do in Cape Cod, they are reborn in a sense and reunite as part of the ocean. What I've also realized is that I'm "part of the ocean." I too am regenerated. Moving away from Chatham doesn't mean I have to lose being the person I became there. I am not just a wave, but part of the ocean and a vital part of this world.

It was two months before my fifth birthday when my parents, brother, and I moved from our rented home in Quincy, Massachusetts, to our very own house on Cape Cod. The small town of Chatham became my new home and would remain my home for the next sixteen years. Now that I have learned what it is, I guess one could say this is where my **sociological imagination** really first began to take flight. In his book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills describes the sociological imagination as a "capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations be-

tween the two"(350). The sociological imagination is what allows us to see ourselves and our own lives in relation to everyone else and the world around us.

When most people think of Cape Cod they think of lighthouses, beaches, and beautiful summer homes. This is all very true, yet the Cape is not just a summer vacation for me. A human-made canal separates my hometown from the rest of Massachusetts and you need to first cross over a bridge and then drive approximately forty-five more minutes before reaching Chatham, the elbow of the Cape. Chatham's population in 2004 was 6,860 (www.mass.gov/cc/chatham.html); this

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survey was taken in July, however, which includes summertime residents. The median age of Chatham residents is 53.9 and the residents are composed of whites (95.3%), blacks (1.8%), hispanics (1%), and other populations (0.9%) (www.city-data.com). Reading this data made me realize more than ever how different the town is from other parts of the country.

I didn't think of it at the time, but the excerpt from the film, *The Matrix*, can really be applied to my life. In the film, Neo and the rest of the humans are living life while wearing blinders. According to **phenomenological sociology**, we must study and gain knowledge of the world from the eyes of the active participants, us. In the film, Neo and the others can only view the world with the **stock of knowledge** they have been provided with. Stock of knowledge is one of Alfred Schutz's concepts and in the text it is described as, "…social recipes of conceptions of appropriate behavior that enable them to think of the world as made up of 'types' of things like books, cars, houses, clothing, and so on" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006, 264). The "them" in this definition are people or individuals. Neo's stock of knowledge is limited to what the Matrix provides, much like my own stock of knowledge being limited to what my small town could provide.

Chatham is often depicted as a wonderful, safe place to raise a family or simply spend an enchanting few weeks or months when visiting in the spring or summer. It is a small village on the water with virtually no crime rate. The loud, fast paced movement of urban areas is only experienced to a small degree when tourists arrive. Somewhat **macrosociologically** speaking, this sheds some light on how well the structure and function of the town must work. **Functionalism** tends to look at the institutions of society and how they all relate to each other, as well as depend upon one other in the larger social context. When I was still in elementary school I could ride my bike to school without the accompaniment of an adult. There was no such thing as crime, and every person in the town was a friend and neighbor. If a new business wanted to move in, it had to be approved by the town. The **social institutions**, such as town government, churches, police, and schools all worked together to keep the town functioning properly.

The functioning of the town was also made a lot easier by its shear size. In a sense, everyone knew each other. I was, and still am, Jennie Porter, JP, or simply Porter, according to which friends you ask. I lived on a street that included chop houses (associated with the low-income families), near the Dugan's, Dunne's, and Logan's. From the time my family moved there I was **integrated** into the specific social order of Chatham's society, an integration process in modern society Emile Durkheim wrote about in his work (Wallace & Wolf, 20). The **collective conscience** of my seaside community involved for the most part working hard, going to church, helping your neighbor, looking out for one another, and always being polite and courteous. Growing up, there wasn't much room for acting out because someone would always know about it, intervene, and reprimand you.

The Social construction of my reality was dictated to me by the town I lived in. According to Berger and Luckmann, every bit of "knowledge" I gained became a part of my "reality," and thus everyday existence became a socially constructed system, of which I was part (Wallace & Wolf, 286). The first moment of this social construction process they called **externalization**. For me, when I arrived in Chatham I began to create my smaller *social world* through the playmates I found in my neighborhood. My social world was further constructed when I entered kindergarten and began to form friendships. I ended up graduating with all of the same people I entered kindergarten with, give or take a couple. Ac-

cording to George Herbert Mead the **"I"** is, "the unorganized response of the organism to the attitudes of others, the spontaneous disposition or impulse to act." (Wallace & Wolf, 206), and the **"Me"** is, "a set of organized attitudes of others that the individual himself assumes in turn; that is, those perspectives on oneself that the individual has learned from others." (Wallace & Wolf, 206). The small town shaped many attitudes and traits in "me," but "I" also helped shape my small-town attitude, values, and approach to things. The rules my classmates and I created became a part of the structures of our own everyday interactions, and thereby **objectivation**—or the second moment of the social construction process (according to Berger and Luckmann)—too place. As a matter of rule, we all looked out for each other, took care of one another, went to school and played together, even got in and out of trouble together. This was a part of our everyday reality and even when new friends joined us they had to learn to socialize into those patterns of interaction—they had to, **internalization** the rules, which Berger Luckmann call the third moment of the process through which our social reality is constructed (Wallace &Wolf, 290-291).

I graduated from Chatham High School in 2002 with sixty other classmates; to this day I call more than half of them friends, some as close as family. No one will ever know me better than the people I experienced growing up with in Chatham. Through **symbolic interaction**, we actively take part in our lives as creative individuals. Herbert Blumer identifies symbolic interactionism as involving interactions using "a common set of symbols and understanding possessed by people in a group" (Wallace & Wolf, 198-199). Since our social group was small we all understood the same things and pretty much shared the same interests. We consciously interacted with each other and grew together, defining our situations. One of William Isaac Th-

omas' notions, **definition of the situation**, points to how we conduct our responses to outside stimuli based on the definitions we attribute to the situations in which we find ourselves or create. There will then be certain consequences when making such decisions and interactions (Wallace & Wolf, 202). This is in contrast to the **stimulus-response approach**, "which sees behavior as acquired but essentially involuntary responses to external stimuli" (Wallace & Wolf, 198).

I would like to think that we all voluntarily took part in school activities and going out and drinking on the weekends; however, I can't help but wonder whether or not we were falling victim to a negative side of what Charles Horton Cooley calls the **looking-glass self** phenomenon. The looking-glass self is comprised of how we imagine other's see us, how we imagine their response to us, and then the feeling we get as a result. If you are not part of a very large group it may be more noticeable when you are not following along. Perhaps as we were growing up, we initially involuntarily responded to the stimuli because we imagined the other members rejecting us, leading to our feeling of being alienated from the group.

Alienation can come in many forms, and I am reminded here of Annie Roper's article, "*From Alienation to Exploration: Breaking Free From the Iron Cages of My Life*" (2003/4). "The social experience of alienation has affected most of my life," Roper writes; "I grew alienated from my core self when I attended Catholic schools and I've been working on changing that ever since" (Roper, 2004, 48). In her paper she examines how the shift from her free family lifestyle to a strict Catholic school was a very difficult move for her. Roper's socialization began to change drastically and she became a fragmented person. In order to not face alienation from my peers I went out on the weekends with everyone else. In doing this I followed the **social**

norms and also received the reward of future relationships, ones I would never trade in, but am learning to separate myself from. Roper's challenge is one in which she is breaking free from the alienation from her core self; mine, in contrast, is learning to distance myself from my hometown without becoming alienated from the person I am and without feeling alienated from my new surroundings.

Alienation can also be seen in terms of my move from Chatham to the Boston area when I decided to go back to school. A prominent sociologist, Georg Simmel, examined the freedom, yet alienation, that an individual felt when moving from a small town to an urban area. Simmel liked to study sociology on the individual level because he saw society as a living organism that involved organs and parts as its atoms and molecules (Wallace & Wolf, 200). The atoms are humans, or the individuals who help create society and keep it running. We read Simmel's essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," as part of the collection of readings edited by James Farganis (2004). In his introduction to Simmel's essay, Farganis writes, "Urban life today allows individuals to play a variety of roles in different social spaces thereby enhancing freedom…Yet the price of this freedom is to be found in the increasing sense of alienation that people experience in respect to the culture of urban life (Farganis, 2004, 128). I related to this because while in Chatham I feel secure with my **role** as a group member, when I am no longer there and in a big city such as Boston that sense of security seems to vanished and I sometimes feel alone and alienated. In my town everyone is a friend, in the city, everyone is a stranger.

In "The Drinking Matrix: A Symbolic Self Interaction" Neo Morpheus writes about social identity, and how what is normal for some people, is considered to be **deviant** to others. He discusses making first impressions and how he decides what to tell and show about himself depending on which acquaintance he is with (Morpheus, 2003, 15). This reminds me of Erving Goffman's concepts, **dramaturgy** and **impression management**. Dramaturgy views the world and society as a play and the individuals as *social actors*. Wallace and Wolf define impression management as "the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her" (2006: 238). Morpheus presents his "**front-stage**" self in most situations because of the impression he wishes to make. In my case, a big curtain to separate the two stages didn't really exist. Wallace & Wolf (2006) describe the "front-stage" as including "anything observed by the audience while the actor is on front stage that makes for a successful performance" (2006: 238). This means that we are all actors who tend to perform to the expectations of the audience who is watching. The "**back-stage**" is where people, as actors, "can be themselves" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 239). To the outside world we tend to present ourselves as one way and back at home with our families were are just ourselves, no performances needed. I feel that because my town was so small there was not much need for different performances. Pretty much everyone I had grown up with saw all of who I was and still am, and I saw all of them. Our front and back stages were never clearly separated, yet as I've gotten older and moved away, I find myself caring more about the audience and how they see me.

I don't get caught up in designers and brand name fashions, yet much as portrayed in the film, *Affluenza*, I find myself worrying more about appearances. Living near the city, taking the train, and going to school I am more heavily bombarded with ads for buying expensive things and I find that I tend to compare myself to others more often. *Affluenza* stressed that the constant desire to obtain new things and appear wealthy and happy was not going to make you happy; in fact, in the long wrong

you would probably be feeling sad and overwhelmed. While the multi-million dollar homes were all around and the extremely wealthy tourists arrived every summer, I didn't have this same feeling when living in Chatham. The natural beauty of my town made me feel rich and my classmates/friends were all pretty much middle class. No one had fancy cars and all of our parents worked hard as fishermen, carpenters, emergency medical technicians, teachers, librarians, letter carriers, house cleaners, and so on. We all knew each other, and there was no need to keep up appearances.

In her paper, "My Life's Tapestry: Casting Theoretical Lights on the Social Threads That Tie Me Down," D.M. Rafferty discusses "the classist and sexist attitudes that still persist in today's society" (Rafferty, 2004: 41). Rafferty writes about being looked down upon because of being part of a working class family and that the dominant type of people in her hometown of Roxbury determined her "social worth." I never had to experience or feel what she felt. My "social worth" was never an issue because we were all the same. My family has less than many families in the town, yet I have never felt like we have had less. The gap between the have and the haves-not in the town is not as large as what you find in larger urban areas.

When I graduated from high school in 2002 I went to the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) in North Adams. I was at a fairly small school in the mountains and although I had a great roommate and became a member of the dance company, I never felt like I fit in. I desperately wanted the same companionship I had back at home in Chatham. In his essay "City and 'Community': The Urban Theory of Robert Park" (1971), Park Dixon Goist explains that the "search for community" has been a leading theme in the life of America since the Civil War (46). For me, nothing could compare to the community I had back home and I was afraid of search-

ing for a new one. A community is a place you can belong, a place of shared goals and interests, a place of comfort and security. I left MCLA after just one semester and moved back home. The town had not changed and many of my friends were still there; I liked not having to search for them.

After taking a few courses at the community college and living back in my comfort zone for awhile, I finally decided to go back to school full time by coming to UMass Boston. I moved into an apartment in Allston right on the green line between B.U. and B.C. Moving from my quiet town to the 24-hour noise of this urban area was quite a change for me. Sociologist Robert Park, influenced greatly by Simmel, liked to look at the transition from small-town life to city life. In his essay Goist (1971) says that according to Maurice Stein, Park was also influenced by Emile Durkheim and his concept of **anomie**. Wallace & Wolf (2006) write that anomie, literally translated from the French, "means normlessness, a situation where rules or norms are absent" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 22). Then there are two types of anomie, **acute anomie**, "which is the result of an abrupt change" and **chronic anomie**, which is "a state of constant change, characteristic of modern industrial society" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 22). Urban sociologists, such as Park, looked at how our changing country was giving birth to the growing cities, and the same kind of **social control** found in smaller communities was disappearing. However, Park noticed that cities were full of many subcommunities, as he himself put it, "a mosaic of minor communities" (Goist, 1971: 53). Many of these areas are divided according to different ethnic cultures and backgrounds, but Park saw it as a way for people to share beliefs and interests and maintain a sense of community.

When I arrived in Allston I found no subcommunity to connect with. The area I lived in had many college students like most of Boston, but everyone seemed to be

so different from each other and always moving very fast. In my town you would always run into people you know and strike up conversations or at least smile and wave, yet the city-goers always seemed to be avoiding eye contact at all costs. At times I would really begin to feel so distant from everything around me. I have started to realize that much of this comes from my upbringing. Living in our safe town and trusting those around us was something we learned to do only there—the outside world was not included in our circle of trust, they were nothing like us. Chatham was not a cult and we were never molded to ignore the world or discriminate, yet everyone and everywhere else was known as "off cape" and it seemed so far away.

Rousseau talked about the term **natural state** where the "differences in people were far less acute in society. It is society, he argued, that distorts the basic goodness, decency, and equality that are the natural condition of mankind" (Farganis, 2004: 2). For me this means that we are all much more alike than what we think we are. When we are living in our "natural states" we tend to show our human qualities and reach out to one another, yet society somehow distorts this for us. I felt like my natural state could only be found in my hometown and that the people I met outside of my town were not as "real" or sincere. Along with urban society, I placed everything in a hard to reach spot and it just always seemed easier to call or visit home. Social interaction became a problem for me, something Georg Simmel might understand. In *Readings in Social Theory*, Farganis writes; "For Simmel, **modernity** connotes the breakdown of small, rural communities and their personal styles of interaction. In their place, urban center of production and culture have emerged that tend toward anonymity and impersonality in social interactions" (Farganis, 2004: 9-10). So, with this modernity or urbanization if you will, individuals begin to feel disconnected. I felt disconnected.

Simmel studied and understood this disconnection. He felt that modern society and urban life could enhance "freedom from the constraints of a fixed, static, and communal life of an earlier era" (Farganis, 2004: 128). However, this freedom did not come without costs. A growing sense of alienation is felt in the culture of urban life (Farganis, 2004: 128). In his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Simmel discusses the driving force behind the individuals who live in a metropolitan area compared to a small town. According to Simmel, small town people were led more with their hearts and metropolitan people react with their heads. The **intrinsic rewards**, "which are intangible, such as love or respect" were being replaced with **extrinsic rewards**, "which are tangible things, such as money" (Farganis, 2004: 264). This is exactly how I felt after I moved. In Chatham my favorite place is the beach and my most prized possessions are my family and friends. In Allston I became consumed with making money at work to support myself and I wanted more too. Taking the train everyday I was surrounded by ipod users and I found myself left out and jealous. Back at home my interactions with people involved emotional relationships, and in the city the interactions were either cold or based on monetary influences. This all plays into **rational choice** and the **social exchange theory**, but first I want to make a connection to one of the films we watched in class.

In Michael Moore's film, *The Big One*, he is on a book tour around the U.S. visiting many struggling cities. One of his main goals is to visit large corporations and try to understand why that at times of making record profits corporate America seems to always downsize, eliminate thousands of jobs here, and move to places like Mexico or Indonesia. He knows and we know that it all comes down to money; minimizing costs and maximizing profits. What Moore tries to do with these corporate leaders is to get them to rationalize their decisions to

force people out and exploit others in countries around the world just for more money. These companies are not struggling, they have plenty. Karl Marx's conflict theory would explain these leaders' ***ideology***—which basically involves their thinking that what they're doing is perfectly fine when it is not—in terms of their economic motives and interests. Such an ideology, when one looks at it carefully, is a form of ***false consciousness***, because they are "focusing attention on a supposedly better world to come" as opposed to seeing how wrong their present actions really are (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 87-88). All of this focus on economic profits in *The Big One* is similar to the focus of life in the city. The ***cash nexus*** of commercial life and the city "alienate people not only from what they produce and the act of producing it, but also from both themselves and others" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 88). Alienation from myself and others is what I felt and sometimes still feel now, but my struggle is to learn how to solve this problem without strictly relying on my friends from home.

Going back now, let's look at things in terms of the **social exchange theory**. Exchange theorists, such as George Homans, Peter Blau and Coleman, at times drawing inspiration from Simmel, saw social interaction always as a series of rational choices. Wallace & Wolf (2006) explain that "People choose whether to participate in an exchange after they have examined the costs and the rewards of alternative courses of action and have chosen the most attractive. In Simmel's words, 'all contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence'" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 304). In Chatham my social exchange involved the give and take found in personal relationships and friendships, yet when I'm taken out of the exchange there and placed somewhere new I find the interactions and exchanges to be impersonal in a sense. As I'm getting older though, I am making the efforts and decisions to share myself with others and create these personal relationships elsewhere. It has just taken me longer than it might for others; I always seem to be comparing everyone else to what I have back in Chatham.

Using Robert K. Merton's concept ***anticipatory socialization***, I feel a ***process of role exit*** must occur for me. In the textbook Helen Rose Ebaugh, a student of Merton's, explores role exist as the, "disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 50). I need to exit my role as a member of Chatham's society and enter fully into my role as a member of the world's society. In her paper from the social theory forum held at UMass Boston in April 2006, AnaLouise Keating talked about the term "nepantla" as proposed in Gloria E. Anzaldúa's writings. "Nepantla" is "a Nahuatl term meaning 'in-between space'—represents both an extension of and an elaboration on her well-known theory of the ***Borderlands***. Nepantla "signals unexpected, uncontrollable shifts and transitions…But nepantla is also a time of self-reflection, choice, and potential growth" (Keating, 2006: 1). Even though I am not experiencing life between cultures like Anzaldúa did, I am experiencing a transition. Much like the wall that separates the Mexican and U.S. borders that existed as the literal borderlands for Anzaldúa, a canal separates my hometown from the rest of Massachusetts and the U.S. Two bridges are our only connection to everyone else. I have to cross these bridges in the literal sense to leave from and return to Chatham, but I also have to cross symbolic bridges as well. We as individuals and humans need not live life so much on the borderlands, but realize instead that we are all connected.

In practicing ***Phenomenology***, it is important for us to put ourselves in the shoes of others. In the film *12 Angry Men*, Henry Fonda's character is trying to get the other jurors to do just that. Jurgen Habermas

would call this an ***inter-subjective projection into others lifeworld***, which is "understanding what it would be like to be inside someone else's skin, experiencing the world as he or she does" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006: 180). Fonda's character wants the others to realize that the boy they so quickly want to sentence to death is not so different from them; he wants them to really put themselves in his position. In order for any of us to relate to others and experience empathy and understanding we need to do this. I have needed to see the potential rewarding relationships around me, ones similar to what I have in Chatham, without being fearful.

Postmodernism recognizes that the theories applied to our modern world need to be seriously questioned and altered because we've past the modern world and its assumptions. We're beyond seeking simple truths, we need to re-adjust these truths in today's society. The most important truth or concept for me is our interconnection and need for the care and support of others. We are all searching for a community to belong to, but what we don't realize is that we already belong to a community, just a very large one.

The need for recognition and love is explored in *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom. In the book Morrie is talking about being a child rocked by his mother and he says, "'We all yearn in some way to return to those days when we were completely taken care of—unconditional love, unconditional attention…'" (Albom, 1997: 116). At one time I thought unconditional love and attention were things I could only find in the family I had in my small town. The security I felt there had a lot to do with my only feeling comfortable as my small-town self surrounded by the people who have known me my entire life. I have always failed to realize that I am not just a part of a small community, but a part of something much larger, and that it doesn't have to be scary. I always felt that without my safety zone I would crash and become nothing, like the little wave Morrie talked about in *Tuesdays With Morrie*. When waves crash onshore and then retract, as they also do in Cape Cod, they are reborn in a sense and reunite as part of the ocean. What I've also realized is that I'm "part of the ocean." I too am regenerated. Moving away from Chatham doesn't mean I have to lose being the person I became there. I am not just a wave, but part of the ocean and a vital part of this world.

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