



“Getting Stupid to Avoid” **My and Society’s Avoidance Problem with Driving While Drunk**

Jennifer Cervantes

University of Massachusetts Boston

jennifer.cervante002@umb.edu

Abstract: In this paper, using various sociological concepts and the sociological imagination as a conceptual framework, I explore avoidance as both a personal trouble as well as a public issue. As one of my close high-school friends passed away due to a drinking and driving incident, I started to examine some of his, my, and my friends’ reactions to the problem of drunken driving. I questioned many things and ultimately questioned myself about why I took the same approach they took toward the public issue. Avoidance of problems and situations that involve unwanted emotions was a personal problem that not only I had but also does society as well. I realized this when I started to take a closer look at society and myself together using a sociological imagination. We are all part of society and society is a part of us. Being sociologically mindful is something we can all do and should do to help ourselves and broader society.

When our professor stood in front of the class explaining the syllabus, speaking about the sociological imagination and went on about how we would have to write a final paper in this class, I wasn’t sure how this class would shed light on my own life as well as society. I didn’t know then how it was going to show me so much about something that was around me and everyone else in this world. It would encourage me to ask many questions, and make me so intrigued that I would see anything and everything with different eyes.

“Those who possess the sociological imagination can better understand how their thoughts, feelings, and actions are shaped by larger social and historical forces. They can also recognize how their

seemingly **personal troubles**—unemployment, divorce, depression—are linked to larger public issues, such as economic crisis, increase mobility, the dispersion of families, and rapid social change” (Cahill & Sandstrom 3). After reading this in the first chapter of *Inside Social Life*, edited by Spencer E. Cahill & Kent Sandstrom, I understood what my professor was talking about, and it made me want to look into almost every public issue and relate it to a personal issue. Instead, I chose an issue I had been affected by not too long ago, drinking and driving. As many other people, I had a close friend who passed away a few months prior to school started due to a drinking and driving incident. As I was dealing with my friend’s death I

Jennifer Cervantes is a freshman at the University of Massachusetts Boston, majoring in Biology. Cervantes wrote this paper while enrolled in the First Year Seminar, Soc. 110G: “Insiders/Outsiders,” instructed by Mohammad H. Tamdgidi (Associate Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston) during the Spring 2011 semester.

observed a lot of things that I had questioned myself, but had never looked into them more deeply.

As I looked up articles, I came across a paper titled, *The Drinking Matrix: A Symbolic Self Interaction*, written by a former SUNY-Oneonta student using the pen name Neo Morpheus. Regarding his drinking problem, he wrote in the article, “The way I acquired these characteristics may be explained by the **Learning Theory** in social psychology. At a young age through **model learning** I witnessed alcohol as a progression to fun” (12). This made me ask questions like: what makes people want to drink? Does drinking have to do anything with one’s past experience in life? And most importantly, what personal troubles can I relate this to?

One of my personal troubles—and looking back now I found I did it even in reaction to my friend’s death—is **avoidance**. Avoidance of all my problems, avoidance of situations I don’t want to deal with, avoidance of speaking about it, avoidance of things around me, and so on. But why did I do this? While thinking about this, reading a chapter in *Inside Social Life*, titled “The **Social Foundations** of Human Experience” made me wonder what could be the start of an explanation to this. In the chapter, authors Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann talk about how we grow up learning from what is around us. One particular passage in the editors’ review of the chapter that helped me understand a little better the answer to my question was, “Humans at all time and in all places do not experience the same reality. Rather, they experience a **socially constructed reality** that their predecessors have bequeathed to them and that they routinely reproduce. In this selection, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann briefly explain why humans must construct their **own reality**, how that reality is transmitted from one generation to the next and routinely confirmed, and some implications for

understanding the relation of the individual to society” (7).

As we grew up we were taught to crawl, walk and talk by our parents and familyl we weren’t born knowing how to do these things. Just like all of these things were taught to us, so was our reality today constructed by previous and current generations. Personally, we also all have different parents with different styles, morals and points of view whose ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving contributed to the construction of our own everyday personal realities. As I tried to relate my personal life to the above sentences, a movie we watched in class came into play in my mind. Like everyone else, I have a problem **opening up** as well as admitting that I’m wrong. The film *Good Will Hunting* inspired me to make a connection between the main actor of the movie, Will, and myself. In the movie, Will wouldn’t open up and he would avoid questions that would make him open up, until the very end of the film. Everyone has his or her own story to tell, and depending how open one is in analyzing and telling it, one may differently shape how one will ultimately create one’s own reality.

As I grew up, I was in an environment in which people wouldn’t really talk about things. My parents had their fights like any couple but wouldn’t talk to each other; they also didn’t talk about things with me and I grew up thinking that, that was the way to deal with everything. “Eventually it will go away,” is what I started to think about any problem because that’s what I had seen those around me say. Emotions were not expressed as much, so I also grew up feeling strange anytime emotions were being expressed. Every time a problem arose in my life, I would find myself avoid talking to anyone about it and dealing with it by myself. I found it hard to open up and confront my problems. I feel the personal interactions we have with other people play a big role in how society shapes our

lives.

Starting with my very first interactions with my parents, I started to feel that I have to play by the rules in order to be accepted by them. As human beings we all want to be accepted by the ones we care for and love the most. My parents did things a certain way and if I did it differently, I wondered whether they understood me. How would they respond? What if they viewed the expression of feelings as a sign of weakness? I learned to confide in myself and to **inhibit** expressing my feelings. Modeling after my parents' relationship with one another and their relationship to me, I dealt with my intimate relationships in the same matter. Ultimately, I became the person with all the right answers to other relationships, but not mine.

In my current relationship, I had done the same and had been called out on it multiple times. He is a person who likes to talk about everything and anything we have problems with in our relationship. I, on the other hand, always avoid it. I know that by avoiding a problem, it isn't going to go away or suddenly disappear, but I continue acting as if that will happen. Sometimes I just wish he would avoid things like I do. Even though I know I am wrong, I like to think that I am not. “If things are avoided it would be much better,” is what I tell myself.

In the film *Tuesdays with Morrie*, when speaking to Mitch Albom about his own mother and her sickness, the late sociologist Morrie Schwartz said “I felt if I ignored it the sickness would go away”; this is how I felt. When Mitch asked what happened to his mother, Morrie responded “well, she died”; because something isn't talked about, it doesn't mean it isn't there. Yet, still I acted as if it wasn't. When my boyfriend kept pushing me to talk, I would become angry, which is a strategy that not only I use, but also do others. At that point in time I felt that if I were to say something it would be something I don't mean because I

have been pushed to say it. The times I did find myself talking about our problems and not avoiding it, I felt as if something was being taken away from me. I felt uncomfortable and troubled because I felt I was doing something **out of script**. It wasn't like the kinds of behavior in the environment I had grown up with; it wasn't the ‘normal’ script in the stage of family's drama. I felt as though I was playing someone else.

Cahill and Sandstrom, in their introduction to the essay titled “Face-Work and Interaction Rituals” by Sociologist Erving Goffman, stated that “We attempt to avoid places, people, situations, and topics that might threaten our own or others' **face** and attempt to ignore events that do” (235). Our interaction rituals or how we learned to interact since childhood ultimately shape what Goffman calls our face. Our face in a sense is how we identify ourselves in our everyday routines. When my boyfriend pushed me to change my routinized behavior, I would attempt to avoid it, because of the feeling I got that my face was being violated, being replaced with another one, revealing multiple selves in me. That face was something I took up because of my parents and here is another person who is as well a very big part of my life, asking me to take up another face for our relationship. I want to be accepted and understood by him, as I wanted the same from my parents.

“Students sometimes avoid the kind of contact that give rise to unwanted emotions,” wrote Allen Smith III and Sheryl Kleinman in their chapter titled “Managing Emotions in Medical School” (Cahill & Sandstrom 66). The chapter is about students in medical school and how they manage their emotions. As a Certified Nurse's Aide, I have cared for the elderly and the disabled. To keep a professional environment as a care giver, I need to wear another face, and present another self—a professional self. For example, when changing a patient who had been inconti-

ment, I had to learn to keep anything I was feeling to myself. I also have to suppress my emotions when reacting to death, to others' emotion or views, and to other lifestyles. I related greatly to the students in medical school as studied by Smith and Kleinman, and just like the students, the character I have to maintain in my workplace sometimes overflows into my personal life. And not until I read this chapter did I see a similar tendency in my own life in regard to work.

"Wonderful and traumatic experiences are often intertwined. Not discussing or understanding one may make the other even more difficult to grasp" (Pennebaker 122). Reading this passage showed me how intertwined everything is in my life. Not only did I find myself avoiding confrontation or talking about difficult situations, but also I found it hard to express my positive emotions when I was feeling happy, when I loved someone, when I was excited, or anything else that would be easy for anyone else to express. Although I wanted to say how I felt about someone or something that would be considered a wonderful experience, I couldn't do it.

As humans we all do what is the easiest for us to do and the most familiar to us. In *Opening Up*, James Pennebaker classifies people into two **levels of thinkers**, high or low. These are the strategies people pursue when faced with difficult emotions. Some engage in high-level thinking, "characterized by a broad perspective, self-reflection, and the awareness of emotions" (61). Others, in contrast, engage in low-level thinking, of mindless preoccupation with trivial and superficial things. Based on his scheme, I would like to think that I would be categorized as a high-level thinker. But he also brings up an intriguing concept that I find myself very telling of the kind of behavior I usually engage in, that is, **Getting Stupid to Avoid Pain**. When reviewing the results of one of his experiments, Pennebaker wrote, "By moving to

extremely low levels of thought, the women were actively avoiding thinking about a potentially devastating event" (Pennebaker 66). Like the women he was talking about, I find that I also make myself "stupid" to avoid any topic that could possibly bring up any unwanted emotions, thoughts, or topics that were difficult. This has been something easy for me to do. But my point here is to say that this isn't just how I behave, but it is, according to Pennebaker, how many in society or even sometimes all of society behave(s).

We shape our environment and are also shaped by our environment, by how we are brought up by our parents, influenced through interactions with friends, and so on. We do certain things because of our past conditioning, so does such conditioning determine who our true selves or true feelings are? I do not want to avoid things and I know I can because I have done it at times, but why is it that when I do I feel like I'm acting out of character when I do so? These are all questions we don't stop to think about in our everyday lives, because we always feel we are running out of time. As we go on with our lives, we find ourselves continually pressured by a culture that so much worships doing things faster and faster that we don't take the time off to analyze what's going on around us or even within ourselves. The PBS documentary **Running out of Time** portrayed this very well, and so did the film *Tuesdays with Morrie*. In the latter film, Mitch Albom was always rushing around everywhere for his job, so much that he never stopped to listen to anyone around him, until he goes to go see his old professor, the late sociologist Morrie Schwartz. Morrie wasn't afraid to ask Mitch profound question that would make him see his life in a different way and to look within himself to slow down his life and enjoy what really mattered.

In my high school there was a club called SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving). SADD always posted up bulletin

boards in the hallways about drinking and driving, but most of the time everyone just looked at them and failed to comment on them—sometimes we would just ignore it purposely. No one wanted to actually sit down and have a conversation about what they did on the weekends and how drinking and driving was dangerous, and how they had even probably put themselves or others in a deadly situation. And this doesn't just go on in my high school; it goes on all over the world. The truth of the matter is that one in five teens binge drink, but only one in a hundred parents believes his or her teen binge drinks (Institute of Medicine, 2003).

A study by the Prevention Research Center indicates that there are serious problems in the communication between adult authorities and adolescents. Parents, schools, and police are not persistent in their communication with adolescents about alcohol drinking and driving. According to the study, alcohol drinking and driving were not topics that were touched upon a lot between parents and adolescents. In general, the communication between parents and the adolescents about alcohol questions in this sample appeared to be difficult. Although some parents tried to be open about raising the issues and showed understanding of their teenagers' wishes for experimenting with alcohol, most of the parents were not able to establish the necessary foundation for a communication that could affect their children. I found myself not being able to do the same in my relationships.

“**Conflict avoidance** is a strategy used to avoid problems in the workplace, in relationships, and in a lot of situations” (www.Livestrong.com). By avoiding that we have a problem with or just avoiding everything in general—like I did—it isn't going to make it go away. Pretending a problem isn't there can help avoid conflict at the present, but inevitably, the situation will not go away and will have to be dealt

with. The issue can often become more complicated with more serious consequences than if it was handled earlier. A good example is cited in an online article “Examples of Conflict Avoidance.” It states, “a spouse who suspects her husband of drinking can choose to ignore the possible alcohol abuse, especially if there are not obvious problems like violent behavior or job- or family-related problems. But if alcohol abuse is not addressed, resentment can build up in the other spouse over time, and complications ranging from potential drunk driving arrests to a damaged relationship can ensue” (www.Livestrong.com).

The same is applicable to drinking and driving as a public issue; unfortunately, nothing is said and done for it until something really serious happens. Even then the problem only is talked about but not dealt with in favor of a long run, but only a temporary solution. No one is going to willingly admit to drinking and driving and to getting the help they need, because no one wants to admit being wrong. People driving while drunk are all around us and you see constantly people dying because of it. And, what are people doing? They are avoiding it and not dealing with it, as I did when my friend passed away due to drunk driving. There are many reasons I can now see why people would choose to avoid something so serious like this. Pennebaker's concept of “Getting Stupid to Avoid” can be directly correlated with such issue. Some people may use and abuse alcohol to, in a sense, get “stupid” to avoid any problem they are not willing to face, or emotions they do not want to deal with. As Patocks stated in her article about drinking, “The stress-dampening (self-medication) model suggests some individuals may use alcohol as a means to cope with their experience” (2). Alcohol is only a temporary fix. After using alcohol to avoid their problem, the latter is still going to be there.

As a result of our friend's death, other

people that were affected by it expressed their anger and emotions toward the person that was responsible for the death. Club, house, and fund-raiser parties were thrown in remembrance of our friend's life. Along with promoting for the parties, so was alcohol use: the very thing that caused the death of our friend. Many people gathered knowing that alcohol would be there. Yet they avoided or ignored this fact. Why was this being done? Why wasn't something being said? Instead of talking and expressing their feeling and emotions toward the devastating event that had occurred, they were using the very same drug that had caused his death to avoid it, as well as to avoid the fact that more lives could have been put in danger. All of this could very well be as hard to explain for me as it could be for the people that were doing it. Or maybe they didn't even raise the question.

As Pennebaker stated, "If you can't explain something to someone else, you probably don't understand it yourself" (96). Throughout his book Pennebaker encourages us to express our emotions, good or bad, about things in our lives through writing or talking about them; he says such opening ups would bring about great healing for us. This I found to be very true. Pennebaker not only encourages writing, but any form of expression that can be used. Billy in the film *Billy Elliot* used dance as a means to express his feelings, and through his dance he expressed to his father, which was against his dancing ballet, why he loved it so much. He first needed to express to himself why he wanted to dance and not engage in boxing like he attempted to in the beginning of the film. Not until he was able to accept and understand it himself, was he able to convince his father to let him do what he liked to do with his life.

This semester in college I decided to change my major. Everyone chooses his or her major or career for many different

things, some simply for the money, ambition, some because their family wants them to, or because it's a family tradition. Biology is the major I chose when I entered college; but I wanted to become a physician for all the wrong reasons. Nursing is the major I want to choose now. You are probably thinking, why nursing and ask whether I am sure I want to change my major to nursing? This class has shown me that we should always look within ourselves, as well as to the larger society, to answer question like these. While I was thinking about it, one of Morrie's questions that I think everyone should ask themselves came to mind, "am I leading the life I want to lead? Am I doing what I want to do?"

Sean Conroy, a former UMass Boston student, wrote in his article titled, "My Father, My Self: Employing a Sociological Imagination to Transcend the Imaginary in Both Self and Society": "The imaginary river, and all of the negative precipitations of my avoidant defenses are products of unconscious fears and elements, most of which are still unknown to me. An attempt to gain awareness of the unconscious is an imperative part of the self knowledge that allows us to incorporate biography, culture, social theory and historical situation to employ Mills' sociological imagination to reduce the imaginary in both self and society and act in ways more appropriate to the reality of the situation" (Conroy 86). Before actually writing down and trying to analyze my personal problem of avoidance in this paper, I would have not been able to understand it myself and relate it to similar issues facing others in society. I found many connections between myself and society as a result of this study, which I would not have known if I didn't make myself aware of the social world, and how it shaped my world. By relating my person problem to society, and trying to overcome it, I realized we can too overcome society's problems.

I embraced the question and looked

within to answer it. I learned a lot from Morrie, as well as while doing my clinical to obtain my CNA license. I cared for the elderly who like Morrie had a lot of knowledge they shared with me. My connection and relationship continue to build with my patients, and these are things I don't want to avoid. That would be something that going on the medical school wouldn't give me. A physician doesn't have such a one-on-one interaction and connection with the patient who needs them. The nurse does so and is the one that the patient will remember. And when I thought of this, that's when I knew that nursing is what I wanted to do, not just for myself but for others as well. I knew I wanted to continue to learn from everyone I would encounter in my nursing career, as well as to teach them what I know, because together we can all help each other out. I found something that I loved to do because of my experience of giving and living not just for myself but for others. As Morrie said, "you're not a wave; you are part of the ocean." And we can all make this ocean a better place.

As a future nurse who will encounter and treat many kinds of problems, my new understanding of myself and society will help me better serve my patients. Being more sociologically mindful and helping others through nursing can help society make a change. Through gaining such knowledge I can enrich other lives in this world by educating them, promoting health, and encouraging others to be sociologically more mindful. By caring for an individual you are ultimately caring for society as a whole.

Sean Conroy wrote in his article introduced above: "Society *is* [Herbert] Blumer's series of actions and reactions. I would go so far as to say that without a doubt the fabric of society is woven by a chain of re/actions by individuals. Every single one of our actions perpetuates or sets into motion another chain. So, if we make the effort to increase our self-knowledge so

that we may learn how many of our actions find their roots in the imaginary, then we are doing our part to change society" (Conroy 86).

As Conroy wrote about his decision to stop avoiding his problem with his father, I decided to stop avoiding. I stepped into my boyfriend's car and said "ok, let's talk ..." I opened up and expressed everything I had felt before, and confronted all the problems I had avoided to talk about. With an astonished face, he pulled me closer and said "I understand now"!

Although that was a beginning effort in my part to stop my avoidance tendency as a personal trouble, I may very well be starting to do my part in confronting society's avoidance problem in dealing with the public issue of drunken driving.

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