



Shattering A Looking Glass Self **Building An Applied Sociological Imagination**

Melanie Maxham

University of Massachusetts Boston

m.maxham@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay started as an exploration of my relationship with two brothers and their challenges in life due to current child support enforcement laws. However, through the process, it transformed into an analysis of the profound impact of the death of a parent on other family relationships. Growing up in an addictive family system shaped my life. Through reading about micro and macro sociological theories I have continued the process of self-discovery that began slowly a few years ago.

Originally, for the purpose of writing this paper, I sought to research child support enforcement policy and explain the impact it has had on two of my brothers who are non-custodial parents, and by extension, on my life. However, upon reading sections of James Pennebaker's (1997) book, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, where he notes that "Most individual traumas have social components," I changed my paper topic.

I realized then that I should be working both on my own experiences of trauma, and on my feelings about my brothers being dead-beat dads, recognizing that studying them and exploring my own life, are not separate exercises. According to the sociologist C. Wright Mills, our personal troubles—as "inner lives" and "external careers"—are intimately related to one another and to the broader social issues prevalent in the kind of society we live in. This approach, of studying our biographies

in relation to history and broader social issues, is what Mills referred to as "the Sociological Imagination" in his book of the same title, published in 1959.

The reason my brothers are on my mind, and therefore a legitimate subject matter of my own self-study, is that my mother died and she appointed me to be the executrix of her (meager) estate; they turn to me now. I'll call them Burt and Earny to protect them and their estranged families. In both cases, the mothers of their children abused the system and took their children to another state. Both women were awarded huge child support payment settlements even while living, unmarried, with another man who fully supported the household.

Growing up, I completely sided with my brothers. I saw my brothers as victims of a broken system that allowed women to manipulate it and force them underground. Now that my mother is gone and I've seen

Melanie Maxham is (beginning Fall 2011) enrolled in the Accelerated BA/MA Degrees Program in Applied Sociology at UMass Boston, also double-majoring in Sociology/Psychology. She wrote this paper while taking the course Soc. 341: "Elements of Sociological Theory," instructed by Mohammad H. Tamdgidi (Associate Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston) during the Spring 2011 semester.

both of my brothers spend their meager inheritance on alcohol and stop working under the table, my perception has changed; they could have paid some of their debt, or tried to renegotiate. As a result, I suffer **emotive dissonance** when forced by family rituals and responsibilities to interact with my brothers. **Emotive dissonance** happens when one experiences conflicting emotions over any situation (Hochschild 1983). Hochschild describes it as “a struggle to maintain the difference between feeling and feigning” (Wallace & Wolf 2005:251). Although part of my role as their sister requires me to treat them with familial compassion, I’m also a taxpayer who harbors resentment about their strain on our economic system and is disappointed over their inability to provide for their own offspring. The situations of my brothers cause me emotive dissonance; however, it is not *the* trauma in my life that needs healing.

In 2009, my mother died on Halloween and I went through divorce two days before Thanksgiving. My original research into the situation with my brothers is still relevant because, when my mother passed away, I had to be accountable to them. A 1986 study by Nichols-Casebolt indicated the proposed change in child support enforcement policy may reduce poverty for custodial families but would likely increase poverty for the non-custodial parent. She was right. Both of my brothers are living in poverty; one is homelessly couch-hopping, the other has been hiding and will someday be carted off to jail for non-payment. The very fact that they are in these situations flies in the face of what the **Rational Choice Theory** assumes. “Theories of rational choice assume that people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals” (Wallace & Wolf 2005:303). Their behavior cannot be explained by this theory which spans, according to which theorist you consult, both micro, mid-range, and macro

levels. There is nothing rational about my brothers’ goals, or lack thereof. The **inner career of action** is a term coined by the sociologist Herbert Blumer, who is associated with the theory of Symbolic Interactionism (and who in fact coined the term), that conveys an individual has a story that demonstrates the causes and effects of personal choices (Wallace & Wolf 2005:225). My brothers’ inner careers of action, or personal stories and beliefs, drove their behavior; they still refuse to accept and follow rules that they feel are unjust.

Wallace and Wolf (2005) in *Contemporary Sociological Theory* write about the active debate within the field of sociology about whether or not society can be studied empirically. Phenomenologist Aaron Cicourel uses the term “**inner horizon**” to explain his doubts of the validity of sociological measures. The inner horizon is subjective and it must be considered, for it is impossible to make unbiased conclusions. He states that sociological measures on the macro level alone can only consider the “**outer horizon**” such as “prestige scales or social class rankings” (Wallace & Wolf 2005:283). We may be able to empirically measure the percentage of court-awarded child support not being paid, but it doesn’t take into consideration why. According to the 1980 US Census Bureau “only one-half of children for whom child support is decreed actually received it” (Write & Price, 1986). It seems that only through intensive interviews can we measure the internal decision-making process that non-custodial parents go through when deciding not to fulfill their obligation to support their children. It cannot simply be a resentment of the custodial parent, but a feeling of defeat that lowers his self-worth as a product of a **social system** that exists to allow their exploitation without representation.

A social system may involve any relationship between two or more people. Talcott Parsons gives a more elaborate defi-

nition: “A social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the ‘*optimization of gratification*’ and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols” (Wallace & Wolf 2005:27). There are many systems in which my brothers are involved here, the system of law, the economic system (working and paying for shelter, goods and services, debts and taxes), the system of extended family, the system of immediate family which includes siblings, parents, and children, and then the systems of their estranged families including the mothers of their children and the children themselves, which include the relationships (or not) with just their children, and their relationships (or not) with just the mothers. Regardless of their participation, the system of law requires them to maintain an economic relationship with these people. They, as actors, are supposed to be motivated to fulfill that optimization of gratification but they refuse to participate—even though one would expect that, biologically, the impulse to protect and care for one’s children should be stronger than the impulse to withdraw from society and neglect one’s offspring.

Functionalism is a sociological theory that, in brief, likens social change on a macro level to the “organic systems found in biological science,” and that no part can be changed without affecting the other parts (Wallace & Wolf 2005:17). I bring this up to point out that the **manifest functions**, or expected results, of the child support enforcement laws are “...to ensure that children have the financial support of both their parents, to foster responsible behavior towards children, to emphasize that children need to have both parents involved in their lives, and to reduce welfare costs” (US

Department of Health and Human Services 2008). But the **latent functions**, that is, the unexpected results or side effects, have been to drive at least two men into poverty without a voice. It almost makes me want to interview more men who have actually gone to jail for non-payment of child support and do intensive cognitive interviews to uncover what could have helped them take responsibility instead of going underground.

In the movie *12 Angry Men*, a young boy is almost sentenced to death based on a socially constructed and prevalent racial prejudice. The **social construction of reality**, coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Wallace & Wolf 2005), is a concept that means reality is constructed by individuals interacting and sharing certain beliefs and values that set rules, roles and boundaries—that reality is socially constructed and maintained by people whose behavior reinforces the “**norms**” (what is thought of to be normal or expected attitudes and behaviors). Today’s reality is such that non-custodial fathers who do not pay child support should be shunned in society. Custodial mothers are painted as victims, while non-custodial mothers and custodial fathers are somewhat unheard of. Being a dead-beat dad in the US today is a stereotype that is almost as stigmatized as being a sex offender. Both of my brothers have been living as underground as possible to avoid paying child support. Not because they don’t love or want to support their children, but because they assume the mothers will use the money to get high. I knew both women as a child and adolescent and remember them living a deviant lifestyle with an attitude of entitlement to be supported by outside sources, either the men they were with or the government.

Max Weber discussed three **ideal-types of authority**: **rational-legal** which is “derived from formal rules,” in other words, laws, rules, processes are put

together and enforced through bureaucratic means; *traditional authority*, which is represented by any kind of authority that is continued from past practices; and *charismatic authority*, which is one that is given to a leader due to his or her ability to persuade the audience or membership (Wallace & Wolf 2005:73-74; bolding added). My brothers have been hiding from their obligations set out for them by our rational-legal authority system. This means avoiding reporting their income; so, they have not paid taxes. Their children have suffered a childhood without feeling the love or support from their biological fathers. My brothers represent a “**generalized other**” (Wallace & Wolf 2005:210), i.e., that of the dead-beat dads. As part of our social system, they have a title that differentiates them and ascribes them certain values, reducing their ability to pursue happiness. They suffer from *anomie*, which involves a loss of norms (Wallace & Wolf 2005:22). And both have been so emotionally destroyed and shamed by the experience that they have developed severe alcoholism. It baffles me that as children they suffered the same pain of having an absent father; my mother did as well—her father, also a severe alcoholic, died of tuberculosis when she was 9. I don't understand why they would knowingly continue the cycle.

When my mother was alive, she loved Burt and Earny. Even though they abandoned their children, she took responsibility for their failures. She lent them money constantly and patted them on the back. She was charismatic and through that also conveyed her sense of authority. She came from a long line of independent and outspoken women. I grew up loving my brothers, not understanding the full picture of how they impact the world with their behavior or how their choices were going to impact the futures of their children and their own futures. They explained themselves to me when I was too young to fully

appreciate the gravity of the situation. I understood them from their own perspective. My mother served as a buffer. She created the stage for us to play out our family **drama** at holidays and other gatherings. My **front stage** identity was to smile and act as expected during a holiday, not discuss anything unpleasant. **Back stage**, though, I shared my feelings about my brothers discreetly with my sisters (Wallace and Wolf 2005:238).

Now that my mother has passed away, they turn to others for the handouts they became accustomed to receiving, as well as the emotional comfort that allowed them to go on neglecting their responsibilities. I now resent them for being unable to manage the economic fluctuations in their own lives at the age of 50. They don't even know they have management problems, letting circumstances drive their behavior and reacting instead of taking control of their lives and working on getting their lives together.

Currently, the child support enforcement law is framed so that the custodial parent receives payment from the state regardless of whether or not the non-custodial parent pays. The non-custodial parent must pay the state back usually through garnished wages. In the case of non-payment, if they become unemployed or otherwise unable to pay, their license is suspended, vehicle registrations rendered non-renewable, and further non-compliance can lead to jail time. As much as I resent my brothers, it makes no sense to me that putting someone in jail is supposed to help them afford their child support bill. How is one supposed to qualify for a new job after serving time? If they're going to serve jail time, drug test them and add rehabilitation and job training. The current system is inherently flawed and counter-productive, rewarding abuse of the system and incurring further costs to the state by incarcerating someone who needs to work in order to fulfill the obligation for which

they are being punished for not being able to manage.

This makes me think of the Conflict Theory, and that of Karl Marx in particular, and his idea of false consciousness. False consciousness is a term used to describe the situation when social (especially class) actors are not aware of their own interests in social conflict. If you have a false consciousness nowadays, you are under the impression that you are in control of your life and happy working in a for-profit company, receiving a fair share in exchange for your labor, and taking your two-week vacation every year with the 2.5 children. This was made very clear in the film *The Big One* by Michael Moore. People working in factories all their lives were living under a false consciousness that they had some kind of control over their lives and received a fair wage for their work until one day the company made a big (though not apparently big enough) profit to move overseas so they could exploit the workers there. Neither of my brothers fell for the false consciousness of working like Fred Flintstone, or Homer Simpson, but they also seem to have no goals or sense of control in their lives. The false consciousness they live under is that somehow everything is going to be alright and it's not, and I have no idea what to do about it—even though I feel like there's something I'm supposed to do.

Without my mother, I am starting to pay attention to Burt's and Earny's choices. The **Exchange Theory** does seem to explain why they never faced their situations to serve a greater good. Exchange Theory tries to explain why "people choose whether to participate in an exchange after they have examined the costs and the rewards of alternative courses of action..." (Wallace & Wolf 2005:304); there is a heavy emphasis on reciprocation. My brothers see little value in giving money to women who abused drugs and manipulated them; they saw a kind of freedom in rebellion. Instead of pushing them to do what was right for

their children, my mother had consoled my brothers and joined them in verbally bashing the women who wronged them. They were continually rewarded by my mother regardless of her own beliefs. She felt that one's child should be the most important thing in one's life, as far as her own children were concerned. She proved her belief to her sons, but they did not model her behavior. Instead, they chose to exchange their responsibility to their children for their own mother's unending forgiveness.

I am observing my feelings about them and their problems so that I can reconcile my hesitation to do them favors. They barely work, spend all their free time and (sometimes work time) drinking, complain constantly, and act like they had no part in the formation of their circumstances. Burt and Earny prefer to live under the radar, work under the table, hide from society and have completely rejected the system that caused their pain. Their **self-definition** (Wallace and Wolf 2005:258) includes both righteousness about why they didn't pay, and shame for not being the father they were each expected to be.

Regarding my brothers, a major result of my 2009 double traumas (losing my mother and becoming embroiled in my brothers' circumstances, not to mention my own divorce) is that I have pulled away from them emotionally, as I have pulled away from my father, and even my friends. In *Opening Up*, psychologist James Pennebaker writes about low-level vs. high-level thinking, **mindlessness vs. mindfulness**, as two strategies for dealing with emotional pain, one inhibiting it, another understanding and expressing it. He describes behaviors that produce, promote or allow us to be mindless. An otherwise healthy practice of mindlessness is to exercise. An unhealthy practice is to participate in self-destructive habits, like drinking. He references routine drinking to reduce stress as a mindless activity. My brothers have been mindlessly and heavily

drinking away their problems for many years. When grieving over the loss of my mother and marriage, I also started to drink every day. Still, I successfully managed the estate for my family, moved, and continued to be mindful in my engagement with other people. I upheld all my responsibilities, worked full-time and continued pursuing my undergraduate education.

The biggest reason I have been withdrawing from my family and friends is that I am afraid of the eventual and inevitable future losses. We tend to gravitate to situations we perceive to be less distressful vs. situations we perceive to be more painful (Twerski 1997). It is less painful to drink alone and watch television and more painful to allow my long-term relationships to develop, because one day they will be gone. It is easier for me to maintain temporary relationships and build relationships with those I have short-term commitments than to face people I love in my family who will leave me one day because of death.

I am mentally isolating from my father, for instance. I see him almost every day but I spend as little time talking as possible and actually feel like my space is being invaded when he walks into a room where I'm trying to "relax." Immediately after my mother passed, my father's first request was to get rid of her cats. She loved cats. I love cats. But I placed his grief higher than my own love for cats and completed his request to get rid of them. One got out and never returned; another one I dropped off at the shelter. I'm only now coming to terms with how that made me feel.

This spring, of 2011, in a sociology course on alcoholism, I learned about addictive family systems, the roles the family members play, and the addictive paradigm. My role in the family was People Pleaser. When I went out into the world, some people picked me out right away and I became engaged in social interactions that ended up not being helpful to me. In the process, I learned how self-disclosure may

not always work well, and the benefits depend on the reactions of the audience receiving it. Pennebaker writes, "Self-disclosure will change the nature of your friendship. Usually, revealing a deep secret will bring you and your friend closer. However, your friend may be threatened or hurt by what you say. If this happens, your relationship may be at risk" (1997:116). I didn't realize until this year that some of my difficulties emanated from the fact that I grew up in an **addictive system**, a system that is closed to change and fosters a culture that maintains addictive behaviors. I had an **addictive paradigm**, a way that I viewed the world because of how I was raised. My father was the caretaker, I was the hero—or the child that distracted everyone from the family problems—and my brothers were the scapegoats, the ones everyone could look up to as the black sheep that we loved. My family rewarded rebellion to a certain extent. I realized that I gravitated to my ex-husband for very similar reasons. I developed a personality trait that attracted people in need. He was also charismatic, charming, and grew up with an alcoholic mother. At one point during our marriage, I thought about all of our close friends and realized nearly every one of us grew up with an addicted parent. I realized my own role in the relationships and started to develop better personal boundaries.

After reading and watching *Tuesdays with Morrie* for the second or third time, I am starting to come to better terms with the sociologist Morrie Schwartz' lessons which are good and true. The pain I suffered from losses in 2009 was so great that I suppressed it. "You're afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails..." Morrie tells his student, Mitch Albom (p. 105). I am afraid to love again, even on a shallow interpersonal level. I have the love and I can point to the love I have for humans; I wouldn't study sociology if I didn't care, but to let that love develop to attachment is

a different matter. I have difficulties with attachments.

Though I have rationalized my withdrawal from family and friends, I have developed a method of suppressing my feelings through “**impression management**.” Following experiencing my traumas I was drawn to drinking. I needed to be mindless for short periods of time at night, and I found it comforting, but it didn't help me psychologically. I kept my feelings hidden from even myself. As Neo Morpheus (pseudonym), a former SUNY-Oneonta student, wrote in his essay “The Drinking Matrix,” “Most people are unaware of my situation, but I am myself aware of my social classification” (2003:16). I was afraid to be **socially classified** as an alcoholic but I knew I had to reach out for help.

To spend a short time with strangers was so much more appealing than to spend even two hours or more with a good friend. Pennebaker writes, “If you have suffered a loss, many of your friends will not know what to say or how to deal with your feelings” (p. 106). I still at times don't want to be close to anyone, because I fear that eventually I will lose them. The grief over the loss of my mother is still keeping me from being able to maintain happy close relationships. I'm sabotaging them on purpose because it hurt too much to lose my mom.

Growing up I had a very strong attachment to my mother. I would cry for an hour when she dropped me off at Kindergarten. I loved her so much and couldn't figure out how to be normal with other people without her. As an adult child of a closeted alcoholic, I resented her. We visited Italy and she could not control her drinking in public. After the trip I distanced myself from the little girl inside me who wanted to show my love for my mother and I felt her need for my adoration grow. But I was determined to not visit or call, to have as little interaction as possible—except for holidays and family gatherings.. When she

was diagnosed with cancer, everything changed. I became her basement drinking buddy and listened to her life story. Another example of role distance would be how I suspended my grief after she died until all of the social expectations were fulfilled with regard to her estate, my divorce, school and work.

Even though the hardest part has been over, I still tend to withdraw from my friends and family because I do not want to be relied upon right now. As the people pleaser, I would be at everyone's call, with resources or a listening ear. Now, I prefer at times to be left alone to heal. When I look at my people-pleasing behavior last year and after everything I just went through, I feel people were not really there for me. I feel people who knew me didn't know how to help me and instead of being able to ask for help and comfort, I found it in a bottle. The dependence on alcohol still had a grip on me. I actually had a thought one day that completely shocked me. When I confronted these thoughts, I had a sudden sympathy for myself and knew instantly that it would be impossible for me to stop without support. I started going to AA.

At the time, I took a stress test online at <http://www.stresstips.com/lifeevents.htm> and found that I was 80% likely to be susceptible to a stress related illness. Even making the decision to change my paper-topic has helped in relieving that stress, since it has allowed me to see the social components of my own personal troubles. It is easy to get caught up in minutia of every-day life. As portrayed in the PBS documentary *Affluenza*, where people comfort themselves with material goods and ignore their deeper relationship issues, I was busying myself with accomplishment and avoidance, and embracing a **looking glass self**. The looking glass self is a concept by Charles Horton Cooley that describes how our self-feelings are shaped by how we imagine others perceive and judge us. I can see that my sense of myself

and relations I have with others are shaped by how I imagine others view and judge me. However, I am starting to see evidence that my friends and family do not think of me as the benevolent, accommodating provider as I saw myself. They know I have been suffering silently and didn't know how to help.

George H. Mead stated that having multiple selves is a common experience of our everyday lives arising from how we develop selves by taking many social roles. I have a self that reflects Burt and Earny, and a self in me that represents my father. I worked very hard at an early age to give people credibility—look for the beauty in everyone. This was self-preserving because my hope was that they will also look for the best in me. I had to face the fact that a friend I had wasn't the person I thought she was, and that it was not entirely her fault; but I don't have to allow myself to be taken for granted anymore. I don't have to be part of a one-sided relationship. That is what I had with my ex-husband as well. I was attached to them and they thought they could treat me however they wanted because they thought I was so codependent I would never leave or stand up for myself. I am learning to develop healthy relationships that do not require attachment.

I'm still seeing a therapist and attending meetings with support groups and the last step of the support group is to be able to help other people with the same problem I have. I can't wait to get to that step—but I must wait because I'm still prone to getting attached. I need space. I need to develop a way to love without becoming attached and afraid of loss. If you know you don't really have something, it shouldn't hurt to let it go.

With a smile in my heart, I am in love with the subject matter of the majors I am pursuing at school. And I think when I get into political issues affecting peoples' lives, my passions come out even stronger. I don't want to just research and study soci-

ology—I want to apply what I learn so that I can make a difference in people's everyday lives. This is why I applied and now am enrolled in the 5-year Accelerated BA/MA Degrees Program in Applied Sociology, one that I am combining with a Bachelor of Arts double-major in Sociology/Psychology. Despite the traumas and the challenges I have faced, and in order to face them, I have remained a dedicated student with a 3.94 GPA, and plan on using my experiences as a path to deepen my understanding of how society works inside out so that I can be of help to others, and myself, in real ways.

Applied sociologies and social psychologies that intend to make a difference in the real world must begin with understanding and changing ourselves. I have come out to my family with the truth about my past dependence on alcohol and they are surprising me with their open responses. My looking glass self is shattered and my real "I" is starting to connect again with people, learning to trust and stop carrying the whole burden inside. I have started to open up to myself, writing a journal of my dreams and interactions and suddenly all of the pursuits I'm involved in are lining up and answers are coming at me through the strangest of sources. Radio songs, signs, lines in a book, the integration of similar topics across my classes, all point to a future where I will understand why I am here and grow more every day.

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