

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL STRUCTURE THROUGH PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: THE CREATIVE USE OF STATUS AND ROLE AS EXPLANATORY FACTORS*

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"IT'S ALL UP to the individual!" Most sociology instructors have encountered this response from students who have internalized the dominant ideological perspective of "personal responsibility" and therefore resist our efforts to encourage a rigorous examination of structural forces. A number of articles in recent issues of *Teaching Sociology* (e.g., Coghlan and Huggins 2004; Dundes and Harlow 2005) advance experiential learning techniques for promoting the sociological imagination. Building from this objective, I have devised a comprehensive lesson which includes two specific exercises that incorporate the symbolic interactionist perspective to generate a more personal understanding of matters of social structure. This paper provides details about the exercises, the rationale for their implementation, the ethical issues involved, and the meaningful outcomes for students.

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

Conventional thought within scholarly circles privileges the cognitive realm, typically neglecting the affective domain as a rich source for learning. By "marginalizing emotions and elevating rationality to a supreme position" (Dirkx 2001:65), educators fail to recognize the central role of emotions not only on performance in the classroom,

but also on our entire ways of knowing (Heron 1992). Since socio-emotional variables are "integral rather than incidental to learning" (Ragozzino et al. 2003:169), providing the context for students to utilize affective elements as a catalyst for stimulating enhanced motivation for learning and comprehension of course material is critically important.

Innovative pedagogical strategies such as service learning (Hattery 2003) and autobiography (Powers 1998) personalize the educational experience in order to help students understand course concepts and their relevance. The significance of a direct connection and ownership of ideas seems intuitive, since students have a greater likelihood of success when the material is "theirs" instead of just "ours" (Vygotsky 1978). From the sociological perspective, this approach can assist students in seeing the broader social dynamics that impact their lives (Hollander 2000). Hollander (2005) claims that teaching women's victimization and resistance has engendered greater cognizance of systems of domination, serving as the impetus for students to assume more autonomy in their own lives and perceive greater agency in creating change. In embracing the use of personal examples in the classroom, Powers (1998) asserts:

Challenging students to examine historical and structural constraints that may account for [their] experiences—attempting to understand rather than simply tell their story—can help move them beyond catharsis to some level of competency as critical sociologists and participant observers of the life stories they tell. (P. 203)

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THE LESSON

The lesson outlined in this paper responds to these epistemological issues and offers a novel look at the affective-cognitive link. I have offered this complete lesson for years while teaching at a racially diverse community college with approximately 10,000 students of a wide age range coming primarily from working-class backgrounds. Many of these students have endured challenging family dynamics and report to me that they appreciate classes offering insights that can directly benefit their lives. Having also conducted the lesson's exercises separately in classes at a small liberal arts college with mostly middle- and upper-income students, I have found the experiences to be valuable for students at all levels. Although I have incorporated the exercises mainly in classes of 30 to 40 students, I contend that they can be effective with groups of all sizes. A standard feature of my introductory sociology, social problems, and family classes, the lesson can be tailored to meet objectives in many additional courses.

I use the lesson in the period following a discussion of status and role. Before class begins, I solicit the assistance of four volunteers for a skit, informing these students of the focus on family addiction and allowing them to opt out if they are uncomfortable. Each student selects a part to play—alcoholic parent, hero, scapegoat, lost child, or mascot—with the instructor performing the remaining character. A lecture alone cannot fully capture the emotions involved in family addiction, and while many videos poignantly depict the realities of these families, the skit represents a more “personal” and quicker mechanism for addressing this issue.

In the scene, the parent returns home after a difficult day of work to find a ram-bunctious environment. In addition to preparing dinner, the high school-age hero shares stories of his or her accomplishments, essentially assuming responsibility for being the parent in the hopes of “saving the family” from its dysfunctional state. At

some point, the scapegoat informs the parent about getting into a fight in school. In a rage, the parent berates this child for continued misbehavior and concludes with the hurtful line, “If only you were more like _____ (the hero), I wouldn't have to drink.” The mascot continuously cracks jokes to provide comic relief. Meanwhile, mindful of the potential dangers of involvement, the lost child remains silent. The performance typically lasts about five minutes, with the instructor determining an appropriate concluding moment.

I ask all students to take one minute to silently process their immediate reactions. Since the scene may have clear personal connections to their lives, I prefer a private reflective mechanism for starting the analysis. In addition, I believe that encouraging students to begin with a “psycho-logical” response and subsequently illustrating the merits of a sociological exploration helps them develop greater appreciation of our discipline's power and relevance.

Next, I briefly lecture about the concept of “family systems theory,” connecting this model with the concepts of status and role. As in the functionalist paradigm, family systems theory views the family as an interdependent social system, with each part operating to maintain the existence of the entire unit. While individual behavior might initially seem pathological, it “makes sense” when understood within the overall system. For example, the perfectionist behavior of the hero (status) protects the family from outside scrutiny (role), while the scapegoat provides a way for family members to dump their anger and blame. Through open discussion, we explore these statuses and the potential impact on individuals' lives as adults.

I then suggest the idea that the child may have little control over her or his status in the family, especially during initial identity formation. Clearly, the oldest child would be most likely to assume the hero position, with non-exemplary behavior generating a negative response for failure to provide a “good example” for the siblings. With all

the positive accolades bestowed upon the hero, the scapegoat utilizes negative behavior in an attempt to garner some attention. I repeatedly remind students that the emerging personality is not always necessarily a function of the individual, but rather, of one's status—since, for instance, the person occupying the “lost child” position would most likely act quite differently if he or she had been the first born.

In essence, the family “needs” the various individuals to accept particular statuses and to perform the requisite roles. Family members often apply various sanctions as mechanisms of social control in order to enforce these expectations. As an example, I mention a former student who attempted to better his life by abandoning the streets and immersing himself in the college world. Finding himself rejected by his own family members who were committed to the gang mentality, he succumbed to the desire for acceptance and ended up dropping out of school.

Before engaging the entire class in discussion, I grant students time to examine themes related to the skit or the lecture through three minutes of free writing. Students can frame their responses using either “personal reflection” or “sociological analysis,” allowing greater comfort for students who would rather not interrogate their own lives. To stimulate thought, I provide examples of each modality but grant students freedom to pursue any line of thinking:

[Reflection]

- Have you personally witnessed these family dynamics, how did they compare to the skit, and how did you feel watching it played out?
- What do you hope that we cover in our discussion, and why might it be important?

[Analysis]

- Does this model apply to all types of families or even other social groups?
- From the sociological perspective, how might other social variables such as race, class, gender, or age affect these patterns or

the way people respond to this issue?

Students pair up and discuss any issues generated by the lesson so far, and I remind them that they are not obligated to reveal “family business.” Students often share openly in the dyad encounter and in the subsequent large group discussion; if the class has achieved a degree of closeness, several individuals may mention their own experiences in alcoholic families. As a result, not only do some children of alcoholics discover that they are not alone, but other students also gain awareness of the pervasiveness of addiction. For individuals from addicted families, it is empowering to know that they are not “crazy” or to be “blamed.”

Conversely, it is possible that the majority of students will remain quiet as a result of discomfort with the topic or lack of knowledge of how to talk about it. In those instances, I encourage students to analyze the reasons for the silence and then ask them to anonymously write down any topics they want included in the conversation. I read these comments to the group to stimulate discussion. In general, instructors must be prepared for highly personal comments, responding with a combination of compassionate words and a sociological framing that helps students recognize the structural implications of the situation.

Some incredibly insightful ideas have emerged from this exercise, as students discover that it is safe and helpful to examine this subject. Typical comments address issues such as the challenges involved in changing roles, strategies for handling the sometimes disparate roles expected in multiple family situations (stepfamilies, extended families, etc.), and suggestions for avoiding unhealthy aspects of these roles in adulthood (e.g., heroes often become romantically involved with partners whom they wish to save). In addition to linking the discussion to course material, I reiterate the sociological contention that these behaviors cannot be explained solely by individual factors, but, rather, are best understood as

the result of the dynamic interplay between the individual and social structure.

Before concluding the exercise, I encourage students to consider other structural arrangements that profoundly impact their behavior. For example, based on the dynamics of their neighborhood, they may have been heavily influenced to adopt a certain styles or traits. We often act differently than how we feel or wish, and each setting produces divergent demands and identity outcomes. By appreciating the operative external forces, students are in a stronger position to decode these social settings and possess greater agency in making healthier decisions.

To close this portion of the lesson, I share data about the prevalence of addiction in families as well as insights from expert practitioners in the field. From a sociological perspective, we can appreciate that the social stigma surrounding addiction may have lessened in recent years, yet it is still difficult for many young people to disclose personal information—especially when raised in families admonishing members who “air dirty laundry.” Thus, these important ideas are disseminated for their personal use or to be forwarded to others in need.

First, I explain that one in four young people grows up in an alcoholic family, with social learning theory explaining why they are at greater risk for developing addictive behaviors. I also explain that these individuals can break the cycle by realizing that parental addiction is not their fault and by learning from others some new ways to handle the challenges encountered at home. I then distribute a handout with tips for coping as well as contact information for local resources, and I conclude by asking the actors to state their real names to get out of character.

Moving immediately to the next exercise, I request that students think of anything that they wish they had said to a particular person in their lives. I suggest a few possibilities such as failing to apologize to a former romantic mate for an indiscretion, wanting

to thank a teacher for being a positive influence, or perhaps desiring to finally reveal a secret to a friend. The issue does not have to be overly profound or personal, but it ought to have a degree of importance.

After each student identifies an example, I tell the class that everyone will finally have the opportunity to share the idea—albeit to a classmate, not the actual person. Each student finds a partner and provides her or him with the identity of the message recipient. Then, both students take turns revealing the “unspoken idea,” with the listener playing the role of the recipient and responding to the words presented. For instance, Student A resents her mom’s decision to spend the family’s entire savings account on an abusive boyfriend instead of her own daughter’s college education. Student B assumes the “mother” character in this mini-skits and replies to Student A’s words as she feels a typical mother would. The scene unfolds for about two minutes, before everyone switches roles so that Student B can initiate the discussion with his or her own issue.

I ask students to briefly explore the experience with the partner, thinking about their emotional response to the exercise as well as the relevance of status and role in the scenario. For instance, if the issue had taken place between friends as opposed to siblings, how would their feelings about the issue or the discourse have differed? How and why might there be divergent interpretations of what constitutes appropriate behavior for a parent?

During the subsequent open discussion, many students express appreciation for the opportunity to “practice” their words and to become more aware of the possible reactions from the intended recipient as well as the individual’s rationale for that response. Indeed, some students report that they gained the confidence to speak to the real target. Thus, in addition to teaching course content, the lesson helps students to potentially be able to improve their lives.

Towards the end of the lesson, I raise the issue of social construction of reality, prompting exploration of topics such as the

impact of race and gender on interaction rituals and self-disclosure. Students have suggested that some comments—or even the idea of confronting one’s parents—might not be possible in other times or cultures. Even the foundation of the experience, the open expression of feelings, reflects the values of a therapeutic society influenced by Dr. Phil and Oprah. In addition to offering meaningful sociological ideas, this discussion provides moments of humor, a particularly valuable commodity in the midst of emotionally charged exercises.

Finally, just before dismissal, I distribute a short feedback sheet to assess the efficacy of the exercises as well as to identify any concerns or questions. I announce to the class that if the lesson generated the desire to talk, students can feel free to see me or to consult the student counseling services. Several students have approached me to continue the conversation. No student has ever revealed a negative reaction to this lesson, either out loud or on paper.

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Having recently changed institutions, I wanted to evaluate the outcomes from this lesson for a different population, so I examined students’ reactions to two recent class iterations. The first class, a section of Introduction to Sociology, consisted of 14 male and 17 female students. Eight females and six males from an Introduction to Social Welfare class served as the other subjects. All students were African American and of traditional college age. Entering the seventh week of the semester, both classes had established a healthy collective spirit, with many students feeling safe to reveal personal information and controversial opinions.

The assessment instrument included three Likert-type questions, using a five-point scale with higher numbers reflecting more positive responses. The first two questions measure students’ feelings about how much they learned from the lesson as well as its personal relevance. Question three asks for

their level of comfort during the lesson. With the goal of identifying correlations between family background and students’ reactions to the lesson, I also asked students in the classes I surveyed whether alcoholism or other drug addiction was present in their household. Finally, I granted respondents the chance to write any additional thoughts on the back side of the paper. Despite a limited sample and potential threats to internal validity with the research conducted by the teacher, the data still offer meaningful insights into students’ reactions and the lesson’s value.

Table 1 provides an overview of students’ responses. Overall, the results demonstrate that students rated the lesson quite positively. The scores for the level of “comfort” on both tables indicate that students felt relatively comfortable—an especially meaningful finding since students shared very personal life experiences with family problems and addiction. Some degree of discomfort is probably necessary in order for some students to be intimately challenged to confront difficult issues and understand their social significance.

Table 2 includes a breakdown of results based on whether the student reported growing up in a family with addiction. It is particularly noteworthy that the response for the lesson’s personal usefulness among students from homes with addiction produced the highest rating.

The open-ended response section also offers evidence for the impact on participants, with three particular themes emerging in the data. First, students commented on how much they appreciated the chance to

Table 1. Assessment of Teaching Strategy	
Question	All Students (N=45)
In general, how would you rate today’s session in terms of how much you learned?	4.5
How useful was the information personally to you?	4.2
How comfortable did you feel?	4.2

Table 2. Assessment of Teaching Strategy, With Breakdown of Self-Reported Presence or Absence of Family Addiction

Question	Presence of Family Addiction	
	Yes (N=10)	No (N=35)
In general, how would you rate today's session in terms of how much you learned?	4.4	4.5
How useful was the information personally to you?	4.7	4.1
How comfortable did you feel?	4.1	4.2

connect their personal lives to course material, which allowed them to gain greater understanding of the concepts as well as of themselves and their classmates:

I really enjoyed this class [session] because I could relate to the topic on a personal level.... I learned something about myself today and I am glad because I am in the process of trying to figure out who I am.

I really could relate it to my own experiences. I think we should have lectures like this more often.

Some of the issues that were raised in class I could relate to myself, and it was good to hear that others have been through it, too.

Second, a number of comments reflected the students' abilities to comprehend the larger sociological lesson about the centrality of social structure:

I never evaluated why children of addicted parents behave or take on the roles they do.

I knew in my family me and my sister [sic] had different roles but I couldn't explain why or what they were. Now after today I see how children fall into roles.

The theory explains a lot about what happens in families. I used to always wonder why certain kids acted the way they did. This theory shows why.

By asking for "any comments... about the class session or the issues raised," the sur-

vey may have led students to focus on personal reactions. I suggest that contributions during the discussion evidenced additional changes in sociological thinking. For example, students raised provocative points about the centrality of gender in family roles, effects of community variables on family dynamics, and the notion that schools typically fail to offer sufficient opportunities for students to address personal concerns. As one student stated, "This has sparked something—just how much I really do act differently in different settings due to outside pressures."

Perhaps most importantly, a few students revealed that this type of learning experience has profound personal value for them and can sustain motivation and purpose in learning. Through fostering within students some excitement for the learning process and the desire to utilize the information to better their lives and the world, the exercises encourage the type of lifelong learning and integrative development espoused by Kolb (1984). The words of the students capture their interest in blending academic, personal, and social goals:

As long as I can learn from others and help them, I'll feel like I'm doing something here.

I feel like discussions like this are beneficial to our people to help heal.

I think the class session was very resourceful [sic]... The more knowledge I gain, the greater the desire in me to share it.

ETHICAL CONCERNS AND PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS

In addition to assessing the effects of innovative approaches on learning, it is critical for instructors to consider the possible affective impact on students. As Lusk and Weinberg (1994) suggest, the use of sensitive topics requires thoughtful planning and implementation. In their discussion of ethics in teaching, Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994) suggest that, while often pedagogically meaningful, experiential activities may unintentionally produce emotional harm to some students, especially when addressing extremely personal matters. Thus, instructors who wish to capitalize on instructional benefits and minimize potential risks must carefully evaluate their pedagogical approach and purpose. Students need to be properly prepared for these exercises and not feel coerced to share painful stories. As a student, Copenhaver attests to the salience of the power dynamics that may obscure from teachers how some learners feel violated or powerless when divulging personal business without reciprocal sharing from their instructors.

I use a variety of techniques throughout the course to reduce the likelihood of a negative response to this lesson. As mentioned above, I strive to create an inclusive classroom environment that affirms the rights of students and supports open and honest discourse. From the first day, I offer relevant examples from my own life, with the notion of "teacher as text" (Jacobs 1998) encouraging an open and collaborative learning environment. hooks (1994) similarly articulates the need for educators to model this behavior for students:

I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share... It is often helpful if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. (P. 21)

Furthermore, I specifically make reference to the statement in the syllabus that prepares students for moments of discomfort that inevitably occur at some point in the course. If we intend to rigorously examine social life and produce meaningful knowledge, we must address provocative and sometimes difficult topics. Learning embodies the confluence of head and heart—and that transformative education requires personal engagement with issues of greatest intimate importance to us (Shor and Freire 1987). Although initially awkward, these moments can ultimately be empowering by helping students to better understand their lives and the world around them. While I inform students that we are not engaging in group therapy, and that I do not intend for them to experience extreme anxiety, I do offer some suggestions if they need support, such as reaching out to peers, keeping a journal, and visiting or emailing me.

The structure of the lesson itself avoids some of the problems identified by Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994). First, since students have the option of discussing either their reflective or analytical reactions, they are not coerced into addressing painful memories. While promoting involvement in the large group discussion to generate new ideas, I am careful to state that no one is required to participate. However, in the typical class, a large number of students join in and share thoughtful insights and personal experiences that enlighten their classmates.

The second exercise also provides students the freedom to select and explore an example of their own choosing. In the event that students are interested in using a more sensitive issue, the ability to process the experience with a classmate may offer a safe and meaningful context for obtaining valuable feedback. Finally, I do not require any formal assignment regarding the overall lesson that might place additional emotional or coercive pressures on students or the instructor.

Due to the nature of the exercises, this lesson may not be appropriate for all in-

structors to implement. In addition to possessing the requisite knowledge about addiction in families, instructors must have established a trusting classroom environment and be prepared to address any significant emotional responses that may occur. Instructors might also wish to assess how class size and demographic characteristics could affect the experience.

While I believe that the lesson itself has intrinsic value, I have also written this paper to celebrate the benefits of affective-based learning in general and to encourage instructors to tap into their own ingenuity in formulating innovative ways to engage students. Certainly, there are risks involved in using more personal experiential exercises. As a result, my goal is to reduce the possibility of harm while still allowing for the personal connection that enhances the learning process for students and assists them in developing sociological skills and practical knowledge for their daily lives (Greenfield 2005). I agree with Hollander's (2000) claim that to avoid topics that matter deeply to students would constitute the abandonment both of our moral responsibility and of a critical opportunity to effect real change. The personal is indeed the political, and by utilizing students' experiences, we can make a powerful symbolic and pedagogical statement.

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