

Social stratification in always running



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Always Running, by Luis Rodriguez, boldly addresses multiple sociological themes that embody the entirety of the story. Rodriguez's social construction of reality was predetermined by society's expectations on him due to his race, socioeconomic background and upbringing, and his education. Because of these aspects of his life, his past had no story and his current actions and future were already set up to fail, falling into the stereotype of a "drug taking, violent gang member," with no other possible options. According to *Society: The Basics*, by John Macionis, both culture and social class shape the reality people construct. Social construction of reality is "the process by which people creatively shape reality through social interaction," (Macionis, 120). Luis Rodriguez's interactions with schoolmates, gang members, teachers, and police officers have shaped the way he views himself in retrospective to society. Each interaction places Rodriguez in an immovable place, where he is stereotyped. The theme of social stratification and social construction of reality interact together to create a recurring theme throughout Always Running through Rodriguez's upbringing and gang experience, his schooling and jobs, his interactions with authority, and his pursuit out of the gang system. Always Running portrays Rodriguez's life by demonstrating the effects of social stratification, which allows society to rank people into categories of hierarchy.

Beginning with Rodriguez's ascribed status, he was raised with uncertainty and instability in the US, and his background was determined as a constant jobless and financial struggle. Not only did he experience a low socioeconomic status, he was discriminated against due to his ethnicity and his ability to speak Spanish as his first language. Society determined his

upbringing as unable to succeed and set him up for failure. Each of these aspects of Rodriguez's background were ascribed, which is a status that you are born into and unfortunately have little social mobility. His social stratification and social construction of reality was determined by how people treated him and his family in the United States. Because his family had experienced such discrimination and had been placed in an immovable caste system, Rodriguez had no other choice than to see his circumstance as his permanent reality. He describes, "The refrain 'this is not your country' echoed for a lifetime." (p. 20) This idea became his reality and the unfortunate reality for all minorities of his kind. His reality was constructed by what the United States allowed them to enjoy and how much of it. Rodriguez's family was "allowed" to enjoy the freedom of America but struggled to find financial security and experienced discrimination daily. This portrays the amount of power others have in determining another's reality.

Rodriguez's upbringing directed him on the path of violence as well.

Rodriguez describes, "Even my brother enjoyed success in this new environment. He became the best fighter in school...the big white kids tried to pick on him, and he fought back, hammered their faces with quick hands, in street style, after which nobody wanted to mess with him. Soon the bullies stopped chasing me home when they found out I was Joe's brother," (p. 31).

Rodriguez's way of surviving the discrimination was through self-defense.

Seeing that his brother could survive such abuse, society had set up Rodriguez to have to resort to the same tactics. This led to Rodriguez's involvement in gangs, he described, "It was something to belong to—something that was ours. We weren't in Boy Scouts, in sports teams or

camping groups. The Impersonations is how we wove something out of the threads of nothing,” (p. 41). The police officer catching this group of Mexican boys simply spending time together late at night set up Rodriguez’s perception of himself; that no matter what, his ethnicity would set him up for fear and trouble. Formerly known as a club, their gang had created a safe space for the boys to embrace where society had placed them. Being stratified into this socially constructed idea of a Mexican, Rodriguez learned the necessity of power to be feared. Rodriguez said, “ It never stopped, this running...the police, the gangs, the junkies, the dudes on Garvey Boulevard who took our money, all smudged into one. We were always afraid. Always running.” (p. 36) His upbringing and ascribed statuses set him up for the gang lifestyle that promised him protection and community. “ I don’t mind paying for my mistakes...Sometimes we pay even when there’s been no mistake. Just for being who we are...Just for being Mexican. That’s all the wrong I have to do,” (p. 144). Being Mexican became a “ failure” in society’s eyes, which became his perception by no fault of his own.

Luis Rodriguez’s schooling experience was demonstrated as a social construction of his reality due to his social stratification. In high school, Rodriguez described, “ The school separated these two groups by levels of education: The professional-class kids were provided with college preparatory classes; the blue-collar students were pushed into ‘ industrial arts,’” (p. 84). Before starting high school and allowing his intelligence to determine the types of classes he took, his ethnicity and the prejudices that came with being ‘ other than white’ determined this. Being Mexican and isolated lead Rodriguez to a place where he wanted to be untouchable.

Everywhere he walked, his reality was set, even if Rodriguez tried to break the social construction. He says, I'd walk into the counselor's office for whatever reason and looks of disdain greeted me- one meant for a criminal, alien, to be feared. Already a thug. It was harder to defy this expectation than to just accept it and fall into the trappings. It was a jacket I could try to take off, but they kept putting it back on. The first hint of trouble and the preconceptions proved true. So why not be proud? Why not be an outlaw?

(84) This shows that his reality has been created and his social mobility out of this system is impossible. He understands that no matter how hard he tries to prove this pre-assumed idea of Mexicans wrong, he will constantly be put back in his place where society has assigned him. Because the school system was set up for Rodriguez and his kind to not be as successful as white students, he was removed from Mark Keppel High School for his involvement in multiple fights against white students. Being separated from schooling placed Rodriguez as a busboy in a restaurant, where he had to carry his birth certificate around due to his constant fear of deportation.

Due to Rodriguez's interactions within his work, his reality of pursuing a steady job that would lead to success was lessened. For example, constantly being addressed with, " Hey boy..." became his identity; his new name. When Rodriguez returned to Taft High School, he tried to oppose what society had told him to learn by attempting to take classes that would expand his education. When he was placed in industrial type classes, he addressed, "'I had to- that's all they'd given me,' I said. ' I just thought maybe I could do something else here. It seems like a good school and I want a chance to do something other than with my hands.' ' It doesn't work

that way,' she replied. ' I think you'll find our industrial arts subjects more suited to your needs,'" (p. 137). Rodriguez's reality to pursue a privileged education was denied because of the presumptions that came along with his academic record and ethnic background. He was assumed to be a violent Mexican male who needed an educational outlet in order to attempt to succeed in his lifetime. The education system became a social construction of his reality. This demonstrates the lack of power granted to him. " I recalled when I first entered school in Watts, how I had been virtually written off, pushed into a corner with building blocks and treated like a pariah; how in Garvey I had been heaved out of classes and later in high school, forced to drop out and labeled failure," (p. 218). Anytime the school system continually turned against him and his freedoms, it was inevitable for Rodriguez to return to the streets.

His education finally moved forward when Chante's organization called, " The Collective" invited Rodriguez in to discuss social issues, which led him to return to school. Because of school organizations such as ToHMAS, MASO, and HUNTOS, His culture finally had a supported voice by teachers like Mrs. Baez. This demonstrates that by having support, the reality for Chicano students was more respected. Another example of Rodriguez's reality being socially constructed is through his interactions with authority figures, such as the police force and his teachers. Each interaction between himself and the Chicano group and these authority figures have determined how he views himself and how he is set up to act. Due to the preconstruction the police have of any Chicano involvement in crime, Rodriguez goes back and forth between jail and his gang. After non-fatally shooting a man, he struggles

with the influences he is affected by in these jailhouses and the effect the police officers had on him. He says, “ Sometimes the police just held me over three nights and then let me go at the start of the week to keep me off the street,” (p. 189). The police force’s influence not only determined the reality of incarceration for Chicanos, but also how they perceived themselves. For example, while discussing how to end barrio violence in the town, one woman expressed, “‘ We need more police protection- we need to stand up to these hoodlums and put them behind bars.’ ‘ That sounds like cops talking.’ Chente said. ‘ These aren’t criminals without faces. They are our children! What you propose only pits the community against itself- and the police would like nothing better than that,’” (p. 194). It became normal for police officers to find a group of Mexicans drinking in their own homes and immediately pulling out guns, prepared to fire at any given moment.

The reality of constantly being in fear of living was what these people were forced to deal with on the daily basis. This type of fear stripped away freedoms others had the luxury of embracing. Rodriguez said, “ They were about *locura*, the spirit of existence which meant the difference between living life to the fullest and wandering aimlessly upon the earth, taking up space, getting in the way,” (p. 206). The Chicanos felt pointless, that whatever they did in their life, the police would end up involved and they could never move upward in their social mobility. Their existence was constructed for them, and any sign of struggle against this resulted in incarceration or death. The last example of police influence on Rodriguez’s reality was when he defended a woman being brutally beaten by a police officer. For simply vocally advocating for the woman in her misery, he was

charged with disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and assaulting an officer. This fear was instilled back into Rodriguez by no choice of his own.

Last, Rodriguez's pursuit and attempts out of the 'comfort' of the gang system exemplifies how his socially constructed reality is exhausting and inevitably difficult to escape. He expressed this by saying, "But we were often defeated from the start," (p. 219). The gangs became a source of home and support when the rest of the world was a force against them. Any sight of upward social mobility was shot down, making it even more difficult to escape the gang related lifestyle. Rodriguez had to reach a place of desperation in order to discover the fight within himself to move forward. He contested, "I arrived at a point which alarmed even me, where I had no desire for the internal night...I required more, a discipline as bulwark within which to hold all I valued...I figured I could help the homeboys become warriors of a war worth fighting," (p. 237). The reality that society gave these men and women nothing to work for that was worth the fight set them up to resort to gangs, suicide, drugs, and a seemingly pointless life. The power America holds put Rodriguez in a place of terror and where meeting America's expectations was a set to fail. Rodriguez testified, "I've talked to enough gang members and low level dope dealers to know they would quit today if they had a productive livable wage job...If we all had a choice, I'm convinced nobody would choose la vida loca, the insane nation- to gang bang," (p. 251). His attempts to escape the gang system were that much harder because of the way his reality was established.

In conclusion, Luis Rodriguez's life was socially constructed from the past of his upbringing, his schooling and gang affiliation, his interactions with

authority, and his attempts to escape the gang system. Each aspect depicted a struggle that unnecessarily became practically impossible to defeat.

Society decided without Chicano's consent how to deal with their culture, pushing them towards a lifestyle that gave them no future and no power.

Rodriguez states, " Outlaw their actions and creations. Declare them the enemy, then wage war. Emphasize the differences- the shade of skin, the accent in the speech or manner of clothes...Gangs flourish when there's a lack of social recreation, decent education or employment," (p. 251). It is not the fault of those involved in the system but society's fault in placing these people inevitably here. Rodriguez concludes, " You have worth outside of a job, outside the ' jacket' imposed on you since birth. Draw on your expressive powers. Stop running," (p. 251).

Works Cited

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