

Biography on we must tell our own story

[Sociology](#), [Community](#)



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We Must Tell Our Own Story

Introduction

There exists in the world of sociology some controversy between two theories of thought. The debate is usually over a question like this “ Which has more control over an individual’s life agency or structure?”

One side argues that people are confined behind the boundaries of social structures. How a person behaves within the structure is controlled by the boundaries or his perception of the boundaries. How a person acts depends on how the social structure (or hierarchy of social structures) “ allows” him to act. There is free will only as it fits into the power structure of social systems. For example, the hierarchy can consist of four layers such as family, community, nation and world. What is happening within these four social systems determines how an individual will act. His choices will be determined by the boundaries of these four layers of social systems.

The other argument is that there is no such thing as “ social structures.” We

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may organize our perceptions of social systems in order to make sense of the real world, but our perceptions and the reality are quite different. On this side of the debate, it is argued that free will determines how an individual acts. A person determines his or her own actions because each one has free will. Any social systems or social boundaries are outside of self so there they have no power over us to determine our actions. We are therefore free agents.

In fact, there is a third way to consider this argument; both agency and structure have power over a person's actions. One is not more controlling, powerful or determining than the other. Agency exists because structure exists; structure exists because agency exists. In other word they are dependent upon each other.

As an example I would like to offer Bauman (2007) who has a way of sitting on the boundaries to describe what he is observing. In the 1970's he was arguing that " sociologists should recognize that human beings are socially constrained by their embeddedness but capable of choice and change. Sociology should facilitate a more ambitious, emancipatory process of exploring rationally how the world could be made better (Jacobsen & Poder, 2008)."

" Bauman concluded that the proper focus of struggle and negotiation should be political rather than economic, concerned with shared human interests rather than divisive class or group interests."

I would like to tell you about my experiences within the interdependency of agency and structure. I had free will to make choices but they were not the choices I wanted to make for a good life. The choices I made were

determined by the social structures of war and chaos. The actions I chose; I chose in order to survive.

In telling the story I will pose many questions that I feel sociology should address very seriously. I will try to reference those who have already recognized the same problems and have attempted to make sense of them using the concepts of agency and structure.

Was I confined by the choice I made using my free will or was I confined by the choices of the social structures which I found myself living inside? I propose that the social structures of the community, nation and world determined my actions. And that the will to survive determined my actions (actions I took of my own free will) within the social structure.

Discussion

Personal experiences of spatial mobility

Larsen and Jacobsen (2009) have pointed out that both Bauman and Urry, contemporary sociologists; discuss ‘ a new mobility paradigm’ because the degree to which ‘ spatial mobility’ has become a part of the modern experience calls for a new way of viewing the effects of social structures. Bauman¹ and Urry² argue that ‘ nowadays we are all on the move’ and ‘ sometimes it seems as if the world is all on the move. Let me give you a personal example.

In America you call me an “ orphan.” In my country of Sudan I was called “ A Lost Boy” because I was a child with no parents. I was born in war so all I really know about the world has been the fear and tragedy of war. I had no parents to comfort me or to explain the world to me. I had no one to protect;

I had to protect myself. For so many years I felt I was useless. My life was useless. I couldn't feel anything but a kind of despair. I did have inside me though something which gave the courage and the daring to take great risks to survive.

When I talk about no place to call home I don't mean only a building that has rooms and a family inside. I mean a place. I don't have a home that is a place or a community. My country, Sudan, isn't my home. It was where I was born and it has my love and respect. But is it my home?

When people are labeled "refugees" what does that say about their home?

In Sudan many children grow up in refugee camps along the border of Ethiopia. Is it possible for a refugee camp to be a home? Sometimes I have to wonder if the word "home" can apply to our modern world. Think about descriptions like "at home." As in, I was at home the other evening reading a book. If a person is traveling to some "safe place" or living in a refugee camp does the description "at home"

1 Bauman. (1998a). Globalization: The Human Consequences. 77.

2 Urry. (2007). Mobilities, 3.

have a meaning? Or let's think about the phrase "home away from home." If the home you are 'away from' has been destroyed by war and/or bloodied by the murders of your family . . . is that really a home? One has to have an original home to be 'away from home.' The word home has special connotations of safety, peace and happiness. Home is a place to picture in your mind for comfort when you are "homesick" but if there is no memory of

a home what does that say about contemporary life.

Many families and individuals in the world are migrating due to war. Many others are trying to migrate to a good place but instead some social structure places them in a refugee camp. What kind of social structure has the power to put a family or individual in one place, forces them to stay there instead of allowing them to continue their migration?

Even as I write this autobiography other people are experiencing the same ‘spatial mobility’ that I experienced. Let me first tell the story in terms of groups before I tell you more about my individual story.

In September, 2011 alone, one month, approximately 27,500 people have fled Blue Nile, Sudan. In other words in one month the population of a small city was forced out of their own communities to find shelter in a refugee camp. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has realized the dire need for more room for people and have established a new refugee camp in Togo which is about 125 miles from the place where most people cross from Sudan into Ethiopia. Some of the people are able to bring their animals and some belongings with them. Other resources such as 10,600 US gallons of good, safe water and more is being located by the UNHCR. And for cooking so families and individuals can have cooked meals the UNHCR has a month’s worth of fire wood ready. They need other ways for cooking though such as the solar cookers that work without smoke pollution. (Edwards, 2011).

Edwards (UNHCR 2011) reports that although the first refugees were mostly women and children now men are leaving their properties to join the camps because they are unable to protect their land. Many of those arriving are

expected to have injuries as he stated in the Briefing Notes, “ at the border points (we) have seen larger numbers of men arriving, and more injuries. We had recent cases involving a young man who had sustained bullet wounds, and a woman injured by shrapnel. Another man had lost his legs in a bomb explosion.” (Edwards, 2011).

My home country is at war with itself, a civil war. There are many factions at war mainly the Sudanese army and those rebels that have joined them against the Sudan People’s Liberation (North). War is one social structure that determines an individual’s actions without giving much room for ‘ free will.’ You can choose to fight or can choose not to fight. The choice of which side to join isn’t really important (in my opinion). Each choice whether you choose not to fight or to fight comes with its own set of risks. If you feel that morally you cannot kill another human being you will choose not to fight. But what if you choose not to fight and then see your whole family cruelly and violently murdered? Do you feel so much adrenaline that in your anger and grief you pick up a gun from the ground and start killing even though morally you think this is a bad decision? I am asking many rhetorical questions but these are the questions that need to be asked if sociology wants to remain relevant in the contemporary world.

I have not been to my country, Sudan, since November 17, 1987. I walked out of Sudan to Ethiopia which required a lot of walking and I risked many dangers. I had to leave though because the social structure people in the United States recognize - access to safety which is provided by the community, good homes which are provided by the parents, and regular schooling which is provided by public resources – these do not exist any

longer where I was living in Sudan. (Deng Deng, 2010).

Walking for three months I traveled in many places but not as a tourist (Deng Deng, 2010). I traveled as a refugee which is a class of people that needs to be remembered when sociologists are working together to develop their theories. Refugees as a distinct class must be remembered by social workers too because this class of people has special needs.

I traveled walking with many other boys. We started out many more than finally survived. The reality of death was never far from my eyes nor was it far from my mind. I had to leave Ethiopia because of war in May of 1991. There is a river between Ethiopia and southeast Sudan named River Gilo. We had to cross the river to flee Ethiopia. This was a very terrible place to be. Many boys drowned. Some boys were eaten by crocodiles or by other wild animals. (Deng Deng, 2010). Can you imagine waking up in the morning and having to face such challenges instead of going to school?

After walking across the Sahara Desert finally, finally after more than one year we reached refugee camps in Kenya. We arrived in Kenya on July 17, 1992. I lived in a refugee camp for nine years. I grew up and developed through my childhood transitions in a refugee camp. (Deng Deng 2010). (Deng Deng, 2011).

The refugee camp is under the governance of the United Nations. The UNHCR organized our lives (mine and the other Lost Boys) so that we left Africa on April 29, 2001 arriving in the United States of America on May 1, 2001. (Deng Deng, 2010)

The United Nations (UN) seems to be a kind of imaginary democratic institution to many people living in the United States but to the rest of the

world the United Nations is a world governmental body which allows millions of people life when there would only be death in their future.

The UN is also a bureaucracy and must meet the laws and regulations of each country of the world in which it deals. The label I has a 'refugee' was changed to 'immigrant' by filling out the correct paperwork. By the way, what does that mean to a person in recognizing or understanding their own identity? I was able to enter the United States (US) legally under Section 207 of the Refugee Act of 1980, Public Law 92-212. This is a law that allows the UNHCR and the US Department of State Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration to cooperate legally with each other when transporting a person from another country into the US.

As an immigrant I was sponsored by the World Relief Agency in Chicago. They sponsored under the Geneva Convention of the 1950s which then President William J. Clinton signed. When discussing the spatial mobility of people in the contemporary world there is not only one social structure determining the actions the individual can or cannot take. There are many social structures which overlap cooperatively or at odds with each other to determine a person's whereabouts and essentially that person's chances of a future.

I would like to bring attention to the fact that although people may spend many years at a refugee camp ideally the refugee camp is a transitory place to rest until one can leave to go to a final destination. In my personal example you must have noticed that getting to the refugee camp in Ethiopia did not mean that I only had "one more" part of a journey to take to reach a final destination. I had to leave and find another refugee camp in another

country (Kenya). When thinking of a refugee camp a sociologists or social worker must not think of it as a “fleeting time” time in the life of a resident. Now more and more transitions are made between refugee camps especially in Ethiopia. This is because refugee camps along the border have been threatened with the war; people must move further into the country (Rulashe, Oct. 2011). When considering spatial mobility as a function of agency and support, details like this must be considered.

During the walks to Ethiopia and then again to Kenya the older boys of about 10 and 11 years of age acted as our elders. The middle aged from about 7 to 8 years old parented each other and the smaller boys (LostBoysChicago, 2009). These were the boys that had to bury those that died along the way. For them and for other young people from other countries the growth and development is much different than in countries where war is only a business and the resulting violence is not an everyday fact of life.

Of the approximately 26, 000 of the original boys of all ages who had to hide in the forest and walk to refugee camps perhaps 10, 000 to 12, 000 are still living. About 120 of us are living in Chicago. The rest of us are scattered around the United States but we are still The Lost Boys of Sudan and we will always have our own community. Here is how we as a group describe our experiences on our website.

“ The Voice of the Lost Boys of Sudan. We are living, we are surviving, and we are " The Lost Boys of Sudan!" Our movement's goal is to preserve an identity, an antiquity and representing the future of our people... Those who died and those who live for the Southern Sudan. Our country had no happiness...! No freedom...! No hope...! And also no future! It's filled up with

graves. No elsewhere but my country Sudan, where 2. 5 million people have died as a result of either war or famine, and displaced more millions in other countries. The government practices systemic genocide with a vengeance on its own civilians, [waging war by burning buildings and massacring people's belongings, destroying lands and farm animals, raping women and killing men], in which a more able world has ignored the cries of the cruelly persecuted natives who lived there by many generations. In this place a terrible holocaust is taking place each day. Because of war, the people of Southern Sudan scattered everywhere in the world. And now again, the People of Western Sudan are dying every day and night.”

As our community we speak with one voice from our shared experiences. As individuals we face many challenges when trying to cope with the concept of identity.

Comments on Identity and Personal Identity

While reading about testing in public schools I came across an article with a title that shook me a bit “‘I’ll be a nothing’” (Reay & William, 1999). This is a feeling that sounds like it cannot exist but it does. To feel that your future is nowhere and that you will grow up to be a nothing was a common feeling for all of us, Lost Boys, at some time or another. Depending on our character and center core of identity seemed to be the only determining factors as to the duration and intensity of the feeling.

The article addresses the feelings of anxiety and fear which children in schools face due to the National Curriculum tests which are given to school age children in both England and Wales starting at the age of 7. Instead of

learning the children are treated like consumers of information and their test results are used to ‘ assess’ their ability to regurgitate the information. For them the school years aren’t a time of fun with friends and learning to be excited about learning. Instead they are experiencing various degrees of fear and anxiety. Is this the kind of social structure desired or needed by the communities, states and nations that care about their children? I would say this is a dangerous path to follow. A choice is possible by the communities for what they want for their children. Anxiety and fear should not be a part of that wish for their children or the future. These are the children that will be the future leaders. The idea that they spent years of their childhood frightened and tense does not bode well for the future.

Degrees of fear and anxiety are impossible to measure qualitatively but degrees of fear and anxiety can be ascertained and evaluated. When sociologists and social workers remember to discern the different levels one feeling can have they will be more capable to make good judgments and decisions in their profession.

Lemert (1995) gives a very succinct definition of identity, “ to have an identity is to be able to recognize a rightful place for oneself in a social world.” A social world that is highly structured and organized enough to over public schooling should be able to offer children each an identity based on something positive.

Lemert (1995) also points out that the profession of sociology “ claimed to tell the truth of the modern social order, the regime of liberal man. Because that regime was riddled with differences moderns wanted to

deny, professional sociology could never quite tell the truth of which it dreamed. The truth of modernity was, therefore, always caught up in distortions. As a result, ideology became a central, if underestimated, question of modern man's social identity.”

This is important to me because it emphasizes the point I have been working to make. The modern social order is not the “ regime of the liberal man.” It is a group of parallel and competing social orders which involve each age and gender of human beings.

The modern order cannot even be considered orderly because the people with the classes of the contemporary world are mainly in transit, traveling from one place to another with any way to be sure confident as a sociologist, where or when they will stop traveling. These people should not be considered on the margin or on the edge of the contemporary society they need to be considered as do other classes.

Lemert (1995) mentions Foucault. “ Critical analysis, Foucault believed, must work from the “ forms of resistance” to modernity. Thus, he said of his method, “ Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, [my method] consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies (Foucault, 1983).” This is a strategy that sounds much more practicable and realistic to me. The results of such a strategy would be much more realistic due to the tensions that accentuate the characteristics of study.

“ Ideology must be broken apart, reshaped, and used--not as a master category but as an element in a politics of historical knowledge. Thus, the

term subject is taken in its two parts--subjugation and subject-hood as identity --both of which must be kept in mind if one wants to understand modernity (Lemert, 1995)” this is a distinction Lemert built from his analysis of Foucault and which I believe is very important. Based on my experiences I can't think of a better way to analyze identity for those who have similar experiences of being forced into living ' in transit.' Personal identity is not the realm of only ' liberal men' as the description used to be stated. Personal identity is as varied as are persons yet there are still basic constancies and consistencies with which to measure unique qualities.

Here I would like to bring Bauman back into the conversation from The Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman - Challenges and Critique by Jacobsen and Poder (2009) because the way I read Bauman was as an exciting professional in sociology. The way Jacobsen and Poder describe him reflects my positive feeling and also analyzes his work in a way which respects his credentials as a socialist while explaining why we need to hear what he has to say (Jacobsen and Poder, pg. 2). Bauman understood the need for sociology to grow from the traditional roots and make room for the new phenomena in the modern world. The authors review his analysis of “ morality, power and globalization” while accepting the importance to sociological concepts the effects of freedom, strangeness and ambivalence.”

Conclusion

The work of Bauman, Lemert and Jacobsen got me excited about a future in social work. I want to be able to face the challenges in trying to understand how to help people. In order to do that I have to be willing to be patient and

try to work out some complex issues that weren't traditionally thought of as in the realm of sociology.

I have an attitude that sociology can be a hands-on type of study which can give social workers a concrete set of ideas to help them deal with clients. The idea of sociology only being for theorists does not interest me. I asked many questions that I can't yet answer in this essay. That is like Bauman who asked questions that didn't always address the theory of a problem. People and communities struggle with moral issues. When humans suffer because of the chaotic social structure that they live in free will is in short supply. I'm interested in how moral issues are dealt with a person who is faced with survival. I'm even more interested in the moral challenges that face a social worker who is trying to be helpful and supportive of a person in a bad situation. Maybe a person one that is trying to survive is something I could work on. Even more though I would like to be able to come up with ways social workers can help people who are experiencing fear and anxiety.

In the article written by Ampersand (2002) he asks and answers something about Langston Hughes that means a lot to me. "What made Hughes dedicate his life to writing and to his fellow Black Americans? First, there was a sense on his part of a profound personal obligation."

I understand that feeling of "profound personal obligation" because I understand how fortunate I am to be living here in the US. I feel an obligation to find ways and to help people who are spatial mobile; moving from refugee camp to refugee camp, from city to city or from country to country to live a good life despite their hardships.

I do not want to be the type of person that Ralph Ellison (1952) describes as

unable to see a person based on the viewers' prejudices. " I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; Not one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

The " invisible person" is the exactly the person I want work with in social work. People that are homeless in the US seem to be invisible to everyone walking down the street. When I was in Sudan walking and walking, I could not understand how people around the world could ignore what was happening. Ralph Ellison helped me understand that they just did not see us. They did not see what was happening with their own eyes. Somehow there must be a way to allow people to see what is happening right before their own eyes.

Ralph Ellison is telling a story about how it felt to be a black man in America. His book is more universal than to just be about men with dark skin who live in America. When I read his book I felt like he was addressing the issues of millions of people in the world - people who are homeless, landless, don't have enough food or clean water. I don't think these people have the same skin color, the same politics or even the same religious beliefs. They are people in a marginalized class who often have to travel to find what they need. I don't think they are choosing to live in the way they live. The structure of their world has determined the way they must live. Mostly they are trying to survive. They want to get a place in the world where they can raise healthy children. And I think they want really good things of their children; not only plenty of food and water but also an education and a nice

community. When this happens it will be their children that have will be able to use their choices to empower themselves and their communities.

The work of Bauman is an inspiration to me. I read how so many people rejected his ideas and said he wasn't a sociologist. They pinned a lot of labels on him. The labels he was given did not do anything to make his work less important though.

I am not going to feel ashamed of the life I was given. I don't want to feel ashamed of having to ask for help. I want to understand sociology so I can give back to the communities who have supported me and given me a chance to live a good life. Living on the edge of survival is a nightmare that is very difficult to write about. It's something no one should have to do in such a great world. So I want to understand the structures that have made so many people marginalized. I want to be able to strengthen those social structures that work well and demolish those that don't.

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