

Who Am I? Sociology Has Answers!

There's a joke that people who study psychology are looking for answers concerning their personal pathologies. Or that people in marriage and family counseling programs are looking for answers to fix their own troubled relationships. If that's true, then students of sociology are looking for answers to where they fit into the social world.

I was seventeen and had just finished high school. I had been accepted to the colleges on my list, but my dad had been awarded a Fulbright, so our family was off to Hong Kong for the year. I wanted to think I was an adult and could manage on my own, but doing so would have required action and this teenager was simply floating downstream, oblivious to the possibility of what lay ahead. So, I boarded a plane with only a vague idea of how I would be spending the next twelve months.

Being the third-generation American-born child of Chinese parents meant that education was paramount. My sisters and I lived a privileged life: white, upper-middle class suburbs, private school. After-school jobs were prohibited because they would cut into study time. But unlike Chinese kids today, we were anomalous. There was only one other Chinese kid in my class (the son of Joyce Chen) and my parents did not make Chinese language classes, or becoming integrated into the Chinese community in Boston's Chinatown, a priority. So, I never saw other Chinese faces except during extended-family get-togethers. The message was clear: education (and family, of course) was the only thing that was really important.

As a result, I lived in a social bubble. My friends were white; my teammates were white; my girlfriend was white; my teachers were white; my school curriculum was white; everywhere I looked, the faces were white. I began *to* think I was white, too, and given the

power of social context, I didn't even notice.

Then every once in a while, an event would snap me back to reality. Usually, these events involved someone shouting from the window of a passing car: racial slurs, sometimes sophomoric, sometimes genuinely hurtful. I developed a healthy self-loathing that to this day still resides in the recesses of my mind.

The year in Hong Kong was transformative. For the first time, I was surrounded by Chinese faces. No one yelled "ah-so" from windows of passing cars or pulled on the sides of their eyes. I dated a Chinese girl for the first time. Ironically, my status as an "ABC" (American-born Chinese) subjected me to a new form of prejudice that was not quite as painful as "chinky-chinky chinaman" but every bit as real. Now my status as American was the source of denigration by the Chinese people around me, instead of my Chinese-ness being the target of Americans. It was a sociological lesson (although I didn't know it at the time) on racial stratification. It was also a lesson on the sociology of self.

I spent the year doing what I knew best: going to school. But there were no advisors, no first-year program, and no real advising to speak of, so I fell into a 400-level course called The Sociology of Knowledge in the fall of 1972. One of the books we used was a classic called *The Social Construction of Reality*, by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann;¹ the instructor was Geoffrey Guest, a British national. His approach to teaching was "old school"—no active learning, no recognition of what is now a rich literature on teaching and learning. Nope, he stood in front of us, stared at the back wall and talked for an hour or however long the class was. No "Questions? Comments?" No "What do you think about...?" Just straight lecture. Talking, really.

But the subject matter was fascinating. The course raised questions like: How do

we know what we know? Where do social facts come from? What makes them facts? I didn't know it at the time, but it was an introduction to symbolic interactionism and what would become a life-long interest in sociological social psychology that resulted in my second book.²

I learned that symbolic interactionism was based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed. In the deviance class that I now teach, we begin with the premise that there is no such thing as a universally deviant act. Social context is what makes it deviant, and social context is the product of social interaction. Without two or more people, there is no interaction, and without interaction, there is no agreement of what is deviant.³ Sort of like the philosophical question about the tree falling in the forest.

I thought, “Huh, that makes sense.” All of a sudden, here was context, a framework and theoretical model on which to hang my observations about social living. And the context defined the situation. When I got teased, my mother would say: “Don't pay attention to them.” In a way she was right: surround yourself with like-minded individuals and the reality changes because the definition of the situation changes.

I never fully appreciated the experience of being in Hong Kong for a year until much later. Instead, I was eager to get back to the States and when I did, I matriculated at Trinity College. I still had white friends, white teammates, white girlfriends, white teachers, and a white curriculum. But sociology reminded me of the power of social context. I now had tools to understand my world and my self that I did not have before taking those first sociology classes. Remember the clinicians at the beginning of this essay?

I now had answers to questions such as “Who am I?” which introduced me to

Kuhn and McPartland's study of the self.⁴ Besides giving me the tools to do a sociological study of my self, it also became something I now pass on to students in my classes.

Asking the question: “How do others see me?” gave me an understanding of Goffman's concept of impression management.⁵ Goffman's “presentation of self” is a cornerstone of sociological social psychology with practical implications for how I appear to my students. I remind them that they, too, can analyze their own presentation of self and benefit from this exercise. Now, I not only had answers to questions like these, but the questions had legitimacy. The still incomplete puzzle was beginning to take shape.

I learned how to refine these musings into researchable questions and testable hypotheses. I collected data and analyzed these data. I produced a senior thesis that is the basis for a presentation that I use today in my own introductory course.

Today I feel that I have a responsibility to pass on the sociological perspective. Of course it is my job as a professor, but it is also my responsibility to do this for my (now adult) daughters, for the kids in my soccer world with whom I come into contact as coach or referee, or for anyone else with whom I might cross paths. That is because sociology taught me something that helped me feel less like an outsider and more like I belong. Don't most young adults feel the same way as they embark on a quest to find out how they fit into the world? I found that sociology helped me on my journey. As a professional sociologist, it is my hope that I can pass it on to my students, too.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Anchor, 1967).
2. Jeffrey Chin and Cardell Jacobson, 2009. *Within the Social World*. (Allyn and Bacon, 2009).
3. Howard Becker, *The Outsiders*. (The Free Press, 1963).
4. Manford Kuhn and Thomas McPartland, "An Empirical Investigation of Self-Attitudes." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 19 (1957): 68-76.
5. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Doubleday, 1959).