



Hooped Dreams: **Internal Growth, External Stagnation, and One Man's Search for Work**

Anonymous

UMass Boston

To be honest, I never really had much of a chance. For the better part of two decades, I carried myself as if I did, but I never *really* had a shot. I'm not talking about winning the lottery. I had better odds of hitting the number and striking it rich than this. I am speaking about the chance to live out my boyhood dreams.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to play professional basketball for a living. I still do to this day in fact. Watching ten guys throw a ball through a hoop looks easy enough on television. I figured that I could do the same thing. However, there was one major problem. I was too short, slow, unskilled, undisciplined, so on and so forth, to reach that goal. As I grew older, I played less and less to the point where I was a bit embarrassed whenever I stepped onto the court. But whenever anyone asks the question, "So what do you want to do when you grow up?" the answer remains the same. "Play in the NBA." I say this with a look that tells people how serious I am.

This is not so much a story of my failed hoop dreams. The world has seen and heard enough of young African-American

men not making it to the pros. It is the story of an individual searching for a career choice and a place in today's society. It involves fits and starts, some times takes two steps forward, other times three steps back.

The best approach to examining this situation comes from the famed American sociologist C. Wright Mills. He believes that "the **sociological imagination** enables its possessor to understand the large historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals" (Wallace and Wolf, 106). In other words, by locating myself within this period of history I will be better able to understand my own experiences and "grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Wallace and Wolf, 106).

Today is an interesting time to be young. The world is changing at a speed never before seen in human history. The information age is tearing down walls between nations and their citizens. The time in which we live is well described in the book *The Third Wave* by Alvin Toffler. Published in 1980, he correctly predicts many aspects of social, political and economic life in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Toffler contends that the American economy has shifted from an industrialized to a post-industrialized state. Many of the careers of yesteryear, which included those in the manufacturing of goods, have now gone overseas or are done by computers. The service economy now dominates and it requires up-to-date skills, certificates and qualifications that are only available through intense training and prolonged education. Any personal troubles I have in pursuit of a place in social life must be understood in the context of the post-industrial age in which I live.

I consider myself lucky to be born into the circumstances into which I was. I have a loving and supportive family (both near and extended) that is and was always on my side. Both of my parents are pretty

bright and I like to think at least one or two of the “smart” genes were passed on to my brother and me. During my **primary socialization** I learned the rules, values and norms of society and my community. Say “please” and “thank you,” respect your elders and listen to your parents. When I went to school and started to make friends, I began to learn new norms and values. This stage was known as my **secondary socialization**. Among them were two lessons. The first was that in America, one can be whatever one wants to be, so long as one can imagine it and is willing to work hard at it. The second was that education is the key to getting there, so I should work hard in school because it will pay off in the end.

Analytical sociologists such as Dahrendorf believe that **conflict** is the driving creative force in human history. His writing on norms, power and the social order explain what many in my social network feel is desirable and good. He highlights the concept of **social stratification** in discussing this. What emerges as desirable are based on general norms and upheld by power. The American dream, about which I learned in my secondary socialization, had several caveats to it. Young men were not supposed to dream about driving a taxi, or being a hotel concierge. The careers that we were to choose involved glamour, publicity and most importantly, lots of money.

These lessons were reinforced by my family history. My father, the youngest child of two schoolteachers was an immigrant from Antigua who came to this country to attend college and live a good life in the “Land of Opportunity.” My mother was the youngest child in a large family and was a schoolteacher herself. The members of our family had high expectations for one another and achievement was expected. The boys in the family were supposed to make a mark on history, I used to think.

A **postmodern approach** sheds a bit of light on where this grandiose expectation of self came from, for the American dream

would be considered to be a metanarrative and an ideology serving political ends. The so-called American dream is a product of the capitalist system which runs the economy. It offers each individual the hope that he can achieve anything he wants, so long as his motivation and ambition match his work ethic. This creates a society of driven people, willing to use their productive capacities to contribute to organizations that offer them the chance to live out the dream. A Marxist examination tells us that those in power structure the society. Under capitalism, those people own the means of production (the buildings, rails, factories, machines, etc.). The American dream is an **ideology** that they wield as a weapon to legitimize their place atop the economic ladder and make others strive to join them. The state, Marx believed, is also an instrument that allows the capitalists to rule over the rest of the country. Berger and Luckmann helped explain the nature of this “sky is the limit” mentality that I internalized before I knew what was happening. This reality is created entirely by human activity (**externalization**). American citizens come to believe, as if an objectively established fact, that through education and hard work, they can achieve anything (**objectivation**). From as early as kindergarten, I internalized this ideology to fit into this way of life as best I could (**internalization**.)

My years of schooling through high school were just that for me. I learned to read and write, perform mathematical functions and cooperate with others. In my mind, what I was doing was not in preparation for any future employment. School was something I did because that was what kids do until they got older and went to work. Needless to say, I was never fully enthused with the process of formal learning. I enjoyed playing sports more.

There was one aspect of education of which I was entirely unaware as a child but became more and more apparent as I grew older. This was school’s role in the wider

society. Children everywhere are taught that education is important, for various reasons, but above all else it is essential to the continuation of the American way of life, or what Talcott Parsons described as social equilibrium. When children age, they are expected to join the workforce and contribute to society. In school, children learn the basic habits and responsibilities of a good worker and society learns which ones are set on which tracks. Those that achieve in school are encouraged to take challenging courses and continue up the educational spiral. Others are often branded as **deviants** and encouraged to pursue other paths. The actors involved in all parts of the educational systems share what Parsons called a “moral commitment” to ensuring the continuation of the educational cycle.

Parson’s functionalist ideas and **theory of action** were present during my high school years in applied form. I attended a private school where students often competed against each other and themselves in the classroom. Many came from economically privileged backgrounds and the normative standards of the school regulated most students’ lives around school and sports. Though many of my classmates were great students, others (myself included) struggled with the rigors of a college-prep education. Those of us who fell into this category were not placed on a separate track as in most schools. We were forced to conform by several forces. Parsons’ idea of **socialization**, where its members internalize society’s values, told us that we were not living up to our potential as students and there was a high level of **social control** as well. Compared to most schools, there was a very low student to teacher ratio and relationships between the two parties quickly became **expressive**, or personal and informal. My advisor would write letters to my parents detailing both my struggles and accomplishments. He even called me at home on Christmas Eve to tell me I had scored a 92% on my math midyear ex-

amination. My early deviance and disequilibrium were controlled by the functioning of a private education.

Compared to the majority of young Americans, I achieved great success in my early years. Looking back, I can attribute it to a combination of macro and microsociological factors. Homans’s theory on rational choice best summarizes what took place. I was raised in an environment that stressed the merits of educational effort at face value. People who tried hard were rewarded with social approval and that was something that I valued highly. His **rationality proposition** states that people will multiply the value of an action’s possible reward by the probability of it actually materializing. It was clear to me that through sustained effort, I would win praise from my parents, classmates and teachers. On a macro level, good grades gave me the chance to attend college. I internalized **rule norms**, as Dahrendorf describes, that were originally established and maintained by the upper classes, the state and those in a privileged position in society. They had defined higher learning as a means to achieve the American dream and told me that a good job is the desired end. Coleman’s concept of **closure**, or a close relationship between the actors involved in the life of an individual, allowed me to better conform to society’s goals by controlling any signs of deviance.

The idea of working for a living had little meaning to me during my childhood years. Household chores were my responsibilities but the concept of real-life adult work was foreign to me. The essential link between academic achievement and professional success was lost on me for several reasons. First, I always saw school as an end in itself. I worked hard because my parents and teachers loved me for it and that reward justified my efforts. Secondly, I believe that the speed of change that Toffler describes played a major role in my inability to formulate concrete goals or plans.

With the decline of the industrial sector, many direct paths that once were open to people my age began to close. No longer could I expect to study agriculture, become a small farmer and survive. In the global economy, I could decide to grow corn and be competed out of business by large agribusinesses that can manufacture the same crops that withstand weather, drought and insects. Where Americans were once taught to go to school, study industry, and run a factory, they are now taught to amass a wide set of skills and put them to use in the service sector. The post-industrial economy presented so many options that they all seemed a bit overwhelming. Basketball was the one job that I would hold up because it provided all the traditional trappings of the American dream. It was a link between childhood and adulthood that would provide the crux of my story and many of my trials and tribulations.

Many people define themselves by what they do for a living. By the time I was in my late teens I recognized this. When someone asked what I wanted to do, I saw this as a way of saying “who do you want to be?” What will be the substance behind my name? This was the first time in my life that I had taken this point of view. It made me think of how others would see me and the results made me a bit nervous.

Notions of power and authority, as described by Peter Blau was of great interest to me. He defines **power** as “the ability of persons or groups to impose their will on others despite resistance through deterrence either in the form of withholding rewards or punishment” (Wallace and Wolf, 334). I was not so much in search of power for myself, but I wanted to be in a position where no one person would have that sort of power *over me*. I also saw myself as being positioned to achieve a level of **authority**. Max Weber understands there to be three types of authority, the first being **charismatic** or resting on a leader’s personal qualities. The second is **traditional**, that

which is handed down from the past. Third is **rational-legal** or derived from formal rules. I began to ask myself: in what sector would I have a suitable degree of independence, along with some authority (which my upbringing had entitled me to)? I saw business as a suitable pursuit for a period of time.

However, the last ten years have seen a shocking change in the business climate that Michael Moore addressed in his documentary, *The Big One*. Although Fortune 500 companies were posting record profits, they continually laid off workers and moved operations to other parts of the country and continent. The major companies that once relied on innovation and brand loyalty to stay competitive now aim to keep costs as low as possible and it has dire effects on worker lives and morale. Examples of corporate greed appeared in the news on a daily basis and this soured my opinion of the business culture in the capitalist economy.

The old saying goes: Time waits for no one. As time progressed the day when I would enter the workforce drew nearer and I still was unsure as to where I saw myself in the future. As described in Charles Cooley’s concept, **the looking glass self**, I was very concerned with how others perceived me and my (in)actions. I then began to act upon those imaginations I had for myself. I was very active in my community during my years in high school. Those close to me considered me somewhat of an activist and when we would discuss my plans, my quick wit provided me with a host of **indexical expressions**, such as responding with: “I want to be social garbage man. I’ll do good work and clean up society’s trash.” It didn’t actually mean anything, but it didn’t sound too bad at the time. Other times, I would rely on the **et cetera principle**. I would say, “well I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” Any astute observer could tell that I hadn’t the slightest idea, but the use of these devices was an

unspoken way of telling people that while I may not have a plan per se, I'm halfway clever so I still have a chance of making something of myself.

I love basketball; both playing and watching. The problem is that I never played on a high level. I attended a couple of camps as a youngster, but height was always an issue. My 5'3" mother did not do me any favors. I tried out for one team in middle school and did not make the first cut. I then joined the school wrestling team and stuck with that as my main athletic pursuit through high school. Basketball was never really an option at all, but the point is that I had never seriously considered any options and by the time I started college, it was time to think about choosing one.

This time in my life was a pivotal one and my feelings can be best characterized by a profound sense of what Berger and Luckmann would call **alienation**, or a loss of meaning. The socially constructed view of the world that taught me to work hard in the classroom so I could get a good job had lost its meaning. After all, what could I do in a classroom that would catch the eyes of professional scouts?

On a societal level, unemployment was rising and each class of graduating college seniors faced a tighter job market than the previous year's class. The traditional cycle of school to work looked to me like a total institution. If I had to peer into the future, what I saw was pre-determined. As I dabbled in Marxism at the time, I believed that if I worked for a profit venture in the business sector, I would become another victim of **exploitation** by the capitalists. I could produce something of value, a snappy commercial for instance, but the gains that would come from my work would be appropriated by the company and not for myself. I valued independence and as a projection of strength, I vowed not to join the ranks of the exploited.

In exploring the rational choices people

make, Homans discussed the **Aggression Approval Proposition**. It states that if people's expectations are disappointed they become angry, often aggressive, whereas if they are fulfilled or exceeded they are pleased. I was told that a solid education would win me anything I could dream of, but I saw a life of wage-work and the dreaded "rat-race." I began to falter in the classroom, while searching for a purpose or direction outside of it. Where my relationships with teachers were once expressive, or informal, my dealings with professors were what is known as **instrumental**, or formal and impersonal. Jennifer Kosmas wrote in her article "The Roots of Procrastination: A Sociological Inquiry into Why I Wait Until Tomorrow" (2003/4), that her low self-esteem led to chronic procrastination, incomplete work and failing grades. I identify with those struggles because I shared them for much of my college years. She wrote of **internal conversations**, saying "the internal conversations one has with oneself are an essential part of the Meadian perspective because they are the means by which human beings take into account and organize themselves for action." I saw myself in a new light after withdrawing from my college studies. I was an American with no real dream and the negative thoughts became the basis of my inaction. While society measures the progress of an individual by major milestones (such as finishing school, landing a job, earning promotions and raises) I took to growing out of the person I had come to know and leaving the world of education.

My relations with friends changed. People remarked that I seemed more distant and quieter than ever. This is best described by Blau's notion of **cognitive dissonance**. My close friends were experiencing many of the same cognitive inconsistencies, frustrations, and pains as I. We kept in close contact and as we identified more and more with one another's experiences. The feeling that something was out

of line soon gave way to the idea that these are normal trials of youth growing up in the post-industrial age.

Externalization describes the process by which people create their social world. As a carefree youth, I was everywhere all of the time. I would attend parties and functions, hog the telephone at home, constantly checking in with friends and family, or stay active with various youth groups and civic organizations. I even tracked down my kindergarten teacher and invited her to my high school graduation. As a young adult, I kept a much lower profile. There were fewer phone calls, less time powwowing with buddies and more quiet contemplation. Basketball practice also ceased.

One interesting approach I took to this was taking up the role of the outsider. This is known in sociological circles as the **phenomenological** approach. I spent my early twenties as an outsider in my own skin, questioning and challenging everyday assertions that people made or those that I saw in the media. I also took up a new sport of choice. Though I did not know it at the time, it is called **breaching**. I kept a watchful eye for what I believed were meaningless social customs and disrupted it to see what happens. When someone would ask, "how are you?" before they even said "hello," I'd respond with a quick, "fine, thanks," in reply and not return the obligatory "and how are you?" I wondered if people really cared how I was, or was that just a way of saying hello. I would test out different answers to such questions, amusing myself with peoples' reactions. Occasionally, I would meet the informal "how are ya?" with a rundown on the previous 24 hours leaving, speaking so fast that the other person would lose track of how I was doing. There was no ill intent to my breaching. It was just a way of keeping things interesting and exploring the social world.

My early adulthood also saw my attitudes towards work (adult work, that is.) influenced by outside forces. Some of my

older friends were entering the workforce and shared their horror stories. The monotony of certain entry-level 'jobs' overcame the youthful spirit of my friends and it would take years to pay down tens of thousands of dollars worth of debt. Others, who had 'good jobs,' those in the finance industry told of sixty or eighty hour workweeks. They made a lot of money, but they only spent it on liquor because partying was all they did during their down time. Shopping also became a popular hobby but I knew some of the characters in the bunch were left wanting more. It reminds me of the stories portrayed in the documentary *Affluenza*. I recognized this as a disease of sorts, because they were fulfilling a deep, almost spiritual need with mindless consumerism.

This was the future I saw ahead of me and liked it even less than the uncertain one I had faced in earlier times. I truly felt for my friends who had become wage-slaves in my eyes. **Reification** describes the degree to which I believe that I am not in control over my future. I must admit it was at a high level, but it could not prolong the inevitable. Time would inevitably push me into the work force, so I began a serious examination of my personality to get a better sense of the type of work I would do to put food on the table.

My quiet disposition put me at a disadvantage in certain sectors of the economy. Most sales positions require a level of energy that I was unable, or unwilling, to keep over the course of the workday. Though I consider myself outgoing and friendly, I am this way on a voluntary basis. Jobs that require **emotional labor**, as Hochschild describes, require the employee to maintain a public face and manipulate (to an extent) people with whom they come into contact. Also, quotas need to be met in order for a salesperson to keep their job. As a self-confessed free spirit, I was not ready to cede control over my personality to the bottom line causing a strain that Hochschild refers to as **emotive dissonance**. I chose to remain

loyal to my personality while seeking a career direction.

The scene in *The Matrix*, where Neo first plugs into the Matrix after Morpheus “frees” him, reminds me of the shock that comes with learning that, like it or not, we all have to get up and work for a living. Basketball is not a career option for all, but for a small percentage of the population—and that is reality. Morpheus tells Neo that the Matrix is the world around us that appears to be reality, but is not; and that who Neo thinks he is is simply the way he appears in his “digital projection of self.” With an education and plan, so goes the American dream, one can plug into the worldwide market and project any sort of image one desires. However this may not be any less of a fictive Matrix than my hooped dreams. There is something liberating in just knowing the truth.

REFERENCES

- Farganis, James (2000) *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Postmodernism*. Third edition. McGraw Hill College Division
- Kosmas, Jennifer M. (2003). “The Roots of Procrastination: A Sociological Inquiry into Why I Wait Until Tomorrow.” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, II, 2, 74-81.
- Toffler, Alvin (1980) *The Third Wave*. New York. Bantam Books
- Wallace, R. and Wolf, A. (1999) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition*. Fifth Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall

Films:

- “Affluenza.” (1997) Bullfrog Films.
- “The Big One.” (1999) Miramax Home Entertainment.
- “The Matrix.” (1999) Warner Brothers.