



Half Empty or Half Full? **Sociological Self-Explorations of An Aspiring Realist**

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Abstract: In this paper I use various sociological concepts and studies in order to understand why I tend to be more of a pessimist than an optimist. I explore various different aspects of my life through both micro- and macro-lenses in order to find the causes of my outlook on life. Before this, I had never really looked at myself at a deep sociological level. I never really thought about how I am and why I am until the writing of this paper. My biggest worry is that I may not be able to change myself, let alone the world. I understand all of the concepts and ideas throughout my paper, but really how do I go about putting them in practice? I can write this paper preaching about how I should change my life, but is there a way of actually changing it, and society? This will be the ultimate subject of my study in the coming years, to see if I can take what I learned in this paper and apply it to the real world.

As I reflect on my life and notice how much I have been affected by my surroundings, I realize that I often talk a lot like my father. My father is a pessimist, as judged by many of the statements he makes. As for me, I also tend to be a pessimist, even though I'd rather call it a realist. I look at the facts the way they are and state things the way I see them. This may make me appear pessimistic on some topics, but optimistic in others. In other words, I'm not a complete optimist on some things and I am not a pessimist on others. However, as I observe my life I often catch myself saying statements that would almost exactly sound like how my father would have stated them. Even when my optimistic nature comes out, I soon begin seeing things in a pessimistic light. I realize some of this have to do with the impact of my

father's statements and actions on my life.

My pessimism can range from those on topics such as economics and politics to even conversations about household issues. My mother, in contrast, is a lot more of an optimist than my dad and I. She is always finding the good in any situation. I find it peculiar that I often become self-conscious of and take on my dad's pessimism compared to my mom's optimism. I don't necessarily want to be so pessimistic at times because sometimes I feel as though it isn't the best way to approach things. Other times, though, I feel like it is the only way to handle situations.

As I have progressed through this course, learning more and more about the social world, various ideas seem to shed light on and explain why I am more a pessimist than an optimist.

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'**Sociological mindfulness**' is an absolute necessity for me in order to understand why I feel this way about my life. According to sociologist Michael Schwalbe sociological mindfulness is the "practice of tuning-in to how the social world works" (3). This is exactly what I have to do to understand my pessimist attitude toward life. Schwalbe goes on to argue how rare this sociological mindfulness is because of several reasons. One in particular is that many people don't believe that they can really make a difference in the world. Schwalbe states, "Some smart and caring people withdraw from the world because they do not believe they can do anything to change it. They feel so powerless, as do many in our society" (5). I feel this way a lot because of my attitude toward many different aspects of my life. I am so focused on the negative than the positive aspects and possibilities that many times I feel as though I am saying "What's the point?" If I wanted to reverse this way of feeling I should truly study the social world and grasp aspects of my life. I will then not be as pessimistic in every part of my life.

As I analyzed my issue further in relation to the various chapters in Cahill and Sandstrom's book, *Inside Social Life: Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology*, more and more aspects came to light of my pessimist attitude toward life. One basic consideration is that everyone goes through **socialization**. Whether or not it is primary socialization where you learn the basic principles of life in the intimate context of your family in your early childhood, or secondary socialization when you enter the world in order to make your various impacts on the world, every single person goes through it. As I was going through my socialization I always strived for the best, whether it was in school or at sporting events. As I got to college I had to give up one of the most important aspects of my life which was playing the game of soccer. I grew up with soccer; it was my

own way of secondary socializing with other individuals. Then I came to realize, because of my pessimistic mentality, that I had to give up the sport to find a job to help with the financial strains of college tuition. Even though I feel as though I have continued socializing through my life and transitioning into my new job, the experience of giving up the game of soccer, which is one of my true passions in life, severely impacted me. Giving up soccer brought about feelings of regrets and a pessimistic outlook on my future, because I felt that what made me feel positive about myself had to be sacrificed for (what I presumed to be) a 'realistic' life-course outcome. This—now that I think about it—has been a major contributor to why I deeply felt so upset, which also explains why I never talked to anyone about this, and generally about how I feel about things.

Language is described as the greatest symbolic system that humans have ever developed. As I study myself, I realize that I have not been talking enough to the people that truly cared about me. I was practically wasting away this greatest symbol of all, simply by keeping my mouth shut. In "Symbols and the Creation of Reality," Kent Sandstrom expresses how important language is for the individual. He states, "**Symbols** provide the mechanism by which we create and acquire culture, or the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize our society...Language is the system of symbols that members of a culture use for representation and communication (21). The use of language and symbols is such an important tool. In order for me to grasp my knowledge of my problems I need to talk with other people and find out how to cope with these issues.

The power of language can be seen in the movie *Good Will Hunting*, featuring Matt Damon and Robin Williams. The film shows Will Hunting (played by Matt Damon) as an incredible math genius, but one who has had so many issues going on

in his life that he didn't know how to handle them. One of the biggest breakthroughs for Will was to talk to a therapist, played by Robin Williams. By the end of the story, Will really let his emotions go and talked about how he felt. If I do this with my life and truly tell the people I love how I feel I could only imagine what the possibilities could be. Will ended up going on a journey to find the love of his life and who knows I could be on the same path as well.

One can also read about the power of language in James Pennebaker's book *Opening Up: the Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. This book really showed me how important it is to talk about one's feelings and emotions. He describes various different experiments he led, in which some people talked about superficial things while others talked about deep personal issues. He found that people who talked about their deep personal troubles felt relieved having gotten these issues off their chest. This relates to me a lot, in that I'm bothered a lot by how I am feeling when I adopt a pessimistic attitude toward everyday life. I feel as though I do not want to express my emotions too much because sometimes I find that expressing my attitude, which tends to be pessimistic at times, throws me in a bad light and I do get sad about it.

Pennebaker, however, argues that even though you are saddened during and after writing down your thoughts and emotions, in the long run it will work out for the better, and you will lead a healthier life as a result (42). I have to realize that I have flaws and no one is perfect, but if I can take some flaws and use them to the best of my ability, then the better this is for me. I will feel like a healthy person by just honestly talking about my attitude toward things and what I feel when I express my pessimism. Sometimes what I need to do is to be open to observing myself when I have thrown myself in a bad light in order to live a life that is healthier.

Observing oneself and the emotions that arise in everyday life, especially when confronted with one or another personal trouble, can be very powerful. But it requires **emotion work**. The term '**emotion work**,' coined by the sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild, is another concept that can be applied to my situation. When I confront my sense of myself in social settings as being too much of a pessimist, I tend to feel bad about it and therefore deny it. Even then, and also when I am by myself, when I try to suppress or inhibit the feeling, I am doing emotion work, though not a healthy one. However, when I start thinking what if I am, as I am doing in this paper, I am also doing emotion work, by confronting the feeling, and trying to change those feelings into the idea or feeling that it's not that bad. By changing my feelings I'm also doing emotion work. I am either really just masking up the problem and do not want to acknowledge it, or, as I am doing now, I am writing about my thoughts and feelings about it, and in doing so am doing what Pennebaker would consider healthy emotion work. Since, as stated before, I would describe my father as a pretty pessimistic person, my continuing to feel bad about my own pessimism also projects on my feelings toward my father who I think is similar to me—so changing my feelings about myself through emotion work is also at the same time also doing emotion work on my relation to my father.

This idea brings up a huge issue that relates to self-image. What I am talking about is the concept that Charles Horton Cooley came up with, called the '**looking glass self**.' This is the idea that "images are formed through the imaginary adoption of someone else's perspective" (Cahill and Sandstrom, 151). Often times, when I act in everyday life, I imagine how my father views and judges me, and then I act based on the feeling I get due to such mental comparison. Thereby, I tend to take a lot of the views that I imagine my father has and

express them much like how I imagine my father would. No matter what, I still look up to my father as a role model and someone to aspire to be, but I have to always distinguish between how I imagine my father would view and judge my actions, and how he may actually do so. In any case, this is another possible explanation for my pessimistic outlook on life. My social environment has a lot to do with how I think things through in terms of my imaginations of others views and judgments. George Herbert Mead also best describes this, in a different way, in his "The Self as Social Structure." In this excerpt he states, "The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavioral pattern of his social group to which he belongs" (160). What Cooley adds to this formulation, though, is the subtlety that how we act in social interactions will have to go through our imaginations of how we relate to others. This is hitting the nail on the head from my perspective. I am an outcome of my social experience within my family, in the sense that my relating to them always go through, simultaneously, an internal consideration on my part. I am becoming aware that my feelings about the statements that I say that are negative may be based on my own imagination of how they could be words spoken by my dad; my dad may turn out not to actually think that way in a given situation, perhaps. It is like I was mimicking him exactly word for word, through my own projections of who he is and acts like. Therefore my pessimism is being reinforced in my home life not always directly by him, but also by my own inner conversation about him.

Another key contributing factor to my pessimism is the fact that life is a stressful place. As shown in the PBS documentary, *Running out of Time*, I am doing just that, stressfully running out time in everyday tasks. I'm working a part-time job, going to

school full-time, taking care of household tasks and having a social life all at once. This is tough to manage. I can understand why there were petitions to get a six-hour work-day, as portrayed in the film. As we continue on in our lives we strive to be the best and forget the matters that are most important to us. In my case, when I think realistically, I feel that I need to keep that job in order to pay bills, go to school to improve my career options, and fulfill my home duties, and have a social life. All seem to be realistically needed. But, when I see that, I become a pessimist, because I ask whether the stress I am going through will ever end—the film, obviously, points that it often does not, even when you have the perfect job, home, social life, etc. Always, you run out of time to get more of them. This is how I view things and my pessimistic outlook comes out as a result. Stress is such a huge issue as a public issues as well as my own personal trouble, especially when I have to multi-task so many things at once. Therefore, I think a lot of stress has also to do with my pessimism. Studying myself using the **sociological imagination**, a concept coined by the sociologist C. Wright Mills, entails developing the ability to see how my personal troubles and broader public issues relate to one another. This is illustrated well when I think of the role stress plays in my life, as well as the broader society. This brings me one step closer to understanding the broader social nature of my everyday stress, and how my pessimism contributes to it.

Stress is just one of the many aspects I look at in myself to discover the truth behind my pessimistic outlook on life. In "Gloried Self," sociologists Patricia and Peter Alder describe well how our experience of our selves are shaped by our social interactions in a **multidimensional** way. They state, "An individual's self concept is usually multidimensional. It consists of an organized complex of social identities and corresponding self evaluations" (210).

Their article discusses how high school athletes develop a “gloried self” as a result of their success in sports and the media attention it generates, such that this self overtakes and inhibits the development of their other selves, as students for example. What this indicates is that we all have multiple selves, each of which is subject to the dynamics of various social situations we find ourselves in. Essentially, what I am doing in this paper as I speak, is that I split myself into a self that is being studied, and one that observes and studies it. I am looking at myself in various ways, as if from the outside looking in, to figure out whether the whole of me is a pessimist, or just a part or self in me, and try to understand the reasons for my split selves, gloried or not. This concept is similar to Mead’s idea that having **multiple personalities** is a common experience of our everyday lives. Sometimes I have to act different in different social situations because I take on different roles in them, no matter what the circumstances, and yet a this what I seem to consider to be “ungloried” pessimist self shows up. In many cases I can see it when I talk to my friends about certain issues. Some of my friends have even said that I seem really depressed sometimes and that could easily be from the fact that at those moments, that self is up and running, shaping my attitude towards subjects using his pessimist mentality.

The meaning of life is something that I have had trouble grasping and in *Tuesdays with Morrie* Mitch Albom expresses a lot of heartfelt emotions and questions about the meaning of life. What I learned about my own outlook on life from Morrie Schwartz was his idea of **tension of opposites**. He states, in the book on which the movie is based, “Life is a series of pulls back and forth. You want to do one thing but you are bound to do something else” (Albom 40). I think this has a lot to do with my pessimist outlook on life. When I started college I

gave up 15 years of soccer in order for me to get a job and help pay for college. When I think deeply on this issue it saddens me a lot because I allowed society to restrict me and not live my dreams because of financial pressures on my life in terms of career planning. Obviously, I know that this is a part of growing up but it is just so hard to move on with my life since soccer was such a huge part of it. I can definitely see how Morrie’s idea of the tension of opposites is ongoing in society at large and inside each one of us. People are in situations where they have to make choices, but, as Mitch tells himself in passing, “hey that’s growing up I guess.” Not only can Morrie’s words be applied to micro-sociological problems but his words of wisdoms can be applied to macro-sociological issues as well.

Another piece of evidence in *Tuesdays with Morrie* that I can see as a strong relationship to me and society is Morrie’s idea of culture. Morrie states, “The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. We’re teaching the wrong things. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn’t work, don’t buy it. Create your own” (Albom 33). Morrie states it plain and clear that the society and culture we are in is difficult, but it is also up to us to decide whether we want to buy it or not. I believe that my pessimist attitude is without a doubt affected by the larger culture and society. I am telling myself that I need to make money to succeed, and I need to find a good job, but as I tell myself this I get upset because of the sacrifices I have to make to get there. I feel like it is impossible to not buy into the culture as Morrie puts it. How can I deviate from society’s grasp if everyone in society is pressured by it? I think things through so much in a pessimistic perspective that I am not using my sociological imagination to view society from both personal as well as broader social perspective.

I think a lot of the world’s problems can be directly related to my own pessimistic

outlook on life. The best way of describing this is the chapter on inhibited cities in Pennebaker's book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. He describes how, when cities experience traumatic events, people in the city take on an inhibited attitude toward the trauma. For instance, the death of J.F.K caused the city of Dallas to be literally depressed due to the whole country's blaming on Dallas the death of J.F.K. When a country is in an economic downturn as the United States is right now; many people in the country do not have faith in the country or one another. I think this definitely has an impact on my life as well because I am a part of this country, no matter how small I am. So this inhibited city phenomenon definitely trickles down to the individual, such as me. So when I see society in a melancholy state I become a pessimist who sees the economic downturn for what it is. The economy is just one part of the big world that can be used to show my pessimistic perspective. One way that society is viewed that also sheds light on my life may be found in the journal article titled "The Tension of Opposites': Exploring Issues of Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in My Identity Formation" by UMass Boston student Claudia Contreras. Her article describes **phenomenological sociology** which she describes as one that aims "to challenge our culturally learned values and ideas by questioning our way of looking at it and our way of being in the world." (18). This I feel is so hard to accomplish in today's world, even when using our sociological imaginations and applying it to our own lives critically. In my case, being a pessimist, I think I look at a lot of issues that pertain to the world but in a matter of fact way and sometimes it is not the best way to do it. I have obviously been affected by the American culture but it is hard to question that way of life. As Morrie said in *Tuesdays with Morrie* it is the problem with society that it teaches us this way to live which really prevents us from living. I

think a lot of my life is so influenced by negative lights because of life's challenges. The world is a big place and I am just a little guy but if I can learn how to grasp sociological concepts and apply them to the world and myself hopefully I can find a way of becoming successful in intrinsic as well as extrinsic ways.

In the excerpt "Unrealistic Optimism and Positive-Negative Asymmetry: A Conceptual and Cross-cultural Study of Interrelationships between Optimism, Pessimism, and Realism," authors Peters, Cammeret, and Czapinski describe individuals as optimistic, pessimistic, or realistic. They conducted a study where they labeled individuals using the three terms in regard to future scenarios that they could encounter such as divorce, or nervous breakdowns. Surprising to me, the results showed that many individuals were labeled as optimists (8). As I continued to read, I noticed that the attitudes studied were based on how much control we have in our lives. Pessimism was based on the idea that many negative events in our lives are considered uncontrollable and therefore we really cannot help it. Meanwhile, on the other hand, optimistic people that perceive having control of issues will have a better outlook on life (12). I think this, again, definitely has a correlation to Cooley's looking glass self. We are imagining what others perceive us to be and judging us accordingly, so if we imagine being viewed and judged as being in control of our lives, we tend to be an optimist. We don't want to be judged negatively by individuals, therefore I feel that if I admit I'm a pessimist people will look at me in a negative outlook, or what I perceive they will judge me as. This can also be related to what the sociologist Erving Goffman refers to as **facework**.

Facework can be described as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact"

(Goffman 236). Everyone consists of maintaining face one way or the other. National figures, countries, and average persons all do facework and maintain and distort it throughout their lives. For example, politicians use the **avoidance process** as a type of facework. They avoid issues that might distort their image and hurt their reputation. They maintain what they believe and “keeping face” by avoiding issues that affect their face. Not only can people do facework but entire countries can do it as well. For instance, the United States just recently laid to rest the number one enemy of the United States in Osama Bin Laden. Clearly, many Americans despised the man and did not want him to receive any form of burial rights. But the United States laid him to rest at sea, trying to respect Muslim’s culture heritage. If we were to destroy the body we would be seen as being disrespectful to those who believe in and practice Islam. In essence there is a **cooperation of facework**, where cultures and countries try to do facework and save face when interacting with one another.

Facework can also be related to Goffman’s ideas of the **front-stage** and the **back-stage**, which are part of his dramaturgical theory, that is, of seeing everyday life as a theatrical stage. I maintain face by upholding my respectfulness to others. I believe I am an honest and trustworthy person and many times I believe I maintain face despite a situation that would call for some other action. This can be described as my front-stage; but on the other hand, my back-stage is influenced by this pessimist outlook that would often completely contradict the front-stage of appearance. Sometime I try to practice what Goffman calls ‘**impression management**’ by using the term “realist” when referring to myself, rather than the label “pessimist.”

This front-stage, back-stage presence can be seen in both the film *Billy Elliot* and in the study by Spencer Cahill on “The Interaction Order of Public Bathrooms.” In

the film, Billy is a young boy that is struggling with his interest in dancing and the need to have the approval of his father. Billy’s father wanted him to be a wrestler or boxer and essentially take on the masculine role compared to dancing which Billy’s father believes to be a feminine activity. Billy’s front-stage is consumed with pretending to do boxing and appearing to be committed to fulfill his father’s wishes for him to achieve a masculine role, meanwhile on his backstage he dances and practices it, which is where his heart is. This I think pertains to me a lot and the world as well. There is always a struggle between your heart’s desire and what you regard to be a realistic outlook on life. (Note that even continuing to learn about my issues, I’m still trying to use the term “realist” instead of “pessimist”). I believe many countries, as collectivities, also have hidden desires behind their motives and plans and their front-stage and back-stage behavior do not necessarily agree with one another. This is what is so great about sociology and society. There are so many ways to observe and study the world and our relation to it, which makes it such an exciting field of study.

Front-stage and back-stage can be seen in Cahill’s study of “Interaction of Public Bathrooms” as well. The front-stage is clear; the bathroom is used to relieve oneself. Meanwhile the back-stage is the idea that when you step into the stall there is a sense of security in that the temporary time you spend in there is yours to do whatever you want. Goffman refers to this as the “**interaction order**,” i.e., even the most mundane activities we engage in are ordered. There are these unwritten rules acknowledged by people in bathrooms that follow the interaction order. These unwritten rules are also present in politics and economy in society. There are rules that are not acknowledged but they go on under the radar. I have to realize that the world is interconnected not only from country to

country but individual to individual. Macro and Micro issues both intertwine and only when I consider both can I shed a better light on me and the issues that affect my outlook on life.

Another study of pessimism, optimism, and realism was conducted by Hannelore Weber, Manja Vollmann, and Britta Renner titled, "The Spirited, the Observant, and the Disheartened: Social Concepts of Optimism, Realism, and Pessimism." This article has conclusions that are similar to those of the first article I cited above, that is, how the control people perceive to have over their lives influence being a pessimist, optimist, or realist. One important finding of the article is how optimists and realists were able to change and adapt to the different scenarios while pessimists were not able to accomplish this (1). The authors interviewed and asked individuals to label acts and people as one of the three types. The study concluded by describing how realists were "masters of adaption" and individuals should try to be realists with a sense of optimism but never be a pessimist (26). So, the label 'realist' can be used to refer to those people who are able to flexibly switch from being an optimist to that of a pessimist, depending on the situation or issues they encounter. However, this article does tend to describe pessimism as a terrible thing to have, although a little pessimism could be good. What I mean by this, based on the study's findings, is that if someone is always optimistic then they will feel the pain when they fail. If there is a sense of pessimism then the feeling of failure won't be as strong. Of course, it is always better to be happy therefore optimism is a crucial part of it. So, taking all aspects into consideration would probably be the best option in order to be fully aware of society's actions.

Society is something everyone can be a part of and really learn from it as I have throughout writing this paper. Herbert Blumer states in "Society in Action,"

"Human social life is a continual process of individual and collective definition and interpretation" (283). He continues to describe how society can change if the human beings that comprise it collectively act together; however, he thinks no collection social action is possible without the individuals participating in it having an inner life and conversation about it as well. We are all part of a world together and all share its problems, even though we may not equally share its luxuries. As I continue to grow and learn about society I can see that it can change as time progresses and everyone can learn how not only to adapt to change but also to bring it about through critical social action. I think a lot of the pessimistic outlook I have today may be a phase reflecting my perception of current social conditions, as well as how I regard myself. Hopefully I can open up and adjust to the changes and come up with a better outlook of life. Blumer describes this as "**play and fate of meaning**" and I think this action is common sense in a way but so many people ignore what is happening because they don't think they are important and capable of making a difference.

Readings in section VII of *Inside Social Life*, by Cahill and Sandstrom, on "reproducing and resisting inequalities," reveal how inequalities are constantly reproduced from generation to generation. The book's final section also consists of articles on "the politics of social reality." This idea is essentially that specific individuals have a lot more of a say in how social reality is constructed. "He who has the gold makes the rules." This shows how strong economic elites can be in this country in that they do decide who participates in society and/or how. It is always about the rich businessman and no one cares about the poor little guy. Not only is it economic but it is a social factor as well.

In the excerpt "Collective Forgetting and the Symbolic Power of Oneness," Barry Schwartz describes how Rosa Parks

is remembered as the civil rights symbol and many other individuals are completely forgotten to history. **Collective memory** is how people remember history and aspects of it. Why was Rosa Parks remembered...that is because she had nothing bad against her in her past and she was a good role model for the movement. Many other individuals did the same as her but no one cares about them because they had a past that was less presentable.

I can't stand the fact that big businessmen have the power to decide my life; it frustrates me. I'm a person who likes to listen to multiple sides of any matter and get a full understanding of things; so if some in society seek to influence and shape my views on life, especially when done subconsciously, that is completely unfair because in effect it is robbing me of my life.

I think much of this paper illustrates what James Pennebaker encourages us to do in his book, *Opening Up*. As I continued my research I did a lot of self-reflecting and wrote about a lot of these issues in this paper. Pennebaker states, "it is valuable for people to stand back and reflect on who they are, why they behave in the ways they do, and how and why they respond emotionally" (196). This is so important to me. I need to understand why I am the way I am by self-critically examining myself and my relationship to others.

I had never really looked at myself at a deep sociological level. I never really thought about how I am and why I am until the writing of this paper. My biggest worry is that I may not be able to change myself, let alone the world. I understand all of the concepts and ideas throughout my paper but really how do I go about putting them in practice? I can write this paper preaching about how I should change my life, but is there a way of actually changing it, and society? This will be the ultimate subject of my study in the coming years, to see if I can take what I learned in this paper and apply it to the real world. I might be labeled as a

pessimistic person but perhaps things could change for me in the future.

I can honestly say that my life has been impacted by this paper and this course, in terms of how I want to live my life. I guess that now makes me an optimist in this regard.

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