



What Drives A Teenager to Depression? **An Insider's Sociological Look into Its Causes**

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Abstract: This paper explores, through a sociological imagination, what causes a teenager to develop depression. As explained, family is one of the main factors, not only in the development of adolescent depression, but also in the treatment, being a double-edge sword that can affect in both good and bad ways. The first half is a micro-analysis of the subject, being a self-exploration of the time I suffered from depression in my teenage years, when not one member of my family found out my condition at the time. What led me to this point? How did I manage my daily activities in this state? And finally, what helped me overcome depression? Using various sociological concepts, readings, movies, and other materials used in class I try to answer these questions. As the paper continues I go from micro-analysis, which is just exploring *my* experience with depression, to macro-analysis, where I don't think only about myself, but all those other teenagers that have suffered or are suffering from depression, and the social structures underlying that suffering. Our minds are very complex because in the end all we do is a result of what we perceive through our eyes and minds. We may think we are considering others but in the end we're just acting upon our own perceptions of how things are "out there." So, the study of society and the self must go together in understanding and solving personal troubles and public issues.

One of the most important stages of our lives is adolescence. We go through so many changes, and not only does our body change but so does the way we think. At some point in our lives we become so obsessed with what others think of us that we live trying to please others. But the truth is that we can never fully please anybody because we cannot read minds. What we do is live and act according to our own perception of how others see us. With this "looking-glass self" (Cooley 26-30) we form

images of oneself through what we consider to be someone else's perspective. In the end this is just an extension of how we see ourselves. We focus so much on pleasing others that we forget about our own desires and need. At this point we start feeling a void that can lead to depression.

This has happened to various teenagers not only in the U.S. but also around the world. I include myself in this group of teenagers. I suffered from depression when I was 14 years old. At that time I lived in my

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country of origin, which is the Dominican Republic. At that time I didn't know that I had suffered from depression until several years later. My family found out also several years later. Nobody in my family knew at that time. It all started when my mom had to come to the U.S. to work because we were in a tight financial situation. My dad had to take care of me and my brother, who is one year younger than I am. My dad also had to work so he didn't spend much time at home. Even though I had friends, we didn't see each other outside of school very often, and more often than not I felt lonely.

I did a lot of "**emotion work**" (Hochschild 51-56) in my adolescence. My intention was to change not only the way I displayed feelings but also the very core of that feeling. I'll mention one occasion in which I used emotion work: I went to a friend's birthday party and whoever saw me there would've thought that I was very happy, but my true feeling was sadness, because that exact day was the three month anniversary of my mom's departure to the U.S. I felt like crying but nobody knew that. And not only did I try to appear happy but I actually managed to feel happy for a moment because of my emotion work. Note that I was successful in changing my actual feeling to happiness, but this doesn't mean that the outcome is always successful. As Hochschild emphasizes, "note that 'emotion work' refers to the effort—the act of trying—and not the outcome, which may or may not be successful" (53).

Why did I think that I needed to be happy at this birthday party? Who said that I can't be sad when I feel like it? This display of an emotion that you do not feel is based on "**feeling rules**" (Hochschild 51-56), which are the rules of what you are supposed to feel in a given place or situation. A good example is the birthday scene I gave above. And these rules "seem to govern how people try or try not to feel in ways 'appropriate to the situation'" (Hoch-

schild 52). The fact that I appear to be happy at this birthday party when I'm not is not only caused by feeling rules but also by "**sociological mindfulness**" (Schwalbe 3-6). I showed happiness not only because I was supposed to, but also because I was being mindful of my friend's feelings; I thought, "wouldn't she worry if she saw me with a sad face?" Going back to emotion work, I think that my emotion work is related to how Will, of the movie *Good Will Hunting*, felt, because he used emotion work to hide his true feelings, and he did this so efficiently that he himself actually believed he felt that specific way, when he actually felt a totally different way. But as the movie reached its end, Will realized what his true emotions were.

I've always been a very good student, and my parents, specifically my father, have always been very proud. Since I always had good grades there came a point in time when my parents just expected those good grades from me, when those grades became something normal, something that just *had* to happen. At that point I realized just how much I wanted to be praised by my parents. I felt so much pressure to maintain those grades, not only because my parents expected them, but because my teachers, friends, and fellow students also expected them. One day I decided to fail a quiz just to see my father's reaction. And his reaction was completely different of what I expected. He said to me, very calmly, "just try harder next time." I did not try "**emotional management**" (Smith and Kleinman 57-68) in this case because I let my emotions interfere with my work. I did not "put [my] personal feelings aside" (Smith and Kleinman 57).

I measure my success and failure by what others expect of me, as did UMass Boston student Minxing Zheng in "Measuring Personal Success and Failure. A Self-Assessment, Applying the Sociological Imagination." We measure success and failure not by our standards, but by other

people's standards. And I think this is caused by *our* “**primary socialization**” (Berger and Luckmann 7-14) because our parents had their own perception of success that was caused by others in *their* “**secondary socialization**” (Berger and Luckmann 7-14) and then those perceptions were passed to us as primary socialization. And this perception is carved into us even further because we change our perception of success as time passes and it becomes part of *our* secondary socialization.

I think that in some sense we use various selves to please different individuals or to fit in different situations. And when I think of this, dualism comes to mind, as UMass Boston student Colin Allen further explained in his paper “Understanding American Apathy for the Homeless through the Sociological Imagination.” Allen examined the contrast of what one thinks of oneself and what one actually does. We are not the same in every time and space. We decide in each day, situation, and place what we're going to be like. We act as chameleons, changing ourselves to fit in different backgrounds.

As I passed my afternoons doing nothing, my dad introduced me to a music school. I began playing the saxophone and soon after fell totally in love with music. And with this I went through a **partial transformation**” (Berger and Luckmann 7-14), because I think you perceive things differently when you're a musician. As I began to focus on music I had to work really hard not to be tempted to do other things instead of studying. As James Pennebaker explains in his book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, sometimes there are things that “require our mental attention not to do something [else]” (12). I think music is my healing tool because as Pennebaker explains how “writing about [our] deepest feelings resulted in improved... health” (34), I see music as writing my feelings in

that stage of my life. Instead of writing down my emotions I expressed them through my instrument. As I became more involved in music I got better in playing my instrument and was admitted into a band and as a result found the chance to travel around the world. And without any kind of medication, like antidepressants, I achieved a goal that I had set to myself, which was improving my music skills and trying to be more positive towards life and those around me.

Although the documentary film *Running Out of Time* shows how our fast-paced society can cause parents to spend less time with their children, spouses to spend less time with each other, and sons/daughter spending less time with their elderly, I thought of this in another way. In my case, I felt that I was “running out of time” to worry about things that sadden me—things that hold me back. My time was focused in its entirety on music and not undesirable thoughts. Here I used “the concept of grouping similar and different experiences to interact with their environment” (Zerubavel 24). I did this because I didn't want my sad thoughts to affect my music. As Zerubavel explains, “Separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them” (24).

After my experience with depression I became more aware of my surroundings and understood that we need to pay attention to the hardship and options other people face. And after writing this paper I found myself understanding what Pennebaker explains in his guidebook *Writing to Heal*. He writes, “people who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than before writing” (Pennebaker 32). I feel somewhat relieved after writing this paper. And I think that if I had written it when I was feeling down maybe I would've recovered much faster because “reports of depressive symptoms and general anxiety tend to

drop... after writing about emotional upheavals” (Pennebaker 32). Not only do you feel better emotionally, but also physically because it can improve your health. In my times of depression my means of healing was my music. Even to this day it relaxes me and keeps me calm. I think that art is a good way of dealing with stress, because just as writing is an output for your emotions, so is expressing them in an artistic way, like music, or an abstract painting, etc. Even though some people resort to antidepressants, I suggest that people try other methods first, and if those don't work, then acquire antidepressants. And since the pills are addictive I think they should be used as a last resort. Some people even fear that they might lose their true self to these medications because you can become dependent on them. Some people think they might lose their identity, or reach a point where they want to express an emotion but can't because of the drug. I think medication should be the last option in treating depression, especially in adolescents.

Human beings are often self-interested. They don't give much thought to what others feel or think. Let me begin the macro exploration of my inquiry by mentioning a little story by Prof. Morrie Schwartz, from the movie *Tuesdays with Morrie*. There was this little wave going around in the ocean, very happy, when suddenly she sees the other waves crashing into the shore and realizes that's what awaits her too. Now the little wave is freaking out thinking about how she'll soon crash. Then another wave sees the little wave all upset and asks "what's wrong?" the little wave answers "you don't understand! Soon we'll crash into the shore and become nothing!" the other wave says "no, *you* don't understand. You won't disappear, because you're not a wave; you're part of the ocean." The point that is being made in this story is that we need to understand we're not only living for ourselves, but for everybody out there

and that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

It is very hard for a parent to notice whether their adolescents are depressed. And it is hard because teenagers have their own backstage and frontstage behaviors. Their backstage is anywhere they are on their own and don't have to act. Their frontstage is wherever there are other people besides them. But sometimes the "**personal front**" (Cahill 245-254) they present in the frontstage can fail and they become unable to get it back. As Spencer Cahill explains "Individuals who are... repairing their personal fronts in public encounter difficulties in maintaining the degree of interactional readiness... their attention tends to be diverted from the social situation that surrounds them" (251). When we are backstage alone we drop our personal front and therefore we feel relaxed, because the backstage offer individuals some relief from the pressure one may feel from the frontstage audience. Even though our frontstage can fail sometimes we may not be able to save the situation, but when this occurs people usually use "**The corrective process**" (Goffman 235-244), in which we try to save face with a different number of steps. Another way we try to save face is by ignoring it completely. On this matter Goffman writes "When a person fails to prevent an incident, he can still attempt to maintain the fiction that no threat... has occurred" (240).

How we interact with each other is seen in terms of action, which is described by Herbert Blumer as "the multitudinous activities that the individuals perform in their lives as they encounter one another and as they deal with the succession of situations confronting them" (283). This may be true in some cases, but not in all, because depressed adolescents don't interact how they normally would, because of the state they are in. The normal "**dual process**" (Blumer 283-287), which indicates to others how to act and interpret the indications made by others, won't be the same because

when used by a depressed adolescent it may be misinterpreted. For example, you try to interact with someone (and lets say that he or she is depressed) and your words and actions are interpreted wrongly because the way that person interprets them is not the same. Our "**social interaction**" (Blumer 283-2887) changes completely. We no longer engage in normal social interaction because the depression, as I mentioned before, changes how we interpret others.

Depressed adolescents have their own strategies and coping mechanisms, as do many people in different environment and professions. Reflecting on Daniel Chambliss' article "Protecting the Routine from Chaos," I believe some of the strategies are similar. For instance, "**keeping outsiders outside**" (Chambliss 288-296). I think the name of this strategy is very self-explanatory. We basically don't let anyone inside our world, we keep everyone at bay. We still interact but only superficially. Nobody really knows what's going through our minds. Another strategy mentioned by Chambliss, one that I think fits well here, is "**routinization rituals**" (Chambliss 288-296), where we don't allow anything unknown to approach us, and where we cast out anything that may jeopardize our routine. Another strategy that I also think applies to adolescent depression is "**keep going**" (Chambliss 288-296), which, thinking about adolescent depression, I interpret as to just keep acting happy and without problems day in and day out, even though you feel as if nothing really matters any more. Keep going, because while being depressed one discontinues normal activities, and it comes a point in time when we get used to our own behavior and regard it as normal. So when family and friends try to help us, in the beginning we resist, sometimes even unconsciously, similar to how Prudence Carter explains in her article "Straddling Racial Boundaries at School," when exploring the way black and hispanic

kids resist "**acting white**" (Carter 366-381). I made this connection because African-American and Hispanic adolescents are more prone to develop depression than do whites. This is further explained by Sung Moon and Uma Rao in their article "Youth-Family Youth-School Relationship and Depression." They show through their study that "Hispanic and African-Americans had relatively higher depressive symptoms than white groups" (Moon and Rao 126). Latinos and black felt that if they comply with the rules and norms of the "white society" then they would lose their "**social identity**" (Carter 366-381).

After much hard work with family, friends and in some cases medical intervention that include visits to doctors and/or antidepressants, depressed adolescents can overcome their problems. But the fight doesn't stop there. When an adolescent has suffered from depression, parents and friends seem to be overprotective and in the case that they may notice something odd, the adolescent feels "**stigmatized**" (Marvasti 408-420). They immediately get negative labels for just feeling a little sad one day. The adolescent compensates this by showing a happy face even when he or she may not feel that way because they want to be seen as an optimistic happy person. According to Amir Marvasti, "the stigmatized try to create positive identities" (410).

Those around us are very important factors when recuperating from depression. Life becomes much easier with the support of our family. But not all have that good luck, and another great movie we saw in class comes to mind, *Billy Elliot*. He manages to convince his family to support him while he follows his dream of becoming a ballet dancer, but at the beginning his father disagreed. As Billy's family ended up being a great support for him, so must be the parents of depressed adolescents, and continue to do so throughout their lives. Because parents may concentrate in

providing materialistic things and forget that kids need attention. As Wen-Jui Han and Daniel Miller emphasize in their article "Parental Work Schedule and Adolescent Depression," "parents work for their kids' sake, but along the way, the time they spend working becomes more important and eventually overpowers the time they spend with their kids" (38).

In conclusion, while writing this paper I found myself more at peace with the situation I was in at the time of my depression. I also thought about some steps I can take to bring about important changes in my life toward resolving the issue at hand. Even though I don't suffer from depression anymore, one of the biggest changes I could ever make is expressing myself. Expressing my feelings and thoughts and emotions is important for me, since I have always been a very reserved person regarding my deepest thoughts. Kids can be helped a lot and their depressive tendencies reduced in so many ways by bringing about some changes in their relations with parents, like parents' spending more time with their kids and asking them how they feel. By encouraging them to express themselves and their feelings in speech, writing, or through the arts, children can help heal themselves.

While writing this paper I learned that there would've been different ways for me to deal with my depression, like writing about it, as James Pennebaker says in his book *Opening Up*. He explains that "writing about emotional upheaval has been found to improve the physical and mental health of [different kinds of people]" (40). Thinking about it now I realize that the very simple act of writing would have improved my condition so much. I will definitely write when I feel sad or pressured about my everyday life, and take Pennebaker's advice when he says "write continuously. If there's something that you would like to say but can't for fear of embarrassment or punishment, express it on paper" (41).

Another great book I thought to be very helpful while writing this paper is Pennebaker's *Writing to Heal*. There, Pennebaker explains that "writing is a far more powerful tool for healing than anyone had ever imagined" (7). I think society should emphasize more how greatly writing can help anybody who has suffered from something traumatic. Pennebaker also explains that using his guidebook "you examine your very deepest emotions and thoughts... and that writing can bring up emotions and thoughts that you may not had known you had" (32).

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