Looking Inside Out

A Sociology of Knowledge and Ignorance of Geekness

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Abstract: Geek. Nerd. Dork. Outsider. Anti-social. Outcast. Non-mainstream. No life. All of these words have been used to describe me, and all of them are true to some degree. These are terms used for people who have interests that are outside of popular culture. When a person falls out of the "in" group due to different interests, whether it be from liking things that the dominant group does not approve of or from *not* liking things that the dominant group likes, he gets branded with one (or all) of the above terms. This categorization is a way to separate the insiders and the outsiders, and a hierarchy is established. It is obvious that the outsiders are at the bottom of that arrangement, since all of the terms used to describe them bear a negative connotation. I open this discussion by first looking at myself. I do this because, according to the works of G.I. Gurdjieff, the process of knowing has to start with self-awareness. "The only person who can know myself is *myself* ... no amount of fantasizing about who or what I am will substitute for a direct, dispassionate look at the data" (Speeth). To look at this with such a narrow scope is not good enough, however. The problem of separating popular and geek culture lies far beyond just me or the groups of people I associate with. I move on then to gain a better understanding of the situation by reading the work of Elizabeth Minnich. She explains how divisions have formed, and how groups are excluded. This exclusion is necessary so that the dominant group can de-legitimize all other groups. The root of our problems with knowledge is that we have separated people into groups, or "kinds," as she calls them, and then taken the words of one group as having more significance than all other groups. Minnich goes on to explain that the root problem has led to errors in the way that we construct knowledge, and that there are four main areas where errors occur. She calls them faulty generalization, circular reasoning, mystified concepts, and partial knowledge. The four errors have a tendency to overlap, and they perpetuate each other as well as perpetuate the root problem itself. Looking inside out, and drawing upon Gurdjieff and Minnich, I then try to develop a sociological approach to the knowledge and ignorance of geekness.

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All of these words have been used to describe me, and all of them are true to some degree. These are terms used for people who have interests that are outside of popular culture. When a person falls out of the "in" group due to different interests, whether it be from liking things that the dominant group does not approve of or from *not* liking things that the dominant group likes, he gets branded with one (or

all) of the above terms. This categorization is a way to separate the insiders and the outsiders, and a hierarchy is established. It is obvious that the outsiders are at the bottom of that arrangement, since all of the terms used to describe them bear a negative connotation.

This system of branding is a problem for many reasons. For one thing, it is a system that turns a difference in the preference of trivial interests, such as what kind of music people listen to and what forms of entertainment they enjoy, into marked divisions. With people thusly divided, it establishes that one particular culture, the "popular culture," is superior and more acceptable than the unpopular culture. Finally, the people who aren't in the "in" group find it impossible to break out of their ascribed identities. They find that they need to conform and change what their interests are to avoid being labeled as anti-social or geeky, even if the terms are not accurate descriptions of their characters.

I personally relate to this issue because I am a geek, in many ways. I have an interest in and work well with computers and the internet. I entertain myself with video games and trading card games. Much of the music in my collection is made by non-American artists, with names that few people have ever even heard of. I do not go to clubs, I do not actively date, and I do not watch sports. These are all trivial things, yet it's enough for people to describe me as anti-social, an outsider, and someone who has no life. I could never figure out why my choice in entertainment had so much bearing on my character, and why it is such a source of division.

I will open this discussion by first looking at myself. I do this because, according to the works of G.I. Gurdjieff, the process of knowing has to start with self-awareness. "The only person who can know myself is *myself* ... no amount of fantasizing about who or what I am will substitute for a direct, dispassionate look at the data" (Speeth

73). It is a difficult, and perhaps impossible, task, but looking at my experiences without bias and questioning my impressions and memories help me draw as clear a picture as I can possibly draw.

One of the important concepts from Gurdjieff's work is that of questioning how you think. "Judge everything from the point of view of your common sense. Become the possessor of your own sound idea, and don't accept anything on faith; and when you, yourself, by way of sound reasoning and argument, come to an unshakable persuasion, to a full understanding of something, you will have achieved a certain degree of initiation" (Gurdjieff 27). Looking deeply into how I formed my own thoughts, I can begin to see how muddled they are. My identity isn't as much based on how I see myself as it is on how I present myself to the world. I am only a geek because other people have told me I am a geek. With that in mind, I have conformed to their definition of what a geek is.

Recognizing that my own thoughts could interfere with my quest for the truth is the first, and most difficult, step. "Sometimes subconscious barriers need to be broken before a person can become aware" (Cohen 10). The problem with subconscious barriers is that it's difficult to know that they even exist. My preference for geek culture, for gaming, and for associating with that group could be caused by unconscious spite. Perhaps my years in high school being out of the "in" group have nurtured a sort of disdain for all things mainstream. This may have evolved over time into a tendency to "go against the flow." While this would be a logical explanation, it is not complete. I do conform to mainstream things if they fit within my realm of reason.

Thinking critically about my own thoughts brought me to a realization. I was thinking of myself as my ascribed character and using the definition that the dominant culture had given. I had always assumed

that that definition was correct. So while I have thought of myself as anti-social, closer analysis of my everyday dealings reveal that nothing could be farther from the truth. Much of my time is spent interacting with people, whether it is with classmates and friends at school or through instant messaging over the internet. Most of the games I play involve other people, and in the case of games over the internet, there are even social interactions with people I have never been in the same physical room with. This *is* being social, but because it is not the mainstream way of socializing (going to clubs, bars, "hanging out"), it becomes invalid.

I had always seen myself as an outsider, but again, I've come to realize that that is also a flawed term. I am outside of popular culture, but I am inside of the geek culture. If simple things such as liking *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars* is enough to label someone a geek, then the geek culture has a rather sizable population. It is this population that I end up associating with when I play my games. This shows that "outsider" is a relative term, and is not an accurate way to describe me. It was my own fault for believing that I didn't "fit in," when it would have been more accurate to say that I merely did not fit in with popular culture. I do fit in somewhere, and that does not make me an outsider.

The "problem" of being a geek is not my fault. I have become pushed into that category by others, and my belief in the validity of the labeling system helped influence my preferences. This situation bears a striking similarity to a SUNY-Oneonta student's discovery of the sociological imagination. When talking about her social anxiety disorder, Murray writes, "I alone am not the cause of my anxieties and phobias … The world around me influences my everyday behaviors" (Murray 52). I did not arrive at my geek identity by myself. The world around me labeled me a particular way due to my activities. There are certain criteria that give people the geek label, and I happened to fulfill enough of them.

I have no reason to feel like the geek community is somehow a "lesser" community. My experiences with the trading card game *Magic: the Gathering* has taught me that communities centered around a simple game can be very strong. When I first started the game, it was at a friend's suggestion. I had never played a trading card game before, and I didn't know what it would be like. The owner of the store, who sold me the cards, thought I was already into the game, and informed me that Saturday is "open gaming night." I asked him what that meant, and he said that that was when the tables in the store were free for anyone to come in to use for gaming, completely free of charge. He also said that they have a regular group of about twenty people who show up every weekend just to play.

I had no idea that *Magic* was such a social game at first. The fact that so many people from so many places would gather at this cramped Hobby Bunker store just to play this game fascinated me. After learning as much of the game as I could on my own, I went back to Hobby Bunker one Saturday and was astounded. In the back were about twenty people, separated into groups of four or so depending on who got there with whom. These people were all talking, laughing, playing, trading, and overall enjoying themselves. I didn't immediately feel like I belonged, newcomer as I was to the game, and found it difficult to approach and sit. One of them took notice of me and introduced himself as "John." He and his play group were from Everett, a town bordering Malden, my hometown. He had to travel to the store by bus for a half-hour. I introduced myself and told him I was new to the game. He demonstrated a few matches against a friend, explaining everything along the way to help me get a feel for the general flow of the game. Just before the store closed, John handed me a pile of com-

mon cards and told me I could have them. I went home looking forward to the next weekend, eager to play the game more often with my newfound friends.

The game was very fresh and exciting to me at the time. I could never figure out what it is about Magic that is so exciting. Perhaps it is the way the cards can interact with each other, allowing a strategic player to combine several cards for devastating effects. Perhaps it is the competition of seeing who can build a better deck or pilot their decks better. Perhaps it is the mystery of going against a new opponent, or someone who secretly built a new deck and wants to put it to the test. Whatever it was, Magic drew me in quite quickly, and I found myself wanting to build unique decks to pummel my opponents with.

I noticed over the weekends following that different people from different towns started showing up. Some faces I saw in previous weeks disappeared, as well. It wasn't until three weeks later that I saw John again, but during that time, I was playing duels with those strangers from other towns. The way I was accepted and how I accepted them was something I never truly gave much thought to until now. We were total, complete strangers, but because we played Magic, we were friends. Instantly, we were a community. We would make trades, discuss the cards, or help tune each others' decks. It didn't even matter if the following week a different group walked in. There would be the same friendliness and sense of community. Someone who is not inside this community would not necessarily be able to see that it even exists.

In order to stay in any group, I would have had to exhibit certain qualities. Erving Goffman calls this "impression management," and the term is rather self-explanatory. If I at least pretended that I liked sports or listened to popular music, and hid my true preferences, I would still be in the popular group. But as Sheerin Hosseini, a student at UMass Boston, described it, "I know that almost everyone engages in impression management at one time or another, to influence society. Still, I feel that something is wrong in our society that everyone has to alter their true selves to show themselves in a more favorable light" (31). The problem is not my inability to manage my image to the liking of the popular group. Rather, it is a problem with popular culture for finding my differences to be problematic.

A certain level of impression management would be needed in order to stay in the geek culture as well, but it does not seem as strict as in popular culture. Being in an outcast group, someone would probably find it harder to get *out* of geek culture than to get into it. The geek community can be broken down into subgroups, but they still share something in common. Whether you are a gamer geek, a computer geek, or a goth geek, you are a geek simply because you are not mainstream enough to be in the larger popular group. Whatever group you've chosen to identify with, you would need to tailor your image so that you fit into it.

To get at my motivation for being a gamer and a geek, I want to go back to Gurdjieff. "It is not enough to understand with the mind, it is necessary to feel with your being the absolute truth and immutability of this fact; only then will you be able, consciously and with conviction, to say 'I know'" (Gurdjieff 15). It is one thing to use sociological theory to say that I am managing my impression and whatnot, but it is something entirely different when I try to come up with my own conclusion. I do think that I get a genuine feeling of satisfaction when my geek identity is affirmed. I like being different from mainstream culture. Knowing this, though, it's hard to say that it is my only motivation. Still, it is good that I can even point this out.

Being self-aware is only the first step, but it is crucial. Instead of being trapped in

the role of the geek, I can choose to break out of it or not at my discretion. Just by knowing that I gain satisfaction from being different, and being able to objectively see myself as being motivated by something so simple, I can consciously make better choices. Gurdjieff describes this consciousness as being "awake." The opposite would be being "asleep," where a person goes about his life without questioning what motivates him. It is a sort of prison, and if someone is not aware that he is trapped, he can never get out of it. The main difference between the awake and the asleep is that a person who is asleep does everything as an unconscious reaction to the world, while a person who is awake would be able to observe his reactions consciously and then choose whether or not to react.

To look at this with such a narrow scope is not good enough, however. The problem of separating popular and geek culture lies far beyond just me or the groups of people I associate with. I have gained a better understanding of the situation after reading the work of Elizabeth Minnich. She explains how divisions have formed, and how groups are excluded. This exclusion is necessary so that the dominant group can de-legitimize all other groups. The root of our problems with knowledge is that we have separated people into groups, or "kinds," as she calls them, and then taken the words of one group as having more significance than all other groups. "It is about changing *what* and, just as important, *how* we think so that we no longer perpetuate the old exclusions and devaluations of the majority of humankind that have pervaded informal as well as formal schooling in the United States and around the world" (Minnich 49). To fix the problem means changing the way we think. It is not a path of choosing not to acknowledge the differences in people's preferences for entertainment. Rather, it is the path of not letting those differences become divisions.

Minnich goes on to explain that the root problem has led to errors in the way that we construct knowledge, and that there are four main areas where errors occur. "Four basic kinds of errors derive from and lock in the root problem of turning *distinctions* among groupings of particular people into abstract, hierarchical *divisions* by 'kind' such that a particular few emerge as the imperially inclusive 'kind' or term, the norm, and the ideal for all" (Minnich 104). She calls them faulty generalization, circular reasoning, mystified concepts, and partial knowledge. The four errors have a tendency to overlap, and they perpetuate each other as well as perpetuate the root problem itself.

The first of these errors, termed faulty generalizations, is a relatively simple concept. It is taking a narrow view and using it as a representation of the entire picture. She also calls this "universalization," which may help clarify her meaning of this term. It is the process of changing the meaning of all-inclusive terms to actually refer to a small population. She uses examples such as "religion" usually being generalized to "Christianity" and "philosophy" being generalized to "Western philosophy." What this does is it excludes different groups, and makes it so that one group is more legitimate and more valid than others. We make faulty generalizations subconsciously. For example, if I told you I was deeply religious, chances are that you would think I believed in God. The fact that "religion" and "Christianity" have become synonymous in many American minds is a symptom of this error in thinking.

Faulty generalizations serve to set a norm, usually on the basis of majority. It establishes that a particular group, like Christians as an example, is the normal and default, with all other religions being deviations. This line of thinking, when applied to something like culture, serves to make one group more correct while labeling all others as deviant. This is what causes geeks to be looked down upon. From this error is

born the idea that there are such things as normal choices of entertainment. Anyone who chooses to enjoy different things is a deviant.

Circular reasoning is the second error, and ties in very closely with the first. A circular statement is one that proves itself by referring to itself, which is logically unsound. The problem of separating people into different "kinds," leads to having to set boundaries and to patrol them. Setting boundaries means defining the different kinds so that accurate categorization can happen. Circular reasoning comes from attempting to set up these boundaries. Assertions such as "Females are more intuitive than rational" and "Blacks have rhythm" are examples of this circular way of thinking. They look, on the surface, like descriptive statements, but they are, in reality, *prescriptive* statements (Minnich 154). Rather than being statements that generalize a particular population's properties, they are descriptions of what those groups are *supposed* to be (or not supposed to be). It is, in a sense, working backwards. You could take a group of geeks and make a statement that describes them, or you could make a statement first and then categorize everyone who fits that statement as a geek. Looking at it rationally, the first method would be more accurate for categorizing different "kinds" of people, but circular reasoning will more often involve the second method.

This error is problematic because it leads to statements that cannot be contradicted. An example of circular reasoning would be if I took a common stereotype like "Gamers are anti-social." One would think that contradicting this statement would be as simple as finding a gamer who likes to socialize. However, because of the circular reasoning, this is not the case. If I find a gamer who has many friends, goes to parties, and is sociable overall, then the usual counter-argument would be that this person is not a gamer. The original statement was disguised as a description of gamers, but it really is just a way of "diagnosing" a gamer. It is really saying, "If you are social, then you are *not* a gamer."

The third error that Minnich describes is mystified concepts. This refers to the way certain ideas are given monolithic, exaggerated status so that they take on their own meaning. This meaning is usually some sort of distortion of the literal definition of the concept. Examples that Minnich uses are "gender," "sex," and "equality." In the dominant U.S. culture, Minnich claims that "equality" has been historically confused with "sameness" (Minnich 179). When minorities and women are fighting for equality, they are not looking for this "sameness." It is not enough that these oppressed groups have the "same" opportunities as the white, male, dominant groups. Yet, it is often cited that the fact that women and blacks can attend colleges is proof of "equality," and then the argument ends there. Equality is a mystified concept because it is a distortion. It is not aiming for sameness, because sameness is impossible. Individuals and groups of individuals cannot be completely same nor completely different from each other. In addition to that, oppressed and excluded groups already have a history of being outside of the norm. Having already been branded deviant, "sameness" for them means they have to prove they are "as good as" the dominant group.

This becomes relevant to geek culture because geeks are the oppressed group versus the popular culture. The statements on equality brings up one very important property of the oppressed groups. They are always on the defensive. As a geek, I have to prove myself to be as good as those in popular culture. I have to justify that my form of socializing is at least as good as their form of socializing. I am defending the artists of the music I listen to by citing their other works and what their fame is in countries outside of the United States.

Someone within popular culture does not need to defend his choices of preference. His choices are already perceived as the norm, and are therefore already correct. Only the deviants need to prove that they have merit.

The last of Minnich's four errors is what she calls "partial knowledge." The term "partial" does not mean only knowing a piece of the full picture, as it might suggest. She is instead referring to partiality—the idea that knowledge can be and actually is biased. She exemplifies this concept when she talks about religion, or more specifically, Christianity. "We have had histories that tell of the 'martyrs' who died for the faith that ultimately won, while the martyrs among those who lost have been called 'heretics,' 'infidels,' 'unbelievers,' 'superstitious Natives'" (Minnich 232). The winning side tells the story, and it tells it in a very particular way. This statement points out that the winners are always put in a good light, such as these martyrs who have given their lives to what is undeniably the "right" cause. The losers, who had also given their lives, only got what they deserved.

Why partial knowledge is a problem lies in the fact that it is always disguised as impartial knowledge. It is impossible for knowledge coming from human minds to not be tainted by human bias. The problem here is not to say that we should be aiming for knowledge that is completely objective, as that would be an impossible task. The problem lies in our false claim that some of our knowledge is absolutely free of bias. We have to get away from that lofty claim because it simply is not true. The result of believing that something is impartial when it really is not is that we take that knowledge for granted. It becomes something that cannot be challenged, in a sense, morphing into a monolithic, "mystified" concept. If the story of the winner is already taken as objective truth, then the losers' view of the situation would already be seen as "the other side of the story." The "other" already implies that it is biased, and inherently incorrect, when compared to the "objective," unbiased point of view.

The concept of partial knowledge serves the dominant group, and this is how it ties into my situation. Popular culture already establishes that certain trends are correct. This extends beyond just geeks and gamers; it applies to all people outside of the established norm. Certain activities, whether it be watching sports, eating meat, or drinking alcohol, are considered socially healthy. Even if groups outside of the norm such as vegetarians do not see things this way, they are considered to be wrong. Their point of view has been tainted by any number of things, whether it be because they are environmentalists or lovers of animals. If you are a part of the meat-eating "norm," though, your view is not considered tainted. The benefit and the downfall of the dominant group is its refusal to self-criticize.

Groups are separated into insiders and outsiders, oppressors and the oppressed, the dominant and the submissive, haves and haves not. Looking at the situation this way, using a wider scope than just my own personal experiences, it is easier to understand exactly what being a geek is. It explains why even though my own feelings are that I am correct, I still feel like I am wrong. There has always been this looming suspicion that even though I am enjoying being different from the norm and cannot imagine being a part of the larger crowd, I am somehow going down the wrong path. If the majority is acting differently from me, then wouldn't it make more sense that *I* am incorrect? It turns out, though, that my looming suspicious are probably because of what Minnich calls the root problem and her four main errors. I am one of the deviant "kinds." Therefore, the dominant culture has set up a system to make all other kinds illegitimate. I, being a part of this vast system, am feeling its effects. Even if

through self-reflection I find that I am comfortable with the way I live, the bigger society is working to make me conform. It attacks me, and all outsiders at a deep level—it make us doubt our lifestyles. It constantly reminds us that we are wrong, and they are right. It makes us measure rightness and wrongness by their scale, which is arbitrary, and we always find ourselves ending up at the bottom of that scale.

In the David Yates film *The Girl in the Cafe*, the female protagonist is an example of the personal effects of being an outcast. My experiences as an outsider are similar to hers. She is regarded as a simple-minded, uneducated girl who does not know what she is talking about at the G8 Summit, and the people there did not initially take her seriously. She did not sum up her knowledge in statistics and numbers and bars and graphs, nor did she have a list of references to cite. She did not follow the format of what was considered correct knowledge, and so her ideas were seen as too simplistic. She was thus seeing herself as already dead, because her voice meant nothing to anyone. Her ideas were not bad, and they made perfect sense to her, but all that mattered was that they did not make sense to the leaders at the G8 summit—the people who have already defined what "true" knowledge should be.

As an outsider, I find myself feeling dead as well sometimes. There are things that I cannot say about myself when I'm with particular crowds. I cannot be taken seriously as a scholar if I admit that many of my hobbies are games. If I say that I am a gamer, and that my thoughts are constantly occupied by ways to strategize in all of these games that I play, I will somehow become less of a person. I would be discredited, because even if I have salient and profound things to say, I will be seen as childish—a grown man who still likes to play with cardboard, dice, controllers, and joysticks.

Another issue that the Yates film

brought up also relates to Gina's feeling dead inside. In the film, she went to prison for harming or perhaps killing a man who abused a child. In her mind, it is wrong for anyone to harm a child. That was her logic and her reasoning, and the action that she took was justified as far as she determined. However, society punished her for harming the man who harmed the child. The justice system set up its own code of rightness and wrongness, and found her guilty. She was poor, she was a woman, and she harmed a man. As far as the dominant group was concerned, she was wrong, on many counts. It did not matter what her justification was, because her judgment was clearly not as unbiased, objective, and just as that of the judicial system.

I had an interesting thought as I was watching the 1999 film *Tuesdays with Morrie*. In it, the character Morrie, based on the real life story of the sociologist Morrie Schwartz who taught at Brandeis, is slowly dying of Lou Gherig's disease. The whole film centers around one of his former students coming to grips with his relationships to people, and to Morrie in particular. Morrie mentions as he is dying that there are certain things that people do not talk about because they are afraid to talk about it. Death is one of those things. Death is the failure of the body, and inevitably leads to the idea that the body will cease to function. The reason why people fear death is because it reflects a life that is not fulfilled. The fear of death mirrors an unsatisfied life. Talking about it means confronting it, and many people are not ready to accept the inevitability of death.

This relates to my situation because it lends me a small bit of insight on what is going on inside the insider. The insider conforms because he does not want to confront himself. He does not want to go through a process of self-criticizing, of doing something different, and of possibly being wrong. He is taking for granted the information provided to him by other insiders,

and not questioning their rightness or wrongness because doing so would force him to question himself. He wants to go along with the notion that he is different and superior from those on the outside. Otherwise, it would open up the possibility that the insiders and the outsiders are one and the same, and perhaps that is the scariest thought of all. Once you are in the dominant group, you should be concerned with differentiating yourself from the outside groups.

At this point, I do not know if I am settled with this issue. It seems that even if I understand the system of oppression at a cognitive level, there is little I can do about the emotional level. I still feel like I should be ashamed and should be cautious with whom I share with. As comfortable and satisfied as I am with my deviations from the norm, there are still times where I feel like I'm doing something wrong, and that I should aim for the comfort of conformity. Social life would certainly be much easier if I conformed. I would be legitimate, I would be taken seriously, and I would be alive. But then I would not be me.

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