



Understanding Fear Using My Sociological Imagination

E. M. Walsh

University of Massachusetts Boston

Abstract: In this paper, the author examines her long-standing fear using her **sociological imagination** applying various theoretical lenses offered in sociology, ranging from phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, social exchange/rational choice theory, functionalism, conflict theory, and postmodern perspective. Relating her personal troubles surrounding her fear to larger social issues, she hopes to not only achieve a better sense of the fear in her own life, but also shed some light on issues of fear in society as a whole.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since I can remember, nearly every aspect and event of my life, whether good or bad, has been characterized by the sense of being driven. This, it seems, is a fairly common phenomenon. People everywhere desire and do things, set goals and achieve them, being driven by some force such as success, happiness, or wealth. In my case, however, what has been driving me both towards and away from the things I hope to accomplish, the choices I have made, and the goals I set for the future, is *fear*.

It seems that into whichever area of my life I choose to delve, what I find is an underlying characteristic of fear defining my feelings, choices, motives, actions, and aspirations. As to the origins of this fear, it is easy for me to pinpoint why *some* areas of my life would have such a fearful emotional charge. However, I continue to struggle with understanding why this fear has seeped and bled into other unrelated as-

pects of my life. Likewise, I also have yet to figure out how this undertone of negativity could be eradicated from my decision making and goal setting processes completely.

In early childhood, from what I remember and what my mother has shared, I was scared of quite a few things. My father being a firefighter, I was scared of the house burning with me trapped inside. Because he was an alcoholic and unemotional, I was scared of him. In a correlative sense, I assumed that he would be unable or unwilling to save me as our house potentially burned to the ground. I was scared of death, and losing my parents, as I think most children probably are. My house was tall, old, and creepy, reminding me of *The Addams Family* home. Lastly, I was scared of spiders (and anything with more than four legs, for that matter).

As I grew older and life became more complex, so did my fear. At the age of 14, I was sexually assaulted outside of my home and my life was threatened at my ever

E. M. Walsh (pen name) is an undergraduate student at UMass Boston. She wrote this paper while enrolled as a junior in the course Sociology 341 ("Elements of Sociological Theory") instructed by Mohammad Tamdgidi (Associate Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston) in 2008.

speaking of what happened. Immediately I was confronted by a fear and lack of trust for any other person. At first, I did as I was told and kept the secret. As my thoughts began to boil and fester in my memory and imagination, the fear began to turn onto my self. I felt as if I had betrayed my **self-concept** and my own body to the extent that I could no longer trust myself, and therefore was someone to be feared. I knew I needed help for what had happened to me, but was afraid to tell anyone, fearing that the man who hurt me would come back and rape me again, or worse yet, kill me. I was also fearful that no one would believe me or that I might even be to blame for what happened. I began cutting myself to such an extent that someone would notice and reach out to me. More than once I also drank hard liquor because I knew it would make my blood thinner, thus potentially killing me and in turn putting an end to my fear. I now realize that this was also a method I had used to get in touch with my own emotions; the hurt I inflicted on my body both brought to mind and simultaneously numbed out the emotional turmoil. It had the ability to both distract me from my fear if it became debilitating and allow me to feel something if suppressing the memories left me void of all emotion.

Eventually my self-destruction “paid off,” and my cousin noticed and brought me to the hospital. My parents were called and I was admitted to a private hospital for overnight observation. It was here, in the temporary feeling of sanctuary that the hospital gave, that I first told someone what had happened to me. I began getting treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression linked to the incident, yet I still refused to give the identity of the man who hurt me.

Over the years, I have for the most part resolved and recovered from my PTSD. I have not had a flashback in over two years and have relinquished much of my fear of other people, my self, and my perpetrator.

However, it seems that to a large extent, the fear I experience in my day to day life is a lingering effect of both my trauma and my childhood with an alcoholic parent. In order to resolve issues of my past which have driven me into a life of fearful action and reaction, I must heed Louise DeSalvo's (1999) advice and deeply explore my pain and fear. She writes in her book, *Writing As A Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, about how writing can influence healing that in order to achieve healing, we must “go with our pain and into it; we observe it and examine it in detail” (1999:52). It is now my goal (one that I am fearful to set for myself, might I add) to examine and interpret this fear using a **sociological imagination**, applying various conceptual lenses in sociological theory. On the microsociological and macrosociological levels, I will try to relate my personal troubles surrounding my fear to larger social issues. In doing this, I hope to not only achieve a better sense of the fear in my own life, but also shed some light on issues of fear in society as a whole. In doing so, I may find that I am not alone, that others are dealing with similar issues, and that we can mutually learn from our experiences.

II. PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEAR

I find it helpful to first look at my fear through the lens of **phenomenology**, taking a step back to treat my fear as problematic and examine how I experience and apprehend my fear from the standpoint of a stranger who is new to this life. I must question my assumptions regarding fear's origins and continuation, observing it as if I were outside of my self.

From this vantage point, it becomes clear that my fear has been the result of **socialization**. The fear instilled in me due to my father's sterility and lack of emotion was a product of **primary socialization** and

shaped me as a growing, thinking, learning individual. Later the fear was further ingrained by let downs and violations by men in my life. This was a form of **secondary socialization** from which the roles I began to take in life were characterized by elements of fear. As Anthony Giddens points out, socialization occurs “by creating and recreating the familiar” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:266). Thus, the continued fear I felt towards my father as a child was recreated by another, yet more traumatic, familiar sense of fear towards people in my life. This socialization was also reinforced by what Alfred Shutz termed the “**reciprocity of perspective,**” which states that through interaction, the meaning attached to situations can become shared between those interacting (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:267). In other words, my mother’s anxiety, which she had suffered from during my entire life largely due to her relationship with my father, was in a sense passed along to me. The meaning she attached to living in daily life was apprehensive, which made my fear seem normal, thus reinforcing it.

The way in which my fear has progressed in my life can also helpfully be looked at in terms of **ethnomethodology**, which is defined as “how people make sense of everyday activities,” and is used in a way that one “treat(s) as problematic what is taken for granted in order to understand the common sense everyday world” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:269). By problematizing my fear and my ideas of how it influences my life, I begin to see it in a new light. Essentially, as stated above, I feel as though 90 percent of my issues both in regards to childhood and being raped are resolved. The 10 percent remaining surrounds the issue of fear, but my fear is not necessarily always debilitating. It is, however, largely my standard for making sense of my environment. I find that even my successes, such as being a “straight-A student,” are motivated by fear of not being good enough or smart, and fear of financial instability. But, as I

treat these assumptions—fear as my driving force, or the belief that my previously stated issues have actually been resolved—as problematic and taken-for-granted, I realize I could be wrong. Perhaps these assumptions have merely allowed me to make sense of and order my environment based on terms that I am familiar and comfortable with. After all, “by making sense of events in terms of a preconceived order for society, people create a world that is indeed ordered” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:270).

I have become somewhat comfortable with fear, as it has become what is familiar. Maybe this is just my way of presumptuously **accounting** to myself and to those around me how I am making sense of my life and my actions. In other words, my fear has become so **routinized** that it is now the formulae by which I judge almost all aspects of my life. Bristol and Sherman (1954) state that

...every wrong picture which enters your consciousness, with intense feelings of fear behind it, is like a seed that takes root in mind and, eventually, reproduces similar happenings in your life. (pg. 153)

By looking at my fear in this way I begin to see that it has not only become routinized, it has also been the foundation for how I have **constructed my social reality**. I have realized that in past situations fear has been **externalized** by others and imposed on me through a process of **objectivation** that has been facilitated by various cultural and gendered structures of knowledge. Through **internalization** of these via various forms of socialization, I have accepted this fear and made it my subjective reality in areas of my life previously unrelated to the trauma or my childhood. This reality that I have internalized spills out and becomes the fabric of my day to day experience, causing ever renewed cycles of externalization, objectivation, and internal-

ization. In other words, this fear that has taken over my self-concept has projected into my external environment, shaping and molding not only who I have become but also the world I live in. If this is true, it is not necessarily bad because, in all its complexity, "it [also] means that human beings can create a new social reality" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:287). Therefore, my fear is not beyond eradication, and I can do something about it, because it has not been an innate, but a socially constructed, reality influencing my life. Louise DeSalvo explains how writing can be a method of **reality construction**, and how Virginia Woolf began reconstructing her reality through writing. Speaking of understanding the chaos of life, Woolf says "It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole... This wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me" (as cited in DeSalvo, 1999: 42). It seems as though Woolf uses her writing to manipulate and reconstruct her social reality. Perhaps by simply writing about my fear, making it whole, and understanding it, I can reconstruct my reality to exist without fear.

In this **context of my social reality** and the process by which I construct and reconstruct it, I have also become aware of what Berger and Luckmann call "**reification.**" This is when something, my tendency to fear, is accredited to being produced by something other than human action, such as one attributing something to "god's will" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:291). I begin to see that in some cases I have reified my actions, stating that they were spawned by my fear, and thus fully explained. By doing so, I dehumanize my actions, making an excuse rather than fully understanding and making them meaningful. Doing this also relinquishes me from the grip of responsibility by implying that my condition is "meant to be." For example, after high school I decided not to move away for college, something I deep down really wanted to do. I stated that it was simply because I

was afraid of having flashbacks and people judging and not understanding my circumstances. I instead went to a community college, which I knew was an "under-achieving" behavior by my own standards. I used my fear to reify the fact that I was simply not ready to move away from home, and that I wanted to be a little lazy for once and not overexert myself in my studies. In other words, it seems that up until I understood the social process of constructing reality, fear had not only been hindering my behavior, but had also been a useful excuse to avert dealing with my true feelings.

III. FEARFUL SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

It is clear that my fear, both in the past and continuing into my present, is an emotion that has had a lasting effect on my social behavior. I am not passive in what I choose to do, say, or be. Rather, my thoughts and emotions rooted in my fear are continuously reinterpreted in different situations causing me to respond the way I do. This is made clear through the lens of **symbolic interactionist** theory. From this vantage, I can see that I am an individual "with a self," and there continues to be an interaction between my fear and my social behavior (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:199).

Symbolic interactionists tend to "look at the process by which individuals define the world from inside and at the same time identify their world of objects" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:227). By looking at my fear in this way, I see that I tend to view my life through fearful eyes. This can be seen clearly in the case of finding and securing a committed relationship, for example. In the cycle of my **stimulus-interpretation-response**, when a suitor (A) acts with interest towards me (B) (this attraction being the stimulus), I respond based on the meaning that I attach to the way A is acting, by interpreting this meaning (Wallace & Wolf,

2006:214). Due to having **internalized** my fear, this unnecessary emotional attachment gets looped into my interpretation and influences me towards a fearful, non-trusting response in interaction with my male suitors. Even in situations where I have succumbed to feelings of love and companionship, over time my fearful interpretation overcomes and causes the relationships to end due to what appears to the suitor as jealousy, insecurity, and lack of trust. Beyond this, my fear of a **dyad** also expands to include being fearful that I will be abandoned. This is understandable, due to the nature of a dyadic relationship As explained by Wallace and Wolf (2006) when introducing the ideas of Georg Simmel, if one or the other (A or B) withdraws from the relationship, the dyad as a whole ceases to exist (pg. 201). Perhaps this is the reason why I find myself more comfortable with small groups of close friends, finding security in the fact that if any in the group chooses to leave, the group itself will remain intact.

Furthermore, my **interpretation** of potential dyadic relationships is influenced by what I like to call my "*imposed dyad*," or in other words, the dyadic relationship from my past that was never consensual. This particular interaction had lasting effects on the way I interact with others in the relational sense. I have also related my experience to my interactions with my mother and father growing up. My father never showed love towards anything. In response to this my mother's life seemed filled with anxiety. We both feared my father because of his distance and lack of empathy, but I came to fear him even more than she. As I began **role-taking**, putting myself in her shoes, my interpretations of love relationships became even more dire. Even now, as I try to keep my past as my past, and work on successes for the future, my **definition of the situation** I find myself in continues to be one of dread. Like UMass Boston student Christine Berry exploring her life in

"Coaching Myself Beyond Self-Doubt" (2006), I realize that I may often define my situation incorrectly. Somewhere in my **self-interaction** (my internal conversation in relation to life situations), particularly in regards to love relationships, the situation becomes warped by my fear and apprehension. As in a self-fulfilling prophecy, therefore, my situation then becomes "real in its consequences" (Wallace & Wolf, 2002): that my fear of not being able to trust enough, despite love, to build a significant, lasting, long-term relationship, produces such a reality as a consequence.

It is somewhat unclear as to what **phase of the self** my fear lies in. My fear may be arising from the "**Me**" phase, the "perspectives on oneself that the individual has learned from others" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:206). In other words, I could be simply reacting based on my internalized, past experiences with fear in a way that does not rightly evaluate the situation as a new, and different situation. In this sense my fear has been learned and is the perspective from which I now judge my interactions with others. Or, my fear could be contained in the "**I**" phase, which is "the unorganized response of the organism to the attitudes of others, the spontaneous disposition or impulse to act." The fear may be, in other words, a spontaneous reaction arising from everyday interactions in the present. As George Herbert Mead explains, however, it is most likely an interaction between both of these phases:

The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases there could be no conscious responsibility, and there could be nothing novel in experience. (as cited in Wallace & Wolf, 2006:207).

In light of this evaluation of the **phases of the self**, it seems as though over the years of interaction between the "**I**" and the

“me,” the influence of my “me” self on my “I” self has in a sense desensitized the reaction. This causes me to “do it naturally” without self-interaction. In other words, my fear response, which was initially part of the “me,” organizing and guiding my behavior, has engulfed the “I,” depriving it of recognizing the novelty of every new relationship and situation and thereby of being able to react to it as such. Most of the time, therefore, my ‘I’ is simply a pre-conditioned reaction to situations without thought.

In light of Herbert Blumer’s **three basic premises of symbolic interactionism**, the meaning that I have attributed to situations in my past have come to be involved in the interpretation of current interactions, and thus the meaning I attach to new situations is also one of fear. Blumer’s first premise states that “Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.” Basically, my behavior away from committed relationships and towards educational goals can be better understood in terms of the fear I have developed toward my social interactions. My fear is pushing me away from something positive (love) while simultaneously protecting me from something negative (unemployment). The second premise: “The meaning of things arises out of the social interactions one has with *one’s fellows*,” also rings true in my situation. The interactions between myself and my perpetrator, my father, my mother, and a significant number of my friends (many of whom have also been physically or sexually abused) allow me to continue to attach a fear-based meaning to my interactions. Premise three, stating that “The meanings of things are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with things he encounters,” sheds light on just how I interpret new situations based on those of the past, ascribing to them an emotional tag of fear (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:217-19).

I have said that I am uncertain in my educational goals, and believe that I am only continuing on the path I am on due to being afraid of lack of success. However my choice of going into the field of psychology may also be differently explained. Mead explains that the self “arises in experience through the individual stimulating himself to take the attitude of the other in his reaction towards the object” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:210). This explains that perhaps my decision to go into psychology is because I have been in the “**role of the other**” for which the people I hope to help are also in. I feel that since I have been in the roles of *raped*, *violated*, and *mentally ill*, essentially it can be my goal to help others who have had to play similar roles. My success in college could also be explained by the concept of **role-distance**. Over time, as I grow and change, I begin to deny “not the role [being a sufferer of PTSD] but the virtual self [being fearful] that is implied in the role” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:221). By looking at my fear and educational goals in this way I can see that I have actually made much progress away from the fear I experienced throughout high school. I have been able to put enough distance between myself and my fear to be able to maintain good grades and a healthy college life. I have never lost the label of my mental illness, but by distancing myself from the actions expected of someone in this role, I have been able to maintain sufficient distance from my fearful self in order to successfully partake in various educational and professional roles. This reminds me of the film *Twelve Angry Men*. In the film, twelve jurors are deliberating over a murder case that seems to be a clear-cut case of presumed guilt. The men are using their past experience and interactions to simply dismiss the boy as guilty. For example, one man who recently had a falling-out with his son is applying the disappointment he felt in that situation to judge the young man in the case as guilty without question. This is the same way I

use the fear lingering from past situations to judge new experiences fearfully. I see now that I tend to dismiss the facts of the situation, like the facts of the case, and make a summary ruling based on fear. One should therefore not forget that Blumer's premises are also intended to draw our attention to the fact that meanings are not readily determined by previous interactions, but can also newly arise in the here-and-now realities.

Oftentimes I find myself feeling like Neo in *The Matrix*. I am in between two different realities. I find myself caught in the "matrix" of a girl with a debilitating illness, yet I have begun over the years to also see and live in the real world of successful, goal-oriented people. Taking the "red pill" to see how deep the rabbit hole goes, however, is not easy, though it is my only hope toward seeing the whole truth of my fear and being able to escape the Matrix. Having a mental illness in the land of "the American Dream" often makes me feel as if I have what DuBois calls a **double-consciousness**, in which I have the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," separated by the **veil** of mental illness (Farganis, 2008:152-3). Basically, my **looking-glass self**, how I imagine others to be perceiving and judging me and the way I feel towards my self as a result, has perpetuated my fearful actions. I imagine that people assume someone with PTSD will be handicapped in day to day activities and that some level of fear is to be expected. This may be why it has been hard to escape or overcome my fear; because I imagine that it is imposed on me by others. Another reason why I may also stay attached to my fear is due to **genderism**, which Erving Goffman defines as "a sex-linked individual behavioral practice" (as cited in Wallace & Wolf, 2006:243). Women traditionally are allowed, perhaps even expected, to be fearful of certain things, and it is men who are expected to be protectors of women, helping them to escape their fear. In my own

imagination, I continue to ascribe to this notion of gender, yet I am additionally fearful because the men in my life have tended to increase my fear rather than steer me away from it.

Achieving success in the wake of mental illness and a history of abuse involves a great deal of **impression management**. Erving Goffman, in his **dramaturgical** theory, describes how it is necessary for people to coordinate their **front and back regions** in order to manipulate how others perceive them. My **back region**, the part I keep closed and hidden, includes my sense of fear and my history of abuse. By keeping these hidden, I can give others the impression I present in my **front region**: that of a successful, emotionally strong, goal-oriented young woman (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:238). Although I am able to keep my façade most of the time by managing my front and back regions, there have been times when they have not been well coordinated and I have at times been **discredited**. This is similar to what the people in the film *Multiple Personalities* (1994) experience. As in the three cases portrayed in the film, occasionally a personality that is being hidden in my back region becomes noticeable by onlookers. However, unlike those in the film who suffer from multiple personality disorder, I am conscious of not only having these contrasting selves, but also when they become visible in my front region.

In a class I had taken at a previous college, once my history and mental illness became apparent when I had a breakdown in class. My attempts at **emotion management** failed and I lost my appearance as an intelligent and strong class leader, and was from then on seen as what I had been hiding in my **back region**: an unstable person that was unreliable in times of stress. I notice that Sheerin Hosseini, another UMass Boston student, felt similarly in the sense of always having to "**save face**." In her paper where she describes her need for acceptance, she explains how "[i]n order to main-

tain face” she found she must “conform to the values and norms set by society” (Hosseini, 2005:32). Like Sheerin, I feel that in order to be successful, I must maintain face by being sure that the emotional attributes left from my past trauma remain hidden in the back regions of my every day life’s drama.

IV. FEAR OF EXCHANGE/RATIONAL CHOICE

By examining the past decisions I made out of fear, I can see that, for the most part, I have done so rationally despite my sense of fear. At times, however, my fear has interfered with my ability to make rational choices.

According to **rational choice theory**, “people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:303). Social **exchange theorists** see social interaction in terms of the exchange of goods or services, whether material or immaterial, between individuals. These exchanges are governed by the **norm of reciprocity**, in that the exchange is expected to be, for the most part, equal (pg. 308). For example, in a love relationship, the interaction between the two individuals is expected to be characterized by a mutual exchange of emotions; the two individuals involved are supposed to maintain mutual love, respect, and trust for one another. In the case of my relationships, however, this norm of reciprocity is not fulfilled. My inability to commit to things in life (goals, relationships, identity) is largely due to the violations of the moral or normative expectations of exchange. Because of past experience, I often expect a let down, and in turn am unable to reciprocate love and trust, even if the person is in fact being loving and trustworthy. Therefore the **cost** of overcoming my fear and the possibility of succumbing to further let downs seems to

overshadow the **intrinsic rewards** of a love relationship.

It even seems as though sometimes I do not have clear options to choose from, or that my fear causes me to behave irrationally. I am reminded of the lead character, Tommy, in the film *The Fountain*. Tommy is a scientific researcher looking for a cure for cancer, motivated by his dying wife. After a remarkable breakthrough (the lab finding a reversal of the aging process) Tommy becomes upset and continues the search for the cancer cure against authority. His boss tells him that he is “not being rational,” and that this remarkable discovery is something not to be dismissed. This is in fact true; Tommy’s fear of losing his wife is causing him to forego rational thought in his decision-making, and continue on his goal *despite* numerous unsuccessful attempts. My fear also tends to get in the way of my rationality. I don’t take chances, and challenge myself academically when I know I should, because of my fear response to interactions. Fear also, like Tommy’s driving him to find a cure, is driving me away from interpersonal relationships with other people, and also towards a career in psychology. I seem to be caught up in a cycle of fear rather than making rational interpretations of fact and knowledge to judge a situation. This again reminds me of the film *Twelve Angry Men*. The men’s feelings and internalizations of past experiences affect their rationality. They were at the beginning, as I am, not looking at the whole picture in a rational way, but were motivated in favor of a verdict of guilty without examining all of the facts.

Like UMass Boston student Katherine Heller, who uses her sociological imagination in her paper “My Choice of a Lifetime: ‘Finding True Love’ in a Sociological Imagination” (2004) to explain her search for true love, my alternative choices have been blinded as I have become trapped in my own **self-fulfilling prophecy**. Heller was caught up in questioning the choices of her

lovers to the extent that she felt she would always retain some lack of confidence in regard to her relationships. In the same way, I have become trapped by my fear, causing me to not only be distressed by interactions with others, but also to convince myself that all my troubles *must* be due to my fear. This is perhaps a means of avoiding the feeling altogether; by simply denouncing a situation as ruled by fear, I sort of “change the subject” on the issue.

I have learned that fear, though a negative emotion, can cause positive social behavior. The hurt I felt from being violated, and the resulting fear, serve as the foundation for my work in the field of psychology. Peter Blau’s explains in terms of social exchange theory that the concept of **reciprocity** is “the ‘need’ to reciprocate for benefits received in order to continue receiving them serves as a ‘starting mechanism’ of social interactions” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:343). This notion helps to further explain why I set education goals towards a degree in psychology. In my case, however, I am reciprocating for *punishments* received, while anticipating future benefits. It is a choice I made to continue receiving healing for myself through helping others to the healing I hope to achieve. Thus, as Coleman’s view on **exchange asserts**, “your actions benefit others, then those others have an incentive to provide rewards” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:356). Hopefully, my contributions to psychology will benefit others in their healing process, yet unbeknownst to the patient, they will be aiding in my healing process as well.

George Homans’s “**elementary social behavior**” also seems to shed some light on my issue of fear. Homans describes certain propositions of social behavior in terms of an individual’s motivations and psychology. His **aggression-approval proposition** seems to be the most fitting to my situation, in stating that:

When a person’s action does not

receive the reward he expected, or receives punishment he did not expect, he will be angry; he becomes more likely to perform aggressive behavior. (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:316)

Another of Homans’ propositions also implies that a behavior receiving punishment and lacking expected rewards will decrease the likelihood of the behavior. This is apparent in my social life. I received unwarranted punishments (rape and emotional abuse) in my social interactions outside of my home and with my father. Due to this, I became angry and less likely to take part in interactions. This proposition explains why I shy away from dyadic interactions, the social world, and a relationship with my father. My *choice* to take part in social life, then, is largely inhibited by my expected fear response.

The lack of close-knit relationships in my life due to my fear is not a negative thing in terms of my success. The basic element of **trust** that exists in basic human interaction, due to having been continuously let down, is difficult for me to appreciate and develop in my interactions. Due to this lack of trust, I have formed many weak associations with other people, rather than close emotional bonds. Mark Granovetter’s notion about the “**strength of weak ties**,” explains how loose ties in a social network often better serve an individual, in that they are important for “furthering an individual’s goals” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:361). Mere “acquaintances” that are not closely tied to an individual often bring forth information from other networks, which could prove helpful to an individual’s goals. As he explains, the information in a tight knit group is, by nature, shared with the entirety of the group, and thus is less important for the *individual’s* goals. This helps to explain why I have continued to be successful in spite of my fear. My success in education and the job market can be attributed to

the wealth of information I receive personally since I am not part of a more intimate group, with whom I would have to share the information I receive.

V. CONFRONTING FEAR ALSO AS A PUBLIC ISSUE

It becomes apparent looking at fear through the lenses of these largely micro-sociological perspectives that my questions in regards to the origins, effect, and continuity of my fear are not beyond answering. With just a little introspective help from sociological theories and concepts, I believe I have already made progress in how I view, explain, and hopefully resolve, my issues of fear. In reexamining my fear through these lenses I notice that the fear I experience in my day to day life is not something that I alone must conquer, but that there are others who are struggling with the same problem. DeSalvo seems to be right in stating that "writing about difficulties enables us to discover the wholeness of things, the connectedness of human experience... Through expressing ourselves, we establish our connection with others and with the world" (43). By crossing the bridge from micro into macro theories, it becomes crystal clear that my fear is not only a *personal trouble*, it is also a *public issue*.

Some of the first cues that I was not alone in experiencing fear in my life came from the media exposure that I experience every day. The more I came in touch with my fear and try to explain it, the more I became aware that many singers and songwriters were expressing similar emotions. One of the first songs that I assimilated I had heard many times before but had never noticed the similarities of emotion. The song starts out: "Fear / and panic in the air / I want to be free / from desolation and despair." As I changed the song to another, and then another, I realized that fear is, in fact, a common emotion expressed in cur-

rent popular music. Popular music has always seemed to me to be an expression of the era. For example, if you listen to music from the '60s you would hear a political undertone of anti-war protest and emphasis on loving one other. This is a tell-tale reminder of both the Vietnam War and the hippy subculture. This is not a coincidence; it is simply the fact that symbolic expression through music not only communicates individual emotions, but also the national, and even global, climate of emotion. According to DeRivera, Kurrien, and Olsen,

Societies seem to have emotional climates that affect how people feel and act in public situations. Unlike the emotions experienced in an individual's personal life, these modal feelings reflect a collective response to the socio-economic-political situation of the society and influence how most people behave towards one another and their government. (2007:1)

This may explain how emotions, including fear, make their way into popular culture, but it does not explain why.

Looking at current events both in the United States, as well as globally, one will find much to fear. As a nation, we have been victims of terrorist attacks. We are daily losing brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, and friends to a war that seems to be without end. Left and right people are killing, beating, torturing, raping, and brutalizing their own fellow human beings. Natural disasters strike without warning, leaving in their wake death, destruction, and desperation. It is impossible to turn on any news channel without hearing about all of the things I just mentioned. It is no wonder people are living in fear. Relatively unrepresented by the media are instances in which good things happen to good people. Muzzatti and Featherstone (2007), in an article on the me-

dia's coverage of crime, explain that "news increasingly consists of stories about what to fear and how to protect ourselves," but that "the news media is not always a representation of objective reality" (pg. 1). The important thing, as William Isaac Thomas explains, is that "If men define a situation as real, they are real in their consequences" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:202). The reality the media portrays becomes internalized in individuals and one consequence is widespread fear throughout the culture. In order to fully understand this fear one must look not only at individuals but also to the larger social structures and institutions within our society.

VI. FUNCTIONS OF FEAR

Functionalism is a scope of sociology that transcends the individual and looks at society as a functioning whole. This whole is made up of parts, consisting of economic, social and cultural phenomena. The parts perform certain functions and are interrelated within the social system. Furthermore, functionalists believe that society itself is naturally homeostatic, and that problems in society are problems of the parts, not the whole (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:17).

From the functionalist perspective, one must look at the **function** that fear serves within society. For centuries fear has served the function of societal regulation and control. Jeffrey Victor (2006) explains that fear has been "manipulated by special interest groups," especially politicians, in order to serve such a function. One example that immediately comes to mind is Robespierre's "Reign of Terror," a campaign of mass executions to control French citizens at the outbreak of The French Revolution. Even closer to home, however, for some citizens, the mere knowledge of secretive government agencies such as the CIA and FBI causes some to fear the government

enough to "stay in line." Similarly, one can even identify the **function** of media as the grapevine through which this fear is circulated.

The media reinforces fear to the point that it is taken for granted as a **social fact**, "which is general over the whole of a given society" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:20). Robert Merton made the point that it is always important to ask for whom something is **functional** or **dysfunctional** (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:48). The use of fear to govern society may at first glance seem functional for a government. Michael Moore points out in his documentary *Bowling For Columbine*, however, that this fear can cause citizens to distrust their neighbor, leading to serious consequences. Moore believes that widespread fear is why so many Americans carry weapons and are quick to use them in comparison to Canada. If this fear, then, is the reason for our country's exceptionally high crime rates, then how is this functional for anyone? The **manifest**, expected or intended, **function** was control, but the unintended consequences, or, rather, the **latent function** was to create a society in which individuals are so scared of one another that they react with violence.

Critically looking at functionalist Talcott Parsons' **four-function paradigm** may also serve helpful in explaining the origins of fear. In his view, four functional requirements need to be met in order for a social system to be functional: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance/tension management. In Parsons' view, these needs are met by the establishment of **social institutions**, or "interrelated systems of social norms and roles that satisfy social needs or functions" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:38). **Adaptation** involves a system's need to adaptively secure and maintain necessary resources and distribute them (behavioral system often involving economic activities). **Goal attainment** is the mobilization of these resources to achieve a goal (personality sys-

tem often significant in political decision-making). **Integration** is the need for parts of the system to work together and regulate one another (social system). **Latent pattern maintenance/tension management** is the need to motivate the actors to play their part and to provide outlets for tension that may arise (cultural system, as in family, religion, and education). Further light on the nature of modern society and how fear is implicated in it can be found in Emile Durkheim's work. Durkheim theorized that too much or too little of either **integration** (how much those within a society are interdependent) or **regulation** (how much control they have over their social lives) can be detrimental to a society (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:23). Perhaps the lack of integration among members of society has led to fear, particularly that of outsiders. Perhaps also there is too little personal (and/or too much official) regulation of society's members, and fear is springing from the perceived notion of so many living in **anomie**, or normlessness, hence the high crime rates. It is also possible that there is too much regulation, causing people to be afraid that they might step outside the lines.

Fear can stem from the dysfunctions of institutions (or, if we use functionalism critically, of the whole system) that are supposed to be serving the aforementioned functions. As far as adaptability is concerned, running out of fossil fuels and increasing costs of energy, environmental degradation, pollution, and abuse of nature certainly strike fear among many around the world. Personality systems, especially in the political arena, but also in civil society not only do not contribute their part in attainment of societal goals, but amid global clashes of ideas and ideologies have caused tremendous fear among those struck by terrorism in all its official or unofficial forms. The social and legal systems are doing a poor job at engendering national and global integration, causing much

anomie and alienation and conditions of living in social isolation and fear, because there is still widespread inequality among races and classes, as well as corruption within our legal and economic systems. Also, as far as cultural systems are concerned, again, due to the changing of the structures of family and religion, and the difficulty of achieving effective education and earning a career, latent pattern maintenance/tension management are not being effectively fulfilled. Given such systemic dysfunctions, it is no wonder that people live in such generalized environmentally, economically, politico-legally, socially, and culturally induced states of fear. Furthermore, my own fears arising from the above systems (financial instability, personality conflicts, social commitments and safety fears, and cultural/educational challenges) can all be explained by the flaws in these systems.

The problem with Parsonian functionalism was that it assumed the system as a whole is not structurally flawed, and only by fixing its dysfunctional parts, it can be restored to equilibrium. **Neofunctionalism**, a perspective later developed to address theoretical limitations inherent in the Parsonian functionalism, has been particularly geared towards tying together micro and macro concerns while putting an emphasis on uncertainty and human creativity. Jeffrey Alexander argues that human **action** and reaction contain an element of free will (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:58), which means people may be differently affected by problematic social structures and institutions, and can also act to transform them. This concept explains why my fears may differ from yours, or how I may choose to act differently based upon those fears. This notion explains how despite the widespread fear after September 11th, 2001, there was also an overwhelming sense of patriotism. Some saw it as a reason to alter their day to day lives, while others saw it as a chance to join the armed services and

show their support and pride in the nation, and yet others considered the tragic events as a wakeup call to question the historical and global socio-political roots of conditions which precipitated 9/11. Sociologist Neil Smelser also suggests that people tend to have **opposing affective orientations** towards the same objects, symbols, or people (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:59). This again depends on free-will and a person's individual meaning attached to the object. For example, after September 11th, the vast majority of this nation saw a state of unity and patriotism. Many others, however, saw separation as people began to more closely scrutinize and be suspicious of their neighbors.

VII. CONFLICT AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR

Perhaps fear is rooted in the malfunction of the parts, or maybe it is a problem with the whole. Fear examined through the lens of **Conflict theory** would imply that the latter can also be the case. Unlike functionalists, conflict theorists hold the notion that **conflict**, rather than equilibrium, is the norm in society. They argue that the struggle for **power**, resources, and control over these is inevitable. Marx, one of the leaders in conflict theory, heavily stressed peoples' individual amid especially class **interests**, and believed that when interests differ, conflict is created. Marx would most likely argue that fear is a necessary byproduct of **capitalism** and that eradication of this, and other, class-based social systems, will bring forth a communist society free of socially institutionalized fear. What Marx essentially saw in his class theory was class struggle involving mass fear leading to the eventual change within society to the point of reaching a utopian society. What happened in actuality was the failure of his proposed communist state. Revolts against the **bourgeoisie** did occur resulting in

many individual communist states. However, the global revolution that Marx predicted never happened. For these reasons, the historical experience of communist and socialist movements and states have so far proven such predictions otherwise, such that fear remained and remains a central feature of social psychologies of the communist states.

Max Weber, another forerunner, would probably also argue that fear is endemic to human society, and especially in a capitalist society bent on moving toward an "**iron cage**" of bureaucratization and depersonalized social life. Unlike Marx, in other words, Weber was not so optimistic that fear based society may come to end at some point, and would argue that since human conflict is eternal, so is the fear it creates.

It is important to note that in a class society, fear is not a psychological attribute of either rulers or the ruled, but is endemic to them across the board, albeit in different forms. There are differences in how fear is experienced amongst those with **status** and **wealth** versus those lacking them. By its very nature, in other words, capitalism generates differential conditions of wealth, status, and varied forms of fear associated with them, and power across populations. Using Marx's class analysis, the fears of the bourgeoisie is different from fears of the proletariat, and this also applies to the fears the classes have toward one another. A wealthy business owner of high status, for example, may not fear this country's alarming deficit if he has invested his wealth properly and has others in power to back him up. On the other hand, a factory worker who is aware of the failing economy may be terrified that this will be the week he gets laid off and cannot support his children. Also, as portrayed in Michael Moore's film *The Big One*, when companies lay off workers to "down-size" and move to third-world countries as a way to increase their profits, the employees and their employers of down-sizing firms experience

fear differently depending on their interests. The employee is interested in making enough money to support his family, and is fearful of being unable to do so if he is unemployed. The employer, on the other hand, is interested in being able to remain competitive against other large companies, and fears going bankrupt leading to the potential loss of the company.

Marx described wealth and class in terms of **property ownership** and its distribution. "A class is made up of people who are alike in their relationship to property: they have none, or they have the same type" (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:82). By this concept, one can see that the conditions of capitalism also serve to reinforce fear. Those who have property and access to power must continually struggle to keep it. In other words, fear is endemic to how capitalism works and is its systemic attribute. Each actor, individual, group, or corporate, lives in constant fear of being undermined in the "free" marketplaces of economics, politics, and culture. It is this same need of the ruling class to remain in power that perpetuates the **system of oppression** of minority and "inferior" groups, yet another prominent source of fear for those who comprise those oppressed group (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:83). Those at the bottom rungs fear being unable to rise in ranks, whereas those at the top fear the rise of the underdogs.

Economically speaking, there are many causes for alarm in our current system. Marx's concept of **alienation** that describes the social psychology of the workforce basically tells of a continued sense of estrangement of which fear is a central attribute. This is alarming for any happiness-seeker. The striving of the capitalists for infinite profit creates a system that alienates people from not only the work, but from each other, from their work environments, and themselves (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:88). Once one has committed to work for the capitalists, they find themselves do-

ing more and more, not for themselves but to meet the demands of the employer. This in turn takes one away from his or her individual interests. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom is very much caught up in the capitalist hum-drum. As a journalist, he is working so hard to meet the demands of his media boss and the system to find the right stories to write about, that he is completely alienated from his own true interests. He almost loses the woman that he loves, because the system has robbed him of all his time and he cannot fit her into his busy schedule.

Another theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, sheds even more light on why fear may be so widespread. Pierre Bourdieu uses the concept of **fields of conflict**, to explain how life in a capitalist society one confronts in all walks of life never ending processes of competition. He uses the term "field" instead of "classes" to explain how conflict is much like that of opposing sports teams. "People maneuver, develop strategies, and struggle for resources" not only in the sense of classes, but in every area of life (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:112). This constant competition in society is scary, because it means that unless the system of capitalism is radically transformed, one may potentially end up on the losing end. Bourdieu's concept of **class reproduction** makes me think that capitalism, and thus fear, are here to stay. He theorizes that generations pass on their privileges to the next generation (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:114). It is doubtful that anyone who is given privilege at birth will give it up willingly. It is also highly unlikely that those who are upwardly mobile, once in possession of such privileges, will make a move for change. As a result, we find ourselves caught in series of what Bourdieu calls **habitus**; "a system of durably acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action" (pg. 115). By these standards, it seems unlikely that conflict can or will be eradicated, thus leaving fear amidst the **class struggle**.

Conflict can play different roles in defining certain groups and their stability. Lewis Coser argued that **internal conflict**, conflict within a particular group, can either increase or decrease the group's cohesion and stability. If the conflict is handled properly, it can create a sense of satisfaction among the group that they have successfully resolved a conflict, thus making them stronger and more unified. But in the case of **divisive social conflict**, the group is weakened and split or eradicated. Coser notes that such conflicts are likely to occur in societies whose groups do not overlap and have tried to suppress dissent (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:135). This is ironically reassuring, because many different groups in our society are overlapping despite the competitive atmosphere amid which they live. While freedom of speech allows for expression of dissenting opinions in certain core areas of the capitalist world-system, as sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein would have it, he also reminds us that there are other parts of the world in which speech and dissent are far from free, and, moreover, that in the modern world-system the freedoms of some at the expense of oppression of others are not separate processes but have conditioned one another.

One of the biggest fears stemming from a conflict perspective among people in the U.S. is that of violence. Given the extent of tension among and within classes over available resources, violence has seemed to be just a part of life. Michael Moore in his documentary *Bowling for Columbine* on media-perpetuated violence went to Canada to see if the climate of fear there differed from that of the United States. After being told by many citizens that they never locked their doors, even by some who had been robbed before, he went out to check for himself. Every door he attempted to open was unlocked. Upon asking those who were home why they don't lock their doors, many responded that they trusted their neighbors. One man even said that by

locking others out in fear you are only locking yourself in. Walklate and Mythen argue that "the intensity and the frequency of fear are not causally connected to the probability of harm" (2008:1). So, in other words, more people are afraid of being harmed when the chances of their actually being the victims of violence are slim. But with "crime as a sellable commodity" (Muzzatti & Featherstone, 2007:1), just another thing to buy and sell in our capitalist world, the ideas that we should oppress certain groups and that violence is a common reality are reinforced. The availability of news stories of all the things in life we should fear, paired with the availability of guns and weapons, individual and massive, continue the cycle of fear and violence.

Wallerstein's "**modern world-system**" perspective is helpful in explaining the issue of fear in regards to economic conditions. He argues that capitalism has been from its inception a globally expanding, hierarchical economic system. Within this system, the **core** provides the labor with the raw materials extracted from the **periphery**, each serving a particular function in perpetuating the capitalist world-economy. The core controls the periphery by means of **economic integration**, by buying its raw materials and thus "underdeveloping" its economy and society, making it increasingly dependent on a global division of labor (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:165). However, if a country in the periphery was no longer willing to supply the core with the raw materials that it needed, the system would be disrupted. The tensions between the independent seeking peripheral state and region and the dominant core states can be sources of significant instability and fear. Fear, in the views of many Americans is rooted in this exact scenario, with Iraq being a part of the periphery and a main supplier of our much needed oil. Anti-globalization activists argue that "a single institution—the large multinational corporation—has taken over... government"

(Wallace & Wolf, 2006:166), and seeks to impose its priorities and interests on the world's population. This is alarming because "corporations" are not fool-proof and are susceptible to failure, yet, legally are only virtual entities and their CEOs and directors are not susceptible to punishment and penalty, especially when much of their policies and actions can have long-term, irreversible, consequences for the environment and the eco-system. This enormous power to shape the world and lack of legal responsibility for its outcomes is indeed source of much fear and anxiety for the world's citizens.

VIII. THE MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY OF FEAR

Capitalist modernity also heavily emphasizes the notions of evolution and change. Jürgen Habermas, believes that social evolution is the result of contradictions within a system, which then causes "**steering problems**" in a system that lacks of definite direction (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:177). This helps me make sense of the seeming lack of direction in our current political crisis in the United States especially in regard to policies toward terrorism, and the wars in Iran and Afghanistan.

Habermas is still very much interested in pursuing and deepening the project of modernity, though in ways that departs from the mainstream modernity that capitalism offers. Central to his alternative model of modernization is the enrichment of the ways people can and should communicate with one another. He combines observations of the evolutionary process of society with how they are interpreted by individuals. In doing this, he argues for the necessity of an "intersubjective projection into others **lifeworld's**", in other words, "for understanding what it would be like to be inside someone else's skin, experiencing the world as he or she does" (Wallace &

Wolf, 2006:180). Much like the idea of role-taking, but taken in both macro and micro senses of the term, Habermas is stating that the importance and meaning in the social structure can be understood through shared experience. By understanding the situations of others and understanding the ways they experience the lifeworld, simply the world we live in, one becomes aware of his or her self as a part of the whole.

To advance his perspective and agenda, Habermas ties in symbolic interactionist thought in his **theory of communicative action**. "It is through the action of communicating... that society actually operates and evolves; this process is encompassed and structured by the actors' lifeworlds" (181). He argues that **crises** develop along the lines where the system and the lifeworld meet due to contradictions of values. Wallace and Wolf give the example of how the conditions under capitalism destroy the family structure (2006:183). This seems to imply that the crises of distrust in the natural order of society and the fear that stems from it has developed in relation to the system itself. In order to understand this fear, therefore, one must delve into the lifeworlds of others, and see that they may also be afraid. Habermas also seems to imply that in order for issues of society to be resolved, including the phenomenon of fear, communication is necessary. At the micro-level and even introspective, this idea is received well in the work of Louise DeSalvo, who notes that expressing emotion in writing not only serves to communicate and help others with similar issues, but that it is healing for one's self. She explains how she utilized the communications and writings of others that had described issues similar to hers. "I could remind myself that others, too, had shared my experience," writes DeSalvo. This also helped her to "learn how others rebuilt their lives," and reconstructed their reality (DeSalvo, 1999:104).

Giddens does make some predictions

about **modernity** and what is to follow. He believes that society will continue to change social structures and institutions as it has since the beginning of time. He argues that although “modernity has destroyed tradition,” it has also served to rebuild it by creating new traditions (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:190). He defines **tradition** as “an organizing medium of collective memory,” and as being protected by “guardians” who serve to preserve and keep it (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:190). If tradition is not preserved, a new one will replace it because individuals will continue to organize amongst others who share similar ideas. He also explains that “the loss of tradition means that people have to decide on their lifestyle, their relationships with people, and the sort of person they are going to be” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:191). This conflict between traditional and modern living and standards can be significant source of anxiety and fear. Another modernist, Anthony Giddens, points out in his **theory of structuration** a notion similar to micro-perspective theorists. He believes that although it may be true that actors create and reproduce the social structure that reacts back to constrain action, it is not a vicious cycle. He argues that human action is **transformational** and that humans are capable of changing social structure (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:187). When individual’s become so constrained that it leads to widespread unhappiness or fear, they may act back upon the social structure and attempt to change it. Could the fear and unrest being experienced globally lead to social change? What I find most interesting about both the critical versions of **modern** and **post-modern** thought is that we can only adopt a critical and activist view toward existing conditions and the here and now. Using this lens we are not only philosophers, taking from what we know in society’s past to make predictions about the how, why, and what’s of the future, but also we can adopt a transformative attitude toward our

shared, global reality.

Giddens even goes so far as to say that there is a **commonality of anxiety** in our society. This is because globalization has become too future-oriented in its **risk calculation**. Wallace and Wolf explain that, although primitive societies may have faced more risks, they were not able to “try to quantify the risks, set out alternative scenarios, and insure and plan their lives accordingly” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:192). Without modern knowledge, more primitive societies of the past merely had to accept the risks and hope for the best. Nowadays, “the future is continually drawn into the present by means of the reflexive organization of knowledge environments” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:192). It is because of our **risk society** that “people in the United States are constantly bombarded with appeals to fear” (Victor, 2006). We are always watching out for what might happen next rather than experiencing life as it is now. The attention paid to the global warming crisis, although indeed important, has been a cause for much concern in modern thought. On issues like this, however, I feel that fear can also be an important attribute, as it will spur action to fix the problem. If we do not narrow our focus to what can and should be done now, the issue will never be resolved. Perhaps we are focused too far ahead, preventing us from seeing alternatives that can at least get us moving in the right direction.

In the **post-modern perspective** the concept of modernity is approached from a critical perspective. The two main features of post-modern thought that distinguish it from contemporary social theory are the rejection of the use of an over-arching scientific model to explain society and the reliance on discourse and texts (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:421). I tend to think that my paper leans on having adopted the perspective of a post-modernist by way of its conclusion. I tend to suspect the notion that science can fully explain my fear, i.e., that it

is something that can be definitively understood. Even though I have usefully drawn upon a wealth of discourse and texts drawn from various sociological and social scientific lenses, and as such have benefited from them, I still feel that I should remain always critical of all these lenses, and be skeptical of the notion that an overall, over-arching, social theory can once and for all illuminate how my fear has come to be.

Post-modernists believe that “there has been a major shift in the nature of society, and that the type of society that we have characterized as modern has been succeeded by a very different one” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:420). One theorist of this perspective even goes so far as to compare our modern society to a prison. To Michael Foucault “the prison and the asylum exemplify the modern world” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:422). Foucault’s notion of the **carceral society** is based on how power is exercised in modern society; in a way that is much like in a prison. Prisoners, under the assumption that their behavior is being constantly monitored, begin to discipline themselves. The prisoners’ fear of potential punishment from the guards is enough to keep their behavior in check, most of the time. In a similar sense, my fear that has generalized to many areas in my life may be a manifestation of how society have made me keep my behavior in check most of the time. It is true that my fear keeps me on my educational and career path and similarly away from things that might deter me from such goals, but I should also be on guard against situations where my internalized fears are disciplinary mechanism that society had internalized in me to conform to its taken-for-granted needs and goals.

In other words, taken in another light, it could be that my path to success itself is what much of my fear stems from. Foucault believed, keeping with the perspective’s view on rejecting scientific canon, that the human sciences have become breeding

grounds for power and fear. According to Foucault, in James Farganis’ words,

The knowledge produced in these disciplines has had a profound impact on the lives of ordinary people and has shaped their views of themselves and others around concepts of normality and deviance. (Farganis, 2008:415)

This seems to paint my life of fear all too colorfully, especially considering my choice of majors. The kind of knowledge that I am receiving as a psychology major, according to this perspective, advances the notions of normality versus abnormality all too uncritically. Given the stigma attached to my mental illness, I would be considered abnormal by comparison. Reading about this everyday in my courses, designed to feed me this knowledge, I am consistently reinforcing my fear because I am ascribing to science’s notions of behavior and society. Similarly, in order to reach my goal of completion of a degree, I find that I must continue to define myself by what is “normal” for a college student. I find that I must continue to do the work, attend the classes, and pass exams in order not to be considered “deviant” and unsuccessful in reaching graduation.

Postmodern thought also emphasizes the role of the **mass media** on the way people experience society. Postmodernists recognize the “profound effect that the mass media have had on our experience of the world and on what people experience as real” (Wallace & Wolf, 2006:420). From this perspective, one can easily see how my world could have come to be defined by fear considering the richness of fear-provoking images in the media. The mass media also serves to keep me on my career path by defining education and career-orientation as the norm.

IX. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Fear, when critically looked at through various lenses of sociological theory while maintaining a skeptical point of view throughout, becomes a less difficult topic of exploration. It is helpful to know that it can not only be explored and somewhat explained, but also that it is not a feeling that I struggle with alone. Concerning my personal fear, I understand that its roots can be found in the ways I have been socialized. False interpretations of situations, my interactions with others, and even by my own reconstruction of the fear itself based on assumptions about my self and the world have allowed my fear to fester and continue. I know now that the reality I have created for my self has also led me to continue to be fearful, and that the structure of society as a whole is also playing a part. Both sources of fear are thereby twin-born. My mother said to me once that “fear begets fear,” probably quoting something she had once learned. Because I am not just an individual, but also part of society, if those around me are in fear, then mine will continue despite differing origins, so long as I remain sociologically unaware of the origins and nature of my fears.

In order to eradicate fear from my life, I must learn to deal with by becoming ever more aware of it as both a personal problem and one that is shared as a public issue in my culture. The best thing to do is to understand that my fear has been defined by my lifeworld, my interactions, and my society. It is important to use my fear to my own advantage and not allow it to debilitate me and steer me away from the things in life that I want and need. It is important to remain positive, because Like President Roosevelt said in his 1933 inaugural address: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I must acknowledge that some fear is good fear, causing me to act for the bettering of my self and my society. Con-

versely, the fear that could be detrimental to my achievement can be calmed, if not defeated entirely. The fear that exists among members of society today must be taken into account, but not allowed to rule my life. Jeffrey Victor states that, due to the embedding of fear within our society by the mass media, one must always use “reason and skepticism” when making decisions (2006:7). If I start to make decisions out of fear rather than by well-informed choice, I must remember to go back to using my sociological imagination to find out why and how fear is weighing in again in my everyday life.

The mere expression of my fear and acknowledgement that it exists is a step towards living a life free from it. In order to change my self or the society I live in, I must communicate with others the issue at hand. It seems as though fear in society will continue to exist so long as the prevailing conditions in our global society continue. As I am part of the whole, it is no doubt that my future will always retain some fearful elements. However, understanding that I am a thinking, acting, and rational individual in a world and society that is capable of change is enlightening. I understand now that the fabric of my life is largely a creation of my own, but is also a patchwork of experiences of the society I live in. I can choose to allow my own and my culture’s fear to construct a shroud that will smother my hopes and actions; or I could use my sociological imagination to allow my blanket of reality to warm me into a successful future.

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