**Introduction**

Sociology was never something that I was familiar with throughout my life. Before the fall semester of my second year of college, I had never taken a class that studied any type of human behaviors or institutional structures. However now that I know some basics of sociology, I can see the different ways to study behaviors. Many times throughout this semester, I have started to look back on my life and pull apart the different ways that I have been affected and how they can be looked at sociologically.

The first thing that I truly started to analyze was how I identify myself. My self-identity is something that I have struggled with my entire life. It is something which until I came to college was confusing for me. My identity was something that would change each year based on the different events happening in my life. Looking back into my high school years, I experimented with all of the different clichés within my school. Looking from a sociological view point, I can see that several different events that happened in my life are what caused the drastic shifts in my self-identity. The changes in my self-identity can be related to the theory of the looking glass self. According to Charles Cooley, the looking glass self is a concept based around how “we imagine other see us.”

Many of the people I went to high school with believed that I came from a very tradition family. Some, who I had once been friends with during my first two years of high school, never noticed the changes in my family. All throughout high school, maintaining this image in other people’s heads was important to me. This image was all a part of my looking glass self. I did not want others to see me differently in fear that I would face harsh judgment and mimicry for my family which went against the “normal” family stereotype.

In high school at first glance of the family photos I shared with others, you could not see the dysfunctional dynamics of my family. In a photo, you could see the typical, ideal American family: a father, one mother, one daughter, and a son. In high school, I had the belief that I would be looked down upon for my family’s nontraditional dynamic. I always tried to hide that my great-grandmother was the one who was cooking dinner each night for my younger brother and I while my mom worked long hours and my father worked mid-nights. However, the idea that this was unusual was socially constructed in my mind. When comparing my family to popular television shows such as the Simpson’s, my family showed great contrast; I felt others would ridicule me if my family were not to fit into that perfect mold presented by the media. This led me to believe that my family was wrong because it did not follow the set-up which is popular in the media even today.

 During high school, my parent’s careers, or lack thereof, were the center point of my life. My father had worked in the printing business for many years; however it is a dying profession and he has experienced numerous layoffs. This layoff was part of something greater than I knew at the time. The recession of my father’s printing profession was a part of the economic restructuring taking place at the time. This economy is still changing at a macro level; where more and more jobs are being taken over by technology.

 During my freshman year of high school, my family was left with a very large, new house with only one income when my father lost a respectable job. My father being a 40 year old man with skills in a trade which was becoming obsolete, found himself unemployed for nearly a year. Even after seeking the help of a temp agency, he became stuck in low paying, benefit less jobs. In May of 2010, according to Bureau of Labor and Statistics there were 135,789 new claims for unemployment at the same time as my father’s claim. This was not something that I realized when my father had lost his job. To me, it was something that only seemed to be affecting my life; and it was something that gave others room to place judgment upon me for coming from a low income family.

After my father’s layoff, my mother became the bread winner for my family. It became her goal to work overtime whenever possible for her. She has worked in a lab office for over twenty years now, and has received most of her support in life through the women that she works with there. During my sophomore year, my mother even tried working a second job to help with money for school related things.

During my senior year of high school, my parents finalized their bankruptcy. This was something that I viewed as having a very negative stigma attached to it; and I wanted nothing to do with being associated with that in my life. I worked very hard to maintain the same self-identity as before they declared bankruptcy. Much like with my father’s unemployment, I did not know bankruptcy was a common problem in our declining economy.

**Social Changes Due To Economic Changes**

When I started high school, I was a shy, young lady. However, I had a relatively close group of friends which I was very outspoken with when they were around. This group of friends was very open about their lives, beliefs, and values. Each one had an immature passion to go against the traditional views of our small town. They all enjoyed making perverted jokes as well as expressing their atheism. For my entire freshman year, I joined in and partook in numerous conversations that questioned the meaning of religion and mocking the existence of such institutions. Based on the influence of my peers, I found myself identifying with this group of people and sharing the same liberal values. I did not question the norm to poke fun at others or to be cruel without reason. In the fear of being judged by my peers, I conformed to the norms within this group and they became my own.

However as my freshman year finished out, my life at home was rapidly changing; and I found myself struggling to make sense of these changes. My father had just lost his job, and I no longer felt comfortable opening up about my life to the friends who I had been hanging around. To overcome this challenge, I made a new friend; and turned my troubles over to a higher power of some whose existence I had previously questioned. This new friend of mine had never even laughed at a perverted joke, let alone told one. She was an avid Christian, and was also not shy about sharing her values with others. I began attending youth sermons with her and attended many religious events hosted at her house.

The hegemony of this religious institution was very powerful. Within in this institution, the entire congregation accepted the belief of God unconditionally. The values of compassion and generosity were strongly reinforced by the group’s relationships and community service. My pervious norm to be disrespectful was rapidly changed by the influence of these compassionate values. My new found faith and conservative values caused a great strain on my relationship with my liberal friends. As those friendships deteriorated, I began to identify myself as an all-around shy, quiet, conservative young lady. This change came based on how I thought others perceived my thoughtful actions.

As high school continued through my sophomore year, my life at home was again disrupted as my parents filed their bankruptcy; and my religious faith was again rattled. My life had nearly been turned upside down, and it was not something I wanted to talk about to others in feel of ridicule; so I found a group of people where I didn’t have to become close with on a personal level. The rest of my high school career was quickly absorbed by athletics. My relationship with my new found religious friend became strained when I joined the basketball and track; much like with my liberal friends, my religious friend and I soon drifted apart.

I found myself identifying with an entire new group of people who I had previously never associated with before. Becoming a high school athlete was something that again completely changed my values. This time it was not my religion which was changed by my new group of friends, but my true life values; such as my personal goals. I found my priorities we completely reorganized. My previous friendships had always had strong beliefs in individualism. Once I had joined different athletic teams, I realized how important working together with others was as well. Previously in my life, religion had played a strong role in getting involved with the community and bettering myself. Sports shaped my views to also working together with others to complete a goal and physically working hard toward that goal.

**Conclusion**

 When I look back onto my high school career with a sociological lens, I can see that there was much more to my behaviors then I realized at the time. Each of my shifts between friends can be looked at as not wanting to share my home life with others. It can be inferred that I feared facing the risk of receiving judgment and criticism from others. I can also see that some of the troubles that my family was experiencing were not only happening to us. The economy was changing and many other families across the country were facing unemployment and bankruptcy as well. According to the United States Courts, more than 44,042 people also filled bankruptcy in western Michigan during 2011. This is something that I had not realized at the time.

Now realizing these things, I am no longer afraid to speak out about the different challenges I faced in high school and the affects they had on my self-identity. During that time, if I had made the realization that others face the same problems that I was experiencing, the construction and deconstruction of my self-identity throughout high school could have been much different. I now know there is far less negative stigma towards bankruptcy as there has been in decades previous. The structures of our economics is changing at the macro level with the recessions and restructuring of the economy; as well as at the macro level with the ways families are functioning to stay afloat; therefore making not it entirely one’s family members fault for the unemployment that is having such a large impact on their lives.

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