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THE READER SHOULD EXPECT REDUNDANCY, PROBLEMS WITH ORGANIZATIONAL CLARITY,
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Imagination: Sociological and Moral

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The topic for this series is “Cultivation of Moral Imagination”. As I understood the charge, in accepting the invitation I agreed to discuss how the discipline of sociology aids in the cultivation of moral imagination. Actually when Ann first approached me last summer, I think the phrase she used was “construction of moral imagination” and I really liked that terminology, because, in case there’s anyone in the room who isn’t aware – I am a dyed in the wool, true-blue social constructionist. Not all sociologists are social constructionists (although the theoretical perspective is much more legitimate in the discipline than it was back when I was in graduate school). Therefore it should be stated up front that I’m not talking for all sociologists.

Another reason why I really liked the title was the inclusion of the word “imagination”. One of the things that I have often found difficult in teaching sociology is that so many students seem to lack the ability to conceptualize social institutions or to imagine alternative patterns of social organization. They have no difficulty understanding ‘a family’ as in my family, your family, my friends’ families. But it is difficult for many of them to think of “family” as a general social institution. Likewise they can easily understand personal ‘economy’ (specific work places and personal budgets), yet often can’t grasp ‘the economy’, the overall pattern of organizing the production and distribution of goods and services. If they cannot conceptualize social institutions, then by definition, they cannot adequately evaluate them (i.e. make moral judgments about them or conceptualize alternative social organization patterns.)

As a good sociologist I know why individuals have this difficulty. One of the features of every fairly stable society is effective and thorough socialization of its new

members into that society's basic culture, its 'taken-for-granted'. One of interesting things about 20th century American culture is one of our taken-for-granted is the assumption that physical technology will continuously and rapidly change. But when it comes to social organization – to the structure of family, education, religion, government, economy, etc., most Americans are confident that American social institutions are 'natural' and/or 'the best it's possible to be'. Thus one of the functions or outcomes of a stable society is that its members will be lacking in this kind of imagination. Still, for someone who attended college in the 60's & 70's, as part of a subculture of youth who 'knew' that our social institutions could be so much better, this lack of imagination on the part of more recent youth is frustrating.

More Americans, especially young Americans, need to cultivate their imagination about social forms. I am also of the firm conviction that Americans need to cultivate a social form of moral imagination. By that I mean the ability to think in terms of the morality (or lack of it) of social arrangements. Because our culture is so very individualistic, we tend to limit our application of moral judgment to individuals as well. Thus we indict 'bad people' and respect 'good people'; we ponder whether 'good people' might be capable of doing 'bad actions' and vice versa. Even when we recognize social problems or aspects of society that we define as 'bad', we seek to find the individuals whom we assume are the sole causes of those 'bad things'. Why did the shuttle blow up? It must be the incompetence of some individual(s). Why did the U.S. engage in 'unjust war' (in Vietnam or Iraq for example)? It must be because of evil or stupid leaders. Why is there a 'glass ceiling' in a corporation? It must be because of sexist corporate leaders. Because we tend to not even "see" the reality of social institutions, we are incapable of morally evaluating those institutions as institutions. Instead we limit our moral judgments to individuals - individual intentions, actions and consequences. This is a tendency that severely limits our ability to solve problems. Finally the lack of 'sociological thinking' limits our abilities to dream of 'better' (in moral terms) forms of social organization. If we can't even conceptualize social reality, then we can't evaluate it and thus the whole question of imagining alternative, 'better', or more morally right social arrangements is truly impossible.

The thesis of this paper is that sociological imagination is needed and necessary for the construction/cultivation of a robust moral imagination. To arrive at that conclusion I want to do the following:

1. Provide a basic introduction to ‘the sociological imagination’
2. Provide a basic introduction to the process of the ‘social construction of reality’.
3. Argue that using this perspective enables us to cultivate/construct moral imagination because it makes it possible to evaluate social structures (rather than just individual actions) in moral terms and thus enables us to make conscious moral choices about acting to alter (or construct anew) those social structures.
4. Finally I hope to illustrate these ideas with reference to the topic of patriarchy and gender.

Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills, in his book with the same title, coined the concept “sociological imagination” in 1959. Much of this book is a passionate denigration of what he saw as his contemporary sociologists ‘selling out’ (largely to corporate and bureaucratic interests by becoming ‘abstracted empiricists’, what would today be called ‘number busters’), when they should be using the power of the sociological perspective to help people and society. I will not discuss that part of the book.

In the first chapter (titled “The Promise”) Mills described what he saw as the value of ‘thinking sociologically’ for people. Today there are few if any introductory sociology texts that do not reference Mills’ sociological imagination. Furthermore, the first chapter of the book is probably the most reprinted chapter of any sociology book.

Mills did not provide a nice concise definition for the phrase “sociological imagination”, the following quotation from early in the chapter neatly captures the idea: (note – the quote is actually taken from “The Promise” by C. Wright Mills as reprinted in Lisa McIntyre. *The Practical Skeptic: Readings in Sociology*. Mayfield Publishing Company. 1999. p. 2)

“Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to

control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.” (underlining added for emphasis; note: there is irony in the fact that I’m quoting a passage that uses sexist generic man language. Although I’d like to think that if Mills were writing today he would use non-sexist, gender neutral language, from what little I know about his own biography, I am not confident he would).

We can use the phrase “quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world” as a definition for ‘sociological imagination’. Here the term ‘imagination’ refers to the ability to ‘see’ or conceptualize what is not ‘available to the senses’. It is the same type of ‘imagination’ that enables humans to conceptualize atoms and economies, neither of which can be literally seen. Mills is arguing that humans not only need to be able to ‘see’ abstract social realities (like ‘family’, ‘economy’, ‘government’ etc.) and also desperately need to be able to “see” the connections between concrete individuals and those abstract realities.

It is the fact that sociology provides that perspective (or point of view) that makes sociology valuable. This ‘quality of mind’ enables a person to understand that personal circumstances and ‘troubles’ (Mills’ term) are not always caused solely by the individual or other individuals in the person’s social milieu. Rather personal problems are often individual instances of larger social ‘issues’ (again Mills’ term) where some aspect of social organization is causing lots of individuals to experience the same problem. So long as problems are treated as if they are ‘troubles’ and solutions to problems take the form merely of ‘changing individuals”, Mills argues, the solutions cannot be effective because they ignore a large part of the cause.

For example, it may be that the leaders of a corporation with a ‘glass ceiling problem’ could each sincerely swear “I’m not sexist”. Believing them, other individuals could then say, “Ah – so it’s really not a glass ceiling problem at all. It’s just that the current women in the company are not really competent enough or sufficiently dedicated to the job to achieve promotion. The argument could continue without resolution, with each ‘side’ blaming the individuals on the ‘other side’. But the cause of the problem may not be ‘within’ (or not only within) the individual male leaders or the individual female un-promoted employees.

One of the features of a bureaucracy is the fact that higher positions tend to be ones for which job descriptions are vague. In lower level positions, ‘objective criteria’ can

often be created so that it is clear which applicants are qualified and which are not. However, higher level positions are often described in vague terms of “good leadership skills”. Likewise one of the key (but often unpublished) job qualifications for a higher level position is that vague qualification of “fit”. Current leaders want to hire or promote someone who is a ‘good fit’ with the organization, and especially with current leadership. Think about how often we use that term in faculty searches here. But what constitutes “good fit”? In the absence of clear cut, objectively measurable job qualifications, what current leaders tend to want in the new person is someone with whom ‘it’s easy to communicate’, someone who shares ‘our way of thinking’ – in short someone “like us”. These leaders need not mean “men like us” (or “whites like us”). But the reality is that it is most likely going to be white males who ‘fit in’, share the same language of metaphors, find humor in the same kinds of jokes, etc.

So how solve the problem? If we focus on social structure and culture instead of just on individuals, we might suggest creating a new ‘rule’ or a new conscious intention to ‘override’ the largely non-conscious search for ‘people like us’. This might be a ‘rule’ requiring the hiring of “well-qualified” (however that is defined) people who are also ‘different’. In short, if something about ‘the system’ (the shared thinking and interaction patterns) is, at least partially, the cause of the problem, then it is necessary to focus on changing ‘the system’ in order to solve the problem.

The other side of the sociological imagination is one that recognizes that human individuals collectively, via their interaction with each other, are the architects of those social institutions. An important word in the above definition is ‘interplay’, not one-way causation. The sociological imagination does not posit humans as mere ‘balls of clay’ molded by some abstraction called ‘society’. Individuals are not conceptualized as robots, programmed by social institutions. Rather the relationship between individuals and society is mutually determinative. Humans are social products, but are also social producers. Although Mills clearly wanted sociologists to do the research, analysis and writing to demonstrate the power of social institutions on individuals so that those individuals (particularly the ones with less authority) could consciously exert their power to re-construct social institutions, he did not give much insight into exactly how this

process of changing social institutions can and does occur. To address that question, I turn to the work of Peter Berger

Social Construction of Reality

Berger is responsible for many now classical works that have made an impression not only on sociology but on several other disciplines as well. Exploring his full theoretical perspective is also well beyond the scope of this paper. The book I do want briefly discuss is his 1966 work with Thomas Luckmann titled The Social Construction of Reality. In this work, Berger and Luckmann attempt to explicate, on several levels of analysis, the actual process by which humans collectively create social reality. Again, this paper cannot do full justice to the entire theory, but I do want to briefly describe the three-stage social construction process they present. The 'stages' in this process are externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The following is a simplistic description of those 'stages', but please keep in mind that they are not described by Berger and Luckmann as a neat progression.

Externalization occurs when some individual (or sometimes multiple individuals in different locales) expresses a 'new' idea. To 'externalize' simply means to get the idea out of the individual mind and into the 'external world'. The new idea might be tentative or it might be a fully developed new explanation or plan of action developed quietly by that person over years of painstaking writing and finally published. Clearly it requires some degree of creativity on the individual(s) initiating the idea, but the important point is that this 'new idea' must get into the social realm before it can have any effect. Once in the social realm it must become the object of attention of many individuals. It must be 'sold' and discussed and typically debated in both informal and formal settings. People must interact with each other about this new idea.

Objectivation refers to the point in the process when the idea is becoming a social object in itself. It no longer matters who the creator of the idea is or even that it was, at some point, one person's creative act. The idea (theory or proposed new way of doing things) begins to seem to take on a life of its own, sometimes in ways carefully controlled by the original creator of the idea (if that person is skilled in the exercise of social power and has access to the means to control the dissemination of the idea), but also sometimes

in ways not intended or envisioned by the original creator. In other words the objectivation process may take the form of marketing a fully developed idea and persuading others of its validity or it may take the form of ‘brainstorming’ on a massive scale in which no single person controls the process or it may take any form in between these two extremes. What is important is that it involves lots of interaction among individuals

The life of a new idea (or new form of social organization) may be short-lived. The interaction involved in the objectivation process may result in ‘killing’ the idea (either temporarily or permanently) without it ever becoming fully objectified. Or, at the other extreme what was once a strange, weird, new idea may eventually come to seem so obvious that people define questioners of that idea as strange and weird. In between these extremes are periods when the idea may become a ‘hot topic’, with some completely convinced of its validity and others hotly arguing that it is “bogus”. Thus among some groups it becomes “reality” while among other groups, even in the same society, it is a ‘lie’ or a ‘heresy’.

The final stage of this social construction process is internalization. At this stage, the new idea has become a part of the society’s or group’s ‘taken-for-granted’. It is now taught to new members as objective, obvious reality, part of that what ‘everyone knows’ and no one much thinks about. New members may occasionally question it, but others respond simply by validating it and discouraging the questioning. Yet, eventually, some stubborn or brave soul may actually persist in questioning and suggest an alternative and be skillful enough or lucky enough to engage others in dialogue about some new ‘externalization’. At this point the process begins anew.

What is crucial in this entire process is the dimension of human interaction. It is disturbing to some that this theoretical perspective does not allow us to see social change and history as a linear process of ever more dominant rationality. While it may be disturbing, it is, I believe, important to recognize that rational ideas do not necessarily or always dominate merely because they are rational. Furthermore, what is taken as ‘rational’ in period of history often comes to be seen as irrational in another period and vice versa. Solid predictability also is not possible from this perspective because there is an emergent, creative dimension to the entire process. Given access to sufficient

information about the process, a skilled analyst can explain it but only after it has occurred. Those who desire to intentionally initiate social change can then use that explanation to more effectively plan and try to direct what might be called a ‘successful objectivation campaign’. However the variables are too multiple to be subject to total control even in an age of mass mediated, corporate controlled communication.

Although this is a simplistic depiction of Berger & Luckmann’s theory, I think it’s sufficient to highlight some important points.

First it allows us to at least begin to comprehend the paradox of how human individuals can simultaneously be social products and social producers.

Second the process emphasizes not just individual humans but rather human interaction – action between individuals.

Third, it allows us then to focus on the ‘connecting link’ between the micro and the macro level of social life. Macro level social institutions seem to exist objectively ‘out there’, apart from me, as social forces that constrain my choices, as ‘reality’ to which I must simply adapt or suffer the negative consequences of being an ‘outsider’. But analyzing social life through this lens allows us to see those macro level social institutions not as truly objective realities but as constructed by human beings and as requiring human interaction (including my interaction) to persist at all. Thus if we change our interaction patterns, we actually can and do change the institutions- not quickly or easily but change them nonetheless. I find this to be an empowering realization. But, just as this perspective opens our realizations to our own importance in maintaining or transforming social realities, it also should open our recognition of our individual responsibility for make conscious moral evaluations. The perspective implies that we have a responsibility not merely for ‘following the moral rules’ laid down by authorities, but also for making judgments ourselves about the appropriateness of those rules and those authorities. In short, if individuals each participate in the constructing and maintaining of social structure then individuals also have a responsibility to morally evaluate existing social structures. Here’s where the cultivation of moral imagination comes into my argument.

Moral Imagination

First I need to describe what I mean by that phrase. With the phrase ‘sociological imagination’ I said above that the term refers to the ability to ‘see’ macro level social institutions such as ‘the family’, ‘the economy’ etc. – i.e. to see that which is not immediately available to the physical senses. However, I hope that the discussion above also shows that the term involves the ability to ‘see’ or ‘imagine’ new or alternative social forms. I think this dual meaning for the word ‘imagination’ also applies when we consider moral imagination. Morality itself is one of those abstract terms, referring to something beyond physical sensing – something that must be ‘imagined’. But the term ‘moral imagination’ also refers to the ability to ‘see’ or imagine new or alternative moral evaluations.

From the sociological perspective as I described it above, we are led to see morality itself as a social construction, an aspect of a group’s, or society’s culture. I fully realize that I have just raised the specter of ‘moral relativism’ for some of you, but please bear with me.

I think a case can be made at the philosophical level of analysis for the existence of ‘universal human values’ and that case is ably presented by many, including members of own faculty (for example in the opening Convocation address presented by Dr. Peter Schotten a few years ago). However, what I find much more interesting is the enormous variety of actual interpretations and empirical applications of those universal values made by different groups and societies in human history. For example one might argue that every known human culture has defined murder as immoral and has defined the unprovoked killing of an innocent person as murder. But what constitutes “provocation”? What constitutes ‘innocence’? What constitutes ‘a person’? We are currently having difficulty arriving at what Berger & Luckmann might call ‘objectified agreement’ on that last question in our own society now. As another example, one could persuasively argue that every known society has condemned rape as immoral. But when is an act of forced sexuality rape? Is it only when the woman is ‘pure’ and thus prostitutes can’t be raped? Is it only when the woman is not married to the man and thus domestic rape is an oxymoron? Is it only when the woman is a ‘citizen’, as opposed to a slave? Is it only when the perpetrator of the act is male and the victim is female, thus defining

homosexual forced sex and woman on man forced sex as something other than rape? The idea of morality as socially constructed and thus ‘relative’ refers to these various empirical applications of the same abstract, philosophical moral values.

Furthermore, from a sociological perspective, I am interested in philosophical analyses of whether or not any one particular application of an abstract moral value is ‘the right one’ only in the sense that those analyses are part of the social construction process. In other words, what matters (from the sociological perspective) is not so much whether a particular argument is or is not logically valid, but rather who and how many engage in the argument and who and how many come to define it as logically valid (whether it ‘really is’ or not). Likewise, what fascinates me as a sociologist is not ‘the nature of evil’, but rather the varieties of ways in which particular definitions of evil get institutionalized (objectified) in human groups and societies and how those definitions get changed.

As I am using the term then, ‘moral imagination’ refers to the ability to conceptualize the possibility that the taken for granted ‘morality’ of one’s own group or society (as embodied in its mores and laws) might actually be immoral or have immoral consequences or to imagine the possibility of altering social arrangements in a way that would more directly embody those abstract moral principles. It is very important that individuals cultivate/construct this mental ability and that they be encouraged to exercise it.

Of course this also means that, as a citizen of the society or a member of the group, I want both myself and other citizens/members to be to interact with each other about the question of ‘what is evil?’, “what is murder?” and “what is rape?” and to address those questions with an openness to the possibility that my own ‘taken for granted’ answer to them might need to be changed, even if that ‘taken for granted’ is supported by institutionalized authority.

Moral Authority or Moral Chaos or Moral Social Construction Process?

This question is usually much shorter in that it is presented simply as ‘moral authority’ or ‘moral chaos’ (resulting from rampant individualism)? Part of an article recently published in the Argus Leader illustrates this. The article was by Jeffrey Weiss,

titled: “*Not all biblical laws followed equally,*” [Sioux Falls Argus Leader. Feb.7, 2004. p. 1D & 3D.] It focused on the current controversy among Christian groups regarding the ordination of gay clergy and the recognition of homosexual marriage. Weiss wrote:

Modern Catholics rely on the long history of authoritative church teachings to divide laws into those that should be heeded and those that needn't be, said the Rev. Brian Daley, a theology professor at the University of Notre Dame.

“There's a desire to stay in touch with the sources, but there is a constant interpretive process going on,” he said.

Lending money with interest is prohibited in the Torah and was considered sinful by many Christians until the 17th century, he said. That has clearly changed.

“Most people would not say it was an abandoning of a major moral activity but a viewing of it in a new context.” Father Daley said.

That, of course, is exactly the argument made by those who support gay bishops and gay marriage, he acknowledged. They say times have changed, and the Bible should be read in a new context. That's where church authority comes in, said Father Daley. “You need a community to draw the line, unless it's going to be every individual for himself.” (underlining added for emphasis).

I know nothing about Father Daley's theology or church history perspective beyond what printed in this article and I fully realize that the above quotation from him might well be inaccurate or taken out of context or have been intended to be secondary to a point he attempted to make as more important than these words. My intention here is not actually to engage Father Daley, but rather to use this quotation to illustrate a tendency to conceptualize the question dichotomously.

When I first read this article, I was particularly drawn to Father Daley's use of the word ‘community’ because to me (as a sociologist) that word connotes a collection of interacting people. However, on second and more careful reading, I realized that by “community”, Father Daley apparently was referring to “church authority”, and thus to only ‘some’ individuals (presumably the Pope, the Cardinals, the variety of Vatican officials, etc.) and their interactions. He seems to be saying here that we have an option of either moral chaos (because every individual is left to make purely personal decisions regardless of whether that person is versed in moral theory or not) or else we can have a fairly orderly society because ‘regular folks’ (my term) leave it up to some authoritarian body (the Church in this instance) to make the moral judgments for them. The moral

responsibility of ‘regular folks’ then, presumably, is simply to learn the authorized moral rules and follow them. Unless you’re an extreme libertarian, the choice seems clear. Few would define chaos as desirable.

However, the sociological imagination (at least in the version I described above), suggests that there is another alternative. Sociology can help us see the linkage between the two levels and save us from the specter of either yielding to individualism run amok or ceding moral interpretation to highly authoritarian social institutions. There is a middle ground. It is the “place” where ‘ordinary humans’ (as well as ‘morality experts’) participate in social construction/cultivation of shared morality. That ‘place’ lies in the interaction among individuals – on street corners, in living rooms, in bars, on talk radio, in book groups, in televised discussions and debates, in academic seminars and forums like this one and the conversations that Pastor Paul is hosting about Lutherans and homosexuality and, yes, also in official Catholic Church Councils.

It is in those conversations and debates (as well as public protests and demonstrations) where existing taken-for-granted get brought into individual and public consciousness and actually discussed, where the externalization of new moral interpretations occurs and gets subjected to questioning and where, often, a synthesis between the thesis (the taken-for-granted) and the antithesis (the challenge) gets socially constructed. Furthermore, that “synthesis” from one group might then become a new externalization in another group and get debated and maybe altered in that interaction. And then someone may tell someone else about that ‘new’ idea and the conversation occurs again in more different locales with more different participants. In this way it may spread until lots of folks are talking and some of them are writing and providing new stimulus to conversation by more and more folks. If the process started in the ‘lower echelons’, it may eventually ‘bubble up’ to those in positions of authority. Maybe they simply act to attempt to repress this new ‘interpretation’ and maybe they’re successful in that repression and thus the authority maintains the current moral order and prevents change. Or maybe the authority furthers the change process by - eventually - formally recognizing a ‘new interpretation’ (a new ‘revelation’ perhaps) and formally objectifies a changed moral reality.

My point is that every individual, not just those ‘in authority’, can and many typically do participate in this construction/cultivation process, especially when we are considering ‘big changes’. In my opinion more should do so.

Application of Ideas to Patriarchy and Gender.

In The Gender Knot (one of the texts Dr. Sandra Looney, Dr. Dick Hanson and I use in our capstone course of the same title), Allan Johnson writes:

“We [males and females] cannot avoid participating in patriarchy; it has been handed to us. But we can choose how to participate in it, how to relate to the paths of least resistance that patriarchy lays out for us, how to be not merely part of the problem but also part of the solution.” (1997. p. 14)

This quotation ably applies the sociological imagination’s implication that individuals are both social products and social producers. At the personal level, the application of these ideas is that, first, no one in contemporary American society can accurately say “I’m not a sexist” or “I never act in such a way as to uphold patriarchy” – not even openly avowed feminists like myself. I cannot not be influenced by the patriarchal social system in which I was raised and live. However the quotation also implies that I (and everyone) can act and interact in such a way as to move the society towards some, as yet vague, non-patriarchal social system.

We can now continue illustrating how the theoretical ideas I have presented can be applied by an individual. In order to “decide how to be part of the solution”, a person has first be able to ‘see’ patriarchy as a social system rather than a merely a matter of individual attitudes. Then the person has to recognize that this social structure is neither ‘natural’ nor objectively ‘God-ordained’, but rather is constructed and maintained by real live human beings (even when they do not have a conscious intention to ‘oppress women’ and ‘force men into narrow roles’). Then, applying moral imagination, the person has to evaluate this system and decide whether this social system, even if its consequences are ‘oppressing’ to both men and women, also has moral benefits that perhaps outweigh those immoral consequences. Then the person has to be able to envision a possible alternative that retains the moral benefits of the current system but eliminates (or at least

reduces) the immoral consequences. In all of these stages of personal transformation, the person must interact with others, initiating ideas and responding to the ideas of others.

In our capstone course the major paper requirement for the past few years has required students to:

- (a) select some social pattern (e.g. dating & romance, marriage, parenting, education, religion, government, economy, etc.);
- (b) ‘dream’ about how they want that social pattern to look in 40 years with regard to the degree to which is gendered;
- (c) justify why they believe that ‘dream’ is morally better than the current state of affairs in that institution; (Contrary to what some of our more disgruntled students might have told you, they do not have to share our own more or less feminist moral values. In fact last fall, two students wrote papers that projected and strongly defended a family institution in which every family resembles 1950’s sitcoms, such as “Father Knows Best”. However, both were well written and well developed papers and earned high grades.)
- (d) indicate what actions they can honestly see themselves taking to ‘move things in the direction’ of their dream coming true.

This assignment reflects our interpretation of the charge that capstone courses lead students to ‘wrestle with questions of moral value’ and consider the question of “how then shall we live’. The three of us can attest that this is for many of our students a very hard assignment. I think a major reason why they find it so difficult is that they lack (or have not fully cultivated) both sociological imagination and moral imagination.

I have two more application illustrations. The first comes from comments in another recent Argus Leader article (*Amy Wilson, “ ‘Da Vinci Code’ stirs people to probe their faith”, Sioux Falls Argus Leader, Feb. 9, 2004, p. 1A & 4A.*) The end of the article includes an interview with Sue Monk Kidd, author of The Secret Life of Bees (a recent novel) and The Dance of the Dissident Daughter (a 1996 memoir about her own spiritual journey). The article reports that it took Monk Kidd eight years to get to a conceptualization of “the sacred feminine” (which, for any of you haven’t yet read it, is a key concept in The Da Vinci Code.) She is then quoted as saying: “It’s such an amazing

leap from when I wrote (“Dissident Daughter”) to now. So much of this was not OK to talk about. The Sacred Feminine was pushed down and suppressed . . .”

What happened in those eight years was a widespread social process of the construction of moral imagination. The Sacred Feminine is not really a new idea. It was ‘externalized’ centuries ago and repressed. It has popped up again repeatedly in recorded history, but did not gain sufficient ‘objectivation’. The dominant moral ideologies and theologies, embodied in powerful social institutions (peopled mostly by sincere rather than evil male individuals who believed the idea was heretical) ‘won’ in that they successfully repressed the idea. But in the last couple of decades (or for Monk Kidd, only the last eight years), there has been lots of ‘objectifying’ interaction occurring, so that she is amazed at how much things have changed in what seems like a very short period of time.

But will that idea now become fully objectified as a part of our collective ‘taken for granted’? Maybe so. But I am not confident that its time has finally come. My look at history shows that similar gender ideologies have fairly often ‘taken hold’ in some limited sense, only to have what Allan Johnson calls “the genius of patriarchy” co-opt the ‘new gender morality’ and twist it so that it serves to actually maintain patriarchy. But maybe - if those of us who support this idea as morally right do not let down our guard, do not assume that it is just obvious and every right thinking person will agree, do not stop actively participating in the construction/cultivation process – then maybe this particular basis for a ‘new morality’ will actually get objectified and internalized as a taken for granted for some future generation.

The last application illustration I want to provide is personal experience. About a year ago I overheard a conversation in reference to one of our ‘everyone’ email messages. The sender of the message had used the phrase “personing residence hall desks”. One person I overheard exclaimed loudly upon reading the message that ‘personing’ was an inappropriate, silly, “PC run amok” choice of words. Two others (both female) immediately agreed, indicating that they would not be personally offended by the more common usage of “manning”. The first person indicated that “manning” would not have to be used either, but rather “working at” could be used.

What does using sociological imagination and moral imagination suggest about this interaction? First the sociological perspective sees language as a fundamentally important aspect of culture. It embodies taken-for-granted assumptions, including moral ones. A body of research literature now exists showing that there is a strong tendency for individuals to act as if the word ‘man’ (or ‘manning’ in this case’) refers only to males. The research shows that this is true even when people know cognitively (i.e. when specifically asked) whether the word was intended in the specific context to refer to a human (male or female) or to only a male. In other words, accurately discerning the assumed intention of the term does not typically reduce individual’s tendency to behave (e.g. draw pictures, select illustrations, etc.) as if the word refers to males only. So, whether one is individually offended by this generic man usage is not the only relevant information in evaluating the usage. Using the phrase “manning the desk” in an email message is a very trivial action. Yet when it is one instance of a larger social pattern of using “generic man’ terminology, then this, by itself trivial act takes on larger consequences. Perpetuating its usage actually does contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy overall.

Of course using “working at the desk” would be a perfectly acceptable way to simply avoid the issue of connoting either males or females doing the work. However, the use of the word ‘personing’, precisely because it is experienced as ‘awkward’, has the additional effect of highlighting the more common, but sexist, term “manning”. Its usage here in fact stimulated interaction about a topic that would not likely have been discussed otherwise. As it turns out, the writer of memo had no conscious intention to ‘stimulate interaction about gendered language or patriarchy’. That person was simply following a habit picked up from a former employer.

My point here is that the trivial can be important. It is in the trivial that the truly taken-for-granted assumptions most often appear. And it is in the trivial that individuals can most directly take action to implement changes.

You may well ask, what I, the able sociologist and avowed feminist, did in the interaction. There were a number of courses of action I could have chosen. I could have given an impromptu lecture on patriarchy and sexist language. I could have vociferously argued that my colleagues are ‘dupes of a misogynous conspiracy’. Or I could have

expressed the ideas in the previous few paragraphs as a co-equal participant in the conversation. I would very much like to report that I chose the latter option, participated in the interaction and tried to persuade the others without coming off as self-righteous. However, the truth is that I exhibited one of the not uncommon failings of professional sociologists. What I actually did was become so fascinated by listening and observing and analyzing the interaction that I hurried back to my computer to write notes before I forgot the event. I completely skipped this opportunity to engage in a micro level interaction that could have been a contribution to the larger process of re-constructing reality in the direction I want it to go. While it is important to be able to analyze, to use both sociological and moral imagination, it is also necessary to act.