

## TOPIC 5

# Social Structure and Social Interaction

ONE OF THE ABIDING DILEMMAS OF SOCIOLOGY IS HOW to simultaneously account for and explain the macro and micro influences on human behavior. It seems that as we focus the research or theoretical lens on one, the other slips from view. Bridging this gulf between the social forces of institutions and the face-to-face world of interaction is not an easy task. One world is full of large structures like government or the economy, and the other world is rich with interpersonal contact and subtle, complex connections with persons in our immediate environments. In this topic, we examine some theory and research that help us to build a bridge across the rift in the sociological landscape and illustrate the true complexities of social life.

Social structure, most sociologists agree, is the enduring patterns in society that place people into relative positions (statuses) based on important characteristics like age, income, gender, race, or ethnicity. There is even a structure based on whether one has a disability or not. The rich are in a different social class position than the poor, women in a different social position based on gender than men, and people of color find their ethnicity and culture affecting them differently than ethnicity does for whites. New students to sociology might have one of their most difficult lessons in seeing social structure and appreciating the effects in our personal and collective lives. However, learning this lesson is the critically important dimension of a “sociological imagination.” For example, knowing that your family and each classroom you attend has a structure that is set before you actually participate in them indicates that social structures exist apart from people. Parents or

adults have more status (a higher position in the social structure) than children in the family; teachers a higher position than the students; and so on. Can you look at the behavior of people in your family and classroom and understand the impact of structure on behavior? Imagine the macrosocial world of ethnicity, or social class, or gender and you can glimpse the large structures that have a great impact on us, almost continuously.

Social interaction is a complex, subtle process whereby people initiate and respond to one another based on commonly understood symbols. Some of the symbols are verbal, like words, and some are nonverbal, like gestures. We learn to express ourselves, respond to others, and create continuous loops of interaction in an endless number of social situations. Because we are accustomed to the meaning of the symbols and the patterns in which they occur, we do “social interaction” without thinking about it; it seems unconscious. When sociologists study this process we discuss it as “spontaneous” and “emergent” (something that is not predetermined or set). The theory we use to study the microsocial world is “symbolic interaction,” a topic covered earlier in the book. Social interaction is also an opportunity for individuals to impact social situations and affect their own and others’ behavior. If social structure feels as though it impedes our ability to be creative and spontaneous, social interaction gives us some measure of autonomy as actors in social settings. Here we are, then, human actors sandwiched between the structural influences of the macrosocial world and the dynamic, creative process of social interaction in the microsocial world. Recognizing how we are affected by the world and how we affect the world certainly will enhance our understanding of human behavior and our ability to act on the world ourselves.

In Topic 5, three articles are brought to the reader as illustrations of “social structure and social interaction.” First, Charles Lemert shows us how to “imagine social things, competently.” Through the use of personal examples and the reviews of Durkheim and Mills, we are given several glimpses of how to look at social settings with a sociological eye. Seeing social structure will be one of our first and most important lessons in the discipline. Second, William J. Chambliss’s article uses his rich qualitative study to demonstrate how social structure (social class of the boys) affects the community’s perceptions, and even the boys’ future life chances as they participate in two gangs, “The Saints and the Roughnecks.” Finally, nothing is more personal than interactions between marriage partners, and Lillian Rubin does an excellent job of

showing how gender (a structure) affects our communication (interaction) in her applied research, "The Approach-Avoidance Dance." Structure affects behavior and the behavior reinforces, but might alter, the structure of the relationship.

## 13

## READING

CHARLES LEMERT

## Imagining Social Things, Competently

He was amazing to me, a miraculous boy. In school, I tried to write as he wrote (he won the prize in penmanship), talk as he talked (he always had something confident to say), and walk as he walked (he had an awkward gait but he *always* knew where he was going). This was David Bennett. In the 1940s in the less-than-classy western suburbs of Cincinnati there were few heroes. Our fathers had come back from the war bitter and broken, not at all brash and ready to build the American Century. We hardly knew the bravest generation. But David Bennett, he was something else. We never knew what became of his mother. In those days, little white boys born to merchants or professionals of modest success knew almost nothing about separation or divorce. When our lives were disrupted, we were taught to look away in silence, even to pretend that everything was just fine. I remember my grandfather's wake as the best family party ever. His face, made over to cover lines the pain of cancer had etched, rose just above the edge of the coffin around which we children played as we always had in his presence. We knew of death, of course, but in our polite and polished bourgeois world, divorce was unheard of. One of the guys said that David's mother was living in Kentucky somewhere. Why?

Then it happened that his father grew ill and died. David was left with Gramps and his grandmother. Many years later, when we were all in college, Gramps was much beloved by the boys in David's fraternity house. Such a character he was! But not the kind of parent-substitute a small boy dreams of. We could never play with David on Saturday mornings because, we were told, he was required to mop and wax the

kitchen floor. And he was never, never allowed out after seven in the summers, and this is just the beginning of a long list of what we thought were harsh domestic rules—rules we could comprehend no better than divorce or separation.

But, remarkably, David seemed to know just how to master all that befell him. He accepted his losses and obeyed the demands of his upbringing. He had the best grades. The teachers loved him. In spite of this, he was our friend. He beat me out for the last spot on the school basketball team. So what? When I last heard of him, more years ago than I can remember, he was a successful doctor, living somewhere outside Chicago.

Some people are like that. They know just how to get by, often with a grace that cannot be taught. When I grew up a little more, I was surprised to learn that I too had some of that grace. Still later, when I was able to think about it even more, I realized that most people, even those who could never hope to go to medical school, had this surprisingly durable human quality that allowed David to overcome and thrive.

This quality—one might even call it a competence—turns out to be widely distributed among humans. Not only do most people enjoy the benefits of this competence, but it seems to come to the fore especially when things are as bad as they can get.

Across the world from Cincinnati where David and I dealt with the losses and pains of our otherwise secure worlds, other children of our generation faced far worse terrors. Some children, like many today who suffer the violence of poverty and dangerous streets, were exposed to the brutality of political terrors they could barely understand, even when they had to. One such child of my generation grew up to write a book about his childhood in Poland under the reign of Soviet military police during the gathering storm of the Second World War.

*Since the time of our house search, Mother does not let us take off our clothes at night. We can take off our shoes, but we have to have them beside us all the time. The coats lie on chairs, so they can be put on in the wink of an eye. In principle we are not permitted to sleep. My sister and I lie side by side, and we poke each other, shake each other, or pull each other by the hair. "Hey, you, don't sleep!" "You, too, don't sleep!" But, of course, in the midst of this struggling and shoving we both fall asleep. But Mother really does not sleep. She sits at the table and listens the whole time. The silence of our street rings in our ears. If someone's*

*footsteps echo in the silence, Mother grows pale. A man at this hour is an enemy. An enemy is a terrifying figure. Who else would come around at this hour? Good people are afraid; they are sitting hidden in their homes.<sup>1</sup>*

These were Polish children in the village of Pinsk, sometime in 1939. The Soviet secret police had already deported their father. They were children just the same, able to play in the dark against a fear they understood well enough. Like them, millions of people lie awake at night, terrified that terrible men will come, sent by evil to visit fear on children when and where they are—once in Italy and Germany, then in Russia and China, then in Afghanistan and Iraq, then in Rwanda and Darfur, tomorrow who knows where. But many people facing such terrors get by, often with humor.

What is this quality of human resilience, this competence that sustains and enriches human life, even against the odds? It is, to be sure, not a simple thing. Certainly, it encompasses what is often called the “human spirit,” just as it embraces “tough-mindedness,” “street smarts,” “grit,” and other such attributes associated with the best, most determined, and most transcendent powers of human creatures. But it also includes, in significant way, something you may never have thought of, or even perhaps realized existed.

Even if the world in which they live is degraded by poverty or violence, most people get by because they are endowed with *sociological competence*. This seemingly native, highly practical, virtually ubiquitous capacity sustains us individually, but it also contributes mightily to our ability to form and keep social relations with others. Without it, social life would be impossible. Without it, every time we entered a new and different social situation, we would be forced to learn anew what to think of it and how to behave. But, most of the time, we understand what is going on and where we fit in.

Think of the number of different situations you may have encountered just in the day you are reading this book. If you happen to be a student, it is possible that earlier this day you met in a room with others with whom you are making a class. To no one’s amazement you already knew just what to do. When your teacher entered, for example, it is likely that all the students, whatever their ages and backgrounds, realized it was time, gradually, to fall silent and listen. If you happen to be a mother or a father stealing a few moments to read while the children play, it is likely that already more than once today you were required to referee some fight, kiss some bruised body part, or wipe

away a tear. You may not feel entirely comfortable with how you did what you did, but it is likely you did it well enough. Most parents do this kind of thing as if by second nature.

It hardly makes a difference who you are, or what you do. Nearly all of us, most hours of most days, run into social situations filled with demands and potential risks we know, as if by instinct, how to handle. Greeting strangers, entering crowded rooms, asking the time of day, finding the right subway, ordering Big Macs without fries, meeting deadlines, getting deadlines extended—all these, much more, and virtually all the little events out of which we compose the course of daily life entail sociological competence.

The sociological competence of which I speak is not, at least not initially, the trained competence of the professional sociologist. But what the professionals know and have to say depends on a competence you already possess without the benefit of special studies. Indeed, there could be, and would be, no academic discipline organized under the name “sociology” were it not the case that sociology itself is a commonly held skill of untrained people and, thus, an important feature of social life itself. This may seem a bit odd to say. The more customary attitude in our society is to think of sociology as a sometimes complicated, often jargoned, though usually interesting, field of formal study and research. It is, of course, but, before it can be this, sociology is something else.

What is this miraculously effective and possibly universal human quality? Consider again those small Polish children, or others like them elsewhere in the world. What got them through the nights was an ability to imagine the reality in which they were caught. They understood, it is clear, that they were in danger. They knew that the police had carried off their father in the night. They knew why their mother kept them dressed, why she never slept at night. Straightforward? Not quite. Remember these were children for whom the ideas of oppressive police-states, of Soviet ideology and repressions, even of bad men and enforcers, were at best ill-formed. Their native sociological competence, though it served them well, could not have instructed them as to the subtleties of the wider world of totalitarian regimes—regimes that in time fell away only to be replaced by more of their awful kind. What those children, like others before and after them, understood was that there was danger around, and they were able to imagine creative ways to ward off the fear, even by so touchingly gentle a way as holding each other tight in a playful game of daring, teasing, but connecting, thus imagining the only truly safe place available—a place protected by their mother’s vigil, the subject of their jokes.

How human beings form relations with each other is the central mystery of any sociology. What is now reasonably well known is that children and others perform such amazing feats of courage by means of a resilient capacity to imagine—that is, by their ability to hold in mind the wider world of others, the good alongside the evil, and thus to organize what must be done. Imagination of this sort is not dreamily removed from practical things, nor is it simply a psychological endowment. On the contrary, it thrives in the practical, and it seems to be not so much an individual instinct as a common *social* sense. Frightened children have it with each other. We all have it, most of the time, in our dealings with the others we come upon.

Whenever you enter a room and “just know” you don’t belong there, when you see a stranger on the subway and understand intuitively that it is safe to return his not-quite-delivered smile, when you are introduced to someone elegantly dressed in a certain way and know she is not to be called by her first name even if she offers it—these are among the evidences for the sociology in each of us. They may seem to be trivial manners by contrast to the urgency of survival through dark nights. And so they are. But, however small, they are not unimportant. They may seem inconsequential just because they come to us so naturally. But think of what life would be like if we regularly encountered people who were sociologically *incompetent*.

One fine evening, some time ago, I met my wife at the late train after a week away. As the station cleared, we saw a woman alone and not quite sure of where she was. It was dark and late, so we offered her a ride. She gladly jumped into the back seat. Then, in the few minutes it took to get her home, she proceeded to tell us the most intimate details of her life, including how her husband had just bilked her of millions of dollars, that Ethel Kennedy thought it was terrible, and that, by the way, “I am telling the truth.” She may have been, but it was hard to believe. Though her plight may have been real, something important was missing in her dealings with us. In such situations, the normal competency rule is something like this: “Try to understand the circumstances of those to whom you tell your stories; make sure, if you can, that they want to hear what you have to say.” All it would take is a few encounters like this one for most people to want to go hide, or at least to think twice about offering rides to strangers. This woman, whoever she truly was, clearly had a vivid imagination, but, it would seem, she was so upset by what had happened to her that her local sociological imagination was impaired. In those brief moments with us, she could not think

of a world in which one needs an invitation before telling all to kindly strangers willing to help, but far more eager to hold each other after a week apart.

Social life, whether among passing strangers at local stations or throughout the whole of complex society, depends unforgivingly on the ability of members to understand social things competently. This competence is the key ingredient in their ability to enter imaginatively into the social realities all about. That most people can, and do, is itself a miracle of sorts. What makes this so surprising is that we all know that the competence is not something we normally think about. It is not even something we are always able to provide an account of when called upon to do so. Where exactly did you learn to avoid some strangers while welcoming others, or learn not to defer to some people while giving others full formal regard? Most of us got this competence from somewhere, and at a very young age. It is so natural that, when on those rare occasions someone asks us to discuss this skill, we are more likely to be annoyed than intrigued by the request.

Sociological competence is much like our native ability to use the language we hear as infants. All of a sudden, one day, a child begins to speak, soon in sentences, eventually without pointing, eventually in reasonably correct forms of the past and future tenses. (“Daddy, I saw some sheeps on the way home!”) A child does this sometime late in the second year of life or so, and without benefit of any organized instruction in grammar. Much the same happens, though at a somewhat later age, with sociological competence. The learning may be rough, and in need of encouragement or a few gentle spankings and playground pinches or punches, but it too comes relatively easily, and quite early. Some people hate to study sociology for the same reason they hate to study grammar: “I already know this stuff. Why give it a fancy name?” This is true, of course, for a great deal of our sociological competence. Most of us know a lot already—but not *everything*.

The first accepted definition of sociology was given in 1894 by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). Durkheim persuaded many who followed him that, as he put it, “social facts are things, that is, realities external to the individual.”<sup>2</sup> *Sociology*, thereby, is the science of social things. Durkheim meant to insist, quite reasonably, that, as important as individuals are to what goes on around them, there are also certain things that are inherently, and without exception, social in nature. The status of these social things has ever since been a topic of

debate among professional sociologists for the simple reason that it is obviously more difficult to define social things than it is individual ones.

When David Bennett went about being a brilliant student, a fair athlete, and a generally good guy even while being required to scrub the kitchen floor, his pals could observe what he did and how he did it. I could not tell you why he made the basketball team and I did not. But he did. His jump shot was ever so much more awkward than mine. This and many other of the uncountable little things that made him a unique individual were plainly visible. The tougher question is, What were all the features of the complex dynamic of his family life that made him the kind of kid he was? His departed mother, his dead father, his grumpy gramps, and much else, including, even, the effects of a world war on his parents' marriage or of the conventions of postwar suburban culture in the United States—all these came together in such a way as to play a part in making him the unusual person he was. These influences on his behavior as an individual are social things. Without them, David would not have been who he was, and is today—out there somewhere, presumably still alive, caring for his patients, perhaps looking in on grandchildren of his own as they come up against the different social worlds.

But, even now that I am a trained and certified professional sociologist, I could only barely begin to suggest just how to go about discovering the workings of those social things. If complicated in the case of one good white boy from the American suburbs, think how much more complicated the task is when, say, someone tries to explain just what the Soviet imperium was and why it wanted to frighten little children and their mothers. This is a social thing of a very consequential kind. It is one thing to observe the facts of the deported fathers, vigilant mothers, and terrified kids. Quite another to give a coherent account of the social thing itself, of the Soviet imperium in all its vast operations upon millions of people. Yet, it can be done. As a matter of fact, that little boy who hid at night in 1939 grew up to be a world-famous writer and journalist, able in adult life to describe in compelling terms how his feelings of terror as a boy might have been produced by the social organization of the former Soviet Union. That Ryszard Kapuściński could write *Imperium* in 1993 does not mean that all, even most, children who suffered as he did in the 1930s grew up to describe the social things that had made their lives miserable. In fact, most people are unable to describe very many of the more complex social things that affect them. They could, of course, were they to undergo the training, and many do it without much education at all. But the basic fact is that most people know, more or less well, how to get

by in daily life. They are sociologically competent, even when they lack the advanced sociological training to describe their competence.

This is the problem Emile Durkheim and most professional sociologists since his day have had to face. People know a lot about social things, but they cannot talk about them very well without some help or, perhaps, without a challenge of some kind. They, therefore, are inclined, quite naturally, to mistrust the reality of social things, that is, of things just as mysterious as David Bennett's seemingly weird family arrangement, or of a totalitarian state's unusually evil methods.

The challenge Durkheim took up was that of establishing sociology as a formal, academic discipline against the commonplace prejudice that other things are much more real. Psychology, economics, history, and political science have a much easier time of it because it is relatively easier to imagine what they are about—minds (or the like), market or prices, the facts of some group or another's story, how and why people vote and govern as they do. Just why these might seem more imaginable than *social things* is itself a difficult question I will not even attempt to answer. Minds, markets, stories, and votes are hardly simple things. But, relatively speaking, they seem so to many people. By contrast, just about everyone considers *social things*—or, more familiarly, *societies*—abstract, abstruse, and fluffily vague. Most people are not wrong. Since Durkheim, and certainly before, sociologists of all kinds (including small children trying to sleep in the dark) have had to contend with this inconvenient, but most interesting, fact of social life.

Durkheim himself died before sociology became much of an organized and institutional part of the university. He died in 1917, during the First World War, when it seemed that modern Europe would collapse before the continuing inability of nations and their leaders to create a stable political environment in which their people could enjoy the benefits of the modern world.

Some years later, well after the Second World War had similarly failed to make to world a better place, another sociologist made an enduring attempt to define sociology. C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), who was born just the year before Durkheim died, defined sociology in a way that made clear what was unclear in Durkheim's definition. While Durkheim assumed that social things can be as readily imagined as other types of facts of the human condition, Mills came to the more honest, and accurate, conclusion that at least one class of social facts is normally unavailable to those not specifically trained to see them.

Imagine again those small Polish children in 1939. Too young to understand much at all about the Soviet brand of totalitarian oppression, they understood at best that something was terribly wrong, that the world somehow was filled with cruel men. Though little Ryszard grew up to understand full well who those men were and why they did what they did, as a child he could only huddle back into the trembling arms of his sister. Their attempt at a playful response, a game of a sad sort, was indeed an imaginative response to social facts they could experience but only dimly comprehend. While it seems, these children did not come to one of the more common human conclusions in the face of such odds, they might have. It is not uncommon for terrorized children to take the terror into themselves and to conclude that, in some inexplicable way, the evil visited upon them is a result of something they did. While this is just one of several self-defeating conclusions, it is a familiar one. Adult women, boys and girls, minorities, the unjustly punished, victims of family violence, children of abusers or alcoholics, even an occasional white guy of privilege are all strongly tempted to place the blame for their misery on themselves. While there are many reasons for this (most of them psychological), the sociological explanation is that, when we live in small worlds, whether as children or adults, it is usually difficult to understand the larger social forces that affect us. The more powerful social things are, the less we are equipped to comprehend them without some extra work.

This basic fact of life lay behind C. Wright Mills's now famous definition of sociology as the work of the *sociological imagination*.<sup>3</sup> He meant that sociology is the activity by which persons of differing degrees of training and experience often learn eventually to create imaginative reconstructions of the larger structural forces that affect their lives. Without this sociological skill, they are left with the belief that the troubles in their lives are of their own doing, or perhaps the result of some abstract fate; but, in either case, they feel that these are matters with respect to which they should, and do, feel guilty. The sociological imagination refers to the ability of some to learn—often with good luck or coaching or perhaps with formal schooling—to realize that, just as often, one's personal *troubles* are in fact *public issues*. Those children in Poland feared, and could have blamed themselves because of, a social and political system so massive in comparison to their little home in Pinsk that they could hardly be expected to comprehend the "issue" of totalitarian rule as anything other than their personal "troubles." They were, thus, no different from anyone in another situation in space and time who suffers unwittingly because of social things beyond his or her control—no different from

those who fail in schools because their schools don't teach, from those unable to achieve their dreams because they are arbitrarily excluded from the places where those dreams are realized, from those unable to find the relationships they desire because they are still controlled by unconscious memories of sexual abuse they suffered in a long ago they cannot, or will not, remember—no different from children who grew up to suffer abuse in the Abu Ghraibs of the world.

It is not just the victims of society who are disadvantaged in this way. Most of us, whatever our circumstances, have need of a more vividly active sociological imagination, which we sometimes develop by the example of others, by the lessons of practical life, and, even, by courses in sociology. C. Wright Mills, though he was a professional sociologist, did not intend that the sociological imagination be a competence of only the more highly educated. On the contrary, he believed that the most important value of sociology is its potential to enrich and encourage the lives of all human beings. Mills was one of the first to insist with a defiant passion that sociology is not for the professionals alone—that the sociological imagination is every bit as important to the ordinary person, for whom it can be a matter of quite serious urgency. The passion with which he held this conviction explains why he exercised so much popular influence and why, in particular, his ideas influenced the politics of the early student movement in the 1960s. Though not alone in the conviction, Mills did more than anyone to clarify and convey the extent to which sociology is first and foremost a practical skill available to all men and women, even to boys and girls. Sociology's value as an academic field of research and instruction relies on this prior fact.

## NOTES

1. Ryszard Kapuściński, *Imperium* (Random House, 1994), pp. 11–12.
2. See Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1894; reprint, Free Press, 1982), chapter 1. The words given are Durkheim's but they are rephrased for simplicity's sake. They are nearly the same as those used in the preface to his later book, *Suicide* (1897).
3. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1959), especially chapter 1.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is Lemert's discussion of "sociological competence"? Discuss how it is used in social life and how social life is more difficult without it.
2. What important points does Lemert make through the works of Durkheim and Mills? Summarize their contributions to this discussion of "sociological competence."

## 14

## READING

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**WILLIAM J. CHAMBLISS**

## The Saints and the Roughnecks

Eight promising young men—children of good, stable, white upper-middle-class families, active in school affairs, good pre-college students—were some of the most delinquent boys at Hanibal High School. While community residents and parents knew that these boys occasionally sowed a few wild oats, they were totally unaware that sowing wild oats completely occupied the daily routine of these young men. The Saints were constantly occupied with truancy, drinking, wild driving, petty theft and vandalism. Yet not one was officially arrested for any misdeed during the two years I observed them.

This record was particularly surprising in light of my observations during the same two years of another gang of Hanibal High School students, six lower-class white boys known as the Roughnecks. The Roughnecks were constantly in trouble with police and community even though their rate of delinquency was about equal with that of the Saints. What was the cause of this disparity? the result? The following consideration of the activities, social class and community perceptions of both gangs may provide some answers.

### The Saints from Monday to Friday

The Saints' principal daily concern was with getting out of school as early as possible. The boys managed to get out of school with minimum danger that they would be accused of playing hookey through an elaborate procedure for obtaining "legitimate" release from class. The most

common procedure was for one boy to obtain the release of another by fabricating a meeting of some committee, program or recognized club. Charles might raise his hand in his 9:00 chemistry class and asked to be excused—a euphemism for going to the bathroom. Charles would go to Ed’s math class and inform the teacher that Ed was needed for a 9:30 rehearsal of the drama club play. The math teacher would recognize Ed and Charles as “good students” involved in numerous school activities and would permit Ed to leave at 9:30. Charles would return to his class, and Ed would go to Tom’s English class to obtain his release. Tom would engineer Charles’ escape. The strategy would continue until as many of the Saints as possible were freed. After a stealthy trip to the car (which had been parked in a strategic spot), the boys were off for a day of fun. . . .

Having escaped from the concrete corridors the boys usually went either to a pool hall on the other (lower-class) side of town or to a cafe in the suburbs. Both places were out of the way of people the boys were likely to know (family or school officials), and both provided a source of entertainment. The pool hall entertainment was the generally rough atmosphere, the occasional hustler, the sometimes drunk proprietor and, of course, the game of pool. The cafe’s entertainment was provided by the owner. The boys would “accidentally” knock a glass on the floor or spill cola on the counter—not all the time, but enough to be sporting. They would also bend spoons, put salt in sugar bowls and generally tease whoever was working in the cafe. The owner had opened the cafe recently and was dependent on the boys’ business which was, in fact, substantial since between the horsing around and the teasing they bought food and drinks.

## The Saints on Weekends

On weekends the automobile was even more critical than during the week, for on weekends the Saints went to Big Town—a large city with a population of over a million 25 miles from Hanibal. Every Friday and Saturday night most of the Saints would meet between 8:00 and 8:30 and would go into Big Town. Big Town activities included drinking heavily in taverns or nightclubs, driving drunkenly through the streets, and committing acts of vandalism and playing pranks.

By midnight on Fridays and Saturdays the Saints were usually thoroughly high, and one or two of them were often so drunk they had to be carried to the cars. Then the boys drove around town, calling obscenities to women and girls; occasionally trying (unsuccessfully so

far as I could tell) to pick girls up; and driving recklessly through red lights and at high speeds with their lights out. Occasionally they played “chicken.” One boy would climb out the back window of the car and across the roof to the driver’s side of the car while the car was moving at high speed (between 40 and 50 miles an hour); then the driver would move over and the boy who had just crawled across the car roof would take the driver’s seat.

Searching for “fair game” for a prank was the boys’ principal activity after they left the tavern. The boys would drive alongside a foot patrolman and ask directions to some street. If the policeman leaned on the car in the course of answering the question, the driver would speed away, causing him to lose his balance. The Saints were careful to play this prank only in an area where they were not going to spend much time and where they could quickly disappear around a corner to avoid having their license plate number taken.

Construction sites and road repair areas were the special province of the Saints’ mischief. A soon-to-be-repaired hole in the road inevitably invited the Saints to remove lanterns and wooden barricades and put them in the car, leaving the hole unprotected. The boys would find a safe vantage point and wait for an unsuspecting motorist to drive into the hole. Often, though not always, the boys would go up to the motorist and commiserate with him about the dreadful way the city protected its citizenry. . . .

Through all the pranks, drinking and reckless driving the boys managed miraculously to avoid being stopped by police. Only twice in two years was I aware that they had been stopped by a Big City policeman. Once was for speeding (which they did every time they drove whether they were drunk or sober), and the driver managed to convince the policeman that it was simply an error. The second time they were stopped they had just left a nightclub and were walking through an alley. . . .

The boys had a spirit of frivolity and fun about their escapades. They did not view what they were engaged in as “delinquency,” though it surely was by any reasonable definition of that word. They simply viewed themselves as having a little fun and who, they would ask, was really hurt by it? The answer had to be no one, although this fact remains one of the most difficult things to explain about the gang’s behavior. Unlikely though it seems, in two years of drinking, driving, carousing and vandalism no one was seriously injured as a result of the Saints’ activities.

## The Saints in School

The Saints were highly successful in school. The average grade for the group was “B,” with two of the boys having close to a straight “A” average. Almost all of the boys were popular and many of them held offices in the school. One of the boys was vice-president of the student body one year. Six of the boys played on athletic teams.

At the end of their senior year, the student body selected ten seniors for special recognition as the “school wheels”; four of the ten were Saints. Teachers and school officials saw no problem with any of these boys and anticipated that they would all “make something of themselves.”

How the boys managed to maintain this impression is surprising in view of their actual behavior while in school. Their technique for covering truancy was so successful that teachers did not even realize that the boys were absent from school much of the time. Occasionally, of course, the system would backfire and then the boy was on his own. A boy who was caught would be most contrite, would plead guilty and ask for mercy. He inevitably got the mercy he sought.

Cheating on examinations was rampant, even to the point of orally communicating answers to exams as well as looking at one another’s papers. Since none of the group studied, and since they were primarily dependent on one another for help, it is surprising that grades were so high. Teachers contributed to the deception in their admitted inclination to give these boys (and presumably others like them) the benefit of the doubt. When asked how the boys did in school, and when pressed on specific examinations, teachers might admit that they were disappointed in John’s performance, but would quickly add that they “knew that he was capable of doing better,” so John was given a higher grade than he had actually earned. How often this happened is impossible to know. During the time that I observed the group, I never saw any of the boys take homework home. Teachers may have been “understanding” very regularly. . . .

## The Police and the Saints

The local police saw the Saints as good boys who were among the leaders of the youth in the community. Rarely, the boys might be stopped in town for speeding or for running a stop sign. When this happened the boys were always polite, contrite and pled for mercy. As in school, they

received the mercy they asked for. None ever received a ticket or was taken into the precinct by the local police.

The situation in Big Town, where the boys engaged in most of their delinquency, was only slightly different. The police there did not know the boys at all, although occasionally the boys were stopped by a patrolman. Once they were caught taking a lantern from a construction site. Another time they were stopped for running a stop sign, and on several occasions they were stopped for speeding. Their behavior was as before: contrite, polite and penitent. The urban police, like the local police, accepted their demeanor as sincere. More important, the urban police were convinced that these were good boys just out for a lark.

## The Roughnecks

Hanibal townspeople never perceived the Saints' high level of delinquency. The Saints were good boys who just went in for an occasional prank. After all, they were well dressed, well mannered and had nice cars. The Roughnecks were a different story. Although the two gangs of boys were the same age, and both groups engaged in an equal amount of wild-oat sowing, everyone agreed that the not-so-well-dressed, not-so-well-mannered, not-so-rich boys were heading for trouble. Townspeople would say, "You can see the gang members at the drugstore, night after night, leaning against the storefront (sometimes drunk) or slouching around inside buying cokes, reading magazines, and probably stealing old Mr. Wall blind. When they are outside and girls walk by, even respectable girls, these boys make suggestive remarks. Sometimes their remarks are downright lewd."

From the community's viewpoint, the real indication that these kids were in for trouble was that they were constantly involved with the police. Some of them had been picked up for stealing, mostly small stuff, of course, "but still it's stealing small stuff that leads to big time crimes." "Too bad," people said. "Too bad that these boys couldn't behave like the other kids in town; stay out of trouble, be polite to adults, and look to their future."

The community's impression of the degree to which this group of six boys (ranging in age from 16 to 19) engaged in delinquency was somewhat distorted. In some ways the gang was more delinquent than the community thought; in other ways they were less.

The fighting activities of the group were fairly readily and accurately perceived by almost everyone. At least once a month, the boys would get into some sort of fight, although most fights were scraps between members of the group or involved only one member of the group and some peripheral hanger-on. Only three times in the period of observation did the group fight together: once against a gang from across town, once against two blacks and once against a group of boys from another school. For the first two fights the group went out “looking for trouble”—and they found it both times. The third fight followed a football game and began spontaneously with an argument on the football field between one of the Roughnecks and a member of the opposition’s football team.

Jack had a particular propensity for fighting and was involved in most of the brawls. He was a prime mover of the escalation of arguments into fights.

More serious than fighting, had the community been aware of it, was theft. Although almost everyone was aware that the boys occasionally stole things, they did not realize the extent of the activity. Petty stealing was a frequent event for the Roughnecks. Sometimes they stole as a group and coordinated their efforts; other times they stole in pairs. Rarely did they steal alone.

The thefts ranged from very small things like paperback books, comics and ballpoint pens to expensive items like watches. The nature of the thefts varied from time to time. The gang would go through a period of systematically shoplifting items from automobiles or school lockers. Types of thievery varied with the whim of the gang. Some forms of thievery were more profitable than others, but all thefts were for profit, not just thrills.

Roughnecks siphoned gasoline from cars as often as they had access to an automobile, which was not very often. Unlike the Saints, who owned their own cars, the Roughnecks would have to borrow their parents’ cars, an event which occurred only eight or nine times a year. The boys claimed to have stolen cars for joy rides from time to time. . . .

The Roughnecks, then, engaged mainly in three types of delinquency: theft, drinking and fighting. Although community members perceived that this gang of kids was delinquent, they mistakenly believed that their illegal activities were primarily drinking, fighting and being a nuisance to passersby. Drinking was limited among the gang members, although it did occur, and theft was much more prevalent than anyone realized. . . .

There was a high level of mutual distrust and dislike between the Roughnecks and the police. The boys felt very strongly that the police were unfair and corrupt. Some evidence existed that the boys were correct in their perception.

The main source of the boys' dislike for the police undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that the police would sporadically harass the group. From the standpoint of the boys, these acts of occasional enforcement of the law were whimsical and uncalled for. It made no sense to them, for example, that the police would come to the corner occasionally and threaten them with arrest for loitering when the night before the boys had been out siphoning gasoline from cars and the police had been nowhere in sight. To the boys, the police were stupid on the one hand, for not being where they should have been and catching the boys in a serious offense, and unfair on the other hand, for trumping up "loitering" charges against them.

From the viewpoint of the police, the situation was quite different. They knew, with all the confidence necessary to be a policeman, that these boys were engaged in criminal activities. They knew this partly from occasionally catching them, mostly from circumstantial evidence ("the boys were around when those tires were slashed"), and partly because the police shared the view of the community in general that this was a bad bunch of boys. The best the police could hope to do was to be sensitive to the fact that these boys were engaged in illegal acts and arrest them whenever there was some evidence that they had been involved. Whether or not the boys had in fact committed a particular act in a particular way was not especially important. The police had a broader view: their job was to stamp out these kids' crimes; the tactics were not as important as the end result.

Over the period that the group was under observation, each member was arrested at least once. Several of the boys were arrested a number of times and spent at least one night in jail. While most were never taken to court, two of the boys were sentenced to six months' incarceration in boys' schools.

## The Roughnecks in School

The Roughnecks' behavior in school was not particularly disruptive. During school hours they did not all hang around together, but tended instead to spend most of their time with one or two other members of

the gang who were their special buddies. Although every member of the gang attempted to avoid school as much as possible, they were not particularly successful and most of them attended school with surprising regularity. They considered school a burden—something to be gotten through with a minimum of conflict. If they were “bugged” by a particular teacher, it could lead to trouble. One of the boys, Al, once threatened to beat up a teacher and, according to the other boys, the teacher hid under a desk to escape him.

Teachers saw the boys the way the general community did, as heading for trouble, as being uninterested in making something of themselves. Some were also seen as being incapable of meeting the academic standards of the school. Most of the teachers expressed concern for this group of boys and were willing to pass them despite poor performance, in the belief that failing them would only aggravate the problem.

The group of boys had a grade point average just slightly above “C.” No one in the group failed either grade, and no one had better than a “C” average. They were very consistent in their achievement or, at least, the teachers were consistent in their perception of the boys’ achievement.

Two of the boys were good football players. Herb was acknowledged to be the best player in the school and Jack was almost as good. Both boys were criticized for their failure to abide by training rules, for refusing to come to practice as often as they should, and for not playing their best during practice. What they lacked in sportsmanship they made up for in skill, apparently, and played every game no matter how poorly they had performed in practice or how many practice sessions they had missed.

## Two Questions

Why did the community, the school and the police react to the Saints as though they were good, upstanding, nondelinquent youths with bright futures but to the Roughnecks as though they were tough, young criminals who were headed for trouble? Why did the Roughnecks and the Saints in fact have quite different careers after high school—careers which, by and large, lived up to the expectations of the community?

The most obvious explanation for the differences in the community’s and law enforcement agencies’ reactions to the two gangs is that

one group of boys was “more delinquent” than the other. Which group was more delinquent? The answer to this question will determine in part how we explain the differential responses to these groups by the members of the community and, particularly, by law enforcement and school officials.

In sheer number of illegal acts, the Saints were the more delinquent. They were truant from school for at least part of the day almost every day of the week. In addition, their drinking and vandalism occurred with surprising regularity. The Roughnecks, in contrast, engaged sporadically in delinquent episodes. While these episodes were frequent, they certainly did not occur on a daily or even a weekly basis.

The difference in frequency of offenses was probably caused by the Roughnecks’ inability to obtain liquor and to manipulate legitimate excuses from school. Since the Roughnecks had less money than the Saints, and teachers carefully supervised their school activities, the Roughnecks’ hearts may have been as black as the Saints’, but their misdeeds were not nearly as frequent.

There are really no clear-cut criteria by which to measure qualitative differences in antisocial behavior. The most important dimension of the difference is generally referred to as the “seriousness” of the offenses.

If seriousness encompasses the relative economic costs of delinquent acts, then some assessment can be made. The Roughnecks probably stole an average of about \$5.00 worth of goods a week. Some weeks the figure was considerably higher, but these times must be balanced against long periods when almost nothing was stolen.

The Saints were more continuously engaged in delinquency but their acts were not for the most part costly to property. Only their vandalism and occasional theft of gasoline would so qualify. Perhaps once or twice a month they would siphon a tankful of gas. The other costly items were street signs, construction lanterns and the like. All of these acts combined probably did not quite average \$5.00 a week, partly because much of the stolen equipment was abandoned and presumably could be recovered. The difference in cost of stolen property between the two groups was trivial, but the Roughnecks probably had a slightly more expensive set of activities than did the Saints.

Another meaning of seriousness is the potential threat of physical harm to members of the community and to the boys themselves. The Roughnecks were more prone to physical violence; they not only

welcomed an opportunity to fight; they went seeking it. In addition, they fought among themselves frequently. Although the fighting never included deadly weapons, it was still a menace, however minor, to the physical safety of those involved.

The Saints never fought. They avoided physical conflict both inside and outside the group. At the same time, though, the Saints frequently endangered their own and other people's lives. They did so almost every time they drove a car, especially if they had been drinking. Sober, their driving was risky; under the influence of alcohol it was horrendous. In addition, the Saints endangered the lives of others with their pranks. Street excavations left unmarked were a very serious hazard.

Evaluating the relative seriousness of the two gangs' activities is difficult. The community reacted as though the behavior of the Roughnecks was a problem, and they reacted as though the behavior of the Saints was not. But the members of the community were ignorant of the array of delinquent acts that characterized the Saints' behavior. Although concerned citizens were unaware of much of the Roughnecks' behavior as well, they were much better informed about the Roughnecks' involvement in delinquency than they were about the Saints'.

## Visibility

Differential treatment of the two gangs resulted in part because one gang was infinitely more visible than the other. This differential visibility was a direct function of the economic standing of the families. The Saints had access to automobiles and were able to remove themselves from the sight of the community. In as routine a decision as to where to go to have a milkshake after school, the Saints stayed away from the mainstream of community life. Lacking transportation, the Roughnecks could not make it to the edge of town. The center of town was the only practical place for them to meet since their homes were scattered throughout the town and any noncentral meeting place put an undue hardship on some members. Through necessity the Roughnecks congregated in a crowded area where everyone in the community passed frequently, including teachers and law enforcement officers. They could easily see the Roughnecks hanging around the drugstore.

The Roughnecks, of course, made themselves even more visible by making remarks to passersby and by occasionally getting into fights on the corner. Meanwhile, just as regularly, the Saints were either at the cafe on one edge of town or in the pool hall at the other edge of town. Without any particular realization that they were making themselves inconspicuous, the Saints were able to hide their time-wasting. Not only were they removed from the mainstream of traffic, but they were almost always inside a building.

On their escapades the Saints were also relatively invisible, since they left Hanibal and travelled to Big Town. Here, too, they were mobile, roaming the city, rarely going to the same area twice.

## Demeanor

To the notion of visibility must be added the difference in the responses of group members to outside intervention with their activities. If one of the Saints was confronted with an accusing policeman, even if he felt he was truly innocent of a wrongdoing, his demeanor was apologetic and penitent. A Roughneck's attitude was almost the polar opposite. When confronted with a threatening adult authority, even one who tried to be pleasant, the Roughneck's hostility and disdain were clearly observable. Sometimes he might attempt to put up a veneer of respect, but it was thin and was not accepted as sincere by the authority.

School was no different from the community at large. The Saints could manipulate the system by feigning compliance with the school norms. The availability of cars at school meant that once free from the immediate sight of the teacher, the boys could disappear rapidly. And this escape was well enough planned that no administrator or teacher was nearby when the boys left. A Roughneck who wished to escape for a few hours was in a bind. If it were possible to get free from class, downtown was still a mile away, and even if he arrived there, he was still very visible. Truancy for the Roughnecks meant almost certain detection, while the Saints enjoyed almost complete immunity from sanctions.

## Bias

Community members were not aware of the transgressions of the Saints. Even if the Saints had been less discreet, their favorite delinquencies would have been perceived as less serious than those of the Roughnecks.

In the eyes of the police and school officials, a boy who drinks in an alley and stands intoxicated on the street corner is committing a more serious offense than is a boy who drinks to inebriation in a nightclub or a tavern and drives around afterwards in a car. Similarly, a boy who steals a wallet from a store will be viewed as having committed a more serious offense than a boy who steals a lantern from a construction site.

Perceptual bias also operates with respect to the demeanor of the boys in the two groups when they are confronted by adults. It is not simply that adults dislike the posture affected by boys of the Roughneck ilk; more important is the conviction that the posture adopted by the Roughnecks is an indication of their devotion and commitment to deviance as a way of life. The posture becomes a cue, just as the type of the offense is a cue, to the degree to which the known transgressions are indicators of the youths' potential for other problems.

Visibility, demeanor and bias are surface variables which explain the day-to-day operations of the police. Why do these surface variables operate as they do? Why did the police choose to disregard the Saints' delinquencies while breathing down the backs of the Roughnecks?

The answer lies in the class structure of American society and the control of legal institutions by those at the top of the class structure. Obviously, no representative of the upper class drew up the operational chart for the police which led them to look in the ghettos and on street corners—which led them to see the demeanor of lower-class youth as troublesome and that of upper-middle-class youth as tolerable. Rather, the procedures simply developed from experience—experience with irate and influential upper-middle-class parents insisting that their son's vandalism was simply a prank and his drunkenness only a momentary "sowing of wild oats"—experience with cooperative or indifferent, powerless, lower-class parents who acquiesced to the laws' definition of their son's behavior.

## Adult Careers of the Saints and the Roughnecks

The community's confidence in the potential of the Saints and the Roughnecks apparently was justified. If anything, the community members underestimated the degree to which these youngsters would turn out "good" or "bad."

Seven of the eight members of the Saints went on to college immediately after high school. Five of the boys graduated from college in four years. The sixth one finished college after two years in the army, and the seventh spent four years in the air force before returning to college and receiving a B.A. degree. Of these seven college graduates, three went on for advanced degrees. One finished law school and is now active in state politics, one finished medical school and is practicing near Hanibal, and one boy is now working for a Ph.D. The other four college graduates entered submanagerial, managerial or executive training positions with larger firms.

The only Saint who did not complete college was Jerry. Jerry had failed to graduate from high school with the other Saints. During his second senior year, after the other Saints had gone on to college, Jerry began to hang around with what several teachers described as a “rough crowd”—the gang that was heir apparent to the Roughnecks. At the end of his second senior year, when he did graduate from high school, Jerry took a job as a used-car salesman, got married and quickly had a child. Although he made several abortive attempts to go to college by attending night school, when I last saw him (ten years after high school) Jerry was unemployed and had been living on unemployment for almost a year. His wife worked as a waitress.

Some of the Roughnecks have lived up to community expectations. A number of them were headed for trouble. A few were not.

Jack and Herb were the athletes among the Roughnecks and their athletic prowess paid off handsomely. Both boys received unsolicited athletic scholarships to college. After Herb received his scholarship (near the end of his senior year), he apparently did an about-face. His demeanor became very similar to that of the Saints. Although he remained a member in good standing of the Roughnecks, he stopped participating in most activities and did not hang on the corner as often.

Jack did not change. If anything, he became more prone to fighting. He even made excuses for accepting the scholarship. He told the other gang members that the school had guaranteed him a “C” average if he would come to play football—an idea that seems far-fetched, even in this day of highly competitive recruiting.

During the summer after graduation from high school, Jack attempted suicide by jumping from a tall building. The jump would certainly have killed most people trying it, but Jack survived. He entered college in the fall and played four years of football. He and Herb graduated in four years, and both are teaching and coaching in

high schools. They are married and have stable families. If anything, Jack appears to have a more prestigious position in the community than does Herb, though both are well respected and secure in their positions.

Two of the boys never finished high school. Tommy left at the end of his junior year and went to another state. That summer he was arrested and placed on probation on a manslaughter charge. Three years later he was arrested for murder; he pleaded guilty to second degree murder and is serving a 30-year sentence in the state penitentiary.

Al, the other boy who did not finish high school, also left the state in his senior year. He is serving a life sentence in a state penitentiary for first degree murder.

Wes is a small-time gambler. He finished high school and “bummed around.” After several years he made contact with a bookmaker who employed him as a runner. Later he acquired his own area and has been working it ever since. His position among the bookmakers is almost identical to the position he had in the gang; he is always around but no one is really aware of him. He makes no trouble and he does not get into any. Steady, reliable, capable of keeping his mouth closed, he plays the game by the rules, even though the game is an illegal one.

That leaves only Ron. Some of his former friends reported that they had heard he was “driving a truck up north,” but no one could provide any concrete information.

## Reinforcement

The community responded to the Roughnecks as boys in trouble, and the boys agreed with that perception. Their pattern of deviancy was reinforced, and breaking away from it became increasingly unlikely. Once the boys acquired an image of themselves as deviants, they selected new friends who affirmed that self-image. As that self-conception became more firmly entrenched, they also became willing to try new and more extreme deviances. With their growing alienation came freer expression of disrespect and hostility for representatives of the legitimate society. This disrespect increased the community’s negativism, perpetuating the entire process of commitment to deviance. Lack of a commitment to deviance works the same way. In either case, the process will perpetuate itself unless some event (like a scholarship to college or a sudden failure) external to the established relationship intervenes. For two of the

Roughnecks (Herb and Jack), receiving college athletic scholarships created new relations and culminated in a break with the established pattern of deviance. In the case of one of the Saints (Jerry), his parents' divorce and his failing to graduate from high school changed some of his other relations. Being held back in school for a year and losing his place among the Saints had sufficient impact on Jerry to alter his self-image and virtually to assure that he would not go on to college as his peers did. Although the experiments of life can rarely be reversed, it seems likely in view of the behavior of the other boys who did not enjoy this special treatment by the school that Jerry, too, would have "become something" had he graduated as anticipated. For Herb and Jack outside intervention worked to their advantage; for Jerry it was his undoing.

Selective perception and labelling—finding, processing and punishing some kinds of criminality and not others—means that visible, poor, nonmobile, outspoken, undiplomatic "tough" kids will be noticed, whether their actions are seriously delinquent or not. Other kids, who have established a reputation for being bright (even though under-achieving), disciplined and involved in respectable activities, who are mobile and monied, will be invisible when they deviate from sanctioned activities. They'll sow their wild oats—perhaps even wider and thicker than their lower-class cohorts—but they won't be noticed. When it's time to leave adolescence most will follow the expected path, settling into the ways of the middle class, remembering fondly the delinquent but unnoticed fling of their youth. The Roughnecks and others like them may turn around, too. It is more likely that their noticeable deviance will have been so reinforced by police and community that their lives will be effectively channelled into careers consistent with their adolescent background.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Using the concepts from the article, can you illustrate the effects of social class on the community's definition of the boys?
2. How does the idea of "self-fulfilling prophesy" relate to Chambliss's research?

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LILLIAN B. RUBIN

## The Approach–Avoidance Dance

### Men, Women, and Intimacy

For one human being to love another, that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Intimacy. We hunger for it, but we also fear it. We come close to a loved one, then we back off. A teacher I had once described this as the “go away a little closer” message. I call it the approach-avoidance dance.

The conventional wisdom says that women want intimacy, men resist it. And I have plenty of material that would *seem* to support that view. Whether in my research interviews, in my clinical hours, or in the ordinary course of my life, I hear the same story told repeatedly. “He doesn’t talk to me,” says a woman. “I don’t know what she wants me to talk about,” says a man. “I want to know what he’s feeling,” she tells me. “I’m not feeling anything,” he insists. “Who can feel nothing?” she cries. “I can,” he shouts. As the heat rises, so does the wall between them. Defensive and angry, they retreat—stalemated by their inability to understand each other.

Women complain to each other all the time about not being able to talk to their men about the things that matter most to them—about what they themselves are thinking and feeling, about what goes on in the hearts and minds of the men they’re relating to. And men, less able

to expose themselves and their conflicts—those within themselves or those with the women in their lives—either turn silent or take cover by holding women up to derision. It's one of the norms of male camaraderie to poke fun at women, to complain laughingly about the mystery of their minds, wonderingly about their ways. Even Freud did it when, in exasperation, he asked mockingly, "What do women want? Dear God, what do they want?"

But it's not a joke—not for the women, not for the men who like to pretend it is.

*The whole goddamn business of what you're calling intimacy bugs the hell out of me. I never know what you women mean when you talk about it. Karen complains that I don't talk to her, but it's not talk she wants, it's some other damn thing, only I don't know what the hell it is. Feelings, she keeps asking for. So what am I supposed to do if I don't have any to give her or to talk about just because she decides it's time to talk about feelings? Tell me, will you; maybe we can get some peace around here.*

The expression of such conflicts would seem to validate the common understandings that suggest that women want and need intimacy more than men do—that the issue belongs to women alone; that, if left to themselves, men would not suffer it. But things are not always what they seem. And I wonder: "If men would renounce intimacy, what is their stake in relationships with women?"

Some would say that men need women to tend to their daily needs—to prepare their meals, clean their houses, wash their clothes, rear their children—so that they can be free to attend to life's larger problems. And, given the traditional structure of roles in the family, it has certainly worked that way most of the time. But, if that were all men seek, why is it that, even when they're not relating to women, so much of their lives is spent in search of a relationship with another, so much agony experienced when it's not available?

These are difficult issues to talk about—even to think about—because the subject of intimacy isn't just complicated, it's slippery as well. Ask yourself: What is intimacy? What words come to mind, what thoughts?

It's an idea that excites our imagination, a word that seems larger than life to most of us. It lures us, beckoning us with a power we're unable to resist. And, just because it's so seductive, it frightens us as well—seeming sometimes to be some mysterious force from outside ourselves that, if we let it, could sweep us away.

But what is it we fear?

Asked what intimacy is, most of us—men and women—struggle to say something sensible, something that we can connect with the real experience of our lives. “Intimacy is knowing there’s someone who cares about the children as much as you do.” “Intimacy is a history of shared experience.” “It’s sitting there having a cup of coffee together and watching the eleven-o’clock news.” “It’s knowing you care about the same things.” “It’s knowing she’ll always understand.” “It’s him sitting in the hospital for hours at a time when I was sick.” “It’s knowing he cares when I’m hurting.” “It’s standing by me when I was out of work.” “It’s seeing each other at our worst.” “It’s sitting across the breakfast table.” “It’s talking when you’re in the bathroom.” “It’s knowing we’ll begin and end each day together.”

These seem the obvious things—the things we expect when we commit our lives to one another in a marriage, when we decide to have children together. And they’re not to be dismissed as inconsequential. They make up the daily experience of our lives together, setting the tone for a relationship in important and powerful ways. It’s sharing such commonplace, everyday events that determines the temper and the texture of life, that keeps us living together even when other aspects of the relationship seem less than perfect. Knowing someone is there, is constant, and can be counted on in just the ways these thoughts express provides the background of emotional security and stability we look for when we enter a marriage. Certainly a marriage and the people in it will be tested and judged quite differently in an unusual situation or in a crisis. But how often does life present us with circumstances and events that are so out of the range of ordinary experience?

These ways in which a relationship feels intimate on a daily basis are only one part of what we mean by intimacy, however—the part that’s most obvious, the part that doesn’t awaken our fears. At a lecture where I spoke of these issues recently, one man commented also, “Intimacy is putting aside the masks we wear in the rest of our lives.” A murmur of assent ran through the audience of a hundred or so. Intuitively we say “yes.” Yet this is the very issue that also complicates our intimate relationships.

On the one hand, it’s reassuring to be able to put away the public persona—to believe we can be loved for who we *really* are, that we can show our shadow side without fear, that our vulnerabilities will not be counted against us. “The most important thing is to feel I’m accepted just the way I am,” people will say.

But there's another side. For, when we show ourselves thus without the masks, we also become anxious and fearful. "Is it possible that someone could love the *real* me?" we're likely to ask. Not the most promising question for the further development of intimacy, since it suggests that, whatever else another might do or feel, it's we who have trouble loving ourselves. Unfortunately, such misgivings are not usually experienced consciously. We're aware only that our discomfort has risen, that we feel a need to get away. For the person who has seen the "real me" is also the one who reflects back to us an image that's usually not wholly to our liking. We get angry at that, first at ourselves for not living up to our own expectations, then at the other, who becomes for us the mirror of our self-doubts—a displacement of hostility that serves intimacy poorly.

There's yet another level—one that's further below the surface of consciousness, therefore, one that's much more difficult for us to grasp, let alone to talk about. I'm referring to the differences in the ways in which women and men deal with their inner emotional lives—differences that create barriers between us that can be high indeed. It's here that we see how those early childhood experiences of separation and individuation—the psychological tasks that were required of us in order to separate from mother, to distinguish ourselves as autonomous persons, to internalize a firm sense of gender identity—take their toll on our intimate relationships.

Stop a woman in mid-sentence with the question, "What are you feeling right now?" and you might have to wait a bit while she reruns the mental tape to capture the moment just passed. But, more than likely, she'll be able to do it successfully. More than likely, she'll think for a while and come up with an answer.

The same is not true of a man. For him, a similar question usually will bring a sense of wonderment that one would even ask it, followed quickly by an uncomprehending and puzzled response. "What do you mean?" he'll ask. "I was just talking," he'll say.

I've seen it most clearly in the clinical setting where the task is to get to the feeling level—or, as one of my male patients said when he came into therapy, to "hook up the head and the gut." Repeatedly when therapy begins, I find myself having to teach a man how to monitor his internal states—how to attend to his thoughts and feelings, how to bring them into consciousness. In the early stages of our work, it's a common experience to say to a man, "How does that feel?", and to see a blank look come over his face. Over and over, I find myself listening as

a man speaks with calm reason about a situation which I know must be fraught with pain. "How do you feel about that?" I'll ask. "I've just been telling you," he's likely to reply. "No," I'll say, "you've told me what happened, not how you *feel* about it." Frustrated, he might well respond, "You sound just like my wife."

It would be easy to write off such dialogues as the problems of men in therapy, of those who happen to be having some particular emotional difficulties. But it's not so, as any woman who has lived with a man will attest. Time and again women complain: "I can't get him to verbalize his feelings." "He talks, but it's always intellectualizing." "He's so closed off from what he's feeling, I don't know how he lives that way." "If there's one thing that will eventually ruin this marriage, it's the fact that he can't talk about what's going on inside him." "I have to work like hell to get anything out of him that resembles a feeling that's something besides anger. That I get plenty of—me and the kids, we all get his anger. Anything else is damn hard to come by with him." One woman talked eloquently about her husband's anguish over his inability to get problems in his work life resolved. When I asked how she knew about his pain, she answered:

*I pull for it, I pull hard, and sometimes I can get something from him. But it'll be late at night in the dark—you know, when we're in bed and I can't look at him while he's talking and he doesn't have to look at me. Otherwise, he's just defensive and puts on what I call his bear act, where he makes his warning, go-away faces, and he can't be reached or penetrated at all.*

To a woman, the world men live in seems a lonely one—a world in which their fears of exposing their sadness and pain, their anxiety about allowing their vulnerability to show, even to a woman they love, is so deeply rooted inside them that, most often, they can only allow it to happen "late at night in the dark."

Yet, if we listen to what men say, we will hear their insistence that they *do* speak of what's inside them, *do* share their thoughts and feelings with the women they love. "I tell her, but she's never satisfied," they complain. "No matter how much I say, it's never enough," they grumble.

From both sides, the complaints have merit. The problem lies not in what men don't say, however, but in what's not there—in what, quite simply, happens so far out of consciousness that it's not within their reach. For men have integrated all too well the lessons of their

childhood—the experiences that taught them to repress and deny their inner thoughts, wishes, needs, and fears; indeed, not even to notice them. It's real, therefore, that the kind of inner thoughts and feelings that are readily accessible to a woman generally are unavailable to a man. When he says, "I don't know what I'm feeling," he isn't necessarily being intransigent and withholding. More than likely, he speaks the truth.

Partly that's a result of the ways in which boys are trained to camouflage their feelings under cover of an exterior of calm, strength, and rationality. Fears are not manly. Fantasies are not rational. Emotions, above all, are not for the strong, the sane, the adult. Women suffer them, not men—women, who are more like children with what seems like their never-ending preoccupation with their emotional life. But the training takes so well because of their early childhood experience when, as very young boys, they had to shift their identification from mother to father and sever themselves from their earliest emotional connection. Put the two together and it does seem like suffering to men to have to experience that emotional side of themselves, to have to give it voice.

This is the single most dispiriting dilemma of relations between women and men. He complains, "She's so emotional, there's no point in talking to her." She protests, "It's him you can't talk to, he's always so darned rational." He says, "Even when I tell her nothing's the matter, she won't quit." She says, "How can I believe him when I can see with my own eyes that something's wrong?" He says, "Okay, so something's wrong! What good will it do to tell her?" She cries, "What are we married for? What do you need me for, just to wash your socks?"

These differences in the psychology of women and men are born of a complex interaction between society and the individual. At the broadest social level is the rending of thought and feeling that is such a fundamental part of Western thought. Thought, defined as the ultimate good, has been assigned to men; feeling, considered at best a problem, has fallen to women.

So firmly fixed have these ideas been that, until recently, few thought to question them. For they were built into the structure of psychological thought as if they spoke to an eternal, natural, and scientific truth. Thus, even such a great and innovative thinker as Carl Jung wrote, "The woman is increasingly aware that love alone can give her her full stature, just as the man begins to discern that spirit alone can endow his life with its highest meaning. Fundamentally, therefore, both

seek a psychic relation one to the other, because love needs the spirit, and the spirit love, for their fulfillment.”<sup>1</sup>

For a woman, “love”; for a man, “spirit”—each expected to complete the other by bringing to the relationship the missing half. In German, the word that is translated here as spirit is *Geist*. But *The New Cassell’s German Dictionary* shows that another primary meaning of *Geist* is “mind, intellect, intelligence, wit, imagination, sense of reason.” And, given the context of these words, it seems reasonable that *Geist* for Jung referred to a man’s highest essence—his mind. There’s no ambiguity about a woman’s calling, however. It’s love.

Intuitively, women try to heal the split that these definitions of male and female have foisted upon us.

*I can’t stand that he’s so damned unemotional and expects me to be the same. He lives in his head all the time, and he acts like anything that’s emotional isn’t worth dealing with.*

Cognitively, even women often share the belief that the rational side, which seems to come so naturally to men, is the more mature, the more desirable.

*I know I’m too emotional, and it causes problems between us. He can’t stand it when I get emotional like that. It turns him right off.*

Her husband agrees that she’s “too emotional” and complains:

*Sometimes she’s like a child who’s out to test her parents. I have to be careful when she’s like that not to let her rile me up because otherwise all hell would break loose. You just can’t reason with her when she gets like that.*

It’s the rational-man-hysterical-woman script, played out again and again by two people whose emotional repertoire is so limited that they have few real options. As the interaction between them continues, she reaches for the strongest tools she has, the mode she’s most comfortable and familiar with: She becomes progressively more emotional and expressive. He falls back on his best weapons: He becomes more rational, more determinedly reasonable. She cries for him to attend to her feelings, whatever they may be. He tells her coolly, with a kind of clenched-teeth reasonableness, that it’s silly for her to feel that way, that she’s just being emotional. And of course she is. But that dismissive word “just” is the last straw. She gets so upset that she does, in fact, seem hysterical. He gets so bewildered by the whole interaction that

his only recourse is to build the wall of reason even higher. All of which makes things measurably worse for both of them.

*The more I try to be cool and calm her the worse it gets. I swear, I can't figure her out. I'll keep trying to tell her not to get so excited, but there's nothing I can do. Anything I say just makes it worse. So then I try to keep quiet, but . . . wow, the explosion is like crazy, just nuts.*

And by then it is a wild exchange that any outsider would agree was “just nuts.” But it's not just her response that's off, it's his as well—their conflict resting in the fact that we equate the emotional with the nonrational.

This notion, shared by both women and men, is a product of the fact that they were born and reared in this culture. But there's also a difference between them in their capacity to apprehend the *logic* of emotions—a difference born in their early childhood experiences in the family, when boys had to repress so much of their emotional side and girls could permit theirs to flower. . . .

It should be understood: Commitment itself is not a problem for a man; he's good at that. He can spend a lifetime living in the same family, working at the same job—even one he hates. And he's not without an inner emotional life. But when a relationship requires the sustained verbal expression of that inner life and the full range of feelings that accompany it, then it becomes burdensome for him. He can act out anger and frustration inside the family, it's true. But ask him to express his sadness, his fear, his dependency—all those feelings that would expose his vulnerability to himself or to another—and he's likely to close down as if under some compulsion to protect himself.

All requests for such intimacy are difficult for a man, but they become especially complex and troublesome in relations with women. It's another of those paradoxes. For, to the degree that it's possible for him to be emotionally open with anyone, it is with a woman—a tribute to the power of the childhood experience with mother. Yet it's that same early experience and his need to repress it that raises his ambivalence and generates his resistance.

He moves close, wanting to share some part of himself with her, trying to do so, perhaps even yearning to experience again the bliss of the infant's connection with a woman. She responds, woman style—wanting to touch him just a little more deeply, to know what he's thinking, feeling, fearing, wanting. And the fear closes in—the fear of finding himself again in the grip of a powerful woman, of allowing her

admittance only to be betrayed and abandoned once again, of being overwhelmed by denied desires.

So he withdraws.

It's not in consciousness that all this goes on. He knows, of course, that he's distinctly uncomfortable when pressed by a woman for more intimacy in the relationship, but he doesn't know why. And, very often, his behavior doesn't please him any more than it pleases her. But he can't seem to help it.

That's his side of the ambivalence that leads to the approach-avoidance dance we see so often in relations between men and women.

#### NOTE

1. Carl Gustav Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1928), p. 185.

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the gender structure in marriage affect communication for these married couples?
2. What is the "approach-avoidance dance" as presented by Rubin? How could we change and improve these relationships?