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## Using Audio/Visual Media to Increase the Sociological Imagination of an Adolescent Audience

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jon Cariba Phoenix entitled "Using Audio/Visual Media to Increase the Sociological Imagination of an Adolescent Audience." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

Harry F. Dahms, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Michelle Brown, Robert E. Jones

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Using Audio/Visual Media to Increase the Sociological  
Imagination of an Adolescent Audience

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Science  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jon Cariba Phoenix  
August 2014

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## **DEDICATION**

To Katie Gilroy:

When I asked if you were willing to risk everything on a crazy, unconventional, untested idea  
that had never been tried before,

And you nonchalantly said “Sure...”

I knew this was going to work out ☺

Thanks for being there.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could never have come as far as it has had it not been the incredible and sometimes serendipitous help of so many other people. The fact that I have been so blessed is nothing short of miraculous, and neither words nor conventional English grammar can express the gratitude that I feel towards all of you. First and foremost, thanks to historian James Loewen, who inspired me and set me on the course that would become the idea for this show; thanks to Monica Hickey, Nate Charny, and the entire staff at *The Colbert Report*, who gave me my unforgettable start in television and whose advice I'm eternally grateful for; to my financial aid advisor Jill Deteso Deknatel, without whom I could never have survived college; to my other financial aid advisor Mike Wildeman, who somehow managed to come up with an extra \$3000 to pay for a summer class in television production; to the indefatigable Chris Teubner, cinematographer extraordinaire who provided indispensable help in shooting the pilot; to Katie Gilroy, fellow *Colbert* intern and steadfast friend with an amazing knack for witty one-liners; to Mike Wiseman, Emmy award winning editor who not only has helped with post-production, but gave me the confidence to continue; to Ron Starr who gave me my second job in television at the Northeastern television studios and thus gave me a means to support myself while I embarked on this crazy project; to Michelle Carr, my TV production teacher who was nice enough to let me into her class even though I wasn't a communications major; to children's edutainment legend Lloyd Morrisett for taking the time out of his busy day to talk with me; to Joe Bageant, another inspiration who I think would be proud that this effort is taking place in rural America; to Bill Nye and Alton Brown for the inspiration and the knowledge that a show like this is possible; to Ann Terrell, a.k.a. "Granny T," neighbor and the sweetest old lady ever; to all of the thespians and crew ~ Jackie, Whitney, Khyla, Jessica, Michelle, Cindy, Robert, Nikki, Manx, Ellen, Kiki, David Mynott, all the extras whose names I've long forgotten; to the late, great Lawrence Goodwyn, who may have influenced my writing style a bit; to Erich Fromm for his help over the years; to Harry Dahms, Michelle Brown, and Bobby Jones, seriously the greatest thesis committee anyone could have ever asked for – What follows in these pages belongs to all of you. And it brings me to tears when I realize how lucky I am to have met all of you, been helped by all of you, and graced by your presences. You collectively are the reason why I've been able to survive, and I could never have done this without you.

And lastly, I'd like to thank C. Wright Mills, the cool, slick, sharp-as-nails, movement-inspiring motorcycle-riding academic swashbuckler, for teaching me above all else that sociology is supposed to be an adventure, and to never forget that fact.

May god bless you and protect you.

May god smile and be gracious to you

May god lift up the path before you, and show you the way to peace

Thank You

## **ABSTRACT**

Adolescence is a time of drastically increased sociological inequality. This thesis explores the possibility of using an educational sociology television show as a means to increase teen empowerment by developing their sociological imagination. After reviewing the causes of increased inequality during adolescence, I probe the link between sociology and empowerment by critiquing Mills' conception of the sociological imagination. After finding his formulation incomplete, I use Bandura's social cognitive theory to fill the gaps in the original framework and derive a new expanded sociological imagination focused on increasing efficacy. Efficacy is the social science construct most closely related to empowerment, and without an explicit focus on increasing it, merely highlighting the links between history and biography (Mills' classical conception of the sociological imagination) is very likely to cause resignation amongst substantial portions of students. The expanded sociological imagination's focus on efficacy means that sociology instructors have to either provide mastery experiences or model for students how sociological knowledge can lead to better outcomes compared to a purely individualistic approach. I demonstrate how this can be done in a television program that follows entertainment-education best practices. I also use the expanded model to derive both a list of cognitive components that comprise sociological thinking and a skeletal storyline that can integrate sociology into a television program regardless of the program's narrative format. A case study that is attempting to integrate sociology and television is examined, followed by an exploration as to the type of research necessary to gauge the effectiveness of sociological edutainment programming. The thesis concludes with a discussion of how the E-SI might benefit undergraduate instruction of introductory sociology and its implications for ongoing efforts to bring sociology to high school.

## PREFACE

### The Search for a Something

Officially, this thesis is about how television can be used to teach sociology to teenagers. Unofficially, this thesis is about something very different: Under present economic circumstances, a vast swath of America's youth have their potential stolen from them; this thesis is about how to get it back.

What do you call such a process? What do you name the means by which a person learns to master their destiny? Community organizers, from urban Boston to rural Appalachia, have frequently told me how important it is to "name" a problem so that people can be better mobilized to challenge it. Yet in all the research that went into this thesis, that one perfect "name" never quite came into view...

I am by neither the first nor best author to have dealt with this issue before. The idea that our modern social structure shapes people unequally has been one of sociology's fundamental findings; that it generates inequality despite superficial legal equity, its first counterintuitive discovery. Any polarized social system has to condition at least most of its youth to a lifetime of subservience. Without such conditioning, any unequal social structure would be unable to reproduce itself, given the innate egalitarian tendencies of the human species (Fromm 1990b). Thus countless sociologists (from Marx onward) have pondered if some alternative to this conditioning is possible, that perhaps human beings could develop an awareness of how they are molded or manipulated by systems beyond themselves. Duly aware human beings, the hope goes, could surely reshape themselves in whatever better direction they see fit. Yet there is no consensus as of yet as to how to bring about such a paradigm shift, or even what to call it.

The fact that this sociology thesis integrates a surprising amount of psychology research (particularly social cognitive theory) stems from the following fact: That when writing this thesis, I had a particular vision about what this paradigm shift consisted of, yet had few words to express it. Writing this manuscript was my way of searching for how to "name" this phenomenon, yet my research into other sociological "names" never seemed to produce the quite right fit. I found myself time and again wondering what to call what I was really looking for, the true aim of a sociological television show, only to try and reject numerous conceptualizations of others. "Consciousness?" Too vague. "Grace?" Too religious (and *extremely* vague<sup>1</sup>). "Counter-hegemony?" Overplays the role of media<sup>2</sup>. "Self-possession?" Too withdrawing from the social world. "Autotelic existence?" Too psychological. "Disalienation?" One would have to definite alienation first, and *that* debate is nowhere near resolved<sup>3</sup>. "Autopoiesis?" That came closer, but the cybernetician author of that concept (Humberto Maturana) specifically denounced Luhmann for applying it to sociology, and I did not know Luhmann's work well enough to make an informed decision as to that criticism's accuracy (Seidl 2004). In an early draft, I seriously

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<sup>1</sup> Note that at least one theorizer of adolescence made use of this concept. See Friedenberg 1969.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of Bertell Ollman's concept of "market mystification" in the text

<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, I also learned this the hard way, as I discovered that psychologists (including many positive psychologists) have a very different definition of alienation compared to most sociologists. See Csikszentmihalyi 1991.



considered using the word “oneira,” a neologism I coined at 17 to denote “something so close to perfect, it does not need perfection.” But that wouldn’t have been very scientific, would it?

What it turned out I was looking for, and yet had so much trouble finding, was *not* just florid descriptions of some ideal state of awareness, but rather a means to bring it about. The journey to uncover that, which eventually led to Bandura, started with Fromm’s social character theory, as well as his description of “spontaneity” or “productiveness.” These two terms seemed to come closest to describing the end-state I was looking for: The ability to reach one’s fullest human potential, which can only be realized in a sort of economic structure very different from our own. Under humanistic communitarian socialism, without the fear of want and a universal opportunity to do meaningful work, the economic system would systematically create a “productive” personality, an orientation is marked by the full development of one’s love and reason and the ability to live without a mask. “Productiveness” becomes the core to a “revolutionary” social character, defined as a personality type driven “to liberate life from conditions that block its free growth” (Fromm and Maccoby 1996; Fromm 1990a). But since our economic system is capitalist, and thus generates severe inequality, the “productive” orientation and the “revolutionary” social character are quite rare; not entirely absent (due to serendipitous factors), but very uncommon. Thus the question becomes how can those with perspectives ahead of their time organize, mobilize, or otherwise share their perspectives with those whose class position and economic relations rarely allow them to sustain (or even conceive of) such worldviews without outside intervention.

While Fromm was not the only theorist who offered an attractive examination of “consciousness” (see my discussion of Adorno below), I was drawn to Fromm’s work partly because unlike several of the other theorists, he had experimental evidence to back his claims (Fromm and Maccoby 1996). This evidence reiterated his point (and the point of many other theorists) that position in the class structure creates certain personality types, and under capitalism the revolutionary character is not normally one of them. Yet the relationship is not deterministic; human beings and their beliefs can react back upon the social structure and redirect its trajectory. If a revolutionary character is to be created and sustained, people need the actual opportunity to fight for love, reason, and the realization of their potential – what Marx termed “revolutionary practice.” Creating those opportunities for revolutionary practice and encouraging students to take them appeared to be the role of an emancipatory education.

To me, this realization implied two things: First, that such an emancipatory education had to be intelligently sociological, in order to discern which opportunities could lead to substantive change and which to dead ends. And second, that such an education had to convince students that such opportunities were worth seeking out and pursuing. This second element is harder than it sounds; as stated earlier, becoming the master of one’s own destiny (especially on any collective level) might be so outside the realm of some people’s experience that it might be difficult for them to conceive of.

In my quest to overcome this obstacle, I was guided by the works of Gaventa (1982), Goodwyn (1978, 1991), and Lerner (1998), all of whom had arrived (from very different perspectives) at a similar conclusion: Many of those who are oppressed are keenly aware of their oppression, and that neither the oppression’s ferocity nor awareness of it was sufficient to overcome hopelessness. Yet the fact that each of these scholars were researching different social movements clearly demonstrates that hopelessness can at least on some level be overcome. And in at least four cases (the populist movement of the 1870’s-1890’s, the Appalachian United Mine

Worker's organizing drive of the 1930's, the Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960's, and Poland's Solidarnosc in the 1980's) what appeared to be decisive in overcoming despondency was the presence of some proposed solution to (whatever was seen as) the fundamental problem of the oppressed. The solutions (exchanges to collectively sell produce, a union, student occupations, and a committee to organize a general strike) were by no means perfect or permanent. Yet at a particular time and place, these solutions appeared to offer (and in some cases *did* offer) a way to resolve long-standing grievances *and* were perceived to be, for lack of a better phrase, "doable." These solutions thus became the cores of a "generalized belief" which, combined with structural conduciveness, structural strain, a precipitating incident, and mobilization, could (and did) lead to the collective behavior necessary for broader social change (Smelser 1962).

Thus, what sociology education is looking for (my logic went) are *implementable solutions* to the problems of oppression *and* the cognitive tools by which to find them. These solutions could potentially mobilize the oppressed could and inspire bold collective action. A succinct solution to what my emancipatory television show ought to accomplish, right?

Well...not exactly. As Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*, even the educators (i.e., the creators of a solution to oppression) have to themselves be educated. They have to themselves develop that perspective which tells them to search for such solutions in the first place. This raised in my mind yet another question: What makes a person think that solutions to a seemingly intractable problem exist?

A religious person might answer "faith," but a social scientist might want something a bit more specific: Faith in what? The universe? The masses? An eminently bendable arc of justice? Faith in the ability to find a solution in the first place?...

As it turned out, that latter sort of "faith" turned out to be a very fruitful avenue of answers, for the faith in one's ability (as an individual or a collective) to resolve problems one would like to see fixed has a scientific definition. It is called efficacy, and the search for information on efficacy inevitably led to Bandura, mainly because he remains the towering giant in the field. At least at the time of this writing, his paradigms define how both self and collective efficacy are currently conceptualized. And like Fromm, Bandura and associated researchers had plenty of empirical evidence to strengthen and expand their theory.

Thus, towards the end of my conceptual journey, I was left with something new: A quirky marriage between C. Wright Mills and Albert Bandura that added to the study of sociology education: a focus on efficacy and the particular mechanisms to increase it. It was a combination that stated that while sociology can be used to generate better solutions to oppression, teachers of sociology (be they in classrooms, television programs, or social movements) have to increase the efficacy of their students to even make such solutions remotely conceivable to them. Only if both processes happen can individuals and collectives become autonomous enough to seek out or create those opportunities for revolutionary practice and intelligent enough to evaluate them. In the process, they can become shapers of their destiny.

The following pages explore this finding in depth and consider its application to the realm of sociology edutainment. But it should be noted that when it comes to the problem of human liberation, Mills plus Bandura is far from the only solution

### *Retrospective Perspectives*

The views in this thesis constitute my own interdisciplinary perspective. But if I were to rewrite or expand this thesis, it would be useful to consider some other sociological perspectives that could possibly enrich this paper. Gramsci would undoubtedly make an appearance, and I did seriously consider using him here. But I found Bertell Ollman's argument that capitalist hegemony comes from the experience of everyday market relations more convincing than a normal Gramscian focus on media hegemony. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to see the connection between the sort of educational show proposed in this paper and Gramsci's discussion of the "Modern Prince," capable of mobilizing the disenfranchised. If the edutainment research has established that certain types of shows can affect people's behavior, perhaps Gramsci can help producers uncover just how far emancipatory mass media can possibly go.

Another theorist to be included in an expanded thesis would likely be Theodore Adorno, and like Gramsci he almost made it into this version. I had come across Adorno's discussion of emancipatory education (Adorno and Becker 1999) and found several of my own thoughts echoed there. Adorno calls for an "education for maturity and responsibility," which dispenses with artificial conceptions of ability in favor of a new mental framework that supports an "education for protest and for resistance." While there is much to be said for resisting the efficacy reducing and mind-deadening elements of our present society, Adorno's work was not included in this thesis because his suggested mechanism for altering the consciousness seemed questionable. Specifically, Adorno writes (citing Freud) that autonomy can only come when a child internalizes or identifies with a father figure, and is then painfully forced to detach from that figure once it reveals itself as incapable of living up to its idealization. While there may be some metaphorical significance to this statement, I was hesitant to include such undiluted Freudianism in this thesis. Straight Freudian psychology has only a mixed record of being verified empirically. Moreover young people today seem as likely to gain their perspective from relatively anonymous authorities (the mass media, experiential market relations) as from their own families, a key distinction given that the resistance to persuasion works somewhat differently for more passively absorbed and superficially held beliefs (Wegener et al. 2003). Any thorough inclusion of Adorno would do well to examine the relevant psychology and communication literature relevant to his claims.

Lastly, any expanded thesis could probably benefit from the inclusion of Pierre Bourdieu, given his intelligent examination of the concepts of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). As both he and Lareau (2011) point out, education (at least for upper and middle income groups) does not just convey knowledge. It also conveys a way of carrying oneself, connections, a certain outlook on life, as well as various tastes and mannerisms. Cultural and social capital as concepts raise major questions for any emancipatory educationalist, one of the most significant of which is whether emancipatory education should try to convey this cultural capital to disadvantaged populations. Doing so would seem to constitute cultural imperialism, yet not doing so might cause the disadvantaged to fall further behind.

While I have not examined Bourdieu in depth, on a personal level I tend to support what could be called a Freirean answer to this question. Following Freire (2000), I believe it is perfectly possible to convey emancipatory knowledge without destroying or belittling the cultural perspectives of disadvantaged groups. The "cultural capital" of dominant groups can be exposed for what it is – a byproduct of economic inequality and *not* the innate superiority of the

dominant groups. Meanwhile, the experiences of the disadvantaged groups can be celebrated or analyzed as a potential source of empowerment<sup>4</sup>.

Also worth noting: With one important exception, this thesis does not include works of nor was it hugely influenced by critical sociologists who have undertaken this long overdue task of bringing marginalized voices into the discourse. Particular perspectives that could be incorporated into the show or an expanded thesis include critical race theory (Delgado 2012), post-colonial theory (Fanon 2008; Said 1994), queer and LGBT theories (Carlin 1989), and (a personal due to my status as a transgender person) some thought-provoking debates on feminism and post-genderism (Butler 2006; Dvorsky and Hughes 2008). That said, this thesis was not entirely devoid of marginalized voices, as this entire project (both the television program and the thesis) *was* strongly influenced by one critical perspective: That of the rural working class (Bageant 2011; Carr and Kefalas 2010; Gaventa 1982). On one level, the idea for this show and screenplay came out of my own experiences guest teaching at a rural high school, and seeing first hand how certain students who were by no means stupid became disengaged by teachers and pedagogies that did not connect to them. The lecturing I did in that setting was specifically designed to captivate and galvanize the students who typically found high school alienating, something that according to the grapevine of that small rural town, I was briefly successful in doing. On another level, the fact that class is typically the fundamental cleavage in rural America, and that this cleavage is reproduced by rural schools, may have also played a role in this thesis emphasizing class and educational inequalities far more than racial or gender ones.

Not that this focus on class is by any means bad. An intelligent argument can be made that class inequality is the cleavage that anchors all the other inequalities of race, gender, and orientation. Moreover, it is class inequality that may play the single biggest role in uncovering what this proposed TV show must do for teenagers *today* to find it compelling.

## **Will the Kids be All Right?**

Every successful television show has to capture the spirit of an age, the zeitgeist of its audience. If this show is going to successfully target adolescents, it is worthwhile to reiterate just how different the lives of the current generation of teens are from those who've come before. Specifically, it appears that the current generation of teens is distinguished by a remarkable paradox: Incredible optimism, in spite of some of the bleakest economic prospects ever faced by a population cohort in the developed world (Pew Research Center 2010; Wyn and White 2000).

The reasons for the bleaker prospects are well known: Neoliberalism, austerity, student debt, and cuts to the welfare state. Rather than move from schooling into employment, economic insecurity means that the current generation of adolescents is more likely than ever to move from schooling to higher levels of schooling instead. The optimism about present and future circumstances on the other hand requires some deeper explanation, particularly since it was observed amongst both privileged and underprivileged students. While a casual observer might

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<sup>4</sup> This should not be taken as an endorsement of identity politics, which I feel fails as an emancipatory project due to its frequent inability to tie disparate groups together. See Smith 2007 for a more in-depth critique.

be tempted to argue that it comes from teens (being young) not having a more secure past with which to compare the present, youth sociologists Wyn and White argue differently. Adolescent optimism is much more complex, stemming from “their sense of individual agency in shaping their own pathways” (Wyn and White 2000:170). This increased sense of individual agency comes from a variety of sources: The vistas opened up by more participatory forms of communications technology; the precariousness that *forces* one (to some extent) to craft one’s own identity in the absence of viable social models; the increased emphasis of competition within schools that accentuates an individualistic outlook. Perhaps, the authors suggest, if secure employment is unlikely, one possible coping strategy is to develop transferable behavioral skills such as self-regulation, which as a side effect may increase individual agency. Either way, the bleakness of objective economic circumstances is being met (or at least was being met during the early stage of the Millennial generation) with a sense of “pragmatic decision making and personal choice.”

What does this mean for a television show trying to reach adolescents? On one level, one should exercise a certain amount of caution in interpreting studies such as this. While its conclusions are not unique (see Howe and Strauss 2000), the later portion of the Millennial Generation (those born in the 2000’s as opposed to the 1980’s and 90’s) and the as-of-yet unnamed generation following it have grown up experiencing war, terrorism, and economic depression. On one level, this might make later Millennials somewhat less optimistic than earlier ones. Yet on another level, more recent research has confirmed that Millennials as a whole even today remain “confident, connected, and open to change” (Pew Research Center 2010). It would thus be a mistake to assume that adolescents are universally apathetic or depressed by problems beyond their control. Moreover, Wyn and White note that teen optimism, where it exists, stems in part from very real efforts on the part of young people to effect change in their (troubled) environments. The individualistic construction of personal responsibility, while not capable of offering long-term sociological solutions to the economic bleakness, at least suggests some realms of opportunity where adolescents *do* have the power to act. Thus, many teens can gain a justified optimism in the fact that they can chart at least some autonomous path for themselves in spite of the economic barrenness. Many have had to, because their financial survival has depended on it. But a figurative \$64,000 question remains: Is that optimism is enough?

While the sociology of youth is a topic that I did not have a chance to examine in depth, my guess is that sooner or later, the paradox of 21<sup>st</sup> century adolescence will have to resolve itself one way or another. Either the optimism will win out, with the sense of individual efficacy spreading to more collective realms, or the bleakness will win out, with the Great Recession gradually wearing down the hopefulness of youth. One can very easily hypothesize that class will stratify the outcomes as Millennials age. Yet for the generation as a whole, the endpoint is not predetermined, and given the sheer size of the adolescent cohort one can expect (and currently witness) both sets of outcomes. On one level, Wyn and White warned (in 2000) of a noticeable increase in adolescent suicide and mental health issues. But on the other hand adolescents and Millennials, far more tolerant than their preceding generations (Pew Research Center 2010), have thrown themselves into several collective mobilizations recently, including the gay rights movement, the immigrant rights movement, various student movements, the Occupy protests, and Obama’s 2008 campaign. It appears that young people have a great thirst for social change, and are perfectly capable of mobilizing collectively *when given the opportunity to do so*.

Therein lies the great potential for this television show, its fundamental task for this particular age group in this particular time. If young people today are optimistic in the face of scarcity this program can help them make that jump, from individual efficacy and individual solutions to collective efficacy and sociological solutions. It can do this by teaching them how to think sociologically. Such a tool helps one come up with far superior solutions to the social problems of our time, and can both build self-efficacy amongst the hopeless and extend that efficacy to collective realms. It can act as a cognitive heuristic, instructing its users on how to discover for themselves the ability to navigate that line between desperation and hope, where all effective change comes from. In doing so, perhaps it can save this generation of young people from being swallowed by the economic bleakness that surrounds them.

Of course the word “can” is key. As will be discussed in this thesis, one of my hypotheses is that introductory sociology education at an undergraduate level (the only exposure to sociology most people will get) rarely emphasizes efficacy, much to its own detriment. Though in all fairness, I should point out here first that my critique does not apply to graduate sociology education, and second my own limited dataset: Four semesters of being a teacher’s assistant in introductory sociology classes at a state flagship institution, plus my own experience taking introductory sociology as a student. While this experience is far from conclusive, the fact that I witnessed five separate undergraduate professors with very different personalities all teach sociology the same way (textbook based power point lectures before a large class) with the same ineffective outcomes (most students losing their sociology knowledge once no longer required to remember it for an exam) generated a hypothesis that for better or worse I believe this thesis and future research will bear out: *That the ineffective and textbook-driven introductory sociology survey course is a direct consequence of the vagueness of what the sociological imagination is and what it is supposed to do.* Until that vagueness is eliminated (something I hope my proposed Expanded Sociological Imagination model will assist with), introductory sociology courses will remain reliant on textbooks, and focused on teaching sociological jargon rather than the sociological thinking heuristic.

Again, this thesis is simply my own perspective. From my own perspective, I sincerely hope that this research will explicate what the sociological imagination is, and why such explication is so important – particularly for a discipline that is starting to spread to high schools and particularly for a generation of high schoolers who may soon face a life or death struggle between optimism and an enveloping economic darkness. And while it might seem odd for me to put my money on the confidence of teenagers, I remain as ever firmly committed to the idea that optimism is worth fighting for. More importantly, it might *require* fighting for if it is to sustain itself in the years and decades ahead.

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## **LIST OF ATTACHMENTS**

Director’s Book and Pilot Screenplay.....JPGG\_Pilot\_Director's\_Book.pdf

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### When the *Sesame Street* Kids Grew Up

Since Joan Ganz Cooney's report *The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education*, which led directly to the creation of *Sesame Street*, educational television has been held out as a promising form of children's media (Cooney 1967). Research on numerous programs such as *Sesame Street*, *Reading Rainbow*, and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* have demonstrated over several decades the ability of these shows to boost literacy, numeracy, and pro-social behaviors amongst young children (Coates, Pusser, and Goodman 1976; Fisch 2004; Lesser 1975; Rockman 1996). Such programs can also have a profound emotional impact on those who watch them. When *Sesame Street* first aired in 1969, the fact that the show featured a racially integrated neighborhood was revolutionary at the time, something that deeply affected many in its audience, particularly inner city minority children who Cooney had desired to help. More recently, education writer Jonathan Kozol recounted an anecdote of when he travelled to Harlem in the 1990's with Fred Rogers, an unplanned event that triggered a spontaneous outpouring of affection from local children, and several adults as well (ChallengingMedia 2008).

But what happens when the children who watch *Sesame Street* or *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* grow up?

In his own moving accounts of the Harlem neighborhood that he and Rogers visited, Kozol points out that by the time the young and energetic children he wrote about became teenagers, many had turned hardened and cynical. The combined effects of poverty, misery, and an abysmal school system led some of Kozol's subjects to suicide, others to a life of crime, and still others to join the one-sixth of American teens who drop out of high school (Kozol 2013).

Given the far-reaching effects educational television can have on children, as well as the growing body of research demonstrating edutainment's ability to affect adults (Singhal and Rogers 1999), one could envision an age-appropriate version of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, focused on adolescents. Such a show, aimed like its predecessors at the most disadvantaged segments of society, which could show America's teens why their society is the way that it is and empower them by demonstrating how they can transform it. In place of despondency or resignation, two of the most common reactions to powerlessness (Bandura 1997), imagine a show that demonstrated to adolescents how they could overcome that powerlessness, precisely at that developmental stage where such a message could matter most.

If edutainment programming from other countries are any indicator, such a show could indeed be powerful. But it would have to be very well designed.

#### ***Enter the Sociologist***

Any television show designed to empower disadvantaged teens would almost by definition have to teach sociology. Virtually all of the problems that can scar an adolescent's life, from bullying to child abuse to low-quality education to fear of the future, are directly or indirectly sociological. That is to say that they are either caused either by broader social forces emanating from the structure and organization of society, or from how human beings react to such forces. Aside from perhaps the most trivial of minor personal problems, there are no problems that American teens (or adults for that matter) face with purely individualistic roots.

This means that any teen looking for solutions to the biggest problems in their personal lives could benefit from a “sociological imagination” (SI), which has classically been defined as understanding the link between private troubles and public issues (Mills 2000:5–6).

Thus, any edutainment program for teens designed to be empowering must include sociology. Yet this realization raises a host of theoretical questions. The sociological imagination, while having existed in the sociology lexicon for 55 years, remains one the most poorly conceptualized concepts in the discipline. As one team of researchers put it, one could “ask 100 sociologists to explain this [SI], and you may receive 100 different definitions” (Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney 1995). The lack of a consensus means that most sociology textbooks cover the concept quite superficially, quoting Mills on the importance of connecting biography to history, but including very little else. There is little discussion what the SI is supposed to accomplish outside of the cognitive realm, and even less discussion on what students who possess the SI are supposed to “do” with it after they have gained it. There is little modeling of how the SI brings greater advantage compared to more conventional forms of reasoning. But without a means to demonstrate the SI’s effectiveness, or a consensus on what the SI is supposed to be effective at, the SI gets reduced to a purely cerebral advance, lacking the material trialability that prior research suggests is crucial for successful diffusion (Rogers 2003:15–16). Either sociology gets perceived as confusing, or becomes viewed as simply a more formalized recap of “common sense” (Bengston and Hazzard 1990; DeCesare 2006). But neither view is truly accurate.

## **The Roadmap of This Thesis**

In light of the facts that empowering teens through television requires a SI, and that the SI faces a significant conceptual vagueness, this thesis will do two things that have not been done in the sociology literature before: First, it will elaborate Mill’s skeletal conception of the SI into what I call an “Expanded Sociological Imagination” (E-SI) model. This expanded model argues that *the fundamental purpose of the SI is to use the understanding of the intersection between biography and history in order to increase self and collective efficacy*. Second, it will discuss how educational television can best model this expanded imagination and demonstrate its potential to raise efficacy in order to both teach sociology and increase empowerment amongst an adolescent audience. To my knowledge, both parts of this thesis will fill significant gaps within the sociology literature and entertainment education more generally. By delineating an expanded model of the SI, this research will hopefully provide a long-overdue clarity regarding what the SI is supposed to accomplish and how it can best do so. By linking the Expanded SI (E-SI) model to entertainment education, this thesis will provide a skeleton for a novel show that could empower adolescents with sociology, a significant advance considering there are very few edutainment programs aimed at adolescents, and none focused on sociology (Wilson, Kunkel, and Drogos 2008; Woodard 1999).

In order to develop this argument, this thesis will proceed in the following manner: First, a relatively short background section (Chapter 2) will set the stage by discussing the underlying problem a sociology TV show hopes to solve: The fundamental disempowerment of disadvantaged adolescents that takes place in America today, largely (but not entirely) through the school system. Much as how Cooney’s report began with an indictment of the achievement gap between rich and poor preschoolers, this thesis will commence by outlining why American

adolescence typically involves increased inequality between privileged and disadvantaged teens. This discussion will form a foundation for an extensive literature review (Chapter 3) which will cover five general areas: Mills' conception of the sociological imagination, Bandura's research on self-efficacy, the implications of the latter for the former, critical thinking and ongoing debates over the role of reflexivity in sociology, and entertainment education. In this review, I conclude that Mills' conception of the SI was incomplete and use Bandura's social cognitive theory to show exactly how. After reviewing the research on edutainment best practices, I will also review existing theoretical models of how edutainment works. While some of these models are somewhat unwieldy, I will attempt to apply the most parsimonious of them from the field of drama to the field comedy to develop a theory of edutainment satire.

The threads in this literature review will be brought together in Chapter 4 as I elaborate my Expanded-SI model, which states that heightened efficacy is the fundamental advantage that the SI confers compared to more individualistic worldviews. Modeling (in the classroom or on video) how the SI increases efficacy compared to other modes of thinking is thus fundamental to teaching sociology. Using the literature I will develop a protocol describing the sequence by which the SI develops and how it can contribute to collective and self-efficacy. I will also use my model to derive a list of concepts that comprise the sociological way of looking at the world, and that must constitute a core of any sociology curriculum using this model. I will then explore what my E-SI model suggests about how to bring sociology alive in either a TV series or the web, including what formats, segments, and storylines might be most helpful.

After expanding on the E-SI model and its theoretical application to television, the last three chapters will focus on more practical issues. Chapter 5 will cover an extended case study regarding my own efforts to shoot a TV pilot designed to teach social science to adolescents. This effort incorporates many of the ideas discussed here. Chapter 6 will follow this by discussing the formative research and evaluation necessary to measure the success of such a television program. Lastly, Chapter 7 will conclude with some final remarks, including how the two threads of this thesis (the E-SI model and its application to television) can provide useful insight for edutainment producers, sociologists, and sociology educators in general. Given ongoing efforts to bring sociology to high school, this chapter will also discuss what the E-SI model suggests an Advanced Placement Sociology exam ought to accomplish.

Like the Cooney Report that preceded it, it is hoped that this research will lead to the development of new programming that will popularize sociology for a wider audience, and empower the most disadvantaged in the process.

## CHAPTER II BACKGROUND

### The Life and Times of the American Teen

Consider what today's typical American adolescent has to go through between the ages of twelve<sup>5</sup> and nineteen: Puberty starts, relationships with certain peers become emotionally charged, sex starts to appear interesting, masturbation becomes fun, school goes from individualized to depersonalized, its stakes become much higher, one is suddenly expected to choose a life-mission (or at the very least, an occupation), planning for adulthood becomes far more important, one has to master a huge number of new skills, deal with increased responsibility, learn to guide one's own behavior, fight for and win greater personal freedom, learn how to access, process, and evaluate knowledge from an overwhelming barrage of information, and do *all* of this in a society with no guaranteed role models, no institutionalized mentoring, and very little economic security.

Considering the challenges, it may seem remarkable that most teenagers get through adolescence without too many problems. Psychologically at any rate, the overwhelming majority of teenagers negotiate this transition without long-term ill effects or mental health problems (Bandura 2006a:6–7; Petersen 1988:589–592). Contrary to the stereotype, which reduces adolescence to turmoil and teens to hormonally driven automatons, adolescence is from a teen's perspective a time of expanding mastery and profound personal growth.

Sociologically however, adolescence is a different story. While American children do not enter their teenage years totally equal, the level of inequality between individuals at the end of adolescence dwarfs the variation that exists at its start. For while a cohort of teens will enter middle school together, not performing at the same level but at least not having dropped out of primary school, they will exist high school going in completely different directions. Some will end up with a college education and later a well-paid job, others will end up in marginal employment and remain there for life; some will be single, some will have children; some will enter the military, others the criminal underworld – the destinations themselves are less remarkable than the great variety of destinations. More remarkable still is the fact that where a person is at the end of their adolescence will largely determine their trajectory for the remainder

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<sup>5</sup> A note on terminology: While the words teenager and adolescent are often used interchangeably, in reality they mean two slightly different things. A teenager refers to an individual between the ages of 13 and 19, whereas an adolescent refers to someone between puberty and adulthood. Given how the onset of puberty is gradually shifting earlier in developed happen, this means that adolescents could be by definition between the ages of roughly 10 or 11 and eighteen. Given how puberty is a process that lasts several years and starts quite gradually, this thesis will define adolescence as beginning with the turning points of puberty rather than with the subtler and less noticeable changes that may take place a few years earlier. For our purposes, this means that the onset of adolescence will be defined as between the ages of 12 and 13, given how 12.5 is the average age of menarche for American females and 13 is the average age of spermarche for American males (Anderson, Dallal, and Must 2003; Jorgensen and Skakkebaek 1991).

of their adult life (Lareau 2011:263–311). Adolescence is thus where the inequalities of a wider society are imprinted onto an increasingly stratified cohort of children, as young people are pushed and pulled to their various termini across the class system.

So why does this disparity increase across adolescence?

### **The Erosion of Adolescent Efficacy**

Debates over inequality, poverty, and social injustice in general have often been framed in one two opposing ways: Either individuals and their mistakes are seen as the problem, or the individual is seen as powerless in the face of a reified, disembodied, social structure. One view sees human agency as absolute, the other as non-existent. This thesis rejects both of these perspectives in favor of an interdependent view. Human beings are not completely free agents, insofar as they are part of social systems and are shaped by those systems. But social systems are not disembodied black boxes, as they can only operate and emerge through the activities and psychologies of individual members. While the individual is shaped by society, the individual can in turn shape society through the exercise of self and collective activity. Thus, this thesis will adopt Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation theory as one of its guiding assumptions, which sees the person, their behavior, and the social structure as three sides of the same coin, with each factor having an effect on the other two (Bandura 2006b).

A benefit of this triadic model is that it helps untangle the web of sociological and psychological reasons of why adolescent inequality increases so drastically, in spite of an educational system that superficially is open to all and rhetorically claims to promote equal opportunity. These promises fail due to a combination of structural inequalities, which tend to lower the efficacy of the disadvantaged populations, which in turn encourages a series of self-defeating behaviors that ultimately reinforce the system. It is a multi-layered story, and one that producers of empowering sociological television must understand for their efforts to succeed.

#### ***Starting Unequal***

While American schools promise a level playing field, the basic fact of American life is that our children do not enter the school system on equal terms. To begin with, children from middle or upper class households will come from families who have far more financial resources to deal with life's challenges. But beyond this, more privileged children will enter school coming from households with somewhat different cultural repertoires compared to working class households. Middle or upper class children are likely to be raised by parents who see childrearing as an act of "concerted cultivation," while working class parents are more likely (at the time of this writing) to see childrearing the act of "the accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau 2011). Children in the former households are systematically shaped by parents in ways designed to increase the children's talents, often through various organized activities and increased monitoring of a child's behavior. Poor or working class parents in contrast typically lack the resources (money and time) to systematically cultivate their children's abilities. Organized activity and monitoring is replaced with a combination of more outright directives and greater independence.

Each style of parenting has both benefits and severe drawbacks (little independent activity in one case, increased physical abuse in the other, etc.). But when a child enters school,



“concertedly cultivated” children will enter school with several distinct advantages over above their purely financial ones. These advantages include a greater likelihood of having parents who elicit their children’s opinions, more experience discussing those opinions, and a greater sense of efficacy when (in middle class households) those opinions effect change. By comparison working class children are much more likely to grow up in households with a higher expectation of obedience. Though having more free time than their middle class counterparts, children from working class households as well as their families will enter school with far less knowledge of how to question authority and less experience thinking or acting for themselves. Combined with the greater financial stress, both working class children and their parents will approach the school system with a much lower sense of efficacy.

### ***The Ends and Means of American Education***

Unfortunately, the inequalities students enter the schoolhouse with are not systematically reversed in American public schools. The reason for this stems from the fact that America’s school system has historically has been torn between three different sets of objectives: The desire to promote egalitarian citizenship, and thus provide everyone with a quality education; the desire to fulfill the needs of capitalist industry, which requires a small proportion of well-educated individuals and quiescence from the rest; and the desire to promote individual social mobility, which involves getting the highest educational credential possible for the least amount of work (Labaree 1997). Given the (rhetorically, at least) egalitarian aim of free public education, one might expect that if working class children entered its halls with lower efficacy or otherwise disadvantaged, the system would extra care to bring these children up to par. But the American school system has gradually shifted away from openly egalitarian goals, particularly in recent decades. Moreover, the structure of America’s school system is a reflection of the fact of the three possible goals for mass education, no one vision of education has managed to gain and maintain hegemony. Thus the school system working class youth enter is a system that reflects a century and a half of tenuous compromise between stakeholders, rather than one that prioritizes equality above all else.

Egalitarian education has constantly been stymied by the fact that a capitalist system does not create enough decent paying, non-alienating jobs that would require everyone to get a high level of education. The capitalist vision for education meanwhile has struggled with the fact that not educating everyone creates stratification and inequality that cuts against the professed egalitarian ideals of this country, including the ideals of mass education itself. Moreover, an education system that becomes *too* polarized might produce too few workers intelligent enough to function above a non-menial level. The inability to win dominance has caused both egalitarian and capitalist educationalists to promote social mobility as the end goal of education, but a social mobility paradigm has its own set of problems. For seeing education as a means of economic advancement is an inherently individualistic viewpoint, pitting family against family. One cannot use educational credentials to better oneself if everyone has the same credential. Thus, social mobility goals drastically increases the level of competition within a given school system, which in turn results in at least two distinct problems. Students who fail the educational competition loose the prospect of social mobility, while students who win the educational competition often do so with a gamesmanship mentality. Education for getting ahead becomes less about the love of learning, and more about getting the highest grades possible with the least amount of work.

Three long-term trends can be seen across the history of American education. First, the emphasis on social mobility has increased at the expense of the other two goals. This has alarmingly increased educational gamesmanship and superficial rather than substantive learning (Robbins 2007). Second, both the egalitarian and the capitalist paradigms have dominated the discourse at different times, often in coalition with the social mobility focus. And third, since the early 1980's, momentum has shifted in favor of the capitalist and social mobility paradigms of education, partly due to the fact that the loss of America's economic hegemony resulted in widespread fear about American economic competitiveness (Labaree 1997:58–59). The fear resulted in calls on a national level for greater educational standards, and an increased focus on competition as a means of improving education and efficiently sorting the best and the brightest from the rest (Robbins 2007:38).

On the classroom level however, the focus on competition results in several trends that increase rather than decrease the inequality children enter school with. Most competitive classrooms are structured in highly hierarchical ways that utilize “banking methods” of education: A teacher stands in front of a room and lectures. Students are supposed to memorize information and regurgitate that information on tests, papers, or when prompted by a teacher question (Freire 2000). It is common that in every class, there may be three or four students practically begging for the opportunity to answer a teacher question and prove how much they know, while the remainder attempt to keep their heads down in order to hide the fact that they may not know as much as the star pupils. This superficially meritocratic game disadvantages any students who cannot perform at a high level, including most working class students who (through no fault of their own) enter school with a lower level of preparation compared to their wealthier peers. Thus, the typical classroom contains a “hidden curriculum,” whereby the manner in which subjects are taught sends a tacit, devastating message: The further you are from the top performers, the less you matter (Snyder 1973).

This belief is reinforced by the widespread practice of tracking, a mechanism whereby students are guided into different levels of courses and academic performance based on presumed aptitude. From a capitalist paradigm tracking is beneficial, as it efficiently sorts students into fields they are (presumably) more likely to succeed, while preventing too many students from entering any one area. But from an egalitarian perspective, tracking is devastating. The assumption that a certain student will never enter college typically results in that student receiving far less teacher attention or care, as well as being placed in a series of courses that do not prepare the student for higher education (Carr and Kefalas 2010). Thus, tracking creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where the students who need the most help from school become the least likely to get it.

It should also be noted that the inequality within schools gets compounded in this county by severe inequality between schools. The fact that most public schools are funded through property tax revenue means that wealthier states (as well as wealthier counties in poorer states) fund their schools at much higher levels compared to poorer states and counties (Baker, Sciarra, and Farrie 2014; Kozol 2006). Additionally, more politically conservative states may have far lower quality curricula compared to more liberal states, particularly in light of recent attempts to discourage evolution, ban critical thinking, and fund poor quality religious schools with public money (Pan 2012; Strauss 2012). Poorer schools are also far more likely to be subjected to putative surveillance and security measures, such as metal detectors, corporal punishment, drug-sniffing dogs, dress codes, school uniforms, corporal punishment, and warrantless searches of student

property (Mukherjee 2007). These putative measures, such as paddling students, have demonstrable effects on increasing student alienation and lowering academic performance (Farmer 2008; The Center for Effective Discipline 2010).

### ***The Psychosocial Effects of Educational Stratification***

The alienation from school and the inability to perform well in them creates a crisis for an adolescent. In a society such as ours where good jobs require educational credentials, the fear that one may not be able to get those credentials can lead to despondency, especially if one's peers seem to be succeeding (Bandura 1997:20–21). Middle and upper class children who fall behind are more likely to have parents with the resources and efficacy necessary to interact with educational professionals and get their children extra help. Working class parents on the other hand may lack the economic resources necessary to do such a thing, as well as the self-efficacy necessary to search for other feasible solutions. Thus, when working class children systematically start falling behind in school, systematically neither the school system nor the parents intervene effectively.

The psychological effect of low school achievement is a massive reduction in self-efficacy in all areas related to school. Rather than see education as a pathway to social mobility or economic stability, working class adolescents are much more likely to see school as alienating. The decreased self-efficacy results in decreased aspirations: Dropping out of or barely passing high school might seem like a more feasible future than attending college (Bandura 2006a). As these adolescents decide how to regulate themselves, which aspects of their lives and personalities to cultivate and which to cull, educational achievement is consequently less likely to be a priority.

Even if disadvantaged adolescents want to do well in school, without extra help to boost their skills and self-efficacy the desire alone will not guarantee the desired outcome. As stated earlier, this help is unlikely to come from either strapped parents or schools. While America's school system offers a great deal of help for the most advanced students (more care from teachers, gifted and talented programs, merit scholarships, etc.), it offers very little systematic assistance (like vocational apprenticeships) aimed at adolescents not going to college. But regardless of whether disadvantaged teenagers become resigned about their educational prospects, or merely despondent (a distinction that Bandura says comes from the perceived level of environmental responsiveness, see next chapter), the results are plain to see: One out of 14 American high school students drop out, a fifth do not get a high school diploma within four years, and half of all American adults cannot read at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level (Downey 2013; Literacy Project Foundation 2014; National Center for Educational Statistics 2014; Stetser and Stillwell 2014). Those who fall into these categories are the ones more likely to get stuck in low-wage menial jobs, unable to provide much economically for their own children, and often without the self-efficacy to find alternatives. And barring any transformative change to either the economic or educational system, their children will inherit the disadvantage.

Meanwhile, there are some worrying signs that the polarization of our school system may get worse. Standardized testing has placed severe restrictions of curriculum development in many states, increasing the risk of gamesmanship and further alienating both teachers and students (Ravitch 2011; Strauss 2014). The former are becoming so incensed with the deskilling of their profession that teacher turnover has reached astronomical levels. Elected school boards in charge of school governance meanwhile are typically composed of local elites, not

stakeholders directly working with or affected by the school system. These school boards typically lack a full understanding of why the education system is the way it is. If they are lucky enough to escape the wrath of voters, (who in their frustration are increasingly turning to autocratic school leaders), many school boards today are currently proposing a series of reforms which are likely to make education problems worse: Deskilling and lowering the pay of teachers, and increasing standardized testing. Such proposals come from an individualistic interpretation of education's problems, which puts the blame on the most visible element of the system (namely teachers). These "solutions" will likely worsen the problem of educational inequality that they are ostensibly meant to fix.

## **The Rationale for an Adventurous Sociology Education**

The above scenario is quite bleak. The bleakness makes one wonder: How could things be different? It seems vaguely possible that things could be different; in spite of the broad and seemingly impossibly large-scale problems discussed above – funding inequality, hierarchical classrooms, and all the rest – the sociological factors are only part of the story. An entirely other aspect of educational inequality comes not from the social structure but from how we as human beings react to that social structure; how we, as actors in a play we didn't write, become participants in a drama beyond our grasp (at least most of the time). Presumably, even if changing the social structure *seems* impossible, changing one's reactions to the social structure at least seems doable. And since changed people act in changed ways, perhaps (this line of reasoning goes) making people aware of the tragedy they're unknowingly a part of will lead to changed behaviors. And from that could come a changed society...

Thus the search goes on for something that is usually labeled "consciousness." It is a quest that is by no means new. While experiencing the horror of Hitler's concentration camps, psychologist Viktor Frankl noted how different prisoners reacted to Auschwitz: Some committed suicide, a few plotted escape, most became apathetic, yet some became compassionate angels providing solace to their peers (Frankl 2006). Not all reactions were equally optimal (i.e., those who had something to live for were most likely to survive), the same way that not all reactions to a sociologically imposed trauma are equally optimal. The great promise of the sociological imagination is that it provides its bearer with the scientific tools to figure out those optimal responses. For while the person who cannot think sociologically might look at a crisis and see nothing but gloom, or be diverted by faulty solutions, the bearer of the sociological imagination in contrast can look at that same crisis and see previously unnoticed avenues of opportunity. Armed with that better sociological understanding, he or she could generate solutions that are more likely to work<sup>6</sup> and would likely not have occurred to oneself otherwise.

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<sup>6</sup> As an example, the sociological studies cited in this chapter on the causes of educational inequality suggest several possible transformations to our school system. These include: cooperative classrooms, broader curricula, ending tracking, repealing or removing alienating aspects of the school environment (like corporal punishment or uniforms), equalized education funding, assessments which measure substantive understanding rather than superficial memorization, a shift in teacher education, more mentoring, internships, and apprenticeships, particularly for students who decide they do not wish to attend a four-year liberal arts college,

The question remains however, how does one go from a conventional way of looking at the world to becoming the bearer of a sociological imagination? What is the process like? Or does a process even exist? More to the point for this thesis, once has figured out said process, how does one convey it to adolescents using entertainment education? More than 55 years after the publication of *The Sociological Imagination*, many of these questions still have not yet been definitely answered. The last of these questions has likely never been asked at all, since sociology has not been popularized in the mainstream media to the extent of other sciences.

Thus, it is with a firm desire for answers that I turn to the literature on the sociological imagination and related fields, to see what responses can be made.

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and shifting school governance to more participatory boards of parents, teachers, and students. Proposals such as these, which stem from a properly sociological understanding of educational inequality, have a much greater likelihood of improving school performance and indeed have improved school performance in countries that have adopted them (Hancock 2011; Partanen 2011; Robinson 2013).

## **CHAPTER III LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The sociological imagination (SI) can be an exceedingly complex topic. Examining it raises fundamental issues including (but not limited to) questions regarding the purpose and nature of sociology, the scientificity of the discipline, the SI's relation to "critical thinking," and the effects (if any) the SI is supposed to have on an audience's worldview or "consciousness" (variously defined). The term "sociological imagination" itself can be maddeningly vague, as several authors cited in this section attest to.

Therefore, given the complexity of the theme this literature review has been arranged in a particular sequence for greater comprehension and to show the development of an idea in progress. This examination of the sociological imagination will start (unsurprisingly) with C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* itself. The original conceptualization of the SI will be explored, examined, and critiqued. From there, I will explore Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and use this theory to evaluate Mills' conception of the SI, highlighting the roots of several weaknesses in the original conception. This assessment will form a skeleton for an expanded model of the sociological imagination (E-SI), which will be briefly outlined here (full details will follow in the subsequent chapter). This expanded model will then be discussed in conjunction with wider debates over critical thinking, including very virulent debates within sociology about what type of critical thinking the discipline ought to use. I use the E-SI and its focus on efficacy can help resolve these longstanding public sociology disputes in a way that can hopefully move the discipline forward. I will conclude this chapter with a review of literature on entertainment education, including theories of how edutainment works and how best to integrate education with television. This will form the foundation for the next chapter, where the Expanded SI model is elaborated and directly applied to television.

### **Mills' Sociological Imagination and its Dilemmas**

C. Wright Mills gave the original classic definition of the sociological imagination in his eponymous book published in 1959. According to the author, in a world where individuals feel overwhelmed by problems that they barely understand, the sociological imagination allows its user to understand how those problems relate to broader sociological forces (like the structure of society). The SI "enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life...of a variety of individuals" (Mills 2000:5). With the SI, what was once seen as a discrete problem of a solitary person becomes viewed as a wider social issue affecting many. It is an understanding of the connection between biography and history.

Yet Mills' conception of the SI does not end with this understanding. Mills himself points out that SI has at the very least three components: An understanding of the social structure (i.e., the different parts of society and how they relate to one another), knowledge of how society developed and the possible directions towards which it is developing, and an awareness of how the social system shapes those within it (including why certain types of people tend to succeed in certain societies; Mills 2000:6–7). This understanding is not meant to be deployed purposelessly,

but rather is meant to orient people towards those avenues of opportunity that might otherwise go unnoticed, those “levers by which the structure may be maintained or changed” (Mills 2000:131). This strategic view of the SI tends to get lost in the classroom and media today. As Todd Gitlin bemoaned in his afterward to a recent edition of *The Sociological Imagination*, the SI as it exists today may be more widespread than in Mills time, but only in a very superficial way. Journalists, teachers, and professionals may in an offhanded way make reference to the fact that their actions or analyses are connected to some broader sociological trend. But this cursory mention is more often than not just that: A token reference used to justify rather than question whatever actions are being taken. The SI gets reduced to the intellectual equivalent of fast food (Gitlin 2000:239–240)

### ***Ambivalent Limitations***

One might ask why Mills’ conception of the SI has been trivialized in this way. While scores sociologists can point to external causes (for-profit control of the media, capitalism, the education system, etc.) that degrade bold intellectual ideas, a maxim from cybernetician Stafford Beer points to a possible flaw intrinsic to the conception itself. That maxim is that purpose of a system is what it does (abbreviated as POSIWID; Beer 2002). While Beer originally applied this to organizations it holds equally true for systems of thinking such as the SI. And unfortunately, when it comes to discovering what if anything the SI should actually accomplish, Mills does not give a straight answer. In one part of his book, Mills argues that intellectuals who refuse to turn their insights into action will “morally crush themselves” (Mills 2000:190–191). Yet on literally the very next page, he writes that the SI as he’s described it “neither means nor requires that one hit the pavement” (Mills 2000:192). That he should advocate for action to change society, but simultaneously not for the type of collective action typically necessary to so is a contradiction, one likely related Mills beliefs regarding the role of intellectuals in social change.

In his work written before *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills analyzed the American labor movement (*The New Men of Power*), the middle class (*White Collar*), and the upper class (*The Power Elite*) and concluded that neither group could be trusted to take up the banner of social change (Gitlin 2000). In Mills eyes, the labor movement had accepted quiescence in return for economic gains, the middle class was too wary and confused to lead the charge, and the upper class too blatantly irresponsible. Thus Mills put his faith for transformation in a certain kind of intellectual, one who would use the SI to transcend the limits of their surroundings, find those “strategic points of intervention,” and thus change society. While this perspective is not badly intentioned, it does lead to a particular set of problems with regards to audience.

As both sociologist Everett Rogers (2003) and historian Lawrence Goodwyn (1991) have noted in very different contexts, the intellectual creation a new idea is only the first step in a much larger process. As hard as it might be to conceptualize a new way of organizing society (particularly in authoritarian regimes), diffusing that idea to a wider population is exponentially harder. As a consequence, it is by no means uncommon for the creators of an innovation (who are more likely to be intellectuals) to inadvertently seal themselves off from a wider population that appears to neither appreciate nor understand their ideas. But associating only with people like oneself (a tendency Rogers terms homophily) tends to seal innovations within a small intellectual group. Critical mass is never reached without popular support, and as a consequence the innovation does not diffuse (Rogers 2003:305–307).

Relating this tendency to Mills, an intellectual might heed Mills' call to create some bold new plan for social change, and use the classically conceived SI to draw up such a scheme. But when it comes time to win popular support for that plan, Mills' writing is of far less help. Mills does not leave behind any protocol for how to bring the sociological imagination beyond intellectual circles. He offers no plan for personal transformation, whereby a formerly apathetic individual is transformed into an engaged member of the community. Mills' SI is thus that of an activist academic writing for other activist academics. It is an excellent tool for intellectuals, whose occupation is oriented on crafting ideas, but for everyone else it may be too incomplete to serve as a useful guide to action. He does not explain how the SI can or should diffuse, and is himself ambivalent on whether sociological ideas must be connected with action at all. That lack of clarity as to what action (if any) the SI should lead to means that the bulk of sociology students who do *not* go on to study sociology professionally will likely reduce Mills' SI to a purely cerebral mechanism

### ***Abstracted Vagueness***

This ambivalence over the non-cerebral outcomes of the SI helps explain some of the more frustrating trends noted in the sociology pedagogy literature, including the lack of consensus over what the SI is supposed to accomplish or how to operationalize it. There is a general agreement that the SI is supposed to be more than memorizing jargon (Eckstein et al. 1995). But beyond that, the literature is sharply divided. Some argue that the SI naturally has "debunking" tendencies capable of overturning common sense individualistic perceptions and combatting domination (Buechler 2008). Yet others argue that the SI is increasingly part of common sense (Bengston and Hazzard 1990), and that the SI is simply a more systematic or focused version of this common sense. Still others argue that any SI which challenges domination is a form of political bias, and state that a properly scientific SI ought to increase analytical reasoning skills (Logan 1976). Along this line of reasoning are contentions that the SI consists of creating logical sociological arguments that take into account the social structure (Green and Klug 1990), and/or that the goal of the goal of sociology classes is learning to apply the SI in new situations (Geertsen 2003). Another set of perspectives sees the SI as fundamentally related to critical thinking somehow (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003; Rickles et al. 2013). But this relation introduces another level of complication, for critical thinking has had its own issues with vagueness of meaning.

In sorting through this grab bag of objectives, it is useful to consider that one conclusion of Rogers' innovation research is that there are inherent limitations to the diffusion of any purely cognitive innovations. Regardless of whether one is considering the sociological imagination or a new farm implement, the odds of adaptation increase if the innovation is observable, brings a relative advantage, and can be tested out prior to adoption. (Rogers 2003:15–17). With these standards in mind, it becomes increasingly clear that any SI that remains solely "in one's mind" gets rendered invisible. If the theoretical perspective is separated from action it becomes less obvious how a potential adopter can test out this innovation for oneself, or what advantages accrue from it. Such an SI will not diffuse very much, resulting in the outcome well known (and bemoaned) by many a sociology professor: The majority of their students disengaging from sociological thinking the moment they leave the classroom and are no longer required to use it.



## On Efficacy

While that outcome may be somewhat depressing, there is hope – a hope alluded to by Mills himself when he discussed the “levers” of power. The observation that the SI at its best could be used to uncover those otherwise unnoticed opportunities for transformative action means that the SI *could* have an extra-cognitive purpose: To increase efficacy. Such a purpose suggests the SI of Mills can and ought to be combined with the findings of Albert Bandura, whose work on efficacy has defined the subfield for almost a quarter century.

Efficacy is defined as the ability to perceived ability to reach a desired goal. It is a concept quite distinct from freedom (which implies a lack of constraints) and in fact is a necessary precondition of freedom. A group of slaves with low freedom but high efficacy are far more likely to rebel and thus win their freedom compared to slaves who believe such resistance is futile. More politically, as Tocqueville noted in *Democracy for America*, the vibrancy of the republic could be measured not simply by the fact that (white male) Americans could vote for president, but rather that they had a sense that they could control their own destiny. That sense of efficacy allowed for a vibrant social life, which involved Americans joining large numbers of smaller groups or local organizations designed to modify some aspect of existence. Without such control over local, smaller, or minor decisions, Tocqueville warned, the ability to make decisions on a broader scale would eventually be rendered irrelevant (Tocqueville 2002:772–773).

Bandura defines *self-efficacy* as “the belief that [one] is capable of performing actions that will produce a desired effect” (Feist and Feist 2008:486–487). Such a sense of one’s own effectiveness is crucial for sustaining human motivation in the event of setbacks, which are inevitable in a task of even moderate difficulty. Moreover, Bandura considers self-efficacy the most fundamental aspect of self-reflectiveness, which along with intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, constitute the fundamental characteristics of humanness. Self-efficacy is not global, as it can vary within an individual across different situations. Nor should it be confused with related terms like “locus of control” or outcome expectations. For the belief in one’s ability to reach a desired goal (self-efficacy) is empirically distinct from the belief that people’s actions in general affect outcomes in a given environment (outcome expectations). This distinction may seem subtle, but will shortly prove to be crucially important for sociologists.

Bandura’s research on efficacy grows out of his triadic reciprocal causation model, which states that a person’s cognition, behavior, and environment all shape one another. It is an agentic psychological model that in sharp contrast to the determinism of Skinner or Freud, who saw human activity controlled by either the environment or early childhood events (Davidson 2003). This interrelatedness becomes particularly notable when looking at the interaction between self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Bandura 1997:20–21). An individual with high efficacy in a responsive environment will be productive, have aspirations, and seek personal satisfaction. Protests or social change in such an environment do not appear necessary here. A person with low self-efficacy in an environment seen as unresponsive will become resigned and apathetic. In contrast, a person with low self-efficacy in an environment perceived as responsive will become despondent or devalue oneself, as he or she questions the success of others in the face of personal failure. Meanwhile, it is only under conditions of high self-efficacy in an unresponsive environment that protests, social activism, and intensified effort in general takes place.

### ***Increasing Efficacy***

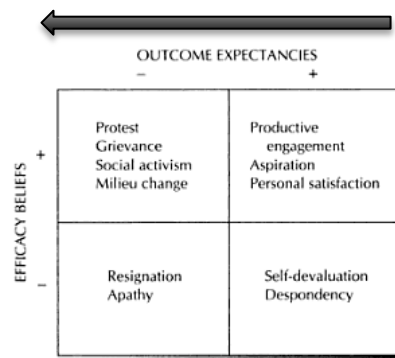
How can one increase their self-efficacy? According to Bandura, there are four empirically verified methods: Mastery experiences, vicarious modeling, social persuasion, and altering physical or emotional states (Bandura 1997; Davidson 2003; Feist and Feist 2008:498–499). Of these, the first is by far the most powerful and influential. Direct mastery experiences in a given domain remain the best way to breed the expectation of efficacy in that domain. But in case it is not possible to experience mastery directly, it can still be experienced through the social modeling of efficacy provided by others. Given the difficulty of arranging mastery experiences directly, such observational learning is actually quite common. Verbal persuasion meanwhile can also both raise and lower efficacy, but Bandura warns that this method faces certain limits. It is easier to verbally persuade someone of their inefficacy rather than their efficacy, and any persuader must be both credible to the target audience and give only suggestions that are within the audience's range of capabilities. Moreover, the best social persuaders of efficacy combine their verbal suasion with a certain manipulation of external events, such that the audience might gain some mastery experience to reinforce the verbal efficacy message. Lastly, self-efficacy can also be increased through the influence of physical or emotional states. Specifically, the reduction of fear, anxiety, and stress or an increase in relaxation can boost efficacy. Even phobias can be defused if one is guided to the realization that such fears are unrealistic.

In addition to these four methods of increasing self-efficacy, control over one's life can also be broadened through the use of both proxy agency and collective efficacy. In the first instance, one maintains or boosts their self-efficacy by relying on someone or something else to accomplish that which she or he cannot do on their own. Such activity allows humans to expand their realm of action beyond the limits of one individual, but can also weaken self-efficacy if proxy agency degenerates into dependency. Bandura meanwhile defines collective efficacy as "people's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results" (Bandura 2000). Empirical analysis has revealed that collective efficacy appears to depend on self-efficacy in personal matters rather than the other way around, as well as *individual social efficacy* - the belief that an individual's actions can bring about social change. Upon these, arises collective efficacy, a belief that a collective as a group can influence its own destiny (Fernández-Ballesteros et al. 2002). Though it should be noted that high personal and individual social efficacy might be necessary but not sufficient preconditions for collective efficacy. A team with individually gifted players might lack the belief in team's ability to act as a unit. Thus collective efficacy is an emergent property of a group, greater than the sum of individual self-efficacies (Bandura 2006a:9). And just as with self-efficacy, the greater the perception of collective efficacy, the more likely that collective with persevere in the face of setbacks.

The belief in collective efficacy has come under siege in recent times. The rise of an increasingly complex and technological world, the growth of bureaucracy, the "butterfly effects" of distant strangers' actions on one's own fate, as well as the overwhelming magnitude of many global problems all serve to hinder collective efficacy. Not only are social movements' efforts stymied by complex social structures, but most social movements are typically quite fragmented between those constituents fighting for parochial interests and those focused on wider collective objectives (Bandura 1995:37). These trends create an entire domain where people might feel helpless, even if they possess high self-efficacy in other areas.

### ***Social Cognitive Theory's Critique of the Sociological Imagination***

A Google Scholar search reveals that prior to this thesis, there has not been any systematic application of Bandura's social cognitive theory to analyzing the sociological imagination. This is unfortunate, as there are at least four significant critiques social cognitive theory can make of the SI and its pedagogy. These critiques can help explain the root causes behind the fact that many sociology students seem not to understand what the sociological imagination is, and/or tend to drop most sociological thinking once a sociology class ends (Eckstein et al. 1995). If Mills' conceptualization of the SI was incomplete, insofar as he was an academic writing to inspire academics, social cognitive theory (SCT) can provide a map for how the SI can enlighten everyone else.



**Figure 1: Classical SI's Effects on Efficacy and Outcome Expectations**

SCT's first critique stems from the fact that self-efficacy is very different from outcome expectations, and *that sociology education tends to decrease the latter*. While self-efficacy refers to one's perceived ability to affect an environment, outcome expectations refer to the responses one believes one will get from an environment. Psychologically, this distinction is important because self-efficacy (or its lack) will result in very different behaviors depending on the outcomes one expects from a given environment (see Figure 1, taken from Bandura 1997:20). Sociologically, this distinction is important because a sociology education tends to decrease outcome expectancies. In Figure 1, this is equivalent to leftward movement along the x-axis.

The reasons for such a decrease are not hard to fathom. The entire thrust of a sociology education is that biography is connected to history, and that the actions one thinks are one's own are actually shaped by an anonymous social structure that one did not create. Such a revelation makes the wider environment appear far less responsive to individual desires, for (as sociologists reveal) the social system appears to operate under its own system of laws.

While sociologists with only a crude understanding of psychology might mistakenly assume that a decrease in outcome expectancies automatically results in a decrease in self-efficacy, social cognitive theory actually predicts something a bit less simplistic: Students with high self-efficacy who learn sociology are likely turn from productive engagement with the

system to social activism within it. The rest however are likely to turn from some form of despondency to full-blown resignation (if they aren't resigned already). This pattern seems to match the anecdotal experiences of introductory sociology professors, most of whom can point to two or three students (out of 50-75) who are so affected by what they learn that become campus activists and/or sociology majors. But the bulk of the rest do not seem nearly as engaged, at least not in a conventional lecture-oriented introductory class. And while the sociology professors might pride themselves on connecting with these two or three students, SCT says the exceptional students' performances might have less to do with high quality teaching than with high preexisting self-efficacy.

The two or three students in every sociology class who truly connect with the material should likely be congratulated for maintaining their self-efficacy in spite of a society that does an excellent job of destroying it (see chapter 2). Perhaps if sociology as a discipline focused on increasing self-efficacy (rather than simply decreasing outcome expectations), more students would manage to achieve at that high level. This leads to SCT's second critique of the SI: *As currently conceived and taught, the SI ignores efficacy*. One possible reason for why this lacuna exists may stem from the fact that some branches of sociology have not satisfactorily resolved the agency-structure debate. Though technological or economic determinism is not part of sociology's founding principles (not even with regards to Marx), there nevertheless are significant numbers of sociologists who believe in such determinism (Fromm 2011:139–142; Kellner 2002). Following this logic there's no point to using the SI to boost self-efficacy, for the social structure will just rob humans of their agency anyways.

Social cognitive theory rejects the dualistic divide between human agency and a disembodied social structure. Rather, the triadic reciprocal causation model discussed earlier sees human activity as “[the] product of a reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioral, and environmental determinants” (Bandura 2006b). Humans create social structures, which shape individual lives, and in turn can be reshaped by humans again. Considering how self-efficacy is associated with a host of positive results, including a greater willingness to persevere in the face of setbacks, SCT recommends that the sociological imagination be deployed in way that systematically increases efficacy.

This conclusion leads to the third social cognitive critique of the SI, one that has to do with collective rather than self-efficacy. As stated earlier, collective efficacy is more than just the sum total of individuals' self-efficacies, but rather includes a belief in the effectiveness of the collective itself. And high self-efficacy is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for collective efficacy (Bandura 1995, 1997, 2000). Thus, even if teachers used the sociological imagination to show students the individual actions they could take to partially fix global problems such a demonstration, while admirable, might not be enough to resolve those problems. To begin with, the global problems facing the planet today transcend most individualistic solutions. But beyond this, even if collective solutions are found and promulgated (as Mills would have wanted), knowledge of such solutions is very different from knowledge of how to collectively mobilize supporters, devise and execute strategies, and persevere in the face of obstacles (Bandura 1995:33). Yet increasing collective efficacy is a research question that has been sadly ignored – by both sociologists and psychologists alike. A Google Scholar search for “increase collective efficacy” yielded a measly 138 hits, none of which provided a generalizable, evidence based model on how to do so.

As will be discussed in the following chapter, Bandura's research on increasing self-efficacy can be applied to increasing collective efficacy as well. However, since collectives beyond a certain level of complexity are by definition more than the sum of their parts, one wonders if there exists some as-of-yet undiscovered means of increasing collective efficacy that would go beyond Bandura's four mechanisms for increasing individual efficacy. Thus, SCT's third critique of the sociological imagination can actually be seen as a multifaceted appraisal of the SI's approach (or lack thereof) to collective efficacy. Specifically, *when it comes to collective efficacy, it appears that: (1) Sociology research has prioritized finding collective solutions over finding how to increase collective efficacy; (2) since the 1970's, it appears that sociology has been in virtual retreat from even thinking about collective efficacy, given the global uncertainty over whether a post-capitalist world is possible, what it would look like, and how to bring it about (Callinicos 2011:299–309; Sanbonmatsu 2004); and (3) out of a desire to not even appear "political," many sociologists have retreated from discussing any solutions to global problems at all, even individualistic ones, out of a desire to not appear biased (Burawoy 2004).* And while Mills put his faith in activist academics coming up with intelligent collective solutions, a SCT critique points to his relative silence on how to increase collective efficacy as a major gap within his work.

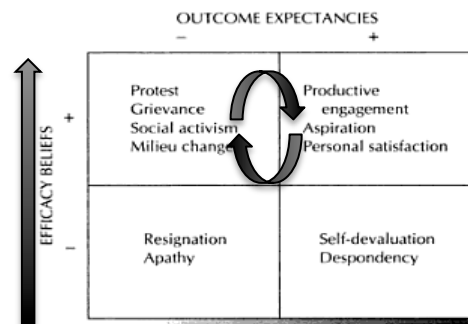
Lurid depictions of social ills without a consequent discussion of how to either collectively resolve them or mobilize people to resolve them can leave people feeling powerless in key spheres of life (Bandura 1997:516–524, 2000). But with Mills' theorization of the SI being so vague on the issue of efficacy, some sociology pedagogy research consequently makes a certain mistake that is not unique to sociology: *they confound the markers of a phenomenon with its outcomes.* This is social cognitive theory's fourth critique of the SI.

As Bandura puts it, a marker is an accomplishment while "an outcome is something that follows from it" (Bandura 1997:22–24); they are not one and the same. Thus, when trying to measure the sociological imagination, some researchers inadvertently create conceptual confusion by conflating a marker that one "has" an SI to be the outcome of the SI itself. This is particularly problematic in research where student writing samples are analyzed to augur their levels of sociological thinking (Eckstein et al. 1995; Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003; Rickles et al. 2013). That a student discusses the structural causes of poverty might be an indicator of sociological thinking, but presumably the attainment of that indicator should not be the only outcome of the SI. But as long as sociology remains divided as to what the SI's outcomes should be (if any), sociology pedagogy may find itself trapped within a circular logic, where the "outcome" of the SI gets conflated with its visible "markers," the ability to point out the effects of social structure. Such an infinite regress precludes the sort of meaningful engagement Mills envisioned.

## **Towards an Expanded Imagination**

The thrust of SCT's critique of the sociological imagination is that as classically conceived it ignores or hardly emphasizes self or collective efficacy. Given sociology's inherent focus on that which is beyond the individual, such an absence can inadvertently cause resignation rather than empowerment. But suppose sociological education decided to address this gap? What would that enterprise look like?

As seen with the upward arrow on the Y-axis in Figure 2, a focus on efficacy could result in a profound shift in the results of a sociological education. Regardless of one's outcome expectancies, increased efficacy could lead from resignation to milieu change, or from despondency to productive engagement, depending on one's perceived level of environmental responsiveness.



**Figure 2: Possible Extended-SI Effects on Efficacy and Outcome Expectations**

Yet increasing efficacy is only one dimension of the problem. As stated in the previous section, sociology tends to reduce one's expectation of environmental responsiveness to human action, simply because the social structure appears to operate independently of human desires while decisively shaping those desires. And while increasing outcome expectancies is not the same as increasing self-efficacy, it may be useful for sociologists to highlight the dialectical relationship between human action and the environment – that the society constitutes human beings, but that human beings in turn can change or affect society. This dialectic is represented in Figure 2 by the pair of circular arrows. A primary reason for conveying such a message is that regardless of the best intentions of sociology professors, the overwhelming majority of people who encounter sociology (in the classroom or in everyday life) are unlikely to become sociology professors or full time social movement activists. Moreover, if the sociological imagination (classical or extended) can be considered an innovation, then like all innovations it must prove compatible with an adopter's life (Rogers 2003:240–258). Thus, a sociology which requires social activism *all* of the time is likely to backfire, as it would ask from people far more than most are willing to give. Counterintuitively, an expanded SI combining increased self-efficacy with a focus on *both* how society affects humans *and* how humans can affect society could succeed where the classical SI fails. For with an expanded SI, students would be able to learn both how to craft their own future for themselves within society and how to mobilize and organize collectively to change that society when they believe such action is needed. Both are necessary to overcome structurally imposed constraints.

In terms of how to raise efficacy, social cognitive theory says that an Expanded SI can do four things: It can provide students with mastery experiences, it can model mastery experiences for students, it can engage in social persuasion, and it can alter physical or emotional states. As stated earlier, of these four methods, the first two are much more effective than the later two, and mastery experiences are the most effective of all. Thus, the Expanded SI should *provide its users with direct experiences or social modeling demonstrating how an understanding of the social structure's effects on individuals can lead to greater effectiveness as a person or collective*. Teachers of the Expanded SI can also engage in social persuasion and use power of certain emotional states, but as Bandura points out those mechanisms alone are not likely to be as effective.

## **Critical Thinking & Critical Sociological Thinking**

### ***The Need and Nature of Critical Thinking***

In the current literature, increasing the sociological imagination does not involve modeling or mastery experiences. By and large, the literature does not appear to emphasize action in general as an outcome of the SI, but rather frames the SI as a cognitive tool. While the earlier analysis points to limitations of such a conception, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that proponents of the cerebral view are right about one thing: Our society for the most part does not transmit any kind of systematic sociological thinking to its members. In a society based on market relations, human beings appear as individual and superficially equal independent actors. Since most people experience nothing but capitalist relations over the course of their lives, this individualistic perspective becomes internalized (Ollman 2004). And while this form of thinking represents a major advance from feudal conceptions of humanity, which saw human beings as unchangingly unequal, it does not give most members of society the ability to understand their society accurately. For inequality under capitalism by no means vanishes; it simply gets covered with a veneer of legal equality. Thus under capitalism sociology and the scientific method become necessary in order to distinguish the superficial veneer with the often counterintuitive reality (Offe and Wiesensthal 1980). In contrast, feudal reformers had no need for sociology. Since their societies had obvious and legally codified inequality, Enlightenment reformers could serve their purpose (and typically did) with elegantly deduced philosophical speculation, something that is insufficient for the modern age.

Sociology therefore fundamentally involves some form of “critical thinking,” in that it requires people to think beyond that which is considered conventional in this day and age. Therefore, there is at least some logic to the classical view of the SI that sees its sole purpose as describing the link between biography and history. But herein lay a problem: Critical thinking is probably the most vaguely defined terms in social science research, even compared to Mills’ hazy sociological imagination. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to come up with a definitive definition of the term, it is useful nonetheless to review what critical thinking entails and how the sociological imagination fits in with it.

In his meta-analysis of the critical thinking literature, Stephen Brookfield argues that the broad research on critical thinking points to its definition a four-step sequential process: Identifying the assumptions underlying our thinking, questioning those assumptions to assess their accuracy, looking at our reality with new assumptions or from different perspectives, and taking informed action on the basis of this examination (Brookfield 2011). Critical thinking is a

social process. In classrooms at least it is hugely dependent on teacher modeling, which tends to work best when critical thinking is applied to specific events or experiences. One of the foremost triggers to critical thinking is some kind of unexpected circumstance or disorienting dilemma. But contrary to other critical pedagogists (such as Wallerstein 1987), Brookfield concludes that critical thinking should actually *not* be applied to a student's personal experiences at first. Because critical thinking can be potentially destabilizing, it is safer and more effective for students to first be introduced to critical thinking in more innocuous realms and be guided to apply to their own lives later.

Different disciplines have interpreted critical thinking in multiple ways, and there are at least five different intellectual conceptions as to what critical thinking means. The analytical philosophy traditions focuses on creating coherent arguments and critiquing logical fallacies, the hypothetico-deductive school focuses on using the scientific method, pragmatism focuses on using inductive reasoning to analyze everyday experience, psychoanalysis focuses on applying critical thinking to the factors that shape one's personality, and critical theory focuses on using critical thinking to challenge and overcome domination. The sociological imagination as a whole fits within this last tradition. Yet sociologists who would equate the SI solely with the critical theory school of should keep in mind that these other traditions of critical thinking exist, all of which could add something to sociology as a science.

### ***Critical Thinking Tensions***

While Brookfield provides a useful overview of the different kinds of critical thinking, it becomes clear in his analysis that critical thinking is by no means an uncontested idea. There are several tensions and unresolved debates within the critical thinking literature, at least two of which have a direct bearing on sociology. The first regards the instrumentality of critical thinking, or what (if anything) critical thinking should actually accomplish. As Brookfield points out, a concentration camp guard could use "critical thinking" in order to determine the most effective mechanism of extracting slave labor from starved prisoners (Brookfield 2011:16–17). He or she could very well question his or her assumptions in order to find the most efficient means of inducing terror. But such instrumental reasoning, focused on finding a better solution to a problem, does not question the underlying assumptions behind why concentration camps exist or why terror is necessary in the first place. It focuses on means, but not ultimate ends, and thus an instrumentalist critical thinking appears to bypass a major area of the human experience. Moreover, it reduces critical thinking to a discrete process, which Brookfield argues cannot be separated from the object of analysis. Yet proponents of such an instrumentalism might argue that at least an instrumental critical thinking process can yield practical results, rather than remain mired in lofty abstraction. Moreover, unless critical thinking can be reformulated as process that describes *how* to think about thinking, instrumentalists can argue that critical thinking degenerates into something too vague for most populations to use.

While a callous instrumentalism could be considered a problem of too little critical thinking, a related tension comes from the opposite direction. For as critical thinking gets applied to assumptions and then assumptions behind the assumptions, one may eventually reach a point where there is no solid cognitive ground left to stand on. If one claims that all normative rules or standards are based off of unquestioned assumptions, then one is left with a relativism that declares all knowledge systems to be equally valid in their own context. Such relativism can be quite dangerous, as it can allow certain crimes (say female genital mutilation) to go unchallenged



under the cover that norms opposing such crimes are ultimately based off of untested assumptions. Yet without the willingness to challenge one's assumptions, one is frozen within a particular paradigm, which is by definition the opposite of critical thinking.

The debate over relativism brings up yet another tension within the critical thinking framework, revolving around how one can decipher what is genuinely accurate about reality. Here, there exists a debate between what Derber, Schwartz, and Magrass call a "rational discourse" paradigm versus a "critical discourse" paradigm. The former argues that objective knowledge does exist and that properly scientific examination can uncover it, while the latter "questions the whole concept of objectivity and the practice of expertise" supposedly based on it (Derber and Schwartz 1990:28). Supporters of the former paradigm are overwhelmingly dominant, and tend to emphasize a hypothetical-deductive way of finding knowledge. Supporters of the latter are more open to a broader variety of tools to examine reality, and argue that much of the intellectual class that practices rational discourse typically uphold existing power structures rather than challenge them. Supporters of the critical discourse paradigm argue that their framework has not lost touch with the emancipatory power of reason, while supporters of rational discourse argue that their framework can be just as supportive of emancipation without sacrificing intellectual standards.

### ***The Critical Thinking Debate Within Sociology***

The tensions within critical thinking reflect the fact that Mills' sociological imagination can be pulled into at least two directions, depending on how one interprets its mandate to overturn assumptions. One course is more instrumental, conceiving the SI as a tool that uses deductive reasoning to uncover means to particular ends; the other is more reflexive, arguing that the SI should focus on uncovering the assumptions behind the assumptions and focusing on ends rather than means. Burawoy most notably further subdivides each type of sociology by whether they aim for an academic or an extra-academic audience (Burawoy 2005). Instrumental sociological knowledge aimed at academia is professional sociology; when aimed beyond academia, it becomes policy sociology. Reflexive sociological knowledge for academia gets termed critical sociology, while the same thing aimed at the broader population becomes public sociology. Of the four, public sociology appears the closest to Mills' vision for the sociological imagination.

Burawoy cogently argues that there is a time and place for both instrumental and reflexive knowledge (i.e., both kinds of critical thinking) within sociology. At their best, the four subtypes of sociology inform and cross-pollinate each other through dialogue. But recently, Burawoy warns, instrumental knowledge in general and professional sociology in particular has become increasingly dominant. This is due to the fact that in the United States at least, professional sociology supplies the high paying, high quality jobs while policy sociology (instrumental knowledge, aimed beyond academia) tends to provide funding. Yet this dominance weakens the interdisciplinary aspects of the field. Isolation not only brings out the less-desirable aspects of each branch of sociology, but also leads to a general weakening of both kinds of reflexive sociology. Rather than nourishing the debate with a candid discussion of ends, reflexivity gets blamed for making sociology too ideological, alienating prospective patrons, and threatening the science as a whole. Such a mindset especially harms the prospects of public sociology, for while academia might tolerate reflexivity (hence giving critical sociology a lifeline), public sociology gets deemed too dangerous to be allowed more than a marginal

existence. For this reason, opponents of public sociology argue, sociology as a discipline should remodel itself with an “engineering mentality,” focused more on solving the problems brought to sociologists by its clients (Turner 2005).

This denigration of public sociology is unfortunate, the main reason being that public sociology is the one type of sociology that the public is most likely to see. Without public sociology, *policy* sociology will remain the only kind of extra-academic sociology available, limiting sociological thinking to that small subset of the population who focus on policy issues. And in contrast to predictions suggesting that such a retreat will boost sociology’s reputation as a “properly scientific” discipline, it may actually backfire. For only mass support can protect sociology from either getting drowned out by other voices or from the inevitable backlash that comes from power brokers anxious about any science that does not justify their existence. To use a recent example, without mass support (carefully nourished by decades of public astronomy), Neil deGrasse Tyson’s remake of *Cosmos* might have been forced to include creationism after the first episode provoked widespread condemnation from the religious right (Gettys 2014).

### ***Towards an Integrated Sociology***

What makes the expanded sociological imagination so useful is that by welding sociology with a focus on efficacy, public sociology (and reflexive sociology in general) can be invigorated with a new purpose and a new lease on life. *That new purpose of public sociology is to model for an extra-academic audience not just how broader sociological forces affect/cause personal problems, but how knowledge of such forces can increase the personal and collective efficacy to resolve those problems. The process of both modeling and creating certain mastery experiences for an audience, to demonstrate the efficacy raising power of a sociological understanding and to use such an understanding to raise their efficacy directly, is the expanded sociological imagination*<sup>7</sup>. In contrast to the classical SI, the expanded SI’s audience is not other sociologists or critical intellectuals, but all of a society’s population. This makes the “organic public sociology” of the expanded-SI very different from that Burawoy calls the “traditional public sociology” of the classical-SI (Burawoy 2009).

Additionally, the welding of sociology and social cognitive theory can possibly resolve the sometimes-virulent debate that has raged regarding the role of public sociology. For while public sociology opponents are at least partially correct that public sociology under certain circumstances degenerates into ideology and political correctness, an efficacy-based SI allows for an engineering-styled SI that does not ignore the public. If an “engineering” sociology is focused on problem solving or a client, then an “engineering” public sociology (i.e., the organic public sociology mentioned earlier) treats the general public as the client and low efficacy as the problem – or at least the problem which when fixed, makes resolving all the other problems

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<sup>7</sup> This definition does not exclude Bandura’s two other documented methods of increasing efficacy, social persuasion and using physical or emotional states. I have not included these methods in this definition however because these two methods currently form the main methods sociology professors currently use when attempting to increase the efficacy of their students, if indeed they even try to raise efficacy at all. As Bandura points out, these two methods are far less effective at raising efficacy compared to direct or modeled mastery experiences, and should thus be considered supplemental to the two primary methods mentioned in the italicized definition.

easier. For as stated earlier, only people and collectives with high self or collective efficacy are able to persevere in the face of setbacks in their quest to achieve certain goals. And if the overarching goal of sociology (not just public sociology) is to fix long standing socioeconomic problems (regardless of clientele), it's going to require perseverance – and therefore efficacy – so that neither sociologists nor our audiences loose hope or give up along the way.

As conceived here, an organic public sociology and its efficacy-based E-SI could play a key part, along with policy, professional, and critical sociology, in revitalizing and boosting the field of sociology as a whole. Organic public sociology and the E-SI do not displace the other three subtypes of sociology, but rather contributes something that the other three do not in order to strengthen the whole. For decades, the exact nature of public sociology's contribution was clouded by debates over Mills' classic SI: Whether it had a purpose, whether it was supposed to do anything, and whether it had to reach for an audience beyond academia. With the contribution of social cognitive theory, these debates can finally be decisively resolved, public sociology renewed, and sociology as a discipline advanced.

## **Effective Entertainment Education**

Over the last several decades, entertainment-education (or edutainment) has been designed, produced, and broadcast in countries all over the world, both for purely entertainment purposes and as carefully designed societal interventions. As an intervention, edutainment TV and radio has proven itself capable of promoting family planning, pro-social behavior, public health, literacy, numeracy, and gender equality amongst both child and adult audiences, as well as promoting both behavioral and attitudinal changes (Singhal and Rogers 1999). Yet the process of using media to convey educational messages is far from simple. Edutainment is notoriously easy to get wrong, and it is quite possible for producers to err by making their programs with too much entertainment and no education educational content, too much education but no entertainment, bad storylines, bad characters, bad writing, bad recommendations, or no relevance to an audience (Piotrow and De Fossard 2004). As with media production in general, anything that can go wrong often does, and then some. That said, there has been a cornucopia of research on how to use media as a teaching tool, and unlike the literature on the sociological imagination, this literature has proven remarkably convergent.

The research on edutainment can be split into at least two major areas (and a few minor ones). The first of these focuses on what is necessary in an edutainment production for that production to succeed (i.e., the necessary preconditions for information transfer), while the second focuses on how edutainment transmits information to the audience, as well as how that information leads to behavior change. Other research domains include examinations as to whether watching video is an active or passive process, as well as artistic theories on how thespians convey a desired emotion to an audience. Given how this thesis is more a work of social science than humanities, and many of the artistic theories that have not been (and perhaps cannot be) empirically verified, like Sabido's Theory of Tones, will not be critiqued here. But all other branches will be.

### ***Necessary Preconditions for Successful Edutainment***

The fact that there are hundreds of case studies covering dozens of individual edutainment programs suggests the usefulness of meta-analysis, in order to uncover what

patterns emerge from said case studies. The Capacity Model is one such pattern distilled from a meta-analysis of American children's educational television (Fisch 2004). In this model, Shalom Fisch states that all edutainment (unlike traditional television) contains both narrative and academic elements, and that audiences *always* focus on the narrative first. Even shows (like *Bill Nye the Science Guy*) that do not outwardly appear to have a narrative still possess one ("funny guy in lab coat talks about science"), albeit minimal. No matter how simplistic a narrative is, audiences will always focus on it first and academic content second. Moreover, since viewers have a limited amount of cognitive resources, comprehension of an edutainment program can be increased by making both the narrative and the academic content as lucid as possible, and by decreasing the distance between them. If the academic content is not well integrated into the narrative, comprehension of both will suffer.

In contrast to Fisch, who focuses mainly on American children's educational television, Singhal and Rogers (1999:205–217) analyze international edutainment programming aimed at adults. The subjects of their meta-analysis include programs designed to promote gender equality in India, AIDS prevention in Tanzania, safe sex in Mexico, and family planning in several African countries. From this exhaustive review, the authors determine that there are six "contingency factors" that decisively affect edutainment effectiveness: Audience characteristics, organizational factors, the media environment, audience research, program-specific factors, and infrastructural factors. A deeper examination of each factor yields several conclusions regarding successful edutainment, many of which have been confirmed by other researchers.

Under audience characteristics, meta-analysis reveals that television is not as passive a media as it has often been described as. Audiences actively shape their meanings of any edutainment program. This is consistent with other findings demonstrating that merely being watched does not guarantee a television show's ability to hold its audience's attention. The emergent creation of meaning occurs simultaneously with audience's actively ongoing decisions to give or withdraw attention to the television program itself (Anderson and Lorch 1983). Additionally, an audience's selective attention means that edutainment is much more effective in creating awareness of an educational issue rather than changing behavior. This was also confirmed in an interview with Lloyd Morrisett (2014), one of the creators of *Sesame Street*. According to the show's in-house research team, more involved changes usually happened only when toddlers watched *Sesame Street* with an adult who could point out the relevant details.

In terms of organizational factors, the shows analyzed by Singhal and Rogers tended to show more success when the show had committed leadership, powerful champions in the country's communication system, technical expertise, and collaboration amongst shareholders. While many of these conclusions undoubtedly hold true for edutainment in the United States, the different media structure here means that the "champions" needed might be of a different type than ministers in a nationally owned television network. Given the rise of the web, one should also note that gatekeepers take on a very different form in the case of web-series, sometimes not even existing. Their absence has allowed many home-produced shows to reach millions on YouTube.

The media environment plays another big role on edutainment success, and if the media network is not perceived as credible, any shows appearing on it will not appear credible either (a serious issue with edutainment broadcast in dictatorships). Moreover, the more saturated a media environment, the less the likelihood of any one program gaining widespread exposure (a serious issue in America). Political and economic factors can shape edutainment, and edutainment's

effectiveness is increased when accompanied by supplemental materials to form an integrated strategy. Again, this sentiment was echoed by Morrisett and other analyses of *Sesame Street* (Cooney 1967; Lesser 1975; Morrisett 2014).

Audience research must be conducted beforehand in order to make edutainment effective. The best formative research includes both qualitative and quantitative methods, and can provide invaluable insight into audience, provided one avoids over doing said research (i.e., scrutinizing every piece of dialogue). Morrisett expanded upon this by saying that high quality formative research demands long-term follow-ups of audience comprehension, not simply pre- and post-viewing tests.

Aside from integrating the suggestions of the capacity model, other program-specific factors associated with successful edutainment are eschewing overly formal or technical language (which impedes comprehension), integrating Bandura's social cognitive theory, and repetition of academic content. Obviously, this is addition to the artistic basics of having a compelling plot and interesting characters that the audience can relate to and connect with. Singhal and Rogers also that scheduling is important, in order to make sure that the TV or radio program airs during a timeslot when its desired audience is tuning in. This piece of advice is a relatively moot point true for most web-series. However, releasing an entire season of a Netflix series all at once might generate less interest compared to releasing it at a slower rate of say one episode per day (which is still a faster air rate than television).

The last set of factors Singhal and Rogers point to as crucial for the success of edutainment are infrastructural, such as whether a show promoting contraception airs in a location where residents have access to it. Though it may appear otherwise, these infrastructure factors still matter for the sociology program proposed here, especially in light of the E-SI model discussed earlier. If the role of the sociological imagination is to promote efficacy, the situations explored in the show not only have to be relevant to a teen audience's life, but the prescriptions of the E-SI have to be things that the audience is actually capable of acting upon. As stated in the section on SCT's critique of Mills, if a program informs an audience about a social problem but then yields no information on how the audience can solve it, the program will likely not empower its intended audience.

### ***How Information Transfer Happens in Edutainment***

While previous meta-analyses are relatively clear on the factors that contribute to successful edutainment, there is somewhat less agreement as to how information conveyed in an edutainment show gets transferred to the audience. Though there is nevertheless far more consensus around this topic compared to the cacophony of opinions surrounding the classical SI (see earlier section). Both Fisch (2004:167–172) and Bandura (1976) offer a relatively simple model of observational learning. This model says that viewers must first pay attention to and comprehend a program's educational content, then retain mental representations of that content in symbolic form, then convert those symbols into a particular behavior in some new situation, and in the process be motivated to do all of the above. Fisch calls the new situation the "transfer situation," and states that for transfer of knowledge to occur, the viewer must realize the educational content seen earlier is relevant to the new circumstances. As viewers age (an important consideration considering Fisch's meta-analysis dealt with children's television), they gain a higher developmental ability to transfer knowledge. Transfer can be aided if edutainment

programs repeat information multiple times in different contexts, or if a character's actions are coded in verbal signals.

One can congratulate Fisch and Bandura for proposing a relatively simple model of observational learning, especially if one considers that amongst the adult (rather than children's) edutainment literature, there have been no fewer than 24 different proposed theories of information transfer (Sood, Menard, and Witte 2004). These theories range from the highly empirical to the purely abstract, and come from a variety of academic disciplines. While these and other theories not included in Sood, et al's meta-review can be organized in several ways, for the purposes of this chapter I will group the relevant literature into five categories: Information transfer theories, psychological theories, communication theories, sociological theories, and dramatic theories. Each angle covers a different and valuable aspect of the edutainment experience.

The first set of information transfer theories tend to focus on the linear steps or stages of the transfer process. These include Shannon and Weaver's (2002) communication schematic (communicator, message, medium, receiver, and noise), Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation process (knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation), and other theories like the hierarchy of effects model (McGuire 1969) which combine elements of the two. Some edutainment creators have taken these linear models and turned them into circular or interactive ones, where (for example) each step of Shannon and Weaver's communication process is visualized as affecting all the other steps simultaneously. But regardless of the add-ons, all stage models tend to describe a similar process: An edutainment program demonstrates something new through a communication channel. An audience has to become aware of that information first and foremost. They have to both understand it and it as relevant, and then be persuaded to adopt that information or integrate it into their existing schema, which often involves personalizing the information to fit one's own life. After the information is implemented or integrated, one has to remember it and/or keep implementing it, which can be facilitated by positive reinforcement.

This relates to the next set of the psychological theories, including the social psychological ones. Psychological theories include work on the cognition process and the psychology of persuasion; in other words, how an audience actually encodes a message and what message characteristics increase the likelihood of successful encoding. According to Cialdini (2006), a message's persuasion can increase if the receiver likes the communicator, if the communicator appears to be an authority figure, if the communicator can convince the receiver that taking a certain action is consistent with the receiver's persona and previous actions, if there is a reciprocal relationship between communicator and receiver, if the information, product, or action suggested by the communicator appears scarce, or if the receiver sees others acting in accordance with the communicator or the message. Social psychological theories meanwhile include Bandura's social cognitive theory (very commonly used to inform edutainment production), and the theory of planned behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 2009), which describes the relationships between attitudes, norms, intentions, perceived efficacy, and action. The theory of planned behavior is particularly useful because it helps clarify some of the relationship between environment, person, and behavior described in Bandura's triadic causation theory. Combined with the psychology of persuasion research and the stages theories of the previous paragraph, one gains a much fuller picture of how an appropriately persuasive message gets communicated to an audience in order to convince them to adopt an innovation or integrate some new knowledge into their daily lives. But this picture is not yet fully complete.

Audience centered theories, many from the field of communications rather than psychology, focus on the power of communication process as a whole rather than on its component parts (i.e., the message or receiver). Among these include the two-step flow model of communications (Katz 1957), which argues that the mass media does *not* tell audiences what to think, but rather *what to think about*. In concurrence with Rogers' diffusion of innovation model, the mass media is theorized as having the bulk of its direct effect only on a small subset of the population that is most concerned with opinion leadership (i.e., being the ones other people come to for information). The rest of the population is reached indirectly through these opinion leaders via interpersonal rather than through mass communication. Audience centered theories also focus on the "para-social" relations formed between the audience and both the characters on TV and the celebrities who play them (Brown and Fraser 2004). While the characters are not real, seeing a character who's circumstances mirror one's own drastically increases an audience member's openness to the social modeling that character accomplishes, a prediction also made by social cognitive theory. Audience centered theories also emphasize the fact that audiences watch edutainment for a variety of reasons – not simply to get educated – and that producers have to take this into account. Given how the audience fundamentally retains control over its choice to pay attention to the show or not, successful edutainment must convince audience members to get either emotionally or cognitively involved with the program (Sood 2002). Without such motivation, they are unlikely to proceed down the path outlined in the stages theories above.

Sociological models focus on the wider context behind edutainment. Relevant theories here include Gramsci's discussion of hegemony, which argues that the dominance of one economic class over another allows the dominant class to present its viewpoints as the "normal" or "common sense" ones (Gramsci 2007). This is particularly important with any edutainment program that tries to uplift those at the bottom of society's hierarchy. Gramsci's conception has been expanded by several theorists who have pointed out biases within the mass media that emerge from the economic need of networks to "sell" their audience to advertisers. Conventional television programming tends towards the pro-corporate and the standardized, upholding stereotypes and conventional social norms rather than questioning the potential for these norms to disempower various groups (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Meanwhile, other sociology theorists who consider Gramsci's conceptions valuable yet dated have contested his conception of hegemony. Ollman (2004) in particular has argued that widespread acceptance and quiescence to capitalist inequalities stems less from capitalist control over the media and more from the experience of capitalist relations in everyday life. But regardless, theories of hegemony argue that edutainment programs pursuing empowerment must make sure that they do not inadvertently propagate the sexism, racism, classism, or the sense of disempowerment they are ostensibly trying to challenge.

Lastly, drama theories focus beyond the information transfer aspects of edutainment to the subjective and dramatic elements that improve audience receptiveness to a message. Psychologist Carl Jung argued that these experiences and characters have been transmitted across the generations from humanity's earliest descendants to the present day, and form a "collective unconscious" amongst humans today. Much like a baby chick flees the shadow of an eagle even if it has never seen an eagle before, so too do humans have a common reaction to certain types of common events, as experience combines with an innately programmed blueprint to bring out a latent emotion (Campbell 2004; Feist and Feist 2008:104–114). For edutainment producers, this means that quality programming, which requires quality storytelling, can convey empowerment

messages through the use of certain archetypal myths, scripts, and characters that depict universal aspects of the human experience. The use of the “hero’s journey” has been noted as an especially effective tool (Sood et al. 2004). Additionally, Kincaid’s (2002) drama theory suggest that while watching an evocative program, it is the emotional response in the audience becomes the driving force behind the audience reconceptualizing their personal problems along the lines shown on a program. This leads the audience to act to resolve their problem in ways similar to those depicted by a program’s positive role models.

### ***Three Hybrid Models of Empowering Edutainment***

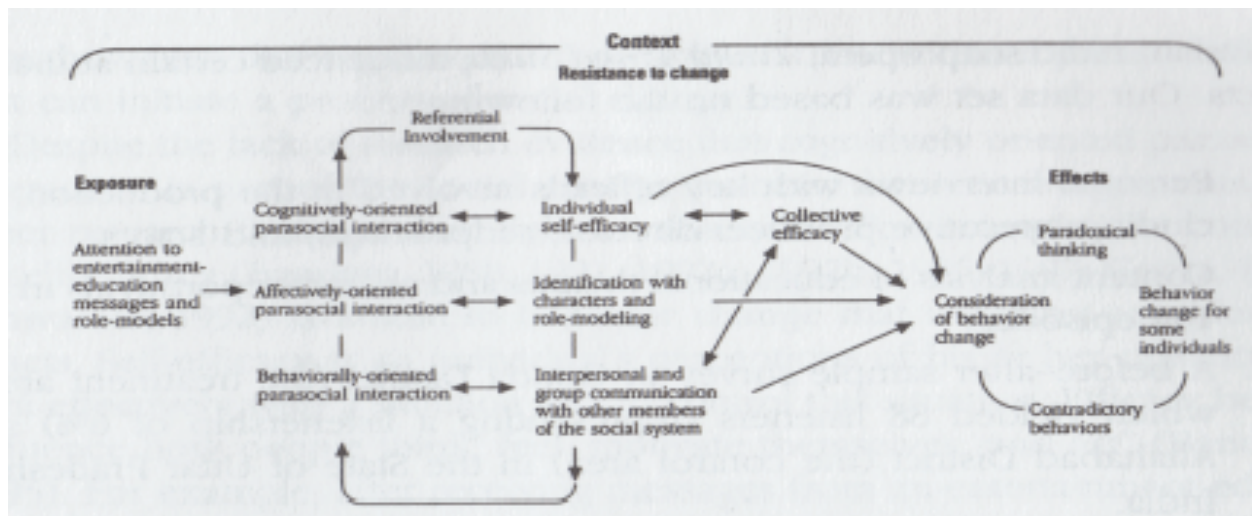
The breadth of the edutainment literature suggests some need for a comprehensive hybrid model that can combine the different pieces into some coherent whole that succinctly explains how edutainment can empower its audience. In creating such a synthesis, there are a couple of possible ways to proceed. Perhaps the simplest method would be to simply add together the different theories discussed earlier to create a composite theory that spans multiple disciplines. The hybrid combining sociological, psychological, dramatic, audience centered, and stage theories would probably look something like this: A capitalist society generates widespread inequality that causes large numbers of non-elites to lose their sense of efficacy and become resigned. But, by modeling empowerment on television with emotionally compelling characters, edutainment can create a vicarious experience that increases both self and collective efficacy. Such modeling is not immediate; the show has to first walk its characters and its audience through Rogers’ various stages of adopting a new efficacy-increasing innovation. That innovation could be an enhanced sociological understanding of how individuals and collectives can respond to the social problems they face. Though not immediate, it is nevertheless possible for such modeling to increase efficacy and convince audiences to adopt or at least consider adopting new behaviors. Additionally, those not in the audience who are not directly affected by the edutainment program may still be influenced by it through conversations with opinion leaders who experienced the program directly.

This amalgam is essentially the hybrid model (see Figure 3) of edutainment effects suggested by Singhal and Rogers (1999). This additive model is not by any means bad, but it can be a little unwieldy. Moreover, by simply combining the different edutainment theories discussed above, the whole does not necessarily become anything more than the sum of its parts. Again, for the purpose of creating edutainment programming, this amalgam has proven more than adequate. But, just for the sake of chasing perfection, it may be worthwhile to consider whether there is a more parsimonious model that describes how edutainment works.

Probably the most parsimonious comprehensive model of edutainment is that of Kincaid (2002), who chides other models for ignoring the emotional aspects that make edutainment different from regular education. Building upon an ironically unemotional foundation of game theory, Kincaid’s drama theory says that dramatic edutainment tells a captivating story, involves the audience emotionally, and depicts a change in characters with which the audience identifies. The essence of drama is conflict, where a character desperately wants something but has trouble getting it, and what makes it so captivating is that it is unclear whether a desirable or threatening outcome will result. The emotional connection to the audience comes from when the audience identifies with the characters, perhaps because said characters are going through conflicts similar to those faced by the audience. And when the pressure of the dramatic situation forces a change in the characters, the emotional connection (as stated earlier) compels a change in the audience.



While Kincaid's theory is an exceptionally parsimonious description of how dramatic edutainment operates, there remains one unaddressed issue that is particularly relevant for the sociological edutainment proposed here: Kincaid's edutainment theory says nothing about comedy. And while dramatic edutainment programs may be excellent for adults (and possibly teens as well), many of America's most successful edutainment programs that have been all or part comedic. This is especially true for *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, probably the most direct inspiration for the show being proposed here. Beyond explaining dramatic edutainment, can Kincaid's parsimonious theory tell us anything about *comedic* edutainment?



**Figure 3: Singhal and Rogers' Hybrid Edutainment Model**

Kincaid might not be able to tell much about comedy and edutainment, but with a few modifications his theory might be able to shed some light on modern satire. If his sentiment is correct that drama is about a person who wants something badly enough but has trouble getting it, then the "drama" of satire that a person wants sanity but has trouble getting it. In drama theory, conflict emerges and is eventually resolved by some change in the conflict frame. In satire, conflict emerges and is simultaneously highlighted and diffused through comedy. Yet the comedy does not resolve the conflict, since the conflict frame remains unchanged. This may explain why Jon Stewart has said much of his work and the work of this staff revolves around channeling their frustration into jokes (Kakutani 2008).

Following Kincaid's logic, a parsimonious theory could be constructed about what makes edutainment satire different from regular satire. As in drama theory, satirical edutainment has to involve a captivating story, which sparks emotional involvement that can drive change. But here, the captivating story is a lampoon of some defect in society, and the captivation comes both from the humor and the drama of our ideals clashing with the realities of our time. The audience identification comes partly from enjoying the humor, but also from a connection with the satirist.

For in the host of a satirical program, an audience member will see his or her own frustrations reflected and brought to life. And lastly, *unlike regular satire, where humor dulls the feeling of powerlessness, edutainment satire can spark change as the host demonstrates the information or models the action necessary to resolve the conflict.* This is how edutainment satire can empower an audience, and this is where an expanded sociological imagination fits into edutainment media. An expanded sociological imagination focused on efficacy can provide the information, the cognitive tools, and the motivation to seek out, uncover, and implement those changes necessary to transform society. And it is to that expanded model that we now turn.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE EXPANDED MODEL OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION & ITS APPLICATION TO TELEVISION**

#### **Overview**

Having pointed out in the previous chapter the importance of efficacy in sociology thinking, this chapter will do three things. First, it will spell out the Expanded Sociological Imagination (E-SI) model in full detail. Following Brookfield's discussion on the importance of critical thinking "protocols" (Brookfield 2011), this detail will describe a hypothesized sequence through which a person with little to no training in sociology develops their sociological reasoning. Second, I will use my E-SI model to derive a list of concepts that together constitute a necessary core to any sociological curriculum. For if the sociological imagination is (partially) a way of thinking about the world and not just the memorization of factoids, it seems logical to explicate the elements that comprise sociological thinking and what makes it different from non-sociological reasoning. Lastly, this chapter will apply this model to television, building off of the proposed hybrid model of edutainment satire described on the previous page. This last section will integrate the E-SI model with the edutainment research to discuss possible formats, storylines, and segments for a show that can teach sociology to adolescents. If done properly, I believe such a show could be transformative.

#### **The Expanded Model Explained**

The E-SI (see Figure 4) begins by conceptualizing the process of learning how to think sociologically as being analogous to Brookfield's critical thinking sequence: One identifies one's assumptions, checks their accuracy, looks at one's reality from a different set of assumptions, and takes informed action. The student sets begins this process with a certain set of experiences and a base-line level of efficacy, and ends by taking some form of action. If they do not reach that final point, then the process of critical thinking is ultimately incomplete.

The way in which an individual proceeds through the critical thinking process varies depending on whether or not one is aiming to think sociologically or not. A person with a purely individualistic framework (see the left side of Figure 4) will analyze society or a social problem (for example, poverty) and only uncover individualistic assumptions about people's actions. Sociological perspectives will not only be unexamined, but may not even enter one's consciousness at all. Those individualistic assumptions (i.e., "poor people are lazy") may be questioned in Step 2 of the critical thinking process (i.e., "lots of poor people work hard"), but only get replaced with other individualistic assumptions in Step 3 (i.e., "poor people might not be lazy, but they should have done better in school if they wanted a better job"). The final Step 4 (if the person gets that far) thus results in purely individualistic action (i.e., "I'll just donate to charity"). While helpful, such deeds are unlikely to resolve the broader sociological problems precisely because they ignore the wider and systematic causes of those problems.

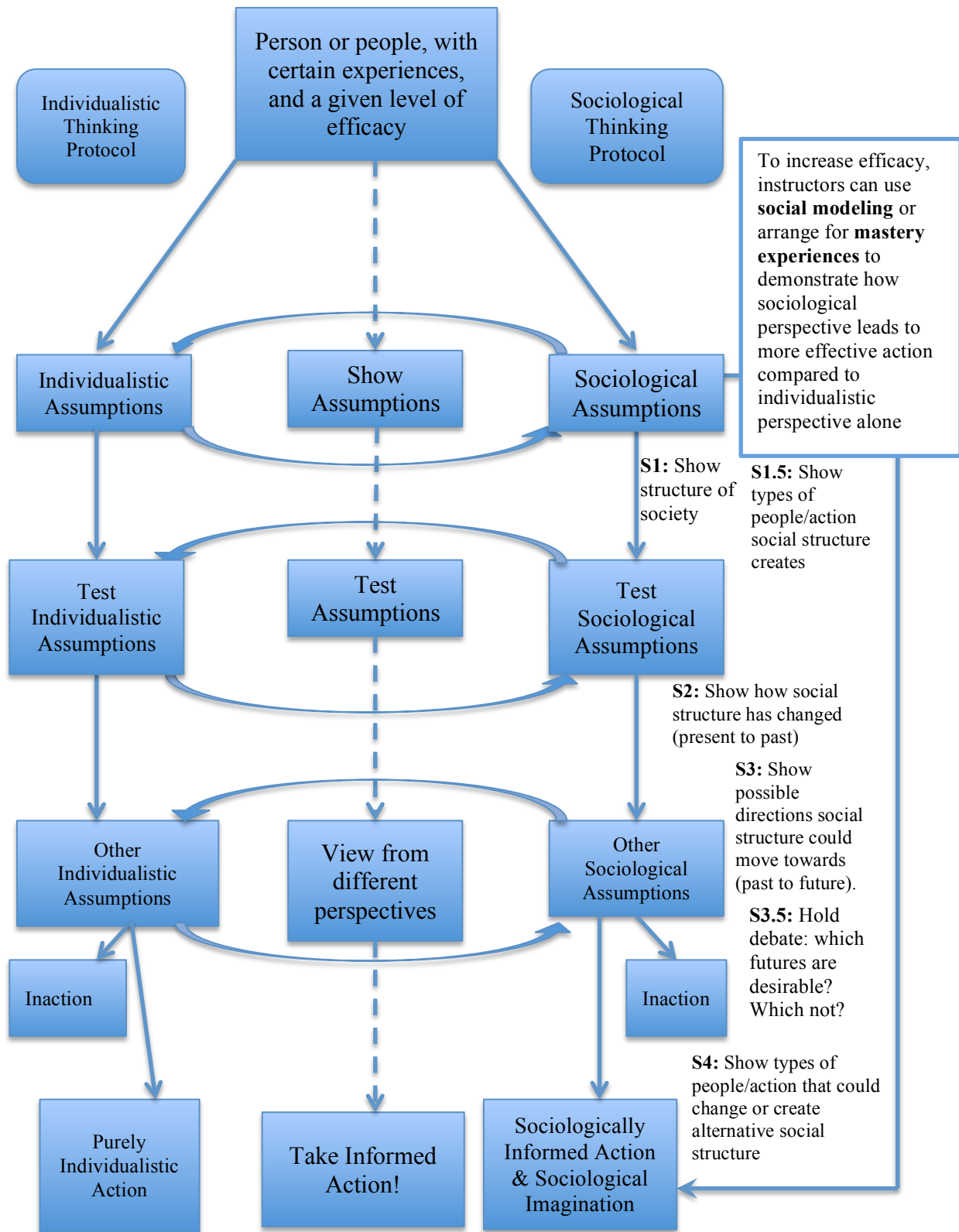


Figure 4: The Expanded Sociological Imagination Model

A person with a more sociological framework in contrast proceeds down the column on the right, following an analogous set of steps. It should be noted here that at the start of the process, it is perfectly possible that one may have a sociological perspective, but that perspective might be flawed and simplistic (i.e., “bad things are just the way it is and will never change”). However, as one proceeds down the right hand column however, the sociological perspective is examined and refined through questioning one’s assumptions and examining reality with different assumptions. This process typically involves the following protocol (adapted from Mills, but with some revisions):

First, as part of uncovering one’s sociological assumptions, one learns about the structure of society (i.e., the different parts of society and how they interact with one another) and how that social structure tends to create and shape certain types of people.

Second, as part of testing those sociological assumptions, one learns about how that structure has changed between the present and past. No social system is ever static, and in this step one learns how the system has become what it is.

Third, as part of directly questioning one’s sociological assumptions, and viewing something from different sociological perspectives, one takes the direction of societal development as suggested in the previous step and projects it into the future. One looks at that projection from different perspectives and one generates a set of possible futures that could emerge from the present. One can then debate which set of futures are the most preferable.

The final part of the sociological thinking protocol involves relating the debates over possible futures back to the present, as one analyzes the types of actions necessary to bring that optimal future into existence *and* acts accordingly. This corresponds to the final stage in the critical thinking process, taking informed action.

However, the model does not simply say that questioning sociological assumptions is enough to result in informed action. Again, a key aspect of the E-SI model is its focus on efficacy, without which sociology education is more likely to result in apathy. The rightmost part of Figure 4 describes how Bandura’s social cognitive theory can be used to increase efficacy along with sociological reasoning. This can be done *by teaching sociology in such a way that instructors model for students how understanding the sociological causes of phenomena leads to more effective action, or if instructors can arrange students gain direct mastery experiences which demonstrate the same thing*. Thus, the sociological imagination emerges with a combination of both learning about social structure as well as learning/experiencing how such knowledge can increase efficacy. It is this second element that is mostly absent in sociology pedagogy today.

## **Core Elements of a Sociology Curriculum**

The literature review in the previous chapter noted that there is no current consensus as to what the classical sociological imagination actually constitutes. With the E-SI model explored and the role of efficacy properly explicated, it may be possible to use this model to derive a list of concepts that the model suggests are key components of a sociological perspective. This list will by no means be a complete delineation of a full sociology curriculum, but it could highlight those component cognitive practices that make thinking sociological different from ordinary reasoning. This list will also serve as a guidepost for elements that should be included in any sociology edutainment show or course on sociological reasoning.

Starting at the top of the E-SI model, that all human beings arrive to a sociology class having had certain experiences and a certain level of efficacy. From this, one could gather that a sociology curriculum ought to include some discussion of the *existential human experience*. Insofar as we are all humans, we are forced to create the meaning of our own life, as no instinct provides solutions ready made for us (Fromm 1990b). Thus, all sociology education (and indeed all education, regardless of subject) should be framed in terms of helping the students reach their highest potential as human beings. This is a point critical pedagogists (Freire 2000) have been making for years. Moreover, it may also be useful at the outset to *introduce the concept of both self and collective efficacy* so that students understand their importance. Specifically, it should be made clear how efficacy allows us to alter our reactions to and thus not be defeated by powerful external tribulations, even if solutions do not seem immediately apparent.

As a student moves into the first step of analyzing the social structure, it would be useful for she or he to learn how to employ *inductive reasoning*. Inductive reasoning is the core of what many sociologists do, as they draw inferences from observable patterns and use them to form hypotheses. This process logically implies that a sociology curriculum ought to also teach students *theory building*, or how to take their inferences and design a properly testable theory. What makes for a good and bad theory could be examined in depth here. Moving forward from this, the next step could be to teach *sociological experimentation methods*<sup>8</sup> as well. That way, as students deploy their newfound inductive reasoning to build theories from experience, they will be able to develop creative ways of testing their ideas and gain mastery experience from that.

But of course, just because a theory appears falsified does not mean it actually is falsified. Imre Lakatos has pointed out that the apparent falsification of a theory might actually result in the falsification of only *part* of a theory. From this rejected segment can possibly arise new band of research that expands our knowledge (Burawoy 1990; Lakatos 1970). It is important for students to understand this distinction, as a formerly rejected theory may at a later date prove more useful than originally realized. Thus, a sociology curriculum ought to include *the philosophy of science* of people such as Lakatos who have realized this point.

Students encountering sociology for the first time may have no concept of what a social system is, what social structure means, or how they can affect individual behavior. While not easy, it may be useful to resolve this problem by introducing sociology students to *systems theory or complexity theory*, research that discusses how individual pieces of something can come together to form a whole greater than the sum of the parts. Meanwhile, the fact that the social structure shapes human beings all but guarantees that a sociology curriculum ought to include *social character theories* (such as those elucidated in Fromm and Maccoby 1996) which specifically analyze how economic structure shapes personality, which in turn shapes which ideologies different people will find themselves attracted to.

That social structure changes over time suggests that an introductory sociology curriculum ought to include both *historical materialism* and *dialectical reasoning*. The first is highly useful because it provides a skeletal outline for how societies change over time (Burawoy 1990; Harman 2008:i–vii; Marx 1859). If not taught crudely, it could form a backbone for the discipline of sociology as a whole, much as evolution provides a backbone for biology.

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that deductive reasoning would fall under this heading, and has thus not been listed as a separate category.

Dialectical reasoning meanwhile is crucial because its focus on “and/both” rather than “either/or” allows its users to conceive of the world as a dynamic, constantly changing entity (Ollman 2003). Given just how rapidly society is changing, more static conceptions of reality will not prove as useful in this discipline.

The debate over what potential futures are optimal is a partly ethical debate that may not be completely resolvable under the umbrella of social sciences alone. Nevertheless, sociology as well as psychology could contribute to this debate with a properly scientific discussion of fundamental human needs. Much as astronomy can breed certain humble empathy when a human realizes how insignificant they are compared to the vastness of the universe, a **sociological humanism** can encourage a similar empathy as it reveals human beings to be indescribable infinities, each with a complexity that is never truly captured, each nevertheless following certain patterns or scientific laws as they arrange themselves into complex systems, and each possessing the awe-inspiring power to reshape those systems and possibly even the laws which create them. And while those scientific laws governing the formation of social systems are not necessarily as visible as the laws of physics governing the movement of galaxies, they are no less majestic.

On a somewhat less ethereal note, the discussion over the future of society also suggests that there may be a need for a basic sociological reasoning course to include exercises to increase **divergent thinking**, as well as **convergent, or analytical thinking**. The former is important because it refers to an individual’s ability to generate possible solutions to a problem. It should be noted that one of the great flaws of the American education system is that it systematically reduces the divergent thinking of the students who go through it, even though all children are born with this ability (Robinson 2010). Given the complexity of the modern world, it seems crucial that those who learn sociology learn how to generate multiple answers to a problem, since the troubles of the modern world will likely require multiple solutions. And since not all proposed solutions will be equally useful, sociology instruction must also teach **convergent or analytical thinking**, which focuses on using logic and deductive reasoning to figure out which fixes are preferable. While by no means the be-all-end-all of critical thinking, analytical thinking also useful because it teaches students how to both construct good arguments, and spot the fallacious reasoning that is all too common in our discourse.

Given how critical thinking is ultimately supposed to result in action, sociology education would do well to emphasize a **growth mindset**. Narrowly conceived, a growth mindset is one that views intelligence as developable rather than static (Dweck 2007). However, it can more broadly be visualized as a mindset that emphasizes effort and learning rather than performance. Those who deploy it much are more willing to embrace challenges and view effort as a means to mastery. In contrast, those who see intelligence as static or are more focused on outcomes are more likely to avoid challenges and avoid effort out of a preconception that success should be automatic. Given how success in solving a social problem is rarely automatic, it would behoove sociology to teach its learners to enjoy the journey rather than just the destination.

Lastly, since resolving social issues typically involves collective action, it is important that sociology instruction models **the necessary preconditions for collective efficacy**. As stated in the literature review, collective efficacy refers to one’s belief that a group *as a group* will be able to accomplish its goals, and is more than the sum of the group members’ self-efficacies. Since the necessary preconditions for collective efficacy appear to be at minimum individual social efficacy and high efficacy in the personal spheres (Fernández-Ballesteros et al. 2002), it would seem advisable that a sociology TV show models how sociological knowledge can be

used to achieve one's goals in both personal, individual-social, and collective realms. This can be in addition to explicitly pointing out the importance of efficacy as a tool to help one persevere in the face of adversity. For example, the program can demonstrate how sociological thinking can help one find a more satisfactory career (personal efficacy), how it illuminates those individual actions one can take to resolve broader social problems (individual social efficacy), and how it helps generate the collective action capable of affecting widespread change (collective efficacy). Without modeling all three, there is a possibility that viewers will be less likely to take the action that is necessary for critical thinking.

## **Applying the Expanded Sociological Imagination to Television**

### ***Possible Formats***

Based on both the literature and previous examples of successful edutainment programming, a sociology television show for teens could employ at least two very distinct formats. On the one hand, it could use a *Bill Nye the Science Guy* type format, which has academic content presented comically with minimal narrative. On the other, it could use a *Sesame Street* style format that mixes academics with narrative segments. The level of narrative included in an episode greatly affects all aspects of that episode's production, and there are both advantages and disadvantages to both high and low narrative formats.

*Bill Nye the Science Guy* was a very successful show, and that success demonstrates the usefulness of that format. Not employing a narrative makes for a less complicated program, which can both focus on academic content and include more academic content in each episode. But barely having a narrative does present some disadvantages, as it limits the ability of the show to include complex storylines or present to the audience a wider range of emotions. The humor of *Bill Nye* allowed that show to reach an elementary school audience, but it's not clear that kind of slapstick presentation will be sufficient to interest high school students.

A more narrative-oriented program can introduce storylines, episode arcs, and more three-dimensional characters. Each episode's narrative can be tailored to the academic content producers want to convey, and depending on the subject matter, screenwriters can make audiences laugh, cry, or do anything in between. Yet having a narrative means that less academic content can be conveyed in each episode, since screen time has to be dedicated to developing the narrative. Moreover, whatever academic content that is presented has to be tied to the storyline somehow in order to not appear disjointed. Additionally, having a storyline opens the show up to the possibility that audience members will dislike the storyline or find it uninteresting. This may be why many existing non-educational adolescent TV shows often use hackneyed plots in an effort to appeal to the lowest common audience denominator.

Having or not having an academically integrated narrative are two ends of a continuum. Some edutainment shows such as *Good Eats* have employed elements from both models, copying the *Bill Nye* style of focusing on academic content, but using narrative within certain episodes in order to teach certain topics. The *Good Eats* universe also had a cast of minor characters who while not appearing in every episode did appear frequently enough to provide the audience with some extra entertainment and insight as needed. The fact that *Good Eats* is neither wholly with or without a narrative demonstrates that how much narrative to include is very much an artistic question, the answers to which can change over the course of a series. While the



capacity model says that audience focuses on narrative first, it does not require that edutainment programs be narrative heavy.

### ***The E-SI Storyline***

The debate over format and narrative is ultimately a debate over what type of television show ought to teach sociology. Should a sociology TV show follow in the footsteps of American children's edutainment, and stress learning sociology information? Or should the program follow the path blazed by other edutainment shows worldwide, and go beyond an academic mandate with a narrative? Such a question is somewhat subjective, but if one follows the E-SI model, one discovers that both sorts of shows could possibly work.

From the perspective of teaching sociology, the E-SI model says that a sociology TV show must model for its audience how an understanding of sociological factors can lead to more effective action or the resolution of problems. This imperative provides a skeleton that can be used either with or without a narrative in an edutainment program. When narrative is minimal or absent, one could imagine the following episode structure based on this model:

1. The host introduces a certain topic or problem.
2. The host expands upon this problem or topic.
3. The host discusses non-sociological, common sense, or individualistic perspectives on this topic, and why these perspectives might be problematic.
4. Host proceeds down the right hand side of the E-SI model, providing a sociological explanation of the phenomenon, a discussion of how that phenomenon has changed between past and present
5. Host discusses possible directions that topic, phenomenon, or problem could go in, including best and worst case scenarios
6. Host discusses or demonstrates how the actions we take today can determine which sort of future unfolds, and the different actions people could take based on the future they want to see and their interpretation of the problem
7. The host either demonstrates or takes some action to demonstrate that the sociologically inspired action being is more likely to result better and more effective outcomes than action taken from a purely individualistic standpoint. Modeling this can thus increase the efficacy of the para-socially connected audience.

These elements form a story with some broad sociological topic serving as the main character. In contrast, a more narrative heavy episode could keep all of the above elements, but encase the story of a sociological topic within a wider story of one or more characters. Perhaps one could imagine the episode structure here looking something like this:

1. Introduce character and the character's problem
2. Character may try to resolve problem by non-sociological means and fail
3. Character meets host, who introduces the character to a sociological perspective on the problem (steps 1-6 above).
4. With their new sociological interpretation of the problem, the character proceeds to resolve the problem successfully. Thus, the character (instead of or in addition to the host) models how sociological imagination can increase efficacy in one's own life.

It is noteworthy here that regardless of additional narrative, the storyline informed by the E-SI model remains in either format. Every episode demonstrates the usefulness of the sociological imagination by showing sociologically informed reactions to problems as being more efficacious

than non-sociological reactions. This relatively flexible skeleton can be adapted to a wide range of topics as well as a wide range of possible narratives, if narratives are judged by producers to be more useful in helping an audience understand a particular topic.

### ***Potential Segments and Characters***

A full description of how the E-SI storyline was artistically implemented will be described in the case study in the next chapter. And while it is true that there is great artistic leeway in terms of how the E-SI storyline can come to life, there are nevertheless certain types of characters and segments that both the literature and edutainment case studies seriously suggest ought to be included.

Of the main characters in an edutainment program, there typically are positive role models, negative role models, and transitional role models. The first demonstrate whatever behavior or innovation the show has been produced to encourage. The second serve as foils to the positive role models, and intentionally show the negative consequences of not adapting the suggested behavior or innovation. The third begin as negative role models but become positive role models over the course of the program. The transitional characters are especially important for their journey is essentially a representation of the journey the audience will go through. They are the characters that will model a desired behavior for the audience, and they must be included in some way. And of course, the program must show the rewards that accrue to this transitional character for making a major shift.

In versions of this show with a narrative, providing positive, negative, and transitional role models is fairly straightforward. Given storyline suggested on the previous page, it would not be hard to conceive of an episode structure where the transitional character and the negative role model have a problem and the positive role model shows the benefits that come from a sociological approach to that problem. While the negative role model does not adopt a sociological approach, the transitional model does, and gets rewarded.

For the show with a minimal narrative, both the audience and the sociological issue itself become the main character of the episode's story, as the host describes that issue's past, present, and potential futures. In this case, it might be useful for the host to use historical figures or minor characters as the transitional characters, who can demonstrate using sociology to better resolve that sociological issue (perhaps with the host narrating).

In terms of the types of segments in each episode, there is a great deal of artistic license possible. Nevertheless, assuming that the proposed narrative or non-narrative based program will be a comedy, the segments of every episode will most likely fall into one of three categories. There will be informative segments concerned primarily with teaching academic content with a comic overtone, shorter comic or artistic segments geared primarily for humor, satire, and pacing, and narrative segments designed to forward the episode's plot if there is one. While combinations of these three types of scenes can be woven into an episode, the edutainment research *strongly* highlights the need for an epilogue at the end of every show that can neatly reformulate the key lessons from that episode. Such an epilogue makes audience symbolic coding of the show's content significantly easier (Singhal and Rogers 1999:66).

## **CHAPTER V**

### ***JON PHOENIX, GOVERNMENT GURU: A SOCIOLOGY EDUTAINMENT CASE STUDY***

This chapter presents a narrative of *Jon Phoenix, Government Guru*, a television program currently in its pilot stage that was conceived of to teach adolescents social science in an empowering way. Since this story is very much a personal one, based on my own experiences and the experiences of my production team, it is written in first person.

#### **The Production of a Pilot Episode**

##### ***The Birth of an Idea***

The inspiration for creating a sociology edutainment program actually came from a historian. That historian was University of Vermont professor James Loewen, and in my sophomore year of college I read his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. A comedic yet often tragic look at the state of high school history education, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* tells the story of Loewen examining 14 textbooks used to teach American history to adolescents and his discovery that none of them teach it properly. The result is history becoming the least popular subject in American public high schools, and widespread ignorance about US history.

That book was nothing short of inspirational, and from what I gather it has inspired many others as well. At its core, *Lies* was a book about a teacher who fundamentally understood and cared about the emancipatory power of social studies education, and he furiously rallied against those forces which alienated students from the love of learning. Web forums described how many readers of this book were inspired to high school teachers, and in 2009 I was one of them.

Though I was not a history major in college, I was a sociology minor, and the link between sociology and history was fairly obvious to both Loewen and I. As Loewen has explicitly stated elsewhere (Loewen 2010), history is essentially sociology in the past tense, the sociology of earlier societies rather than our current one. Bad sociology makes for bad history. And with American high schoolers getting virtually no education in sociology whatsoever, they end up with no substantive understanding of American society and how that society has changed. With high school sociology non-existent and high school history more textbook-bound and focused on rote memorization than any other subject, students' conceptions of American history becomes superficial. So superficial in fact that one in five American teen do not know the country we won our independence from and thinking the Vietnam War was fought between North and South Korea is a common misconception (Loewen 2007:200; Marist Poll 2010).

Thus, with Loewen's inspiration and the memory of my own extraordinary teachers in high school, I was driven to the idea of giving teens a much higher quality of social studies, one that was properly sociological and that would help adolescents (particularly disadvantaged ones) analyze and react more effectively to the troubles in their world. Yet in spite of the fact that I initially was drawn to teaching at a high school, I very quickly realized the limitations of a high school environment, particularly if one wishes to teach sociology or a more sociologically oriented history. Classrooms offer an audience of a few hundred each year at most, and school environments have become so toxic that a third of all teachers quit within three years (Kopkowski 2008). But in late 2009, I had the pleasure of working at a television show in New York for a semester, which awoke within me this long-latent love of video production. This love

merged with my desire for a more empowering social studies education. And thus in late 2010, the idea for *Jon Phoenix, Government Guru* was born: A show that could do for the social sciences what *Bill Nye the Science Guy* had done for the physical sciences.

### ***The Screenwriting Process***

Having an idea for a show is only the first step in the process. The next challenge was creating a screenplay that could embody the principle of empowerment through social science education. The pilot script that got developed reflects the fact that the idea for this program that has evolved somewhat since its inception and been modified by the crucible of experience. For at the time the pilot was written (mid 2011), my knowledge of sociology and critical pedagogy was less developed than it is now. Nevertheless I was not a complete novice at the time to critical education. I had read Freire's critique of traditional pedagogy (Freire 2000) as well as Loewen's indictment of history education, and I had the experience of my own sociology training to guide in terms of the sorts of things typically taught in a sociology course. While I had not yet read or assimilated Bandura's social cognitive theory, I had at least some inkling at the time as to the importance of efficacy. Yet while I knew that there was some distinctly sociological way of looking at the world, I was not yet clear on what the component elements of sociological thinking were. Indeed, my sociology courses had never covered that.

Thus the screenplay that I wrote was a product of my experiences and the person I was at the time. As such, the screenplay reflected both the potential of a nascent idea as well as other elements that would later be seen as drawbacks. It began with components that were familiar to me; since I had done presentations on it before and felt familiar enough with the subject, I chose the history of Ancient Greece as the first episode's topic. I drew upon my knowledge of the sociology of Greek society to put together a historical materialist analysis of Ancient Greece, which was to be presented across several scenes in the episode. The explicit *theme* of the first episode was my search for an understanding as to why classical Greece was home to such great innovation. The *story* of that pilot (and answer to that question) was how certain material factors lead to the rise of a Greek oligarchy, which the lower classes in certain areas and under certain conditions managed to overthrow and replace with democracy. This sociological exploration of a historical topic meanwhile was combined with a very open critique of conventional "banking" methods of education. This is depicted in an opening scene where I contrast the style of teaching to come in the rest of the episode with the rote memorization typical of most history classes. With this combination, I hoped to kill two birds with one stone: Teach the sociology of Ancient Greece, and use that lesson to model what a more empowering history education could look like.

### ***Plotlines, Segments, and Characters***

By the end of the screenwriting process, the pilot episode combined the sociology component with the critique of history education in the following academic plot:

1. A quirky host (me) gets introduced. I begin by discussing the importance of history
2. I ask why is history the least popular subject in American public schools? A scene follows where an incompetent teacher is shown berating her kids for failing a multiple-choice test.
3. I lure the teacher out of the room and share with the students in the history class the meaning of a *real* history education: One that looks at why things happened (not just what happened) and what we can learn from the past and apply to our present.

4. I transition to the discussion of Classical Greece, in order to give an “example” of what real history education looks like
5. I discuss how technological and geographic factors shaped Ancient Greek civilization, including how they resulted in a certain kind of economic system based on slavery
6. I break down the Ancient Greek world into its component social classes, and discuss the economic dynamics of the classical Greek economy, including the tendency for small peasant farmers to gradually fall into debt bondage and slavery
7. I discuss how the economic interests of different classes led to different types of political action, including the formation of oligarchies and democracies
8. I discuss Athenian direct democracy and how its use of sortition made it very different from republics that use elections instead
9. I discuss how rising debt led to debt rebellions and protests, which in some but not all cases led to democracies. I discuss why some Greek city states with debt bondage became democratic, and why others did not
10. A final epilogue (set in the same area as the opening scene) returns to the idea of how a real history education should focus on the “why” and not just the “what.” And after a brief recap of some of the accomplishments that accrued to the Greeks who asked “why” (i.e., discoveries that were millennia ahead of their time), I end on an exhortation for the audience to “love learning”

While the academic scenes by far constituted the bulk of the screenplay (40 out of the 57 pages), only half the 22 scenes in the original script were academic. In the interests of entertainment, the original script interspersed the academic scenes with ten short comedic scenes<sup>9</sup>, including a satirical *Crossfire*-style debate, a parody of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and a version of *A Prairie Home Companion*’s ketchup advisory board segment. As a tribute to *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, the script also included a satirical take on home science experiments (titled “Home History Experiments”) and a music video towards the end of the episode. Each of these comedic segments was written in order to fit with the wider academic story. For example, the music video was of the *Song of Seikilos*, a Greek song that happens to be the oldest complete song in existence, while the *Space Odyssey* parody lampooned the discovery of the alphabet.

The comedic segments required the creation of several minor characters that were created specifically for comic effect. While some of these were episode specific, I hoped when I wrote the script that at least some of these characters would return in future episodes. Comedic characters included Katie the Kardashian, a parody of celebrities and celebrity culture, Jenkins and Fern, a pompous congressman and naively ineffective activist respectively who squared off in the debate scene, and a weirdly “cheery host” who would demonstrate wildly impossible “home experiments” in the “Home History Experiments” scene. This last character was meant to satirize the disingenuous and candy-coated sort of happiness often found in conventional tween programming, and was actually the first character I created.

These comic characters were played by the same actors that appeared in the background of the academic scenes. While the thespians in the academic scenes would occasionally act out something related to what the host was saying, the script did not really have any characters in the academic scene that would last beyond the pilot. The only partial exception was the character

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<sup>9</sup> The eleventh non-academic scene was the opening graphics and theme song

labeled “Cece” in the script, who I considered turning into a sidekick of the host. But since the script had already grown to 57 pages when this idea was considered, I figured to leave any possible character development to a future episode.

### ***The Production Process***

The pilot was produced in and around Northeastern University, using equipment borrowed from the school. The thespians were recruited with a casting call posted on the website NewEnglandFilm.com. Given how I lacked the money to make a very elaborate production, I ended up using an exceedingly simplistic set: Tables set up with different colored satin tablecloths in front of black curtains. Other scenes were shot in front of a green screen or outside in the Back Bay Fens (a local park). Most of the costumes and props were equally low tech: Ancient Greek tunics were made using white sheets and safety pins, and the spaceship in scenes 10-12 was just spray-painted cardboard boxes taped together. The only relatively complex physical article in the entire pilot was the host’s costume; as a tribute to Bill Nye, but in an attempt to nevertheless show my own style, I purchased a cotton twill lab coat and tie-dyed it in my bathtub. The total cost of props, costumes, and set design was around \$500, which was roughly all I could afford at the time.

When production started, the only video production experience I had was working at *The Colbert Report* and one college class on production. Nevertheless, I was able to recruit a team of people who were interested enough in my project and script that they helped me out with the production. The key members at the time were Katie Gilroy, a fellow intern from *Colbert*, and Chris Teubner, an employee at the Northeastern studios with two decades of lighting and cinematography experience in Hollywood. Later, Emmy-award winning TV editor Mike Wiseman would begin assisting me with the extremely lengthy editing process once I began graduate school. Other members of the team included the thespians, extras, as well as friends and former classmates who were willing at different times to help out with camera work. That said, in spite of the help, I had to shoot several of the scenes by myself, with no other equipment but a camera, tripod, and a lavalier microphone.

And of course like all productions, the script changed during the shooting process, sometimes dramatically. The most significant changes were that some of the comic scenes (scenes 7, 8, and 17) were shortened or cut entirely, while scene 19 (the five minute satirical debate scene) will be cut into three segments and interspersed between other academic scenes. This will help create a desired pacing within the final product, similar to that of *Bill Nye*.

## **Critique of the Pilot Episode**

### ***Sociological Content***

How does the pilot match up to the guidelines suggested by the Expanded-SI model? Since the pilot was created before the model was remotely conceived of, it would have been highly improbable for the episode to meet every requirement of the model. But while there are some major gaps and omissions that must be corrected in future episodes, the script nevertheless managed to incorporate many of the E-SI’s suggestions.

The main argument of the E-SI model is that to teach sociology effectively, an instructor has to model how knowledge of sociological factors can lead to more effective action, which increases the students’ efficacy as the learners discover new solutions to previously intractable

problems. On the whole, I would say that the pilot met this requirement, but did so nowhere near as clearly as it could have. Part of the reason for this judgment goes back to the script, which as stated earlier, combined a sociological analysis of classical Greece with a sociological critique of “banking-style” history education. And while sociological analysis of Greece was quite thorough, the critique of education could have been more developed.

Part of the reason for the relatively brief treatment of the education critique was that when the script was written, the scene critiquing education was seen more as a means to introduce the audience to the main subject, Ancient Greece. I felt very few people would watch a show that was stated from the outset to be about Ancient Greece, thus it was introduced obliquely, via a critique of history education that was revisited in the final epilogue scene. On the one hand, this combination worked; I as host made a cogent critique of history education overly focused on rote memorizing. The Ancient Greece portions of the show meanwhile overtly modeled how a sociological analysis led to a more interesting and informative history education, one that could be used to examine modern day events (like the then-recent mass protests in Greece). On the other hand though, the script in hindsight could have included at least one extra scene further developing the education critique. This scene could have included the host helping the students learn the things they could do to increase the quality of their own education, or could have made more explicit how the cognitive lessons from the Ancient Greece scenes could be used to advance self-directed learning. Alternatively, other possibilities could have included either splitting the pilot into two shorter episodes (one focused on Ancient Greece, the other on the education critique). Or the episode could have been inverted, such that the education critique became the main focus and the sociology of Ancient Greece was used mainly to provide examples backing up that critique’s argument.

Either way, there should have been more explicit modeling for the audience as to how the sociological knowledge of an ancient civilization could be useful in the audience’s lives. Though in consolation, the pilot script does provide a great deal of implicit modeling by the end of the episode as to what a proper history education and sociological analysis of society look like. The experience of producing this pilot meanwhile points to at least one significant advantage for the use of narrative: In episodes with a topic that is difficult for the host to introduce, a narrative involving the host and other characters can work the academic topic into the narrative, and then return to the narrative once the academic exposition is complete.

### ***Curricular Requirements***

In the previous chapter, the E-SI model was used to derive a list of several components to sociological thinking. Did the pilot script include these elements? Table 1 lists the components of sociological thinking, slightly reordered to compress redundant categories, and shows whether they were present in the pilot. On the one hand, in several areas, the pilot did quite well. It demonstrated historical materialism and social character theory, modeled collective efficacy, and with its segments critiquing education managed to hit somewhat upon the grown mindset and humanistic needs. At the same time however, it didn’t discuss divergent or convergent thinking, nor did it explore the sociological experimentation that might be needed at times to verify a sociological theory. As stated earlier, the arguably most important component was absent in that the pilot did not *explicitly* demonstrate how a sociological interpretation of reality could lead to more efficacious action. This may have in large part been due to fact that the pilot’s topic was a

2400 year old society, and it may be somewhat more difficult to demonstrate the relevance of applying sociology to that compared to applying sociology to a more contemporary problem.

The experience of creating this pilot episode raises the question as to how a sociology program can manage to cover these core components of sociological reasoning within an episode of reasonable length. It is distinctly possible that a sociology series would be more effective if it divides the effort across several episodes. Multi-episode arcs could also be developed which could apply different components of sociological thinking to the same topic over several shows to provide greater depth.

<b>Table 1: Sociological Thinking in <i>Jon Phoenix, Government Guru</i> Pilot</b>		
<b>Component of E-SI</b>	<b>In Pilot?</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Inductive Reasoning	Slightly	Used patterns in Greek society to theorize about that society
Theory Building	No	
Sociological Experimentation Methods	No	
Philosophy of Science	No	
Systems Theory	Indirectly	Discusses interactions between geography, technology, economics, and politics
Social Character Theory	Yes	Describes influence of class on behavior in Ancient Greece
Historical Materialism	Yes	Historical materialist analysis of Greek society
Dialectical Reasoning	No	
Sociological Humanism & The Existential Human Experience	Yes	Discusses the importance of asking why, and shows how banking style of education alienate students
Divergent Thinking	No	
Convergent Thinking	No	
Growth Mindset	Yes	Shows how success on standardized tests is not an adequate measure of intelligence
Demonstrates Efficacy of Sociological Knowledge	No	
Importance of Efficacy	No	
Modeled Self-Efficacy	Maybe	Host might self as model of self-efficacy
Modeled Individual Social Efficacy	Somewhat	Encourages students to ask “why” in order to further their own education
Modeled Collective Efficacy	Yes	Shows collective action taken by Greeks during debt rebellions



### ***Production Critique***

The single biggest issue with this pilot is its length. The original script was 57 pages long, reduced to 45 pages after cuts. With roughly one script page corresponding to one minute of screen time, a 45-minute pilot is roughly the right length for an hour-long show (with commercial breaks). But the expectation within the TV industry is that any non-drama TV show is supposed to be a half hour long, which translates into a roughly 22 minute long episode. Since the pilot script was written with each academic scene placed in a particular spot in order to tell the story of Ancient Greece, cutting the script to 22 pages does not seem like a possible solution.

Hour-long educational programs do exist, with *Sesame Street* being a notable and quite possibly only current example. For a longer edutainment program to get accepted however, it would have to be of an exceptionally high quality. Whether this pilot can meet that standard is debatable. On the one hand, production values in the pilot are not high. But on the other hand TV pilots are often more about selling the idea of the show rather than the pilot episode alone. The set is very low budget, yet the quality of the picture can possibly be improved with special effects. The only one potentially unresolvable problem with the pilot might be its audio. Since Northeastern lacked functioning boom stands that could hold a boom mic without the need of an assistant, many of the scenes were shot with lavalier mics only, and thus the sound quality in certain scenes is lower than desired. It remains to be seen how easy this technical problem will be to resolve.

### **The Plan for Future Episodes**

Thus, regardless of what ends up happening with this pilot, it may be useful to look ahead to the planning of future episodes. The pilot has provided a cornucopia of experience, both in terms of what works as well as what ought to be avoided. Combined with the insights of the Expanded SI model, I believe that it is more than possible to turn *Jon Phoenix, Government Guru* into a viable show to teach sociology to children.

While airing on television is a long-term goal, future episodes in the near term are likely to be web series. A key focus with series is quantity as well as quality, for building up a fan base requires the regular posting of new content (Williams 2013). In order for such a quantity of programming to be produced, new episodes will have to be exceedingly easy to produce, very low cost, and obviously with scripts much shorter than 57 pages. These imperatives suggest that the *Bill Nye* model might be more viable at least for the time being. And since web series videos are usually recommended to be 10 minutes or shorter (in order not to lose audience attention), I have the option of either creating shorter episodes, or producing regular television length episodes (22 minutes) and splitting them into several parts. This latter option might be useful for building a fan base, as single episodes can be split into multiple parts and released over time in order to generate interest.

That said, the challenge remains how does one adequately teach sociology in a 22 minute long television episode or a possibly 10 minute long web video? According to the E-SI model, the fundamental question is whether or not an audience sees or experiences how a sociological understanding of some issue can lead to greater ability to resolve that issue. The plotlines described in the previous chapter can still be employed. And rather than trying to fit 17 different criteria into a single episode, the web series can divide that effort across several episodes,

tailoring which criteria to cover based on their amenability to the topic at hand and ensure that every component of sociological thinking is covered multiple times over the course of a season.

New episodes will in all likelihood retain the overall pacing of the pilot, in that regardless of narrative, each episode will contain several academic segments interwoven with shorter comic ones. However, in order to fill the curricular gaps left by the pilot, new episodes of *Jon Phoenix, Government Guru* will include a series of new elements that will cover the other components of sociological thinking. These elements will include:

- A much more explicit focus at the start of the episode as to why the topic to be discussed is important
- In applicable episodes, an explicit comparison of different sociological and individualistic theories explaining a particular phenomenon, and an explanation as to why certain theories have been proven wrong over the years.
- At least one episode dedicated to the philosophy of science
- At least one episode dedicated to systems theory, and/or a more specific explication in every episode of how sociological forces emerge from the interactions of individuals and how they in turn affect those individuals
- An explicit mention of the importance of efficacy, and an explicit discussion as to how sociological interpretations open up new vistas of action
- *The Di-Con Game*, a segment that can be included towards the end of most episodes, which helps viewers develop divergent and convergent thinking. In this fast-paced skit, the host and say 4-5 characters analyze what they can do to resolve the problems discussed in the episode. Divergent thinking is used to generate solutions to the different aspects of the problem discussed in the episode, while convergent thinking is used to judge those proposed solutions as to their feasibility. I envision this segment and involving rapid-fire dialogue between the characters, with the script specifically written to incorporate comedic dialogue with the characters developing an awareness of their own ability to resolve the main problem of the episode. Each segment should ultimately produce a list of steps that both the characters and the audience can take to resolve a particular issue, both individually and collectively. And the episode can then possibly show the characters taking those steps

With these segments incorporated into shorter, streamlined, and easier to produce episodes, I hope to be able to create enough content to build up a fan base. This show can hopefully get enough funding from a network to air on PBS, or enough crowd-sourced support to continue as a web series.

## CHAPTER VI

### ASSESSING EDUTAINMENT EFFECTIVENES

The research involved in the production of an edutainment program usually involves two components: Formative research, done before the show with prospective audience members, helps clarify what the show should be like in order to best appeal to its target demographic. Evaluation research, done after production is completed, measures the effects of the show on its audience. Given how there are currently no other sociology edutainment programs to build upon, some of the assessment mechanisms proposed here will by definition have to be original. But nevertheless, there is a wellspring of knowledge on how other shows have carried out formative and evaluation research. That knowledge will be used to guide the assessment of this proposed program.

#### Proposed Formative Research

As stated in the literature review, the best formative research uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain access to the minds of the audience. In the television industry, qualitative formative research typically involves focus groups, while quantitative research involves surveys of audience opinion. To make *Jon Phoenix, Government Guru* as successful a program as possible, I intend to employ both types of research.

Unfortunately, high quality datasets on adolescent attitudes are remarkably difficult to find. The only major dataset of adolescent attitudes, the *Monitoring the Future* survey of 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, appears to focus predominantly on attitudes towards major institutions and drug/alcohol use (Johnston et al. 2012). It asks relatively few questions about personality, excludes 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders from question about political change or attitudes, and does not ask about teens' feelings toward significant personal topics, like curfews and how parents treat adolescents. Moreover, the fact that it is almost entirely a quantitative survey, with very few non-Likert questions, means that the survey about teens does not radiate much of a teen voice. A much more intimate survey of teens with open ended responses was done in the early 80's (Norman and Harris 1981), which later led to a book titled *The Private Life of the American Teen*. But while the survey in that book had 160,000 respondents and 100 in-depth interviews, its authors are not clear enough about their methods to satisfy me that their sampling procedure was flawless<sup>10</sup>.

Luckily, other companies such as Nielsen have done much more competent research into adolescent's most personal attitudes. Much of this research is done for the entertainment industry, or by companies looking to better sell their wares to an adolescent demographic. Thus, while they might not ask teens their opinions of sociology, they do ask about adolescent attitudes towards parents, school, and life, the sorts of programs adolescents would like to see on television and the characteristics teens are looking for in a TV show. This research however is

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the authors state that students completed the survey in their classrooms, but are silent about to how the classrooms or schools were selected. The authors state another questionnaire was prepared and administered to 857 individuals primarily in shopping malls, but the choice of venue suggests to me the possibility of voluntary response bias.

quite expensive. Thus, until I can raise the money necessary to access this data, my formative research will center on focus groups instead.

The focus group research for this show could involve me approaching some local high schools and recruiting say 25 student volunteers, split into four focus groups. Each focus group will be introduced to the concept of this show, asked the same sets of questions: What would an edutainment program like this have to be like for them to get interested in watching it? What are the types of shows they would like to see on TV that are not currently there? What are the main issues they consider important in their everyday lives? What would they like to see in a social science education program? What would or could this show do in order to be useful for them (and thus encourage viewership)? And how could the producers craft this show in order to maximize whatever utility teens would hope to get out of it? Essentially, the ultimate goal of this focus group is to figure out what makes adolescents “tick,” and what they would like a social science edutainment show to offer them.

## **Proposed Evaluation Research**

Edutainment in general cannot simply be evaluated on the basis of a simple pre- and post-viewing comparison. Viewers need to be assessed both before viewing the program and several months (or even years) afterwards to see if the program has any true long-term effect. Such an assessment however requires a consensus on what is to be measured and how. In this case, the “what” to be measured is in the expanded sociological imagination, but the “how” is somewhat hazier. Given the sociology pedagogy literature’s lack of consensus over what the sociological imagination is (discussed in Chapter 3), it is not surprising that there is no agreement as to the one “best” method of measuring it.

The most common trope within the literature on SI measurement is the focus on developing rubrics (Geertsen 2003) which are then used to evaluate student essays in college sociology classes (Eckstein et al. 1995; Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003; Rickles et al. 2013). Other methods discussed include in-class debates (Green and Klug 1990), questionnaires (Bengston and Hazzard 1990), scenario analysis (Brookfield 1997), and testing students’ ability to point out logical fallacies (Logan 1976). While not necessarily terrible, many of these measurement techniques are limited by their author’s conceptions of the SI and the fact that some measurement tools that work in classrooms may not work when evaluating video. Essay questions in particular are not very portable in that they require a fair amount of time and mental effort to both write and evaluate. Very few members of any audience would willingly write a whole essay critiquing a video, and even with incentives it seems likely that many respondents would only write the bare minimum necessary if they chose to write anything at all.

Thus, if a relatively easy to use and portable measurement tool is required, one that could be administered to a large number of people rapidly, the two most viable candidates are scenario analysis and a survey questionnaire. Both tools can be designed to require very little effort on the part of respondents. But designing them raises issues regarding the coding of responses and the sorts of questions to ask

### ***Scenario Analysis***

Scenario analysis asks respondents to interpret an ambiguous situation. While normally used to measure critical thinking and whether respondents can question their assumptions, this

tool can also be used to measure sociological reasoning. Specifically, by presenting a vague social situation that could be interpreted in individualistically or sociologically, scenario analysis can reveal whether respondents have moved beyond individualistic interpretations to a sociological understanding. Scenario analyses can also be designed quite flexibly, with sequences of scenario analyses allowing researchers to gauge different aspects of sociological reasoning, such as whether that reasoning extends to finding solutions to a proposed problem.

Here's one way a scenario analysis could be used: The researcher presents a respondent with a scene familiar to adolescents: A classroom where students learn only what they need to in order to pass the class, but neither learn nor study more substantively. In this scenario, the respondent could be asked why they believe the students are employing academic gamesmanship, and the responses coded based on whether they are sociological (i.e., focused on the structure of the school or classroom) or individualistic (i.e., blame the teacher or student laziness). This initial scenario could be grouped with similar scenarios where researchers can test whether changing a particular element of the original scene (i.e., the teacher quality in the fictional class improves, but gamesmanship remains) changes the nature of the responses. Additionally, in a less frenzied version of the Di-Con Game proposed in the previous chapter, the scenarios could also be linked with questions where respondents are asked to propose solutions to the problem at hand, or critique the proposed solutions of others. Again, the responses can be coded as to whether they focus on individualistic or sociological factors.

### ***Survey Questionnaire***

Aside from scenario analyses, a survey questionnaire with Likert item responses provides an easy way to assess sociological reasoning, as well as audience responses towards the edutainment program itself. The edutainment literature already highlights the importance of measuring audience attitudes towards the show, the emotions they felt while viewing it, as well as any identification audience members had with the main characters. The argument for these lines of questions is pretty straightforward. Without a para-social connection between characters and audience, it becomes much more difficult for the characters to serve as role models (Singhal and Rogers 1999:151–152). But if a survey in contrast wanted to measure the SI with Likert items, what sorts of questions should it ask?

The E-SI model proposes that there are four steps involved with the sociological thinking process (labeled in Figure 4 as S1-4): Analyzing a particular sociological phenomenon and its effects on individuals, analyzing the history of that phenomenon and how it's changing, projecting the possible ways that phenomenon could change in the future and what sorts of changes are desirable, and taking action in the present to bring about a desired end state of that phenomenon. Each step provides a line of Likert or short answer questions that can be asked to respondents in a questionnaire in order to gauge their level of sociological thinking. To measure the first segment of the process, a survey could ask a series of questions as to whether an individual believes in social forces or their effects on themselves and others. If the survey is tailored to a particular episode of the proposed show, it could also ask a series of comprehension questions to gauge whether the respondent remembers the sociology concepts discussed in the episode. Similarly, with the second step the survey can ask general questions about whether the respondent believes sociological phenomena can change are static or changing, along with questions measuring the comprehension of the concepts discussed in the relevant portion of the program. With the third step, the survey can ask whether they think the sociological problem

discussed in the show or sociological problems in general have solutions. Even if they do not know what those solutions are, the survey can still ask whether respondents have faith that solutions exist or are possible to create. Lastly, the survey can ask respondents about their outcome expectations regarding this phenomenon (i.e., do they human action in general can alter it) as well as measure respondents' hope, self-efficacy, individual social efficacy, and collective efficacy. This last series of questions can be considered the most important, and the show could arguably be considered a success if it manages to increase both sociology comprehension and efficacy over the long term.

Ultimately, the best measure of a show's effectiveness comes from comparative studies done over a long period of time. Ideally, the best way to measure the effects of this program would be to prepare several episodes, and show them to a representative sample of adolescents at regularly spaced intervals. A control group meanwhile would not see these episodes, and perhaps another experimental group would only view a single episode. A survey, containing scenario analyses and the various Likert items described above, would be administered before viewing the program to measure a baseline level of sociological thinking. Meanwhile a second survey, containing the above questions as well as questions regarding audience attitudes towards the show would be administered both immediately after the viewing, as well as one, three, six, and twelve months later. The follow-up questionnaires would be modified slightly, in that the scenario analyses would be altered to prevent learning effects. But many of the Likert questions could remain the same, albeit arranged in a different order. If the surveys reveal a significant increase in sociological thinking and efficacy, sustained over a lengthy period of time, then this show could be declared an edutainment success.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

#### **What Have We Learned? Why Does It Matter?**

This thesis began as an attempt to explore the uncharted territory of teaching sociology to teens using video. The search for answers led me to an in-depth exploration of edutainment, C. Wright Mills, sociology education, and more. Through it all, empowering people with sociology and the medium of video remained the guiding question.

What has been learned after so many months and years of research? The good news is, quite a lot: The classical sociological imagination of Mills, while revolutionary for its time, today falls short in its emancipatory mission. It is too focused on activism in a narrow academic sense, and does not address how to empower a wider public and move them to action. Luckily, social cognitive theory offers a means to fill this void. By demonstrating how “empowerment” (a rather vague term) can be better conceptualized as efficacy (one’s perceived ability to reach one’s goals), Bandura’s theory demonstrates how simply teaching about the sociological causes of phenomena is not enough. Rather, to increase efficacy, instructors must combine sociological knowledge about an issue with mastery experiences or social modeling that demonstrating how that knowledge leads to more effective action in resolving the issue. Sociological thinking thus gets presented to students as an innovation that can increase one’s efficacy rather than as simply another body of inert facts to be memorized.

This knowledge can be directly applied to a sociology edutainment series, as a cast can demonstrate how sociological reasoning helps characters overcome obstacles. Such a series could either integrate the academic content into a wider narrative or use a minimal narrative (i.e., a quirky host presenting content) in order to better emphasize the academic content. But regardless of format, every episode of this series could turn some sociological issue into the main topic, its history and potential futures into a story. Storylines can contrast positive and negative role models who experience different levels of success based on whether they have an intelligent sociological interpretation of their problems. A transitional character meanwhile can either be shown as adopting the perspective on the positive one, or the audience can be made to understand its own role *as* the transitional character. I documented my own efforts to create a show based on this model, a project which while far from completed has great potential.

Now why does this matter? On the one hand the research topic of television and sociology education seems harrowingly specialized. Yet this research can have a much broader applicability beyond a single artistic production. For fundamentally, this research is about adolescents and what our society does to them. Our youth enter their teenage years usually optimistic and brimming with a great deal of hope and optimism (Johnston et al. 2012; Norman and Harris 1981; Pew Research Center 2010). But by the time these teens reach adulthood, some portion of them will have their hopes pulverized. Others will have been set on a life course that will pulverize their hopes in the future but don’t realize it yet. These are the consequences when the developmental drive of adolescents, that of self-definition, clashes with a society that is polarized and cannot offer equal opportunity to all of them. Thus, as stated in earlier chapters, the teenage years are when those permanent patterns of adulthood are forged by both sociological factors and the teens themselves. If adolescence is a time of conflict, that conflict is

primarily sociological, as some teens are painfully forced to define themselves “downward” and lower their aspirations.

Because of this conflict, sociologist and theorizer of adolescence Edgar Friedenberg (1969) argues that teenagers are (to use a religious term) looking for a certain kind of “grace” in these formative years and often do not find it. They want that kind of information, knowledge, and guidance that will help them understand their world without taking away their power, right, or ability to define themselves in it. But that desire for transcendence and self-actualization, which is innate to all humans, conflicts with the stratification and polarization of our class society. Therefore, there exists a system-level need to either coerce or mold teenagers in particular ways in order to manage this conflict and reproduce society close to its current state. If this did not take place, and the innate drive towards self-actualization remained unaltered, society would no doubt be reproduced along very different lines. But the molding *does* take place, and for reasons suggested in Chapter 2, many adolescents are unlikely to find the sort of “grace” they’re looking for. For many teens, the results include tuning out from school, herd conformity, running away, and day-to-day resistance, sometimes all within in the same person.

The great promise of this research is that it openly conceives of sociology as an intervention in this process. The great potential of the expanded sociological imagination is that its focus on efficacy can teach teens how to persevere in the face of adversity while its focus on sociological analysis helps teens learn the typically hidden causes of that adversity. Together, these two components can help an adolescent see how they fit into a vast societal cosmos and how to navigate it. The sociological efficacy of the E-SI is a “habit of mind” (to use Mills’ phrase) that can help teens find those hidden solutions to the sociological challenge of adolescence that let them keep their integrity intact. Combined with the power of video, which already transformed early childhood education with shows like *Sesame Street*, this habit of mind could be shared with teenagers around the world. This thesis shows that such an enterprise is imminently possible; it may require a reconceptualization of the SI and more social modeling than most teachers are used to providing, but it’s possible nonetheless.

## **Recommendations for Stakeholders**

What of other audiences, aside from sociology edutainment producers? Can they benefit from this research as well? I believe they can, that the conclusions from this analysis can be applicable for a broad swatch of constituencies related to sociology and education. Some of the relevant conclusions for these stakeholders are summarized below, along with recommendations suggested by this research.

### ***Sociologists***

Sociologists since Mills have been debating the role of sociology and what it is supposed to accomplish. While the classical conception of the SI was limited given its haziness over what the SI was supposed to accomplish, the E-SI clarifies the matter greatly: The purpose of the sociological imagination is to increase efficacy so that those who use it can better persevere and navigate the adversities or challenges they face. Moreover, as stated in an earlier chapter the E-SI model resolves the longstanding debates between instrumental and reflexive sociologists over the role of public sociology. The purpose of public sociology becomes raising the efficacy of wider publics and helping them take the action necessary to resolve the sociological issues in their own



lives. With this backbone the subfield can avoid degenerating into an unscientific and purely academic discourse.

This research recommends that the E-SI model be more widely promulgated, particularly in introductory sociology textbooks. Short of that, sociology organizations and instructors can more explicitly discuss the importance and role of sociological thinking in raising efficacy, which is a key ingredient to perseverance.

### ***Undergraduate Sociology Educators***

Most introductory sociology courses have a common format: A single teacher (often a graduate student) lectures, usually from a power-point presentation, to a large class of 50-150 students. Unfortunately, this thesis suggests that this common classroom format may not be an effective teaching method.

Using Bandura's framework, the conventional lecture based sociology class can be critiqued as being very heavy on social persuasion but very light on either mastery experiences or social modeling. Lecture classes present sociology as a list of jargon or a mass of inert knowledge to be memorized. Standard sociology textbooks make the same mistake, with the added problem that many textbooks cover such a wide breadth of material that no professor can cover competently in a single semester. Grades in these classes are typically based on multiple choice tests or writing a somewhat artificial paper that serves little purpose outside of the classroom. Either method however all but guarantees that the majority of students will lose most of their sociology knowledge once they are no longer required to remember it.

Thankfully, this thesis offers many recommendations that could improve teaching undergraduates. This research suggests that efficacy has to be integrated into the sociology curriculum as a core goal. Rather than frame sociology as yet another mass of facts to learn, sociology should be articulated as an innovative way of looking at reality that increases one's power and perseverance in dealing with adversity. Such a conception could convince many non-sociology majors to value the course for something more than filling a graduation requirement.

Yet for efficacy to truly be the guiding principle of sociology education, introductory sociology professors will have to move beyond power point lectures. For even when entertaining and presented by a charismatic presenter, the social persuasion of such lectures is a poor augmentor of efficacy compared to modeling and especially mastery experiences. At the very least, professors ought to integrate social modeling into their curriculum by *demonstrating how a sociological interpretation can lead to more effective action and the ability to find solutions to social problems*. But beyond this, it is even more strongly recommended that *providing mastery experiences to reinforce this above point becomes the standard modus operandi of sociology classrooms*. There are numerous this can be done, and many of the best ways will require students to do something more active than just sit at a desk and take notes. Perhaps professors could give their students activities where they would have to use their sociological knowledge to generate solutions to particular social problems. For some select problems, students could then go work (perhaps as a class) trying to implement some of their proposed solutions, turning once abstract ideas into concrete action aimed at accomplishing some sort of change. Such efforts may or may not be successful, but either way they can provide an incredible learning experience, particularly in using sociology to analyze how to advance one's goals in our social world.

Additionally, this research also suggests that introductory sociology introduce students to inductive reasoning, theory building, and sociology experimentation from the start. Looking for

patterns in the world around us, creating a theory based on these patterns, and testing the theory to verify whether or not the interpretation is accurate is crucial for a properly scientific sociology. And if action to resolve a social problem forms one side of sociology's intellectual coinage, these three theoretical elements form the other. Such activities could be integrated into an introductory sociology syllabus along with the direct experiences suggested in the previous paragraph.

While introductory sociology textbooks have created this expectation that Sociology 101 is supposed to be survey course, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that there are other ways of teaching introductory sociology. Moreover, breadth in a sociology class typically comes at the expense of depth. Undergraduate sociology programs therefore might want to consider some alternatives. At the very least, a one-semester survey course could be redesigned to span two semesters instead (i.e., Sociology 101 and 102). This would greatly lessen the pressure on professors to rush through too much material in too little time, and yield more opportunity for activities beyond conventional lectures that are better creators of mastery experiences. Alternatively, if an extension is not possible, Sociology 101 could be redesigned to cover fewer topics with more depth. Sociology departments might want to also consider either creating a separate course on sociological thinking, which would teach in depth the 17 elements discussed in Table 1 and help students develop the sociological perspective that makes sociological knowledge possible. Though if some departments decided that breadth of sociology knowledge is still a desirable outcome for an introductory sociology class, the contents of a sociological thinking course could probably be merged into a yearlong introductory class.

### ***High School Sociology Educators***

High school sociology is almost non-existent. Though it is slightly more prevalent now than it was a few years ago, in schools where it does exist, sociology tends to be overly textbook dependent, opening up the possibility of replicating the problems found in public school history classes (DeCesare 2006; Loewen 2007:301–339). The ASA meanwhile remains hard at work trying to create an AP Sociology exam, which would likely boost high school interest in sociology significantly. The fact that high school sociology is still in its infancy means that steps can be taken today to avoid repeating in high school the mistakes of high school history or college sociology classes. If Sociology 101 at a college level is too lecture based and too focused on digesting inert factoids, it be even more problematic to push those flaws on to adolescents.

Luckily, this research suggests a potential outline for both an AP Sociology test and an AP Sociology course. What would likely work best would be a year-long course that combines much of the breadth of a college level survey course with an *intensive* focus on sociological reasoning as delineated by the E-SI model. The course could be designed to work through the 17 core components of the E-SI in a logical order. In terms of teaching methods, the suggestions proposed above for college courses could also be applicable here. But as stated repeatedly before, the course must explicitly model and provide direct mastery experiences of using sociological knowledge to resolve outstanding social problems and thus increase efficacy.

Building on this vision, the AP Sociology exam could be structured in such a way that sociological *reasoning* is tested just as prominently as sociological *knowledge*. To measure the latter, an AP Sociology test could follow in the footsteps of the other AP social science exams and have a multiple choice section worth half the final grade with 50-75 questions. But, unlike the AP Psychology, US Government, and Comparative Government exams, the essay question

section that follows would be structured specifically to measure sociological reasoning rather than just knowledge alone. Based on my research, I would specifically suggest an essay section with three questions: One on theory building, one a scenario analysis, and one focused on problem solving. Similar to the AP History exams the first question could present students with an ambiguous sociological phenomenon, described through quotes from several scholarly sources using multiple explanations for the same phenomenon. Students would then be asked to come up with or identify at least two distinct theories to explain the same phenomenon, and to design an experiment that could test which theory is right. The second question would present an ambiguous scenario, and ask students to both come up with a sociological explanation and critique an alternative individualistic explanation. The final question could present a social problem and two low quality policy responses (one individualistic, the other sociological but of terrible quality). Again, students would be asked to critique these proposals, and then use their sociological reasoning to come up with a third, better solution, that incorporates any positives of the two earlier proposals while avoiding their mistakes. A test such as this would likely make it one of the longer AP exams (three hours instead of two, likely with an hour for Section 1 and two for Section 2) but it would also make it one of the most rigorous. The rigor would come from the fact that unlike many of the other AP social science exams, memorizing factoids from textbooks alone would not be enough to gain a good grade with these sorts of questions. Students would actually have to be able to think sociologically in order to succeed. Such a requirement could hopefully encourage a greater focus on sociological reasoning, both in high school and college level courses.

### ***Non-Sociology Edutainment Producers and Researchers***

There already is a terrific amount of research on edutainment, including how to integrate psychological theories like SCT with production. But although many adult edutainment programs focus on major social problems (like gender inequality) and even model collective efficacy, they often lack a sociological explanation for why the problems exist. As a result, some edutainment shows might ironically increase efficacy but decrease outcome expectations, as social problems are depicted as constants of society yet solvable.

One of the key findings of sociology is that social problems are not constant, but are related to the structure of society that is both constant changing and constantly being modified by its members. Thus while the psychological focus on adult edutainment programing is important and does not need to be diminished, edutainment producers should also consider including some sociological analyses of the social problems the episodes are focusing upon. Thus, the characters in the program can grow beyond fixing problems within a small set of families, but get depicted as gaining the knowledge necessary to take their quest for change to a higher level.

### **Future Development: Some Personal Plans**

The rise of the Internet has allowed small producers to circumvent the traditional gatekeepers within the television industry. Additionally, increasingly professional web series have come into existence, sponsored by web-only networks such as Netflix or Hulu. And while “independent television” has not yet reached the maturity of independent filmmaking, there are nevertheless many more opportunities today to create a new TV series than ever before. Thus, in

order to bring this television show to a wider audience my production team and I are going to pursue several possible routes.

In the near future, one of my main goals is to launch this show as a web series, perhaps posting a new sociology edutainment video on the Internet once every two weeks. These segments could either be stand-alone videos or be future episodes broken up into smaller parts. Either way, a premium will be on creating video that is high quality and exceptionally easy to produce, even with a skeleton crew. This would allow the production team to shoot perhaps a couple dozen short segments (2-5 minutes each) in bulk, which could then be released regularly to the web. Compared to the pilot, future episodes will also be much shorter (no more than 22 minutes), and segments will be shot in more natural environments and make greater use of a green screen. Rather than create a low quality set, which might detract from the wider program, it seems preferable to use no set at all until adequate funding can be secured to build a proper one. To find that funding, I will seek out both private and public grants (including a National Endowment for the Humanities development grant), sponsorship by a private, public, or online network, crowdsourcing, money from sociology organizations, and possibly selling education kits aimed at teachers once those have been developed.

In the longer term, I hope to have this television show picked up by a major television network for national distribution, provided said network does not interfere with the scientific integrity of the program. I also am working towards incorporating a non-profit production company. If everything goes well, the upcoming semester will be spent on screenwriting, and winter break dedicated to producing new segments. In February will be the 2015 Kidscreen Summit, an annual gathering of children's entertainment producers and studio executives. My hope is to attend that conference with at least one or two completed episodes that can be pitched to network buyers directly.

### ***Some Final Thoughts***

In an age where a remake of *Cosmos* attracts millions, and a sitcom about physicists (*Big Bang Theory*) gets renewed for another three seasons, sociology remains remarkably distant from the public consciousness. There are a variety of reasons for this, but perhaps one is that sociology has not been able to show the public a unified face. Burawoy's four types of sociology have at times been at odds with each other over what sociology is supposed to do, for who, and why.

If nothing else, it is hoped that this thesis can help sociology return to the promise Mills so eloquently described that is at the root of the discipline: Those habits of mind which let one see the ordinarily invisible realm of the social, and react to it in such a way as to empower oneself and others. Creating this perspective is the goal that motivates so many dedicated teachers of this subject, and if nothing else I hope that this thesis will clarify what exactly that goal is and how to reach it. With such things illuminated, the stage can be set for a new chapter in the saga of public sociology, one that turns society itself into a story that its members will be able to both understand and see themselves as a part of. Such an age could see sociology itself becoming part of the public discourse, as the characters of our film we call society become aware of themselves, and transform into active shapers of their own destinies.

It is a message I believe many adolescents would respond to, if for no other reason than because shaping one's destiny plays a big role at that age. And perhaps, like *Sesame Street* or *Mister Rogers* decades ago, this program will create a new consciousness, which could help a generation of optimistic youth challenge those forces that doom some of them to hopelessness. In

this way, adolescents could find that sense of self and integrity that will be their beacon as they enter adulthood.

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## VITA

Jon Cariba Phoenix has led a mildly unconventional life. After running away from an abusive home six days after graduating high school (the most excellent Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland), he was lucky enough to get a scholarship that let him study political science at Northeastern University. Though he spent most of college borderline broke and occasionally homeless, he somehow managed to survive with the help of friends, financial aid advisors, a former presidential candidate, working two jobs, and selling his body to medical research, where he became one of the first people to test an experimental AIDS vaccine (not kidding!). While in college, he interned at *The Colbert Report* (where his love of television production was sparked), prevented banks from evicting working class families (as part of a group called City Life), started a chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society, shot a pilot for a TV show, organized a tuition freeze petition (which passed!), participated in Occupy Boston (which didn't work out quite as well), and volunteered with the local anti-corruption watchdog, thus learning where the bodies were buried in Boston city politics. After graduating with a BA in 2007 and leaving Boston for Appalachia (a long time dream of his), he attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville for his Masters degree where he studied sociology, electoral movements, and how to change the world through television. He is currently running for office in his small town and trying to create a social movement in the process. When not campaigning, helping people in need, or fixing his vegetable oil car, he can occasionally be found teaching local children how to cook.