

Sociological Mindfulness: Reexamining Our Views

During the fall of every year, Saturdays, Sundays, and Monday nights are dominated by one thing; football. College teams play on Saturdays and the professionals take over on Sundays and Monday nights and millions upon millions of people watch. We gather at the stadiums, or huddle around our televisions to watch America's most popular sport blissfully unaware of the hidden themes that run through it. Most people watch the games with the thought that it is only a game and nothing more but in his book, *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation*, Michael Schwalbe urges us to think differently. Schwalbe wants us to look beyond the surface of things and see what is underneath to find out why things are the way they are. He calls this kind of thinking "sociological mindfulness" and he describes it as "the practice of tuning into how the social world works." (p. 3). He wants us to see what is for many the opposite side of our views in hopes that this type of thinking will produce better human beings and therefore a better society for us all. Before reading this book, I loved watching football and like most people I was unaware of the sociological themes that the games carries, I thought it was just a game. After reading this book however, I still love watching football but I have a much greater knowledge and perspective of how the social world works and I am able to recognize sociological patterns not only in the game but in real life as well. In this paper I use the game of football and its participants as a metaphor for our own society. A football organization is used to represent our society and its players are used to represent the society's citizens. I illustrate that by being sociologically mindful, we can see how sociological patterns can be recognized in the game of football and in real societies as well.

Early in his book, Schwalbe states that, "Every part of the social world exists only because of the ideas people embrace and act upon." (Schwalbe 17). Part of being sociologically

mindful means understanding that this is completely true. This is easy to see in everyday life, for example, why do we go to school? We go to school to get an education because we have embraced the idea that a higher education will lead to a better paying job and therefore a better life which is our society's idea of success. People hold onto and act upon these ideas of society because it helps them know what is right and what is wrong. So how is this represented in football? The football organization represents our society and in this society every person from the president on down to the towel boy has embraced the idea of success; winning. It is obvious that losing is wrong and winning is right in this society and the citizens will do whatever necessary to achieve their goal. Yes the social world exists because of ideas but the social world works only because of the patterns of activity that are amid at acting upon these ideas. Being sociologically mindful is seeing that the social world is a series of patterns that never ends. Each day we go to work and work with other to achieve the embraced idea of success and when this day is over the pattern begins again and it is the same in football. It is also easy to recognize patterns within patterns in football; each large pattern has smaller more intricate patterns within them. Offseason, preseason, season, offseason, preseason, season this pattern has been followed for over fifty years. And within this annual pattern there are smaller ones; games, practices, games, practices. And within these practices there are different drills that are repeated and different patterns of movements make up these drills. So, without the drills there could be no practice, without practice the team would have no success and without success a football organization cannot exist. The smallest patterns can help to make up the whole of a society.

One of Schwalbe's main aspects of being sociologically mindful is realizing that any choice we make affects many more people than ourselves. Our behaviors affect and are affected by other people we come into contact with. When we are sociologically mindful "We

might thereby see that many of our choices are not so personal, in that they have significant bearing on other, directly or indirectly.” (Schwalbe 65). Our actions ripple far beyond our own lives. For example, a simple choice of which car to buy can ripple far beyond what you may think. Suppose that instead of a fuel-efficient car, you decide to purchase a Hummer for its power and image of toughness. By doing this you have helped to contribute to global warming because of the massive amount of green house gases it emits. You have also helped increase The United States’ dependency on oil because of the massive amount of gasoline the Hummer requires. This continued dependency on oil may cause The United States to continue its pursuit of foreign oil in the world and this may lead to war with other nations also competing for oil, and war destroys societies. Once again football can mirror our society quite well. Every play, an offensive lineman is faced with a simple choice; to block or not block. If he blocks, he protects the most valuable player on any football team, the quarterback. If he protects his star quarterback the quarterback stays healthy and is able to perform well and lead the team to victory. If the team wins games, the organization makes money and everyone involved benefits and the organization thrives. On the other hand, if the lineman chooses not to block for his quarterback, his choice still ripples through the society but in a negative way. Without protection, the quarterback is injured by the opposing defensive player. The quarterback’s injuries are so severe that he is knocked out for the remainder of this season and the next. Without their best player, the team loses the rest of its games and the organization loses massive amounts of money. The team then goes into debt and is eventually disbanded. Not such a “personal” choice when approached that way.

Schwalbe also states that being sociologically mindful means looking beyond individualism and seeing “that individual achievement is an illusion.” (Schwalbe 59). Nothing in this world has and never will be achieved by one person alone, it takes many different

interactions from many different people. If you would have told me this before I read this book I would have disagreed. I would have told you that the most important thing to achieving something is personal desire but my views are much different now. Schwalbe's examples and logic proving otherwise are extremely compelling. Without others, how would we even know what we should strive to achieve, and without help from others you would never be able to achieve those goals. One example of how "personal" achievement is dependent on others and not on personal desire appears in my life. During high school I had trouble acquiring a job. I applied to dozens of different places without any success until a friend of mine helped me secure a job at the same local pizzeria where he worked. First of all, how did I even know that getting a job was the right thing to do? Without my parents telling me that a job would give me success I would not have even tried to get a job and without my friends help I would have probably continued to go on without a job. I asked my friend to ask the manager if he had any spots open to work and to tell him that I would be a good employee. Without even turning in an application I was hired. So you see that all of my personal desire did not even matter with the dozens of other applications I had submitted to different businesses because I was never even called for an interview. The only reason I secured that job was through social interaction with my friend and his social interaction with his boss. Through this social interaction I reached a "personal" achievement. This appears in football as well. Without the coaches telling the running backs that scoring touchdowns is good, the running backs would never know what to do, and without the quarterback giving him the ball or his linemen blocking for him, the running back would never have an opportunity to achieve this "personal" success.

When we are sociologically mindful we see that there are many more factors other than a person's desire or ability behind a person's success or lack of it, and most of these are out of

their control. "Achievement also depends on others giving us opportunities to develop and display our abilities." (Schwalbe 59), but sometimes these opportunities are not equally distributed among society, for reasons completely out of the person's control. This unequal distribution of opportunity is clearly displayed in our last reading *Ain't No Makin' It*, by Jay MacLeod. In *Ain't No Makin' It*, two groups of boys living in housing projects, The Brothers and The Hallway Hangers are each trying to work their way out of the lower class of society into the middle class and therefore a better life. However, many of them are denied work opportunities because of their current living situation and therefore remain stuck in a life of poverty. Due to their background, something completely out of their control, they are denied an opportunity to display and develop their abilities even though some of them may possess the skills and potential to achieve greater success than their wealthier peers. An example of this is seen in football as well in the situation of back-ups vs. starters. Imagine that there are two quarterbacks competing for the starting position at their college. One of the quarterbacks has slightly better skills than the other and may develop into a better NFL quarterback after college but his parents live across the country and are unable to contribute to the booster club. The less skilled quarterback however has parents that live five miles off campus and contribute large amounts of money to the booster club. Although he has lesser skills, the coach makes the quarterback with highly involved parents the starter, laying the foundation for unequal distribution of opportunities. While the starter has every opportunity to succeed, the back-up will be denied his chance for four years while he sits on the bench. Just like The Brothers and The Hallway Hangers, the back-up quarterback, who is more skilled and may have the potential to become a better player, is denied an opportunity to achieve success for reasons that are out of his control. This pattern is displayed all over the United States in people living in the projects and the football metaphor completes the cycle as

well. Since the back-up is denied the opportunity to succeed he will not be looked at as a good NFL prospect and will not move into the upper echelon of society, just as The Brothers and The Hallway Hangers will not move into the middle class.

To a sociologically ignorant person, this paper may seem silly and over analytical. They may respond with an answer such as, “It’s only a game! That’s it and that’s all.” This is the, perfect answer of a person who is not sociological mindful, and the answer I would have given before reading this book. Recognizing and understanding that these sociological patterns exist in the sport of football is being sociological mindful. In this paper, by no means have I tried to somehow say that football is bad, I just illustrated the way football and its participants can represent many of the same themes in our society, themes that I did not even know existed before I read *The Sociologically Examined Life*. Once I started thinking in a sociological mindful way, it became easy to recognize these patterns in football and this helped to recognize them in society as well. Now that Schwalbe has challenged me to look at football in a different way than before I read his book, I will continue to apply his way of thinking to more of my views, which is exactly what he hoped to achieve with his book.

Works Cited

MacLeod, Jay. Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood.

Second. Boulder: Westview Press, 2004.

Schwalbe, Michael. The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation. Fourth. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.