

Making the Familiar Strange: The Sociological Imagination and Religious Education

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Melissa James, Ph.D.

Abstract

In the mid- 20th century the concept of sociological imagination, coined by C. Wright Mills, created a significant and lasting shift within sociological engagement with the world. To employ the sociological imagination one must “make the familiar strange” whereby everyday experiences are seen as parts of larger social structures. This study draws on a content analysis of children’s religious education curricula focused on social justice and world religions read through a conceptual analysis of the sociological imagination and the relationship. This paper asks whether or not a more robust employment of the sociological imagination is warranted within children’s religious education.

Making the Familiar Strange: The Sociological Imagination and Religious Education

The sociological imagination is a term first coined in 1959 by C. Wright Mills, a 20th century American Sociologist. In this concept, Mills attempted to bridge the two primary foci of study, the macro asking questions of large scale institutions and systems, and the micro asking questions of individuals, agency, and relationships. For our purposes, the two key aspects of the sociological imagination central to our task here are the dual tasks of “making the familiar strange” and the connection between the individual and society. These two areas of insight of sociology continue to set the course for much of the sociological task since Mills.

The central task of making the familiar strange hearkens to the commitment of sociology stemming from the influences of modernity and enlightenment influences to scientifically study the world of human behavior and systems. In order to analyze the social world we must take a step back and look at it with open and critical eyes. Entering into a culture and asking questions about how relationships, culture, and social order operated were not new in Mills time. However, most of this work had been happening with anthropologists going into far off “exotic” cultures. Mills and his contemporaries argued that we must do that in our own setting in order to do the type of analysis that would lead to sociological insight. To make the familiar strange one analyzes their situation as though they were completely unfamiliar with their context would do so. Often times this is taught using the alien thought experiment wherein students are asked to imagine they are an extraterrestrial who is entering the student’s context for the first time. All of the sudden, simple and forgotten aspects of our world become interesting items for question—body language betrays relationships, interactions become understood as intricate cultural ritual. By naming and questioning even the most basic and taken for granted aspects of our context we begin to see things in new ways and offering deeper analysis.

The most significant contribution, many would argue, of Mills’ sociological imagination is the way he bridges the link between the micro and the macro, the personal and the social structures. Mills described this as the link between biography and history:

“The ability of understanding the intersection of one's own biography and other biographies with history and the present social structure you find yourself and others in. In essence, it is understanding the private in public terms” (Mills, 1959).

Mills is arguing that sociology allows us to see that an individual’s situation or problem can often be seen as linked to larger social problems. A family’s inability to pay their bills on a full time minimum wage job is taken out of the realm of personal problem or personal failure and seen as a micro-level expression of wider socio-political structures that shape the economics of wage labor. A ten year old receiving a diagnosis of Type 2 Diabetes is seen as it relates to national trends of childhood obesity and can be examined with questions related to the way class and race shape health outcomes of children.

While the concept of the sociological imagination has been expanded and employed by many and is a standard in introduction to sociology courses, it is not without

critique. Postcolonial theorists have also critiqued Mills' concept for its roots in modernity with a Euro-centric perspective and perpetuating the hegemonic understanding of the world (see Bahambra 2007). For example, Sociologist Gerardo Lanuza (2011) puts Mills' sociological imagination in conversation with Michel Foucault and argues that Mills' SI is a "totalizing analysis of society" (p. 2). For Lanuza, the sociological imagination is strengthened by a more complex understanding of power as found in Foucault and a critique of the assumption of understanding all of social structures as a total rather than a web of power relationships. In recent times, feminist sociologists such as Martha E. Thompson and Michael Armato (2012) have offered extensive works on the use of the sociological imagination to help people become "gender analysts" with the skills to "deconstruct competing definitions of important terms and ideas, assess how gender inequalities have persisted and how they have changed over time and evaluate which social actions and social changes promote social justice and empowerment" (p. 300). These efforts to reframe the sociological imagination in light of contemporary scholarship and critique suggest that this concept can continue to be useful for many applications including those within Religious Education.

Sociological Imagination and Religious Education

Nineteenth century Unitarian theologian William Ellery Channing famously wrote

"The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, But to stir up their own; Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly And steadily with their own; Not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire A fervent love of truth; Not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, But to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment. In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life."

When considering the purpose of religious education, the task of stirring up minds into ones that seek knowledge rather than an imposition of "arbitrary rules" has inspired religious educators much broader than Channing's own Unitarian ranks. This stirring up of minds involves providing the tools and resources for one to critically analyze one's own and others' assumptions and beliefs.

One of the central tasks of the sociological imagination is the ability to step outside of oneself to look anew at one's assumptions, surroundings, and contexts. Much of this task is reflective of the stages based in faith development theories. At the thirty-year mark of his influential work on faith development, James Fowler (2004) writes that faith development theory combines cognitive development (ala Piaget) and moral development (such as Kohlberg and I would add Gilligan). However that is not all there is to faith development. Fowler adds that theories of faith development have "made explicit the role of social perspective-taking (Selman)" (p. 420). Here we begin to see the overlap of the sociological imagination with faith development theories. More explicitly, however, we see confluence in what Kohlberg calls the constructive dimensions of faith development, in particular in the development of "Bounds of Social Awareness." This is described as "[t]he quality and extent of our capacity for both a deepening and widening of the imaginative construction of the perspectives of others and developing the capacity

for moral reasoning” (p. 420). Being able to analyze one’s own and others’ situations and place it in a broader context, connected to social issues is foundational for building the capacity to make the normative claims of ethical reasoning.

A critical application of sociological imagination to increase understanding of the perspectives of others moves us beyond tolerance or shallow multiculturalism. Theologian Boyung Lee (2010) contends that Religious Education pedagogy (for her, particularly Christian Religious Education) must move beyond multiculturalism, which she argues, does not challenge the model of one center with which marginalized groups and cultures interact. This echoes the post-colonial critique of the sociological imagination that challenges a notion of one overarching social structure as the center of our analysis. Lee argues that Religious Education must therefore move toward interculturality which focuses on paying attention to multiple voices both in their own right as well as in conversation with each other rather than solely in relation to the dominant group. Religious Education should have as its purpose “Liberating Interdependence.” She writes “to have *Liberating Interdependence* be the purpose of our pedagogy, religious educators need to ask whether our pedagogy brings the liberation of those who are the most marginalized among and beyond our community” (p. 291, emphasis in text). Using the critiques of the sociological imagination which decentralizes the totalizing sociological perspective and allows for multiple, interconnected understandings of relationships of micro and macro level players, we can add elements of Liberating Interdependence into Children’s Religious Education.

A critical employment of the sociological can bring these three perspectives, the stirring up of minds, an intercultural approach focused on “liberating interdependence” together. However, because of the deeply analytical nature of the sociological imagination, there are developmental limitations to its employment. It would be easy to dismiss the role of the sociological imagination in early childhood and elementary aged religious education due to their cognitive development stage. However, studies in empathy show us that the foundation for being able to step outside of oneself is laid very early. Like many Psychologists, Nicole McDonald and Daniel Messinger (2011) connect the development of empathy with moral reasoning and argue that the:

“the ability to empathize is important for promoting positive behaviors toward others and facilitating social interactions and relationships. Empathy is involved in the internalization of rules that can play a part in protecting others, and, significantly, it may be the mechanism that motivates the desire to help others, even at a cost to oneself. In addition, empathy plays an important role in becoming a socially competent person with meaningful social relationships.”¹ (19)

In other words, as children develop empathy they develop as relational and moral beings. McDonald and Messinger show that learning empathy begins in infancy and continues throughout the stages of development. Learning empathy involves a progressive understanding that other people have experiences different than one’s own, connecting

¹ McDonald and Messinger, p. 19

with and responding to another's distress, and being able to come to an understanding of the cause of that distress and respond not only to the immediate distress but the roots. As children develop empathy, they are, in essence, laying the foundation for employing the sociological imagination.

If one of the purposes of religious education is to equip participants with tools to critically engage with the world of religion in ways that allow them to enact their faith/spirituality in the world a critical and intentional use of the sociological imagination used in developmentally appropriate ways can provide a key link between religious education and the formation of social change agents rooted in their religious and spiritual tradition.

Sociological Imagination and Children's Curricula

Many of the core theoretical components such as fostering the ability to make connections with broader social issues and understanding texts and issues from perspectives other than one's own are present in many children's religious education curricula goals.

For the sake of this paper I analyzed two Unitarian Universalist curricula for their use of the sociological imagination. The first, "Picture Book World Religions" by Kate Tweedie Erslev, a religious educator since 1984, is a 15-session curriculum for grades Kindergarten through 2nd intended to be used in a congregational setting. The second, "In Our Hands: A Peace and Justice" was created in 1990 by the Peace and Social Justice Curriculum Team of the Unitarian Universalist Association and is still being used in congregations. "Though the In Our Hands" series has curricula for grades Kindergarten through Adult grade, my analysis is limited to the 4-6 grade curriculum which includes 16 sessions. Both curricula continue to be in use in Unitarian Universalist congregations throughout the United States.

Picture Book World Religions focuses on helping lower elementary-aged children learn about Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam through the use of picture books, themed classroom décor, and theme-based activities. World Religions curricula like this one are often placed in the context of a "roadmap" for the Unitarian Universalist children's education programs which rotate through some combination of the foci of World Religions, Unitarian Universalist Identity and History, Ethics and/or Justice, The Judeo-Christian heritage of the movement. I specifically analyzed a primary grades curriculum in order to see how foundational skills that would develop the ability to employ the sociological imagination are used. I coded the curriculum for use of language consistent with the task of the sociological imagination in both the instructions provided for the teachers as well as instructions and prompts to be given to the children and activities requiring the use of the sociological imagination and/or empathy building skills. The stated goal of the curriculum is "to introduce world religions through stories and allow young children to explore the differences and similarities to their own lives." The author has the philosophy that young children cannot "grasp abstract concepts of comparative religious studies" but through this curriculum Religious Educators can "help them begin a journey of understanding, tolerance and celebration for the diversity of human

expressions of faith.” These expressed goals seem largely in keeping with an age-appropriate application of the sociological imagination insofar as children are developing skills to step outside of their personal experience to think about their experiences critically and make connections with the experiences of others. Many of the picture books provide the children with the opportunity to learn about a faith or spiritual tradition presumably other than their home tradition through a story of a child in that tradition. This is an effective tool for helping children foster basic empathic skills through hearing and understanding the experience of others. However, when instructing the teachers how to talk with the children about the picture books, the author writes “spend a few moments, if possible, connecting the story to the larger picture of the faith.” Three out of the 15 lessons ask the children to connect the experiences of the story to their own experience or reflect on their own experience.

Surprisingly, both for the age group and the topic, this curriculum does not contain the word “imagination” or “imagine.” It uses the word “pretend” in 1 lesson where children are instructed to pretend to be a child of the tradition they are studying as an aid for the teacher to help them sit for a longer story. Overall, while the curriculum is age appropriate, it falls into the pattern many curricula focused on multiple world religions do of learning about the traditions rather than employing the sociological imagination. Because of the importance of developing religious literacy with attention to avoiding cultural appropriation, teaching about religious traditions outside of the expressed tradition of the community in which the education program is being held hold both challenges and promises. These challenges and promises can both be addressed using the sociological imagination.

The second curriculum for our consideration, “In Our Hands” is intended for slightly older children (9 to 12 years old) and therefore in my analysis I looked for the ways we would find the second focus of the sociological imagination: connecting biography with history. Children of this age are gaining cognitive and critical thinking skills that allow them to make larger connections. While not fully developed to understand all of the complexities of the relationship between micro- and macro-level concerns, I would expect curriculum, particularly curriculum explicitly focused on peace and justice, for this age to help children begin to make that connection. What I found instead was a strong focus on “making the familiar strange” rather than connecting biography and history. Throughout this curriculum, children are invited to participate in guided meditation that are most often phrased as “journeys of the imagination.” In these guided meditations they explore different situations they have faced or they have witnessed as an observer. In short, they examine them with the sociological imagination. These meditations are supported by discussions and other activities that continue to foster the skills of analysis of everyday situations and the development of empathy. However, where this curriculum misses out on vast opportunity to employ the sociological imagination is in its lack of connection between the experiences they are analyzing and wider social systems, privilege, or systems of oppression. They begin to bridge this divide in the final unit that focuses on being “stewards of the Earth” but fail to do so even when introducing concepts like prejudice and stereotypes.

What could the Sociological Imagination Do for Children's Religious Education Curricula?

Critical application of the sociological imagination and foundational skills which lay the path for children to develop such an imagination have significant potential to strengthen and enrich children's religious education curricula. In lower grades, curriculum should build in basic empathy skills and connection to thoughtful examining of one's own experience lay the foundation for being able to do deeper analysis and learning as the child develops. In curricula like the Picture Book World Religions framing the task not as learning about someone else but as understanding experiences of others and self are central to such a task. One primary way of doing this is by guiding discussion and thinking about the stories provided in terms of two key things: 1) Empathy for the characters of the books: questions about identifying their experiences and feelings help children learn to relate to the needs of others, questions about how the children may have responded to help or be a friend to the person help them develop empathic responses; 2) Connecting to similar experiences in the children's live, having the children be able to identify what is significant in the story and find corollaries in their own life help them develop skills around thinking about and analyzing their own experience. Teachers can take this further through questions about what the children/characters in the story would say about the child's experience.

In upper elementary, curricula should focus on helping children make the connection between biography and history. By continuing to develop the ability to think about one's own experience as an outsider this age can develop critical skills for analysis. Our task, then, is to help them then think about how the experience of one person relates not only to individuals but to larger social realities.

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