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"Penny-Wise, not Pound-Foolish"

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“Penny-Wise, not Pound-Foolish”

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Sociology 611: Paper #2

Professor Dillon

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Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Goffman are all familiar names in the world of Sociology. Although the four share a common passion for sociological materials; each of these theorists view, support, and explain different situations based on their own beliefs. The article, *Penny-Wise, Not Pound Foolish*, written by Stephanie Saul is an article about the lengths in which obese people will go to improve their physical health. The content in this article would be interpreted differently by each social theorist, but each would have several points and ideas to illustrate the story.

Karl Marx was a German theorist; born in 1818. Marx was highly interested in the material lives of individuals and how it effects social change. He believed that, “all the things in which you cannot do, your money can do” (Tucker, 1978) This relates to the article, *Penny-Wise, Not Pound Foolish* in the reality that obese American citizens believe that the money they spend to fix their dangerous health habits can cure their issues with their physical self. The Durham Diet Houses in North Carolina receive over \$50 million dollars a year from patients in order for them to change both their physical and emotional status for the better. The individual’s who believe they cannot change their negative habits alone spend money to receive treatment and participate in programs that may allow them to reach their health goals with support from others.

In a contrast to Marx, French social theorist Emile Durkheim is not interested in material and economic status of people; but highly intrigued by social order. Durkheim’s concept of *social integration* is described as, the extent in which individuals or groups are tied with society. *Social solidarity* results from these shared bonds and interactions between individuals. Several dieters who arrive in Durham develop such a strong tie to the community that they make the decision to stay. Franklin Wittenburg was one of the multiple patients that developed a strong social bond to Durham’s Diet House (Saul, 2005) The difficulties that individuals such as Mr. Wittenburg have with obesity and health is what Durkheim would describe as a *social problem*; which are thought to be socially “normal.” Obesity and eating issues are a part of social life and have an impact on society as a whole. An example of a way in which a social problem affects a community is relevant in Saul’s

article. The money that diet houses earn from the overweight American population's social problem has impacted the local economy of Durham, North Carolina in a positive way.

Another major traditional theorist is Max Weber. Similar to Marx, he wrote about *stratification*. Weber focused on both economic and non-economic resources and how they create class inequality. Weber is very involved in the concept of *social action*. He focuses on four ideal types(;)- two rational-actions and two non-rational actions. The four include; value-rational, instrumental, emotion, and tradition. The article, *Penny-Wise, Not Pound-Foolish*, involves the use of the *instrumental-rational action*. The dieter's are taking into effect the costs, along with the benefits of going to Durham for help improving their health. Costs that are considered include the expense of getting treated; as well as having to obtain the complete dedication to reaching a more stable medical state. The benefits generally outweigh the costs. Benefits of participating include(;) becoming thinner, obtaining an under-control blood pressure, and becoming more emotionally satisfied and happy with themselves.

Unlike Marx, Durkheim, and Weber; Erving Goffman was categorized as a contemporary social theorist; which is referring to those post 1940's. Erving Goffman was one of the theorists that focused on *social emergence and the presentation of self*. One of the concepts that he concentrated on was *stigmatization*. When someone is being stigmatized that person is considered to be "non-normal", due to having a physical deformity, disability, character blemish, or a specific group identity that is unable to be related to by some (Dillon, 2009) Many individuals who decide to take part in the Rice Diet Program in Durham, NC feel like they are being stigmatized. Those who are not overweight look at those who are, and discriminate because they may not be what the "norm" is for physical health.

Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are all very wise traditional social theorists(;), but to describe contemporary American society I would refer to concepts that arose from more recent individuals.

Two contemporary social theorists that I feel give the most insightful framework of the US society are; Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) and Erving Goffman (1922-1982). In present day America all individuals communicate through an array of symbols, gestures, and languages. Certain symbols and gestures indicate different emotions today. When someone is happy to see someone after a long period of time away, they may greet them with an embracing hug or kiss; while conversely, someone who is angry after a driver cuts them off may respond with a gesture or use of language that is not as kind. Blumer, who was a student of G.H. Mead referred to *social interaction* as the interpretation of positive or negative symbols, gestures, and the use of language. These are examples of social actions that are used on a daily basis by contemporary American society.

Relating to Blumer's focus on gestures and body interpretation is social theorist, Erving Goffman. He looks closely at the presentation of self in everyday life. "Whether in the classroom, the cafeteria, or on the street, and regardless of whether we want to communicate or not, we cannot stop communicating" (Goffman, 1959) "We may cease talking but our *body idiom* (body language and display) continues communicating with those around us. The ways we dress, stand, move, and speak are constantly being interpreted differently by others every day. Body symbolism and appearance is constantly judged, communicated, and perceived by all members of contemporary American society." Goffman, 1963).

Gestures, body language, and appearance are all what determine modern communication. This is why Goffman and Blumer display the most insightful framework for present day American society. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are all theorists who paved the way for contemporary social theorists; including Mead, Blumer and Goffman. Although all refer to different sociological concepts, they are similar in countless ways and will continue to be recognized heroes in the world of sociology for all eternity.

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