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OUTSIDERS AND JUSTICE CONSCIOUSNESS

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The foundations of my justice consciousness lie in two books that share the name "outsiders." I was introduced to S.E. Hinton's novel before I was a teenager and it was my first real contact with the "Greasers," the "Socs," and a world of juvenile delinquency divided by social class. Written by a 16-year-old girl around the time I was born, I think it was this book that initially sparked my fascination with juvenile delinquency and the study of crime. I pursued this interest in college and became concerned with inequality and the ways in which our social surroundings shape our choices and our life chances. Reading Howard S. Becker's classic statement of labeling theory in his version of *Outsiders* changed my perspective again and I have never looked at the world in quite the same way since.

Keywords: Deviance; Juvenile delinquency; S. E. Hinton; Howard Becker; Outsiders; Justice; Inequality; Gangs; Labels

I grew up in a rural area, the youngest of three sisters. We were a working class family and I was the first to aspire to attend a university. I lived a quiet childhood, a straight-laced girl who got good grades, made friends with other nice kids, and never got into real trouble. Although I knew such things existed, I never thought much about justice or injustice, crime or deviance. The idea of justice did not become a part of my consciousness until I read S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*.

I was 11 or 12 when my older sister passed on her copy of the Hinton book to me, claiming it was one of her favorite books and that I should read it. I'm not sure how she discovered it or who directed her to it. When I talked to her about it recently, she did not remember clearly the circumstances and only vaguely remembered the story told in the book. Apparently, it did not enter her justice consciousness to the same extent it did mine. But I will always be grateful that she shared the book and these characters with me.

In this fictional account, Hinton tells the story of seven teenage boys growing up in a rough world with few adults to care for them. They become each other's surrogate family and each is extremely loyal to the gang. Ponyboy Curtis, the youngest member of the gang, narrates the story. He tells us on the first page that he is a "greaser," from a tight-knit neighborhood on the East Side. Greasers are similar to hoods, he explains, and they get into trouble, steal things, and occasionally have a gang fight. The greasers mainly fight with the "Socs," the wealthier West Side kids who also make trouble but are more likely to have it overlooked and to get the benefit of the doubt from the rest of the community.

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Ponyboy lives with his brothers, Darry and Sodapop, and their makeshift family consists of four other boys from the neighborhood: Dally, Steve, Two-Bit and Johnny. Ponyboy freely admits that he and his friends deserve a lot of the trouble they get into and probably deserve even worse. I had little in common with Ponyboy and his friends yet I empathized with them. I could visualize each character, laugh at their jokes and feel their pain and confusion as they grew up in a world that had seemingly abandoned them at birth. They learned early on that life isn't fair and that even if they worked tirelessly, they would always be several steps behind the more privileged Socs. Ponyboy expresses his frustration and the feeling of powerlessness in their life circumstances in the following paragraph:

> "It ain't fair!" I cried passionately. "It ain't fair that we have all the rough breaks!" I didn't know exactly what I meant, but I was thinking about Johnny's father being a drunk and his mother a selfish slob, and Two-Bit's mother being a barmaid to support him and his kid sister after their father ran out on them, and Dally—wild, cunning Dally—turning into a hoodlum because he'd die if he didn't, and Steve—his hatred for his father coming out in his soft, bitter voice and the violence of his temper. Sodapop . . . a dropout so he could get a job and keep me in school, and Darry, getting old before his time trying to run a family and hold on to two jobs and never having any fun, while the Socs had so much spare time and money that they jumped us and each other for kicks, had beer blasts and river-bottom parties because they didn't know what else to do. Things were rough all over, all right. All over the East Side. It just didn't seem right to me. (Hinton, 1967, p. 43)

It didn't seem right to me, either. It was, perhaps, the first time I really thought about the inherent inequalities in the U.S. It was the first of many times that I learned to be grateful for my own life circumstances. Life isn't fair, I learned, but it could be much, much worse.

The greasers lived by their own set of rules, prizing loyalty to each other above all else. In their neighborhood, they learned to stick together, to avoid being caught, and to fight fair. They didn't have the best families, the best homes, the best grades, or the brightest futures but they did have each other. In the end, that was what counted most. They would always, no matter what the circumstances, take up for each other.

The Socs may as well have been from another planet as far as the greasers were concerned, so different were their lives. Ponyboy gets a glimpse into the life of a "big-time Soc" when he befriends Cherry, a popular cheerleader at his school. In one memorable evening, they talk freely and share their thoughts with each other, and Ponyboy is surprised and somewhat doubtful when Cherry tells him that the Soc life is not ideal and that: "Things are rough all over" (Hinton, 1967, p. 35). This becomes one of the recurring themes of the book as Ponyboy struggles to reconcile his view of the world with this new information.

I learned from Ponyboy that people can be discriminated against simply because of the circumstances into which they were born. He and his friends didn't ask to be born poor. They didn't choose to come from abusive families in a rough neighborhood. They longed for better, with little hope of getting it. As Ponyboy explained, "It wasn't fair for the Socs to have everything. We were as good as they were; it wasn't our fault we were greasers" (Hinton, 1967, p. 47). Even as they fought the Socs in a struggle for turf, and ultimately respect, they knew they might win the occasional battle but never the war. The war was largely between the economic classes, and: "you can't win against them no matter how hard you try, because they've got all the breaks and even whipping them isn't going to change that fact" (Hinton, 1967, p. 11). To figure out that the world is fundamentally unfair is a hard lesson to learn at a young age, but I got my first glimpse of this truth in reading Hinton's novel. It awakened my justice consciousness to the fact that injustice will always surround us; it struck a chord in me that resonates to this day.

A second book, also called *Outsiders*, went a long way toward shaping my justice consciousness in adulthood. This book, written by the U.S. sociologist Howard S. Becker, gave me new tools for thinking about juvenile delinquency, deviant behavior, and justice. It

helped me to understand how someone labeled an outsider may have a different view of the matter. Becker (1963) explains:

> But the person who is thus labeled an outsider may have a different view of the matter. He may not accept the rule by which he is being judged and may not regard those who judge him as either competent or legitimately entitled to do so. Hence, a second meaning of the term emerges: the rule-breaker may feel his judges are *outsiders* (p. 2).

In Becker's view, we are all outsiders in some situation or social group and others judge our behavior based upon their own standards. Power plays into the equation but we ultimately have little say about the labels others pin on us. Being labeled a greaser put in motion a process by which all Ponyboy's behavior would subsequently be judged, whether he consented to it or not.

In Hinton's book, Ponyboy resents being labeled a greaser. He believes that the Socs are no better than he and his friends but he also recognizes that their money and status in the community will always propel them to the top of any crowd, just as his lack of such resources will help to hold him down. He thinks in an aside to himself:

> What kind of world is it where all I have to be proud of is a reputation for being a hood, and greasy hair? I don't want to be a hood, but even if I don't steal things and mug people and get boozed up, I'm marked lousy (Hinton, 1967, p. 132).

Identified as greasers and treated accordingly, Ponyboy and his friends hope to someday find a comfortable place for themselves in society. Of the seven friends, some accept their fate without seeking a better future, some struggle to overcome the label and two pay the ultimate price, losing their lives before the book is over.

Hinton's story begins with Ponyboy being randomly jumped and beaten by a group of Socs out for thrills. His gang comes to his rescue but the stage is set for the escalating battle between the Socs and the greasers. After meeting Cherry and being seen with her in public, Ponyboy and Johnny are attacked by Cherry's drunk and jealous boyfriend and several of his Soc buddies. In the midst of the assault, Johnny ends up killing Cherry's boyfriend and he and Ponyboy go into hiding.

Johnny is a particularly vulnerable character in the book, alternately beaten or ignored by his parents, and suicidal by the age of 16. He is the gang's pet—everyone's favorite—and the friendship of the boys is the only good thing in his life. As Ponyboy describes, "If it hadn't been for the gang, Johnny would never have known what love and affection are" (Hinton, 1967, p. 12). For his part, Johnny worships Dally, finding much to admire in the hardest character in the book. The toughest and angriest boy in the gang, Dally had grown up largely on his own, roaming the rough streets of New York as a child, arrested by the age of 10. Ponyboy describes Dally as somewhat self-centered and focused on survival: "in his hard face there was character, pride, and a savage defiance of the world . . . It would be a miracle if Dally loved anything. The fight for self-preservation had hardened him beyond caring" (Hinton, 1967, p. 59). Yet, Dally cares about Johnny and risks his own life to save him from a burning building when the boys are in hiding and his hard façade crumbles when Johnny later dies from his injuries.

The class and neighborhood war between the Socs and the greasers comes to a head at a rumble organized between the two groups. They agree to fight each other without the use of weapons in order to blow off steam, to win bragging rights, and to claim ownership of territory within the city. Before the rumble, Ponyboy has a private conversation with Randy, a Soc, who shares his belief that the rumble will not solve anything and he tells Ponyboy that he is choosing not to participate. Like Cherry before him, Randy offers Ponyboy a different perspective, telling him that to fight is futile:

> You can't win even if you whip us. You'll still be where you were before—at the bottom. And we'll still be the lucky ones with all the breaks . . . We'll forget if you win, or if you don't. Greasers will still be greasers and Socs will still be Socs (Hinton, 1967, p. 117).

During their conversation, Ponyboy realizes that Randy is desperately unhappy and that life is not easy, even for Socs. He finally understands, "Socs were just guys after all. Things were rough all over, but it was better that way. That way you could tell the other guy was human too" (Hinton, 1967, p. 118).

As they prepare for the rumble, Ponyboy and his friends embrace the stereotypes and labels they live under, chanting to each other: "I am a greaser, a JD, a hood. I blacken the name of our fair city . . . a menace to society . . . victim of environment, underprivileged, rotten, no-count hood" (Hinton, 1967, p. 136). They beat the Socs at the rumble, but the elation is fleeting as they are all battered, bruised and broken, and basically no better off than they were before. Gang wars do not have the power to change social status in the larger community and they wake the next day with the same problems, fighting the same issues, still labeled as greasers.

When Johnny dies, the whole gang is devastated. Ponyboy sees Johnny's life as a set of unfortunate circumstances he was never able to overcome:

> Sixteen years on the streets and you can learn a lot. But all the wrong things, not the things you want to learn. Sixteen years on the streets and you can see a lot. But all the wrong sights, not the sights you want to see (Hinton, 1967, p. 122).

In the end, suicidal Johnny had wanted to live, to see better sights, to have better opportunities, but the choice was no longer his.

Dally, the toughest member of the gang, took Johnny's death the hardest. It was the one thing that could break him and he fell apart the only way he knew how. He robbed a store and pulled an unloaded gun on the police, prompting them to shoot and kill him. Ponyboy watches in horror as Dally goes down with a final look of triumph on his face: "And even as the policemen's guns spit fire into the night I knew that was what Dally wanted . . . Dally didn't die a hero. He died violent and young and desperate, just like we all knew he'd die someday" (Hinton, 1967, p. 154).

The deaths of their friends gave the remaining members of the gang plenty to grieve over and think about. Ponyboy spends time thinking about Bob, the Soc that Johnny killed, and wondering what he was like and how he had come to harbor the hatred that led him to attack greasers. He tried to imagine the different facets of Bob's personality—what had drawn Cherry to him, what had made Randy and the others follow him? He wondered about Bob's family and how they viewed the greasers who had ended his life:

> His parents let him run wild—because they loved him too much or too little? Did they hate us now? I hoped they hated us, that they weren't full of that pity-the-victims-of-environment junk the social workers kept handing Curly Shepard every time he got sent off to reform school. I'd rather have anybody's hate than their pity (Hinton, 1967, p. 162).

More than ever, after the deaths of his friends, Ponyboy looks to his brothers for support and motivation. He sees his older brother Darry working to overcome their circumstances and to make a better life for the three of them. Ponyboy admires his drive and views him as a good example to try to follow:

> He wasn't going to be any hood when he got old. He was going to get somewhere. Living the way we do would only make him more determined to get somewhere. That's why he's better than the rest of us, I thought. He's going somewhere. And I was going to be like him. I wasn't going to live in a lousy neighborhood all my life (Hinton, 1967, p. 138).

In the midst of the tragedy in their lives, Ponyboy consciously decides that he will do his best to overcome his environment and create better opportunities and better choices for himself. His social class and label will always influence how others view him and react to him, but he does not have to be a helpless pawn trapped by circumstances. The road may be harder for him than it will be for the Socs, but he can choose to travel down it. He can still find hope in the future.

As I have indicated, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* was one of the first books that really made me consider the importance of social structure and how the environment shapes the choices of individuals. The story gave me a personal glimpse into lives very different from my own. Reading Ponyboy's thoughts and sharing his perspective offered me new insights into the world of delinquency and juvenile gangs. It was a work of fiction, but the truths in it were unmistakable, even to my young consciousness.

In his *Outsiders*, Howard S. Becker shares a sociological perspective that helps to explain why individuals committing the same acts might be treated very differently. It depends on power, resources, and who feels he or she has been harmed by the act. Rules are created and applied according to the status of the individual; Hinton recognized this and showed us a vivid example in the greasers and the Socs and how the community reacted to them. Further, Becker argued in 1963 that we needed more research on delinquents and more focused accounts to help us understand their day-to-day reality. He explains:

> There are simply not enough studies that provide us with facts about the lives of deviants as they live them. Although there are a great many studies on juvenile delinquency, they are more likely to be based on court records than on direct observation. Many studies correlate the incidence of delinquency with such factors as kind of neighborhood, kind of family life, or kind of personality. Very few tell us in detail what a juvenile delinquent does in his daily round of activity and what he thinks about himself, his society, and his activities (Becker, 1963, p. 166).

Before I was born, a 16-year-old girl wrote a fictional account of delinquent boys that still speaks to me today. In creating sympathetic characters and showing them maneuvering through difficult situations, she offerered her young readers access to the very type of data that Becker suggests we should pay attention to. We know exactly what Ponyboy thinks about himself, his friends, and their place in society and we can see where he developed his ideas and perspectives. In sharing Ponyboy's world for a while, we can see our own more clearly. Personally, it was my first real glimpse into lives lacking strong adult figures or clear opportunities; lives filled with crime, violence, and surprisingly, hope. Johnny's last message to Ponyboy is one of optimism: "don't be so bugged over being a greaser. You still have a lot of time to make yourself be what you want. There's still lots of good in the world" (Hinton, 1967, p. 179).

At the end of her book, Hinton offers a wider lens on the story of the greasers. I now recognize this paragraph as an early glimpse into the sociological perspective that I would adopt in my career studying and teaching about young people in trouble. Although I did not realize it at the time I first read *The Outsiders*, the following lines—some of Ponyboys' last thoughts in the book—apparently sunk deep into my justice consciousness:

> Suddenly it wasn't only a personal thing to me. I could picture hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities, boys with black eyes who jumped at their own shadows. Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better. I could see boys going down under street lights because they were mean and tough and hated the world, and it was too late to tell them that there was still good in it, and they wouldn't believe you if you did. It was too vast a problem to be just a personal thing. There should be some help, someone should tell them before it was too late. Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then and wouldn't be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair oil he wore. It was important to me (Hinton, 1967, p. 179).

It was important to me, too. It still is. I hope it continues to be important to younger generations as they come of age.

My nephew is now 11. At the moment, his imagination has been captured by the books in the Harry Potter series; he has read each one several times and he eagerly awaits the next. I think for his 12th birthday I will encourage him to explore the world of the greasers and the Socs—of loyalty, friendship and courage in daunting circumstances. I will give him a copy of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and hope he begins to discover his own justice consciousness.

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Biography

Michelle Inderbitzin received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Oregon State University. Her research interests include juvenile corrections, juvenile justice, delinquency prevention, and issues of race, gender, and social class as they relate to justice decisions.