

CHARACTER AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

CHARACTER AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON:
AN INTERACTIONIST ANALYSIS OF SEMINARY LIFE

By Arthur McLuhan, M.A.

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Author: Arthur McLuhan

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ABSTRACT

In the social sciences, the dominant approach to the study of character—people’s essential interactional dispositions, especially of a moral and durable nature—has been to treat it as a set of objective dispositions lodged within the individual. This dissertation challenges the objectivist orthodoxy in the study of character by examining it from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993). Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic research in two Protestant Christian seminaries as an empirical case, I find that character is ultimately a matter of audience definition, a self-other dispositional designation achieved in social interaction. Three empirical papers examine specific aspects of the character-making process. The first paper considers character as a contingency influencing people’s trajectories of involvement in group life. The second paper examines how ministry students define and experience character formation in the seminary. The third paper analyzes how character problems are identified and responded to in the seminary.

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INTRODUCTION

Virtue, then, is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character [i.e., of ethos] results from habit [ethos]; hence its name ‘ethical’, slightly varied from ‘ethos’...We are by nature able to acquire them [virtues], and we are completed through habit...We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions....For what we do in our dealings with other people makes some of us just, some unjust; what we do in terrifying situations, and the habits of fear or confidence that we acquire, make some of us brave and others cowardly. The same is true of situations involving appetites and anger; for one or another sort of conduct in these situations makes some temperate and mild, others intemperate and irascible. To sum it up in a single account: a state [of character] results from [the repetition of] similar activities. That is why we must perform the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II

There is nothing original or profound about pursuing a study of character in itself. The study of character is not new. Indeed, as the passage from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* demonstrates, interest in character is quite old. The intellectual history associated with the development of the idea of character is a formidable one. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Elyot, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill are among the many notable figures who have had something to say about character as a feature of human reality. Despite the concept’s long history in Western social thought, however, the study of character is still a site of contested knowledge and a number of basic questions remain: What is character? Does character exist? How shall we know if it does? How should we study character and how does it work? Is it possible that character—something that is intimately aligned with

individuality and unique personhood—is actually a social phenomenon? This dissertation takes up the challenges posed by these questions.

Of course, some scholars would argue that most of the aforementioned questions have been adequately addressed. They would contend that character has an objective existence as set of dispositions lodged within the individual. Depending on the scholar's theoretical predilections, the conception of these character structures varies from a set of (1) robust and unified dispositions that become manifest in a consistent way across a variety of situations to a set of (2) weak and fragmented dispositions that are localized and situationally specific. Either way, character is treated as one of the structural determinants of human behaviour. Further, character is treated primarily as an individual phenomenon whose proper method of study is either through philosophical reflection or psychological experimentation.

However, by treating character as an objective essence, the propensity in the literature has been to conceptualize character in unduly individual and psychological terms as well as structural and deterministic terms. This dissertation argues that a symbolic interactionist conception of character, however, would differ markedly from the objectivist approach and would avoid its theoretical and conceptual inadequacies.

In three recent articles (Prus 2007a, 2007b, 2008), Prus calls on social researchers to begin to lay the conceptual foundation for an interactionist understanding of character and moral virtue as community based, interactionally achieved phenomena. Beyond a few exceptions (e.g., Goffman 1967; Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Holyfield and Fine 1997; Jonas 1999; Nack 2002), the concept of character has received relatively little

direct empirical attention from interactionists. However, while interactionists have not considered character in their writings in any sustained, comprehensive sense, they have much to offer to its study, especially with respect to their conceptions of self, identity, and role.

The symbolic interactionist approach that Herbert Blumer (1969) articulated has its philosophical foundations in the American pragmatist tradition. At the heart of an American pragmatist (Cooley, 1902; Dewey, 1922; Mead, 1934) conception of human group life is the primacy of activity, language, and interaction, as well as a rejection of all dualisms. This also includes a rejection of a sharp distinction between the individual and society, and this would also be the case in conceptualizing character. There are no characters developed in isolation; their development is based in social interaction. Moreover, just as analysts should be reluctant in conceiving character as an entirely individual phenomenon, they also should be wary of imposing deterministic and structural character frameworks so as to deny human agency.

This brings me to the purpose of this dissertation. What would an empirically grounded conception of character look like, one attentive to the interpretive features of human-lived experience? In attempting to provide a theoretical and methodological base from which to answer to this question, I draw heavily from Chicago school symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Prus 1996; Strauss 1993), rooted in the American pragmatist philosophy and social psychology of George Herbert Mead (1934). In what follows, I begin by (1) examining the origins and ordinary (i.e., everyday) definitions of the term “character.” This is followed by (2) a brief review of the traditional treatments

of character in the humanities and social sciences. Following this review is (3) an introduction to the interactionist approach to the study of human group life. Finally, (4) I present an overview of the three empirical papers that constitute the core of my analysis in this dissertation.

What is Character?

The word *character* is derived from the Greek *kharaktēr*, meaning an engraving or marking tool, and later used to describe a distinctive mark, impression, stamp, or quality of a thing. Thus, in its original sense, character refers to the process of making something distinctive or the actual attributes of distinction. These attributes are useful for distinguishing between things of a related nature (e.g., different types of coins), but they are also durable in the sense that they are engraved or impressed upon the thing and thus resistant to change. This first literal sense of character is relevant to our discussion, but character has since acquired other common meanings more germane to the present inquiry:

Character *noun* **1** the collective qualities or characteristics, esp. mental and moral, that distinguish a person or thing. **2** moral strength (*has a weak character*). **3** reputation (*a blot on her character*). – *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, Second Edition, 2004*

The term character has been extended into the social realm. Character is now often used to describe the qualities, traits, or attributes of individuals. The first meaning of character refers to the mental and moral qualities or attributes that distinguish individuals from one another, the second sense has to do with the perceived moral quality of those attributes, and the third with group definitions of self and other.

Character also has become conflated with other commonly used social concepts, such as personality, temperament, and disposition. While the accuracy and usefulness of some of these synonyms will be considered throughout the dissertation, they should be noted at the outset so that the reader may appreciate our starting point.

Character *noun* **1** (*a change of character*) personality, temperament, disposition, nature, individuality, identity, attributes, ethos, quality, calibre, constitution, make-up, cast, complexion. **2** (*a stain on her character*) reputation, repute, name, status, standing, position. **3** (*a man of character*) honour, integrity, uprightness, rectitude, moral fibre. – *The Penguin Thesaurus*, 2004

As used herein, the everyday conception of character refers to people's essential interactional dispositions, especially those of a durable and moral nature. A qualification of the use of the term *moral* is in order, however. In addition to the traditional sense of right and wrong good and bad behavior, desirable and undesirable, it is also useful to consider the way in which Durkheim (see his *Moral Education* and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) sometimes used the term.¹ That is, *moral* often became synonymous with *social*—that part of persons that distinguishes them from their base origins as individual species-humans. Individual species-humans were understood to be primarily self-interested, psychobiologically based beings, concerned with their survival through the satisfaction of their basic drives and appetites: acquiring food and shelter as well as procreating. For Durkheim, moral persons transcend the shackles of their

¹ Some readers may be more familiar with Durkheim, following Auguste Comte, the positivist and structural-functionalist (see, e.g., *The Division of Labor in Society* [1893], *The Rules of Sociological Method* [1895], and his seminal work *Suicide* [1897]). However, some readers may be surprised that Durkheim's later works (*Moral Education* [1903], *The Evolution of Educational Thought* [1905], *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912], and *Pragmatism and Sociology* [1914]) resonate with American pragmatist philosophy, especially the thought of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead (also see Joas, 1993; Prus, 2009; Stone and Farberman, 1967).

psychobiological origins by gaining some control over these appetites (i.e., through self-regulation) and acting in socially disciplined, responsible, and dutiful manners in order to become members of the greater social milieu.²

Thus, character involves people's more typical and obdurate ways of interacting with others, especially in terms of the regulation of their conduct in relation to the broader moral order(s) in which they are situated. It will be argued, then, that character is fundamentally a *dispositional designation* achieved in social interaction—not a set of objective, immutable traits—because it is ultimately enacted, interpreted, and attributed in a group context.³

Traditional Conceptions of Character in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Two disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have dominated the study of character, philosophy and psychology. Sociology has also made some contributions, but its tradition is much more limited in scope and substance. In order to establish the typical form and boundaries of the study of character, it is necessary to review the central features of each of these approaches.

² As will be pointed out in the dissertation, notions of right and wrong, good and bad, responsible and irresponsible are ultimately matters of social definition, situated in particular interactional contexts and life-worlds. Thus, morality, rather than being viewed in homogeneous, singularly pervasive terms, is best conceived of in terms of a “moral mosaic” which reflects those varying contexts and life-worlds that constitute society and the multiple perspectives that may be invoked by the actors located therein.

³ Some might object to this definition, noting that it does not include matters of solitary character (e.g., perseverance in the face of arduous circumstances). However, from an interactionist perspective the concept of truly solitary activity is problematic and untenable, for even in situations of isolation the individual actor is engaged in interaction with the roles of particular or generalized others by means of the reflexive self (Mead, 1934), and thus is never truly solitary.

As noted above, our modern Western conception of character can be traced back to the origins of Western social thought in classical Greek scholarship. A number of intellectual figures engaged the character concept, but it was Aristotle who would have the most enduring influence on our folk and scientific understandings of character.

For Aristotle, character is a stable, obdurate, and broad set of interrelated dispositions. These character traits or dispositions manifest themselves in corresponding types of human behaviour. Our characters, in large measure, are responsible for the consistency in our behaviours across time and situations. As Doris (1998: 506) states, “Aristotelian virtues are robust or substantially resistant to contrary pressures.” Further, the cultivation of the right dispositions is the key to living a good, admirable, and flourishing life. For example, in order to achieve this ideal, Aristotle argues that a number of dispositions must be acquired: courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, mildness, friendliness, truthfulness, wit, modesty, and righteousness. Much of the philosophical tradition since Aristotle has been about the identification and articulation of what desirable traits are required to live a good life and also to form a resilient defence against moral temptation, deficiency, and failure in the inevitable trying circumstances we will encounter. The specification of the virtues, therefore, is not just some abstract exercise; its value is in its practical utility. Aristotle (1999: 1103b28-30) was clear on this matter: “the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us. And so we must examine the right ways of acting.” Doris (1998: 512) summarizes the philosophical position this way: “reflecting on these ideals can help us become people who are, and do,

better: through reflection on moral exemplars, we may improve our own character and conduct.”

If philosophy has been primarily concerned with the *ought* of character, then psychology has been primarily concerned with the *is* of character (see Doris 2002), or the disinterested, objective, scientific analysis of character. Still, the influence of Aristotle’s virtue ethics, including the philosophical tradition it inspired, is evident in psychological approaches to character and “personality” as objective dispositions. As Doris (1998: 509) observes, “Personality and social psychologists standardly treat personality traits as dispositions productive of behavior, and philosophers have typically understood virtues along the same lines.” Indeed, the early approach to the psychological study of character conceived it as the stable, obdurate, and broad set of interrelated dispositions that would become produce trait-related behaviours across a variety of situations, much like Aristotle’s original formulation.

However, the early disciplinary unity in psychology concerning the precise nature of character was short-lived. Questions about the transsituational consistency of character arose after the publication of Hartshorne and May’s (1928) large study of 10 to 12-year-old school children which found inconsistency in moral behaviour across trait-relevant situations (e.g., honesty in one type of situation—on a test, for example—was not strongly correlated with honesty in another situation—in a game, for example). A number of other studies and theoretical critiques followed, arguing that situational factors were better predictors of behaviour than broad character traits.

The debate continues between these two camps—dispositionists and situationists. While the two approaches represent a variety of theoretical positions and empirical evidence, those details are largely tangential to the purpose of this dissertation. Suffice it to say that *dispositionists* subscribe to a psychological version of the stable, obdurate, and broad dispositions that Aristotle suggested. Whether the terminology used is “character” or “personality,” the traits thereof are deemed to be objective transsituational determinants of behaviour. *Situationists*, in contrast, challenge the existence of Aristotelian character traits, in the robust and transsituational sense, citing experimental studies that suggest that the structure of situations is a more powerful determinant of behaviour. Human knowing and acting, therefore, is not as morally consistent and unified across trait-relevant situations as the dispositionists claim. Still, beyond some exceptions (e.g., Harman 2009), situationists do not preclude the possibility of the existence of character traits entirely. Instead, the tendency has been to conceive them as a collection of fragmented, localized dispositions that are situationally specific rather than broadly transsituational (see Doris 2002).

However, more important for the purposes of this dissertation is that, whether one subscribes to the position of the dispositionists or the situationists, both of these camps are variants within the objectivist *character-as-dispositions* approach, one stressing broad dispositions, the other localized and inconsistent dispositions:

...although the situationist rejects the notion of robust traits effecting cross-situationally consistent behavior, she allows the possibility of temporally stable, situation-particular, “local” traits that may reflect dispositional differences among persons...systematically observed behavior, rather than suggesting evaluatively consistent personality structures, suggests instead fragmented personality

structures—evaluatively inconsistent associations of large numbers of local traits. (Doris 1998: 507-508)

Sociology also has an intellectual history in the study of character. In comparison with philosophy and psychology, however, the body of work is rather diminutive. A handful of monographs constitute the majority of the sociology of character corpus. Most notably, this includes Durkheim's (1902-3) *Moral Education*; Weber's (1904-5) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Fromm's (1941, 1947, 1955, 1962, 1970, 1976) work on social character; Adorno et al.'s (1950) *Authoritarian Personality*; Riesman et al.'s (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*; Gerth and Mills's (1953) *Character and Social Structure*; Sennett's (1977, 1998) *The Fall of Public Man* and *The Corrosion of Character*; Bourdieu's (1977, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) concept of *habitus*; and Bellah et al.'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart*.

Although these works are theoretically and empirically diverse, they all may be viewed as variants within the broader *social character* approach, which, in general terms, posits that membership in particular groups produces people with specific qualities of character. For example, Durkheim (1902-3) emphasizes the influence of the school during childhood, Weber (1904-5) religion, Riesman et al. (1950) population and technological change, Gerth and Mills (1953) social role taking, Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1992) participation, immersion, and trajectories in cultural fields, Sennett (1977, 1998) cultural and economic systems. Analytically, then, these theorists conceive of character in much the same manner as the traditional approaches in philosophy and psychology, as a set of objective dispositions that is lodged within the individual. The sociological caveat is that group membership produces and mediates these dispositions.

All three of the traditional approaches to the study of character have their limitations. The predominant philosophical theories are too moralistic, prescriptive, and abstract. The psychological theories are too individualistic, mechanistic, and atomistic. The common sociological theories are also too structural and deterministic in their emphases.⁴ So what are we left with? Herein lies the value of an interactionist conception of character.

Employing Goffman's (1967) essay "Where the Action is" as a conceptual reference point, there have been a few ethnographic studies in the interactionist tradition that have dealt with character in an explicit way (see Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Holyfield and Fine 1997; Jonas 1999). Although these studies are a welcome interpretivist alternative to the objectivist domination of the study of character, as a set they are much too limited a base upon which to construct an empirically grounded and comprehensive conception of character for sociology. Further, following Goffman, character in these studies has been defined in an arbitrarily narrow way, as in courage and composure in fateful situations. These studies do, however, attend to the interactionally constructed nature of character, and thus suggest potential directions an interactionist study of character could take.

The alternative to the social character approach that these interactionist contributions imply is one that treats character as a matter of audience definition rather than an objective set of qualities lodged in individuals. Consistent with the Chicago

⁴ While I could not locate any postmodernist / poststructuralist accounts of character, given their tendency to trivialize and diminish the relevance of the self (see Baudrillard 1983, 1988; Berman 1992; Gergen 1991; Lyotard 1984; Sica 1993), it is doubtful that any notion of a stable character would be considered to be possible.

school symbolic interactionist approach (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Strauss, 1993) to human group life, character, like deviance, is a social construction, a self-other designation that is defined, assessed, influenced, resisted, and experienced in everyday life. Thus, an analytic distinction can be made between habits, or dispositions, and character, or dispositional designations. The qualities of character that are attributed and responded to in everyday encounters are not necessarily a facsimile or reflection of some objective, psychobiological essences. Even when these dispositional designations are understood to more closely approximate “true” or “real” dispositions, they are apt to provide only a partial representation. That is, when people typify the characters of self and other, they generally are selective in what is and is not subsumed by their designations, focusing on what they view as the most salient or relevant qualities, not the full spectrum of dispositions that could possibly be conceived or named. Interpretation, deliberation, and negotiation are therefore essential to the character-making process. In what follows, the theoretical underpinnings and methodological orientation supporting this position are considered in more detail.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

[S]ociology has never had any alternative but to move eventually toward the interactionist perspective. (Maines 2001: 2)

This dissertation provides further evidence for Maines’s (2001) contention that symbolic interaction is the most viable approach for understanding the relationship between individuals and society. In order to establish the relevance of an interactionist approach to the study of character, its theoretical assumptions, core concepts, and methodological

orientation need to be examined. In what follows, I (1) describe the logico-deductive intellectual climate of the social sciences in which a nascent symbolic interactionism developed; (2) discuss Herbert Blumer's challenge to the positivist status quo; (3) address misplaced criticisms of the interactionist perspective; and (4) recognize interactionism's continuing relevance in contemporary sociology.

The Positivist-Interpretivist Debate

Rationalist, positivist emphases have dominated the social sciences since their inception in the 19th century. Most researchers following Auguste Comte (1787-1857), John Stuart Mill (1806-1877), Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) stress deductive analysis and the use of quantitative data to comprehend and examine the causes and connections between the phenomena under consideration.

Although some scholars have been concerned about developing theory in more abstract terms, a major objective of positivist research has been that of better predicting and controlling aspects of human behaviour and community life. A major attraction of logical positivism reflected the success that this methodological emphasis had achieved in the physical or natural sciences (Bittner 1973). It was anticipated that one might be able to shape human behaviour and community life by applying a parallel methodology and associated notions of cause and effect (independent and dependent variables) to the human subject matter.

Methodologically, once researchers proposed universal rules, principles, or models, analysts could test variants of related phenomena to see if, and to what extent,

these principals were valid or needed to be further qualified. The ensuing theory could be seen to have a “top-down” or deductive quality, where researchers typically engage in hypothesis testing within the parameters of those principles.

In actual practice, a great deal of informal analytic induction or comparative analysis is invoked as researchers assess hypotheses against overarching principles. Nevertheless, analytic induction, as a methodological procedure for learning about the phenomenon under consideration, remains much more implicit or taken for granted in positivist research. As a result, opportunities for exploring the nature of the phenomena are limited by focusing on the independent and dependent variables implied in investigations of causes and effects of the principles being assessed.

It was in this intellectual climate dominated by logico-deductive reasoning and research that symbolic interactionism would emerge and gain credence with scholars skeptical of the viability of a positivist social science. Rather than viewing people as neutral mediums for the expression of forces, factors, or variables, those invoking interpretivist (also pragmatist, interactionist, constructionist, intersubjectivist) approaches to the study of human group life argued that people are qualitatively different from the objects of study of the natural sciences and that social science research needed to be mindful of people’s capacities for interpretation, interaction, reflectivity, knowledge, deliberative agency, and minded activity. These latter emphases were largely disregarded or taken for granted in the positivist quest to develop a more viable “social physics.” Thus, whereas those invoking a positivist approach used deductive logic to generate theory, moving from generals to particulars, in a top-down fashion, interpretivists stressed

an analytic-inductive approach where theory is built up from particular instances of human group life and cast into more general or abstract conceptualizations. It is this interpretive, analytic-inductive approach that Herbert Blumer would refine into what is now known as symbolic interactionism.

Engaging the Positivist-Interpretivist Divide: Blumer's (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical and methodological approach used in the social sciences to study how people make sense of and adjust to the realities of everyday group life. The philosophical underpinnings of its intellectual heritage can be traced back to the analytic-inductive, interpretive, pragmatic thought of the classical Greeks, most notably Plato and Aristotle (see Prus 2004). Its contemporary formulation has roots in the German hermeneutic tradition of Wilhelm Dilthey as well as the American pragmatist tradition of William James, John Dewey, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead. Most notably, it was a student of Mead, Herbert Blumer, who would challenge the predominant positivist paradigm and articulate a viable interpretive alternative, symbolic interactionism.

While George Herbert Mead never developed an explicit theoretical scheme on the nature of human society, it is very much implicit in his work. Whereas Mead stressed the primacy of society for human knowing and acting, his focus was on the philosophical implications rather than the sociological, per se (see Blumer 1969; Prus 1996). Thus, while Mead forged the philosophical foundations of an interactionist approach to the study of human group life through the concepts of (1) the linguistically-enabled,

reflexive, and purposive self; (2) socially constructed action; (3) the nature of objects, and (4) the process of the social act, it was Blumer who would synthesize Mead's social philosophy into a more explicit sociological cast. Blumer (1969: 2) termed this approach "symbolic interactionism," and it can be expressed succinctly in the form of three premises or propositions:

[1] human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... [2] the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows... [3] these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

For Blumer, these premises are central for understanding human knowing and acting. First, human beings are conceptualized as purposive agents who act toward their worlds based on the meanings that they have for them. As Blumer acknowledges, there is nothing particularly groundbreaking or original in this proposition, since most social researchers would generally agree with the premise that meanings influence action.

The second premise, that the meanings people have for their worlds arise in a process of social interaction, begins to differentiate symbolic interactionist thought from its social science brethren. For Blumer (1969: 10), "objects" include anything to which a person can point or refer. Like Mead, Blumer (1969: 4-5) contends that the meaning of objects—the very things that compose the life-worlds of human beings—do not inhere in them, waiting to be discovered. Rather, the meanings of objects, including selves, others, and situations, are born in, maintained, and modified through a linguistically-mediated process of social interaction.

Although social interaction is viewed as the source of meaning, it is a mistake, Blumer (1969: 5) argues, to conclude that actors uncritically accept and/or apply these meanings. Central to symbolic interactionist thought is the role of the interpretive process by which people indicate, define, assess, modify, and resist meanings arising out of their interactions with others. Thus, Blumer acknowledges people's capacities to purposefully engage their life-worlds as agents. Meanings, then, are not only viewed as arising out of social interaction, but also understood as undergoing change as people interpret these emergent meanings relative to their own situations.

In addition to these three foundational premises, several core concepts inform interactionist research and analysis. These concepts include: the self, the act, social interaction, objects, joint action, and obdurate reality. Each of these concepts is briefly reviewed in what follows.

The self. For interactionists, human beings have “selves” and are objects unto themselves. As Blumer (1969: 62) explains, “The human being may perceive himself, have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself, and act toward himself.” Moreover, the self is not a fixed, structured, or inherent quality of any particular individual, but rather is an emergent, interpretive, and formative process that arises in symbolic interaction, both with oneself and others. The process of self-interaction carried out by the reflexive self provides the basis for the operation of the interpretive process through which people indicate, define, judge, adjust, and resist meanings as well as construct lines of action.

The act. The implication of the premise that humans have selves and engage in an interpretive process in approaching and making sense of their worlds is that interactionists understand people as active participants in the construction of their lines of action, rather than viewing acts as being merely released through them. In no way does this mean that all actions will be deemed to be rational or wise, but rather actors purposefully construct actions, be it in so-called “rational” manners or otherwise. That is, humans with selves are humans with agency, not neutral mediums for the expression of forces or dominant cultural discourses.

Social interaction. Language is central to the interactionist understanding of human behaviour. Through its use, people are able to “take the role” (Mead 1934) of the others around them, treat themselves as objects, engage, interpret, assess, modify, and resist the meanings of objects, and construct meaningful (i.e., purposive) lines of action in conjunction with others. Thus, as people acquire language, they transition from the world of non-symbolic interaction (i.e., the world of the “gesture” and response) to the world of symbolic interaction where they communicate via “significant symbols” (Mead 1934). It is through the communication of significant symbols that the actors in the situation are able to interpret each other’s gestures and act based on this shared meaning.

Objects. As noted above, “objects” are anything that to which people can point or refer. People live in worlds of objects. Specifically, different worlds of objects constitute different social worlds, and society comprises myriad emerging, shifting, dissipating, overlapping, segmenting, and stabilizing social worlds (see also Strauss 1993; Prus 1997). Moreover, objects have no inherent meaning, but rather people socially construct them

through symbolic interaction. As meanings are established and handled in the interpretive process, people act toward objects based on the meanings that they have for them. Thus, to know a human group is to know its world of objects and meanings, and to know an individual is to know the multiple groups in which he or she is and has been a member.

Joint action. Blumer uses the term “joint action” in place of Mead’s “social act.” Joint action, as Blumer defines it, consists of the fitting together of lines of action from dyadic relationships to complex organizations. The social process encompassed by joint action constitutes the very life of society, providing the foundation upon which it operates. The sociological implications of this premise—that society comprises manifold emerging joint actions—are threefold. First, society exists in action and not in structure (i.e., No action, no structure.). Second, analysts should not conceptualize individuals’ isolated lines of action without considering how they fit their lines of action with others’ to initiate new instances of joint action. Finally, because joint actions are processual in nature, they can be conceptualized in “career” terms, or as having an historical or developmental flow (see also Hughes 1937; Becker 1963). These careers of joint action can become more routinized, stable, and durable as participants find common meanings for the action. Still, careers of joint action are open to ongoing adjustment and change.

Obdurate reality. It is also erroneous to consider the meanings that people have of their realities to be entirely subjective, with individual actors capriciously constructing whatever version of reality that suits their situational or diurnal whims, independent of a broader social reality. For Blumer (1969: 22), intersubjective reality is a constructed but

obdurate reality. In the human struggle for existence, people have to come to terms with the resistances they encounter in everyday life.

Schutz's (1962) concept of "sedimentation" provides a way to conceptualize the constructed but obdurate features of human group life. Briefly put, sedimentation refers to the process of particular forms of knowing and acting that become "objectified" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and taken-for-granted in the multiple life-worlds that constitute social reality. As ways of understanding and approaching the world emerge and achieve intersubjective consensus with respect to their viability and pragmatic utility, they become more resistant to change. However, meanings are never immutable, always having the potential for reassessment, adjustment, and rejection through ongoing social interaction. Still, the more objectified particular ways of knowing and acting are, the slower they change, more generally.

Having outlined the nature of human knowing and acting from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the question remains: What is the appropriate methodology for studying the human subject matter, given its purposive, processual, and interpretive nature?

Achieving Intersubjectivity with the Other: The Ethnographic Imperative⁵

The empirical research that interactionists generate is ethnographic in its thrust. In general terms, "ethnography" refers to the study of the way of life of a group of people. As Prus (1996: 103-140) observes, while there have been many variants of ethnographic

⁵ "The Ethnographic Imperative" is a phrase borrowed from Robert Prus (2007).

methods used in the social sciences since their inception, it was a group of scholars working out of the University of Chicago during the first half of the 20th century that forged an analytic ethnographic approach for the social sciences, more generally, and symbolic interactionism, in particular. This ethnographic approach includes the use of in-depth, open-ended interviews, observations, and participant-observation to access and gain familiarity with the life-worlds of the people being studied.

Ethnographic methods allow for the study of social life as an ongoing, emergent process. They also allow analysts to attend to the multitude of social worlds that people participate in, and the interpretive process by which they make sense of these worlds. For Blumer, therefore, ethnographic research is the best method for developing an “intimate familiarity” with the human subject matter. The idea is to develop a shared understanding of meaning between researcher and participant (i.e., achieve intersubjectivity), so that analysts can generate valid accounts of social worlds and social processes from the perspectives of the participants who knowingly engage them. Thus, symbolic interactionist researchers employ an analytic-inductive approach in attempting to develop viable theories of human group life, wherein particular instances of human activity are analyzed, contrasted, and compared in order to build theory from the “ground-up” rather than from the “top-down.”⁶

While it is acknowledged that this methodological scheme is not always perfect, neat, or elegant in its implementation and/or representation, it is the only way, as Blumer (1969) argues, of developing an in-depth, firsthand familiarity with the empirical social

⁶ Readers interested in a more systematic statement on this general analytic-inductive approach are directed to Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

worlds which we purport to study. That is, because the linkage among social interaction, the interpretive process, and human behaviour is so central to interactionist thought, researchers employing this perspective focus on how actors develop meanings develop and how actors construct lines of action.

I have addressed the emergence of symbolic interactionism as well as its theoretical assumptions, core concepts, and methodological orientation. Although necessarily brief, the preceding account of symbolic interactionism demonstrates the analytic power and utility of the approach to understanding group life as something “in the making” and it provides a theoretical reference point for situating the analysis of character to come. Still, it should be noted that interactionism has been neither completely understood nor completely appreciated in sociology. Beginning in its earliest days and continuing until the present time, interactionism has been plagued by a number of myths.

The Ghosts of Misrepresentation:⁷ Debunking Interactionist Myths

Prus (1999: 127-134) identifies several misconceptions that have haunted interactionism and vitiated its more formal recognition and explicit acceptance by mainstream sociology: (1) the subjectivist myth, (2) the micro and astructural myths, and (3) the atheoretical and antiscience myths. I will address each of these in turn.⁸

⁷ This phrase is borrowed from Prus (1999: 128).

⁸ In part, deficiencies attributed to the interactionist approach are due to misinformed and incomplete textbook expositions (Fine 1993; Maines 2001; Prus 1999). These surveys of the discipline serve to perpetuate, institutionalize, and objectify misconceptions about interactionism, especially with respect to those working outside of the perspective. Moreover, the empirical research generated by interactionists, most notably the Chicago ethnographic tradition, has largely been disregarded by critics (Prus 1996).

The subjectivist myth. As Prus (1999: 128) observes, symbolic interactionism is “neither a ‘subjectivist’ nor an ‘objectivist’ approach to the study of human behavior.” Rather, interactionism offers an intersubjective (i.e., linguistically shared and achieved) conception of human knowing and acting. Meanings are developed, negotiated, and sustained through a collective process of symbolic communication. Thus, interactionists prioritize the group over the individual, insist that the self cannot develop apart from group interaction, and recognize that without a reflective self there is no human agency. Further, while the collective nature of human knowing and acting is paramount for interactionists, “This does not deny or preclude notions of individuality, creativity, or the like, but rather points to the intersubjective foundations on which notions of individual consciousness and expression are based” (Prus 1999: 129).

The micro and astructural myths. These interrelated criticisms posit that interactionism, while it offers a useful analysis of face-to-face interactions and small group settings, cannot account for broader “macro” processes, structural forces, or constraints. However, symbolic interactionism was never intended, nor is it required, to treat social structure in the same manner as more conventional “structuralist” sociologists. Interactionists take a different approach, focusing on people actively constructing, engaging, resisting, adjusting, and forging structure rather than experiencing structure in an unknowing and deterministic sense (Blumer 1969).⁹ Viewed in these terms, structure is conceived of in terms of sedimented systems of knowing and acting (Schutz 1962;

⁹ It should be noted that part of the astructural criticism is due to a group of interactionists more sympathetic to conventional structuralist conceptions (i.e., determinism, quantitative analysis) found in the social sciences (e.g., Kuhn 1964; Stryker 1980).

1964), objectified and institutionalized social constructions (Berger and Luckmann 1966), going concerns (Hughes 1971), ongoing commitments (Becker 1970), and negotiated orders (Strauss 1978; 1993). This approach, rather than rendering interactionism analytically impotent when it comes to structural concerns, is one of the more promising avenues for developing a grounded theory of structure that is attentive to the interpretive actualities of human group life. Indeed, one of the theoretical implications of focusing on the primacy of social interaction for human group life is that a symbolic interactionist approach is not limited to particular substantive areas but is able to account for all forms of human association equally well (e.g., conflict, cooperation, indifference). This is in contrast with those approaches which impose one type of human relationship on the whole of society as the organizing and determining scheme (e.g., Marxism): “Their great danger lies in imposing on the breadth of human interaction an image derived from the study of only one form of interaction” (Blumer, 1969: 68).¹⁰

The atheoretical and antiscience myths. If one insists that social theory should be modeled after the logico-deductive approach found in the natural sciences, then, as Prus (1999: 133) observes, the charges that interactionism is atheoretical and antiscientific have “some logistic merit” (see e.g., Huber 1973). However, if one takes the position that (1) human beings are qualitatively different from the objects of the natural sciences, (2) theory should be developed to suit these uniquely human realities, and (3) the imposition of a natural science model on the human condition necessarily rests on a set of erroneous

¹⁰ Blumer’s scholarship was acutely attentive to structural or macro issues, as evidenced by his studies of mass media effects (Blumer 1933; Blumer and Hauser 1933), collective protest (Blumer 1978), race relations (Blumer 1955), social problems (Blumer 1971), and industrialization (Blumer 1990).

assumptions and a fallacious conception of human group life, then the analytic-inductive approach of symbolic interactionism should be considered one of the most theoretically viable, rigorous, and robust approaches in the social sciences (see Blumer 1969; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

In terms of the atheoretical charge more specifically, regardless of whether one develops substantive or formal theory, it is expected that analytic-inductive theory builds on existing conceptualizations as new instances of research are developed and earlier notions of theory are assessed within this ever-increasing base (see Blumer 1969, Glaser and Strauss 1967; Prus 1996). Huber's (1973) charge that interactionists begin with no theory, then, is untenable and rather absurd.

Collective Amnesia and the Illusion of Discovery:¹¹ Sociology's Interactionism

Fine (1993) and Maines (2001) argue that interactionism is more pervasive in contemporary sociology than its formal labeling or identification would suggest. Many sociologists incorporate interactionist theory without explicitly acknowledging or recognizing it. In fact, interactionism has had a necessarily continuing and expanding relevance to the development of sociology.

Maines states interactionism was ahead of its time. Emerging during the "institution-building" phase of sociology, interactionism never gained widespread acceptance during its initial introduction to the discipline which was dominated by a natural science model. However, as sociology progressed, the tenets of interactionism

¹¹ This phrase is borrowed from Sorokin (1956), as used by Maines (2001).

became more accepted and implemented in sociological research, although without researchers' explicit awareness. While some researchers openly identify with interactionism (i.e., explicit interactionism), others whose position is otherwise quite consistent with an interactionist approach fail to recognize this (i.e., unaware interactionism). This results in an "invisible interactionism" in contemporary sociology.

Instances of explicit interactionism are generally self-evident, but it is mainstream sociologists' incorporation of interactionist concepts that provides a case for its increasing relevance to the discipline. Specifically, Maines (2001: 16-25) identifies three interactionist themes strewn throughout these more conventional works: (1) the primacy of action and interaction (e.g., structure as activity/constructed/emergent), (2) the concept of the situation, and (3) the emphasis on meanings, definitions of situations, and interpretive processes.

Similarly, in his account of the historical development of symbolic interactionism, Fine (1993: 67) notes the 1980s and early 1990s were an era marked by mainstream sociology's adoption of interactionist concepts and premises, although these instances were not always, or usually, acknowledged. Some of the more consequential contributions included (1) an interactionist conception of emotion work and experience (Denzin, 1985; Goffman, 1959; Johnson, 1992; Prus, 1996; Shott, 1979), (2) the social constructionists' veritable domination of the social problems literature (Blumer 1971; Schneider 1985; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Holstein and Miller 1993), and (3) the creation of selves, including notions of self-esteem, self-feeling, self-concept, identity

work, self-presentation and impression management (Goffman, 1959; 1963), the gendered self, and the self as a social construct.

Another contribution, one these interactionist historians do not explicitly acknowledge, pertains to methods. Blumer was perhaps the most influential proponent of an analytic-inductive and qualitative methodology for sociology. In fact, Blumer's (1928) dissertation, "Methodology in Social Psychology," directly challenged the logico-deductive, positivist orthodoxy. Blumer insisted that Cooley's (1909) "sympathetic introspection," although not perfect, was the most viable means of studying human group life. Thus, Blumer, together with Park and Hughes, may be envisioned as laying some of the analytic foundation for the inexorable interest in qualitative methods that was to come with the publication of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

Glaser and Strauss, a student of Blumer, first introduced the term "grounded theory" to sociological literature in 1967. Grounded theory is a methodological-analytic approach wherein researchers develop theories of human behaviour from direct comparisons of the data at hand. It has since become the most prevalent method used in qualitative research (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007: 1). However, the more consequential impact of grounded theory has been to instill a conceptual and methodological rigor in qualitative research that was previously uncommon. This has given qualitative research more "scientific" credibility and made it more appealing to a new generation of researchers. Grounded theory also has a generic relevance and applicability to all aspects of human group life, as evidenced by its prevalent use in a panoply of disciplines and approaches, not just sociology.

Symbolic interactionism's influence continues to ramify throughout sociology and the social sciences. While one of interactionism's greatest strengths lies in its analytic versatility, at its core it has always been most recognized and adopted as the sociological approach for understanding the relationship between the individual and society. It follows, then, that interactionism would be a useful analytic scheme for examining how character is constituted in group life. Indeed, beyond perhaps the concept of the self, there is probably no concept more closely aligned with individual personhood than character. However, the psychologizing of character has led to sociologists' comparative disregard of the concept. This dissertation begins to redress this situation. In the next section, I provide an overview of how I take up this task in the papers that follow.

Overview of the Dissertation: Achieving Character as a Social Process

Returning to the earlier definition of character proffered in this introduction as people's essential interactional dispositions, especially of a durable and moral nature, an interactionist conception of character can begin to be propounded, one that considers how character is enacted, interpreted, and attributed in and through social interaction. Far from being viewed as a set of quiescent tendencies waiting to be activated by external conditions, an internal psychological structure, or a manifestation of social structure within individuals, an interactionist conception of character emphasizes the primacy of human agency and social interaction in achieving character as a social process. Character can be understood in the context of acquiring and sharing the concepts of the group through linguistically-enabled interchange. One can look at how social actors engage

their characters and the characters of others in meaningful (i.e., minded, thoughtful, purposive) terms. Thus, rather than treating character as embedded in social structures or individual personalities, this dissertation explores character as an interactively constituted phenomenon. The role of interaction cannot be dismissed in conceptualizing character, since it is only in group contexts that character may be developed, invoked, shaped (influenced and resisted), regulated, and attributed to self and other.

In examining character as an interactively achieved social process, I consider processes such as defining character, assessing character, doing and experiencing character, and influencing and regulating character. In addition to focusing this dissertation, these processes represent points of potential inquiry and comparative analysis for future ethnographic research on character.

The empirical component of the dissertation is based on ethnographic research in two Protestant Christian seminaries. Why seminaries? Seminaries provided a substantive setting and group from which the more generic process of the social construction and mediation of character could be illuminated. In addition to being an identifiable and somewhat structured group to empirically engage in a study of character, the emphasis on morality, discipline, self-regulation, as well as character assessment and development made seminaries a promising research site for this project.

I began the ethnographic research by involving myself in a range of everyday settings and activities in the seminaries, looking for instances where issues of character arose, and engaging individuals in conversations that had them reflect on the questions about character that I was asking. The thrust of my observations and questions had to do

with how character was understood, enacted, managed, regulated, and developed in the broader community on a day-to-day basis. The ultimate research objective was to develop a more coherent, theoretically grounded, process-oriented conception of character for the social sciences.

The empirical analysis in this dissertation comprises three independent papers. Paper One, “Character as a Career Contingency: The Case of Becoming a Seminarian,” considers the relationship between character and trajectories of involvement in group life. How does character influence, if at all, people’s involvements in groups, activities, relationships, or roles? In order to begin to answer this question, I analyze how people become ministry students, with a specific analytic focus on how character becomes a reference point during this process. I consider both the faculty assessment of applicants and prospective students’ experiences during the application process. I find that character is indeed a salient feature of the initial involvement process, but in a way that has been overlooked in the character-involvement literature.

Paper Two, “The Moral Character Career of the Ministry Student,” moves the analysis to the ministry students’ experiences while in the seminary. The focus of this paper is on how ministry students experience and make sense of the character formation process as they work their way through the professional ministry program. Building on Goffman’s (1961) concept of “moral careers”—the evaluation of people’s senses of self over time—I consider how ministry students experience a “moral character career”—the sequences, stages, and shifts in definitions and evaluations of character over time—while in the seminary.

Paper Three, “Character Problems as Collective Behaviour,” completes the ethnographic examination of seminary life. Focusing primarily on the perspectives and activities of the seminary faculty and administration, I trace the development of student character problems in the institutional context by asking the question, How are troublesome characters identified and dealt with in the seminary? I find that character problems, though commonly ascribed to individual troubles, arise in a social process of identification and response. Deriving analytic focus from Blumer’s (1971) analysis of social or public problems, a three-stage natural history model of character problems as collective behaviour is proposed: emergence, legitimation, and remediation.

The conclusion revisits the purpose of this dissertation and considers what has been learned more generally about character as a sociological phenomenon through the ethnographic examination of seminary life. The conceptual contributions of each empirical paper are summarized, and the broader theoretical and conceptual contributions to sociological knowledge are considered. Future directions for the sociology of character are then suggested.

PAPER ONE

Character as a Career Contingency: The Case of Becoming a Seminarian

ABSTRACT

The relationship between character and people's careers of participation in particular groups, activities, relationships, or roles is the subject of much everyday talk and empirical research. In the social sciences, character has traditionally been treated as a set of objective dispositions lodged within the individual. This has led to character being conceived of as an objective career contingency, determining in part people's movement from one stage of involvement to another. The objectivist approach has largely disregarded the possibility that character affects career lines in another way, as an interpretive or subjective career contingency. This paper addresses this lacuna by employing a symbolic interactionist analysis of character and involvement. Based on an ethnographic examination of initial involvement in professional ministry programs at two Protestant Christian seminaries, the analysis reveals three character-related interpretive career contingencies: character recruitment, character seekership, and character reservations. These contingencies represent sensitizing concepts of generic sociological relevance for the study of the becoming involved in multiple contexts.

INTRODUCTION

What is character and how does it influence people's trajectories of involvement in group life? In everyday talk, people often appeal to notions of character—as in people's essential interactional dispositions, especially of a durable and moral nature—as a convenient causal shorthand in accounting for why people become involved in particular groups, activities, relationships, or roles. As Doris (2002: 15) states, “Character and personality traits are invoked to explain what people do and how they live.” Examples of the character-involvement narrative are legion. Consider, for instance, the common distinction made between *extraverts*—people who tend to be assertive, outgoing, and gregarious—and *introverts*—people who tend to be reflective, reserved, and solitary (see Cain 2012). Extraverts seek the social life; introverts seek the secluded life. Extraverts

become entrepreneurs, politicians, activists, community leaders, and party-makers. Introverts become writers, intellectuals, artists, and engineers. The extravert-introvert discourse is but one example of the increasingly common trend toward the “scientization of everyday life” (Berger and Kellner 1981), the psychologizing of people and their behaviours, and the “deprivatization” of self and personhood in contemporary Western society (Gubrium and Holstein 1995, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2000), in which people attempt to make sense of themselves and others through the objectification of personhood.

As with its appeal as a behavioural explanation in everyday discourse, part of the social scientific interest in studying character is its potential for predicting people’s behaviour, at least probabilistically or in aggregate, as an explanation for why particular individuals or groups of people become involved in specific ways of life. After all, “Knowing something about a person’s character is supposed to render their behavior intelligible and help observers determine what behaviors to expect” (Doris 2002: 5). Although the character-involvement connection has figured most prominently in psychological research, the association has also been examined in sociology. The sociology of character tradition is a chequered one, marked by a scattered and uneven development. Like the related concept of habit, the concept of character has been one of the victims of sociology’s quest for disciplinary identity and autonomy (see Camic 1986), generally being deemed to be the proper domain of philosophers and psychologists. Still, some sociologists have been interested in how character affects people’s movement into, through, and out of groups, activities, relationships, and roles. Indeed, the connection

between character and involvement has been an interest of some of the discipline's seminal theorists and works. For example, Durkheim's (1902-3) *Moral Education* examined the relationship between character and becoming a responsible citizen; Weber's (1904-5) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* considered character and involvement in capitalistic enterprises; Adorno et al.'s (1950) *Authoritarian Personality* connected character traits with fascism; Riesman et al.'s (1950) *The Lonely Crowd* proposed a link between character and involvement in general types of relationships with others and authority; Bourdieu's (1977, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) concept of *habitus* linked character with immersion in particular cultural styles, tastes, and attitudes; and Bellah et al.'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart* associated character with interest in and commitment to particular lifestyles.

However, the propensity in most sociological studies of character and involvement, like the psychology of character and personality literature, has been to treat character as a set of objective dispositions lodged within the individual, though socially produced or mediated. This position may be termed the *character-as-dispositions* approach. Character is viewed as something that impels people into particular involvements, both consciously and subconsciously, as one of the ways social structure manifests itself in the everyday lives of individual actors (see Bourdieu 1977, 1984, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Conceptually, character is treated as an objective contingency that influences people's trajectories of involvement and action in group life (see Osgood and Rowe 1994; Ulmer and Spencer 1999).

But in all the effort to connect objective dispositions with behavioural outcomes,

something of great analytic import and sociological significance has been lost. I would argue that the very essence of character has been disregarded. What is missing is an examination of how people in everyday life understand, designate, and respond to character. In short, what does the idea of character mean to people, and how do they engage it as they make sense of themselves, others, and situations? The attribution and interpretation of character have not merited much, if any, attention in the character-involvement literature. Thus, the possibility that character is an interpretive career contingency has not been considered.

This paper proposes an alternative sociological approach to understanding how character influences people's involvements, one neglected in the character-involvement literature. It posits that character, rather than being some objective set of qualities that inhere in individuals, is a matter of audience definition, a self-other *dispositional designation* arrived at through social interaction. From this perspective, regardless of whether it is in an informal encounter or a formal social scientific study of traits and behaviour, character is a social construct used to typify people and account for their conduct. That is, as an imputation of people's essential, ontological natures (Katz 1975), the idea of character is an interpretive resource, with an attendant vocabulary, that people use in developing, and making sense of, their lines of action (see Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968).

The implications of this view suggest a markedly different approach to the study of character and involvement. If character is a socially-constituted dispositional designation, then we need to examine the character-making process and its influence on

human conduct. The analytic focus shifts from attempts to explain people's involvements with reference to internal, individual states to the self-other labelling of character and its influence on the involvement process. Analytically, people engage two roles in the social production of character (see Prus and Grills 2003). There are the *agents of characterization*, or those who act as tacticians in defining, classifying, promoting, forming, and regulating character, and there are the *targets of characterization*, or those who are the subject of character imputation, formation, and regulation efforts. As people engage these roles, they draw upon their *character consciousness*—an awareness of the group-derived character-related perspectives, precepts, and practices—to make sense of their character work. The question for the researcher of character and involvement becomes, How are definitions of character attributed and responded to over the course of people's involvements? Thus, although not denying the possibility for people to develop dispositions of various sorts, the position taken here, one that the Chicago school symbolic interactionist approach informs (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993), is that objects, including people and their dispositions, have no inherent meaning. Rather, the meaning of character arises in a process of collective behaviour and definition. In turn, the meanings people attribute to the character of self and other have consequences for their ongoing and potential involvements. When viewed in this manner, character is understood as a subjective or interpretive contingency influencing people's lines of involvement and action in group life.

Building upon the interactionist concepts of career and career contingencies, this paper examines the connection between character and career by focusing on a particular

case. Specifically, it examines how definitions of character influenced the process of initial involvement in professional ministry programs at two Protestant Christian seminaries. Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic research in the two schools, three character-related career contingencies emerged: attending to character recruitment, engaging in character seekership, and managing character reservations. These contingencies represent sensitizing concepts of generic sociological relevance in the study of the becoming process in manifold contexts.

CAREERS AND CAREER CONTINGENCIES

The career concept has a long and storied history in sociology. Everett Hughes and his students at the University of Chicago most clearly developed and employed the concept in the ethnographic study of work and occupations (see Barley 1989). Since that time, the career metaphor has also been applied to other involvements. Just as doctors have careers, so too do marijuana users (Becker 1953a) and dying hospital patients (Glaser and Strauss 1968). Career is therefore defined in a generic sense, devoid of any occupational or organizational requirement, with *careers* referring to people's histories of participation in and trajectories through any group, activity, relationship, or role, and the related concept of *career contingencies* referring to the conditions that influence the movement from one stage, level, or position of involvement to another (see Hughes 1937; Becker 1953a, 1963; Goffman 1961; Lofland 1969; Strauss 1993; Prus 1996, 1997; Prus and Grills 2003). Together, these concepts have proven to be a very useful way of understanding people's involvements in a variety of occupational and non-occupational social worlds.

For example, researchers have used these concepts to study the experiences of public schoolteachers (Becker 1952), medical and psychiatry students (Becker et al. 1961; Haas and Shaffir 1987; Light 1980), scientists (Hermanowicz 2007), professional musicians (Becker 1953b; Faulkner 1973), ironworkers (Haas 1974), amateur and elite athletes (Prus 1984; Stevenson 1990a, 1990b, 2002), leisure activity participants (Heuser 2005; Snyder 1986; Stalp 2006), mental patients (Goffman 1961), exotic dancers and prostitutes (Dressel and Petersen 1982; Luckenbill 1985, 1986; Prus and Irini 1980; Skipper, Jr. and McCaghy 1970), hustlers and thieves (Prus and Sharper 1977; Shover 1983), drug users and drug dealers (Becker 1953a; Adler 1985), cases of lawyer misconduct (Arnold and Hagan 1992). The diversity of these settings is a testament to the utility of the career concept in sociological research.

One of the main advantages of the career concept is its analytic versatility, not only in terms of its applicability in disparate contexts, but also in terms of its effectiveness in handling multiple levels of analysis in these settings. As Barley (1989: 49) notes, “For Hughes and his students, the critical property of a career was its ontological duality.” The career concept captures the “ontological duality,” or “two-sidedness” (Goffman 1961), of temporal experience by attending to the dialectic interplay of structure and process, order and creativity, public and personal as people engage and adjust to their circumstances. As Hughes (Hughes 1937: 409-10) explains:

...a career consists, objectively, of a series of statuses and clearly defined offices . . . typical sequences of position, achievement, responsibility, and even of adventure. The social order will set limits upon the individual's orientation of his life, both as to direction of effort and as to interpretation of its meaning. Subjectively, a career is the moving perspective in which the person sees his life

as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him.

Although the career concept was always intended to capture the interpretive experience of the involvement process, there has been a tendency outside of the interactionist career studies to focus on the objective career lines and career contingencies (see Barley 1989). This has resulted in a bifurcation in the career literature into variable-oriented approaches, which employ factorial and structural analyses, and person-oriented approaches, which examine the meaning-making processes of involvement (Hermanowicz 2007). The variable-oriented bias is also evident in the character-involvement research. This study seeks to redress the absence of person-oriented approaches in the character-involvement literature. The examination of a specific case has the potential to yield more general concepts and insights pertinent to careers in other settings (Hermanowicz 2007: 626).

One way to examine involvements is to divide them into a series of general stages that are common to participation in all arenas of social endeavour. As Prus (1996, 1997; Prus and Grills 2003) observes, when involvement is analyzed as a generic social process, four general stages or subprocesses are evident: (1) becoming initially involved; (2) sustaining and intensifying involvement; (3) experiencing disinvolvement; and (4) becoming reinvolved. These four stages represent areas of inquiry for research on the involvement process, with many studies having specified further subprocesses for each stage. It should be noted, however, that people need not experience all of these stages. Some people may consider initial involvement but fail to follow through, others may become involved and committed but never become disinvolved, and still others may exit

the involvement and never return or reengage. It is important for analysts to attend to the contingencies that influence the variation in these career trajectories.

In terms of the focus of this paper, a review of the ethnographic literature reveals that the process of becoming initially involved includes four modes of entry—being recruited, engaging in seekership, experiencing closure, and attending to instrumentalism—and one mediating process—managing and overcoming reservations (see Prus 1996, 1997; Prus and Grills 2003). This paper, then, examines the contributions of an interactionist conception of character to understanding the process of initial involvement.

DATA AND METHODS

I derived the data for this paper from an ethnography of character and group life. In order to examine character as a general social process, I examined a specific empirical case. The professional ministry preparation programs in seminaries were an auspicious setting to pursue such a study since they explicitly attended to character and moral formation. The most common manifestation and benchmark of these programs is the Master of Divinity professional degree program, which prepared students professional ministry in a variety of denominational and non-denominational settings and roles. Two Protestant Christian seminaries agreed to participate in the study. The first was Evangelical Seminary,¹² an interdenominational school that provided non-denominationally specific, evangelically-oriented ministry education. The second seminary, Mainline Seminary, was

¹² All names are pseudonyms. Evangelical Seminary and Mainline Seminary are pseudonyms adopted from Carroll et al. (1997).

a denominational school that prepared people for ordained ministry in a Mainline Protestant denomination.

I engaged in ethnographic research in Evangelical Seminary and Mainline Seminary over a 14-month period. During that time, I conducted 80 in-depth interviews of 64 Master of Divinity students, faculty, and staff. I also engaged in participant-observation in 23 full-term courses between the two schools, weekly community lunches and dinners, worship, and informal student gatherings. I supplemented these field data with an analysis of organizational documents from both seminaries that addressed objectives, requirements, and guidelines for successfully completing the Master of Divinity program.

Using this larger “analytic ethnography” (Lofland 1995)—one that was focused from the outset on concept and theory building in the sociology of character—as an empirical base, I drew the data for this paper primarily from interviews that I conducted with faculty and ministry students about the process of initial involvement in ministry studies. A portion of each interview focused on the processes of developing interests in the seminary, recruiting or encouraging participation, getting and giving advice, putting the application together, and dealing with any reservations or concerns about involvement. Thus, I examined involvement as a social activity, one which both faculty and students negotiated.

I used the constant-comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) during data collection, coding, and analysis. This included attending to both negative cases and emerging themes, pursuing them until theoretical saturation was achieved. The analysis

revealed a pattern consistent with Prus's (1996; Prus and Grills 2003) grounded theory of careers of participation in social worlds developed from primary research as well as a meta-analysis of other ethnographic work from diverse settings on "becoming involved." This analytic scheme benefitted the present analysis by providing a body of existing cross-cultural, trans-situational, and trans-historical concepts to connect with, build on, assess, and refine. Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that general social theory can be most effectively achieved through comparative analyses of multiple settings. The purpose of doing theory is not to contribute a series of discrete silos of knowledge only pertinent to specific settings. In order to achieve greater relevance, however, research must move beyond the idiographic to the more universal, encompassing, and generic. In this way, we transcend context-bound analyses to bring into perspective and connect the broader analytic archipelago of which they are an integral part, and it is only then that the full value of grounded theory analyses and theory building is completely realized. To neglect these broader connections is to relegate these studies, specifically, and social theory, generally, to a state of obscurity and obsolescence.

FINDINGS

How do the attribution and interpretation of character qualities influence the process of becoming involved? In the case of people becoming ministry students, three character-related contingencies of initial involvement emerged: (1) attending to character recruitment, (2) engaging in character seekership, and (3) managing character reservations. These contingencies, though developed from a specific case, represent

general conditions that may encourage or restrict people's entry into any group, activity, relationship, or role. In what follows, I define each of these contingencies in the seminary context.

Attending to Character Recruitment

[A]lthough some recruitment efforts may be directed toward anyone in the setting, agents may be much more exclusive or exacting in the criteria they establish for recruiting others. In these latter cases, targets may be screened more thoroughly and/or subjected to extended realms and occasions of testing. Relatedly, while some recruiters may focus on preexisting target qualities, others may place more emphasis on people's abilities to learn appropriate viewpoints, practices, composure, and the like. (Prus and Grills, 2003: 104)

Enlisting new members is paramount for the ongoing existence and relevance of most, if not all, groups. If groups are able to be selective in this process, then character qualities are apt to be an evaluative category of interest and debate among group gatekeepers, or those charged with recruiting and admitting new members. As Light (1980: 23) notes in relation to psychiatry students, "Because psychiatry, which emphasizes psychotherapy, considers one's personality the principal tool, to be honed and refined, *who* gets selected into the profession is no small matter. As residents and staff often said at the University Psychiatric Center, 'It's not what you know but who you are that counts.'" What kinds of characters is the group looking for? How can individuals exhibiting these characters be attracted? How should the character of prospective members be assessed and vetted? What character-related traits are seen as undesirable and function, therefore, as the basis for rejection? These are some of the questions those engaging in character recruitment are likely to ask.

The term *character recruitment* refers to the related processes of (1) defining desirable character qualities, (2) attracting and encouraging the participation of individuals with particular characters, (3) assessing the character of prospective group members, and (4) admitting new group members. The people who perform these tasks may be termed *character recruiters*. It should be noted that the character-recruitment process and the character recruiter role are likely to vary in organization, procedure, and importance from group to group, situation to situation. That is, character recruitment processes are related to the character consciousness of the group, or the intersubjective perspectives, precepts, and practices that give meaning to what character is and how it should be handled. Even though overlap and continuity between the character consciousnesses of different groups may exist, each group nevertheless develops its own points of emphasis in approaching the character of its members.

Defining desirable character qualities

When considering prospective students' applications, seminaries are generally interested in two questions: Who has the right qualities (competence and character) to succeed in the program and who has the right qualities to succeed in ministry? Before this evaluation can happen, however, group gatekeepers need to address the question of *what* are the right qualities. The answer to these questions will vary according to the character consciousness of the group and the perceived requirements of the situation and role.

Mainline Seminary was a denominational school. As such, when it came to the M.Div. program, it had a specific organizational mandate: to prepare people for Christian

ministry in the Mainline denomination. Furthermore, the pedagogical focus at Mainline was on preparing people not just for ministry, generally, but for congregational ministry, specifically, which includes, among other things, leading a Mainline church (e.g., attending to its administration as an organization and going concern), performing a traditional pastoral role in the Mainline tradition (e.g., preaching and leading worship), and attending to the spiritual needs of the church's congregants (e.g., administering pastoral care and visitations, baptisms, weddings). Thus, the character recruiters at Mainline had well-defined contexts and roles to take into account during the recruitment process.

Mainline employed an outcomes-based curriculum in the M.Div. program. Some of the outcomes that administrators developed and codified were character-related. The school distributed lists of these outcomes to incoming students and used them during faculty members' assessments of students *in situ*. Students needed to meet the established outcomes if they were to succeed in the program. This institutional character assessment document served as one of the reference points during the character recruitment process. Other reference points included previous experiences with successful and unsuccessful students and ministers, as well as denominational directives and expectations.

The contexts and roles in which Evangelical Seminary's students would engage were less prescribed. Although Evangelical did not employ an outcomes-based curriculum, its character recruiters, of course, had an idea of what makes a successful ministry student based on their previous experiences with other students. The more ambiguous determination was what character qualities make a successful minister, since

Evangelical prepared people for a diffuse set of roles, encompassing a variety of denominational, non-denominational, congregational, and non-congregational ministries. Examples of non-denominational and non-congregational include positions at summer camps, hospitals, prisons, shelters, and community living programs. Thus, the character requirements for incoming students were more relaxed at Evangelical, the minimum requirement being the person should be broadly evangelical in their orientation to Christianity.

Attracting and encouraging the participation of individuals exhibiting particular characters

As the desirable character qualities for involvements in particular groups, activities, or roles become defined or established, character recruiters may attempt to identify, attract, and encourage the participation of desirable targets.

With few exceptions, those who are recruited to seminaries to become ministry students are recruited from ongoing ministry contexts, congregational or otherwise. Because seminaries and their professors operate at some distance from the everyday life of these ministries, opportunities to identify targets with particular character qualities are limited. Third parties participating in those settings—for example, ministers, leadership, and lay members—generally fulfilled the role of initial agent of character recruitment.

Still, sometimes faculty members did provide some initial assessments of and advice for potential students. For example, a professor at Mainline Seminary explained

that she would have a conversation with potential applicants, looking for signs of openness, depth, and nuance in their relationship with faith:

I tend to want to hear the person's story and really hear them speak. I'd be listening for openness. I'd be listening for a kind of "thinking faith." You know, a thoughtless faith would be one that would raise questions. I'd be listening for a thinking faith. For me, the big one is how we think about God, and the relationship of God and humans, especially with the big one—suffering and a loving God—and an openness to explore some of that. I'd be curious about how they read their lives through their faith lens. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Part of promoting participation in the seminary during these encounters might be achieved by demystifying the group and its activities for potential members:

A lot of people don't know. Seminaries aren't the biggest institutions in the world, so there is probably a little bit of mystery for everybody about what happens in a place like this...So part of it is just giving them some idea that this could be something that they could get into...Nobody talks about it on television, you don't get it in the newspapers, so where would you find out? (ETS 25, Professor)

It should also be noted that character recruiters may attempt to contextualize, temper, or dissuade the potential participation of prospects as they discover more about the target during their interaction. It is one thing to have an interest in ministry, but it is another thing to have the character qualities that fit the ministerial context and role.

Consider the following:

A lot of students, before they come to seminary, focus on their call. God's called them...If you listen to call stories you have to watch because they kind of get more and more esoteric as they get told. It's almost like God was standing on their shoulder or something. So my big thing is to say to them, "God calls, but God also equips. So what do you think your gifts for ministry are? Where do you think seminary can help you grow those gifts? What gifts maybe don't you have that you think you're going to need?"...So that breaks this down, "God calls," because who knows what that means. It means different things to different people. [It moves the conversation] to "You know, I'm really good with people," or "My goodness, I hate public speaking. I'm an introvert. I can't do this." They begin to then look at what it is they have and what they need to do to develop. (MTS 13, Professor)

In addition to individual faculty members' more fortuitous and informal recruitment efforts, Evangelical employed more organized and concerted strategies to target and attract individuals with desirable characters. This recruitment situation was a product of both competition from other seminaries and a diffuse pool of potential applicants, who could be from many denominational and non-denominational ministry organizations and contexts. Thus, Evangelical targeted specific churches and media in an attempt to reach these potential students:

We put out ads in some of the magazines that a lot of Christian churches or pastors read. We've got one that's more for young people...We've also had someone who's been going out to some of the major churches and just taking some of the pastors out for coffee to make sure they know about us, who we are—someone that was in the M.Div. program...And then we have giveaways for them, something to sit on the pastor's desk so that they can remember who we are. We go to conferences. (Administrative staff, Evangelical Seminary)

Mainline Seminary, in contrast, did not use these recruitment strategies. One of the reasons was fairly simple: if one wanted to become a Mainline minister, then one must attend, with few exceptions, one of the few Mainline seminaries located in Canada. The result of this captive audience was a *de facto* monopoly on the production of Mainline ministers.

Assessing the character of prospective members

Once potential members have been identified—either through institutional recruiter encounters, third-party referrals, or prospect-initiated approaches or applications—a more focused evaluation of target character may take place.

Thus, although character recruiters are apt to make some preliminary and individual assessments of targets' character qualities during initial encounters, these may be followed or buttressed by more formal and collective character assessment processes as prospects move closer to, or express interest in, pursuing involvement. These formal group processes of character assessment seem especially likely in cases when the group is selective or circumspect about new members.

The associated concepts *character discovery contexts* and *character signifiers* are pertinent here. Character discovery contexts are informal or formal situations where qualities of character are “discovered” or identified by self or other—that is, character discovery contexts refer to the when and where of character designation. Character signifiers are the data agents of characterization use in making character imputations. Three types of character signifiers may be identified: appearance (Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Hood 1984; Katz 1975), manner or behaviour (Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Goffman 1967; Holyfield and Fine 1997; Jonas 1999), and biographical background (Emerson 1969; Goffman 1961; Katz 1975; Nack 2002; Vassenden and Lie 2013). What qualifies as a character discovery context or character signifier is related to the person's group-derived character consciousness.

As noted, Mainline and Evangelical generally relied on third-party recruitment agents to attract, encourage, and persuade people to consider and apply to their professional ministry programs. The seminaries required prospective students to submit a formal application to the M.Div. program that designated assessors would later be review and then accept or decline. Although relying on third-party recruitment agents might have

provided the two schools with a greater pool of potential applicants to draw from, it also resulted in an unevenness and unpredictability in whom third-party recruiters targeted:

[Q: Are the churches doing a good job at identifying potential students?] Right now our systems for that work are mixed. Some [local church bodies] are very, very good at doing key work. Others, we wonder, we wonder. They don't like to turn anybody down. They're nice, kind of thing. So it's a mixed bag, the students that we get. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

While assessors readily ascertained academic competence using traditional measurements (i.e., academic transcripts and references), the more challenging quality for gatekeepers to assess was character (see also Light 1980: 23-46). Faced with a lack of personal acquaintance and experience with most applicants, assessors attempted to construct a character image of each applicant based on the data available in the application: academic transcripts, personal statements, and references. The institutional review of these materials therefore constituted a formal character discovery context, and the data that were inferred to indicate character qualities were character signifiers.

Knowledge of the applicants' biographical background, specifically their previous involvements in particular groups, activities, or roles, was used as an indicator of the kind of character qualities to expect from them. These involvements were understood to either *require* a set of preexisting qualities for participation or *form* a set of qualities through participation (see also Light 1980: 26). Professors at Mainline Seminary and Evangelical Seminary identified four involvements that desirable students tended to have histories of participation in: (1) secular university degree programs, especially in the arts, humanities, and social sciences; (2) cross-cultural experiences; (3) diverse church, ministry, and leadership experiences; and (4) illness, dying, and loss experiences. Professors deemed a

history of these involvements to be a sign of possessing the “right stuff” to succeed in seminary and ministry:

They [desirable students] come from two places. It's surprising, but the students I always look forward to had a university degree. They often came with theological degrees from one place or another, but boy when they had a [secular] university degree, very often they really had the stuff you could work with. They're faith people, but they're the good ones. The other ones were some that had some kind of cross-cultural experience, whatever it was. They've been out in the world and done something else. Those usually were the ones that I could count on to be good. They had some sort of foundation. You had things you could work with. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

It's really sort of interesting. From the range of young people that are coming through, they are into their mid-twenties or whatever and have done their [undergraduate] degree, we're finding people who have throughout their life been involved in some sort of camping activity, camp ministry, [MTS denomination] youth, something along those lines; have a good sense of both the foundations of ministry but also the realities of ministry that it's not all good and not all bad, so a good balance. People who are second-career, it's really hard to assess. People who are coming out of the humanities, social sciences, that sort of area, teaching, social work, seem to fit very well and have a good ethos of what's going on. That's helpful. Experience in the church is good I think for anybody coming in. Those who have been in multiple churches seem to do better. The person who comes in that was born in a church, raised in that church, and the only minister that they've known for the last thirty years was Reverend X, and thought that every sermon was supposed to be dumb and boring, it's pretty hard for them to recognize the diversity that is there. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Those who have lived through the difficult stuff of life, who have had major loss and who had to sort of work that through. I don't know that it's required, but it's like how have you thought through, how has faith been engaged at the level where you're willing to go through the crappy, crappy stuff of life and not try and make it sound like something other than what it is? That requires a lot of trust. That requires a lot of getting rid of that [disposition toward], “Fix it. Fix it.” or “God's doing this. God's doing that.” (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

In addition to indications of desirable character qualities, assessors were also on the lookout for signs of potentially troublesome character qualities in reviewing prospective students' applications. Two sources were central for the identification of

potential character trouble: the personal statement of interest and reference letters. The personal statements and reference letters were used to infer habits of thought and action of the applicants.

Each school required M.Div. applicants to write a short statement (one paragraph to a few pages) detailing their interest in the seminary and their faith journey. Not surprisingly, some of these statements were difficult to interpret. One Mainline professor commented, “The statement of purpose is sometimes written in very spiritual terms. So you kind of have to read between the lines and think, What does this mean? What are they saying?” Despite the imprecise nature of the statements, troublesome or peculiar qualities were still identified and inferred through this medium:

Their statement, “Hmm. Are they out to save the world? Have they got a Messiah complex? What am I really reading?” (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

We are looking for a personal statement that we can identify someone as being a Christian and having a turning point in their life where it’s not just, “I was born a Christian,” but that they have an actual relationship with Jesus Christ. So if we don’t see that, that would raise a red flag....We’ve had people that have said that they came to the point where they tried to commit suicide. I’m amazed what people put in that statement when you think it’s going into a file. It depends on someone’s character or personality. I would never put some of the details that some put in it, and we’re not really asking for that detail. We’re asking for a personal statement of how they came to know the lord Jesus Christ. Some people start from birth and go all the way up. You can have one page, and you can have some that are ten, fifteen pages long. There’s no limit. But when they get really long, sometimes that’s kind of a red flag like, “We didn’t really ask for your whole life story, but glad that you’re sharing...” (Administrator, Evangelical Seminary)

For most of the students whom I interviewed, the personal statement was a critical component of their application, even if it was only a paragraph or two. These statements were the only opportunity for the aspiring seminarians to present an image of themselves

and their Christian faith in their own words. Thus, in addition to providing a forum for describing one's relationship to the faith, statements were also used to highlight character formation. Faced with the task of gaining admission to a morally revered community, most students attempted to craft their statements in a way that demonstrated their possession of a suitable Christian character. One strategy was to emphasize involvements that were potential character signifiers:

I felt fortunate that I had gotten involved at an addiction counselling office and youth sports in the previous 6 months. So those looked good...I told them that I had a lot of leadership experience. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 26 years old)

Character formation tales were also presented, acknowledging a critical self-awareness of personal fallibility and the possibility of remedy and redemption through their Christian faith and church involvement:

I just said, "I believe that Jesus died and rose. I believe that he's changing my life, and it's a process. Each day I try to get up and try to live for him." So very personal things. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

I explained that I was on my journey and that I was still learning and that the school could play a part in improving that... In terms of references to my character I just honestly spoke of how I've grown and what ministries I've been involved in. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 27 years old)

These applicants also said that while personal disclosures of personal fallibility were important to acknowledge in general terms, the statements need not include all of the details of their moral transgressions—such as substance use, sexual escapades, and family problems—but just enough to be viewed as self-aware and authentic. A well-crafted statement made some necessary omissions in order to give the impression of possessing an appropriately blemished character:

You don't want to be disingenuous, but you also don't want to just put down your life story. I tried to be as professional as I could but also as honest and sincere as I could. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 27 years old)

I stuck to the gospel. I wasn't going to [divulge everything]...If people really knew who I was, maybe they wouldn't let me in. My point is the gospel—I stuck to that, what I believed about Jesus, my convictions...stuff that I know they can't read and say, "Oh, that's not biblical." That's the ironic thing. If I stick to my convictions of the Bible and stuff like that, then they can't say that you're wrong. If my exegesis and my interpretation are good and I can apply it, I'm following Jesus, and at the end of the day that's what I stand for. They're Christians too...So I stuck to the gospel. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

I talked about my faith journey, my church involvement, my mission trips, pretty much everything that I've told you, but leaving out the nitty-gritty details of my family... I think I put [in general terms] family hardships that led me to have a need of God in my family, just not the details of the divorce. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 25 years old)

Both schools required prospective students to submit letters of reference attesting to their suitability for the program and ministry. Both schools required one letter from a minister, and the other one or two letters could be from a professor, employer, or somebody able to attest to the applicant's character in personal terms. Assessors found these letters to be especially useful indicators of potential character trouble, both explicitly and implicitly:

...we would strongly look at the one from the pastor. It raises a red flag for us if they cannot get a reference from a pastor—and we would really like a pastor, not a Sunday school teacher, someone in the pastoral role. The odd time we accept someone without that, but they have to have a really good reason why they can't get a pastor's recommendation. (Administrator, Evangelical Seminary)

One of the things that I've learned over the nine years is those [letters of reference] are incredibly important because the danger signals in the letters of reference are very guarded. So when somebody hints at something in the letter of reference, it usually is already a big red flag. People are very kind, so they don't want to do somebody in. But they will give you little hints...You have to really read the subtlety. To give you an example, the student who was impulsive, that was indicated in her letter from her pastor. He said she sometimes does things

without consulting. We thought, “Okay, we’ll iron that out.” But no, that was a core issue for this person. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

When I’m reading a reference, I look for, one, honesty, number two, I am very careful and cautious around the areas that are vague, that you could run a train through. I automatically think that there must be an issue there—something they don’t want to say but they feel they’ve got to at least allude to it. So I look for that. If I look at a reference and it’s all 100% everything is going well and there is no sort of critical dynamic, then I become a little cautious. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

As noted above, intimations of potential character trouble were not the only issue flagged as worthy of further attention. Even more conspicuous, perhaps, was the total absence of any issues related to personal and moral formation. This makes sense given the general character consciousness of Christianity, which rests, in part, on the narrative of the imperfect, fallible nature of human beings. If we all have our flaws, then an impeccable application might beg the question, Where are yours? Letters that fail to address areas of personal and moral growth risk being dismissed as inauthentic representations of applicants and their characters.

Again, as with personal statements, difficulties of interpretation of the reference letters were apt to occur, and this could complicate the admissions process:

The character reference is often a friend, so they are usually pretty good. If they’re not, then we might think, “Okay, they have to choose their friends more wisely” (laughing). [Q: So you’re not reading into that one too much?] Not too much. We would certainly notice if it wasn’t very good. Because if it wasn’t very good, we would think, “That’s your friend? And that’s what they are saying?” We would be a little bit worried. [Q: Has that happened?] We’ve seen the ones where the friend was lower than the other two, but I think if they are really strong Christians they might think, “I really have to tell the truth.” And people have different markers, so what I might put as a 10 [perfect], others might say, “No, you’re in the Christian world; only Jesus can be 10.” So they are somewhere below that. So you’ve always got to think that way. (Administrator, Evangelical Seminary)

Again, this is where the challenge comes. There was a letter the other day I was looking at and I thought, “Oh my goodness. This student has real time management issues. But what does time management issues mean? What is actually at the heart here? Are they just over extending themselves? They are wanting to do ministry. Are they going to be a real dud when they get into the parish because they’re never going to settle down?” How do you judge a twenty-four-year-old in that?...I’ve got kids, and at twenty-one they could be like kids or they could be like adults at any given moment. It didn’t mean that they weren’t going to be good at what they do ten years from now. So these are some of the judgment calls that you have to make. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

I have studied at seminaries and taught at seminaries where character reference has been part of the application form. There are limitations to character references, one of which is the individual who gives the reference, there’s no guarantee about how serious they take it, and that’s just a caveat across the board. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

As with the crafting of their personal statements, applicants were also strategic in the selection of their referees. The pool of potential pastoral and academic references was obviously limited, but who wrote the personal character reference was entirely up to the applicant. In selecting character references, most applicants chose referees who had an “intimate familiarity” with their faith journey and character transformation as a Christian. Referees could then act as witnesses to, and narrators of, prospective students’ character formation tales, attesting to all of the challenges and triumphs experienced along the way to seminary.

The pastor who was running that first youth group I got involved in. I knew this man had known me from when I was a mean person until present day. So I’m glad he was able to comment on the change that has happened in my life. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 26 years old)

I have a close friend who has known me through all of this, so she could kind of speak to the transformation... I have friends who have known me since Grade 1...but our conversations are just different because they might not believe or they are just not interested in it [church]. When we get together we never talk about it. So they just couldn’t speak to different things that I think the college would have been looking for. Most likely they would have had to check the NA [not

applicable] box, which wouldn't have helped me. I needed someone who knew that I was serious about this. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

[I chose] a friend who was in seminary at a different school at that time...He had been my roommate the first year of undergrad, and we had a lot of deep theological conversations. I felt like he knew my character, the things that I had struggled with and could accurately reflect that. So that's why I chose him. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 26 years old)

Even though referee status was not something that the application assessment panellists emphasized, there were a few applicants who considered the status of the referee as an important criterion in character referee selection. Being associated with someone of social significance was thought to potentially reflect one's personal character in some way:

[Q: Who gave you the character reference?] It was my young adults pastor. I'm on the leadership team, with young adults. I was already a member of the young adults group before he came. He came from bible college, so he understands that aspect...He knows us from before. He was one of my brother's groomsmen. So he knows me outside of church. So he was my character reference. [Q: So the thought process was to try and get someone who knew you both inside and outside the church?] Not really. I thought, "Hmm. Character reference. A youth pastor would look awesome for that." The fact that he knows me from before is just a bonus. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 23 years old)

I respect her [an associate who gave me a character reference]. She is a person who is very much like my own mother. She's engaged in the community. She's won the community person of the year award...She is just the type of person that I admire. We had been involved in community events together. She knew me well enough to say what she knew. And if I was getting a reference from her, then I would think it was a good person to get a reference from because of who she is. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 48 years old)

Once all of the applicants had been reviewed and assessed, admission decisions had to be made. Admission decisions were made, in part, in reference to the character discoveries from the application assessment process.

Admitting new members

If assessors determine that prospective students have both the competence and character to succeed in the seminary, they are admitted unconditionally. If, however, there appears to be some question as to the academic abilities of the student or the aforementioned character trouble prognosis is problematic, admission is either denied or made conditional on a one-year *probationary period* (see also Prus and Grills 2003; Wolf 1991) of observation at the school prior to full admission into the M.Div. program.

Conditional admission and probationary periods only occurred at Mainline Seminary. Probationary periods allowed faculty members to further identify and assess any character trouble that emerged in the review of the initial application. If the trouble was confirmed and determined to be beyond remedy, the seminary was able to redirect the prospective student into another program, one that did not lead to professional ministry, or sever ties completely:

One of the things that we do when we see those red flags, we don't necessarily not let them in, but we admit people conditionally. We don't actually admit them into the Master of Divinity program. They need to complete one or two courses successfully before they can apply. We don't do it automatically, they have to reapply. Otherwise, they can continue doing the M.T.S. [Master of Theological Studies, which does not require them to meet specific character outcomes]. That way after we've had a year of experience with this person, we've seen them in some of these human growth courses, we've seen them interact with other students, we can say, "No, we don't want to admit you into the Master of Divinity program, but you can continue on in the M.T.S." It keeps us from having to remove somebody from the program. That's been very effective as screening process. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Even with these formal measures for the early identification of character trouble, it was understood that they by no means guaranteed issues of character would not emerge later in the course of the program or ministry:

Formation can break down. Character can break down. If you have younger students who come in who have never experienced a set back and all of a sudden they are dealing with death and all of that, they can go for a crash. We had one student who the first time when she went into a hospital to visit, ran out. She couldn't take it. She couldn't handle it. So we made her repeat her field education with someone who could help her work in this area because you can't be a minister if you can't go into a hospital. There was something about the hospital and death and all of that that was just prominent in her psyche at the time. So you just never know. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Finally, for all the talk and effort that went into the character recruitment process at both schools, an exigency that most seminaries in Canada face mediated recruitment—the need for new students in order to maintain the viability of the institution as a going concern:

To be honest, we'll take any warm body, as will any theological college you can find because we are all desperate for money. In fact, I think the problem is we allow too many people in, people who we know are not going to make it in ministry, but if you want to pay us your money, then knock yourself out. We do have academic standards, but I think we fudge on them sometimes just because it's a little more tuition. The financial constraints are an absolute reality. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

We are usually less strict than [the local church body process] and guidance conference. We often see potential where others do not. When we see somebody who is willing to listen, learn, and grow, we give them a chance. So more often than not the rest say no and we say okay. Behind that is we need students, we need enough students, and we are aware of that, but that's not what motivates it. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Although the first character-related career contingency discussed—character recruitment—was focused on the perspective of group gatekeepers, it is also worthwhile to consider the experiences and perspectives of prospective group members in greater detail. The focus of the analysis now shifts to those perspectives.

Engaging in Character Seekership

Character recruiters and group gatekeepers are of course not the only people attentive to the relationship between character and potential group membership. Character may also be a focal concern for prospective members. Participation may be viewed to be advantageous for achieving desired senses, types, designations, or qualities of character. The involvement becomes a means to demonstrate or form the character of self or other (see, e.g., Stevenson 2002: 135).

The term *character seeker* refers to people who become involved in particular groups or ways of life in order to effect some character change in self or others. In this study, character seekers could be divided into two groups: (1) prospective students who saw themselves as having character flaws and (2) prospective students who were secure in their own characters but had a felt need to change the characters of others. It should be noted that character seekership was generally accompanied by some personal fascinations with the seminary or ministerial way of life; involvement was not just an instrumental interest in which character formation was pursued as an end in itself. Rather, expressions of character seekership were closely aligned with the character consciousness of Christianity more generally, in which personal formation in the image of Jesus Christ is a foundational narrative. Analysts may distinguish instances of engaging in character seekership by the target of the character change, either self or other.

Attending to the character of self

Some prospective students saw seminary as a place to do some personal character work, to achieve a more desirable, more Christian character. This type of character seekership was usually precipitated by a period of experiencing dissatisfaction with self or situation. Dissatisfaction emerged in three ways. First, some participants experienced *character contradictions*, identifying a discrepancy between an enacted, situational character and an idealized, publicly claimed character:

...I got mixed up with the wrong friends, started to drink, started to do drugs and stuff...Not every Sunday, but some Sundays I would be waking up and going to church hung over, and that was never something that I was okay with. The worst thing was being drunk and talking to friends about Christianity, because, you know, you have a few drinks and you open up and talk about things. I would say that this is something I believe and this is something that is important to me, yet I'm drunk and potentially high [on illegal recreational drugs]...I remember having one conversation with a friend and talking about salvation, but he said, "You're no different. You're no different than me other than what you believe." (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

I remember being the leader of youth group [at camp] and telling all of these young people about God. And then I would come back to [my girlfriend's place] and sleep over. I was becoming a leader for these young guys, telling them to "Just wait [abstain from sexual intercourse] and don't get into this dating nonsense because you will just bring baggage into your life. Don't go chasing a bunch of different girls." Meanwhile, this is exactly what I was doing. I was living this double life... That was a tough summer for me. I look at the church, and people get mad at it. "All those people are hypocrites," they say. I understand [that perspective], but we all are [hypocrites]. I mean, I can give you a million excuses why I did something that goes against what I believe and what I was preaching to others. I really regretted that. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 25 years old)

Another turning point in definitions of self and situation was encountering new worldviews (see also Lofland 1966). For example, one participant explained the inescapable influence of reading the theological ideas of the prolific Christian author N.T.

Wright, especially *Simply Christian*. Wright's ideas about the nature of Christianity and the Christian life profoundly influenced this participant's understanding of being a Christian, including what it meant to have a Christian character in everyday life:

After I read N.T. Wright, what was so remarkable was not that I knew more but that I couldn't help but do certain things...N.T. Wright writes about, in a very persuasive way, that if you read the Bible you don't find these two separate worlds [heaven and earth], you find God is desperately trying to bring the kingdom here. And if God is king, then things will look certain ways... In the person of Jesus, you have these two worlds smashed together. So the kingdom is coming now. It's here but it's not... Just an incredible, careful putting together of all these things that I thought about but just couldn't put together before. So it was like this is the way I have to live now, as if God is king... So I had to put this together and say, "What does this look like? What does this look like for my money? Et cetera." (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 26 years old)

Third, dissatisfaction with self was a more prolonged experience for one participant, dating back to her childhood, as she explained, "I didn't really want my issues to hinder my relationship with God anymore. Like I said, I was very depressed throughout the whole divorce." Hers was an extended struggle to become a "good Christian" in spite of the worldly obstacles and distractions that she perceived as pulling her from that course.

Again, the Christian character consciousness of these students, as a part of the broader institutional belief system, provided not only the source of character tension but also the means of solution—further submission and commitment to God and the faith. Thus, although the particulars of these participants' character trouble differed, the self-prescribed remedy was the same. Pursuing ministry studies at seminary was viewed as a means for achieving desired senses of self. Just as character recruiters viewed particular

involvements as crucibles of character—groups, activities, or roles that demonstrated or formed particular character qualities—so did character seekers:

I wanted to develop as a person—I was coming in as a very heartbroken person from my family's past and I was hoping seminary would help me with that, help me develop...I wanted to improve on my knowledge and my personal formation the most... One of my goals was to learn my faith so that I could defend it, apologetics. I also just wanted to be a good Christian, just work on my own issues... I just wanted to come out of my shell more, and discover more of my skill set. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 25 years old)

That's where I got to the ultimate low, like what kind of life am I living? I got into prayer. "God, I don't know where I am going. I've let you down. I've let people down. I feel like shit. I don't think I'm living the life that you've called me to." I just had this very genuine, very desperate prayer. I was crying, and then I just felt this peace come over me where I just realized that this stuff is not just abstract but it's real—it's not always going to make sense or have a clear cut path. You're going to misrepresent God and the church, but that's where I found Jesus Christ and God's grace. So all of these things came up, and I started to embrace this feeling of "Not me, God, but you. Whatever I can do to honour you." That started to work its way through my life, and I considered going to seminary. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 25 years old)

For these participants, experiencing character problems in reference to their faith further strengthened their commitment to their faith. Character problems provided them with a focus and purpose in their subsequent faith-related pursuits, encouraging them to attain greater levels of congruence with their definition of the ideal Christian character.

Attending to the character of others

Of course, sometimes the source of character-related dissatisfaction was others, not self. When others were viewed to be misrepresenting the faith or not meeting some personally defined moral threshold of what a good Christian should be, then they could become the target of character work. In these instances, character seekers intended to remedy this

character trouble, in part, through their participation in seminary and, later, ministry. The targets of these character intervention efforts included groups—the church—and individuals—ministers and other Christians. Again, evidence of character contradictions was especially troubling for these aspiring Christian leaders and ministers:

If I think of one broad, all encompassing reason for why I'm here it is because I see things that I don't like in the church and the only way to change anything is to do something about it. So you have to get to the source. My goal has always been to break those stereotypes that I have even had about the church and mediate those things that I see that are good in the church to others. I want to change the church. Something needs to happen. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 22 years old)

I found myself being very critical of other ministers. I listened to what they were saying and I got the sense that I could do better than that. So it was kind of a challenge for myself to go and do that. There were some people who I was quite disappointed in what they were saying. They weren't following the word of God, as far as I was concerned...They weren't staying true to the text. They went off on their own personal biases, stories. They weren't revealing the word of God the way that I would like to see it revealed...I think that lack of effort in putting together the sermons would be it in a nutshell, for me. You could tell that they just scribbled something down to fill time. To me, if you're being honoured to present the word of God to the people, then you should spend the time to do a good job of that. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 45 years old)

I wanted to teach people about the word of God. I wanted to not just have people be mediocre Christians, which was something that I was, where you call yourself a Christian but you're aren't actually living it out. I wanted people to be Bible Christians, if that makes sense—have a Christian lifestyle, live by biblical principles, and not just call yourself a Christian, but be a Christian for people. Show people that you are a follower of Christ through your lifestyle. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 23 years old)

The second character-related career contingency—engaging in character seekership—dealt with attempts to effect desirable character change in self or others, often with the purpose of aligning character with existing or prospective contexts. The

third contingency that emerged also deals directly with the idea of having the right stuff for the situation or role to which one aspired.

Managing Character Reservations

When considering involvement in a group, activity, or role, people may experience reservations, doubts, or concerns about initiating and engaging these prospective endeavours. In order for involvement to occur, prospects need to manage, mitigate, overcome, or deal with these concerns in some fashion before committing themselves to participation in any extended or serious way (Prus 1996, 1997; Prus and Grills 2003). In terms of the present analysis, particular reservations are of interest: those that deal with the character designations of self and other. The term *character reservations* refers to the processes of (1) experiencing character-related doubts or concerns about involvement and (2) attempting to manage, mitigate, or overcome these concerns.

Experiencing character-related concerns

Since the Master of Divinity program is a professional program designed to prepare people for Christian ministry and leadership, it should not be surprising that the concerns prospective seminarians experienced were related to being both seminary students and ministers. In this regard, two general character-related concerns were evident: (1) having an inadequate character for the prospective role and (2) anticipating a shift in character expectations.

The first character reservation—possessing an inadequate character for the role—took two forms. A few participants identified personal character qualities that they viewed as inauspicious for, or irreconcilable with, the ministerial role:

All the while in the back of my mind was the idea of being a minister. But, to be very honest with you, I didn't think that I had the right temperament to be a minister at that time. First of all, I didn't think I had enough life experience. Secondly, I was very sensitive, sensitive to criticism. I didn't think it was the best fit for me. So even though I was interested, I didn't pursue. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 58 years old)

I just don't think I can do it. I can't do an M.Div. [Q: How come?] I don't think I'm patient enough, and I don't care enough...I just can't take people's B.S. at times, especially in church where there's this sort of expectation that you have to be a certain way. I can't do that. I can't commit myself to that. (Theology student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 27 years old)

The problem I ran into, and I feel this when people are pushing me to be a minister, I felt myself that you could very easily fall into the trap of pride. They just build you up, you know. It can go to your head. That part scared me. I don't like people like that. I want to be a humble person. So that part scared me a little bit. But it got built up. It was a real high after a sermon. If it went good, then everyone was coming and complimenting you. It just felt right. But the problem that I had was that it felt like I wanted some more of that. I'm not sure that's a calling from God. So that's why I was a little hesitant about it [pursuing my interest in ministry further] as well. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 45 years old)

The other form of defining self as an inadequate character for the role may be termed *character impostorism*, a self-attributed morally unworthy status that disqualified one for the prospective seminary context or ministerial role:

We had a new minister who turned out to be fantastic. We had some good chats. It was just really nice. It wasn't long after that I remember sitting at the back of the church watching [the minister] do her thing and I just had this thought, "I could do this. This could be good for me." Then I immediately, "I don't know. That's stupid. I could never do that. That's not my scene. Not long ago I got kicked out of residence for smoking pot. I'm not minister material." (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 25 years old)

I was worried that I wasn't Christian enough, so to speak—maybe I didn't pray enough, read my Bible enough, behave like a Christian, you know? I swear, I watch things that probably aren't good for me, but I don't care because it's fun. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 36 years old)

We all have sin and baggage in our life, and I think some of those things through. I started to examine my life and thought, "I'm not holy enough to be here. These people are all righteous lovers of God." (Theology student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

Prospective students who felt like moral impostors often had naïve understandings of the moral realities of seminarians and ministers. These views were informed by the prospects' still lay character consciousness, which had yet to be professionalized through a socialization process of "doctrinal conversion" (Davis 1968). That conversion would come later as students worked their way through ministry program and developed a more nuanced understanding of the ministerial life. In these early stages, seminarians and ministers were viewed to be spiritually and piously exalted figures, in comparison with whom prospects viewed themselves as critically deficient. This devaluing or diminishing of personal character in reference to some imagined moral other (see Cooley 1922) was common for both prospective and novice ministry students, as one professor explained:

I think the biggest thing is that people come and they are intimidated because they feel that their knowledge is inadequate, and even that they are coming to seminary and they will be amongst all of these spiritual giants and they will be found out as some spiritual midget or have an inferior morality...I think because we are dealing with something that is so deep for people—their faith, religion, spirituality—people sort of come and have this natural sort of inadequacy, like we're not good enough, we're not righteous, we're spiritually poor...This can be a pressure packed environment. In every academic discipline we want to show we are smart and belong, but here I think the sacredness of the subject matter kind of ups it a little bit more, the sense that we need to be somebody. It's part of the ethos of this place when students first come in. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

The second character concern was anticipating a shift in character expectations. New involvements, roles, relationships, and activities often bring new expectations for participants. A few participants were concerned about what concomitant character expectations the ministerial role would bring. For example, one female participant was worried about the implications ministry would have for the possibility of future intimate relationships. The moral status of the female minister as untouchable was a “master status” (Hughes 1945) she preferred to avoid:

I was scared that I wouldn't be able to get married. Especially in the Korean context when a female is a pastor, it's like the holy, holy woman you can't be with. So that was actually a big concern. When I first became a youth pastor, I heard some guys in the church college group talking about how I became a pastor. One guy actually told me, “You know some guys were talking, and one of them said that, ‘If you ever say that Pastor _____ is pretty, you're going to get punished, and if you ever say that she is hot, you'll go to hell!’” So that was like their joke. I was really concerned that maybe nobody would want to go out with me. Even now, people think I'm so professional. They look at me from afar. They don't really approach me that well. So that was a big concern....A lot of people told me, “You should go out with someone before you graduate because if you get ordained, it's going to be hard for you to get married.” A lot of people told me that because that is the reality. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

Similarly, applicants were also attentive to the implications of the ministerial life for their families and spouses. Two participants' wives expressed concerns about the moral expectations and scrutiny that they expected to encounter in the role of the minister's wife:

The other concern she [my wife] had was the image of the old style minister's wife. When you hire a minister you get two for one. And she would have to be involved in the Sunday school programs and leadership. She's done those things. But she didn't want it demanded of her... The other thing with the minister's wife maybe being in the looking glass and the expectation that she would be held to a higher standard. She wasn't too comfortable with that either. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 59 years old)

I know why she doesn't want me to be a minister. She had a great uncle who was a minister. He was terrible at it. He went through two or three wives. Where she grew up, in her church the minister's wife did just as much work as the minister. That's just the way it was. She actually doesn't view herself as a good Christian. I don't get this. That's something you can always improve yourself on. But she kind of views herself as not good enough to take on that role. Therefore, she doesn't want me to do that role because it would mean by default that she would have to. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 45 years old)

Character-related concerns are best understood in reference to the character consciousness of the aspiring seminarians and those around them. Doubts and reservations were experienced as participants imagined how they would be viewed and evaluated in the seminary and ministerial context. Even if these self-assessments were overly critical, they nonetheless represented points of concern that often needed to be managed in order to stay the course toward ministry studies.

Managing character reservations

Generally, for participation in seminary to occur, prospects need to deal with any debilitating doubts or concerns in some way. While some prospective seminarians attempted to ignore or discount these character-related concerns about involvement, leaving them to be dealt with upon admission, others managed them in more specific ways.

First, some aspiring ministers were given opportunities to engage the ministerial role through lay preaching at church. In contrast with the earlier example of a participant being wary of the potentially insidious effect of being praised for ministerial work,

affirmation received in that role could also mitigate concerns and be interpreted as a sign that one truly possesses the right stuff for ministry:

The biggest sign for me was when I was asked to preach. I would preach, and then people would say to me afterwards, “You completely missed your calling.” That was totally unsolicited, just random people in a congregation. I would preach again and somebody would come up and randomly say, “You’ve completely missed your calling.” So that idea in the back of my mind, you know, I’m not getting any younger. If I have that gift, if God’s given me that ability, then I need to be using it rather than not using it. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 58 years old)

Another way of managing reservations about the fit between personal character and the ministerial role was to redefine the role in less traditional, and thereby more befitting, terms. Character work, then, can include preemptive reframing of future involvements in order to achieve an imagined goodness of fit between character and context. Further, reframing the situation to fit one’s character might be perceived to be a less radical effort than the alternative—reforming character in order to fit the situation:

Even when I came here, I wasn’t sure that I was heading for ordained ministry. One reason for that is that it seems like such a big thing. Who am I to think that I would be able to do that? There are also so many different ways of looking at what a minister is. I just have to not look at what they think because I don’t see myself in a lot of those ways, either the very elevated view of the minister or the very evangelical way of looking at the minister—those are very frightening possibilities for me and not my style. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 60 years old)

It was a bit of a negotiation process with my wife. She has fixed in her mind that I would be a good chaplain. I don’t see exactly what she thinks the difference between chaplain and minister is. It’s a little hazy. But in her mind, that’s [being a chaplain] acceptable. But for that you need an M.Div. in order to do that job. So I had her blessing on that aspect to pursue that...So she views being a chaplain’s wife as less involvement on her part. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Male, 45 years old)

Finally, one participant stressed that an element of faith needed to be exercised in order to manage her character concerns about becoming a minister, trusting that God would assist her in overcoming these obstacles. Trust in the face of fear and doubt is a recurrent biblical theme, and it is one of the indicators of a mature and robust faith. As such, this prospective student took solace in, and resonated with, biblical characters who had similar experiences and ended up being character success stories:

That was one of the things that I thought, “You know what, God will take care of this.” I just keep getting reminded of Moses’ story, where Moses says, “I’m not ready. I’m not really good at speaking. How am I supposed to lead your people?” Then God says, “Don’t worry. I will give you the words.” So I keep praying on that, “God, you did that for him. Why not for me? There’s no other way that I will be able to make it through without that.” (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

CONCLUSION

The relationship between character and involvement in groups, activities, relationships, and roles has been a concern for some of sociology’s key figures. The typical approach has been to understand character as an objective essence lodged in individuals that impels them, consciously or subconsciously, to act in particular ways. This has led to a bias in the character-involvement literature toward “variable-oriented” or structural analyses. In the process, “person-oriented” or interpretive analyses, which emphasize the attribution and meaning-making processes involved in the social construction of character in everyday life, have been disregarded.

This paper begins to redress this conspicuous gap in the character-involvement literature. I offered a symbolic interactionist conception of character as an alternative to the objectivist social character approach. The meaning of character was shown to be

contingent on audience interpretations. Character was posited to be a self-other dispositional designation that people use as an interpretive resource in making sense of their own and others' actions. When attention shifts to the social production of character, then the roles people engage in this constitutive process become evident. The terms *agents of characterization* and *targets of characterization* were used to identify these roles, and the term *character consciousness* was used to conceptualize the interrelated set of intersubjective perspectives, precepts, and practices that were used to identify, give meaning to, problematize, and remedy character.

The examination of a specific empirical case—initial involvement in ministry studies—illustrated how these concepts sensitize one to character as an interpretive phenomenon, one that influences people's careers of participation in group life. The character consciousness of seminary recruiters was paramount in assessments of prospective students. It was also central in the prospective students' self-designations and ongoing character work. These two groups—recruiters and applicants—engaged the roles of agent and target of characterization. The interaction of the people engaging those roles continually produced and reproduced meaningful characters. Applicants even assumed both roles as they assessed their own characters and responded to these assessments. Clearly, more concerted study of the character-making processes suggested here is worthwhile and necessary.

In addition to offering a theoretical and conceptual orientation for understanding character as an interpretive phenomenon, generally, this paper also contributes a set of concepts that are of direct relevance to the character-involvement literature, specifically. I

considered in detail three character-related contingencies—character recruitment, character seekership, and character reservations—and some of their subprocesses. If the character-involvement literature is to develop person-oriented analyses of character and career, then these concepts represent reference points for pursuing studies of that type.

This study is limited in that it focused on a specific case, initial involvement in two Protestant Christian seminaries in Canada. Future research should refine and extend the three character-related career contingencies of initial involvement that were identified as well as any other contingencies that occur in other settings. The use of multiple cases will provide the opportunity for a more formal, generic, and robust theory of the relationship between character designations and initial involvement (see Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Prus 1996). Similarly, the character-related contingencies of sustaining and intensifying involvement, disinvolvement, and reinvolvement would also contribute to a more encompassing theory of character and career.

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PAPER TWO

The Moral Character Career of the Ministry Student

ABSTRACT

Character—as in people’s essential interactional dispositions, especially of a durable and moral nature—is a fundamental feature of everyday group life. Although it rarely merits sociologists’ serious attention, those who have examined character have tended to approach it as a set of objective dispositions lodged within the individual, though socially produced or mediated. This paper presents an alternative to the *character-as-dispositions* approach that has dominated both psychology and sociology. Rather than a set of set of objectively identifiable dispositions, character can be understood as a *dispositional designation*, an instance of the labelling process. Ethnographic research was conducted on how ministry students experienced the character formation efforts at two Protestant Christian seminaries. Students learned to identify, classify, assess, regulate, conceal, and affirm personal dispositions of moral significance for the ministerial role. This process is analyzed through the concept of moral career, specifically moral character career, or the sequences and shifts in people’s sense and evaluations of character over time.

INTRODUCTION

Then he said to them all: Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

Luke 9:23-26 (NIV)

Character—as in people’s essential interactional dispositions, especially of a durable and moral nature—is a fundamental feature of everyday group life. Whether it is in the arena of socialization, education, religion, politics, business, work and occupations, sports, crime and deviance, or interpersonal relationships, character is often a salient concern, being appealed to as an account for individual successes and failures, accomplishments and transgressions in all of these eminently social realms of endeavour.

It is curious, then, that psychologists have traditionally dominated the study of character, often in the guise of “personality,” the analytic emphasis being on the discovery and documentation of individuals’ dispositions through personality questionnaires, tests, and experiments, and predicting future behaviour based on these individual traits. In contrast, sociologists have comparatively disregarded the concept of character. This is regrettable and in need of redress. It is a particularly confounding anomaly (but see Camic 1986) given the socially constituted nature of character, though this is rarely emphasized in contemporary scholarship. Rather than being something internal to individuals as a consequence of their being human, character is only possible and indeed only achieved when individuals become linguistically-enabled, reflective, minded members of a community and enter into the intersubjectively constituted historical-developmental flow of its moral order.

There have been some notable exceptions to sociology’s disciplinary neglect of character (e.g., Durkheim 1902-3; Weber 1904-5; Riesman et al. 1950; Adorno et al. 1950; Gerth and Mills 1953; Fromm 1970; Bourdieu 1977, 1984, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bellah et al. 1985; Sennett 1977, 1998). These efforts to explain the role of the group in the formation of members’ characters have been a necessary corrective to the traditionally individualistic and psychological treatments of character. Still, although much more attentive to the social foundations of character, these approaches typically treat character as something lodged within the individual—as a core set of dispositions—though socially produced or mediated.

This paper presents an alternative to the *character-as-dispositions* approach that has dominated both psychology and sociology. Rather than a set of objectively identifiable dispositions, character can be understood as a *dispositional designation*, an instance of the labelling process (Becker 1963). Working from a Chicago school symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993), character—like deviance—is ultimately a matter of audience definition. Being a person of a certain character is more an effect of being defined and typified as such a person than possessing some essential habits, tendencies, or dispositions belonging to such persons. While not denying the capacity of people to develop more habitual, routine, or regularized ways of knowing and acting, the position taken here is that character attributions are not necessarily facsimiles or objective representations of individuals’ “actual” dispositions. The social contexts in which people are embedded shape character attributions.

When viewed in this manner, character is a result of the collective action of people playing a range of roles in the *character-making process*. Broadly, people assume two types of roles in the character-making process (see also Durkheim 1902-3; Prus and Grills 2003; Prus 2011: 59-61), with each type potentially subsuming a variety of sub-roles. There are the targets of characterization, or those who are the subject of character attribution and formation efforts. There are also the agents of characterization, or those who act as tacticians in the character-making process, assuming roles as evaluators, instructors, regulators, and moralizers.¹³ Further, these roles are not mutually exclusive.

¹³ When understood in this manner, the psychological endeavour to identify individuals’ character or personality traits through tests and experimentation is just a specific instance of the character-making process that goes on in society.

People may assume these roles on sequential, simultaneous, or alternating bases, for example. The degree to, and manner in, which these roles take on more central, meaningful, or prominent positions in specific situations is also likely to vary, with some people exercising greater influence over the character-making process than others. It is only by examining this broader social process, and the multiple roles that it entails, that a more comprehensive account of character as a sociological phenomenon can be developed.

For example, in becoming members of a group, people enter into the historical-developmental flow of the group's moral order. Through their observations of and interactions with established members, the neophyte can begin to develop a *character consciousness*, an intersubjective awareness of the character-related perspectives, precepts, and practices of the group. This includes, for instance, community-based notions of what character is; how character develops; how to identify, classify, and monitor character; notions of deviant and respectable characters; how character can and should be regulated; and what types of habitual, emotional, and interactional dispositions are suitable for particular roles, involvements, activities, or relationships. Achieving character consciousness enables people to integrate into the group's moral order, contributing to its continuity and adjustment as moral mediums. Through this intersubjective process, the individual becomes a "society in miniature" (Shibutani 1955; Prus 2007).

This paper offers an empirical analysis of a specific instance of the socially constituted nature of character. Specifically, it examines how ministry students

experienced the character formation efforts at two Protestant Christian seminaries. Ministry students experienced a professionalization process that engendered a character consciousness of the revered role and office for which they were preparing to assume. Students learned to identify, classify, assess, regulate, conceal, and affirm personal dispositions of moral significance for the ministerial role. The students needed to demonstrate, for themselves and others, that they were fit for ministry, that they were persons of a particular character fit for a particular role. A useful way of conceptualizing this process is through the concept of moral career, specifically moral character career, or the sequences and shifts in people's definitions and evaluations of character over time.

MORAL CAREERS

The moral career of a person of a given social category involves a standard sequence of changes in his way of conceiving of selves, including, importantly, his own. These half-buried lines of development can be followed by studying his moral experiences—that is, happenings which mark a turning point in the way in which the person views the world—although the particularities of this view may be difficult to establish. (Goffman 1961a: 168)

In his classic paper, “The Moral Career of the Mental Patient,” Goffman (1961a) introduced the concept of moral career, a variant of the career concept sociologists use as a way of conceptualizing people's natural histories—the sequences, stages, and shifts—of involvement in particular groups, activities, relationships, or roles. Goffman appropriated and modified the career metaphor, using it to analyze the evaluation of people's senses of self over time, that is, their moral careers. One of the analytic advantages of the moral career concept lies in its “two-sidedness,” revealing both the personal and public dimensions of experience. As Goffman (1961: 127) states, “One side is linked to internal

matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and it is a part of a publicly accessible institutional complex.”

In examining the moral career of the mental patient, Goffman divided it into four stages. The prepatient stage involved conceptions of self that led up to admission to the mental institution. The inpatient stage included the changes in definitions of self that occurred during the person’s residency in the institution. The ex-patient stage comprised the definitions of self emerging after experiencing this ordeal. Finally, the re-patient stage attended to the self-changes involved in returning to mental patient status.

The experiences of the inpatient in Goffman’s (1961) study have the most direct bearing on the present analysis.¹⁴ Upon entering the mental hospital, the person experiences a systematic institutional stripping of “rights, liberties, and satisfactions” (140). The person’s status is degraded from citizen to mental patient. The effect of these mortifying experiences is to initiate a redefinition of self, the meanings and consequences of which include both intended and unintended features. The results of Goffman’s analysis demonstrate that the self, rather than a possession of individual persons, is a socially constituted phenomenon, one that rests on the interactive foundations of the groups and institutions in which one is embedded and engaged.

¹⁴ It should be noted that, in making this reference to the experiences of mental patients, I do not intend to equate mental patients with ministry students or mental hospitals with seminaries in either an exact or a derogatory sense. Rather, a useful conceptual analogy can be drawn between the experiences had in these two realms. By focusing on the generic-conceptual features of these settings and the process of self-redefinition that occurs for the people who experience them, we may learn something of general value for the understanding of selves, especially of a characterological sort, in society.

Since the introduction of the moral career concept, others have established its analytic utility for understanding people's experiences in variety of contexts, especially their involvements in and contacts with organizations and institutions (see Blankenship 1973). There have been studies of the moral career of psychiatry students (Light 1980), immigrant mothers (Liamputtong 2006), mothers experiencing drug treatment (Radcliffe 2011), antidepressant users (Malpass et al. 2009), female sexually transmitted disease patients (Nack 2002), free clinic patients (Parizota et al. 2005), cigarette smokers (Peretti-Watel et al. 2007), urban nomads (Spradley 1970), sport supporters (Crawford 2003), even American Chinatowns (Light 1974). Some of these studies attend to definitions of character as an aspect of moral careers, but the analytic focus has generally remained on the originally broad definition of the moral career concept that Goffman proposed (see Nack [2002] for an exception), which would subsume anything pertinent to evaluating self, as in notions of character, competence, appearance, and social location, for example. Notwithstanding Nack's (2002) excellent analysis of the "diagnostic encounter" as an important turning point in the designation of moral character among female STD patients, the conceptual contribution of the moral career concept for the sociological study of character has largely been left implicit, undeveloped, or unexplored in the literature. This paper begins to address that lacuna.

Thus, although Goffman did not focus specifically on character in talking about moral careers, his concept can be employed in a more focused, narrow way. The position taken here is that character, as a central feature of our selves, is also a socially constituted phenomenon, and that this can be demonstrated, in part, by examining the moral character

careers—the sequences, stages, and shifts in definitions and evaluations of character over time—of people embedded and engaged in specific groups or relational networks. The analysis that follows examines the moral character career of one such group: students preparing for professional ministry.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper is part of a larger project examining character as a sociological phenomenon. From the outset, the project has been theory and concept driven. Developing an empirically grounded concept of character served to guide the selection of the research site, the collection of the data, and the analysis of the data (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland 1995). The project seeks to address a basic question: How does character work in everyday life?

Using this basic question as an analytic reference point, I chose seminary life as a specific social world that I could investigate for the purpose of developing some general insights about character. Seminaries, in the Christian tradition, are theological schools that prepare people for professional Christian ministry and service. Although one could potentially pursue a study of character in any social realm, the seminary setting offered several advantages. First, seminaries are explicitly concerned with the evaluation, regulation, and development of character of their students. Second, these character formation efforts are engaged from a range of roles as students, instructors, supervisors, and administrators. Third, seminaries provide a location, population, and set of activities

that are circumscribed and accessible. The combination of these features made seminaries an appealing site to pursue a study of character as a sociological phenomenon.

I recruited two Protestant Christian seminaries—Mainline Seminary and Evangelical Seminary—to participate in the study.¹⁵ Mainline Seminary primarily prepared people for ordained ministry in the Mainline denomination in Canada. Evangelical Seminary, though denominationally affiliated, prepared people for ministry in a variety of denominational and non-denominational settings. Both schools prepared their ministry students through their Master of Divinity professional degree programs, which employed a combination of course work, supervised ministry placement, and ministry placement seminars.

I conducted ethnographic research in the two seminaries over 14 months and included 80 in-depth audio-recorded interviews of 64 students, faculty, and staff; participant-observation of the seminary setting, including participation in 23 full-term courses, community meals, worship, school events, and informal student gatherings inside and outside the schools; and observational documents, including ministry student handbooks, supervised placement manuals, course syllabi, assignments, school webpages, and ephemera.

All three of these methods facilitated one another. The initial participant-observation in classes allowed me to identify and develop rapport with potential interview participants. It also allowed me to collect organizational documents to be analyzed after leaving the field. Interviews were useful in providing background information to help

¹⁵ All names are pseudonyms. Mainline and Evangelical are pseudonyms adopted from Carroll et al. (1997).

contextualize and make sense of what was happening during participant-observation of courses, events, and other gatherings. They also indicated what organizational documents figured most prominently in the participants' everyday realities. In turn, the organizational documents provided useful reference points in interviews, as well as for approaching some of the information encountered while conducting participant-observation.

Consistent with the methodological principles and practices Glaser and Strauss (1967) outline (see also Charmaz 2006; Lofland 1995), I examined these data for emerging themes, especially those instances dealing with character. Based on this “constant-comparative” analysis, I developed conceptual categories and noted connections among them. I identified the conceptual parallels between this study and Goffman's (1961) analysis of moral careers during the later stages of the research. The conceptual categories had already developed in ways congruent with the moral career concept, so its inclusion, as another instance of grounded theory, in the analysis was apposite. Still, I modified and focused the concept to reflect the circumstances of the present study. The result was the concept of moral character career, an account of the progressive changes in a person's definition and evaluation of character over time.

FINDINGS

Like Goffman's (1961) analysis, this paper focuses on the more general or typical experience of participants, privileged over the idiographic, unique, and exotic. An ideal-typical model of the experience of character formation at seminary emerged. Though

people arrive from manifold backgrounds at seminary to pursue ministry studies, once in the program students “are confronted with some importantly similar circumstances and respond to these in some importantly similar ways” (Goffman 1961a: 129).

I explore four stages of the moral character career of the ministry student. First, students faced exaggerated character expectations for the revered role that they were training to assume. Second, students experienced increased scrutiny of their character. Third, students were expected to manage, regulate, and train their character, forming it into the ministerial mould. Fourth, students legitimated their character, confirming that they had the right moral stuff for ministry. These four stages are not mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily unfold in a linear pattern. They may be more accurately thought of as different realms of character consciousness that are cultivated and responded to as students experience the ministry program. That is, students learn that a minister’s character is a particular kind of thing that should be engaged in a particular kind of way.

Experiencing Exaggerated Character Expectations

A holy calling will not save an unholy character. (Professor, Lecture, Mainline Seminary)

New roles bring new expectations. This was the case for many of the ministry students in this study. In addition to demonstrating the professional skills required for ministry, many students also sensed an increased moral expectation to demonstrate and develop the dispositions associated with the ministerial role. The source of these expectations was both self- and other-derived.

Before they had even arrived at seminary, many prospective ministry students experienced character concerns. These participants described reservations about measuring up morally. The most prominent reservations had to do with possessing the right moral stuff for the task and role that lie ahead. At this stage, concerns were often rather abstract and sweeping, couched in terms of personal piety—“I’m not holy enough” or “I’m not Christian enough.” These prospective students imagined the hallowed halls of seminary and the revered role of minister as a place and a position for which they viewed themselves as undoubtedly unqualified:

I remember sitting at the back of the church watching [the minister] do her thing and I just had this thought, “I could do this. This could be good for me.” Then I immediately, “I don’t know. That’s stupid. I could never do that. That’s not my scene. Not long ago I got kicked out of residence for smoking pot. I’m not minister material.” (Student 5, Mainline Seminary, Male, 25 years old)

We all have sin and baggage in our life, and I think some of those things through. I started to examine my life and thought, “I’m not holy enough to be here. These people are all righteous lovers of God.” (Student 24, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

And so these prospective students worried about possessing character flaws and being discovered as character impostors. These concerns set the stage for their forthcoming involvements, when they would arrive at seminary for orientation and their first courses, anticipating a community of character into which they must fit.

Once students arrived at seminary, the initial concerns of some about being character impostors began to subside. Orientation and the first couple of weeks of classes provided an opportunity to permeate some of the moral mystique that initially enshrouded seminary life. Students realized that most of them were in the same position. That is, they were all lacking in some regard. Nobody was perfect:

I kind of had this image that everybody would be pious, and I didn't consider myself pious at all. There was an interaction with all of them, seeing that they were all just regular human beings too. They all had their issues and concerns...They still worried whether they were worthy enough to be ministers too. (Student 19, Mainline Seminary, Female, 42 years old)

In reality, you can look at statistics and realize that everyone here is in the same boat; it's just that sometimes we like to pretend that we're not. (Student 24, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

As will become clear, the tension between fulfilling the character expectations of a revered role and acknowledging the fundamental Christian narrative that we are all fallible, imperfect beings was continually played out through the students' seminary experience.

Students' preconceptions were gradually replaced by the institutional understanding of seminary life and ministry through a process of socialization, a process Davis (1968) termed "doctrinal conversion." Rather than worrying about whether or not they were holy enough to fit in with the rest of their classmates, students' attention was drawn to more pressing concerns. Upon entering the program, the seminaries heaped a number of character-related responsibilities and expectations on ministry students. If they were not aware already, they learned that to be successful in ministry not only required great competence in the areas of theology, preaching, exegesis, and worship, but it also demanded great character. The new role that they were being trained to assume was one that, in the Christian world as well as in many other circles, occupied an elevated moral status and responsibility relative to their previous histories and positions. Many ministry courses commonly stressed the theme of representing God's character to the world continually reminded students of their responsibility to be God's character

representatives. As one professor at Evangelical Seminary exhorted, “The bar is really high for pastors. It ought to be. They need to reflect Jesus Christ, truly.”

I use the term *character representatives* to refer to people who are defined, expected, or required to embody the character of the group in which they are a member. The actions of those who occupy this role are understood to reflect some broader reality (as in viewpoints, habits, practices, emotions) of the group, not just personal idiosyncrasies. Although, at different times, most members of most groups may be treated and interpreted character representatives to greater or lesser degrees, there are some who may, willingly or otherwise, assume this role more consistently and prominently than others. In the Protestant Christian tradition, the minister occupies such a position. Ministers represent the character of Christians, the church, the denomination, other ministers, their congregations, Jesus Christ, and God.

Being a character representative involved not only taking personal responsibility for one’s character, but also integrating self into the broader historical-developmental flow of the moral order of the group. Ministers need to maintain and foster the integrity of their office and position. Many of these responsibilities and expectations—as students were frequently reminded in class—are recorded in the Bible, which served as an important record of the history and significance of being God’s character representatives. For example, in a lecture on the seven sins of Israel and the reference to “so profane my holy name” found in the Book of Amos, the professor explained to the class:

At Mount Sinai, God told Israel they would be a ‘Kingdom of Priests.’ Priests are intermediaries between God and the people. When a priest displays poor character, then they are telling a lie (that is, profane) about God’s (my holy name)

character because a priest's character is supposed to reflect the character of God. (Professor, Lecture, Mainline Seminary)

In a separate class, another Mainline professor, referencing James 2:14-17 and its relevance for understanding the responsibility of the church and its ministers in social justice, stated:

This passage is about reflecting the character of God. We are the body, or the embodiment, of Christ—his hands and feet. He leaves for us his work to be done. That is our interest in social justice. (Professor, Lecture, Mainline Seminary)

Professors continually attempted to engender in their students a sense of the moral reality to which they were entering and would be held to account, in this world or otherwise. In their coursework, students examined some of the key players in this history were examined, including the character flaws that eventually proved fateful. These cautionary tales served to outline some of the moral boundaries of the group, and document the transgressions thereof. By no means was it all doom and gloom, however. A variety of characters were distinguished as moral exemplars, as paragons of propriety to learn from and strive towards achieving, albeit in some small, invariably deficient way. Jesus, of course, being the most notable of these characters, was one who seminarians and professors alike commonly appealed to in the refrain “to be Christ-like.”

Many students, as ministers in training, acknowledged that they were integral moral mediums through which Christianity would maintain its mission to reflect God's character in the world. This played out, for example, in how they understood and approached their interactions with others now that they were ministry students:

I'm conscious of the fact from that point they [the people who know I am a ministry student] are going to be watching me and looking at me, and rightly they should, looking at me and saying okay so this is what a Christian is. With my non-

Christian friends as well, now that I've expressed my faith and now that they know that I'm in seminary, how I interact and how I behave towards them is going to be looked at and probably connected. (Student 8, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 36 years old)

Yeah, I'm a Christian, but I'm also in seminary training to speak on behalf of Jesus to wherever I am. So there is just maybe more pressure on me to live my life out a certain way. (Student 15, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

Whether you have a collar on or not or whether you are in the pulpit or not, you are a minister. That's what people are going to say what a Christian minister looks like. So there is a constraint in terms of you're a face for the faith and you want to do it justice in everything you do... (Student 8, Mainline Seminary, Female, 48 years old)

Being a character representative was also understood, in some cases, to extend to a minister's family, which could add another layer of complexity to an already demanding situation. Not only may a minister's family be expected to reflect a Christian character, generally, they may also be deemed to reflect the minister's character, specifically:

He [a minister] has to keep his family together, and that's an important thing. So how's his wife and how are his kids? That isn't to say that he has to have perfect kids. That's how it was read for a while. But is his house orderly or are things just going crazy in that household? Not that you might not have a disobedient child or whatever. There is a lot of pressure on pastor's kids. But is it a house where people are reflecting the kind of thing that is reflected sometimes in Old Testament leaders? David's kids just seem to fall apart. So is that what is happening across the board and consistently? So those are reflections of an inner life. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

The pastor's family lives in a fishbowl... There are always people who comment on "Oh look what the pastor's family is doing." Or "Oh look at what the pastor's kids are doing." There are always those who expect you to live perfectly. And not just church people either. (Student 4, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 42 years old)

Am I perfect? No. Now, with that being said, I have 2 girls, and there is the concept of how am I going to be evaluated based upon the girls? (Student 7, Mainline Seminary, Male, 49 years old)

Being a character representative and displaying a character suitable for Christian ministry were not just suggestions for students to consider. They were requirements built into the Master of Divinity program at both Mainline and Evangelical Seminary. Students were expected in their courses, placements, and interactions to demonstrate the qualities consistent with being a Christian minister. The rest of the analysis considers how students handled these great expectations.

Scrutinizing Character

There was this girl in our church who was looking to become a minister as well. But she stopped the process because she didn't want to be, quote, "In a fishbowl her whole life." That scared her. To me, it doesn't really bother me. I have nothing to hide. (Student 15, Mainline Seminary, Male, 45 years old)

In response to the elevated moral status and expectations of the role that they were endeavouring to assume, ministry students experienced an increased scrutiny of their characters. A circuit of character appraisal audiences (see also Goffman 1961a)—self, other students, professors, ministry placement supervisors, outsiders—attempted to discover, classify, and assess the students' characters in order to determine their goodness of fit with the ministerial role. Students' experiences both inside and outside the seminary initiated and supported these moral monitoring efforts.

The Christian tradition has a long history of noting the fallible, imperfect, sinful nature of human beings. So the focus on character as a subject matter might have seemed natural for students. Still, Mainline and Evangelical employed methods that were particular to the seminary process. Students learned that character was not something to

be left unexamined. A self-accounting of its genesis, trajectory, constituents, classification, and consequences was not just some academic exercise in moral philosophy but was an integral discipline to be practised throughout a ministry career.

The curriculum at both schools promoted the practice of scrutinizing character. Whether it was lectures, assignments, or supervised ministry placements, each contributed elements to the ministry student's emerging character consciousness. For example, in their lectures, professors often employed what may be referred to as "seminaryspeak," a language particular to Western Christian ministry and leadership, and one that incorporates many concepts related to character formation. Professors continually lectured students on the importance of being *self-aware* and *self-critical* of their characters; identifying their *gifts, graces, and growing edges*; being *intentional* and *accountable* in their personal moral formation; *integrating* course concepts with moral and ministerial practices; articulating personal-pastoral *identities* and *boundaries*; developing a *God consciousness* that can discern the *embedded theologies* at work in their everyday practices and encounters. Professors expected students to achieve a familiarity and fluency with these terms and use them in scrutinizing self.

Character-related assignments often required students to classify their character and account for its development. As one Evangelical professor explained to his class, "The act of self-reflection is the art of stopping to think about whom we are and why." These assignments often included preexisting character classificatory schemes and theories of genesis for students to draw upon during their self-analyses. For example, in a course at Mainline Seminary, students were required to construct a "genogram,"

essentially a psycho-medicalized version of a family tree (see McGoldrick and Gerson 1985), which traces psycho-biological conditions and dispositions through one's family history. Students were to indicate relevant demographic information (e.g., ages, children, substance use, abuse or incest, ethnicity, religion, marital status, criminal histories); horizontal stressors (e.g., major transitions, migration, death, illness, unemployment); vertical stressors (e.g., racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia); familial-relational roles (e.g., saints/sinners, secret keepers/tellers, trouble starter/solver, overfunctioner/underfunctioner, selfish/selfless, peacemakers, clowns); relationship types (e.g., fused/enmeshed, distant, conflicted/hostile, focused on, ignored); and triangles (e.g., parent-child triangles, in-law triangles, oppressor-persecutor-victim triangles); familial scripts and narratives (e.g., about work, money, faith, relationships, values, success and failure); and theological themes (e.g., works/faith, fear/trust, guilt/forgiveness, sin/grace, pride/humility). These data were then analyzed for emerging patterns, especially in regard to any possible implications for the student's character and future ministry. The discovery of these character types, origins, and trajectories were intended to serve as reference points in interpreting situations and orienting self in the ministerial role:

How does your family of origin impact upon your ministry? What are the strengths and growing edges it offers you? What might be your blind spots? Your temptations? Situations of ease/anxiety? Relationships of ease/anxiety? What recommendations do you give yourself for ongoing growth and integration? (Assignment handout, Mainline Seminary)

The supervised ministry placement program at both Mainline and Evangelical continued the process of character scrutiny, primarily through immersing students in a focused circuit of character appraisal audiences. Broadly, the program comprised a

weekly placement in an approved ministry setting and a weekly field education reflection seminar. These two components operated in a dialectical relationship, with each informing the other. In the ministry setting, the student worked under the supervision of a ministry professional, who reported to the seminary. The field education reflection seminars occurred in the seminary setting, and included other students assigned to one's group, faculty facilitators, and, sometimes, outside ministry professionals. The Director of Ministry Formation oversaw the program at each school. As students worked their way through the program, they continually rotated around the circuit—meeting with the Director, placement supervisors, seminars groups and facilitators—having their characters discussed and assessed by all of the key players involved, sometimes informally, and at other times, through scheduled formal program evaluations. The supervised ministry program, then, provided another instance of the application of the seminary's character concepts to self and other.

For most of the students that were interviewed, moral monitoring was also a self-scrutinizing practice that was carried over into their personal lives outside the seminary and ministry placement. Students' extra-seminary involvements, routines, and tendencies were redefined in light of their preparation for ministerial role. Students' increasingly realized that the ministerial status was one by which they would be primarily identified and evaluated, by both self and other. It could become a "master status" (Hughes 1945), one that threw potential character trouble into sharp relief:

I can't be in class and learn these things and then leave and not do what I'm learning, or else what am I even doing here? I can't preach about caring for people and read about it in the Bible in class and have these discussions with people about meeting the needs of others, and then not go and do that outside of class.

There has to be consistency, and when there isn't I totally feel it. I totally feel that I'm not genuine and that there's a void that needs to be reconciled. It's a daily thing. (Student 15, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

I often revert back to thinking I can be a mean person, calculating and manipulating and coercive. I know that's not suitable [for ministry]. So that's one thing that haunts me, setting up circumstances so things will go a certain way. That's something I really want to be careful about. (Student 9, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 26 years old)

For some students, the scrutiny could even develop into a "moralization of minutiae" (Lofland 1969), where students engaged in the moral monitoring of thoughts and actions that they previously had paid little mind:

If I ever had a thought, "Oh, that person is really mean," then I'll be like, "Wait, am I supposed to think that?" Those very stupid little things that I probably haven't thought twice about before, but now I'm even more aware of them, right. (Student 21, Mainline Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

It's everyday choices. I'll constantly reflect. It's the little things are going to affect the bigger things. So if you get the little things wrong you are going to completely fuck up the rest of it. Pardon my language. (Student 13, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 23 years old)

...I start to see things that in themselves seem pretty small. So swearing, you say something, which two years ago every second word was something. But that comes with a certain level of tension or anger almost, which if not checked, it develops and develops and develops. Pretty soon you've turned into...That may be a stretch, but looking at the people and ministers that I've held up, you can start to see those things, which in themselves are fairly small, but they lead to something bigger, so you can say, "Whoa, let's stop that." (Student 28, Mainline Seminary, Male, 30 years old)

Having discovered and classified their personal dispositions through the various scrutinizing practices associated with seminary life, students could get on with the work needed to develop and demonstrate a character suitable for assuming the ministerial role.

Managing Character

Father, help us to act wisely. Help us to act with courage, but not act foolishly.
(Professor, Prayer before class, Evangelical Seminary)

Now that students had examined their character, it was not something to be left unregulated. According to the seminaries, as inherently fallible beings, human sin is inevitable. This fundamental Christian premise did not free students of the responsibility for their characters, but rather impelled them to take measures to mitigate their imperfect natures. Having scrutinized their characters, identifying and classifying desirable and undesirable dispositions, ministry students could now begin to respond to the results of these discoveries. These self-regulatory efforts were crucial in demonstrating moral fitness for ministry.

As with scrutinizing character, instruction on and opportunities for managing character were a key part of the M.Div. program at Mainline and Evangelical. The schools espoused techniques for managing character. One method that was advocated was the use of character models, or interpretive schema people could invoke on an emergent basis in order to evaluate and orient their everyday interactions (see also Mead 1934). Jesus Christ as a character model epitomized this phenomenon, but there were also other models more specific to performing the ministerial role, although most of these could also be found in Christ's example. For example, course materials and in-class discussions referenced the image of the shepherd, pastor, preacher, teacher, servant leader, Priest, wounded healer, planter, and harvester. These models could all be connected with

specific biblical characters and passages, which served to imbue the schema with greater moral authority and flesh out more detail in how these interactional styles were enacted.

Still, according to the seminaries, Jesus was the ultimate moral exemplar that all Christians, especially ministers, should employ as a foundation. In a lecture on Christian leadership, students were reminded that they were to be imitators of Christ, as noted in Ephesians 5:1-2 (NIV):

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Similarly, another professor explained:

How I identify myself is the primary environment in which my moral life grows...The scripture is calling us to self-identify in Jesus Christ. (Professor, Lecture, Evangelical Seminary)

By invoking the image of Jesus as a concrete character example, students were expected to more readily develop and maintain a Christian moral focus and orientation in their daily lives, the end goal being a full integration and habituation of these Christ-like features in the self, to transform themselves in the image of Christ, thereby transcending the shackles of their pre-Christian or pre-seminary characters. The idea was that people could act their way into being, a process of moral habituation that is guided by Christ as a character model, where the intentional cultivation of external habits would eventually result in internalized dispositions to think and feel in morally appropriate and authentic ways. Through Jesus students could be “made better than they are,” as expressed in a course reading at Mainline:

Perhaps that is a lot like what Paul had in mind when he urged the members of the church in Rome to “put on Christ.” He was asking his listeners to assume some of

the qualities of Christ, to wear them as they would a new and perhaps ill-fitting set of clothes, in order that some day they might fit, and be fitting expressions of who they had become. (Daniel and Copenhaver 2009: 65)

The moral frames implied by these character models were intended to become habituated through what may be termed moral disciplines, or regular practices that served as moral mnemonics, reminding one of, and reconnecting one with, orienting character models. In the seminary, these practices were referred to as “self-care practices,” “spiritual disciplines,” and “holy habits,” and they included activities like praying, reading the Bible, performing daily devotionals, worshipping, taking the Sabbath, engaging in mission, performing physical exercise, going on retreats, doing meditation, and constructing personal character appraisal audiences. Professors and students continually appealed to these disciplines as essential for developing a Christian character:

Spiritual disciplines are activities that we engage in to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and the purposes of his kingdom. They are embodied practices that we use to engage God and say yes to God. (Professor, Lecture, Evangelical Seminary)

Spiritual disciplines are tools that help you to know God more deeply and that he uses to mould you more and more into his image. They are learned habits that free us to focus on the object of the activity—God. (Professor, Lecture, Evangelical Seminary)

For me it goes to what are the practices that I need to develop and have developed in order to be the person who I want to be. So it's more of being the person I want to be than here are the things that I have to excise. For me, it looks like spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines. (Student 7, Mainline Seminary, Male, 49 years old)

For example, most students cited prayer as an influential moral discipline that they used to orient their daily lives or reorient themselves in situations of potential character trouble:

I've tried to incorporate daily prayer into my life more intentionally, and I have this little prayer book that I carry with me, really simple. So if I get 5 minutes here or there, I pull it out and just read it and be in that moment. I find that's really helpful thing for me...It is calming for me to pray, to have that relationship. I can say anything to God. My husband and I can say anything to each other, but I don't want to be respectful in that moment. But to God I can say anything. I really believe that God knows it anyway. But being able to say anything to God is so freeing. And then when I've said it and pray, "God, please don't let me be that way. Change my anger into something more useful, more pleasant, more wonderful." Sometimes I'm so frustrated with people in the moment and I don't want to say that to them out of respect, so I say it to God and God turns that around so that I can actually be who I want to be by taking that in...God helps me be who I want to be more. (Student 8, Mainline Seminary, Female, 48 years old)

I start everyday and I loosely use some of the Lord's prayer, asking for some of God's kingdom to come to this place and for it to come through me as well. I find that's a solid place to begin your day because then you perceive the world around you as you're looking through that lens, that sort of kingdom lens. [Q: The kingdom lens?] For me, it's a prayer that sort of centers myself on trying to view the world in a way that's not completely selfish and arrogant...It is character formation. I think that's one of the key functions of prayer. It's not so much for you to tell God to make you fly [i.e., asking for gifts] but to change your own heart so that you live into that peace, that shalom. (Student 24, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

The supervised ministry placement program also provided students an opportunity to train their character in a structured and supervised setting, where one could focus on developing desirable dispositions as well as managing undesirable dispositions. Indeed, students were encouraged to view the potentiality of their placements in these formational terms:

I'm pretty even keel. I was nervous about being in situations where people are in the depths of pain and suffering. I didn't know how I would handle that. So I did my placement [in two hospitals]. I went to where my greatest fear was. Through those experiences I feel much more confident in my ability to be in those situations and to be authentically in those situations. I wasn't confident in that before...I feel more prepared. (Student 7, Mainline Seminary, Male, 49 years old)

I'm not a fan of interpersonal one-on-one communication. I think I've been classically conditioned to hate it, and classically conditioned to forget other

people's names, both of which are problematic...I just feel uncomfortable with the one-on-one communication...The potential of being put in that position makes it very stressful...But a lot ministerial work is one-on-one counselling...I know I'm more comfortable in front of a hundred people than I am in front of one or two. I always have been...I think the only way to overcome it is to be put in that position more often, so part of my placement is to put me in that position more often. (Student 13, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 23 years old)

Placements, in part, acted as a character remedial regimen, one ratified in a character contract between students and their supervisors. Formally referred to as "learning covenants" in seminary parlance, these contracts detailed what dispositions to work on (as in "growing edges" and "areas of personal growth"), the remedial plan of action, and the method of assessment.

While students made more concerted attempts at character change through work on particular dispositions, they also employed impression management tactics in their efforts to demonstrate they had the "right stuff" for ministry. The presentation of piety and propriety occurred both outside and inside the seminary.

In their interactions outside the seminary, many students attempted to avoid engaging in behaviours that might be deemed inconsistent with a ministerial character. Drinking alcohol was a common example. While some students abstained from or reduced their drinking, others engaged in "audience segregation" (Goffman 1963) or selective disclosure of their ministry student status, situationally freeing them from the expected moral constraints by achieving some "role distance" (Goffman 1961b) when outside the seminary or church context:

Drinking is the tangible thing for me. Knowing who I'm with [when drinking]. There's a time and place where I could have a few pints, and others where I could have none. I'm realizing whether you like it or not, people will draw conclusions

[about you in those encounters]. (Student 14, Mainline Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

In terms of acting out of character—whatever that means—I find that if I’m in a context where nobody knows that I’m in seminary, nobody knows that I’m a Christian, it’s so easy for me to do and say whatever. I won’t tell people that I’m in seminary. [Q: And you might do and say things that you wouldn’t here?] Right, like maybe I might drink a little more or just be a little bit more loose, I guess. (Student 15, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 26 years old)

Impression management also occurred inside the seminary. For example, when under the scrutiny of character appraisal audiences some students would present themselves in ways they thought were morally suitable for ministry:

The only thing that I was worried about was I put on my profile that I play video games. I wondered if they [denominational retreat interviewers] would push on that, because some of the video games I play are violent. And they asked. I said, “I play this, this, and this. I’m mostly interested in the social aspect. A lot of the video games today have moral choices embedded in the story telling, and I’m interested in those moral story choices because that’s a reflection on society, what society is thinking. So what these developers and writers are putting in the story is a reflection of society. It doesn’t matter what choice I make, they are thinking about these choices. So I’m interested in that dialogue.” So I think that was a kind of interesting way of thinking about a video game. And it’s not untrue, but it kind of allowed me to avoid the, “On top of that, I get to play an ex-cop who is a drug addict on a redemption tour shooting up all the bad guys, but along the way there are all of these moral decisions he’s got to make or whatever.” So it allowed me to avoid that. And unless they ask... (Student 4, Mainline Seminary, Male, 36 years old)

[Did you lay it all on the line during your denominational retreat interview?] No. But I gave them enough, I thought. [What sorts of things did you try to manage?] I would talk about my parents’ struggles and their split-ups a couple of times, and how that’s affected me broadly. I wouldn’t get into some of my own personal issues [binge drinking, drug use, premarital sex, and involvement in an abortion] and details around that. (Student 14, Mainline Seminary, Male, 24 years old)

The seminary speak that is so prevalent in class when students are answering professors’ questions, doing group work, and engaging in discussions was often mocked by the same students during informal gatherings outside the classroom setting. (Field notes, Mainline Seminary)

A couple of students, however, noted that some of their colleagues could push the presentation of piety and propriety too far:

I find in seminary that people are always trying to prove themselves as pious or worthy to be here. And I don't think people need to prove to me that they are worthy to be here. You don't need to overtly go out of your way to prove that, whether in class discussion or conversation...I remember asking someone at Christmas if their kids were excited for Santa and stuff and they were like "Oh yeah, but not the Santa and presents and stuff. We like Christ." I get it! We're in seminary. I know you see the meaning in Christmas. You don't need to tell me that. It's like everyone is always out to show their whole theology in every conversation... Like you're here for three years at least, so there's lots of time to show everyone who you are as a Christian every second. (Student 1, Mainline Seminary, Female, 22 years old)

I find that prayer is such a catch phrase here, "Let me pray for you. Can I pray for you?", that it irritates me. I don't find it authentic. I find it hokey. When I'm sitting in class listening to people pray, I sometimes find it irritating. Would you ever pray like this outside of this building? Is it just for show? I do see the power of prayer and I do see the point of prayer. But there is a certain level of show here. Sometimes I just get the sense that it's about acting like the peacock and strutting around saying stuff...The longer we are together, the more people's images start to fracture and you start to see the real person behind the façade they've created at [Mainline]. You start to see it, so then you realize that this isn't the person that you are 90% of the time. So I've become more cynical of people [students] and their intentions. (Student 9, Mainline Seminary, Female, 27 years old)

Thus while observable behaviour is commonly understood as the best and most common indicator of character (see Doris 2002), there is also the sense that true or authentic character also involves doing the right things for the right reasons (e.g., moral motives) and experiencing those actions in the right ways (e.g., moral feelings) (see Aristotle 1999; Hochschild 1983).

Having acknowledged the elevated moral expectations for the ministerial role, experienced increased character scrutiny, and learned how to manage their characters, the

final stage in the moral character career of the ministry student was affirming that they did indeed have the right stuff.

Legitimizing Character

We can't do it perfectly because we are fallen, broken people. (Student 6, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 49 years old)

If seminaries only dissected students' sense of character and indicated what qualities disqualified them from the ministerial role, then there would be few ministers emerging from their programs. A balance needed to be struck between heaping on the exaggerated moral expectations that are associated with Christian leadership and affirming that students' alleged imperfect characters did indeed meet the moral threshold for ministerial fitness.

One of the ways of easing students' concerns about moral suitability was to acknowledge that all ministers are deficient in some regard and that assuming the ministerial role would not cause an ontological shift in the person's imperfect nature. Indeed, the "fallibility of humankind" was an important "account" (Scott and Lyman 1968) that could be appealed to in times of self-doubt and community criticism in order to maintain the "alignment" (Stokes and Hewitt 1976; see also Hunter 1984) of self with the culture of Christian character:

Professor: What do you think are some important character traits that ministers need to have?

Class: Humility, discipline, integrity, courage, emotional control, ability to handle criticism, hospitable, honesty, personal life boundaries, learning attitude, openness, humorous.

Professor: I agree with all of those characteristics. But let's recognize that very few of us have all of these qualities. In fact, I wither when I reflect on my own qualities relative to your list. One of the things about leadership is that no one person possesses all of the qualities. Of course we don't expect anyone to be great at all of these things. But there will come a time when the people you minister will point out and become frustrated with what they see as inadequacies. Any leader who has accomplished anything of significance in this world has had people who think he or she is an ass. Remember that you are in good company. Did everyone love Billy Graham? No. Mother Theresa? No. Jesus? No. (class laughs). I'm not saying to go out and run roughshod, but if you upset some people, then you are probably doing something right.

Rather than precluding students from ministry, an acknowledgement and awareness of their imperfect natures was framed as a wonderful opportunity for self-knowledge and personal growth. Faculty explained that while we are fallible, we are also formable:

The most important lessons in life come from wrestling with the vulnerability within us...It opens up vistas of ministry that would otherwise be closed. (Minister, Guest lecture, Mainline Seminary)

I've failed a lot in leadership. My failures have formed me the most in my leadership. That's where I've probably learned the most. (Professor, Lecture, Evangelical Seminary)

Students continually invoked the fallible but formable narrative in situations that challenged the certitude of their suitability. In addition, the thought that they were not on their own also assured students. It was God who had called them to take on this task, and it was God who would not allow them to fail in fulfilling it:

I think there are probably times when everybody questions their suitability for ministry. I have had them. I think whenever they occur, I just remind myself that I do have sense of call and purpose for doing this. This is something that God is calling me to do, so he probably wouldn't let me do that if he didn't think I was able or if he wasn't going to help me to do it. Also, there's no one who's perfect. (Student 14, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 22 years old)

I think, again, it's a clear sense of calling. God is not going to put me in a sinking ship. He's not going to allow me to go through something...When doubts come, and they come very often, I just think, "Well, God called me." I know for sure. I know for sure. There are two things that I know for sure, only two things: I am saved and I am called...[Y]ou just believe that God is in control. (Student 29, Mainline Seminary, Male, 47 years old)

Further commitment to and trust in God was thus one of the ways to manage self doubts. When God calls, you better answer, and it is this sense and surety of call that mitigate against concerns about moral suitability that may inhibit one from continuing on their path to ministry.

Students' characters could also find affirmation in the character appraisal audiences they engaged while in seminary. For example, the results of psychological tests and denominational retreat interviews could be read as another sign that students were fit for ministry:

They [the psychological exam] picked up various other things, but they also said that yes this person has values that are resonant with being a minister. Of course it's a secular process, but the conclusions that it came up with I thought were very affirming and very surprisingly good. (Student 2, Mainline Seminary, Male, 52 years old)

I kind of went in [to the denominational retreat interview] with the idea that would be the test for me, the litmus test for me, kind of thing. If they say no, then it's just no, because I was still not sure...I figured that they would affirm for me whether this was meant for me. If it's not, I'd be fine. I'd walk away...I just wanted to know...It was a very good experience. I liked it. They affirmed my call. They saw that I would not be your traditional kind of Anglo-Saxon kind of person, but that I could minister to different people with different perspectives. (Student 19, Mainline Seminary, Female, 42 years old)

Similarly, the M.Div. program also provided students with opportunities to perform self-appraisals relative to others in the seminary community:

Sometimes I feel confident when I listen to somebody else who I don't think is a good minister. I was in a little exchange with two students the other day, one of

whom was talking about personal problems in his family. The other one was just so blasé about it, not really connecting with it in a way that I think was sensitive. So I thought to myself, “Oh, I do have a little sensitivity or understanding of people,” whereas normally I don’t think of myself as having that. So sometimes I think I have something to go on. (Student 6, Mainline Seminary, Female, 60 years old)

The most common character appraisal audience that students referenced as a source of surety and solace was the ministry setting in which they served, usually as a part of the ministry placement program. These experiences provided opportunities to don the ministerial role and attempt to pass as ministerial. If their audiences responded to them as if they possessed a ministerial character, then students were more likely to view themselves in these terms as well:

I think that right now in my life I’m probably more confident than I’ve ever been. There’s a couple of reasons for that. In our program we have to be involved in practical placements every year. So this year I’m working at our church. I feel very believed in and encouraged by the church that I’m working in. I feel as though people are utilizing me in a pastoral capacity. And they are saying things like “Thank you for what you do. It’s really meaningful.” So to get that kind of feedback is really encouraging. (Student 1, Evangelical Seminary, Female, 24 years old)

I feel like I’m more suitable during times when I’m actually at the church practicing things, speaking with the kids...it’s when you see your friend and you’re helping them, that’s when you’re like, “Yeah, I can do this, all day. This is what I want to do.”...When you see the person that you are helping directly, that’s what encourages me. (Student 18, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 33 years old)

CONCLUSION

Relative to psychology, the comprehensive study of character has not merited much attention in sociology. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, as demonstrated in this paper, character is a socially constituted phenomenon, and thus sociologists are well positioned for developing an empirically grounded theory of character. Second, the

study of character has something to offer sociologists: it extends cognate bodies of sociological knowledge such as the sociology of self, identity, and role.

This paper attempted to reclaim character as an object of sociological study. In addition to the analysis of ministry students' moral character careers as they work their way through their way through seminary toward the revered ministerial role, several concepts of generic relevance to the character-making process were introduced. Three concepts in particular were of import to understanding the social production of character. Seminary faculty, administration, ministry placement supervisors, congregants, and, at times, students acted as *agents of characterization* as they attempted to define, classify, attribute, and regulate character. Students also experienced the *target of characterization* role as they were the subjects of these character formation efforts. The interaction of agents and targets jointly produced meaningful character designations for students, which were interpreted in reference to an institutionally developed *character consciousness* that defined what character is and how it should be handled. The sociology of character would do well to pursue further studies of the character-making process along the lines suggested here. As an area of relatively undeveloped and unorganized knowledge in sociology, the potential for theoretical development and refinement in the sociology of character literature is great.

The findings of this paper have implications for a variety of substantive areas, especially the sociology of self and identity, work and occupations, deviance, morality, emotion, and religion, to name a few. Three sociological projects in particular would seem to benefit from a comprehensive sociology of character.

First, the findings are a substantive and conceptual contribution to research on moral careers. Substantively, although seminary life has been the focus of two quality ethnographies (Kleinman 1984; Carroll et al. 1997), the moral careers of ministry students have not been examined. Conceptually, the concept of moral character career is a new addition to this literature, one that focuses explicitly on the character-making processes involved in everyday life. The analysis demonstrated that there is something to be gained in analytically distinguishing between senses of self generally over time (i.e., moral careers) and sense of character specifically over time (i.e., moral character careers). Conceptual specification should enable more precise theory building on moral character careers, since the original moral career concept, and its subsequent application in a variety of research settings, has been broader, generally encompassing all self-evaluations (e.g., competence, character, appearance) over time.

Second, this research has implications for the call for a sociology of the person (Cahill 1998). Callero (2003: 121), following Cahill (1998), notes a bias in interactionist research toward the personal self, or “self-understandings, self-meanings, and self-concepts,” over the public self, “the self that is visible and known to others and encompassed by what we come to accept within the cultural category of personhood.” As Cahill (1998: 131) notes, “the public person is not made in the image of a unique self; rather, an interpretive picture of a unique self is made in the image of the public person”. Akin to the notion of character consciousness developed herein, “This suggests that a full understanding of self-meanings, self-images, and self-concepts requires a broad conceptualization of context, one that extends beyond the immediate definition of the

situation to include historical and cultural settings where unarticulated assumptions about the nature of the person have their origin” (Callero 2003: 121). Attending to the character consciousness of particular and general groups achieves, in part, this connection between immediate situations and broader historical-developmental flows of perspectives, precepts, and practices related to what it means to be a person of a particular character. As people enter into these flowing moral orders, they develop an intersubjective awareness of the character consciousness used to identify, assess, and enact character in specific situations.

Third, this paper contributes to the sociology of institutional selves (Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2000) by offering an ethnographic examination of the character making process in an institution in the “self-construction business.” There has been a proliferation in contemporary Western society of these groups that specialize in problematizing and then purportedly remediating the self. The findings of this paper contribute substantively to an understanding of the institutional production of self and character analyzing the process whereby troubled, presemenary characters are made suitable through an institutional process of socialization: experiencing exaggerated character expectations, scrutinizing character, managing character, and legitimating character.

Future research should employ the moral character career concept in a variety of other substantive settings, with the goal of developing more general, more formal theory and concepts on the character-making process in organizations and everyday encounters. Comparative analysis of multiple settings is necessary for building grounded theory in a

systematic fashion (see Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Research should be conceptually focused, aiming to refine, extend, or revise what has come before, in addition to developing new concepts. I have considered several concepts for further examination in this regard.

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PAPER THREE

Character Problems as Collective Behaviour

ABSTRACT

Character—as in people’s essential interactional dispositions, especially of a durable and moral nature—is a central feature of everyday social life, but it is a subject that rarely receives sociological attention. When it does, the tendency in most of this work has been to follow psychology in treating character as a set of objective dispositions inhering in the individual, though socially produced or mediated. An extension of this objectivist emphasis, the typical approach to the study of character problems has been to treat them as dispositional essences. In this paper, I challenge this view, demonstrating instead that character problems are the result of collective definition and action. Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic research in two Protestant Christian seminaries, a natural history model of character trouble is presented that identifies three stages to the career of character problems: emergence, legitimation, and remediation. The symbolic interactionist and social constructionist traditions inform the analysis, which builds on classic statements by Blumer (1971), Emerson and Messinger (1977), and Lemert (1962).

INTRODUCTION

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

– Proverbs 22:6

Now, Proverbs 22:6 is good advice, but it is not a guarantee. It doesn’t always work out. These proverbs are principles, not promises.

– Professor, Lecture, Mainline Seminary

Character problems abound in group life: a team’s management group devalues a professional athlete for exhibiting a poor work ethic; a counselling agency reprimands a crisis counsellor after numerous complaints about her lack of empathy; a congregation dismisses a church leader after learning of his promiscuity in intimate relationships; a crew of ironworkers ostracize a new recruit for demonstrating a lack of courage and composure in fateful situations. Indeed, notions of character are salient features of much

everyday talk and action. But what is character? This is a question sociologists do not often ask, though one to which they should attend. The concept has a long history in Western social thought, dating back to at least the classical Greeks, most notably in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The definition of character has remained relatively constant since that time, denoting people's essential interactional dispositions, especially of a durable and moral nature.

Deriving conceptual form from Aristotelian ethical philosophy, the idea of character also has a rich history in the social sciences, particularly in psychology. The empirical study of character has been the subject of prodigious output by psychologists, usually in the form of personality research. Much effort has been expended in classifying the qualities, traits, or attributes that constitute people; developing tests or instruments to aid in the identification of these traits; and associating these individual attributes with behavioural outcomes. For psychologists, character problems are explained in terms of developmental deficiency, biological dysfunction, or some combination thereof.

In contrast to the psychological tradition, the sociological research on character is rather sparse, though some notable scholars are included among its contributors: Durkheim's (1902-3) *Moral Education*, Weber's (1904-5) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Adorno et al.'s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, Fromm's (1941, 1947, 1955, 1962, 1976) work on social character, Riesman et al.'s (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*, Gerth and Mills's (1953) *Character and Social Structure*, Bourdieu's (1977, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) concept of habitus, Bellah et al.'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart*, and Sennett's (1977, 1998) *The Fall of Public Man* and *The*

Corrosion of Character. Although these studies are empirically and theoretically diverse, they are unified in their conclusion that the group plays a central role in the development and individuation of people's personal dispositions. By attending to the role of the group in the genesis and development of character, these statements provide a necessary corrective to the predominant individualistic emphasis in psychological theory and research. Character problems, in the sociological tradition, are rooted in social structure, social location, cultural pathology, and group membership, with remedial possibilities "residing only in some kind of major social restructuring" (Hewitt 1989: 5).

Although psychologists and sociologists differ in their analysis and explanation of the source of individual character problems, they both ultimately treat character as an objective set of relatively enduring dispositions lodged within individuals. These dispositions, in turn, are understood to manifest in regular individual behaviours. The conventional psychological and sociological positions on character are thus both variants of what may be called the *character-as-dispositions* approach.

If the history of the sociological study of deviance and social problems have anything to teach us about the study of character, it is that conceptualizing character problems as objective dispositions that inhere in the individual is a poor analytic foundation upon which to build a theory of character problems. The inadequacies of such an approach become evident when considering that, of the myriad potential character problems that could be identified in group life, relatively few come to be recognized as problems of social significance (see Spector and Kitsuse 1977). If objective dispositions are poor predictors of character trouble, then how can we explain its occurrence?

The thesis of this paper is that character problems are products of collective behaviour and definition. Rather than treating character as an objective set of dispositions, character is viewed as a *dispositional designation* intersubjectively achieved in group life, an imputation of the essential, durable, and moral nature of the individual (Katz 1975). When approached in this way, character is a social accomplishment. The analytic focus shifts from the search for individual dispositions to the examination of the relationships and processes involved in the social production of character. The construction of character involves a process of joint action, with people engaging roles as *agents of characterization*, or those who act as tacticians in defining, classifying, developing, and regulating character, and *targets of characterization*, or those who are the subject of character attribution and formation efforts (Emerson and Messinger 1977; Lemert 1962; Prus and Grills 2003). The participants' group-derived *character consciousness*—or an intersubjectively achieved awareness of the perspectives, precepts, and practices concerning what character is and how it should be dealt with—shapes the character-making process. The character consciousness is an interpretive resource and reference point (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 161-165) for the imputation of character problems.

For the sociologist, some basic questions are of interest for understanding the character-making process: When in everyday life are character attributions made? How are they made? How are they legitimated? How are they responded to? What are their implications for people in group life? This study begins to answer some of these questions. Building on classic statements by Blumer (1971), Emerson and Messinger

(1977), and Lemert (1962), this paper examines the natural history of character problems in two Protestant Christian seminaries. The analysis demonstrates that the career—emergence, legitimation, and remediation—of character problems is an eminently social phenomenon. That is, as with Lemert's (1962: 3) analysis of the paranoid, I "question the sufficiency of the individual as the primary datum" for understanding character problems (see also Rosenhan 1973).

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

In his seminal 1971 paper, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," Herbert Blumer laid part of the foundation for what would become the social constructionist approach to social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Schneider 1985). Taking issue with the typical approach to the study of social problems, which treats social problems as objective conditions, Blumer identifies several critical errors on which the objectivist approach is based: the objectivist approach is a poor detector of social problems, relying instead on what the public recognizes as a problem at any given time; it cannot account for why some troublesome conditions become recognized as problems while other equally troubling conditions do not; it reduces ostensible problems into their constituent conditions, but the resulting analysis is often inconsequential and irrelevant to what is and what is not recognized as a problem; it results in the proposal of ineffective remedial measures, for it disregards the divergent interests and concerted debate that constitute the social problems process. These errors can all be traced in their origin to one fallacious assumption, that social problems are objective conditions.

Instead of attempting to locate social problems in objective conditions and isolate their constituent elements, Blumer (1971: 301) contends that a much more effective way to account for the emergence of social problems is by recognizing that they are products of collective definition and action:

The process of collective definition is responsible for the emergence of social problems, for the way in which they are seen, for the way in which they are approached and considered, for the kind of official remedial plan that is laid out, and for the transformation of the remedial plan in its application. In short, the process of collective definition determines the career and fate of social problems, from the initial point of their appearance to whatever may be the terminal point in their course.

Blumer identifies five stages to the career, or natural history, of social problems: (1) emergence, (2) legitimation, (3) mobilization for action, (4) formation of an official plan of action, and (5) implementation of the official plan. Each of these stages represents distinct analytic phases in the history of a social problem, with contingencies influencing whether the problem progresses from one stage to the next. For example, many potential problems that emerge fail to become legitimated and thus never become widely recognized as problems at all.

It is my position that this model, developed for the analysis of widely recognized public problems, can be appropriated and modified for the study of character problems in institutional, organizational, occupational, and subcultural contexts (see, e.g., Lemert 1962), a level of analysis somewhere between the macro lens of public problems (Gusfield 1981) and the micro lens of interpersonal or dyadic troubles (Emerson and Messinger 1977). In doing so, the following analysis extends and reveals the versatility of Blumer's model by employing it in a meso-level analysis and applying it to instances of

problematic individuals.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper is part of a broader “analytic ethnography” (Lofland 1995) of the character-making process. Rather than attempting to provide descriptive detail of every aspect of the everyday life of the group being studied, analytic ethnography is focused on developing more comprehensive concepts and theories, using the studied group as an empirical case. The concept of character guided the selection of the research site—the ministerial formation efforts in two seminaries—and the analytic focus in the field—when and how are character attributions made, and what are the implications of those attributions.

I conducted ethnographic research in two Protestant Christian seminaries, Evangelical Seminary and Mainline Seminary.¹⁶ Christian seminaries are educational institutions charged with the task of preparing people for leadership and ministry in the church as well as a variety of other religious and secular contexts. The Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program is the most common professional degree program intended to accomplish this task through a combination of coursework, supervised ministerial placement, and ministerial practice reflection seminars. Seminaries may also offer Master’s and doctoral level degrees in theology and religious education, but the focus of this study was on the faculty and students involved in the M.Div. program.

Evangelical Seminary had denominational roots but positioned itself as an

¹⁶ All names are pseudonyms.

interdenominational school, providing non-denominationally specific ministry education with a general evangelical thrust. Evangelical Seminary's students represented 35 Christian denominations and a variety of non-denominational groups. The Master of Divinity program had an enrolment of 100 students. The school designed the program to be completed in 3 years of full-time study. Part-time study was an option for the M.Div. program, and 65% of the M.Div. students were classified as part-time. Evangelical had 13 core faculty members and 11 adjuncts, who also represented multiple denominations.

Mainline Seminary was a denominational school, providing ministry education primarily in preparation for ordained ministry in the Mainline Protestant denomination. Although students from any denomination could qualify for the M.Div. program, almost all of the 90 M.Div. students were members or affiliates of the school's denominational sponsor. Mainline's M.Div. program was also a 3-year full-time program, but 62% of the students opted for the part-time option. The faculty comprised 8 core professors and 5 adjuncts, who were all members of the Mainline denomination or its affiliates.

I collected the data for this study during 14 months of fieldwork in the two schools, and included (1) 80 audio-recorded in-depth interviews of 64 M.Div. students, faculty, and staff; (2) participant-observation in 23 full-term courses, weekly community lunches and dinners, worship, and informal student gatherings; and (3) an analysis of organizational documents related to ministry preparation and formation.

I started interviews at both schools after a period of a few weeks of participant observation. This initial period allowed me to introduce myself to the community and develop relationships with initial contacts met during the classes, events, and meals that I

attended. This period also allowed the community to become more comfortable with my presence, practice, and intentions. People would ask questions about the research, and this seemed to ease any wariness that they might have initially had. Immersion in the day-to-day seminary life also proved invaluable for developing a sense of the life of a ministry student as well as the work of their professors.

As I continued the participant-observation and completed the initial interviews, the mystique of having an ethnographer as a regular class member and concern about participating in an interview subsided. Professors and students became more accepting of me as a member of their community. This was reflected in the extent to which they included me in classroom debates and group activities; course-affiliated online discussion groups; student gossip and criticism concerning the school, students, professors, staff, and courses; conversations about personal relationships and family life; and informal student gatherings outside the school for drinks and meals.

The data were collected and coded consistent with the principles that Glaser and Strauss's (1967) advocated in discussing their constant-comparative method. The initial analytic emphasis was broad, focusing on how character was defined, attributed, experienced, and responded to in all areas of seminary life. As analytic themes emerged, these were pursued in subsequent data collection. This narrowed the initially broad data collection efforts, providing more focused and robust conceptual categories through theoretical saturation.

FINDINGS

How do people identify and deal with troublesome character qualities? This is the general question that I examined in a specific context, two Protestant Christian seminaries. Not only are seminary professors charged with the task of imparting ministerial knowledge and skills to their students, but they also are interested in the character of their students. The degree to, and manner in, which professors intentionally pursued character identification, evaluation, and formation varied, but three general processes emerged regarding how character trouble was spotted and handled.

The natural history of character problems comprises three subprocesses. First, potentially troublesome tendencies emerge. Second, if the troublesome tendencies achieve group respectability, then the character problems are legitimated. Finally, remedial efforts may be undertaken in order to address the concerns these groups raise. In what follows, I examine the natural history of character problems as it occurred in Mainline Seminary and Evangelical Seminary, noting the contingencies that influenced movement from one stage to another.

The Emergence of Character Problems

Were it not for the continued operation of all habits in every act, no such thing as character could exist. There would be simply a bundle, an untied bundle at that, of isolated acts. Character is the interpenetration of habits...A man may give himself away in a look or a gesture. *Character can be read through the medium of individual acts.* (Dewey 1922: 38; emphasis added)

In order for character problems to emerge, people first need to discover some potentially troublesome tendencies. *Discovering character* refers to the process by which a quality,

or some qualities, of an individual's character becomes known to self or other. For the purposes of this analysis, consideration will be limited to the discovery of the character traits of others, specifically how seminary professors discovered the character of their students. Still, although there may be some differences between the character discovery of self and other, it should be appreciated that there is also much conceptual continuity and overlap in how this process occurs.

Character is not something attributed to others in the abstract, but rather notions of character attain their meaning in the actual situations in which people engage others, themselves, or any other object of dispositional significance. Situations in which character qualities transpire may be called *character discovery contexts*. It is in these contexts that putative, latent, quiescent character qualities become manifest.

Character discovery contexts can be classified into two general types: formal and informal. Formal discovery contexts include organized forms of interaction, activity, and evaluation that are intended to reveal specific character qualities of their participants. Personality tests, organized sport training camps and tryouts, and military basic training are examples of formal character discovery contexts. Informal character discovery contexts include everyday encounters with self, others, or objects in which qualities of character are unintentionally "revealed" or become an object of awareness. The discoveries, though somewhat fortuitous and haphazard, nonetheless represent meaningful reference points for the actors involved.

Moreover, since people's characters, as things that inhere in the individual, cannot be directly observed, the data used in character discovery are necessarily inferential.

Three types of data are commonly used as *character signifiers*, or signs that indicate some personal character quality (see also Goffman 1963): appearance (Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Hood 1984; Katz 1975; Rains 1971), manner or behaviour (Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Goffman 1967; Holyfield and Fine 1997; Jonas 1999; Lemert 1962), and biographical background (Emerson 1969; Goffman 1961; Katz 1975; Lemert 1962; Nack 2002; Vassenden and Lie 2013). What is and is not taken to be a character signifier will vary according to a group's character consciousness. The most important character signifiers at Mainline and Evangelical were manner and behaviour.

Three primary character discovery contexts were used at the two seminaries: student class participation, student-student interaction, and reflection assignments. The degree to which these character discovery contexts were formal or informal varied among different professors, classes, and schools. In general, Mainline Seminary, which was a denomination-feeding seminary and used an outcomes-based approach to ministerial formation, employed more formal character discovery contexts, while Evangelical Seminary, which trained students from a variety of denominational and non-denominational settings, employed a more informal approach to discovering character.

The primary setting in which student character was observed and engaged was the classroom. This had become increasingly the case as Mainline Seminary and Evangelical Seminary accepted more part-time and commuter students. Full-time students were the minority at both schools, and residential students were quite rare. As some faculty expressed, the loss of full-time residential seminary life is regrettable. Much of the formation process was assumed to take place during extra-class life where students would

debate and discuss what they had been learning. Times have changed. Student-faculty and student-student interaction were almost entirely restricted to the weekly, sometimes monthly, classes. Thus, the seminaries viewed classroom interactions as paramount in the ministerial formation process.

Student participation was usually the first opportunity for professors at both seminaries to really “get to know” their students. At Mainline Seminary, student participation was a focal concern for many of the professors, who were tasked with assessing which students were meeting the institutionally mandated character outcomes and which were not. The character-related outcomes included:

- To live and act in community as a committed, confessed person of Christian faith
- To demonstrate personal responsibility for behaviour and learning process
- To develop and demonstrate the virtues of conscientiousness, dependability, honesty, and personal integrity
- To act in the best interest of others
- To live an ethical and principled life
- To demonstrate a cross-cultural sensitivity, awareness, and appreciation
- To work with, care for, assist, and instruct others of a variety of walks of life
- To demonstrate the ability and tendency to professionally and responsibly discern, manage, engage, and adapt to change
- To demonstrate the ability and tendency to self-assess, self-regulate, and self-improve
- To demonstrate the ability and tendency to provide, receive, and incorporate constructive criticism
- To demonstrate the ability and tendency to embrace learning as a life-long process

These outcomes served as a diagnostic frame of reference for interpretations and designations of ministry students. All behaviour, rather than being attributable to the situation, tended to be viewed as a potential indicator of character, as a product of the person (Rosenhan 1973).

In addition to assessing whether students were or were not meeting these outcomes, there was also an emphasis at Mainline on the early identification of trouble. Most of the faculty believed that the earlier the community identified trouble, the more likely they would be able to develop effective solutions.

Student participation—the first character discovery context—provided initial indications of potential character trouble. The first type of participation-related trouble was reticence:

How people interact in class is a really big piece. Do they ask questions?...For me, the questions people ask, more importantly, actually, is if they ask questions or not... They show their personality as someone who likes to speak a lot, sometimes too much, likes to hear their own voice. Or if they aren't speaking up, maybe there are some self-esteem issues there, which can be brought up later. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

The student that is most troublesome for me is the one that has no questions. They are just disengaged, or they have just turned you off, or they aren't smart enough to think about questions. I mean how can you do that higher level of integration, demand it?...So there are a few students that are very quiet in my class right now...I haven't decided yet whether they are fearful about saying the wrong thing, or whether they're tired. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

It should also be noted that cultural understandings of character that might reinforce reticence for particular groups of students (e.g., ethnicity and gender) mediated these initial assessments of reticence:

If they don't ask questions, then sometimes it's a cultural issue. Because we have a very intercultural class, that's one of the things that I try to attend to...I have to work at helping students know that I want them to ask questions and that there are no stupid questions. The other thing is that there are language barriers. People might not have a great grasp of the language, so they are embarrassed. I'll do all kinds of little things in class to try and make them feel comfortable. I will celebrate someone like that in class if they speak up, name it if it is a really interesting question. I just try and encourage a space where people will talk. I will suspend my teaching agenda if there is a good discussion. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

The second type of participation-related trouble was dominance. Thus, at one end of the participation continuum were disengaged characters, while dominating characters occupied the other end. Students needed to find the mean with respect to their level of presented engagement in order to not become conspicuous characters, in the troublesome sense.

I like students to be respectful of the classroom environment and respectful of their fellow students. If they're not respectful in that way, then I consider that a problem, by that meaning that they participate as they should. I don't mind if a person participates a lot, as long as they have good stuff to say, but not dominating to the point where nobody else can speak and they don't hear what others have to say—all that kind of stuff. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

For some professors, those who tended to dominate class discussion were more desirable than those who remained silent. The over-enthusiastic participant could be channelled and managed, while the silent cases presented more challenging character projects:

The positives really are the people who speak up and ask questions. Even if it's over eager, I like over eager. I can manage that, you know, "Let's hear from somebody else now." I'd rather manage that than not have that. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

There's always that kind of thing going on where somebody is silent. That's why I like the small classes, because nobody's silent. Sometimes you can structure the classes so that one person doesn't dominate. Kinds of participation never really troubled me. In fact, I like it. Stir things up. Ask questions. As long as you're on track, I don't even mind being interrupted, although that might bother some of the people if I allowed that. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Although faculty at Evangelical Seminary also identified character trouble through student participation, these efforts were much more informal than those at Mainline, i.e., less organized, deliberate, and intentional. If Mainline Seminary was interested in the subtlety of incipient trouble—akin to the “moralization of minutiae”

(Lofland 1969) found in “total institutions” (Goffman 1961)—then Evangelical was more exclusively concerned with blatant student deviance. The difference in interpretive intensity between Mainline and Evangelical is a reflection of the formal character consciousness of each school. Mainline’s program was structured around particular procedures and outcomes for character assessment and formation, all in preparation for a relatively specific role, ordained ministry in the Mainline denomination. In contrast, Evangelical did not include formal character outcomes as a part of the ministry program, and thus the professors were not as concerned with the subtleties of ministry student behaviour, nor were these nuances typically interpreted as character signifiers. Further, Evangelical was preparing students for a comparatively diffuse set of roles, ministry in any broadly evangelically-oriented Christian organization. Thus, in terms of student participation at Evangelical, potential character problems included cases of angry, arrogant, emotionally turbulent, and interactionally inept students—personal qualities that would prove problematic for almost any role.

A troublesome student is a student who is so full of themselves that they aren’t really sensitive to the people that are around them. They’ve got their own damned agenda, and they are just going to go after it. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

There are different kinds of troublesome students. There are those who, and they are few and far between in my experience, but there are some who are angry and have a deep edge in a negative way. I think it’s often anger and insecurity. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

There are some students who just plain have the wrong attitude. In one way or another, they see themselves as God’s gift for [something], and the studies are just a matter of ticking off the boxes to get the piece of paper...Some of the older ones who are emotionally immature, part of that comes across as this sense of, “I’m 35. I’ve been around church for 25 years. I know things. I know what I’m doing. I’m just doing this to tick off the boxes.” That kind of thing is there. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

The second character discovery context was student-student interaction. At Mainline Seminary, faculty assigned group work, in part, in order to create interactional contexts intended to reveal student character qualities. Students were generally unaware of this ulterior purpose of group work.

[In group work contexts] I'm looking at whether they balance things out, do they participate fully or did one ride along while the others did work. Those kinds of things are really telling in terms of assessment. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

I've had some concerns recently because of a student who tends to take over and speak for others in quite unhelpful ways...[Q: How does that look?] Summarizing what the group has said without being asked to do so. Or explaining the way a person should write their paper because this is what's obvious. So what's demonstrated to me is very much the lack of self-awareness, lack of openness to cultural difference. So I'm mindful of that in a situation right now. I want to pay attention to this. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

One student shared her concern that this type of troublesome quality is more a product of the interactional situation and institutional method of evaluation than reflective of some generic, consistent, personal quality of character:

I would prefer to go to a pass/fail system rather than a mark-based system because I think the mark-based system makes us more competitive than we need to be. Competition is not always the greatest learning experience, so I would rather go to a pass/fail system where we could actually take some risks...I'm not a big fan of group work. That's because I'm a very high achiever. I find that you get lumped into a group with people that are not [high achievers], and because it's a high stakes thing for you, you end up doing all the work. In a small college like this, there's no redress for that. It's just the way it is. It's just the reality of the situation. So I've never been a fan of having marks associated with group work. (Ministry student, Female, 58 years old)

The third character discovery context was personal reflection assignments. These assignments were designed to reveal habits of thought, as well as propensities to act, concerning matters of ministerial and moral importance. For example, students were

asked to role play specific ministerial situations in class, assess cases of challenging or problematic ministerial situations, write papers that reflected on their own lives, keep a reading journal of their thoughts on the assigned readings, and contribute to course-affiliated online discussion topics:

So that's another way I get at it [character]: assignments that are geared one way or another, assignments that require reflection, grading that goes that way, and then in class teaching techniques, techniques that require them to watch a video and then reflect on it, inviting students to put themselves forward on a low level (if you think of a scale of 1-10, where 10 is an issue where they should see a therapist, and 2-3 is just normal bumps and bruises of life), so bring a 2 or 3 thing out there and actually talk about it—and that invites everyone to reflect, including me. So there's in class demonstrations, there's responding to case studies, there's reflection exercises in class, there's reflection assignments that they have to turn in. So I'm trying to build in that reflection piece all over. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Some professors expected these reflection assignments to be more revealing about self than the traditional academic role of disinterested analyst and classroom participant. Again, this illustrates that different contexts were employed in an effort to discover character qualities and that multiple contexts were deemed necessary. For example:

One assignment from the last two years, a student who I thought wasn't engaged wrote a really lengthy and poignant paragraph in one of their assignments in which they talked about how as a result of the way in which we had focused on the person of the individual who does ministry that they have become pushed to reflect upon the priorities in their life and what that meant about how they spent their money and what that meant about their free time. They had made some purposeful decisions to change that. Well, I would have never of known that from the way that student was present in class. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

When there is an online discussion group, the conversations are very interesting, very revealing, and actually more helpful [than traditional assignments] in some ways. It's a different kind of interaction. But you get people, because they are required to post, you get response from every single person in class. Sometimes there are gems that get revealed that you wouldn't know in another kind of format. So I have even started to include stuff like that in my regular classes. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Personal reflection assignments were also understood to provide opportunities for professors to interact with students about these revelations, direct students toward areas of reflection that would further reveal and detail these incipient discoveries, and pursue other unexplored territories of the self:

Often because we can vocalize it, we think we understand it, but the two are very radically different things... In reality, you can read the characteristics of conjunctive faith, and you can say, "Oh yeah, that fits me. I know about paradox." You can talk about paradox, but you don't know paradox until you've actually been engaged in it. So part of it is helping people do good clear self-assessment and then be prepared for the transition into the development that is still yet to come. So it's understanding, it's raising awareness, but it's also trying to engage them in good critical self-reflection. So my courses function primarily on what I would call professional development papers. So what it becomes is a term of ongoing dialogue between the individual student and myself. I will affirm where they are and what they're doing, and push them into areas of known or unknown. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

The data considered so far suggest that the social process of identifying people's qualities of character happens in specific situations, or character discovery contexts. Three character discovery contexts were evident in the two seminaries: classroom participation, group work, and personal reflection assignments. Professors used these mediums to identify particular character qualities in their students. These initial discoveries were not enough, on their own, to constitute sufficient concern for the recognition of a character problem. A second interpretive process had to follow character discovery. These discoveries needed to be used to make inferences about students' future behaviour. As Goffman (1963: 49-50) notes, "the visibility of a stigma (as well as its obtrusiveness) must be disentangled from certain possibilities of what can be called its 'perceived focus.' We normals develop conceptions, whether objectively grounded or not,

as to the sphere of life-activity for which an individual's particular stigma primarily disqualifies him.”

The social reality of everyday life is an inferential reality. People attribute meanings to self and other, and they develop and fit together their respective lines of action based on these meanings and any inferences that seem to naturally follow from them. How we define, categorize, or typify people becomes consequential for our expectations of, and responses to, those people.

In terms of character attributions, then, once these qualities of self or other are discovered, discoverers may make some prognoses for future lines of action based on their revelations. The projections of these prognoses, in a temporal sense, can be as near as the immediate interactional context, as in the next move in a situational confrontation, or as far as years into some distant, imagined future, as in childhood relationship troubles portending adulthood relationship troubles. In either case, a process of *extrapolating character* occurs, that is, extrapolating discovered character qualities into immediate, identical, or analogous situations. This process may coincide with the process of discovery, or it may happen in reflection some time removed from the initial discovery. Again, the character consciousness of the agents of characterization—in this case, the seminary professors—influenced character extrapolation.

The professors at both Mainline Seminary and Evangelical were primarily concerned with making inferences about how the discovered character qualities of their students would translate in a ministerial context:

So I'm thinking about the person in ministry, right? This looks like a bully in ministry. That's why it's very important. So I think [to myself that she seems to

have] the propensity to bully, and doing it in a nice way, which is usually the case with ministers (laughing)...Now, I also see signs of shifting. For me, it's more of an attempt to keep track of some of these things, examples, because I anticipate this is going to come up. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

We see it sometimes in personal discipline, you know, lateness in class, missing too many classes, saying they are going to do something and it doesn't happen. That happens once or twice a year in the church and you're done. You might as well go sell peanuts somewhere. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Sometimes, and this is about character development, sometimes you see students who are arrogant and have a pride and arrogance about themselves. Their problem is that they think they know everything everyone else needs to know, and all they need is the right church to call them and they will change everything. So they have a certain arrogance to them. I look at that and think that will not get you very far in ministry. That's going to be a problem. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

The character related type things would be around...if somebody had no ability to take criticism, would always get upset if you criticized, or was always offended, then, you know what, you will never survive in ministry. You will never survive in ministry. [Q: Around things like discussions in class, papers?] It's sort of an observation in class. If there's a debate, they are ready to go [argue]. Or, if you criticize a paper, then they come upset. You can just tell that they are just unable to take criticism...In ministry, you get criticized over everything. You're dealing with people, and they are paying your salary, and they feel like they can, "I didn't like your sermon," "I don't like your shirt." If you can't take criticism, if you can't handle people's idiosyncrasies, you will never survive. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Again, as with the process of discovering character, the degree to which professors made these inferences varied. Some professors, primarily at Evangelical, were less confident that such inferences could even be made. These two groups differed in their understandings of the continuity versus the discreteness between situations. Character extrapolation was unlikely to occur when assessors viewed the situations or settings under consideration as unrelated. That is, for some, the seminary setting was not viewed as a situational analog of the ministry setting, especially at Evangelical Seminary, which

prepared people for ministry in a variety of denominational and non-denominational contexts:

What you see in a classroom isn't always what you see when they are dealing with people. Sometimes people seem a little odd and you think, "That's really strange." But you don't see them in public when they stand up in front of people. Sometimes they change a bit in that context. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

I recognize that we are working with a broad range of expectations in terms of the churches we are working with and ministry organizations. What may not fit within one may fit perfectly in another, so I would hate to say, "You're not suited to ministry," and by that what I mean is my narrow definition of it, when you could be functioning really well in some other context. And we've seen a lot of that happen—people that some questioned, but actually God has prepared a place for them and they are serving in a way that maybe nobody else could. So I kind of like to keep that loose. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

In Goffman's (1963: 49-50) terms, the "perceived focus" of the stigma does not disqualify these students from ministry, though it might limit their options to particular ministerial contexts.

In sum, the emergence of character trouble is contingent upon the processes of discovering character and extrapolating character. Once some character quality is identified through the medium of character signifiers and inferred to be potentially problematic in the future, the conditions have been met to move to the next stage in the career of character problems, legitimation.

The Legitimation of Character Problems

In order to be legitimated, a character problem needs to gain respectability with some legitimating audience, a group that can give credence to the trouble as something meriting serious attention and response. Without social legitimacy, putative character problems

will perish. To be sure, they may remain sources of inconvenience and consternation for some, but these troubles are likely to remain situational and interpersonal, languishing in a state of social insignificance. A character problem usually gains respectability for some of the same reasons why it emerged or gained recognition, though typically more is involved. What are those other contingencies?

While in the M.Div. program, students continually revolve around a circuit of character appraisal audiences (see also Goffman 1961), where students' characters are on display and open to informal and formal assessment. Examples of these audiences include classes with individual professors, supervised ministry placements in church and other Christian or secular organizations, and ministry placement reflection seminars in which students, faculty, and ministry professionals meet to discuss experiences in, and topics pertinent to, Christian ministry. When character trouble emerges in any of these contexts, it must be brought to the attention of the broader school community, especially to those who have the ability to influence the definition of the problem, in order for it to be legitimated. The formation of coalitions of intersubjective consensus about the problem contributes to its social legitimacy (Lemert 1962). Consider, for example, the instructions to ministry placement supervisors at Evangelical Seminary:

Placement Supervisors are also invited to meet, consult, or correspond with the Director of Ministry Formation throughout the year. Informal conversations, questions, suggestions and feedback are always welcome. In particular, the Director of Ministry Formation should be consulted at the first sign of any problem or difficulty in the placement. Overlooking issues often leads to an escalation that may well be averted by a timely intervention with the student, supervisor, and Director of Ministry Formation for details. (Ministry Formation Manual, Evangelical Seminary)

Of course, some instances of potential character trouble never reach the stage of social legitimation. There were both personal obstacles and organizational obstacles to problems becoming socially legitimated. On the personal side, people might find it uncomfortable if not exceedingly difficult to publicly challenge or confront the problematic qualities of others:

I've been very reticent to tell people what to do. I don't like telling people what to do. I don't like saying, "You know, you've got a problem with pride," or "You've got a problem with anger." My own default position is to hope that they will correct that themselves, not tell them that...I've a harder time calling someone in to sit down and tell them they have to do something. I suck at that. I don't think anybody likes that. Will I do that? I hope, because there have probably been a few students over the years that I wish I had done that with, like "You've got a call to ministry. But I've got to tell you that this is going to present problems for you in the future." I wish I had done that more, not that it's happened a lot, but I can think of two or three times when I wish I had done that. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Similarly, some people may be reluctant to bring potential problems to the group's attention when they perceive there to be little chance of the problem being acknowledged and given social respectability:

Some people [students] don't like if they are paired with some student who doesn't speak English well. If this a seminary, if this is an equipping school, then they need to overcome that. They should, instead, view that as, "It's good to have them in our group. We can work together..." Sometimes other professors think they are good students, but they aren't for me. They show their different attitude to me, when compared to other professors. So when I see that [unwillingness to work with others], I usually don't share it [with my colleagues]...The reason I don't share with them is because it would take a lot of faculty time. Sometimes I don't want to hold them [the students] back, so I just let it go...Those faculty meetings we do so many things, so we are always running out of time...I know I see other parts of students that I know other professors don't. But sometimes I don't want to create a problem, so I just leave it alone. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

There were also organizational obstacles to the legitimization of character problems at Evangelical Seminary. Mainline Seminary conferred both M.Div. degrees, indicating successful completion of program requirements, and certificates of the college, representing Mainline's endorsement of the graduates' moral fitness for ministry. In contrast, Evangelical only awarded M.Div. degrees, which could not be withheld in the event of concerns about the graduates' character. Moreover, Evangelical prepared students for a much broader set of potential ministry organizations than Mainline, and so the imposition of a single organizational assessment of the students' moral fitness for ministry would have possibly been more difficult to define and assess. The lack of formal structures and processes of character problem legitimization at Evangelical Seminary inhibited formal challenges of, and meaningful consequences for, troublesome students. Some professors found these institutional impediments to character regulation challenging, especially in "fatal cases":

There have been some people, not that they were immoral, but maybe emotional struggles. We wondered about whether they were mature enough. There were obvious issues in their lives that were still open wounds. We wondered if that would be good if that person would go and work in a leadership capacity in a church. But, again, we don't really have a way of dealing with that. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

This is one of our great challenges actually... We talk about this time to time. It's rare. There aren't many. But you get some students and you go "They are going to come out of our school with an M.Div. and some church might hire them?" And it's happened. It's literally happened before where we know that this person isn't set or ready. The truth of it is we do not have any mechanism to address that. I've had trouble to figure out how to do that, unless the student asks you directly to assess them. I never have on my own sat a student down and told him or her "Look, I don't think you should be in ministry." Maybe I should have, but it never happened. That's a difficult thing to do obviously, and I haven't figured that one out yet. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Given these organizational obstacles, an alternative to pursuing the social legitimacy of character problems was to handle matters in a more informal and personal manner. When encountering troublesome characters, one strategy may be to accommodate the trouble, that is, avoid, ignore, mitigate, minimize, manage, or normalize the undesirable dispositions. It is well documented in sociological studies of encountering deviant behaviour that, rather than challenging the “deviant,” it is common for people to try to avoid the situation or accommodate the deviance of others by altering their own behaviour (Emerson 2011; Lynch 1983). This is also one of the responses to encountering character trouble. Even though some character quality of some other is discovered, extrapolated, and deemed troublesome, the response may be directed toward self to abstain from intervention, avoid confrontation, even making efforts to minimize or normalize the troublesome tendencies of others. For example, one professor commented on his attempts to manage and mitigate the interruption and obtrusiveness of a chronically disruptive student:

I tried to defuse him, “We can agree to disagree.” In general, if someone is being rude or belligerent in class, I try to defuse it. “You have your opinion and I have mine. We don’t have to agree here.” (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Some of the other professors at Evangelical employed more confrontational responses, directly or indirectly challenging the perceived source of the trouble, akin to what Emerson (2011: 15) terms “dyadic complaints.” Consider, for example, the following responses:

I will try and challenge that...the student who comes in and is cocky, knows it all, I will push back and challenge, and hope that over the three years the student will say, “Oh...Okay, I get it.” (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

I remember taking a counselling course, and that was very challenging. The prof was asking us to address personal issues that we were dealing with in our own lives, and it wasn't necessarily with three people but in a big group. So he would call you out and ask you a question in front of everyone and say, "You need to deal with this." (Ministry student, Male, 26 years old, Evangelical Seminary)

I have a very simple bottom line. Most people that come through are perfectly fit for one form of ministry or another. I have a little shit list. Pardon me, but I do. There are just three or four people on it who I know if I'm ever asked [for a reference], I'll go, "Don't you dare." Very few people on it, but on their way through I thought, "Whoa!" (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Even though these informal challenges might be viewed to be effective in some cases, they lacked institutional repercussions. For Evangelical professors, the result of this lack of institutional processes to handle character trouble was predictable, especially around conspicuous cases that had a high degree of consensus around the likely outcome once the student was to begin ministry in a church or other organization:

I can remember one student in particular that we had an internal discussion about whether we could actually grant the person a degree. His life was such a mess, and we were afraid of him being in a church, like a fear of what he would do to people. This guy was mentally abusive. We weren't necessarily afraid that he would physically hurt someone. But he was totally dysfunctional... His way of relating to people, faculty and students, yelling, getting up and storming out of classes, rude, belligerent. I probably had it the least, but I thought, "I'll be glad when this guy is out of here." I think he flipped [the principal] off at graduation. There was some visible display of obscenity at the graduation ceremony... But it was like, "Well, he's fulfilled the requirements. He's passed his classes. He's done all the things. How can we say now we aren't going to give you the degree?" So that's kind of what it came down to. But no one wanted to give our imprimatur to this person because of his decrepitude [sic]. But we did... I think we were right on that one. I think the guy is in jail now, or at least he was arrested and taken to jail. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Thus, although embracing a denominationally diverse student body and mandate provided Evangelical Seminary much freedom in how it did seminary education, it also fettered Evangelical, inhibiting the imposition of a single institutional standard of what constitutes

the “right stuff” for ministry on its students. From the perspective of the school’s administration, that responsibility, as well as the ownership of any potential character problems, ultimately lay with the organizations and churches that hired and ordained its students:

Keeping in mind that we are a seminary, but we are not the ministry organization itself. We are not the church in that sense, so there are others who have responsibilities also. I guess that part of my broad view on things is that I don’t think it’s our duty to be the agency, and we don’t accredit or ordain or do anything like that. What we try to do is try to provide the best possible foundation that can be used in any number of ways, and where they go and head needs to be also done in consultation with others—that would be church bodies, mission organizations, whatever it might be. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

At Mainline Seminary, the situation was quite different. People who wanted to become ordained ministers in the Mainline denomination were generally required to earn their degrees at one of the few Mainline sponsored seminaries in Canada. This denominational mandate and reference point gave faculty and staff greater clarity about what was expected and required of Mainline ministers.

Mainline had a much more formal process in place for legitimizing character problems, one that relied on problem recognition by individual professors and placement supervisors, who then collectively legitimated or diminished the problem based on the evidence brought forth. Faculty meetings were held each term to review the progress of students. During these meetings professors recounted their discoveries of student character trouble. If other faculty members provided similar experiential accounts of the student, thereby achieving some intersubjective consensus around the character problem, then the issues raised would be recorded in a “fitness for ministry” file, an institutional

record of incidents bearing “symptomatic significance” (Goffman 1961: 155-156) of character trouble:

We go over each student and say, “Who has this person? Are there any issues around outcomes? Any outcomes they are struggling to meet?” Someone might say, “Yeah, I have them. And I think that they have an issue around dealing respectfully with others or showing integrity in this aspect of work.” And then they’ll cite an example of a moment in class where the person really disrespected another student or submitted a paper that was plagiarized. Those are the cases for us where issues of character really get highlighted. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

It’s quite surprising, you know, one faculty member speaks up and says, “Well, you know, I don’t know whether to mention this, but I noticed this during the course.” And then another faculty member will say, “Wow, I’m really glad you said that because I saw it too.” (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

It is during these exchanges that that any irrelevant, insignificant, or ambiguous incidents may be redefined as part of a broader pattern of trouble. That is, once a character problem is brought forth for the group’s consideration, others reflect on their previous interactions with the student for indications portending similar problems, and after a process of retrospection and reconstruction, “Earlier relational incidents may be interpreted in light of subsequent diagnoses of the trouble” (Emerson and Messinger 1977: 125). Relatedly, in situations where the observations and experiences adduced are deemed insufficient for a deviant character designation, the discussion and suggestion of trouble can foster a heightened awareness and visibility of the offender’s subsequent behaviour as potential confirmation of the original complaint (see Lemert 1962: 12).

The collective assessment and evaluative practices were intended to guard against misdiagnoses of character trouble. If the observed behaviour was inconsistent with the history of interaction that other professors had with the student—the student’s *character*

biography—then the incident might be defined as a *character anomaly* and disregarded.

That is, it failed to become formally legitimated as a problem at the corporate level:

In terms of telling people that they are not suitable for ministry, that's a corporate function of the faculty. It's not an individualized function. I think my example of women's ordination debate is exactly why it's not because I can react quite negatively to those that show arrogance, because I had to deal with it for years. Whereas other faculty will say, "That's not how I experienced it. This is how I experienced it." Sometimes arrogance is arrogance, and they are not suitable. Sometimes arrogance is insecurity, and we can work on that. So I really think formation is a corporate function of the whole faculty. We each do our little bits, but our judgment is only as strong as our ability to work together. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

With a few exceptions, what generally works is when we share information about a problem with a student in an area like...let's talk about rigidity. If I'm the only one experiencing that, my colleagues will say, "No, I don't see that at all." Generally people will respect you but not necessarily cave in. So then you go, "It may be me. It may just be a personality thing," in which case, we leave it. We note it, but we leave it. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the second stage of the natural history of character problems involved legitimizing the trouble. The social recognition of the problem was contingent upon (1) the absence of, or the ability to overcome, personal obstacles to problem legitimation, (2) the formation of coalitions of legitimating audiences that acknowledge the existence of the problem, and (3) the existence of organizational or group processes of problem legitimation in official policy and procedure. Although little may be done about these problems other than the expression or acknowledgement of discontent, the people involved may attempt to address the character trouble through a process of remediation.

The Remediation of Character Problems

The process of remediating character problems is analogous to Blumer's (1971) stages of mobilization of action—where the problem becomes the site of ongoing discussion, debate, and contention by various parties—formation of an official plan—where people decide how to deal with the problem—and implementation of the official plan—how those doing the social problems work actually handle the problem.¹⁷ *Remediating character*, then, refers to the process of attempting to manage or discontinue the troublesome tendencies of self or other. It also includes the related notion of developing desirable character qualities. Remedial strategies included *treating* the character trouble and *removing* the character trouble from the group. These efforts can be further distinguished by their focus and implementation. For example, they can be directed at self or other, performed individually or collectively, and organized and implemented formally or informally.

Those deemed to have troublesome character qualities might be expected to undergo some form of treatment, or *remedial regimen*. At Mainline Seminary, there were two general types of remedial regimens: self-directed and third-party interventions. Self-directed remedial regimens, as the term suggests, were student designed and implemented, though faculty representatives assessed and ultimately approved these proposals. The onus was on students to reflect on their character trouble and then develop effective strategies to correct these tendencies. The student entered into a *character*

¹⁷ I was not able to fully access all of the people involved in the implementation of the official plan, such as counselors and psychologists. This represents an opportunity for future research on character problems.

contract with the seminary. This contract generally took the form of an agreement between the faculty representatives and the student, and it proscribed the identified troublesome tendencies, prescribed desirable or countervailing tendencies, and detailed how this character work would be achieved and demonstrated:

The data for that [documenting character problems] would be classes. So attendance, working in small groups, assignments, all those kind of things... We need to have data to be able to share with the students and say, "Okay, this has been identified. This is an example of it. How are you going to address this? What do you suggest?" We usually have them write it up so that they can take the initiative. So [for example, areas of concern might include] a repeated lack of communication, or just being away, because we immediately translate that into a ministry context. It's like, "If you're inaccessible here [at seminary], then how is that going to be different in ministry?" Sure, it's a different context, but the practice is important. It's about integrity, and all that. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

And it depends on the situation. If it's not a major sort of thing, then it's between the student and his or her supervisor. If it's a major sort of issue, then the student may be asked to put together a plan that would last a term or two terms, which is then reviewed by faculty and agreed to by the student. We're expecting these students to come here for three or four years and then go out to serve congregations, so they have to be very much a part of their own programming. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

Student resistance to deviant designations and remedial regimens might only further confirm the faculty assessment of character problems:

[After collectively identifying a character problem] we send two faculty to talk to the student about the incident. That's the first step. In some cases, students hear that and work to change. In other cases, they fight it. In this particular case, the student fought it, and in his fighting he just reaffirmed that what was being seen and identified was absolutely spot on... We're not always right, but I'm more worried about the times when we miss the small stuff than maybe when we've misinterpreted it. Sometimes when you get resistance like that it shows that you're right. I hate to say it, but it does. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

If a person is open to hear suggestions about their own development, that will challenge them to look at and change their life, if they are able to hear that and respond to it, they are people who can grow and function successfully in

community. If they can't, if they resist, if they constantly say that the whole faculty has it wrong, they are all wrong, I'm right, then I think we have a fatal case where we have to say that this people isn't fit to do this kind of work and, frankly, for most jobs, not just ministry. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

The second type of remedial regimen used at Mainline Seminary was third-party treatment (see also Emerson and Messinger 1977). This usually took the form of professional counselling to help identify, sort through, and work on dispositional issues. The counselling option was usually suggested when the trouble was viewed to be too deep-seated and intractable to be effectively dealt with "in-house," or if faculty representatives expected counselling to be a useful and helpful experience for the particular student under consideration.

Sometimes we get a student who is really combative in class or really belligerent with fellow students. You think that there might be something deeper going on... We don't want to graduate people, have them check off the boxes, and then send them out to burn out in a year and a half because they have these other issues. So we've had two or three cases at least since I've been there. So we've told these students that we want you to see a psychologist for a year or year and a half...After the year or year and a half, we have the person come back to the program and finish up. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

What might come out of second-year assessment interview is: Okay, this person, we're going to slow this program down...So there will be times when they get to that point, say in the assessment interview, and then we realize, "Okay. This person needs more work." Counselling may be something [to address that]. So then they will be required or recommended to undergo some counselling for so many sessions, or over a period of time, to work on this, this, and this. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

However, a few staff members were less confident in the abilities or effectiveness of third-party character treatment specialists, viewing them as generally disengaged from the kinds of concerns that are particular to the seminary and life in ministry:

We have some horrible psychologists. I can't believe they are in business. They start off by saying, "So and so has been seen by a psychologist" and we don't

know who it is. And their stuff is so superficial. We do have a couple who are very good and really, I think, are helpful to the person. [Q: So some professors and staff see some of those psychological tests as problematic?] Oh, they're useless. [Q: But it's something the denomination...] The denomination does it. They are the ones that choose the psychologists. I've told them that this group [a psychological assessment business] is useless. I met one of the psychologists and asked her, "Would you ever tell us if a person was not suitable?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "That's good because I wonder." (Administrator, Mainline Seminary)

Once these remedial efforts were completed there can still be a great deal of ambiguity about whether the trouble had been "fixed." Indeed, this was one of Mainline's greatest challenges. One professor expressed that there was too little time to comprehensively assess and address the results of the character remediation:

I have to say that the thing I think we struggle with more is just seeing that those things are done with the other realities of student life, our life, studying, and being so far along before we can say, "But we're still not seeing this." So that's where I think we fall down. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

If time and resources are available, initial remedial failure can initiate protracted "remedial cycles" in which various treatments are applied. In the process, the problem becomes further defined and detailed as an objective condition: "A difficulty arises, a remedy is sought and applied; it works temporarily or not at all; then some new remedy is sought...the trouble is progressively elaborated, analyzed, and specified as to the type and cause" (Emerson and Messinger 1977: 122). Alternatively, as Emerson (2011) observes, "remedial failure" in these types of situations can also prompt other, and more serious, imputations of character trouble than originally designated, especially when there is the perception that the target of corrective action is being duplicitous: "with continued remedial failure the troubled party may begin to entertain suspicions about the other's deeper trustworthiness and truthfulness. Particularly where the other has previously

agreed to corrective action, the reoccurrence of the troubling behaviour can lead to basic distrust” (21).

Finally, the third way of remediating character trouble was removing the troublesome character. At Mainline, this could be removal from the school or a simple lateral move—mutually agreed upon or institutionally imposed—from the Master of Divinity program to the Master of Religious Education or Master of Theological Studies program:

If someone comes in with a significant character flaw that we think is going to make it difficult for them to function well in ministry, or it's going to lead them to a place where they're going to be damaging to the people in the congregation and there's no real possibility that there's going to be remediation or improvement, then often what we'll do is sit down with them and have a heart-to-heart about another program that's not going to lead them into ministry. So there's some stuff that you can do. I think that [Mainline] has a more detailed and well thought out approach than pretty much any seminary out there as far as identifying potential issues and working to correct them. But there are sometimes when you just have to say that this isn't in the best interests of you because you're not going to be satisfied in this ministry, and it's in the best interest of the church as well. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

The student might also voluntarily withdraw from the school. At Evangelical Seminary, where there was no formal mechanism for dealing with character problems, this might be the only viable recourse in cases of ministerially-unsuitable characters:

Usually what happens, I think, is that people who are not really suitable will drop out because the ethos here is uncomfortable for them. So they don't stay most of the time. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

Withdrawal from the program may be the end of the character problem for that particular seminary, but, as one professor at Mainline lamented, many of these students go on to enrol at other seminaries. Regulations concerning student privacy prevent communication

about potentially troublesome characters among the seminary community, so the students are able to start afresh, building a new identity in a new place.

The third, and final, stage in the natural history of character problems included attempts to manage or discontinue the troublesome tendencies of self or other, as well as developing more desirable character qualities. Rather than being the terminus of character problems, new character troubles may be discovered and old troubles may re-emerge during or after remedial efforts through a process of ongoing *moral monitoring*, and this may begin the cycle once again.

CONCLUSION

What might a sociology of trouble or a sociology of morality look like, distinct from theory and research that concentrate on why people behave in ways that happen to break rules or on the social distribution of this behaviour and how to control and punish it? (Schneider 1985: 227)

Sociology has a long and uneven history of attempting to develop an adequate conception of character. The tendency has been to view character as a set of objective dispositions lodged within the individual, though produced or mediated through group membership or social structure. This paper has offered an alternative sociological approach to character, one that treats character as a matter of audience definition achieved in everyday situations. Specifically, it examined how character problems were identified and responded to in two Protestant Christian seminaries. This particular case was used to develop more general insights into the natural history of character problems in group life,

and it cast serious doubt on the use of the individual as the analytic focus in its identification and explanation.

The group is the appropriate unit of analysis when it comes to the study of character problems. Even here, however, it is the collective definition and action of the group, rather than appealing to some structural variables, that allows one to follow the career of character problems from their genesis to their ultimate manifestation and potential disappearance. Three stages of the natural history of character problems were examined: emergence, legitimation, and remediation. Each of these stages represents a sensitizing concept to be further pursued and developed in future research on character problems. The character problems process, and the contingencies that influence its trajectory, need to be examined and accounted for in any adequate explanation of when and how people become known as bad or troublesome characters, and what should be done with them (see Blumer 1971; Emerson and Messinger 1977; and Lemert 1962). What is the character problem? Can it be predicted? Whose responsibility is it? Should it be fixed, avoided, endured, passed on, disguised, or contained? These are questions of the utmost social significance, and it is only by attending to character problems as a social process, situationally contextualized, not as objective dispositions, that we can begin to adequately answer them.

This paper contributes to social problems theory in several ways. First, the findings contribute to Cahill's (1998) call for a sociology of the person by examining how troublesome persons are constructed in organizations and communities, and how these people and their characters become recognized as social problems. By attending to the

broader historical flows of character consciousness of the groups in which character problems are discovered and responded to, we learn more about what it means to be a person in contemporary Western culture.

Second, and in a similar vein, by analyzing two organizations in the character assessment, development, and regulation sphere, the findings contribute to the sociology of institutional selves (Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). The institutional self literature is concerned with how self and identity are fundamentally, and increasingly, shaped by institutions that purport to examine, give meaning to, and remediate the self. The seminary case provides valuable insights into how a particular form of identity—character—is produced by institutional processes of discovery, extrapolation, legitimation, and remediation (see also Holyfield and Fine 1997).

Third, taking conceptual inspiration from Goffman's (1967) essay "Where the Action is," the few ethnographic studies that have explicitly dealt with the social production and construction of character have followed Goffman's lead in stressing that character—and character problems—is revealed in risky, high pressure, fateful performances or situations (see Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Holyfield and Fine 1997; Jonas 1999). However, as evidenced by the analysis of the discovery of ministry students' characters, the emergence of character problems occurs in situations that are much more subtle and mundane than these other studies suggest. Part of this focus on the fateful may be explained by a more narrow definition of character than employed here, where the meaning of character is restricted to courage. A more generic definition of character

reveals many more character discovery contexts than those related exclusively to courage and cognate dispositions.

Fourth, the analysis demonstrates the relevance for social problems theory for subcultural, social world, or meso-level analyses. The emergence of subcultural problems is a more delimited arena of identifying and responding to trouble than traditional social problems analyses typically pursue. Most social problems research in the constructionist tradition has been focused on explaining the emergence of widely recognized, public problems (see e.g., Gusfield 1981), involving a number of claimsmaking groups contesting matters of putative import for society more generally. Others have applied this perspective to dyadic, interpersonal, and micro troubles (see Emerson and Messinger 1977; Emerson 2011). The constructionist approach has less often been applied to subcultural settings, but the findings here demonstrate that it is also quite effective in analyzing the “micro-politics of trouble” (Emerson and Messinger 1977) in these contexts. In particular, Blumer’s (1971) natural history approach, initially developed to explain the emergence of public problems, proved to be a useful analytic scheme for understanding more localized and situated character problems.

Future research on the natural history of character trouble is needed in order to ascertain how generic—trans-situational, trans-historical, cross-cultural—this social process is (see Prus 1987, 1996). This would include, for example, studies of (1) identifying and responding to the character trouble of others in multiple substantive settings; (2) experiencing the target role; (3) individuals’ and third-parties’ implementing and remediating efforts; and (4) identifying and responding to the troublesome tendencies

of self. This would provide the foundation upon which a more formal theory of character trouble can be developed (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

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CONCLUSION

The direct examination of the empirical social world is not limited to the construction of comprehensive and intimate accounts of what takes place. It should also embody analysis. The research scholar who engages in direct examination should aim at casting his problem in a theoretical form, at unearthing generic relations, at sharpening the connotative reference of his concepts, and at formulating theoretical propositions. Such analysis is the proper aim of empirical science, as distinguished from the preparation of mere descriptive accounts. (Blumer 1969: 43)

The genesis of this dissertation can be traced to two basic questions: What is character, and how does it work? In order to begin to answer these questions and develop a conceptual scheme that would enable future studies of character as a sociological phenomenon, I employed a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework and conducted ethnographic research on the character formation processes in two Protestant Christian seminaries. The analysis has demonstrated that character is a socially constituted phenomenon, a product of collective definition and action. Whereas traditional approaches to character have conceived of it as a set of objective dispositions, I have argued that character is best understood as a dispositional designation achieved in everyday life. The group provides the intersubjective foundations upon which all character designations and experiences are based and interpreted. The sociology of character must attend to the character-making process if it is to contribute a countervailing approach to the psychological objectivist orthodoxy.

In what follows, I review the main findings of the dissertation and consider new directions for the sociology of character. Specifically, I summarize the conceptual findings of each empirical paper. I then review the more general theoretical and

conceptual contributions of the dissertation. I conclude with some suggestions for future research on character as a sociological phenomenon.

SUMMARY

From the start, this project has been concept and theory driven. An interactionist conception of character needs to be developed, not only for the symbolic interactionist conceptual canon, but also for the sociology of character. In keeping with the interactionist mandate of examining group life as something “in the making,” ethnographic research on character “in the making” was required to develop an empirically rich and grounded concept of character. The efforts to form the characters of ministry students in the seminary context provided a suitable setting to accomplish such a task.

Three papers emerged from the data. The first paper demonstrated that character was an interpretive contingency in the careers of prospective ministry students. The second paper examined how ministry students experienced the character formation process while in the seminary. The third paper analyzed how seminary faculty and administration identified and responded to student character problems. Each of these papers is summarized in this section.

Character as a Career Contingency

In Paper One, I examined the relationship between character and careers of involvement. Whereas the typical objectivist approach to explaining how character influences people’s

involvements in groups, activities, relationships, or roles emphasizes a structural, mechanistic, and deterministic causal process, I posited that character should be conceived of as an interpretive contingency that influences career trajectories. That is, how character is defined, attributed, and understood has implications for the course of people's involvements in group life.

In an attempt to sensitize the reader to the character-making process, I introduced the three interdependent concepts central to the social production of character. Character is constructed or produced when people assume roles as *agents of characterization*, or those who act as tacticians in the designation and regulation of character, and *targets of characterization*, or those who are the subjects of agents' character designation and regulation efforts. Both of these groups make sense of these activities in reference to their *character consciousness*, or an awareness of the group-derived perspectives, precepts, and practices related to what character is and how it should be managed. These concepts were employed in all three of the empirical papers.

Using ethnographic research in two Protestant Christian seminaries as a specific case, this paper identified three general character-related career contingencies of initial involvement: attending to character recruitment, engaging in character seekership, and managing character reservations.

The term "character recruitment" subsumed four interrelated subprocesses: (1) defining desirable character qualities, (2) attracting and encouraging the participation of individuals with particular characters, (3) assessing the character of prospective group

members, and (4) admitting new group members. The agents or tacticians involved in these recruitment roles were called “character recruiters.”

It was noted that Mainline and Evangelical relied upon third parties to be the initial agent of character recruitment. The majority of the seminaries’ recruitment work occurred after prospective students had applied to the M.Div. program. The application review process was conceived of as a particular instance of a more general phenomenon, “character discovery contexts,” or informal or formal situations in which individuals’ particular character qualities transpired. The committees charged with assessing applications used the data included in these files—academic transcripts, personal written statements of interest, and references letters—as “character signifiers,” or indicators of the specific type of character attributes individuals possess. At Mainline, if potential character trouble was spotted and determined to be serious, the applicant could be denied admission or admitted conditionally, being subject to a probationary period where further character assessment could take place.

The second character-related career contingency examined was “character seekership,” or becoming involved in a group, activity, relationship, or role in order to effect some character change in self or other. The analysis was divided into instances of attending to the character of self and attending to the character of others.

In this study, a period of experiencing dissatisfaction with self, situation, or others preceded character seekership. A change in character was viewed as a possible remedy to this dissatisfaction, and it was decided that seminary, as a *crucible of character*, was the place to do or enable this self-other character work.

The third character-related career contingency discussed in this paper mediated the other three. The term “character reservations” was used to describe the interrelated processes of (a) experiencing character-related doubts or concerns about involvement and (b) attempting to manage, mitigate, or overcome these concerns.

The participants in this study experienced reservations about possessing an inadequate character for their prospective role and experiencing a shift in moral expectations. In addition to being generally discounted or ignored, other techniques of managing these reservations included being affirmed in the prospective role, redefining the prospective role in more amenable terms, and referencing character success stories.

The Moral Character Career of the Ministry Student

In Paper Two, I examined the process of character formation that ministry students experienced as they worked their way through Master of Divinity program. Agents of characterization, targets of characterization, and character consciousness were also integral concepts to this analysis. As students integrated themselves into the historical-developmental flow of the seminary moral order, they learned to define and treat their characters as a particular kind of moral object to be fashioned for a particular kind of moral role.

Four stages to the ministry students’ moral character career were identified: experiencing exaggerated character expectations, scrutinizing character, managing character, and legitimating character. These four stages were not mutually exclusive.

Rather, they were conceived of as representing different realms of the character consciousness that student participation in the ministry formation program cultivates.

In the first stage students experienced exaggerated character expectations associated with their new role. The naïve concerns that students carried with them into seminary were soon replaced through a process of “doctrinal conversion” (Davis 1968) with a more nuanced set of character concerns and reference points. Regardless of whether students thought that they should or not, students learned and expected that they would be viewed as “character representatives” of God, Jesus, Christianity, ministers, and their churches. Ministers, among others, were the moral mediums through which God’s work was to be done.

The second stage of the students’ moral character career involved responding to these great expectations through an institutionally-mediated process of scrutinizing character. While in the program, students rotated around a circuit of character appraisal audiences, whose task was to assess the students’ character for goodness of fit with the ministerial role. There were also others outside the seminary context who, knowing that the students were training to become Christian ministers, engaged in moral monitoring and evaluation of the students informally. Whether it was through the use of formational language (i.e., “seminary speak”), character-related assignments, personality tests, ministry placement supervision, or informal interactions, students learned to classify and give meaning to their character.

In the third stage, now that the students’ characters had been sufficiently dissected, the work involved in managing and regulating character could be performed.

Students needed to take responsibility for their character and its development. Again, character regulation, in part, was an institutionally-directed process. The ministry program at each school advocated the use of character models as interpretive schema for orienting a ministerial life. The idea was that people could become transformed through these images. Transformation was predicated upon the habituation of these interpretive schemas through daily moral disciplines, such as prayer and daily devotionals. Seminarians also developed strategies that allowed them some reprieve from moral monitoring and character work when outside the church or seminary context.

The fourth stage provided students some affirmation that they had the “right moral stuff” for the rarefied role that they were attempting to assume. Although the scrutinizing and regulating of character were important disciplines to be cultivated throughout a ministerial life, it was also important to qualify these efforts in reference to the Christian notion of the fallible, imperfect nature of humankind. This narrative could be used as an interpretive resource to draw upon in the inevitable moments of moral doubt and criticism that would occur in a minister’s career. Affirmation was also achieved through the reflected evaluations of character appraisal audiences inside and outside the seminary.

Character Problems as Collective Behaviour

Paper Three analyzed how faculty and administration identified and dealt with their students’ character problems. Taking issue with the treatment of character problems as springing from objective dispositions, I showed how character trouble was produced through a process of collective definition and action between the agents and targets of

characterization, a process that an institutionalized character consciousness informed. In doing so, this paper demonstrated the cross-contextual relevance of Blumer's (1971) classic analysis of the natural history of social problems. Specifically, three stages of the natural history of character problems were identified: emergence, legitimation, and remediation.

The emergence of character problems was contingent upon the related processes of discovering character and extrapolating character. "Discovering character" refers to the process by which a quality, or some qualities, of an individual's character becomes known to self or other. In this paper, consideration was limited to the discovery of the character qualities of others. As with the analysis in Paper One, character discovery contexts and character signifiers were pertinent. Character discovery contexts were classified into two general types: formal and informal. Formal discovery contexts included organized forms of interaction, activity, and evaluation that were intended to reveal specific character qualities of their participants. Informal discovery contexts included everyday encounters with self, others, or objects in which qualities of character were unintentionally "revealed" or became objects of awareness.

Character discovery was also related to the organization of the group in which it occurred. Some groups, like Mainline Seminary, are more explicitly interested in identifying and dealing with character trouble than others. In groups that more closely resemble a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961), a "moralization of minutiae" (Lofland 1969) can occur that impels its members to make the identification of character trouble a central feature of everyday life. Other groups, like Evangelical Seminary, are less

interested in identifying and dramatizing (Tannenbaum, 1938) the subtleties of deviance, being more attuned to what they view to be blatant transgressions of character that are difficult to ignore because of the interruption to the everyday activity of the group.

The second process in the emergence of character problems was “extrapolating character,” which refers to using discovered character qualities to make inferences about and prognoses for the actor’s future behavior in immediate, identical, or analogous situations. During this process, the goodness of fit between discovered character and future context are assessed. Sometimes the result of this assessment forebodes trouble. Character extrapolation was unlikely to occur when assessors viewed the situations or settings under consideration as unrelated. However, a troublesome designation was required in order to move to the next stage in the natural history of character problems, legitimation.

If other do not recognize the character trouble, then it will remain an isolated, individual, or interpersonal problem. Character problems needed to gain credence and respectability with a legitimating audience. Two types of obstacles to character problem legitimation were identified, personal and organizational. In regard to personal obstacles, for example, it was noted that people might find it uncomfortable or difficult to publicly challenge or confront the problematic qualities of others. Organizational obstacles referred to absence of, or impediments to, formal processes of problem assessment, legitimation, and management.

The organization of the group and its character consciousness influenced how character problems were handled. Informal challenges of character trouble were more

common at Evangelical Seminary, which had no formal directive for identifying and responding to character problems. Formal efforts were defined to be outside its organizational mandate.

Groups that have a formal mandate for identifying and dealing with character trouble are likely to document and record troublesome incidents. At Mainline Seminary, this file was used to track the type and extent of character problems of individual students. The term “character anomaly” was used to describe behaviors that were viewed to be inconsistent with the history—or “character biography”—of the alleged offender. When one professor’s interpretation of trouble was inconsistent with the history of interaction that others had with the student, then the incident was defined as anomalous and disregarded. Consistent differences of interpretation around character issues could ostracize some professors from the assessment process, resulting in a reluctance to report trouble.

If character problems achieve group legitimacy, then efforts to remediate the problems may be undertaken. “Remediating character” refers to the process of attempting to manage or discontinue the troublesome tendencies of self or other and attempts to develop desirable character qualities. In this study, remedial strategies included treating the character problems and removing the troublesome character from the group. In terms of treating and correcting character trouble, it was noted that remedial regimens might be developed and implemented, sometimes through third-party treatment specialists. The typical remedial regimen at Mainline Seminary included a “character contract” between the offender and the institution. Character contracts proscribed the identified troublesome

tendencies, prescribed desirable or countervailing tendencies, and detailed how this character work would be achieved and demonstrated. Student resistance to deviant designations and remedial regimens only further confirmed the faculty assessment of trouble.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This dissertation contributes to the sociology of character and symbolic interactionist theory in three ways: (1) offering an alternative to the objectivist character-as-dispositions approach, (2) adding the concept of character to the interactionist analytic vocabulary and articulating its relationship with the self, identity, and role concepts, and (3) applying and extending the career concept in three new ways. Each of these contributions is considered in more detail in this section.

Toward a Sociology of Character

Although sociology has much to offer to an understanding of human character, psychologists have dominated its empirical study in the social sciences, especially in the guise of the personality concept. The sociologists that have engaged character as their subject matter, though emphasizing the group as relevant the unit of analysis, have tended to, like the psychologists, ultimately define character as a set of core dispositions that are lodged within the individual. This dissertation has noted several limitations of the character-as-dispositions approach and suggested that an interactionist approach to the sociology of character is required.

What might such a sociology of character look like? From the preceding analysis, five premises about the nature of character can be propounded. In addition to drawing upon symbolic interactionism's rich theoretical and empirical resources, future researchers of character as a sociological phenomenon are likely to find these premises useful reference points in developing their projects. As with all grounded propositions and concepts, these premises are open to extension and revision as a larger body of research on character in everyday life is produced.

1. *Character and habit are analytically distinct.* Habits may be understood as routinized ways of knowing and acting in the social world. Character includes social attributions of essential interactional habits, dispositions, or tendencies, especially of a durable and moral nature. The reality of character is inextricably linked to the social typing process. A character designation may refer to some putative habit. But that habit may not “actually” exist, it may not be defined as essential or related to character, all audiences may not be define it in the same way, or it may elude their perception and recognition. Thus, in order to understand character, it must be studied as a phenomenon with its own reality.
2. *Character is intersubjective.* The reality of character is neither objective nor subjective. Rather, character—as a self-other dispositional designation—is an intersubjective phenomenon, one that the character consciousness of particular and generalized groups shapes and frames. It is this social foundation that also gives character its multi-perspectival nature, with each group developing its own

notions of what character is, how it can be identified, how it should be evaluated, and how it should be managed.

3. *Character is processual.* Character is an emergent and historical phenomenon. It is historical in the sense that groups develop a character consciousness, one that is transferred among different members and between generations. It is emergent in the sense that this consciousness is interpreted, assessed, and negotiated over time.
4. *Character is a social act.* Becoming known as a person of a particular character is not an individual act, but one that involves the collective definition and action of people engaging at least two general roles. There are the *targets of characterization*, or those who are the subject of character attribution and formation efforts. There are also the *agents of characterization*, or those who act as tacticians in the character-making process, assuming roles as evaluators, instructors, regulators, and moralizers. At times, individuals may engage both of these roles, but that does not make the process any less social.
5. *Character is situational.* Definitions of character are inextricably linked to the groups and contexts in which they are inferred and attributed, and to the future contexts in which they are predicted to have implications.

Using these premises as reference point for research in the sociology of character, the analytic focus shifts from discovering dispositions to the character-making process and its implications for human knowing and acting. For example, Paper One demonstrated that one way to approach the study of the character-making process is to

examine people's moral character careers in specific settings. The group sets the expectation of character for membership; defines what character is and how it develops; types its members' characters; performs moral monitoring of its members; regulates and disciplines its members; and provides opportunities for character approbation, legitimation, and censure. Being a person of a certain character, then, is more about being a person embedded in and responding to situations in a particular moral community or network of relations than having some inherent and objective set of dispositions. Without the group, there is no character.

Character and the Interactionist Triumvirate: Self, Identity, and Role

The findings of the dissertation can also be situated in the broader literature of Chicago school symbolic interactionist (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969, 2004; Strauss 1993) approaches to self, identity, and role. The interrelatedness among character and these concepts has long been left implicit or taken for granted in interactionist theory and research, but it is deserving of further examination and specification.

Self

For interactionists, the self is best envisioned as an ongoing social process, not a set of immutable attitudes or an innate personality. The self refers to the linguistically enabled, reflective process, arising in social interaction, where people are able to act as subjects as well as treat themselves as objects unto themselves, thereby gaining some measure of minded and purposive control over their conduct. Mead (1934) referred to these two

dimensions of the self as the “I”—the self as subject, the self in action—and the “me”—the self as object, the self in reflection. By taking the role of particular or generalized others, applying these perspectives to self and conversing with themselves about themselves, humans are able to treat themselves as objects of their own awareness, beyond any immediate environmental stimuli. This interpretive process allows people to indicate, define, judge, adjust, fit, resist, and construct their lines of action. Thus, the premise that humans have selves is paramount for comprehending all human knowing and acting.

Character—as a self-other dispositional designation—is a particular kind of self object, one that attributes some essential, durable, and moral nature to the person. Rather than being derived ethereally, seemingly out of nothing, character attributions are made with reference to a group-based interpretive framework—a character consciousness—actors use as a resource in identifying, assessing, and enacting character. Individuals achieve an intersubjective awareness of a group’s character consciousness by taking the role of particular or generalized moral others.

Character consciousness may be viewed as an element of a broader “idioculture” (Fine 1979), “local culture” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 161-165), folk psychology or ethnopsychology of specific or generalized groups (see Cahill 1998: 134), but it is also influenced by scholarly perspectives on character by the increasing “scientization of everyday life” (Berger and Kellner 1981) through psycho-medical-therapeutic tests, interpretations, and evaluations (see also Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 111), as the boundaries between folk and scientific conceptions of the person become increasingly

permeable and dialectic in nature, with each informing the other (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 65).

As the character consciousness of a group and its members undergoes change, so do self-other character attributions. For example, the tendency to attribute behaviours to situational conditions rather than personal dispositions will have implications for the character-making process, as well as notions of “true,” “real,” or “authentic” selves (see Turner 1976: 991). Character cannot be disentangled from the group-based interpretive reference points used in its attribution.

Furthermore, as organizations and institutions attempt to formalize, codify, or otherwise influence the meaning of character, the character consciousness becomes “organizationally embedded” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 165-167). This was the case in the seminary context where multiple organizations and institutions—for example, seminaries, churches, and denominations—laid partial claim to defining what character is and how it should be formed. Gubrium and Holstein (2000: 104) suggest that institutions in the “self-construction business” are increasingly influencing the group-based perspectives and practices for understanding the personal self—character being a dimension of which. These sites of character knowledge and character production are “relatively stable, routinized, ongoing patterns of action and interaction...Large or small, formal or informal, each represents an ongoing commitment to a particular moral order, a way of being who and what we are in relation to the immediate scheme of things” (Gubrium and Holstein 2000: 102). This dissertation offers an analysis of a kind of organization that has been in the self-construction business for a very long time.

Identity

The interactionist conception of identity is inextricably linked to the conception of self. Following a classic statement by Stone (1962: 93), identities are self-other designations related to one's position in a social group or situation: "One's identity is established when others *place* him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or *announces*. It is in the coincidence of placements and announcements that identity becomes a meaning of the self." Identities are products of the self-interpreting and self-objectifying process noted above. Analytically, three general types of identities may be distinguished: situational, social, and personal (see Vryan, Adler, and Adler 2003). Situational identities include the more fleeting positions assumed in transitory interactions (e.g., take-out customer at a fast food restaurant). Social identities refer to one's position in more general groups or social categories (e.g., gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, class). Personal identities comprise the complex of unique and biographical features, self-narratives and personalities attributable to individuals. Multiple identities are part and parcel of the interactionist conception of the person.

The designation of character is but one of the many potential identity products of the reflexive self, an attribution of a set of essential dispositions, constructed and reconstructed as we engage the world. Character attributions are typically thought of as personal identities, but they emerge in situational encounters (e.g., a troublesome customer), as well as being associated with broader social categories (e.g., gendered

dispositions). These attributions, as noted, are rooted in the character consciousness of particular or generalized groups. The attribution process is also wholly social, involving agents and targets of characterization efforts. In a related sense, adopting a morally significant position or role can influence the character-making process, serving as a “turning point” (Strauss 1959) in identity by initiating a status passage (Glaser and Strauss 1971) whereby the person is elevated or degraded (Garfinkel 1956) to another class of character. Also, since character designations generally refer to some core, obdurate, transsituational aspect of self, they can take on a more encompassing quality, becoming a “master status” (Hughes 1945) that tends to override other statuses within and across situations.

The last point—that character offers a way of conceiving transsituational identities—merits greater emphasis, for some scholars have taken the position that, while interactionist theory and concepts are capable of analyzing identity across time and setting, enduring identities, like character, have not received their due attention in the interactionist literature. Instead, the emphasis has been on situational or fleeting identities (Cahill 1998; Callero 2003: 121). Hewitt (1989: 150) puts the situation this way:

[Symbolic interactionists] have over-emphasized situated identity and neglected identity as a phenomenon relevant beyond the sphere of the immediate situation. There is little theoretical conception of the person as someone who endures beyond the audiences and appraisals of particular contexts of interaction. Indeed, there is a reluctance to theorize about persons, as if somehow to do so is to descend into hopeless psychologism. But if it is to be a fully useful concept, identity must be conceived as a sense of self that is not only produced with the situation but also brought to it.

An interactionist conception of character is one of the ways this ostensible deficiency could be remediated, since character offers a means of anchoring identity across time,

situation, group, relationship, and role. Relatedly, the character consciousness concept also provides a means of connecting immediate situations and identities with the broader historical-developmental moral orders of which they are a part. After all, a character designation refers to a particular kind of moral object in relation to a particular moral community.

Role

Denoting the general expectations and perspectives associated with particular identities or social positions, symbolic interactionists use the concept of role in at least three ways (see Hewitt 2003). First, roles provide some general framework or structure for approaching interactions. They are a way for social actors to define themselves, others, and the situations that they encounter. Second, roles provide general orientations or perspectives for engaging situations, not a fixed set of rights, duties, and obligations. That is, rather than being a predetermined unfolding of behaviour, roles are continually made as they are enacted. Third, roles act as resources for fitting together multiple lines of action, anticipating and interpreting the behaviour of others.

There are obvious connections between role and character. Generally, each role has a subset of character expectations associated with it. These expectations are not fixed or always clear, but they are nonetheless general reference points for the kind of personal dispositions deemed necessary for the role. Character expectations may be more prominent for some roles, as for ministry students, than others. Again, these character expectations are revealed as people achieve greater degrees of intersubjective awareness

of the group's character consciousness. Achieving a desirable character attribution congruent with a group's character consciousness is highly dependent upon the ability to take the role of particular and generalized moral others. That is, successful role making is based on role taking, where one applies, among other things, the character expectations of others to self. As people identify more personally with specific groups and roles within, they may be expected, by self and other, to maintain a consistent character performance across contexts, a kind of totalizing role embracement (Goffman 1961). This was the case for ministry students who many defined to be character representatives of their groups, an embodied representation of the group's moral perspectives and practices. In contrast, role distancing may be used as a temporary reprieve from character expectations, or it may be used to carve out a personal identity, including character, that is distinct from individual roles (Goffman 1961). In short, there is no character without role taking and role making.

Careers and Career Contingencies

The notion of career is one of the most potent yet underappreciated concepts in sociology. Analytically, "careers" refer to the sequences, stages, and shifts of some phenomenon over time. The related notion of "career contingencies" refers to conditions that influence movement from one career stage to another. Symbolic interactionists and students of deviance have long recognized the analytic versatility and value that the career concept holds in explaining the development of myriad phenomena, from simple ideas to complex institutions. The concept not only gives continuity and coherence to seemingly disparate situations and events, but it also handles the personal and public, "subjective" and

“objective” equally well. Mainstream objectivist sociology, however, has been less concerned with the complexity involved in tracing the temporal trajectories of human knowing and acting, being consumed with the quest for the discovery and isolation of the structural determinants of behaviour.

As noted, the objectivist approach has dominated the study of character. Rather than being rendered purblind by the putative objective structure of character, it should not be surprising that an interactionist study of character would be attentive to its processual features. Thus, the career concept was a natural fit, with all three papers employing variants of the career metaphor. This was not necessarily by design. I did not set out to examine character-related contingences, moral character careers, or character problem careers. Rather, the fit between each paper and the career concept emerged with the processual analysis of character in the seminary context.

Paper One, “Character as a Career Contingency: The Case of Becoming a Seminarian,” employed the career and career contingency concepts in the form the Chicago school of sociology and the symbolic interactionist tradition developed them. The “ontological duality” (Barley 1989) or “two-sidedness” (Goffman 1961) of the career concept has been disregarded in the character-involvement literature. In fact, beyond the study of criminal careers (see Osgood and Rowe 1994; Ulmer and Spencer 1999), the career concept has not received much explicit attention at all by sociologists who have examined the relationship between character and involvement. Instead, the sociological tendency has been to treat character as an objective set of dispositions that social structure

produces. In turn, sociologists consider these dispositions to be structural determinants of behaviour, and often characterize people as unaware of these effects.

Paper One thus contributes an extension of the career concept by focusing on character and introducing the notion of character-related career contingencies, such as character recruitment, character seekership, and character reservations. The analysis also offers an interpretivist critique of the objectivist character-involvement literature.

Deriving analytic inspiration from Goffman's (1961) classical appropriation of the career concept, Paper Two, "The Moral Character Career of the Ministry Student," also pursued the career theme. Specifically, Goffman's discussion of "moral careers"—people's self-other evaluations over time—was modified in order to account for moral character careers—people's definitions and evaluations of character over time. In doing so, the analysis revised and applied the moral career concept in a new way. The conceptual specification of moral character careers allows for more focused theory building in both the moral career literature, which encompasses a wide variety of self-evaluative criteria beyond character, and the sociology of character, which has disregarded the self-other character designation process.

Employing the career concept in yet another way, Paper Three, "Character Problems as Collective Behaviour," examines the career or natural history of character problems in the seminary context. The analysis demonstrated the continuing relevance of Blumer's (1971) classic natural history analysis of social problems as products of collective definition and action. Social problems research has tended to focus on "public" problems, or macro-level analyses. By attending to the careers of character problems in a

subcultural context, this paper offered a meso-level analysis not typically pursued in social problems research. This paper thus broadened the relevance and analytic focus of traditional studies in the careers of problems. As Best (2003) argues, if the social constructionist approach to social problems is to continue to be intellectually viable, it needs to move beyond the narrow confines that it has traditionally inhabited and into new analytic territories. Paper Three represents a step in that direction.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation suggests a number of directions for future research on character as a sociological phenomenon. Two avenues in particular will be discussed here: (1) future research contributing to a formal interactionist theory of character and (2) future research contributing to variants of the interactionist career concept.

Although this dissertation has provided an empirical and conceptual base upon which future studies of character can be designed and pursued, it represents just the beginning of the development of a comprehensive analytic scheme for understanding the character-making process in group life. It is difficult to develop a general, encompassing concept of character from the study of any single substantive setting. Thus, while there have been some explicit examples of research on the socially constructed nature of character from an interactionist perspective (e.g., Goffman 1967; Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Hood 1984; Fine 1996; Holyfield and Fine 1997; Jonas 1999; Nack 2002), sustained comparative analysis of character in diverse settings is needed in order to produce more general theory, along the lines Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest.

Glaser and Strauss (1967: 32) contend that their constant comparative method can be used to generate two types of theory, substantive and formal. *Substantive theory* is particular to a setting or group. It might focus on people's experiences in specific settings, activities, relationships, or roles, for example. *Formal theory* is broader in its scope and is applicable to numerous substantive settings. For example, Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management and identity work was grounded in an ethnography of a particular community—Shetland Islander community—but this analysis was supplemented with excerpts from and citations to research in a variety of other settings, attending to the similarities and differences in impression management in each case. The result was not just an analysis of impression management in the Islander community but an analysis of impression management in general, the insights of which can be applied to a wide variety of social groups and people's roles within. Whereas substantive theories may be generated around one substantive group or setting, such as this dissertation, those developing more formal or abstracted grounded theory would include data from multiple groups and/or contexts in order to establish a generic social relevance. Regardless of whether one develops substantive or formal grounded theory, it is expected that grounded theory would build on existing conceptualizations as new instances of research are developed and earlier notions of grounded theory are assessed within this ever-increasing base.

The substantive theoretical contributions of the character-making process in the seminary setting could achieve greater degrees of applicability through comparative analysis. As I alluded to above, one way to accomplish this task is to do a meta-analysis

of existing ethnographic work that provides insights into the social construction of character. The interactionist ethnographic tradition provides great potential as a resource in that regard. While most of that body of ethnographic research was not developed around character as a focal point, the nature of interactionist ethnography, with its attention to meaning-making and identity attribution processes as well as its use of extended quotations from participants in the setting, is amenable to meta-analytic and comparative work. Another way of accomplishing the comparative analysis required would be pursuing analytically focused ethnographies in other settings.

For example, this dissertation examined character in the seminary setting (religious context). Using the theoretical and conceptual insights of this dissertation as a reference point, one could develop studies of similar social processes in other areas: the training of natural scientists (scientific context); the world of drug users and drug dealers (deviant/criminal context); intimate relationships (interpersonal context); the weight lifting subculture (sport and physical performance context). The objective would be to draw from a diverse group of settings and people while maintaining an analytic focus on character (see Stebbins 1992; Prus 1987, 1996, 1997).

A second opportunity for future research is in the conceptual extension and application of the career concept. Each of the empirical papers suggests possibilities in this regard. Paper One demonstrated that character designations could be thought of as interpretive contingencies that influence career trajectories. The analysis focused on initial involvement in ministry studies. Future research should attend to not only initial involvement in other settings, but also other career stages—sustaining and intensifying

involvements, disinvolvement, and reinvolvement (see Prus 1996). These studies would provide an empirical foundation from which to develop a formal theory of character and involvement through comparative analysis.

Paper Two examined the character formation process within the two seminaries. The moral character career concept was developed in order to analyze how students experienced this process, including the attendant changes in perspectives and practices related to character. Again, in order to develop a formal theory of character change, moral character careers should be examined in a variety of other settings. This would include an analysis of not only the moral formation efforts of other organizations or in other substantive contexts, but also the experience of character change across multiple situations and involvements over time—over the life course, for example.

Paper Three considered the career of character problems within the two seminaries. While I was able to attend to each of the three stages—emergence, legitimation, remediation—of the natural history of character problems from the perspective of the seminary faculty and administration, or the agents of characterization, it would be worthwhile to research the experiences of the targets of characterization, specifically the people who have been identified as troublesome characters. Also, more research is needed on the involvement of third party agents who are tasked with further diagnosis and treatment of character problems. Finally, it would be interesting to examine whether the natural history of subcultural character problems—that is, the character problems of subcultural members—applies to the identification of and response to personal character troubles—that is, the character problems of self. Again, comparative

analysis of multiple settings is required in order to develop a formal theory of character problems as collective behaviour.

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