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SOC 100-002

### Applying The Trees and the Forest Essay

#### Part A:

Alan Johnson's understanding of how "paths of least resistance" shape an individual's actions becomes clear as one defines and explains the interaction of his concepts "culture" and "structure." I must start by defining what culture means and all the elements that come together to create a culture. Culture can be viewed as one's ideas, views, or outlook that helps create a reality (McGinn, 9/8/2021). To better define culture, we must first break down the factors that create a culture. The key factors that create a culture are beliefs. A belief is an idea that I value to be true or false regardless of factual accuracy (McGinn, 9/8/2021). An example of a belief would be that Santa is real. I can understand that it is impossible for someone to deliver billions of presents in a single night. However, I can still have a belief that Santa exists regardless of the practicality of the belief. An essential element of your beliefs are the values that you hold. A value is what a person views as right or wrong and is used to make decisions that follow one's beliefs (McGinn, 9/8/2021). Values are what allow one to justify their beliefs by adding merit to their decisions. Imagine again that I believe Santa is real, but I also believe he likes kids who treat their siblings well. Since I believe in Santa and that he likes kids who treat their siblings well, I am now inclined to treat them better. When beliefs create guided choice, they then become values. However, when values begin to have consequences or benefits associated with them, they become norms. A norm can be defined as a value that puts pressure on you to act in a certain way by incorporating a reward or punishment (McGinn, 9/8/2021). Keeping with the Santa example, imagine that I am told that I now will only receive presents on Christmas if I am

nice to my siblings. In this example, there is now a reward for acting a certain way that reinforces my values of being nice to my siblings. Because of the reward added to this situation, the value of being nice to my siblings has now turned into a norm that will guide my decision-making process. The last major factor that creates a culture is attitude. Attitude can be described as an emotional reaction formed from a person's beliefs, values, and norms (McGinn, 9/8/2021). For example, in an attempt to treat my siblings better, my attitude towards them would be more caring and friendly. Beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes all work together to create the culture by which society lives.

Now that we understand the factors that make up culture, we must further define elements that create social structure. Doing this will explain how culture and structure interact to cause a path of least resistance. A social structure can be defined as the organization of a relationship between two or more people and the distribution of power and wealth within that relationship (McGinn, 9/8/2021). Similar to culture, social structures have several different aspects that contribute to how a structure functions in society. A social structure is formed by first assigning all members a status. A status is the name of the position that an individual holds within a social structure (McGinn, 9/8/2021). An example of status is student, boyfriend, and teacher. It becomes a role when a status is associated with beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms (McGinn, 9/8/2021). The difference between a status and a role is that status simply is a description of your position within a structure. On the other hand, a role takes into account beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms to create a description of my "job" within a structure. To go back to the Santa example, my status, in that case, would be a son and a brother (among many other). My role, however, would be to be a caring brother and a well-behaved son. As a result of my beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes derived from my culture, my role has shaped me into an obedient

child. When roles involve making decisions that are based on beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes, a path of least resistance is created.

The **path of least resistance** can be defined as a person's choices that incorporate one's roles and culture to ultimately **make decisions that will cause the least amount of conflict in a society** (McGinn, 9/8/2021). Let's say, for example, that your role in a given structure is a grocery store cashier. As a cashier, your role is to help the customer and accept money for the goods that they are purchasing. Now, imagine a homeless man who does not have any money is attempting to get a candy bar for free. Your role as a cashier tells you that you are not supposed to give customers free food. Although you may have beliefs and values that contradict what your role in a structure tells you to do, your role in a structure creates a path of least resistance that influences how you act. As Johnson explains in Chapter 1 of **"The Forest and the Trees,"** often it is **"easier to follow the rules" even when you would "rather not" follow them** (Johnson, p. 26).

This shows that to remain within a social structure, an individual is expected to take the path of least resistance regardless of if that path matches with one's beliefs, values, and norms.

Furthermore, it is critical to note that a role conflict can occur when participating in two different societal roles. A **role conflict** arises when two or more social systems have different paths of least resistance. When thinking about the cashier example, I can participate in a social structure in which my role is to be a good Samaritan. As a good Samaritan, I believe it is moral to help the homeless. My values tell me that giving food to the homeless is the right thing to do. On the other hand, as a cashier, my beliefs tell me that I should not give any customers groceries for free. My values reinforce my beliefs by affirming that it's a bad idea to give away free food. Furthermore, since I will be punished for giving away free food (fired from my job), there is now a norm associated with not giving the homeless customer the candy bar. By not giving the

homeless man a free candy bar, I am choosing to take the path of least resistance even though that choice may not agree with my personal beliefs as a good Samaritan. This example shows how culture and social structure combine to create a path of least resistance that shapes how individuals "appear and behave" within society (Johnson, p. 80).

### **Part B:**

Each year throughout my schooling, it seemed as though there was a new fad that everyone participated in. In order to keep up with your classmates and be seen as "cool," it was expected that each individual in our school participates in the year, seasonal, and even sometimes, weekly fashion crazes. As for me, in my early middle school years, you would often observe me wearing a cheap tee-shirt with long basketball shorts that in no way matched colors, socks that went up to my calf, and off-brand tennis shoes. My low-popular status in middle school at this point in time allowed me to wear these types of clothes without the impact of norms. However, as I began to play and dominate various sports throughout my time in middle school, I started to make friends with individuals who were of higher statuses. As friendships formed and grew and my status reached new highs, I received many questions about my fashion choices. Often, I would hear questions such as: "Why do you wear your socks so high?", "What made you buy Asics shoes?", "Is there a reason you don't wear socks that stop at the ankle?" I began to realize that within my new role, a popular athlete, I had to adhere to different beliefs, values, and norms. In order to stop the constant bombardment of weird looks and questions about my fashion choices, I decided to accept the path of least resistance. Within the following six months of becoming friends with many of the popular kids at my middle school, I purchased Nike shoes, low-cut athletic socks, and athletic shirts and shorts that matched. Norms that led my peers to judge and ask questions about my fashion choice were created directly from my new

role as a "cool" student. Rather than accepting the consequences of getting asked about my clothing choices, I decided to embark on the path of least resistance and follow the standards that were expected of me as a "cool kid." Although the path of least resistance **did not necessarily align with my personal taste in fashion**, I was shaped by the culture of middle school to adhere to the fashion trends of my peers.

## References

Johnson, Allan G. 2014. *The Forest and the Trees*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

McGinn, Terrence. 2021. "Culture and Structure" 8 September. Angell Hall