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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 8
Issue 1 *March*

Article 18

March 1981

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Recommended Citation

Bianco, Karen N. (1981) "Tommy - The Story of an Oppressed Family," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.

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"TOMMY - The Story of an Oppressed Family"

Karen N. Bianco

Tommy was unhappy. He loved his Mommy and Daddy, but he thought that they didn't love him. Everytime he walked into a room where his Mommy and Daddy were, they would yell at him. Tommy didn't pick up his dirty clothes. Tommy didn't feed his dog. Tommy tore his dungarees. Tommy wasn't nice to his baby sister.

Tommy thought it was hard to be nice when nobody was nice to him. Mommy and Daddy called him "bad" so much that Tommy began to think that "bad" was his name.

Tommy didn't know where to put his dirty clothes because his whole house was a mess. He could never find his clothes and Mommy was always asleep when he went to school. She said it was good for Tommy to learn to dress himself.

Tommy didn't feed his dog because his dog just ate yesterday and yesterday Mommy said there was no more money to buy dog food until next week. There wasn't much food left so Blackie only got a little every other day. Tommy thought this was a better idea than giving Blackie all the food at once and then running out of it for two or three days until Mommy could buy some more. Tommy didn't understand why Mommy kept yelling at him for not feeding Blackie. Mommy must have forgotten what she told me yesterday, Tommy thought. Mommy forgets alot now.

Tommy tore his dungarees playing ball at school. Tommy had fun at school. He was happy theres. His teacher, Mrs. Wilson, was real nice. Mrs. Wilson said it would only take Tommy's Mommy a few minutes to patch his jeans because it was only a little tear. Mrs. Wilson said that she didn't think Mommy would be mad. Lots of kids, boys and girls, tear their jeans at one time or another, Mrs. Wilson said. Mommy was mad. Real mad. Mommy said Tommy should tell Mrs. Wilson to fix his jeans if she was so smart.

Tommy wasn't nice to his baby sister, Sarah. She always broke his toys. All Sarah had to do was cry and boy, would Tommy get it. Lots of times, Tommy had to stay

in his room alone because he yelled at Sarah and made her cry.

Tommy cried alot.

When Tommy was in his room alone, he remembered things. Like feeling hurt and scared all the time. Not hurt from being hit even though that happended to him a lot, but hurt because no one he loved seemed to love him. He thought he could take being slapped because, after all, he must have done something to deserve it. But he didn't like feeling like he was alone all the time. Tommy felt like he had nobody to talk to when he got scared and lonely, mostly because the people who he wanted to talk to - Mommy and Daddy - were the ones who made him feel scared and lonely. They never seemed to have time for Tommy and when they did have time, all they did was holler at him and call him terrible names - like "Stupid" and "Brat" and "Pain in the Neck." Sometimes they even said that they were sorry Tommy was ever born. Boy, did Tommy hurt when he heard that. At least Mrs. Wilson seemed to be glad that Tommy was alive.

One day Mrs. Wilson told Tommy that his Mommy and Daddy were coming to school that afternoon. Mrs. Wilson had called them last night. She had called Miss Jones, too, and had asked her to come to school at the same time. Miss Jones used to come to Tommy's house a lot to see Tommy's Mommy. All Tommy knew was that Miss Jones was always nice to him. She smiled at him a lot and she even played ball with him. Tommy liked Miss Jones. She told him that she really likes kids and that was why she always came to see Tommy's Mommy - to try to make things better at home for Tommy and Sarah. She said that Mommy needed a friend. She said that one of the neighbors had told her that Tommy's Mommy was always hollering at him and sometimes even Sarah. The neighbor even told her that Tommy and Sarah would cry hard when they got spanked. She could hear them next door, she said. And it happended almost every night. Miss Jones said that she wanted to help Mommy feel better so this wouldn't happen. Tommy didn't think his Mommy was sick so he never understood what Miss Jones meant about making Mommy feel better, but whatever she was doing wasn't working anyway because Mommy still hollered at Tommy, and usually spanked Tommy, for no reason, especially after Miss Jones would leave. Tommy didn't want to tell Miss Jones this because maybe then she wouldn't come back and play ball with him. Mommy used to call Tommy "Stupid" for even talking to Miss Jones.

Mommy would ask Tommy what he said to Miss Jones but before he could say anything, Mommy slapped him. Right across the mouth. It hurt. Then she would send him to bed. Sometimes Tommy's nose would bleed and Tommy thought he was going to die. But then Mommy would say she was sorry and help Tommy get cleaned up and then cook him his favorite meal for supper. Tommy loved Mommy.

Tommy was scared but he didn't know why. He remembered the telephone ringing last night and when he asked Daddy who it was, Daddy just yelled, "Nevermind, it's none of your business!" Then all of a sudden, he started picking on Tommy again. He hadn't yelled at him too much after school. What did I do now, Tommy thought.

Mommy and Daddy went to school but they were late. Tommy's stomach hurt. First he thought that Mommy and Daddy had gotten into a car accident and that was why they weren't there on time and it was all his fault. Then he thought that they forgot. What would Mrs. Wilson say? Maybe she'd get mad, too, and then even school wouldn't be fun anymore.

When Mommy and Daddy finally got there, the meeting started. Tommy sat down beside Mrs. Wilson and Mommy and Daddy just kept staring at him. Mrs. Wilson was telling them that Tommy was having a hard time in school now and she wanted to know if Mommy and Daddy could give him some help at home after school. Mommy and Daddy told Mrs. Wilson that they always help Tommy but Tommy always misbehaves so they always end up sending him to his room. They had to, they said, so Tommy would know who was "Boss." Tommy wondered how come Mommy and Daddy said this to Mrs. Wilson because it wasn't true. Well, not all true. It was true that Tommy was always being sent to his room, but every time he asked Mommy and Daddy to help him with his school work, they told him they didn't have time, and besides, they said, if Tommy didn't fool around so much at school, he wouldn't be so stupid and he would learn what he was supposed to and then he wouldn't have to ask Mommy and Daddy to help. Tommy was mad at Mommy and Daddy for lying to Mrs. Wilson - she was too nice to lie to.

Mrs. Wilson was asking Mommy and Daddy some questions about Sarah, too, like how old is she and does she like Tommy. Tommy could tell that Mommy was getting mad. She kept staring at him and Miss Jones. This is how she looks just before she yells at me and spansks me, Tommy thought. But she didn't yell at Mrs. Wilson. And Mrs. Wilson was

too big to spank. Phew, Tommy said to himself.

Then Mrs. Wilson told Tommy that she and Miss Jones wanted to talk to Mommy and Daddy alone and she wondered if Tommy would like to go back to his classroom and write on the blackboard. Tommy loved to write on the blackboard, especially after school 'cause there were no kids to laugh at him if he spelled a word wrong or something.

When Mrs. Wilson and Miss Jones were done talking to Mommy and Daddy, Mommy was crying. Tommy was mad at Mrs. Wilson because she must have made Mommy cry. Tommy told Mrs. Wilson he didn't like her stupid old blackboard anyway.

Mommy and Daddy were very quiet all the way home. Tommy was, too. For some reason, he was scared. Scared to look at Mommy and Daddy in the eye.

Blackie greeted them at the door, as usual. And Tommy gave him a hug, as usual. No one else seemed to care, Tommy thought.

Mommy and Daddy were hollering at each other as Tommy was going to the refrigerator to get some milk and something to eat. He was hungry now, now that the meeting at school was all over. Mommy yelled at Tommy and told him to keep the refrigerator door shut. Tommy said all he wanted was a glass of milk. Mommy said there wasn't any. But Tommy knew there was. And he told her so. Mommy yelled again at Tommy and said there wasn't any milk. "Liar!", Tommy said. "Liar, liar, liar, just like all the lies you told to Mrs. Wilson!"

All of a sudden, Mommy got real mad. Madder than Tommy had ever seen. She screamed at Tommy and called him a brat. She grabbed him by the shirt and, as she was smashing at his little body, she hollered about how she hated him for embarrassing her for having to go to school and be told that Tommy was stupid. "They must think I'm stupid, too," Mommy screamed. "How humiliating!" All the while, Tommy kept ducking Mommy's slaps, but each time he bent down, Mommy kicked him. Blackie was barking at all the commotion. Tommy was crying. When he could catch his breath, he yelled at Mommy to stop, but she didn't.

It seemed like forever.

Tommy woke up in the hospital. Miss Jones was sitting

near his bed. So was Mommy. At first Tommy thought he was dreaming because everything looked blurry. He went to rub his eyes and felt a bandage on one of them. It hurt real bad. Tommy asked Mommy what happened, but Mommy couldn't answer. She was crying and stroking Tommy's hair. Miss Jones told Tommy that Mommy had lost her temper last night and had hurt him. The next door neighbor had heard Tommy crying and Blackie barking and Mommy yelling and had called the police. The police called Miss Jones when they got to Tommy's house because that's who Mommy said could help. Miss Jones and Mommy had brought Tommy to the hospital.

After five days in the hospital, Tommy could go home. Tommy couldn't wait. Mommy had been to see him every day, but this wasn't the same as being home.

When Tommy got home, Mommy and Daddy told him that he could stay up later that night - after Sarah went to bed. Tommy was real happy. This only used to happen on Tommy's birthday.

After Sarah went to bed, Mommy called Tommy into the kitchen. Daddy was there, too. He didn't even look at Tommy.

Mommy told Tommy she was sorry. She said she didn't know what for, but she was sorry. Tommy thought back to what had happened before he went to the hospital. Maybe Mrs. Wilson found out that Mommy and Daddy lied to her and maybe she yelled at Mommy and called her a liar like I did, Tommy thought. Maybe Mommy was sorry for lying. Mommy started to cry. Sometimes, when I lie, Tommy thought, Mommy finds out and yells at me and then I cry.

Mommy said that Sarah and Tommy would have to go to live with someone else for a while. Tommy didn't want to leave Mommy 'cause she felt so bad, but then he thought that he may be going to see Uncle Ben. Uncle Ben always used to tell him that he wished he had a nice boy like him. Mommy and Daddy didn't like Uncle Ben. Tommy knew because he heard them talking about him one night. They said he was always sticking his nose in other peoples' business and he shouldn't try to tell people how to bring up their kids, especially when he didn't have any of his own. They said the same thing went for Miss Jones.

When Tommy asked Mommy if he was going to Uncle Ben's, Mommy said no. She cried even harder now. Now what did

I do, Tommy thought. Maybe something bad had happened to Uncle Ben.

Tommy knew Mommy was upset and he told her it was okay. He really didn't think that it was, but he wanted Mommy to stop crying. When she cried, Tommy felt bad, and he felt like crying, too.

Tommy really wondered where he was going and how long he was going to be there. He wondered if the people would be nice, like Mrs. Wilson, or would they be mean. Tommy remembered that Mrs. Wilson used to be nice until she made Mommy cry. Tommy wondered if anybody was nice besides Mommy.

Tommy was scared. He didn't want to go to any other place to live. Who was going to feed Blackie? and who was going to make sure that Mommy got up in the morning? Tommy thought if he promised Mommy that he'd try real hard in school and be real good, maybe he wouldn't have to go. And he could tell Sarah to be real good, too.

Mommy told Tommy that he still had to go. Then Tommy thought that it would make Mommy happy if he told her he would come to visit her a lot until he could come home again. Like Mommy did for Tommy when he was in the hospital. Mommy started crying again. Then Daddy told Tommy to go to bed. Tommy heard Sarah crying when he went into his room. Then he heard Daddy yell, "Shut up!", to Sarah. Sarah still kept crying, but so was Tommy now.

When Tommy woke up, he couldn't find any of his clothes. Not even the dirty ones. When Tommy found Mommy, he saw her putting all his clothes in boxes. Sarah's were in a big green garbage bag. Did Tommy have to leave already?

Mommy put out a clean T-shirt and jeans for Tommy to wear. She said he had to look nice when he went to his foster home so the new people wouldn't think Mommy was a slob.

Daddy was talking to Miss Jones at the door now. Tommy knew Miss Jones liked him so maybe he wouldn't have to leave already if she could convince Mommy and Daddy that he wasn't really stupid or bad. They must talk about me, Tommy thought, because every time Miss Jones comes to visit, Mommy makes me play outside, even if I don't want to.

Pretty soon Miss Jones asked Tommy if he and Sarah would like to go for a ride in her car. She said they were going to the foster home. What's a foster home, Tommy thought. Does that mean that the peoples' names are Mr. and Mrs. Foster? How long would he and Sarah have to stay there? Where are Mommy and Daddy going to be? How will they know where to find us? How would Blackie ever find me?

Tommy said he didn't want to go, but Mommy said he had to. He had to help Sarah, Mommy said, because she didn't want to go either. Well, Tommy thought, how can I help Sarah when I don't want to go. Sometimes, I don't even like Sarah, Tommy thought, but at least we'll be together and I'll know somebody there.

Then Daddy got mad because Mommy started crying again. Tommy and Sarah got in the car with Miss Jones and their green garbage bag and Tommy's boxes. Sarah started to cry and kept looking at Mommy and Daddy and banging on the window of Miss Jones' car. Mommy and Daddy didn't even wave goodbye. At least Blackie said goodbye. He was chasing Miss Jones' car down the street. Tommy was sad.

Miss Jones seemed to talk forever. She said that Tommy and Sarah would have to stay with their foster parents for about three months to give Mommy and Daddy time to work out their problems at home. She kept saying that she wished that Tommy and Sarah could have met their foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hall, before they had to leave Mommy and Daddy, but there wasn't time. Tommy didn't even know what a foster parent was and Sarah didn't seem to care. She was asleep now.

Miss Jones said that foster parents are people who take care of kids when their Mommies and Daddies can't. Tommy wondered why Mommy and Daddy couldn't keep taking care of him and Sarah. They had both promised to be good. And even if Mommy and Daddy couldn't keep taking care of them, why couldn't they go to live with Miss Jones? She was nice.

Miss Jones told Tommy everything about Mr. and Mrs. Hall but Tommy wasn't listening. He wondered how Mommy and Daddy were. He even missed Mrs. Wilson, the big creep. This was all her fault. He hoped he never saw her again.

Then they were there. Mrs. Hall was outside smiling.

Tommy wasn't smiling though. Sarah was awake now and she was crying again. I wish she'd go back to sleep, Tommy thought. She's always crying.

Miss Jones gave Mrs. Hall all of Tommy's things. Sarah's, too. If Mommy said it was only for a little while, how come I don't have anything left at home, Tommy said to himself. Did Mommy lie to me, too, like she did to Mrs. Wilson? Mommy wouldn't do that. Not to me, Tommy thought. Not my Mommy!

Miss Jones talked to Mrs. Hall for a long time. Then she said she had to go. This time Tommy wanted to go with her, but Miss Jones said he and Sarah would have to stay.

After Miss Jones left, Mrs. Hall kept smiling at Tommy but he didn't feel like smiling back. She told Tommy that he looked real nice and said he must have a nice Mommy who takes such good care of him to make sure that he looked nice.

Mr. Hall came home when Mrs. Hall was cooking supper. It smelled good and it was Tommy's favorite - spaghetti. Tommy wasn't hungry though. His stomach hurt again, just like it did the day his Mommy and Daddy were going to see Mrs. Wilson at school. He missed Mommy and Daddy - even if they always yelled at him. And he missed Blackie.

Mr. Hall played with Tommy after supper. He said Tommy could climb on him and he'd give him a piggyback. Tommy never had a piggyback before but he didn't want to now. Then he saw Sarah playing with Mrs. Hall so he thought he should play with Mr. Hall so he wouldn't hurt his feelings. Before he knew it, Tommy heard some laughing - it was him - Tommy. Mr. Hall kept tickling him. Tommy laughed so hard that his face got red. Then all of a sudden, he started to cry. He was trying hard not to and he kept telling Mr. Hall that he must have gotten something in his eye when they were playing. But Mr. Hall knew that this wasn't true. He knew Tommy was sad about everything and he told him everything would be okay. He told him that he knew he missed his Mommy and Daddy and that he must be mad because it felt like they sent him and Sarah away. Tommy said he didn't care about Sarah but Mr. Hall knew this wasn't true either. Tommy was just scared and lonely, even if there were people around. Mr. Hall hugged Tommy and Tommy felt better. He didn't even know Mr. Hall but he kept hanging on to him and he didn't want to let him go. He wished he was home so Mommy and Daddy

could hug him instead of some stranger - but they never did anyway. Only Mrs. Wilson did that.

The next three months were hard for Tommy. Tommy didn't know how long three months was, but it seemed like forever. And it was Summer, too, so he missed playing with all of his friends that he knew from school.

Mrs. Hall helped Tommy understand three months by putting a big red mark next to the day's date on the calendar each night before Tommy went to bed. At least this way Tommy had some idea of how many more days it would be before he and Sarah could go home.

Tommy still cried inside though. He missed Mommy and Daddy. And Blackie. But he also knew it was almost time to go home because Mommy and Daddy said so the last time they visited. But then Tommy kept thinking about the time that Mommy and Daddy lied to Mrs. Wilson and he couldn't help thinking that maybe Mommy and Daddy lied to him, too, and if this was true, maybe he would never go home. Maybe Sarah would, 'cause Mommy and Daddy loved her. They used to hug her a lot.

Then one day Miss Jones came and talked to Tommy and Sarah for a long time. Sarah wasn't too interested but Tommy was. Miss Jones said that Mommy and Daddy felt better now and that meant that Tommy and Sarah could go home next week. Tommy asked Miss Jones if Mommy and Daddy were sick or something. He didn't understand. Miss Jones said that Mommy and Daddy used to have some big problems but now they weren't so big. The problems were like not being able to talk to each other about things that bothered them. And there were lots of things that bothered them. That's funny, Tommy thought. All he remembered about problems was that he used to hear Daddy ask Mommy what her problem was and Mommy would say she didn't have a problem. Tommy still didn't understand. Miss Jones said that sometimes it's hard for grown-ups to say that something is wrong because it makes them feel bad. Especially if they have a problem that they don't know how to fix. And when a lot of problems come at the same time, and they're not talked about or taken care of, well, then all it takes is one little thing to happen to make everyone upset. Like Tommy asking for milk or Sarah crying or Blackie tracking mud all through the house. Then Mommy and Daddy get really angry - not because they're mad at Tommy or Sarah or Blackie but because they're mad already at themselves and there's no one else to take it out on. And usually

kids don't fight back - because they love their Mommies and Daddies and don't want to hurt them. And besides, they're not big enough.

Miss Jones said that some day Tommy and Sarah would be older and then they would understand grown-up problems. Like Mommy and Daddy problems. But some things Tommy and Sarah could possibly understand now. Like other problems Mommy and Daddy had. Like not having enough money to buy food. Then Tommy remembered about Blackie. He felt sad. Sad because he wanted to be sure that Blackie was okay. Sad because he must have made Mommy feel bad when he kept asking her to buy some more food for Blackie.

And besides all that, Mommy and Daddy didn't have enough money to buy Tommy and Sarah the clothes they wanted them to have to make them look nice like the other kids. Mommy and Daddy felt bad when the other kids teased Tommy and Sarah about the clothes they wore or not having a nice apartment or not having a washing machine - every-one had a washing machine. Daddy had a hard time getting a job because he didn't have a car to go back and forth to work. After Daddy had looked for a job for a long time and couldn't find one, he got discouraged. Tommy asked Miss Jones what "discouraged" meant. Miss Jones said that sometimes people don't feel like trying if they always seem to fail. Like Tommy used to feel when he couldn't do his arithmetic. He tried and tried but he could never figure it out. And when he went to the blackboard in front of his whole class, he'd feel funny, like everybody was staring at him. Sometimes the kids would even laugh at him when he got a problem wrong, even though Mrs. Wilson told them that it wasn't nice to laugh at anyone, especially when they were trying real hard. Miss Jones told Tommy that sometimes this was how Daddy felt. Daddy didn't really want to stay home all day, but he used to feel so bad that he couldn't even make himself get up in the morning to go to look for a job. Then he would be crabby all day and yell at Tommy and Sarah and even Mommy. Tommy remembered Daddy yelling at Mommy and Mommy used to cry. Tommy sometimes told Daddy that he hated him for making Mommy cry.

Tommy was beginning to understand grown-up problems now. And Miss Jones said that was good because now when things go wrong at home, Tommy would know that his Mommy's and Daddy's problems were not his fault. And Tommy wasn't bad like he always thought - or stupid.

Miss Jones said things were better now, too, because Daddy had a job. A new neighbor had moved in next door and he worked at the same place where Daddy's job was so Daddy could ride back and forth to work with him. And now Mommy felt better, too. She never liked to yell at Tommy and Sarah and spank them all the time. She just felt awful inside and sometimes when people feel this way, they make everybody else feel awful, too. Especially the people they care about, because people who really love you, never go away, no matter how mad you get at them sometimes. And Mommy and Daddy never wanted Tommy and Sarah to go away - at least not until they wanted to when they were big. Mommy and Daddy wanted to make things better for Tommy and Sarah and themselves and they needed time to do it. Things weren't always going to go well, Miss Jones said, but at least now, the chances were much better. And understanding that there is a problem is a big step in making it go away, she said.

Miss Jones said that she could help, too. She said she would try to be a friend to Mommy and maybe this would make Mommy feel better about herself. And there was something else. Now Mommy would have another friend to talk to when she was feeling bad and having grown-up problems. Daddy. But sometimes Daddy had a lot on his mind so he wouldn't always be able to be there. But at least Mommy knew that she had two friends who cared about her and her feelings. Friends make you feel better, no matter how bad your problems get - whether you're a grown-up or a little boy, Miss Jones said. Tommy knew what she meant. Blackie was his friend and he always made Tommy feel good.

The day finally came for Tommy and Sarah to go home. Tommy was real happy but Mr. and Mrs. Hall were real sad. They said they were never so happy as when Tommy and Sarah were with them. They were real good kids, they said. Mrs. Hall even started to cry when she saw Miss Jones' car coming up the street. Mommy and Daddy were with Miss Jones. Tommy couldn't wait to get home. Mr. and Mrs. Hall asked Mommy and Daddy if Tommy and Sarah could come to visit them once in a while. They said yes, but never for this long again because they never wanted Tommy and Sarah to have to leave again. Mr. Hall said that he understood what they meant, because they weren't even his kids and he and Mrs. Hall didn't want them to go.

The first thing Tommy saw when he got home was Blackie. Boy was he happy. He looked great, just like Mommy said. When they got in the house, Mommy started to

cry and Tommy thought, oh-oh. But this time, Daddy told Mommy it was okay. And then Daday and Mommy hugged each other and then they hugged Tommy and Sarah. And then they all were crying and they didn't know why except that they were all very happy to have each other. Tommy felt so good, he even went over to give Blackie a hug. And Blackie barked and lapped his face, almost like he always knew that Tommy would come back, just like he did. And Tommy told Blackie that he would never leave him again. And Blackie was happy. Because when you love someone, you never want them to go away....