

this difference? What are the consequences of this "false consciousness" about power?

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Differences and Inequalities

One time, during a discussion of inequality, I said that people with more money and education tend to have different values and tastes than people with less money and education. This was a minor point that I didn't expect to cause any trouble. But a young woman came to me after class with a worried look. "Don't you think it's good to celebrate diversity?" she asked, surprising me with the question. "Well, I suppose, maybe. Diversity in what?" I said. "Like in tastes and values," she said. "You know, like you said go along with social class." It seemed that she had taken my point to be that the values and tastes of the rich were better than those of the poor. I said that that was not at all what I meant.

As we talked, I realized why this student had misunderstood me. She wanted to see social class differences as similar to ethnic differences. If people talked and dressed and ate and carried on differently because they had different levels of income and education, this was, she believed, an interesting and desirable condition. I said that things were more complicated and that we had better come back to this at the start of the next class.

During the next class we talked about the kinds of differences that exist between people. We talked about how some differences make society more interesting—for example, different styles in clothing, food, music, literature, dance, art, and language. We talked about how other differences, such as in religious beliefs, political values, or sexual preferences, can be threatening and disruptive, especially if people are intolerant and lack compassion. Then we came back to social class, and again some students wanted to see it as just another interesting kind of difference.

I said that social class was not simply a matter of difference but of harmful inequality. Why, I asked, would we want to celebrate the fact that some people work at hard, dirty, dangerous jobs for low pay while others have vastly more wealth (often through nothing more than inheritance) than they need or could ever use? Was this something to celebrate or was it a flaw in how our society worked? Certainly it was a different *kind* of difference, not like the happy differences between lefse, tortillas, rice pancakes, and crepes.

After we talked about this for a while, one student asked, "Are you saying that nothing good comes from social class differences? Isn't it good that we have a system in which some people can be free to think and to create?" These were hard questions that moved the conversation ahead by forcing us to consider things in a larger context.

Yes, I said, money could buy a fine education and give a person time to do creative work. And, yes, it was good that at least some people enjoyed these possibilities. But did these possibilities *require* inequality? Surely we could educate everyone and allow time for creative work, I said, without vast inequalities in income and wealth. I also said it was important to consider the human capacities that were wasted when so many people never got to develop their talents. Perhaps with more equality, I said, we could have a richer society for everyone, because more people would have time to think, create, and care for each other.

One student pointed out that poverty and oppression had given rise to a lot of creative adaptations—ways to survive and to enjoy life—on the part of African, poor, and working-class people. He cited jazz, blues, gospel, and country music as examples. Another student replied that these were inadvertent results that came at a high cost. I agreed: Just because some people can produce great art under horrible conditions doesn't mean we ought to tolerate such conditions. I said that even under the best conditions, human life would not lack for the tension and conflict that spark creative work.

I hoped that this discussion would help students to see differences and inequalities in a sociologically mindful way. The point was that some kinds of differences are good because they give us all a chance to enjoy more kinds of food, clothing, music, and so on, but that other kinds of differences—in wealth and income, for example—are destructive. If some people can't afford to eat nutritious meals, clothe themselves against the cold, get a good education, or take time for creative work, then not only do they suffer, but

the whole society suffers, because the talents and energies of some of its members are lost.

How, then, can we be sociologically mindful of the difference between differences and inequalities? We must ask, "In what ways does this difference matter? Does the difference allow one group to benefit at the expense of another? Does it give one group power over another? Does it mean that members of one group get less respect than another?" In short, we must ask, "Does this difference cause harm?" If a difference leads to exploitation, unfair advantage, domination, or some other kind of harm, then it is more than a difference. It is a form of inequality and not worth celebrating.

Forms of Inequality

An inequality exists when a difference between people or between groups benefits one person or one group relative to another. That seems clear enough. But it is still a slippery idea, since it doesn't say what counts as a benefit. Perhaps, then, it would help to be more concrete about the forms that inequality can take in the United States. In what ways can individuals and groups be unequal, and how do these inequalities matter? Here are some possibilities:

- To start with the obvious, some people have more wealth (stocks, bonds, property) and income (salaries, wages, interest) than others. Money is a universal resource because it can be used to acquire all kinds of things that make life more comfortable, enjoyable, and stimulating. Money doesn't guarantee happiness, of course, but it is very useful for acquiring the things and experiences that foster happiness.
- Some people have more and better education than others. Education can help people make sense of the world, solve problems, avoid mistakes, articulate their ideas, appreciate history, and enjoy art, literature, music, and other cultural products. It can also be used to make connections and to get jobs.
- Some people have more prestigious jobs than others. A judge, for example, has a more prestigious job than a secretary; an engineer has a more prestigious job than a janitor. Having a prestigious job can in turn help to elicit respect from others. In

U.S. culture, a person's status in a community often depends largely on the prestige of his or her job.

- Some people have more political power than others. Perhaps this comes from having money or from connections. In any case, having political power means being able to get people in government to take your problems seriously and look after your interests.
- Some people have better health than others. This isn't necessarily a natural result of physiology. It also results from better access to quality health care, from having less-dangerous jobs, and from living in cleaner environments.
- Some people enjoy more safety than others. They do not have to worry about injuries on the job, being hit by stray bullets in their neighborhoods, or being unable to afford new tires and brakes for their cars.
- Some people have more access to art, films, theater, concerts, and other cultural events than others. Not everyone wants to go to the opera or to browse in art galleries. Even so, many people who might enjoy such activities never get a chance to take them in.
- Some people can afford to travel widely, while others cannot. Seeing other countries, meeting different kinds of people, and experiencing other cultures can be enjoyable and stimulating. Many people cannot afford these experiences.
- Some people can afford luxurious homes, some can afford decent homes, some can afford small homes, some can barely afford to rent, and others cannot afford housing at all. Not having a quiet, safe, private space in which to relax can make it hard to recover from the stresses of everyday life.
- Some people can afford to eat the most delicious, artfully prepared food, while others must make do with whatever they can scrape together. Even simple health food (organically grown fruits and vegetables, for example) can be more expensive than the heavily processed food sold in discount grocery stores. Eating well and eating healthily are thus out of the reach of some people.
- Some people can afford well-made, durable, and stylish clothes. Others must buy clothes of lesser quality, clothes that are also a sign of having less money. Some people can thus feel exposed

by the clothes they wear, even while others can use clothes to flaunt their wealth.

- Some people have better and more powerful tools than others—not just hand tools or power tools, but all kinds of tools for making things happen. A printing press is a tool; so is a computer; so is an aircraft carrier.
- Some people have more information than others. Information is a resource that can help people make good plans, avoid being manipulated, and get what they want. To lack information is to be at the mercy of a world that seems to operate in a mysterious way.
- Some people have better networks than others. By “networks” I mean connections to supportive friends, helpful mentors, knowledgeable teachers, and acquaintances who can help make further connections. A better network isn't necessarily a bigger one, but one in which there are more people who already possess, and are willing to share, useful resources, such as money, tools, information, and so on.
- Some people have more skill and more control over their work than others. To have skill is to possess a resource that can be traded for a decent wage or salary. It is also to have a kind of power to make things happen. Having control over one's work is also more satisfying than being closely supervised and always told what to do and how to do it.

These are not the only forms that inequality takes in U.S. society. Perhaps you can think of others. In each case the inequality means that some people have advantages over others—more specifically, they have better chances to live good lives. Part of being sociologically mindful is seeing these differences and recognizing how they matter.

Perhaps you can also see that advantages tend to accumulate. For example, people with a great deal of wealth and income can turn these resources into other things: comfort, safety, security, pleasure, political power, excitement, information, networks, and so on. These things, in turn, might add to a person's ability to accumulate more wealth. Similarly, the lack of a key resource—education, for example—can make it hard to get more of other resources.

We should also be mindful that these inequalities are social, not personal. They are social because they result from how society is

organized and where people fit into that pattern of organization. For example, one can be born into poverty only in a society that allows poverty to exist. Likewise, one can feel lucky to have a clean, safe, high-paying job only in a society where many people are forced to take dirty, unsafe, low-paying jobs.

To say that society is rife with inequalities is not to say that everyone who is disadvantaged lives in constant misery. Hardship is not pleasant, of course; nor is injustice. Yet many people who do not have much money or formal education, do not travel, do not have luxurious homes or go to fancy restaurants . . . are happy. This is not terribly surprising. Human beings are resourceful and can adapt to all kinds of conditions. Once basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and companionship are met, humans are adept at creating ways to comfort themselves and wring happiness out of simple things.

In light of this, some people might say, "You see? These folks are happy with simple things. They don't need much. They don't even know what they're missing, so there's really no need to get upset about our wealth. It is a source of happiness for us and yet takes nothing away from our inferiors. In fact, they should be grateful that we keep them busy with productive work. Now why disrupt a system that works so well?"

Statements like this have been used in many times and places (e.g., in the U.S. South during slavery times) to justify the misery suffered by working people. The premise of this justification is that some human beings are not worth as much as others. If that premise is accepted, then it becomes only logical to use the time, bodies, and energy of the supposedly inferior people to create happiness for those who are supposedly better. This sort of thinking helps perpetuate inequality by allowing some people to believe that they are entitled to live well at the expense of others.

Invisible Resources

There is a bumper sticker that says, "Dress for Success—Wear a White Penis." This wry slogan reminds us not only that white males have, on the average, better chances of success in a society run by white males but that people in other groups can't shed their disadvantages as easily as changing clothes. If the bumper sticker makes us laugh, it is because we know that as a piece of advice it is absurd;

if you are not born with a white penis, it is almost impossible to put one on, at least in any convincing way.

Being sociologically mindful, we can see another point: Differences between bodies are not mere differences if one kind of body can elicit more respect than another. For example, in a society where things male and masculine are more highly valued than things female and feminine, a male body is a more valuable resource than a female body. If you dwell in a male body, you are more likely to be listened to, taken seriously, and seen as a potential leader. You can always end up proving yourself to be a fool, but at the start you will be given the benefit of the doubt because of your body.

Similarly, in a society where European features, especially light skin, straight hair, and a sleek nose, are more highly valued—or seen as "beautiful"—then possessing a body with these features is a plus. With these features, you may be seen as having more innate goodness and intelligence and thus be treated better. And if those who are already in power see you as looking like they do, they may be more inclined to admit you to their circles, thus giving you access to further resources.

The heading of this section suggests that skin tone and body type are somehow "invisible" resources. How can this be? Don't these resources have to be visible to produce results? The answer has to do with who sees what. It often happens that those who possess features that are more highly valued do not see the advantages these features provide. It is as if a person were blind to a badge s/he wears every day.

White people, for example, often fail to see that merely having light skin means they will be treated better in many situations than people with dark skin and African features. Being "treated better" means being listened to, appreciated as an individual, presumed competent or trustworthy, and recognized as entitled to dignity and respect. You might think, "What's so special about this? This is how it should be for everyone." You are right, of course, but this is not how things are for everyone. That, too, can be hard to see.

Having a male body can work the same way. All else being equal, a person in a male body is more likely to be presumed credible and capable. It is as if the male body were a sign that said, "Be assured that I know what I'm talking about and can back up my talk with action." And yet, as with whites and skin color, males seldom see that their bodies bring them unearned advantages *relative to women*. The full value of a male body as a resource thus remains invisible to those who possess it.

Bodies can also possess other kinds of resources that are invisible until used. For example, strength, coordination, and muscle control are bodily resources. So is resistance to heat, cold, and disease. We could also include acute hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. All of these capacities reside in the body, as a result of natural endowments and training, and we might not know that a person possesses these resources until they are displayed.

Are such bodily resources differences or inequalities? Both. A difference in strength, for example, is, by definition, an inequality because it means that one person is stronger than another. What matters, however, is whether strength can be used to produce other kinds of inequalities. If people could legally enslave others who were weaker, then strength would be quite an asset. Likewise, if people were paid according to how much heavy lifting they could do, strength could be turned into inequality in wealth. So we must be mindful that what counts as a resource depends on the situation.

Visible Origins of Invisible Resources

Where do invisible resources come from? Even strength, which at first seems like a genetic matter, is affected by culture and experience. Without proper nutrition and exercise, people who are destined to grow tall and wide do not necessarily become very strong. And even small people can develop their strength to the point where it exceeds that of others who are twice as big. Much can happen, by choice or by accident, to shape our bodies in certain ways and not others.

Other kinds of resources that reside in the body depend even more on experience and training. No matter what our potential might be, we always depend on others to teach us how to do things, to give us problems to solve, and to help us correct our mistakes. Differences in skill and problem-solving ability (what some people call "intelligence") thus arise out of social life. We like to be rewarded for what our bodies and minds can do. Unfortunately, many people never get the chance to learn to do what is valued by those who can dole out rewards.

We can see that social experience conditions our bodies to react to the world in certain ways. Suppose you looked up from the page right now and saw a wizened old man with bulging eyes and flecks of spittle on his chin coming at you with a knife in one hand and a rattlesnake in the other. What would you do? You might shriek,

freeze, run, cower, or throw this book at him. In any case, you would surely have a bodily reaction—your heart would pound, your chest would tighten—and this reaction would be a result of how your body has been conditioned to respond to scenes you interpret as threatening.

This odd example serves to illustrate the point that our bodies, not only our minds, react to the world in ways that result from how we have been conditioned to react. Recognizing that these responses are conditioned is important, for it reminds us that we do not control all our reactions to the world. What is important to see is that some ways of responding to the world are more valued, more useful than others, and more likely to lead to inequality.

Imagine that you are invited to give a public talk about sociological mindfulness. The talk should be about an hour long and is set for a week from today. Your family, friends, and teachers will be there, along with most of the leaders of the community in which you live. You can expect an audience of about 1,500 people, not counting reporters and photographers. When you speak, you will be representing not only yourself but all the people and groups to which you belong. If you do well, you will receive more honors and probably several job offers.

The prospect of giving such a talk would make many people extremely anxious. They would worry about looking unpoised, about saying the wrong thing, about embarrassing themselves and others. A person who reacted this way might think, "I am so nervous I can't think straight. I can't prepare adequately in just a week! I know I am going to blow it. My heart pounds when I imagine getting up in front of all those people. I can't do this!" This sort of reaction might make it hard to do a good job, thus leading to the bad performance that is so feared.

Another person chosen to give the same talk might say, "Thank you for this honor. A week will be plenty of time to prepare. I'll get to work right away and do my best." Then, brimming with self-confidence, this person brushes up on sociological mindfulness and studies the speeches of great orators throughout history. S/he then writes a first draft, revises it, gets comments from others, revises it again, practices giving the talk, revises some more, and then, finally, on the big day, does a great job, makes everyone proud, and launches a brilliant career.

Why might two people react so differently to the prospect of giving a public talk? It is not much help to say, "Some people are

more comfortable speaking in public than others." That is an observation, not an explanation.

Being sociologically mindful we would ask, "What *experiences* led one person to be so confident and the other to be so anxious and afraid? How did one person *learn* to have faith in his or her abilities, and the other person not?" We would try to understand how it happened that these people learned to feel so differently about their abilities and about the challenge of using them.

We should also be mindful that ways of responding to the world, the ways that are conditioned into us, are patterned. Some types of people are more likely to be conditioned to respond to problems with calm faith in their own abilities and worth. If you are white, male, and upper-middle class, you will probably have more experiences that nurture your talents, affirm your sense of worth as a person, and give you confidence that you can do whatever you set your mind to than if you are a black woman growing up in poverty.

Obviously this is not true in every case. Some white men from rich families can be plagued by self-doubt. And there are many women of color, from all kinds of backgrounds, whose families and communities instill in them tremendous abilities and pride. Yet on the whole, on the average, the pattern holds, as it must, in a society that is run by and privileges whites, males, and those with wealth. In general, those who are born with more visible resources have better chances of acquiring the inner resources that lead to further advantages.

Reconditioning Ourselves

Upon hearing this argument about inner resources, a student said, "But isn't this a lot like in nature? You know, those who survive and succeed are the fittest—the ones who are, for whatever reason, best adapted to the environment." I said yes, the situation could be seen that way, but that there are two differences.

One difference is that in nature, creatures are what they are by virtue of genetic endowment; they do not become what they are by going to school, learning skills, and acquiring the habits and dispositions that allow them to survive. In the social world, however, we must devote conscious effort to all the tasks needed to turn children into fully functioning, talented adults. If we don't do this, human beings can be damaged or stunted.

The second way things are different with humans, I said, is that our environment is not simply given to us by nature but is socially constructed. The survival-of-the-fittest analogy is thus wrong, because the social world *can* be changed to make it safe and nurturing for all kinds of people. We do not have to sacrifice human beings as if they were little fish deserving to be eaten by bigger fish. That kind of predatory arrangement does not make for a very humane world.

Reconditioning ourselves is always a possibility. If a lack of self-confidence is the problem, we can practice setting achievable goals and then work to achieve them, thus boosting our self-confidence. We can also learn new skills, habits, and ideas at any time. This becomes more difficult, of course, as we get older and settle into comfortable ruts. It might also be that others whose ruts run parallel to ours will resist our efforts to change.

Yet with support from others, remarkable change remains possible. If our relationships with others make us what we are, then we can potentially remake ourselves by relating differently to others or by forming relationships with different others. As long as there exists the possibility of doing this, of making these kinds of changes, we need not resign ourselves to accepting everything that has been instilled in us by a particular form of social life. We can always pursue growth and change in directions of our own choosing.

Being sociologically mindful, we can see how certain highly visible facts of social life—such as huge inequalities in wealth, status, and power—can lead to inequalities in the distribution of invisible resources. The old adage "To them that have shall be given" is a poetic way of making the same point, which is that advantages tend to accumulate. If we are mindful of the bad results that arise from this tendency, we can decide to reorganize ourselves to make things turn out differently, with greater justice for all.

False Parallels

One time I was talking about how women are hurt by occupational segregation, which is the practice of steering women into jobs that pay less than "men's jobs." A man in the class said, "Men are hurt by occupational segregation, too." When I asked how, he explained that he wanted to become an elementary school teacher but that, as a man, he had been discouraged from doing so. He argued that just as women are oppressed if they are directed away from high-paying

"men's jobs" (e.g., engineer, surgeon), he was oppressed because his wish to be an elementary school teacher was not being honored.

His statement evoked a great deal of sympathy. Most people in the class seemed to agree that there was something unfair about his being discouraged from being an elementary school teacher, a job that is usually held by women. His example implied that occupational segregation was equally bad for women and men. He was suggesting that women did not have it any worse than men, because men experienced parallel problems.

I asked the young man who was discouraging him. "My dad and my uncles," he said. I asked if he was being discouraged by anyone in the university or in the public school system. "No, if anything they want more men to go into elementary education," he said. I asked why, if the future for men in elementary education looked so bright, his dad and uncles were discouraging him. "They say it's a woman's job, and that I could do better," he said. At that point the parallel broke down.

This young man's experience was *not* like what women experience when they seek jobs typically held by men. In seeking to become an elementary school teacher, this young man wasn't being told, "You are not good enough for this kind of job." He was being told, "This job is not good enough for you." But even this message did not come from anyone with any power to keep him out. It was his dad and uncles who said he was setting his sights too low. A young woman who wanted to become an engineer or a surgeon would probably not get that sort of message.

Despite all this, I urged the young man to stick to his goals if he wanted to teach children. Then he said, "It's not so much that I want to teach children. I figured I'd teach for a few years and then go into administration. A lot of school systems are eager to hire men as elementary school principals, and from there you can go on to be a superintendent." I was disappointed to hear him say this. The young man who claimed to be oppressed had in fact calculated that his gender would *aid* his career. There was no parallel here to women's experiences of exclusion from the most rewarding jobs.

Taking History and Context into Account

Another false parallel often comes up when talking about racism. If I talk about white racism, someone will invariably say, "Yeah, but blacks can be racist, too." I ask how that can be, and someone will

explain, "You see it all the time. Like in the cafeteria. Blacks sit by themselves and exclude white students. They also make disparaging remarks about whites, just like some whites do about blacks. That's racism." Actually, while this behavior might reflect prejudice, it is not racism. Being sociologically mindful, we can see why accusing blacks of racism—for keeping to themselves or for satirizing whites—is a false parallel.

Part of being sociologically mindful is taking history and context into account. If we do that, we can see two things. One is that it was not Africans but Europeans who invented the racial categories "black" and "white" to justify colonization and slavery. If any group is racist, it is the group that invents and imposes such categories. It makes no sense to call the victims racist.

We can also see that in the United States blacks have never had the power to oppress or exploit whites; nor have whites had to suffer daily indignities at the hands of a black majority. When it comes to oppression, exploitation, and disrespect, the situation has been, and remains, entirely the other way around. Blacks have suffered, not benefited, from the idea of "race" and the social arrangements built on this idea.

So if blacks, who are still a relatively powerless minority in the United States, disparage whites and try to maintain solidarity among themselves, this is not racism but *resistance* to racism. To say that blacks who are unfriendly to whites or who tell jokes about whites are "just as racist" as whites who do the same things to blacks is a false parallel. It is false because it ignores the historical responsibility for racism; it ignores the huge differences in power between blacks and whites; and it ignores the different consequences that arise, depending on who is disparaging whom.

Anyone can exhibit prejudice if they embrace stereotypes about members of another group. And so if some blacks see all whites as untrustworthy bigots, we can call this "being prejudiced." Understandably, many white people resent this stereotype. But since blacks as a group do not have the power to discriminate against whites, any prejudice harbored by blacks is of little consequence. Without power it is simply impossible to "do racism." Being sociologically mindful, we can see that doing racism requires not only prejudice but also the *power to discriminate* in ways that hurt others.

Often I can make this point about power and discrimination by asking how many students believe that to get their first big job they will have to please a black employer. So far no one has raised a

hand when I've asked that question. I then ask how many students believe that their career success will depend on the judgments of black employers. Again, no hands.

The difference in power between racial groups in the United States also suggests why it is a false parallel to say that when blacks exclude whites from their gatherings, this is the same as whites excluding blacks. If whites hold most positions of power and tend to give such positions to others who are like them—others who are in their networks—then people who are excluded from these networks will suffer; they will be locked out and kept powerless. Blacks, on the other hand, have relatively little power and wealth, so if they say, "We prefer not to associate with people who look down on us," that is not cause for much suffering among whites.

Recall the student who mentioned blacks sitting by themselves in the cafeteria. It is curious that this example comes up so often. It's a good example of a false parallel that is made just to avoid seeing what is really going on.

I once asked a white student who cited the pattern of separate seating to explain why it bothered him. "Are you bothered because you want to sit at a table with your black friends and suddenly, when they're together, they don't want you to join them?" I asked. He said no, that wasn't it; he said that the black students he was thinking of weren't even his friends. So I asked, "If they aren't your friends, why do you want to sit with them?"

While he was thinking, a black woman raised her hand and said, "People sit with their friends if there's room. It's just that white students are more likely to have white friends and black students more likely to have black friends." She was trying to make peace. Then another black woman said, "It isn't that white students want to sit with us. It's that whites are so used to being able to go wherever they want and sit wherever they want, they resent it if there's even one place where they don't feel free to go." All of the black students and about half of the whites nodded their heads in agreement. It seemed that she had hit the nail on the head.

False Gender Parallels

In discussing the problem of sexual violence, I try to make the point that part of the problem (one of the enabling conditions) is men's practice of sexually objectifying women. This refers to men talking

about and treating women as targets of sexual conquest rather than as human beings. When I make this point, often someone will say, "Yes, but women also sexually objectify men. Women talk about men as 'hunks,' and remember there was that television commercial where the secretaries ogled the male construction worker."

To equate women's sexual objectification of men with men's sexual objectification of women is false for two reasons. One is that men do it more often, because showing sexual interest in women—showing that you are attracted to their bodies as sexual objects—is part of signifying (heterosexual) manhood in U.S. culture. The more important reason is that the consequences of objectification are different in the two cases, because men have greater power to harm women physically and economically.

A woman who is treated as a sexual object is not being respected as a complete human being. It is this lesser respect for a woman's personhood that underlies rape and other forms of sexual coercion. It also underlies discrimination in the workplace (it is hard to appreciate the intellect and skill of a person who is perceived as a set of body parts). Again, it is men who, because of their physical strength and institutional power, can cause harm to women—harm that grows out of treating others as objects. Women generally do not have the power to harm men, so the sexual objectification in which women engage is rarely a threat to any man's body, status, or career.

Being sociologically mindful does not lead to the conclusion that it's wrong for men to objectify women but okay if women do it to men. To objectify others is wrong because it is likely to produce harm, if only by reinforcing the habit of ignoring the humanity of other people. We must be mindful, however, of how the consequences of objectification can be very different, depending on who is objectifying whom, under what conditions. When there is a serious imbalance in power, and especially the power to cause harm, we must take this imbalance into account and not let a false parallel keep us from seeing which acts of objectification are more dangerous and damaging.

Patterns in True Parallels

One time I was talking about death rates from stress-related diseases, such as heart attacks, strokes, and liver failure. I pointed out that the rates were higher for black men and for working-class men

than for white men and middle-class men. In response, a student said, "But there are a lot of executives who have stress-related health problems, too." I said that while this was true, the data on death rates contained a more important lesson: Inequality in U.S. society is one reason that some men, those on the lower end of the economic ladder, die sooner than others.

Instead of grasping this lesson, the student tried to conjure a parallel, as if to say, "Sure, workers have their health troubles, but then so do executives." While this is not literally false, to put matters this way distorts reality. If executives are stressed, it is often because they are trying to hold on to power; when workers are stressed, it is often because they lack power. Invoking a parallel between workers and executives also implies that both groups suffer equally—a notion that is clearly false, as shown by the differences in death rates.

Being sociologically mindful does not mean ignoring all parallels. In fact, it is good to look for them, since true parallels can reveal important things about how the social world works. Perhaps, for example, there is a commonality in the troubles experienced by working-class *men* and executive *men*. Both groups of men might be striving, in parallel ways, for control over their lives. This would be worth looking into. Still, we should not presume that a parallel, even if it is a true parallel, is necessarily an equivalence.

Being sociologically mindful does not mean ignoring the troubles of people in privileged groups; nor does it mean overlooking the misbehavior of people in oppressed groups. Being mindful means paying attention to context, to history, and to power, so that we can see when differences are inequalities, and when false parallels make inequalities seem to disappear.

Self-Justification and a Test for Justice

We could say that people make false parallels, refuse to see inequalities, or try to portray inequalities as mere differences because they are not being sociologically mindful. But what is behind the resistance to being mindful in these matters? Perhaps it is a desire to justify one's place in the world. People who enjoy privileges because of their race, gender, income, or sexuality usually seek to justify the arrangements that provide these privileges.

It is hard to change people's thinking when their view of the social world also supports a favorable view of themselves. Someone who has status, wealth, and power is likely to embrace a view of society as a place of fair and open competition, since this view implies that they have done well through their own merits. A critical view of society might threaten this view of themselves. Nor is it very useful to say, "Think harder, stop deluding yourself, and face up to reality." Most privileged people will respond by thinking harder about how to justify holding on to the version of reality they prefer.

It is possible, however, to get people to consider a different way of seeing, if a way can be found to preempt their need to self-justify. How can this be done? One way I have tried to do this is with an exercise (inspired by the thinking of philosopher John Rawls) that might be called a "test for justice." It is a collective thought experiment that comes with these instructions:

A new society is in the works. The principles of distributive justice on which this new society will operate remain to be formulated. Your job is to formulate them. You have been chosen to do this precisely because you don't know anything else about this new society. More important, you don't know what your place in this new society is going to be. Thus you are perfectly situated to come up with principles that will produce a fair distribution of wealth, since you can't know how to tilt the game to your advantage. Your task, then, is to do the following:

1. Formulate the rule or rules by which it will be determined who gets how much wealth in this new society.
2. Formulate the rule or rules by which it will be determined what each person must contribute to this new society.
3. Show how the rules you formulate will maximize justice and equality. (Obviously, you need to define what you mean by "justice" and "equality.") Be sure to consider how your rules will produce fair results even in unusual cases.

This is a difficult exercise for most people. For one thing, it is hard to imagine not knowing who we would be in a new society, since we are so used to being who we are. For another thing, we are unused to anyone asking us how to distribute wealth in a just way. Yet the basic idea behind the exercise is simple: *If you don't know what your*

position will be in this new society, you have no privileges to justify and every reason to devise rules that will ensure justice for everyone.

Here are some of the rules that my students and others have proposed for determining who gets how much wealth: (i) everybody gets a share of wealth that is in proportion to what they contribute to society; (ii) everybody gets exactly the same equal share of society's collective wealth; (iii) everybody gets whatever amount of wealth they need to live a decent life, plus some extra if they have special hardships.

Some of these rules don't work so well when we get to the third part of the exercise, because what at first glance seems fair—such as distributing wealth based on contributions to society—can produce unfair results in many cases, such as when people are disabled and can't do as much work as others. Even the strict equality rule—everybody gets an equal share of the wealth—runs into trouble because some people (e.g., those raising several children) have greater needs than others (e.g., those who are single, with no dependents). To give everyone an equal share would thus produce an unjust result because some people would get more than they need, while others would get less than they need.

It is interesting to see the problems that arise when trying to formulate a rule for determining what each person must contribute to the new society. You might wonder why such a rule is necessary. For one thing, every society depends on people doing what is necessary to keep the society going. Someone has to grow and sell food, build houses, clean up, care for children, and do thousands of other unglamorous tasks. No society could last if everyone decided to sit back and live off the fruits of other people's labors.

Another reason for formulating a rule about contributions is to ensure fairness in the new society. No one should have to do more than their share of the necessary labor, and no one (who is able to work) should get away with a free ride. So what kind of rule can we devise to ensure that fairness prevails? Here is one possibility: We will calculate how much time it takes to do all the work necessary to keep society going and then divide up this work equally among all who are able to work. Perhaps it will turn out that we need twenty hours a week from everyone to keep society running. If so, then the rule becomes "everyone must put in their twenty hours a week."

A rule like this is just a starting point; we would still have to figure out who gets to do what kind of work. Many people might say, "I'll do my twenty hours a week as a brain surgeon, because

that seems most interesting." Probably too few people would say, "I'll put in my twenty hours as a garbage collector, because I like stench and filth." We would thus have to come up with a rule to deal with inequalities in different types of work, to make sure that pleasant work and unpleasant work were fairly distributed. Perhaps we would need a rule like this: Everyone must do a share of the dirty work; no one gets to do fun and interesting work all the time; and no one gets stuck doing dirty work all the time.

There are many possible rules, all of which solve some problems of justice while creating others. But that is inevitable; we always have to keep thinking about how to make sure that our abstract rules, principles, and guidelines lead to good results in concrete circumstances. That is in large part what human intelligence is for. Being sociologically mindful means bringing this intelligence to bear on problems in the social world.

The goal of the test-for-justice exercise is not to arrive at a single vision of what a just society would look like. The goal is to encourage thinking and conversation about justice and about how well our current society produces just or unjust results. This exercise seems to make it easier for people to see problems in existing society because they do not get so caught up in justifying arrangements that benefit them. Instead they think about the kinds of arrangements that would produce better results for everyone.

I have also noticed that one idea never comes up during this exercise. No one has ever said, "To maximize justice and equality, all we need to do is use the same rules that govern U.S. society right now." No one says this, I think, because once the incentive for self-justification is gone, they are free to be more sociologically mindful than usual.

◆ ◆ DIALOGUE ◆ ◆

Inconvenience and Oppression

The section on false parallels has elicited more false parallels. For example, several times I have heard something like this: "What if a white person has a black person for a boss, and that black person treats whites unfairly? Isn't that racism?" A variation on this theme is the female boss who treats men badly. Of course this sort of thing can happen; white males have no monopoly on the abuse of power.

We should be mindful, however, that discriminatory acts by members of subordinate groups are relatively rare and do not constitute systematic oppression.

To explain this, I should say what I mean by "oppression." This is not just political rhetoric. It can be a useful analytic term, if we take a moment to define it.

To say that people are oppressed is to say that certain things are done to them. Namely, when people are oppressed they are *devalued* (i.e., defined as worth less than people in other groups), *discriminated against* (i.e., given fewer chances to develop, display, and be rewarded for their abilities), and *exploited* (i.e., not fairly rewarded for their ideas, time, and labor). Oppression thus presupposes inequality between groups, because no one can be devalued, discriminated against, or exploited except by someone more powerful. To say that a group is *systematically* oppressed is to say that its members face obstacles every which way they turn.

The philosopher Marilyn Frye uses the metaphor of a birdcage to describe systematic oppression. Think of a bird in a wire cage. If the cage has only one wire, it isn't much of a cage; the bird can just fly around the wire and be free. But imagine a cage with many wires close together, surrounding the bird on all sides. Now, no matter which way the bird turns, a wire blocks its way. That is what systematic oppression is like.

There is a difference, then, between systematic oppression and situational inconvenience. The former is like being in the complete cage; the latter is like facing a single wire that can easily be avoided. Here is a longer example (based on a true story) that I have used in class to spark discussion of these matters.

A young white man, a pre-med student at a large university in North Carolina, was returning to school after spending summer vacation with his family in Connecticut. Near Washington, D.C., he got off the freeway to get a bite to eat. After a few blocks, he found a restaurant and went inside. He was the only white person there, on either side of the counter. He waited in line to place his order, but then, when it seemed to be his turn, the young woman behind the counter ignored him and took someone else's order. When he thought it was his turn again, the young woman ignored him again. Finally, on the third try, she took his order. He got his food and left, returning to his life as a college student.

I tell this story in class and then ask a simple question: Is the young white man oppressed? Most students, if they have been given a sociological definition of oppression, say no. They recognize that

the hungry young man has male privilege, white privilege, and is on his way to considerable class privilege. So it makes no sense to say that he is oppressed. Yet a few students always insist that he is oppressed, *in the restaurant*.

Actually, it seems to me more sensible to say that the young man is situationally inconvenienced. He is not denied service, insulted, or threatened. At worst, he is unfairly made to wait an extra minute before ordering his burger. But then, once he has his food, he is on his way back to a life of opportunity, privilege, and comfort. To use the birdcage metaphor again, we might say that he has had to face, for just a moment, one slim wire that is of no serious consequence.

When I use this story in class, I ask two other questions to prompt discussion. I ask, first, What if the young man had decided to complain about how he was treated? To whom is it likely that he would end up speaking? The manager of a fast-food restaurant in a black neighborhood of Washington, D.C., might well have been black, too. But since the restaurant was part of a national chain, chances are, if the young man went up the corporate ladder, he would end up speaking to another white male.

I point out, then, that the young white man's experience, if he made a complaint, would likely be different from that of a black person who did the same thing. While the young white man could count on eventually speaking to someone like himself, and thus getting a sympathetic hearing, a black person who pursued a complaint would probably end up dealing with less similar and less sympathetic people. A black person might thus face the wire of situational disrespect, and then face another wire—not being listened to or taken seriously—if he or she decided to press a complaint.

The other question I ask about the burger story is this: Does racism have anything to do with what happened in the restaurant? In response, I can always count on someone to say, "Yes, the young woman behind the counter was being racist." Fortunately, I can also count on someone else to offer a more mindful analysis.

It is fair to say, however, that the young woman behaves in a discriminatory way. She makes the young white man wait while she serves black customers. If that seems rude or unfair, well, it's hard to disagree, given our culture's rules about serving customers in restaurants. But why might she behave this way? What might her behavior possibly have to do with racism?

There is no way to know for sure what she was thinking. But it seems plausible to suppose a few things: Her minimum-wage job probably did not fill her with joy; she might have felt that her job

opportunities were limited by anti-black discrimination; she might have resented the privileges taken for granted by whites; and, over the course of her life, she might have been disrespected many times by white people. In other words, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, as a black woman in a society fraught with racism and sexism, she would have a few things to be angry about.

And now across the counter appears a young white guy—a college student, she guesses—pretending not to be nervous in a restaurant full of her people. Maybe she thinks that this is a good experience for him. Maybe she thinks that he is learning a lesson about what it feels like to be in the minority. Maybe she thinks it's also a chance for a tiny bit of payback: Make him wait a minute to place his order.

It's not as if she thinks this particular white guy deserves to be punished. He might be perfectly nice. But then she has been treated all her life, by white people, first as a member of a category, and only secondarily, if at all, as an individual. So here, in this one rare instance, she can give a representative member of the dominant group a small taste of what black folks like her experience every day. Maybe that's what she was thinking.

So if her behavior has anything to do with racism, it is a reaction to living as a black woman in a society dominated by white males. Upon making this point, I also say, speaking to white students, that if they would prefer to live in a society where such situations do not arise—where white people do not occasionally have to face even mild expressions of anger from black people—then they ought to work against racism. Which is to say that we should go after the root of the problem and not fool ourselves into thinking that all will be well if everyone just smiles and says, "Have a nice day."

Once again, in the restaurant example, we see that to really understand what is going on in a face-to-face encounter we must take larger circumstances into account. Being sociologically mindful, we might ask, "To what groups do the people in this encounter belong? How have these groups related to each other historically? Has one group used its power to oppress the other? Does one group still have far more power than the other?" The answers to these questions will surely shape our interpretation of what happens when people from different groups come together.

By taking history and the larger context into account, we can avoid making false parallels, which are, as I say in the chapter, obstacles to understanding. At the very least, we should not confuse

inconvenience (which can indeed be unpleasant) with oppression (which is pervasive and life threatening). In terms of the birdcage metaphor, being sociologically mindful means examining not only individual wires, but how the wires are created and how they are connected.

◆ A NOTE ON COMMON WEALTH ◆

The first time I heard the word *infrastructure*, I thought, What an ugly piece of jargon! It was a word I never wanted to use. But then I realized that it meant something like what I had previously learned to think of as "the commons," which originally referred to a plot of land on which everyone in a medieval town could graze their livestock or grow food. And so I came to see *infrastructure*, though still an ungainly word, as referring to something of value: the shared resources that sustain a community.

These days, it's rare that any place in the United States has a real commons where people can graze their cows or plant a garden. But most communities do have a lot of infrastructure or, to use the term I prefer, *common wealth*, that exists in other forms. This common wealth consists of all the buildings, machinery, places, organizations, and other resources that people in a community create to help them get things done together and generally enrich their lives.

Parks, playgrounds, and libraries are examples of a community's common wealth. So are public schools, roads, bridges, and public transportation systems. So are public hospitals, fire departments, police departments, health departments, courts, and local governments. I would also include water and sewage treatment plants, airports, and other public utilities. Whenever people in a community pool their money and efforts to create something from which everyone can benefit, they are adding to their common wealth.

Part of what makes a community's common wealth so valuable is that everyone has equal access to it, or is supposed to. If this principle is followed, then people can help themselves by drawing on resources that might not otherwise be available to them. A body of common wealth to which everyone has equal access also gives everyone a stake in the community—that is, it gives them incentive to be responsible, contributing members. A community can begin to break down, however, if some people acquire so much power that

they can unfairly exploit the common wealth for private gain. This is why mindful communities create policies not only to ensure equal access to the common wealth, but also to ensure that it remains common.

PATHS FOR REFLECTION

1. Perhaps you are in school in hopes that it will help you to avoid getting stuck in a lousy job—the kind that pays badly, offers little challenge, gets you no respect, and leaves you vulnerable to the whims of nasty bosses. It's understandable that you would want to avoid this fate; an awful job can make a person's life miserable. But of course many millions of people will, through no fault of their own, end up in awful jobs their entire lives, while others will, because of class, race, and gender privileges, end up in good jobs. Who benefits and who pays when a society works this way? How might we reorganize things so that people are not permanently stuck in jobs that make it impossible to live a good life?

2. I have heard it said that economic equality is a bad idea "because that means everyone would be the same." This objection to equality has always struck me as strange, since it is obvious that people who have the same amount of money are often very different in other ways. There is, in other words, a lot of diversity *within* economic classes. If you consider what enables people to develop their potentials, how might reducing economic inequality—if only by eliminating poverty—actually increase the amount of interesting diversity in society? Suppose, too, that we democratically decided to adopt the following policy: *No one will have more wealth than they need until everyone has at least as much as they need.* Putting this policy into practice would reduce economic inequality. How might it help to reduce non-economic inequalities as well?

3. Upon learning about the extent and harmfulness of inequality in our society, some people will say, "Yes, it is sad." I have often wondered about this expression. It is not the same as saying, "These facts about inequality make me feel sad," or "I am saddened to see how people are hurt by inequality," either of which makes it clear that the speaker or writer is claiming to have an emotional response. To say of inequality, "It is sad," uses the language of feeling but implies detachment. How do you interpret and explain

the use of this expression? What do you suppose are the consequences if people look at inequality and injustice and feel sad (or merely say they do) rather than angry or outraged?

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