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The Forest, the Trees, and the One Thing

As a form of sociological practice, I work with people in corporations, schools, and universities who are trying to deal with issues of diversity. In the simplest sense, diversity is about the variety of people in the world, the varied mix of gender, race, age, social class, ethnicity, religion, and other social characteristics.[1] In the United States and Europe, for example, the workforce is changing as the percentages who are female or from non-European ethnic and racial backgrounds increase and the percentage who are white and male declines.

If the changing mix was all that diversity amounted to, there wouldn't be a problem since in many ways differences make life interesting and enhance creativity. Compared with homogeneous teams, for example, diverse work teams are usually better with problems that require creative solutions. To be sure, diversity brings with it difficulties to be dealt with such as language barriers and different ways of doing things that can confuse or ir-

ritate people. But we're the species with the "big brain," the adaptable ones who learn quickly, so learning to get along with people unlike ourselves shouldn't be a problem we can't handle. Like travelers in a strange land, we'd simply learn about one another and make room for differences and figure out how to make good use of them.

As most people know, however, in the world as it is, difference amounts to more than just variety. It's also used as a basis for including some and excluding others, for rewarding some more and others less, for treating some with respect and dignity and some as if they were less than fully human or not even there. Difference is used as a basis for privilege, from reserving for some the simple human dignities that everyone should have, to the extreme of deciding who lives and who dies.[2] Since the workplace is part of the world, patterns of inequality and oppression that permeate the world also show up at work, even though people may like to think of themselves as "colleagues" or part of "the team." And just as these patterns shape people's lives in often damaging ways, they can eat away at the core of a community or an organization, weakening it with internal division and resentment bred and fed by injustice and suffering.

Some organizations realize the importance of a workplace where everyone feels accepted and valued for who they are and what they can contribute. One way to bring this about is to run programs to help people see what's going on, the consequences it produces, how these consequences affect people in different ways, and what they can do about it to create something better. The hardest thing about this work is that people are so reluctant to talk about privilege, especially those who belong to privileged groups. When the subject of race and racism comes up, white

people often withdraw into silence as if paralyzed by guilt or other feelings they don't dare express. Or they push back, angry and defensive, as if they were being personally attacked and blamed for something they didn't do. Men often react similarly to issues of gender and sexism.

Because members of privileged groups often react negatively to looking at privilege, women, blacks, Latinos, gays, lesbians, workers, and other groups may not bring it up. They know how easily privilege can be used to retaliate against them for challenging the status quo and making people feel uncomfortable. So, rather than look at the reality of what's going on, the typical pattern in organizations—and just about everywhere else—is to choose between two equally futile alternatives: to be stuck in cycles of guilt, blame, and defensiveness; or to avoid talking about issues of privilege at all. Either way, the old destructive patterns and their consequences for people's lives continue.

Why does this happen? A major reason is that people tend to think of things only in terms of individuals, as if a society or a company or a university were nothing more than a collection of people living in a particular time and place. Many writers have pointed out how individualism affects social life. It isolates us from one another, promotes divisive competition, and makes it harder to sustain a sense of community, of all being "in this together." But individualism does more than affect how we participate in social life. It also affects how we *think* about social life and how we make sense of it. If we think everything begins and ends with individuals—their personalities, biographies, feelings, and behavior—then it's easy to think that social problems must come down to flaws in individual character. If we have a drug problem, it must be because individuals just can't or won't "say no." If

there is racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, it must be because of people who for some reason have the personal "need" to behave in racist, sexist, and other oppressive ways. If evil consequences occur in social life, then it must be because of evil people and their evil ways and motives.

If we think about the world in this way—which is especially common in the United States—then it's easy to see why members of privileged groups get upset when they're asked to look at the benefits that go with belonging to that particular group and the price others pay for it. When women, for example, talk about how sexism affects them, individualistic thinking encourages men to hear this as a personal accusation: "If women are oppressed, then I'm an evil oppressor who wants to oppress them." Since no man wants to see himself as a bad person, and since most men probably don't *feel* oppressive toward women, men may feel unfairly attacked.

In the United States, individualism goes back to the nineteenth century and, beyond that, to the European Enlightenment and the certainties of modernist thinking. It was in this period that the rational mind of the individual person was recognized and elevated to a dominant position in the hierarchy of things, separated from and placed above even religion and God. The roots of individualistic thinking in the United States trace in part to the work of William James who helped pioneer the field of psychology. Later, it was deepened in Europe and the United States by Sigmund Freud's revolutionary insights into the existence of the subconscious and the inner world of individual existence. Over the course of the twentieth century, the individual life has emerged as a dominant framework for understanding the complexities and mysteries of human existence.

You can see this in bookstores and best-seller lists that abound with promises to change the world through "self-help" and individual growth and transformation. Even on the grand scale of societies—from war and politics to international economics—individualism reduces everything to the personalities and behavior of the people we perceive to be "in charge." If ordinary people in capitalist societies feel deprived and insecure, the individualistic answer is that the people who run corporations are "greedy" or the politicians are corrupt and incompetent and otherwise lacking in personal character. The same perspective argues that poverty exists because of the habits, attitudes, and skills of individual poor people, who are blamed for what they supposedly lack as people and told to change if they want anything better for themselves. To make a better world, we think we have to put the "right people" in charge or make better people by liberating human consciousness in a New Age or by changing how children are socialized or by locking up or tossing out or killing people who won't or can't be better than they are. Psychotherapy is increasingly offered as a model for changing not only the inner life of individuals, but also the world they live in. If enough people heal themselves through therapy, then the world will "heal" itself as well. The solution to collective problems such as poverty or deteriorating cities then becomes a matter not of collective solutions but of an accumulation of individual solutions. So, if we want to have less poverty in the world, the answer lies in raising people out of poverty or keeping them from becoming poor, *one person at a time*.

So, individualism is a way of thinking that encourages us to explain the world in terms of what goes on inside individuals and nothing else. We've been able to think this way because we've

developed the human ability to be reflexive, which is to say, we've learned to look at ourselves *as selves* with greater awareness and insight than before. We can think about what kind of people we are and how we live in the world, and we can imagine ourselves in new ways. To do this, however, we first have to be able to believe that we exist as distinct individuals apart from the groups and communities and societies that make up our social environment. In other words, the *idea* of the "individual" has to exist before we think about ourselves as individuals, and the idea of the individual has been around for only a few centuries. Today, we've gone far beyond this by thinking of the social environment itself as just a collection of individuals: Society *is* people and people *are* society. To understand social life, all we have to do is understand what makes the individual psyche tick.

If you grow up and live in a society that's dominated by individualism, the idea that society is just people seems obvious. The problem is that this approach ignores the difference between the individual people who participate in social life and the relationships that connect them to one another and to groups and societies. It's true that you can't have a social relationship without people to participate in it and make it happen, but the people and the relationship aren't the same thing. That's why this book's title plays on the old saying about missing the forest for the trees. In one sense, a forest is simply a collection of individual trees; but it's more than that. It's also a collection of trees that exist *in a particular relation* to one another, and you can't tell what that relation is by just looking at each individual tree. Take a thousand trees and scatter them across the Great Plains of North America, and all you have are a thousand trees. But take those same trees and bring them close together and you have a

forest. Same individual trees, but in one case a forest and in another case just a lot of trees.

The "empty space" that separates individual trees from one another isn't a characteristic of any one tree or the characteristics of all the individual trees somehow added together. It's something more than that, and it's crucial to understand the *relationships among* trees that make a forest what it is. Paying attention to that "something more"—whether it's a family or a corporation or an entire society—and how people are related to it is at the heart of sociological practice.

The One Thing

If sociology could teach everyone just one thing with the best chance to lead toward everything else we could know about social life, it would, I believe, be this: *We are always participating in something larger than ourselves, and if we want to understand social life and what happens to people in it, we have to understand what it is that we're participating in* and *how we participate in it.* In other words, the key to understanding social life isn't just the forest and it isn't just the trees. It's the forest *and* the trees and how they're related to one another. Sociology is the study of how all this happens.

The "larger" things we participate in are called social systems, and they come in all shapes and sizes. In general, the concept of a system refers to any collection of parts or elements that are connected in ways that cohere into some kind of whole. We can think of the engine in a car as a system, for example, a collection of parts arranged in ways that make the car "go." Or we

could think of a language as a system, with words and punctuation and rules for how to combine them into sentences that mean something. We can also think of a family as a system—a collection of elements related to one another in a way that leads us to think of it as a unit. These include things such as the positions of mother, father, wife, husband, parent, child, daughter, son, sister, and brother. Elements also include shared ideas that tie those positions together to make relationships, such as how "good mothers" are supposed to act in relation to children or what a "family" is and what makes family members "related" to one another as kin. If we take the positions and the ideas and other elements, then we can think of what results as a whole and call it a social system.

In similar ways, we can think of corporations or societies as social systems. They differ from one another—and from families—in the kinds of elements they include and how those are arranged in relation to one another. Corporations have positions such as CEOs and stockholders, for example; but the position of "mother" isn't part of the corporate system. People who work in corporations can certainly be mothers in families, but that isn't a position that connects them to a corporation. Such differences are a key to seeing how systems work and produce different kinds of consequences. Corporations are sometimes referred to as "families," for example, but if you look at how families and corporations are actually put together as systems, it's easy to see how unrealistic such notions are. Families don't usually "lay off" their members when times are tough or to boost the bottom line, and they usually don't divide the food on the dinner table according to who's the strongest and best able to grab the lion's share for themselves.[3] But corporations dispense with workers all

the time as a way to raise dividends and the value of stock, and top managers routinely take a huge share of each year's profits even while putting other members of the corporate "family" out of work.

What social life comes down to, then, is social systems and how people participate in and relate to them. Note that people *participate* in systems without being *parts* of the systems themselves. In this sense, "father" is a position in my family, and I, Allan, am a person who actually occupies that position. It's a crucial distinction that's easy to lose sight of. It's easy to lose sight of because we're so used to thinking solely in terms of individuals. It's crucial because it means that people aren't systems, and systems aren't people, and if we forget that, we're likely to focus on the wrong thing in trying to solve our problems.

Thinking of systems as just people is why members of privileged groups often take it personally when someone points out that society is racist or sexist or classist. "The United States is a racist society that privileges whites over other racial groups" is a statement that describes the United States as a social system. It does *not* thereby describe me or anyone else as an individual, for that has more to do with how each of us participates in society. As an individual, I can't avoid participating and can't help but be affected and shaped by that. But how all that plays out in practice depends on many things, including the choices I make about *how* to participate. Born in 1946, I grew up listening to the radio shows of the day, including *Amos and Andy* which was full of racist stereotypes about blacks (the actors were white). Like any other child, I looked to my environment to define what was "funny." Since this show was clearly defined as "funny" from a white perspective in a white society, and since I was born white,

I laughed along with everyone else as we drove down the highway listening to the car radio. I even learned to "do" the voices of "black" characters and regaled my family with renditions of classic lines from the show.

More than forty years later, those racist images are firmly lodged in my memory; once they get in, there's no way to get them out. With the benefit of hindsight, I see the racism in them and how they're connected to massive injustice and suffering in the society I participate in. As an individual, I can't undo the past and I can't undo my childhood. I can, however, choose what to do about race and racism *now*. I can't make my society or the place where I live or work suddenly nonracist, but I can decide how to live as a white person in relation to my privileged *position* as a white person. I can decide whether to laugh or object when I hear racist "humor"; I can decide how to treat people who aren't classified as "white"; I can decide what to do about the consequences that racism produces for people, whether to be part of the solution or merely part of the problem. I don't feel guilty because my country is racist, because that wasn't my doing. But as a white person who *participates* in that society, I feel responsible to consider what to do about it. The only way to get past the potential for guilt and see how I can make a difference is to realize that the system isn't me and I'm not the system.

Nonetheless, systems and people are closely connected to each other, and seeing how that works is a basic part of sociological practice. One way to see this is to compare social systems to a game such as Monopoly. We can think of Monopoly as a social system. It has positions (players, banker); it has a material reality (the board, the pieces, the dice, play money, property deeds, houses and hotels); and it has ideas that connect all of this to-

gether in a set of relationships. There are values that define the point of the game—to win—and rules that spell out what's allowed in pursuit of winning, including the idea of cheating. Notice that we can describe the game without saying anything about the personalities, intentions, attitudes, or other characteristics of the people who might play it. The game, in other words, has an existence that we can describe all by itself. "It" exists whether or not anyone is playing it at the moment. The same is true of social systems. We don't have to describe actual basketball players in order to describe "a basketball team" as a kind of system that has characteristics that distinguish it from other systems.

I don't play Monopoly anymore, mostly because I don't like the way I behave when I do. When I used to play Monopoly, I'd try to win, even against my own children, and I couldn't resist feeling good when I did (we're *supposed* to feel good) even if I also felt guilty about it. Why did I act and feel this way? It wasn't because I have a greedy, mercenary personality, because I know that I don't behave this way when I'm not playing Monopoly. Clearly I am *capable* of behaving this way as an individual, which is part of the explanation. But the rest of it comes down to the simple fact that I behaved that way because winning is what *Monopoly* is about. When I participate in that system, greedy behavior is presented to me as a path of least resistance. As defined by the game, it's what you're supposed to do; it's the point. And when I play the game, I feel obliged to go by its rules and pursue the values it promotes. I look upon the game as having some kind of authority over the people who play it, which becomes apparent when I consider how rare it is for people to suggest changing the rules ("I'm sorry, honey," I say as I take my

kid's last dollar, "but that's just the way the game is played"). If *we* were the game, then we'd feel free to play by any rules we liked. But we tend not to see games—or systems—in that way. We tend to see them as external to us and therefore not ours to shape however we please.

What happens when people participate in a social system depends on two things: the system and how it works, and what people actually do as they participate in it from one moment to the next. What people do depends on who they are in relation to the system and other people in it (in Monopoly, everyone occupies the same position—player—but in a classroom there are teachers and students and in a corporation there can be hundreds of different positions). People are what make a system "happen." Without their participation, a system exists only as an idea with some physical reality attached. If no one plays Monopoly, it's just a bunch of stuff in a box with rules written inside the cover. And if no one plays "Ford Motor Company," it's just a bunch of factories and offices and equipment and rules and accounts written on paper and stored in computers. In a similar sense, a society may be "racist" or "sexist," but for racism or sexism to actually happen—or not—someone has to do or not do something in relation to someone else.

For its part, a system affects how we think, feel, and behave as participants. It does this by laying out paths of least resistance. At any given moment, there are an almost infinite number of possible things we could do, but we typically don't realize that and see only a narrow range of possibilities. What the range looks like depends on the system we're in. While playing Monopoly, I *could* reach over and take money from the bank whenever I wanted, but I probably wouldn't like the reaction I'd get

from other players. When someone I like lands on a property I own, I *could* tell them that I'll give them a break and not collect the rent, but then collect it happily when someone I don't like lands there. But people would probably object that I wasn't playing "fair" or by the rules. Since I'd rather people not be angry at me or kick me out of the game, it's easier to go by the rules even when I'd rather not. And so I usually do, following the path of least resistance that's presented to people who occupy my position in that particular system. This is why people might laugh at racist or sexist jokes even when it makes them feel uncomfortable—because in that situation, to not laugh and risk being ostracized by everyone may make them feel *more* uncomfortable. The easiest—although not necessarily easy—choice is to go along. This doesn't mean we *will* go along, only that if we go along we'll run into less resistance than if we don't.

In other situations, paths of least resistance might look quite different, and giving a friend a break or objecting to sexist humor might be seen as just what we're supposed to do. In relation to my children, for example, I'm supposed to do whatever I can to help them—that's the path of least resistance that goes with the relation between parent and child in the family system (except, perhaps, when we're playing Monopoly). This is why I'd never want my daughter or son as a student in one of my classes, because I'd have to choose between conflicting paths of least resistance associated with two different systems. As a teacher, I'm supposed to treat my students the same; but, as a father, I'm supposed to treat my children as my "favorites" above other people's children. The path of least resistance in one system is a path of much greater resistance in the other; hence the dilemma posed by what sociologists call "role conflict."[4]

So, social systems and people are connected through a dynamic relationship. People make systems happen, and systems lay out paths of least resistance that shape how people participate. Neither exists without the other, and yet neither can simply be reduced to the other. My life isn't simply a predictable product of the systems I participate in; and social systems aren't simply an accumulation of my own and other people's lives. What results from all this is the patterns of social life and the consequences they produce for people, for systems themselves, and for the world—in short, most of what matters in the human scheme of things.

On the surface, the idea that we're always participating in something larger than ourselves may seem fairly simple. But like many ideas that seem simple at first, it can take us places that transform how we look at the world and ourselves in it.

Individualistic Models Don't Work

Probably the most important basis for sociological practice is to realize that *the individualistic perspective that dominates current thinking about social life doesn't work.* Nothing we do or experience takes place in a vacuum; everything is always related to a context of some kind. When a wife and husband argue about who'll clean the bathroom, for example, or who'll take care of a sick child when they both work outside the home, the issue is never simply about the two of them even though it may seem that way at the time. We have to ask about the larger context in which this takes place. We might ask how this instance is related to living in a society organized in ways that privilege men over

women, in part by not making men feel obliged to share equally in domestic work except when they choose to "help out." On an individual level, he may think she's being a nag; she may think he's being a jerk; but it's never as simple as that. What both may miss is that in a different kind of society, they might not be having this argument in the first place because both might feel obliged to take care of the home and children. In similar ways, when we see ourselves as a unique result of the family we came from, we overlook how each family is connected to larger patterns. The emotional problems we struggle with as individuals aren't due simply to what kind of parents we had, for their participation in social systems—at work, in the community, in society as a whole—shaped them as people, including their roles as mothers and fathers.

An individualistic model is misleading because it encourages us to explain human behavior and experience from a perspective that's so narrow it misses most of what's going on. A related problem is that *we can't understand what goes on in social systems simply by looking at individuals.* In one sense, for example, suicide is a solitary act done by an individual, typically while alone.[5] If we ask why people kill themselves, we're likely to think first of how people feel when they do it—hopeless, depressed, guilty, lonely, or perhaps obliged by honor or duty to sacrifice themselves for someone else or some greater social good. That might explain suicides taken one at a time, but what do we have when we add up all the suicides that happen in a society for a given year? What does that number tell us, and, more importantly, about what? The suicide rate for the entire U.S. population in 1994, for example, was twelve suicides per 100,000 people. If we look inside that number, we find that the rate for males was

twenty per 100,000, but the rate for females was only five per 100,000. The rate also differs dramatically by race and country and varies over time. The suicide rate for white males, for example, was 71 percent higher than for black males, and the rate for white females was more than twice that for black females. While the rate in the United States was twelve per 100,000, it was thirty-four per 100,000 in Hungary and only seven per 100,000 in Italy. So, in the United States, males and whites are far more likely than females and blacks to kill themselves; and people in the United States are almost twice as likely as Italians to commit suicide but only one third as likely as Hungarians.[6]

If we use an individualistic model to explain such differences, we'll tend to see them as nothing more than a sum of individual suicides. If males are more likely to kill themselves, then it must be because males are more likely to feel suicidally depressed, lonely, worthless, and hopeless. In other words, the psychological factors that cause individuals to kill themselves must be more common among U.S. males than they are among U.S. females, or more common among people in the United States than among Italians. There's nothing wrong with such reasoning; it may be exactly right *as far as it goes*. But that's just the problem: It doesn't go very far because it doesn't answer the question of *why* these differences exist in the first place. Why, for example, would males be more likely to feel suicidally hopeless and depressed than females, or Hungarians more likely than Italians? Or why would Hungarians who feel suicidally depressed be more likely to go ahead and kill themselves than Italians who feel the same way? To answer such questions, we need more than an understanding of individual psychology. Among other things, we need to pay attention to

the fact that words like "female," "white," and "Italian" name positions that people occupy in social systems. This draws attention to how those systems work and what it means to occupy those positions in them.

Sociologically, a suicide rate is a number that describes something about a group or a society, not the individuals who belong to it. A suicide rate of twelve per 100,000 tells us nothing about you or me or anyone else. Each of us either commits suicide during a given year or we don't, and the rate can't tell us who does what. In the same way, how individuals feel before they kill themselves isn't by itself enough to explain why some groups or societies have higher suicide rates than others. Individuals can feel depressed or lonely, but groups and societies can't feel a thing. We could consider that Italians might tend to be less depressed than people in the United States, for example, or that in the United States, people might tend to deal with feelings of depression more effectively than Hungarians. It makes no sense at all, however, to say that the United States is more depressed or lonely than Italy.

While it might work to look at what goes on in individuals as a way to explain why one person commits suicide, this can't explain *patterns* of suicide found in social systems. To do this, we have to look at how people feel and behave *in relation to* systems and how these systems work. We need to ask, for example, how societies are organized in ways that encourage people who participate in them to feel more or less depressed or to respond to such feelings in suicidal or nonsuicidal ways. We need to see how belonging to particular groups shapes people's experience as they participate in social life, and how this limits the alternatives they think they can choose from. What is it about being male or

being white that can make suicide a path of least resistance? How, in other words, can we go to the heart of sociological practice to ask how people participate in something larger than themselves and see how this affects the choices they make? How can we see the relationship between people and systems that produces variations in suicide rates or, for that matter, just about everything else that we do and experience, from having sex to going to school to working to dying?

Just as we can't tell what's going on in a system just by looking at individuals, we also can't tell what's going on in individuals just by looking at systems. Something may look like one thing in the system as a whole, but something else entirely when we look at the people who participate in it. If we look at the kind of mass destruction and suffering that war typically causes, for example, an individualistic model suggests a direct link with the "kinds" of people who participate in it. If war produces cruelty, bloodshed, aggression, and conquest, then it must be that the people who participate in it are cruel, bloodthirsty, aggressive people who want to conquer and dominate others. Viewing the carnage and destruction that war typically leaves in its wake, we're likely to ask, "What kind of people could do such a thing?" Sociologically, however, this question misleads us by reducing a social phenomenon to a simple matter of "kinds of people" without looking at the systems those people participate in. Since we're always participating in one system or another, when someone drops a bomb that incinerates thousands of people, we can't explain what happened simply by figuring out "what kind of person would do such a thing." In fact, if we look at what's known about people who fight in wars, they appear fairly normal by most standards and anything but bloodthirsty and cruel. Most

accounts portray men in combat, for example, as alternating between boredom and feeling scared out of their wits. They worry much less about glory than they do about not being hurt or killed and getting themselves and their friends home in one piece. For most soldiers, killing and the almost constant danger of being killed are traumatic experiences that leave them forever changed as people. They go to war not in response to some inner need to be aggressive and kill, but because they think it's their duty to go, because they'll go to prison if they dodge the draft, because they've seen war portrayed in books and movies as an adventurous way to prove they're "real men," or because they don't want to risk family and friends rejecting them for not measuring up as true patriots.

People aren't systems, and systems aren't people, which means that social life can produce horrible or wonderful consequences without necessarily meaning that the people who participate in them are horrible or wonderful. Good people participate in systems that produce bad consequences all the time. I'm often aware of this in the simplest situations, such as when I go to buy clothes or food. Many of the clothes sold in the United States are made in sweatshops in cities like Los Angeles and New York and in Third World countries, where people work under conditions that resemble slavery in many respects, and for wages that are so low they can barely live on them. A great deal of the fruit and vegetables in stores are harvested by migrant farm workers who work under conditions that aren't much better. If these workers were provided with decent working conditions and paid a living wage, the price of clothing and food would probably be a lot higher than it is. This means that I benefit directly from the daily mistreatment and exploitation of thousands of

people. The fact that I benefit doesn't make me a bad person; but my participation in that system does involve me in what happens to them.

It's About Us and It's Not About Us

If we start from the idea that we're always participating in something larger than ourselves and that social life flows from this relationship, then we have to consider that we're all involved—even if only indirectly—in the social consequences that result, both the good and the bad. By definition, if I participate in a racist society—no matter what my race—then I'm involved in white privilege and racist consequences. As an individual, I may not feel or act in racist ways and in my heart I may even hate racism; but that's beside the core sociological point. I'm *involved* in one way or another by virtue of my participation in society itself.[7] If someone takes what I say more seriously because I'm white, then I've received a benefit of racism whether I'm aware of it or not, and in doing so, I've unwittingly participated in racism. This raises the question of how society works *and* how I participate in it—whether I actively defend white privilege or let people know I'm against racism or just go about my business and pretend there's no problem to begin with.

In diversity training sessions, this simple insight can dramatically alter how people see potentially painful issues and themselves in relation to them. This is especially true for people in privileged groups who otherwise resist looking at the nature and consequences of privilege. Their defensive resistance is probably the biggest single barrier to ending racism, sexism, and other