
Introduction: Life, Practice, and Promise

I am a practicing sociologist, and this book is about what it is that I practice and what it means and why it matters. This book is about how the practice finds its way into almost every aspect of life, from headlines in the morning paper to the experience of growing older to the ravages of war, injustice, oppression, and terrorism in the world. It is about things small and large, things simple and things complex far beyond what we can imagine.

I practice sociology in many ways. I practice it when I think about how social life works, when I write books, when I work with people trying to see what's going on in the world and our lives in it. I practice as a public speaker and workshop facilitator to help solve the dilemmas of a diverse and difficult world in which race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and other forms of privilege, power, and oppression cast dark shadows over people's lives. I practice when I read a newspaper or turn on the television or go to the movies. I practice when I walk down a street, shop in a market, or sit in a sidewalk restaurant, sip a cup of coffee, and watch the world go by and wonder what life *really* is all about, what this stream of

interconnected people's lives consists of, what knits it all together and what tears it apart, and what, as my students would say, it's got to do with me.

I practice sociology for many reasons. I practice it because there is so much unnecessary suffering in the world, and to do something about that suffering we need to understand where it comes from. In this sense, practicing sociology has a profoundly moral dimension. I don't mean "moral" in the sense of being good instead of bad, but "moral" in a deeper and broader sense that touches on the essence of what we're about as human beings and what our life together consists of. It is impossible to study social life for very long without coming up against the consequences that social life produces, and a lot of these consequences do such damage to people's lives that, unless we find ways to deny or ignore reality, we feel compelled to ask, "Why?" And once we ask that question, we need tools to help make sense of where it leads and to imagine how we might go from there toward something better.

We can't help but be part of the problem, but practicing sociology is a way to also be part of the solution. This not only helps the world but also makes it easier to live in, especially given how crazy a place it can be. It helps to be able to see how one thing is connected to another, and, in that, how to find ways to make a difference, however small. We can't change the world all by ourselves, but we can make informed decisions about how to participate in it and thereby help turn the world toward something better, even if it's just in our neighborhoods or families or where we work or go to school.

I wouldn't do all this if I didn't believe something better was possible, so I have to add faith to my list of reasons for practicing sociology. I believe that the choices we make as individuals matter beyond our lives more than we can imagine, that things don't have to be the way they are but that they won't get better all by themselves. We need to do something, and what we do needs to be based on more than hunches and personal opinion and prejudice. We need

systematic ways to figure things out, and that's what sociological practice offers.

I also practice sociology because it helps me keep in touch with the essence of my own life in the world, for sociology isn't simply about some larger world "out there." It's also about us in the world and the connection between the two, which means it can take us toward basic truths about who we are and what our lives are about. I practice it because it reminds me that for all that we think we know about things, beneath that is all that we don't know, which is good reason to feel some awe from time to time.

There are times, for example, when I am amazed that social life works at all, that we're able to live and work together as much as we do, to talk, dream, imagine, fight, and create. There is something miraculous about the simplest conversation, miraculous in the sense that there is a core truth about how it happens that we can never get to. We can contemplate the miracle of things by taking ourselves toward the limit of what we can know. And we can feel the fringe of core truths and how our lives are part of them. So, while my practice is usually "about" understanding the world, it is also about keeping myself in touch with the essentially unknowable essence of human existence that lies beneath.

Practicing sociology is a way to observe the world and to think about and make sense of it. It is also a way to be *in* the world and of the world, to play a meaningful role in the life of our species as it shapes and reshapes itself into the mystery of what's going on and what it's got to do with us.

Practice What?

Most people probably have some notion of what I mean by "sociology," but I doubt that it looks much like sociology as it's practiced. If you've ever looked at a typical introductory sociology text (the only

glimpse of sociology that most people ever have), you probably see sociology as a collection of facts and terms about almost everything, from the family to economics to politics to crime to religion to the intricacies of conversation. It's like high school social studies, but at a higher level. Looking at all these varied aspects of social life isn't by itself sociological, however, because many disciplines look at these same areas. Criminal lawyers, legal scholars, and judges, for example, study crime; economists study economics; political scientists study politics; anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and divorce lawyers study families. But this doesn't mean they're practicing sociology.

This is why vague definitions of sociology as "about" groups and societies or "about" social life aren't of much use. Since few words are as vague as *about*, sociology winds up meaning pretty much whatever you want it to mean, which gets close to meaning nothing at all. This makes it easy to think that sociological practice is everywhere, that when the *New York Times* or CNN or PBS or your favorite blog comments on something "social," they're practicing sociology. It's also easy to think we can learn as much from reading the newspaper and watching television or surfing the Web as we can by practicing sociology. As a result, many sociologists go out of their way to impress upon people that what they do is more than common sense. They're right, of course; it is much more than common sense (now I've done it, too), but having to convince people that it is more than common sense is a situation that sociologists have largely brought upon themselves, digging a hole with one hand while trying to fill it in with the other.

You also won't find a clear sense of sociology by looking at scholarly journals. It's not that the authors aren't practicing sociology. It's that they're so far removed from caring to explain the *essence* of what they're doing that it gets buried beneath layers of data and theory, implicit rather than explicit. Since most sociologists write primarily for one another, they seem to assume that the question of what sociology really amounts to isn't worth figuring out, much less

articulating so that people outside the field can understand it. You could read several years' worth of journal articles without getting a clue as to what it is that makes them all sociological.

For some sociologists, the lack of a clear sense of sociology isn't so much a problem as it is the nature of things. There is no one sociology, they argue, but instead a diversity of *sociologies*. It's futile, even presumptuous, to look for a "grand narrative" that explains everything in one fell swoop. It's old-fashioned, rigid, and overly modernist. Even worse, it won't work.

It's undeniable that sociology encompasses a dazzling collection of ideas and methods and points of interest, and it's undoubtedly true that no theory can explain everything. But if the nature of things is that sociology revolves around many different "narratives," *we still have to ask ourselves what it is about these narratives that justifies calling them all "sociological."* If we can't answer that in a reasonably clear and straightforward way, then it's hard to see why anyone would take sociological practice seriously. Without that, without some way for people to grasp the defining essence of what sociologists do and why they do it, all the research and theory in the world won't amount to much except for sociologists.

That is why I've written this book. The premise for *The Forest and the Trees* is a hypothetical situation I put myself in when I started writing it. If sociology could teach everyone just *one* thing, if it could pass along just one central insight, what would that be? Would it be something about the family? About political institutions? About social inequality? About the use of language in social interaction? About conflict theory, exchange theory, functionalism, postmodernism, or any of the other theoretical perspectives sociologists have used over the years? Would it, in short, be some piece of data or a term or a theory from the mountain of data, terms, and theories that fall under the general heading of "sociology"?

I don't think so, or, at least, I hope not. Far simpler and more powerful is a core idea that serves as a starting point, a gateway

opening onto questions that in turn point toward everything else. By itself, such an idea doesn't explain anything (that wouldn't be the point). Instead, it defines a core view of reality on which sociological practice of all kinds is based, consciously or not, and provides a touchstone for what it means to do sociology.

When I say that I practice sociology, I refer to that core view, that common ground that joins so many kinds of work. This book is one practicing sociologist's answer to the hypothetical, the core insight with the greatest potential and promise to transform how we see the world and ourselves in it. This book is about what that core view is and why it matters that we understand it, use it, live it, and pass it on.

1

The Forest, the Trees, and the One Thing

In practicing sociology, I work in universities, schools, and other organizations with people who are trying to deal with issues of privilege and oppression organized around various differences that occur among human beings, often referred to as "diversity." In the simplest sense, diversity is about the variety of people in the world, the varied mix of gender, race, age, social class, disability status, ethnicity, religion, and other social characteristics. In the United States, for example, the population is rapidly changing as a result of immigration from Asia and Latin America.

If the changing mix were all that diversity amounted to, there wouldn't be a problem since in so many ways, differences are what make life interesting and enhance creativity. Compared with homogeneous groups, for example, diverse groups are usually better with problems that require creative solutions. To be sure, diversity brings with it difficulties such as language barriers and different ways of doing things that can confuse or irritate people. But humans are the species with the "big brain," the adaptable ones who learn quickly, so learning to get along with different kinds of people shouldn't be a

problem we can't handle. Like travelers in a strange land, we can 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. Difference is 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 dignity that everyone should have to the extreme of deciding who lives and who dies.¹ The resulting patterns of inequality and oppression not only ruin people's lives, but also create division and resentment fed by injustice and suffering that eat away at the core of life in communities, workplaces, schools, and other social situations.

There are places where the importance of feeling accepted and valued for who you are and what you can do is taken seriously. One way to bring this about is to run programs to help people see the consequences of what's really going on, how those 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, for example, 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.

This is what happened in 2005 when the city of New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. In the aftermath, thousands of people were left stranded in the city without adequate water, food, or shelter, and no one who watched the news could fail to notice that those left behind were overwhelmingly people of color. In the weeks that followed, as the slowness of the federal response to the disaster and its victims deepened the level of misery and turned a natural dis-

aster into a national disgrace, there were those who tried to begin a national dialogue about race and class in the United States. Almost immediately, however, the idea that the racial patterns of experience in New Orleans might have had anything to do with race provoked a storm of denial and near outrage from many in the white population, from the president on down, with a large majority reporting the belief that what happened in New Orleans had *nothing* to do with race.²

Because members of privileged groups often react negatively to the idea of looking at privilege and oppression, women, blacks, Latinos and Latinas, gays, lesbians, people with disabilities, workers, and other subordinate 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 privilege and oppression, the typical pattern 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 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 by isolating us from one another, promoting divisive competition, and making it harder to sustain a sense of community, of all of us 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, life stories, 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 are racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of privilege and 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 there is terrorism in the world, it must be because there are certain kinds of people—terrorists—who by their nature feel compelled to engage in terrorist behavior. In short, if evil consequences occur in social life, it is 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 become upset when they're asked to look at the benefits that go along with belonging to that particular group and the price those benefits require other groups to pay. 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 consciously intend to act in oppressive ways 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, individualism 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 experience. Over the course of the twentieth century, the life of the individual has emerged as a dominant framework for understanding the complexities and mysteries of human existence.

You can see the tendency toward individualism 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, then the individualistic answer is that the people who run corporations are greedy, or the politicians are corrupt and incompetent. 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.

From an individualistic perspective, the way to make a better world is to put the "right people" in charge, or to 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 how to change 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 natural disasters or terrorism then becomes a matter not of collective solutions but of an accumulation of individual solutions. If we want to have less poverty in the world, the individualistic answer lies in raising people out of poverty or keeping them from becoming poor by changing what sort of people they are, *one person at a time*. Or the way to end terrorism is to identify all the individuals who might be inclined to practice terrorism and do something to stop them.

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 in order for us to 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, that a society is people and people are society, and 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 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. The same individual trees in one case constitute a forest and in another case are 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 “some-

thing more”—whether it’s a family or a university or a 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 most profound effect on how we understand 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 is neither just the forest nor 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 colleges 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. Colleges and universities have positions such as student, president, and professor, for example, but the position of “mother” isn’t part of the academic system. People who work or study in colleges and universities can certainly be mothers in families, but that isn’t a position that connects them to those systems.

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 usually don’t “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 a dynamic relationship between social systems and the people who participate in them. Note that people *participate* in systems without being *parts* of the systems themselves. In this sense, “father” and “grandfather” are positions in my family, and I, Allan, am a person who actually occupies those positions. This distinction is easy to lose sight of but crucial. 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.

To see the difference between people and systems, imagine you’re in a social situation such as a church wedding, and someone who’s never been in this particular place before walks in the door

and looks around. Perhaps the visitor is a woman whose car has broken down, and she is looking for a phone so she can call for help. Most likely, the woman will know immediately where she is in a social sense and, even more important, will have an accurate idea of what the people in the room expect of her *even though she has no personal knowledge of them whatsoever*. So long as the visitor can accurately identify the social system in which she is participating and her position in relation to it, she will be able to behave appropriately without violating the expectations that go with that situation.

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. “The United States is a racist society that privileges whites over people of color” is a statement that describes the United States as a social system. It does *not* thereby describe me or anyone else as an individual, which 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.

I was born in 1946, for example, and grew up listening to the radio shows of the day, including *Amos ’n’ 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 into a white family, I laughed along with everyone else as we drove along 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 fifty years later, those racist images are firmly lodged in my memory, because once they get in, there’s no getting them out. With the benefit of hindsight, I can 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 the privileged position of "white person" that I occupy. 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 the creation of racism in this country 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 connection 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 those elements together 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 and 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 the game of basketball as a kind of system whose characteristics 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 children, and I couldn't resist feeling good when I did (we're *supposed* to feel good) even if I also felt bad 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 a human being, which is part of the explanation. But the rest of the explanation comes down to the simple fact that I'd behave that way because winning is what the game of *Monopoly* is about.

When I participate in the *Monopoly* system, greedy behavior is presented to me as a path of least resistance, what you're supposed to do if you want to feel that you belong. 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 in part on the position they occupy 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 in the context of one social system or another.

For its part, a system affects how we think, feel, and behave as participants. It does this through the general process of socialization, but also by laying out paths of least resistance in social situations. 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 happily collect it 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 with 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 the same position I occupy 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 *must* go along or that we *will*, 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

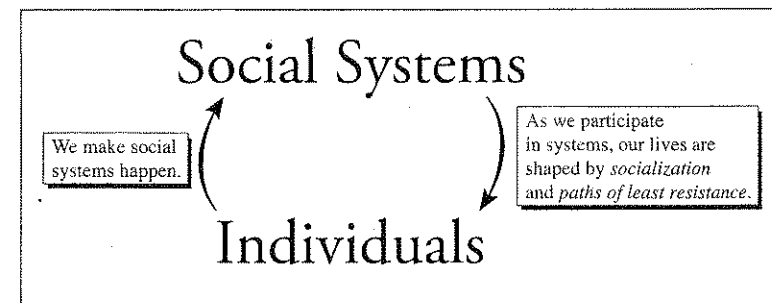


FIGURE 1-1 Individuals and Social Systems: A Dynamic Relationship

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*). However, 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, producing what sociologists call “role conflict.”⁴

So, social systems and people are connected through a dynamic relationship, pictured in Figure 1-1. People make systems happen—consciously or not—and systems lay out paths of least resistance that shape how people participate. Neither people nor systems exist without the other, and yet neither can be reduced to the other. The complexity of my life isn’t some predictable product of the systems I participate in, nor is a social system an accumulation of my own and other people’s lives.

What results from all this are 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. When we can identify how a system is organized, we can see

what is likely to result if people follow the paths of least resistance. We know, for example, where the game of *Monopoly* is going just by reading the rules of the game and without having to know anything about the individuals who play it, except the likelihood that most of them will follow the path of least resistance most of the time.

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 to places that transform how we look at the world and ourselves in relation to it.

The Individualistic Model Doesn't Work

Probably the most important basis for sociological practice is to realize that the individualistic perspective that dominates current thinking about social life is wrong. Everything we do or experience happens in relation to a social 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 although it may seem so at the time. We have to ask about the larger context in which a situation occurs.

We might ask, for example, 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, while she may think he's being a jerk. But the issue is never as simple as that, because 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 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, in the case of soldiers and suicide bombers, obliged by honor, duty, loyalty, or religious belief to sacrifice themselves for someone else or what they identify as a 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? This was the question posed by one of the founders of sociology, the great French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his classic work, *Suicide*.

The suicide rate for the entire U.S. population in 2003, for example, was eleven suicides per 100,000 people. If we look inside that number, we find that the rate for males was eighteen per 100,000 but the rate for females was only four 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 more than double the rate 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 eleven per 100,000, it was thirty-three per 100,000 in Hungary and only eight 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 the emotional states associated with suicidal behavior. 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 because it doesn't go far enough. 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. Acknowledging this fact draws attention to how those systems work and what it means to occupy those positions in them in relation to paths of least resistance.

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 eleven 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 in Hungary. It makes no sense at all, however, to say that the United States is more depressed or lonely than Italy.

While looking at the psychological process in individuals might 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 experience various psychological conditions or to respond to them in suicidal or nonsuicidal ways. We need to see how belonging to particular social categories shapes people's experience as they participate in social life and how their participation 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 like something else entirely when we look at the people who participate in that system. If we look at the kind of mass destruction and suffering that war and terrorism typically cause, for example, an individualistic model suggests a direct link with the "kinds" of people who participate in it. If war and terrorism produce cruelty, bloodshed, aggression, and conquest, then the people who

participate in it must be cruel, bloodthirsty, aggressive people who want to conquer and dominate others. Viewing the carnage and destruction that war and terrorism typically leave in their 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 crashes an airplane into a building or drops a bomb that incinerates thousands of people, we can't explain their action 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 the experience of being in combat as alternating between boredom and feeling scared out of your wits. Soldiers 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, or they see it as a way to be of service to their country, or they've seen war portrayed in books and movies as an adventurous way to prove they're "real men," or they don't want to risk family and friends rejecting them for not measuring up as true patriots, or they're afraid of being sent to prison if they refuse to be drafted.

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, for example, 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, some in the United States, but most in nonindustrial countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, where people often work under conditions that resemble slavery in many respects and for wages that are so low they can barely live on them. Similarly, a great deal of the fruit and vegetables sold in grocery 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, then the price of clothing and food would probably be a lot higher than it is, which means 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 the oppression of people of color.

As an individual, I may not feel or act in racist ways, and in my heart I may even hate racism, but all of that is beside the core sociological point that I'm *involved* in one way or another by virtue of my participation in society itself.⁷ If the path of least resistance is for people to take what I say more seriously because I'm white, then I'm likely to receive 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.

From this perspective, it doesn't make sense to use the words *racist* and *racism* as nothing more than ways to describe the character of individual people, because the most important factor in perpetuating privilege and oppression is the way social systems are organized and the paths of least resistance they lay down for people to follow regardless of which kind of people they are. In his book *Portraits of White Racism*, sociologist David Wellman argues that *racist* and *racism* should refer to anything that has the *consequence* of perpetuating white privilege, regardless of the intentions or character of the people whose behavior brings about that result. Most people believe, for example, that it's good for children to go to school in their own neighborhoods. Since racial segregation in housing is still pervasive, however, such a policy also has the consequence of perpetuating racial segregation in schools, which a considerable body of evidence shows is not a good thing for students of any race, especially for children of color. Those who advocate neighborhood schools often protest that their position has nothing to do with race, which may be true of their intentions as individuals. But the *consequence* of such a policy has a great deal to do with race and the perpetuation of white privilege and the oppression of people of color that results from that privilege.

Getting clear about the relationship between individuals and social systems can dramatically alter how we see potentially painful issues and ourselves 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 forms of privilege and oppression. Most of the time resistance happens because, like everyone else, people in privileged groups are stuck in an individualistic model of the world and can't see how to acknowledge white privilege as a fact of social life without also feel-

ing personally to blame for it. And the people who are most likely to feel this way are often the ones who are otherwise most open to doing something to make things better.

When they look at a problem like racism sociologically, however, they can see how it's both about them and not about them. It's not about them in the sense that they didn't create the racist society we all live in. As I was growing up white, no one asked me if it was okay with me for white people to use *Amos 'n' Andy* to make fun of black people and keep them in their place beneath white privilege. And if they *had* asked me, I doubt that as a child I'd have known enough to object. In this sense, white people who have grown up in a racist environment have no reason to feel guilty when they hear anger about the existence of white racism and the harm and suffering it causes.

Racism is about me personally, however, because whether or not I'm conscious of it, I'm always making choices about how to participate in a society that is organized in racist ways and that makes behavior that perpetuates white privilege a path of least resistance. Regardless of how I behave, as a white person I am eligible for privilege that is at the expense of people of other races. White privilege is built into the system itself, which means I don't have to like it or believe in it or even do anything to receive it. When I go shopping at the mall, sales people and store detectives don't follow me around as if I were going to steal something. They don't swoop down on me and pointedly ask, "Can I help you?" as if I were a suspicious character or something other than a serious customer. But people of color are mistreated this way all the time, and it usually doesn't matter how well they dress or how much money they have to spend.⁸

Most people would agree that everyone should be treated decently, but when some are and some aren't simply because of which group they belong to, then an oppressive system of privilege is at work. And whether I like it or not, as a white person I benefit from that by getting something of value that's denied to others. Once

I see this, it's hard to avoid asking about how I participate in the system that produces such consequences. What are my responsibilities? What could I do differently that would contribute to different outcomes? How can I be part of the solution to racism rather than merely part of the problem?

In other words, by making me aware that I'm involved in something larger than myself, sociological practice gets me off the hook of personal guilt and blame for a world that I didn't create and that isn't my fault. At the same time, however, it makes me aware of how I choose to participate in that world and how and why those choices matter. I have no reason to feel guilty simply because I'm white, but I also don't have the luxury of thinking that racism and white privilege have nothing to do with me.⁹

Personal Solutions Can't Solve Social Problems

If the shape of social life is rooted in relationships between people and the systems they participate in, then those relationships are also where social problems will be solved or not. Personal solutions are just that—personal and individual—and they cannot solve social problems unless they include changes in how people outwardly participate in social systems. An individualistic model encourages us to think that if enough individuals change, then systems will change as well, but a sociological perspective shows why change isn't this simple. The problem is that social life isn't simply a product of people's personal characteristics and behavior, for these arise out of their participation in social systems. In that sense, social life depends on how people are connected to one another through the structures of social relationships, and systems don't change unless relationships change.

An individualistic model also doesn't work because personal solutions arise primarily from a sense of our own personal needs, and

focusing our attention on personal needs is a path of least resistance. Once we find a solution to the problem that works for us personally, we've accomplished our goal and are likely to leave the problem behind rather than stay with it to help make things better for others.

In the United States, for example, personal solutions are the typical response to the problem of economic insecurity, which seems to be a way of life for the vast majority of people in most capitalist societies. Rather than stop and ask how the economic system itself sets us up to feel insecure, the path of least resistance is to work hard to establish our own private zones of safety within an insecure system. The easiest thing for people to do then is to hang on to what they have and leave everyone else to fend for themselves. Not surprisingly, this strategy doesn't lower the overall level of insecurity and poverty in society as a whole—it doesn't, in other words, solve these *social* problems. Instead, it shuffles people in and out of various levels of well-being and security, like a game of musical chairs. As long as I have a chair for myself, why raise questions about the fact that there aren't enough chairs to go around?

Sociological practice uses more complex models of change that focus on several different levels of social life at once. Consider, for example, the problem of pollution, which a growing number of communities around the world have to deal with. Suppose that people in your town start getting sick. Large numbers of children don't show up for school and local clinics and hospital emergency rooms are jammed with patients who turn out to be suffering from chemical toxins.

On a purely individual level, we could say that we've figured out why people are getting sick. And to solve the problem in terms of individuals, we could just treat each sick person until they're well and change people's behavior so that they don't get sick again. If the toxic chemicals are in the water supply, then don't drink the

water. Buy bottled water instead. Each person now has a solution to the problem, if they can afford to drink bottled water or, perhaps, install expensive filtration systems in their houses. It would probably turn out that, like most communities, some would be able to afford this individualist solution and some wouldn't, which means that some people would still get sick. Of course we might enact some kind of collective response to this inequality by providing subsidies for poor people to buy bottled water, but notice that we still wouldn't have done anything about the underlying problem of polluted water. We would simply have found a way for individual people to avoid drinking it.

To take the problem to a sociological level, we have to ask about systems and how people participate in them, and so far we haven't said anything about people getting sick as a systemic problem. People are told to change their private behavior by not drinking water out of the tap. But nothing's been said about the possibility of changing the system they're participating in.

Suppose we trace the toxin backward from each faucet and wind up at the local reservoir. From there, we trace it to the surrounding soil and a stream, and from there to a local chemical plant that employs a large number of people in the town. Now we have a different explanation of why people are getting sick and a different solution: get the plant to stop dumping chemical wastes in ways that wind up in the town's water supply.

Suppose, however, that the people who run the company say they can't do that because it would cost too much, and the business they're in is so competitive that they'd have to close down the plant and move to where people care more about their jobs than they do about polluted water. And if the owners close down the plant, a lot of local people will lose their jobs, the effects of which will ripple out through the town as fewer people have money to spend in local businesses or pay in local taxes to support schools and such.

Now the problem of what's making people sick is more than simply a matter of how the plant is run. The problem is also related to still larger systems that the plant as a whole participates in and the company's powerful position in relation to the community that depends on the company for jobs. The nature of the economic system—competitive global capitalism—shapes the choices that plant owners make in ways that affect the quality of water that people have to drink. That economic system is tied to unequal distributions of power and wealth and to values about the desirability of making a profit and the right of people to do what they want with private property, perhaps even including dumping toxic wastes on land they "own" or in streams that run across their property. Ultimately, the town may have to confront the company's power over their lives and choose between powerful competing values about how communities and societies are organized.

Taking the problem to the level of systems doesn't mean we have to ignore individuals. It isn't a matter of one or the other, because sociological practice looks at social life in relation both to systems *and* to how people participate in them. People often box themselves into a false choice between attributing a problem to "society" and blaming it on individuals. But social life doesn't work that way. The choice is hardly ever as simple as one or the other, of society or individuals, because societies and individuals always exist in relation to each other. The challenge of sociological practice is to see how this works. If we don't, we go back and forth between acting as if individuals play no part in creating social problems and acting as if people behave in a social vacuum without being affected by the kind of society they live in.

There is a third alternative: It's a matter of both/and, not either/or. Systems don't change without people changing at one point or another, and no system can change through individual change alone.

It's Messier and More Interesting than That

The language of "systems" and "individuals" can make things seem a lot simpler and more clear-cut than they really are. It encourages us to think of systems as things, as rigid molds that people must fit into. In some ways a social system is "thing-like" in that we can identify characteristics such as the distribution of power or rules or a physical setting or positions that people occupy as participants. "School," for example, conjures up some predictable images—of rooms with chairs in rows, chalk boards, cafeterias, gymnasiums, libraries, computer labs, students, teachers, locker-lined hallways, bells ringing at regular intervals, rules, grades, teachers having power over students, administrators having power over teachers, semesters, vacations, teaching, learning, graduation. Because such images of this thing we call "school" are relatively fixed in our minds, we can experience it as being thing-like in some ways.

In other words, we can think of school as something outside us, as an "it" rather than a "me" or even an "us." People attend or work in "it," but the people aren't it and it isn't them. In that way, school is like the game of *Monopoly* in a box. People take it out (go to school), play it for a while (teach, study, administer), and then put it away (go home). And that's pretty much what it is, or so we might think.

But social life is messier and more interesting than that, because in many ways social systems aren't something. They are ongoing processes. They are continually being created and re-created as people do things in order to make them happen. The associations we have with school are just words on a page, images in our minds, until people actually participate in the process of school as a system. When they do, some familiar patterns shape what goes on, but there is also an enormous amount of variation around those patterns as people put their own spin on how they're going to participate. "It"

never happens just the same way twice, because what we call "school" is as much about what people do as it is about all the associations we have with the idea of school as a social system.

While we may not be aware of it at the time, at any given moment any of the people in school could do something unexpected that would shape how school happens in that time and place. We may have a general understanding of what school is in the same way that we understand what *Monopoly* is. And we can use such knowledge to predict with some accuracy what the general patterns will look like in a given school on a given day. But there is a great deal that we can't predict because in an important sense "school" only happens as it happens. In this sense, school literally is what people do when they identify themselves as "in school."

What makes social life and sociological practice messy and interesting is that both ways of looking at things are true. When I visit a college classroom and sit down with students, I can feel how the situation of school limits what I see as my options. I know in general what I'm expected to do and what, therefore, would be considered inappropriate for that situation. But as I sit there looking at students, there's also a sense in the air of, "So, what are we going to do?" Although we all know we're in school and that this means many things are very unlikely to happen, we also don't really know what is going to happen because it hasn't happened yet. So, I say something to start things off, or a student asks a question or makes a comment on something they've read, or something else altogether happens. And so it goes from there, as "school" unfolds, emerging from how these people choose from moment to moment what they're going to make of their participation in this system.

If we want to explain what happens during that time, it isn't enough to understand what school is about as a social system, and it isn't enough to understand who the people in the room are as individuals. What happens depends on *both/and*—it depends on both the situation these people are in and how they choose to participate in it.

What makes things still messier and still more interesting is that in important ways we aren't all in the same situation. Because we occupy a variety of social positions within each system, we tend to experience each situation differently. We are shaped differently by it, limited by it in different ways, and therefore tend to participate differently. So, what school is about will vary depending on whether you're a student or a teacher, female or male, Asian American, Native American, white, Chicano, African American, older, younger, working class, lower class, middle class, upper class, immigrant, native-born, heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, with or without a disability, employed, unemployed, married, single, a parent, or without children. Such characteristics "locate" us in different ways in relation to other people and to social systems. They affect how we see ourselves and others, how they see us, and how we treat one another as we participate in making a system happen. When we say that we are always participating in something larger than ourselves, it's important to remember that *we* is not a homogeneous term. There are multiple "*we*'s" in social life and an important part of sociological practice is to see how the presence of multiple "*we*'s" affects what happens.

Into the Practice

All forms of sociological practice are *sociological* because they flow from the same basic questions: What are people participating in, and how are they participating in it? The work can vary in the balance it strikes between the two questions, with some work leaning more toward one or the other. A study of how people use language to affect how other people see them, for example, might pay little attention to the social systems where such behavior takes place. Or a study of the world economy might never look at the fine details of how people interact as they participate in it. But the connections

between systems and people are always there for us to follow toward a deeper grasp of the complex web that makes up social life and our experience of it and ourselves. Although the main focus in the rest of this book is on systems, questions about how we figure in social life are never far off, for without people to make systems happen from one moment to the next, there would be no systems to understand or anyone to care one way or another.

The next three chapters lay out a systematic way to think about what makes one social system different from another in terms of their cultural, structural, and population/ecological characteristics. There are a couple of things to keep in mind as you read these chapters. The first is that I've never found a clear and coherent way to describe this approach all at once. I find it easier on the mind to break it into pieces taken one at a time, hence separate chapters on culture, structure, and population/ecology.

The problem with doing it this way is that in reality the pieces don't occur separately, but only in relation to one another. It's similar to studying anatomy. There is no nervous system, for example, without a circulatory system, and yet anatomy textbooks devote separate chapters to each system, as if each system were a distinct entity existing on its own. To the extent that each system is a distinct entity, it is only in our minds, since nerves, vessels, and the body are completely bound up with one another. We can invent ways of thinking that allow us to *imagine* a circulatory or nervous system as something separate from everything else, but this is only a device, a learning tool that makes things easier. But this approach also raises a challenge by distorting the nature of reality, which I'll try to put back together in Chapter 7.

The other problem with carving things up is that something has to come first, and it's tempting to infer a rank of importance from the order in which topics appear, as in culture must be most important because it comes first. Thinking that would be a mistake. I begin with culture because as a writer and a thinker I'm drawn to

words and symbols and how humans construct reality in their minds. I have a special affinity for culture, so that's where I begin, knowing all the while that everything is connected to everything else in complex ways that require us to grasp not only the parts, but the whole, which, as I said, I'll get to in Chapter 7.