Chapter 2
Diversity: A Sociological Perspective
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To understand the need for diversity and its role in efforts to increase equity, one must first have a sociological framework for understanding how power functions in our society. As sociologists, we push ourselves to make connections between the individual and their society at large. Through sociological inquiry, we are better able to examine the varying levels of meaning embedded within social interaction that are often invisible to the lay-person. By examining ideologies, or systems of belief, we can cut through our surface-level assumptions to explore how they really impact our social reality and everyday lives. We are also more able to see the world from others' perspectives. This helps us understand not only the viewpoints of populations who have been silenced or ignored in our society, but also those of dominant groups.

Western societies tend to be highly individualistically focused, and we view issues like inequality in similarly narrow ways. It is easy for us to think "well, I'm not a bigot, I have never committed a hate crime" and absolve ourselves of responsibility for inequality. "Diversity" as a buzz word continues that individualistic thinking and often lets us believe that the bare minimum is more than enough. Contrary to the conventional wisdom concerning most diversity initiatives, simply including a few people of marginalized identities in a field is not enough. Sociological perspectives resist this kind of individualistic thinking to focus on systems within society and examine how they relate to the individual. Through this lens, diversity is not a goal in and of itself, but a necessary part of our collective efforts to increase social equity.
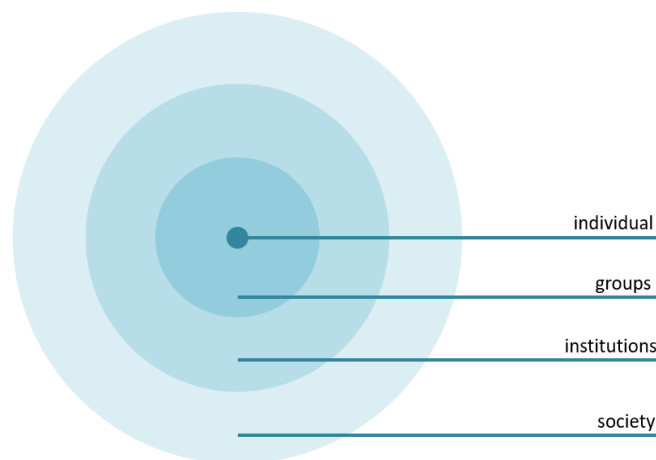

Figure 1: The individual exists within a larger social structure

Structural Thinking

Neither society nor individuals exist independently of one another. Individuals, groups, and institutions all interact with each other to make up our society. Illustrated in Figure 1 is a large circle with three concentric circles inside of it: the largest circle represents society, which here means all interactions, relationships, and practices of groups of people. The next circle in represents institutions, the structures that make up society, such as education, the economy, and religion. The circle inside of that represents groups,or collections of individuals held together by shared experiences or identities, such as data visualization scientists, or lesbians, or people with a college education. Inside of that circle is a tiny dot representing the individual. All of our lives are intimately connected to the groups we belong to, the institutions that we interact with, and the society we live in. While we are all individuals and possess autonomy, none of our actions and opinions are free of social influences. A sociological approach to society and its institutions allows us to see beyond how institutions are purported to work to examine how they actually function in our society at large and in our individual lives. For example, education is not only used to transmit knowledge to younger generations, it is also used to teach children the rules (both explicit and implicit) of society, including a respect for authority and the behaviors and qualities that will make them obedient and productive workers later in life.

Sociologists view norms, values, beliefs, and language as part of a social system that is learned and perpetuated through repetition. Critical engagement with such norms helps us denaturalize social behaviors that often go unquestioned in society. Some of our most interesting inquiries stem from asking why these social systems exist. For example, if we argue that the norm of paying women less than men, especially women of color in comparison to white men, is not due to an innate biological inferiority, but due to social norms, we are better able to explore questions concerning the history of these systems and how they work. Who benefits from women being less financially independent? Why would women's labor be less valued in society? What other instances do we see in society that have similarly oppressive impacts on women? How do institutions like capitalism, education, and family and social institutions like race, class, and ability interrelate with this phenomenon? With the knowledge we glean from these questions, we can then begin to disrupt and dismantle these oppressive systems in the hopes of pushing society toward a more equitable paradigm.

Socialization

Through the process of socialization we internalize the social norms, attitudes, and values of our society. Put simply, through socialization, we learn the "rules" of how to exist in our society. Those who transgress these rules, or appear to have transgressed them, are negatively sanctioned or punished while those who adhere to, or appear to adhere to, the rules are positively sanctioned or rewarded. These norms are a mechanism of social control. By learning what is acceptable, and realizing that there are punishments for violations and rewards for adherence, we are trained to police ourselves, and others, into conformity.[i] Nearly from the moment that we are born, we internalize a myriad of cultural mores and ideas about what is acceptable, what is normal, and what is expected of us. This process is important as it teaches us how to be members of a society, however, no society is free of inequality. Many of our social rules and norms function in ways that are oppressive, and as socialized members of society, we perpetuate them, often unconsciously. Just like society shapes us, we shape society, and our repetition of the norms we have been inculcated into throughout our lives further reinforces them as normal and right. When we are socialized in a society in which cultural norms reinforce and tacitly (and

sometimes explicitly) approve of systemic bias in favor of certain groups at the expense of others, we perpetuate those biases and reproduce inequality. Furthermore, because institutions are made up of people and designed by people, all of whom have been socialized within these oppressive paradigms, inequality is built into the structures of our society. This process is recursive, or self-reproducing, but also constantly shifting as norms change and people work to change them.
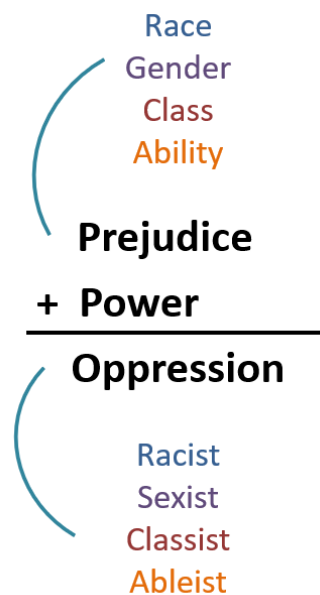
Race
Gender
Class
Ability

Prejudice

+ Power
_____

Oppression

Racist
Sexist
Classist
Ableist

Figure 2: The anatomy of oppression

Oppression

Oppression, too, is a structural issue and works on multiple levels to systematically disadvantage members of certain groups. Social stratification divides society into hierarchized groups, leading to the unequal distribution of wealth, power, access, respect and rights. The basic formula for oppression is prejudice plus power. For example, as illustrated in Figure 2, prejudice around race plus power creates racist oppression. To be considered oppression, actions, beliefs, and norms need to not only have the prejudices that we have internalized throughout our lives, those prejudices need to be backed up with institutional or systemic power. These could be racist, sexist, classist, or ableist oppressions. For instance, a woman telling a friend that she hates men is not oppressive because our social hierarchies value men and masculinity over women and femininity, whereas a man telling a friend that he hates women is a form of oppression because his opinion mirrors the larger social system that enforces gendered inequality. No opinion exists in a vacuum, and in this example, the woman's animosity toward men stems from systematic oppression of women, whereas the man's animosity stems from an internalization of sexist norms and a belief in his superiority. Oppression isn't a "you" thing, it's an "all of us" thing. We all participate in structural oppression, because we all participate in society.

At the end of the day, all of this boils down to power.[ii] Power is not a singularly top-down phenomenon, it is produced everywhere and is present in all interactions.}. Dominant groups, for example white, able-bodied, or heterosexual people, get tacit benefits that are imbued

from society. We get opportunities that are just not accessible to other people, and greater access to rights and resources while those who experience the brunt of intersecting oppressions have less access and political power. Members of a dominant group benefit from the oppression of other groups through heightened privileges relative to others--greater access to rights and resources, and better quality of life. This is not to say that white or heterosexual people do not experience suffering, but they don't experience it because of their race or sexuality. Those who are oppressed have less access to rights and resources than those in the dominant group(s), experiencing less political power, lower economic potential, poorer health, and higher mortality rates.[iii]

This institutional oppression is built into our society, and is the bedrock of our economy, our media, our education system, our medical system, our government, our religions, and our laws. But even more so, these oppressions are built into our social consciousness. The norms and values we are socialized into and the practices we see as normal also perpetuate, and support, institutionalized oppression. This too is recursive. All systems are made up of individuals and all individuals have been socialized in a society that is inequitable. Through socialization we internalize these inequitable ideas and then recreate them in individual and institutional ways. The recreation of inequality normalizes and further codifies inequality in society, leading to it being socialized into others.

One of the insidious characteristics of institutional oppression is the way that systems of inequality interact together, reinforce each other, and render each other invisible. Theorist and philosopher Marilyn Frye described this phenomenon through the metaphor of a birdcage.

> Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires… There is no physical property of any one wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere… the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (Frye 1983)

The more we study these social systems, the more we see how interconnected and interdependent they are emphasizing how deeply embedded they are in the bedrock of our society. Much of these oppressions happen quietly within institutions that are seen as neutral or natural. For example, the rule of law is purported to carry out justice that is blind to factors like race or class, but in actuality, a belief in the purity of rule of law masks the deep disparities that are knit into the fabric of our laws.[iv]

Or, consider data-- embedded in the concept is the assumption of truthfulness and impartiality that hides the implicit biases of those who created the experiment, collected the data, interpreted it, and represented it (Lloyd 1996). If you take anything from this chapter, perhaps the most important lesson is that nothing is outside of systems of inequality, no matter how harmless or neutral these systems seem.

Generally, it is easier to identify individual discrimination than institutional discrimination. We know that treating someone worse because of their race or sexuality or ability is wrong, and we can often recognize it when we see it. What we often have trouble seeing is the

institutional discrimination, in which institutions systematically discriminate against members of a marginalized group. For example, the disproportionately high rates of mass incarceration of Black Americans, or the disproportionate rates of deportation of non-white undocumented immigrants in comparison to that of white undocumented immigrants. The reproduction of social inequality is the process through which institutional norms of discrimination, which are based on codified prejudicial norms, lead to social disadvantage which then reinforces the prejudice once again. For example, racist ideology that paints Black men as violent and uneducated is prominent in our cultural environment, these beliefs lead to institutional discrimination against Black men such as disproportionately high rates of murder by police officers, incarceration, and job insecurity, which then reinforces the prejudices that underlie that discrimination (Entman 2008). As members of an unjust society, our social institutions and our behaviors and norms all perpetuate inequality, whether or not the individuals participating intend to.

Privilege/Disprivilege

In Peggy McIntosh's seminal "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" she describes white privilege as "…an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks." (McIntosh 1989) This is true for all institutional privilege, just by existing, as a person with privilege, we are equipped with more access and power than those who have less privilege. Systems of inequality are so neatly woven into the fabric of our society that their influence is often concealed, leading to an unconscious perpetuation of oppression simply through participation in these institutions. Because dominant ideologies are created by dominant groups, we often don't see these privileges and benefits that we are carrying around. We all have differing privileges and disprivileges that shape the way that we interact in everyday life. However, it is not nearly as simple as "privileged" vs "disprivileged" because none of us are any one thing, and no social category is monolithic.

Multiple axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels to create an individual's lived experience. Axes of power, like gender, class, ability, and race, all intersect to create one's own specific life.[v] Not all members of a group are homogenous, and each person's experience of that identity is informed and influenced by their other identities. Some of this is due to differences in individuals' experiences and environments, but a lot of this difference is a result of the individuals' axes of identity and oppression. This also complicates the privilege vs. disprivilege conversation because oppression is experienced differently depending on multitudes of factors. For example, a Black American woman has very different experiences of racism, sexism, and racialized sexism than a white woman, or a non-American Black woman, or an American Black man. Our identities don't simply add or subtract privilege, they interact and inform one another to create complex social positionalities that extend into all aspects of our lives. Imagine a paint palette where each color of paint represents an axis of identity, red for class, blue for race, yellow for gender etc. An additive model of oppression would imagine a person's experience of social hierarchization as distinct dollops of paint, the person experiences class, race, and gender based privilege or disprivilege individually. An intersectional model would mix the paints together to create a unique shade that incorporates all axes of identity, arguing that a person's experiences of class, race, and gender cannot be separated, and that their identities actually change how they experience their other identities.

Visualization: a Case Study

Looking at the makeup of the data visualization community can help elucidate how complex and insidious institutional oppression can be. Numerous studies have shown that in Western countries, girls in elementary and middle school have similar levels of interest and confidence in their abilities in STEM fields as boys their age, but in high school, these numbers drop precipitously. This is credited to the social messages that equate science and math with masculinity that make the fields inhospitable to girls and women (Leaper 2015). This curtails the number of women who enter collegiate and graduate programs in science and math, and sexism and harassment within institutions drives even more women away (Rosser 2012). This leads to a pool of candidates for jobs in the field of data visualization that skews toward men. This gap is even wider for women of color in STEM fields (Johnson 2011). Further, people of color, due to institutional racism and historical economic oppression, tend to be less wealthy and subsequently, live in areas with poorer school systems. This leads to Latinx[vi] and Black children, particularly Latinx and Black girls, being undereducated in math and science. Furthermore, due to soaring higher education costs and the negative impacts of poor school systems, low numbers of Latinx and Black students are achieving higher education and careers in math and science fields (Funk 2018). An onlooker may see the lack of women, people from poorer backgrounds, and people of color trying to enter data visualization jobs as indicative of a lack of interest or ability in science and math, but a sociologist sees it as a direct result of historical and institutional oppressions.

Furthermore, our internalized biases have a large effect on how we treat others, the language we use, and the decisions we make (Greenwald 1995). Have you ever seen a woman colleague's ideas be ignored or devalued in favor of a man's similar or worse idea? Have you ever seen a person of color in your lab or office and briefly had the thought "what are they doing here?" or "they're probably only here because of affirmative action"? Have you ever wondered about the capability of colleagues with disabilities? Have you ever seen someone be given a raise or promotion over a candidate who was more qualified or deserving, but who was a woman, or a person of color, or had a disability? You probably have. These instances are not anomalies, nor are they isolated events of sexism or racism or ableism, they are a product of institutional social hierarchies. It would be a mistake to assume any field or social arena is free of these biases, regardless of how diverse it seems, or educated its population, or liberal its politics.

Next Steps

In the face of the bleak reality of the omnipresence of oppression I remain hopeful. Perhaps it is naïve, but I don't think you can be a good sociologist without a healthy dose of hope. It's our job to study the many and varied ways people are cruel to one another, and without the hope that the knowledge we glean through our studies could push back against this tide of suffering, we would surely break under its weight. We know from study after study that the more people come into contact with others unlike them, the less prejudiced they tend to be (Godsil 2013). That, in and of itself, is justification for increased efforts towards diversity. Diversity makes harboring prejudice harder.

Diversity is also a tool for harm reduction. If those in positions of privilege have trouble identifying when oppression happens, then a population made up primarily of those with privilege is more likely to perpetuate inequality than one with people of varying privileges and disprivileges. By making environments more welcoming and accessible to more people---the essence of diversity--- we bring more voices into the conversation. Furthermore, simply talking about these issues, bringing them into the light and examining our roles in them, can be

productive in and of itself. By acknowledging and understanding these power structures, we can work to do better. Who better to speak on the experiences of the oppressed than those who experience oppression? And who better to direct us toward a more equitable paradigm than those who have fought under the current inequality of this one? By listening to their voices, amplifying their ideas, and learning from their experiences, we can learn how to be less complicit in systems of oppression. Diversity is an essential stepping stone toward a more equitable society for us all.

Endnotes

[i] French philosopher and critic Michel Foucault argued that social control, or power, is omnipresent and not only acts on all individuals but is enacted by all individuals. In this way, all individuals are made both the object and the instrument of this "domination-observation." We are sensitized to deviance from the norm and self-surveil and surveil others to limit and punish deviance in order to maintain norms. This process naturalizes norms and constitutes norm-breakers as deviant, and therefore in need of correction or punishment. (Foucault, 1975)

[ii] In his book "The History of Sexuality," Foucault argues that power is "… produced from one moment to the next… Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And "Power," insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities." (Foucault, 1978)

[iii] Iris Marion Young's seminal essay "Five Faces of Oppression" divided oppression into five types, or faces: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural domination, and violence. Young's schema enables us to conceptualize the varied ways oppressive power systems structure our daily lives, institutions, and emotional landscapes. Not all oppressed groups experience all five faces of oppression, and certainly not in equal amounts. This flexibility allows us to place different forms of oppression that are often do not easily fit into the oppressed privilege dichotomy into a larger framework of power without losing nuance. (Young, 2013)

[iv] Critical Race Theory is a field of legal studies that explores the embedded nature of white supremacy in the United States legal system through the use of a critical understanding of history, a disruption of mythologies that obscure the racism built into our institutions, and the elevation of counter-hegemonic voices. Critical Race theorists assert that the legal system is far from neutral and in fact perpetuates racial inequality.

[v] The term "intersectionality" was first coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her paper "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Crenshaw, a founder and leading scholar of Critical Race Theory, used the term to describe the unique oppression of Black women in the United States and U.S. legal precedent. Since then, the term has into a broader social theory that explores the interrelatedness and compounding effect of axes of oppression. (Crenshaw, 1989)

[vi] Latinx is a gender-neutral term for people of Latin American culture and descent.

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