INDIVIDUALISM: OR, THE MYTH THAT EVERYTHING IS SOMEBODY'S FAULT

We live in a society that encourages us to think that the social world begins and ends with individuals. It's as if an organization or a society is just a collection of people, and everything that happens in it begins with what each person thinks, feels, and intends. If you understand people, the reasoning goes, then you also understand social life. It's an appealing way to think, because it's grounded in our experience as individuals, which is what we know best. But it's also misleading, because it boxes us into a narrow and distorted view of reality. In other words, it isn't true.

If we use individualism to explain sexism, for example, it's hard to avoid the idea that sexism exists simply because men *are* sexist—men have sexist feelings, beliefs, needs, and motivations that lead them to behave in sexist ways. If sexism produces evil consequences, it's because men *are* evil, hostile, and malevolent toward women. In short, everything bad in the world is seen as somebody's fault, which is why talk about privilege so often turns into a game of hot potato.

Individualistic thinking keeps us stuck in the trouble by making it so hard to talk about it. It encourages women, for example, to blame and distrust men. It sets men up to feel personally attacked if anyone mentions gender issues and to define those issues as a "women's problem." It also encourages men who don't think or behave in overtly sexist ways—the ones most likely to become part of the solution—to conclude that sexism has nothing to do with them, that it's just a problem for "bad" men. If well-intentioned men don't include themselves in the problem, they are unlikely to feel compelled to include themselves in the solution.

Individualistic thinking also makes us blind to the very existence of privilege, because privilege, by definition, has nothing to do with individuals, only with the social categories we wind up in. Individualistic thinking, however, assumes that everything has *only* to do with individuals and *nothing* to do with social categories, leaving no room to see, much less consider, the role of privilege.

The result of individualistic thinking is a kind of paralysis. Either people talk about sexism in the most superficial, unthreatening,

trivializing, and even silly way ("The Battle of the Sexes," *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*) or they don't talk about it at all.[2]

Breaking the paralysis begins with realizing that the individualistic model is wrong, that the social world consists of a lot more than individuals. We are always participating in something larger than ourselves—what sociologists call *social systems*—and systems are not collections of people. A university, for example, is a social system, and people participate in it. But the people aren't the university, and the university isn't the people. This means that to understand what happens in it, we have to look at both the university and how individual people participate in it. If patterns of male privilege exist in a society, for example, the reason is never just a matter of men's personalities, feelings, or intentions. We also have to understand how they participate in particular kinds of social systems, how this participation shapes their behavior, and the consequences it produces.

INDIVIDUALS, SYSTEMS, AND PATHS OF LEAST RESISTANCE

Contrary to the individualistic model, social life happens only as people participate in social systems—families, schools, workplaces, religious organizations, and so on. If we want to understand what happens in the world, including patterns of privilege and oppression, we have to understand the dynamic relation between people and social systems.

As Figure 2 shows, the relationship between systems and individuals has two parts. The arrow on the right side represents the idea that as we participate in social systems, we are shaped as individual people in two ways. The first is the process of socialization through which we learn to participate in social life. From families, schools, religion, and the mass media, through the examples set by parents, peers, coaches, teachers, and public figures—in short, from just about every direction we are exposed to ideas and images of the world and who we are in relation to it and other people. We learn to name things and people, to value one thing or kind of person above another, to distinguish what's considered "normal" and acceptable from what is not.

Through all this, we develop a sense of personal identity—including gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability status, and

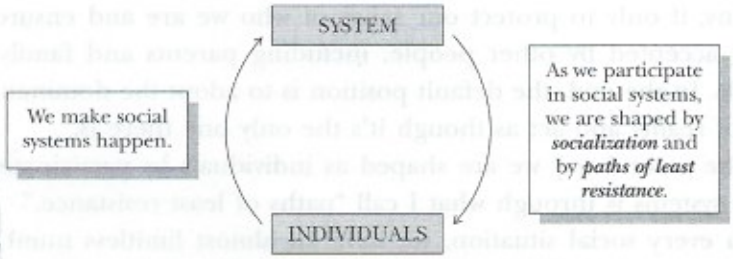

FIGURE 2. Individuals and Systems.

sexual orientation—and of how that identity positions us in relation to other people, especially in terms of inequalities of power. As I grew up watching movies and television, for example, the message came through loud and clear that straight white men are the most important people on the planet because they're the ones who supposedly do the most important things. They're the strong ones who build; the heroes who fight the good fight; the geniuses, writers, and artists who create; the bold leaders who govern; and even the evil—but always interesting—villains. Even God is gendered male and raced as white, just like me (but, in terms of gender, not my mother or my sister).

Among the many consequences of all these messages is to encourage dominant groups to feel a sense of entitlement in relation to subordinate groups. Men, for example, are encouraged to expect women to tend and take care of them, to defer to and support men no matter how badly men behave. In the typical episode of the television sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond,* for example, Ray Barone routinely behaves toward his wife, Debra, in ways that are insensitive, sexist, adolescent, and downright stupid, but by the end of each half hour we always find out why she puts up with it year after year—for some reason that's never made clear, she just loves the guy. This sends the message that it's reasonable for a heterosexual man to expect to "have" an intelligent and beautiful woman who will love him and stay with him in spite of his behaving badly toward her a great deal of the time.

Invariably, some of what we learn through socialization turns out not to be true and then we may have to deal with that. I say "may" because powerful forces encourage us to keep ourselves in a state of denial, to rationalize what we've learned in order to keep it safe from

scrutiny, if only to protect our sense of who we are and ensure our being accepted by other people, including parents and family and friends. In the end, the default position is to adopt the dominant version of reality and act as though it's the only one there is.

The second way we are shaped as individuals by participating in social systems is through what I call "paths of least resistance."

In every social situation, we have an almost limitless number of choices we might make. Sitting in a movie theater, for example, we could go to sleep, sing, eat dinner, undress, dance, take out a flashlight and read the newspaper, carry on loud conversations, dribble a basketball up and down the aisles—these are just a handful of the millions of behaviors people are capable of. All these possible paths vary in how much resistance we run into if we try to follow them. We discover this as soon as we choose paths we're not supposed to. Jump up and start singing, for example, and you'll quickly feel how much resistance other people put up to discourage you from going any further. By comparison, the path of least resistance is far more appealing, which is why it's the one we're most likely to choose.

The odds are loaded toward a path of least resistance in several ways. We often choose a path because it's the only one we see. When I get on an elevator, for example, I turn and face front along with everyone else. It rarely occurs to me to do it any other way, such as facing the rear. If I did, I'd soon feel how some paths bring on more social resistance than others.

I once tested this idea by walking to the rear of an elevator and standing with my back toward the door. As the seconds ticked by, I could feel people looking at me, wondering what I was up to and wanting me to turn around. I wasn't saying anything or doing anything to anyone. I was only standing there minding my own business. But that wasn't all that I was doing, for I was also violating a social norm that makes facing the door a path of least resistance. The path is there all the time—it's built in to riding the elevator as a social situation—but the path wasn't clear until I stepped onto a different one and felt the greater resistance rise up against it.

Similar dynamics operate around issues of privilege. In many corporations, for example, the only way to get promoted is to have a mentor or sponsor pick you out as a promising person and bring you

along by teaching you what you need to know and acting as an advocate who opens doors and creates opportunities. In a society that separates and privileges people in various ways, there aren't many opportunities to get comfortable with people across lines of difference. This means that senior managers will feel drawn to employees who resemble them, which usually means those who are white, straight, male, and nondisabled.

Managers who fit this profile probably won't realize they're following a path of least resistance that shapes their choice until they're asked to mentor an African American woman or someone else they don't resemble. The greater resistance toward the path of mentoring across difference may result from something as subtle as feeling "uncomfortable" in the other person's presence. But that's all it takes to make the relationship ineffective or to ensure that it never happens in the first place.[3] And as each manager follows the path to mentor and support those who most resemble them, patterns of privilege and oppression in the system as a whole are perpetuated, regardless of what people consciously feel or intend.

In other cases, people know alternative paths exist, but they stick to the path of least resistance anyway, because they're afraid of what will happen if they don't. Resistance can take many forms, ranging from mild disapproval to being fired from a job, beaten up, run out of town, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. When managers are told to lay off large numbers of workers, for example, they may hate the assignment and feel a huge amount of distress. But the path of *least* resistance is to do what they're told, because the alternative may be to lose their own jobs. To make it less unpleasant, they may use euphemisms like "downsizing" and "outplacement" to soften the painful reality of people losing a way to make a living. (Note in this example how the path of least resistance isn't necessarily an easy path to follow.)

In similar ways, a man may feel uncomfortable when he hears a friend tell a sexist joke and feel compelled to object in some way. But the path of least resistance in that situation is to go along and avoid the risk of being ostracized or ridiculed for challenging his friend and making *him* feel uncomfortable. The path of least resistance is to smile or laugh or just remain silent.

The other half of the relationship between individuals and systems (the left arrow in Figure 2) represents that individuals are the ones who make social systems happen. A college, for example, is a social system, but it doesn't actually happen until students and staff and faculty come together and perform their roles in relation to one another. Since people make systems happen, then people can also make systems happen differently, and when systems happen differently, the consequences are different as well. In 1960, for example, four African American students in Greensboro, North Carolina, entered a Woolworth's lunch counter that, like most such stores across the South, had a policy of not serving people of color. The four students sat down on the stools and asked to see menus, deliberately stepping off the path of least resistance in the hope of forever changing this aspect of the social system. In the days that followed, they were threatened and abused both physically and verbally, but they held their ground and were eventually joined by other students until the sit-in occupied the entire restaurant. Soon, similar actions began in Nashville, Tennessee, and other cities across the South. Within six months, lunch counters in twenty-six cities had been successfully desegregated as well as many other public facilities such as swimming pools and libraries and theaters.[4]

Social life, then, works through the relationship between individuals and social systems and cannot be understood by looking at individuals alone. To see what I mean, consider the game of Monopoly. I used to play Monopoly, but I don't anymore because I don't like the way I behave when I do. Like everyone else, as a Monopoly player I try to win by taking everything from the other players—all their money, all their property—which then forces them out of the game. The point of the game is to ruin everyone else and be the only one left in the end. When you win, you feel good, because you're *supposed* to feel good. Except that one day, I realized that I felt good about winning—about taking everything from everyone else—even when I played against my children, who were pretty young at the time. But there didn't seem to be much point to playing without trying to win, because winning is what the game is *about*. Why land on a property and not buy it, or own a property and not improve it, or have other players land on your property and not collect the rent? So I stopped playing.

And it worked, because the fact is that I don't behave in such greedy ways when I'm not playing Monopoly, even though it's still me, Allan, in either case. So what's all this greedy behavior about? Do we behave in greedy ways simply because we *are* greedy? In a sense, the answer is yes in that greed is part of the human repertoire of possible motivations, just like compassion, altruism, and fear. But how, then, do I explain the absence of such behavior when I'm not playing Monopoly? Clearly, the answer has to include both me as an individual human being who's capable of making all kinds of choices *and* something about the social situation in which I make those choices. It's not one or the other; it's both in relation to each other.

If we think of Monopoly as a social system—as "something larger than ourselves that we participate in"—then we can see how people and systems come together in a dynamic relationship that produces the patterns of social life, including problems surrounding privilege and oppression. People are indisputably the ones who make social systems happen. If no one plays Monopoly, it's just a box full of stuff with writing inside the cover. When people open it up and identify themselves as players, however, Monopoly starts to *happen*. This makes people very important, but we shouldn't confuse that with Monopoly itself. We aren't Monopoly and Monopoly isn't us.

People make Monopoly happen, but *how?* How do we know what to do? How do we choose from the millions of things that, as human beings, we *could* do at any given moment? The answer is the other half of the dynamic relation between individuals and systems. As we sit around the table, we make Monopoly happen from one minute to the next. But our participation in the game also shapes how *we* happen as people—what we think and feel and do. This doesn't mean that systems control us in a rigid and predictable way, as if we were robots or puppets on a string. Instead, systems load the odds in certain directions by laying down paths of least resistance.

Note that the individualistic model cannot explain what's going on, because it would argue that people behave in greedy ways simply because people *are* greedy. But this can't account for the fact that I don't behave in such greedy ways *when I'm not playing Monopoly.* To understand such patterns of behavior, it's not enough to focus just on people's thoughts and feelings, intentions and personalities, because

people can and do behave very differently from one social situation to another. When I'm not playing Monopoly, I don't behave in greedy ways, but when I am playing Monopoly, I try to win as much as the next person. Same Allan in each case, but very different behavior and with very different consequences.

What we experience as social life happens through a complex dynamic between systems—families, schools, workplaces, communities, entire societies—and the choices people make as they participate in them and help make them happen. How we experience the world and ourselves, our sense of other people, and the ongoing reality of the systems themselves all arise, take shape, and happen through this dynamic. In this way, social life produces a variety of consequences, including privilege and oppression. To understand that and what we can do to change it, we have to see how systems are organized in ways that encourage people to follow paths of least resistance. The existence of those paths and whether we choose to follow them are keys to what creates and perpetuates all the forms that privilege and oppression can take.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE INVOLVED IN PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION

Individuals and systems are connected to each other through a dynamic relationship. If we use this relationship as a model for thinking about the world and ourselves, it's easier to bring problems such as sexism and ableism out into the open and talk about them. In particular, it's easier to see the problems in relation to us, and to see ourselves in relation to them.

If we think the world is made up of just individuals, then a white woman who's told she's "involved" in racism is going to think you're telling her she's a racist person who harbors ill will toward people of color. She's using an individualistic model of the world that limits her to interpreting words like *racist* as personality flaws. Individualism divides the world up into different kinds of people—good people and bad, racists and nonracists, "good guys" and sexist pigs. It encourages us to think of the isms as diseases that infect people and make them sick. And so we look for a "cure" that will turn diseased, flawed individuals into

healthy, "good" ones, or at least isolate them so that they can't infect others. And if we can't cure them, then we can at least try to control their behavior.

But what about everyone else? How do we see *them* in relation to privilege and oppression? What about the vast majority of whites, for example, who tell survey interviewers that they aren't racist and have nothing against people of color? Or what about the majority of men who say they favor an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution? From an individualistic perspective, if you aren't consciously or openly prejudiced or hurtful, then you aren't part of the problem. You might show disapproval of "bad" people and even try to help out the people who are hurt by them. Beyond that, however, the trouble doesn't have anything to do with you so far as you can see. If your feelings and thoughts and outward behavior are good, then *you* are good, and that's all that matters.

Unfortunately, that isn't all that matters. There's more, because patterns of oppression and privilege are rooted in systems that we all participate in and make happen. Those patterns are built into paths of least resistance that people feel drawn to follow every day, regardless of whether they think about where they lead or the consequences they produce. When male professors take more seriously students who look like themselves, for example, they don't have to be self-consciously sexist in order to help perpetuate patterns of male privilege. They don't have to be bad people in order to play a "game" that produces oppressive consequences. It's the same as when people play Monopoly—it always ends with someone winning and everyone else losing, *because that's how the game is set up to work as a system.* The only way to change the outcome is to change how we see and play the game and, eventually, the *system itself* and its paths of least resistance. If we have a vision of what we want social life to look like, we have to create paths that lead in that direction.

Of course there are people in the world who have hatred in their hearts—such as neo-Nazi skinheads who make a sport of harassing and killing people of color or gays or lesbians—and it's important not to minimize the damage they do. Paradoxically, however, even though they cause a lot of trouble, they aren't the key to understanding privilege or doing something about it. They are participating in something

larger than themselves that, among other things, steers them toward certain targets for their rage. It's no accident that their hatred is rarely directed at privileged groups but instead at those who are culturally devalued and excluded. Hate-crime perpetrators may have personality disorders that bend them toward victimizing *someone,* but their choice of whom to victimize isn't part of a mental illness. That's something they have to learn, and culture is everyone's most powerful teacher. In choosing targets, they follow paths of least resistance built into a society that everyone participates in, that everyone makes happen, regardless of how they feel or what they intend.

So, if I notice that someone plays Monopoly in a ruthless way, it's a mistake to explain that simply in terms of his or her personality. I also have to ask how a system like Monopoly rewards ruthless behavior more than other games we might play. I have to ask how it creates conditions that make such behavior appear to be the path of least resistance, normal and unremarkable. And since I'm playing the game, too, I'm one of the people who make it happen as a system, and its paths must affect me, too.

My first reaction might be to deny that I follow that path. I'm not a ruthless person or anything close to it. But this misses the key difference between systems and the people who participate in them: We don't have to be ruthless *people* in order to support or follow paths of least resistance that lead to behavior with ruthless *consequences.* After all, we're all trying to win, because that's the point of the game. However gentle and kind I am as I take your money when you land on my Boardwalk with its four houses, take it I will and gladly, too. "Thank you," I say in my most sincerely unruthless tone, or even "Sorry," as I drive you out of the game by taking your last dollar and your mortgaged properties. Me, ruthless? Not at all. I'm just playing the game the way it's supposed to be played. And even if I don't try hard to win, the mere fact that I play the game supports its existence and makes it possible, especially if I remain silent about the consequences it produces. Just my going along makes the game appear normal and acceptable, which reinforces the paths of least resistance for everyone else.

This is how most systems work and how most people participate in them. It's also how systems of privilege work. Good people with good intentions make systems happen in ways that produce all kinds

of injustice and suffering for people in culturally devalued and excluded groups. Most of the time, people don't even know the paths are there in the first place, and this is why it's important to raise awareness that everyone is always following them in one way or another. If you weren't following a path of least resistance, you'd certainly know it, because you'd be on an alternative path with greater resistance that would make itself felt. In other words, if you're not going along with the system, it won't be long before people notice and let you know it. All you have to do is show up someplace wearing "inappropriate" clothes to see how quickly resistance can form around alternative paths.

The trouble around privilege and oppression is so pervasive, so long-standing, so huge in its consequences for so many millions of people that it can't be written off as the misguided doings of a small percentage of people with personality problems. The people who get labeled as racists or homophobes, for example, are all following racist, heterosexist paths of least resistance that are built into the entire society.

In a way, "bad people" are like ruthless Monopoly players who are doing just what the game calls for even if their "style" is a bit extreme. Such extremists may be the ones who grab the headlines, but they don't have enough power to create and sustain trouble of this magnitude. The trouble appears in the daily routines of every workplace, every school and university, every government agency, every community. It involves every major kind of social system, and since systems don't exist without the involvement of people, there's no way to escape being involved in the trouble that comes out of them. If we participate in systems the trouble comes out of, and if those systems exist only through our participation, then this is enough to involve us in the trouble itself.

Reminders of this reality are everywhere. I see it, for example, every time I look at the label in a piece of clothing. I just went upstairs to my closet and noted where each of my shirts was made. Although each carries a U.S. brand name, only three were made here. The rest were made in the Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, Taiwan, Macao, Singapore, or Hong Kong. And although each cost me twenty to forty dollars, it's a good bet that the people who actually made them—

primarily women—were paid pennies for their labor performed under terrible conditions that can resemble slavery.

The only reason people exploit workers in such horrible ways is to make money in a capitalist system. To judge from the contents of my closet, that clearly includes some of *my* money. By itself, that fact doesn't make me a bad person, because I certainly don't intend people to suffer for the sake of my wardrobe. But it does mean I'm involved in their suffering because I participate in a system that produces it. As someone who helps make the system happen, however, I can also be a part of the solution.

But isn't the difference I could make a tiny one? The question makes me think of the devastating floods of 1993 along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The news was full of powerful images of people from all walks of life working feverishly side by side to build dikes to hold back the raging waters that threatened their communities. Together, they filled and placed thousands of sandbags. When the waters receded, much had been lost, but a great deal had been saved as well. I wonder how it felt to be one of those people. I imagine they were proud of their effort and experienced a satisfying sense of solidarity with the people they'd worked with. The sandbags each individual personally contributed were the tiniest fraction of the total, but each felt part of the group effort and was proud to identify with the consequences it produced. They didn't have to make a big or even measurable difference to feel involved.

It works that way with the good things that come out of people pulling together in all the systems that make up social life. It also works that way with the bad things, with each sandbag adding to the problem instead of the solution. To perpetuate privilege and oppression, we don't even have to do anything consciously to support it. Just our silence is crucial for ensuring its future, for the simple fact is that no system of privilege can continue to exist without most people choosing to remain silent about it. If most heterosexuals spoke out about heterosexism, for example, or if most nondisabled people came out of their closet of silence and stood openly against ableism, it would be a critical first step toward revolutionary change. But the vast majority of "good" people are silent on these issues, and it's easy for others to read their silence as support.

As long as we participate in social systems, we don't get to choose whether to be involved in the consequences they produce. We're involved simply through the fact that we're here. As such, we can only choose *how* to be involved, whether to be just part of the problem or also to be part of the solution. That's where our power lies, and also our responsibility.