Thinking Sociologically About Inequality

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“[…] Inequality is perhaps the most consequential feature of our society. It matters for every aspect of our individual lives: comfort, safety, health, education, stress, dignity, pleasure, longevity, and the opportunity to fulfill our potentials. It also matters for our collective life, since inequality affects the workings of democracy, community, and relations between nations. So if there is any feature of the social world that deserves serious analytic attention, it’s inequality. Not only is it at the center of things, but it matters, we could say, right down to our bones.

[…] One way to study inequality is by looking at how much there is. This is certainly an important kind of study to undertake. We need to know whether there’s a lot of inequality or a little, as well as who possesses how much of what. […] But supposing that we observe a significant degree of inequality, what then? It seems that the next questions should be how this condition arose and why it persists.

Questions about the origins of inequality are historical ones. To answer them, we need to study the past. By doing so, we learn that how things are now being not the way they’ve always been, and that we got to where we are today through an understandable […] sequence of human actions. We can then ask, What’s going on today that perpetuates inequality? These are sociological questions.

Studying the reproduction of inequality [or why inequality persists] is made difficult by two things: the efforts of those who benefit from inequality to obscure what’s going on and our own involvement in the processes whereby [inequality] occurs.

Because inequality often originates in ignoble [or immoral or harmful] practices (theft, extortion, exploitation), it makes sense that those who benefit from it discourage inspection of those practices. […] They prefer to let those practices fade from memory, to keep them out of sight, or to cover them with justifying rhetoric. [They] also tend to amass power that can be used to hide what they’re up to. […] And because it can be hard to get a clear view of what’s going on, it can also be hard to convince others that something fishy is going on.

The other obstacle to seeing how inequality is reproduced is our own involvement […] [so] it’s good to “get some distance on it” as the saying goes. This means setting aside strong feelings at least temporarily, so we can distinguish between what’s really the case and what we would like to be the case. The stronger we feel about something, the harder it is to do this. It’s even harder if cherished ideas about ourselves are involved.

For example, suppose we wanted to know how some people manage to “get ahead” or, as sociologists say, “achieve upward mobility”. We might begin by listing those things that matter for getting ahead. […] It’s a sure thing that someone will put aspirations [the strength of someone’s desire to get ahead] on the list. With some effort, […] we could then determine whether aspirations matter and if they do, how much they matter relative to other things [such as
class background, access to resources, opportunities, or luck]. [It turns out that aspirations do matter but sometimes not as much as these other factors.]

The difficulty however, is that a lot of people […] want to believe this hypothesis so badly that they can’t think straight about it. They want to believe it not only because they’ve heard it from parents, teachers and other adults, but because of how it makes them feel. It makes some people feel that they’ve got a chance to get ahead; it makes others feel that they deserve what they’ve already got; and it makes others feel okay with not challenging inequality. None of these feelings has any bearing on the truth […], but such feelings can make it hard to see what’s true and what’s not.

To put the point in a nutshell: it can be hard to understand the reproduction of inequality […] especially if [it] threatens comforting beliefs about society and ourselves. The irony is that when we avoid taking an honest look at these matters, we are, in that act of avoidance, helping to perpetuate inequality. It’s like wandering a dark cave but refusing to light a candle because the light might reveal scary things we’d rather not see. […] A bit of irritation is not a bad thing if it sparks thought and conversation.”