



Seeing Connections

One time a student said, "I believe in tradition and think that in the home the man should be dominant." Earlier this student had said that she wanted to be a corporate attorney, so I asked if she expected to be treated as an equal at work. "Absolutely," she said. Then I asked, "Do you think it might be hard for men to see you as an equal at work if they are used to treating women as subordinates at home?" She looked puzzled, but another student saw my point and said to her, "Think about your husband. If he's used to you being subordinate at home, that's what he's going to expect from the women he works with." Another student said, "If you raise boys in a home where a man is dominant, they'll expect to be dominant themselves when they go out into the world, and that's going to hurt other women." Another student tried to sum it up: "If women settle for inequality at home, they're never going to get equality in work or politics."

Part of being sociologically mindful is seeing how our actions in one part of life are the causes and consequences of what happens elsewhere. In the example above, the first student didn't see how accepting inequality at home could keep her and other women from achieving equality at work. She was not sufficiently aware of how home life and work life are connected, such that her actions in one realm could produce unintended consequences in the other.

Here is another example. For various reasons, some people don't want to pay taxes to support programs that help the poor. And so they vote for politicians who say they will lower taxes by cutting spending on welfare, education, public housing, and school-lunch programs. You might or might not think that cutting aid to the poor is a mean and selfish policy. But without judging it in those terms, we can ask whether it is mindful or not.

The first thing we should note is that the Federal Reserve Board sets interest rates so that unemployment stays, according to official figures, at about 5 percent (it is really about twice as high). This

means that there will be millions of people without jobs, through no fault of their own. If there are not enough jobs to go around, and public aid is eliminated, what is the result likely to be? Probably more crime, illness, and despair—all of which have costs: higher taxes to pay for more police and prisons; higher rates for health insurance to cover the cost of emergency-room care for the poor; higher rates for insurance to cover the costs of more burglaries; greater resentment and fear between the poor and the middle class. So where is the savings? Because of how our society works, there would probably be no savings, and in many ways there would be higher costs and more suffering for everyone, except the very rich.

Sociological mindfulness does not tell us how to make tax policy. But if we pay attention to how different parts of society are connected, we are less likely to make wasteful and destructive choices about how to collect and use our common wealth. Being sociologically mindful, we can see that when we pay less for one kind of thing, we might be creating conditions that will force us, eventually, to pay more for another.

Sociological mindfulness means taking a larger view of things. For example, in the case of taxes and public aid, it would be wise to look at how much of our federal budget is spent on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, which is commonly known as welfare (less than 2%) and how much is spent on the military (30–50%, depending on what is counted as military). We might thus see that there is plenty of wealth to provide food, housing, education, health care, and so on to all who need it—if only we did not spend billions of dollars a year to build weapons.

While it is sometimes helpful to study one problem at a time, it is also important to see how problems are connected. Consider the example of failure in school. Why do so many children and teenagers do poorly in school or drop out? Only part of an answer can be found by looking at what happens inside schools. To understand why students do badly in school, we must look at how schools are connected to the larger society.

Students who are hungry or tired probably will not do well in school. Why are they hungry or tired? Perhaps because their families can't afford adequate food and quiet housing. And why is this? Perhaps because there aren't enough good jobs to go around. And why is

this? Perhaps because employers want a high rate of unemployment to keep wages down and profits up. A lack of jobs can also dampen motivation. If school is boring and doesn't seem likely to result in a job, why stay? To make another connection, school might be boring because teachers are underpaid, overworked, and worn out. Why is this? Perhaps because so much money is spent on machines for killing, instead of on education.

The problem of failure in school is more complicated than I have made it out to be. But that is precisely the point: The problem is complicated because it arises out of a web of connections between schools, students, teachers, families, corporations, and government. To understand the problem, in a complete way, we must trace out these connections. Simply attributing the problem to something inside schools or, as some do, to a deficiency inside students, is not very helpful. The point of tracing out connections is to find the roots of whatever problem we are trying to understand and solve.

Consider again the link between equality at work and equality in the home. Women cannot compete as men's equals at work if they are doing a second shift of cleaning, laundry, and childcare at home. A man whose wife does these chores for him, or a man who doesn't do his share, is freer to devote himself to a job. As this freedom translates into higher earnings, a man expects and gains more power in the home because his job becomes the chief source of family income. The connection now runs two ways: A little extra power at home, arising out of old ideas about gender, can give a man an edge at work, which can in turn, over time, amplify his power in the home. Seeing things in this way implies that to reduce inequality between women and men we must tackle inequalities in different but deeply connected realms of life.

Awareness of Unintended Consequences

Perhaps you are thinking, "The household inequality problem is not so complicated. If two people are busy pursuing their careers and are doing well, they can hire a maid." This is a good example of a solution that is not a solution, as we can see if we are mindful of how unintended consequences can come about. To see these consequences we must first see connections.

There is clearly a connection between a couple's income and the act of hiring a maid. Only people who have high incomes can afford to do this. There is also a connection between the lack of job opportunities and the availability of maids. If there were lots of jobs offering good pay and working conditions, few people would choose to clean others' toilets for a living. These are obvious connections; others are harder to see.

To see these connections we must note first that most maids are women, and, second, that when a couple hires a maid, it is usually because the woman in the couple has decided she does not want to do so much housework. This situation typically arises, as suggested earlier, because the man in the couple resists doing a fair share of the work. If he did his share, chances are that a maid would not be needed.

So what is going on here? Is any real change being made? Not much. There is no challenge to the idea that housework is primarily a woman's responsibility. It is just a different woman who ends up doing the work. The couple simply uses some of its income to put the burden of inequality on the back of a poorer woman. The result may be a little more equality in housework within the couple, but inequality in society as a whole is reinforced. This is doubly true if the couple is white and the maid is not.

The situation is not much different if the housecleaner is a man. In this case the idea that housework is a woman's responsibility is less obviously reinforced (though it is still typically the woman in a couple who hires a housecleaner). But what is still reinforced is the idea that inequality is okay. Once again a person with few job opportunities cleans the toilets of others, who are then freer to do more enriching things. The message conveyed by such an arrangement is this: "I am too busy making money and having fun to be bothered with cleaning up my own messes. Other people, those who have less money, should do that work for me."

We can see here a connection to a set of ideas that make inequality seem acceptable. One such idea is that a person with money is entitled to have others do his or her dirty work. To use such an idea, if only implicitly, to justify hiring a housecleaner affirms the rightness of inequality. It is as if to say, "Wealth determines human worth, and it is thus okay for a person of my wealth and worth to hire a person of lesser worth to clean up after me." Parents who hire a housecleaner

teach this principle to their children, who learn that people who are rich enough do not have to take responsibility for cleaning up the messes they make.

Men can use these same ideas to argue that they should be free from doing dirty work and have more time for “serious” work, and for play, because, after all, they make more money and are thus worth more than others, usually women, who earn less. The connection here is between the perpetuation of two seemingly different kinds of inequality, one having to do with economics, the other with gender. Both kinds of inequality are connected because a similar belief—about what determines the relative worth of human beings—underlies and supports them.

Sociological mindfulness brings these connections to light. What we are trying to see is how our actions, and the ideas we use to justify them, can have intended and unintended consequences because of how the social world works. If our society were not so fraught with inequalities, the meaning and consequences of hiring a housecleaner might be different.

Analyzing Moral Problems

The need to be mindful of connections increases when the problem at hand evokes strong feelings. Abortion is a good example. To see the point I will try to make about sociological mindfulness, it will help if you can set aside, for a time, your feelings about this issue. Try to shift into an analytic frame of mind.

Opponents of abortion believe that a fetus is an unborn child and that abortion is akin to murder. Others believe that until a fetus can survive outside the womb, it is part of a woman's body. In this view, abortion is the exercise of a woman's right to dominion over her body and her life. A point that is often missed is that abortion is not just about the rights of individual women to control their bodies. If we are mindful of how our society works, we can see that there is more at stake: Restricting abortion makes it unlikely that women will ever achieve equality with men.

If women are forced to be mothers, they cannot compete as equals with men who need never worry that pregnancy, or the obligation to care for a child, will impede their striving for success in work and

politics. A lack of freedom to decide whether to give birth and care for children puts women at a disadvantage. Forcing women to be mothers by restricting abortion also reinforces the idea that being a mother is a woman's most important role, implying that it is best if women make babies and homes rather than laws or economic policy.

There is another connection to see here. If women cannot get safe, legal abortions, they will get them under unsafe conditions, risking injury and death. This has always been the case when abortion is restricted. What this means is that not only women's wishes, but their safety, are ignored when abortion is restricted. Such a policy thus conveys messages about women's role and worth. It says, in effect, that women should not resist motherhood and that women are less important to society than the fetuses they carry.

Denying women the option of ending a pregnancy is connected to inequality in another way. A policy of restricting abortion implies that women are incapable of making wise choices in these personal matters of life and death. If that is so, then women are surely incapable of dealing with the larger matters of life and death that concern men, matters such as whether to wage wars and kill millions of fully grown people. Restricting abortion thus not only impedes women's ability to compete with men; it also reinforces the idea that women are not men's moral and intellectual equals when it comes to dealing with the vital affairs of society.

Perhaps this sounds like an argument for abortion. Not necessarily. It is an attempt to practice sociological mindfulness with regard to the abortion issue, so as to see more of what is at stake. This way of seeing does not inevitably lead to the conclusion that abortion is right. You might believe, for example, that abortion is an undesirable practice because it reinforces a view of inconvenient life as disposable and that such an attitude will have harmful consequences in the long run.

Differences in values may also lead to different conclusions. You might believe, for example, that a zygote or a fetus deserves no less moral consideration than a fully grown woman and that restricting women's freedom is a reasonable price to pay for protecting a fetus's "right to life." If so, then you may think it is fine to restrict or outlaw abortion. But to arrive at any sound and responsible conclusions either

way, one must be mindful of the connections between abortion and women's freedom and equality.

Sociological mindfulness can help us see more of what must be taken into account in seeking solutions to moral problems. This is mostly a matter of trying to see connections between our acts and their consequences, in light of how the social world works. The example of abortion shows that being mindful in this way requires a willingness to look with some detachment at how the social world works, whether we like it or not. This does not mean ignoring our hearts when making moral judgments. It means also using our heads.

Everywhere a Sign, Every Sign a Doorway

The social world is full of signs called indexes. Like all signs, indexes point to, refer to, or represent something else. Learning to see and read indexes is part of learning to be sociologically mindful. To read or interpret an index sociologically is to see its connection to some aspect of how the social world works.

Imagine, for example, an unpaved road in an area where many poor people live. The road is an index. It points to the poverty and powerlessness of the people who live nearby. That is an interpretation, of course; we would want to check to see if it was true. But it is a plausible interpretation, given how our society works. We know that people usually like to have nice, paved roads and that officials who control road-building are usually more responsive to people who have money. The unpaved road could thus also be seen as an index of how government works in this country. If we know how to read it, the road can point us to many other things.

Some indexes attach to people. For example, we learn to read cars, clothes, and houses as indexes of a person's wealth. We learn to read behavior as an index of character. We can do this because we have ideas about how society works and why people act as they do. These ideas allow us to see connections between indexes and other conditions. In general, the more such ideas we possess, the more connections we can see. If people don't see the same connections, it is probably because they have different ideas about how the world works.

Sociological mindfulness does not tell us precisely how an *index* is connected to some other condition. Nor does it tell us what is an index of what. Being sociologically mindful simply means trying to see how conditions, customs, and events might be signs that point to other things. We can do this by making a habit of asking, "What does this condition, custom, or event *mean*? What other realities does it *point to*? What does it *say* about the nature of our society?" The answers we arrive at depend on our knowledge of how the world works.

Non-Obvious Indexes

Most people learn to read the behavior, appearance, and possessions of individuals as indexes to their character and wealth. This is a basic interpretive skill. But sociological mindfulness can take us further. Things that once didn't seem meaningful are examined more closely and probed for their meaning. In this sense, sociological mindfulness amplifies our powers of interpretation.

Here are examples of arrangements, customs, and conditions that can be read as indexes. My interpretations are based on my understanding of how the social world works. Your ideas about how the world works might be different. If so, some of my interpretations will seem strange. That's fine. You do not have to interpret a sign the same way I do to appreciate that it is a sign. What matters is forming the habit of seeing parts of the social world as indexes.

I have already mentioned the vast share of our common wealth that is spent on tools for killing and on training people to use these tools. You might think this situation is atrocious, merely unfortunate, or quite all right. For the moment it doesn't matter. I ask you just to think about what it means that we use so much of our common wealth to kill or prepare to kill other human beings. What does this say about our society? What does it say about us as a people?

I think it says that we live in a society where the rich and powerful use a large part of our common wealth to become richer and more powerful by creating well-equipped armies to control workers, gain access to raw materials, and keep trade markets open. It says that we live in a world where many people feel they have no choice but to violently resist oppression and exploitation. It says we live in a world where some people feel entitled to exploit others, as long as they

have the power to do so. I think it also says that most of us are afraid to protest the use of our common wealth to create a huge apparatus of violence.

"Military spending" could be read differently. You might not agree that it points to what I think it does. Again, that is fine. What matters is not taking it for granted but instead seeing it as an indicator and a consequence of how our society works. Being sociologically mindful, we look at "military spending" as a doorway to other social realities. Once the door is opened, we can trace out connections and talk about what else they might lead us to see.

Here is another example. Today the conditions in many of our inner cities are wretched. Many industries have moved to more profitable locations. Good jobs are thus scarce and unemployment is high. Because so many people cannot find steady work, inner-city housing is deteriorating, drug use and street crime are rampant, rates of infant mortality are extremely high, schools are in bad shape, and good health care is hard to find. Many of the people living in these areas are members of racial minority groups.

In this case we could say that conditions in inner-city areas are indexes of how our economy works. When it is more profitable to move a factory elsewhere, that is what will be done, regardless of the effects on those who are left behind. But there is a different kind of index that appears in this situation. We can see it if we look beyond the cities themselves. Consider how most white Americans react to conditions in inner cities.

What is the reaction? The most visible reaction is to blame the poor, insist that they work harder, and cut off public aid. But the most widespread reaction among white Americans is disregard. The majority of white Americans are not demanding that more be done to help people in inner cities. Most white Americans seem to wish the problem would just go away.

What is the meaning of this lack of compassion? What does it say about white Americans? It can be read as an index of racism, although I think it points to more than that. It also points to white Americans' insecurity about their own economic status; to their desire to believe that their achievements are of their own doing; and to their feelings of powerlessness when it comes to solving problems that require generous use of our common wealth, over which we do not exercise

democratic control. In this case the index is *action not taken*. If we are sociologically mindful, we can see that the *absence* of something can be a sign, too.

Social Organization As an Index

The ways we organize ourselves to accomplish tasks can also be read as indexes. In other words, our customary ways of doing things encode messages about us; they can be read as signs of what we value and what we fear. Consider, for example, our ways of schooling.

We give grades to individuals and insist that individuals do their own work. We separate school from home life, make teachers act as surrogate parents and bosses, break the school day into blocks of time, give students breaks and vacations, make students follow rules of order (raise your hand if you want to speak!), and punish students for violating these rules. What do these practices say about us? I think they say that we, or at least the people who organize schools, are mainly concerned with turning students into good workers.

Schooling does more than transmit knowledge and basic skills. Our *form* of schooling teaches students to be competitive individualists, to accept hierarchy and authority, to follow rules, and to get up every day and do meaningless work. Students who learn to accept this regimen adapt quickly to the world of work, which is organized in much the same way. If school were organized differently—with less hierarchy and authoritarian control, less regimentation and regulation by the clock, less competition, and more respect for students' real concerns—then students might not adapt so well to the demands of employers.

Do we really value creativity, independent moral judgment, and critical thinking as much as we say? The answer encoded in our form of schooling is "no." Even though some people, including many teachers, may value different kinds of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind than do employers, most schooling is organized to create good workers, rather than artists, social critics, and political activists. This fact can be seen as an index of the power of employers, and of business in general, to influence how we conduct seemingly non-economic activities in our society.

Let me suggest some other things that can be seen as indexes. You can try to read these on your own. Ask what they mean, what

other realities they point to, and what they say about the nature of our society.

- The popularity of violent movies and sports
- The small percentage (1–3%) of chief executive officers of Fortune 500 firms who are women
- The refusal of TV stations to run ads for condoms even in the midst of an AIDS epidemic
- The intense interest many people have in the lives of actors and other celebrities
- The format of television news programs
- The continuing widespread belief in religion, even in a scientific age
- The use of mood-altering drugs, such as alcohol and nicotine, by many middle-class people
- The way in which political candidates “debate” and respond to each other during campaigns
- The percentage (45%) of Americans who do not read books

You could see these items as mere curiosities and not give them another thought. Practicing sociological mindfulness, however, you can see them as doorways behind which lie interesting and complex connections to other aspects of the social world.

Connections to the Past

If you care to muse about the past, or about its connections to the present, you need not go to a museum. You are already in one. The past is congealed all around us. Our clothes, the language we speak, the houses we live in, the ideas we embrace, and the customs we practice are all bequeathed to us from the past. We do change these things, of course; but we do not start from scratch.

When we are sociologically mindful, we try to see how the past delivers us into the present moment, and what the present moment tells us about the past. We could call this “trying to see historical connections,” or “looking backward to try to see how things today got to be what they are.” It is like seeing things in the present as indexes to the past, although things in the present do not merely point to or refer to the past; they carry it with them.

This seems most obvious if we consider material objects, such as clothing and buildings. The clothes we wear and the ways we wear them are clearly matters of tradition. It is the same with our buildings and the ways we build them. Food is a good example, too—at every meal the past is served up to us. These solid objects seem to hold the past firmly in place. We can look at them and say, “This is how it was done long ago. And see? We are still doing it much the same way today.” In these instances, evidence of the past is plain to see.

Knowledge itself is the past living in our minds and habits. We know what we know and do what we do—today—because of what others learned before us, thousands of years ago. This is evident right now, even as I am writing and you are (somewhat later) reading. Our language—each word, each grammatical rule—connects us not only to each other, but also to a common human past.

The idea that the present is connected to the past might seem obvious. Yet people often fail to see historical connections, sometimes because they don't want to. For example, many white people in the United States will say, “Racism is a problem of the past. Discrimination is illegal now. Everyone is on an equal footing. So we don't need affirmative action or special programs for racial minorities.” Statements like these erase connections to the past—as if all the power and privileges white people accumulated while enslaving blacks for hundreds of years do not exist.

Here is another example. In the past, women gave up their family names upon getting married and took the last name of their new husband. This practice served to indicate that a woman, as a piece of property, had been transferred from one male (the father) to another (the new husband). Men did not change their names. Men were owners, not property.

Today we reject the idea of women as property, yet this name-changing practice persists. Why? Perhaps because many young women do not see the connection between this practice and the past. If so, they fail to see the significance of changing their names. They fail to see that giving up their names—when few men would consider doing such a thing—helps perpetuate the same idea on which an older form of patriarchy was based. The idea is that a woman's identity is determined by her relationship to a man. If we want to affirm the

value and equality of women, it would seem wise to reject practices that keep an oppressive past alive in the present.

The example of name-changing suggests how to be sociologically mindful about connections between past and present. It is not enough to say, "The past shapes how we think and act today." That is an important recognition, but we must go further. Being sociologically mindful, we should ask, "How did this practice originate? What problems did it solve for whom?" Those questions can be answered only by looking into the past. To seek answers is not merely to satisfy curiosity about times gone by. It is to try to better understand what is going on now.

Deepening the Present

Being sociologically mindful of connections between past and present can also lead us to ask better questions about the present. For example, we can ask—about any traditional idea, custom, or social arrangement—"Does it serve the same purpose today as it did originally? Has it become dysfunctional in some way? If so, why has this tradition been preserved? Who benefits from carrying on this tradition—the same people as in the past? How has the tradition been changed over the years? Why?"

Asking these kinds of questions makes the present more complex and interesting. Finding answers can also help us to appreciate the constructedness of the social world. By looking at connections between the past and present, we see that what people intend to construct, once upon a time, can vary greatly from what comes about over time. Looking backward also helps us see how *contingency* (a peculiar mix of fateful circumstances) affects the making of the social world.

Earlier I used the example of slavery and the consolidation of political and economic power by whites. I said that this past shapes our present and that it is foolish and wrong to deny it. But there is still room for argument and for the weighing of evidence about exactly how this past shapes which parts of our present. Undertaking this kind of inquiry and conversation is part of being sociologically mindful.

SOON
FLAK

Another way to be mindful of the past in the present involves listening to others here and now. Specifically, we should be mindful of the *meaning* of the past and the *feelings* these meanings evoke. The question is not whether people's ideas about the past are correct. Rather, the question is, "How do people's feelings about the past, whatever those feelings might be based on, affect how they behave in the present?"

Consider again the example of slavery. We might analyze how it has affected the balance of power between blacks and whites in the United States today. That is an important kind of analysis to do. But we must also consider the meaning of slavery as a part of our past. We must consider what this part of our past means to people today. We must take these meanings into account if we want to understand the present, because these meanings affect how blacks and whites get along. If my people were enslaved by yours for hundreds of years, and then you tell me, less than 150 years later, "Oh, that's no big deal, and it certainly doesn't have any bearing on the present," you can be sure that this will affect my feelings toward you.

Understanding how people define the past and how they feel about it is part of being sociologically mindful of connections between past and present. It is to see another way in which the past lives on inside us and affects what goes on between us. Here is one more example.

One time a few of us were talking about Atlanta, Georgia. We were all going to a conference there very soon. Everyone spoke well of the city. One person said, "It's amazing how they rebuilt the city after it burned in the Civil War." Another person in the group, a woman from Georgia, then said, "Honey, Atlanta didn't burn in the Civil War; it *was* burned." She wanted to remind us that a horrible event didn't simply happen, but that a northern army had savaged a part of her home state. Her remark surprised me, since I had grown up in the North and had never met anyone with strong feelings about the Civil War. Our interaction on this occasion was affected by feelings arising from the meaning given to events that had happened over 120 years before.

We can argue about whether it is good or bad, useful or not, to hold onto certain parts of the past. But that is a different matter. The point here is that we can't deal well with others without being mindful of how the meanings they give to the past affect the meanings they give to things in the present. We must also be mindful of how people

learn about the past and come to define it as they do. To know these things we must connect a person to his or her own past, as we must do with ourselves.

If we can't see these connections, the present will seem to just tumble into the future. The present itself might seem like a random configuration of circumstances. Practicing sociological mindfulness is a way to dispel this illusion and to find orderly connections between present and past. It is a way to avoid repeating mistakes of the past and to see when old dangers arise in new forms.

RELATED READINGS

- Anderson, Elijah. (1990). *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gottdiener, Mark. (1995). *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Kleinman, Sherryl. (1996). *Opposing Ambitions: Gender and Identity in an Alternative Organization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwalbe, Michael. (1996). *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sennett, Richard, & Cobb, Jonathan. (1972). *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Vintage.
- Snow, David, & Anderson, Leon. (1993). *Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.