

Understanding Diversity

An Introduction

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This is a book about how diverse groups of people in our society define, experience, and address various social problems. What is *diversity*? Forty years ago, the term *diversity* might have indicated the inclusion of black students at historically white schools, acknowledgement of ethnic divisions within an urban neighborhood, or the presence of women in the corporate boardroom traditionally populated by men. Over the past several decades, our understanding of the term diversity has changed and become more complex in many ways. A sociological understanding of diversity requires that we consider not only race, ethnicity, and gender, but also how other social locating factors such as class, age, religion, sexual orientation, sexuality, and ability shape our experiences and perspectives in society. Growing up in the United States, with a strong focus on individualism, it is easy to assume that we are who we are because of hard work and determination. Indeed, there are examples that support the Horatio Alger myth that anyone can make it to the top, anyone can be successful—just pull yourself up by your bootstraps. A fundamental component of the dominant ideology of the United States is the notion of *meritocracy*—that is, individuals succeed (or fail) on the basis of their own merits, such as their innate talents and how hard they work or apply themselves to a task. However, such an understanding prevents us from exploring why people with certain characteristics are more likely to be successful than others and from asking questions such as why do some people not even have boots to pull up? Why are Native Americans less likely to graduate from high school than their white peers? Why are single women with dependent children the most likely population to live in poverty? What accounts for these differences in experiences and how do the structural arrangements in society shape our experiences and lead to inequality and social problems? What even constitutes a social problem?

PERSONAL TROUBLES AND PUBLIC ISSUES

Answering these questions is not an easy task. To begin to do so, though, it is important to draw on the work of the famous sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) who, more than 50 years ago, argued that it is critical to distinguish

between personal troubles and public issues. Mills characterized *personal troubles* as those private matters that are problematic for us as individuals. A personal trouble may be characterized as something that occurs in our own social realm, which violates or threatens our own individual values. In contrast, *public issues* are problems that transcend the individual; they are problems that stem from the larger social structure and the ways institutions in a society are organized and how they operate. For Mills, the promise of the *sociological imagination* was to cultivate the ability to see the relationship between an individual's own personal troubles and experiences and larger social structural public issues. It is useful to think about unemployment as a way to explore these concepts. One can lose a job and look for personal reasons for this trouble—for example, I was lazy, I was late too often, I did not have the right credentials. Or, one can look at the widespread patterns of unemployment to consider the structural issues—economic downturns, corporate restructuring, racism, homophobia, sexism, and technological advances that have displaced workers. Using the sociological imagination enables us to connect our own personal experience of job loss to larger social factors and the reality that currently in the United States the unemployment rate is 8.1%. However, for certain groups, the rate is even higher, with 10.3% of Hispanics and 13.2% of blacks experiencing unemployment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). Understanding how personal troubles are connected to public issues helps us to make sense of our world and to develop social structural solutions to these problems.

There would be little argument that unemployment and poverty are social problems in the United States right now. There is much debate, however, about how social problems should be defined. Some use the *objectivist approach*, which considers social problems as those conditions that harm individuals or society (Best, 2013). For example, Leon-Guerrero (2011) defines social problems as a “social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world” (p. 8). This definition, though, begs the questions: harmful to whom, to how many, how much harm, and who decides? There are many examples of issues which are now included in social problems textbooks, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence against women, that would not have been included in textbooks 50, even 30, years ago because although all of these behaviors certainly existed, they were not seen as problematic. A serious concern with the objectivist perspective, then, is that historically, the voices of those who are marginalized in society and who frequently experience the worst effects of social problems have not been heard in the defining process. Often what has been labeled a social problem and how it has been defined as problematic have reflected the interests of those in power. Frankenburg argues that “there is a link between where one stands in society and what one perceives” (Curran & Renzetti, 1993, p. 8). Those who are most marginalized and have the least amount of power to draw attention to how specific problems affect their lives have the greatest difficulty rallying support for social change that will improve their quality of life.

Another way of viewing social problems is from the *subjectivist* or *social constructionist approach*, which defines social problems in terms of how we perceive situations to be, problematic or nonproblematic. Joel Best (2013) argues that “it is not an objective quality of a social condition, but rather the subjective reactions to that condition, that make something a social problem. Therefore, social problems should not be viewed as a type of social condition, but as a process of responding to social

conditions” (pp. 9–10). Using this perspective, we explore the social construction of problems, which means that we examine the ways in which meaning (through language) is assigned to issues and how problems are framed. This is considered a social problems *process*. In his classic constructionist paper, Joseph Gusfield (1989) pointed out the value of language and the significance of the framing process. For example, government subsidies to industries that are struggling are not called “aid to dependent factories” as are government subsidies to poor families, which were historically known as “aid to dependent families and children.” This language implies personal failure and deficiencies on behalf of these individuals, but this is not the way failing industries are viewed. “Differing language frames mean differing assessments and evaluations” (Gusfield, 1989, p. 435). As Best (2013) indicates, the subjectivist perspective is important because how we conceptualize a problem and the words that we use to describe the condition, those affected by it, and recommendations for change are all social constructions that will have not only different meanings, but more importantly, differential outcomes.

CONCEPTUALIZING DIFFERENCE

We begin with the understanding that the identifiers or categories we use to describe ourselves are also social constructions. Sociologists believe that we live in a society in which these identifiers help determine our access to resources and our place in society. As David Newman (2012) writes, “Our identities dictate our chances for living a comfortable life, our access to valued economic, educational, or political resources; the likelihood of being seen positively or negatively by others; and our susceptibility to victimization, either by crime or by illness” (p. xiv). One’s social location in society determines access to resources, opportunities, and power. These identifiers or categories are determined by social, not biological factors. Thus, when someone asks us what race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religion we are, we answer in terms of social categories or social constructs. With regard to race, gender, and sexuality, we have historically expected people to choose one of two binary categories—either white or nonwhite; either male or female, either straight or gay. The U.S. Census Bureau maintained a policy of singularity of racial heritage identification until 2000, when individuals were finally given the option to select more than one racial category. This does not mean that multiracial individuals did not exist prior to 2000, but rather that the federal government did not acknowledge multiracialism until then (Ore, 2006).

We will return to the question of multiple identities shortly, but first it must be emphasized that because all of these categories are social constructions, we create and re-create them through interaction with one another and through culture. As Tracy Ore (2006) writes, “it is the social recognition, definition and the groupings of these factors that make them culturally significant in our daily interactions” (p. 1). Importantly, these classifications and categories are understood as different from each other, but it is not the difference that causes inequality. Each category does not carry inherent value—men are not inherently more valuable than women; being white is not inherently better than being black—but it is the value socially ascribed to these categories, which we learn through our culture, that leads to inequality. From birth, we are socialized by families, peers, the education system, the media and many other institutions to recognize not only differences among people, but also how specific traits or identities are

differentially valued and where members of different groups fit into the larger culture (Ore, 2006). We tend to take these values and norms for granted rather than critically analyzing them. Deviation from the normative typically is identified as problematic, rather than the social construction of inequalities and their effects on individuals and groups deemed non-normative. The precise objective of the chapters in this book is to call into question the dominant values and norms that marginalize various groups of people in a host of ways and to show the differential impacts of inequality and marginalization.

It bears repeating that differences do not of themselves produce inequality; instead, the social relations built on differences lead to inequality. Newman (2012) argues that in every society there are power differentials and groupings.

While differences do not have inherent value, the values we attach to the differences have very real consequences in people's everyday lives. Those with the most power and prestige in a culture have the most privilege (i.e., the greatest access to society's resources and rewards). Those in positions of dominance may be unaware of the privilege or power they possess; they experience it as a given without appreciation for the benefits. Often it is not until the question of privilege is raised (e.g., white privilege, male privilege, or heterosexual privilege), usually by a member of a less privileged group, that someone in a position of dominance becomes aware of the differentiation. One of the coeditors of this book experienced such an Aha! moment this year in the classroom when a young, black, male undergraduate student raised the issue in a social problems course. He spoke eloquently and with great passion about his need to continuously and outwardly prove that he was a legitimate member of the campus community by always wearing an ID on a lanyard, carrying a backpack on campus (whether he needed it or not), and trying to walk with white male students as frequently as possible. These aspects of his daily reality were not experienced by any of the other students (none of whom were students of color) or his professor (who is neither young nor a person of color). This student experienced disadvantages on multiple levels because he was young and black and growing up in an urban community where young men of color are often feared. His experience highlights another important point: There are complex intersections of domination, privilege, and identity known as *intersectionality*.

Few of us would identify ourselves as only female or only heterosexual or only Jewish or only white. Instead, we each hold multiple identities simultaneously, and we tend to identify ourselves differently in different contexts throughout our lives. Who we are and our place in society (our access to resources and rewards, including power and privilege) are largely shaped by these multiple identities. Over the last few decades, sociologists have come to understand the complex ways in which the different components of identity may be in conflict with each other in terms of social advantages and disadvantages. Consider a white gay man who is poor. His status as a white man brings him race privilege and status; however, he does not enjoy class privilege or heterosexual privilege (Collins, 1990). Those who are *othered*, who are *marginalized*, have less access to resources. They experience other negative consequences of inequality, and these experiences are more severe for those who are marginalized in multiple ways. Understanding intersectionality is important for providing a richer, more nuanced perspective of difference, but also for acknowledging the diversity of experiences among those who are constructed as members of

the same group or category. For example, it is not unusual to see a chapter on racial inequality in a textbook that claims to address the Native American experience or the Asian experience, as if Native Americans and Asians are members of a unified, homogeneous community, allowing us to generalize from the experiences of one Native American ethnic group (e.g., Diné) or one Asian ethnic group (e.g., Chinese) to all Native Americans or all Asians. This ignores the tremendous variation and the disparities in experiences across these groups and can lead to gross inaccuracies (Newman, 2012). Such a homogenous view also prevents us from fully grasping the wide range of inequality and diversity experienced within our culture.

A nuanced understanding of intersectionality demands that we ask who benefits from the existing power structure and inequality, who is disadvantaged by it, and how. Many theorists would argue that those in a position of dominance benefit from their position of power and superiority, which allows them to exploit others. Writers such as bell hooks argue that “oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality is part of an interlocking politics of domination which is ‘a belief in domination, and a belief in the notions of superior and inferior, which are components of all of those systems’” (Ore, 2006, p. 15). The intent of this book is to provide such a rich and nuanced view of social inequality and diversity.

CELEBRATING DIFFERENCE, CHALLENGING INEQUALITY

The goal of the chapters in this book is to examine diversity and social inequality within major institutions. Specifically, we explore diversity and social inequality within such institutions as the economy, the legal system, the educational system, the media, and health care, and how various groups experience these differences. For example, in Chapter 10, Jennifer Bondy and Anthony Peguero question the popular perception of education as the great equalizer, as providing a level playing field for all children to succeed as their individual talents permit. The authors document the challenges facing different groups of immigrant children as they make their way through the educational system. These challenges include racism, prejudice, xenophobia and hostility, which create serious barriers to their opportunities for upward mobility. Similarly, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, in Chapter 15, explores the issue of upward mobility through her research with low-income male and female teenagers growing up in impoverished urban neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland.

The book is organized into four major sections: Work, Health, and Well-being; Crime, Deviance, and Justice; Education, Intimate Relationships, and the Media; and Communities and the Environment. We wish to emphasize that these divisions are purely for organizational purposes; they are not intended to place particular problems or specific groups of people into discrete categories, or what Elliott Currie (1985) so aptly characterizes as “compartmentalizing social problems along bureaucratic lines” (p. 18). The problems discussed in individual chapters overlap with one another and span multiple social institutions at once. For instance, Jennifer Wesely’s discussion of violence in the lives of homeless women is in Section I: Work, Health and Well-being, but it could just as easily fit in Section II: Crime, Deviance and Justice, or Section IV: Communities and the Environment. Moreover, we have deliberately avoided organizing the chapters by the social categories of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on, to again emphasize intersectionality. While it is important

to examine social institutions and the social categories of difference, it is not sufficient to simply have a chapter on each type of institution and every type of difference—one on race, one on class, one on sexuality, one on age, and so forth. To fully understand diversity, we must acknowledge the intersectionality of difference and how experiences vary with *layers of marginalization*. Thus, for instance, Leslie Picca, in Chapter 11, discusses how racial inequality is perpetuated on college campuses. She examines the differing views and experiences of racism among white and black college students. In Chapter 12, Kathleen Bogle looks at diversity on college campuses through a very different lens by analyzing the so-called hookup culture and how it is constructed by students.

The contributors to this book also explore the diversity within individuals' experiences of inequality and do not assume that all members of a particular group share the same perspectives and challenges. One important way in which this is done in many of the chapters is by drawing on qualitative research. As Keiko Tanaka, Patrick Mooney, and Brett Wolff write in Chapter 17, "Aggregate data are very good at showing trends among individual categories, but mask variations within them. All people of a given racial group or living situation are not the same and neither is their relationship with food." Drawing on interviews and a case study of a food pantry in Lexington, Kentucky, these authors explore the problem of food insecurity. Similarly, in Chapter 18, Shannon Bell uses qualitative methods to analyze the extreme poverty and environmental injustice among those who are facing marginalization in a variety of ways as they live in rural Appalachia. Other contributors combine qualitative and quantitative data. In Chapter 8, for instance, Holly Foster and Jocelyn Lewis use a mixed-methods approach to explore the diverse experiences of incarcerated women and their children. They address the serious issue of what it means to grow up as a child whose mother is incarcerated, while they simultaneously analyze variations by race and ethnicity with regard to how children are raised. In Chapter 16, Anna Santiago, Amy Restorick, and Eun-Lye Lee answer the question of what home ownership means to three different sets of low-income families. They consider the social benefits of home ownership, such as sense of community, safety, and privacy accrued by some low-income homeowners, and they present the practical implications of new social and economic development policies.

Diverse risks for and experiences of violence, whether interpersonal or environmental, are an important focus of this book. For example, Jennifer Wesely explores these issues in Chapter 4 as she addresses the experiences of violence in the lives of poor women who are homeless and have a history of physical and sexual abuse, while in Chapter 5 Miriam Abelson looks at the risk of violent victimization among transgendered men. The experiences of women who are abused and the significant role that Internet pornography plays in the perpetuation of this violence are the focus of Chapter 14 by Walter DeKeseredy. DeKeseredy offers important suggestions for social change and how we can work to end this problem.

Importantly, many of the chapters in this book address how individuals and groups exercise agency to negotiate and adapt to their life circumstances in order to overcome barriers and constraints in creative ways. For example, in Chapter 7, Nikki Jones and Alexis McCurn examine how poor black young women balance the threat of interpersonal violence with not violating the expectations of feminine behavior of the larger society. These young women do this as they navigate the frequently

dangerous public spaces in their urban communities. In Chapter 9, Valerie Jenness, Jennifer Sumner, Lori Sexton, and Nikkas Alamillo-Luchese examine what it means to be transgendered in a total institution—a prison—and they explore how transgendered inmates negotiate life within this system. Drawing on the voice of one of the coauthors, a transgendered prisoner, we come to understand these challenges and develop a richer, more in-depth understanding of the dilemma of difference that transgendered prisoners face daily.

The contributors to this volume challenge many of the most popular stereotypes of U.S. culture. For example, in Chapter 17, Tanaka, Mooney, and Wolfe, by answering the question “Who’s hungry?,” debunk widely held myths about who is poor and who experiences hunger in this society. Their analysis reveals the complexities of food insecurity in the United States and the reality that many white, educated, older, working Americans require food assistance. In Chapter 6, Ruth Thompson-Miller and Joe Feagin challenge the historical assumption that sexual violence was largely experienced by white women assaulted by black men. Their research documents the power inequities under Jim Crow laws that in effect allowed white men to rape black women and girls with impunity.

While the topics covered and the experiences shared in this book are varied, the common themes that unite all of the chapters are diversity and inequality. Although the focus of the book is differential experiences of social problems, the intent is not to imply that diversity or difference is bad. To the contrary, research indicates that diversity has numerous benefits, from cultural enrichment to economic growth. Educational researchers, for example, report that students who attend colleges and universities with a diverse student body, where socializing across groups occurs on a regular basis, express greater satisfaction with college, have an increased level of cultural awareness, and show a commitment to promoting intergroup understanding (Chang & Astin, 1997). According to economists, diversity increases innovation and stimulates new ideas, which are essential ingredients for economic growth (Legrain, 2007; Ottaviano & Peri, 2006). As one analyst explained, a team of talented individuals with diverse backgrounds is typically more effective at problem solving than a homogeneous group of geniuses (Page, 2007). The guiding question is: How do we maximize the advantages diversity offers while minimizing the liabilities? Recall our initial premise that difference is a social construction and, therefore, may be ascribed positive values instead of negative ones. It is from the negative ascription that the liabilities of difference arise. In developing a fuller understanding of difference from a social constructionist standpoint, we will be better equipped to both celebrate our diversity and challenge inequalities.

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