



Behavioral Science

Name:

The Forest and the Trees

Section:

Directions: Read the following excerpt from Allan Johnson's book *The Forest, the Tress, and the one Thing* (Temple University, 1997) and answer the questions at the end of the article.

The Forest, the Trees, and the One Thing

Allan G. Johnson – Temple University

As a form of sociological practice, I work with people in corporations, schools, and universities who are trying to deal with issues of diversity. In the simplest sense, diversity is about the variety of people in the world, the varied mix of gender, race, age, social class, ethnicity, religion, and other social characteristics. In the United States and Europe, for example, the workforce is changing as the percentages who are female or from non-European ethnic and racial backgrounds increase and the percentage who are white and male declines.

If the changing mix was all that diversity amounted to, there wouldn't be a problem since in many ways differences make life interesting and enhance creativity. Compared with homogeneous teams, for example, diverse work teams are usually better with problems that require creative solutions. To be sure, diversity brings with it difficulties to be dealt with such as language barriers and different ways of doing things that can confuse or irritate people. But we're the species with the "big brain," the adaptable ones who learn quickly, so learning to get along with people unlike ourselves shouldn't be a problem we can't handle. Like travelers in a strange land, we'd simply learn about one another and make room for differences and figure out how to make good use of them.

As most people know, however, in the world as it is, difference amounts to more than just variety. It's also used as a basis for including some and excluding others, for rewarding some more and others less, for treating some with respect and dignity and some as if they were less than fully human or not even there. Difference is used as a basis for privilege, from reserving for some the simple human dignities that everyone should have, to the extreme of deciding who lives and who dies. Since the workplace is part of the world, patterns of inequality and oppression that permeate the world also show up at work, even though people may like to think of themselves as "colleagues" or part of "the team." And just as these patterns shape people's lives in often damaging ways, they can eat away at the core of a community or an organization, weakening it with internal division and resentment bred and fed by injustice and suffering.

Some organizations realize the importance of a workplace where everyone feels accepted and valued for who they are and what they can contribute. One way to bring this about is to run programs to help people see what's going on, the consequences it produces, how these consequences affect people in different ways, and what they can do about it to create something better. The hardest thing about this work is that people are so reluctant to talk about privilege, especially those who belong to privileged groups. When the subject of race and racism comes up, white people often withdraw into silence as if paralyzed by guilt or other feelings they don't dare express. Or they push back, angry and defensive, as if they were being personally attacked and blamed for something they didn't do. Men often react similarly to issues of gender and sexism.

Because members of privileged groups often react negatively to looking at privilege, women, blacks, Latinos, gays, lesbians, workers, and other groups may not bring it up. They know how easily privilege can be used to retaliate against them for challenging the status quo and making people feel uncomfortable. So, rather than look at the reality of what's going on, the typical pattern in organizations – and just about everywhere else – is to choose between two equally futile alternatives: to be stuck in cycles of guilt, blame, and defensiveness; or to avoid talking about issues of privilege at all. Either way, the old destructive patterns and their consequences for people's lives continue.

Why does this happen? A major reason is that people tend to think of things only in terms of individuals, as if a society or a company or a university were nothing more than a collection of people living in a particular time and place. Many writers have pointed out how individualism affects social life. It isolates us from one another, promotes divisive competition, and makes it harder to sustain a sense of community, of all being "in this together." But individualism does more than affect how we participate in social life. It also affects how we think about social life and how we make sense of it. If we think everything begins and ends with individuals – their personalities, biographies, feelings, and behavior – then it's easy to think that social problems must come down to flaws in individual character. If we have a drug problem, it must be because individuals just can't or won't "say no." If there is racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, it must be because of people who for some reason have the personal "need" to behave in racist, sexist, and other oppressive ways. If evil consequences occur in social life, then it must be because of evil people and their evil ways and motives.

If we think about the world in this way – which is especially common in the United States – then it's easy to see why members of privileged groups get upset when they're asked to look at the benefits that go with belonging to that particular group and the price others pay for it. When women, for example, talk about how sexism affects them, individualistic thinking encourages men to hear this as a personal accusation: "If women are oppressed, then I'm an evil oppressor who wants to oppress them." Since no man wants to see himself as a bad person, and since most men probably don't feel oppressive toward women, men may feel unfairly attacked.

In the United States, individualism goes back to the nineteenth century and, beyond that, to the European Enlightenment and the certainties of modernist thinking. It was in this period that the rational mind of the individual person was recognized and elevated to a dominant position in the hierarchy of things, separated from and placed above even religion and God. The roots of individualistic thinking in the United States trace in part to the work of William James who helped pioneer the field of psychology. Later, it was deepened in Europe and the United States by Sigmund Freud's revolutionary insights into the existence of the subconscious and the inner world of individual existence. Over the course of the twentieth century, the individual life has emerged as a dominant framework for understanding the complexities and mysteries of human existence.

You can see this in bookstores and best-seller lists that abound with promises to change the world through "self-help" and individual growth and transformation. Even on the grand scale of societies – from war and politics to international economics – individualism reduces everything to the personalities and behavior of the people we perceive to be "in charge." If ordinary people in capitalist societies feel deprived and insecure, the individualistic answer is that the people who run corporations are "greedy" or the politicians are corrupt and incompetent and otherwise lacking in personal character. The same perspective argues that poverty exists because of the habits, attitudes, and skills of individual poor people, who are blamed for what they supposedly lack as people and told to change if they want anything better for themselves. To make a better world, we think we have to put the "right people" in charge or make better people by liberating human consciousness in a New Age or by changing how children are socialized or by locking up or tossing out or killing people who won't or can't

be better than they are. Psychotherapy is increasingly offered as a model for changing not only the inner life of individuals, but also the world they live in. If enough people heal themselves through therapy, then the world will “heal” itself as well. The solution to collective problems such as poverty or deteriorating cities then becomes a matter not of collective solutions but of an accumulation of individual solutions. So, if we want to have less poverty in the world, the answer lies in raising people out of poverty or keeping them from becoming poor, one person at a time.

So, individualism is a way of thinking that encourages us to explain the world in terms of what goes on inside individuals and nothing else. We’ve been able to think this way because we’ve developed the human ability to be reflexive, which is to say, we’ve learned to look at ourselves as selves with greater awareness and insight than before. We can think about what kind of people we are and how we live in the world, and we can imagine ourselves in new ways. To do this, however, we first have to be able to believe that we exist as distinct individuals apart from the groups and communities and societies that make up our social environment. In other words, the idea of the “individual” has to exist before we think about ourselves as individuals, and the idea of the individual has been around for only a few centuries. Today, we’ve gone far beyond this by thinking of the social environment itself as just a collection of individuals: Society is people and people are society. To understand social life, all we have to do is understand what makes the individual psyche tick.

If you grow up and live in a society that’s dominated by individualism, the idea that society is just people seems obvious. The problem is that this approach ignores the difference between the individual people who participate in social life and the relationships that connect them to one another and to groups and societies. It’s true that you can’t have a social relationship without people to participate in it and make it happen, but the people and the relationship aren’t the same thing. That’s why this book’s title plays on the old saying about missing the forest for the trees. In one sense, a forest is simply a collection of individual trees; but it’s more than that. It’s also a collection of trees that exist in a particular relation to one another, and you can’t tell what that relation is by just looking at each individual tree. Take a thousand trees and scatter them across the Great Plains of North America, and all you have are a thousand trees. But take those same trees and bring them close together and you have a forest. Same individual trees, but in one case a forest and in another case just a lot of trees.

The “empty space” that separates individual trees from one another isn’t a characteristic of any one tree or the characteristics of all the individual trees somehow added together. It’s something more than that, and it’s crucial to understand the relationships among trees that make a forest what it is. Paying attention to that “something more” – whether it’s a family or a corporation or an entire society – and how people are related to it is at the heart of sociological practice.

Thought Questions:

1. From a sociological standpoint how does diversity help and hurt a social environment?

2. How does he use trees as an example of a sociological concept?

3. Why are issues such as competition and privilege so difficult to address?

4. How does the idea of individualism connect to the sociological perspective?

5. What is one instance or example of something you have personally encountered that connects to what Johnson was talking about?