These are extracts from a longer series of blog posts I wrote about a conference I attended on racial disparities.

**White Supremacy Extracts**

A Black professor in his sixties gives a lecture whose point is to explain how simple differences become schisms between people because of inequality. He then develops an example using the two white police officers sitting next to me that is an extended tale about what if you (white man) were always knocked down by her (white woman) every time she saw you, what would you do? The white man says "lash out" (most don’t hear him say it) but the speaker says that you’d just lie down to avoid being knocked down, and then goes on to say that you’d teach your children to just lie down and avoid the woman and her children, and the children would do it even if they did not know why. And, he says, the woman’s children would expect the other people to lie down, but not know why they are doing it. I find these different perceptions of how people respond to oppression to be important and telling. I think lashing out is what most whites do think the most common response to oppression is, not having actually experienced it. And even as much as I teach this stuff, I am struck by the speaker’s emphasis that you lie down to avoid being knocked down, and that you can teach that to the next generation.

In the next talk, a Chicano professor refers to the previous, and tells of a workshop in which the Black professor had told some details of growing up in segregated Mississippi along with his knocking-down example, and having a white professor in his 30s say “Professor X, we know how racism works.” The speaker says, “The arrogance of that man. To sit there as a white man in his thirties and tell a Black man in his sixties that there is nothing he needs to learn about racial discrimination, that is white supremacist ideology.” I can only agree. (There is a discussion in the long post about the Chicano professor’s views on what some call invisible minorities.)

After a break, we are assigned to groups to talk about what solutions we would advocate. When we talk about possible solutions to disparities in incarceration, the first three speakers, all older black people, involve suggestions for improving education and families. Then the black people get into an argument about whether it is more important for black people to work on strengthening black families and communities or to challenge discriminatory systems and practices. An ADA – who I have heard be very aware and critical of discriminatory practices in the criminal justice system – argues that young people have to be taught to behave and not challenge police because assaulting an officer is a felony and will ruin their lives. A younger black man says that young people are facing discrimination and that’s why they resist. She says, "I know that. The first time I encountered the police I was 11, I was walking with my brothers who were two years older and two years younger than me. A police officer came up to us, grabbed them, and threw them on the sidewalk and handcuffed them because there had been a report of a theft in the area. We had not been doing anything, we had nothing to do with the theft. We were just walking on the sidewalk. I understand why they did not like the police. But their lives were
ruined." I’ve heard her talk on other occasions about young people who just seem to lack any moral or behavioral boundaries. She is working on the problems of discrimination in the system, but she also works on the problem of healing the kids and getting them to behave and succeed. I think to myself that this is the kind of conversation that a lot of white folks don’t think black people have. It’s not that they are unaware of or uncritical of racism. Rather, racism is the box they are living in, the reality they are arguing about how to cope with.

From Conclusions

This was an overwhelming experience in many ways, and there are many threads one could pick up from the things that happened at the conference. I’ll discuss three themes: the content of what people talk about, the importance of listening along with talking, and cultural differences in public talk. I tried to provide a lot of details about what people said and how they said it because I’m very interested in how people talk as well as what they talk about. I have been struck before how the whole tone of interaction shifts when a meeting is dominated by people of color instead of whites. Although the two day conference in Farmtown was a kind of immersion experience, I have had many similar experiences before. As a White person watching the interactions, I’m most struck by how deeply personal and painful these issues are for Black people.* Most of the people at the conference are professionals – academics, social workers, lawyers, police officers, judges, teachers – as are many of the black people I’ve met doing this work. But black professionals are much less insulated from the pain of the black poor than white professionals are. I do this work, I care about this work, but I don’t have the same gut-wrenching day-to-day in-your-face experience with it as they do. I do meet and talk with ex-offenders periodically, but most of the ex-offenders I know are far along on rehabilitation. I’m not doing reentry work with the folks who just got out. And I’m not in the schools dealing with the troubled and ill-socialized children. Over and over I’ve heard the same kinds of back and forth talk as I heard at this conference: angry critiques of structural or individual racism intertwined with critiques of bad behavior of black young people. It is not just these two strands are in the discourse, almost all individuals interweave both strands in their own thinking about the problems. By contrast, most Whites seem more likely to pick one side or the other, either focusing on helping or blaming individuals, or instead focusing on institutional critique. (I’m in the institutional critique camp.)

I also wanted to speak to what seems like a kind of arrogance in a lot of discussions of public sociology that I think needs to be resisted. This particular conference turned out to be more about disparities in education and less about disparities in criminal justice, so my own “expertise” in presenting and discussing data was not central to the conference and, after my own speech, was a relatively peripheral participant in the rest of the event. But even where the whole meeting is organized around a discussion of my presentation, I find it important to listen as well as talk. Much of what I know about how things play out in “the system” and in people’s lives comes from hearing what other people say when I’m out there presenting my data and getting their questions and reactions. You don’t have to be doing official “public sociology” to benefit sociologically and personally from hearing what people from different social positions think about the stuff you are studying. The presentations and conversations I heard at that meeting were chock-full of sociologically-relevant information about what the problems are, how people define problems,
what repertoires of action people invoke for dealing with problems, what solutions they have found, and what resources they have available.

I did not need a public sociology role to go out and get myself involved in groups that are culturally different from my own. When I lived in the South, where Black people were a larger share of the population and making integration work was still an explicit goal of many groups, I was a member of some mixed-race political groups without it having anything to do with my sociology. For a long time after I moved to the Midwest, I did almost no political work, due to personal life and career choices. Most community groups I’ve been in here have been overwhelmingly White, partly a simple function of racial demographics. I got involved in the public sociology project through choosing to reinvigorate my community involvement later in life, not through trying to build my career. I feel that I have gained and learned an enormous amount from the people this work has led me to meet.

Another theme is about styles and customs in holding meetings. I cannot even pretend to be an expert on this. A case could be made that I am not particularly good at picking up the interaction cues in my own culture, much less anyone else’s,** but I do feel that I encounter a lot of white people in my part of the country who seem to believe that their way of talking and holding a meeting is the only right way. I remember a different meeting in a different setting where the discussion topic was about racial interactions. A Black woman activist who is married to a White man talked about being at a meeting of White parents who were talking about how they could get the Black parents at the school to be more involved in the parents’ association. She said she said to them, “How uncomfortable are you willing to be?” I asked her what she meant by that, and she talked about moderating a Black community summit where, she said, Whites would have been upset at the digressions and tangents and arguments.

I found the Farmtown meeting to be well-organized, friendly and thoughtful. Maybe people were nice to me because I was an invited speaker, but I saw people mixing and talking across racial lines all around the room. The assumption was that if you were there at all you were an ally, regardless of race. But there were ways of talking that would make a lot of White people uncomfortable. One is the frequent expressions of anger at racism, injustice and oppression, including characterizations of whites as racist that did not stop to acknowledge non-racist whites. Another is the overt expression of disagreement without all the softening used in some cultural groups: People were arguing sometimes in a way that would be coded as angry by many Whites, when they were not at all angry, but intensely engaged in debating an important issue. Another is that discussion often did not stick to some narrowly-defined point, but would range widely, and that some people used their turn speaking to make very long and rambling statements about personal experiences and the lessons they draw for political action. Another is the mixing-in of religious language in a secular meeting. Of course, none of these is unique to Black groups – I can think of some White ethnic groups that are similar. Nor do all Black people act the same way – there are not only individual differences, but sub-cultural differences among Black people about these styles. But there are big differences in central tendencies.

When I’m a visitor in a setting dominated by people from a different social group, I try to lay back and see what I can learn, and try not to misbehave.*** I remember the 1970s in women’s groups,
where men varied in how well they could behave in a female-dominated setting. Some men would keep challenging everything you tried to do; they were a pain in the behind. Other men kept trying to prove how feminist they were; they were also really annoying, because they still thought everything was about them. But there are men (more now than in the 1970s) who can sit comfortably in a woman-dominated group, laying back, not trying to be the center of attention or dominate, adapting pretty well to women’s ways of having a conversation, emitting a sense of relaxation and a bit of a sense of humor, comfortably acknowledging their maleness, and participating actively as an equal among equals. I try to be like that. Trying not to talk too much, mostly interested in what other people have to say, but engaging and participating as myself. How I’m seen by others, I don’t know. But that’s what I try for.

Being in a setting dominated by someone else’s culture is something real minorities have to do all the time. It is a valuable experience for a majority-group person who is used to the comfort of her own culture to have to learn to adapt to another culture, to find a way to sit with being the “other” instead of being the neutral baseline. But it is important to remember that the situations are not symmetric. Being a member of a dominant group who is temporarily in the minority at one meeting is very different from being a member of an oppressed minority group who has to successfully adapt to the majority’s culture year after year to keep her job or get a college degree. I did have to adapt to male-dominated workplaces when I was younger, so I do have some idea of what this is about, but I know even that isn’t entirely the same.

I’m interested in any thoughts, experiences, comments you may have.

Notes:
* I worry that if you are a black person reading that sentence, or if you are a person from any culture with direct experience with the problems of poverty, it may be off-putting and alienating for you. You are thinking, “Wouldn’t any dolt know that?” But I know from testing that most of my blog audience is white, and so I’m a privileged white person talking to mostly privileged white people here, and apologize for the implicit exclusion in the writing.

** A few people have even suggested that I’m on the autism spectrum, due to my inability to conform to many of the subtle standards of behavior in my culture. I don’t think this pseudo-psychological diagnosis is right, but it could be that never being fully comfortable in my “home” culture makes it less of a shock to be in someone else’s culture.

** Being in a setting dominated by people who consider themselves an elite, such as lawyers, is another cross-cultural experience that I won’t go into here, except to say that elites are in many ways much more annoying if you are not part of the in-group.