Public Sociology in Farmtown.
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This is a series I wrote in 2008 as an anonymous blogger. I started planning to write these as short entries, but they got longer and longer over time.

#1. In the past 8 years, I’ve given over 80 speeches to various audiences about racial disparities and have attended some or all of dozens of conferences, as well as participated in over a hundred meetings of various groups, boards, and commissions. These range from lawyer-dominated professional groups to white church groups to student groups to mixed-race community groups. Although I am a good public speaker and articulate and forceful in manner, I’m also by nature an introvert and by avocation an academic who is quite happy spending hours in front of a computer or otherwise minding my own business. So being at all these conferences and meetings has opened me to a lot of experiences I would not otherwise have had. I’m interested in what people talk about and how they talk. Last week, I spent two days at a racial disparities conference organized by university people in a rural area I’ll call FarmTown. I took detailed notes on what happened and my reactions and thought I’d write some of this up as a blog, as a reflection on what this “public sociology” stuff is really like out there in the trenches. I told some of the organizers of the conference that I was going to do this, and they were ok with it, agreeing with me about not using real names. It was a complex event, and my impressions are more about the juxtaposition of many different themes and kinds of experiences than about drawing any single conclusion or point. I’m going to follow the wise lead of some other bloggers (especially Bradley Wright who does this so well) and break this up into a series of small posts, rather than one long one. In so doing, I’ll lose the kaleidoscopic impact of the event as a whole, but avoid producing one big block of indigestible prose. My point, to the extent that there is one, is to counter what I see as a common one-sided romantic or patronizing view of “public sociology” as a sociologist bringing revealed truth to the uneducated masses or the national elites, and to stress the extent to which I learn things I did not know when I get out of my office and go spend time with people in different social locations.

#2 I wrote this from notes I took at a conference on racial disparities in incarceration and education at a branch campus of the state university located in a rural very-white area I will call Farmtown. I was invited to give my disparities talk by a group of university-connected people in Farmtown who have been meeting because they want to do what they can to fight problems of racial disparities. The call to the conference expressed the hope of linking up people in different communities working on these issues. Farmtown is 150 miles away from metropolitan Segtown, where most of the state’s African Americans live, and 75 miles away from Unitown, the state capital and home of the major university where I work and live, so this seemed an odd locale for such a conference. I could have just given my talk and left, but I am a member of the “community” who is working on these issues, so I decided I’d like to stay for the whole two days to talk to people and see what was going on. I told the organizer that if they covered my conference registration fee (which includes three meals and a dorm room) I would consider myself adequately compensated, and did not need an honorarium. I was told that about 45 people have
registered for the conference, although not everyone is spending the night, a large contingent of Unitown people are coming tomorrow only, and some people have been coming and going from the room.

When I counted at the opening session, I got about 11 whites and 18 people of color who are mostly black. I learned as the day progressed that I had miscategorized some folks, about which more later, but the errors were in both directions. The conference is about 2/3 people of color. Thinking about it later, I realize that I am the only white speaker at the conference. Although most of the groups I talk to are overwhelmingly white, I have addressed and worked with groups that are at least half black before, and am comfortable in the setting. I’ll talk more later about the impact of racial mix. Roughly half the attendees are from Farmtown, virtually all university faculty, staff, or students, including mostly people of color but also a couple of white deans. In pre-opening chit chat, a white woman who is one of the deans chats with a black woman who is a U-Farmtown staff member about the new choir director at the church they both attend. Most of the non-Farmtown people I talk to turn out to be alumni of U-Farmtown, and the core of the conference is clearly African Americans who know each other because of the U-Farmtown connection. This surprises me, as it had not occurred to me that ANY African Americans would be at or have gone to a university in this very-white part of the state. Shows what I know. I learn more later about what they have been doing at U-Farmtown and think there are things to learn from them. There are few representatives from the criminal justice system here, unlike the groups I’ve worked with in Unitown or Segtown. Unitown’s police force has three representatives here, one black (who seems to know the organizers well) and two white, a man and a woman; all seem fairly young to me. I chat with the black police officer as we wait for the opening; he knows of my work and we talk about the issues. There is also someone from the state university system and her intern; I don’t know whether she is part of the network or not.

to be continued

#3. My in-house editorial advisor says he likes the longer posts better, that the shorter posts seem like wind-up and no pitch, so I’m going to do this in somewhat bigger lumps. To recap posts 1 and 2, I’m writing about a conference of 35-45 participants on racial disparities in incarceration and education being put on at a university in a rural area (Farmtown) that is organized by faculty and staff of color whose attendees are predominantly people of color, roughly half from the hosting university and the others from the metropolitan areas in the state, which include the state capital with the main university campus I call Unitown, the big city I call Segtown, and other urban areas in the swath between Segtown and BigCity in the next state over. I wanted to write about partly because interactions in a conference that is mostly people of color are different from those in a white-dominated setting and are different from what many whites think they would be. And partly just to give the flavor of a real conference in all its complexity.

This is an ambitious and even exhausting conference. Here is the line-up of events: Day 1: Opening remarks, lunch, me talking for 45 minutes about racial disparities in incarceration, 15 minute break, a educational administrator speaking on disparities in education, break, a panel of students from SegTown, a pair of lectures on racism by two Farmtown professors, break into
small groups for brainstorming solutions to criminal justice disparities, dinner, an educational administrator from another state talking about how their success in educating youth of color, break, another brainstorming session about educational disparities; quit for the night at 9. Day 2: breakfast at 8, a social scientist speaking on ethnographic work on school-family relations, break, panel discussion of 6 speakers from UniTown about the various community programs they are involved with, break, small groups to develop community action plans, lunch, speaker from the next state over who delivers a rousing “call to action” speech, large group discussion, closing at 3pm.

We start about 30 minutes late, I think maybe because the chancellor who is supposed to welcome us has not shown up. It is possible the chancellor welcomed us but, if so, I have erased this from my memory banks. I recall being welcomed by the university’s diversity coordinator who is also in charge of conference logistics. We skip the planned “get acquainted” activity due to the late start. Another of the leaders of the task force, a black criminal justice professor, sketches the history of the group and the reason for the conference. He opens with how he decided to do something about the issues after visiting the juvenile corrections facility and meeting high school kids who could not read. He tells the story about how you can boil a frog if you heat the water slowly, and urges us to wake up the frog and do something about the problems. After everyone briefly says their name and affiliation, we go to lunch.

The folks who organized this conference are largely unaware that other groups have been working in SegTown and UniTown on these issues for years. They have decided they want to do something, so they go to the trouble to organize a conference and bring in speakers who will tell them more about the issue. This is often the setting for “public sociology.” The “public” isn’t just sitting around like bumps on a log, it is real people who care about an issue and take initiative to pull in outside experts. Until you get activated on an issue, you often are oblivious to what others are doing. In one telling interaction later in the conference, I’m talking to two black women who are friends from going to college together at Farntown but live in different cities. One woman says she’d like to learn more about what is happening in other communities, and I say, sort of laughing, “Well, I think I can put you in touch with someone who can tell you about UniTown.” “That would be me,” says the other black woman, an assistant district attorney, who is the director of the juvenile disparity project in UniTown. (I know her because I’m on the advisory board for that project.) “You’re doing that?” says the first woman. “I didn’t know.”

I speak after lunch. My presentation on incarceration disparities is well received. They wanted information and I gave it to them in a passionate and engaged way, keeping an eye on the clock and making it clear that I respect the schedule. I use the r-word, referring to the situation as racist, but without make a big deal out of it, as in this group it is obvious to the majority that the situation is racist. They are more interested in how and why it happens. At the end of my talk, a black woman comes up and gives me a hug and calls me her sister and says she is so happy to know we think alike. After a break, we hear a presentation from a black woman who is the diversity coordinator for the state department of education school system. She is a former school principal, and is proud to tell us that she has brought along her adult daughter who is now also a
school principal and will be handling the PowerPoint slides. She talks about the problem of kids being kicked out of school for “school rules violations,” about racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions, and also about graduation disparities. She has charts that show that suspensions rise in middle school and peak in 9th grade. She stresses that points of transition are especially difficult for young people and that schools are experimenting with 9th grade academies. Audience discussion rapidly gets into the problem of parental involvement in the schools, how important it is and how difficult it is to get it, with discussion of problems of unwelcoming schools and parental stresses. An audience member from SegTown talks about his son, who has a racially ambiguous appearance, visiting the families of his (black, I think) students and having the parents call the police, thinking he is a criminal. He talks about year old children being kept out of school to care for their younger siblings, and the problem that the children’s only real meal is at school, which they don’t get if they don’t attend, not to mention the loss of instruction.

Then there is a panel of one college student and four high school students on the campus for a pre-college program. All are black and from SegTown. In response to audience members’ questions, they describe problems of violence in their schools and neighborhoods, teachers who don’t care whether they learn, and examples of what sure sounds like discriminatory/inappropriate behavior (i.e. being suspended for insubordination for asking the teacher for help, or for saying “gravity”). One college student talks about being given all As in high school and passed along because he was a star athlete and making Ds in his first year of college. He talks about just not having the academic skills he needed, and praises the mentoring and training he has gotten in the college program, so that he he is making As and Bs in his junior year. Also in response to audience questions, they describe the factors that are helping them to succeed, which involve some combination of mothers who go to bat for them, mentoring programs with a strong component of social connection and solidarity as well as academic help, and determination or competitiveness. I feel like I’ve learned a lot listening to their thoughts and am particularly struck by the young men’s somewhat vague descriptions of a fraternity-type program (I think it is mixed-sex though) that seems to build on peer solidarity and deep emotional support. Every time a young person describes getting a good GPA (3.1, 3.4, 3.5), the audience claps. Celebrating academic success is an important part of the group culture. In the process, I come to realize that this campus seems to be doing a good job mentoring young disadvantaged people to succeed in college. Speakers stress the importance of people of color running the programs, because they know what the young people need. Later in small groups, I’m chatting more with the people running the program, and mention a young woman I worked with at my school who had made As in high school and was struggling to get Cs in college (I said C’s, although I realize now that it is Bs that she is making). They insist they would have her making As, that it is a matter of mentoring and instruction. I wonder if they are right, whether they are mentoring better and whether their classes are as hard as ours. I don’t know.

I’ve been at a number of conferences that feature youth panels, or meetings that invite youth to speak. All of the ones I can think of that did this were organized by groups with a high percentage of African Americans. I don’t believe I’ve ever been at a white-dominated conference where youth were asked to speak to the adults as “experts” about what youth concerns are, much less
asked what solutions they would advocate. I’m struck by this. Every time I’ve listened to youth speak, I’ve learned stuff I did not know that has influenced my thinking.

In this session, I’m sitting next to two youngish white police officers (one man, one woman) from my home city of UniTown and we talk about issues of local policing during break. The man is asking me for details about a story I told about blanket parole revocations after a local murder, and I’m worried that I messed up and got the details wrong. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the next session starts before we can sort out the facts and figure out whether I’ve spoken in error.

#4. It is important to place this discussion in the context of the whole conference, so if you are new to this series, please check out the previous post. For a quick recap, I’m writing about a two-day conference on racial disparities in incarceration and education at a university in a rural area I call Farmtown. The previous post focused the first half of the first day and the ways information was brought into the group. This post focuses on the second part of the first day, which ran from 3:15 - 9pm.

Two Farmtown professors do the short version of a workshop they’ve done often before for white faculty at their institution on the ideology of white supremacy. The black social science professor goes first, and it is relevant to note that he is older, in his sixties. His title is “isms and schisms.” The point is about how demographic differences become structures of inequality. He talks about how people respond to experiences of discrimination and then asks people what they see when they imagine pictures of powerful groups (i.e. Congress, Supreme Court). We are supposed to say “white male.” I hear one of the officers next to me say something like “mostly white males with some women and a few blacks and latinos” to Congress, and for the Supreme Court says “mostly white men and a woman and a black man.” At the end of this exercise, he requires the white man to answer his “what do you see?” question, and the answer is “mostly white men.” I’m glad I’m not put on the spot like that. I learn later that the speaker always forces a white person to answer this question. I don’t know whether I got a pass because I’m female or because I’m an invited speaker or because I called disparities racism, but I’m grateful because I was thinking the same thing as the white guy was thinking – mostly but not entirely white men, I was remembering the exceptions.

The speaker then gives an example using the two white 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. This is not dissing the white guy, by the way, who I talked to a lot more later. But I think it 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.

As I reflect in the process of writing this blog, I realize that this is the organizing principle of the conference. I had been wondering why we took time for a racism workshop in a conference with predominantly-minority attendees who presumably were already aware of racial issues or they would not have signed up for the conference. I think the answer, from the organizers’ perspective, is that they see themselves and others as having acquiesced to oppression and as needing to think about the context of oppression in viewing the problems they confront. You lie down before they knock you down.

The next speaker is a professor with a southern accent and an Anglo name whom I’d coded as white from across the room, but he makes a big point of telling us that he was adopted by whites and is an indigenous Mexican who identifies as Chicano/Latino/indigenous. (I talk to him more later about this.) He gives a very militant speech about white supremacist ideology. He says that one of the major acts of white supremacy is to take away people’s names, both their personal names and their group names and sense of identity. I remember that earlier, a Native American audience member had called out “Christian names” as an example of white supremacy in response to a question from the black professor (I can’t remember the context), a point I had enough background to understand when it was said, but is now being made a major point instead of a throw-away line. The Chicano professor speaks a lot about the mis-interpretation of Martin Luther King, Jr., saying that he said “my dream has become a nightmare” after the Watts Riot, and the thing he would probably most regret about his career was the March on Washington speech, with its colorblind rhetoric that has been used by opponents of the things King stood for, as it was the only speech in his career that criticized only blacks (telling them to be nonviolent) and not whites. He reminds us about all the stuff King said after 1963. He also quotes the statistic that 77% of whites believe that blacks are less intelligent, and asks if it is any wonder that too many white teachers have low expectations for black children and blame them for not learning.

In his talk, the Chicano professor refers to earlier speaker, 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. As I think later about the story, I am even more amazed. Don’t get me wrong. I know a lot of white folks (even, being honest, sometimes including me) will listen to lectures on discrimination and feel like you do know it. I mean, after all, I do lecture about this stuff. BUT for a young man in his 30s to be so publicly dismissive of a speaker in his 60s is to reveal to all that he is so comfortable in his white supremacy that it does not even occur to him that he is revealing his supremacist assumptions in his very speech act. Chatting about this later, the Chicano professor tells me that “X wouldn’t let him get away with it. He just stopped, turned, glared at him and said [here his voice gets loud and stern in imitating the intonation], ‘NO YOU DON’T’.” He talks in a kind of shortling way about
what the guy must have felt like, having to sit there for the rest of the day in the workshop with everyone knowing that he had been put down. I’m wondering whether the guy actually learned anything at all, or just dismissed the incident and privately reworked his sense of superiority and grievance.

During break, I chat more with the Chicano professor. He complains a bit about too little recognition of Hispanic disparities, and I talk about the data problems, and the disparities in criminal justice are generally a lot lower than for Blacks, and use the phrase “White Hispanic.” He sort of challenges me on that and asks me to define it, which I do (it is a census category), and talk about students I’ve known that have Hispanic names but not identity, then he starts on his point, and I realize it is my turn to listen. His point is that there are a lot of forces suppressing identity and forcing people into racial categories that are meaningless to them. He then tells me that, even though he has light skin and features that I would never code as Mexican, he is always recognized immediately as Chicano/Hispanic/Mexican by Hispanics/Mexicans in the US Southwest and in Mexico. And that the immigrant Chinese running the Chinese restaurant in FarmTown said to him, “You’re not white like these others, are you?” He wears a long braid with ribbons and a lot of Mexican/Indian jewelry so if I’d gotten a good look at his self-presentation, and not just his face, I might not have coded him as white, but then I might have just thought he was a white guy who likes to dress that way. I remember that the dean of my college is an American Indian who, to me, does not “look” American Indian and keeps a pretty low ethnic profile as far as haircut and dress and public statements go (except for a tribal ring that looks like a fraternity ring), although I know because I know him that his tribal membership is an important part of his identity and he is very involved with and supportive of ethnic/racial minority students and faculty generally and American Indians specifically. The assumptions I’m making as I ask myself whether the Chicano professor is “really” all that ethnic (with his white adoptive parents) are exactly the kind of suppression of other people’s culture and identity that he is challenging. Then we talk about teaching race, standpoints in teaching and we do a little bonding around that. I cover Chicano movements a bit in my course, and he kind of quizzes me about how much I know about the group it turns out he is an expert on – I know a little but it turns out not enough, and he tells me his view about reinterpreting the Mexican American generation in light of a reworked understanding of Chicano. I’m going to look up his book.

This flows into a conversation with the Chicano professor and others from U-Farmtown (including a white male dean). I say they seem to have a lot of positive stuff going on and ask whether they feel they’ve have influence and respect. They say influence but not respect. After working and agitating, they got the chancellor to agree to require an all-day racial awareness training workshop for all faculty. They feel they are doing a good job mentoring the minority students. But they think there are a lot of problems to deal with. They feel beleaguered.

Next we have an exercise in which we are assigned to groups to talk about what solutions we would advocate. The facilitators in my group are caucusing outside, so we started without them. My table is me, the male white police officer, a black woman who grew up in Birmingham and says one of her friends was killed in the church bombing (she talks at very great length about her
experiences in Birmingham and her philosophy of social change activism as a consequence), a black retired state employee from SegTown whose son is a teacher who has lots of long stories about how bad the schools are, a young guy who is light enough that I thought he was white but clearly identifies as black and is a community organizer in UniTown whose suggestion is “less cops” in black neighborhoods and spend the money instead on education, two facilitators (one white, one black) who don’t talk, and one who does, the black head of diversity programs at U-Farntown. Late in the conversation, a black ADA I know from UniTown joins us. While the facilitators are out, we got into talk about the drug war, the big money being made by non-black kingpins and money launderers, the CIA dealing drugs in VietNam, how some kids are paying electric bills and feeding their families with drug dealing because the parents are unemployed after all the factories closed.

After the facilitators get back, we talk about suggestions about improving schools, legalizing drugs (the white police office is making this suggestion). 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. The 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 reflect to myself that over and over when I do these gigs, I hear the black people talking about what they can and should do to improve black communities from within. 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. I think the outrage in many black circles about Cosby and Obama’s calls for black responsibility isn’t what they said – I don’t think they said anything that isn’t said all the time in Black churches and Black gatherings – but that they said it in a “white” forum and left out reference to the structures of oppression that create the problem.

I ask about the ideology of white supremacy business which, I say, I’m on board with, I teach it, but should folks consider the political strategic question of whether to use a rhetoric that invites in white allies and acknowledges differences among whites rather than a rhetoric that tends of
polarize. I ask this question because we had several big debates about tone and language when we wrote the Governor’s Commission report. The black diversity director says that first people have to be educated about racism and then they can be allies. Then the black people talk and argue some more about how to deal with white people, you know you don’t have enough numbers, you need whites, but what is the way to change things. I’m aware that a lot of white folks would not appreciate a dialog that does not overtly acknowledge differences among whites or that discursively equates whites with racists, even though they know and I know they know that whites vary. I don’t push any more on the rhetoric issue. There are other things to discuss. If we were discussing it, I would say that my concern is not my feelings or other white people’s feelings, but I have thought a lot about how you persuade people, and the importance of understanding where people are coming from and speaking to their concerns if you want to persuade them. The strategic question is whether to “force” people to change from challenge and pressure or to “persuade” them to change through a rhetoric that pulls them into the struggle. This is, of course, an ongoing tension in any social movement. But the problem of white supremacy is that it is whites who have to be persuaded or forced and this privileges white perspectives in any discussion of social policies.

Later, at dinner, the white male police officer asks me about white supremacist ideology, why did I say I was on board with that idea? I give him the 2 minute version of my “construction of the racial state” lecture, that the US government was founded as the nation of whites that was displacing the Native Americans, and quote the Immigration and Naturalization act of 1793 that restricted naturalized citizenship to “free white” persons, and tell him that my own view is that racial ideology is more a consequence of structures of inequality than a cause of it, that we are all influenced by these structures and can’t help it. That seemed reasonable to him. (There’s another older white guy at the table, too, who is paying attention to some of this.) I talk about how these structures create all these problems, that I’ve talked to African Americans about weird incidents where you don’t know if race was an issue, maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t, but you don’t know, and the same thing as a white person, race is always looming there contaminating interactions because of the structures of inequality. I say that there are times when there is something that a person of color thinks is racial and that I’m pretty sure isn’t, and my friend the black ADA who is sitting next to me jumps in and says, “Well, but often you just get a feeling, you know,” and I say, “Well, yeah, but I’m still white and I see it the white way.” I was trying to model for the white folks at the table how I think you can operate with integrity in a multi-cultural space. I think she understood what I was saying, but maybe she did not feel heard. I don’t know. I will say here that I’ve caught myself operating from an implicit standpoint of white supremacy with her and with other people of color on multiple occasions, and I think this stuff goes really deep.

I’ll gloss over the presentation by the black school administrator from Texas. It was mostly about how they organize their majority-minority school to help kids achieve and meet state and national standards. I was thinking about his talk and the earlier one about drop outs and audience discussion and the way the No Child Left Behind standards gives schools an incentive to get rid of the kids who will score low on tests and how selection bias impacts achievement statistics.
After dinner our “working group” reconvenes and we talk about cultural differences (including the problem of blacks being perceived by whites as angry or menacing when they are not) and the problem of educating children whose parents are not able to help them at home, for whatever reason. These are issues I bring up because I’m interested in them. I also tell the diversity coordinator that it seems like they have a good program, and we talk about what they are doing. We are all worn out by the time they tell us we can go. (We are not allowed into the dorm until 9 pm.)

Next: Another overwhelming day of experiences, I’m not sure how I’m going to organize them into a blog (there will be a delay for at least a few days as I also have to get ready for ASA). Details about problems people confront, talk about solutions, an inspiring political/religious “sermon,” some reflections about interactional styles and cultural differences in how you have a conversation.

# 5. (This is the next in a series about a two-day conference I attended on racial disparities in education and criminal justice. I was the first speaker. After that, I attended, listened, and learned. This picks up on day two, after a night spent in a dorm room.) After a buffet breakfast, the morning speaker is a Black educational researcher who does qualitative research on children’s and families’ perceptions of schools, stressing the importance of talking to the people being “served” by institutions. One project involved asking children what their sources of support were and then asking teachers what the children’s supports were; in general the teachers did not know. Children often viewed their families as supportive while the teachers saw the same families as unsupportive or problematic. Children also cite other children as important sources of support. He says research shows that successful classrooms are more likely to foster solidarity among the children. Many black boys have internalized negative norms about black men and create solidarity among themselves on this basis; intervention programs have taught boys to use solidarity to build positive relations among each other and watch for signs of trouble.* The speaker stresses the need to provide supported opportunities to develop the behaviors and dispositions necessary for success. He gives an example of a mother who talked to her child about her mistake, an act of dishonesty she had committed that cost her a job, and about how she owned up to her mistake and did her best to atone and move on. He talks about this as a wonderful role model, someone willing to model right behavior and integrity through talking about her own errors.

He then tells us an extended story from his interviewing and observing different people with a focus on a 6 year old boy. The school personnel see him as threatening, angry, scary, hurtful, as a problem. By contrast, the family see him as depressed, lonely, and sad due to his father having recently gone to prison and as considerate and helpful of others.** The school defines the family simply as dysfunctional and disorganized, father in prison. But there is a network of people in the home and nearby connected in various ways who see themselves as part of the child’s support network who are actively trying to support him in his grief about his father’s absence, and who overtly encourage him with his school work. Another older child in the network who is doing well in school gets expelled over a zero tolerance policy and a major share of the family network
moves to another city to be sure the older child can graduate high school and have a chance to succeed, thus depriving the younger child of half the people who were actively involved in supporting him. The overall message is the need to treat poor families with respect, as people with resources and strengths, not just as deficits. The speaker says that when he told a school official about the problem with the older child, the official said, “I wish I’d known. I could have fixed that problem with one phone call.”

Audience discussion is lively. Many are upset about the “phone call” comment. They and the speaker call this an indictment of the school, that they did not know and did not care enough to find out and just let a system roll that could easily ruin one child’s life and deprived another of needed social support. They also complain that anyone with that much power is that ignorant. Then people talk about “racist assumptions that take away the self esteem and strengths of our children.” The discussion then bridges into the need for structural changes, living wages etc. and the larger problems that impact families and make it difficult for them.

*An ASA paper I heard stressed similar issues: Victor Rios talked about how Black and Latino boys are treated as criminals not only by schools, police, and commercial establishments, but often by their families. He quotes boys saying: “If you are going to treat me like a criminal, I might as well act like one.” I was sensitized to this paper by all the conversations the previous week at the Farmtown conference, and I felt overwhelmed thinking about the psychological burden on all these young people. I’ve been at other meetings where social workers and advocates stressed many young people are acting out because they are depressed, and youths are sent to anger management classes when what they need is help with their depression and their life problems.

** This reminded me of my own son, who is white, who by the end of first grade was in trouble constantly for fighting and acting up, and was viewed by his teacher as hostile and disruptive. But at the first parent-teacher conference in the fall, the teacher’s report was that he was fine and behaving in class, although my son’s report was that he was depressed and unhappy and the other children were teasing him. The teachers’ response at that school to complaints about teasing was, “Just ignore it.” My son got a second chance from another school and learned how to control his behavior at school, although it was several more years before he could govern his temper at home. He’s now a polite, affectionate, and high-achieving young man. I’ve heard many tales of black first grade boys (first grade!) being told by teachers, “You are going to end up in prison.” And in his presentation, Victor Rios told of some children being told that by their families: “You’ll end up in prison, just like your father.” I cannot help but think about how racism and disadvantage send children on different paths from the same beginnings.

My heart aches.

#6.

In this episode: details about problems and programs, some startling facts about returning prisoners, a brief eruption around mistaken racial identity, we talk about mentoring. Again, a
mosaic of experiences. Remember, these discussions are not being “performed” for Whites; the point is a group dominated by people of color are trying to understand what is going on and what they can do to contribute to solutions.

Next up is a panel of six people from Unitown, all in their thirties to sixties. None were here yesterday for the first day of the conference. They are a White woman who runs a faith-based nonprofit with a significant prisoner reentry project; an Asian woman community organizer; a Black man who has been a local politician and is head of Unitown’s office of equal opportunity; a Black man who is a former prisoner who is now the head of a returning prisoner’s organization, and a Black married couple (both professionals) who have been involved in a lot of different activist projects; she is now chair of Unitown’s Equal Opportunity Commission. I know five of them from the various groups I’ve worked in and have heard much of what they say before. My notes are details that caught my attention.

The organizer talks about building youth political groups who hold conferences on disparities and build political capacity. She gives a very cogent analysis of the problems with the disproportionate minority confinement project we’ve been involved with – lots of meetings, lots of concern, lots of buy-in from officials, but the racial disparities are still there. In one middle school, 54 of 55 kids suspended were African American – this is the school my children went to, it is 16% Black, 19% Asian and 57% White (less White than when my children were there). An 11 year old child committed a sexual assault against a family member and will be on a sexual registry for the rest of his life. She also talk eloquently about the importance of being able to cry and the prevalence of depression in the community. There it is again – an epidemic of depression among young people.

The equal opportunity director brings up a variety of issues around race, including a widely-publicized incident a few years ago when some White teachers circulated an email of critique and resistance after a district-mandated two day “courageous conversations about race” training in the public schools. This is linked to other talk about teachers’ racial biases hurting children of color.

The White woman and the ex-offender talk about programs for returning prisoners; the Circles of Support program creates groups of five people to support one returning prisoner. The head of the returning prisoner’s group says that when he went to prison, he got rehabilitative programs that allowed him to come out with skills and succeed in a legitimate life style. But it is different now. When he was in prison, he met young kids who were sentenced to 20+ years under the RICO act, they were young low-level drug runners but charged under conspiracy acts. Inside prison, that they no chance to be educated or learn skills. Now with the recent crack cocaine decision, 20,000 prisoners are being released immediately from federal prisons, they are just being released to the streets, instead of getting the usual 90 days in halfway houses. Young men who went in at 17-19, spent 15-20 years warehoused in federal prison are now just dumped on the streets. “They are still children in men’s bodies.” He talks about the extreme discrimination in the workplace for people with conviction records, even if you have a college degree, and how people who really want to change their lives and stay out of prison get discouraged and throw in the towel. He complains
about the lack of diversity in the skilled trades and says they are the logical place for young men in
good physical health with few skills, but it is “like pulling hens teeth” to get ex-offenders into a
trade apprenticeship.

The married couple go next. They are prominent in activist circles and appear separately and
together in many forums about many issues. They have taught classes to Black parents about
positive parenting approaches and headed Unitown’s slavery reparations movement. In addition to
raising a birth child who turned out fine, they parented a foster child who got into trouble and
spent time incarcerated. His style moves around from serious objective (spoken in “standard”
English) to jokey (spoken in “Black” English) to militant (spoken in eloquent “standard” English
laced with “Black” English phrases); he makes a “jokey” point of saying that he is going to let his
wife go first, because he knows what is good for him. Her style is more soft-spoken, sounding
warm and compassionate as she talks about the needs of children. They sort of hand the stage
back and forth to each other, speaking as distinct people but also as a team, as I’ve seen them do
before. He talks about rescuing the Black male, “No one will save us from ourselves but
ourselves” and “We need to stop focusing on telling our children what they cannot do, we have to
tell them what they can do.” He gives a wide-ranging short speech condemning racialized
imprisonment, the decline of rehabilitation, teachers who only want to teach the bright students,
schools that don’t route children in to the classes they need for college, the importance of schools
caring about the children.

She argues that the most important thing is for teachers to love and respect young people as
human beings. She is critical of “cultural awareness” and “cultural competence” programs, saying
that you really cannot teach somebody else’s culture, you just trivialize it if you try, and that
“cultural competence training can be fear generating.” (I’m not sure what she means by that, I
don’t get a chance to find out.)

The Chicano professor who looks White and sounds Anglo from yesterday speaks up and says
that “cultural competency” is a euphemism, a cover, that really what we are trying to teach is
about who controls power and curriculum can make a difference. The Black man says something I
did not get down as a quote, but it was something like “You think you know, but you really don’t
know about the minority experience.” It is clear that he is coding his challenger as White. The
Chicano professor says, very loudly and sternly, “No you don’t know what my experience is.”
The two get into a tussle where it is clear that the Black speaker is treating the Chicano man as
White and the Chicano man resents it. The organizer calls time and ends the session. The two men
get into a heated conversation which I don’t hear. The Chicano professor is still pretty steamed
when I talk to him a few minutes later.

After break, we have small groups with the assignment to talk about some concrete plan for what
we will do back in our community. My group includes mostly people from Unitown – the married
couple, the head of the returned prisoner’s group, the White woman who heads the faith-based
organization (who leaves early), the white male police officer, and me – plus a black man from
Segtown and a facilitator from Farmtown. I know there is already a lot going on in Unitown and
everyone at the table is already involved in something. How is a randomly selected small group of people thrown together at a conference in Farmtown going to plan a project that would necessarily have to locate itself with respect to all the other projects in Unitown? How do we even know that we want to work with each other rather than all the other groups we are already working with? This is my only criticism of conference planning. While we wait to get going, the Black woman and I chat about how maybe we can have a book-writing support group back home, as each of us is trying to write a book.

We open with a discussion of a prior project to develop an Afrocentric class that, after a lot of work, ran aground because the white leaders of the school district called it racist. The man from Segtown talks at some length about “the 300 pound white gorilla,” Eurocentric behavior and racism. He says that we need to do work on something we have control over because if it is in the control of a school district “we will be litigating forever” – the school is Eurocentric and puts us in an inferior position. He says we should develop a multi-faceted mentor program, try to help people connect into trades and professions. Most of the people at the table say something positive about mentoring program. I was especially struck by the returned prisoner’s statement. He says that he learned an enormous amount from mentors: “What was normal for me was abnormal for society. . . How to treat women, get up and go to work every day, or hug and kiss their children. I did not learn this in my dysfunctional family.” He picks up on the theme from his earlier talk about the children in men’s bodies, this time stressing the need for mentoring about relations and life skills. The Black woman from Unitown talks about a really broad agenda to include college preparation, occupational, parenting skills, life skills such as how to walk and speak and manage a checkbook. The Black male facilitator from Farmtown talks about how they run a men’s group for their black male students, who he says are lost, from the streets, and want to keep a thug mentality; he says they need to change to a proud black identity to get an education. (He is quick to add that they also run programs for women and other ethnic groups.) He offers to bring a busload of his students to Unitown once a week to mentor students there.

Listening to the discussion, which seems to focus mostly on Black identity and role models, I ask about the role of Whites in mentoring plans. Several Black people say Whites are needed and welcome, that young people need to learn how to relate to White people and those of all ethnic backgrounds, and give the example of the Circles of Support, which usually include white people. The man from Segtown adds that it is important to expand the discussion to include women and other ethnic groups.

The facilitator wants us to commit to the next step. I keep quiet; I think my plate is already full. The group agrees to explore options back in Unitown.

#7.

(This continues a series. See the earlier posts in the series for context.)

Our lunch speaker is a Black man I code as about 40 plus or minus 10 years. He has a staff job
with a college in another state and is also a Baptist minister. His style is passionate Black ministerial oratory interweaving politics and God, interweaving joking and anger and challenge, ranging broadly across a lot of issues and pulling in quotations from many writers. He says his goal is to challenge and upset people. The talk is free-flowing but planned out; there are extensive quotations from religious and political sources. I’ve tried to capture the feeling of the speech/sermon in my notes.

My goal is to make you upset and angry today. People need to stop being PC and talking about “institutional racism” as a cover and being afraid to call out individual racists. We should demand justice. But instead of demanding, we are sitting complacent and saying we are doing something, but we are not doing something. We should demand drug treatment and job training. Socially responsible businesses should offer training at their own cost, benefits to community. We should go back to Operation Breadbasket, when leaders demanded businesses to sponsor jobs. We should call out the Urban League for distancing itself from other side of the tracks. NAACP needs to study Black on Black violence. Police Departments need viable community review boards to challenge discrimination and police brutality. We need alternatives to prison for non violent offenders, there is no reason for prison for nonviolent offenders. We need a meaningful curriculum for offenders so they avoid repeating their crimes. The tough on crime era was grounded on racism, unconstitutional, denied right of due process, moved people into the federal system. We need to challenge individualism and competition, and bend our ears to hear the suffering. We much challenge the idea that people at the top have God’s grace. Everyone has God’s grace, including the down and out. We must say with Eugene Debs, “While there is a lower class, I am in it; While there is a criminal element, I am of it; While there is a soul in prison, I am not free!” Disproportionateness screams for repair, we cannot take a myopic one sided view like Cosby and Obama, we have to go to root causes, rescinding racist policies, revolutionizing values, redistributing wealth, educating the young, inculcating principles of altruism, compassion, conscientiousness, and unity. We need to believe that America will change. We cannot deny we are oppressed. There are three responses to oppression: acquiescence, violence, or direct confrontation. We need to do direct confrontation. We need a mass movement for equity and justice, we need militance. We must be relentless, turn a world upside down that would be right side up for God. God give us leaders. A time like this requires leaders who have honor, who will not lie, who will stand against a demagogue. We need leaders who emerge from an environment of faith and courage, virtue, conscience. Not cowardice, is it safe. Not expedience, not vanity. Conscience asks the question “is it right?” We must take a position because it is right. Our thinking makes our future, our actions pave the way; We build a new tomorrow on plans we make today. Let’s start causing trouble. To forge a society in which justice rolls like water. To make our people full participants in all aspects of society. This is the only way to get some sleep. Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell and organize. Get something done each day. Build a new legacy. He ends with: If you can’t be a pine on the top of the hill, Be a shrub in the valley—but be The best little shrub at the side of the hill; Be a bush if you can’t be a tree. . . . Be the best of whatever you are."
Well, I like this sermon/speech a lot. I have heard Black sermons and oratory before, and it is a style I appreciate. My own political/religious views align with the speaker’s, and I like the interweaving of issues and inspiration, the emotional tenor and passion of the talk, the call to action. I reflect, as I have before, that inspirational oratory wasn’t such a lost art in my ethnic group.

There are initially not a lot of questions, so I ask one. I say I liked the talk a lot, but I question his use of apathy or laziness to describe the loss of movement. I say that it is important to remember that people can fight hard but lose, and that trying hard and losing is what makes people lose heart and become despairing. Some others in the audience nod in agreement with me. He concedes my point, but won’t concede to despair. He responds with another mini-sermon. It is important to keep moving, we have to be socialist and share. He says he is criticized by his employer for being involved in the community, but says you have to do it, you have to be involved. You must have confrontation, you have to be in their face, all the time.

Then he tells a story about a young man who was tased unfairly, despite repeatedly offering to cooperate with the police who stopped him. The kid’s actions and statements were recorded on the squad car video, but then the police shoved him out of the range of the camera and started tasing him off camera after they had handcuffed him, shouting “stop resisting” periodically for the benefit of the camera. Then they take the kid to jail and hold him. He talks about being downtown and confronting and confronting the people until they got the kid out. He says you have to be in their face and cry out injustice. You gotta do it, you are not going to win all the time, you have to do it even if it hurts. He says he gets in trouble with his employer because he helps people in the jail who are being beat up. But, he says, “You just have to do it. You are a member of the community, you have to help out if you can.”

From the audience, another speaker, a Black man from Farmtown, says we need another mass movement, it is time for the student movement to start a new civil rights movement. There is an exchange about dealing with Whites and about making change. Then a young man, a student, says he is half black and half white but identifies as black, and talks about how hard it has been, he does not know why he has succeeded; he complains about people looking shocked when he gets an A because he is black, he says “It is just a grade.”

The goal is to inspire us to action, to be willing to be confrontational, to re-create a mass movement. I am both inspired and very aware of all the structural reasons why it is so hard to get a mass movement going now. These are very hard times. Next: group reports and wrap up

#8.

The final session of the two-day conference I’ve been describing in the “Farmtown” posts is supposed to be reports from the small groups that met in the morning. These reports get longer and the discussion gets more animated with each successive speaker. As with the sermon, I’ve
tried to capture the flavor of the longer speeches. Again what interests me is the way people weave different themes together when they talk.

The first group decided to work on more parental involvement in the schools, and focused on developing a program to accomplish this. (Nobody talks about the problem that there is a fundamental conflict at the core of parental involvement: the schools want parents to be involved so parents will do what the school wants them to do, while parents want to be involved so the school will do what the parents want them to do. I think this, but don’t bring it up, although I have at other meetings in UniTown sometimes.)

The second group took a brainstorming approach and came back with large sheets of paper full of ideas and proposed solutions. Their main emphasis was to list the many groups that are involved with these issues and to develop programs to increase the relations among existing organizations and to increase overall community involvement. One proposal from group two is “outlaw zero tolerance.” One Black woman (a district attorney) not from the group speaks up and says, “well you want zero tolerance for some things.” We then get into a vigorous discussion/debate with a lot of speakers (including me) about zero tolerance policies and whether discretion is good or bad. The discussion goes toward a critique of policies that eliminate thinking and judgment in deciding how to respond to problems and then to a rebuttal that there are things you have to be against, you need school safety. I said that I could imagine a circumstance in which even bringing a gun to school would not warrant expulsion and sketched a narrative about an heirloom 19th century rifle (which I made up on the spot) that made everyone laugh but did not seem to persuade anyone who did not already agree with me. No consensus.

The third group reports a lot of ideas about schools: Make students be part of the rule-making process. Social workers in the school. Think about the goals of the school and address them. Extra curricular activities. There is discussion about not always blaming the teachers and the need to get parents helping in the classroom. “Look at whole system.” The community organizer (see Farmtown #6) gives what I think is a very well-taken speech. She says: There is too much pointing at the kids, you also need to point at other people. We need to organize for systemic change, hold people accountable. People have to get together and look at the whole. It is purposeful that all of us are competing for limited dollars for programs and competing against detention programs that have high failure rates and get more money, a social program with that failure rate would never get that much money. We need to get key stakeholders involved. And elect people who will make change. We need not just write to legislators, but to be a powerful force with elections.

The fourth group is the one I was in. I wonder how the report will go. It is given by the black man from SegTown. As several times before, he gives a very long talk about his own experiences and opinions, which are interesting to me, although his way of occupying floor time might be considered inappropriate in some groups. He talks again about his son’s experiences teaching, stressing that the son is mixed race and cannot tell whether he is “Black, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, or Arab.” He describes a case of a 12-year-old threatening to hit another child with a fire
extinguisher then pushing a child through a window; the police took the child to jail although the son did not want them to. His son offered food and child care so parents could come to the schools; they’d bring the whole family to eat because this was their best chance at a meal. (This image really hits me.) He says: The poor need resources. A lot of the problem is racism, there too much emphasis on symptom and not the disease. You got to do small things, not too big. We have to make a difference one at a time.

Then he tells a longer story that really strikes me as it unfolds. I was mentoring women trying to get them to college, they had a stroke, I never asked them about their personal lives, they each had a stroke because their sons went to prison, I did not know because I was busy helping with them going to college, writing term papers. I did not know about the other problems. One woman got beat up. Mentoring is important, the people in these situations don’t make good choices, they have choices bad and worse, they don’t even get to good. Under stress people panic and the only decision they make is bad. Who do we mentor? People already in jail, children? Preschool? Parents? We are in such a crisis we should deal with all of them. I thought I’d been doing my job mentoring, but I had not realized how bad it had gotten, and I did not realize until my son started working in the school. He said while his son was caring about the kids he was teaching, he (the father) was trying to pull every political string he could to get his son transferred out of the school where he was into one in a safer area, but his son wants to go back to the same school. Then he goes on: I raised a lot of hell, caused trouble for every employer I ever had. Change only comes about through some kind of conflict. It’s a seven-headed hydra. Money is drying up for the people we are talking about. There is no money in these communities. No jobs there any more. Without financial resources you are not going to have a healthy environment for kids to grow up in. We should do all the things we say we will do, but when you cut off one head another one will grow back. We live in a Eurocentric society. I was astonished yesterday to learn that half our children are labeled as learning disabled. The label says we don’t have to educate that child. People in the room yesterday yelled at me and said that we Blacks are equally responsible because we get money for SSI when our children are labeled disabled. We talked about mentoring, but in the final analysis it won’t solve the problem because we are part of the problem. We talked about a six month time frame for setting up mentoring.

The speaker is followed by a wide-ranging discussion with a lot of participation from many people. Someone says: ” This is a whole community problem, when the child in the community cannot read. It is no wonder that they act up in class if they cannot read.” There is discussion about how we will connect with other groups, how we need new paradigms, how we need actions in the community.

We are past the announced ending time. A conference organizer stands up to make closing remarks, to end on a definite note. We don’t have plans here, but you can generate something. We (the task force who convened the conference) are committed to a five year plan, we will keep working, we hope others will become involved, we will have a strategy to attack this thing. We hoped that groups from community would come here, then go back into the community to work as a community team. We just want to be the initial body to encourage teams in your community
where the real work will get done. You need to form the network you will need as you take on this issue. The racial serpent will rear its head. You have to be prepared. We will keep working, we will meet again.

Next: The last Farmtown post: Reflections on the experience

#9.

I’m not sure who (if anyone) has stuck with this series, so I’m not sure what your interests are in wrap-up. Drop comments if you want me to address other issues. Here are my thoughts. 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.

* 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.