The Work and Life of Women: The Dynamics of Individualism and Power

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With my colleague, Rosalind Sun, I have recently written a book about women for whom their entire world is enmeshed in work (Sun and Bergquist, 2021). This essay provides my own reflections on the insights Rosalind and I have gained from the investigations underlying this book. Specifically, the matter of control over the work and life of these women concerns something more than the economic basis of the society where one resides. It also concerns a cultural bias toward individualism rather than collectivism. When one lives and works in a society that emphasizes individual responsibility and control over one's own destiny, then the matter of internal and external control becomes quite complex—often leading to either contradictory or frequently shifting perspectives regarding the character of one's work and life.

If we are citizens of a society that is highly individualistic, we should have immediate and continuing control over our own individual life. After all, internal control is supposed to be a foundational piece of individualism. Yet, we don't always (or even often) have control over our work and life. The safeguards to be found in a collectivist society are absent in an individualist society. Without collective responsibility, the forces of external control are likely to be strong and more powerful than the rather hazy and often flimsy platitudes about individual rights and declarations of freedom.

Individualism Reconsidered

I suggest that the interplay between individualism and locus of control is even more complex and the impact of individualism on the women we studied is even more elusive. First, as the noted sociologist David Riesman has observed, the status and dynamics of individualism is not readily captured in a simple statement of support or condemnation. In his essay on *Individualism Reconsidered* (Riesman, 1954), Riesman turns to his earlier distinction between inner-directed and out-directed orientations to society (Riesman, 1950). He suggests that many of the leaders of industry (particularly in the United States) during the early years of the industrial revolution were inner-directed. Their personal values helped to guide the ways in which they did business. While making money (capitalism) was the focus of their business decisions, they also (according to Riesman) possessed a moral compass that restrained their endeavors: "they were guided by internalized goals and ideals . . . And since the ideals that were internalized included many vestiges of older traditions, they were frequently paternalistic men, who,

despite nominal belief in free enterprise, helped ameliorate the worst abuses brought about by their innovations." (Riesman, 1954, pp. 13-14).

In contemporary times, Riesman points to the Rockefellers and their many philanthropic endeavors as evidence of a powerful moral compass – though once again we need to remember that the original source of the Rockefeller wealth came from business decisions that were based minimally on any sense of morality or concern for societal welfare. Does philanthropy ever erase the abuse of workers? Is it ever acceptable to exchange welfare for wages? When we provide charity to those we have abused, then we remain in control. The recipients of our charity remain helpless and alienated from the products of their work—whether they are oil refinery workers, service station attendants, or those (like the women we studied) who are working in mills and restaurants.

It is perhaps most telling that Riesman observed in 1954, that "men [at the present time] who compete primarily for wealth are relatively harmless as compared with men who compete primarily for power." (Riesman, 1954, p. 16) These considerations regarding individualism could have profound implications regarding the world in which women worked during the second half of the 20th Century and now work during the first half of the 21st Century. Might an issue of power rather than economics lead to conditions where women are still being discriminated against regarding wages and upward mobility?

The following cries might have been heard in the C-Suites of the last 75 years:

> What if these women actually move up in the ranks of business and begin to control things? We can't let this happen!!
>
> If we give women a taste of power, then they might want more!

Perhaps power is not only justified by individualism. It might also be engaged to ensure that the locus of control is external when it comes to the work and life of women.

The Poverty Cycle

Like many social observers and social critics over the past half century, we propose that a cycle of poverty is closely related to the two major themes introduced in this chapter (capitalism and individualism) as well as the attendant themes of power and control. A similar relationship is identified by Daniel Moynihan and his colleagues who published *On Understanding Poverty* in 1968 (Moynihan, 1968a). There is a strong propensity for the establishment of a poverty cycle when there are established conditions of profound individualism and the dominance of a capitalist spirit in a specific society

(Moynihan (1968b), Specifically, there are four elements (actually cluster of elements) in the poverty cycle that all interact and reinforce one another—and each of these clusters relates directly to both capitalism and individualism.

The Elements of Poverty

First, there are cultural and environmental obstacles to motivation in a society where capitalism and individualism tends to shift control from an internal source to an external source. This first cluster of motivational elements is joined by a second set of elements. Poor health, inadequate education and low mobility lead to limitation in earning potential. A third cluster of elements closely relates to the first two. These elements concern limited job prospects and income opportunities. Lower earning potentials and opportunities lead to lower wages. Lower wages, in turn, lead to reduced expenses and increased profit—which are two of the primary goals in a capitalist society. Furthermore, a spirit of individualism in a society tends to minimize collective protection or control, thus making it even more likely that those earning low wages will be unable to change these poverty-producing conditions. With no societal guard rails there are no opportunities to break up the poverty cycle.

The various states and conditions of poverty represent the fourth cluster of elements. The states of poverty result from the interweaving of the other three clusters. Poverty, in turn, contributes to the other three elements. A “perfect storm” is created with the winds and waves of cultural and environmental barriers, poor health and education, limited opportunities for work and wages, and poverty. These winds and waves pile up—creating chaos and despair among those caught in the poverty cycle. What are the environmental conditions that increase the chances there will be a perfect storm? They are capitalism and individualism. Both conditions lead to an externalization of control and to ways in which the women we studied experience their own life that is filled with work.

Social Stratification

Moynihan moves us past the cycle of poverty to the condition of social stratification—one of the Lines. With the cycle of poverty firmly established, the process of social stratification is fully engaged. Separate communities are now established, with the “haves” living in one community and the “have nots” living in a completely different community. The Line has been drawn. In describing the social stratification that accompanies and reinforces the cycle of poverty, Moynihan (1968a) turns to the much broader social analysis offered by Talcott Parsons (1954) and his exceptional precursor, Max Weber (Gerth and Mills, 1958), along with Miller and Roby (Miller and Roby, 1968), as members of Moynihan’s study

group, Parsons describes the interplay between three major elements in most societies: class, status, power. As with the cycle of poverty, there is a recursive dynamic operating with class influencing status and with both class and status influencing power. Power, in turn, reinforces class and status. While class, status and power are held by individual members of a society, these three elements are reinforced and supported by the large private enterprises that dominate this society.

As engines of capitalism, the private enterprises become "the servants of power" to those individuals who reside at the top of the social stratum. (Baritz, 1960). These enterprises are further complemented by the servants of education and government who condone if not directly aide the acquisition of power by the upper class and the reinforcement of Lines. Furthermore, there is a psychological sense of social honor that accompanies class, status and power: one can take pride in and a sense of personal responsibility (internal locus of control) for being a leader of industry and community. It is indeed poignant that those at the highest levels of social stratification can readily perceive themselves as being in total control of their own work and life. Their Word for World is *Empowerment*.

Culture of Poverty

We now come to the final stage of the poverty cycle, as identified by Daniel Moynihan and his co-authors of *On Understanding Poverty*. With social stratification comes the creation and maintenance (over many generations) of a culture of poverty. In describing the nature and dynamics of this culture, Oscar Lewis (1968, pp. 187-200) contributed an anthropological perspective to this study of poverty. While the factors that Lewis identifies as leading to a cycle of poverty are similar to those offered by Moynihan and the other authors of this book on poverty, he moves much further in describing the psychological impact of poverty on those inhabiting this culture. Lewis focuses in particular on fatalism and low levels of aspiration as related to the powerful forces of capitalism and individualism that we have been highlighting:

> The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair that develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society. Indeed, many of the traits of the culture of poverty can be viewed as attempts at local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies because the people are not eligible for them, cannot afford them, or area ignorant or suspicious of them. (Lewis, 1968. P. 188)

In this statement, Lewis is acknowledging the separation and isolation of communities within a single society, based on sustained social stratification. He has described the Line. Lewis defines this as a culture because it is expansive in terms of both space and time. Not only does this culture tend to spread across an entire isolated lower and lower middle-class community but also across time. There is an intergenerational transmission of the culture as well as the trauma inherent in this culture. As Lewis (1968, p. 188) notes:

> The culture of poverty . . . is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on children.

Lewis (1968, p, 199) concludes with a powerful (and disturbing) statement: "it is easier to eliminate poverty than the culture of poverty."

It is not just that the culture of poverty is transmitted in a persistent manner from generation to generation--there is also the even more troubling alignment between culture and trauma. As Lewis (1968, p. 188) suggests, there is often a deeply felt trauma associated with the inter-generational transmission: "Most frequently, the culture of poverty develops when a stratified social and economic system is breaking down or is being replaced by another."

Under such conditions, the powerful fist of authoritarian dominance comes to the fore and leads to even more forceful and often violent assertion of external control. As a result, women living in a world filled with the demands of work have lived in a culture of helplessness and hopelessness. There is no way out of their current job. Many of these women do not have the money to leave their job. While they might not have been members of the lower class of poverty, they are subject to the multiple sources of trauma that arise from poverty. While they might not formally be called "slaves", they certainly live under conditions that might be identified as modern wage slavery (Chomsky, 2008). Furthermore, this trauma and the accompanying psychological states of helplessness and hopelessness might be passed on to the next generation. To paraphrase, Oscar Lewis, it might be easier to mitigate the abuses associated with inhumane work than to eliminate the culture that is created by these inhumane conditions.

Community: Isolation, Support and Heart

Community is a bedrock theme in any exploration of the interplay of work and life. Communities play a critical role in determining how women living in a world of work experience their life. Is life for them aligned with or alienated from the community in which they reside and work? Communities can provide support for our women. By contrast, they can serve as barriers and sources of isolation that disallow either justice or freedom. Put simply, communities can be good or bad depending on the perspective from which we view the life of the women we have brought to this book.

Given that community seems to be important in understanding and appreciating the work and life of the women Rosalind Sun and I studied, it might be important to reflect for a short while on the nature of community. What exactly is community and how does it play a role in the life of women for whom virtually their entire world consists of work?

Community as Territory

Originally, community was defined by physical location. The cluster of people (tribe) with whom we lived became the community. People residing in other locations were defined as the enemy or at least as the "other". This distinction is not unique to human beings. Many other animals are territorial. However, humans may be near the top of the list as territory-obsessed animals--as noted by Robert Ardrey (1966) in *The Territorial Imperative*. Many of the conclusions reached by Ardrey have been challenged since his best-selling book was published, and there is considerable controversy concerning the extent to which territorial competition is a primary source of violence in primate communities (Goodall, 2010; Sapolsky, 2017; Wrangham, 2019).

There is much less controversy, however, concerning the importance of territory for virtually all primates. It seems that many primates spend a considerable amount of their time at the boundary (or communicating about their time at the boundary). They are serving as guards against the threatened invasion of other members of their own species. For human beings, physical proximity and the clear definition of physical territory has been of similar importance. Our communities have traditionally been defined by physical proximity. Our fellow primates could certainly appreciate this tradition.

As a community development specialist, Roland Warren (1963, p. 1) offers the following analysis concerning this traditional way of defining community as territory and physical location:

> The idea of . . . community is deceptively simple, so long as one does not ask for a rigid definition. The term calls forth a rich imagery associated with the "country village," the "small town," or the "big city" of an earlier day. One thinks of the country village's Main Street, with its

> several stores and post office and the streets and houses and lawns which immediately surround it before one comes to the enveloping prairie, dairy-farm country, or forest.

Warren (1963, p. 1) becomes a bit nostalgic and wistful:

> One calls to mind the road which traverses the five, ten, or twenty miles . . . which connects it with a small city. Here in the small city is a larger population, a greater variety of shops and services, a daily newspaper, a series of wholesale establishments serving surrounding villages, perhaps a college or university, a hospital, a number of industries. Or one conjures up the larger city with its great concentration of people, its businesses and medical center and museums and department stores and newspapers which serve a large section of the state or perhaps parts of several states, and its burgeoning suburbs.

Warren (1963, pp. 1-2) does not stop with this preliminary way of defining community. He describes the various images and assumptions that accompany this traditional definition:

> One thinks of places large and small. places whose appearance reflects the specialized industrial or other functions they perform, places which vary according to climate and topography, according to the origin of the people who first settled or later migrated there, according to diverse history and traditions- places which differ from each other in a dozen ways, and yet have much in common.
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> One thinks of communities, large or small, as clusters of people living in close proximity in an area which contains local stores and other service facilities for the sustenance of local people, and also industries whose produce is distributed throughout a much wider area. Surrounding this concentration of people is usually a much larger geographic area which is the effective "service area" of the place, and whose size varies according to which types of "services" one is considering.
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> Various criteria thought to characterize communities include a specific population, living within a specific geographic area, amongst whom there are present shared institutions and values and significant social interaction.

This first framing of community clearly was prevalent during the hunter-gatherer stage of human evolution. Even though groups of people were on the move during this early stage of human evolution, they cared deeply about the specific territory in which they were temporarily located. This might be

considered an early version of the "movable feast"! Physical territory continued to be a priority as human beings moved on to agriculture. The concern for physical proximity remained in place when the agrarian-based community became prevalent. Physical territory might have become even more important with the creation of permanent farms. Members of the community remained in place—tilling the soil and growing crops and domesticating and raising animals. As Warren noted, these agrarians also began to build institutions on the territory they were claiming as their "community."

Community as Workplace

Communities changed as the Modern era emerged. Institution-building became even more important with the movement to an industrial base. Cities were being established and members of these urban communities often identified with specific institutions—be they religious, governmental or production-based. Many residents of these newly formed cities began to identify their workplace as their community. The small worker enclaves associated with their workplace became the specific location of their community.

Workplace communities established during the Modern era were often directly aligned with another type of community—the ghetto. People clustered in large modern cities based on their ethnic identify or religious faith. In some instances, they were forced into these ghetto communities. In other instances, they voluntarily entered these communities, wishing to acquaint primarily with people who spoke the same language, observed the same rituals and norms, and viewed those from other neighborhoods as "other" and often as enemies.

These ethnically based enclaves were especially prevalent in large urban centers. They were established when these centers (such as New York City, Boston, London and Paris) were rapidly expanding with the arrival of diverse immigrant populations. Immigration was often sequential in nature with immigrants from one specific country or region of a country arriving first, with immigrants from a second and third country or region arriving next. The large cities in the world by the early years of the 20th Century were often actually clusters of many smaller communities with distinct boundaries. Many modern cities were, in essence, composed of many small ethnic-based towns—with important socio-economic Lines being drawn between these inner-city towns.

These ghettoes were not just established in large cities, they also existed in much smaller settings. These small-town ghettoes were a blend of work-based and ethnic-based communities. Everyone (at least most of the adults) worked in an American business (often factory) located near their enclave and spoke

a common language (other than English) while retaining the culture of their home country. As in the case of the urban setting, there were often sequential migration patterns, with one newly-arriving ethic group replaced the previously arriving ethnic group—replacing this group at the bottom of the socio-economic totem pole. Though both groups remained below the Line, sub-Lines being drawn.

Community as Lifestyle

More recently, as we enter a post-industrial and post-modern era, the notion of community has further evolved. There are the lifestyle enclaves described by Robert Bellah and his associates in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and the virtual communities that have become dominant in many technologically advanced societies. People no longer spend all their free time interacting with people living next door or working in the same organization. In many suburban communities throughout the world, residents might not even know the name of their neighbors – especially if they are living in suburbs where there are high rates of mobility. During the last few years (often driven by the COVID-19 virus), the in-person workplaces are being replaced by virtual settings in which employees interact via Zoom, Skype and other digital-mediated venues.

It is often more likely that suburbanites spend a Saturday afternoon attending a sports car rally or going to the gym three miles away to work out with their friends. During the past decade it has become even more likely that they are sending Saturday afternoon (and most weekday afternoons or evenings) talking with their Internet buddies—especially if these suburbanites are under 30 years of age. A similar story can be told about those working in virtual environments. Instead of going out for a beer (or wine) after work with their fellow workers, they are likely to shift from their work-based email account to their personal mobile device for chats with their Internet buddies. No beer or wine--rather an afterwork sharing of thoughts and feelings with those holding a similar set of values and perspectives—that is with other members of the same lifestyle enclave.

It is easy to declare that the lifestyle enclaves are new and that the Internet and virtual workplaces have changed everything. Before doing so, perhaps we should consider ways in which things haven't really changed. The lifestyle enclaves of the 21st Century might simply be variants on the ghettoes of an earlier time (and the current time in some societies). It is all about shared perspectives, interests, histories and even language (with technical terms and shorthand terms and abbreviations being bandied about inside the enclaves). There is one big difference. The lifestyle enclaves are freely chosen by their inhabitants, whereas the ethnic ghettoes are usually not a matter of personal choice. It is a matter of survival or at

least protection in a broader community that enforces discriminatory practices against the new immigrants.

For many women it is not just a matter of economics. It is also a matter of socio-economic Line. On one side of the Line are those in the majority who rule the Gold and have the luxury of joining a lifestyle enclave. On the other side of the Line are those in the minority who are required to follow the Golden Rule. This Rule includes the requirement that these "other people" stay in their separate ghetto and "behave themselves" (conforming to norms of the dominant community). Gold can be used to pay for discriminatory public polices (formal and informal) and for the authority to enforce these policies.

Virtually all people live in communities. For many of us, this community is established among those people with whom we work—rather than among those people who live near us. Communities of work are to be found among many women in the world – both past and present. Their life has been filled with the demands of work, and they often have never known anything different in their life. Their community and ultimately their entire world is defined by and prescribed by Work.

Communities Without Privilege or Inclusion

It is important to note that communities in close proximity often are built on contradictions. Communities provide the opportunity both for inclusion and for exclusion. There are those women who live inside a community and those who live outside a community (either by choice or by exclusion). Those living inside a community because of dormitory residency or societal discrimination often find support and care—though life in this community usually comes at the expense of exclusion from a larger community in which they live. Those living outside a community other than a family that they are serving typically find that the broader community in which they reside is not very welcoming.

For many women, the profound challenge of living in a world that provides little privilege and some form on exclusion—they all are living below the Line. They are all defined in some way as the "other" and are subject infrequently (or even frequently) to multiple forms of discrimination. Building on our exploration in this chapter regarding the role played by capitalism and individualism in the work and life of the women we are studying, we look specially at this point more carefully into the nature of the work being done and the way status and power are wrapped up in the concepts of *Privilege and Inclusion.* It is to these dynamics of privilege and inclusion that we direct our attention in this concluding examination of the societal context in which our women work.

Privilege and Inclusion

We are about to look at how these two concepts play out in the life of the women Dr. Sun and I studied—but we first offer an expanded version of both concepts (as they are usually conceived). We consider privilege to be something more than just the granting of informal and formal authority for some people to speak on behalf of and make decisions on behalf of an entire society. From our expanded perspective, privilege concerns the right of someone to not only sit at the table where influential conversations occur and consequential decisions are made, but also to be heard and fully appreciated for the unique perspectives, experiences, knowledge and skills that they bring to the table.

Similarly, inclusion is more than just making sure that everyone is invited to the table. It is about the recognition that this inclusion improves the quality of problem-solving and decision-making that occurs at the table. Inclusion is not just about being "kind" to our fellow human beings (a form of paternalism); it is about being smart about the need for and use of inclusion and the resulting diversity (Page, 2011). It is about the shared construction and interpretation of reality that yields information that is more likely to be valid and useful than is the case when privilege and inclusion are granted only to the wealthy and powerful (Gergen and Gergen, 2004).

I have described the cycle of poverty and related it to an intergenerationally-transmitted trauma of poverty and the creation of an unyielding culture of poverty. This analysis of transmitted trauma can be taken a bit further. There is a deep level of trauma that is evident among women for whom work is their entire world. Trauma is inherent in the life of these women, for they often worked in isolation from the broader community in which they lived and found little privilege in the work they provided. We suggest that these challenges are poignantly portrayed in Resmaa Menakem's (2017) best-selling book called *My Grandmother's Hands*. While Menakem is focusing primarily on race, his observations seemingly apply to the lives led by the women that Dr. Sun and I were studying.

The title of Menakem's book comes from an incident in his own life. One day he asked his mother why his African American grandmother had such rough hands and had difficulty in closing her hands. Resmaa's mother indicated that his grandmother's hands were battered and callused because she had spent many years early in her life picking cotton. Her hands were hardened from encounter with the thorny surface of the cotton boll. His mother also told him that his grandmother found it difficult to walk—because as a child she often had to go without shoes. The early life of Resmaa's grandmother was embedded in the physical conditions of her body. Physical trauma was embodied in her.

Menakem conveys a powerful message regarding the comparable psychological embodiment of early life trauma, as well as the continuing trauma experienced by those who are excluded and denied any sense of privilege—and by those who encounter "micro-aggression" (often minor, repeated slights, mis-perceptions, and inaccurate expectations on the part of other people). In alignment with Oscar Lewis's description of transgenerational transmission of the culture of poverty, Menakem provides an articulate statement about sources of the trauma that is conveyed from generation to generation for not only those who are oppressed, but also the oppressors, and those who must moderate the oppression (such as law enforcement officers).

Menakem's analysis moves beyond that offered by Lewis. Menakem writes about the way trauma is literally embedded (like the grandmother's hands and feet) in one's physical body. The trauma is transferred to the next generation through this physical embodiment. He describes the "clean pain" associated with psychological processes that leads to mending and growth (Menakem, 2017, pp. 19-20). Menakem also identifies the "dirty pain" that leads to avoidance, shame and denial. Clean pain is metabolized (converted) by our body into a motivation for new learning (Bergquist, 2020). By contrast, dirty pain remains unprocessed and traumatizing. It is dirty pain that is found in abundance among those who are poor, targets of discrimination and isolated—those who live below the Line.

Conclusions

If Menakem is right, then the trauma of women is being transmitted to the next generation—as is the culture of poverty (and oppression). Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985, p. 153) suggest that:

> . . . communities . . . have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory,' one that does not forget its past.

In this case, the community of memory is one filled with the trauma of denied privilege and exclusion. Through stories of past abuse and hardship and through the physical transmission of bodily pain, there is a conveying of the trauma to the next generation.

The investigations I undertook with Rosalind Sun regarding the life of women for whom work is all consuming (Sun and Bergquist, 2021) have led me to a deeply disturbing set of questions. Is a cycle and culture of helplessness embedded in any oppressive World of Work that exists and is maintained without privilege or inclusion? Is this cycle and culture just as enduring as the cycle of poverty and

culture of poverty? Is the trauma associated with this cycle and culture deeply embedded in the bones of those who are helpless, as well as those who reinforce the cycle and culture?

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