The history of white privilege is a long and complicated story, too long and too complicated for me to tell completely here, but what I can do is identify major aspects of the story as a way to show how the sociological model works.

We begin with the long history of the British struggle to conquer Ireland and subjugate its people. This structural relation of dominance along with British frustration in the face of stubborn resistance, gave rise to a cultural belief that the Irish were an inferior and savage people, not merely in the organization of their societies, but in their very nature as human beings. The British came to view the Irish as something like a separate species altogether, possessing inferior traits that
were biologically passed from one generation to the next. In this, the British were inventing a concept of race that made it a path of least resistance to see other peoples as subhuman if not nonhuman, making it easier to objectify them and more difficult to feel empathy for them as members of their own kind, both integral to the exertion of control over others.

When the British came to North America, they brought with them both cultural views of race and the expectation of their own position of dominance as a structural feature of any society they might establish. To this was added the explosive growth of industrial capitalism as an economic system in the 18th and 19th centuries, whose structure is organized around the capitalist’s ability to control the conditions and resources on which profit depends. In the early stages of capitalism, for example, markets were the object of that control as capitalists bought goods in one place and took them to another where they were in scarce supply and could command a higher price than the one originally paid. Later, as capitalists became involved in the production of goods, profit depended more on the ability to control workers and natural resources than on markets – the less the capitalist pays for labor and materials, the more is left over for the capitalist to keep.

The ecology of North America lent itself to agriculture on a massive scale, and the capitalist demand for land and cheap labor far outstripped the available supply. Most of the land that was to become the United States was gained through a system of military and political dominance that relied on deceit, broken treaties, and military conquest that included the use of forced migration and genocide, practices that today would be considered crimes against humanity. Most of the labor was drawn from the population of indentured European servants, Native Americans, and Africans, none of whom were initially held in a state of perpetual slavery. The structure of the capitalist system, however, and the British cultural predisposition to see themselves as inherently superior as a distinct race of people, combined to lay down a path of least resistance leading in that direction.

Attempts to convert indentured white servants to permanent slavery failed because most were from England and had too strong a sense of their rights as individuals to
allow it. It proved equally impractical to enslave Native Americans because they could easily escape and disappear among native populations. This left black Africans, who were not among their own people in their own land and whose physical features stood out among the rest, leaving them with no place to hide should they manage to run away. They alone were selected for the status of permanent slavery.

Complicating the process, however, was the existence of the sacred cultural texts on which the fledgling U.S. experiment in democracy was founded. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with its Bill of Rights clearly contradict practices such as genocide, conquest, forced migration, slavery, the buying and selling of human beings, and the denial of basic rights to dignity, self-determination, and freedom. To resolve the contradiction, the concept of race was invoked to create distinct cultural categories of ‘white’ and ‘nonwhite’ human beings. Native Americans, whose societies Thomas Jefferson had regarded as equal to those of Europeans – and in some ways superior – were increasingly regarded as socially inferior and doomed either to be absorbed into an English way of life or to disappear altogether. Unlike Native Americans, however, Africans were held in perpetual bondage extending to their biological descendants, and because of this, the concept of race was carried to an extreme by defining whites as a biologically superior species and blacks as innately inferior and therefore incapable of learning or advancing themselves. This view, in turn, was used to justify holding blacks in a permanent status of subordination to whites on whom they supposedly were to depend for guidance and discipline. It was a common belief among whites that they were doing Africans a favor by bringing them to live their lives in service to whites as a kind of deliverance from an inferior and savage existence.

It’s important to emphasize that prior to the British experience with the Irish and the enslavement of Africans in North America, the concept of race, including categories such as ‘white’ and ‘color’ as social markers of inferiority and superiority, did not exist. Notice, then, how cultural ideas can come into being as a way to justify structural arrangements, and how those same ideas can go on to play a role in shaping other systems in various ways, such as the subordination of Africans and
Native Americans when English migrants came to North America to make new lives for themselves. This kind of interaction among the various characteristics of social systems is basic to understanding how social life happens – everything is connected to and has the potential to affect everything else.

Structural patterns of dominance also operate among whites, of course, and the concept of race has played a role in this as well. In the 19th century, for example, whites in the upper classes carried out a campaign to encourage lower and working-class whites to think of themselves as white – to make “white” an important part of their social identity – as a form of compensation for their miserable situation as workers, as in, “I may be poor, but at least I’m white.” Since then, racial identity has played an important role in distracting white workers from the realities of capitalism by encouraging them to focus on race instead of social class. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, when the labor movement was at its peak, unions routinely excluded workers of color. When white unions went on strike to enforce demands for better working conditions, employers often brought in people of color as strikebreakers, hoping white workers would channel their energy and anger into issues of race and away from the reasons that caused them to go on strike in the first place. Today, similar dynamics operate around issues related to affirmative action and immigration policy.

All of this history happened through the participation of individual people in social systems of various kinds, but it’s important to note that none of it had to happen as it did. The characteristics of systems produce paths of the least resistance for people to follow, but there is nothing in the nature of those paths that precludes the possibility of people choosing otherwise. There was overwhelming acquiescence and support for the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the conquest of new territory and the practice of slavery, but there was also opposition. The abolitionist movement was strong almost from the beginning, for example, and protesters such as Henry David Thoreau were willing to go to prison rather than pay taxes to fund a war against Mexico instigated solely to enlarge the country by taking Mexican land. People who participate in social systems, in short, are not robots or puppets in relation to them. A system’s structural, cultural, population, and ecological
characteristics can load the odds in ways that create paths of least resistance, but the rest depends on what people choose to do from one moment to the next.

Most of the choices we make are unconscious, it being in the nature of paths of least resistance to appear to us as the logical, normal thing to do without our having to think about it. This means, of course, that we can participate in systems in ways we’re not aware of and help produce consequences without knowing it and be involved in other people’s lives, both historically and in the present, without any intention to do so. I came to this awareness for myself through tracing my own family’s connection to the history of the United States, including white privilege and racism.

On the face of it, the path of least resistance is for me to jump to the conclusion that since, as far as I know, I don’t behave in overtly racist ways, and since my ancestors aren’t from the South and didn’t own slaves, then this troubling history has nothing to do with me. But the history of race in this country and how it plays out today show that things aren’t as simple as they seem.

My mother’s father, for example, migrated from Connecticut to Wisconsin where he bought land and started what became a prosperous dairy farm. As it turns out, the land he purchased had been taken from the Ho-Chunk Native American tribe several decades earlier even though the federal government had promised to protect their rights to their ancestral homeland. That promise was honored only until white miners showed an interest in rich deposits of lead on Ho-Chunk land and so the United States reneged and called in the Army to force the Ho-Chunk from their land.

From the Ho-Chunk point of view, my grandfather was in receipt of stolen property, but since whites had the power to make and enforce the law, they could also decide what was stolen and what was not, and so he was allowed to purchase the land without a second thought. He went on to be a successful farmer in the midst of the booming U.S. economy that, as the saying goes, was a rising tide that lifted all boats, including his. For most people of color, however, who were systematically
denied the opportunity to own their own ‘boat,’ the rising industrial capitalist tide brought little benefit.

When my grandfather died, the farm was sold and my mother and her four siblings each received a share of the proceeds. And when my parents bought their first house in 1954, they used her modest inheritance for the down payment. They also obtained an affordable mortgage from the Federal Housing Administration set up after World War II to help returning veterans buy their own homes. Being ordinary citizens, they may well have been unaware of the fact that federal regulations and guidelines governing FHA loans overwhelmingly favored whites over people of color, putting them on the receiving end of white privilege in one of the biggest transfers of wealth in U.S. history. Whether they knew it or not, however, the effect is the same.

My parents now had a boat of their own which was lifted by the rising tide of an expanding economy in the 1950s and 1960s, and when my wife and I wanted to buy our first house in the 1980s and didn’t have enough money for the down payment, we borrowed it from my mother. Now we had a boat that we were able to sell some years later and then build the house that we’re living in now. Which, I recently learned, is sitting on land that was once the homeland of the Massacoe tribe, from whom it was taken by white people in the 17th century.

I could say this history has nothing personally to do with me, that it was all a long time ago and done by someone else, that my ancestors were all good, moral, and decent people who never killed or enslaved anyone or drove anyone from their land. Even if that were true (I’ll ever know for sure), the only way to let it go at that is to ignore the fact that if someone was willing to take the time to follow the money, they would find that some portion of the house and land that we now call home can be traced directly back through my family history to the laws and practices that whites have collectively imposed through their government and other institutions. Back to the industrial capitalist revolution and the exploitation of people of color that made it possible. And back to the conquest, forced expulsion, and genocide through which the land that is now the United States was first acquired by Europeans. In other
words, some portion of this house is our share of the benefits of white privilege passed on and accumulated from one generation to the next.

For some whites, the share of benefits is greater or lesser than it is for others, depending on, among other things, the dynamics of social class. But one thing is certain: collectively, the white population of the United States now holds an enormous unearned advantage of wealth and power. And regardless of what kind of people we are as individuals or what we have or have not done ourselves, that advantage cannot be uncoupled from the history of race and racism in this country. The past is more than history. It is also present in structural distributions of wealth and power and cultural ideologies, laws, practices, beliefs, and attitudes whose effect is to justify, defend, and perpetuate the system of white privilege. And the past is present in the huge moral dilemmas that arise from such a history and the question of what to do about the unnecessary suffering and injustice that result from it.

The path of least resistance in any system is to be aware of none of this, to accept the organization of social life as just the way things are. This is especially true of dominant groups in systems of privilege, who can indulge in the ‘luxury of obliviousness,’ the freedom to live unaware of what you’re participating in and how and with what effect.

By contrast, there is no moment of greater awareness for anyone than when they step off the path of least resistance. And there is also no moment of greater potential to make a difference. In 1960, for example, most public accommodations were racially segregated throughout the U.S. South. One day, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four young African-American college students walked into a Woolworth’s lunch counter and bought school supplies for their first term in college and then sat down at the lunch counter and asked for menus. The waitress, however, refused to serve them – “We don’t serve your kind here” – and told them to leave.

They were furious at being treated this way, being from Northern cities where racism and segregation were certainly alive and well, but not in such a blatant form. For
weeks, they argued among themselves about what to do, until finally they decided to return to the lunch counter and refuse to leave until they were served like everyone else. As they sat on the stools that day, they were threatened, verbally abused, physically manhandled, had food and drink thrown on them, and yet they refused to leave. Finally, the manager announced that the lunch counter was closed. As the students rose to leave, they said they'd be back tomorrow. Which they were, along with others who had heard of their actions, and then still more the day after that, until every seat was occupied by a person of color openly defying the overt racial segregation that had been a hallmark of the South for hundreds of years.

Within a matter of weeks, news of what happened in Greensboro spread and similar sit-ins occurred across North Carolina and then, within a few months, throughout the South in all kinds of public accommodations. The eventual result was an end to this form of segregation.

Notice what these young men did and did not do. They did not try to change anyone’s mind. They did not speak, much less argue, with anyone, or hand out written statements. Instead, they made use of the fact that every social system happens only through the participation of individuals, any one of whom has the potential to change how the system happens by stepping off the path of least resistance. And by changing the way the system happened, they changed that thing larger than themselves that shapes people’s experience and behavior. In other words, they discovered that changing the way a system happens is a far more powerful – and potentially more dangerous – strategy than trying to change individuals one at a time.

By stepping off the path of least resistance, they changed both the ecology and the structure of that small system known as a lunch counter. They altered patterns of interaction and the arrangement of people in physical space – the essence of segregation – and thereby challenged the distribution of power that had kept these arrangements in place as cornerstones of white privilege. This, in turn, produced all kinds of consequences, including tension and conflict and the manager closing the lunch counter and more people showing up the next day and so on, all of which
continued to affect how the system happened from one moment to the next. And those consequences reverberated out from that small place to much larger systems, and on and on from there, including my retelling of the story in these pages and whatever effect that might have on whoever reads it.

This kind of interplay both between systems and the people who participate in them is how social life happens and produces the consequences that make us care one way or another. Clearly, nothing can be reduced to certain kinds of people making certain kinds of choices all on their own. Nor can social life be reduced to the characteristics of social systems by themselves. In either case, there is no such thing, for as the model makes clear, systems and people exist only in relation to each other and everything we do and everything we experience is always in the context of something larger than ourselves.

The challenge of sociological practice is to participate in social life with an ongoing awareness of how systems are organized in ways that produce predictable consequences so long as most people follow paths of least resistance most of the time. Then we become more than mere participants. Then we unlock the potential to make a difference.

Since we are the ones who make social life happen, sociological practice can't help but raise questions about our participation and the consequences that result from it. It is one thing to think about issues like privilege and oppression as “big” problems, for example, but quite another to see what they’ve got to do with who we are and how we live our lives.

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For more about the issues raised in this article, read Allan’s essays, “Our House Is on Fire” and “Who Me?” his his blog post, “America, Love It or Leave It.” Also see his presentations and interviews in the Audio & Video menu and responses to questions in I’m Glad You Asked. For more resources, see Allan’s book, Privilege, Power, and Difference and the following:


Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley, Race in North America: Origins and Evolution of a Worldview (2011)


Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds), Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror(1997)