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There is something about our own lives that is especially poignant to ourselves. Living in the interior of it, always seated at the front row, we experience our individual journey as special. Observing other individuals who are not us and often not comprehending them, we reckon our personhood is unique.

We live in a social and cultural milieu that encourages and compels this individualist mode of conceptualizing reality: individuals are unique, each person makes his or her own choices, chooses their own path. "In the end, it's up to the individual"—this is a sensibility I've heard in many different contexts.

As a teacher of Sociology, this individualist lens is a core mental framework I work to undo when students come into my classroom. I do this not because I want to destroy young people's sense of self-mastery or confidence, but because I want to build up their sense of social belonging and collective responsibility. It is crucial, when we live in society, to understand and appreciate that we are always connected to, shaped by, and impactful to others.

A useful example for illustrating how connected individuals are to others in society is our education system.

The well-known and repeatedly-told story about Singapore's education system is that it is "world class" and a "meritocracy." It has terrific infrastructure and is staffed by well-trained teachers; Singapore students do well in international tests; the education system recognizes and rewards individual "merit" and is thus an appropriate site where the country's best and brightest are identified. Another story less well-known outside of Singapore but widely-known within it is that the education system is a tough one for children and parents—there is a lot of homework and testing; to cope or to do well, parents have to micro-manage and paid tutors outside of school have become increasingly necessary. A third story, gradually gaining attention, is that kids from low-income families are having a difficult time "keeping up" in the system and they need to be "levelled up."

The individualist lens that so many of us view the world through leads us to make sense of the three stories this way: the education system is not perfect but ultimately rational and fair. There are some pitfalls and negative externalities, but this cannot be helped if Singapore wants to identify its best talent. Within what is essentially a fair system, people have to do what they have

to do. They have to work hard and use their own resources, and there is a limit to what the system can do for the individual. If they succeed, it is a sign that they have done what is necessary and have merit; if they fail, it is because they have not done what is necessary. In the end, it is up to the individual.

Through this lens, it is difficult to ask two questions that sociologists of education pose: what qualities does an education system reward and what qualities does it punish? How do the principles and practices of reward systems influence which groups are rewarded and which groups are not? We pose these questions because sociologists, in a wide variety of contexts, have established that *systems* matter: individuals do not make choices in social vacuums—what options we have, what paths are available to us, depend heavily on how/where we are situated in a society. From a sociological perspective, we have seen that education systems embed within them many inequalities; so-called meritocracies have too often *rationalized* rather than alleviated inequalities that stem from class, ethnicity, and gender.

My students catch on that part of what they need to do is to put the three stories about Singapore's education system into one frame. I am asking them to view the world through a lens that insists on the connections between persons and society; a lens that invites them to see all personal acts as socially embedded and socially consequential. From here, they see that the road they have taken—which has led them into the university lecture theater—is the same road that has taken some of their peers into low-wage jobs. My students start to recognize that some of these peers have strengths and talents that do not translate into the rewards they have been promised (insofar as they get to the end of university). As they think back on their journeys, where parents, tutors, and assessment books feature prominently, it begins to dawn on them that they did not notice this sooner because they were traveling on separate lanes and they've been taught to keep their eyes only on their own.

For many, the first moment of reckoning is accompanied by a sense of guilt as they realize that relative class privilege or disadvantage matter very much in shaping which lane people end up in. There is sometimes a second more important moment, the kind of moment when the teacher learns from the student: they remind me that *they've* had to pay some costs to be in the higher-speed lane. This is not just a road but a road race, one they have been on since they were children. They are tired and stressed. They've been told there will be rewards. But now, nearing what is supposed to be the end of the race, they are no longer sure that promise will be fulfilled. Where does this race lead? Who really wins? After the race ends, what does it all mean?

How we view the world shapes the questions we ask of it. The questions we ask of it shapes how we engage with it.

When we view the world through individualist lenses—"in the end, it's up to the individual"—we ask questions inward. How will I do better in the next exam? How do I make sure my child can keep up with her classmates? What self-help book do I read to learn how to maximize my potential? How do I make sure I can "leverage" on qualities no one else has? My students' astute

observations about the uncertainty and costs of their own ostensibly “successful” paths suggest that these questions can make us feel lonely and powerless. We are in the lanes we are in. I’m sorry there are people in the slow lanes that lead to poorer destinations but there is nothing I can do about that. In the end, we are just individuals, and act as individuals.

When we play by rules, when we accept the logic embedded in a system—with its accompanying rules, regulations, procedures—we normalize and strengthen that system’s logic. Our participation is a necessary condition of any system’s perpetuation. When we engage with the world as if we are mere individuals, we behave as if we have no right to ask questions about the system that compels our cooperation. When we engage with the world as if we are mere individuals, we perpetuate our individualism, isolation and powerlessness.

When we live in society, it is crucial to understand and appreciate that we are always connected to others. The choices we make—the roads we take—may feel like individual ones but they are not. Roads and lanes exist before we as individual persons exist; they will continue to exist after we as individuals cease to exist. How we behave as we travel on them affects other road users, present and future. When we live in society, it is crucial to be motivated and emboldened to act as members of a collective, as part of a team on a road that we share.

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