

Week 8: Chapter 7

11.30.2023

- Icebreaker + attendance
 - Least-favorite class you've taken
- 10 minutes to think and write notes on notecards
- Choice of prompts to start with
 - **Hourly workers stuck in cycle - "poisonous feedback loop"**
 - **Starbucks promising to improve, but not following through - "minimal staffing was built into the culture"**
 - **"Just in time" breakthrough in efficiency for manufacturing → applied to people?**
 - **"Captive workforce" - oversupply of low-wage workers**
 - **Cataphora: distinguishing ideas from text**
 - **Sociometric badges ; gathering lots of data**
 - **Simpson's paradox (regarding SAT scores)**
- Fishbowl structure
 - 3 chairs in the middle, only people in those three chairs can talk
 - Discussion should continue from the conversation already happening, or can start fresh using one of the prompts provided!
 - Other students "tag in" and trade places with someone in the center chairs if they want to contribute to the discussion
 - Can call "flush" and swap out all 3 in the middle for 3 new people
 - Each student should be in the center chairs at least once!

Notes

- Ruslana
 - Whole chapter screaming about the need for unions...no negotiating power, can't argue for better treatment
 - Even when Starbucks said it would improve and promised to, no one held them accountable
 - Starbucks workers did actually try to unionize but...didn't work out.

- Notorious for union-busting – KCTS-9 article saying that in some stores, Starbucks permanently closed those stores
 - Shows they do not care about going back on their word – engrained in company culture (managers prioritize it too because if they don't, their livelihoods are at risk)
 - Reagan: culture of trying to optimize the efficiency or profit of the company over time...trying to find the golden point where employees are pushed to limits for efficiency, but not past their limits where they will quit – so intentional; an entire system built around it
 - Will: in comparison to European work schedule, US work schedule is very strange / overkill
- Reagan
 - Prioritizing company efficiency over basic human rights was a crazy theme throughout the chapter...
 - Has never worked somewhere that had scheduling software, so the concept is very weird
 - In work experience, same kinds of things with making the schedule working over making it convenient or good for employees...but now this at scale!
 - "Clopenings" – treacherous
- Will
 - Knows someone who does "super-charged clopening"
 - Disconnect of supervisors with their schedule, not empathizing with their employees and knowing they're not robots
 - Tesla is going to unionize at some point, but Elon "I disagree with the concept of unions."
 - "If we unionize, we have failed as a company."
 - Reagan: Downsides to having a union? Not sure...not enough knowledge about unions.
 - Ruslana: sometimes unions can be counterproductive if unions don't know what results to fight for (SAGAFTRA won overall, but didn't get protection for actors in AI usage...)
- Melody
 - Explain "just in time" concept?

- Will: take number of people going into a business at a certain time of the week, schedule just enough people to barely cover what we expect to see...rather than scheduling an extra person or two to make sure things are covered.
 - In Asia, have a very strict working schedule, but can be better than changing schedule week-to-week like hourly jobs here...at least it's consistent and can rely on that.
 - Hourly and changing schedules sounds like "oh would be more flexible", but not in reality. Managers / supervisors will take advantage of "flexibility" to schedule you whenever they want you to work.
 - Will: plus very evil to not give you the benefits of full-time work
- Athena:
 - Evaluations of employees...who should be held accountable to biases and errors in performance evaluations (like in algorithms/models)?
 - People who built it?
 - Will: these folks...they made the bad tools.
 - Athena: but the people administering it still know what they're implementing and what they're trying to get out of the evaluation...they should be more ready to question it.
 - People administering it?
 - Melody: both, but more so people administering it
 - Thinking about oppenheimer – if they have creativity and knowledge to build it, their intention behind it (like to intimidate rather than destroy) matters more?
 - Both?
 - Even if best intentions, people who made it made flawed software
 - Even if people administering evaluations just say 'following the system', they should be more ready to question it
 - Benya: both...creators because they knew what their model was capable of, but also could have unintended consequences.

- Will: Also depends on how the model is made and the intention behind it, as well as how it's actually being used.
 - Could be made with totally innocent intentions, but can be used in twisted ways...in those cases, maybe people administering it should be more held responsible
 - Should evaluations of workers only ever be done by people? Can it be evaluating workers in a non-biased way?
- Benya: Reagan said something about companies keeping workers as unhappy as possible without them so unhappy they quit. There is a psychological phenomenon where, at different percentages, you are in different places – at 60% have an okay time, at 30% not having a good time but don't see a way out (feels stuck in a cycle)
 - But using this psychological trick against people who are trying to provide for their families, etc. – we need to do better
 - Okay sure maybe options and support and resources are available, but where are they? How to make them more accessible?
- Athena: for people who are stuck in that cycle, should employees have the right to access and understand the data that's being used to evaluate their performance? Should there be full transparency? How should that factor in?
 - Benya: yeah – full transparency...more of a privacy issue when they *don't* share that information
- Sabrina: over the summer, did a summer camp teaching young girls how to code – at the end of the day each day, would have a survey to fill out to evaluate the camp counselors/teachers. It's helpful to see that feedback, even if it's uncomfortable – supervisors would see and go through that feedback as well...but employees also got to see that.
 - There was one survey that *only* went to supervisors, but in general people being evaluated saw most of the data. Maybe a mix is good.
 - Melody: sometimes models are lacking "wrong" data – they need to know how to handle flaws to be perfect. Similar to the idea of transparency – need to have knowledge of what's wrong to improve. Same for models and for workers.
- Benya: Simpson's paradox
 - Presidential cabinet didn't read the data correctly? Seriously??

- We see this a lot in today's society – is that a negative feedback loop?
- Gauri:
 - Amazon scheduling worker shifts - workers were unhappy with their hours and compensation for black friday, sales, etc. – workers went on strike, but amazon threatened to start mass firing
 - Benya: Starbucks does it in the same way – "oh we're working on it" but steps aren't good enough and they don't follow through...maybe make tiny improvements but not nearly enough.
- Charlene: Starbucks system prioritized profit...they limit hours to below the limit where they don't have to give benefits. But is that good for workers?
 - Oppenheimer – he knew his creation would be used as a threat, but maybe didn't realize it would actually be used and dropped on people. Didn't realize until after he created it. Who to blame?
 - "Once people recognize them and recognize their ... faults, they will demand fair options that are better for both sides. However if the goal of the testing is to find someone to blame, ..."
- Sabrina: There are always going to be people along the way who criticize what you're doing. Sometimes the creators of these tools / etc. that cause harm don't listen to the criticism.
- Jinghao: Machine guns were invented by a doctor – he tried to use this to reduce the number of soldiers during the war, but then it was used to devastating consequences. Inventor not on the inventor, but instead on the people who use it.
 - Charlene: intentions of creating something – is focusing on a single goal a bad intention? Like a company focusing purely on profit? Could actually see that as the intention was just to create profit and didn't realize people would get hurt along the way?
 - Ruslana: we keep coming back to intent vs. impact. Intention is to make money, but consequences still exist – impact is what matters. Companies should have the onus to do research, focus groups to think about how things might be used, before they actually create things.
- Ruslana: so how do we incentivize the people or companies or * people who have power to create these large systems or WMDs to do the right thing? To do the research and make changes to avoid causing harm / damage?

- How to get Starbucks to listen to the unions and "do the right thing."
- How do we keep companies accountable?
 - Unions are supposed to do this to some extent...trying to get society on their side to help boycott and put pressure on the companies (because they won't just "do the right thing" themselves). Need society's cooperation.
 - Boycotts can work!
- Ronny: societal pressure didn't work with Starbucks...pressure made them say "oh yeah we're working on it" but then didn't follow through.
 - Works with very transparent things
 - But not Starbucks because they can just delay good things and say they're "working on it" until people lose interest
 - Need to speak their language of money – maybe boycotting some but ultimately might need to turn toward policy and law
 - Even that then we have to deal with lobbyists...
 - Miya: but then social pressure only benefits "popular" causes
 - Then society loses interest
 - Need media attention – just because don't continue to hear about it, doesn't mean that the problem is resolved