

WHY ARE THEY DYING? AN EXERCISE IN SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND THE FORMULATION OF SOCIAL POLICY

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In the spring semester of 1985 I began to teach a seminar on sociology and public policy. When I met the class for the first time, I had two general goals. First, I wanted to create a classroom environment in which there would be a substantial amount of discussion, questioning, and joint effort, along with the inculcation of a problem-solving spirit. Second, since the course met only once a week, I could not be content to offer the standard first-session fare: handing out a syllabus, taking roll, going over readings and assignments, and generally setting the stage for the real work that was to come.

I therefore designed the following exercise with the intention of getting the students to formulate policies about a hypothetical policy issue informed by some of the ideas and modes of reasoning typical of sociology and other social sciences. The exercise also requires the members of the class to think about the political dimensions of the problem and their proffered solutions. I certainly did not want them to begin the course thinking that the formulation and implementation of social policy can be pursued as an abstract enterprise, based solely on the mobilization of appropriate knowledge.

The exercise was presented as follows:

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For 13 years you have held a comfortable position as Lecturer in Social Policy at the National University of New Albion. You have occasionally served as a consultant

to various government ministries, but your tasks have been relatively modest. Now, however, the nation is facing a severe problem--some have called it a crisis--and you have been selected to head a research team to investigate the problem and suggest some possible solutions. You are facing a challenge that will test your expertise and your ability to apply to a concrete issue the principles that you have been enunciating in the lecture halls for 13 years.

The problem is simply stated. In the last three years, the rate of infant mortality, after being stable for many decades, has been climbing rapidly. Whereas 10 years ago, 42 out of every 1000 infants did not survive to the age of two, but in 1983, that rate had climbed to 53, and last year the figure was 58. Many things have happened in recent years, and it is your task to determine which of them has contributed to the rise in infant mortality, and what can be done to mitigate their effects.

Over the past decade, a number of trends and events have altered the social and economic environment of the Republic of New Albion. The most apparent and potentially significant of them have been:

- * the collapse of the international market for wolfram ore, the main export of the Republic;
- * the development of potash mines in the bordering nation of Bingoland, resulting in a number of the citizens of your country migrating to them as temporary workers;
- * rapid urbanization, most evident in the growth of Lumbago, the national capitol;
- * the growth of commercial farming, and the displacement of many peasant farmers;
- * the rapid introduction of

infant formulas, sponsored by Beasley, Inc., the international food corporation;

- * a spreading religious conflict between the True Root Movement (which believes that God is a giant turnip, orbiting 89 miles above the earth) and the Pure Awakening Movement (which believes that prayers must be said in the morning while vigorously flossing the teeth);
- * long-standing cultural values held by many of the people that encourages marriage at an early age;
- * and a chronic shortage of medicines, medical workers, and the means to bring them to those most in need of them.

In addressing this problem, you are faced with a number of interrelated tasks:

1) Through appropriate research, you must discover how and to what extent the circumstances presented above are influencing the rate of infant mortality. You might also consider some other possible causes for the rise in infant mortality. How would you go about conducting this research?

2) Consider your research completed. What have you found. Since this is a hypothetical case, you may simply present some plausible findings.

3) Having conducted thorough inquiries into the problem and its causes, you need to present your findings to the appropriate government agencies while at the same time formulating some possible policies that might alleviate the problem. What are they?

4) Now comes the tricky part. Your years at the National University have taught you just how difficult the implementation of new policies can be, and you suspect

that national politics may be almost as vicious as faculty politics. You should therefore reflect on the policies that you have formulated, and consider the political obstacles that may get in the way of their implementation. Pay special attention to determining the particular individuals, groups, and institutions that are likely to be affected by policy changes, and how they may attempt to influence the formulation and implementation of new policies.

Take 45 minutes to work on this exercise. I will do it along with you. Feel free to confer with anybody in the class as you work on it. We will then use the remainder of the period to discuss our work.

RESULTS

Forty-five minutes proved to be about the right amount of time to do the exercise. The students worked diligently throughout the allotted time period (the fact that the instructor worked alongside them may have contributed to their motivation) but were ready to put down their pens when asked to do so. We then spent over an hour discussing our work. The exercise stimulated the consideration of a large number of topics bearing on social policy. Among the issues taken up were:

1) The possibility that changes in statistical records may be an artifact of changed reporting methods;

2) The ways in which social problems are discovered to be problems, and the importance of social movements in calling attention to them;

3) The difficulties of effectively addressing specific problems while being unable to deal with all the causes of the problem;

4) How problems may be generated by otherwise beneficial changes;

5) How to go about formulating

hypotheses and research strategies that could guide the shaping of effective policies;

6) An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of "technological fixes" for social problems;

7) The political and allocational issues surrounding the development of medical facilities.

The short space of time allotted for this exercise meant that numerous topics were covered in a rather superficial fashion. Nonetheless, the class unanimously agreed that the exercise helped to orient their thinking and prepare them for the more intensive studies that lay ahead. A few volunteered that at first they didn't see the connections between infant mortality and the particular circumstances presented in the exercise, but they agreed that doing the exercise impelled them to make the necessary connections. They thus learned that addressing a particular social problem involves both the specific and the general, and that the policies chosen have to somehow take account of both if they are to prove successful.

I was impressed with the apparent interest that the exercise sparked and the analytical skills that were brought to bear while doing it. The exercise also performed the latent function of getting the class to work and discuss things together. As the semester unfolded, the students continued to exhibit a high degree of interest and involvement. They took their own seminar projects seriously, and offered helpful criticisms of their classmates' projects. Although I cannot claim that this exercise guaranteed a successful class, it certainly helped to create the proper ambiance for an undergraduate seminar.

AN EXPERIMENT IN SEX DISCRIMINATION FOR UNDERGRADUATES

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The part of the Introductory or Sociology of the Family course devoted to the analysis and discussion of sex roles typically generates an enthusiastic response among students. Unequal levels of educational and occupational achievement for the sexes to differences in sex role socialization, legal restrictions, and discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion. However, many recent undergraduates have been skeptical as to the extent of continued discrimination in the hiring of female workers. Thus, I had my Introductory class at Monclair State College replicate an experiment by Levinson (1975) to test the extent of sex discrimination in hiring in the north-central New Jersey area. It was hoped that this project would provoke class discussion about the results, as well as stimulate interest in social research in general.

DESIGN

The experiment is simple and to the point. The students were told to search the classified advertisements in local newspapers for openings in sex-typed jobs--those jobs traditionally held by males (like gas station attendant, truck driver, etc.) and traditionally held by females (e.g. secretary and receptionist). Students were instructed to employ a partner of the opposite sex as part of the experiment. The "sex-inappropriate" (SI) team member (e.g. a male applying for a position in cosmetic sales) was to make the first call to the employer, followed shortly afterwards by the "sex-appropriate" (SA) team member.