

Context, Interests, and Unintended Consequences: Lenses for Seeing, Comprehending and Engaging with the Worldⁱ

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The White Paper on Population created quite a firestorm when it was released in 2013. Many critiques were launched against it – ranging from big and obvious worries about the sheer number of people who are expected to live in this small city; to complaints about where these people would come from; to very nitty-gritty critiques about the details and tone of the White Paper – right down to how nurses are referred to as low-skilled workers in the footnotes.

When the White Paper came out, I was teaching a course about *Power, Politics and the State*. The White Paper and the controversy around it became something that students and I discussed in class. Based on such experiences in teaching, I highlight the sorts of questions that I think we ought to get our students to *ask and answer* when policies are introduced and when controversies arise. As a teacher, I think we should be invested not so much in convincing students about our points of view, but in giving them the tools and lenses to think through problems.

So how do we do provide students with lenses and tools? As a sociologist, three things are key: interests, contexts, and unintended consequences. Let me say a few words about each of these and give some examples of how they are useful in discussing population issues.

Interests

Used crudely, people think that “interests” is about how someone is trying to gain something, trying to maximize their interests. But the way I want my students to think about interests is to pay attention to two related things: when we say the word “interests,” we are first and foremost pointing out that there is *no neutral position from which to speak*. All positions involve a point of view, and more specifically, somebody or some group’s point of view. They may take their point of view because there may in fact be some sort of material benefit or disadvantage involved. But at least equally often, they take that point of view because it fits into the worldview of not just themselves as individuals, but also into the various social groupings to which they belong.

Related to this, I also want students to pay attention to *interests* in the plural form. Just as there is no neutral position, there is no one unitary position. Any decision involving a society will have multiple actors. There will be people and groups who have different interests – there is the state, there are capitalists, employers, there are men who are workers, there are women who are workers, there are young people yet to be employed, there are retirees, there are people in different

occupations who are placed in different places on the social hierarchy, etc. These different groups will have different things to gain and lose, as well as different orientations, sensibilities, and points of view. As critical thinkers, we should identify these different points of view and try to understand why they are the way they are. Importantly, the presentation of any position as “factual” – universal, neutral – is itself an act worth paying attention to.

If “interests” is a lens, what do students do with this lens vis-à-vis discussions about population?

Well, one of the big challenges I realized my students faced was shifting from seeing policies and policy statements as neutral and universal, to seeing them as decisions that represent certain beliefs and worldviews. That is, one of the things they had in fact *not* done a lot of in Secondary School or Junior College was precisely to ask: what interests are at stake, *whose* interests are involved?

Once they asked this question, they had to critically examine some of the assumptions made in the White Paper. One of these was the strong presumption that the only way forward for economic growth is via population growth. Another is that economic growth for the country represents improved wellbeing for all Singaporeans. In other words, they had to ask: is population growth the only way to attain economic growth? Relatedly, whom would economic growth of this sort benefit, and whom would it disadvantage?

These are obviously not easy questions to answer. I emphasize to my students that their answers should be empirically grounded rather than ideologically or dogmatically driven. The purpose of me introducing this lens in classrooms is not

merely to get students to criticize for the sake of criticizing. Instead, I aim to teach students *disciplined* critique—critique that draws on *systematic and empirical* analyses. My purpose as a teacher is in *heightening students’ awareness and engagements as young citizens* who have a stake in the future. So what I want them to be able to do is *not* just be able to say that something is problematic, but push them to question *why or how*, and what *might be some alternative visions* of the world.

Context

This brings me to my second set of tools: context. Context is about showing students that all issues and debates are situated in specific *times* and *places*. It is also very much about showing students that Singapore is not exceptional or unique in the world.

This may sound very obvious, but I’ve found that one big barrier to students’ learning is this myth they carry in their heads that Singapore is so unique in the world that there is no reason to look outside it. This can take the form of a kind of ignorant pride, where the supposed uniqueness is a rationale for not paying close attention to comparative scholarship that sheds light on our case.

As I said earlier, the lens of interests has led them to ask: is population growth the only way to attain economic growth? And which groups would economic growth of this sort benefit, and which groups would it disadvantage?

The second lens, context – situating Singapore in a larger world – now leads them to ask what kinds of issues and problems we have that are not unique to Singapore. And as it turns out, none of our challenges are really all that unique. Importantly, once they stop thinking of

Singapore as exceptional, they are compelled to pose and frame problems differently from how they have been framed in the White Paper. Let me give two examples.

By reading about low fertility in different national contexts, students see that gender inequalities are a key factor explaining the difference between wealthy countries that have managed to reverse low fertility trends and those that have not. The comparative scholarship also demonstrates that public policy plays a major role in either reproducing or correcting gender imbalances. The issue of population, then, has to take into account what enables and does not enable women and men to want and have children; it has to critically examine what policies exist and how conditions in Singapore have been more similar to those countries where gender imbalances have persisted (then those where gender imbalances have been more effectively dealt with). From looking at comparative scholarship on fertility and public policy, then, students can ask whether adequate attention has been paid to the reproduction of gendered inequalities in our population policies.

Now, a second example of how context expands their view. I have students consider political economic development in different cases. Here, students can also see that economic growth through capitalist development has often been accompanied by costs to specific groups of people. Inequalities, loss of freedoms, difficulties in assessing public goods – these are problems faced by many other groups in many other places. They also see that different states have tried to resolve these problems in different ways *and* that the Singapore case lies on the side of the spectrum where not a lot has been done in terms of direct spending and redistribution (to ameliorate some of the problems

endemic to neoliberal capitalism). Hence, from looking at comparative scholarship, students can see that welfare, inequalities and redistribution are *central* rather than peripheral to any discussion of population and economic growth.

Armed with context, then, students can expand their perspectives. They can look at policies, social issues, as part of bigger pictures and patterns. In this way, and particularly when they look outside Singapore, their imaginations for alternatives are also broadened.

Unintended Consequences

Let me now say something about a third set of lenses, a favorite of sociologists: unintended consequences. The notion of unintended consequences is meant to alert students to the fact that the many things we face in our everyday lives – rules, regulations, policies – shape us in multiple ways that go beyond the explicit intentions or goals of these rules, regulations and policies.

It is an important analytical tool: it compels us not to be too narrow and myopic in our analyses of any given policy document. We have to go beyond the goals that are explicitly laid out.

In addition, we can think in terms of unintended consequences *on cultures*. By cultures, I mean the norms, practices and values of various groups in a society. This lens helps us think more about how policies can help or harm the forging of collective membership in a society.

After the White Paper came out, I wrote an op-ed (2013), published in the newspaper *Today*. It was titled “Beware the unintended consequences.” I make several main points. First, policy makers and political leaders in Singapore speak

often about “mindsets” and the need to change them before policies can follow. They speak often of existing “values” and “traditions” that policies must respect and speak to. This, I argue, is an incomplete view of the relationship between policy and culture; it overlooks and under-examines the influence of policy *on* culture.

I make the point that the White Paper on Population and the manner in which it was introduced does not adequately consider its own effects on culture. For example: the continual framing of population problems as resolvable only through aggressive immigration may inadvertently worsen divides between older and newer citizens and create *cultures of division*; prioritization of growth might lead people to feel greater insecurity and thereby compel *cultures of self-centeredness*; rolling out population plans that have not adequately addressed growing public discontent may create *cultures of disempowerment* wherein people feel it is futile for members of society to engage uncynically in public debate.

By looking at unintended consequences, and specifically unintended consequences on social norms and values, I am encouraging students to see that discussions of public policies are never about just what’s on the table. Instead, there are larger consequences for how we think about ourselves as a society, and how we can and should be members of it.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that the Population White Paper throws up a lot of “issues” worth discussing: the relationship between policies and the production of inequalities; the differential benefits and costs of economic growth of a specific sort

to varying groups of people; the appropriate role of the state in resolving these costs; the appropriate role of society in discussing how to solve these issues.

I think social studies and sociology teachers alike have our work cut out for us. But instead of thinking about our work in terms of what issues to cover, I think it is more productive to think in terms of what sorts of tools we should equip our students with.

The three tools or lenses I highlighted today involve sensitizing students to interests, contexts, and unintended consequences. Our role in introducing any topic to our students is to let them see that there are no neutral positions, only positions masking as neutral; that issues arise in specific times and places, but that they can be understood in relation to other cases; and that the effects of rules, regulations, policies often go well beyond intentions to shape how we think about who we are and should be.

These tools not only serve the purpose of helping students understand complex phenomenon, they will also help them imagine alternatives. It is my aspiration as a teacher of Sociology that these lenses will help students see their own stake in the discussions. These, I imagine, are what social studies teachers also aspire to do.

References

Teo, Y.Y. (2013). Beware the unintended consequences. *Today*, 7 February 2013. <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/beware-unintended-consequences>

ⁱ Comments prepared for the National Institute of Education Symposium on “Singapore’s Population Changes: The White Paper and Beyond,” 22 April, 2014.