APPLICATION

THE RESEARCH ARTICLE AS A FOUNDATION FOR SUBJECT-CENTERED LEARNING AND TEACHING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY: EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES FOR THINKING STRUCTURALLY ABOUT CHILD CARE FATALITIES*

This paper is the latest installment in a series that is designed to bridge the gap between teaching and practice by developing classroom applications based on a current research article from the American Sociological Review. *We discuss the ways in which a recent* ASR *paper on child care fatalities can be used to help students explore Burawoy's conception of "public" sociology in a manner that is consistent with a subject-centered pedagogical approach. To illustrate this approach, we offer three experiential exercises designed to facilitate the active engagement of students' hearts, as well as their minds, thereby linking our subject-centered approach to the increasingly popular notion of character education.*

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THIS IS THE THIRD ARTICLE in a series designed to bridge the "curious gulf" (cf. Purvin and Kain 2005:323) that has existed between published research and teaching in sociology, or, more specifically, between the articles published in *Teaching Sociology (TS)* and the *American Sociological Review (ASR)*. Although these two journals are both published by the American Sociological Association (ASA), they are relatively unconnected: few *TS* articles cite or apply articles published in the *ASR*. Many *ASR* articles are not easy for undergraduates to read; they are often quite technical and many are written in a way that assumes considerable background in the field. The American Sociological Association has addressed this problem in part by initiating a new journal, *Contexts*, designed to reach broader audiences, including the general public. Another alternative is to provide guides to how specific *ASR* articles can be used in undergraduate classrooms. The *ASR* remains the paradigmatic venue of "professional" sociology, and many of the articles published in it address issues that are highly relevant in undergraduate sociology courses. These include, for example, articles on the effects of divorce on children, the sources of prison riots, and the electoral effects of barring former felons from voting.

In this article, we offer an approach to using a 2005 *ASR* article by Wrigley and Dreby on safety in child care in undergraduate classrooms. The Wrigley and Dreby article ("Fatalities and the Organization of Child Care in the United States, 1985-2003") is not technical, although it is minimally quantitative, and it addresses an issue of concern to many parents and others: How safe are children in child care? Wrigley and Dreby found child care to be quite safe overall. They also, however, ana-

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lyzed fatality rates across types of care and found that some children were much more vulnerable than others and that fatality rates differed markedly across types of child care.

This article is divided into three sections. In the first, Wrigley and Dreby suggest ways that their child care safety article can serve as a starting point for class discussions to help students orient toward sociology as a field. Their study presents a sociological perspective on an issue that can also be analyzed from a psychological point of view. This affords an opportunity to discuss with students what it means to take a sociological approach and how that differs from an approach more focused on the psychological features of individuals. Instructors can also use the child care safety article to foster discussion of how sociologists address matters of social concern and to introduce discussion of the value and meaning of Michael Burawoy's (2005) concept of "public" sociology. This can help students develop a grasp of the contributions of the discipline itself, and the variety of perspectives within it, to broader society. Although the Wrigley and Dreby article does not conform in all respects to the notion of public sociology as explicated by Burawoy, it provides an example of how sociological research can help frame new concerns for the public agenda.

In this article's second section, Matthew Lee provides a pedagogical perspective on the use of the child care safety study in undergraduate classrooms. He focuses on the development of strategies for active learning to help students become critical thinkers who can be collaborators in their own education in subject-centered (rather than student- or teacher-centered) classrooms.

In a concluding section of this article we provide three classroom exercises that actively engage students in thinking about the study's findings and the real-world dilemmas faced by those grappling with safety issues in child care. The exercises are designed to engage students in understanding the complexity of assessing risks and of weighing individual responsibility for caregiving failures. Consistent with both public sociology and subject-centered learning, the exercises can also be used to foster discussion of the nature and extent of social reform that would be required to produce child care that is significantly safer than at present. We begin with a discussion of child care fatalities as a problem for public sociology, written by Wrigley and Dreby.

A "PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY" PERSPECTIVE ON FATALITIES IN CHILD CARE

In our *ASR* article we analyzed fatalities in United States child care from 1985 through 2003. We used a long time frame because fatalities are rare events. No government or private agency collects comprehensive data on fatalities in child care. When fatalities occur, they are typically handled as private tragedies, to be investigated and understood as anomalies and, correspondingly, without any effort to identify patterns in their occurrence. We gathered our own data from three sources: a systematic national media search, a review of legal cases involving fatalities in child care, and an analysis of state child care and child abuse records in seven states.

We found reports of 1,362 fatalities. Analyzing cases across children's ages and types of child care, we found a marked pattern in how fatalities occurred. Most importantly, the youngest children were the most vulnerable, with infants having the highest death rate. Secondly, we found that child care centers were much safer than child care arrangements offered in private homes, whether the child's or the providers.

The findings lend themselves to a sociological analysis because of the striking differences across types of child care. If these differences did not exist, other types of explanations might come to the fore. If infants were highly vulnerable in all types of care, for example, a starting point for analysis would probably be the greater physical vulnerability of infants compared to toddlers or

preschoolers. In child care centers, however, fatality rates for infants were very low.

If fatality rates were similar across types of care, a psychological analysis of what traits of caregivers might make them prone to violence or to severe neglect leading to fatalities might be appropriate. The much higher fatality rate in private homes compared to centers, however, shifts attention to the organizational environment. We argue that there are some differences in the work forces across the three types of child care, but that there is also much flow of workers between them and many demographic similarities among caregivers in the three settings. This also shifts attention to the organizational level of analysis. If caregivers in the different settings are basically similar, and quite often go from one sector to another, perhaps the key issue is not who becomes a caregiver but the work environment and conditions caregivers experience in each setting. Moreover, we found that even low-quality child care centers, staffed by caregivers who were not particularly responsive to young children or well-trained, were strikingly protective against fatal violence directed at young children. It was the type of child care, rather than the type of worker, that most affected child care safety.

We do not discount psychological issues in precipitating violence against children or inattention to their needs (leading, in some cases, to fatal neglect, as when very young children are left alone in bathtubs). When caregivers fatally shake or batter young children, they are likely to be operating under some extreme stress or breakdown or pressure that leads them to violate the most profound caregiving norms and also to risk their own futures. It would be valuable to know more about how or why individual caregivers participate in these extreme norm violations. What types of events trigger the most extreme reactions? What about personal depression? What about anger or impatience at being denied some goal of personal importance to them, such as the ability to have some quiet time in the middle of the day, a goal that can be rendered impossible to reach by a baby's crying or failure to go to sleep?

Much work needs to be done in exploring how caregivers reach points of psychic stress that lead them to engage in fatal violence. Yet we argue that this type of insight into the situation of individual caregivers, while important, is only part of the story, because caregivers in child care centers are almost universally able to refrain from such violence. It is for this reason that we believe that an organizational analysis must underlie explanations of different rates of fatal violence against young children in child care, rather than a more purely individual one. We offer several specific organizational features of child care centers that can enhance safety. In centers, child care workers are almost always in the presence of coworkers, which can limit their stress when babies are crying and toddlers are balky, and can also help workers control impulses toward violence. Workers in child care centers are also more likely to receive training than those in private homes, and this can help them understand the sometimes annoying or recalcitrant behavior of young children, or at least, find ways to take it less personally. And finally, in child care centers, there are clear organizational and physical boundaries around the center, limiting the children's exposure to adult outsiders who may pose risks to their safety.

Instructors can develop these points to help students understand how we create a sociological perspective on child care fatalities, contrasting this organizational analysis with a more psychologically-oriented approach that would focus on individual caregivers. This can be valuable for students, as many have little understanding of sociology, compared with other subjects like economics, math, or history. It can be particularly hard for undergraduates to understand the distinctive approach of sociologists compared to psychologists. Both fields involve the study of people and neither field is defined by any one particular method or over-

arching ideological framework (of the kind found in economics). Our child care safety article offers a chance to explore these issues: instructors can ask students to think about how the approaches differ and how they potentially could be integrated in a study.

Our child care safety study also offers an opportunity for instructors to discuss the relationship between the sociological perspective and broader concerns for social change. Specifically, instructors might consider our article as an example of "public" sociology of the kind called for by Michael Burawoy (2005). In Burawoy's perspective, public sociologists are willing to orient themselves to the public rather than focusing almost exclusively on their professional peers. Public sociologists are willing to challenge and call for rethinking basic institutional arrangements in society rather than to accept social arrangements as basically given, requiring only tweaking or readjustment in response to particular policy needs. Because of this orientation toward the public, and an openness to challenging existing social institutions, Burawoy sees public sociology as differing from "professional" sociology (geared to research puzzles and theoretical questions from within a mainstream disciplinary perspective and oriented to others working in the field), from "policy" sociology (with an audience outside the academy but a limited concept of what changes in society are possible), and from "critical" sociology (with a broad willingness to rethink social institutions but geared to a professional audience). Public sociologists, in Burawoy's view, often take their research questions from issues raised by community groups and local activists and by social movement organizations. This is different from "policy" sociology, where researchers accept normative frameworks posed by clients or others who want specific research questions addressed.

Our child care article can be used in several ways as an example of public sociology. First, it addresses a grassroots issue of relevance and concern for millions of working parents. Second, it offers specific findings that could be used to make child care safer. It is not purely abstract and it does not suggest that the situation is hopeless, with reform impossible due to powerful social forces. Third, it does not confine its policy suggestions to the narrow range of what is immediately possible in the current political context of the United States. We suggest that making child care significantly safer is feasible, but that this will require more funding. High quality center care for infants is particularly expensive, as it is more labor-intensive than center care for older children. We also suggest that more child care regulation, better training of workers, and higher wages, would improve safety. These recommendations are outside the immediate policy consensus.

Our child care study is not, however, a pure example of public sociology. It grows out of grassroots concerns of parents, but was not done in response to calls from social movement organizations or activist groups. Instead of responding to the agendas of such groups, we aimed to make visible a previously invisible social problem. Most deaths in child care occur with very little attention, perhaps because they generally occur one by one and, often, in private homes that to some extent are closed realms. The scope of the issue has been previously unknown. The fact that no government agency gathers data on deaths in child care makes it clear that there is as yet no sense that deaths in child care must be monitored and investigated. With no tracking of fatalities, each becomes an individual event rather than a case to be studied in relation to others. This is in marked contrast to other forms of safety monitoring, such as occurs in aviation, where accidents and near-misses are reported and closely analyzed. There are public and private groups that monitor children's fatalities, but they tend to be cause-specific, that is, they monitor children's deaths from unsafe products or from being left in cars or from being shaken. These groups do much valuable work, but none has, as yet, emerged that

takes child care as an institutional sector in which deaths must be tracked and studied. In essence, much like activists who reframed domestic violence as a social problem, rather than a private family issue, we have tried to reframe child care fatalities as a public concern rather than a private tragedy (Ryan and Gameson 2006).

By bringing a sociological perspective to fatalities in child care, we aimed to provide the first systematic examination of how fatalities from different forms of violence or from different types of accidents occur across all types of care. This analytical overview provides previously unrecognized insights into how the organization of care provides for greater or lesser safety for children of different ages. As such, it offers an account that is both sociological in its starting point and public in its focus on a social issue of concern to an audience outside the discipline, but that also departs in some respects from Burawoy's definition of public sociology as growing from the agendas of activists or social movements.

In the next section, Matthew Lee will discuss a pedagogical approach designed to promote subject-centered, active learning among students who have read the child care safety study. Such an approach furthers the goals of public sociology through the use of experiential exercises that help students consider the social applications of the research. After a general discussion of subject-centered learning, we provide three such exercises.

APPLICATION: SUBJECT-CENTERED TEACHING AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

In a scathing critique of higher education in the late 1960s, sociologist John Seeley (1969) argued that the university had become a "slaughterhouse" of the human spirit (p. 63). Contemporary critics might suggest that little has changed. Genuine learning and the development of creativity are often stifled by classroom practices on the micro level that encourage the rote memorization of trivial facts, which are forgotten soon after final exams are completed. On the macro level, the university remains beholden to a "riffraff of special interests, economic, political, administrative, and intellectual" (p. 75). Committed to the status quo, educational institutions tend to avoid the progressive concerns raised by Burawoy's conception of public sociology. This fosters a consumerist mentality among alienated students who view the college degree as a commodity.

The continued penetration of corporate influence into the fabric of institutions of higher learning is generally inconsistent with the public sociology approach and contributes to both the consumerism and alienation at the heart of the "slaughterhouse" experience. For example, on the campus of the first author a memo distributed to all university faculty from the dean of the College of Business Administration pushed the consumer mentality beyond the traditional vision of the student as customer to identify the real clientele of the university: "the desires and requirements of our customer, the business community" (Barnett 2005:1). The unintended, or perhaps intended, consequence of such a vision is the development of students who are "responsibly critical," which Seeley (1969:65) defined as having the "trained capacity" to "miss the mark of what matters while making footnote critiques on what doesn't." Of course technical skills are useful and students are rightfully concerned about their marketability after graduation. But citizenship requires ethical reasoning and critical thinking. A well-rounded educational program must do more than promote "technical rationality," which refers to "a way of thinking that elevates the scientific-analytical mindset and the belief in technological progress over all other forms of rationality" (Adams and Balfour 2004:30). It should come as little surprise that students treated as cogs to be molded by the university to fit into the corporate machine exhibit the typical symptoms of an alienated population: boredom, lack of interest, and occasional hostility.

As sociologists, we know that pedagogy is not necessarily responsible for these deep-rooted structural problems, although pedagogical approaches most certainly help to either stifle student learning or cater classroom experiences to the needs of the labor market. But change must start somewhere. Even in the midst of the corporatization of higher education there are better ways to approach our students and engage them as collaborators in their learning, rather than as customers who are to receive a commodity that only teachers are capable of providing. A "teacher-centered" (Palmer 1998:116) classroom model sees the instructor as a knowledgeable classroom dictator and views students as ignorant vessels to be filled with information via passive note-taking. This model often alienates students, particularly those of diverse socio-economic backgrounds. When the ivory tower is accessible only to those who learn to talk the talk and walk the walk of their professors, many students simply tune out. On the other hand, a "student-centered" (p. 116) approach claims that, as paying customers, students have the right to determine their own education. A post-modern deconstruction of truth and objectivity provides support for the student-centered perspective and suggests that all student viewpoints are equally valid. Progress and consensus become unrealistic goals. This model tends to undermine public sociology and demoralize students. In the end, the "student-centered" model accepts that because labor market skills are important to individual students' future careers, they should be the paramount focus of the classroom experience specifically and higher education more generally.

There is some value to both the teacher- and student-centered views. Teachers generally have more knowledge about the subject matter than students and students do have a right to challenge the teacher's perspective. On the other hand, the authoritarian excesses of the hierarchical, exclusively teacher-centered approach, along with its mythical objectivism, are well-documented in the pedagogical literature (Palmer 1998). Similarly, the purely student-centered model, where all student opinions are equally valid and students are to be entertained as consumers in an educational market, has been also been heavily criticized.

An alternative pedagogical approach is "subject-centered" education, which offers a means to deeply engage students' intellectual, ethical, and creative capacities (Palmer 1998:116). The subject-centered classroom draws on the strengths of the teacher-centered and student-centered models, but transcends their limitations by placing at the forefront the subject of study in order to capture student interest. In this model, our classrooms foster the search for truths in ways that draw on the strengths of the group (i.e., the class) and the individuals that comprise it (i.e., students and teacher). We are held "accountable" by the subject matter of study, or "the great thing" as Palmer calls it (p. 117). The metaphor for this teaching style is "the pursuit of truth in the company of friends." (p. 90)

But how can teachers convince skeptical students that "the great thing" is important and worthy of an intellectual and emotional investment on their part? Answer: provide them with opportunities for *experiential learning* (Palmer 1998; Lee 2000, 2006). Experiential learning activities are essential to the subject-centered approach and they have the added benefit of making the concerns of public sociology more immediate and concrete. They foster enthusiasm among students, help to develop their creative capacities, and engage them in sociological and critical thinking at a deeper level than traditional lecture methods in which the student is a more-or-less passive note-taker. Service learning projects require students to leave the "safe" confines of the university setting and interact with people and organizations in the "real world." Similarly, in-class problem-based learning exercises (e.g., mock court trials) force students to play an active and specified social role, synthesize material in novel and creative ways, and present verbal arguments which

are subject to cross-examination by peers. Field trips and guest speakers also enhance subject-centered education. For example, the first author recently toured the Mansfield State Reformatory with students enrolled in his Corrections course. Confronting the realities of an actual prison changed many student opinions about correctional practices and opened their eyes to the relationship between theory and practice in ways that conventional coursework had not. Additionally, statements made by the prison tour guide contradicted some of the themes of assigned readings, leading to spirited debate and deeper understanding of the issues.

Experiential learning exercises based on a subject-centered approach contribute to one of the most important goals of the traditional liberal education: character development. The pressure on universities to treat students (or corporations) as customers has eroded this function. But *character education* has experienced a renaissance in recent years, both at the collegiate and at the elementary and secondary levels (Bohlin, Farmer, and Ryan 2001). Character refers to a person's "moral constitution" and character education is "about fostering the *habits of mind, heart, and action* that enable an individual to flourish" (p. 1-2). We might add that society also flourishes under such conditions, as does public sociology. Habits of mind include such important abilities as reasoning, logic, understanding, and deliberating. Habits of the heart refer to morality, empathy, and the motivation to "do what is right" (p. 2). Habits of action connote a person's ability to put habits of mind and heart into practice, what Marxists call praxis. A subject-centered education offers the potential to build character at all three levels, especially by helping students develop the habits of mind and heart in hands-on, experiential exercises that require them to make decisions and take action. Hopefully the concrete practices embedded in such exercises will give students a sense of mastery and encourage civic engagement later in their lives. The goal is to avoid alienating educational rituals that contribute to *civic privatism*: "political abstinence combined with an orientation to career, leisure, and consumption" (Habermas 1975:37).

Too many college students have internalized the passive habits of obedience modeled in the teacher-centered, command-and-control lecture hall, or the intellectual laziness of the entertainment-oriented, student-as-consumer approach. It is no wonder that many graduates focus on self-development later in life to the exclusion of concern with events in the public (i.e. political) sphere. As the concerns of public sociology become more widely shared throughout higher education, classes will increasingly challenge such complacency and encourage students to explore issues of character through experiential assignments dealing with social justice or spiritual questions (cf. Alexander 2005; Feltey 2005). For activist-minded teachers, the "great thing" of sociological inquiry, or the subject of study, might be combined with a commitment to social justice. An explicit concern of such teachers is that classroom structures mimic the kind of social structures that they would like to see in the wider society. Such structures encourage a sense of community, trust, equality, mutuality, and other humanistic values. By acting as partners in a learning community with students, teachers using the subject-centered model seek to develop character while also demonstrating desirable social arrangements.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

As evident above, we propose that the best way to actively engage sociology students, whether to understand the sociological perspective and its contributions to civil society, or to enhance character education through subject-centered learning, is via experiential exercises. Here we present three examples of how the Wrigley and Dreby *ASR* article can be used in the classroom to this end. By placing students in real-world situations, these three hands-on

exercises address both Lee's pedagogical and Wrigley and Dreby's more theoretical concerns.

Exercise 1: Using Sociological Research in a Magazine Advice Column

Undergraduate students of sociology often have trouble assessing evidence in support of sociological claims. The ability to critically evaluate a research paper and identify the research goals, data and methods, and outcomes is essential, but should also be considered part of a cumulative learning process (Purvin and Kain 2005). This exercise is geared toward students who have already been introduced to different types of research methods and who have had some instruction in critically reading a research article. It is designed to enhance students' ability to identify the major claims of a research article and to understand and evaluate the evidence in support of them. It will also help students think about the implications of research for policy and practice.

We recommend using this exercise in a course on social problems or applied sociology. As the exercise includes two distinct steps, it is most practical to assign the first step in advance as homework, thus allowing the entire exercise to be completed in one class period. Or the exercise can extend over two class periods, with each part done in class.

As homework, or in the first of two class periods, each student should answer the following questions based on the Wrigley and Dreby article: 1) What is the main research question of this article? 2) How did the authors attempt to answer this question? What research methods did they use? 3) What were the research findings?

In the next class period divide the class into groups of four or five students and ask the students to compare their answers and come up with a common group answer to each of the questions (15-20 minutes). Ask each group to present their answers to the class, recording, on the board, each answer to each question (15-20 minutes). Finally, give students the following assignment:

> Based on the article you read and that we discussed today in class, you will now play the role of an advice columnist for a parents' magazine. Your assignment is to develop ideas for an article titled "Five Tips for Parents Looking for Safe Child Care Arrangements." For each tip, you should note relevant data from the article (and page numbers) to support your recommendation. In order to make room for advertisements, brevity is a cardinal virtue in popular magazines. So focus on the most important tips and supporting information.

Depending on class content, as an alternative assignment instructors may want to ask students to make a list of *five tips for child care workers* or a list of *five policy recommendations*. Or, instructors may assign a combination of tips for parents, child care workers and policy makers. Most non-specialist audiences are busy and want highlights rather than lengthy dissertations. Regardless of the approach, this exercise forces students to organize their thoughts to be as concise as possible—a valuable skill in the "real world."

Allow students a few minutes to make their lists and then reconvene the small groups, asking students to share their tips and decide on one list as a group (20 minutes). Again, they should note data from the text (with page numbers) that support each tip or recommendation. Invite each group to present their list to the entire class with the rationale for including each tip on the list (15-20 minutes). For this step, the instructor may wish to play the role of a magazine editor holding a staff meeting to discuss articles for an upcoming issue. The instructor may write the tips on the board or may ask a class member to do so. The instructor can then compare this student-generated list with her or his own list, developed prior to class, and comment on the points of overlap and disagreement. In this way, the subject holds both the teacher and students "accountable" and increases the likelihood that both parties will learn something new. When students play an active role while teachers facilitate, students have more invested in the learning process and have also

gained valuable practice working with a group. In terms of character education, the assigned role focuses student thinking on developing a list of helpful advice for parents. Rather than simply dispassionately summarizing research findings, students may feel enlivened by the thought of helping others, which engages and further develops benevolent or altruistic habits of mind, heart, and action.

Finally, ask students to discuss the limits of their recommendations, thus returning to the theme of public sociology. Tips for parents seeking safe child care are not a substitute for creating a safe child care system.

Exercise 2: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Social Background Defense

This exercise is especially well-suited to Sociology of Law courses, which have traditionally used experiential learning activities such as mock court trials to foster critical thinking and student learning (Storrs and Ferber 1992). Providing students with opportunities to creatively use their intellectual and verbal skills in a court-like setting removes the teacher/lecturer from the center of attention and introduces a focus on the subject (Palmer, 1998). This activity helps students see the ways in which law is socially constructed by parties with diverse interests under conditions of factual and legal ambiguity. These ideas may seem abstract and somewhat meaningless in traditional lectures or assigned readings. But after participating in mock trials, and especially when outcomes reflect compromise and plea bargaining, students are better able to see violations of law as attributions negotiated through interactions among violators, legal agents, and sometimes third parties, all of whom rely on socially constructed understandings of facts and statutes (cf. Lee and Ermann 1999). Because of the experiential nature of mock trials, students who participate can more fully appreciate Yeager's (1993) critique of the "standard approach... in which the nature of law is taken as a given and criminologists are free to investigate violations as 'pure' behavioral phenomena unconfounded by the form of law or the processes of its enforcement" (p. 119). Yeager's own research, for example, found that "designated noncompliance" was the norm with regard to industrial water pollution regulations and legal agents were complicit in redefining such violations as formal compliance with the law (p. 117). A similar process may occur in constructing the criminality of child care workers.

After using mock trials in classrooms for five years, the first author of this paper has concluded that this exercise is not without its limitations. In terms of character education, the adversarial trial format encourages aggressive competition (and occasional duplicity) among students whose focus tends to be on helping their side "win" rather than seeking justice. Fighting against other students to sway the "judge" is sometimes accomplished through rhetorical strategies and courtroom histrionics rather than arguments grounded in empirical data. Such scenes are occasionally entertaining, but hardly consistent with the subject-centered approach to character education that is captured by the phrase "the pursuit of truth in the company of friends" (Palmer, 1998:90). In order to create an environment where students are full participants in a friendly exploration of social reality, a "truth and reconciliation commission" may be preferable to an adversarial trial (see Lee 2006). This kind of judicial body is explicitly concerned about balancing responsibility with forgiveness, an issue that traditional criminal justice institutions tend to overlook. We have no reason to think that an adversarial social process will do a better job than a competition-free approach in helping students understand how the social organization of child care work promotes or reduces fatalities.

This exercise requires that students read the Wrigley and Dreby article before class and prepare summaries of the article's main points. When students are aware that they will be speaking in front of the class, they are more likely to read and prepare summa-

ries than if they expect that they will simply show up and record lecture notes. So the experiential exercise introduces a higher level of active learning even before the class meets. Before having students participate in this exercise, it may also be useful to lecture on the idea of the *social background defense*, as it has been argued in cases involving victims of domestic violence who kill their abuser or criminal defendants who spent their formative years in conditions of extreme deprivation and violence (cf. Harris 1997). The experiential exercise asks students to decide the contentious issue of whether the social background of a child care worker, who was not afforded the advantages of day care centers described in the Wrigley and Dreby article, should partially or completely mitigate her individual responsibility for the serious injuries she inflicted on an infant.

At the beginning of the class, provide the following instructions to the students (verbally and in a handout). Explain that the instructions include some fictional details created for this assignment:

> Because of widespread public concern about the potential contributions of the social organization of work to child fatalities, the Governor of [your state here] has created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission with broad powers to review the cases of convicted day care workers and reduce their punishments as circumstances warrant. Today you will work in groups of five to determine whether a sentence adjustment is warranted in the case of Maryann Constantino, sentenced today to three years in state prison for shaking 5-month-old Dylan Salmon. Details about this case can be found on the first page of the Wrigley and Dreby article. Constantino has not yet left the courthouse to begin serving her sentence. The question before you is whether: 1) she should serve the full sentence, 2) she should be granted clemency, meaning that the crime will remain on her record but she will be released from custody without any form of supervision, or 3) she should be released on supervised parole, which means that she will not serve time in jail unless she breaks the law again in the three-year period. If you choose the third option, you can specify a number of conditions, from community service, counseling, no contact with children, regular meetings with a parole officer, and so on. Ms. Constantino pled guilty to the charge of child abuse, so her innocence is not an issue: she admits to having shaken the child and causing the injuries, after having first blamed her own 3-year-old daughter. However, additional facts not revealed in the description of the case in the Wrigley and Dreby article include the following: 1) Ms. Constantino was under a great deal of stress on the day that she shook Dylan due to some recent financial problems and a pending divorce, 2) because of the stress, earlier that morning Ms. Constantino had considered requesting a day off, but she could not afford the lost revenue and did not want to leave parents without a day care option at the last minute, 3) Ms. Constantino is a well-liked member of the community who often helps her neighbors by giving her time and money to solve their problems.

After discussing the instructions and answering any questions the students have, advise the students to break into their groups and discuss Ms. Constantino's case (15-20 minutes). Then ask each group to present their decision, and supporting rationale, to the entire class. Write their decisions on a chalk board and note any discrepancies in outcome or justification. These differences provide an excellent opportunity to interrogate students' cultural beliefs about law and responsibility and link such factors to their political and social ideologies. Hearing the explanations of other students may convince some participants to change their mind about the outcome. This can be a much more powerful learning experience than listening to a professor explain the abstract complexities of such cases in the traditional lecture format–and more enjoyable for the professor as well. Of course the teacher must summarize and expand on the student-led discussion, but the initial debate is framed by students.

Exercise 3: Dilemmas of a Child Care Regulator Background.

Many child care facilities are licensed and regulated by state officials. Nearly all child

care centers are regulated and many family day care homes also are. Regulators inspect facilities to make sure that they are clean and safe and that providers have whatever level of training is required in their state. Child care regulators also respond to parent complaints. If they think a facility poses a threat to children's basic safety and welfare, they can close it down. If they do, though, they may anger and upset parents who may like the child care center or family day care home and believe it to be safe. Those parents will have to find new child care arrangements overnight. The new places they find may have their own risks. Also, the regulators will have cost the family day care provider her livelihood. If a center is closed, all the staff members will have to find new jobs. These are serious consequences and regulators have to think hard about what action to take when a child care facility has problems.

Plan for the exercise. In this exercise, students take the role of a child care regulator faced with the real-world difficulty of assigning priorities for action in a situation of limited resources where harms may accrue from both action and inaction. They have to decide, based on what they read in the article, which of three situations should receive their most urgent attention. Divide the class into groups small enough that every student can easily speak and join in a discussion. Ask each group to take the role of a child care regulator (working for the state government) who has received three complaints, as described in the scenarios below. Drawing broadly upon the evidence and findings in the Wrigley and Dreby article, the groups must make two decisions. First, they must decide which complaint is the most important to immediately investigate. Which should have top priority? Second, they must decide what action to take in response to each complaint. The possible actions are: 1) Declare the complaint is "not supported" due to lack of evidence or something else that makes the regulator not believe it. *Risk: An unsafe child care facility could be allowed to continue operating.* 2) Issue a Notice of Violation with the requirement that the facility take action to improve the situation. *Risk: The facility could take some time to make improvements. A regulator would have to visit the facility again to check that changes were actually made.* 3) Suspend or revoke the license of the child care facility and order it to close. *Risk: Parents whose children are enrolled in the facility would have to find a new child care arrangement on short notice. If a center is closed, staff members lose their jobs. If a family day care home is closed, the provider loses her business. State officials may be upset if they receive complaints about the closing of child care facilities. The office that regulates child care may lose political support.*

After describing the three possible actions, the instructor should read the following description of the assigned role:

> You are to play the role of a regulator who has worked hard to develop good relations with the child care workers whose facilities you inspect. You believe that it is better to persuade them to improve than to threaten them with enforcement actions. You know that most child care workers receive low wages for doing a tough job. Yet you also know that you are responsible for keeping children safe. Which of these three situations would get your most immediate attention? And what action would you take, if you believed that the parents' complaint was probably true?

Then give the students handouts describing the following three situations. While the students are working in their groups, the instructor should be available to address any questions they have about the situations or their assigned role.

Situation A. A mother called the regulatory office to say that when she picked up her eight-month-old baby, Angela, at her family day care provider's house yesterday, the baby was already sitting in a car seat with her coat and hat on. The mother had a brief and friendly conversation with the provider and then put her daughter in the back seat of the car. When she stopped at a

red light, she noticed that her daughter had knocked her hat off, revealing a large bruise on the top and side of her head. The mother turned around and immediately drove back to the provider's house. She demanded to know what had happened to Angela. The caregiver said that she had not noticed anything. When the mother showed her the bruise, she then said that she remembered that Angela had fallen during the afternoon. She said that another child had pushed Angela and she had fallen into the wall and then onto the floor. The mother is suspicious about this explanation.

You (the child care regulator) check the records on this family day care provider. You see that she has passed inspections with flying colors. Her house has always been clean and orderly. Only one complaint has been received about her in the past. That complaint also involved a baby. A mother reported that when she went back to work, she put her four-year-old daughter and seven-month-old son in the provider's care. When she came to pick them up on their first day, she saw that the baby's face was red and that he seemed a little dazed. Her daughter, the four-year-old, told her on the way home that the provider had become angry when the baby wouldn't fall asleep at nap time and kept crying. The four-year-old reported that the provider grabbed the baby out of the crib and held him tightly by the arms and moved him back and forth. She did this twice more when he continued to cry. Finally he fell asleep. The mother said she asked the provider about this and the provider said, "Babies need to be trained not to cry. They have to learn to sleep at nap time and be on the schedule you want." She told the mother that if she had not spoiled her baby, he would be ready to fit into the provider's schedule. The mother called the licensing office and reported this conversation. When the regulator asked the provider about it, however, the provider denied that she had shaken the baby. She said that the mother had brought the kids to her house dirty and hungry and that they also were not trained to quiet down and take naps. The provider said that she would no longer accept these children into her child care home. The mother withdrew them. The regulator who had looked into the situation had closed the file without making any judgment on whether the complaint had been justified or not, as the only witness had been the four-year-old girl and the regulator did not think she was old enough to report accurately on what she had seen.

Situation B. A teacher at the Puffin Child Care Center called to say that she has just started work there and she is concerned about what she saw there on her first day. Teachers yelled at children and spoke abusively to them. One teacher told a three-year-old girl that she was "stupid" and "disgusting" when she spilled her milk on the floor. Another pushed a four-year old boy onto a mat when he wouldn't lie still at nap time. Although the teacher worked in the toddler room, she was in the infant room several times and noticed that the babies were always left strapped into infant seats without freedom to move.

You check the records on the Puffin Child Care Center and find that it has had many violations over the past five years. Inspectors who have made surprise visits have often found that the center was operating with too few staff to meet licensing requirements. Each time, the director explained that a regular staff member had called in sick and that a substitute had not yet arrived. The center has also received violations for teachers not having had the required training.

There has been one case of an injury reported to the licensing office. A parent told the office that her four-year-old daughter had broken her arm falling from the slide. She said that she felt the playground was poorly supervised, with teachers often clustered and talking to each other rather than keeping a close eye on the children. The regulatory office had looked into the complaint, but it had not been possible to establish whether there had been poor supervision on the day of the accident.

Situation C. A mother called the office

and said that her three-year-old son, Jake, had been left behind at a park where he had been taken as part of a field trip arranged by the Play and Learn Child Care Center. The children had been driven to the park in a van. It was a hot day and the children played in a wading pool. When it was time to leave, the teachers gathered up the children but did not notice that Jake was missing. The children were driven back to the center where his absence was still not noticed. When his mother arrived to pick him up, the center conducted a frantic search. Finally, the center director called the police. It turned out that Jake was at a police station near the park. A couple had found Jake by the wading pool, sobbing, and had flagged down a passing patrol car.

You check the records on the center and find that on a previous occasion, there was a complaint that a center van driver forgot to pick up a seven-year-old from school to take her to the center for after-school care. She was left waiting for 45 minutes until the school principal noticed her still standing by the parking lot and called her parents. After this incident, the van driver's record was checked. It turned out that he had many speeding violations and had once had his license suspended. The center had fired him after this incident and it was a new driver who had left three-year-old Jake at the park.

Guidelines for teachers using experiential exercise 3. Because this exercise is meant to be open-ended without one right answer, it is ideal for meeting the goals of subject-centered learning and character education. To some extent students must draw upon their own instincts and values as they contemplate what actions they would take in these situations. They cannot simply look to the teacher for the "correct" decision. Yet they are not completely on their own either. They should draw liberally upon the findings in the Wrigley and Dreby paper in their assessment of risks. With this article as a foundation for understanding, there are several reasons why it might be most reasonable to decide that Situation A poses the highest level of risk. First, the two children who were thought to have suffered harm were both infants. Very young children, including, especially, children under the age of one, are at much greater risk of serious injuries or fatalities than are older children. In addition, shaking a baby presents a particularly high risk of causing fatalities or serious injuries. It almost never occurs in child care centers, but is more likely to occur when providers work without other staff members present. In Situation A, the provider worked alone. If other evidence suggested there was a risk, there would not be other staff members present to limit that risk. Furthermore, a child reported actually observing a provider shake a baby. The child was not treated as a credible witness, because she was only four years old, but the fairly detailed description she gave her mother of what she had seen made it sound like a shaking case. The mother also observed that the baby had symptoms suggesting that he might have suffered a head injury. The Wrigley and Dreby article discusses how some providers have shaken babies (or otherwise harmed them) in front of witnesses who seemed too young or too dependent to tell others what they had seen. Finally, the weight of evidence suggests that this provider might be physically harming infants through abusive acts. This could pose a high risk. Despite the likely unpopularity of such an action, a regulator could make a good argument for suspending or revoking the license of the family day care provider.

Situation B involves a center with many violations and where a child suffered a broken arm in a playground injury. Still, following the analysis in the Wrigley and Dreby article, an argument can be made that this case should receive the lowest priority of the three. First of all, the child's injury was moderately serious (a broken arm), but playground injuries are relatively common and usually do not involve truly grave injuries. It is very rare for a child to suffer an incapacitating injury on a center playground. In addition, although the center's many violations, and the complaints of

the new staff member, suggest that this center is offering low-quality care—a problem that regulators should address—there is little reason to think that there is urgent need to safeguard the children on the premises. And closing the center, with its many children, would impose costs on a wide range of parties. A regulator could make a case for developing a plan for improvement with frequent monitoring and with a risk of license suspension or revocation if the center does not improve over a specified period.

Situation C involves a relatively high level of risk. It is obviously dangerous for young children to be left unsupervised. The child left at the park suffered particular risk. He was in an unfamiliar environment where people did not know him and might not notice him, while the seven-year-old girl had been left at her school, where she was eventually noticed by the principal. The child left at the park was also younger and was at major risk because he was near a body of water. Circumstances like these can lead to drowning deaths. Clearly the center did not learn an adequate lesson from its earlier experience of hiring a van driver with a bad record. Center personnel once again failed to safeguard children while off the center premises. The center did not implement procedures to make sure that all children were accounted for at all times. A regulator could reasonably argue that this situation requires immediate and strong intervention. The Wrigley and Dreby article shows that in center care the greatest risks occur when children are physically out of the centers. Center directors need to develop systems of checking and double-checking to insure that children on field trips or being transported to and from homes or schools are always safeguarded. This requires having one person check another person, so that the whole system does not depend on the care and attentiveness of one individual.

At the end of this exercise, as with the first experiential exercise, encourage students to think about the implications of the dilemmas and uncertainties facing child care regulators. They face difficult choices in the face of unpredictable events and limited information. Instructors can turn to the question of how the child care system as a whole could be made safer, so that regulators do not have to make guesses about individual behavior.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this article we have described strategies for using a research article published in *ASR* as the basis for experiential classroom exercises. We have argued that such exercises are well-suited to a subject-centered approach to character education and the teaching of "public" sociology. The *ASR* article on child care fatalities by Wrigley and Dreby provides abundant empirical material for students to contest and rethink basic institutional arrangements in society, rather than focusing on the individual psychological problems of child care workers. The challenge is how to make this material meaningful to students. The traditional lecture format remains useful, but often fails to engage students to the same degree as experiential exercises. In order to make the public sociology issues implied in the Wrigley and Dreby article "come alive," we have advocated a subject-centered approach that involves students' hearts, as well as their minds: the hallmark of character education.

Our hope is that experiential exercises grounded in a subject-centered classroom, such as the three that we developed, will not only help students better learn sociology and come to appreciate the sociological perspective as a "great thing," but also work towards reducing the prevalence of post-graduation civic privatism described by Habermas (1975:37). Scholarship published in academic journals like *ASR* is frequently accused of being interesting and relevant for only a handful of highly trained specialists. Our paper, like the others in the *Teaching Sociology* research article application series, offers examples of how such papers can be made more engaging for students by drawing them into active involvement with "the

great thing." This kind of involvement is central to the enterprise of character education, which has been suggested as one way to revitalize democracy in the post-modern world. Well-informed citizens, able to reason effectively, work with others, and use empirical data appropriately, represent a core requirement for democratic systems. We suggest that a strong sociological imagination is also an important ingredient in democratic citizenship. We offer subject-centered, public sociology as one pedagogical avenue for moving our universities in the direction of educating citizens and away from playing the role of slaughterhouse of the human spirit.

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