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Perspective getting in a democracy

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In response to the impossibility of achieving a consensus on how to define or achieve equality, Lewis (this issue) proposes an exercise in perspective-getting. Specifically, Lewis proposes inviting the perspective of “experts—experts on the experiences of those who have been disempowered and marginalized—to partner with policymakers to make more evidence-based decisions” (p. 159).

We agree with this direction toward perspective-getting. National and local policy in the United States (the locus of Lewis’ analysis) needs to incorporate the perspectives of communities who have been marginalized in order to address historic levels of inequality. A strong emerging social scientific literature suggests that *receiving* perspectives from others, as opposed to relying on one’s own powers of imagination or impression formation, is a powerful tool for changing judgments and opinions about marginalized groups (e.g., Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Kalla & Brookman, 2020).

Lewis’s recommendation to seek “experts of marginalization” (p. 160) is well-suited for a decisionmaker who appreciates the limits of her own viewpoint. Decisionmakers, who live (like everyone else) in a segregated and hierarchical society, are separated from many of the constituents their policies need to serve. Their limited range of interactions shapes their ideas, which they are nonetheless motivated to believe represent ground truth. For decisionmakers humbled by the limitations of their own viewpoints and open to input from outside of their circles, Lewis’ suggestion represents a broad playbook: invite in experts on communities in the margins, ask for their input, “... ask [them] to explain the logic and evidence they used to arrive at their recommendations, check the quality of that evidence, and use it to inform interventions and policies” (p. 160).

Of course, the prevalence of decision-makers who are aware of and motivated to address the limitations of their personal viewpoints is low, if decision-makers are like the rest of us. But prior to this problem of finding individuals who would be willing to call on an expert to shape policy for them lies an even deeper quandary. Specifically: even for those willing to admit the limitations of their own viewpoint, defining “expertise” is a process as contested and as motivated by biased personal perspectives as the process of defining equality (Littleford & Jones, 2017; Littleford, Ong, Tseng, Milliken, & Humy, 2010). Achieving a consensus on

whose “expertise” should guide policy parallels the difficulty of achieving a consensus on the ultimate goal, equality itself.

Consider Lewis’ explanation of how psychological processes conditioned by segregation and power inequity prevent a consensus on what is “equality.” Lewis points to research on perception in social networks, showing how individuals take cues from our (segregated) local environments, attending to “those that we have frequent interactions with... [who] become the basis of our mental representation of the world, and ... our (naive) representation of the broader reality” (p. 156). Due to social stratification, decision-makers in asymmetric positions of power and privilege also operate with asymmetries in perception and are inevitably affected by stereotypes that cannot be punctured by their every day (lack of) contact with constituents. Would not such general biases in perception also affect decision-makers’ assessments of expertise?

Who is an expert? Who should guide policy? We know that some of the social forces that make consensus on “equality” difficult also affect the extent to which people view critics as legitimate, persuasive, credible, and constructive or dismiss them as rude complainers (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006; Gulker, Mark, & Monteith, 2013; Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Further, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, feminists, and critical race theorists have long pointed out that certain “ways of knowing” are disenfranchised in the production of high-status knowledge, and certain people are stereotyped as activists or storytellers rather than as knowledge-producers (e.g., Dupree & Boykin, 2021; Fricker, 2007; Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009; Nzinga et al., 2018; Oakley, 1998; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Thus, in an unequal democracy, how can experts on the marginalized lead the formulation of the policy if their expertise is unlikely to be recognized or agreed upon?

It is tempting to turn toward technocratic measures—*bring in the experts!*—as a way to short-circuit the long, slow, and often-regressive path of a democracy. It is especially tempting at this point in history, and especially to academics, who appreciate expertise (in contrast to a vocal segment of the U.S. population at this moment; Romano, 2020; Schofield, 2020). Proposing expertise as an answer to democratic struggles over the meaning of equality, however, cycles us back to the same social and psychological obstacles to political consensus and progress.

Currently, politicians do solicit the advice of experts, and we join Lewis in urging them to solicit expertise on marginalized communities. More broadly, we propose to continue thinking of other ways of infusing the process of policymaking with perspectives from the margins.

What are other avenues in a democracy for increasing perspectives of the marginalized in policymaking? In the short run, enfranchisement—returning the vote to marginalized people such as those who have been incarcerated or kicked off voter rolls—is a direct path toward requesting someone's perspective. Undoing the silencing effects of gerrymandering, allowing the votes of marginalized communities to count toward meaningful political positions, would also be a way to invite perspectives of the marginalized back into policymaking (e.g., Wang, 2016).

Closer to home, academics can restore (or invest for the first time) academic prestige into the role of the scholar-activist, or the applied scientist. Long dismissed as a second-class expert, scholars engaged in translating science and intellectual pursuits play a vital role in bringing excitement and respect to scholarly pursuits in this country, not to mention in bringing expertise to policy craft. Activists have played a major role in pushing policy conversations over the last few years. Academic institutions can provide material support and lend prestige to scholars who participate in these conversations by supplying evidence on the case of policy change. For this and other reasons (see Nzinga et al., 2018; Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins, Goldie, & Mortenson, 2020), norm change regarding the disinterested objective scientist is warranted.

These are a few shorter-term methods through which perspectives could be brought to democratic governmental processes. Longer-term solutions might target norm change toward greater trust in expertise, procedural change to stop unfair silencing of voices in policymaking such as limits on lobbying and filibustering, and reform in our educational system to help young people understand the importance and value of both expertise and of listening to the perspectives of the marginalized. Working toward such ends would help to build democratic processes that center more perspectives from the margins in policymaking.

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