Horton the elephant is a criminal: Using Dr. Seuss to teach social process, conflict, and labeling theory

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Horton the Elephant is a Criminal:
Using Dr. Seuss to Teach Social Process, Conflict, and Labeling Theory

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Abstract

It is fairly well known that Theodore Geisel (“Dr. Seuss”) often used art and storytelling as political and social commentary, no one has attempted to interpret his work through the lens of sociological/criminological theory. This paper argues that several of his tales can be used as aids in teaching the basic principles of many sociological/criminological theories. The author analyzes several of his works and uses one, “Horton Hears a Who” to illustrate his subtle, but powerful commentary on the creation and application of laws, the impact of social stratification, the pervasive and dangerous influence of social and political power derived from economic power, and the nature of crime, punishment, and rehabilitation. The author describes how to create a classroom exercise to teach theory using this particular Seuss story.
Introduction

Teaching theories of crime and criminality can be challenging because the majority of theories derive from more generalized theories of behavior. Criminology, as a social science, has evolved (and continues to evolve) from sociology, social psychology, psychology, and other sciences (e.g., economics, political science). Therefore, the criminological theory instructor must have an understanding of those fields, in addition to how those theories are applied to criminal behavior and to the processing of offenders through the system.

One major difficulty is the tendency for instructors (and students) to desire neat categorizations of theories, based on some epistemology or paradigm. For example, leading criminology texts tend to differentiate and/or classify theories according to factors that contribute to criminal behavior and/or history. Typically, this means categorization into “social process” theories, “social structure” theories, “Classical” theories, trait/positivist/determinist theories, “cultural/subcultural” theories, “conflict” and/or “radical” theories, and some section for “alternative” and/or “integrated” explanations. The names differ, but the attempt is to neatly place theories into cubbyholes based on some sort of common theoretical underpinning. Theories also can be described based on whether they have a micro- or macro-level focus and whether they attempt to explain criminal behavior (in its various forms), victimization, or the development & application of law and treatment of offenders and victims within the system.

The problem with attempts to group theories is that many of the theories overlap or share common characteristics. For example, several theories across typologies have a socioeconomic component; they argue that behavior and/or processing through the system varies across socioeconomic categories.
Students often have difficulty distinguishing among theories and detecting the subtle differences or distinctions among them. Helping students apply the theories to observable behavior may clarify those distinct traits or characteristics and enhance their ability to use what they learn about these theories and how the theoretical integrates with the practical in their everyday lives.

Additionally, students may have difficulty with abstract thinking. Anything having to do with “theory” seems abstract and is often intimidating. Any concrete exercise that places the theoretical in a context that students can understand is useful. Moreover, it may start students on a path of trying to apply theoretical concepts to behaviors and events they witness in their everyday lives.

For example, the idea of labeling (Becker, 1963) is not difficult for most students to understand given that this is a term that most have heard before. In fact, many probably have experienced some form of labeling. However, for students to understand the process of becoming labeled and the resultant effects, concrete examples are helpful.

This paper does not attempt to provide a review of any particular theory or to discuss how certain theories may be applicable to behavior and/or to processing of individuals through the system. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to offer some ideas to theory instructors on presenting theory (specifically those that derive from a conflict perspective) to students in the classroom. The activity outlined in this paper requires integrative thinking for students to understand what the theory looks like in action. Also, students are asked to decompartmentalize their understanding of theory and to recognize shared characteristics among theories.
The Exercise

This exercise involves showing students the film, *Horton Hears a Who*, by Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel). The activity is given at a point late in the semester when students already have been introduced to all of the theories. The entire exercise should occupy approximately three contact hours. Before showing the film, the instructor summarizes the major tenets of all the theories, with special emphasis on those relating to the conflict perspective. The instructor then informs the students that they are about to see a film that contains situations, issues, events, and characters that can be evaluated and described through the application of several theories. Students are asked to watch the film with a critical eye and to be alert to behaviors and activities that can be theoretically interpreted.

Before the film, students are given two handouts. The first is accompanied by instructions for them to be alert to situations that might reflect some of the ideas of social processes and conflict theories (see Appendix A). They are specifically asked to be watching for processes related to law making and societal reactions to law breaking. Finally, they are warned that the film contains social oppression and discrimination themes that they are challenged to detect. This handout also asks several questions about representations and depictions in the film, particularly about symbolism. Students are challenged to think about how the overt characterizations in the film might be symbolic of other events, behaviors, people, and organizations.

The second handout contains the lyrics to one of the songs in the film (see Appendix B). The lyrics clearly illustrate many social processes and reflect numerous theoretical constructs, such as Becker’s (1963) labeling and Cohen’s (1972) conception of a “moral panic.”
Purposes of the Exercise

The exercise described in this paper has several purposes. The primary purpose is to provide students with the opportunity to apply their understanding of certain theories by asking them to interpret situations, events, and characters using those theories as frameworks for discussion. This will enable students to practice looking at behaviors and environments with a more critical eye.

Second, this exercise encourages creativity by asking students to “think outside the box.” People usually watch animated films purely for their entertainment value. In this exercise, however, the students are required to look below the surface at the underlying messages. Students are able to make inferential leaps about a particular character’s motivation by thinking back to what the theories assume about the nature of human behavior and interactions within social groups.

Finally, students will learn how to make and support arguments based on theory. This exercise allows them the creativity to make assumptions, but also requires them to support those assumptions with theoretical constructs.

No one has examined the use of fictional stories to teach criminological theory, although other fields such as education (Rossiter, 2002), demography (Folbre, 1997), geography (Gesler, 2004), history (Smith, 2001), and sociology (Taylor, 2003) have recognized the power of storytelling in enhancing awareness and understanding. Neuhauser (1993) advocates stories as educational tools because they are entertaining, rememberable, and believable. The audience is actively engaged with the plot, with the characters, and with the themes that are involved. Jackson (1995) says that stories are used to transform as well as to inform because stories lead from the familiar to the unfamiliar, which can lead to personal change and growth. The
instructional use of stories in a college classroom could “enable us to engage with new knowledge, broader perspectives, and expanded possibilities because we encounter them in the familiar territory of human experience” (Rossiter, 2002, p. 3; available online: http://www.ericacve.org/pubs.asp). In fact, stories can convey explanations, justifications, and inspiration in ways that abstract thinking cannot, and may “rival logic as a way to understand legal cases, geography, illness or war” (Smith, 2001, p.1; available online: http://www.latimes.com/features/lifestyle/la-000090032nov11.story).

Taylor (2002) uses children’s books, such as those by Dr. Seuss, to teach sociology students about the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes. He asks the students to conduct a content analysis of selected children’s books and reflect on the creation and perpetration of gender roles within the media. Students also are asked to reflect upon the shaping of their own gender identities. In this way, students learn about theory, are taught to recognize and critically examine theoretical concepts, and are exposed to applying theoretical thought to their own lives.

With the Horton exercise, instructors are encouraged to stimulate discussion about the nature of societies, the social, political, and economic power of certain individuals within societies, and the processes of lawmaking. Additionally, it provides a clear illustration of how the behavior of certain individuals comes to be defined as deviant and even criminal, especially when those individuals and their behaviors may threaten the “status quo” and the position of those in power.

Theodor Seuss Geisel

Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known as “Dr. Seuss,” is a famed author of children’s books. Most of these books seem like nonsensical flights of fancy with cute rhymes, catchy rhythms, colorful artwork, and fictional words, characters, and places. However, careful
consideration of Seuss’ writings and art leads to the conclusion that Dr. Seuss had a very obvious agenda.

Geisel began his career as a freelance cartoonist, a writer and artist for *Judge*, and an advertising artist for Standard Oil Company (Morgan & Morgan, 1996). Finally, before concentrating on his writing career, Geisel was a noted political cartoonist (Minear, 1999) before and during World War II, where he tended to create symbolic characters (often animals) to represent important, influential, and/or controversial figures or policies. An ostrich with its head in the sand, for example, represented isolationists who did not want the United States to enter World War II. Nazi Germany, when not represented by caricatures of Hitler, was represented by dragons, sharks, snakes, and somewhat interestingly, by the Dachshund.

Social issues were a prominent theme. Many of his cartoons involve anti-racist messages and messages against anti-Semitism (Minear, 1999). For example, one cartoon shows a black bird labeled “Racial Hatred” perched on the shoulder of Georgia’s governor, Eugene Talmadge, who holds a whip and towers over a fenced-in depiction of the state of Georgia (Minear, 1999).

Geisel also expressed concern and support for America’s unemployed, the over-taxed, and the labor movement, and expressed disgust for the wealthy who seemed to have unfair tax breaks, and those who exploited workers and profited from their labor (Minear, 1999). He drew cartoons depicting Hitler as reveling in U.S. labor unrest, showing Congress as a wrecking crew out to destroy the work of Roosevelt’s New Deal social policies, and portraying the unfair nature of the poll tax, which had racially discriminatory undertones and required payment to vote, primarily in southern states (Minear, 1999).
Geisel as Dr. Seuss

Geisel’s messages were blatantly displayed in his cartoons and the symbolism was often quite apparent. Some of his children’s stories also carry these powerful and not too subtle messages. Oppression and exploitation of workers and citizens was the central message in a story where Hitler (disguised as a turtle) played a prominent role. Yertle the Turtle (Seuss, 1958) depicts the power hungry climb of a Hitler-like turtle dictator to the top of the turtle pile. Yertle reaches great heights literally on the backs of other turtles, specifically a turtle named Mack at the bottom of the pile. However, power obtained at the expense of others and without cooperation or respect soon crumbles as Mack burps and the turtle tower tumbles. The conclusion is that, “And the turtles, of course…all the turtles are free, as turtles, and maybe, all creatures should be” (Seuss, 1958, p. 72).

Geisel’s anti-prejudice message also comes across in another of his popular tales, The Sneetches (1961). Star-Belly Sneetches have stars on their bellies, and Plain-Belly Sneetches do not. This difference translates into separate and unequal treatment of the Plain-Belly Sneetches (perceived as inferior by members of BOTH Sneetch groups). For a price, an enterprising entrepreneur named Sylvester McMonkey McBean sends the Plain-Belly Sneetches through his “Star-On” Machine where they are transformed. The “real” Star-Bellies become nervous and do not like that they can no longer tell “us” from “them.” So, McBean offers (for a price) to send them through his “Star-Off” machine, returning them to a position of uniqueness. Suddenly, McBean is racking up the money as Sneetch after Sneetch goes through each machine so many times that everyone is out of money and no one remembers who originally had what. McBean leaves a wealthy man and the Sneetch society is poverty-stricken but wiser and integrated.
Temple (2000) drew an economics lesson from this tale: “some people will always pay to fit in, while others will always pay to be different. As long as both types of people have money to spend, there will always be people who get rich by playing the one group against the other” (p. 1). From a criminological theory perspective, the idea of labeling is apparent—each group goes through a process of labeling at various times, exploited by McBean, who could represent the United States government. McBean (and the government) profits from one group’s fear of being different and the other group’s desire to maintain the status quo and their superior position.

Exploitation is a dominant theme in several Seuss stories. Marxian tenets such as the promotion of business and profit at the expense of everyone and everything else (i.e., the environment) are clear. Seuss championed the “little man” and recognized the exploitation of the weak by those with political, economic, and social power. At the least, one can derive certain principles of social process theories and of conflict theories from many of his creations.

Horton Hears a Who

The exercise described in this paper focuses on a story Seuss published after visiting Japan in 1953 after the American occupation formally ended. In a 1987 interview, Seuss said that the idea for Horton (Seuss, 1954) evolved from that trip because “Japan was just emerging, the people were voting for the first time, running their own lives—and the theme was obvious: ‘A person’s a person, no matter how small’” (Minear, 1999, p. 263). The story also contains Seuss’ statement on voting; “everyone counts.” Morgan & Morgan (1996) specifically claim that the book evolved from a visit to Japanese schools, “where the importance of the individual was considered an exciting new concept” (p. 144-45).

The story of Horton and the Whos is much more than an insistence that everyone counts. Most observers grasp its cautionary tale against racial prejudice and discrimination (Morgan &
Morgan, 1999). However, readers tend to overlook the fact that it also is an indictment of oppressive government policies and the tendency for political power to stem from social/economic power.

In this fanciful tale, Horton is a happy-go-lucky elephant living in the jungle of Nool, who is blissfully unaware that the other jungle residents perceive him as “different.” Horton is considered so different that he is “labeled” by Mrs. Jane Kangaroo who is constantly accompanied by her young impressionable son, Joey. In fact, Horton is labeled as “different” because he allows himself to be an individual who does not necessarily conform to societal expectations. This tendency, of course, brings suspicion and distrust from the other members of the jungle culture.

Mrs. Kangaroo assumes the role of a “moral entrepreneur” (Becker, 1963) in that she lobbies the jungle occupants to label Horton as an outcast. Societal acceptance of her beliefs is exemplified when she spreads and encourages the spread of rumors and wild exaggerations related to Horton, his behavior, his family, and even his mental health. These rumors run rampant through a flock of gaggling, hysterical birds (sexistly portrayed as females).

Horton becomes a pariah within his community as the result of a concerted campaign by Mrs. Kangaroo. She peddles her influence via gossip and encourages the community perception that Horton is not to be trusted. In fact, Horton is to be feared. Ironically, the power she exerts within the community results in the residents’ flight toward safer territory, leaving her alone in the jungle to do as she pleases.

Horton’s troubles begin when a community of tiny beings, called Whos, catch his attention. The Whos, ensconced within a tiny dust speck called Whoville, are plunging toward destruction in the pool when Horton hears “a very faint yelp. As if some tiny person were calling
for help.” Being the open-minded elephant that he is, Horton does not question whether it is possible for beings to live on a dust speck. He does not consider their skin color, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or socio-economic status. He does not stop to think whether their lives are or are not worth saving. He does not pause, except to say, “A person’s a person, no matter how small.” He saves the dust speck and deposits it gently on a nice, comfy clover. Little does Horton know, but this entire performance has been witnessed by Jane Kangaroo, who also does not stop to question whether a being can exist on a dust speck; she already has determined that it is impossible.

Recognizing Jane’s overwhelming economic, social, and political power, Horton suggests that there may even be families of beings on the dust speck and pleads with her to “just let them be.” Note that he does not try to convince her that they exist or that he was right; he just asks her not to disturb them. But, to her, that would mean that she would have to acknowledge their existence. She attempts to destroy the dust speck, but Horton plucks the clover and runs through the jungle, even as he hears taunts from others.

As he is evading those who would destroy the dust speck, he hears a small voice thanking him for saving Whoville. Dr. Whovey (in the film version—in the written story, Horton communicates with the Mayor) is somewhat akin to Horton because his community also perceives him as “different.” He always has been trying to convince his peers that there was a world outside of Whoville. This represents the common refusal of individuals to broaden their scope of awareness; reluctance to see beyond their borders; a type of ethnocentrism and egotism, as well as a fear of the unknown.

It is a portrayal of those who are often the target of prejudiced beliefs and discriminatory practices to isolate themselves, to practice self-segregation as insulation against greater harm.
Locating the Whos on the clover is purposeful to avoid further harm. Fear of the unknown leads the “bigger” world residents to automatically negate the existence of the Whos. This fear also leads the Whos to resist integration. The bigger world views the small and relatively powerless Whos as a potential threat to their hold on social, political, and economic power. And the Whos view the outside world as a threat to their very existence (and rightfully so).

Unfortunately, society’s politically powerful often have henchmen who assist them in fulfilling their desires. Jane Kangaroo has the three Wickersham Brothers who overpower the fleeing Horton and snatch the clover from his grasp. The Wickersham Brothers are ugly, hairy, monkey-looking creatures with wickedly evil smiles. Stratton (1999) points out the obvious reference to the “see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil” monkeys who aim to repress expression. Instead of merely eliminating the Who threat, the Brothers demonize both Horton and the Whos, propagandizing them both as threats to the very fabric of society.

In the most delightful song in the film, the Wickersham Brothers describe the “deep, dire, evil, political plot” that Horton is attempting to execute (see Appendix B). A well-intended act is translated into something that threatens everyone and every societal institution. The Brothers accuse Horton of trying to “shatter morale,” “stir up discontent,” and “seize the reins of government.” If the Brothers can paint Horton and the Whos as enough of a villain, society will feel relieved at the elimination of the threat and will not notice the oppression, discrimination, injustice, and manipulation of public opinion by those who would have their way.

The story hints that the bigger world doesn’t really want to know about the Whos. The jungle culture was content to take the word of Jane Kangaroo and the Wickersham Brothers that Horton and the Whos were a threat. This exemplifies the “what the people don’t know won’t hurt them” mentality, and that citizens are better off leaving the thinking to the more “qualified”
and more “powerful.” In fact, it often is argued that citizens prefer to remain ignorant of “reality,” and prefer an edited version because it is more palatable and more comfortable. Moreover, if the Whos can remain a threat, the powerful can perpetuate the “us versus them” perception that often keeps them in power.

Society often does not want to deal with reality. This belief is reinforced when the Wickersham Brothers hire a henchman named Whizzer McQuaff to “kindly dispose” of the clover and its dust speck. Whizzer is a “black-bottomed eagle” who is “mighty strong” and “of very swift wing.” Whizzer flies for many hours, until “6:56 the next morning,” when he finally drops the small clover “somewhere inside a great patch of clover one hundred miles wide.” Horton has followed the bird with every flap of his wing. He chased Whizzer, “with groans, over stones that tattered his toenails and battered his bones.”

Horton is now faced with a seemingly insurmountable challenge—to find one small clover in a 100-mile wide field covered with nothing but identical clovers. So Horton searched, “clover by clover by clover, with care,” until he was “more dead than alive.” He did not give up. He picked and he plucked “hour after hour,” until he found his dust speck on the ten millionth flower.

The unfortunate Whos had a rough time when Whizzer dropped them into the field. The violence nearly eradicated their existence. However, the near disaster did force the Whos to recognize the larger world outside their dust speck. They rally as a society and vow to work together to rebuild their community. The events in the United States after September 11, 2001 clearly illustrate how a major disaster can unite individuals in a common purpose.

In the meantime, Jane Kangaroo has caught up with Horton and again exerts her power. She has called more Wickershams to join her cause (“dozens of Wickersham uncles and
Wickersham cousins and Wickersham in-laws”). Our elephant protagonist, with the clover grasped tightly in his trunk, is overpowered once again, roped and caged. The story says, “they beat him,” and “they mauled him.” They made plans to boil the clover in a “hot steaming kettle of Beezel-nut oil.” Horton is about to be executed for his attempts to champion the Who cause.

In a panic, Horton frantically entreats the Whos to make their presence known. He begs Dr. Whovey to enlist the aid of every Who. Horton pleads with them, “Don’t give up! I believe in you all. A person’s a person, no matter how small! And you very small persons will not have to die, if you make yourselves heard! So come on, now, and TRY!”

Dr. Whovey races through Whoville making sure everyone is working to make themselves known. Each Who seems to be yelling or banging or crying out. But it seems fruitless because there are no sounds making their way to the ears of Jane Kangaroo. Horton instructs Dr. Whovey to make sure “every Who down in Whoville is working.” He asks Dr. Whovey, “Is there anyone shirking?”

Dr. Whovey races through the town, fully aware that each second brings Whoville closer to eradication in boiling oil. Everyone seemed to be working. However, there was someone shirking. Dr. Whovey finds JoJo, “a very small shirker,” just standing in the Fairfax Apartments, bouncing a Yo-Yo. Dr. Whovey convinces the young lad that “this is your town’s darkest hour! The time for all Whos who have blood that is red to come to the aid of their country.” Dr. Whovey tells him that “every voice counts.”

Finally, the boy lets out a “YOPP” which, when added to every other Who voice, broke through to the ears of those on the outside. Horton made his case so soundly that Jane Kangaroo was convinced to join him in his fight to protect them, “no matter how small-ish!”
Interpretation and the Application of Theory

Once the instructor has reviewed the theories and has prepared the students by distributing the handouts and summarizing the expectations for the exercise, he or she asks the students to complete the exercise. Instructors may break the class into small groups of students (3-5 per group), or may make this stage of the activity an individual task. Small groups seem to work best in that students can brainstorm and discuss how particular theories apply in a way that is more conducive to the sharing of ideas.

The major situations/events and major characters/objects are listed below, followed by a more detailed discussion of possible interpretations and applications of potential theories. These are provided as a guide. Students are obviously free to develop new and interesting interpretations and think of new ways to apply theory.

**Major Situations/Events:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses to perceived threats to the social order/status quo</th>
<th>Racism, prejudicial attitudes, stereotyping, discrimination</th>
<th>Genocide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppression</td>
<td>Suppression of new ideas, different ways of thinking</td>
<td>Fear of the unknown, the different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labeling</td>
<td>Elitism/social stratification</td>
<td>Moral Panic, induced hysteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social structures, relationships, delegation of power, authority</td>
<td>Role of communication (e.g., gossip) within social groups</td>
<td>Derivation of political, social, economic power from social status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuse of authority, abuse of power, excessive use of force</td>
<td>Development, maintenance, use of conformity and consensus in sustaining social order</td>
<td>Persecution and punishment of threats to social order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of creating “deviance”</td>
<td>Process of creating “crime”</td>
<td>Process/purpose of lawmaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal reactions to lawbreaking</td>
<td>Role of disaster in coalescing communities</td>
<td>Value of the individual within society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A World War II Analogy

Given that Geisel wrote this story in 1953, shortly after a trip to Japan, one clear parallel is to U.S. government actions against the Japanese both at home and abroad during the early 1940s. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, war hysteria and anti-Japanese sentiment gripped the United States. Any person of actual or perceived Japanese descent was seen as suspect. Political leaders, military personnel, reporters, and average citizens began to believe that persons of Japanese ancestry, including individuals born in the United States, should be forced to leave the West Coast.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order in February 1942 that “relocated” approximately 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans into 10 remote “relocation centers” in Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming (http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/89manzanar/89manzanar.htm). The U.S. government created the War Relocation Authority to run the assembly centers, relocation centers, and internment camps, and relocation began in April 1942. Roosevelt rescinded the executive order in 1944, and the last camps closed in March 1946 (http://www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo/9066/9066.htm).

During the time of Japanese internment, however, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima, Japan (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki, Japan (August 9, 1945), eventually killing an

Similar to Jane Kangaroo who wanted the Who threat removed, influential community leaders in many West Coast states (particularly California) urged the removal of Japanese individuals from their cities. In this analogy, the Whos are the Japanese, confined to their dust speck. The dust speck finds a comfortable home on a clover, representing an American city where individuals of Japanese ancestry either were born or to which they emigrated.

The Wickershams and Whizzer could represent the U.S. government, reflexively reacting to the vocal minority that has manufactured and exaggerated a mass fear of the different and of the unknown. The Wickershams issue the order for the clover to be “relocated,” and Whizzer responds, as did the U.S. military during WWII, by attempting to “dispose” of the problem and to destroy the Who world with a “big drop” (the bomb).

Horton:

- The United States (Minear, 1999)
- The best possible type of government/idealized America, protective of even the smallest persons in existence (weak, disenfranchised, poor, oppressed, disadvantaged—the “unheard” and “unseen”)
- The voice of reason, urging tolerance and acceptance
- The “savior” of individuals and communities persecuted and destroyed because they are different and feared
- Social activism, urging the powerless to work together and not be afraid of integration
- The average person with a view that differs from the status quo/non-conformist
- A threat to the social order/those in power. As a threat, his views are criticized then demonized. He is labeled, ostracized, outcast, persecuted, and punished. His actions are transformed into deviance and finally, crime that requires a punishment.
The Dust Speck:

- A world that is ignorant of outside influences
- The unknown/improbable; belief, idea that is hard to accept because of no visible proof

The Clover:

- The truth/threat to social order
- Undistorted/unfiltered reality
- Peace between two different societies (jungle and Whoville)
- Justice: The moral here is unmistakable; one must never give up the search for truth, justice, or peace, even when others try to cover it up or destroy it. The last lesson from the clover is that the truth (or justice or peace) liberates us all; when Jane and the others are faced with the undeniable truth of the Whos existence, they embrace it, becoming liberated from their preconceived notions and prejudices.

Jane Kangaroo:

- Powerful community leader
- An elitist who uses her social position to elicit societal consensus around her beliefs

Joey Kangaroo:

- Mindless drone who cannot form an independent thought
- Represents conformists who blindly follow authority; “in the pocket” of the powerful.

Stocker, Green, and Newth (2001) examined how patterns of communication and connectivity in societies impact the transmission of ideas and group consensus or opinion. The flow of information in any society is dependent upon the connections between interdependent individuals that influence individual and group action (Wasserman and Faust, 1995). Social gossip is a flow of information that derives from those connections and is the primary means for forming human relationships. Language, specifically gossip, evolved to surpass grooming as the
principal means of forming relationships (Dunbar, 1996) because it is more conducive to forming mutually supportive coalitions (Campbell, 1984).

Individuals like Jane who control and distribute information are powerful determinants of a social network’s collective behavior (Marsden, 2000). In this capacity, she can solicit support for a common goal (e.g., maintaining social order/eliminating threat). The development of common goals is crucial to establishing group cohesion. Therefore, she reiterates her role as community leader by creating a common enemy and rallying her neighbors into consensus by distributing information and encouraging its spread through gossip. Horton’s “deviance” is reinforced as the message spreads.

Mrs. Kangaroo is obviously a “moral entrepreneur” as defined by Becker. However, she may represent something more insidious. She may represent powerful interest groups who exert undue influence on government to protect their interests. She may represent judgmental society (closed-minded, set, opposed to change, the status-quo). She may represent the isolationist. She may represent those who advocated Prohibition.

This is a perfect opportunity in the exercise to discuss how socially, politically, or economically powerful individuals within a society can exert disproportionate influence on societal beliefs and practices. Instructors can point out the role of the media and the power of advertising and suggestion on behavior. Cohen (1972), for example, might argue that Jane has used her power to instigate a “moral panic” wherein an “episode, condition, person or group of persons” is “defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (p. 9).

More importantly, this part of the exercise lets instructors discuss the process of lawmaking. The conflict perspective highlights the inequities inherent in the lawmaking process
and how laws are made and retained that protect the interests of the powerful (i.e., wealthy) (Quinney, 1970).

Stemming from this is the notion that “crime” is created. This is clearly portrayed in the film, as Horton suffers through negative societal reactions to his actions. The viewer can see how certain individuals (or groups) are defined as a threat to the dominant social order and their behaviors (or thoughts and beliefs) criminalized. The criminalization process portrayed in Horton, involves the “dramatization of evil” as described by Tannenbaum (1938). Societal reaction, viewed by Lemert (1951) as crucial to social solidarity, is illustrated in the process of defining and suppressing Horton’s deviance.

Finally, the response of individuals and social groups to perceived threat is another possible discussion topic. Fear of crime is a powerful motivator and something that has been thoroughly explored in the literature. Students can extrapolate the behavior of the gaggling gossipy Birds who flee their neighborhood in response to the perception of elevated threat to the behavior of urban residents who flee the inner cities.

The “white flight” phenomenon, where fearful white urban residents tend to move outward toward more suburban areas when they perceive an increase in risk from crime or “bad elements,” generally is associated with increasing minority populations in urban areas. White residents may perceive minority residents as threats to the social order, as the Birds perceived Horton. Crowder (2000) found that the likelihood of whites to leave a particular neighborhood increases significantly as the size of the minority population in the neighborhood increases. Moreover, the likelihood is even greater in neighborhoods that contain multiple minority groups. These findings hold true even when controlling for several micro-level mobility predictors.
Students might question whether white flight and the resulting greater concentrations of minorities in inner-city areas is an intended result of government efforts at crime control. That is, if the government (through messages that perpetuate fear of crime and feelings of increased risk) can control the location of the population (whites in certain areas, minorities in certain areas), crime control may be simplified. Law enforcement resources can then be targeted at the inner cities.

Unfortunately, this results in a self-fulfilling prophecy; the concentration of crime control efforts is likely to lead to the detection of more crime within the concentration area. In turn, the detection of more crime leads to the allocation of more law enforcement resources that will detect yet more crime. If a particular racial/ethnic group also happens to be concentrated in that area, they are the logical targets of enforcement. This perpetuates the stereotype that more crime is concentrated in the minority communities, leading to more white flight and greater minority concentration. Obviously, these conspiracy-oriented theories are very appealing to students and tend to elicit spirited classroom debate.

**Dr. Whovey:**

- Social pariah with limited social power
- An innovator
- A challenge to existing belief systems

**The Whos in Whoville:**

- Japanese who gained a voice through voting (Minear, 1999)
- The small, unseen, unheard, and powerless unless speaking with one voice
- Apathetic society spurred to action by disaster
The Birds:

- Followers, highly susceptible to suggestion
- The conforming, mindless masses; pawns of the powerful

The Wickersham Brothers:

The Wickersham Commission was established by Hoover in 1929 to assess law enforcement in the United States, in response to increasing public concern over crime (Walker, 2002). One of the Commission’s primary responsibilities was to evaluate law enforcement related to Prohibition, established in 1919 in the passage of the 18th amendment. Apparently, enforcement of Prohibition was troubled by abuses of authority (Walker, 2002).

This commission established several committees to study various aspects of the justice system. One of the most influential was the Committee on Official Lawlessness which produced the Report on Lawlessness in Law Enforcement in 1931, written in part by August Vollmer (www.lexisnexis.com/academic/guides/jurisprudence/wickersham.asp). This report concluded that the “‘third degree,’ the willful infliction of pain and suffering on criminal suspects, was ‘widespread’” (www.lexisnexis.com/academic/2upa/Aj/WickershamComm.htm). The commission concluded that “official lawlessness” by police, judges, magistrates, and other players in the criminal justice system was pervasive. The report detailed illegal arrests, bribery, entrapment, witness coercion, evidence fabrication, “third degree” practices, wiretapping, and police brutality.

In the story, the Brothers are compelled to act on behalf of the powerful Jane Kangaroo. In reality, the Commission was compelled to act on behalf of the government. Along with its disturbing findings related to official lawlessness, the commission recommended the continuation of Prohibition, albeit in a modified form. Geisel may have perceived this as the
continuation of “business as usual” in American politics. His family had personally been affected by the passage of Prohibition. He may have perceived governmental influence as directly leading to the demise of the Geisel family brewery. He may have perceived government as a meddling tool of special interest groups.

**Whizzer McQuaff, the black-bottom eagle:**

- Current government, reflexively responding to a vocal and influential minority
- An entity that hides the problems of inequality, discrimination, and oppression; hides truth and justice (out of sight, out of mind)
- The judicial system
- Law as a vehicle for promoting the interests of the powerful and influential

**JoJo, the very small shirker:**

- Each individual; young, small, weak, but still crucial to the survival of the community
- Relatively powerless if alone; invincible when working with others toward common goal

**Conclusion**

This paper describes an exercise for students to enhance their understanding of several theoretical concepts involved in individual human behavior, social organization and behavior, and social processes. This exercise could be useful in multiple fields of study, such as sociology, criminology, and psychology. Its primary purpose is to help students learn how to think critically about theoretical concepts and use those theories to interpret events, behaviors, and situations. Specifically, this exercise is most useful in understanding social dynamics, communication within societies, relations between individuals and those in positions of power and authority, and societal processes and reactions related to lawmaking and lawbreaking.

The animated film, *Horton Hears a Who*, by Dr. Seuss, is used to provide characters and situations that could be interpreted and evaluated from a theoretical standpoint. For example,
students can see how crime control mechanisms are developed and modified as a result of social relations in a small, relatively cohesive society. Spitzer (1979) argues that crime control is developed to “rationalize” social relations, and that criminal sanctions become increasingly intensive, direct, and commonplace. This is clearly illustrated with Horton’s incarceration and near-execution.

The plot is summarized and a listing of characters and situations/events is provided. The exercise is described and its purposes defined. Finally, possible interpretations of characters and objects are provided along with applications of relevant pieces of theory. This serves only as a guide as instructors can tailor the exercise to teach specific lessons (e.g., abuse of power, excessive use of force, the process of lawmaking), focus on specific characters, or highlight specific interactions within the film.

This activity is rewarding to both the students and to the instructor. Students enjoy the animation and are excited to approach theory in a novel way. They also are motivated to engage in this activity because it allows them creativity. Group work enhances this tendency as students will brainstorm interpretations and bounce ideas off one another. It is rewarding for the instructor in that students begin the process of critical thinking and thinking about “abstract” theories with an eye toward application. Instructors can see that students are actually learning how to use the theories rather than just memorizing facts about theories.

Theory is critical for organizing thoughts and ideas about a particular subject. People think about and use theories everyday, although most do not realize it. If students can learn how to critically examine their world, forming theories and testing theories and applying theories, they will be better equipped to respond to problems and issues that arise in their everyday lives. They will have an invaluable tool to organize and analyze their lives and to develop more
effective solutions to difficulties that they may encounter. After all, this is what defines a true education.

References


APPENDIX A

“Horton Hears a Who” (Dr. Seuss) & Social Process/Conflict Theory

As you watch the film, be alert to situations that might reflect some of the ideas of social processes and conflict theory, specifically the ideas of labeling. Think about how conflict theories (including labeling) see the process of law making, and how societal reactions to law breaking stigmatize offenders. Can you detect social oppression, discrimination?

1. What kind of society is Horton’s? Is it an egalitarian society? Stratified socially, economically? Is it capitalistic? What type of political structure does it have? How would you classify it according to Durkheim’s ideas of societies?

2. Pay particular attention to the “labeling” of Horton. Who does Mrs. Jane Kangaroo represent (from the ideas of labeling)? How and why are her beliefs translated into policy (i.e., law)? What is the process of societal acceptance of her beliefs (i.e., Mrs. Tessie Tucanella & friends)? What are the consequences?

3. How is an act that seems relatively harmless, and even heroic, transformed into deviance and eventually “crime?” Why does this happen? How does this happen, according to the theories we have discussed?

4. Who do the “Whos” down in Whoville represent? Similarly, Dr. Whovey & Horton have something in common. What is it? And why do they share this commonality? (Hint: Think about the social dynamics going on—the state of awareness in the societies—the “ignorance is bliss” mentality). How is this pertinent in today’s society?

5. Who do the Wickersham Brothers represent and where do they get their power?

6. Relatedly, what tactics do they use to vilify Horton? (Think about the process of criminalization—making someone out to be criminal based on their actions).

7. What are the Wickersham Brothers doing when they give the clover to the black-bottom Whizzer McQuaff, and ask him to “kindly dispose of this thing”? As a result, what does Horton have to do?

8. Think about the method that Dr. Whovey employs to get his small world recognized. What does that process represent? What did it take for the citizens of Whoville to pull together?

9. Think about the incarceration and near execution of Horton. How did his act come to be sanctioned in such a way? What parallels can you draw between this event in Horton’s world and this event in our world?

10. Who/what does “Jojo,” the very small shirker, represent?
“Wickersham Brothers Song”

Rot, rot, rot, rot.
It’s a plot, plot, plot, plot.

We’re the Wickersham Brothers.
We’re onto your plot.
Pretending you’re talking to Whos who are not.
It’s a deep, dire, evil, political plot.
Pretending you’re talking to Whos who are not.

We’re the Wickersham Brothers.
We’re vigilant spotters.
Hot shot spotters of roters and plotters.
And we’re going to save our sons and our daughters from you.
You’re a dastardly, ghastardly, shnasterdly, schnook,
Trying to brainwash our brains,
With this gobbledy gook.

We know what you’re up to pal.
You’re trying to shatter our morale.
You’re trying to stir up discontent.
And seize the reigns of government.

You’re trying to throw sand in our eyes.
You’re trying to kill free enterprise.
And raise the cost of figs and dates,
And wreck our compound interest rates.

And shut our schools,
And steal our jewels,
And even change our football rules.
Take away our garden tools,
And lock us up in vestibules.
But fortunately, we’re no fools.

We’re the Wickersham Brothers.
We know your type.
And we’re putting a stop to this trickulous tripe.

We’re the Wickersham Brothers
And we’ll squash your plot.
There’ll be no more talking to Whos (no more talking to Whos, no more talking to Whos)
Who are not.

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