

Problems - Numbers

Introduction

Numbers seem to prove something is true. But before you can measure something you have to make all kinds of choices. It's in deciding what and how to measure that numbers become a strategic tool. The unemployment rate, for example, represents people who are over 16, have previously held a job, are available for work, and have looked for work over the last month. This isn't a common sense definition of the number of people out of work. Counting raises questions of inclusion and exclusion and selection.

Key Concepts

Categorization - When counting, you are asserting that one thing matches a description and another thing doesn't. You are dividing a range of difference into two distinct groups and giving them a name. Counting involves minimizing diversity. "Every number is a political claim about 'where to draw the line.'" (p. 167) One example that politicians fight over is how to measure the "middle class." Should a middle-class tax cut apply to be that earn up to \$70,000 or up to \$200,000.

Numbers Promote Action - Measuring something means it's important and subtly suggests that it's worth spending money on, to either improve or to maintain. When you count something, you draw the public's attention to it.

Counting Suggests Regularity - Counting something suggests that it is common, regular, and expected.

Counting Suggests Reality - Counting suggests intangible things such as a "hate crime" or "school performance" suggests that these things have weight and volume, that you can cleanly separate hate crimes from other crimes and measure education as "one year's growth in one year's time."

Counting Creates a Community - Counting is often a strategy to create a alliance, to generate an interest group, and is an essential tool in political mobilization. Being part of a group, can empower people to come forward and take action.

Control - Politicians use numbers alternatively to show that they've made progress on certain problems and that others are beyond their control or not their fault.

Interpretation - Oftentimes the policy fight isn't over the number itself but over the interpretation. For example, is spending a billion dollars on a bomber a waste of money or a sign of our strength, power, and cutting edge technology that deters our enemies. Numbers often come with descriptors such as "dropped substantially" or "rose dramatically" that affect what they mean.

Authority - There is a false sense of precision in numbers that can give politicians and their policies a sense of authority.

Measuring Changes Behavior - People are different than trees and rocks. People react to being counted and change their behavior to fit whatever is considered "the norm." Measuring something as part of an evaluation will inevitably affect behavior. If you determine teacher pay by how well students do on standardized tests, many teachers will start teaching to the test.

Comparison is What's Most Important - Absolute numbers don't tell you anything. Numbers take on meaning in relation to one another. Are things getting better or worse? How does this category compare with that one?

Relationships between Measurer and the Measured - Counters have a job to do and need those they are counting to cooperate. This can give undue leverage to the person being counted. If the Justice Department wants to show a high conviction rate, they will cut deals with convicts in exchange for information that will lead to more prosecutions.

More ambiguity - Numbers can be easily averaged, divided and generally manipulated so that politicians have room to compromise. In calculating the cost of the billion dollar bomber, is that the average cost once the factories are built? Or is the cost of the factories divided up and factored into each plane? Does the government get a bulk discount? How do you calculate depreciation of the plane over time?

Summary

"Numbers are always descriptions of the world, and as descriptions, they are no more real than the visions of poems or paintings...Numbers are real as artifacts, just as poems and paintings are artifacts that people collect, recite, display, and respond to. But the dominance of numbers as a mode of describing society in public policy discussions is only a recent, and perhaps temporary, phenomenon in cultural history--not the result of some underlying reality of numbers." (p. 187)