April 12, 2005: Morning Breakout Session

The breakout session began with an observation given by one of the participants: What happened to the Twentieth Century? He then discussed the ongoing debate between economists and their selective use of purely objective data versus the journalists and observers who rely on less quantifiable data.

This was followed by the parallels of the Industrial, French, and Russian Revolutions where there was a conflict of ideology and decision making.

Then the anecdote was offered of an economist working on a study of juvenile offenders with a large and detailed set of data. As the story goes, when the economist was asked about the outcomes of relationships, satisfaction, etc. of the juveniles, she replies, “I have no idea.” After telling the story, the person summarizes the point by using the Sen quote of how it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong on a topic.

Pushing that line, another participant talks about the broader sense of how things are shaped and labeled. He uses the issue of will in committing crime. The idea of poverty causing crime is a commonly held belief and yet numbers of others in poverty do not commit crime. This pertains to identifying the intangibles. Numbers may describe poverty, but not in all aspects or depths.

With the mention of cause and effect in poverty, a participant talks about causal explanations and what we distinguish as a causal factor versus an antecedent condition on what our goals are. There are errors in perceiving things by not seeing them in proximity to the event itself but to what are the researcher’s goals.

After that point was made, times where researchers obtained feedback information that they did not know what to do with came up. An example given was with a previous study of corruption in institutions. The study found a correlation of leadership and corruption levels. Those who conducted the research simply did not know how to pursue any further analysis of the findings.

Here the framework of internal/external situations was mentioned and how there was something to be said for civic education.

This was continued by another speaking of the relationship between society and activism. This is grouped into social control. He talks about the self deception of people who, because they have an understanding of the events occurring outside their nation, feel they are by no means ignorant or under social control while they have no understanding of what is occurring in the next village over from them. A government who is attempting to convince its citizens of them being well off nationally is the backdrop for this story.

Then the task of developmental ethics comes up directly and asks who the audience for it is. “How can people who are not aware of adjacent poverty to become concerned with the distant poverty of far off places?” It is here, the speaker say, that this question is answered by policy to change their perceptions. It is an issue of poverty and proximity.
Continuing on the previous point, someone mentions how poverty is contemporarily seen as a punishment for laziness. People see it as something that is brought upon themselves through their own actions and not the result of outside forces.

Another supports this by saying it is the same with the perception of the homeless in his own country.

To further build on this, a younger participant tells of his experience being a history teacher in an alternative school for the disadvantaged and poor. “They were all poor,” he said. He then told of asking them why there were poor people. The students responded all the same: laziness. The speaker then emphasized to the present breakout group that the students were all in the school because they were poor and disadvantaged enough to qualify to attend. He summarizes his point by saying that the poor have come to understand themselves as such.

With the issue of self-identity mentioned, a participant says we must see the audience as part of the stage. This refers back the comment made earlier on the conflict of internal and external forces. It is imperative to break down the boundaries separating the two sides and become more sensitive to what is more effective in addressing an institution. By knowing when to use a moral, political, or financial angle with the appropriate audience it is hoped that there will be a greater and more positive feedback achieved in reaching goals. With the changing of angles, the issue of autonomy and plurality is raised and the relative importance of maintaining an identity while dealing with an issue.

A person disputes the use of the stage metaphor by saying it is quaint and too attached to the pre-internet world. Identities now have a fluidity about them and people understand this. Because of this point, it is no longer an issue of changing identities since, if it is not at least expected, it is at least understood by people today.

After this it is brought up that many institutions are not simply monolithic, but have many things occurring within them that involve varying ideas and policies. If you get development ethics to be included in discussions or the actions of these institutions, there is the risk of it being misused. It is hard to know what part of an institution will make use of the developmental ethics and in what application and manner it will be used. This is an example of the argument of advocacy versus facilitation and the ends versus the means.

A participant then wonders about the role of ethnography of a concept and the conditions needed for a concept to become incorporated.

Then it is stated that there is a need for eternal vigilance in seeing that the code of ethics is not misapplied. However, it is important to maintain a balance of both pro and con on an issue to keep a common ground.

The flip side of things is, as one person puts it, is that virtually all organizations have put forward lofty goals in their charters or statements. It then becomes an issue of accountability to hold them to those self-proclaimed goals. He then branches off an uses a reference to the ease of recruiting spies in the Cold War because people in the Soviet Union saw that their system’s dogma was not
working and so they became disenfranchised with it. He then contrasted it with the difficulty of recruiting spies in the Taliban in the nineteen eighties since they believed in the cause. The point of this was to say that people within an institution will realize that their system is either working or it isn’t toward achieving its proclaimed goals. If it isn’t, they will be willing to change.

But then it is pointed out with the previous analogy that those who are associated with a stigmatized group, such as with the alternative school for disadvantaged kids, will simply distance themselves from it.

Institutionalization is touched upon with the experience of one of the participants speaking about his attendance at a conference consisting of mostly senior government officials. He talked of the disconnection between the “predatory” appointees and those below them. The corruption is ever present with the appointed officials and must be side-stepped by those government employees below them who are sincerely working for the advancement for their country.

At the mentions of side-stepping corruption as previously mentioned, another participant remarks on the spiral of corruption downward. She fears that the breakdown of moral values will merely become institutionalized if it is accounted for and not acted upon. If people merely learn to account for it, than our lives will never be rid of it. Banks will simply keep slush funds as terms of normal business to bribe the corrupt and the corruption itself becomes acceptable.

End of Breakout session.