

Starting at Home: Using Local and Current Events to Combat Antisemitism

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Introduction

Antisemitism—prejudice towards or hatred of Jews—is prevalent. Antisemitism can manifest overtly (e.g., swastikas in public spaces), or can occur as a result of other events occurring in a community.

For example, Brooklyn recently faced a measles outbreak. Public officials highlighted low vaccination rates among the hasidic community. As a result, members of the community faced profiling and fear-mongering, reflecting antisemitic tropes of disease spreading.ⁱ

Context

Antisemitism has obvious costs to its victims, but also affects how public services are delivered and utilized. Jewish organizations have to spend more time and money on security measures, which directly impacts their mission-oriented work. Jews who may be trying to access government services may feel shut out or not welcome, and therefore cut off. In public administration classrooms, many of us integrate local and/or current events into our classes in order to show how the material we study has real-life applications. These types of discussions present opportunities to think about direct actions and reactions to blatant expressions of antisemitism. They also show how antisemitism can manifest in seemingly unrelated contexts, and can have unintended consequences on implementation and effectiveness.

Framing the Discussion

Regardless of the specific topic used as an entry point for talking about antisemitism in the classroom, every classroom conversation about antisemitism should begin with basic information about Jews. Jewish literacy—an understanding of Judaism, Jewish history, and the Jewish

community—is a precondition for combating antisemitism. Students in Jewish Studies classes may already have this familiarity, but may need practice using these concepts in general conversations to general audiences.

This discussion should also describe the basic tropes of antisemitism. These tropes traffic in dehumanization (Jews as rats or demons) and stereotypes (Jews as money-grubbing controllers of banks, government, and media). Antisemitism can also manifest in a moral inversion where Jews are perpetrators of hate and violence, not victims.

Depending on the geographic location and course subject, a public administration classroom likely includes Jews, non-Jews with Jewish family or friends, non-Jews with little exposure to Jews, and students who harbor antisemitic views. According to the Anti-Defamation League's 2015 Global 100 survey, 10 percent of American adults have agreed with antisemitic statements. Balancing these demographics, Jewish literacy levels, and attitudes in our classrooms is challenging. Bringing the Self into these discussions can help amplify our message. Engaging in these discussions helps us meet a pedagogical charge set forth by Love, Gaynor, and Blessett of facilitating difficult conversations in our classrooms.ⁱⁱ

As Jews ourselves, we (the authors of this essay) have a unique opportunity to mix our personal experiences with more generalizable content.ⁱⁱⁱ Non-Jews can also bring in the Self by talking about their own vulnerabilities (e.g., these conversations can be hard/outside of comfort zones), admitting mistakes they may have made in the past and/or how they have gone about familiarizing themselves with language that signals allyship.



Borough Park, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Photo by Carol M. Highsmith. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

In-class Assignments: Dissecting a Current Event using Policy Matrices

The steps informing policy matrices can contextualize an event.^{iv} These steps are:

- 1 Define the problem
- 2 Assemble evidence
- 3 Construct alternatives
- 4 Select criteria
- 5 Project outcomes
- 6 Consider tradeoffs

For something that has already happened (e.g., fines levied for vaccine noncompliance), students can focus on the tradeoffs of such a policy, or reframe the problem to walk through all of the steps. For an incident that may lead to further policy actions, they can start with the problem definition itself. We use the examples of the measles outbreak to demonstrate the following these steps.

Definition: Public Health Emergency in New York City - declared by Mayor Bill de Blasio on April 9, 2019

Evidence: 285 cases confirmed in Brooklyn and Queens by April 2019

	Alternative 1: Fines for nonvaccination	Alternative 2: Quarantines
Criteria 1: Efficiency	High - can be administered electronically	Low - raises administrative costs, necessitates human resources (cops, etc.) to be on the ground
Criteria 2: Technical feasibility	High	Low
Criteria 3: Equity	Low - appears high because it is applicable to all nonvaccinated people, but low because in reality it targets specific populations	Low
Projected Outcomes	increased vaccination rates	not necessarily higher vaccination rates, potentially perpetuates the health emergency
Trade-offs	<i>likely to perpetuate stereotypes*</i>	negative impact on economic standing, <i>likely to perpetuate stereotypes*</i>

**only identifiable through a lens of cultural literacy*

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Without understanding the demographic makeup of Brooklyn, and specifically, Williamsburg, the policy alternative of fines appears logical. However, armed with some cultural literacy about Jewish geography and antisemitism, problems become clearer. Declaring an emergency in Williamsburg, without contextualizing the policy solution with cultural sensitivity, may incite connections to antisemitic tropes of Jews as disease carriers. One possible approach may be to frame communication in a way that does not highlight the Orthodox demographic (giving street names as boundaries rather than calling out Williamsburg). Jewish literacy can help public policy makers and administrators recommend and implement solutions that achieve desired health outcomes while also mitigating unintended consequences.

Closing Thoughts

Antisemitism deserves focus as its own issue. We dive into this in more detail in our own field's journal for pedagogy.^v Antisemitism also fits within a theme of Othering, which occurs when, as John A. Powell explains, people winnow the definition of who counts as a full member of society. Islamophobia, sexism, racism, and homophobia are additional examples. In our context, Othering potentially cuts people off from the public services they need. The examples we present here are specific to antisemitism, but offer a lens through which we can help our students engage with many of these challenging topics.

Additional Resources

For Jewish population stats: American Jewish Population Project.^{vi}

For curricula fostering Jewish literacy: Facing History and Ourselves.^{vii}

On social construction: A. Schneider, and H. Ingram "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (1993): 334-47.

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Jamie Levine Daniel, Rachel Fyall, and Jodi Benenson's recently co-authored article, "Talking about Antisemitism in MPA Classrooms and Beyond," appears in the Journal of Public Affairs Education.

i <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/17/new-york-brooklyn-measles-outbreak-orthodox-jewish-antisemitism>.

ii Jeannine M. Love, Tia S. Gaynor, and Brandi Blessett, "Facilitating Difficult Dialogues in the Classroom: A Pedagogical Imperative," *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 38, no. 4 (2016): 227-33. <https://tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/10841806.2016.1237839>.

iii bell hooks. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

iv V. Cooley and A. Pennock, "Teaching Policy Analysis through Animated Films: A Mickey Mouse Assignment?," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48, no. 4 (2015): 601-6.

v Jamie Levine Daniel, Rachel Fyall, and Jodi Benenson, "Talking about Antisemitism in MPA Classrooms and Beyond," *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (2019): 1-23.

vi <https://ajpp.brandeis.edu/publications.php#section3>.

vii <https://www.facinghistory.org/>.