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Commentary and Debate

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THE VAGARIES OF THE VIGNETTE WORLD: A COMMENT ON ALVES AND ROSSI

As a means of assessing the normative regulation of social stratification, the technique of using "fairness judgments" of computer-contrived vignettes has much to recommend it; Alves and Rossi ("Who Should Get What? Fairness Judgments of the Distribution of Earnings," AJS 84 [November 1978]: 541-64) are to be commended. Possessed of a clever and provocative method, Rossi and his associates show signs of running hard; they will not get far, however, for they are running on feet of clay.

In view of difficulties encountered by social scientists in trying to account for variance in income—we typically account for 15%-20%—it is of the utmost importance that we try to determine whether normative regulation of income exists in this (or any) society generally, or whether it tends to be confined to special circumstances, for example, specific bureaucratic settings. The Alves and Rossi concept of normative judgment, however, is misinformed and cannot properly be used to test for the existence of normative regulation as conventionally understood. Respondents were asked to judge the fairness of incomes associated with clusters of background characteristics—education, occupation, and so forth—and presented to respondents by means of computer-generated vignettes. The vignette program, however, was deliberately designed to generate unrealistic results: dis-

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tributions of background characteristics were generally "rectangular" rather than bell shaped, and the correlations among the characteristics were generally close to zero. Inevitably, then, a substantial proportion of vignettes involved combinations of socioeconomic characteristics that do not appear in the real world, and respondents may have been sophisticated enough to recognize functional untenabilities and to classify such vignettes as "overpaid" or "underpaid" largely on the basis of size of income alone. Not surprisingly, gross earnings overshadowed all other variables as a factor influencing fairness judgments.

Conventional definitions of normative regulation recognize the important role of social deviance in providing conforming members of society with a point of reference. When Durkheim argued that crime is "normal," he had essentially two points in mind: first, that any society that attempted to eliminate crime would have to establish such a repressive system of social control that it would probably disintegrate; second, that conformity is maintained largely through the repeated ritual of sanctioning deviants. What Alves and Rossi must demonstrate is that there are existing, and therefore realistic, combinations of socioeconomic characteristics regarded as violating the alleged norms of "merit" and "need," that sanctions are indeed called forth by such instances, and so forth. Given the unreality of many Alves-Rossi vignettes, it is entirely possible that respondents did not vary their fairness judgments at all among those vignettes that correspond roughly with American reality. If this were the case it would tend to confirm my suspicion that, as far as income is concerned, America is Reno writ large. (I call it Reno, Durkheim calls it anomie—that is, normlessness—and Marx would probably call it a result of the immense surplus product of the final stages of capitalism.) Alves and Rossi would do well to abandon their vignette program and to have their computer select vignettes from, say, the NORC General Social Survey.

As an analogy, we could probably get Americans to come out for premarital chastity by having them make selections among vignettes in which the alternatives to chastity were buggery and bestiality.

Alves and Rossi argue that $R^2$ for the regression of fairness judgments on income and background characteristics is an indicator of degree of "consensus" around their alleged normative structure. Obtained values of $R^2$ hover around .50, ranging as high as .62 and as low as .40. Aside from the fact that these coefficients may reflect primarily the ability of respondents to distinguish between realistic and unrealistic vignettes, they tend to be spuriously high for several reasons: first, the arbitrarily low correlations among background traits artificially enhance the ability of each variable to account for variance; second, the vignettes were extraordinarily parsimonious despite the authors' finding that small increments in complexity—such as changing from single persons to married couples—would substantial-
ly reduce explained variance; third, each respondent judged 50 vignettes, and consistency among these judgments, while raising $R^2$, may reflect merely a mental set toward consistency and not an application of subjectively held "norms"; fourth, the sample itself is suspect: a "national probability sample" cannot set "sex quotas within households" and remain a probability sample. (Because of this sampling limitation, the sex variable among "respondent characteristics" in tables 6 and 7 should probably not have been used at all.)

Another fundamental weakness of this article is its erroneous conception of merit and need theories. These theories are inherently relativistic and comparative, and in a multiple regression format they necessitate the use of interaction terms. Yet Alves and Rossi employ only a single interactive term—earnings-occupation interaction—which, though not clearly defined (p. 548), has little impact on the fairness judgments. I gather that, mathematically, this term is a product of its components, and in contriving such a term the authors make it clear that they have not thought adequately about the conceptualization of merit and need. Interaction terms involving products are appropriate for "complementarity" theories. For instance, if academicians are rewarded in part for their research productivity, in part for their teaching skill, and in part for maintaining a balance between these two roles (as a means of taking advantage of whatever complementarity may exist between them), a multiplicative interaction term might well account for much of the variance in, say, salaries. Some hypotheses—for example, those drawing a nexus between status crystallization and suicidal behavior or other forms of personal disorganization—seem to require an unsigned or absolute difference between pairs of status components. Finally, the status-discrepancy literature, which has dealt in part with distributive justice (with generally negative results), tends to operationalize "investment-reward" aspects of distributive justice by taking the signed difference between an investment (e.g., education) and a reward (e.g., occupational prestige) (see Geschwender 1967). Alves and Rossi need to invoke such terms if their research is to have anything to do with distributive-justice issues such as merit and need, being ever mindful of the fact that, since signed differences are linear transformations of their components, there are identification problems; these are not, however, insuperable (Hodge 1970; Hope 1975).

Given these limitations, it is not surprising that gross earnings per se turn out to be the major explanatory factor for variations in fairness judgments. The coefficients associated with education and occupational prestige, with income held constant, are not an adequate indicator of the impact of merit and need on fairness judgments. They merely tell us that fairness judgments tend to change ever so slightly across educational or occupational categories with income held constant, and we cannot tell
whether these changes are associated with education or occupational prestige per se or with the discrepancy between these two measures and income.

Finally, the authors have made no serious effort to operationalize need. Since “full-family households” consisted of married couples, and since 90% of all vignettes involved full-family households, only 10% of all vignettes—those for “one-person households”—treated marital status as a variable. Among the latter vignettes, a certain proportion were designated “previously married.” For obvious reasons, this designation cannot be taken as a measure of need, or even as a rough indicator. Similarly for number of children: the needs of children vary tremendously by age, and in the case of one-person households headed by previously married persons, the vignettes apparently do not clarify the matter of custody. “Need” is a complex, multidimensional concept involving established expectations, family composition and structure, accumulated responsibilities, health, and so forth; it cannot be treated cavalierly.

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References


Rejoinder to Faia

Michael Faia’s comments are difficult to understand completely; they stem mainly from either misreading our article or misunderstanding the rationale behind the approach used. Perhaps the most serious misunderstanding arises over the zero correlations built into the vignettes by design. Of course the “vignette world” does not mirror the “real world”; it was designed that way in order to clarify the judgment principles employed. In the real world, the correlation, say, between occupation and income is certainly nonzero and perhaps as high as +.5, a fact that makes it difficult to separate the effects of income from those of occupation in any analysis of the joint distribution of income, occupation, and any third variable. Not so in the vignette world, where the estimates of income and educational effects are truly net, unaffected by the covariance between education and income.

It should also be pointed out that all of the vignette “anomalies” do