

Are We Making a Difference?

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Abstract

Howard Kunreuther's career has been dedicated to producing economic research and remedies capable of helping people to manage the risks in their lives. That commitment led Howard to uncommon research and uncommon collaborators. He has conducted field survey, qualitative interviews, and experiments, in addition to more familiar economic modeling and theorizing – in order to triangulate on complex problems. He has spent time with insurance salespeople, regulators, and executives – in order to be sure that he understands the problems fully. He has written papers satisfying the editorial standards of journals in psychology, disaster research, and risk analysis – in order to put the work in front of the most relevant audiences. He has convened working groups to develop products that no one had seen before. He has provided missing pieces to similarly spirited work that others undertook, myself included.

How can we tell how well this great experiment is working? We've had a good time intellectually and made some great friends. Universities have thought enough of the exercise to indulge us with positions and resources. We get people to attend our workshops and contribute to our journals. We even get invited to opine, here and there. These experiences, in themselves, should constitute satisfying careers. However, unlike Marx's philosophers, we want to change the world, not just explain it. Yet, we are not consultants or entrepreneurs, positioned to see our grand ideas through to practical realization. So, it is hard to tell what impact we have had. The fact that others cite us is no guarantee of success. Perhaps they were just shopping around, looking for academics' whose conclusions support their interests. The fact that we are ignored need not mean that we are irrelevant. Perhaps our work is politically inconvenient, if only because someone has a line of business that our innovation would replace.

The paper will consider these issues in the domains of risk and uncertainty to which Howard has devoted his career. It will treat them in general terms, inspired by Howard's strategies, but without presuming to know or judge them. Perhaps it will help some in achieving greater impact – or having more realistic expectations.