The Diffusion of an Unsuccessful Innovation

BY SARAH A. SOULE

ABSTRACT: It is often assumed that only successful or effective innovations diffuse. This article examines the diffusion of an unsuccessful protest tactic used during the student divestment movement: the shantytown. Two factors led student activists to adopt it. The first factor was the media construction of the tactic as successful. The second factor was how this tactic fit with an existing student tactical repertoire and resonated with students’ perceptions of South Africa. These factors led students to adopt it without attaining information about its effectiveness at actually forcing university divestment.

Sarah A. Soule is currently an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She has published several articles on diffusion in the American Journal of Sociology; Social Forces; and the Annual Review of Sociology.
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, student activists throughout the United States organized with the goal of forcing their colleges and universities to sell off their South Africa–related stocks and bonds. While concerns about the human rights violations under apartheid had been raised on U.S. campuses since the early 1960s, it was not until the later period that the issue of university divestment was raised by the students. What Americans probably remember most about the student divestment movement were the shanties or shantytowns that graced campuses across the nation in the mid-1980s—makeshift shacks, constructed of miscellaneous building materials such as wood, plastic, cardboard, tarpaper, and metal. The stated goal of the shanties was to force university and college administrations to divest of their South Africa–related securities. Student activists built and lived in shanties that served as a reminder to their administrations that students, or at least some students, strongly approved of a divestment strategy.

The first shantytown was built at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in the spring of 1985. Within 18 months, the tactic had spread to numerous other colleges and universities. At the same time that the shantytowns were springing up on campuses across the United States, the nation watched as colleges and universities, apparently swayed by the new protest tactic, announced plans to divest of their South Africa–related securities. In 1985 and 1986 alone, over 70 universities and colleges agreed to divest (Soule 1995). The diffusion of this new tactic, coupled with a rash of university divestment, led the media and activists alike to conclude that the shantytown protest tactic was an effective means of forcing university divestment. However, a closer look at the divestment movement shows that, in fact, the tactic was not successful. Colleges and universities that had shantytowns actually had slower rates of divestment than those that did not have them (Soule 1995).

This is quite a puzzle. Research on the diffusion of social processes often assumes that only effective or successful innovations will diffuse to potential adopters. Yet, in the case of the shanty, an ineffective tactic diffused. In the broader diffusion literature, scholars have noted a number of other cases in which ineffective innovations diffused, yet only recently have we begun to ask why or how this happens (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1998). Common sense and intuition tell us that ineffective innovations should not be adopted and should certainly not diffuse; however, we see this repeatedly happen.

The goal of this article is to describe how an ineffective innovation was adopted and diffused across a population. I argue that two factors led to the diffusion of this ineffective tactical innovation. The first factor was the compatibility of the shantytown tactic with the worldview of the student activists. The tactic deeply resonated with the experiences and perceptions of the student activists. The tactic also built on an existing tactical repertoire in student activism. The second factor in the
adoption of this tactic was its social construction as successful or effective. Media reports focusing on the divestment movement implicitly or explicitly linked the shantytowns to the wave of college and university divestment. Student activists interviewed by the media often made the same connection. Both the compatibility and social construction of the shantytown tactic caused potential adopters to use it without carefully examining whether it would actually cause their university to divest.

In this article, I argue that student activists monitored what students on other campuses were doing and strategically imitated the shantytown tactic in an effort to force divestment. Strategic imitation of this sort led to the diffusion of the shanties across campuses. Because the tactic was believed to be successful and because it was so compatible with students’ experiences, it rapidly spread across college campuses (Soule 1995, 1997). Thus the diffusion of this innovation may not be explained by its effectiveness.

THE STUDENT DIVESTMENT MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The South African system of apartheid was put in place in 1948. Apartheid refers to state-sanctioned segregation of an entire population according to skin color. The racial laws under apartheid controlled all aspects of South African citizens’ lives (Soule 1995). The system of apartheid made it possible for the white minority to completely dominate and subjugate the black majority. By controlling the land, the governing body, the media, and access to economic resources, white South Africans were able to maintain apartheid for over four decades (Soule 1995).

In the 1970s and 1980s, college campuses in the United States came alive with student activism aimed at forcing university divestment from South Africa. The student divestment movement, however, had its origins in earlier student antiapartheid activism (Soule 1995). Student antiapartheid activism began after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, in which 69 peaceful black protesters were slain by South African police. This event was followed by the U.N. African-Asian bloc boycott of South Africa that helped fuel the fires on campuses in the United States (Jackson 1992). Following these events, the immorality of South African apartheid concerned activists in the United States, but the level of this concern fluctuated in the 1960s and 1970s, as indicated by the cyclical nature of the level of student antiapartheid activism (Soule 1995; Jackson 1992; Vellela 1988).

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, students in the United States began to protest corporate involvement in South Africa. In the late 1970s and 1980s, students redefined their goals from the very broad goal of ending apartheid and corporate investment in South Africa, to the very specific goal of divestment by their own universities. In 1976 and 1977, a group called Catalyst began sponsoring speakers on
divestment at colleges and universities. The speakers brought to the attention of students the fact that college portfolios routinely held stock in companies entrenched in South Africa, a fact that galvanized support among students (Vellela 1988). The first college to divest was Hampshire College, after an organized student movement on that campus. Within a year, students at the University of Kansas were actively involved in a campaign to force university divestment. By 1982, student activists at Columbia and many other universities were pushing for divestment with frequent student protests (Soule 1995). In short, divestment had become “The Big Issue” on college campuses (Williams et al. 1985).

What most Americans will remember about this era of student protest are the shantytowns or shanties that appeared on campuses across the country. From the University of California at Los Angeles to Middlebury College, from the University of Tennessee to New York University, the shantytown tactic spread like wildfire (Soule 1995, 1997). At many universities, students had been fighting for divestment for years but did not mobilize large support until the shantytowns were built (Weiner 1986). Student activists monitored other campuses for cues on what to do to force their universities to divest. The monitoring of activists by others in different locations coupled with the imitation of tactics led to the diffusion of the shantytown tactic. Shanties became a powerful motivating force and tactic on campuses across the country.\(^4\)

**THE DIFFUSION OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL INNOVATION**

In their recent review of the diffusion literature, Strang and Soule (1998) suggest that there is a bias in research on diffusion: researchers pay attention solely to items that diffuse but not to those that fail to do so. They suggest that the examination of innovations that do not diffuse may give scholars a better understanding of those that do. I wish to suggest here that, in addition to paying careful attention to nondiffusing innovations, we need to examine unsuccessful or ineffective innovations that do diffuse.

Although contrary to common sense, it is not uncommon for unsuccessful innovations to diffuse. In the medical literature, for instance, there are numerous examples of ineffective innovations that diffused. Elective hysterectomies of women past childbearing age, tonsillectomies, bleeding as a treatment for disease (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1998), and a “dubious” treatment for genital herpes (Lipton and Hershaft 1985) have all diffused across communities of physicians who adopted them based not on knowledge of the procedure itself, but on the adoption of them by other physicians.

Outside of the medical literature, there are numerous other examples of the diffusion of ineffective innovations. A recent example of an ineffective innovation that diffused is the drug prevention program known as D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). Project D.A.R.E., an educational program designed to keep
children from using drugs, diffused across U.S. cities in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Rogers 1995). Research, however, has shown that D.A.R.E.’s actual effectiveness at preventing drug use has been rather small (Ennett et al. 1994).

It is clear from these examples that the diffusion of ineffective innovations is not uncommon. Often an innovation diffuses before actors are able to obtain complete information about it and its effectiveness. However, at other times, actors, out of necessity or when faced with a great deal of uncertainty, rely on others’ actions instead of on complete information (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Social or observational learning is the process by which information is gathered about a particular decision through the observation of others’ actions. As actors observe other actors, they often imitate their behavior, especially when it involves difficult decisions. This is not surprising and may in fact be a product of evolution, as individuals take advantage of information gathered by others as a means of survival (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1998).

In the case of the shantytown, it seems clear that potential activists were indeed imitating other activists in an effort to attain their goal of university divestment. Because the tactic was so compatible with students’ experiences and perceptions and because the tactic was constructed as successful by the media, activists were less likely to fully assess the effectiveness of the tactic. Instead, they adopted the tactic strategically without examining whether or not it actually caused divestment at other universities, and the tactic thereby diffused across the country.

How could this have happened? I argue that, in the case of the shantytown, two factors led students to adopt the tactic without obtaining full information about its effectiveness. First, the tactic was extremely compatible with students’ perceptions of the situation of South African blacks and with students’ existing tactical repertoire. Second, the tactic was socially constructed as successful, and students relied on this construction without examining the tactic’s effectiveness carefully. The following two sections describe each of these two factors in more depth.

The compatibility of the shantytown and imitation

Rogers (1995) and Strang and Soule (1998) encourage diffusion researchers not to ignore the various characteristics or attributes of innovations, as these often help explain why an innovation, successful or unsuccessful, diffuses. The diffusion literature indicates that one of the most striking properties of innovations that diffuse is that they resonate with the life experiences of potential adopters (Rogers 1995). In other words, often an innovation is framed in such a way as to make sense to a potential adopter. Rogers calls this “compatibility,” by which he means the “degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” (224). Somehow, the innovation, to be adopted, must fit with the
existing belief system and experiences of potential adopters.

Examples of compatibility of innovations abound in the literature. A classic example is Hawley’s study (1946) of why the Eastern Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona converted rather easily to Catholicism, while the Western Pueblos refused to convert. Hawley argues that Catholicism was compatible with the Eastern Pueblo patrilineal, father-oriented family structure, while it was incompatible with the Western Pueblo mother-centered, matrilineal belief system. Because the innovation (Catholicism) did not resonate with the Western Pueblo Indians’ belief system, it was not adopted.

Another example of compatibility is the diffusion of cellular telephones. According to Rogers (1995), cellular telephones are compatible with existing, standard telephones, thus cellular telephone users can communicate with standard telephone users. Additionally, using a cellular telephone does not require learning any new skills. Thus the adoption of cellular telephones has been rapid, in large part, because the technology is compatible with people’s experiences.

In these two examples, the innovations could both be classified as successful, or at least partially so. But what about the shantytown, an innovation that diffused but was not successful at attaining its stated goal of divestment? By carefully examining the properties of the innovation and especially its compatibility with the experiences of potential adopters, one is better able to understand how an unsuccessful innovation can diffuse. In the case of the shantytown, it is clear that the tactic was compatible on at least two dimensions. First, it was compatible with the existing student tactical repertoire, and, second, it was compatible with student beliefs about South Africa under apartheid.

The shantytown tactic evolved from the familiar tactic of the sit-in. Sit-ins had been used on campuses in the U.S. since the civil rights movement, and it is apparent from activist and newspaper accounts that the shantytown evolved from this common tactic. This evolution began at Columbia University in March 1985, when students met to call for divestment of South Africa–related stocks and bonds (Vellela 1988). Much to their surprise, Hamilton Hall, the building in which the meeting was scheduled to take place, was too small to accommodate the growing number of students. Determined not to discourage activism, the leaders turned this meeting into a “sit-out,” where at least 300 students sat outside and conducted a peaceful protest meeting on the steps of the building. The protest scene has been described as “covered with sitting, sprawling, hunkering students, maybe two hundred of them, debating, laughing, reading, conferring and establishing a presence. Armchairs and sofas dragged out from a near-by dormitory offered some comfort. Tarpaulins were rigged up to provide shelter; blankets covered some who slept” (24). The blockade lasted almost two weeks, culminating in a speech by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, which drew 5000 more people
The Columbia event “captured the imagination of students across the country, sparking a sense of urgency, determination, and possibility” (Adams 1985, 2).

Following the sit-out, the tactic began to evolve further. Princeton activists staged a so-called camp-out, which was quite similar to the Columbia event and was followed by camp-outs at the University of California at Santa Cruz and the University of Iowa (Vellela 1988; Soule 1995). Finally, students at Harvard University held a sleep-in at the library (Vellela 1988). The sit-out, camp-outs, and sleep-in marked the beginning of the evolution of the shantytown, the first instance of which appeared in the spring of 1985 at Cornell University. This evolution is consequential as it shows that the shantytown tactic developed from, and meshed nicely with, the existing student repertoire.

In addition to being compatible with the existing tactical repertoire of students, the shantytown resonated with students’ understanding of South Africa. Symbolic of the living conditions of black South Africans, the shantytowns provided a graphic representation of ghetto life in that country (Williams et al. 1985; Rudavsky 1986; Sirohi 1989). An activist at the University of North Carolina said that the shanties symbolized “the viciousness of apartheid and the oppression of South Africa’s blacks” (Weiner 1986, 337). A student activist remarked to a Newsweek reporter that shanties “make a statement to the University of Washington students that this is what living conditions are like in South Africa for blacks and people of color” (Williams et al. 1985, 61). Constructed from cardboard, tarpaper, newspaper, scraps of wood, and tin, and emblazoned with antiapartheid and pro-divestment slogans, the shanties were difficult to overlook on college campuses and often were considered to be mock South African villages. Shanties were often named after notable individuals in South Africa; the names included Biko Hall, Winnie Mandela City, Biko Memorial Hall, and Mandela Hall. An activist, Joshua Nessen, remarked that the shanties “symbolized the lives and conditions of black South Africa” (Vellela 1988, 34), and Loeb (1994) argues that they were so effective because they “made distant wounds immediate and salient” to ordinary students (174).

It should also be noted that the repressive response that many of the shantytown protests encountered seemed to underscore the symbolic nature of this tactic. At Yale, an alumnus burned down the shantytown; at Johns Hopkins, a shanty was firebombed; and, at Dartmouth, the Committee to Beautify the Green took sledgehammers to the shantytown. These extra-institutional attempts to disrupt the divestment movement were not the only form of repression; the shanties were met with official response as well. At the University of Wisconsin, the University of California at Berkeley, Cornell, and numerous other campuses, the administration forcibly dismantled the shantytowns. Repression of both types, the extra-institutional
and institutional, fed the flames of the divestment movement, as the activists were able to draw striking parallels between the repression of the U.S. and South African demonstrations (Soule 1995). In essence, then, the shantytowns and the repression they engendered presented students with a symbolic representation of the human rights violations in South Africa under apartheid.

Thus the shantytown tactic was compatible with students’ experiences on at least two different dimensions: the existing student tactical repertoire and student perceptions of South Africa and apartheid. The evolution of the shantytown from the initial sit-out at Columbia to the first shanty at Cornell was consequential to the diffusion of a protest tactic. The tactic had its roots in the existing student repertoire but evolved into an innovative tactic that resonated with the conditions in South Africa, thus serving as an ugly reminder of the racial situation in South Africa.

The social construction of the shantytown and imitation

But on top of the compatibility of the tactic with the students’ tactical repertoire and their understanding of South Africa, potential adopters of the shantytown received and believed the message from the media that the tactic was successful at forcing divestment. Loeb (1994) makes the explicit link between protest shanties and some form of divestment at 150 schools. Student activists believed that divestment was an “obtainable goal” and that the shantytown tactic was a good way to encourage changes in university policy (Williams et al. 1985, 62). An article in the Harvard Crimson reported that nearly 60 percent of 500 randomly selected Harvard students believed that this tactic of protest was an effective mechanism to force university divestment (Kramnick 1985). In the words of activist Eric Arnesen, “The shanties worked” (Weiner 1986, 338).

Perhaps this was a safe assumption to make; everywhere students looked, the link between protest and divestment was made. In a New York Times article, the link between activism and success was made when the author remarked that protests and the construction of shanties were increasing at colleges and universities because the activists were “buoyed by the success” of other campus divestment movements (Williams 1986). This article went on to link divestment at “dozens of colleges” to the student divestment movement and shantytowns. The divestment strategies of the University of Wyoming, Bryn Mawr College, and Bucknell University were all linked to shantytowns at these institutions in a media report on the efficacy of shantytowns (Weiner 1986).

It is important to note that the decision to divest took time and usually did not immediately follow the construction of a shantytown. Thus, student activists, searching for a way to force their universities to divest, did not have access to perfect or complete information on the
effectiveness of the shantytown tactic. In this situation, the social construction of the shantytown as successful served as an indicator (albeit an imperfect one) that the tactic worked.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have asked how it happened that an ineffective protest tactic diffused so rapidly across college campuses in the United States. I have argued that, in the case of the shantytown, the answer lies in the tactic’s being framed by activists and by the media as successful and in how the tactic resonated with student perceptions and experiences. These factors may have led students to adopt a tactic that, in fact, was not especially effective at achieving their ultimate goal of divestment.

This article raises some interesting questions that diffusion researchers might consider. The first has to do with the generalizability of a protest tactic to other innovations. While I have made the case that the ineffective shanty diffused because of its symbolic power and because it was perceived as successful, it remains to be seen if this is generally true for other unsuccessful innovations that diffuse. In the case of the shantytown, the success or failure of the innovation would not directly affect the student activists; whether or not the university divested would probably not drastically change the students’ lives. In the case of many other innovations, the adoption decision more directly affects the potential adopters. In these situations, the assessment of the outcome of the innovation is arguably more critical. Thus the diffusion of an ineffective innovation to potential adopters who would be directly affected, perhaps even harmed, by its failure is a different issue altogether—one that deserves attention by diffusion researchers.

A second issue that arises in this article involves potential differences between the direct and the indirect effects of an innovation. As noted earlier, Soule (1995, forthcoming) has found no evidence for the claim that the presence of a shanty at a university increased the likelihood of the university’s divesting. However, this analysis did not examine the broader, further-reaching effects of the shantytowns. Colleges and universities do not exist in a vacuum, and the university decision makers in the 1970s and 1980s were well aware of the rising levels of student activism and the spread of the shantytown throughout the country. Thus the general divestment movement, coupled with the rash of shantytowns in the United States, may have had indirect effects on a university’s divestment decision, regardless of the presence or absence of a shantytown on its campus.

Related to this is the issue of unintended consequences of an innovation. In addition to the primary effect of an innovation, there are often many other outcomes. Diffusion researchers should not ignore these secondary outcomes. Although the shanties’ explicitly stated goal was to
force university divestment, the tactic had other consequences as well. As should be clear from this article, the tactic mobilized students and galvanized support for the divestment issue. It also drew a great deal of media attention to the cause, troubled administrations, and angered antidivestment students. Thus, although the shanties did not lead to divestment, they certainly engendered other, perhaps unintended, outcomes—many of which, it could be argued, were positive for the overall divestment movement.

Another question that this article generates concerns the success of innovations. Diffusion researchers often assume that innovations are successful because, if they are not, they are termed “mistakes” (Dornblaser, Lin, and Van de Ven 1989). However, the determination of the success of an innovation is not always easy and often occurs after the fact. This is especially true in cases (like that of the shanty) where the outcome of the innovation does not immediately follow the introduction of the innovation. In such cases, potential adopters may have only notions of perceived success on which to base their adoption decision. Thus, in such cases, it is not surprising that an ineffective innovation diffuses as adopters, out of necessity, act on incomplete information.

By carefully examining the shantytown tactic, I have shown that it diffused because of its iconographic immediacy and symbolic power, not because of its effectiveness at forcing divestment. I have used this illustrative case to suggest future directions for diffusion research. In particular, scholars should pay attention to innovations and how their characteristics affect the diffusion process. It is only through analyses of all components of the diffusion process (transmitters, adopters, innovations, and diffusion channels) that we will have a complete understanding of how and why innovations, both successful and unsuccessful, diffuse.

Notes
2. Jackson (1992) also finds very little support for the hypothesis that all forms of divestment activism (that is, not just shantytowns) led to university divestment.
4. The shanty tactic diffused between colleges and universities of the same type (research, liberal arts, and so forth) and with similar prestige and endowment levels (Soule 1995, 1997).
5. In most cases, the process of university divestment took time. Activists could not necessarily wait to see if a shantytown at a particular university was followed by an announcement of divestment. Activists were, in a sense, operating in an environment of imperfect information, a situation that made them more susceptible to the claims made by the media that the shantytown was an effective means of forcing divestment.
6. While it has been shown that the presence of a shantytown at a university actually decreased the rate of divestment (Soule 1995, 1997), the tactic undoubtedly had other important consequences. I highlight some of these in the final section of this article.
7. Students at Princeton also built a teach-in center, which was modeled after Cornell's
shanty and which was called “Princetown, South Africa” (Adams 1985).

8. This, of course, is usually the case with social movements; there are often many intended and unintended consequences. For a recent review of the literature on outcomes or consequences of social movements, see Giugni 1998.

References
———. Forthcoming. Divestment by Colleges and Universities in the United States: Institutional Pressures Toward Isomorphism. In Bending the