

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DOCUDRAMA



ACT I, SCENE I

Narrator:

- Welcome to our *Socio-Economic Docu-Drama* in which we follow a “three-days-in-the-life” drama of 12-year-old Minnie Smith and her mother, Dana, as they navigate challenges that middle- and upper-income people rarely encounter.
- These challenges can conspire to limit people’s upward economic mobility – their ability to move into higher income brackets.
- This drama’s scenes are based on real people’s experiences as reported in a variety of sources, including interviews with experts in the field, news reports, and the volunteer experiences of SUNY Cortland students, faculty, and staff.
- As this role-play unfolds, use your Playbill to record
 - Low-income families’ challenges,
 - Their strengths, and
 - Situations and conditions that surprise you.
- A Narrator will provide background information on each scene.
- After each scene, we will share the observations and questions that we write on our Playbills.

- In this drama, Dana Smith works during the day; her husband works two jobs, including one in the evenings.

- Although this schedule keeps Dana and her husband from seeing each other, it does let them have an adult at home with their 12-year-old daughter, Minnie.
- Act One, Scene One, takes place at the end of a class meeting in which Minnie is a student. Be alert to factors that could hurt Minnie's ability to learn.

Teacher (Mr./Mrs. G): Okay, tomorrow we start a new lesson: Waterfalls. Let's start thinking about them. Minnie, what it's like to be near a waterfall? What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel?

Minnie: I don't know, Mrs. G, I've never seen one.

Teacher: You've never seen a waterfall??

Minnie: No, never.

Teacher: How 'bout in the movies?

Minnie: I guess, but I don't remember what they look like. Or sound like.

Teacher: [*Sarcastically*:] Great. Well, that about uses-up our time. Class, remember two things – I need your \$5 for our Halloween Party by tomorrow, and remind your parents that tonight we have our parent/teacher conferences.

Minnie, that means your parents, too.

[*End of Act 1, Scene 1.*]



ACT I, SCENE 2

Narrator:

- Together, Dana Smith and her husband earn almost \$33,000/year.
- Over the last 20 years, incomes for wealthy people in the 35- to 55-year-old age bracket rose 20%, but for poor people in that age group, income *fell* 20%.

- In 2012, 22% of US children (one in five) under the age of six lived in poverty.
- The Federal poverty level for a family of three is \$19,790/year or less, but...
- A "living wage" for a New York City family of three is \$43,500/year.

- In Scene Two, Dana greets Minnie at home. As they talk, catch comments that suggest direct and indirect challenges to Minnie's education and, therefore, to her upward economic mobility.

Dana: Hi, Sweetheart; how was your day? [*Light-up a cigarette.*]

Minnie: It was okay. Mom, can I have \$5?

Dana: For what?

Minnie: Our school Halloween party. I need to hand it in tomorrow.

Dana: I don't know, Baby. Rent's due soon. I'll tell you in the morning. Right now, why not do your homework?

Minnie: 'Kay. Would you help me with this stuff? I did try to do it in study-hall, but I couldn't get it. Math.

Dana: Lemme see. Yeah. No. Holy... Wow, maybe Daddy can help you with it. What else do you have?

Minnie: That's it. That's all I have. Honest. 'Cept I'm supposed to tell you that you have your parent/teacher conference tonight. Mrs. G. really wants to talk with you.

Dana: *Does she, now?* When we went last year, one of your teachers about ripped my face off because I brought you with me because we had no one to baby-sit— Like tonight. So if she wants to talk, I guess she'll have to call me.

Minnie: Can I go work on the harmonicas that I'm making? I'm almost done with the next two. And then can I watch TV? I love our big new flat-screen!

[End of Act 1, Scene 2.]



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Narrator:

- Low-wage workers often work without benefits such as paid days-off, yet there is heavy competition for their jobs, so workers must be very reliable.
- Act Two, Scene One, opens on the following morning. Pay attention to health-related issues that can hurt Minnie's education and earning potential as an adult.

Dana: Minnie, are you ready for school? As soon as you leave, I'll leave for work.

Minnie: I'm not feeling well – *again*. I can't breathe and I just threw-up.

Dana: Minnie, I don't want to miss a day's pay, and I definitely don't want to get *fired* because I miss a day!

Minnie: Mom, I'm really *not* feeling well.

Dana:

- Okay, we'll go to the hospital. I'll call work and tell them that I can't be there.
- [*"Dial" the call with your phone, wait a moment, then put the phone down.*]
- Minnie, I just tried calling work, but the phone's minutes are all used-up for this month. Did you make any calls?

Minnie: Yes.

Dana: [*Shake your head and light-up a cigarette.*]

Narrator: Dana and Minnie take busses to the hospital's urgent-care facility.

[End of Act 2, Scene 1.]



ACT 2, SCENE 2

Narrator.

- A regular part of life in poor families is long-term stress.
 - Parents sometimes try to deal with stress by using alcohol and cigarettes. Second-hand smoke is a kind of in-house toxin.
 - Smoking is more likely in low-income, lower-education families.
 - In children, stress can cause shorter attention spans, memory problems, and weakened thinking skills, as well as an impaired immune system hypertension, and obesity.
- Children in low-income families are 1.6 times more likely to be obese than their middle- and upper-income peers.
- Children who are overweight or obese live with a higher risk of serious conditions and illnesses when they become adults; those conditions include diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and certain cancers.
- Act 2, Scene 2, opens at a hospital's Urgent Care Center. Note health-related issues that could hurt Minnie's economic mobility.

Dr. Evans: Hello, Mrs. Smith, Minnie. I'm Dr. Evans. Minnie, how long have you had this breathing problem?

Minnie: Since at least last winter. Probably longer. It's not as bad in the summer,

when I'm outside more, or when I'm at a friend's house. Or at school.

Dr. Evans: Mrs. Smith, what have you done to help Minnie's breathing?

Dana: My husband and I thought that Minnie would get over it, that it was only a small problem, but it's been getting worse, so that's why we're at the hospital.

Dr. Evans: Hmm. Okay. Well, Minnie has Asthma. She's *not* going to get over it unless you and Mr. Smith stop smoking in the house. I smell cigarette smoke. How many packs a week do you and your husband smoke?

Dana: We smoke maybe a pack every couple of days. Each of us. 'Cause we're stressed. We both work, but putting food on the table is still tough. Seems like every other day we're getting a late notice on rent or on electric. [*Look at Millie.*] Or the phone card runs out.

Dr. Evans: Mrs. Smith, I do understand using cigarettes or beer to beat the stress, but you know you're only making things worse. Minnie's asthma is caused – or at least made worse – by second-hand smoke. You need to stop smoking in the house. Call the NYS Quit-line to find ways to quit. If you want, I'll write you and Mr. Smith prescriptions for nicotine patches.

Dana: Okay, we'll do that – with the patch. Thanks. But what about the stress. I'm – we're both – already losing sleep.

Dr. Evans: I'll refer you to a mental health counselor.

Minnie: Does that mean that mom and dad will stop smoking?

Dr. Evans: I hope so, but it might take a while because there's a *nine-month* wait before they can meet with a counselor. Now, you, young lady. Sorry, but you need to lose weight. If not, you'll soon be feelin' a lot of bone and muscle pain. We'll discuss that later; now, let's find-out more about your symptoms. What are the other symptoms, Minnie, and how long have you had them?

Minnie: I've been having trouble breathing for at least a month, and I feel real tired

and I've been throwing-up for a couple of weeks.

Dr. Evans: Got it. Well, I'm gonna run blood and urine tests. Come back tomorrow afternoon so that we can discuss the results of those tests.

[End of Act 2, Scene 2.]



ACT 3

Narrator: The next morning, Minnie is back at school.

Diane: Hey, Minnie! Did you bring my 'monica?

Minnie: Got it right here!

Diane: You mean, you got *her* right here, my harmonica. ...I'm gonna call her my *hermonica*, after you— *The Inventor!*

Minnie: [*Sarcastically*] Clever. Where's my ransom money?

Diane: Got it right here. [*Hands money to Minnie.*] One of these days, you're gonna be a famous musician. And rich. Playin' violin in the orchestra— with a solo!— and comin'-up with your own instruments.

Minnie: Ya never know. You could be my agent.

Diane: That works for me. Say— You wanna come to my house after school?

Minnie: Yeah. ...No, I'm tired.

Diane: You been partyin' at Linda's house?

Minnie: No. Well, not at *her* house.

Diane: Oh, and you haven't invited me? [*Pause.*] Ohhh— You and Benny? Sounds like you two are getting serious.

Minnie: Yeah, but *please* don't tell anyone— I think that we got a little *too* serious.

Diane: Dating a high-school boy. With your eagle-eyed mother, how do you even spend time with him?

Minnie: Diane, you don't want to know.

[End of Act 3.]



ACT 4, SCENE 1

Narrator: The next morning, Dana looks goes to an employment agency because she was fired from her other job for having missed work. Be alert to policies and other situations that could interfere with Dana's economic mobility.

Employment Counselor: So, Mrs. Smith, according to your application, you've completed high school. I've looked over our current job openings for high-school graduates. The only one that fits your training is as a waitress at a restaurant. It starts at \$5.60 an hour.

Dana: \$5.60? But that's not even minimum wage.

Counselor: That's because you're supposed to be able make-up the difference, and more, through tips.

Dana: Okay, if that's the only job open right now. When can I start?

Counselor: You could start tonight.

Dana: Oh. I just assumed that it was a day job.

Counselor: No. Sorry. It's a 24-hour restaurant. You could start with this shift, then later maybe move to day-time hours, once you have seniority.

Dana: Can't do it. My husband already works the graveyard shift. We need someone at home with Minnie. I'm sorry. But now I don't know what to do.

Counselor: I'll keep your application on file and let you know when something else shows up. In the meantime, why not apply for unemployment?

Dana: Well, as I said on my application, I got fired from my last job, so I don't think that I can get unemployment.

Counselor: How 'bout applying for food stamps?

Dana: No, thanks. I earn my keep.

Counselor: You've worked and paid taxes, Mrs. Smith. I'll ask you to think about how much food you have in your kitchen and to think about your young daughter. If you do decide to go, the Department of Social Services is right next door.

[End Act 4, Scene 1]



ACT 4, SCENE 2

Narrator: Dana decides to swallow her pride and go to DSS to apply for food stamps. As with previous scenes, write-down situations and conditions that could hurt Minnie's education.

DSS Employee: [*Speak in a monotone: You are interviewing yet another lazy person who wants a free ride.*] What's your name? What are you here for?

Dana: I'd like to get food stamps.

DSS: Awesome. Now. Food stamps aren't food stamps anymore; they're EBT cards.

Dana: "EBT"?

DSS: Electronic Benefit Transfer cards. E-B-T. Part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SNAP. Gives us better control over who's usin' 'em and for what. Know what I mean?

Dana: [*Irritated.*] Sure. What's next?

DSS. I've read your application. You're approved.

Dana: Thank you. So how much do we get?

DSS: Looks like 'bout \$110.

Dana: One-ten?? For the whole family?

DSS: You got it. That breaks down to five-and-a-quarter per person. Per day.

Dana: Five bucks a day??!? How can we live on that?

DSS: Hey, I don't make the rules, okay? The average in New York State is \$4.67 per person, so don't complain.

Dana: Whatever. Where do I get this card?

DSS: You can get it here, though you might have to wait for up to 45 days.

[End Act 4, Scene 2]



ACT 5, SCENE 1

Narrator:

- Misunderstandings about sex can lead to STDs, to pregnancy – or to both.
- In 2012,
 - 2 out of every 5 births in the US were to unmarried individuals.
 - The birthrate for US teens was almost 1 in 3.
- As Act V, Scene 1, opens, the Smiths are back at the hospital to find-out the diagnosis for Millie's symptoms. Dr. Evans asked to meet with Minnie before speaking also with Dana.

Dr. Evans: Minnie, I tested your urine for pregnancy, and it came back positive:

You're pregnant. Did you think that you might be pregnant?

Minnie: Me and my boyfriend had sex, but I was real careful.

Dr. Evans: Okay. I am going to ask a gynecologist, Dr. Iverson, to speak with you.

May I ask your mother to speak with Dr. Iverson also?

Minnie: Yeah, I guess so.

[Dr. Evans sits with the audience. Dr. Iverson and Dana join Minnie on stage.]

Dr. Iverson: Mrs. Smith and Minnie, hello; I'm Dr. Iverson. I am a gynecologist. Dr. Evans referred me to you.

Dana: Why do we need a gyno?

Dr. Iverson: We have a sensitive topic to discuss: Minnie is pregnant. Minnie has given me permission to tell you about her pregnancy.

Mrs. Smith: What?!? How?!?!? Is that low-life boyfriend of yours the father?!?!?

Minnie: It can't be true! Yes, okay – we had sex, but there's no way I can be pregnant because I did things to not get pregnant.

Dana: Really? Like what?

Minnie: Lots of things: We waited 'til "that time of the month." We were standing up. We didn't do - you know – oral sex. I also didn't want to get the pill because it makes girls fat.

Dr. Iverson: Minnie, you are pregnant. My concern now is that you take care of yourself so that you *and your baby* are healthy. I'll make an appointment for you to be seen at the free clinic so that you can start prenatal care.

[End Act 5, Scene 1.]



ACT 5, SCENE 2

Narrator: Along with second-hand smoke, another kind of in-house toxin is non-nutritious eating habits.

- Some people do not know how to cook certain healthy vegetables.
- Some people cook in non-nutritious ways, such as frying.
- Some eat at a lot of processed foods, which have high sugar levels.
- Some eat a lot of canned foods, which usually have high salt content.

In Act 5, Scene 2, Minnie and Dana are back home.

Dana: [*Light-up a cigarette*] Minnie, what do you want for dinner? I can fry-up some kielbasa and macaroni-and-cheese. You should start eating more veges, so I'll heat-up some canned peas.

Minnie: Sounds yummy, mom. Oh – I brought home some “zook” – I can't even say it. Whatever. It's from my health teacher. It's supposed to be healthy. [*Hand it to Dana.*]

Dana: What the heck is this? I have no idea what it is, never mind how to cook it.

Minnie: That's fine with me, mom; they're weird-looking. Oh, the grocery store has a special on two-liter bottles of cola. Two for a buck. If you give me a dollar, I'll go get a couple.

[*End of docu-drama.*]



The Institute for Civic Engagement
John Suarez, Coordinator, Office of Service-Learning,
John.suarez@cortland.edu, 607-753-4391