

DISCUSSION

Carl H. Madden, Chamber of Commerce of the United States

Sar Levitan's courageous paper raises the important social issue whether the bureaucratic forms of scientific procedure, without its historic spirit of detachment, may not result in developing a society that, almost absent-mindedly, imprisons the individual in an enveloping strait-jacket of cooked statistics.

To some, this formulation may seem strained and pretentious. To those it has to be said that the crusader rhetoric of the "war on poverty" threatens to stifle criticism by placing disinterested observers in grave peril of being accused of "being against people" or "favoring poverty." Levitan, with impeccable credentials as a concerned social scientist, stands on a different footing from self-interested critics. Nevertheless, he says some rather harsh things about OEO reporting, public statements, research-contracting procedures, congressional evaluation, and use of new benefit-cost techniques. If he is correct, the rather shrill metaphor of my opening remark may well be justified.

It is the tone and import of his observations that raise the most important questions. They raise the general question of the relationship between social reality and statistical procedure. We live in a more and more sophisticated environment, in which painstaking critical analysis -- especially marked in modern statistical analysis -- has become a powerful instrument of discovery and as powerful a mold of life styles. In this environment, the crudity of the poverty war rhetoric and the absurd naivety of slogans like "ending poverty by 1976" is, suggests Levitan, essentially corrupting.

Levitan itemizes the potential impact of such corruption on the research community of the government agencies, unable to publish any except approved reports; on the Congress in which independent expert evaluation of OEO results have been lacking; and even, he suggests, on some members of the academic community itself who are sworn by the terms of research grants to silence except upon approval of the contracting agency.

It is, of course, a familiar phenomenon to those who, like the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, hold that there is a real issue in the comparison of government intentions and results. Still, we are known to support the doctrine of limited government and, to that extent, confess to stated bias. To the statistician, however, the problem of stated bias is in principle easier to handle than the problem of unstated bias; and the next step, toward concealed bias, is anathema to him.

So Levitan's important paper, in this interpretation, strikes to the heart of issues close to the statistician's loyalties. Any growing profession, especially one as powerful and relevant to complex social analysis as modern statistics, cannot afford to neglect its institutional configuration. The innocent and heady idea of a neutral and always progressive science

that characterized the past has been buried by the twentieth century. The medical profession in this country now wrestles with the consequences of confusion about its institutional mandate. Levitan, to me, suggests the urgency of the need for distinguished leaders of social analysis and statistics to turn at least some of their attention, as the physicists have had to do, to the design of institutional frameworks that will best permit their subject-matter to enlighten and not corrupt the public interest.

By this I mean that statisticians might ask themselves and their colleagues in the intellectual community how to apply in their contributions to operating institutions the historic criterion of detachment and disinterest that is the heart of the scientific spirit. Is it sound procedure for operating agencies, such as OEO, with vested interests in the justification of political programs, to serve as its own evaluator? What institutional arrangements would be needed to achieve sympathetic but disinterested evaluation of broad social programs?

These are powerful questions that pervade the intellectually honest and straightforward observations Levitan makes. They have application to a far wider range of programs than the war on poverty. The OEO, which after all is admittedly only a modest part of the Federal government's anti-poverty efforts, is itself in the almost impossible posture of "coordinating" Federal research on welfare questions at the same time as it conducts its own. And it is a symptom of the times that OEO's public information staff not long ago outnumbered its research staff by more than two to one.

Levitan also raises technical questions that space limits deny extended comment on. One that should not go unmentioned is the critical theoretical question whether benefits can be compared among alternative programs increasing welfare. This question plunges the analyst into interpersonal comparisons of utility which have plagued theoretical economics for generations. Yet the unsophisticated application of benefit-cost analysis is only more cooked statistics that obscures the issue of alternative uses for resources, at the heart of the economic problem.

Robert A. Levine's paper is subject to many of the comments and criticisms which Levitan directs to poverty research. It is interesting to contrast the OEO research effort as reflected by Levine's paper and Levitan's observations with the U.S. Office of Education report, Equality of Educational Opportunity. That study, marked in conception and execution by the influence of modern epidemiology and its statistical ideas, strikes expert reviewers such as Christopher Jenks as "the most important piece of educational research in recent years" (The New Republic, Oct. 1, 1966, p. 21). Of unprecedented scale for educational research, the study explores with care the effect of different school characteristics on what individual students actually learned. Its results are

far-reaching for educational policy. Why should such a contrast exist between the piecemeal and confused OEO approach and the powerful and general OE approach?

The contrast points up how science can be trivialized by what Levitan suggests is self-serving. It lends force to not only Levitan's concerns but to others, such as Dael Wolfle and

Henry Heald, about the impact of government grants on universities. It suggests that the academic community, in its growing role of service to public and private agencies through university research, may have to grow more sensitive to moral choices implicit in seeking contract funds or face the threat of breeding a new species of Organization Man -- the Scientific Organization Man.