

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN THE POLICY ARENA

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My experiences in public life--particularly over the last six years--have significantly shaped my thinking on today's topic. These include a year as a deputy county executive in a large suburban jurisdiction in the Washington metropolitan area, a last tour at the Office of Management and Budget, and over three years at HEW as assistant secretary for planning and evaluation. I want to share some thoughts with you out of the accumulation of these experiences. These last three jobs that I have held seem to me to be at a juncture where I was deeply involved in trying to take what we know and what we believe and turning all that into what we should do--and in some cases, perhaps, what we should not do. And that hopefully, has given me some perspectives that may be helpful to you in your deliberations as one part of the group in charge of "what we know."

In getting ready for this discussion I thought about who's in charge of what we know and who's in charge of what we believe. We might say, rather simply that the social science researchers are in charge of what we know and that the politicians are in charge of what we believe. I may make more from time to time of that dichotomy, but we all know that it's really not that simple. I've yet to see anyone in the social research field who not only knew something, but didn't tend to believe something about what ought to happen next. And by and large those who are in charge of what we believe, at least hopefully, know something. But it is the interaction between these groups that has been an important part of my role. Somebody asked me at the table during lunch. "Does that make you a policymaker?" I'm not terribly sure that the answer is "Yes," but at least close enough to talk about it for a while.

In thinking about those interactions, it seems to me we are constantly faced with a series of paradoxes and I want to describe these a bit. In the course of this you'll find me returning to some familiar themes. For one thing, I am, unabashedly, strongly in favor of a utilitarian focus on the expansion of what we know, be it in the field of statistics and data acquisition, in social research, or the like. This is not in my view any attack on basic research or on the value of such endeavors, nor is it necessarily a kind of narrow philosophy that says, "I am only interested in today's problems." After all, a utilitarian focus is, in my view, also a process of playing that wonderful guessing game of trying to identify what issues are likely to be important enough five years from now to generate a consuming public debate. The problem is to figure out what I can do as a social science researcher or planner of such activities to get ourselves ready to conduct that debate in an intelligent fashion.

It also seems to me that while we have a responsibility for advancing what we know, there is an equal responsibility in these efforts--on both sides of any question--for some modesty about the likelihood of what we know at any given time being the crucial factor in decisions about what will actually happen. And whether you are in the role of policymaker or politician, on the one hand, or that of a social science researcher, on the other, this responsibility is still there. And we need to remind ourselves from time to time about these limitations.

Let me turn for a moment to what in my view those limitations are. There is first of all a problem of relevance. Now that's a subject about which we all talk a good deal--and not always usefully. In some cases the limitations on social science research in the realm of relevance lie in what may be called the "interesting but not needed" category. Let me give you some illustrations of this out of my own HEW experience. Take for example the issue of sex discrimination. There has been some exceedingly important and needed research that has raised the general level of understanding about the nature of sex discrimination and how it affects our society. We welcome good research on tough problems, such as just what one should do about sex stereotyping in curriculum materials and textbooks in the educational enterprises of this country. But, we do not need beyond that an endless series of research efforts on such problems as, for example, the sex discriminatory provisions of the Social Security Act. They are there in plain view, and if they don't draw attention to themselves, or policymakers don't, the courts are quick enough to get at them. And we don't need to really explore very long to find out what we really need to do--as quickly as possible--to get rid of them. That's not a researcher's problem, but indeed a problem for those who are in the political arena. And I think we do need to be careful at all times not to engage ourselves in such "interesting but not needed" activity.

There's another equally and perhaps more difficult category of "interesting, but not very useful." It is my impression, for example, in the field of education statistics, that we have produced an enormous amount of data but, in many cases, not very much information on problems about school finance, what happening under the efforts of the country to desegregate, etc., and often an avoidance of what are clearly some of the predominant problems in the society around us. In this same category, of course, are the conventional problems of studies that are poorly done. But I would also call attention to the kind of social science research which concentrates excessively on factors which cannot--by activities of the society--be much manipulated. Let me illustrate that point. We know for example in realm of

welfare that one of the causes, if you will, of poverty is family breakup. One result of longitudinal data studies is quite clear; namely, that a change in family composition can often drop families into poverty. What is important to find is that piece of information that is relevant in terms of designing what we do in the welfare field. But it is probably not worth a great deal of effort for policy to, say, get into the whole field of marriage per se and what's happening there since it is rather unlikely that our government is going to succeed, at least at the Federal level, in intervening in that kind of a problem. It is clearly, in our society, a problem that is not subject to governmental action. And yet there are dimensions of how a particular governmental welfare policy may impact positively or negatively on family breakup that could provide important pieces of information for action--and that distinction does need to be made. And this shows, in turn, the importance of asking the right question in the context of the governmental programmatic structure around us.

Another issue in the limitations of social science--and this one really has been for me a bit of a paradox--is found in the problem of popular values and biases, and what to do about these. One technique, of course, is to take that problem and, if one has evidence that the existing biases or values are at least open to question, to try and overwhelm them with the evidence. And indeed I have had some personal responsibility for that around the classic problem in welfare of what should we do about our work ethic and not to build programs that in fact would encourage people to withdraw from the labor market. But there probably comes a point where we need to consider the art of accommodation and to focus some of our research, not on trying to tell people that they don't believe the right things, but rather on how to accommodate both what the evidence shows us and those deep underlying value structures.

The only example that is perhaps most immediately relevant to some of the discussions that you are having in the health field is the issue of cost sharing in health insurance. Here we're wrestling with some enormous public biases and with the whole tradition in the insurance industry over some twenty or thirty years of first-dollar coverage, which the evidence suggests may not be the best way to handle the problems of national health insurance policy. We'll see over the months ahead just how that issue is going to play itself out.

There's also the problem in the social science fields of "no alternatives." We are rather good at looking at activities of one kind or another and demonstrating that they don't work. The area of manpower and education comes quickly to mind, in which a number of competent studies have suggested the disutility of many of those activities. And yet we are in an area of deeply felt societal perceptions and just saying that programs won't work--without discovering why they don't and giving better interpretations of our findings that can

potentially suggest what our analyses show us about alternative ways to proceed in the area--does limit the value of social science research in the policy arena.

Lastly, there is the problem of the nonquantifiables. The literature is replete with the difficulties of capturing cost and benefits. But we need to remind ourselves very often that the problem as perceived is broader than just what we are able to quantify. Issues such as human dignity, health status, and quality of care are for the most part non-quantifiable. We must be cautious that those nonquantifiables are taken into account early because they surely will be when the subject gets to the decisionmaking level in the political arena. Illustrations of this could go on endlessly, but let me just deal with two of them. I think one of the problems of income maintenance reform in this country has been our inability to articulate properly the relationship between that activity and what might be called social services. And the inadequacy of much of our research data in that field has led us in turn to practice of trying to make improvements while ignoring an important dimension. This either prevents a presumably better notion from getting implemented or causes other problems. Some of the issues of relating social services to Supplemental Security Income program are but a recent illustration thereof.

Also in the area of standards, we are at the moment in Washington grappling with standards of all kinds imposed from the federal level which in fact are just proxies to try to achieve something we call "quality of care" for day care, long-term care, and the like. As a result of our inability to deal properly with that quality-of-care issue, we have instead acquired a whole set of proxy measures--and some undesirable and unintended consequences. We now have penalties on providers for inadequately following the proxy measures of quality--and in turn we have penalized the recipients of the service.

In all of these issues I think there is a responsibility for everyone in the field to be mindful of. All these limitations can't be observed at all times; I think the opportunities and achievements now and prospectively are substantial. I think we are becoming increasingly sophisticated, both among those who are expanding the state of our knowledge and among those who are trying to do something with it. Some of these activities over the last four or five years have really made a difference in what has happened. If one looks at the role of experimentation, both the income maintenance and the health insurance experiment--prospectively in the latter case--I think have changed clearly the nature of the debate, not making it easier but perhaps focusing it better. What we have learned about labor response, what we have learned about accounting periods in the income maintenance area, what we can prospectively learn from the health insurance experiments about the relationship between demand and price and hopefully about the relationships between health insurance

coverage and health status are important possibilities that can and will affect public debate.

In the role of surveys and data acquisition we've seen a remarkable event in the enactment of the recent education amendments where there was a heavy debate within the House and Senate committees over an endless series of data runs on how the allocation of education dollars would affect their perceived objectives. And they used that information extensively in coming to decisions about the proper allocation of resources. Perhaps the final choices were not those that an idealist might follow, but the fact that data had an impact is, I think, unquestionable. And indeed other legislation has led increasingly to a surprising and detailed imposition by the Congress by statute of new demands for information. The survey of income and education to provide more detailed and needed data on children in poverty is but one illustration. We are conducting a survey of institutionalized persons to get at various issues of disability. There is a health financing survey which is a demonstration of some remarkable cooperation internally within HEW among its constituent (and occasionally warring) parts to do something that was really important in gaining some new data. The income survey development program for which my office is providing some leadership is, prospectively, another example.

And one moves from surveys and data into straight-forward policy analysis modeling activities and the like where we are getting increasingly better and our product more wanted in examining at least the consequences of possible courses of action with more clarity. And yet in all of this there is a sense of dissatisfaction in many ways on both sides, both by the performers and the potential recipients. As I recently learned with some pain in the recent action of the Senate appropriations committee on my own policy research activities, there is a point of view of saying we are not terribly sure what this is all good for. "You folks out there spend a lot of money on these esoteric research projects and never tell us anything we really need to know."

I think clearly there is a call for a more structured dialogue between those who are trying to expand our knowledge base and whose are trying to do something with it. Between policymakers, policy analysts, researchers, data gatherers, and the like. And that dialogue, it seems to me, has some constituent requirements that I'd like to suggest. While meetings of this kind within professions are important devices for exchanging what's happening and what might go on in the future and learning from each other, there is an equally strong demand I believe for cross-professional contacts. And more listening for cues from other disciplines. And I confess I am as guilty as others in tending to get into a kind of narrow position of listening to the professionals with whom one associates as a normal matter and not

listening to that less distinct voice from off-stage which can lead one to recognize some very important things about what you are doing or ought to be focusing attention on. We are trying in HEW, perhaps more than before, to provide for more structured interaction in our inter-agency activities. And many of the above illustrations I have used are important. This is in fact an effort to reduce a bit of the paranoia about each other between those who were using information and those who are providing it. As the chairman suggested earlier, perhaps some initiatives on both sides to reach out across those barriers and say "look its just not the other fellow's responsibility, we need to do something about that ourselves."

And for those of us on the policymaking side it involves perhaps most critically a commitment of time which is perhaps the most precious commodity of top decisionmaking, to sit down periodically and listen to what's going on in the field and ask ourselves perhaps a series of questions about our research and other related social activities and about the questions we are asking. If we work on a particular problem and if we find the answer will it make any difference to what might happen? If I find the answer will that answer be more likely to raise more questions than I have provided responses to--thus raising an issue of whether I've asked the right question in the first place? If the questions are right, can I find the answers in some timely way or before the political process moves on to make a decision-with or without our findings? And am I working mainly today's and yesterday's problems, or am I thinking sufficiently enough about those problems with which our society is going to grapple five years from now?

And with that set of tough questions, let me stop orating here and let me take on your questions if you have some for the remaining time.