Meetings

Behavioral Sciences and Family Planning

Government resources are now being marshaled to transform family planning from the quiet privilege of upper and middle classes into a service available to all who desire it. So declared Wilbur J. Cohen (Under Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) in his address opening a conference on Behavioral Sciences and Family Planning, held 7–9 June 1967 at Bethesda, Maryland. This recently established policy reflects a truly remarkable shift in attitudes, and is part of the continuing evolution of American freedom.

The conference brought together about 45 scientists and practitioners for an interdisciplinary consideration of ways in which behavioral scientists can contribute to family planning programs. Cohen reviewed in some detail the remarkable recent changes in attitudes towards family planning as part of governmental efforts for the general welfare, both in this country and around the world. He quoted President Johnson: "It is essential that all families have freedom to choose the number and spacing of their children." At the 1967 World Health Assembly 74 nations adopted a resolution stressing the importance of the relationship between health problems and population dynamics. (In 1952 this Assembly heard members threaten to resign if an expert committee were named to determine whether such relationships exist.) The U.S. government has taken legislative and administrative action designed to make family planning more freely available to all Americans. Yet, as Cohen pointed out, these services are still being used by no more than 10 percent of the 5 million medically indigent persons who want them.

Bernard Berelson (Population Council) called family planning at least the world's second greatest problem, particularly in the developing world. Individual and governmental consensus has created a demand for improved contraceptive methods and for more effective social action to extend the practice of family planning. Behavioral scientists operating in this field have already shown how their work can increase the effectiveness of social action; they are also finding it an excellent site for basic theoretical studies.

Ronald Freedman (Michigan) discussed programs in Taiwan, India, Japan, Hong Kong, and other places. He reported that changes in tradition-bound attitudes and behavior are occurring so fast that the changes must be regarded as unique. For instance, in a series of surveys in Japan between 1950 and 1956 on the question, "Do you expect or want to depend on your children in your old age?" the number answering *yes* fell 16 points, from 55 percent to 39 percent. In Korea, the number of families protected by contraception and sterilization rose from 9 percent in 1964 to 20 percent in 1966. Such situations afford rich opportunities for research into the dynamics of innovation. Topics available for study involve such questions as the impact of large-scale organizations on familial behavior; organizational theory and methodology, on a scale involving tens of thousands of people and hundreds of political units; the relative effectiveness of different forms of communication, on a similar scale; the effect of offering material or financial incentives for accepting an innovation; the correlation between input of effort and rate of acceptance; the relations between general social change and acceptance of family planning. Freedman summarized his presentation by saying, "This field is too important to be left to us demographers."

In the ensuing discussion Philip Hauser (Chicago) raised questions about the validity of information derived from surveys based on personal interviews. Have they perhaps provided more misinformation than information? What is actually communicated when an interviewer asks questions the respondent never thought had an answer? What is the value of causal inferences drawn from such data? There is need, Hauser said, for bringing the full battery of the social sciences to bear on this realm that is admittedly crucial in its import for mankind; money is needed to bring in researchers from the whole spectrum of the social sciences.

Michael Young (Social Science Research Council, London) suggested that the focus of discussion might well be shifted from the individual family's limitation of size to deliberate social policies designed to reduce the birth rate. For instance, bonuses might be given for delaying marriage past a specified age, or for spacing out births to a prescribed pattern, or for not exceeding a given number of births in a woman's reproductive period. Policies in this vein would be far more relevant to our contemporary situation than are the pro-natalist trends of existing social services. Such a shift in policy would also protect the industrialized nations from charges of hypocrisy and worse when they recommend population limitation to the developing nations.

How do psychological principles and techniques relate to the population field? Brewster Smith (Berkeley) saw the answers in terms of the decision process. The making of decisions is a close-in mediating process by which demographic and societal factors have their impact on fertility. There is an absurdity in assuming that many people in the world make decisions about coitus, or wanting another child, on the basis of a reasoned judgment about family size. This is an extraordinarily middle class and American way of thinking, very unlikely to be found in many other geographic or social areas. Yet little research has been done on the personality factors that affect decisions. What characteristics of personality are associated with planning, initiative, and autonomy? Data bearing on these qualities could be highly relevant to family planning and could provide the basis for new generalizations about how societal facts are represented at the individual psychological level. With this kind of knowledge family planning might indeed become a strategic wedge by which people gain greater autonomy, greater ability to be masters of their fate.

Orville Brim, Jr. (Russell Sage Foundation) proposed that sociologists take

seriously their responsibility to work on the interaction between sociological theory and technological invention, even to the point where sociologists work out specifications for needed technological innovation. For example, sociologists could have identified the desirability of coitus-independent contraceptives such as the IUD and should press the need for methods to predetermine the sex of offspring. Brim also raised the question of abortion as a major element in family planning. Abortion is a problem that has not yet been solved either technologically or socially, and a mere handful of sociologists are working on it.

Many questions were raised about the consequences of reduced family and population size. What are the effects of child spacing on interpersonal relations within the family? What changes occur in the relations between generations? In the role of women? There was a lively discussion of the need for research on the unintended results of institutionalizing a great social innovation like family planning.

Reuben Hill (Minnesota) focused on family studies, which see man as an initiator in the social process. Such studies are much needed as balance to the demographers' view of man as a passive particle in the grip of social forces. For family planning programs the optimal reference unit seems to be the nuclear family and its social network of neighbors and relatives, rather than the individual mother or society at large. Family planning is a special case of family decision making and problem solving, and it involves the husband and father no less than the mother, although the male member of the family constellation has been largely neglected in family planning research.

Mass communication was described by Daniel Lerner (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) as a technology without a theory. Because the mass media can reach very large communities simultaneously, repeatedly, and rapidly, they make feasible the creation of a climate of opinion in which rapid changes of attitude can occur. This kind of change arouses a whole range of demands—for more housing, more education, and more food, for example. Although mass media cannot alone induce acceptance, family planning programs will be most effective when presented as a form of behavior that can help satisfy the full range of rising expectations. This kind of coordination has been important to the

success of family planning programs in Taiwan and Korea.

Leo Bogart (American Newspaper Publishers' Association) described American advertising as functioning chiefly on superficial levels of motivation that are not particularly relevant to family planning as a marketing problem. However, family planning programs could well use advertising's organizational expertise for distributing the product: it does little good to persuade people to use a product that is not readily available. One important organizational technique in achieving the right marketing mix is the use of a single coordinator with authority to cut across established hierarchical lines to get things done. Another useful device is to select specific target groups and gear each campaign to certain segments of the population. A third value may lie in promoting familiarity with many different kinds of contraceptives, taking the basic concept of contraception for granted; this may serve to alleviate anxiety about a radical innovation by assuming that it is already favorably known.

Catherine Chilman (Welfare Administration) pointed out that poverty groups in the United States have many of the characteristics of a developing nation. Family planning research on middle class families has as little relevance for these groups as for India or Hong Kong.

George M. Foster (Berkeley) suggested that people in all cultures appear to be basically so pragmatic that they will accept any innovation that they can see actually meets a need in their own lives. If this is true it follows that any attempt to establish change depends on four conditions: the people must perceive a need; they must have information on how that need can be met; the materials to meet the need must be easily available to them; and the society must not impose negative sanctions. Actually there now exists sufficient knowledge about these four conditions that they need not comprise the main barriers against family planning. Those barriers are rather to be found in the nature, structure, and personality of bureaucracies. The real contribution that social sciences can make to family planning—and to all technological development—is to enable people to understand themselves as individuals and as members of their organizations.

Foster also challenged the recurring emphasis on expanding freedom of

choice and improving family function as euphemisms for the real goal of family planning programs. This goal he stated as bringing births and deaths into approximate balance at some level which will enable relatively civilized life to continue. This point engendered vigorous discussion. The consensus appeared to be that the three values—individual freedom, family integrity, population control—are not mutually exclusive but can and must be brought into a working synthesis, for the purpose of all population planning is to improve the quality of living. It is probably true that the priority of emphasis among the three approaches will differ with different social contexts, but all are essential.

Everett Rogers (Michigan State) reported on research on the diffusion of innovations and suggested ways of using the diffusion approach for family planning research. He stressed the inadequacy of static or demographic variables such as age, literacy, and family size, and suggested four other variables that hold high potential for family planning research: economic incentives, social-psychological perceptions, social structure norms, and communication strategies.

The final discussion, led by Nicholas Demerath (Washington University), concerned organizational theory. Administrative slow-downs in family planning programs can be relieved by research into the motivations and functioning of policy makers. Four special barriers need investigation. First, administrative elites in developing countries are often very small and seriously overloaded; second, they tend to work in the colonial tradition of custodial leadership; third, there is excessive bureaucratization, often increased by the zeal of technical consultants who are eager to get more people to work on their programs; and fourth, the ethnocentrism of technical consultants, often Americans, is a serious obstacle. Organizations capable of all-out efforts for population planning can never be built until Western consultants work in full partnership with local managerial talents, recognizing their high capabilities and working pragmatically in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate to the environment. The creation of personal competence is essential here, and it can be done by co-opting local talent and helping to give them locally appropriate forms of managerial training. In this discussion of organization, the question was raised

whether public health administrators are the best source for leadership in creating effective family planning organizations. There was some feeling that the intense specialization required for membership in this group does not lend itself readily to the kind of flexible inventiveness needed for family planning programs.

In summing up the conference Lyle Saunders (Ford Foundation) compared contemporary family planning programs with the Wright brothers' airplane—a creaky and ungraceful invention of limited performance. The effort of this conference was to explore ways in which the social sciences can improve both the form and the performance of this innovation. A great variety of areas were explored where the innovation can benefit from a great deal more social science involvement. The conference also demonstrated that scientists can work in this applied field without losing their status in the scientific community.

The conference was sponsored jointly by the AAAS Council Study Committee on Population Explosion and Birth Control and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Calendar of Events—November

National Meetings

8–10. Eastern **Analytical** Symp., New York, N.Y. (E. G. Brame, Jr., Elastomer Chemistry Dept., duPont Experiment Sta., Wilmington, Del. 19898)

8–10. American **Water Resources** Assoc., 3rd annual conf., San Francisco, Calif. (A. A. Stone, International Engineering Co., 74 New Montgomery St., San Francisco 94105)

8–11. **Respiratory Therapy,** 4th annual conf., Boston, Mass. (M. J. Nicholson, 6 Beacon St., Suite 620, Boston 02108)

9–11. **Gerontological** Soc., Inc., 20th annual mtg., St. Petersburg, Fla. (Mrs. M. Adler, 660 S. Euclid St., St. Louis, Mo.)

10. **Laboratory Animal in Gerontologic Research,** symp., St. Petersburg, Fla. (R. H. Yager, Natl. Acad. of Sciences–Natl. Research Council, 2101 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, D.C.)

10–11. New England **Psychological Assoc.,** annual mtg., Hartford, Conn. (M. M. Riggs, New Hampshire Child Guidance Clinics, 121 S. Fruit St., Concord 03301)

11–12. American Acad. of **Psychotherapists,** annual conf., Warrenton, Va.