

Report Says Social Sciences Can Help Avoid Policy Goofs

Few people listened back in 1947 when Robin M. Williams Jr., professor of sociology at Cornell University, predicted that the nation might experience riots and other violence as Negroes improved their status in American life. Militancy, Williams wrote, "is not characteristic of the most deprived and oppressed groups, but rather of those who have gained considerable rights so that they are able realistically to hope for more." The prediction, though generally accepted by the field of sociology, went largely unheeded, for conventional wisdom held that continued efforts to improve the Negro's lot would lead to a peaceful solution of the race problem. Then the urban riots of the 1960's proved Williams correct—and caught public officials unprepared to cope with a domestic emergency that they might well have anticipated.

Why was the nation caught napping by the riots? Because, according to a National Science Foundation panel on the social sciences, numerous obstacles have impeded the effective application of social science knowledge to the solution of significant social problems. These obstacles—and a host of recommendations for overcoming them—are set forth in a report* released on 3 August. The report was prepared by a special commission—headed by Orville G. Brim Jr., president of the Russell Sage Foundation†—which was set up in 1968 by NSF's National Science Board in the wake of congressional and academic concern over social science issues.

The commission argues that significant failures of public policy have been caused by an inability or unwillingness to use relevant social science knowledge. As an example, the commission states that the so-called "Coleman Report" on educational opportunity, published in 1966, had "enormous" social implications because it showed that, on the average, Negroes come into school behind whites and leave school still further behind. Yet the Coleman study has "received little attention from government at any level," the commission says, largely because it "merely reports a disheartening set of facts" and "does not provide a practical solution to the problem."

As another example, the commission notes that, although official U.S. government documents and three separate histories published before 1900 described Negro soldiers in the Civil War as dependable and effective, as late as 1936 an Army War College report described the Negro as "careless, shiftless, irresponsible and secretive," and as late as 1940 the War Department reaffirmed a segregation policy. The report attributes this rejection of decades-old knowledge to the fact that such knowledge threatened prevailing views on the race question.

At a press conference held to publicize the commission's report, Brim cited still another failure to use social science knowledge effectively—this one involving the intra-

uterine device (IUD) for birth control. The IUD is effective for long periods after insertion and thus does not require that women be strongly motivated to take a daily birth control pill. Noting that the Japanese were using the IUD in the 1930's but that it "never caught on here," Brim suggested that the IUD "would have been in use 40 years ago" in this country if the biomedical specialists working on birth control had been familiar with social science knowledge concerning motivation.

The Brim commission's most striking proposal for improving use of the social sciences involves the creation of new "social problem research institutes" to conduct applied social science research on problems of public significance. Each such institute would concentrate on a single problem; it would have a multidisciplinary staff consisting of social scientists, engineers, and other relevant professionals; and it would probably be located either at a university, or in a governmental center, or in a locale troubled by the problem under investigation. The commission recommends that \$10 million be appropriated to NSF to get the program started in the first year and that larger sums be budgeted thereafter to allow formation of some 25 institutes, which might cost \$50 million a year to operate, with most of the funds coming from the federal government, primarily in the form of research contracts and grants. Institutes would be established on the basis of competitive proposals.

The Brim report strongly urges that the social sciences become more "deeply involved" in federal government policy-making, but it stops short of advocating a high-level Council of Social Advisers for the President. Instead, it recommends that existing advisory groups be broadened to include appropriate social scientists and other relevant disciplines. Thus the report suggests that the Council of Economic Advisers should include among its staff and consultants persons drawn from the social sciences other than economics as well as natural scientists and engineers. The report also suggests that the number of social scientists on the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) should be increased to at least three and that more social scientists should be appointed to the staff of the Office of Science and Technology. PSAC currently has only one social scientist, and he is a fairly recent addition. The Brim commission suggests this may be one reason why PSAC "has played only a minor role in the assessment of the implications of computers and automation for our society."

The commission also urges greater use of social science by the professions, business and labor, community groups, and the public. The recommendations are so wide-ranging that it is not clear just who is expected to spearhead their implementation.

The Brim report is the second major report in recent months to urge a greater policy-making role for the social sciences (see *Science*, 13 September 1968), but whether such exhortations will lead Congress to appropriate the substantial funds needed to implement some of the Brim commission's recommendations remains to be seen. Earlier this year NSF encountered hostile questioning when it sought funds to support interdisciplinary groups in the conduct of research relevant to society—P.M.B.

* The report, entitled *Knowledge Into Action: Improving the Nation's Use of the Social Sciences*, is available from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; 75 cents.

† Other members included H. Guyford Stever, president of Carnegie-Mellon University; Samuel J. Eldersveld, University of Michigan; Marion B. Folsom, former secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare; William L. Garrison, University of Illinois at Chicago; Margaret A. Hickey, *Ladies Home Journal*; Adelaide Cromwell Hill, Boston University; Gardner Lindzey, vice president of the University of Texas; Paul A. Samuelson, M.I.T.; Cecil G. Sheps, University of North Carolina; and Allan F. Smith, vice president of the University of Michigan.