11 January 1974, Volume 183, Number 4120

SCIENCE

Social Experiments: Promise and Problems

Major experiments with social policy are under way. For example, the Office of Economic Opportunity's 3-year negative income tax experiment in New Jersey is in its final phases. The government is sponsoring a health insurance experiment to see how the use of health services is affected by the extent to which the patient shares the cost of health care and a series of experiments with housing allowances to see how such allowances affect the demand for and the supply of housing. In education, experiments with performance contracting and with new incentives for parents and teachers have been completed.

The new social experiments were responses to the frustration of those considering new policies who found themselves unable to answer the question: How do you know what will happen? The idea sounds simple, but the new tool is exceedingly tricky and hard to use skillfully.

First there are design dilemmas, some of which arise from the conflict between the desire to obtain valid, reliable results and the equally urgent desire to obtain results quickly and at a low cost. Then there are implementation dilemmas. To get a "clean" test of a new policy, it might seem best to have the policy spelled out in great detail in advance and have expert managers follow the rules to the letter. Allowing local communities to innovate as they go along, and perhaps change the whole intent of the policy, would mess up the experiment. On the other hand, if the policy being tested becomes a national program, it will be carried out by people with their own ideas and their own administrative strengths and weaknesses. Thus the "clean" experiment may turn out to be an unreliable predictor of what will really happen.

There are dilemmas attached to evaluation itself. Good evaluation is not possible unless it is built into the original design of the experiment and unless the evaluators are fully familiar with the details of the operation. On the other hand, if the evaluators are involved with the project from the beginning, can they remain objective? There are also timing dilemmas, for if the results of social experiments are to affect decisions, they must be available when the decisions are being made. Unfortunately, politicians rarely get excited enough about a problem to finance an experiment until they are nearly ready to make the decision. Then they want immediate results. But a "quick and dirty" experiment may be worse than none.

Moreover, there are difficult moral questions associated with experimenting with people. Finally, there is a series of dilemmas having to do with openness of experiments. For example, how can the privacy of the participants in the experiment be protected? If experiments—and indeed other types of social science research—are to continue, a way must be found to protect the privacy of respondents.

It is too soon to draw substantive conclusions from most of these social experiments, but something can be said about the method itself. Clearly experiments are feasible when the treatment is a simple one, such as a change in tax or a payment schedule, and when the outcome is measurable behavior of individuals, such as hours worked or dollars earned. It is still an open question whether more complex experiments are feasible.

Experiments can be an important tool in improving information for decision-making, but we know enough about experimentation now to know how hard it is to do it well. If great care is not taken to make current experiments as useful and as sensible as possible, there may be a reaction against the whole technique, and a potentially useful tool may be taken away.—ALICE M. RIVLIN, *chairman, Panel on Social Experimentation, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C. 20036.*

This editorial is adapted from an article in *Evaluation* **1**, No. 2 (1973).