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Social Science in the White House

For nearly two decades social scientists have been talking about the desirability of having a voice in the highest policy-making councils of the nation. Some have favored placing in the White House a Council of Social Advisors, which would function like the Council of Economic Advisors. Others would rather add social scientists to that council.

More recently, high-level representation has been in disfavor among social scientists because they believe that such "high visibility" would make them into whipping boys of Congress. This is feared because social science tends to deal with value-laden issues and to have a relatively weak basis for many of its positions. Hiding behind the economists or natural scientists is hence considered prudent. Thus, it is said, social science does fare well within the National Science Foundation, and the best place for a social science adviser in the White House is as one of the deputies of the science adviser to the President.

Putting aside the question of how social science's voice is to be heard in national policy-making, it seems that despite its fledgling status, social science has significant contributions to make.

First, its representatives would provide an institutionalized source of basic social facts policy-makers are quick to ignore—for example, that many welfare clients are not able-bodied males, but old or disabled Americans, or mothers of several young children.

Similarly, if consulted before the recent rush to "de-institutionalize" mental patients, retarded children, and juvenile delinquents, most experienced social scientists would have pointed out that while many of those now in institutions can and should be released, (i) some cannot function on their own and have no families or community to return to, and (ii) some who are not now institutionalized need the kind of around-the-clock service only institutions provide. Therefore, closing institutions, as several states recently did, is premature to say the least.

There are literally thousands of such social facts, many summarized in Berelson and Steiner's *Human Behavior* and Rothman's *Planning and Organizing for Social Change*.^{*} Unfortunately, books do not speak, and institutionalized occasions are needed to call attention to their content and to spell out their implications.

In addition to facts, social science perspectives ought to be represented in councils, which often contain only persons whose background is politics, law, or natural science. Thus, politicians typically tend to believe in the potency of the "Madison Avenue" approach. However, social scientists will point out that the view of human nature as subject to manipulation through advertising is probably erroneous. Ads may work well for products people already have a preference for, and are effective in switching people around among nearly identical products, but to overcome addictions or prejudices ads tend to be ineffectual. This has been established by studies on attitudes toward everything from campaigns against smoking to drives against prejudice. Can one, for example, expect an addict to heed such an emotionally shallow and brief input as a 60-second ad, compared to all the social, psychological, and physiological forces that bind him? Or, to put it more technically, can formal communication fight values and peer relations, community and social structure, personality, and biology?

True, social scientists will often not agree on what advice to give, but advisers from other specialties also disagree. And out of the heat of give-and-take a light does arise. Policy-makers should certainly not base their decisions solely on social science, but they might well be better off if they formed them after the social scientists' voices have been heard.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Columbia University, New York 10027, and Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027*

^{*}B. Berelson and G. A. Steiner, *Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings* (Harcourt Brace, New York, 1967); J. Rothman, *Planning and Organizing for Social Change* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1974).