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Usefulness of the Social Sciences

National attention has turned to the productivity, the performance, and even the profitability of science. Measured against such criteria, how will the social sciences fare? Quite well, I believe. Close scrutiny will disclose substantial contributions to economic growth and the public welfare. For instance, numerous well-established industries now market technologies that are derived from social science research: demographic projections, programmed language instruction, standardized educational testing, behavior modification, man-machine system design, political polling, consumer research and market testing, management consulting. Just as medicine draws upon biological research or electronics upon physics, government and management draw upon psychology, economics, demography, geography, and other social sciences.

In addition, the social sciences have vastly extended the observational powers of contemporary societies. Advanced industrial nations are commonly described as information societies in reference to their systematically collected information about the human as well as the physical environment. Human actions and the meanings attached to them constitute the most dynamic and complex of all those environments in which markets sell, banks invest, businesses produce, governments govern, and families plan. Monitoring the ever-changing human environment is a task approached through a variety of tools and disciplines of the social sciences: economic indicators, demographic trends, national statistical systems, historical research, time-series analysis, input-output matrices, developmental psychology, area studies, political geography.

Of course, the public importance of the social sciences, like that of the biological and physical sciences, is not limited to their accomplishments as observational sciences or to a list of industries that market their technologies. It is through theories and intellectual constructs that the sciences realize their greatest potential. In the empirical regularities they reveal, the counterintuitive questions they ask, the contingent associations they discover, and the successive layers of meaning they uncover, the social sciences conceptualize and thereby render accessible to human intelligence a wide array of economic, social, political, and cultural phenomena. Ironically, the social sciences seldom get full credit for their theoretical accomplishments, because the discoveries, once labeled, are quickly absorbed into conventional wisdom. This is easily demonstrated; note the number of social science concepts common to our vocabulary: human capital, gross national product, identity crisis, span of control, the unconscious, price elasticity, acculturation, political party identification reference group, externalities. Obviously, the phenomena revealed through such concepts existed prior to the relevant research, just as DNA, quarks, and the source of the Nile existed prior to their discovery. Yet concepts generated through research are discoveries that make phenomena intelligible and accessible that previously were inaccurately or incompletely understood.

That the tools and concepts of social science work their way into public discourse is a matter of some national importance. Regulatory policy, for example, is seldom discussed without reference to cost-benefit analysis. It is with models from economics and demography that the financial base of Social Security is being examined. Evaluation research is called upon to demonstrate program successes or failures. Game theory provides a vocabulary for looking at shifting international alliances. The current national discussion of productivity will make use of research on topics such as investment and savings behavior, management of complex organizations, competency testing, international labor migration, or human creativity.

In just a few decades the social sciences have accomplished much of practical significance. With continued public and private support, much can reasonably be expected in the decades to come.—KENNETH PREWITT, *President, Social Science Research Council, 605 Third Avenue, New York 10016*