

Social Scientists Make Case to Congress

The House Science Policy Task Force devoted three mornings of hearings in September to the social and behavioral sciences, explaining that their "increasing importance" and "the recent visibility of government support" (that is, of Administration attempts to undercut support) warranted their inclusion in its sweeping survey of American science.

The committee said that although its practice was not to focus on individual disciplines, it was making an exception for these fields. But the monolithic identity they have in the minds of many policymakers was reflected by Representative Manuel Lujan, Jr., (R-N.M.), who said he was glad the task force had decided to look at "this particular discipline."

The general drift of the hearings was that the social and behavioral sciences have made enormous strides in the past generation, and have infiltrated policy-making in many ways not immediately evident. But despite impressive advances in methodology and the growth of quantification, an aura of illegitimacy still clings to much of the endeavor. "By and large we tend to turn away from the social sciences," observed Representative Doug Walgren (D-Pa.), who chaired the hearings.

The hearings led off with a broad overview from Nobel prizewinning economist Herbert Simon of Carnegie-Mellon University who identified economic decision theory and cognitive science (of which he is a founder) as two of the major "hot spots" of scientific excitement. Sociologist Neil Smelser of the University of California at Berkeley spoke of new research on career criminals, research on collective choice, and the implications for research of the internationalization of social, political, and economic life. Harvard psychologist Duncan Luce reported on the National Academy of Sciences' massive "ten year outlook" for the social and behavioral sciences, which will make its appearance some time next year.

Walgren gave the witnesses a rare chance to tell the nation's lawmakers why, as Luce said, "there has somehow been an image that we are different from other branches of science." The usual reasons were adduced: everyone is his own expert when it comes to human behavior; the researcher's scientific finding is often the layperson's common sense; social science almost invariably touches on politically sensitive issues. In Simon's view, there is a special problem in general education: "Every kid who goes to school has a chance to find out what physics, chemistry, biology is . . . but social studies typically are very remotely related to modern social science. . . ." He added that the role of the social sciences often become evident only in controversies—"it's as if our whole view of biology was formed on the basis of its relationship to the abortion issue."

The primary need reiterated throughout the hearings was for support for the conduct of long-term, multidisciplinary studies. Luce also said that there is a "felt need" for interdisciplinary computational centers, which he estimated would cost \$10 to \$15 million apiece and another \$1 to \$2 million a year to operate, for such subjects as brain mapping and developmental psychology. Although the scientists expressed satisfaction with the present peer review process, Smelser said current funding patterns make

needed large-scale projects "difficult if not impossible."

It appears that the growing utility of the social and behavioral sciences is being recognized more fully in the private sector than in the federal government. Walter Albers of the department for societal analysis at General Motors Research Laboratories said that "in my opinion the climate for social and behavioral science research in industry has changed dramatically over the past two decades." His department has grown fourfold in 12 years and surveys a variety of phenomena such as social change, community noise, risk assessment, and driver behavior. "Very few of these were subjects of R&D in industrial research labs 15 years ago." The number of social scientists in industry has grown apace (the number of sociologists went from 10,900 to 23,300 in 8 years, according to the National Science Foundation) even in the face of an overall decline in the work force.

University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman, who is on the GM Science Advisory Committee, noted that the social sciences are particularly relevant to the national concern with industrial competitiveness. Noncompetitiveness has little to do with technical expertise "but everything to do with the way the organization is structured," he said. Yet "the necessity for systematic evaluation of . . . organizational changes is seldom recognized."

Witnesses cited several striking examples of costs saved through social and behavioral research. Joseph P. Newhouse of the Rand Corporation reported on a study of health services costs showing that over a 5-year period people enrolled in a Health Maintenance Organization had 40 percent fewer hospital admissions than the control group. Thus, he said, in 1 year the savings incurred equalled almost 100 times the cost of the experiment. But, he said, such studies are rare because they take a long time, appear to be expensive, and political considerations usually dictate broad dissemination of research money rather than awarding it in large chunks.

Several witnesses alluded to the shortsightedness of the Reagan Administration's 1981 attempt to do away with a good bit of social science research, including program evaluation, policy analysis, and the maintenance of long-term data bases. "Adequate, continuous and assured support for basic data collection is the most important single way in which the federal government can support the social sciences," asserted Albert Rees of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Clark Abt, founder of Abt Associates, said that if the government would conduct more social science research on the effectiveness of government programs, it could "save billions at the cost of millions."

Although industry is putting more resources into the applied end of things, the prospects for more basic research money from the government are not overwhelming. Nor, said Ford Foundation consultant Francis X. Sutton, acting president of the Social Science Research Council, are the foundations "likely ever again to assume the prominence they had a few decades ago." Stability of funding is what the social and behavioral sciences need the most, but Simon said he didn't see how that would come about without "more people understanding what it's all about." Said he: "I guess we have to try harder."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN