

Applying Social Science to Government

Social scientists who conduct applied research have a role, and it is an important one — to provide intellectual input in order to inform and assist the governmental process. My view is that the proper role for this action research is to educate, not advocate. But this is not an easy role to play. There is an understandable tendency among social scientists to want to use expert knowledge to advance their own ideas and values. The way the media behaves encourages this. Journalists frequently cite experts on both sides of controversial issues, thereby reinforcing the temptation for applied social scientists to act like politicians since their work is so often used as fodder for argument. The result is that too much of the time too many social scientists act too much like politicians.

This is an especially serious problem in fields of social policy. It is institutionalized in research conducted in graduate schools of social welfare, public health, education, and public affairs. In a parallel way, position-taking behavior has become standard and expected behavior in the professional organizations aligned with these institutions. Young people are trained as social scientists with the idea that activism involving the definition of public problems and the presentation of recommendations for their solution is good professional behavior in the social sciences. The net result is that applied research in the field of public affairs has become infused with an op-ed mentality that in an automatic and unconscious way mitigates against research that has a traditional and rigorous knowledge-building purpose.

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It is not a simple standard to say that public policy research should be evenhanded and dispassionate and that policy researchers should not take sides. In fact, there has been an almost constant debate in academic circles over whether it is possible to be evenhanded as a social scientist. In one sense, social science, believing as it does in the scientific method and in rational analysis, is a point of view. My reference here to evenhandedness is meant in the ideological sense of not being liberal or conservative, centrist or decentralist, coddlers or admonishers, in public affairs.

Politicians have a very different role from public policy researchers, involving two incompatible jobs — to serve as transmitters of values, and to advance their own values and ideas. The way politicians carry out this delicate balancing act is a good basis on which to judge whether they are good politicians. Politicians make decisions on several grounds — on the ground of what their constituents want, on the ground of what they themselves believe, and on the basis of expertise — that is, the intellectual input to the policy process. This third input to the policy process is the focus of this book.

Politicians also and increasingly vote their pocketbook, reflecting the views of large contributors who finance ever more costly electoral campaigns. I hope this problem of the undue influence of large campaign contributions will be alleviated despite the fact that it stubbornly resists reform efforts.

A newspaper column by Michael M. Weinstein of *The New York Times* on how economists view the issue of school classroom size showed how hard it is to sort out social science knowledge and opinion in the political process. Weinstein juxtaposed the work of two economists whom he referred to as an “odd couple.”¹ The occasion for his article was the long-standing debate on President Clinton’s proposal for new federal spending to put 100,000 more teachers in elementary and secondary school classrooms. Democrats supported him. Republicans, while not opposing the \$1 billion plus in new funding to be provided for education, argued that it should be appropriated flexibly to the states, since more teachers may not be every state’s top priority.

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One member of Weinstein's odd couple was Alan Krueger, an economist at Princeton University. Krueger, according to Weinstein, produced "some of the research results that the Administration uses to bolster its case for smaller class size." The other member of the odd couple is also an economist, Eric Hurnushek, a professor at the University of Rochester, who was described by Weinstein as publishing "one study after another arguing that additional spending on schools wastes taxpayer money."

Neither Krueger nor Hurnushek are offenders in the sense just discussed of abandoning impartiality and joining the political fray in their research activities. In fact, it is hard to see why they are an odd couple at all, as they are very much alike. Both are respected policy researchers and empiricists. Weinstein's column, published under the rubric "The Economic Scene," depicted the two scholars as agreeing on only one thing. They agreed, said Weinstein, "that Congress should resolve the many unanswered questions by running careful demonstration projects to figure out whether a national program to cut class size can work."²

For me, the moral of this tale is twofold. One moral is that it is very hard for even the best applied social scientists to avoid being drawn into the political thicket. The second moral is more subtle and pertains to the quality and nature of proof in social science. I am not sanguine that what Weinstein calls the "careful demonstration projects" advocated by Krueger and Hurnushek can ever fully resolve questions like "whether a national program to cut classroom size can work." Applied social science by public policy researchers can aid the political process by amplifying issues and elucidating options, but it can rarely unequivocally and conclusively settle the most emotional, big-stakes political issues.

The Point of View of This Book

A common abbreviation used in filmmaking to show how the camera is positioned is "POV," standing for point of view. Movie scripts are not easy to read. The camera is always moving. It is much easier to get the picture on film than by reading a script on paper: What is the camera looking at? Who is doing the looking? As a teacher, I have found this

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convention a useful one in the classroom. I tell students studying American government, especially students interested in public service careers, that they should always be mindful of their own POV. And more importantly, they also and always should be mindful of the POV of the people they are dealing with.

It is a good idea in writing to state one's point of view clearly and up front. The purpose of this book on the role of policy researchers in government is to present lessons I have learned in a career in applied social science. The focus is on the work public policy researchers do outside of government. The book also discusses the role of applied social science inside government. Many of my colleagues among policy researchers, as has been my own case, move in and out of government as "inners and outers."* My experience in the federal government helped me develop ideas that influenced my choices of research subjects and the conduct of studies I have worked on; however, the largest part of my career has been as a political scientist engaged in policy research outside of government.

Most of the research projects I have worked on are field network evaluation studies. My role in this kind of policy research began with a national study of the effects of the general revenue sharing program enacted in 1972. (The idea of revenue sharing was to provide flexible grants-in-aid to states and localities on a basis that enabled them to set and carry out their own priorities.) Previous to 1972, I had directed domestic policy studies for Nelson A. Rockefeller's presidential campaigns, which included the fields of federalism and intergovernmental relations. Later on, during the first term of the Nixon administration, I served as an assistant director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, and in this capacity participated in drafting federal revenue sharing legislation. Shortly after Nixon was elected for his second term in 1972, I left government and moved back to the Brookings Institution, where I had previously been a research staff member from 1966 to 1969. At the request of the Ford Foundation, I organized a

* I believe this experience is beneficial on both sides, and have urged academic colleagues to get a taste of government as a way both to enrich their scholarship and enhance its usefulness.

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nineteen-state evaluation at Brookings of the effects of the new revenue sharing law.

The questions that had to be dealt with in designing this first field network evaluation study help to make my point about how hard it is to study the effects of government policies. Arthur Okun, who had chaired the Council of Economic Advisors under President Johnson, was then a senior fellow at Brookings. He had doubts about the field-research approach. What would you say, he asked, if your mother gave you a check for your birthday and wanted to know what you did with it? His point was that the *fungibility* of federal grants-in-aid (the essential notion being that all money is green) makes it difficult — well nigh impossible, I think he said — to know what happens to such a gift.

My career was at a critical juncture. I responded to Okun that I was confident that studying state and local behavior in policy-making and implementation with regard to the uses of revenue sharing funds would tell us a great deal about what different governments (rich and poor, big and little) do with their shared revenue. Afterwards, Gilbert Y. Steiner, director of governmental studies at Brookings, said he was disposed to march ahead. After all, we had the research money.

The conclusion I reached years later, when we were deeply involved in the field evaluation of the revenue sharing program, was that my instinct in responding to Okun was correct. We did learn a great deal systematically about the uses of shared revenue. Many recipient jurisdictions, as it turned out, were wary of adding these funds to their program base — i.e., using this found-money for ongoing operating purposes. One-time capital purposes were a major use. This was especially the case for small, relatively well off, and fiscally conservative local governments. They feared locking revenue sharing money into their fiscal base and later having to raise taxes or lay off civil service workers when the federal government changed the rules or turned off the spigot, which it eventually did.

Not satisfied with focusing only on this fiscal question, the revenue sharing evaluation also examined the effects of the program in the functional areas where these funds were used for new-spending purposes. We

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also studied their distribution: Was the allocation of shared revenue redistributive? And we studied their political effects: Who decided on the use of the funds? How was the political role and structure of different types of governments affected?

Later on, the Brookings Institution was approached by the research office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to conduct a similar field network evaluation of another form of federal financial aid to states and localities — block grants — specifically in this case, the Community Development Block Grant program. In the same way, we were asked soon afterwards to conduct a study of the public service employment program established under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). Seven other field evaluation studies have been conducted over the years by networks of indigenous researchers in multiple governmental jurisdictions, including:

- ❖ A study of the effects of all federal grants on large cities.
- ❖ A study of the effects of President Reagan’s “New Federalism” cuts and changes in federal grant-in-aid programs.
- ❖ A study in New Jersey of the effects of Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG).
- ❖ A study of the implementation of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program for welfare reform under the Family Support Act of 1988.
- ❖ A study of the start-up and early implementation of President Clinton’s Urban Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community program.
- ❖ A study of the Neighborhood Preservation Initiative sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts to aid working-class neighborhoods.
- ❖ A study, still ongoing, of the effects of the national welfare reform law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act, signed by President Clinton in 1996.

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The main units of analysis in all ten studies are *institutions*. The studies have been conducted by networks of field researchers coordinated by a central staff. The focus has been on the *implementation* of new policies, broadly assessing their fiscal, programmatic, distributional, and political effects on state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private contractors. Were the policies we studied implemented the way they were supposed to be?

My “POV,” which is central to my reason for writing this book, is that these applied social science studies were useful and used in governmental processes, and at the same time that they contributed to scholarship on American federalism. Almost all of the field researchers were professors at universities. In these studies, they answered the same sets of questions in preparing their analytical reports that were then combined by a central staff. While the basic approach is inductive, in the sense of learning as we went along, there tended to be an implicit, and sometimes explicit, set of expectations (which could be called “hypotheses”) about likely program effects built into the framework for each round of the data collection for these studies. Most of these studies were longitudinal; in some cases they involved three or four rounds of field data collection.³ This book, which considers the way these policy research projects assisted governmental processes, also looks at the work of other policy researchers with different research purposes and methods.

This is a good time to reissue the book for two reasons. One is that I have clearer ideas now about the themes developed in the original edition. A second reason is that welfare policy, which is the main subject of the studies used in this book as case material, has changed greatly in the decade since the first edition was written. Two major national welfare reform laws have been enacted, both of which I have studied with colleagues using the field network evaluation methodology. A virtual cornucopia of other studies also have been undertaken on the effects of these two welfare reform laws, so the subject is a big and interesting one.

The first new welfare law passed since the earlier version of this book was written is the 1988 Family Support Act, enacted in the final

year of Ronald Reagan's presidency. The bottom line with respect to this law is that it did not make much of an impact. The second national welfare law examined is the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. In contrast to the earlier act, the 1996 act has already had a pervasive impact in American federalism on a wide range of public agencies and nonprofit organizations at every level of government.

The Role of Applied Social Science

As stated earlier, politicians act on the basis of their beliefs and those of their constituents. They also act on the basis of expert knowledge. This, however, is only one — and often not the main — input to public policy-making. One reason for this is that we simply don't have definitive knowledge that would enable politicians to base all, or even most, public policy decisions on uncontroversial scientific evidence. Over the years, social scientists have developed three bad habits that are important for the discussion in this book of the need for a realistic view of the role of applied social science.

The first bad habit of social scientists is the tendency to want to emulate the natural sciences. Beatrice Webb, who worked with Charles Booth in England on the early development of survey research methods, considered this problem in a book about her life as what she called a "social investigator." Webb's family had a close friendship with Herbert Spencer, whose philosophizing about unfettered capitalism could not have been more antithetical to the career and political path later followed by Webb. In her book, Webb used her relationship with Spencer to illustrate her ideas about the meaning and role of social science. Referring to Spencer's writing, she said, "There was a riddle in the application of the scientific method to human nature which continuously worried me, and which still leaves me doubtful. Can the objective method, pure and undefiled, be applied to human mentality; can you, for instance, observe sufficiently correctly to forecast consequences, mental characteristics which you do not yourself possess?"⁴ This is at the nub of debates about the meaning of social science: Can social

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sciences predict human behavior using “the objective method, pure and undefiled?” My view can be summed up as follows:

Social scientists should be realistic about the nature of the terrain in relation to the strength of their theories and methods. The data simply do not exist, nor can they ever be collected, which would tell us everything we want to know about every attitude, emotion, and form of behavior of every individual and relevant group in society in such a way that we could use these data to construct models and produce theories that would approach the predictive power of theories in the natural sciences.

The second bad habit of social scientists that is pertinent here is overspecialization. Modern social science is a bubbling pot of disciplines and subspecialties that have compartmentalized human society. A generation ago, economist Joseph Schumpeter said, “Our time revolts against the inexorable necessity of specialization and therefore cries out for synthesis, nowhere so loudly as in the social sciences in which the non-professional element counts so much.”⁵ In a similar way, social theorist Abraham Kaplan was caustic in comments about the fragmented and competitive character of the social sciences. “The fragmentation of science into ‘schools’ is by no means unknown in as rigorous a discipline as mathematics; what is striking in behavioral science is how unsympathetic and even hostile to one another such schools are.”⁶ This bad habit of social science is reflected both in teaching and professional practice. The boundaries between fields and subfields are rooted in reward systems that measure achievement by one’s ability to do independent work in a single discipline. The most common operational mode of modern social science is one computer terminal in one office operating in one discipline.

The third bad habit of social scientists is closely related to the first two, the tendency for social scientists to prefer quantitative research designs and techniques and downgrade qualitative research methods and data. Qualitative research can and does use numbers to interpret observations made by social scientists. It often involves presenting such data and in the form of generalizations with an empirical base, although typically (but not always) short of being able to bring to bear mathematical

proofs based on samples of sufficient size to infer causality. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, may use data that are less than ideally precise, but in this case with the emphasis on having an adequate sample size to be able to attempt to identify causal relationships. Again, Abraham Kaplan was on target when he criticized what he called “the law of instrument” in referring to quantitative studies. Said Kaplan, “Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding.”⁷ The hammer of modern social science is the computer.

This book highlights three types of applied social science that can be useful and used in the governmental process: (1) *demonstration research* to test possible new policies and major programmatic departures; (2) *evaluation research* to assess the effects on ongoing public programs; and (3) *studies of conditions and trends*. The bulk of my attention is devoted to the first two of these categories, demonstration and evaluation research. Four key points are:

1. Demonstration studies to test new policies and program approaches and evaluation studies of ongoing policies and programs are different in ways that have not been sufficiently taken into account by the sponsors and funders of public policy research and by researchers.
2. Evaluation research to assess ongoing public programs is the frontier of applied social science. Social scientists interested in policy research have the most untapped potential and some of the hardest challenges in this area.
3. In designing and conducting both demonstration and evaluation research, greater attention should be given to the missing links of applied social science research. Two missing links highlighted in this book are those between disciplines within the social sciences and those between quantitative and qualitative research methods and data.
4. In selecting the subjects for both demonstration and evaluation studies, priority should be given to situations in which three conditions apply: first, that policymakers and government officials are

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genuinely interested in the questions being asked; second, that they are uncertain about the answers; and third, that they are willing to wait for them.

These ideas reflect a view about a role for public policy research that is both positive and limiting. I view applied social science as a supporting player on the political stage. We have come a long way in our thinking from the over-optimism of the post-World War II period, which is discussed in the next chapter. Implicit in the earlier view was the idea that social engineering could replace what many intellectuals viewed as an excessively competitive political process dominated by self-interest. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose extraordinary career bridges the worlds of social science and public policy, said in 1969, “the role of social science lies not in the formation of social policy, but in the measurement of its results.”⁸ This is the view of public policy research presented in this book.

In sum, I believe applied social science research should emphasize *how* to do things rather than *what* should be done. Combining social science disciplines in such studies involves much more than bringing additional data to bear. It adds variables to the research equation. When we leave out disciplines, we leave out dimensions of human behavior. Disciplinary compartmentalization rooted in a single intellectual paradigm distorts human experience. Economists, to their credit, have been the dominant players in applied social science, stressing quantitative methods and data. Other disciplines that place greater emphasis on qualitative methods and data need to be brought into the picture, especially political science and sociology.

Ultimately, the kind of applied social science that is conducted depends on the role played by government and foundation officials acting as the sponsors and funders of policy research; they are in the catbird seat. They occupy the critical territory between the producers and the consumers of public policy research. The last chapter of this book considers the role of the sponsors of policy research, how they behave, and how their behavior might change.

Endnotes

- 1 Michael M. Weinstein, "Economists Raise Questions About Educational Priorities," *The New York Times*, 15 October, 1998, p. 28-A.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Professor Irene Lurie of the State University of New York at Albany, recently wrote a paper on this methodology. See "Field Network Studies," forthcoming. See also Richard P. Nathan, "The Methodology for Field Network Evaluation Studies" (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1982).
- 4 Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 139-40.
- 5 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 45.
- 6 Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (Scranton, PA: Chandler, 1964), p. 39.
- 7 Ibid., p. 26.
- 8 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 193.