

THE ACCEPTANCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Social science has now been accepted as a part of the social and political process in this country. The signs are all around. Professors are regularly interviewed on radio and television programs about current crises, foreign and domestic. Writing articles for newspapers and magazines in an effort to influence policy, or at least the public debate, is becoming as much a part of a professor's duties as teaching and publishing in academic journals. It was not always like this.

When I was a student in the 1960s, the social sciences were thought to be underdeveloped, relative to the natural sciences. At interdisciplinary gatherings it was not uncommon for physicists to lecture the assembled social scientists on "the proper use of the scientific method." Students who chose the social sciences, and their parents, worried whether they would ever find jobs.

Today the contribution of the social sciences to the life of the nation is rather widely understood. Most educated people know that the Federal Reserve Board and the Council of Economic Advisers work to maintain steady growth and to control inflation, thereby preventing the panics and severe business cycles, which disrupted the lives of our grandparents.

Most families have a member who has benefited from psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. Seeking psychological help no longer carries the stigma it once did.

Pollsters and the mass media allow political candidates to know and address the concerns of the electorate. One result was the destruction of the old, urban political machines, such as Tammany Hall in New York City.

Market researchers help companies decide what products to bring to market and how to present them, thereby reducing losses and increasing the efficiency of business.

Federal, state and local programs are increasingly evaluated for their effectiveness. Successful programs are expanded and improved, and less successful programs are phased out. The result is better use of tax dollars.

Some dramatic successes in the use of social science knowledge are not so well known. In 1962 and 1963 President Kennedy deliberately used a psychological strategy for the de-escalation of tensions to obtain the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the first treaty to control nuclear weapons, less than a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, probably the peak of tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

President Carter used a method of "principled negotiation" to obtain the Camp David accord between Egypt and Israel.

In the late 1970s the Federal Paperwork Commission studied the reports which citizens and businesses are required to make to the government and achieved some dramatic reductions in the burden, and hence the total social cost, of government regulation.

We are becoming more comfortable at working with intangibles like information, ideas, attitudes and beliefs. We increasingly accept that behavior can be changed by changing the way people think and the way people think can be influenced by means acceptable in a democratic society -- education, training, advertising, and incentives.

In addition to observing behavior, social scientists design and evaluate schemes for influencing the way people think and behave. When described in this way, these actions may sound like "social engineering." But social scientists work through the normal political process, and the results have generally been beneficial. Solving one problem often leads to additional problems, but that is the way change occurs.

I believe the social sciences have been accepted because the values of science are very similar to the values of democracy -- openness, honesty, and experimentation. In addition, both science and democracy insist that attention be paid to means as well as ends. Each transitional step must be an improvement.

The results are in on the grand experiment between capitalism and communism, at least in the minds of the people in the post-communist countries. Major challenges remain in stabilizing global human population and restoring the environment. But we know far more than we have in the past about how to balance economic development with fairness and equality of opportunity.

Science is a way of sharing our experiences by constructing knowledge that can be tested and applied. When used properly, science helps us to achieve our goals. The acceptance of social science is an important step in improving our ability to enhance the quality of life.

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