APRIL 1971

Would Government Support Be a 'Booby Trap' for Behavioral Scientists?

By E. C. HARWOOD *and* ROLLO HANDY

THE BOOK[1] REVIEWED HERE is by The Behavioral and Social Sciences Survey Committee, a group appointed jointly by the National Academy of Sciences and the Social Science Research Council. The number of influential persons associated with the project (see lists of names on pp. 275–79 and pp. vi–viii) suggests that the general point of view expressed in the Report is shared by many contemporary behavioral scientists, possibly a majority of them.

In the first half of the book the authors discuss the field of behavioral inquiry, briefly describe many of the relevant disciplines, review the research methods currently in use, and discuss the social import of behavioral science findings. They recommend the following: the further development, with Congressional support, of a system of social indicators analogous to the President's Council of Economic Advisers' economic indicators; the private (non-governmental) development of an annual Social Report to the nation; the formation of a commission to devise a national data system for behavioral research purposes; the establishment of a federal government group to work on ways of protecting the anonymity of the individuals studied; the creation of graduate schools of applied behavioral science; and an increase in federal support funds for basic and applied behavioral research from between 12 per cent and 18 per cent per year over the next decade.

The second half of the book contains much useful, detailed information on the following: students and degrees granted in behavioral science fields; Ph.D.-granting departments; the role of behavioral scientists in professional schools; behavioral research institutes; non-university behavioral research; federal and private support of behavioral research; and the situation in countries other than the U.S.A.. The factual data are primarily for the 1966–67 academic year; numerous projections are made for 1976–77.

[1] *The Behavioral and Social Sciences: Outlook and Needs.* By The Behavioral and Social Sciences Survey Committee. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 320 + xv pp., $7.95.

I

MANY SECTIONS of the Report will not withstand critical inquiry. *At times* the procedures adopted in the Report are unscientific and superficial, the language used is loose, the relevant evidence is only partially mentioned, and controversial issues are slurred over. Some illustrations follow:

(1) The authors say: "The fact that social prediction will always be contingent upon subsequent events, and hence will always lack complete accuracy, means only that some estimate of the degree of uncertainty must enter into a responsible prediction" (p. 21). But *all* scientific prediction is "contingent upon subsequent events" (*e.g.*, a predicted eclipse of the moon will occur only if something untoward doesn't happen in the meantime); social prediction is no different from physical prediction in that respect.

(2) In discussing political science, the authors note the development of the "behavioralist" movement after World War II. They go on to say: "At first, this new approach was resisted by some who held to more classical political theory. Fortunately, the tensions that arose have largely disappeared, and now there is a recognized division of labor between the more classically oriented political theorists and the contemporary quantitatively oriented empiricists" (pp. 38–39). The use of modern scientific methods urged by the behavioralists is so fundamentally opposed to the nonscientific procedures commonly used by the classical political theorists that one wonders how a productive division of labor could be established between the two groups.

(3) In discussing the ways in which Game Theory can "illuminate" many types of group behavior, the authors note that in this nation no political party has been able to maintain a stable level of support much over the 50 per cent level for more than a short time, and that in European parliamentary coalitions usually only a small majority is maintained. The authors then say: "Unless we are to attribute these observed facts to coincidence, they must have an explanation somewhere deep in the machinery of democracy. Game theory shows how an explanation of the 'minimum-size principle' can be derived rigorously from simple assumptions. The basic idea is that minimum-size majorities have all the power they need to govern; the price they must pay (in terms of concessions and compromises on issues) to attract or to retain additional adherents will be greater, the theorem shows, than anything the core group can hope to gain from the additional strength" (pp. 79–80). The reader is not told how

the Game Theory explanation "illuminates" the "deep" workings of democracies. Nor is the reader given any evidence that Game Theory yields a more useful description of the occurrence of "minimum-size majorities" than a description simply in terms of the group-in-power's unwillingness to make more concessions than necessary to retain power. To translate the latter description into Game Theory notions (even if they "can be derived rigorously from simple assumptions") doesn't improve whatever scientific warrant the description may have.

(4) The authors cite a study of 80 cultures, based on the Human Relations Area Files, showing that in cultures "in which male children were subjected to various sorts of physical stress during the first two years of their lives, the adult males averaged 2.7 inches taller than the adult males in those cultures in which the male infants were not so stressed, even though the racial backgrounds of the cultures were matched as carefully as possible. These somewhat surprising results are being checked by contemporary studies in Africa, for they appear to have implications for child-rearing that should not be overlooked. Apparently an appropriate amount of physical stimulation may be a good thing in infancy" (p. 111). As it stands, such a statement (whatever may be in the original research report) strongly suggests a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* procedure, and seems to assume, without giving evidence, that increasing height is an unqualified "good thing."

(5) In illustrating the benefits students may expect from studying behavioral science materials, the authors say that a student will learn "that mental illness is a product of traumatic relationships between individuals—parent and child, husband and wife, worker and supervisor, and so forth—with perhaps a genetic component as well in some kinds of illness" (p. 262). The emphasis on *individuals* ignores the socio-cultural aspects that many workers believe to be involved, and the passage quoted suggests that traumatic relationships always or often lead to mental illness.

(6) On the last page of the main text, the authors say: "the behavioral and social sciences are *potentially* some of the most revolutionary intellectual enterprises ever conceived by the mind of man. This is true basically because their findings call into question traditional assumptions about the nature of human nature, about the structure of society, and the unfolding of social processes. They challenge the inevitability of business cycles, the instructional and rehabilitative value of punishment, and the superiority of white skin. Psychology has already had a powerful impact on child-rearing and on adults' views of their own sexuality. Economics has

shaken traditional faith in the unregulated market and weakened resistance to planned and directed economies" (p. 272). The illustrations given in the latter part of the quotation are vague. No evidence is mentioned that psychologists or economists in fact have had the influences stated. Possibly those workers were as much influenced by the social changes vaguely referred to as they influenced those developments. And even if psychologists and economists had the impact suggested, we are given no evidence that their views are scientifically sound.

II

IN ADDITION TO THE CRITICISMS indicated above, naive and sometimes inconsistent remarks are found in the book about the relation of behavioral scientists to the government. The authors give several reasons for urging that the proposed annual Social Report to the nation be "tried out on a private basis," including their fears that a Report sponsored by the government would be caught up in partisan issues and be less objective than a privately sponsored Report (pp. 106–07). Yet they also suggest that the Report might be taken over by government eventually, and in other parts of the book show little awareness of the problems posed by direct governmental sponsorship of behavioral research. The blithe ignoring of such issues seems especially inappropriate for behavioral scientists, who presumably should have shed their political innocence and should be especially vigilant in defending their freedom of inquiry.

The authors are favorably impressed by the work of the Council of Economic Advisers and suggest the establishment at some future time of a "permanent council of social advisers" (p. 109). Yet as the Council of Economic Advisers now functions, the policy advice it gives can hardly deviate from what the President deems politically expedient. Such an official advisory group is simply not in a position to urge publicly the elimination of unsound economic policies that are strongly supported by the President and the Congress. A group of scientists could report privately to the President without encountering such difficulties. Or a scientific group could be responsible to the general public. But in our political system official public status for an advisory group is a strong guarantee that its policy recommendations will harmonize with the views of the group in power.

Although the authors emphasize how controversial issues in behavioral inquiry can be, they give no indication that such matters have a bearing on increased federal funding. Scientifically warranted assertions and policy

recommendations based on those assertions may be so unpalatable to politicians that they will not provide the financial support desired or needed. The lure of large amounts of federal money may lead behavioral scientists into a situation in which they cannot function as scientists but can function only as special pleaders for the politicians in power.

Already apparent is the fact that some existing governments recognize how important the work of behavioral scientists will become. For example: the Communist party in the Soviet Union has taken great pains to control the work of behavioral scientists with a view of ensuring that they serve the interests of those in power; and in the United States during recent years each political party when in office has used some behavioral scientists in ways evidently intended to further the retention of power.

Many people today are so impressed with the benign aspects of democratic or republican forms of government that they forget the lessons of history. The first democratic government in Europe following the French Revolution, which was inspired in part by the success of the American Revolution, beheaded Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry. On the other hand, much early scientific work in the 17th and 18th centuries was made possible because benevolent despots in various European countries chose to defy some religious leaders and protect a few scientists as well as support their inquiries. More recently, the economic advisers of an American President apparently have endorsed economic action so unsound that, in the words of a distinguished Harvard professor, it should "make every economist blush."

III

IN SHORT, AN IMPORTANT LESSON to be learned from the experiences of history is that scientists should not expect to be assured of unrestricted freedom of inquiry and discussion as the servants of the government, any form of government, nor by any vested interests having special privileges or positions of power that those interests desire to defend and perpetuate. Especially should behavioral scientists be wary of becoming the tool of agencies that may inhibit full freedom of inquiry and discussion, because, of the three major fields of science—physical, physiological, and behavioral—the last deals almost continuously with controversial matters of consequence to one or another vested interest.

In recent years, the Behavioral Research Council[1] has suggested a code

[1] During the 1950's, George A. Lundberg, Stuart C. Dodd, and E. C. Harwood held conferences with leading behavioral scientists in Claremont, California; Seattle, and New

for behavioral scientists analogous to the Hippocratic Oath and the legal code of ethics. It is:

My primary and overriding moral commitment or obligation is to serve as a behavioral scientist for the purpose of seeking solutions for the problems of men in society and publicly informing my fellow citizens as to the results of such scientific research. This implies:

(1) Relying in such inquiries on the methods of modern sciences in their evolutionary development.

(2) Endeavoring continually to improve my own ability as a scientist to develop warranted 'if-then' conclusions or assertions by applying scientific methods and by subordinating any personal biases in order to assure objectivity in my work and findings.

(3) Avoiding all conflicts of interest (such as might result from employment by special interests, etc.) that might inhibit scientific work or bias me in any way tending to pervert scientific inquiry.

(4) Differentiating clearly in all writings and public statements so that those to whom I communicate will understand whether I am speaking or writing in my role as a scientist within my field of competence or am simply urging in my role as a citizen or in some other specified role a course of action that I personally prefer.

(5) Criticizing as unscientific, without fear or favor, all purportedly scientific reports within my field of competence that (in the absence of such criticism) could be expected seriously to mislead my fellow citizens, whom I have chosen to serve.

Does anyone imagine that men who were conscientiously following such a code would choose to be dependent on funds from any government?

American Institute for Economic Research
Great Barrington, Massachusetts 01230
and
State University of New York at Buffalo
Buffalo, New York 14214

York for the purpose of forming a new organization expected to facilitate cooperation among behavioral scientists in the various fields. Development of common methods, of technical terminology (to the extent practicable) applicable in all the fields of inquiry, and of the cross-fertilization that might be expected to result were to be aims of the new organization. The Behavioral Research Council was formally organized in 1960 at Claremont, California.

The first research project undertaken was a survey of progress in all of the behavioral sciences. The results of this research were published in *A Current Appraisal of the Behavioral Sciences* in 1964. Because this publication has been widely acclaimed by reviewers in many of the scientific journals as the most comprehensive and useful publication of its kind ever published, the Behavioral Research Council is undertaking a revision of the first edition with anticipation of a completed second edition in 1971.