Getting Ahead of the Curve: Anticipating Future Policy Needs in Today's Research

May 01, 2002

The story to date. At unpredictable times, some current event, itself unpredictable, throws an issue onto the "national public agenda." September 11th threw terrorism onto the national agenda, where it had not been before, even though many who studied terrorism had pointed out our appalling vulnerability to terrorist attack, and marked the inevitability of events like those that finally occurred.

What happens when an event suddenly demands its place "on the national agenda?" One consequence is that the executive and legislative branches of the government abruptly understand that they must be seen to move toward solutions of the now "critical" problem, and that they are at risk of censure for having not looked ahead to see the problem before it turned from potential to acute. Rather obviously, a sense of urgency results.

Connecting this to what I have mentioned before in these columns, those charged with coping with the problem will work through already established social networks of contacts, to recruit plausible suggestions about what to do. On the legislators' terms, that becomes what legislation needs to be passed; for the executive branch, what policies need to be put in place, with differential interest in those that do not require legislative interventions.

If psychology is "to get in the act here," more formally, if psychology is to figure into the planning of the national response, we must have our people already established in those networks. So this must be a major function of our Washington presence, which consists not only of our scientific associations, but also of those of us who have become trusted intermediaries between the science communities and the various legislative and executive policy makers on many science-related topics. So being part of the social network that links policy action with scientific knowledge is a necessary condition for having a solution-shaping presence when a concern is thrown into sudden public visibility and is promoted into "a crisis that demands immediate attention."

A necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. When specific suggestions of policy and associated practice, structural innovations and institutional changes are being sought, we need to have suggestions that fit what is needed. We cannot say, "we know a good deal about the basic scientific issues that would – in twenty years time – enable us to generate the structure of solutions. Call us back." We need to have some sense of the institutional changes that will effect the changes we think make scientific sense. And we need those suggestions "right now."

This is not a call for all of us to immediately turn to designing the structure and purpose of various policy interventions in, for instance, education, child-raising, national defense, or public health. There is, in our society, a linear ordering of institutions that influence policy, and it is important to recognize where our own knowledge can best be positioned within this horizontal array of organizations.

At one end lies the institutions that are concerned with "basic science." These are the activities that many psychologists are up to in their research lives, and obviously, this node of psychologists is positioned on the science and discovery end of that continuum of organizations. This characterizes those of us who hang out in university settings, get our research grants from NSF and NIMH, and think of ourselves as "basic scientific psychologists." (We do, I note, manage to fill out the sections of the grant in which we posit the social significance of the research.)

But others of us work for organizations such as RAND, consulting houses, or military or civilian government agencies that station themselves more toward the social practice end of the continuum. Increasingly, we see psychologists appearing in schools of organizational management, and some of us are employed in schools of public policy. Still others – and we probably should wish there were more of these people – staff congressional committees, are interns "on the Hill" or staff government agencies in which policy issues are considered directly, with emphasis on deriving the policy from what research would indicate are best practices.

I have suggested that there is an array of institutions within which psychologists work, and an array of problems on which they work. I have also suggested that we conceive of this array as "horizontally distributed." Why am I harping on that? Because I think that many of us, unconsciously but arrogantly, think of the array as pyramidal, with the prestigious "basic scientist psychologist" perched at the top of the pyramid, and with the "applied psychologists" positioned in various lowly and less prestigious niches of the pyramid. I occasionally find myself thinking this way, and I hate it. Many of the most important discoveries of basic psychology were made by psychologists working in "applied settings."[1]

This is all perhaps sensible, and where my story would have stopped, but if it stopped here it would have left the most important topic completely unaddressed. This column contains no information that suggests to research psychologists where they might put their effort if they want to do work that has a high probability of being policy-relevant in the future. What are going to be the forcing issues that have a high probability of appearing on the national policy agenda in the future, so we can deploy our research in those directions now?

Not a question that many "basic" psychologists have faced. But others have and I can report on some conversations about that because Ken Prewitt passed through town and we had a chance to talk. Prewitt is a political scientist who is the former director of the United States Census, was president of the Social Science Research Council and senior vice president at the Rockefeller Foundation, and more to the point has thought carefully and creatively about science and policy issues.

Take our task as "getting ahead of the curve," as identifying what issues will require policy decisions in the next decade, and mobilizing our research now to make the discoveries around which policies eventually can be formed. What are these developments that will force significant changes in our national policies? Several can be seen on the horizon. Interesting, these issues often seem to merge into each other, so when one begins to think about one issue, one often finds oneself thinking about the others.

First, **global demographics**. Most of us think of the "population explosion" when we think of demographics, and it is true that the world population is expanding. However, in the more developed industrial democracies, the birth rate hovers around a number that will only keep the population stable or

even cause it to decline. Meanwhile, with the advances in public health and health care in those countries, the population grows older. At some point, the older people leave the labor force, and must be supported in their retirement. Most pension plans rely on the funds paid in by the current workers to flow out to pay benefits to current retirees, and the ratio of workers in the labor force to retirees grows steadily worse. Further, in many of these developed countries, it is difficult to recruit citizens to do the lower level jobs such as agricultural labor.

For all of these reasons, there is highly likely to be what is called "replacement immigration" into those countries to provide more workers to do what needs to be done, and to pay into the retirement programs to support the increasing percentage of the population that is retired.

What will be the consequences of this?[2] Many of the replacement immigrants will be of other ethnicities: recently, Latinos to the United States; historically, Turkish Moslems to Germany, North African Moslems to France. In what ways can those groups be fitted into the societies that they enter? What resistance will their presence engender? What will be the consequences for the civic institutions of those societies? Can these groups retain some elements of their ethnic identities? Which elements can be accommodated in the host countries and which will generate tensions? And what sorts of assimilations can we morally expect from these groups? What have we no right to ask them to do?

Science and technology are already leading to extraordinary changes in health, communications, agriculture, and everyday life. Many of these changes will require societal adaptations. Those of us who lived through the "weapons of mass destruction" era are aware of the wrenching struggles to avoid planetary-wide catastrophe, and are aware that those struggles are by no means solved, as we enter an era of nth country acquisition of these weapons. Further, current fears are that these weapons will pass into the hands of groups that are not easily controlled by the threat of mutual assured destruction. What global organizations can be created to ameliorate these threats? And surely the scientific and technological discoveries have more cheerful implications for the quality of lives. How are these to be managed and shared?

All of which of course raises questions about **justice and sovereignty**, questions we have been able to dodge by elevating the principle of national sovereignty to a near absolute. But when our televisions show us evidence that the poor of some badly governed nation starve, or when countries with ethnic tensions slaughter minorities, the limitations of "non-interventionism" become more apparent, and it is hard to resist recognizing that both self interest and concerns for justice sometimes will require intervention in those political entities. Political scientists and internationally-oriented lawyers are considering the justifications for a justice system that can reach within rogue nations; certainly there is a role for psychologists here.

And this concern for justice and its consequences for national sovereignty has led us into issues that are raised by the increasing ease of communications and its facilitation of certain aspects of "globalization." What should psychologists be considering about this? I am as unsure of the answer as I am sure that we need to be thinking about it.

On this unresolved note, I leave us. I have come to my concluding column for the *Observer*. I have enjoyed doing the thinking that the columns have required, and encourage myself with the thought that my musings are so incomplete and unfinished as to leave a great deal of room for others to join in the

process. At the New Orleans convention this June (register), we will have a symposium by others who have a more advanced grasp of psychology's entrance to policy.

---

[1] Read *The Dream Machine: J. C. R. Licklider and the Revolution that Made Computing Personal*, by M. Mitchell Waldrop. Among other things, you will find an account of the emergence of George Miller's magic number 7 from work sponsored by the military at the Harvard Psycho-Acoustics Lab. Think of the origins of the modern psychometric movement from the post war writings of psychologists who worked on military selection problems during the second world war. Notice the contributions made to judgment and decision making theory by those studying risk perceptions or deciding on the value of commodities that would be gained only in the future.

[2] Kay Deaux has recently started studying "psychological aspects of immigration issues," and she tells me that there has been little psychological interest in the topic, although it now starts to build.