

# What We Can Do

June 01, 2006

The Golden Fleece is a thing of the past, but the threat to our field that his Award represented is very much alive. Many in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government have attacked the behavioral sciences, and this continues up to the present. And it's not just federal officials: Even our colleagues in other sciences have been known to express similar criticism of our work.

Why are the behavioral sciences so widely attacked, and what can we do about it? Before addressing these questions, let me establish the experiences shaping my views. I have logged 20-plus years as a behavioral scientist and faculty member. I spent 13 years as a university administrator — from department head to collegiate dean to vice president for research and dean of the graduate school. For nearly one presidential term in an era that, like Proxmire's, was marked by attacks on social-behavioral science, I was deputy director/chief operating officer of the National Science Foundation (NSF). In my most recent decade, I served as a senior foundation executive, working with all sectors of society. I have served in several federal research funding institutes, from peer review committees to advisory councils of agencies. I have also chaired or served on several committees and boards of the National Academies of Science, among other national commissions.

Through all this, I have worked with public officials, scientists from all disciplines, within the academy and outside, in business and in industry. And I have heard members of all these fields express negative views about ours.

When I was at NSF, the chair of the House Science Committee was a strong and regular attacker of the behavioral sciences. So were members of the National Science Board and, occasionally, members of Directorate Advisory Committees. Their comments usually reflected stereotypes: "Those fields are not scientific and have no place in NSF"; "The methods used in the social/behavioral/economic sciences [referring to the NSF Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences Directorate] are not rigorous."

The primary reason for attacks on behavioral science is lack of knowledge of our field and of the science we do. The perception that we do "bubba" psychology — "discovering" what your grandmother always knew — constitutes one sort of misunderstanding about social and behavioral science. I also encountered lawmakers who had been undergraduate majors in political science and who believed that all fields of social and behavioral science were like what they learned as undergraduates. When engaged in discussion with them — as I was often while at NSF — these lawmakers admitted to not knowing of the discoveries I cited from our fields. Other times, they didn't think of the discoveries as coming from social/behavioral science, instead attributing them to medicine or some other field. Once properly informed, however, lawmakers typically appreciated learning that such important discoveries had come from the social and behavioral sciences.

Critics who were scientists themselves often didn't know much about fields beyond their own or closely related ones. While they at least sometimes acknowledged our phenomena as important, they believed

that scientific study of them was fruitless: They perceived that our scientific knowledge lacked monetary value; and they were surprised to learn about the steps we take to establish scientific rigor, given the challenges of measuring phenomena that can only be inferred, and then with error.

I became further convinced that ignorance perpetuates negative views when I encountered “hard” scientists who had collaborated with social or behavioral scientists. These researchers were usually more appreciative of our fields, as they had learned more about what we study and our scientific methods. They saw the utility in our work.

Ignorance and limited understanding, however, are not the only factors at work. Some politicians expressed a belief that social-behavioral scientists are “bleeding heart liberals” who use the label of science to advocate liberal views. While I find it offensive to dismiss “liberal,” I agree that we must differentiate our advocacy roles as citizens from occasions where we speak as scientists from the existing scientific evidence.

There is yet another disturbing reason that motivates attacks on social and behavioral science. Sometimes, both other scientists and politicians look for pots of money to grab for themselves — even though funding for social science research has never been relatively abundant. Motivated attacks from other scientists are particularly disappointing, since they weaken the entire scientific enterprise.

What to do? First, don’t let attacks — or even mild criticism — go without a response. Assume that the speaker doesn’t understand, and appropriately educate him or her. These are teachable moments. Silence will be taken as endorsement of the critical views, and they will be perpetuated.

Second, seize every opportunity to educate. Let other colleagues and the broader public know what it is we do, how we do it, and why it’s important. Even if not all undergraduates are going to go on to be scientists, be sure they understand what behavioral scientists do. If we do not advocate our work, who will?

Third and finally, support those inclined toward interdisciplinary work. Research demonstrates that most scientific discoveries occur at field boundaries. While difficult, interdisciplinary research can be highly productive scientifically. It pays to educate other colleagues about the value of psychological sciences.