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Perspectives *on* Behavioral Science

The Colorado Lectures

edited by
Richard Jessor



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Perspectives
on
Behavioral Science

Preface

This book celebrates an academic institution as well as an intellectual perspective. Since the substance of the book is about the latter, a few words should be said here about the former. From the time of its establishment at the University of Colorado in 1960, the Institute of Behavioral Science has been an important setting for the exploration of ideas and the pursuit of social inquiry. A large number of scholars have found that it offered them an ideal setting for interdisciplinary research and for exchange and interaction with scholars from disciplines other than their own. Over the years, many complex, multidisciplinary research endeavors have been initiated, carried out, and reported upon under the aegis of the institute. Over the years, also, many of the scholars involved in those projects have come to see their fields and their own work in a new light as a consequence of their interdisciplinary experience. Both its influence on research and its influence on scholarly lives need to be counted in measuring the institute's success.

Primary responsibility for whatever success the institute has had rests with the faculty who created the collegial and generative climate that has characterized this setting since its inception. Among the faculty, particular individuals played especially important roles at various times in the institute's history: Kenneth R. Hammond, who promoted its founding; the late Ozzie G. Simmons, who was its first full-time director; Gilbert F. White, whose leadership as director brought the institute to maturity; and Stuart W. Cook, whose steady hand steered it through difficulties on more than one occasion.

The support of the university administration has been consistent and generous from the institute's fledgling days until now. Deserving special mention in that regard are the late Milton E. Lipetz, former vice chancellor for Academic Affairs; Bruce R. Ekstrand, current vice chancellor for Academic Affairs; and Everly B. Fleischer, former dean of Arts and Sciences. It was Vice Chancellor Lipetz who provided the funds for the Distinguished Lecture Series that eventuated in this volume.

The organization of the lecture series was managed with superb care and unalloyed commitment by Debbie A. Ash. She was also responsible

for the processing of the manuscript and for its preparation for publication. Without her involvement in every phase of this undertaking, it could not have succeeded. It would be difficult to exaggerate my appreciation for her contribution. I am grateful, too, to Illana Z. Gallon for the assistance she provided with various chapters of the manuscript.

Academic life has an urgency about it that often precludes the very reflection and unhurried rumination it is supposed to nurture. The celebration of the institute's twenty-fifth anniversary provided an opportunity to engage in just that kind of activity. This volume is the dividend of such scholarly thought.

Richard Jessor

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PART ONE

*Behavioral Science
in Perspective*

I

Perspectives on Behavioral Science

Richard Jessor

“Behavioral science” is a relatively new term, one that emerged only recently in the history of social inquiry. Invented after World War II, the term reflected important new developments in the various social and psychological disciplines as well as far-reaching aspirations for their integration and unification. It was in the context of those developments and aspirations, and in a postwar climate of pervasive intellectual ferment, that the Institute of Behavioral Science was established at the University of Colorado, Boulder. By the beginning of the 1960s, the institute had a full-time director, its own building (a remodeled church!), and a broad range of interdisciplinary research projects well underway. In celebration of the first quarter century of the institute’s life history, a Distinguished Lecture Series in Behavioral Science was organized at the University of Colorado. Spanning two academic years, the series brought to campus a dozen outstanding scholars—all leaders in their fields, pioneers in the interstices among the traditional disciplines, and innovators working the terrain around the edges of the social sciences. This book is a collection of the lectures they presented.

In the thickets of everyday research, it is difficult to find a vantage from which the larger scientific enterprise might be seen whole. This series provided an opportunity for scholars to gain perspective on behavioral science near the end of the twentieth century—what it represents as an approach to knowledge about human nature in society, what forces were shaping its growth and development, and what its future might be. It seemed, in short, a propitious time for deliberate and self-conscious reflection, even stocktaking, about the state of behavioral science.

Unfortunately, there is no clear consensus on what the term “behavioral science” means or, perhaps, should mean. Sometimes it is used synonymously with the notion of social science; at other times, it is used to designate something different from, or in addition to, the social sciences; for example, the recent National Academy of Sciences report is titled “The Behavioral and Social Sciences” (Gerstein et al., 1988). Sometimes it is employed in the singular—behavioral science—as in our own institute’s name, but, probably more often, it is a collective term—the behavioral sciences—intended to aggregate a number of separate disciplines into a common fold. The plural usage in the purview of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences exemplifies the latter.

Indeed, it was the establishment of that center by the Ford Foundation, and the concurrent initiation of its Behavioral Sciences Program in the early 1950s, that first gave prominence to the term “behavioral sciences” and assured not only its currency but also its endurance. Berelson (1968) traces those early developments and argues that the behavioral sciences constitute a special subset of the social sciences and can be distinguished from the latter largely by the particular disciplines and subdisciplines that it includes and excludes. He writes, “there seems to have been a genuine need for a collective term in addition to the traditional ‘social sciences,’ ” and there is “a sense of both substantive and technical unity within this segment of the social sciences” (1968:43). Commenting on the very same events, Sutton adds, “the label ‘behavioral sciences’ was chosen because it could clearly embrace psychology and because it was thought to suggest a more firmly scientific approach than ‘social sciences’ ” (1985:59).

Berelson’s perspective on the behavioral sciences as that subset of the social sciences—including psychology—that maintains a rather direct focus on the scientific study of human behavior is a helpful first step toward definition, but it hardly begins to suggest the basis for his extraordinary prophecy: “The new field of the behavioral sciences will in all probability be ranked among the important intellectual inventions of the twentieth century” (1968:44). More was obviously intended to be conveyed by the behavioral sciences concept, and several other properties of the term were, in fact, elaborated in the staff paper approved by the Ford Foundation’s trustees some forty years ago in 1952 (Ford Foundation, 1953). They include, most importantly for our present purposes, allusion to “an interdisciplinary approach and not to any single conventional field of knowledge or a single combination of them”; a concern for “knowledge which promises . . . to serve human needs. The program is thus oriented to social problems . . . ”; and the inclusion, under the term ‘behavior,’ of “such subjective behavior as attitudes, beliefs, expectations, motivations and aspirations” (cited in Berelson, 1968:42).

Those three properties attached to the behavioral sciences notion—an interdisciplinary approach, an orientation toward social problems, and the incorporation of subjectivity, at least in the limited way then expressed—anticipate some of the key thematic threads that wind through the chapters in this book. That they should have been signaled so explicitly in that “founding” document gives it a definite aura of prescience. Their elaboration in the staff paper makes clear that the behavioral sciences notion was, indeed, intended to connote a great deal more than the mere segregation of a subset of social science disciplines with common substance and technique.

Although the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences Program provided the most recognizable impetus, there were other sources of influence on the development of the new idea of behavioral science as well. One of those grew from the interest in systems theory as a basis for integrating the various social and even biological disciplines and resulted in the founding of the journal, *Behavioral Science*. The journal’s title, in contrast to the Ford Foundation’s usage, is in the singular. In calling attention to this, Berelson tells us, “The Ford Foundation deliberately used the term in the plural to signify that it had not embarked upon the creation of a unified discipline where three or more already existed. The singular usage has sometimes implied intent to create a unified discipline, whether in place of, or in addition to, the existing disciplines . . .” (1968:44). It is obvious that quite different meanings attach to the very same term depending on whether it is invoked in the singular or in the plural. The import of the different usage is profound—one signifies collocation and the other unification—and we will return to a discussion of the difference in the concluding chapter.

There is, of course, a much longer history behind the notion of behavioral science—whether in the plural or the singular. It lies in the enduring interest in all the social science disciplines in *interdisciplinary* research and was evident also in the deliberate creation of various institutions, for example, Yale’s Institute of Human Relations, to promote and foster that style of inquiry. Concern with and support for interdisciplinary work has characterized the social or human sciences during much of this century; the first documented appearance of the term, “interdisciplinary,” is in a presentation to members of the Social Science Research Council in 1926 by the well-known psychologist, Robert S. Woodworth (see Frank, 1988). Over the course of the intervening decades, interdisciplinary efforts and approaches underwent wide swings in popularity and fealty. There were periods in which it held honorific status, and other times when a sense of disappointment with its accomplishments was the common reaction. Some of these shifts undoubtedly reflected expectations having been set too high; as Frank notes in her delightful

history of the term: “‘interdisciplinary’ always promises good” (1988:77). Some of the variation in support for interdisciplinary work reflected, in all likelihood, the politics of academe and the perceived threat it posed, especially when it was institutionalized in new types of academic organizations such as centers or institutes, to the conventional disciplines organized in conventional academic departments (see Sewell, 1989:91–92). And some efforts fell short not simply because of promising too much or because of bureaucratic opposition, but because the particular interdisciplinary approach adopted relied upon an epistemology that proved to be too impoverished for the Olympian task it set for itself. This seems to have been the case with Yale’s Institute of Human Relations.

Overall, however, support and interest in interdisciplinary research among the social and psychological disciplines prospered and continued to thrive. Frank writes: “from the twenties on, ‘between-ness’ was where the action was . . . ,” and, as for the term, interdisciplinary, itself, “it is hard to imagine getting through the rest of the century without it” (1988:78).

The relation of interdisciplinary research activities to the emergence of the notion of behavioral science(s) is an intriguing one, certainly worth analysis by professional historians of science. Several things are already apparent, however. The issues dealt with in interdisciplinary research tend to lie at the border or the boundary of the traditional subject matter of a given discipline. In psychology, for example, the traditional focus is on person and behavior; when a border issue is addressed, for example, the impact of poverty on individual development, it may require a deeper and more searching appraisal of the social and economic context than can be provided by the concepts and techniques available within the discipline. A linkage may then be forged with colleagues across the border, say in sociology, for whom analysis and assessment of the social context is in fact their *métier*. Such “borrowing from neighbors” is probably the most characteristic way in which interdisciplinary research has been carried out. It represents what might be called an additive rather than an integrative model—the investigator in each discipline does, essentially, his or her “own thing,” and their separate contributions are then brought together. Although often devalued as not being “truly” interdisciplinary, that is, not being synthetic, that kind of work is certainly a major step beyond the conventional. It tends to engage what are traditionally, for each discipline, its “boundary conditions,” the taken-for-granted or the *ceteris paribus* assumed when normal inferences are drawn. The incorporation of concepts and techniques from neighboring disciplines implicates a larger segment of the empirical world, and the sources of variance under measurement control become significantly

expanded. This way of doing interdisciplinary research almost always results in enhanced understanding, whatever the issue being addressed.

Notwithstanding its substantial contribution to knowledge, this kind of interdisciplinary inquiry tends to leave the separate disciplines intact. There are, however, other models for interdisciplinary work, models that have a more reverberating impact on the disciplines, that generate pressures on them for reformulation, and that may even yield new disciplines that lie between those that are traditional, for example, biochemistry or behavioral genetics, or that stand above them, for example, cognitive science, neuroscience, and, perhaps, behavioral science. In these latter models, the problems addressed not only lie in the interstices between the conventional disciplines, but inquiry relying upon disciplinary concepts and on additive linkages between them also turns out to be insufficient. New, nondisciplinary, ways of formulating questions seem to be required, new concepts and frameworks get generated, and new technologies for measurement and analysis are devised. In short, there are models of interdisciplinary research that are, indeed, problematic for the conventional disciplines and that may threaten the current departmental organization of academic institutions. In this connection, it is well to remember that the present disciplines are, after all, a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of the organization of knowledge, and their differentiation is probably best seen, in any case, as evolving and transforming rather than as fixed.

With this perspective in mind, it is intriguing to reconsider the impact of the Ford Foundation's Behavioral Sciences Program. Despite its deliberate use of that term in the plural, and its explicit disavowal of seeking to create a unified discipline (i.e., a behavioral science in the singular), it may well be that its vigorous promotion of interdisciplinary research helped to unleash just the kind of forces that have moved social inquiry in precisely the latter direction. We will say more about this possibility in the concluding chapter.

Influences on an Emerging Behavioral Science

The crucible in which behavioral science was being formed, from the mid-1940s on, contained a variety of other influential elements beyond the persistent interest in interdisciplinary research and the continuing quest by many for unity of science. Social science, especially psychology, had emerged from World War II with vigor and self-confidence, having been recognized for and credited with signal and useful contributions to that effort. Scientists returned to campus departments with optimistic aspirations about major and imminent advances in knowledge, and in

prediction and control. It wasn't long, however, before a sense of disillusionment and even crisis began to be felt in many of the disciplines.

Perhaps the most explicit exemplar of these developments was the crisis in social psychology brought most forcefully to attention in a paper by Ring (1967) that had widening reverberations and that stimulated a great deal of self-conscious reexamination of that subdiscipline, its research traditions, and its widely accepted epistemology. Koch's (1959) "Epilogue" to the first three volumes of a massive review of the state of psychology as a whole stands as another document in what was to become a long list of appraisals conveying a deepening sense of disciplinary malaise. Similar concerns were echoed in other disciplines, including anthropology and sociology. The general tenor of numerous commentaries is summarized in the following examples: "many social scientists are not happy with the way things are going" (Blalock, 1984:14); "there has been in the social sciences, at least in recent years, a vague sense of unease about the overall rate of progress of the disciplines" (Shweder and Fiske, 1986:1); and "the present intellectual gloominess that seems to prevail . . ." (Meehl, 1986:315). It can be argued that this sense of disappointment with the reach and the accomplishments of disciplinary work was, itself, one of the elements that spurred the exploration of paradigms for inquiry that could transcend the limitations and overcome the constraints of such work.

A second element in the crucible from which behavioral science emerged was the growing awareness that positivist epistemology, the program for making science on which so much of inquiry was predicated and from which so much had been promised, was fundamentally inappropriate as well as intellectually impoverishing for the social sciences. The decline of positivism was broadly liberating; it opened up a postpositivist climate in which alternative epistemologies more consonant with the unique concerns of the human or social sciences could be explored. This, too, was inviting for an incipient behavioral science.

Third, the decades after World War II saw a greater willingness to acknowledge and accommodate the role of language in human adaptation, the centrality of meaning, and, most basically, the subjectivity that most sharply distinguished the subject matter of the human sciences from that of the physical sciences. This "coming to terms with subjectivity" (Jessor, 1981) has been enormously consequential for behavioral science. It not only played a major role in the further erosion of positivist epistemology, and in stimulating new lines of interdisciplinary connection, but it also provided a place for hermeneutics in an evolving postpositive epistemology more apposite to the objectives of a science of human affairs.

Also contributing to the emergence of behavioral science has been a fourth element, a deepening appreciation in the social and psychological

sciences of the role of context, of setting and place, of the situation in which the human drama is played out. In their rush to emulate physics and to find universal laws, psychologists, especially, had ignored the social situation as a determinant of human action and development, or else they sought to accommodate complex situations with the rather meager reach of the concept of “stimulus.” There was in psychology an almost complete disregard for the texture, the structure, and the social organization of concrete human environments. With the demise of radical behaviorism, concern with context was revitalized in psychology, and it now represents a major conceptual focus in contemporary work (e.g., Magnusson, 1981). This same burgeoning interest in capturing settings is even reflected in anthropology in the call for “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) and in sociology in the ethnomethodology movement (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967). In short, as positivism waned, the search for *situated* understanding became increasingly paradigmatic, and its achievement required that new bridges be built between those disciplines primarily focused on society and those concerned with persons or groups.

Finally, mention must be made of one other element in the mix in which the contours of an emerging behavioral science were being shaped. That element was the increasing attention to inquiry organized around important societal problems. Social problems, whatever their nature—war and peace, poverty, crime, population growth—have in common a scope and complexity that defy understanding by any single discipline. A reasonable grasp on such multifaceted social phenomena would seem to require the concepts and techniques of multiple disciplines brought together in some fashion in which the knowledge acquired by each can supplement that acquired by the others. To the extent that inquiry is organized around or initiated by a concern for social problems, the separate disciplines will inevitably be brought together and challenged to find ways to combine the knowledge they separately generate. Such circumstances are propitious not only for the development of the usual kind of interdisciplinary knowledge, but also for the elaboration of supra- or metadisciplinary formulations as well, formulations that encompass or subsume more than one discipline.

Concern with human problems, incidentally, was explicit in the original plans for Yale’s Institute of Human Relations (see Morawski, 1986), but they were never realized once Hull’s agenda for a stimulus-response theory of learning and adaptation came to dominate the institute’s activities. There was also an explicit focus on problem-oriented research in the staff paper describing the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences Program, as was noted earlier. Other institutional arrangements have also provided support for the growing role of research on social problems, including the Society for the Study of Social Problems and the Society for the