

MORAL VALUES AND SOCIAL EXPERIMENTATION

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The 20th century has been marked by the growth and wide-spread dispersion of the idea of social planning and deliberate intervention into the "normal" processes of society on the part of governments and their agencies with the purpose of improving the condition of life of their citizens. It has, of course, always been the province and the mission of government to be concerned with the welfare of the governed, and governments have established institutions, made laws to maintain civil order, administer justice, and provide protection of life and property to its citizens. Furthermore, in all times and in all places, individuals and private (non-governmental) groups have taken measures to improve the welfare of others. Thus, in earlier centuries in the western world, at least, religious groups undertook to provide education and conserve knowledge; private associations were formed to offer mutual assistance in dealing with illness and death, or disaster; and political parties both peaceful and violently revolutionary were organized to agitate and press for social reforms. But the notion of a "social policy" directed toward achieving certain specific goals for a population, based upon social planning and implemented by a strategy of intervention is predominately a 20th century idea. That idea is rooted in the view that men are not simply the victims of vast forces beyond their control, but rather that they can exercise a measure of influence over the conditions of their lives - and that they can do so without resorting to violent revolution, but rather within the context of orderly, planful strategies of intervention to abate baleful influences and enhance ameliorative ones. This optimistic view is doubtless connected with the historical growth in rational means (science and technology) for influencing natural events and redirecting the energies of nature to human purposes. It is, perhaps, understandable that this view should expand from its base in

the biological and physical sciences to the areas of human experience which are the province of the social sciences. Thus the idea of social policy and social planning imply an applied social science just as the ideas of medicine, agriculture, transportation and communication imply applied biological and physical sciences.

Yet, the experience of the first part of the 20th century has not uniformly reflected such applications. Perhaps the social sciences have been under-developed and have lacked the competence to solve social problems. Perhaps social problems are so vastly more complicated than the intellectual tools available for their solution, that the social sciences have had little or no voice in systematic social planning. In very many cases, only rudimentary use has been made of social analysis and systematically collected social data. Rather, the broad, long range goals of social policy have been attempted through strategies of intervention that at best were poorly informed by scanty data and based upon fragmentary, inadequate models of social systems; and at worst have been simply the derivatives of intuition or ideology, based upon faith rather than fact. In the last decade the United States has experienced a number of efforts to intervene in social processes which although based on good faith and good intentions, have apparently failed to achieve their purpose. Such failure can be found in the fields of social welfare, the delivery of health care services, education, the administration of criminal justice, and the reduction of inter-racial tensions, together with the provision of equal opportunity.

Faced with these facts, a number of U.S. social scientists have arrived at the conclusion that a more satisfactory approach to the implementation of social policy is through the conduct of experiments on social intervention strategies prior to the time they are implemented on a national or other full scale. The basis for this conviction is straight-forward. The making

of social policy requires both some consensus on the valued goals to be sought; and as much knowledge as possible about the feasibility, the cost and effort, and the effectiveness of the various strategies for attaining these goals (various social interventions). It is always difficult to forecast accurately, what will be the effects (both direct and incidental) of a deliberate intervention into social processes. Too little is known factually about the problem to begin with; and good theoretical models of the social processes involved in the intervention are lacking. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to attempt to enlarge empirical experience with intervention by beginning on a small scale and in a systematically designed manner so as to learn as much as possible about the social problem and the various possibilities of intervening. This view suggests that systematic experimental trials of proposed social interventions have important advantages over other ways to learn what programs or what combination of program elements are effective under what circumstances and at what cost. By "experiment" is meant that one or more treatments (i.e. social programs) are administered to some set of persons (or organizations or other units) drawn at random from a specified population; and that observations or measurements are made to learn how much some relevant aspect of their behavior following treatment differs from like behavior on the part of an untreated or control group, also drawn at random from the same population. The basic idea of a social experiment is quite similar to that of a biological or agricultural experiment, but with the important added feature that social experiments may raise certain kinds of ethical (as well as legal) issues. Before embarking on a discussion of these, one further word on the role of the experiment. The experiment should be viewed as part of a cycle which begins with ¹ problem analysis, proceeds to ² program ³ planning, ⁴ development and implementation as an experimental treatment; and closes the loop by ⁵ feeding back the results of the experimental

trial into further program planning and development, directed either toward a new experiment (if the first has shown the intervention to be ineffective) or toward the implementation of a full scale social intervention. Thus social experimentation in its broad form includes program evaluation as an integral part of a design whose intention is to select systematically the ultimately important information about program effectiveness which would indeed become manifest if the social intervention were simply to be launched on a nation-wide scale without trial, but to collect it on a smaller scale and in such a way as to allow dependable inferences about main, (intended) and side (unintended) effects - inferences which can be generalized to predict what would happen if the social intervention were converted into a national program. Such a design is, indeed, ambitious, but social experiments have been carried out, and are in process in the United States as well as elsewhere in the world.

Such experiments frequently encounter questions and objections based upon the opinion that social experimentation is somehow unethical. Most social experimenters readily acknowledge the existence of specific ethical problems. For example, it would be highly unethical to experiment with any treatment that, a priori, might be reasonably expected to inflict damage or harm upon the treated units. In this respect social experimenters are guided also by the doctrine of medicine: Primum non nocere. They are also concerned that the privacy of the participants in the experiment be protected, and the confidentiality of data participants provide to experimenters be respected (this latter problem is, for social experimenters in the United States, a serious one since social data collected for experimental purposes enjoy no special protection of the sort that communications between husband and wife physician and patient, or priest and penitent do). The doctrine of informed consent of participants to the procedures to be employed in the experiment

is another ethical requirement which is readily respected in many social experiments, but can give trouble in some. This trouble arises when knowledge of the purposes of the experimental treatment would per se effect the behavior of the participant units - e.g. if pupils are aware that the purpose of an educational experimental treatment is to improve reading speed they might make deliberate efforts to increase their reading speed in order to please their teachers (or the opposite, to frustrate them). Obtaining the informed consent of an untreated (control) group may face similar problems of artifactual effects. In some experiments there may be a problem of the ethical obligations of the experimenter at the time the experimental treatment is terminated. For example, when an experimental treatment confers a special, but temporary "boon" the inevitable cessation or withdrawal of treatment may leave the participants absolutely, or at least relatively disadvantaged. Of course, if they have given their informed consent and if they have been truthfully told, as they should be, that the experimental treatment is a temporary one, the experimenter should, in principle, have the right to a clear conscience. Nevertheless, some experimental treatments so manifestly improve the conditions of life for the participants that withdrawal of treatment awakens sympathy for those so deprived. When the participants have clearly benefitted and when it is not clear that a regular program will replace the experimental treatment and fulfill its aims, the experimenter may bear some ethical burden to assist the participants in developing their own resources for continuing the treatment from which they appeared to find so much benefit.

Some objections to social experimentation appear to go beyond the specific considerations and assert that social experimentation in and of itself borders upon the immoral. Sometimes this position is expressed by saying that experimenters are ^① "playing with other peoples lives"; sometimes the objections are more penetrating and focused on the ^② alleged immorality of changing an important portion of individuals' life situations simply for the purpose of gaining knowledge. At all levels, however, these criticisms appear to go to the intentionality of experimentation, and they suggest that the purpose of "getting knowlege" is ethically less estimable than the purpose of "doing some good". Experimenters frequently reply that the purpose of "doing some good" through the introduction of a large scale intervention program under such conditions that "getting knowledge" of a dependable sort about its positive and negative effects is impossible, is, indeed, the less ethical of the two choices. But joining the issue on the basis of intentionality seems less fruitful than examining the implications of the ethical charge for social policy planning in general. There may be much less ethical difference between a social experiment and an innovative social program than at first meets the eye. Both are undertaken in ignorance of their actual future outcomes. The experiment is more likely than the national program to yield dependable knowledge about outcomes. If it is unsuccessful, it will be so in a smaller number of cases. If it has unintended and unanticipated negative side effects these will also be minimized. The financial and human costs of experimentation are lower than those of national program interventions and the addition to scientific knowledge of the information gained in the experiment is no inconsiderable advantage. Yet when these facts are pointed out, the objections of certain ethicists do not disappear. They argue that national policies are subject to open national debate during their formulation

and before their institution, whereas social experiments are not. This objection may be entirely reasonable, and the ethicists' objection suggests ~~two lines of thought~~. Perhaps all social experiments should be debated in the Congress or Parliament before they are instituted, despite the fact that this will inevitably result in some scientific difficulties for the sort of experiment in which fully informed consent may impinge upon the treatment variables in such a way as to produce artifacts; and second, ⁽²⁾ that social intervention programs undertaken in the name of "doing good" should themselves be subjected to the same sort of ethical scrutiny which is proposed for social experiments.

33 - This is a straightforward discussion of social experiment as an adjunct of social planning. - presenting a brief historical analysis of the development of social planning, its consequences of implementation and the subsequent growing recognition in some circles that social experiment can be a valuable tool for the social planner. The pros and cons of social experiment or direct implementation of social policy are discussed.

