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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE 6-1858.

The Social Sciences and Society

Hard-nosed social scientists strive to avoid problems of policy and to concentrate on process. When they deal with value preferences at all, it is to measure their incidence, distribution, and intensity in a given population. Matters of this kind can be treated objectively, quantitatively, and scientifically, and the social scientist thus can avoid the fact-value syndrome that plagues his more traditionally oriented colleagues.

Unfortunately this value-free posture tends to blind the so-called hard-nosed social scientist to the really great problems of man and society and often focuses his attention upon relatively unimportant issues. It helps to explain the monumental accumulation of trivia and the ponderous elaboration of platitudes that characterize so much contemporary social science. And it tends to make social science a more or less sophisticated servant of any power elite that may seek its services in the manipulation of human behavior, regardless of goal or purpose.

A value-free science is of course absurd in any strict sense since science has its own norms, standards, or values, by which its statements are tested and/or evaluated. Nor is it enough to say that scientific values are merely methodological or procedural, concerned with means and not ends, except only as they aid in the objective pursuit of truth. For truth wears many faces, and to discover what is true or false is not unrelated to the discovery of what is good or bad. A scientific concept can be true or false in the degree to which it corresponds to the norms or standards of science itself—i.e., to meter readings—and it may be good or bad in the degree that it contributes to, or corresponds with, the basic needs and goals of human life. Unless science is merely random behavior or idle curiosity without purpose, it has a responsibility to discover and to serve these basic needs and goals.

This lays a special obligation on the social sciences because they are by definition concerned with man and society. So-called behavioral science, whether hard-nosed or soft-nosed, assumes that human behavior is goal-directed, and that in striving for these goals, men choose among alternative modes of conduct. It assumes also that in choosing, they are conditioned not merely by the physical world and the pressures of appetite and instinct but by formal education in rational modes of thought and behavior. Rationally induced changes in human behavior thus become as reasonable—as scientific—as rationally induced changes in the physical environment. There is nothing unscientific in social scientists' seeking to change those conditions of character and environment that impair man's ability to make rational choices among alternative modes of behavior.

Not less important is the task of social scientists, by precept and example, to encourage in everyone they can reach a conscious and continuous reflection on the human condition and on alternative roads to the basic goals for which all men strive. Scientists are not immune from the responsibilities of other citizens. They need to be reminded that attitudes of Olympian indifference or cynicism toward moral and ethical problems in a society that has all but canonized the scientist can issue in apathy and cynicism among others, attitudes dangerous alike to science and a good society.—PETER H. ODEGARD [Excerpted from *The Educational Record* 45, 190 (1964)]