

CONFERENCE REPORT

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY

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Scientists presumably engage in research, not as an abstract exercise, but as an endeavor they expect eventually to have an impact on fellow human beings. Products of science have had this direct effect, transforming the lives and environments of people all over the world. Effects, however, may also be indirect, as is the case when scientific information is used in the formation of social and public policies. Repeated examples from the physical and biological sciences illustrate how governments and social institutions have modified or established policies on the basis of new research findings. Such examples are rare in the behavioral and social sciences, however, for here researchers are just beginning to have the kinds and amounts of information that are sufficient to influence policy development.

Thus far, there has been little opportunity for scientists from different countries to share experiences they may have had. In order to facilitate this interchange, a conference on international perspectives in child development and social policy was convened in Toronto for a day and a half before the biennial meeting of the Society. Researchers from 18 different countries, many of whom are members of the Society, were joined by representatives of UNICEF and UNESCO for this initial step in gaining an international perspective on these problems [1]. For most

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[1] Conference participants included: T. Altimirano (Peru), J. Ambrose (England), O. Andreani (Italy), H. Azuma (Japan), G. Bramaud du Boucheron (France), U. Bronfenbrenner (United States), B. Carlsson (Sweden), S. Dirgaganarsa (Indonesia), P.R.J. Falger (The Netherlands), D. Feitelson (Israel), M.C.R. Ferreira (Brazil), J.J. Goodnow (Australia), M.A. Kotliarenko-Echeverria (Chile), F. Liu (The People's Republic of China), E. McWhirter (Northern Ireland),

participants this was a first chance to discuss such issues with colleagues from other countries. The conference was supported by the Society and the Bush Programs in Child Development and Social Policy at the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina, and the University of California at Los Angeles.

A surprising similarity in concerns emerged among the participants, regardless of their country's form of government or status as a developing country. Nations all over the world are faced with many common problems such as bilingualism, urban migration, intergroup conflict, underachievement, poverty, and daycare of children. However, investigators and policy makers, working isolated within a single country, commonly fail to recognize the problems and their solutions, the frustrations and successes that their counterparts in other countries have experienced. One of the important suggestions from the conference was that mechanisms be set up to improve the international exchange of information about the development and outcomes of programs for children. This information, typically contained in informal reviews or reports of evaluation research, seldom appears in journals or publications other than those of the government for which the program was undertaken.

Some participants prepared case histories related to a national problem in the education of young children where social policies were (or were not) influenced by information derived from research in child development. This topic was chosen because education of young children is something with which all governments must deal and in which there is a rich research literature. The case histories covered such diverse topics as the integration of Protestant and Catholic children in the schools of Northern Ireland, education of migrant children in the shanty towns of Lima, Peru, early child care in Australia, refusal of Japanese youth to attend school, placement of five-year-olds within the structure of Israeli schools, and mode of teaching characters to Chinese children. Other participants served as reactors to these case histories. Common themes emerged through the discussions of these cases, and they can be portrayed most vividly by quoting extensively from comments of the participants.

A Pinard (Canada), J. Reykowski (Poland), and C. Suvannathat (Thailand). H. Stevenson, E. Blumenthal, D. Ordway, and R. Haskins (Bush Programs), W. Hartup (ISSBD), and D. Banks and E. Lannert (UNICEF), and D. Bureson (UNESCO).

Ideology

Central to the discussion of many issues relating research and social policy was the role of ideology. Ideology was seen not only as an influence on how research findings are applied, but also on the whole process of research itself. The latter point was explained: "I do not think it is possible to separate ideology from research, or what one knows from what one believes. Every research work has an ideology involved in it, even if the researcher is not conscious of it".

There was acknowledgement, too, that it often is difficult for members of a society who are also scientists to recognize how ideology, research, and policies mutually interact. A critical problem for scientists is to find a way to separate what they know from what they believe. It was put this way:

"As a developmental psychologist and researcher, professionally interested in the problem as well as personally as a citizen and mother, it is imperative ... that I do not misunderstand my own hopes and confuse them with scientific knowledge."

"The problem", suggested another participant, "is that scientists are not cold-minded experts; they also are involved in society. And in being involved in society they also are under pressure of society." Pressures on the researcher in child development are especially intense, for "every mother, every father – everyone – knows what children need."

Scientists, if they are to maintain their status as scientists, must consciously avoid becoming crusaders or protagonists. "Not that crusaders are unimportant", it was suggested, "but we have another role: being someone who can be called upon to call the shots as they are." Another participant addressed the issue in a similar way:

"Scientists should offer governments and social movements an elucidation of possibilities. But this is a difficult task. It is very difficult to liberate oneself from all the social pressures one must face."

The urge to become a crusader derives not only from the pressures of being a citizen and a person with a particular ideology, it also comes from the frustration of seeing that the implementation of policies often is a short term affair:

"A successful, effective minister is likely to move. You just get someone persuaded and he is yanked out. We have to have a very different concept of timing both in getting research done and in getting it integrated and evaluated if we are to have any degree of effectiveness in this

relationship between research and policy. One danger is that the researcher may be doomed to refight the same battles over and over again, so that continued implementation is bought at the cost of continued involvement.”

Goals

In addition to acknowledging problems inherent in separating knowledge from ideology, it also was suggested that researchers interested in social policy must recognize that goals of researchers, politicians, and the general public may often be different. The problem was outlined as follows:

“These groups have very different ideologies, and they also have different goals. What stands out often is not the attempt to carry out an action but to legitimize the action that is being taken. There are cases when a government or a ministry decides on a policy or wishes to make a choice. At the top somewhere, someone has been persuaded, or goes looking for data to make a choice. This we may call a top–down approach. The other is bottom–up, where people like psychologists have data and go looking for a government, department, or policy maker in an attempt to put that into practice. The role of research and difficulties we encounter are different, depending on which we are doing.”

The “top–down, bottom–up” distinction became an important theme to which the discussion frequently returned. The goals of a policy maker in search of data necessarily differ from those of the researcher who seeks to create new policies through results of research.

Goals differ, too, in that the task of the innovator is to change a system while the goal of society’s representatives in government often is to preserve the system. It was put this way: “Countries differ one from the other in terms of ideology, but one of the most important aspects of threat in all countries is the fear of things getting out of control”. Since introducing change in a system may lead to unforeseen side effects and consequences, forces exist within every system, according to what has become known as systems theory, that resist innovation and change. Researchers, failing to appreciate this duality of goals between researcher and policy maker, may help to create a climate of “reciprocal indifference” where interaction is minimized and progress is necessarily slow.

Communication

Since the attempt to use research in the resolution of problems in social policy is a relatively new phenomenon, paths from the researcher to the politician and to the public are often lacking. The problem was described as follows:

“One needs not only research data and a budget, but also some sort of machinery that enables one to implement a variety of things. Research people need machinery to capture the ear of politicians, and politicians often need machinery to implement their platforms.”

It was suggested that until such machinery is more completely developed, it may be difficult for behavioral scientists to be more effective in getting heard by the policy maker. Scientists tend to be reluctant to be their own publicists. But without the impetus provided by the scientist, dissemination of new findings may require a long time.

Much was made of the inability of many scientists to communicate with policy makers:

“Scientists feel powerless in relation to policy makers. Because of that they have a tendency to perceive the policy maker as powerful but stupid. In other words, we cannot do it because ‘they’ have the power, but ‘we’ know how to do it. This is not a position for the development of communication. Communication is very basic but one of the obstacles is the attitude of scientists. We must do something about our attitude in order to increase our effectiveness.”

Research and practice

Few participants reported outstanding success in influencing social policy through research. Why should success be so rare? Many suggestions were offered:

“My impression is that in my country the status of the research and researchers in this field is rather low.”

“There is not a cadre of individuals who have the credentials that might lead them to have credibility.”

“Many pieces of research are still too fragmentary and not directly relevant to social programs and policies. The potential contribution is still largely unrealized.”

“I must say that research workers have not been very keen to try to do research that has some social relevance.”

“Everyone wants to speak of what they want to speak about, and not what they have been asked to speak about. Cooperation between policy makers and scientists is difficult because scientists rarely answer the questions they are asked and policy makers rarely listen to the answers they receive.”

“It is difficult to describe the utilization of developmental research findings in social and political problems in my country because politicians are more inclined to intuition and improvisation than to planning along definite lines with definite aims.”

“The government is not research conscious and fails to plan ahead. They always act in the context of urgency, requiring immediate answers and solutions to problems.”

Part of the reason that research in child development may have had little influence may be related to the distinction that was made between the “hard” science of developed countries and the “action” research of developing countries. Investigators in developing countries are very often unable to obtain support for research dealing with “basic” questions of “hard” science. The only research that can be undertaken is that which deals with a restricted set of questions concerning the feasibility or consequences of the government’s or a social agency’s particular type of social action. It was stated this way:

“We can carry out research in my country, but funds are scarce. Most people working on research obtain funds from charity. Almost all funds are required to implement action and very little is left to evaluate action. There are even fewer funds for “hard” science. The scarce funds we get for research ought to be used to investigate what people in poverty need and what poverty really means. What are the processes people in poverty go through? What are the conditions under which they live?”

There are other problems. Governments necessarily are concerned with problems of immediate social relevance. The researcher is often dedicated to the conduct of research that deals with less transitory phenomena. This leads to a dilemma that was posed as follows:

“Researchers have run *after* the problems and not *before* the problems. We must join the two approaches. We must run after the problems with action research and we must face the future with more basic research.”

Action research poses additional problems for the researcher. How does the investigator maintain objectivity when the subjects of the research are themselves involved in attempting to do something about their everyday reality? The roles of such “subjects” are transformed, for they play an important part in collecting the data and in determining possible ways in which changes may be implemented. Interpretation of such research therefore is made more difficult.

Another reason was offered as to why behavioral scientists in all countries may not have had a strong influence on social policy. If the problems were simple and their solutions obvious, there would be no need for policy-makers to seek enlightenment from research findings. Thus, when the social policy expert consults the scientist it is on extraordinarily complex problems whose solution is particularly difficult. Typically, there is no direct research on the topic, for answers to such complex questions would involve very complicated, expensive research designs. Funding for such research rarely occurs prior to the time the questions are raised. Researchers, therefore, are dependent upon relevant, but not directly applicable findings which they must often qualify. The social policy expert, typically untrained in the behavioral sciences, wants a straightforward answer with no qualifications. The stage is ripe for frustration – a state that may be an inherent part of the experience of the contemporary behavioral scientist who becomes involved in the social policy process.

Problems are expected to continue, then, until groups of policy makers in each country are made aware of the research that exists, the research base increases, researchers find it more gratifying to undertake research with implications for the formation of policy, and the ease of communication between scientist and policy maker improves.

Conclusions

It was obvious that within all countries the fusion of research and implementation occurs at a heavy price. In developed countries problems are difficult. They are acute in developing countries, where there is a paucity of researchers and of policy-makers interested in children, as well as scarce financial and social resources to support these individuals. Nevertheless, efforts to better children's lives through the use of the rapidly developing knowledge about children are gaining momentum in

all of the countries represented. The attempt to use research findings in shaping social policies is a recent phenomenon; in the future we may expect greater interplay between research and policy formation. "The development of knowledge and its application for the purposes of facilitating the public welfare is gratifying", said one of the participants. With such motivation we can expect to see growing interaction between researcher and policy-maker in developing "a dialectic equilibrium which should be rich in fruitful effects and constructive criticisms".

To accomplish this we must meet our obligation as scientists:

"What are the ideological premises that will enable us to talk together? Our job does not stop when we get our facts out. Our big job as scientists is how to build the conceptual and ideological bridges so that our societies, leaders, and the general public can hear a different drummer. Not to convince them that this is the right music – that is their privilege – but to hear a different drummer."

Papers given at the conference on 'International perspectives on child development and social policy' (August 15–16, 1981, Toronto)

(1) *Return migration to the countryside*, Dr. Teofilo Altimirano (Department of Anthropology, Apartado 1761, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima, Peru); (2) *The influence of research on social policy in Italy*, Professor Ornella Andreani (Universita degli Studi de Pavia, Facolta de Lettere E. Filosofia, Instituto de Psicologia, Pavia, 21, Corso Strata Nuova, 65, Italy); (3) *Child development and social policy: Japan's examples*, Dr. Hiroshi Azuma (Faculty of Education, Tokyo University, Hongo 7-3-1, Bunkyo-Ju, Tokyo, 113 Japan); (4) *The children's ombudsman – a spokesman for children*, Mr. Bo Carlsson (Radda Barnen, Box 27320, S-102 54, Stockholm, Sweden); (5) *Some aspects of research on child development and its relations to social policy*, Dr. S. Dirgagunarsa (Daksinapati Barat 11/6, Kimpleks U.I., Rawamangun, Jakarta, Indonesia); (6) *The Latin-American debate on compensatory education*, Dr. Maria Angelica K. Echeverria (Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigaciones ed Education, Enrique Foster Sur 59, Santiago, Chile); (7) *Reform in reading and changeover from K + 1 to infant schools – two case studies*, Dr. Dina Feitelson (School of Education, University of Haifa, Haifa 31999, Israel); (8) *Substitute care for*

disadvantaged under-fives in Brazil: research and policy issues, Dr. Maria Clotilde R. Ferreira (Faculdade Filosofia Ribeirao Preto USP, Avenue dos Bandeirantes s/n.o., 14.100 Ribeirato Pretom S. Pavio, Brazil); (9) *Research and policies for young children: an Australian case*, Dr. J.J. Goodnow (School of Behavioural Sciences, Macquarie University, North Ryde (Sydney), New South Wales 2113, Australia); (10) *Our work in child psychology and its connection to education*, Professor Liu Fan (Institute of Psychology, Academia Sinica, Beijing, People's Republic of China); (11) *Segregated education and social conflict in Northern Ireland*, Dr. Elizabeth McWhirter (Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland); (12) *Child development research and social policy in Thailand*, Professor Chancha Suvanathat (Director of Behavioral Research Institute, 3 Sri Naka Riwi Roth, Prasarnmith, University of Bangkok, Bangkok, Thailand).