A Brief History of the Council

By Kenneth Prewitt, former president

Notes on the Origin of the Council

We start, appropriately enough, at the beginning, with a few informal comments on the earliest years of the Council. I draw heavily on "A Decade of Council History," as it appeared in the Decennial Report, 1923-1933, of the Social Science Research Council, from which all quotations are taken.

The Early Years

In the early months of 1923, a small group of social scientists, representing the American Political Science Association, the American Sociological Society, the American Economic Association, and the American Historical Association, met, informally, to consider how they might assist scholars to conduct studies of a fundamental nature, to secure funds for field work and to make provision for research publications that did not, in their words, "possess immediate commercial value." The group was soon joined by representatives of the American Statistical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Anthropological Association. Informal arrangements were quickly found insufficient, and the SSRC was incorporated in late 1924 with its board composed of representatives from the seven national associations.

The Council began to work, even before its incorporation, in ways that seem familiar today. One of its first acts was to urge Congress to appropriate funds sufficient to allow the Library of Congress to publish an annual index of state laws. Also, in 1923, the young SSRC cooperated with the National Research Council in a study of

human migration. Members of the SSRC had met with the NRC committee, and observed that though the NRC had underway excellent studies of the physical aspects of migration, the design "left without coverage complex and significant questions of a character essentially social." It fell to the Council to design companion studies from the social standpoint. These early activities were forerunners of efforts, respectively, to improve the infrastructure for social research, and to include the human or social dimension in the nation's scientific projects.

If in its earliest activities the Council set forth a number of practices that continue today, so also in its founding principles do we find suggestive continuities. Starting in the mid-1920s the Council sponsored annual conferences. These were described as vital to the Council's work because they were the chief vehicle of what the Council took as its initial task: "the bringing together of men from different sciences, the breaking down of excessive compartmentalization." Part of the folklore of the Council is a story often repeated of how three senior scholars, each a most important figure in his respective field, first met at a Council gathering despite their being from the same university. It is said that this occurs even today.

From such experiences emerged one of the key policies enunciated in the founding years: The Council would deal only with such problems as involve two or more disciplines. The reasoning has a familiar ring. Work in a single discipline was described as traditional and already proceeding in its regular course on an extensive scale. What was lacking, argued the Council, was machinery for work involving more than one discipline. Such machinery would promote "new insights into social phenomena, new problems, new methods leading to advances in the scientific quality of social investigations." The cross-fertilization of the social disciplines, which was taken as a primary goal of the new Council, would not emerge "from work in the center of established fields where points of view and problems and methodology have become relatively fixed."

A second basic policy stressed the importance of preliminary studies rather than direct research investigations. The term preliminary study was a metaphor for research planning, a concept which, though at the very core of the Council's mission, has never been easy to explain. It is comforting to discover that the founders were no more crisp in their definition than we are today. In the Council's terminology, they wrote, research planning "has meant the very thorough consideration of a general area of investigation with the view of reaching a judgment as to the most desirable work to be done in that area. The objectives are a coherent conception of the area in terms of its central or major problems, the subordination of its minor problems, and a decision as to the most promising point or points of attack." So understood, the planning exercise would place the Council in a position to produce what was described in the 1920s as a more continuous and integrated knowledge.

These two principles -- interdisciplinarity and research agenda-setting -- were at the core of how the SSRC understood its mission in its first decade. Not surprisingly, in 1933, as the Council prepared for its second decade, external conditions led it to ask whether its policies were not too narrow. Social relevance was on the table. The Council came to the conclusion that it should give recognition to the immediacy of troubling public issues.

But, of course, it was not self-evident how such recognition was to be given. The Council had first to decide whether to sidestep those issues so current as to be part of the political controversies of the day; our predecessors concluded that the controversial character of an issue was no reason to avoid it. Next, in selecting its portfolio of projects, the Council agreed that it should "give weight to the promise of particular research to contribute to an understanding of contemporary questions." The social research function, argued the Council, included the obligation to "present systematically in relation to social problems the existing state of what is regarded as knowledge." Having thus boldly stated its willingness to engage controversy and to be socially relevant, the Council was then quick to assure its constituency that "this

decision involved no intention of abandoning more remote and fundamental research in favor of that applied wholly to immediate ends."

Marshaling knowledge in forms readily applicable to the practical needs of society is one thing; viewing research as extending "to the solution of problems of policy and action" quite another. This on-the-one-hand/on-the-other formulation did not impede Council action, as is readily discerned in the program of, for example, the Committee on Industry and Trade, which issued reports on banking policy and credit control as related to economic instability; or the Demonstration Project for the Development of Comprehensive Statistics of Welfare Administration; or the justly famous committee work that led to the establishment of the social security system -- which, in effect, got rather close to the "solution of problems of policy and action."

The examples could be multiplied, both then and now, for though the words have changed -- "mission-oriented basic research" or "fundamental research critical to the needs of society" -- sixty-plus years later the Council continues to balance, as best it can, its principal task of advancing basic theory and method in social research with the concern that its work add to the sum total of human happiness and welfare. Even this cursory review of early practices and principles of the Council is incomplete without mention of two topics which, if not basic policies, were certainly central activities in those early years. I have in mind work on methods and training fellowships.

Improving research methods was the task of one of the first committees of the young Council, the Committee on Scientific Method in the Social Sciences. It labored long and hard but not entirely successfully. The title of its major product, *Methods in Social Science: A Case Book*, edited by Stuart A. Rice, reveals much, for the singular in the committee name has become the plural "methods" by the time the book is published in 1931, thereby reflecting the increasingly pluralistic if not eclectic

compromises the committee made. Subsequent efforts to advance methodology tended, as separate projects, to be less ambitious in scope but in combination added enormously to the methodological sophistication of the social sciences in everything from statistics to personality assessment, historical analysis to structural equation models, cross-national comparison to longitudinal analysis, experimental design to sampling theory. Certainly the founders of the Council had in mind that their new institution would advance method as well as theory, and in this their intent has been amply realized.

Finally we note that training was among the earliest of tasks the Council set for itself. The highly respected Research Training Fellowships program was launched in the mid-1920s. It was based on a principle that has cast its influence over several dozens of subsequent fellowship programs. The distinction was drawn between the research worker and the research project. This distinction, seemingly so obvious in retrospect, held that a program focused on the research worker would lead to training in which a new skill or new perspective would result. The research product itself was incidental to the chief purpose of a fellowship that took the recipient beyond his or her discipline or method or expertise and thus would, eventually, promote a broader research agenda. Working from this simple principle, Council fellowship programs have provided personnel for such ambitious enterprises as incorporating mathematics into the social sciences, establishing foreign area studies, and transforming how international security is comprehended.

Today, when Council fellowship screening and selection panels deliberate or when the Council has under review a new fellowship program, the first question is whether it is the research worker or the research project that is the primary target. In asking this question the Council is but recalling the distinction so usefully drawn seven decades ago. To pursue that question further, or other of the issues lightly touched upon here -- infrastructure development, interdisciplinarity, research planning, social relevance -- would require close attention to present programs, which is not the

intent of these pages. The task here is the easier one of reminding readers of the Annual Report that the Council did start somewhere, and that in its origins can be found practices and principles that have had remarkable staying power. How those practices and principles have been modified, and added to, will be noted in subsequent installments. My hope is that these historical notes as well as the project they initiate will be of help to those many scholars active in Council projects who, from time to time, might be curious about the larger picture.