

Social Science Research Council

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Kenneth Prewitt 

President

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Dr. Joshua Lederberg
President
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Dear Joshua:

I am writing to ask for advice in an area of concern to the Council and of substantive interest to you.

As you may know, the Council has during the past two decades actively encouraged collaboration between biological and social scientists. The Council has done this as one aspect of its work to advance research in the social and behavioral sciences. It employs a variety of activities toward achieving this primary goal: the appointment of interdisciplinary committees of scholars to set priorities and make plans for critical areas of social science research; the improvement of research training through training institutes and fellowship programs; the support of individual research through postdoctoral grants; the sponsorship of research conferences, often interdisciplinary and international; and the sponsorship of books and other research publications that may result from these activities.

The Council has contributed to the interaction between the social sciences and the biological sciences through the appointment and sponsorship of two major committees. The Committee on Genetics and Behavior was appointed in 1961 to consider the then present and potential contributions of modern genetics to research in the social sciences. In 1966, this activity was succeeded by the Committee on the Biological Bases of Social Behavior (BBSB). This committee had a broadened mandate to further a general rapprochement between the social and the biological sciences and particularly to provide improved biological training for social scientists. Some of the major accomplishments of these two research planning committees, both of which have completed their program of activities and have been discharged by the Council, are described in the attached tables.

These Council efforts have contributed to and benefited by a variety of developments in the field. As you are well aware, important research advances have been witnessed in the study of brain-behavior relationships, systems physiology, behavioral genetics, and ethology. We have seen the emergence of a Behavior Genetics Society -- with a large associate (graduate student) membership. Other useful developments have occurred in technology -- for example, new recording techniques and

advances in computer science (software and hardware). Still other developments have been theoretical -- for example, the specification of meaningful bio-behavioral response units, the development of increasingly powerful formulations of comparative behavioral data across species, and the emergence of microevolutionary conceptions. As a result, much contemporary behavioral research asks new and searching questions about the machinery of behavior in the individual organism or about the forces acting upon groups and populations of organisms so as to influence their adaptation, their development and capacity for learning, and the nature and speed of evolutionary change as it occurs in the particular species. A growing number of psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists are incorporating theory and findings from the biological or biomedical sciences into their social science research program.

Several current Council activities in the social sciences incorporate projects involving the biological sciences. For example, the Committee on Life-Course Perspectives on Middle and Old Age is adding biologists to its membership and will sponsor several projects on the biology of aging attempting to build linkages between biological and behavioral findings. The Council has established a Committee on Biosocial Science which is examining cross-species, cross-culture, and cross-time perspectives on parenting and early offspring development. The Committee on Social and Affective Development will consider physiological and neurological aspects of emotional expression. An exploratory project on gender will involve a consideration of biological contributions. With the exception of the Committee on Biosocial Science, these activities represent specific projects of research planning committees with broad mandates that are not explicitly directed at the interface of the biological and social sciences. Even the Biosocial Science Committee is currently limiting its attention to a rather specific set of issues. We are, therefore, concerned that critically important areas may not be covered by these projects. For example, much of the most recent work on the biology of development is hardly touched by current Council activities; that is: recent findings on the biochemical and genetic aspects of psychopathology, genetic contributions to plasticity and adaptability, breakthroughs in molecular and developmental biology that may have implications for behavior, the increased medical capability for dealing with birth complications and newborn deficits with the possibility of behavioral consequences, and the intersection of biological and social factors during adolescence. New neuroanatomical approaches to the study of nervous system function and psychophysiological and neurobiological approaches to cognitive research also provide especially promising directions for the interaction of biological and social scientists.

We at the Council only have glimpses of some of the currently exciting and challenging areas of collaboration between the biological and social sciences. It is customary in such situations for the Council

to consult a small number of leading scientists in addition to its Committee on Problems and Policy for guidance in assessing its activities and establishing priorities. We are requesting your advice as a biologist or social scientist with an interest in developing connections between these fields. Is there still a need to encourage further collaboration between biologists and social scientists on certain research problems? If so, in what areas? Is there a role for the Council in facilitating such collaboration? Is a general research planning committee needed, or would you suggest more individually focused projects? Is biological training, as provided by the summer institutes of the BBSB Committee, still needed in the social sciences? Would a social science program for biologists be useful?

We realize that these are broad questions and that responses may be difficult to formulate, but we believe that your opinion will be very important to ascertaining what role, if any, the Council should continue to play in this very important area. Also we would appreciate the names of other scientists with whom you feel we should consult.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ken Prentiss".