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ABSTRACT

For the academic social scientist who aspires to or actually assumes the dual role of expert and activist, the applicability of scientific knowledge and action-oriented expertise becomes an extremely practical problem. When the "knowledgeable" activist fails, the theoretical gap between knowledge and action intensifies the problem, and the question for the academic activist becomes a requestioning of the applicability of social science knowledge to "real life" problems. This paper addresses itself to an examination of this gap between theory and practice, knowledge and action, and admonishes the social scientist to examine the disjunction not in terms of "mysterious elements," but in terms of other social science knowledge and the current state of scientific knowledge. By focusing on a case study of failed, planned change, it seeks to demonstrate why a gap may exist between expert and action, and in so doing, to suggest that it is not due to some unexplained variance but rather, in this case, to such organization variables as time, status differentiation, imported or external leadership, the diffuseness of goals and the characteristics of the authority structure of the organization in question. (Author)

THE "MYSTERIOUS GAP" BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION: A SOCIOLOGICAL COMMENT

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For the academic social scientist who assumes the dual role of expert and activist, the theoretical gap between scientific knowledge and action-oriented expertise becomes an intensely practical problem. The academic as activist quickly develops a vested interest in the applicability of social science knowledge to "real life" problems. Such was the case for Warren Bennis who, along with a cadre of fellow social scientists, was brought to the State University of New York at Buffalo to help implement "massive organizational reform" (1973:2-3). His book, The Leaning Ivory Tower, is an account of the dismal failure of that effort and contains as a pervasive theme the "dichotomy in organizational life between theory and practice" (1973:4). This is evidenced in his questioning of whether "knowledge about" reality can provide "knowledge to do" about reality. In his own words:

> The numberless blue-ribbon task force reports, and the social science research upon which they are based, get better; but the problems still get worse. One sees remarkable, even great men make terrible mistakes--not because they are ignorant or evil, but because they seem incapable of acting on what they know. Some mysterious element seems to step in and disarm knowledge as a guide to action.
>
> (1973:4-5)

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The problem of the applicability of knowledge to action is both real and troublesome, as any academic interested in America's ethnic or educational problems can readily attest. In Bennis' terms, this gap between theory and practice warrants serious attention, yet an equally serious question can be raised about the wisdom of attributing this gap to "some mysterious element." Our contention is that there is nothing mysterious about it and that Bennis' own role as man of knowledge and action supports this argument. Our point is a simple one: to fit the criteria for knowledge in the social sciences is not necessarily to fit the criteria for knowledge applicable for action.[1] This point is seemingly so obvious that we offer as support only the observation that much social science knowledge and theory is predicated upon the assumption of "all other things being equal," while in the real world "all other things" are not equal. While the point is obvious, it seems continually ignored by experts and activists alike. What seems to be consistently overlooked is that perfectly valid knowledge in part has a low probability of guiding action effectively.[2] We focus on Bennis because we contend that he proves our point.

In considering the knowledge gained by Bennis as "observant participant" of failed academic change, we are afforded the opportunity to consider knowledge gained from both expert and activist. The product of experience in both houses, the knowledge thereby gained, should carry a high probability of bridging the gap between theory and practice. The result, in Bennis' own words, is a contribution to the "body of knowledge on the organizational life of universities" (1973: 5). Such knowledge takes the form of eleven guidelines for those who would be successful in introducing planned organizational change into universities. These guidelines are advertised as utilitarian to expert and layman alike in solving "real life" problems and, further, as applicable to other organizations as well (1973:3).

In order to test our argument these guidelines are applied to academic

departments which seek to change, to reform themselves, to improve. In the interest of precision we deal with departments which are characterized by a membership which has concluded that: 1) the department occupies a low professional status position compared with other departments in the same discipline in other universities; 2) this situation should be changed; 3) the change should occur rapidly and; 4) the way to accomplish change is to import a new chairperson, an external change agent, one who commands high professional status.[3] In considering the utility of the guidelines to the situation outlined above, we seek to demonstrate why a gap may exist between knowledge and action, theory and practice, and in so doing to suggest that it is due not to some mysterious element but rather, in this case, to such organizational variables as time, status differentiation, imported or outside leadership, goals and the characteristics of the authority structure of academic departments.

II

For our purposes, Bennis' eleven guidelines are grouped into five categories. The guidelines themselves and the central theme or admonition of each category are then placed in the context of the particular change situation suggested above and assessment is made of their probable utility to actors in the situation.

1. Recruit with scrupulous honesty. To do otherwise is to increase the probability that when reality confronts expectations, the result will be at least disillusionment and a dramatic lessening of morale. We take this as germane to the department's search for an external leader change-agent, hence the warning that lack of honesty on the part of the membership will lead, eventually, to the disillusionment of both parties to the change effort. For at least three reasons it appears probable that this admonition will not be effective. First, unless the membership itself is clear in its goals and explicitly aware of the elements and subtleties of its aspirations, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to be honest with the potential chairman regarding its expectations of

him and the problems he is likely to encounter. The extant goal, to "improve" the department, is at best vague and ambiguous unless there is considerable clarity on the part of the membership as to what it has been about and why and what it wants to be about and why.[4] Second, the low status department's emphasis on a high status change agent, if such a candidate can be found, may mitigate against "honest" investigation of the candidate, as well as "honesty" on the candidate himself.[5] Third, a low-status department is likely to view each increment of honesty about its past and present as mitigating against the probability that a high-status candidate will accept the position. Parenthetically, we may note that the high-status candidate, himself, may not be honest with the department in the sense that he will not be any more clear or articulate in what he plans to be about than the department can be in concurring about what it wants him to do. This is so precisely because he has no need to "sell" himself to the status-inferior membership, hence no need to commit himself in advance to a particular course of action. Hence, during the recruitment process, it is probable that while outright dishonesty may not be practiced, both vagueness and prudent self interest will lead to lack of specification of expectations, the shading of truth and the maintenance of silence on certain issues. This adds to a strong probability that admonitions to honesty, while meritorious or admonitory, will have little utility in the face of the exigencies of the situation.[6] To admonish honesty is to say nothing of how this is to be accomplished in social settings in any other form besides a naive admonition to "just be honest." Lacking the "how," the guideline fails as effective action-oriented knowledge.

2. Don't settle for rhetorical change. While there can be no quarrel with this guideline, it does not deal with the difficulty in distinguishing between rhetorical and substantive change. Rather, it is likely that a membership which proceeds under the assumption that a single change agent leader constitutes the

vehicle for the accomplishment of its goal will equate successful recruitment with that accomplishment. The new leader, in turn, aware of the membership's conception of his role, is likely to assume that his mere enunciation of principles of change guarantees their accomplishment.[7] At this point, both parties have substituted illusion for reality.[8] Again, then, we confront a guideline possessed of face validity but bereft of the "how" component of its implementation.

3. Plan for how to change as well as what to change. Know the territory. Appreciate environmental factors. Build support among like-minded people, whether or not you recruited them. Within this third category Bennis does recognize the importance of the "how" element, the strategic component of change. More generally, this theme focuses on organizational strains produced by problems of communication and information, an issue of particular importance when an imported change-agent leader is involved. Bennis notes that, "change-oriented administrators are particularly prone to act as if the organization came into being the day they arrived. This is an illusion, an omnipotent fantasy. There are no clean slates in established organizations . . . there can be no change without history, without continuity" (1973:138). Departments do have histories, of course, histories which constitute information which is frequently processed through informal communication networks. Knowing how to change as well as what to change necessitates information about the past, the membership and the environment (e.g. the orientations of administrators). Yet an imported change-agent is likely to attempt to ignore this past under the assumption that his concern should be directed exclusively to the present and future. In so doing, he devalues critically important information and closes off valuable informed channels of communication.[9] This propensity to proceed as if the department had no relevant past is intensified when another change-related variable is taken into account--the pressure of restricted time. The less the leader feels bound by the past, the greater his latitude for action, for initiating

the kind of changes he wishes, and thereby increasing the rapidity of change (ostensibly). Since he believes that his mandate is for rapid change he is thus encouraged in this course of action--failure on his part resting not in not producing change but not producing change rapidly. Yet, in proceeding in this manner, he lacks information, access to it and, thereby, to feedback on his actions (most importantly, disagreed). This encourages his tendency to hand down decisions ex cathedra, without benefit of consultation. In so doing, he increases the probability of reaction against him and his efforts, a reaction predicated upon a belief that he is violating cherished procedures inherent in the authority structure of academic departments.[10,11] Again, a set of guidelines is promulgated of undeniable importance. Yet it is revealed as simplistic when, as in the case of time, cross pressures are ignored, are accorded no province in these directives intended for persons seeking to implement change.

4. Avoid future shock. Allow time to consolidate gains. Remember that change is most successful when those who are affected are involved in the planning. Again, the variable of time mitigates against the effectiveness of this set of guidelines. Change agents are warned that the vision of what the future will be increases the probability of disillusionment with the present and increases the probability that the membership may view progress toward the vision as too slow. Yet leaders are admonished as well to take the membership into account in planning change, a tactic which will, or will appear to, slow down the change effort. These (at least in part) counter admonitions must be placed in context, further complicating the problem. In the face of both membership and upper administration "bets" in rapid change, the leader is, or feels, pressured to produce, to demonstrate success and to demonstrate it quickly: time easily becomes the enemy of the leader.[12] Future shock is difficult if not impossible to avoid, given the membership's tendency to assume

that in attracting the change agent the future is guaranteed. Time pressure reduces the possibility of adhering to admonitions to proceed carefully and consensually. Hence, while the guidelines individually appear reasonable, separately and together they do not constitute effective directives to action.

5. Guard against the crazies. Don't allow those who are opposed to change to appropriate such basic issues as academic standards. This set of guidelines goes to the issue of potential conflict within the organization. Within this context, the first guideline deals with recruitment by the new chariman. To the extent that persons recruited by him are viewed as "his people," they are viewed as sharing his orientation, including being supportive of the leader's actions with which the membership disagrees (and which have been alluded to above). This then exacerbates any incipient divisions between leader and extant membership. Yet the leader has no option here, for he can hardly be expected to recruit persons who will disagree with him, thereby increasing the probability that he will fail in his change effort. The second of these guidelines recognizes that any organizational change holds the potential for alienating at least a part of the membership.[13] This is of specific pertinence to academic organizations where the tradition of shared power is jealously guarded, a tradition more likely to limit them than to facilitate change (Ladd, 1972: 209). Yet where rapid change is the prime consideration and is, in fact, the organizational goal, there will be a strong tendency to strain against this cardinal component of the authority structure. To the extent that he does so, the leader opens himself to charges of a dictatorial usurpation of authority and raises the probability that his opposition will thereby be able to usurp the moral center and thus to legitimate that opposition.[14] Once again, guidelines, reasonable on the surface, indicate little power if claimed as of direct utility to change agents.

III

We share, then, with a good many other social scientists, a concern with the applicability of social science knowledge. We have focused on Bennis not only because he has articulated this concern and has offered what purports to be knowledge which is applicable but also because he, himself, has "been there," has been both a man of knowledge and a man of action. In no way can he be counted as naive. Finally, we have applied the test of our own data to the "practical knowledge" Bennis has offered of his own dual experience. We conclude by offering some observations of our own about this gap between theory and practice, knowledge and action, which we believe are applicable to social science generally.

1. If there is a mysterious element in the gap between theory and practice it does not reside in why much of our knowledge is not applied but why knowledgeable persons believe it can be applied in specific action situations.

2. Hence, the following appear questions which could be considered to better profit:

   a. Under what conditions do persons do what they must do thereby guaranteeing that they will fail to achieve their objectives, that is, under what conditions are objectives, in fact, unattainable?

   b. When will we cease offering truisms or "interesting ideas" in the guise of theory, truism in ideas which carry no linkages to situation-specific conditions beyond an easy assumption that they must be, somehow, implicit in the "knowledge" itself?

   c. When will the knowledge we offer as action-oriented make province for contingencies; when will it reflect the complex interaction of a multiplicity of variables; if nothing more, when will we develop some sophisticated, specific, if-then propositions; when will we finally accept that knowledge predicated upon "all other things being

equal" is not directly applicable to a world in which they are not?

3. Finally, we will never know the range of utility of social science knowledge until we start doing what we can do, what we have suggested above. Recourse to the baffling, comforting realm of "mysterious elements" is both absurd for social scientists and a simple abdication of their own responsibility and knowledge. While agreeing with Snow that scientists cannot escape their knowledge, it seems to us disturbingly clear how easily knowledge can escape the scientist.[15]

FOOTNOTES

1. Bennis himself recognized this point in an earlier work when he wrote, "Most of the strategies (for change) rely almost totally on rationality. But knowledge about something does not lead automatically to intelligent action. Intelligent action requires commitment and programs as well as truth" (1969:68).

2. This low probability is attributable to a difference which can be drawn between variables relevant to specific situations. No matter how "significant" the results of empirical research, no matter, for example, how high the correlations between and among variables, unless these variables are subject to the control of actors in the specific situations in which they are operative, empirically derived knowledge cannot act as an effective guide to action.

3. The data base for what follows consists of two components: a) an extended case study of attempted change in an academic department and b) numerous conversations which have been held with persons involved in similar change attempts. While we can give no precise figures, our impression is that this method of change-implementation has been attempted on numerous occasions and, further, that it represents a model to others for how rapid change in status may be accomplished by academic departments.

4. This clarity is unlikely to exist precisely because it is dependent on relatively clear conceptions of organizational goals, both past and present. Not infrequently, membership identification of relatively precise goals is not easily come by. Such frequently-stated objectives as "to train," "to educate," and to "advance knowledge," are nebulous, are general principles at best but do not qualify as <u>organizational</u> goals. We would guess that low status departments have an even more difficult time than high status ones

articulating goals with any precision. Hence, when a low-status department seeks to become upwardly mobile this effort may well represent the first goal which does achieve some precision. This is likely to result in the membership's conclusion that to accomplish this goal is to guarantee that all other goals, whatever they may be, will somehow also be accomplished. Yet in equating goal accomplishment with a single person, a new leader, at the very least the membership opens itself to considerable risk, one example of which Bennis has noted in an earlier work: "Strategies which rely on the individual deny the organization roles and forces surrounding him. There is simply no guarantee that a wise person who attains power will act wisely" (1969:68).

5. The search for the proper person for the job is likely to evidence the following:

   a. While the membership will focus the search process on finding a high-status professional, there will be relatively little confidence that such a person can be attracted to a low-status department.

   b. If a viable candidate is found the single defined criterion for candidate-acceptability and the attractive possibility of actually acquiring a high-status professional are likely to yield the following:

      i. Background investigation of the candidate will not be thorough. Attention will center on whether he is in fact a high-status-professional to the exclusion of consideration of other salient issues involved in planned change (including, for example, his administrative abilities and why a high-status professional would consider being associated with a low-status department).

      ii. The high-status professional candidate is likely to be vague and general in his comments to the membership. He will be so either because he perceives the membership as vague on its own goals or

because he, himself, has no well-thought-out ideas on the chairpersonship or because a) he feels no need to be specific and open with low-status persons because of their inferior position and/or b) he is not in competition with others for a prestige position for which he must sell himself. Additionally, low-status persons are likely to have only a small place in his plans to increase the status of the department to a position commensurate with his own, a plan which will involve building a department of new persons on top of the extant one.

6. In consideration of the process of academic recruiting, perhaps more attention should be devoted to two important contingencies; 1) the relatively short time during which the candidate and the membership interact directly and 2) the ritualized nature of the interview situation. First, interviews almost always take place within relatively limited time spans, available time being further restricted by the way such time is scheduled into meetings, luncheons, symposia, etc. If honesty, for example, demands a measure of clarity, it would also seem to demand a measure of time. It seems unlikely that admonitions to scrupulous honesty will be operative in the interaction of persons who have only just met, know they will be together for a relatively few hours, and probably, at the conclusion, will feel only barely acquainted with each other. Honesty would seem to imply some measure of trust and trust is not usually developed in severely restrictive time frames. This is perhaps especially true when the candidate is not to be a peer but the leader of the department. The "interview situation" is not constructed to encourage the type of honesty we mean here, nor trust, nor a particularly impressive amount of information. This intensifies the conditions Goffman has identified as operative in interaction:

> However, during the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need if they are to direct wisely their own activity. Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the "true" or "real" attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior. Similarly, if the individual offers the others a product or service, they will often find that during the interaction there will be no time and place immediately available for eating the pudding that the proof can be found in.
>
> (1959:2)

Goffman also notes that:

> Taking communication in both its narrow and broad sense, one finds that when the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true values will not be established until after he has left their presence. The security that they justifiably feel in making inferences about the individual will vary, of course, depending on such factors as the amount of information they already possess about him, but no amount of such past evidence can entirely obviate the necessity of acting on the basis of inferences. (1959:2-3)

7. Thereby failing to understand that:

> The important point is to recognize that large numbers of individuals--proud and with a self-image of independence--are not likely to undergo a Damascan conversion simply because some groups or individual has spoken or written with great passion about the need for change. Those who have accepted that need must be ready to work quite specifically at preparing others for it, even though to do so is not part of traditional academic practice.
>
> (Ladd, 1972:212)

Or, as Bennis has observed, ". . . knowledge about something does not lead automatically to intelligent action. Intelligent action requires commitment and program as well as truth." (1969:68)

8. Agreement in principle is a great deal different from agreement on specific organizational changes. "It is at this latter point that individuals really have to give up something--to change--and this may well be too difficult

even for those who support the principle. In short, prior discussion of principles does not insure that consistent policies will result." (Ladd, 1972 213)

9. Given the vagueness of organizationally relevant goals as guides to action in academic departments, the closing off of access to communication channels and the information contained therein is likely to have severe consequences. As Galbraith has observed, ". . . the greater the task uncertainty, the greater the amount of information that must be processed among decision makers during task execution in order to achieve a given level of performance." (1973:4 italics omitted)

10. For a more general discussion of problems attendant to the importation of a change-agent leader, placed in the context of organizational change, see Hage and Aiken, 1970, Ch. 4. For a particularly instructive example of such problems and dilemmas, see Gouldner, 1954.

11. Building "support" for change during what Hage and Aiken call the initiation stage is relatively easy, especially in view of a situation in which "any change is better than what we have now." While the change is still a 'vision,' nothing changes. But when the change is initiated, people and conditions must change, and it is at this point that support falters and resistance is manifested. As Bennis himself notes in an earlier work, "change typically involves risk and fear. Any significant change in human organization involves rearrangements of patterns of power, association, status, skills and values. Some may benefit; others may lose" (1969:68).

12. Since academic departments do not control sufficient resources to finance the desired change (through attaining a high status and therefore costly leader), it is the upper administration which must supply these financial resources. Yet to do so for one department is in some manner to withdraw them from other departments. (While this may not mean that the budgets of these other departments are reduced, it does involve a high probability that

they will not be increased as rapidly as their memberships desire.) Upper administrators are then faced with the necessity of justifying this decision. The best justification is that the bet "paid off," that the desired change was accomplished. This intensifies both the upper administrators' desire to see rapid results and the chairperson's desire to produce them, thereby justifying the confidence expressed in him which, in turn, increases the pressure of time upon him. This is further intensified by his awareness that the membership itself desires rapid change.

13. Assuming, for example, a stable system of rewards, any change in that structure may alter the distribution of rewards so that some now get more and some less than before. The invidious distinction in the change may well be as disconcerting to at least a part of the membership as the actual loss of material rewards themselves. This is especially true if the membership has to that point been characterized by a primary allegiance to solidary incentives (see Clark and Wilson, 1961). If the department was divided between members committed to purposive incentives and ones committed to solidary incentives change is likely to result in either increased alienation from work or alienation from expressive relations (see Aiken and Hage, 1966).

14. The possibility of losing the moral center to determinal opposition is great in academic departments precisely because of the nature of the departmental structure. The chairman of an academic department, as leader, faces a very different situation than the head of a department or division in a conventional industrial organization. In the first place, he is elected by the membership, not appointed from above. While any administrative leader faces two audiences, those above him and those below, the chairman must give much greater credence to those below, since he owes his job to them. Their opinions, in many ways, must carry more weight with him than those of his "superiors" (who are in part only nominal, given the

of academic departments:

(1) A comparatively flat authority structure.

Barber has noted the special feature of authority in professional organizations thusly. Professionals tend to favor control centered in colleagues and peers, while organizations per se tend toward a hierarchical superordinate form of control. Accommodation between these two takes the form of the professional-administrator, the incumbent of which role is a professional, hence a colleague (thereby being granted legitimacy as director of fellow professionals), yet one who is granted a limited amount of superordinate control as well (Barber, 1965:25-27). (For a more general consideration of related issues, see Hall, 1968.)

(2) The distribution of authority and control.

a. Zald (1970:237) has noted that the less routine the tasks to be accomplished by members of the organization, the more discretion they must be allowed. The more discretion which is allowed, by definition, the less centralized the authority. In speaking of the requirements for leadership within univeristies, Jaspers has made this point: "Productive people who have a talent for leadership . . . will leave their subordinates all possible freedom, in the hope that these go even further than they themselves " (1959:78). (It is important to remember that the diffusion of discretion is a functional feature of the organization and not a result of the voluntary delegation of authority by the chairperson.) This diffusion is a jealously-guarded principle of academic organization encompassed within the more general principle of academic freedom. As an instance of organizations concerned with ideological and theoretical issues and "truth,"

members of university units are suspicious of authority. As Zald and Ash have noted: "It is not concern with ideology per se . . . but rather that ideological concerns lead to questioning the bases of organizational authority and the behavior of leadership" (1966:337).

b. A notable example of the dispersion of authority is exhibited in the mechanisms by which member performance is evaluated. While this responsibility may fall to the chairperson alone (in his role as professional administrator) there is strong support for the principle that colleagues should judge one another. Hence evaluations are made by the membership per se or certain segments of it and not by the leader alone. Therefore, the principle of colleague evaluation and judgment helps to mitigate the tendency to distrust authority by distributing it widely.

(3) A cherished tradition of academic departments is that the membership decides who will be hired; it is the membership which controls entrance into the organization. Although less strongly held, the principle also holds for control over who is forced to exit as well. Finally, the principle of tenure protects members from, among others, the chairperson's efforts to dismiss on other than a very few grounds. In each of these cases, authority is extremely limited. This is especially important, for the leader is severely restricted in facilitating change through the widespread change of personnel.

In sum, then, we note Ladd's observation that, "As so often seems to be the case in systems of shared power, the ability to prevent change has generally been greater than the ability to bring it about" (1972:209).

15. Finally, a cautionary note. Throughout this paper we have sought to indicate that while some, or much, social science knowledge may not be directly applicable to "real life" problems, it is not thereby devalued. The sole test of knowledge is not, then, its applicability to problems. Having said

this we note a different issue. Accepting a distinction between pure and applied knowledge, there may be a tendency to assume that if some advertised knowledge cannot be applied, it must, therefore, be pure. This too easy assumption overlooks the possibility that it may not be knowledge at all.

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