

## Societal, World, and Historical Contexts

It is unlikely that we are naturally brighter than people of 1,000 years ago. We just have a lot more to work with: the potential perspective on past successes and failures, the intellectual and physical technologies stored and transmitted in educational systems (including the formal scientific method and statistical tools), the economic resources (beyond subsistence) to allow for specialized careers and for the first one-third of many people's lives spent outside the production system in formal education, and the doubling of individual longevity since the American Revolution. Whether we truly are increasing our knowledge ever faster today, accelerating up the logarithmic curve postulated by some theorists, is not clear; natural science *publications* increase at this rate. But natural science learning is a special case - people can use computers or a new drug without being scientists. In the humanities or social sciences (outside of economics), diffusion of knowledge poses special problems because people cannot just naively use physical embodiments.

It should be noted, however, that societies can also forget. Some knowledge and skills have clearly been lost to most people (e.g., farming), and there are always the issues of whether the quality of American elites has declined since the time of the founding fathers, whether people are becoming more cranky, dependent, and anomic, and whether the intelligence we once had is dissipating as Western civilization progresses by declining.

I will have little to say about international networks or about society or history in general (see Gouldner, 1979; Lane, 1978; Naroll, Benjamin, Fohl, Fried, Hildreth, & Shaefer, 1971). I want instead to focus on two theories (truth norms and secularization), and one hypothesis (that government learning may be a dependent variable.)

### Truth Theory

One theory of an effective learning environment is that it is simply one in which people

tell the truth to each other. A substantial part of psychotherapy proceeds first by establishing a relationship where this is possible; therapy is in part a healing through simple truth-telling. Some people maintain that an essential quality of being a good teacher is to be truthful enough to admit a lack of knowledge; sociologists of science say the norm of truth-telling is crucial to advance (Ben-David, 1971). A veteran Washington lawyer, asked how to make the world work better, told me the key was to get all the liars to tell the truth. If so, one theory is that America is in good shape in this regard: Rokeach (1973) reports that Americans rank honesty as more important than a comfortable life, wealth, or peace of mind - indeed honor it and want it more than all other values. However, the opposite conclusion is advanced by Edelman (1964), who records a substantial amount of evidence that, in political life, both the public and politicians prefer strategic dissembling, psychodrama, and illusion.

### Secularization and Orthodoxy Theories

A standard theory among sociologists has been that secularization of society increases learning activity and, more generally, that any prescribed orthodoxy can restrict learning. Thus, one research issue is the extent to which implicit or explicit orthodoxies in America are sufficiently strong to restrict free speech and investigation (Habermas, 1970; McCarthy, 1976). A related issue is whether secularization has produced a loss of intelligence and hard-won understanding about life. Vonnegut (1970/1976, pp. 165-167), for example, suggests that the best that social scientists can do is to spend their lifetimes hacking their way through open doors with wretchedly complicated methodologies to rediscover old truths about the normative basis of a good society:

*It has been said many times that man's knowledge of himself has been left far behind by his understanding of technology, and that we can have peace and plenty and justice only when man's knowledge of himself catches up. This is not true.*

*Some people hope for great discoveries in the social sciences, social equivalents of  $F=ma$  and  $E=mc^2$  and so on.*

*We don't need more information. . . . All that is required is that we become less selfish than we are.*

*We already have plenty of sound suggestions as to how we are to act if things are to become better on earth. For instance: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. About seven hundred years ago, Thomas Aquinas had some other recommendations as to what people might do with their lives, and I do not find these made ridiculous by computers and trips to the moon and television sets. He praises the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy, which are these:*

*To teach the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to console the sad, to reprove the sinner, to forgive the offender, to bear with the oppressive and troublesome, and to pray for us all.*

*He also admires the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, which are these:*

*To feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick and prisoners, to ransom captives, and to bury the dead.*

*A great swindle of our time is the assumption that science has made religion obsolete. All science has damaged is the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Jonah and the whale. Everything else holds up pretty well, particularly the lessons about fairness and gentleness. . .*

*Science has nothing to do with it, friends.*

### Government Learning: A Dependent Variable?

Because it puts in a broader perspective the internal-process perspective in the classic works of Deutsch (1963) (government as principal investigator), Argyris and Schon (1978), and even the open-systems model of Katz and Kahn (1978), one hypothesis I want to emphasize again is that government learning is often the dependent variable. It is dependent on what universities teach, on what the voters want or can be sold, on what lobbying groups say, on the agendas the news media set, on the standards and quality of critics, on the action mood of the times, on conceptual and methodological innovations from university research, on whether people have enough genuine trust to tell the truth, and on much else. It is probably also true that learning by government is often a function of current, active political conflict and the public adversary processes by which opponents of established policy do the research that ultimately makes government more intelligent (see Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Starbuck, 1976). Research may even show that presidents and the executive bureaucracy have seldom originated qualitative increases in their own intelligence and that almost all conceptual and program innovations have had to be imported (Deutsch *et al.*, 1971).