

Summary of background study 16

BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES IN CONTEXT

Preface

This collection of essays about the policy relevance and scientific challenges of behavioural sciences was written as part of the foresight duties assigned to the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy (AWT) by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. The foresight activities conducted by the AWT have as their starting point social issues or problems expected in the future. The subsequent question is whether the knowledge infrastructure (universities and public research institutes) are responding properly or adequately to both the fundamental and more applied knowledge issues associated with those social issues or problems. This collection of essays is an initial, exploratory step in a foresight process for the behavioural sciences.

Why engage in foresight for the behavioural sciences?

Interviews with policy makers, both in government and in the business sector, about priority issues or angles for foresight activities have shown again and again that there is a genuine demand for knowledge about human behaviour. The aim of many policies is to influence people to a certain extent. However, practical realities prove more awkward to deal with than those policies anticipate.

This observation brings us to the first main question to be addressed by this collection of essays: what can existing behavioural science knowledge offer to policy makers? This question implies thinking about the current situation in the behavioural sciences: what has already been achieved, and what is the policy relevance of prevailing research agendas?

The second main question in this collection is concerned more with the future: what are the emerging social issues or developments which require the deployment or exploitation of behavioural science and are behavioural scientists equipped to deal with those issues?

Why essays?

The demand for knowledge about, and understanding of, human behaviour is a very broad area. Human behaviour plays a role, and often a very important one, in an enormous range of policy areas. Examples are areas involving government, such as education, traffic and transport, the environment, health care, crime etc. There are also more commercial policy areas such as marketing and product development. This wide range makes it impossible to discuss in a single study 'the' significance of 'the' behavioural sciences. Instead, an attempt has been made to find a method or approach which makes it possible to show, in a more case-based way, what behavioural sciences can contribute to specific policy areas in terms of the analysis and possible approach to problems, now and in the future. We think we have found a more case-based method of this kind. We invited academics active in a range of fields to indicate in essay form (and not, therefore, in fully-fledged academic articles) what they consider to be the most important contribution made by their field and what, with a view to the future, they consider to be of importance for the questions addressed by their profession and the development of that profession. You see the result of this approach before you.

A broad, eclectic approach

When selecting disciplines and professors, it was deliberately decided to adopt a broad, and perhaps a rather pragmatic, definition of the concept of 'behavioural sciences', namely those sciences which are involved to a significant extent in the study of human behaviour. That means that academics from outside the core behavioural sciences were also invited to make a contribution. At the same time, it will be clear that this collection of essays does not pretend to cover in full the areas in which knowledge about human behaviour is necessary or available. The range of the field but also – quite simply – the full timetables of the authors in question mean that this collection has acquired a rather eclectic nature. Despite the undeniable gaps in the collection, the aim has nevertheless been to achieve enough breadth and variety to provide the reader with a good picture of the possible significance of the behavioural sciences.

In order to provide the highly varied tapestry in this collection of essays with an overall vision of the contribution of the behavioural sciences, the first essay (Draaisma) picks out a number of leitmotifs which run through the essays.

Follow-up activities in the foresight process for the behavioural sciences

As stated above, this collection of essays is an initial exploration as part of a foresight process for the behavioural sciences. The obvious question is therefore what the follow-up will consist of. First of all, each of the individual essays shows where work is still required in the specific policy areas. In a more general sense, the first essay, which picks out the leitmotifs of the various essays, provides openings for later discussions of substance, advisory activities and action relating to the behavioural sciences. The AWT hopes that this collection of essays will contribute to a better understanding among policy makers of what the behavioural sciences have to offer and that it will inspire those responsible for the content of research in the behavioural sciences to make innovations in the research agenda. In order to encourage these side-effects, the AWT has accepted responsibility for undertaking, in the near future, the activities which follow on from this collection of essays. You will be hearing from us.

Professor Jozien Bensing

AWT member,
Director of NIVEL, the Netherlands Institute for Health Care Research,
Professor of clinical psychology and health psychology, in particular with respect to public health and health care, University of Utrecht

