

AN APPROACH TO PUBLIC AFFAIRS:

REPORT OF THE AD HOC COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS¹

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TAKING appropriate action on public policy issues is a task that APA cannot delegate to any one board or committee. If APA is to act effectively it will require: (a) a strong Board of Directors, (b) a strong Central Office staff, and (c) an informed constituency.

What the Ad Hoc Committee attempted to do was to construct a *system* for dealing with public affairs. This system has three major components: (1) a set of receptor mechanisms to detect signals of emerging issues as early as possible; (2) a decision-making mechanism for processing relevant information and choosing the action to be taken; and (3) a set of effector mechanisms to carry out the decisions. In addition to clarifying the nature of the processes occurring in each component part of the system, the Committee attempted to specify the persons or groups of persons responsible for carrying out these processes.

The Committee recognized that the system could never be a simple mechanical process for grinding out optimal decisions. Tentative decisions to be modified at later stages by feedback resulting from the first actions taken will usually be required.

Both Component 1, the signal detection process, and Component 3, the effector processes, involve the participation of a considerable number of persons and groups, differing for different issues. Most frequently, signals are picked up by Central Office staff members, who have been assigned liaison duties with various government departments and agencies, or by APA boards and standing committees. However, any APA member may become aware of an issue and initiate correspondence with officers or Central Office staff with regard to it. For best results, the sensitivity of all of these signal detectors should be maximized. Generally speaking, the earlier an issue is recognized the better. Most frequently, the final actions taken,

such as, for example, testifying before a legislative committee or writing a statement for a government agency, will be the responsibility of a Central Office staff member or an officer of the association, but the task may be assigned to a committee chairman or an APA member who is especially knowledgeable about the matter under consideration.

Government policy is made at many levels, and APA may need to become involved at any of them, as shown in Figure 1. The decision about where to bring influence to bear on policy is one of the most important decisions to be made in connection with each specific issue.

The middle component of the system, the process of considering relevant information and arriving at a decision, is the most complex, and the Committee devoted the major share of its time to it. It was decided first that the responsibility for carrying out this decision-making function should be assigned to the Board of Directors or the Executive Committee acting for the Board. Two considerations led to this conclusion: (a) the Board is the group elected by the members or their representatives and authorized to make policy decisions, and (b) the Board and its Executive Committee are the only APA bodies that meet frequently enough to make well-timed decisions. With this basic assumption about *who* the decision makers are to be, the Committee formulated a set of guidelines about *how* such decisions should be made.

Structure of the Decision Process

The basic structure of the plan is roughly sketched in Figure 2. It involves two major elements, represented there as dimensions:

1. A graded series of actions that might be taken ranging from a high level of political involvement to no action at all.

2. A graded series of types of issues ranging from those on which action by APA is most relevant or most urgent to those involving little or no relevance or urgency for APA as a national association.

¹ Members of the committee: F. K. Berrien, Kenneth E. Clark, William A. McClelland, Henry Riecken, Donald W. Taylor, Leona Tyler (Chairman), and C. Leland Winder.

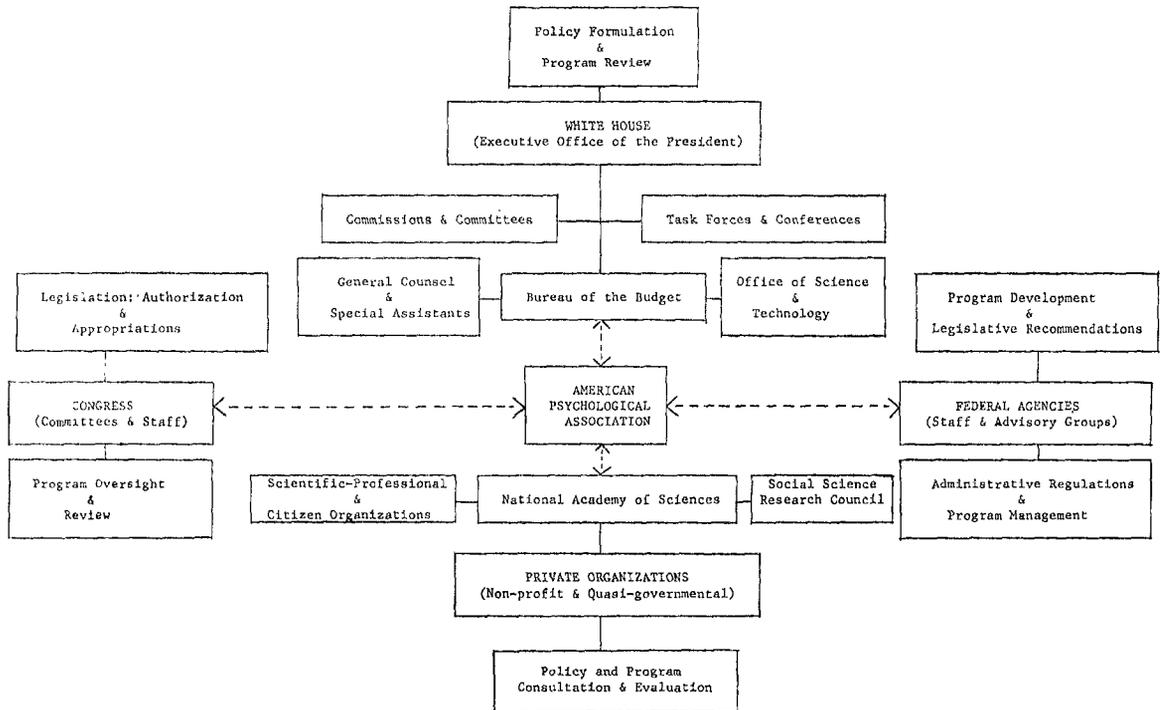


FIG. 1. A simplified schematic representation of the network of relationships maintained by APA in the complex process of government policy formulation, decision making, and program management.

The curved line in Figure 2 represents in a rough way the limit beyond which the decision makers would *not* go in selecting an appropriate

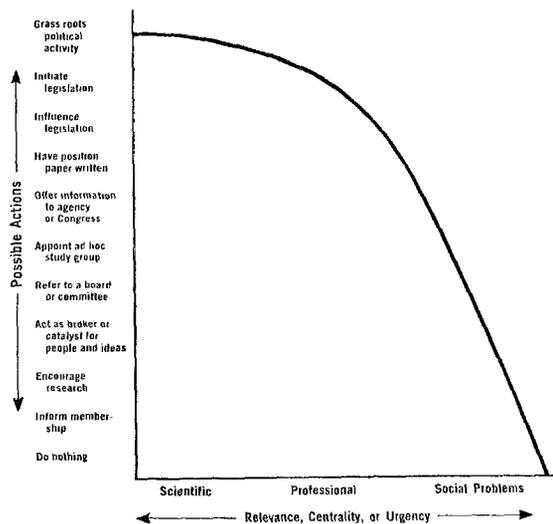


FIG. 2. Guidelines for decisions. (This diagram is intended to represent a concept rather than to show precise quantitative relationships. The Committee had no basis for deciding just where the curve should be drawn or what its exact shape should be.)

action to take in any given instance. The closer to the beginning of the x-axis any issue that presents itself falls, the greater the *range* of permissible actions. In considering which *particular* action to take among those within the permissible range, the decision makers would use criteria which constitute additional constraints:

1. The importance of the problem area (primarily to psychologists, but also to society as a whole).
2. The amount of research-based information available.
3. The extent of value agreement on the issue among APA members.
4. The probability that the action will be effective.

It was recognized by the Committee that the decision-making process is not and cannot be a mechanical selection of an alternative on the basis of criteria. The graded series of actions probably cannot be scaled in any exact way; the weight to be given any criterion in a combination cannot be expressed in quantitative terms. The schema is designed to facilitate decisions, not to make them.

Basic Variables

Each of the three divisions indicated along the abscissa of Figure 2 represents a range of public policy issues of one general class. One thing that distinguishes the set labeled "Scientific" is that they are important to all psychologists who make use of the body of knowledge our discipline includes, and thus have relevance for researchers, teachers, and practitioners. Another distinguishing feature of such issues is that there is no other organization clearly responsible for them. If action is to be taken, APA must take it. Examples of issues falling in this class might be a drastic cut-back in training and fellowship funds or the imposition of crippling restrictions on psychological research.

The set of issues labeled "Professional" has to do with matters affecting the practice of psychology in schools, in clinics, in industry, and elsewhere. Because they do not affect all psychologists in the direct way that the first set do and because there may be other organizations besides APA prepared to take action on them, they are placed a little lower on the scale and are linked to a somewhat smaller range of actions. Within this group of professional issues, some would clearly rank higher than others in urgency.

The consideration that places "Social Problems" at the lower end of the Relevance, Centrality, or Urgency scale is mainly one of appropriateness for action by APA. In each case the question to be asked concerns the extent to which an organization of *psychologists* should channel its energies and resources into this area, and the answer will clearly depend on the extent to which the specified criteria are met. Only if there is a considerable quantity of research-based information and value consensus is high, for example, would an attempt be made to influence legislation.

The actions listed along the y-axis require only brief explanation. "Grass roots political activity" means "calling out the troops," as it were—mobilizing the entire membership of APA to effect the passage of a bill or obtain a policy change. Such a decision would be made only rarely, in cases where the legislation or policy threatened the continued existence or progress of psychology as a field of knowledge and where all of the additional criteria were met at a high level.

"Initiate legislation" means to work with Con-

gressmen or Senators to get a bill introduced into Congress.

"Influence legislation" means to testify before a congressional committee or to assist the staff of a government agency in drafting a bill they intend to introduce.

The decision to take any one of the three actions at the top of the list would never be made except on issues where APA policy has already been made clear in one or more documents. On issues where this clarification has not yet occurred, the appropriate action will often be to appoint a person or a group of persons to write a "position paper." After review by the appropriate boards and committees and acceptance by the Board of Directors, this paper can then serve as a basic document for actions at a higher scale level.

In preparing a position paper on an issue, Central Office personnel are responsible for the staff work. The person or small group of persons designated by the Board of Directors is responsible for writing the paper. The appropriate boards and committees are responsible for reviewing it and making recommendations to the Board of Directors.

Position papers may be of several kinds:

(a) A definitive statement of policy with supporting evidence.

(b) A clear formulation of conflicting positions taken by psychologists on the issue, with supporting evidence.

(c) A temporary statement of tentative policy with supporting evidence and indications of where gaps in it are apparent, one of a sequence of such papers, each superseding the previous ones.

"Offer information" means to send the agency or congressional committee involved in an issue a position paper or a summary of research findings on the question at hand. It may mean arranging for someone to testify before a committee or interview an agency chief. It is distinguished from actions higher in the scale by the neutrality of the information offered. In taking this action APA does not attempt to exert influence in one particular direction.

"Appoint an ad hoc study group" is an appropriate action in instances where issues are not clearly delineated and it is desirable for persons with some special competence in an area to impose some structure on it to enable decision makers to deal with it more adequately. It would often be

a first step leading eventually to some other action. Ad hoc committees are appointed by the Board of Directors, often with the advice of other APA boards or committees in whose area of concern the particular issues fall.

"Refer to a board or committee" is a self-evident action. The Committee would recommend, however, that a time limit always be incorporated in the terms of referral. This is an interim action often appropriate in situations where considerable confusion exists. If the Board of Directors makes such a referral, asking for an opinion by a certain date, and does not receive a report at the designated time, it is assumed that the Board will then take the issue up again and decide on another action possibility.

"Act as broker or catalyst" covers such things as putting an agency in touch with a person who can help or writing to an APA member to ascertain whether he has any interest in becoming involved in a movement. No APA commitment is made in such cases.

"Encourage research" is an even more noncommittal action. It might cover such specific things as announcing in the *American Psychologist* that research on some social problem is needed and that funds may be available from a particular source. It might mean referring the issue to an appropriate APA board or committee for discussion and recommendations as to how research on it might be stimulated or facilitated.

"Inform membership" simply means to let the members know through the *American Psychologist* or the *Washington Report* that an issue has arisen, on the assumption that any individual psychologist who has an interest in it can then take action accordingly.

The reason for including "Do nothing" at the

bottom of the scale is that a clear-cut decision *not* to take action is clearly a legitimate way of disposing of some issues that arise. It is not the same as inaction arising from drift or uncertainty.

Some Related Questions

The Ad Hoc Committee considered some specific questions that will arise if this plan is put into operation.

1. Can the Board of Directors and Executive Committee take on this decision-making task in addition to the other duties their position entails? The Committee's answer is that we should like to have them try. If, even with the streamlined procedure we have described and with increased staff assistance from the Central Office, they find they cannot keep up with the demands in the public affairs area, it will be necessary for them to delegate some of the responsibility to a specially constituted committee. But because the Board of Directors occupies the highest position of responsibility in the Association, where the responsibility for APA's role in public affairs should if possible be kept, it is recommended that the Board itself make the final decision as to which of the possible actions should be taken in each case.

2. What would this recommended system cost? To provide the Central Office staff and supporting services for such a program would require an estimated expenditure of \$50,000 a year. It is believed that by redeploying some of our resources we can carry out the program within the present APA financial structure without a dues increase. The Ad Hoc Committee supports the proposal of the Policy and Planning Board that a study of APA structure be made by an outside research agency, in order that redeployment of resources may be intelligently planned.