



BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Modernizing an Academic Monastery

A venerable institution tries to reinvent itself by applying behavioral science to 21st century problems

Thomas Kuhn wrote much of his landmark 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, at a secluded retreat in the foothills above Palo Alto, California. In the 1970s, future Nobelist Daniel Kahneman spent time here in the formative days of the field that came to be known as behavioral economics. For decades after the Ford Foundation started it in 1954, behavioral and social scientists coveted an invitation to the exclusive Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. The center's yearlong fellowships offered leading scholars freedom from teaching and other academic obligations, as well as a quiet place to reflect and write. Those who came produced seminal works in fields as diverse as political science and primatology.

But in recent years, the center seems to many observers to have lost some of its luster, attracting fewer big-name scholars and producing fewer high-impact works. In part because of financial issues, nearby Stanford University took over the once-independent center in 2008. "The decision the trustees faced is do they just want to let it limp along, dissolve it, or try something new," says Stephen Kosslyn, the center's current director.

They opted for something new and recruited Kosslyn to shake things up. A distinguished psychologist, he left his post as dean of social sciences at Harvard University to become the director of the center in January

2011. "The culture here was that of a monastery," Kosslyn says. He wants to open the center up more to the outside world and emphasize real-world problem solving over heady academic ruminations. He has proposed, among other things, setting up networks of researchers to examine specific issues, from how to make technology more accessible to elderly people to documenting psychological obstacles to peace in the Middle East. "We want to make behavioral science relevant," he says.

Food for thought

Kosslyn is soft-spoken and unassuming, and he looks every bit the professor in round wire-rimmed glasses and a tweed jacket. At the same time, he's proud to say he saw the Grateful Dead perform on campus when he was a Stanford undergraduate in the 1970s, and he keeps an electric bass in his office. He plays whenever he can find a group of musicians with similar skills and tastes (mainly classic rock). He and his wife chose to live in San Francisco, more than 50 kilometers away from the center, because they were turned off by what Kosslyn describes as the materialism and anti-intellectualism of Silicon Valley, whose office parks and suburbs sprawl out below the center's hillside perch. "I don't like the culture," he says.

Several of his colleagues say Kosslyn is well-suited to revive the center. "He's a per-



son of tremendous energy," says Jonathan Cole, a sociologist at Columbia University and chair of the center's board of directors. "He's willing to take risks and experiment," Cole says. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker credits Kosslyn, his former graduate adviser, with breathing new life into another venerable institution. "The Harvard University psychology department had been a backwater, coasting on its reputation, before Steve reinvigorated it in the 1990s with an aggressive program of hiring young mid-career scientists, which vaulted the department into the front ranks," says Pinker, who joined the department in 2003. Pinker also cites Kosslyn's leadership through the financial crisis as evidence that he's the right person to turn around the Stanford center: "I'd be surprised if Steve didn't make the center financially viable and intellectually vibrant within a few years."

The world was a different place when the center was founded, at the midpoint of a century that had brought two world wars, the Holocaust, and the Great Depression. And then there was the Cold War. A *San Francisco Chronicle* article about the center's launch raised the specter of mind-control methods presumably under development in the Soviet Union. "This could be a weapon of great power in Communist hands, unless comparable advances in the West produce effective countermeasures," the article reads, apparently quoting from a statement from a group of social scientists convened by then-Vice President Richard Nixon.

The center's founders realized that solutions to societal problems could come from the social and behavioral sciences, but they also realized how poorly developed these disciplines were, says Robert Scott, a former



deputy director of the center and its de facto historian. One early adviser, the Austrian-born sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, proposed that the center be based on the European model, in which promising young students learn at the feet of the masters, Scott says. That model didn't last long. "It was very un-American," Scott says with a chuckle.

Instead, a more egalitarian culture quickly emerged. Despite its somewhat isolated setting, the center was designed to foster informal exchanges among its 50 or so resident fellows, Cole says. Cozy, low-slung buildings house private offices for each fellow, but their arrangement around several courtyards forces a certain amount of walking between buildings, increasing the likelihood of chance encounters. Lunch is not left to chance, however: Fellows were, and still are, expected to attend lunch each day, catered by the center's private chef. "Where you eat you tend to talk, and where you talk you get ideas," Cole says.

The center has no permanent faculty or students and no laboratories. In the early days, candidates were nominated by past fellows and other academics and ultimately selected by the center's board. For the chosen ones, an invitation would suddenly arrive out of the blue. "It was considered a huge honor," Cole says. Alumni include 22 Nobel Prize winners, 10 Pulitzer Prize winners, 44 MacArthur Fellows, and 128 current members of the National Academy of Sciences. "The simplest way to describe what the center then offered was what most people who went into academia thought they were getting into and never found—that is, a genuine community of intensely interacting, smart, interesting people from diverse fields," Scott says.

Paradigm shift

"The center was a phenomenal place in its time for a select group of people who had a rare kind of experience that couldn't be gotten anywhere else," Cole says. "But that's not the world we live in today." In one nod to modernity, the old-boys' network (literally, for the most part) that hand-selected fellows was replaced years ago by a competitive application process. Nearly half of the members of this year's class are women. But other changes have reduced the center's magnetic pull, Cole says. The Internet has made far-flung collaborations easier, for example, and more researchers today have spouses with professional careers, making it difficult for some prospective fellows to move to Palo Alto for a year. (Fellows typically visit the center on sabbatical from their home institutions, which continue to pay at least part of their salaries.)

Then came the financial crisis. By 2008, the returns on the center's endowment were barely keeping up with its growing operating costs, and the board agreed to let Stanford take over the center's finances and administration. The center's endowment was folded into Stanford's much larger fund just before the stock market crashed. Making matters worse, foundations that once contributed to the center have tightened the purse strings. "They're not interested in paying for people to come here for a few months and maybe write a book, and I don't blame them," Kosslyn says.

Kosslyn thinks shifting the focus to real-world applications of behavioral science will make the center more appealing to donors. One way he wants to do this is by creating "impact networks" of six to eight scholars, including resident fellows and outside collaborators, to work on specific prob-

Intellectual haven. The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford has provided a quiet environment for scholars to think and write since 1954. The center's library (*center*) houses hundreds of books written by past fellows. Stephen Kosslyn, the center's new director, wants the center to engage more with real-world problems.

lems. One proposed network, for example, would study how to design software for elderly people that accounts for age-related changes in vision, memory, and coordination. Another team would identify the daily grievances that most foster resentment and mistrust between Palestinians and Israelis and obstruct the path to peace. Kosslyn hopes to fund these and a handful of other projects he's proposed through a combination of federal grants and donations from foundations and individual donors.

Kosslyn also hopes to create "center institutes," each headed by a resident scholar, that would tackle broader issues. His ideas for these include a war crimes archive and a center on personalized data mining that would examine how search engine and other companies that collect personal data online could use it to benefit the people who provided it. Kosslyn envisions these centers generating specific questions to be tackled by future "impact networks" of scholars.

At the same time, Kosslyn says he wants to preserve and encourage the interdisciplinary discourse the center has always provided. One day last fall, fellows gathered for a panel discussion, part of a new series Kosslyn started to foster crosstalk among disciplines. The topic was culture and economics, and the panel comprised two Stanford economists, Peter Reiss and Frank Wolak, and Jing Tsu, who studies Chinese language and culture at Yale University. They discussed how to define culture and determine its influence on economic activity (and vice versa) and whether cultural scholars might use tools from economics to quantify culture.

Kosslyn realizes that preserving the center's idyllic environment and getting scholars talking to each other will be the easy part. His plans to establish the center as a hub for translational social science research will require raising money in extremely difficult times. But he says the amounts are fairly modest, perhaps \$200,000 per year for an impact network and \$300,000 per year for a center institute. He thinks he can convince potential donors that it would be money well spent. The line between philanthropy and investment is getting blurrier, Kosslyn says, and the center has to prove that it can give something back. Its future may depend on it.

—GREG MILLER