Paper read at conference sponsored by the STUDY
GROUP ON COMPUTERS IN SURVEY
ANALYSIS in London on 1st April, 1974

Social Surveys, Social Theory and Social Policy

by

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Before commenting on the possible combinations of three activities contained in the title, I wish to say a little about each of them separately, and particularly about the first of them – ie. social surveys. As a systematic and reliable method of collecting quantitative information about social conditions it has a long and impressive history on this country. It was almost 100 years ago, in 1875 to be precise, that Charles Booth, according to his wife, first asked himself the series of questions that were to lead to his life work: 'Who are the people of England? How do they really live? What do they really want? Do they want what is good? And, if so, how is it to be given to them?'

To find answers to these questions Booth more or less invented the modern social survey. Here I am not concerned either with his findings or with his methods, but rather with the sources of his interest. Primarily, he was motivated by descriptive curiosity, but not by descriptive curiosity for its own sake; essentially, and above everything else, its purpose was to bring about social change, to change the conditions of the poor by providing those who directly or indirectly governed the country with the sort of hard information that compelled social change. The effect, in terms of both social debate and social action was dramatic – and, by British standards, almost revolutionary. In the words of Beatrice Webb: 'Booth's grand inquest into the conditions of life and labour of the four million inhabitants of the richest city in the world ... seems to me to stand out as a landmark in social politics ... Prior to this enquiry, neither the individualist nor the socialist could state with any approach to accuracy what exactly was the condition of the people of Great Britain. Hence the unreality of their controversy.'

Before continuing with this brief historical background, I wish to stress one very important feature of Booth's work; neither he nor any of his collaborators had the slightest interest in social theory: nor did they at any time conceive of any possible link between the social survey and social theory. As far as I know, only one substantial public figure, Karl Marx, thought there might be any connection between the two, and his solitary attempt to conduct a social survey with this end in view was so fatuous and incompetent that its results were never published. His questionnaire and his sampling techniques would shame any contemporary first year student taking an elementary course in survey methods. And, as far as I know, at no point in his very substantial body of social theory did Marx make any use of his one venture into survey research.

After Booth there came a steady stream of social surveys, both in this country and abroad, and from time to time valuable advances were made in methods – in the operationalisation of concepts (eg. Rowntree), in sampling (eg. Bowley), in attitude measurement (Thurstone, Lickert & Gutman), and in the statistical analysis of the data gathered (Pearson, Lazarsfeld and Kendall). But, at least in this country, the original Booth objectives remained unaltered; and one of the more remarkable features of the early history of modern social science is that in the accepted roster of world-famous theoreticians it is hard to think of a single British figure; the names that come to mind most readily are those of foreigners – Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Pareto, Simmel, Veblen, Tocqueville, Mannheim, Mead, Lasswell, etc.

There was, however, during the 1930s a steady change taking place in the original balance between descriptive curiosity and remedial social action. There can be no question that the original Booth and Rowntree surveys had very considerable impact on social policy and social action. And much of the policy and action was peculiar to this country – it was in no sense a mere imitation of the early moves towards a welfare society that were already taking place on the Continent; in 1906 there was legislation to provide school meals for needy children, followed rapidly by school medical inspections, old age pensions, labour exchanges, wage boards in sweated industries, ill-health and unemployment insurance.

The social problems of the1930's were no less severe than those of the late 19th century, but while the output of social surveys expanded during this period it is clear that they had less and less effect on social policy. The survey statistics which had once been described, fairly enough, as 'the rhetoric of the poor' became increasingly the unwanted and cumbersome intellectual baggage of a despairing counter-élite that thought increasingly in terms of political revolution and less in terms of material amelioration.

The outbreak of war rapidly restored the old balance between action and survey research. For example, the Ministry of Food wanted food consumption surveys so as to help plan rationing, and the Board of Trade needed surveys of private stocks of clothing so as to plan the allocation of fibres and cloth. At least until the end of rationing in the middle 1950s these surveys sustained their utilitarian justification, and indeed were supplemented by new 'communication' studies to ascertain how far Parliamentary exhortation and political rhetoric succeeded in persuading the people to appreciate that a mass acceptance of austerity was in the public interest.

Out of sheer bureaucratic inertia many of these surveys were continued long after they had the slightest impact on social policy, and indeed some of them are still being carried out, are published regularly by the HMSO and are being filed unread by acquisitive and undiscriminating librarians. But again, their loss of action-value has not been compensated by any significant contribution to social theory – at least not in this country. If we look abroad, for example at the USA, we find that over the same early post-war years survey research was making massive contributions to social theory. The survey work of Stouffer and his colleagues ('The American Soldier') for the War Department generated the theory of relative deprivation which has had a tremendous effect on social theory. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance originated in surveys to measure the effectiveness of advertising; the theories of the authoritarian personality developed from a straightforward attitude survey commissioned on a contract basis by the American-Jewish League; Havighurst's theory of disengagement as a sociological rather than a chronological account of aging had its roots in a straightforward longitudinal survey to ascertain who were the people who failed to adjust equably to retirement; even Moynihan's theory of the origins of negro poverty claimed to draw much of its support from survey research.

The mid and late 1960s opened up new possibilities for survey research. The enormous expansion of the social sciences in the universities, the creation of many university-based social research institutions and the launching of several independent social research organisations held out the promise that not only would there be comparable growth in the execution of social surveys, but also a revival of the earlier association between survey research and social policy, and a new coming together in Britain of survey research and social theory.

There can be no doubt about the expansion of social science research in Britain in recent years. At the end of 1972 the Survey Unit carried out on behalf of the Social Science Research Council a census of all social research organisations in the United Kingdom. Very elaborate steps were taken to ensure a complete listing of the total universe. On the most generous possible definition this amounted to approximately 1,500 organisations, and a questionnaire was sent to all of them asking for information about their organisational structure and their current and recent funded research activities. After allowance is made for those units where the phrase 'social research' had been included in their articles of association with the sole intention of underlining their educational status and thereby avoiding taxation, and also after excluding those bodies where the execution of social research was an aspiration rather than a fact (eg. some local government authorities), and those where it was clearly no more than a naive attempt to achieve respectability), I think we can claim to have achieved at least an 80 per cent response rate and that this response rate covered approximately 90 per cent of all funded social research in this country.

Some of the findings relevant to this paper are as follows: half of all research units (ie. other than university departments) engaged in funded research are associated with universities or polytechnics; between them these units employ nearly 3,000 full-time social science researchers; over 80 per cent of them claim to have a high level of autonomy in generating their research projects; nearly 60 per cent of the units claim that their research is aimed at policy- and decision-makers, and well over two-thirds claim that in the course of their work they use or have used survey methods. In short, never before has so much survey research been carried out in Britain in the social sciences and never before has its discipline-scope been so wide – from geography to criminology, from political science to sociology, from education to business management; and never before has there been so much survey research aimed at policy-makers.

Outside the enquiry we have just described it should be remembered that a great deal more survey research is carried out: for example, by university departments, and by market research organisations. According to the Association of Market Survey Organisations – an association of the twenty largest market research organisations in the country – its members in1973 carried out four million interviews – roughly equivalent to 80 surveys every week of the year.

In the light of all this survey research aimed at policy-makers one might expect to find Britain a country free of all problems: a country where economic stagnation has been ended, industrial conflict only an historical memory, cigarette smoking abandoned by everyone, race prejudice and discrimination unknown, student disturbances long-forgotten and inherited poverty inconceivable.

Well, as we know, all these and many others are still with us, and there seem to be more waiting to come over the horizon. Why is this so? I would like to put forward some of the explanations that seem reasonable for me to account for the failure of policy-makers to use more fully the work of social surveys.

1. First in importance I would put the inadequate and amateurish training in survey methods of social science students – both at the undergraduate and graduate level – at our universities. To support this charge I will offer two pieces of evidence. In the summer of 1971 the Survey Unit sent a questionnaire to all post-graduate students whose grants had just terminated. They were asked, in various ways, to evaluate the post-graduate training they had received and we obtained an 83 per cent response – ie. just over 1,000 completed questionnaires. Approximately 70 per cent of the students had completed their post-graduate

studies in the five subject areas of sociology, economics, management, planning, and political science (in approximately equal numbers). Only 60 per cent of all respondents said that they thought any statistical training was a relevant part of their post-graduate training (in the five subjects named above the ratio was 63 per cent). Of all those who thought that statistical training was relevant, nearly 60 per cent rated what they had received in the way of such training as either mediocre or poor; only 7 per cent described it as excellent.

By the time we questioned them almost all our respondents had obtained jobs, and of the 90 per cent who had a clear notion of their future work, over 70 per cent said that it would entail social research – a remarkable figure when one remembers how many were convinced that a knowledge of statistical analysis was irrelevant. One-quarter of all respondents denied that they read any of the learned journals in their field of study, and, indeed, the most widely named publication mentioned as part of their relevant reading was 'New Society'. Respondents were also asked to give the title and brief account of any thesis they had completed in connection with their post-graduate studies (86 per cent of all respondents). From these descriptions three judges (myself and two American professors of sociology) working separately classified the sociology theses into four groups – certainly quantitative, possible quantitative, certainly not quantitative, probably not quantitative. We were agreed in classifying 14 per cent as certainly quantitative, and another 16 per cent as possibly quantitative.

More recently a similar classification was carried out on the BSA Register of 1,000 Post-graduate Theses in Sociology that was published earlier in 1974. This time the results, at least for a numerate sociologist were even more depressing; the judges rated eight per cent as probably quantitative (eg. 'The Influence of Urban and Rural Origins on Workers' Job Attitudes'), 26 per cent as possibly quantitative (eg. 'A Study of the Families of the Mentally Ill'), and 66 per cent as almost certainly not quantitative (eg. 'The Class Use of Entertainment Institutions in 18th Century England', or 'Reactions to Social Change in the First World War; with Special Reference to Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf', or 'The Emergence of the Political Radicalism of Homosexuality').

In part, this bias against quantitative methods in the training of social scientists springs from the contempt with which some senior social scientists regard the skills of numeracy. I well remember when the SSRC invited all universities to apply for grants to finance research and training programmes on the lines of the Detroit Area Survey I visited some of the 75 per cent of all British universities which had shown no interest in the invitation, and at two of them I was told by the professor of sociology, in almost identical words, "There will be no survey research in this department except over my dead body". Neither of them is dead, and indeed both are flourishing and presumably basking in the approbation of their colleagues.

And, of course, this animosity against survey research among some academics is even more acute if survey research can be identified by them with market research. Again, some anecdotal support is available. A few years back I was invited by the Cole Society (after GDH Cole) at Oxford to address the Society on Social Surveys and Political Sociology. When I was taken to supper after the talk the secretary, appropos of nothing that I had said, announced very firmly: "Of course, you realise there's not a single student in this University who would touch market research with a barge-pole". More recently, a senior lecturer at a provincial university who was attending the SSRC Summer School on Survey Methods summed up her condemnatory evaluation of the course by saying "It was all in the hands of market research people". When pressed for a more enlightening comment she explained that she objected particularly to the fact that we had asked four market researchers to devote one day out of the four weeks to deal with attitude measurement techniques as developed by Likert, Gutman and Fishbein. She particularly resented this imposition because, as she explained, she had never heard of these people, and, as far as she knew, nor had anyone else at her university. I strongly suspect that she was, and is, right.

It is not surprising that if this is the preparation received by many postgraduates who are subsequently involved in survey research that their efforts are not likely to provide their employers or their clients with data that can be treated as a rational basis for policy-making. Too many of them, despite their academic qualifications are, at best, novices in survey techniques.

2. I would offer as a second explanation of the gap between survey research and social policy the fact that a great deal of the former can nowadays be justifiably described by the familiar phrase 'mindless empiricism' – a product of which the supply has been greatly increased by the use of computers in the handling of survey data. With the computer at his disposal the survey researcher is too often tempted to throw into the questionnaire everything he can possibly think of; he then waits for the resultant data itself to suggest relationships or explanations or interpretations, "rather than rely on some theory which, in the event, may well be contradicted by the data". (Paul Newbold: 'Forecasting Methods', Civil Service College Occasional Papers 18, 1973.) If survey research is to provide something more than 'mindless empiricism', then even if it aims no higher than providing the policy-maker with relevant and useful descriptive facts (and that is something I regard as pretty high) then he must start with a solid grounding in social theory. Long before he drafts his questionnaire he must be aware of the general propositions that are relevant to his problem, he must translate these general propositions into specific relevant hypotheses, be clear as to what measures must be obtained and used to test these hypotheses, and understand what, in social affairs, constitutes causality and evidence of causality. Without these starting points of theory and causality then he faces two only too frequent hazards: that he may collect irrelevant or inadequate data; or, that he may not understand the real significance of the statistical relationships thrown up by his analysis.

Let me offer you an example where I think the research would have been of greater value to the policy-maker if the researcher, before setting out to collect 'the facts' had been equipped with a wider knowledge of social theory. It relates to some of the para-longitudinal research carried out for the Robbins Committee on Higher Education in an attempt to forecast the long-term demand for higher education. The life histories of young people were mapped extensively almost from birth until they reached the age when some people enter on higher education. But the mapping was completely bare of any influence derived from theories of parental socialisation and, in particular, the different roles played by the mother and the father in this socialisation. As a result, when the survey was finished, and almost by an accident of analysis, it began to look probable that, other things being equal, the best predictor of a working class child's entry into higher education was causally related to the pre-marital occupation of the child's mother.

What alarms me today when I look at the survey research field is the growing gap between the pure technician and the social theorist, with the former increasingly moving to a position of dominance and one where it is not unknown for mathematical statisticians to assume that because of their particular skills they are experts on survey research. If the quality of decision-making for policy is a function of the quality of the information on which it is based, then it is equally true that the quality of this information is a function of the quality of the techniques used to collect and analyse it, of the data-collector's ability to understand the policy-maker's problem, and, perhaps above all, for the data-collector's ability to start his work by placing it in a theory-based context.

So far we have considered the communication failure between the survey researcher and the policy-maker entirely in terms of the shortcomings of the former. This, of course, is not the usual approach. Much more commonly the gap is explained (by the research) in terms of the shortcomings of the latter. The usual attitude of the neglected researcher is "Here I am in possession of a great deal of useful information – why on earth don't those stupid bureaucrats make use of what I know". This viewpoint is forcibly expressed in a recent review in the Times Literary Supplement (23 November 1973) of the book edited by Donnison and Eversley and entitled 'Urban Pattern, Problems and Politics'. The reviewer writes: "Despite all the persuasive arguments and telling statistics, however – or perhaps because of them – this is a very depressing book. As David Eversley, formerly the Greater London Council's Chief Strategic Planner, brings out in his introductory keynote chapter, policy making in London has failed over a remarkably wide field. Friction exists between different sections of the community in a number of areas, and delinquency, violence and bad housing are very widespread; and we all know that grave staffing problems now threaten many of London's schools and its public transport. This book shows that much of the knowledge is available to help solve these serious problems and able, highly trained and dedicated social architects are to hand (and indeed, in post). Yet their influence upon affairs still seems academic and remote. The Victorians had many doers and few thinkers. We have our tables of statistics and staffs of researchers but lack the people of determination to apply their conclusions".

Before we go on to consider the shortcomings of the policy maker it is necessary to point out that the sense of indignant frustration in this quotation is exaggerated. I am sure that most survey researchers can cite instances when their tables of statistics led to rapid and logical action. For example, when the surveys of Research Services and PEP documented the very wide extent of racial discrimination in Britain Mr Roy Jenkins, the then Home Secretary, saw to it that would-be remedial legislation was drafted and enacted within the space of a few weeks. There is, however, enough substance to the charge to justify at least a brief attempt to try and examine the occasional failure of the policy-maker to make use of the findings of survey research.

At the head of the list I would put the unwillingness or the inability of the policy-maker to inform the researcher of the true nature of his problem. Let me give you a couple of examples of this from my own experience. A few years back ministers were apparently faced with the problem of deciding whether or not to encourage the construction of a third 'Queen' liner for the Atlantic service. I was asked to carry out a survey in this country and in the United States to see if there existed a market for such a service. The resultant 'tables of statistics' were unambiguous – on a profit-making basis no such market existed; its construction and operation was only possible on the basis of a total subsidy of £20 million to meet the initial construction costs and the subsequent operation costs over a period of ten years. The client, despite these findings, proceeded to authorise the construction of the third Queen, and then explained that his real problem was not the market for transatlantic liners but how to find employment for at least 2,000 shipbuilders in Britain's depressed shipyards. If the problem had been put to us in that way we would not have spent time and money carrying out interviews with rich Americans in California and New England. As it was, our findings were left unused largely because they cast only minimal light on the client's real problem.

Or, to take another example of survey research that was not used because of inadequate briefing by the client. During the war I was asked to spend some time in various British cities that were undergoing heavy enemy air-bombing and to measure the effect of such bombing on civilian morale. After a few thousand conventional survey interviews the answer seemed clear enough – that almost invariably it was counter-productive, that it tended to raise civilian morale, and that therefore the contemplated bombing of enemy civilian populations would be extremely wasteful. Whereupon the client pushed the report into some limbo of useless statistics and explained that the purpose of the intended bombing was not to lower enemy civilian morale but to raise the morale of our own civilian population. Obviously, if the client had come to me, not with a prepared piece of research, but with his real problem the useless survey would never have been carried out. The solution to his real problem was simple – domestic civilian morale could have been raised by simply firing four or five of the most obviously incompetent Cabinet Ministers.

Here then is one reason why some survey research is left unused; it is because the policy-maker comes to the researcher not with his problem but with a research brief which mistakenly he believes is relevant to the solution of his unspecified problem.

A second reason is that sometimes the policy-maker turns to survey research not because he wants data for action, but because he wishes to delay action. This can be achieved most effectively either by setting up a Royal Commission which will commission survey research, or else by awarding a research contract to a university department. In the latter case he may well buy four or five years procrastination. Such a delay can hardly harm him; at worst it will enable him to build a reputation as a wise, scientifically-minded statesman, and at best it will enable him to move on and leave the problem to be tackled either by one of his competitive colleagues or else by a representative of the political opposition.

A third, and more usual explanation for the non-use of survey data is that the policy-maker often has a different time perspective from that of the researcher. There are many occasions when the former has to make decisions with no more scope than a few weeks or even a few days. These are not time dimensions within which the survey researcher is accustomed to work. Often, neither party is to blame for this, but it occurs frequently enough for the researcher to have learned by now that in some circumstances he has a professional duty to tell the would-be client that nothing useful can be collected and analysed in the time available.

This shortness of the policy-maker's effective time span is a fact of political life that cannot be changed easily. The world in which he has to operate is often one of rapid change: last year's balance of payments surplus of £1,000 million can become this year's deficit of £2,000 million. Within a few months he may have to readjust from a 'normal' rate of interest of 7 per cent to a 'normal' rate of 14 per cent; his party may have lost office, his Prime Minister may have moved him from the Department of Economic Affairs to the Foreign Office; his senior civil servants may have been removed to man a new Ministry.

A fourth explanation is to be found in the fact that the policy-maker's world is very different from that of the researcher. The latter can afford to base his behaviour on the text that "The text will set you free", while the former has constantly to remember that sometimes an over-zealous commitment to this principle in a particular situation may well endanger his plans over a wide range. Again, let us take an example from real life. Some years back a scientifically-minded Minister for Health encouraged the launching of a perfectly designed survey to study the effect of the fluoridation of drinking water on dental caries among children. All the classical steps were followed in the survey design – before and after studies on experimental and control groups, and by a piece of extraordinary good luck one of the experimental areas dropped out of the experiment half way through its duration. After measuring the incidence of caries in the two areas over a period of eleven years the case for adding fluoride to drinking water was unshakeably established and the results and techniques endorsed by dozens of experts. But no appropriate action was taken; for the simple reason that the control of water supplies in this country is a local matter, that in local elections the usual turnout of voters is about 30 per cent, and that a handful of outraged anti-fluoridation zealots could therefore throw out many local authorities who acted on the findings of the survey.

Given then the gap that frequently exists between survey research and social policy what can be done about it? There are three possible reactions which I will spell out only because I wish to reject them.

The first is to do nothing. Why should surveys be 'useful' to policy-makers? Why can they not be an end in themselves and justified as contributions to the growing mountains of knowledge that constitute, in the eyes of some people, scholarship and learning. I reject this solution because I am convinced that the resultant frustration would drive most first-rate survey workers away from survey research.

A second possibility is to replace survey research by more compelling procedures for arriving at the truth about the human condition and about human relationships. The substitute we have been offered in recent years is existential phenomenology. I must admit that I am not very clear as to the nature of EP. The best I can do is offer you the account given by one of its leading advocates. According to him the essence of the technique lies in stripping away from the group or topic being studied all the outer layers, one by one, of objective, and therefore misleading, meaning, until one arrives at the integral wholeness of the group. In his own words, and praising the work of one of his predecessors he writes: "His approach is phenomenological ... His careful attention to the types of meanings given in the phenomenal presentation of cultural objects (lays) ... stress on the meaningful aspect of the intentional act: reduction to the essentials of a phenomenon involves unveiling successive layers of meaning, from the externally manifest to the core latent 'noematic' content." (E A Tiryakian: Existential Phenomenology and Sociology. American Sociological Review, October 1965).

I think it would be unwise to accept this as a replacement for survey research. It is probable that the average policy-maker would prefer to lean on tables of statistics rather than on subjective essence. The latter, as we know from some LSD addicts are included to be fragile supports in the real world.

A third proffered substitute for survey research is what is currently described as action research; it has been widely used in connection with Educational Priority Areas, and Community Development Projects. I use the phrase 'in connection with' so as to avoid the error of suggesting that action research has anything to do with research as we commonly understand that word. As far as I can tell, in action research the person designated as the 'researcher' plays a full part in formulating action and policy and as his knowledge or perceptions change he is free to alter the direction of the programme; and then when the programme comes to the end of its allotted span of years he is free to insist that the convictions that moved him before the programme started have now been substantiated by his experience. The kindest and most sympathetic review of action research that I have seen has been written by Stephen Town in the November 1973 issue of the Sociological Review. He concludes: "These examples of EPA and CDP suggest some of the difficulties involved in the conduct of action research projects which aim to provide the generalised findings suitable for the formulation of policy. The difficulties involved rest not only upon the problem of planning action which can subsequently be evaluated, but in the position of research as an arm of the project which it attempts to evaluate."

If these are the only three replacements that are available for survey research as an instrument for social policy, then I think we are stuck with old-fashioned survey research, and all that is open to us is to devise means whereby the researcher and the policy-maker are brought into closer and more responsive relationships.

To this end I have two suggestions to make – both borrowed from the United States. In 1964, with the Federal Government under President Johnson launched on a massive programme of social intervention and reform, the Carnegie Foundation announced that it was financing 14 White House Fellowships annually; four of the Fellows were assigned to the White House to work alongside the President and one to each of the ten Cabinet officers; thee Fellowships were available each year as long as Mr Johnson was President and undoubtedly brought together researchers and policy-makers into a sharing of methods, values, resources and perspectives. Something similar might be launched in this country.

However, we need something larger than can be obtained by 14 annual Fellowships. And here I suggest we follow the recent innovation at the University of Pittsburgh which provides post-graduate courses and degrees in Applied Sociology. The students work very much as old-fashioned apprentices to a teacher who is both a distinguished craftsman in survey research and also closely associated with policy-making. But in addition to their apprenticeship work students apply themselves as critics to the output of recently completed major research projects. Where the project was one of survey research they examine the report with a view to listing (a) its value to particular types of policy-makers, (b) its contribution to social theory. And if the project under review was concerned with fundamental theory then they have to ask (a) what is its possible contribution to social theory; (b) what empirical research is now needed to test the theory.

Courses in applied social research along these lines would almost certainly produce researchers of more value to policy-makers than those turned out today.