

Social Investigation: Some Preliminary Considerations

With an increasing preoccupation with science and scientific method, modern sociologists seek to ground their theoretical constructs in empirical facts. So sociological enquiries have become a prominent aspect of sociology, and are as much related to sociology as technology is to science. Moral philosophers may feel very strongly about the rights and wrongs of applying techniques to society. Thus, although an analysis of social problems may suggest avenues of action: and may, therefore, be a necessary prerequisite to the information of social policy, it cannot claim – as some idealists might – to provide a prescription for action. Indeed analysis (like medical diagnosis) may be one thing and cure quite another. To know what ails society (or a patient) is not saying that one can necessarily cope with the problem. Moreover, the social scientist, perhaps more than the technologist, runs the danger of becoming a social engineer – in other words a dictator who manipulates society to bring about ends desired on theoretical consideration. At present such danger is small because sociology is not comparable to the natural sciences in its accuracy of prediction, or its ability to discover laws of society that operate with the exactitude of the laws of nature. However, if sociology should ever reach such precision some people would claim that this would also be the end of societies as living entities who would be replaced by mechanically planned processes no longer concordant with what we today describe as “human”.

And of course it is necessary to be particularly conscious of potential social engineering in disaster situations, where outside agencies are in danger of being too manipulative.

Nevertheless, the detailed study of social problems can provide important insights and is of tremendous value in evaluating the effectiveness of social policy and social planning. To discover, for instance, what health services are achieving, methods of sociological enquiry can be effectively used, and some other areas where sociologists make useful team members in research are: environmental disease; mental health; maternity and child welfare; delivery of health care; occupational health etc.; and planning for economic development.

The basis of such investigations is quantitative assessment and thus involves a fair amount of statistics. But it cannot be

stressed too emphatically that on the whole it is far better to consult expert statisticians than to be subject to misinterpretation of data by trying to handle complex problems in simplified manner. The most important asset that any research worker can have is both a healthy respect for and great distrust of the numerical expert. If the statistical analysis runs counter to the scientific expectations and hypothesis, this need not mean that the hypothesis was wrong, but more often than not it is due to faulty techniques of survey design. This paper, therefore, will be concerned to discuss, in detail, questionnaire design and theories of sampling and leave readers to refer to elementary books on statistics as and when required.*

The most useful device for gathering information is some form of survey by which one means systematic acquisition of facts relating to a very limited field. For instance, nutritionists may wish to know the daily calorific value of diets among a given population. They would thus not be interested in anything that does not relate to this problem. But in order to achieve a meaningful interpretation of their data they may have to include a large number of questions that are not immediately related to eating. So the first effect will lie in designing a questionnaire for this purpose. It may also be necessary to paraphrase the questions according to the special environments in which they are asked, since the vocabulary used to describe symptoms of illness will be affected by culture and social class. For instance a Nigerian farmworker will express himself differently from a British housewife.

The trouble is that in personal interviews the personality of the interviewer may bias the results. One can minimise this by briefing all interviewers very carefully indeed, by precoding interviewing schedules as far as possible, and finally by employing statistical procedures in the evaluation of data in order to compensate for what is called observer errors. In order to get the best out of personal interviews it is necessary to make sure that investigators are very familiar with the questionnaire used so that they can move back and forth through it as information

* An extremely useful reference of this nature is Connolly T.G. and Sluckin W., *An Introduction to Statistics for the Social Sciences*, Third Edition (1971).