

SOCIAL SURVEYS
AND
SOCIAL ACTION

by

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MASS-OBSERVATION

When, during the middle 1930's social surveys, public opinion and market research studies were receiving rapidly increasing support and approval there emerged some critics who felt that the normal interview situation used in this work was dangerously artificial and that the compression of people's behaviour, motives and attitudes into a set of figures obscured and even hid the essential structure and dynamics of social life.

These critics had been greatly impressed by the field work methods of anthropologists where the student learns to understand a strange society by participating in its everyday life and by observing the behaviour of his fellows. At the beginning of 1937 a small group of such critics formed themselves into an organisation named Mass-Observation and set to work to study the British Islanders by a variety of methods.

A typical Mass-Observation study may employ as many as five approaches. They are:—

a. Direct interviewing conducted with samples of the relevant population and using the conventional questionnaires of market research, public opinion and social survey studies.

b. Indirect interviewing where opinions, attitudes and motives are elicited from the public in the course of "free," probing, roving and apparently casual conversation.

c. The noting of overheard remarks freely expressed by ordinary members of the public when taking part in some activity under review, e. g., Armistice Day celebrations or Coronation Day ceremonies.

d. Direct observation of people's conduct in situations relevant to the subject under study, e.g., in a cigarette-smoking survey, how women smokers light their

cigarettes, hold them, exhale the smoke and dispose of the butts.

e. Autobiographical statements from members of a panel who describe their own behaviour, emotions, values, opinions, motives, etc.¹

These methods have been applied to a very wide range of subjects and, indeed, one of the main attractions of the work of Mass-Observation has been its pioneering ploughing of areas rarely touched by earlier academic students of society. Their reports have dealt with smoking, pubs, football pools, seaside humour, the monarchy, religious beliefs, peace hopes, village life, industrial incentives, British sex habits and values, capital punishment, newspaper reading and many others. Their reports have aroused much interest and some readers have appreciated the fact that their publications contain extensive quotations of the "actual words of real people." Thus, on opening at random their book, *Britain and Her Birth-rate* at page 183 one finds that the chapter deals with the religious faiths of mothers and that the page consists almost entirely of informants' statements of which the following are typical:—

"Well, I don't go to church and all that, but I believe in somebody. I'm not against it."

"Well, I do believe in somebody watching over us, but I don't go to church."

"Well, to tell you the truth I do what I can and I don't do anybody any harm, but I'm not a church-goer."

1. For a more detailed account of the methods of Mass-Observation see, *First Year's Work, 1937-1938*, by Mass-Observation, Lindsay Drummond, London, 1938; *Limitations of Statistics*, by J. G. FERRABY, *Manchester Statistical Society*, 1943; and *Progress in Mass-Observation*, by L. R. ENGLAND, *International Journal of Opinion Study*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1949.

"Well, I go to church now and again, but I'm not so very religious."

"Well, I don't go to church except for weddings and funerals."

On the other hand, some readers regard these quotations as dreary trivia completely devoid of either significance or interest.

What, in fact, is the scientific value of the methods peculiar to Mass-Observation?

First, there is nothing novel about the method of direct interviewing of a sample of the population. The weaknesses and potentialities of this fact-collecting instrument have already been discussed in the chapter on public opinion research. It is, however, worth noting that Mass-Observation in this side of its work is very frequently satisfied with sharply limited samples of the population. For example, in its recent study of religious beliefs—*Puzzled People*—the sample used for direct questioning was no greater than 500 and all of them came from one London borough; it is possible that the findings would have been different in York or Canterbury, or among the chapel-goers of Wales, or in Scotland or among farm labourers.

The second device favoured by Mass-Observation—indirect interviewing—again is not novel, but undoubtedly it owes much of its recent popularity to this organisation. Its possibilities are considerable, but its value depends upon systematisation and controls which have often been neglected by Mass-Observation in the past. This type of interview is known by various names among sociologists—the intensive or the detailed interview, the depth interview or the case history type of interview, or the qualitative interview. "The qualitative interview aims to help the informant to articulate his

individual case with respect to the topic of the investigation. No categories of answers are determined prior to the interview. Rather, the questions asked in a qualitative interview serve as a starting point for the joint exploration of the informant's attitude and behaviour by both the interviewer and the respondent. The categories of answers are developed after the interview has been made."¹

But this freedom will rapidly degenerate into anarchy unless the interviewers collect comparable material from the different informants. This is only possible if the interviewing is bounded by a specific and uniform guide which for each survey outlines the major determinants of an action, the range of anticipated responses and the facets of an attitude which must be covered in all interviews. And before this can be done the research director must start with a theoretically enlightened understanding of the nature and function of the institution or relationship being investigated; for example, an interview guide to be used in a study of the British monarchy must be built upon an understanding of the nature and role of monarchy and a series of hypotheses as to the causes of its present strength and weaknesses. In the absence of such a theoretical groundwork and its resulting interview guide what emerges is the collection of boring and unrelated quotations to be found in Mass-Observation's study of the Coronation ceremonies published under the title *May 12th*. Only too often when Mass-Observation uses the indirect interview it lacks both the appropriate fundamental theoretical awareness and the provision of an interview guide.

Not that the latter solves all the technical problems of

1. *Training Guide on the Techniques of Qualitative Interviews*, p. 1, Unpublished manuscript, Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, New York, 1948.

such research. The interview guide sets out all the avenues of approach which must be followed by the interviewer; it "gives typical questions which might be used as a starting point, (but) it is left to the interviewer's skill when to ask these questions, exactly how to word them and what additional probe questions to ask." In short, the indirect interview calls for highly skilled and very carefully trained interviewers, people who will not allow their own expectations about each informant to colour their questions and records, and who will probe without prompting. So far, Mass-Observation has apparently not undertaken any such training of its indirect interviewers.

The third method employed by Mass-Observation is the recording and analysis of overheard remarks. Critics have pointed out various weaknesses in this tool. Almost by definition the remarks overheard are public statements—there are legal difficulties and even physical risks about eavesdropping on private conversations; statements overheard by observers are, therefore, of limited scope. Again, speech may have no constant relation to thought and behaviour—as Jespersen has pointed out, some people use speech to express their thoughts, some people use it to hide their thoughts, and a great many use speech to hide the fact that they have no thoughts—to interpret the noises they make as anything but social pleasantries is misleading. And there is always the problem of semantics; for example, the young man sent from London to overhear conversations in Bolton has to learn that certain expletives which are merely coarse when used in Balham, may carry tenuous overtones of amused affection in the mouth of a Lancashire weaver; the same words may mean different things in different regions, different classes and different age-groups.

The fourth source of information on which Mass-Observation depends for its insight into social relations is that of observation. Here again one feels that action has outrun forethought. A typical pre-war directive (October, 1937) sent out from headquarters to Observers ran: "In case of any national emergency, all Observers are asked to make a detailed account of what happens to them, and the reactions of those around them."

The unreliabilities latent in this method of collecting facts are many. For example, it is a commonplace of textbooks on psychology and on journalism that when a group of people are asked to describe some event happening before their eyes they are likely to turn in a variety of accounts. The disagreement will arise from two sources—some people will unconsciously distort and misapprehend what has happened; others will limit their accounts to only parts of the event and will vary in their selection and omission. In short, observing everyday events is a skilled job, and additionally, the observers must be guided in the selection of what to observe and this guidance must be based on a set of hypotheses built around the problem under investigation. A blanket instruction to observers "to make a detailed account . . . of the reactions of those around them" will lead to enlightening reports only by an unlikely concatenation of happy flukes.

A further weakness of the observer technique is that not all members of the public are equally available for observation and not all facets of a relationship are demonstrated in public. For example, in studying by observation the way parents handle their children one is limited in the first place to those parents who present themselves for observation, and secondly, the way these parents behave in public may be different from, even in conflict with, their behaviour at home. Again, in

studying behaviour it has to be remembered that in public everyone acts—one tends to assume a role and act in accordance with what are believed to be the expectations and standards of others; for the same person the role may change from situation to situation. How is this “acting” to be recognised and what part should be attributed to it in assessing the significance of the events under consideration?

Finally, there is Mass-Observation’s use of the diaries, letters and self-analyses of a panel of volunteers. What is the reliability and validity of the contribution of these people? Their number is comparatively small; at the beginning of 1950 they totalled 1,200 and on any particular survey only some 750-800 send in their writings. Moreover, the sample is far from being representative of the total population; the bulk of the panel members are middle class and they are not typical members of the middle class. Thus in a recent Mass-Observation survey of “Sex Attitudes in Britain” the authors put identical questions to the panel and to a representative nation-wide sample of the middle class; they found that “the panel sample showed more ‘modern’ views on sex than the middle class group of the street sample.”¹ It is likely that the average man-in-the-street would regard the Mass-Observation volunteer as a bit of a crank.

Nor is this the only defect in the panel. It is a commonplace of psychology that most people, even when spurred by the best of intentions and even in their most private and reflective moments, find it very difficult to achieve either sincerity or complete understanding when analysing their own behaviour, motives or feelings. At every moment of life unconscious processes play an

1. L. R. ENGLAND, *An Outline of Sex Attitudes in Britain*, Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1949.

important role in determining much of our behaviour, and an awareness of these processes usually requires the use of highly specialised techniques. It is unlikely that the undergraduates, housewives, shopkeepers, school teachers who have volunteered for the Mass-Observation panel have mastered these techniques.

So far we have looked mainly at the methods used by Mass-Observation to collect information. What about its analysis and interpretation of the flow of verbatim answers, overheard conversations, school essays, diaries, letters, and introspective musings that pours in to headquarters? If they are to yield anything of scientific value then they must lead to precise conclusions and generalisations about the structure and dynamics of social life. How is this crystallisation effected? Apparently the material is "classified by an analyst. . . . It is possible by quoting examples of the remarks actually made to give a . . . picture of the nature of the various reactions. . . . The selection of typical remarks is at present based on the subjective estimate by the analyst of what is typical. . . . There is certainly in this method an element of subjectivity in classifying the data."¹

In short, the methods are inchoate and uncontrolled, and this is perhaps the greatest disappointment about the work of the innovators. In thirteen years of prolific activity they have contributed nothing that can be called a scientific method of content analysis—the process which aims "at a quantitative classification of a given body of content in terms of a system of categories devised to yield data relevant to specific hypotheses concerning that content."

Sociologists in the United States have defined content analysis as : "A research technique for the objective,

1. Ferraby, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.”¹ In elaborating this definition they have set out four characteristics or requirements:—

“The syntactic-and-semantic requirement . . . i.e., content analysis proceeds in terms of what-is-said, and not in terms of why-the-content-is-like-that (e.g., ‘motives’) or how-people-will-react (e.g., ‘appeals’). . . .

The requirement of objectivity stipulates that the categories of analysis should be defined so precisely that different analysts can apply them to the same body of content and secure the same results. . . .

The requirement of system is intended to include only those analyses designed to secure data relevant to a scientific problem or hypothesis. . . .

The requirement of quantification . . . is perhaps the most distinctive feature of content analysis. For its purposes content analysis is primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with the extent to which the analytic categories appear in the content. . . . The units of analysis may be certain words or categories of words, themes, characters, items, space measures, etc.”

It may well be that with the application of such content analysis to the material collected by Mass-Observation the whole scientific status of their methods will be revolutionised. Certainly, without it their value will be sharply limited. In an obscure way the present administrators of Mass-Observation are apparently aware of this since many of their most recent books are based almost exclusively on results obtained from questionnaires of the old-fashioned type which their iconoclastic fury rejected in 1937. There is, however, no need for such defeatism on their part.

1. B. BERELSON and P. F. LASARFELD, *The Analysis of Communication Content*, Unpublished manuscript, University of Chicago, 1948.