

Survey Research and Sociology

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One of the distinguishing features of the discipline of sociology is its concern with methods and methodology. By contrast with disciplines as various as history, anthropology, art criticism and economics, sociologists are often criticised for being excessively concerned with methodological preoccupations and with spending unnecessary time and effort establishing the basis of the knowledge and research findings which they present. This preoccupation really needs no defence. From the time at least of Max Weber onwards, a healthy debate has gone on among sociologists, at both the level of general methodology and in relation to particular research methods, about the “scientific” basis of sociological knowledge and about the warrants for the statements which sociologists make.

If sociology is justifiably self-reflective about its methodological stance, a further issue which receives widely differing answers is whether sociology is characterised by use of *particular* methods. Is there one method which is most characteristic of the discipline, which embodies its approach and which is most characteristic of what sociologists do when they conduct empirical social research? Arguably the reason that economists and anthropologists are less preoccupied with methods is that there is a greater degree of agreement about the methods which are used, and to a considerable extent taken for granted, by members of the discipline. In anthropology, for example the mystique around “field work” as a *rite de passage* is a very strongly held principle, while many anthropologists have traditionally maintained that they are studying “other” cultures than their own, and are not equipped to carry out studies of their own society. [This view has always been disputed and is not held by some younger social anthropologists].

This note is concerned with the relationship between sociologists and one particular research method, large scale social survey research, typically using large national samples selected using probability methods. These reflections are prompted by my own sociological career over the last forty years, coming into sociology from the study of history in the early 1960s, pursuing an interest in research methods throughout most of the intervening period, and in the later years of full time employment working intensively for much of my time over a five year period on two projects concerned with disseminating information about large-scale UK social survey research to the UK academic community. This recent experience has made me acutely aware of the ambivalence of perhaps a majority of UK sociologists toward survey research, and an awareness that the principal UK academic developments in survey research are not necessarily being carried out by sociologists.

One does need to distinguish between disciplines, one of which is sociology, research methods, one of which is survey research, and techniques of investigation, such as questionnaire construction and interviewing, which are part of the building blocks of particular methods. The degree of fit between discipline and method varies, and a

number of disciplines may have interests in developing and advancing particular techniques. So the map with which one is working is not simple.

The change which has occurred is epitomised in my own experience over forty years. In the “research methods” course which I was taught as an undergraduate studying sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the early 1960s, “research methods” were treated as synonymous with survey methods, and the course was taught by professor of social statistics Claus Moser [now Lord Moser] on the basis of his standard textbook *Survey Methods in Social Investigation* [1957;1967]. A few years later I was involved in debate about what postgraduates should be taught [Bulmer 1972]. Today, the teaching of survey methods to sociology students in the UK rarely forms a major part of a basic methods course in UK undergraduate degrees in sociology, and in many courses, exposure to quantitative methods is relatively light. Interest in qualitative methods is generally greater, and a degree of polarisation has taken place between quantitative and qualitative methods which has had unfortunate consequences. Indeed, one major reason for the existence of the two resources which I was involved in running, the ESRC Question Bank from 2000 to 2008 and the ESRC Survey Link Scheme from 2002 to 2007, was the perception by the UK Economic and Social Research Council that the infrastructure for survey methods in UK universities was not strong and needed strengthening. It therefore devoted resources to building up these facilities.

The sceptical reader may at this point pose the question: why should there be a particular affinity between the discipline of sociology and the practical activity going under the name of social survey research? Part of the warrant for considering that there is some connection between the two, lies in the history of empirical social investigation [Bulmer 1987]. The social survey generally has been a major tool of social investigation for more than one hundred years, and although not synonymous with the development of academic sociology, it has been a very important part of that tradition [cf Bulmer, Bales and Sklar 1991]. One needs to distinguish between the early systematic surveys, mostly locality based, and the modern probability surveys. The UK poverty studies of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were important both as steps in the establishment of the systematic study of society on a scientific basis and in making the institutionalisation of empirical social inquiry possible. In Europe, sociology developed somewhat later as a growing subject in universities, but the existence of the social survey was an important signal of its distinctive subject matter. In the early development of sociology in the UK, the subject often had particularly close links with the study of social policy and administration, where the social survey tradition held powerful sway.

The early history of the social survey prior to 1940 was the history of studies of social conditions usually conducted in particular localities without benefit of ideas of probability sampling or representativeness. There were a few exceptions to this – the Norwegian statistician Kiaer and the English statistician A L Bowley – but the first major application of probability sampling in surveys was in the US market research industry in the 1930s by pioneers such as George Gallup. The triumph of Gallup’s 1936 presidential election prediction over the flawed *Literary Digest* poll was an early marker. So-

cial survey research began to become established in the federal government, and studies such as *The American Soldier* run by a team of academic survey specialists helped to establish the reputation of surveys based upon probability sampling methods. The US Current Population Survey began as a government survey based on probability methods in 1940 within the Works Progress Administration, devoted initially to surveying economic activity and providing a measure of unemployment in the national economy [Bregger 1983]. Parallel developments began to take place in European governments after the end of World War Two in 1945, for example the initiation of the Family Expenditure Survey in the UK from 1953. In 1951, P C Mahalanobis inaugurated the Indian National Sample Survey, the first national household sample survey in the world.

Parallel with the development of survey research in government and the private sector, academic survey research flourished in the immediate post-war period. In the United States, scholars such as Paul Lazarsfeld, Samuel Stouffer, Louis Guttman, Hannan Selvin and Peter Rossi established the social survey as an instrument of sociological research, and institutions such as the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, the Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research and the Michigan Institute of Social Research became the leading centers for the dissemination of survey research into academic social science. In the UK the developments were somewhat slower, and there was a failure to institutionalise social survey methods, but individual sociologists such as David Glass, W G Runciman, A H Halsey and John Goldthorpe undertook major social survey projects and emphasised the centrality of social survey research for sociology.

Yet social survey research has remained somewhat peculiar as a type of research method in sociology. Other kinds of research method such as ethnographic research, historical and comparative research, documentary research, life history research, for example, are primarily methods of academic social science research developed by academics within the confines of academic disciplines [which are not confined to sociology]. Social survey research, on the other hand, has a substantial presence beyond the academic world, in commercial market research and in government. Professional survey research is practiced there by researchers who, though often educated in the social sciences, are not primarily social scientists but identify themselves professionally as survey researchers.

Many years ago Jean Converse, in her comprehensive history of survey research in the United States up to 1960 [1987], pointed out the peculiar characteristics of the field, positioned, as she put it, orthogonally to academic social science, both by virtue of its spanning the non-academic and academic worlds, and by its strongly interdisciplinary character within the academic disciplines. "Survey research" is not itself an academic discipline, perhaps it can be termed a "quasi-discipline". It is found inserted into departments of sociology, political science, psychology, public health and statistics, among others. It has a specialist literature [for example, the John Wiley series] but no single academic home. It has developed journals which specialise in aspects of survey methodology, for example the Journal of Official Statistics [JOS], published by Statistics Sweden. Social survey research's lack of a disciplinary home is a key part

of the picture in discussing the relationship between survey research and the discipline of sociology.

The question of the relationship between survey research and sociology is not really separable from debates about the scientific status of sociology. Does this account for the ambivalence with which survey research is currently viewed by many sociologists? Consider two issues which have preoccupied me in my role as Director of the Survey Link Scheme and the Question Bank.

The Survey Link Scheme [Bulmer 2008] has been a modest attempt to bridge between the academic world and professional survey research by providing participants with a two-day experience, the first attending a seminar in a university laboratory centred on a particular large scale government survey such as the General Household Survey or the Family Resources Survey. In the morning participants were given an introduction to web resources about surveys and to Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing [CAPI], which is not widely covered in UK social science methods courses [cf Couper et al 1998]. The morning ended with a 30-minute video about interviewing produced by the National Centre for Social Research, the UK independent professional survey organisation, in which four of their interviewers talked about aspects of the interview process in considerable detail. In the afternoon, professional staff of the organisation which conducted the survey, such as Office for National Statistics, NatCen or British Market Research Bureau, would focus on one survey, go through the CAPI version of the questionnaire, and discuss aspects of the design of the fieldwork of the survey. The focus was heavily upon the data collection side of the survey, not upon data analysis.

The second day provided to participants in the Scheme was the opportunity to go out for the day with a professional interviewer to experience survey research at first hand. This was arranged between the participant and the survey organisation under the auspices of the Survey Link Scheme, and could take place in different parts of the UK according to the residence of the participant. It did not involve such extensive travel as participation in the first day, and had an even more practical emphasis than the first. Feedback from those who took part in the Scheme indicated a high degree of positive evaluation, and that the experience had been an eye-opening one, even for those who were involved in the analysis of data from a particular survey. One aim of the Scheme, of course, was to do something to counterbalance the very strong emphasis in quantitative methods courses in sociology upon data analysis and suitable software [eg SPSS, STATA] for handling data. Aspects of data collection [eg questionnaire design] are relatively neglected topics in survey pedagogy, and one aim of the Scheme was to remedy this lack.

The Scheme was given the task of increasing the number of participants, and successfully did this over three years. My overriding impression, however, was that much of this interest came from disciplines other than sociology, and that those directing social science postgraduate training programmes in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science and psychology had little interest in sending their students on short courses such as those that the Survey Link Scheme provided. Since the

time demand was modest and the costs of the participants were met, I concluded that many of these postgraduate directors did not consider that a detailed first-hand knowledge of survey research was necessary for their students to possess.

The second issue which particularly preoccupied me, as Director of the ESRC Question Bank, was the issue of standardised measurement in the social sciences. The Question Bank was started in 1995 and went public on the WWW in 1996. In its first incarnation it thus had a twelve year life at the National Centre for Social Research and at the University of Surrey, for the last eight years under my direction. Qb is now part of the Survey Resources Network, since January 2009 located at the University of Essex as part of the UK Data Archive. I think that Qb in its first decade did a good job in identifying and making available the questionnaires of major UK probability sample surveys, presenting these in the form of PDF files, and making them searchable using a fairly sophisticated search engine which could highlight words in the resulting files discovered. By the end of the project at Surrey we had some 70,000 pages accessible on the Qb web site.

What proved a much greater challenge was to write material about the conceptualisation and measurement of key variables appearing in the many of the surveys presented by Qb. Very good work has been done in the UK over the last decade focused upon the standardisation and measurement of social class [cf Rose and Pevalin 2006], but this topic has tended to be the exception. For many other social variables, there was much less material available, although Qb was committed to trying to commission commentaries upon key social variables and improvements in their measurement. This proved very challenging, one reason being that the professional researchers in survey agencies such as ONS and NatCen had no time to write material for academic consumption, since this was a diversion from the tasks which occupied them in their paid employment. The number of academics in the UK with the capacity and time to write such material was very limited, providing further evidence of the narrow base of survey specialists within disciplines such as sociology. The situation is even more serious in relation to methodological research upon social survey data, where the number of sociologists in the UK carrying out such work can be counted on the fingers of two hands.

The problem is not simply one of sufficient personnel engaged in survey research. There are inherent problems in standardising measurement of many social and political variables, as Heath and Martin [1997] have argued. Sociologists and political scientists seem to lack the willingness to agree with each other which economists have shown in converging upon standard definitions and measurements for key economic terms. The challenge of agreeing upon standard approaches to key variables in sociology is a theoretical challenge which has not had the same priority which it has had in the generalising science of economics. To be sure, there are other intractable problems in the design of questionnaires around the justification for how variables are operationalised in survey design. [See for example Saris and Gallhofer 2007.] But these general issues remain to challenge the sociologist who seeks to make use of survey methods in research. This note has focused on the UK situation, but I am sure that similar issues have arisen in the Swedish context.

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Författarpresentation

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