

Public Opinion Research as Science

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The author here describes various functions and uses of public opinion research, compares it with other scientific disciplines, and suggests a new concentration on the development of conceptual frameworks for organizing the current mass of empirical data. This paper is the Presidential Address presented before the Eleventh Annual Conference on Public Opinion Research at Buck Hill Falls, Pennsylvania.

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PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH is many things to many people. To a goodly number of AAPOR members it is essentially a business, and to a regrettably smaller number, a very profitable business. The "Big Sell" is a dominant pre-occupation of many among us. One should not ignore, nor need one deprecate the commercial origins of our craft. The financial and moral support that public opinion research has received from newspaper owners and publishers, radio, television, marketing, advertising, public relations, and other business executives, has given impetus to much of our progress in this field. It was the owner of my home town paper, *The Washington Post*, so Dr. Gallup tells us, who first among newspapermen perceived the potentialities of public opinion polling as an adjunct of journalism and the business of selling newspapers. Moreover, the speedy and incontrovertible evidence of the direct utility of public opinion research in the commercial world has provided it with a firm foundation upon which experimentation, exploration, and new ventures could be based.

To others, public opinion research is essentially a political instrument, a technique to be exploited to achieve public office and to consolidate, and possibly broaden, one's effective power position in the struggle for men's votes. Here, too, one should not overlook the historical connection between the institution of the straw vote and contemporary public opinion polling. Congressmen, it was reported in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, are increasingly turning to the opinion poll as a technique for cementing good relations with their constituents.¹

To a third group, public opinion research is essentially an effective and necessary instrumentality of propaganda, designed for utilization in the power struggle among nations, or in the clashes among different interest and value groups, or in what is euphemistically called "the struggle for men's minds."

Furthermore, public opinion research, as practiced by philosophers, poets,

** The views expressed here are the personal views of the author and not necessarily those of the National Science Foundation.

¹ *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII (Summer, 1954) No. 2, pp. 121-142.

and historians, is also an art, a mode of interpreting and expressing the soul of a people, the temper of the times, the *Zeitgeist* of an era, or the drift of civilization. Here, again, we must not forget that intuitive and broadly interpretative public opinion analysis existed long before the first doorbell was rung or the first quota sample drawn. And, even with the easy availability of our most recent techniques and methods, some still feel that public opinion polling is essentially an art.²

Public opinion research is, indeed, all these things: a business, a political device, an instrument of propaganda, an art. It is other things besides. Each function or use of public opinion research has its appropriate place in our contemporary world, and each leaves its mark on the nature of the discipline and the character of this professional association.

But, however else we view public opinion research, we must also conceive of it as a scientific endeavor, a systematic effort to apply the fundamental methods and logic of science to a major aspect of human social existence. It is to this scientific aspect of public opinion research that my observations are directed.

Science is not used here in any monolithic, static sense. Science is pluralistic and dynamic, and, at different moments of history, one finds differing conceptions of scientific method. What is one generation's science may turn out to be the next generation's superstitions, as witness the history of alchemy and phrenology. Undoubtedly, much that is being presented at these AAPOR sessions as the best science of which we are capable, will be deemed a generation from now as crude, inadequate, and even erroneous. But it is of the essence of science that it is self-correcting. "As an army marches on its belly, so a science progresses on its mistakes. Its errors are the very pabulum on which it feeds. Constant self-criticism, persistent self-evaluation are the price of its advances," if I may repeat a passage presented elsewhere.³ Percy W. Bridgman, J. R. Oppenheimer, and other theoretical physicists have directed attention to the requirement that science undo its own errors and eliminate or modify its illegitimate concepts. This prescription applies especially to the social sciences.

Social sciences? The very phrase is deemed to be a challenge, battle-cry, or sheer delusion, and promptly evokes endless controversy over the nature of science and whether scientific method can be applied to human social behavior. Without entering into the polemics of these major intellectual issues of our day, I should like to present the viewpoint of one of the truly elder statesmen among contemporary American scientists, Dr. Vannevar Bush. In a statement prepared for the Carnegie Corporation, Dr. Bush observes that

² See, e.g., Stewart Alsop's column in *Washington Post and Times-Herald*, May 2, 1956.

³ Alpert, H., *Emile Durkheim and His Sociology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939, p. 14.

the alleged differences between the natural sciences and the social sciences, namely that the former are experimental and precise, while the latter are observational and imprecise, are based on confusion and involve failure to take into consideration the whole gamut of natural science research.⁴ Thus, sciences such as astronomy and geology are no less observational than anthropology or sociology and the data of genetics scarcely approach in precision much of the social science materials collected in a national census. "Moreover," adds Dr. Bush, "to try to carry over bodily methods of approach from one branch of science to any other leads always into difficulties, as would be expected, for the method must be based on the problem in hand and not on *a priori* considerations." And to those who think of science solely in quantitative terms, Dr. Bush addresses the observation that "one cannot disregard the fact that there has been great science which involved very little in the way of measurement and mathematical formulation. Science does not always lean on the deflection of a needle or the dip of a balance."

In taking this position, one does not deny that there are significant differences among the various scientific disciplines, but these differences do not depend on whether one is dealing with subject matter that is natural or whatever the antithesis of natural may be. Science as a human social activity cannot arbitrarily stop short of man and his essential socio-cultural environment. It will one day be regarded as one of the most fantastic superstitions of our time that the systematic study of the Army ant is classed as science while a similar study of the behavior of Army soldiers is viewed as non-science or meta-science, if not pure nonsense.

Regardless of subject matter, science, as a self-correcting system, involves the disciplined explorations of the inquiring mind—the systematic search for truth by the method of rational intelligence. As such, science, including the science of human social behavior, is a necessary instrument of adjustment in the complex, large-scale, interconnected, technologically advanced, mass society in which we live. In a sense there are no real alternatives to scientific research save superstition, ignorance, and prejudice. Pendleton Herring, in an unpublished paper, puts the matter thus:

"The essential function of research is to give fruitful expression to intellectual curiosity and to offer the discipline of objective analysis as a counterweight to our burden of wishful thinking and bias. . . . If this, then that—an informed awareness of likely consequences—this is the contribution of research. It is essential both for the functioning of a technological society and for the responsible enjoyment of the blessings of liberty by free citizens."

And elsewhere, Dr. Herring observes:

"The basic objective of the social scientists is the same as the aim of the earth sci-

⁴ Carnegie Corporation of New York, Quarterly Report, July, 1954, pp. 6-7.

tists and the life scientists and the physical scientists, and of the humanists and the philosophers. It is the objective of all men of good will, seeking the good life: it is to release the best of mind and spirit to realize human potentialities."⁵

Wherein lie the strength and capabilities of science? The answer, I believe, is found in the power of systematic conceptualization to produce fruitful experiments and observations which, in turn, give rise to further conceptual schemes. Science has been defined by James B. Conant as:

"a dynamic undertaking directed to lowering the degree of the empiricism involved in solving problems; or, if you prefer, science is a process of fabricating a web of interconnected concepts and conceptual schemes arising from experiments and observations and fruitful of further experiments and observations."⁶

As far as public opinion research is concerned we must accept this definition as a standard toward which to strive rather than as an accurate description of the current status of the discipline. Yet, it is only through active pursuit that ideals become realities.

However, the scientific quest requires favorable circumstances for its organization and growth. An enumeration of the essential features of this encouraging environment would include: a corps of trained scientists dedicated to the ideals and ethos of science, including freedom of inquiry, integrity, honesty and the public exposure of one's findings to the free play of the intellectual market-place; an institutional setting which encourages scholarly inquiry and intellectual ferment, for, as I once heard a Yale University microbiologist remark, "the lifeblood of science, as of all scholarly inquiry, has long been the heretic;" the systematic development of conceptual frameworks capable of stimulating fruitful empirical research; and, fundamental grounding in, and expert familiarity with the theories, principles, methods, and techniques of at least one broadly defined scientific discipline. I should like to comment briefly on each of these factors in scientific progress, as they relate to the growth and development of public opinion research as a science.

Modern philosophies of science stress the role of the scientist as a creative artist who can best thrive in a society where "freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and tolerance of different standpoints is the order of the day."⁷ Whether in a university, industrial or governmental laboratory, or commercial organization, scientific research can flourish only in an institutional setting which places high positive value on intellectual, creative accomplish-

⁵ Herring, Pendleton, "Toward an Understanding of Man," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 99, April, 1955, p. 45.

⁶ Conant, J. B., *Modern Science and Modern Man*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1953, pp. 106-107.

⁷ See, e.g., J. B. Conant, "The Goals of the University in the Free World," *The Department of State Bulletin*, 33, Nov. 21, 1955, pp. 837-842. The quotation is from page 841.

ments. Science, along with other scholarly pursuits, is inhibited by the anti-intellectualism of our day. This anti-intellectualism seems to be directed not so much against this or that particular doctrine or theory as against intellectual activity *per se*. Where ideas are devalued, science is stifled. Where science is hampered, technology and other practical activities dependent on science suffer. Without the intellectual creativity of the men in shiny-seated, baggy tweed trousers, whether in the groves of academe or elsewhere, the gray flannel suits of Madison Avenue would quickly turn into hobo rags.

It will be observed that in Conant's conception of science significant emphasis is placed on the primacy of ideas and concepts. Only a theoretical framework of organizing concepts can serve the basic function of reducing the crude empiricism which characterizes the prescientific stage of any intellectual inquiry. Practical approaches certainly get things done, but without theory they do not necessarily get done well. Someone at last year's AAPOR meetings remarked that as opinion analysts we must certainly do better than precinct captains. If ever we achieve this goal, it will be largely as a result of the conceptual frameworks we organize and develop. I do not know whether our Membership Committee has accepted the application of the wag among us who is fond of repeating the old saw: "Any fool can design a questionnaire and most of them do." Even if we bar him from our Association, few of us will deny that there's something to what he says.

We have been told in a series of jeremiads issued first from Chicago's Midway and now from the hills of Berkeley, California, that public opinion and attitude research workers have no clear conception of what a public is, have only the vaguest notions regarding the nature of opinion, and espouse a concept of attitude that is empirically ambiguous and seriously deficient as a scientific concept.⁸ But the same critic believes that sociological concepts can only be "intrinsically sensitizing and not definitive."⁹ If we accept this point of view, we must abandon hope for a science of public opinion research. Yet, the history of science is clear. "Science begins rather with hazy ideas and inexact measurements but greater accuracy is introduced and indeed made possible by the ideal of a scientific system," to quote my distinguished teacher of philosophy, Morris R. Cohen.

I do not wish to minimize our deficiencies with regard to conceptualization. These deficiencies may account, in large measure, for the discontinuity in public opinion research which is identified by Bernard Berelson and Herbert Hyman as a major characteristic of the current status of our disci-

⁸ Blumer, H., "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review*, 13, Oct. 1948, pp. 542-549; H. Blumer, "Attitudes and the Social Act," *Social Problems*, 3, Oct. 1955, pp. 59-65.

⁹ Blumer, H., "What is Wrong with Social Theory?" *American Sociological Review*, 19, Feb. 1954, pp. 3-10.

pline. The need for historical and conceptual continuity is, indeed, great. Yet, however meager, poor, and fuzzy our present concepts may be, they constitute refinements and corrections of earlier ones. Over the past twenty years we have made much progress with such ideas as role, public, status, motivation, attitude, opinion, reference-group, perception, cognition, mass, and related concepts. If we are to pursue the scientific study of public opinion, it is urgently incumbent upon us to concentrate more systematically and more intensively than in the past on the development of conceptual frameworks capable of organizing into meaningful classes and categories the overabundant amounts of raw empirical materials which are being rapidly amassed from numerous sources.

In the spirit of preliminary exploration, I should like to offer a suggestion. For some time I have been puzzled by our failure to explore, in opinion and attitude research, such a synthesizing concept as *mentality*. I believe that many of the specific reports of particular opinions and attitudes, as well as various trend analyses and cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons, could be organized meaningfully to yield evidence on the existence and nature of some generalized mental outlook or perspective, some characteristic, controlling state of mind which tends to organize the particular opinions and attitudes of different social groups. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl devoted a lifetime to the study of the primitive mentality, and other anthropologists have likewise explored the mind of primitive man. Efforts have been made to analyze the secular mentality as related to the growth and development of urbanism. The contrast between the folk mentality and the urban mentality has been a recurrent theme in sociological and anthropological research. It seems to me that polling data and other types of information on opinion and attitudes are a rich source of basic materials which might fruitfully be exploited to provide a better understanding of socially determined states of mind or mentalities. The concept of mentality may well provide the kind of bridge between historical and sociological research, on the one hand, and opinion studies, on the other hand, which Paul Lazarsfeld has suggested as an important direction in which public opinion research should move.

This observation suggests that our conceptual schemes should not be organized narrowly within a separate distinctive field of public opinion research, but should be broadly conceived as part of the wider conceptual frameworks of the life, psychological, and social sciences. Public opinion research should not be viewed as an independent science, but rather as only a subdiscipline or specialized subarea of scientific research. Its conceptualizations are derived from, and have significance only within the theoretical frameworks of more comprehensive sciences such as psychology and sociology. Whatever may be the advantages from the viewpoint of practical commercial activities, it would be unfortunate if people were trained specifically as public

opinion specialists. Perhaps we already have too many individuals with narrow, albeit valuable, specialized technical skills who are superb experts in scaling techniques, sampling design, interviewing methods, questionnaire construction, and other methodological activities, but who tend, by virtue of lack of exposure to theoretical frames of reference, to acquire a strange, but sterile, fascination for pure methodology. Methodology, a famous economist once said, is like playing the slide trombone. No one enjoys it except the fellow who's doing it.

It is my thesis that public opinion researchers are best trained when they become thoroughly grounded in at least one of the scientific disciplines relevant to opinion research while, at the same time, they develop the breadth of vision, the interdisciplinary perspective, and the flexibility which are essential to creative and productive public opinion research. Public opinion experts, in my judgment, should not be trained as such. We should, rather, train sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, etc., with specialization in public opinion study.¹⁰

Let us cultivate, then, a synthetic, scientific understanding of man and society. When engaged in controversy over whether social science research will even become *really* scientific, I am fond of repeating the delightful tale of the rooster who wandered from his home base and came upon a large ostrich egg. He had never seen an egg of such dimensions before. He rolled it back to his roost, called out the hens, and said, "I'm not exactly complaining, ladies, but it can be done!"

Yes, it can be done! But the successful pursuit of scientific research requires dedicated devotion to the values of intellectual freedom and rational intelligence. It demands intellectual curiosity about the nature of nature, including the nature of man and society. Above all, it calls for self-disciplined, systematic, thoughtful inquiry to satisfy such curiosity. Let us eschew derisive references to "deep think." After all, if I may paraphrase a song title from "South Pacific," there's nothing like a thought!

Percy Bridgman recently proposed as the first law of mental dynamics the proposition that man cannot get away from himself. This is only a negative way of expressing the ancient Socratic precept: Know thyself. Firm, reliable knowledge about man and society, including an understanding of the nature of opinions, attitudes, emotions and connected psychological and sociological processes is not a luxury to be indulged in casually when other more significant things are ended. It is a necessary condition of human survival in the complex world we have created.

¹⁰ For a similar view with respect to the training of demographers, see H. Alpert, "The Role of the U. S. National Science Foundation in the Training of Personnel for Demographic Research," Paper presented to World Population Conference, 1954, UN Paper E/Conf. 13/69, Meeting No. 29.

Many of you are familiar with the paper entitled "Some Introductory Comments on the History of Public Opinion Polling with Special Reference to the Period 1951-1970," which, despite its publication in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1951, is still scheduled for delivery before some 600 specialists attending the twenty-sixth annual meeting of AAPOR at some Guatamalan counterpart of Buck Hill Falls. I'm sure that the original author would not object to my adding to his remarks a special note of gratitude to the hardy Aaporian and Waporian pioneers of the 1950's who, in full consciousness of their conceptual, methodological, and just plain human limitations, made possible the progress of public opinion research as science.