

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

PUBLIC OPINION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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On this rostrum last year, W. Phillips Davison recalled Julian Woodward's presidential address, "Public Opinion Research 1951-1970: A Not-Too Reverent History," which was delivered to the sixth annual conference of AAPOR in 1951. More than twenty years ago, Woodward touched on one of last year's important conference topics, "Have We Changed Our Minds about Probability Sampling?" Woodward prophesied: "One result of the sampling ferment in the early 1950s was a type of approach that was dubbed 'possibility sampling'. . . . A possibility sample was, in effect, simply the best sample that could be obtained under the circumstances, but it sounded like much more than that when described by media researchers in full-page advertisements in newspapers."

It is fascinating to re-read Woodward's prophetic "history" of the two decades that followed his address and now lie behind us. Because it is so meaningful and so entertaining, I was tempted simply to read it to you tonight, but that might seem a cop-out. Besides, the Program Committee has suggested that my remarks reflect this year's conference theme: social change.

The year before Woodward's prognostication, Paul Lazarsfeld gave an equally prescient presidential address, "The Obligations of the 1950 Pollster to the 1984 Historian." I would like to paraphrase Lazarsfeld's title and devote my reflections to "The Obligation of Opinion Research to Social Change." To my mind, this obligation is two-fold: first to *describe*, second to *effect* social change.

DESCRIBING SOCIAL CHANGE

Change in attitudes and opinions is not the total of social change, nor is this the occasion to pursue their relationship to behavioral

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change and material change. But opinion research has done a useful job of describing significant changes in public opinions and attitudes. The published polls (whose Association for the first time is co-sponsoring our Conference) with their replicative surveys; the *Polls* Section of POQ, which Hazel Erskine has provided through the years as a labor of love; the Roper Center, with its historical trove and, most recently, with its monthly summary, *Current Opinion*—all excel in charting the opinion manifestations of social change over the span of our existence as practitioners. This represents at least some of what Lazarsfeld contemplated in 1950. Indeed, I have been struck with papers at this conference that take for granted the existence of historical and current opinion data for analysis of a variety of subjects.

But description is not enough. We also need analytical studies of such change, such as those of the Institute of Social Research on consumer behavior and racial attitudes, or Daniel Yankelovich's interpretations of the present youth culture. Proficient as they are, however, such studies are for the most part based on aggregates of individual opinions. Little in them explains the revolutionary changes of the last decade or two.

In introducing his *Mathematical Sociology*, James Coleman once noted that the foundation of sociology was, as the term implies, in study of behavior and interaction in group situations. He observed that it was the technology of the questionnaire and the punch card that directed so much sociological research into description and taxonomy of individual opinions and behavior. We lacked comparable tools for analyzing the social interaction that shapes opinions, but with present computer capability, he argues, sociology should get back to its original business of understanding social influences and social behavior.

Most of us describe individual attributes or behavior and perform analyses based on some sort of categorization. This can go only so far in explaining social change. As Leo Bogart said on this occasion six years ago, "The process by which a group comes to take a position is not amenable to study by a technique that approaches people one by one." Phil Davidson repeated the thought last year when he said "Polls cannot by themselves describe the complicated process by which individual opinions become aggregated."

We do have empirical studies, most of them unpublished, explaining why people buy this product or vote for that candidate. But can anyone explain why the proportion of Southern whites who objected to sending their children to school with Negroes declined from 3 out of 5 to 1 out of 6 in only seven years (1963 to 1970), or why there was an increase in only three years (1968 to 1971) from 31 percent to 55 per-

cent who "wanted to end the war" in Vietnam "even at the risk of an eventual Communist takeover?"

Why, then, are we content merely to describe the truly revolutionary shifts in opinion that we have all witnessed, dutifully displaying sophisticated statistical analyses of demographic variables as though they were explanations, and evidencing so little curiosity about how and why these changes take place? Perhaps the explanation lies in the story about the drunk who was holding onto a lamp-post one night while fumbling in the gutter. A policeman approached him and asked if he needed help. "I'm looking for my wallet," said the drunk. The cop asked, "Where did you lose it?" "Down the alley there." "Well, why don't you look for it there?" asked the cop. "Because the light's better here," he replied.

EFFECTING SOCIAL CHANGE

What of our role as participants in the process of social change? Few among us can have remained unaffected by the wave of social involvement that inundated us a few years ago. As AAPOR members, if not as individuals, we responded to this drive for relevance. Three years ago we established the Committee on Social Concerns, chaired by Barbara Lee. For us in AAPOR Council, there was no activity to which we devoted more time over the past year nor which troubled us more. I have begun to wonder whether what we erected is less an edifice than a monument to our uneasiness, and whether we have left Barbara Lee "like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief."

Social concern implies not mere fretting, but willingness to do something, to be "part of the solution." To say this much evokes images of petitions, pickets, and protests—enough to cause some of our members to cringe.

When the Fall 1972 AAPOR newsletter indicated that Council was pondering the role of our Committee on Social Concerns, a member wrote to us: "For God's sake, keep AAPOR (as an organization) out of the Cause Crowd! . . . the entry of AAPOR in this arena would be quite predictable—somewhat-left-of-center-Liberal. The effects of this would be predictable also: (1) a division of members between those who think we ought to 'get involved' and those who do not necessarily always favor the somewhat-left-of-center-Liberal positions; and (2) an automatic forfeiture of any credibility that AAPOR now enjoys."

Thus, to pursue social concerns within AAPOR may sound like a retreat from science and a concession to the anti-scientific trend among today's activists. In rejoinder I will argue that our AAPOR pioneers were unabashed in regarding our profession as a form of social respon-

sibility. Paul Lazarsfeld concluded his presidential address as follows:

We want all of our intelligent fellow citizens to have respect for the kind of work we are doing. One very good way to get this respect is for us to show that we recognize our common problems and can contribute to their clarification.

The concluding paragraph of Julian Woodward's 1951 essay stated:

As a profession we have had from the very beginning a scientist's conscience and a strong sense of obligation for public service.

And Stouffer, discouraged by his findings of the effects of McCarthyism on academic freedom, said in his 1954 presidential address:

Even if there are those who instead of calling on the doctors for help would shoot them, I believe that members of AAPOR are doing a most important service in this crisis of civilization.

All this was before riots, assassinations, Black Panthers, SDS, involvement in Indo-China, and other radicalizing influences associated with the present emphasis on social concerns. In a more recent expression, Leo Bogart wrote:

If men must be persuaded not to hate, to forgo immediate pleasure, self-interest, or the dictates of tradition in order to plan their own eventual larger good, this can be done only with an understanding of what moves them. Here originates the study of public opinion.

I submit, therefore, that social concern is inherent, if not in all professions, certainly in ours.

The American Marketing Association—to which, according to Joseph Klapper's survey, over 40 percent of AAPOR members belong and whose membership is, by inclination, more conservative than ours—has recently established an elaborate mechanism for taking stands on social policy. It has issued statements on such matters of social concern as unit pricing and deficiencies of the marketing mechanism for the poor.

Social responsibility in our field is different from that in most others, however, because opinion research has no defined area of content. We resemble a statistical association more than a group with substantive emphasis, a condition that has led Albert Bideman to comment that public opinion research as a discipline has only two present social concerns: "plebiscitary democracy" and "program evaluation." I see three areas of social concern among opinion researchers.

1. *Social concern for the integrity of our work.* This requires us to speak out if we find our assignments loaded or our findings distorted, as prescribed in the AAPOR code of ethics. Beyond that, we must try to oversee public presentation in our field of expertise. For many years,

and as recently as last month, AAPOR's Standards Committee has been questioning the accuracy of surveys reported in the press.

We should also challenge misuse of surveys by public bodies, as when we pursued alleged politicizing of a federal statistical agency. We have done this on our own and as members of the Federal Statistical Users Conference. The American Statistical Association, too, recently aired misgivings about the objectivity of the federal statistical establishment in a trenchant article (by an AAPOR member) which recently appeared in *The American Statistician*.

We should also act as advocates in matters affecting the conduct of our work, such as restrictions on reaching survey respondents or abuse of the survey approach, matters which also occupy much of our Standards Committee's attention. For example, Hope Klapper, as chairperson of that Committee, has recently convened a group of her counterparts in related associations to consider problems affecting access to survey respondents. The American Statistical Association is about to conduct a Conference on Statistical Surveys of Human Populations, reflecting the Federal government's concern for proliferation of questionnaire surveys and the reluctance of the public to respond to them. Mervin Field, who has been urging this question on AAPOR and compiling completion statistics on his own, will attend as a member of AAPOR's Standard's Committee.

Beyond threats to the operating requirements of our work, we must resist threats to the integrity of scientific values or efforts to impose political standards on science. I do not cherish a national political administration that curtails—indeed, seems to fear—social research and churlishly disregards findings of its own commissions of social inquiry. But I believe this attitude should be distinguished from the malevolence that brought some of our best scientists here from abroad in the 1930s. Nor is the present atmosphere of grudging ignorance, or even political tampering, to be compared with the repression felt by this body in 1954. Stouffer's presidential address bristles in defense of academic freedom, which was then threatened in a way that contemporary activists have not experienced. In short, the first social concern of the scientist must be in defense of science.

2. *Social concern for utilization of our expertise.* This type of social concern is for the relevance of what we do. Let me first state how I believe the social concern of a scientific association should *not* manifest itself. On the last day of 1972, it was reported in the daily press that the governing council of the American Association for the Advancement of Science by a 80 to 41 vote adopted an emergency motion that stated, in part:

The Council of the American Association for the Advancement of Science urges an immediate cessation of hostilities and an immediate withdrawal of all U. S. armed forces from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Although I claim credentials as a social and political activist I would oppose such a resolution from AAAS, or AAPOR, or any other scientific organization. As an individual, I am glad to join my peers in signing a statement, publishing an ad, or as part of a delegation to Congress; but a scientific organization turned activist (except in defense of science) is neither good science nor good activism.

In our role as concerned opinion researchers, we must act on the basis of our specialized skills and professional knowledge. As Phil Davison pointed out on this platform last year, opinion research, as a form of communication, has its own special impact on social change and social action. It is important to report and analyze what people think on relevant issues. I believe this is what Biderman means by "plebiscitary democracy."

Despite disclaimers that science is morally neutral, its directions and applications reflect value judgments in both the public and private domain. Research in physical science is largely directed by a desire to control the environment; the disciplines underlying opinion research are historically directed toward social action and social change. Lasswell has argued for "policy sciences" that focus the resources of social science "upon the fundamental problems of man in society."

Stated thus, one wonders why we need look beyond our own work for social concern. One answer is that not all of us are working in socially useful fields. Ira Cisin has suggested that AAPOR's urge for social concern indicates a form of guilt among those of us who do not find sufficient social value in our work. It is not only narrowly competitive commercial research that disquiets the conscience; academic and government studies may also be partisan, self-serving, and trivial. As good opinion researchers as well as socially concerned ones, we must make every opportunity to apply what we accept as socially useful directions to our work. In this regard, opinion research in public health is in the interest of prevention and treatment of disease and disability; opinion research on prejudice is in the interest of equal rights; opinion research on crime is for prevention, protection, and rehabilitation. Obviously, health, equality, and law are values in our society.

I feel compelled to add that I personally regret the neglect of international peace in opinion research. Surely peace is one of our society's values as much as health or law or racial equality. Having joined two peace research groups, and having attended two of their conferences and read the programs of a dozen others, I was amazed to find that their emphasis was largely on balance-of-power and gaming approaches.

Only a few peace researchers conduct work that suggests that public attitudes have anything to do with war.

For our part, we opinion researchers tend to treat issues of international conflict topically, as ingredients of voting behavior or concerns of the news. Scarcely any attitude or opinion research treats international warfare as a form of social pathology, seeking out what is relevant to the issue much as we approach problems of crime, environmental concern, or population control. Except for a few pioneers like Ralph White, who chaired such a session at this Conference, and his colleagues who coauthored, "Vietnam and the Silent Majority," few opinion researchers are identified with peace research.

Phil Davison (although not agreeing with my position on this) points out the Preamble to the UNESCO Charter: "War begins in the minds of men." Much the same may be said about racism. We should recall the position that used to be taken on race-relations research by most opinion researchers. Back in the 1930s, a decade before the appearance of Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, most of us in social research knew why science had to be neutral on the question of racial equality and why we, as scientists, could not take sides. Yet, over the years, we did come to take sides, as national policy embraced equal rights. We found that we could study racism with a view toward its abolition.

I look forward to the day when we, as scientists, also recognize that peace is a national value. We may then acknowledge that we should conduct research directed toward abolishing the institutionalized form of conflict known as war. Do we neglect this because we really do not perceive the threat of nuclear extermination, because we are dependent for funds on an unsympathetic government, or because peace activists have so preempted the field (by our default, possibly) that research on war/peace attitudes is regarded as not sufficiently scientific? Are we waiting for a Myrdal or a Stouffer to make the field respectable? The danger of nuclear destruction caused Stouffer, in his 1954 presidential address, to compare this threat to that of the London Plague of 1665 and our incipient capability in dealing with social problems to seventeenth-century medical skill.

I believe we should express such social concerns through selection of the topics we study. And for the majority of us not talented enough to get paid for what we feel is most urgent, but who make a living by researching what our employers or clients dictate, there is always the opportunity to volunteer as researchers for those who need such services. At one phase in its faltering course, AAPOR's Committee on Social Concerns tried to link research needs in agencies of social change to volunteers among our members. This clearing-house operation was later dropped as an AAPOR function, but I'm sure there are many

socially concerned volunteers. Eugene Hartley has called attention to a spectacular example in the Division 8 Newsletter of the American Psychological Association, which suggests that the acquittal in the Harrisburg trial might well have been a direct result of volunteer work in opinion research.

3. *Social concern for acceptance of findings.* If we are fortunate enough to do significant work in a field of social concern, we may then come into conflict with public officials, or even our peers. Superior information may be a curse when the findings conflict with conventional wisdom. Some in this room were present when Leonard Goodwin told a Washington audience that virtually every recent bill introduced in Congress concerning poverty was based on assumptions refuted by his own and others' painstaking studies. This gets close to Biderman's second point, "program evaluation."

In a recent monograph, James Coleman provided a set of sharp and useful distinctions between "discipline research" and "policy research." In it, he says: "Those stages of policy research that lie in the world of action, formulation of the research problem, posing conditions for communication of the research results back into the world of action, and making policy recommendations based on the research results, should be governed by the investigator's personal values and appropriately include advocacy. Those stages that lie within the disciplinary world, execution of the research and statement of the research results, should be governed by disciplinary values and do not appropriately include advocacy." In other words, the research we do is subject to scientific discipline, but we are to be governed by "personal values"—first, in accepting and defining problems and second, in communicating them back to the world of action.

This latter role, in which "personal values" are applied to the "world of action" was mentioned by Ira Cisin in a Conference session last year. He said that scientists are no more "qualified than the next man" and that "there is no evidence that they are wiser or more moral." This begs the question of factual premises on which policy is made and we can scarcely afford to be that modest. It is a tenet of our society that policy should be influenced by knowledge of the facts. Perhaps we cannot claim to be "wiser or more moral," but if our research doesn't provide us with better facts than the next man's, what are we here for? What if the national policy on poverty assumes that the poor do not want to work while our studies show that what the poor really lack are suitable conditions for work? Or if our findings refute the assumption that a get-tough policy with criminals will deter crime? I think we are obligated to announce our knowledge and its implications. We may not always be right, nor always in agreement,

but no one has ever said that science required more than an honest presentation of available evidence.

In the last analysis, social concern is best expressed not in political activism, perhaps not even in brave new discoveries, so much as in finding ways to communicate what we know to those in authority and to the general public who constitute the climate of opinion for social change. In this spirit, AAPOR Council eventually made such communication the primary task for our infant Committee on Social Concerns. (Finding the means to do this has generated much discussion, but that is beyond the scope of this discussion.)

In sum, the obligation of opinion research to social change requires us to be the best researchers possible in measuring and analyzing change, to be activists on behalf of the scientist's dedication to inquiry, and to take the role of social advocate in our choice of topics for study and especially in communicating and applying our findings. Let me repeat what Julian Woodward said in 1951: "We have had from the very beginning a scientist's conscience and a strong sense of obligation for public service." And then Woodward added: "I for one, have no fear that we will ever fail to meet the test of good citizenship."