REFLECTIONS ON REFERENCE GROUPS

BY HERBERT H. HYMAN

With characteristic modesty Herbert Hyman has described his presidential address as "reflections." Opinion researchers have learned to listen intently when he reflects out loud, for he has few equals in the range and profundity of his intellectual explorations. He delivered his address to the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and their guests at the Fifteenth Annual Conference on May 7, 1960, in the Traymore Hotel in Atlantic City. The Proceedings of the Conference over which he presided appear elsewhere in this issue.

Herbert H. Hyman served as President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research during the 1959-1960 term. He is the noted author of books on interviewing, survey design and analysis, political socialization, and a distinguished series of articles. He is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. In 1956 he received the Julian L. Woodward Memorial Award.

ON THESE ceremonial and important occasions, it is customary for the president of our association to view our field in large perspective. Lazarsfeld took us far into the future to 1984. Woodward, whose memory we again honor tonight, with typical modesty transported us only from 1951 to 1970. Last year Wallace first took us on a joyride through our past but then in all seriousness moved us into a different dimension of time and space, to the higher realms of the "second sigma." A president of AAPOR, however, is privileged as well as obligated. While his vision must be extended, his vista may be personal. Perhaps in the spirit of nostalgia—certainly not in any spirit of reaction—and with a definite eye to the future of our field, I shall first take us back in time for a brief historical review. I shall re-visit reference groups, hoping to suggest some future directions for our field.

I

Twenty years ago, while pondering certain problems in the course of working on my dissertation, I elaborated a concept, explored through research some of its properties, and coined a fortunate term, "reference group."[1] With publication I earned my union card and that was about all I earned. The monograph soon went out of print after earning me the magnificent sum of $7 in royalties.

[1] Herbert Hyman, *The Psychology of Status, Archives of Psychology*, No. 269, 1942.

Such were the auspicious beginnings. Time, however, healed the wounds and repaired the bank account. More important, with the passage of time the concept came back to life and has been very lively ever since. The reason is simple. Behind the concept lay an old and vigorous tradition of thought in social psychology. It had been built by many men. The specific ideas flowing from this tradition had not died. Perhaps they were still searching for a fitting title or a name.

When I had confronted my original problem, the way in which individuals appraised themselves, the psychology of judgment led me to inquire into the social frames of reference employed and gave many leads for inquiry. It seemed obvious to me in the light of past traditions of thought that one could not pre-judge who those others might be who would be used as a social framework for comparison. Individuals are complicated and varied and creative in the ways they orient themselves to others, in the groups they select as frames of comparison for self-appraisal. Society provides a rich assortment and complex arrangement of groups from which the choices may be made. The individual's symbolic processes are highly developed and can present to the mind's eye a much larger assortment than is given in direct immediate experience. Obviously, those groups to which the individual referred himself, the reference groups, must be determined by empirical means, not imputed arbitrarily.

A similar orientation must have inspired Newcomb's Bennington study in which he sought to explore the ways in which individuals derived their values and attitudes from other groups.[2] Underscore some of the phrases from his earlier work, the classic *Experimental Social Psychology*, published with Gardner and Lois Murphy in 1937. Describing the formation of attitudes he gave primacy to group influences, but he added the note that "the role of personality factors is that of determining whether or not allegiance to 'inherited groups' shall be continued, and, if not, to what groups it shall be shifted." And he remarked, "Individual variations have much to do with the nature of the groups with which one becomes affiliated and with the degree and permanence of such affiliation."[3] So, searching to understand the change of attitude, or the lack of change, among Bennington students, he was led to explore systematically the ways in which individuals related themselves to the Bennington community; in other words, used Bennington as a reference group. Whether groups function as standards for comparison or as normative sources of attitude,[4] the

[2] Theodore M. Newcomb, *Personality and Social Change*, New York, Dryden 1943.

[3] Gardner Murphy, Lois Murphy, and Theodore M. Newcomb, *Experimental Social Psychology*, New York, Harper, 1937, pp. 1027, 1045.

[4] Harold H. Kelley, "Two Functions of Reference Groups," in G. E. Swanson,

simple but essential principle of inquiry—articulated or not in terms of a specific concept of reference group—was that the groups selected had to be established by systematic empirical research. It is interesting to note that Newcomb's book, which appeared at about the same time as my monograph, 1942-1943, suffered the same kind of early oblivion. The *zeitgeist* certainly was not lavish to us in those days.

A few investigators, Sherif, Cantril, and the Hartleys—one might call them "rare book collectors," invigorated by the same traditions of thought, found the ideas congenial and the concept useful and kept it going. So Sherif laid much emphasis on reference groups in his *Social Psychology* of 1948 and gave Newcomb the opportunity to summarize his Bennington study and to rephrase it in terms of the explicit concept, "reference group."[5]

The concept had emerged in the course of empirical studies, from the confrontation of puzzling research problems. The basic idea clarified the paradoxes of why some individuals did not assimilate the attitudes available from the groups in their milieu or why self-appraisals and the correlative behavior did not correspond to the individual's social location within an assigned group. In the same way, Stouffer and his associates were led to the concept of relative deprivation, a close cousin, as they confronted paradoxical findings and drew on the common heritage of knowledge and theory.

Thus the ideas maintained some prominence among a small group up to 1950, but it is the elegance and systematic formulation of Merton and Kitt's "Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior" to which we are indebted for the current vogue and eminence of the concept of reference group.[6] In the decade that has passed, it has become standard equipment among sociologists and social psychologists. "Reference group" is now referred to! The concept is employed by so many investigators, figures as a phrase in so many formulations and interpretations, and is incorporated in so many spheres that I cannot begin to review them all. The concept crops up in Australia and Israel, in studies of farmers and drunkards and newspapermen, in inquiries into marketing and public relations and mass communication, as well as in opinion formation.[7]

T. M. Newcomb, and E. L. Hartley, editors, *Readings in Social Psychology*, New York, Holt, 1952, pp. 410-414.

[5] Muzafer Sherif, *An Outline of Social Psychology*, New York, Harper, 1948.

[6] Robert K. Merton and Alice S. Kitt, "Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior," in Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, editors, *Continuities in Social Research: Studies in the Scope and Method of the American Soldier*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1950, pp. 40-105.

[7] F. E. Emery and F. M. Katz, "Social Theory and Minority Group Behavior," *Australian Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 3, 1951, pp. 22-35; Ronald Taft, "Minority

I do not have any intention of subjecting you to an inventory. Fortunately, Merton and Kitt wrote the systematic foundation for the field, and Merton, in his subsequent essay on continuities in reference group theory, has carried the concept forward, reviewed the more recent history of its use, elaborated the many lines of conceptual refinement, and described the extended network of connections to other branches of theory.[8] I hasten to add a postscript to this brief history. During this period I remained on the sidelines devoting myself to public opinion and survey research. I was far from an innocent bystander, however, or an apathetic member of the audience, for the concept remained dear to my heart. Perhaps I might be regarded as one of the culprits, guilty of having opened this Pandora's box and letting loose the specific term or concept, but the developments of the last eighteen years proceeded independently of me, for I was too busy conducting surveys. Now there is something strange in this very fact, and I have deliberately related this bit of autobiography as if reference group theory and public opinion research were two separate and opposing worlds. The reference group concept was invented the better to understand opinions and attitudes. It takes on scientific status and significance only as it is embodied in empirical procedures. It belongs at the crossroads, in the center of the two-way traffic, speeding scientific travelers to their destinations of improved surveys and improved theory. But apart from the instance of questions on subjective class identification, which represents a widespread application of the concept to surveys, there has been little traffic. There have been two worlds rather than one, and scientific isolationism, like political, is detrimental.

In the contemplation of this fact and the fate of the concept over

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Group Behavior and Reference Group Theory," *Australian Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 4, 1952, pp. 10-23; S. N. Eisenstadt, "Studies in Reference Group Behavior. I: Reference Norms and Social Structure," *Human Relations*, Vol. 7, 1954, pp. 191-216; Everett M. Rogers and George M. Beal, *Reference Group Influence in the Adoption of Agricultural Technology*, Iowa Agricultural and Home Economics Experiment Station Project No. 1236, 1958; Everett M. Rogers, "Reference Group Influences on Student Drinking Behavior," *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, Vol. 19, 1958, pp. 244-254; I. de Sola Pool and I. Shulman, "Newsmen's Fantasies, Audiences, and Newswriting," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 23, 1959, pp. 145-158; *Group Influence in Marketing and Public Relations*, Ann Arbor, Mich., Foundation for Research on Human Behavior, 1956; John W. Riley, Jr., and Matilda White Riley, "Mass Communication and the Social System," in R. K. Merton, L. Broom, and L. S. Cottrell, Jr., editors, *Sociology Today*, New York, Basic Books, 1959, pp. 537-578; Raymond A. Bauer, "The Communicator and the Audience," *Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 2, 1958, pp. 67-77.

[8] R. K. Merton, "Continuities in the Theory of Reference Groups and Social Structure," in R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, rev. ed., Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1957, Chap. IX.

the years, I have some reflections on reference groups. I take the privilege of communicating them, hoping that they will aid in the mutual enrichment of public opinion research and reference group theory.

II

The flowering of reference group theory does not mean that all its branches have flourished. This is not to urge wild growth, for a concept may become overextended, particularly when it gets too far from its methodological life lines. Nor can we expect a tradition of thought to develop uniformly. But a strange neglect attends two aspects of the theory. Recall Merton's general formulation: "Reference group theory aims to systematize the determinants and consequences of those processes of evaluation and *self-appraisal* in which the individual takes the values or *standards* of other *individuals* and groups as a comparative frame of reference."[9] I emphasize the three polar terms in the phrases: self-appraisal rather than evaluation, standards vs. values, individuals rather than groups. Reflect on the first two phrases, in which self-appraisal through comparison with the standard of a reference group is contrasted with the assimilation of attitudes or values from a reference group.

Comparative versus normative functions of the reference group. The concept of reference group today seems almost always to be used in connection with group influences in the formation of attitudes. The equally important element of the theory, the fact that self-appraisal is dependent on the reference group which one employs as a point of social comparison, has been seriously neglected. Merton's prestigious essay begins on this note. He shows how central to the analyses in *The American Soldier* is the variable of self-appraisal and the corresponding sense of relative deprivation that stems from the particular soldier choosing one rather than another reference group for comparison. He also reveals how this use of the concept of reference group clarifies paradoxical behavior on the part of soldiers in particular objective statuses. Despite all this, current workers seem to show selective exposure to and selective memory of reference groups exclusively regarded as sources of attitude. Why the selective forgetting of the other half of reference group theory? The concept of the self is still central to social psychology.[10] There is hardly a minute in the

[9] Merton, *op.cit.*, pp. 50-51 (italics mine).

[10] The Hartleys are an exception to the general rule, giving prominence to the comparative reference group in their discussion of status. See E. L. and R. Hartley, *Fundamentals of Social Psychology*, New York, Knopf, 1952, *passim*; for unusual examples of empirical study of the self and the influence of reference groups in the self-conception, see Manford H. Kuhn and T. S. McPartland, "An Empirical Investi-

analysis of a survey where an opinion is not cross-tabulated by some status of the respondents, as if to imply that one's rank on a status and one's self-appraisal are important in understanding attitudes. Yet we usually approach such analyses in a mechanical way, forgetting that the meaning of such positions is relative to a reference group. It is hard to figure out why we do not manipulate such rich resources of survey data in ways that reference group theory and a doctrine of relative deprivation would suggest. Perhaps in this age of opulence, it is hard for us to remember that many individuals experience some kind of deprivation, absolute or relative.

Occasionally, the notion comes back to life. We are aware that social comparison processes are at work when we study categories of individuals who are de-statused, so obviously deprived relative to what they deserve and others get, for example, Negroes. We surmise that some strange social comparison process, some exotic reference group, is being employed when we observe types of people who feel deprived despite their high status and actual well-being—I have in mind professors. Apart from such instances, we rarely revive the idea of relative deprivation and the concept of the comparative reference group.

Consider but one example of a procedure we all employ and which implicitly shows our neglect of a very good bet from reference group theory. We cross-tabulate opinions by occupation. Next we cross-tabulate opinions by education. Sometimes we deal with these two statuses simultaneously, but when we do, we usually handle the two variables in an orthodox way. We either follow the logic of controlling one—getting rid of it—while examining the other, or we combine the two by addition into an index of socio-economic status. In the latter instance, low occupation plus high education yield the same sum, or index, as high occupation plus low education. Does it not make equally good sense, if not better sense, in the light of reference group theory, to consider the possibility that a person of little education in a high occupation has a totally different sense of identity and far less relative deprivation than a person of high education in a lowly occupation? The two individuals are very likely to use different reference groups in appraising themselves. Yet by assigning a single numerical score which combines both statuses into one index, while we gain something, we certainly obscure the probable variations in reference groups, relative deprivation, and self-appraisal.[11]

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gation of Self-attitudes," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19, 1954, pp. 68-76; or Ralph Turner, "Reference Groups of Future Oriented Men," *Social Forces*, Vol. 34, 1955, pp. 130-136. One other unusual example is provided by James A. Davis, "A Formal Interpretation of the Theory of Relative Deprivation," *Sociometry*, Vol. 22, 1959, pp. 280-296.

[11] In studies of mental illness among Negro migrants and nonmigrants in Phila-

Current sociological theory emphasizes status sets, the multiple statuses that an individual occupies, and there have been some notable papers on the implications of inconsistencies between the statuses a person holds. In one of these papers, Lenski demonstrates from the Detroit Area Study in 1952 that individuals whose status in one respect, for example, education, is inconsistent with their status in another respect, for example, occupation, show different party preferences and ideologies from individuals who occupy consistent ranks across their various statuses.[12] Clearly, here is empirical evidence that a more subtle handling of such routine, everyday, survey face-sheet information would have a rich pay-off. In their monumental new book on *The American Voter*, Campbell, Miller, Converse, and Stokes provide evidence based on national samples in support of the argument. The combination of low education and white collar occupation or the combination of high education and blue collar occupation has demonstrable effects on subjective class identification, on voting preference, and on attitude.[13] Thus, reference group theory would stimulate more imaginative use of face-sheet data in surveys. But it should also be stressed that secondary analysis of existing survey data would provide rich evidence on such theoretical problems as status crystallization, incongruities in statuses, and comparative reference group processes. The traffic could really be two-way.

There are innumerable other examples of ways in which the routine face-sheet data of our surveys could be more imaginatively handled if we reminded ourselves periodically of the concept of the comparative reference group. I shall cite but one other which is suggested to me

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delphia, R. J. Kleiner has demonstrated that the nonmigrants have higher educational levels, but their occupational achievements are not commensurate with their education and their income level is lower than that of the less-educated migrant group. The discrepancy in the two statuses is regarded as a source of tension, perhaps relative deprivation, and as predisposing to the greater incidence of schizophrenia among the nonmigrants. It should be noted that a conventional analysis of status factors in mental illness would have predicted that the higher status group, the educated, would show less pathology. In further analyses using this discrepancy score, Kleiner reports that it predicts mental illness for the white Protestant group as well. For a preliminary account of the findings, see R. J. Kleiner, "Status, Group Membership, and Schizophrenia," paper read at the American Psychological Association Convention, September 1959.

[12] Gerhard E. Lenski, "Status Crystallization: A Non-vertical Dimension of Social Status," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19, 1954, pp. 405-413.

[13] I am indebted to the authors for making these findings available to me in advance of publication and for special tabulations which they generously provided. The interpretation they suggest of these findings is more in terms of multiple reference groups with which the individual has identified in the course of social mobility than in terms of comparative reference groups affecting self-appraisal. Either way, the finding documents the utility of reference group theory for survey analysis. See A. Campbell, P. Converse, W. Miller, and D. Stokes, *The American Voter*, New York, Wiley, 1960.

by footnote 13 in the Lenski article, not an unlucky number, as you shall see.[14] In comparing responses of individuals contrasted in level of formal education, might not more valuable information be obtained if these comparisons were made separately for the young and the old? I do not have in mind the idea that age should be "controlled" or that the content of educational experience has changed over time, but rather the fact that for an oldster not to have gone to college is no great deprivation or stigma. By contrast, among the younger generation where higher education is commonplace, to be uneducated may really degrade the self, and to be educated may provide little or no distinction. Soon the Ph.D. may even be routine, and God help the poor professor then!

It should be noted that the analyses I have described all involve an assumption about which is the operative reference group. In the last example, I have assumed that age categories are likely to be employed as reference groups for self-appraisal. Obviously, it would be far better to determine the reference group empirically than to make an assumption, no matter how reasonable, as to the reference groups people are likely to employ. We must move in the direction of simple but sound instruments for reference group measurement which can be applied routinely in surveys.

Reference individuals versus reference groups. Let me table this important problem temporarily while we consider one other neglected aspect of reference group theory. Recall that Merton mentioned both *individuals* and groups in his formulation. The reference group as a normative source of attitudes or opinions is prominent in current theory and research. Alas, the reference individual is almost forgotten, and it would be greatly to our advantage to reinstate the concept. In my original research I stressed both concepts, since over half the subjects gave evidence that they used particular other individuals—rather than larger categories or groups of people—as reference points for appraising their status. Merton incorporated into his original formulation both concepts, and in his subsequent essay gave greater prominence to the "reference individual." Sherif described that glorified variety of reference individual to which he gave the apt title, the "reference idol."

The reference group idea reminds us that individuals may orient themselves to groups other than their own, not merely to their membership groups, and thereby explains why the attitudes and behavior of individuals may deviate from what would be predicted on the basis of their group membership. Our symbolic processes create the escape hatch from the confines of a narrow social world. Otherwise

[14] Lenski, *op.cit.*, p. 407.

provincialism would be the law of life, conformity to the parochial the rule. We would all be like those "portions of the sovereign people" whom Lippmann describes in his *Public Opinion* as moving "as if on a leash, within a fixed radius of acquaintances, according to the law and gospel of their social set."[15] Thus, a theory of the group determination of attitude has been properly enlarged by the concept of reference group. Parallel to a theory of *group* influences on attitude, a recent fruitful development of theory and research has dealt with social influences of an *interpersonal* sort mediated through direct interaction and communication, and has become known to us under the headings of "opinion leadership," "the influential," and "personal influence." But this latter theory would take on enlarged significance by some stress on "reference individuals" as sources of influence. Just as reference group reminds us of the influence of nonmembership groups, the concept of reference individual would remind us that there are influentials, or opinion leaders, with whom we are *not* in direct social relation. We model ourselves not only on those who are near but on those who are far away. Recall the old-fashioned phrasing of the phenomenon of the "influential" that we find in the writing of those who founded the tradition of thought from which the concept of reference group grew. In 1908, E. A. Ross in his *Social Psychology* spoke of the "radiant points of conventionality" which guide us lesser lights. He went on to say: "Every editor, politician, banker, capitalist, railroad president, employer, clergyman, or judge has a following with whom his opinion has weight. He, in turn, is likely to have *his* authorities. The anatomy of collective opinion shows it to be organized from centers and subcenters, forming a kind of intellectual feudal system."[16] Certainly the emphasis in recent research on intimates as sources of influence is an understandable and wholesome reaction to the earlier emphasis on hierarchical and feudal types of influence from superiors, but perhaps the balance has swung too far. The point to be stressed is that the links in the interpersonal chain do not have to be forged exclusively via direct social relations.

Fortunately, the reference individual as opinion leader has not been completely ignored in current research, and this provides some empirical data which demonstrate that the distinction I am urging is not merely academic. Katz and Lazarsfeld, in *Personal Influence*, concentrate essentially on the "specific influentials," people with whom the respondent has face-to-face contact and who influence his marketing and similar decisions, but they were sensitive to the notion of the "general influential," or "expert," the "person in whom one has con-

[15] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York, Pelican Books, 1946, p. 37.
[16] E. A. Ross, *Social Psychology*, New York, Macmillan, 1908, p. 348.

fidence and whose opinions are held in high regard."[17] For decisions in the public affairs realm they describe research procedures to locate such "experts," and in turn the expert's experts, and finally the expert's expert's experts. We come a little closer to the feudal center which Ross mentioned, the reference individual from afar, although Katz and Lazarsfeld set the boundary lines within which they studied influence processes at the community and face-to-face level. Even with this restriction, it should be noted that the findings on the expert or general influential are quite different from the findings on specific influentials, whose influence is in the form of advice mediated through direct social relations. Now, if we were to explore the reference individuals without any restriction whatsoever on the directness of their social relations with those who are being influenced, it seems likely that even more novel findings would emerge and that our total understanding of social influences on opinion formation would be enhanced.

So much for the *theoretical* insights that the concept of reference individual affords. A considerable gain for *applied* social research and social policy would accrue from simultaneous study of specific influentials and reference individuals. Reading in another spiritual father of reference group theory brings the point home. In his exquisite account of the "social self," William James, speaking as moralist and reformer, suggests that our *potential* social self is the most interesting, for he notes:

> When for motives of honor and conscience I brave the condemnation of my own family, club, and "set" . . . I am always inwardly strengthened in my course and steeled against the loss of my actual social self by the thought of other and better *possible* social judges than those whose verdict goes against me now. The ideal social self which I thus seek in appealing to their decision may be very remote. . . . Yet still the emotion that beckons me on is indubitably the pursuit of an ideal social self, of a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest possible judging companion, if such companion there be. . . . All progress in the social self is the substitution of higher tribunals for lower.[18]

Apart from the high moral tone, James reminds us that some influentials are better than others, that distant reference individuals enlarge our opinions and our self more than intimate influentials, if only because they beckon us on toward a wider world. One may not like the tone of "moral uplift," but the problem recast in terms of how to widen our horizons by substituting more "cosmopolitan" reference individuals for more "local" influentials seems to me of high priority.[19]

[17] Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1955, p. 140.

[18] William James, *Principles of Psychology*, New York, Holt, 1890, Vol. I, pp. 315-316.

[19] For an example of actual detrimental consequences of using intimates as sources

Reference group measurement. I have time for only one more set of reflections. The reference group concept has helped illuminate and interpret a wide range of phenomena. It has spurred many investigators on to research in significant problems. Its worth has been proven, and I believe its success has been deserved. But there is the danger, to use Sherif's words, that the concept "is becoming a *magic* term to explain anything and everything concerning group relations."[20] Whether it becomes a magic term, rather than a scientific term, is dependent on the degree to which the several aspects are precisely specified and translated into actual research procedures. Mere invocation of the term does not prove anything, unless we really believe in magic. Invoking the concept when our methods do establish that a reference group is operative and determining some outcome is not magic.

I believe it is possible to lengthen our methodological life lines and to rescue the concept before it is lost in a magical realm. Thoughtful theorists are giving more specificity to the aspects involved in such reference group processes. Gifted investigators are developing simple instruments of measurement applicable to survey research. Even a device as simple as the question on subjective class identification, which has become routine in surveys, provides an operational definition of one feature of reference group processes and is quite powerful in explaining survey findings. This simple measure of what class has psychological meaning for a respondent is improved greatly by another single question developed in the voting studies at the University of Michigan. Because the *judgment* of one's location in the class structure may not really express any *feelings* of identity, the respondents were asked whether they think about themselves in class terms. The data establish that the combination of the two questions on self-location and class awareness is a powerful predictor.[21]

For other social categories which might be reference groups, the feeling of identification can also be tapped by simple techniques. In the Elmira voting study, respondents were asked to indicate which of a series of groups were most important to them. In the Michigan voting studies, individuals were asked whether they "felt pretty close" to the group, and how much interest they had in the group. These measures

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of influence, see a study by Carlson of the relative accuracy of advice given to individuals suffering from syphilis by intimates and nonintimates. R. O. Carlson, *The Influence of the Community and the Primary Group on the Reaction of Southern Negroes to Syphilis,* Columbia University, 1952, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation.

[20] Muzafer Sherif, "The Concept of Reference Groups in Human Relations," in Muzafer Sherif and M. O. Wilson, editors, *Group Relations at the Crossroads,* New York, Harper, 1953, p. 204.

[21] Campbell *et al., op.cit.,* Chap. XIV.

of psychological identification predict voting better than the mere measure of objective group membership.[22]

The measurement of which group is a reference group is only one aspect. An individual can identify with a group, but in order to orient his attitudes he must have some perception of the group's norms. His opinion may deviate from the objective position of a group, not because he opposes the group, but simply because he conforms to a false norm that he has taken for the true norm of the group. The awareness that there is a norm at all, and what its content is are two important aspects of reference group measurement. But these matters were recognized beginning with Newcomb; a simple "guessing technique" in which the respondent is asked to estimate the attitudes or behavior of other persons or groups has been well developed by many investigators. Such an instrument works very well, as revealed in the data collected in the Elmira voting study of 1948, the Michigan voting study of 1952, and special analyses of the Elmira material conducted by Norman Kaplan.[23] As various investigators have argued, if the individual does not know what the norm of the group is, the group's norms cannot be relevant to the determination of his attitude no matter how much he would like them to be. Analysis of this simple datum, nonawareness of the norm, reveals a great deal that is of interest. Following the procedures presented in the Michigan study of 1952, I conducted supplementary analysis of the study's data.[24] Not only do group members in a given social category have greater awareness that there is a norm than nonmembers, but those members who identify most closely with the group have greater awareness of a norm, as, for example, in the instance of members of a religious group who are church attenders. Among nonmembers, awareness of the norm of another group is higher for those whose environment brings them closer to the other group. For example, Northern non-Catholics are more aware of a Catholic norm in voting than Southern non-Catholics. Nonfarmers living in farming areas are more aware that farmers have a voting norm than nonfarmers in manufacturing areas. Non-Jews in the North are more aware of a Jewish voting norm than non-Jews in the South. Nonunion members have greatest awareness of a union voting norm

[22] For the Elmira findings, see E. A. Suchman and H. Menzel, "The Interplay of Demographic and Psychological Variables in the Analysis of Voting Surveys," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and M. Rosenberg, editors, *The Language of Social Research*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1955, pp. 148-155; for the Michigan data, see Campbell *et al.*, *loc.cit.*

[23] *Ibid.*, B. Berelson, P. Lazarsfeld, and W. McPhee, *Voting*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1954; Norman Kaplan, *Reference Group Theory and Voting Behavior*, Columbia University, 1955, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation.

[24] I express my indebtedness to Dr. Warren E. Miller for these special tabulations and for his detailed suggestions.

when they live in Northern manufacturing areas, and least awareness when they live in Southern agricultural areas. These perceptions are regulated in an orderly fashion by environmental conditions, which determine the ease of orienting oneself to a reference group norm.

When we deal with large and heterogeneous social categories functioning as reference groups, another aspect must be considered. Such groups are not unified. They have a differentiated structure and a set of norms rather than one norm. Correspondingly, there will be a set of perceived norms. This too has been examined by relatively simple instruments. In the Elmira study, the little primary groups and individuals who compose and perhaps represent the large impersonal social category were one component of the structure, and the respondents reported their perception of their norms. The Michigan study in 1956 dissected the structure of social categories by asking the respondent how he perceived the aggregate group voting, how he perceived the voting norm of the local members of the group, and how he perceived the leadership voting. In the latter instance, we get closer to a significant reference individual. Ruth Hartley has approached the same problem in reference group theory and measurement by a battery of questions which tap the "perceived cohesiveness" of the group.[25]

Another aspect that has been conceptualized is the clarity of the norm. The norm may be ambiguous because the group is not unanimous in its views,[26] or is uncertain of its views. Certainly, if the group is differentiated, the complex of different norms characterizing the component parts may lead to lack of clarity in perception; if the group's salience is heightened or if it is engaging in vigorous communication, the norms will have greater clarity; if the group is not easily distinguished from other groups, the norm may have little clarity and perception may be difficult. Measurement of clarity of the norm can be incorporated into the same guessing technique that is used to measure awareness and perception of the norm, by allowing categories for the response that the group is mixed or split in its position, or by the instrument developed by Hartley to measure perceived uniqueness of the norms of the group.[27]

A variety of other dimensions of reference group processes lend themselves to simple measurement and are important to the general theory. I shall comment on only one other dimension, the felt legitimacy of the group exercising its norm. A respondent may have a particular reference group with which he identifies and may perceive its norm clearly, but he may not regard it as legitimate or appropriate

[25] R. E. Hartley, "The Acceptance of New Reference Groups," Office of Naval Research Technical Report No. 3, Nov. 15, 1956, mimeographed.

[26] See Kaplan, *op.cit.*, pp. 42ff.

[27] Hartley, *op.cit.*

that the group exercise its influence in that particular jurisdiction, and thus his behavior or attitude may not be governed by the reference group. While this seems a subtle aspect for measurement, it lends itself to empirical inquiry. In the Michigan studies, respondents were asked whether it was "all right" for organizations representing the particular group to support legislation and candidates. According legitimacy to the group's activities on behalf of its norms predicts the respondent's behavior.[28]

Despite the simplicity of these research techniques, survey researchers may find the total battery too much excess baggage to carry along on their ordinary travels into the field. A good deal can be done by even simpler procedures which would bring us a bit closer to the ideal of effective measurement of reference group processes. For example, for social categories or groups into which we were not born, it would certainly seem reasonable that the length of our membership would indicate something about our sense of identification or about the degree to which we have internalized its norms. But how rare it is that we bother to ask how long a man has been a union member, or how long a person has lived in the South, or how much geographical mobility and wandering through a sequence of possible reference groups he has experienced. Such a minor refinement might well improve our analyses.

These reflections in no way exhaust the many thoughts which have been stimulated by the concept of reference group, nor do they solve all the problems. I hope that the concept will have greater effect on the practice of survey research, for in the conjunction of the two there will be profit to both theory and practice. I, for one, regard these past years as but an interlude in my devotion to the concept. I have husbanded my resources—$7 compounded over eighteen years—and I am now raring to go.

[28] Campbell *et al.*, *op.cit.*, Chap. XIV.