

This report is not intended as exact minutes of the meeting held on the 30th of January but as an expansion of some of the ideas expressed there and on other occasions by members of the group. Its purpose is to inform members of the RSS of the concerns and activities of the group. As such there is no reason why any points which other members feel should be included in the "report" shouldn't appear, so we would very much welcome suggested additions, improvements or just criticisms. Please let me have them by FEBRUARY 24th in order that we can meet the deadline for the April issue.

Following on from a letter appearing in the January issue of News & Notes, an inaugural meeting of 'Radical Statistics' was held in London at the end of January. Over 50 people attended, mainly drawn from the universities, polytechnics and research units, but also including statisticians in public administration. The main feelings expressed were concern at the lack of critical discussion of the uses of statistics and of the relationship between statisticians and those who "consume" his output. This was attributed in part to an elitist system of education, in which the bulk of the population have absolutely no contact with statistical ideas. It was felt that these considerations would have important implications for the teaching of statistics, the training of statisticians, their work situation and responsibilities, and the way in which their work is published and assessed.

While one of statistics' aims is to simplify and clarify complex data, it seems very often that statistical results are presented in a way that only experts can find comprehensible. This is particularly worrying when policy decisions depend upon the outcome of research, since in this case the mystification of statistical methodology effectively limits public debate to technical wrangling among the so-called experts. Thus statistics can effectively dis-enfranchise the layman. A procedure which has a similar effect is when policy decisions are deferred and made contingent upon the results of a programme of research. The research might for instance consist of examining the views of individuals who may be affected by the decision under discussion. In this case the carrying out of the research can have the effect of closing alternative channels of action which might otherwise be open to these people. One possible function of the group would be to provide statistical information and "expertise" for action-groups, claimants unions and the like. This would attempt to redress the imbalance in a situation in which the administration has many technical resources at its disposal, but the man in the street has none.

Concern was also expressed about the statistician's technocratic involvement. In this role he is hidden from public view, his methods are assumed to be value-free, and he has little or no control over the product of his work once the statistical analysis is finished. Members of the group were particularly disturbed by the restrictions placed on statisticians working in central and local government. These workers are often required to produce "figures" for purely political purposes, and are constrained by their employers and by Official Secrets Act from making public their objections to these figures, or the methods by which they were devised. In academic work these constraints are less formalised, but nevertheless the requirements for promotion tend to encourage technocratic research divorced from real issues. It was suggested that a code of practice for statisticians might be a useful way of highlighting the ethical and political problems involved in all kinds of statistical work.

The group decided to set-up study groups to discuss ideas in several areas, these would meet fairly frequently and informally. The areas suggested were Methodology, The Working Statistician, Teaching Statistics, and groups to look at the application of statistics in Health, Education and Economics.

FINANCES

It was decided at the meeting that the expenses involved in circulating newsletters etc. would best be met by voluntary contributions from members rather than a subscription. At the meeting £16.00 was collected and this should go quite a long way as long as the size of the group doesn't get very much larger

FUTURE EVENTS

The Research Seminar Group in Quantative Social Science, an SSRC sponsored group which holds quarterly meetings on applications of statistical methods and papers on research in progress, is holding a meeting on the 3rd of July, which is being organised by John Bibby. The meeting consists of two sessions, and the present plan is that the first session should be on the theme of Teaching Statistics and that the second might consist of a critical examination of the application of statistics to a particular research area. If any member of Radical Statistics has a paper which would fit into these two themes, or knows of anyone else who might be willing to give one, John would be very glad to hear from them. He can be contacted at the Open University, Milton Keynes, Bucks
Tel: 0908-74066 Ext 3150.