

RS

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RADICAL
STATISTICS
NEWSLETTER

NO. 3

AUG. 1975

This is effectively the third issue of the Newsletter, following those mailed by Liz in February and by John in May. The aim is to provide a congenial medium so that members may work out and express their views, read what others are articulating, and give and receive feedback. (Following the view that it is at least as blessed to give as to receive, your editor has provided a Feedback Form on the last page of this issue.) We will also announce as many events as readers let us know. See the "Announcements" section for news of our September weekend conference.

The views expressed may be on the evolving role of statistics and of statisticians, as well as on wider social and political issues. The main thing is that people should feel free to "try out" their ideas "among friends" as part of the process of articulating and elaborating them.

Much of the activity of the RS group is centred around the activity of the study groups. Those currently active are: Education, Health, Statistician as Employee, and Teaching/Methodology. (See the "News" section, for reports from these groups.) In addition, there is a proposal to resurrect the Economics group (especially with reference to prices and wages) and others to create a "Community Advice" group. (See the "Letters" section.) Use the Feedback Form if you wish to be informed of the meetings of any of the study groups.

It is planned that the Newsletter should appear bi-monthly, around the middle of "even-numbered" months. (A little bit of quantification there, just to indicate that this is a serious publication) Each issue will be edited by a volunteer editor or group of editors; it is hoped that the editorship will thereby circulate as widely as possible. It is the responsibility of the current editor to arrange for (a) successor(s) from the volunteers at the most recent general meeting. The editors for RS₄ are John Irvine and Paul Dixon (c/o 14 Upper Wellington Road, Brighton, Sussex; tel. Brighton 684424).

Contributions for the next issue should be sent to the editors by 30th September; they should ideally be typed single-spaced on one side of A4.

Production and mailing may be arranged by contacting John Bibby. This process will take about two weeks (longer if any typing is needed).

Readers who have not yet contributed to the funds are asked to send something between 50p and £1.50 (according to ability) to Liz Atkins.

NEWS

Radstats General Meeting - Issues and decisions

This report is going to suffer from all the methodological weaknesses of participant observation - and probably have none of its virtues. I make that remark in both a jocular and serious sense since it is intended to underline both my own limitations and two of the problems the group left unresolved at the end of this meeting - the problem of defining what the "Group's View" is - and whether, if it existed, it could ever be presented by a "representative". Since I doubt the existence of the first and the possibility of the second, this description of the meeting can only be partial, subjective, and therefore misleading representation of what it was about! ! Perhaps this has implications

The discussion at the meeting centred around two aspects of the group's development, what one might describe as its "aims" and its "methods". I shall try and describe each separately although it's obvious that one can't really separate them.

"Aims"

The central point made was that as a group we have no "Party Line" and no common view of what our aims should be. We are united at the moment more by our criticisms of the existing use and methods of statistics than by any shared view of how our analysis of the present situation can lead to Radical alternatives - and what these should be. This presents problems in terms of presenting the group to potential members - and to the "public". This was clearly pointed out by the comments of a newcomer to the group. Other radical groups, he said, were involved both in criticising and analysing their discipline's philosophical foundations and in making their expertise available to people who want to challenge the "official" view. Since the group did not seem to be involved in either of these, he couldn't see what was radical about us. One suggested meaning of radical was offered in terms of the exposing of assumptions and misuse in application of statistics, as was being attempted by the

Education subgroup, but this was not a view shared by others in the group. It was clear that this was a fundamental problem which we should discuss further, and one in which the whole group should be involved. One decision which was taken will provide an opportunity to do this - a one-day meeting is to be organised for the autumn (Sept./Oct) aimed at helping the group to get together more - in the above sense, but equally importantly in the social sense.

"Methods"

One aim of the meeting was to review the existing organisation of the group and suggest ways of improving it. It was clear that with now nominally 150 members and the high level of interest in the group, we would require more active organisation. The working of the subgroups set up at the January meeting was reviewed (see reports) and it was decided that those which were going should continue, and aim to provide contributions to the newsletter. In order to draw more people into these discussions we should circulate their meetings to a wider list of members, who might be interested in participating for occasional topics, even if not attending regularly. The suggestion was made of holding a series of meetings with invited speakers e.g. from other radical groups, so that we were not always 'talking to ourselves', but doubts were expressed about the value of this type of meeting at this stage, and it was agreed that two members would give some further thought to the idea and come up with some proposals.

The question of the formation of an "advice and help" group - a kind of statistical fire brigade was the subject of a long and interesting, but rather inconclusive discussion! Doubts were expressed about the need of other radical groups for statistical expertise from outside, and it was also pointed out that the role of the statistician as outside-expert was something the group should be trying to break down. It was suggested that members of the group would be more able to play an active part in the issues these groups are concerned with from the inside, and that in many cases

the statistician was no better placed, e.g. to make criticisms of a policy proposal, than anyone else. There was a danger in attacking these proposals using the same methods as were used to justify them - that one accepts the definition of the situation provided by the originators of the proposals. This amounts to an acceptance of the status quo - something we should be attempting to challenge. It was still felt that in terms of offering a practical way of getting involved directly with the issues we are concerned with, it may still be worth trying to establish some network within the group for doing this. (See letters from Nic Wright and John Bibby).

Funds Situation

Liz Atkins

Contributions Received	£30.40
Circulation Costs (not including this issue)	£ 9.95

Balance	£20.45 (Note: Each issue of the Newsletter costs roughly £8.)

AT the moment, we are trying to avoid the necessity of levying a sub to cover costs (though the typist is sinking fast- Ed.), but see p.1 about contributions.

(I am including an outline written by John before the July 3rd meeting. -Ed.)

'RADICAL STATISTICS'

An Outline for a possible Publication

The book would consist of a set of articles, sub-divided by subject matter, with linking sections and introduction provided by the editor. A paperback version would seem desirable. The book would probably contain between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand words.

Content

No definitive plan is available at present, but the following would seem to be a possible outline.

I Introduction

1. What is 'radical statistics'? (an outline and survey).
2. How statistics can confuse the issue. (examples in various fields).

II Teaching

3. Statistics and the problem of induction (see paper for 3rd July meeting).
4. Statistics at the Open University (based on paper for 3rd July meeting).
5. The 'density-free' approach to teaching statistical theory.
6. A survey of the literature on teaching statistics.
7. Summary of discussion from 3rd July meeting.

III Applications

8. Housing (paper for 3rd July meeting).
9. Penology (paper for 3rd July meeting).
10. Economics (paper for 3rd July meeting).
11. Other subject areas: health, education, technology, politics.
12. General themes.

10.

IV Statistics in the socialist world

13. Cuba.
14. China.
15. Eastern Europe.

V Implications

16. Implications for the development of statistical and substantive theory.
17. Implications for practice.
18. Conclusion.

Comments and Suggestions gratefully received. Please send to

John Bibby