

News, comment and reviews

A Note on Hodgkinson, Williams and Payne (Radstats 85)

Many sociology students are in flight from numbers and a minority have not been well taught at school – for example those undergraduates who need to have percentages explained to them. But more importantly there are others who see sociology as a series of perspectives, narratives or – simply – opinions. Whatever they are taught some of these students persist in the belief that all opinions are equally valid. They have little notion of an evidence based enterprise. For example, to discover that ethnic minorities do not constitute fifty percent of the UK population may or may not be seen as an invitation to adjust their opinions – but the discovery that they held quite wrong ideas about the population does not open up any sociological problems for them.

It may be that quantitative methods have not yet recovered from their deservedly poor press in the 1960s and 1970s. I was in the front of the queue when it came to sending up North American journals that published complicated analyses of small (often campus-based) surveys in pursuit of theoretically trivial issues. I kept one subscription alive for many years in order to have a stream of truly bad articles for teaching purposes. But today there is no excuse for confusing this with serious quantitative research.

I am not surprised that published articles contain so little sophisticated statistical analyses. Such analyses depend on the availability of very high quality data. The production and management of large data sets is an expensive undertaking and now concentrated in a few institutions with dedicated research teams. These excellent data are available to us all, but secondary analysis does not appeal to many of our colleagues who regard ‘real’ research as collecting their own original material. This means that they are usually restricted to the analysis of quite small data sets which rarely lend themselves to more than cross-tabulation. The ‘means of production’ problem will remain until more of our colleagues are convinced of the value of secondary analysis.

Paradoxically I have spent most of my research career using qualitative data from observation and interviews, archival research and community studies, but my methods teaching has been largely concentrated on quantitative methods. I despair of those colleagues who are dismissive of important elements of our intellectual armoury and characterise quantitative methods as number fetishism. I do however believe, on the basis of my own casual observations, that colleagues who work with quantitative methods have not

fully engaged others to convince them of the contribution that quantitative analyses make to sociological theory. We increasingly work and publish within sub-disciplinary compartments and I suspect looming deadlines dissuade colleagues from reading journals or attending conferences that approach the discipline in ways that diverge from their own. We read and confer to confirm our views on the nature of the sociological enterprise, not to challenge them. No one gains from this.

Robert Moore
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Response to Robert Moore

We very much welcome Robert's response with which there is little to disagree. Quite rightly his response shifts the debate onto what we teach sociology students – a key concern with participants in the BSA/ CSAP Consultation. As it stands few sociology students come to utilise the quantitative skills they do acquire. In final year dissertation work they do not use quantitative methods at all, or if they do they have only the resources to conduct very small scale studies, which limit the analyses. One possible way forward would indeed be to do more secondary analysis. The revisions of storage and access to the archives, led by the ESRC in the last couple of years, has significantly indeed fundamentally changed the opportunities for secondary analysis. One way to take quants out of its ghetto is to have optional modules in which students tackle genuine sociological problems by using data-sets from Manchester, Essex, School of Hygiene, etc. (see also the report by Rice et al 2001). This would be *doing* sociology rather than reading about it and writing yet more essays. Secondary Analysis should be a featured growth point in the curriculum/discipline: undergraduate dissertations should be actively encouraged or required to use it.

However, as Robert implies, the problem is a 'deeper' one than just number and is about what kind of discipline sociology is. Is it a scientific discipline in which quantitative and qualitative data rigorously gathered and analysed producing reliable and valid explanations of the social world, or is it just a form of relativistic literary criticism? Certainly the tendency toward the latter has led in many instances to an epistemological equivalence of anecdote and evidence amongst those who ought to know better.

One small point we would take issue on is that of the teaching of maths at school. Much of the 'bad teaching' is the result of a system of specialisation which concentrates teaching resources on those who take maths on to A-level, and allows the less capable/enthusiastic to opt out. A gendered science/ arts specialisation is the result and sociology often finds itself the loser in such specialisation. This may result in the same outcome that Robert means by 'bad teaching', but it is one that is more easily addressed if reforms of A-levels are carried through.

In a career of impressive contributions Robert has demonstrated his openness to a variety of methods, effectively refuting claims that the call for better quantitative methods is just 'number fetishism'. Unfortunately the retreat into qualitative methods has not made for quality there, but rather an unsophisticated and inappropriate use of such methods (Payne and Williams –forthcoming)

References

Payne, G and Williams, M (forthcoming) 'Generalisation in Qualitative Research'. *Sociology*.

Rice, R., Burnhill, P., Wright, M. and Townsend, S. (2001) *An enquiry into the use of numeric data in learning & teaching: Report and Recommendations for UK higher education*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.

Malcolm Williams, Liz Hodgkinson, Geoff Payne

Statistics Investment in the Future

Two of 'us' attended this conference in the Czech Republic believing from the blurb (on website) that it was going to be an interesting occasion to examine the possible roles for statistics in the era of globalisation, the New Economy, etc. We were wrong: it was actually an occasion for official statisticians to celebrate the growing 'harmonisation' of official statistics across Europe; and in particular for the Czech Statistical Office to demonstrate that it was the most European of all. But it was not without interest for readers of this Newsletter and that is why we are giving a short report; and anyway there's no harm in making you all jealous about Prague ...

The opening and only plenary – thankfully short – set the tenor with short speeches by the President of the Czech Statistical Office, the President of the Czech National Bank (in whose premises the conference was held – they

have their own Congress Centre!), the Rector of the Economics University, a representative of the President's Office all emphasising the importance for transition and new accession countries – and especially the Czech Republic of course – of the Conference for harmonising their statistical systems for economic activity on the paradigms developed in the West. But it was the Deputy of EUROSTAT who provided the gem 'Official Community statistics serve as input for the regular (macro-) economic policy coordination and for highly visible policy initiatives. As they usually provide a solid and widely recognised information base, they are *shaping the debate*, helping to identify common objectives, and facilitating the promotion of best practices. official Community statistics contribute to the *convergence of perceptions* on key issues such as growth, stability, competitiveness, or sustainability' (our italics). This wasn't a slip of the tongue or a verbal infelicity in a second language; the quote is from a written speech photocopied and distributed. No longer any pretence of getting it right or validity – simply making sure everyone was in step, on message.

Once we had realised the real theme of the Conference, we weren't particularly surprised at the British contingent: apart from ourselves, there was only one other British academic there – from the Data Archive – but there were *five* people from ONS (and it would have been six but Haskey didn't come). They were the largest contingent from a National Statistical Office (apart from the Czechs), i.e outgunning the French, Germans and Italians. Now, I think we would all agree that our overstressed civil servants should have the odd freebie or two but what were *five* of them doing there? What was happening in Drummond Street whilst they were away? Where was the funding for independent critics?

The main sessions we went to were, unsurprisingly again, Users of Statistics, Social Statistics I, II and III and Statistics of Minorities. The other sessions were mostly in economic and financial statistics.

The session on Users of Statistics included *two* papers by ONS authors – both of which explained the development of the ONS publicity machinery. The Powerpoint slides included that infamous photo showing people holding placards that proclaimed the 2001 UK population was 58,789,194. European statisticians must have been very impressed by a publicity machine that could convince the public that the UK population could be counted with such accuracy.

The first Social Statistics session was mystifying – apparently something to do with reviving the silk industry in Europe - until we realised that they were talking about the follow-up to the European Community Household Panel, viz the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) wherein

EUROSTAT sets target variables for which it wants data and the countries can decide themselves how to obtain the information. One bizarre component is that taxpayers' resources are being spent on what seems to us to be a completely futile exercise to agree on a European Poverty line – currently set at 7,000 euros (c. £5,000).

Another highlight was the Welcome Reception in the magnificent Municipal House - marked by the shortest welcoming speech these two inveterate conference-goers have ever heard - with magnificent food and drink.

We won't comment on the second Social Statistics Session because that's when we both spoke except to say that most people seemed to have not quite worn off the effects of the previous evening.

The third Social Statistics Session included what must have been the most bizarre paper of the conference on the economic system of nature presented as an explanation for the ageing of developed countries – if you don't believe us go to the website – to balance two very earnest Czech papers, one on GIS and the other on counting emigration and immigration (I'd never realised it was so LOW).

The session on Statistics and Minorities contained an interesting paper from a Belgian claiming that the data presentations they had made had influenced policy; and then two turgid demonstrations of wizardry with GIS. An otherwise boring session on history included a valuable paper by Venant Mutabihirwa of Lesotho on basic concepts in statistics. For Mutabihirwa basic concepts do not belong to what he calls 'the numbers paradigm', but to concepts like measurement, variable and information. All statisticians should read this paper if they want to understand how their activities might relate to the real world,

For those interested in the proceedings all the materials presented at the conference, together with a list of participants and their contacts on the web site via the link "Proceedings":

<http://www.czso.cz/sif/conference2004.nsf/i/home>.

Roy Carr-Hill and Ray Thomas
