

Using our past to develop our future? Contributions to the 2015 Radical Statistics Conference

Statistics for taking power

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After I had done my national service in a radical bookshop in 1977, and was wondering what to do next, it was Harvey who suggested that social statistics would be a good option. He also recruited me to Radical Statistics.

I remember being bored by some of the philosophical discussions because they seemed to lead only to further discussions, but completely engaged by *Demystifying Statistics*, written by Radical Statistics members and published in 1979. For me, the chapter from the inside of official statistics, and some of the others, told a very convincing story of how statistics are made.

Those authors would, I think, snort with laughter at the title of this conference, 'Good data, good policy?'. It would be the kind of laughter that denotes derision. The very idea that good policy might emerge out of good data! Data (and processed data or analyses) do not exist in a raw state to be mined; they are made: the production of data follows policies rather than the other way around.

Of course there are statistical approaches that are more technically appropriate and accurate once the decisions and resources are made about what to count. That professionalism of good technical practice without political interference is the basis of the Royal Statistical Society's Data Manifesto, and can sometimes illuminate the contradictions in policy by clarifying terms, definitions and quantities. But the direction of travel remains: first the purpose then the collection.

RadStats has often repeated this insight. In its conclusion, the RadStats' edited book *Statistics in Society* emphasises that priorities of

policy lead statistics at each stage of their production: defining their Purpose, organising their collection or Assembly, their Interrogation or analysis, and their Dissemination. The capitalised letters provide the mnemonic: statistics are PAID for.

Since most statistical enquiries are expensive, most are state funded. And state-funded statistics and research naturally follow government and establishment policies. This is the case whether thinking of the categories of national accounts, or the choice of a project to be funded by academic research councils.

I think the evidence overwhelmingly confirms that statistics are socially produced in this way. To be counted is to be heard, to be recognised, for good or for ill. We have seen that in the development of statistics of religion in the UK, and a focus on characteristics of immigrants.

If statistics follow power, then it follows that communities and their campaigns who wish to raise an issue that is *not* being addressed by those with power, will usually find few statistics to support them. Whether it is homelessness, slave labour in Britain, institutional racism, or illegally low wages, the statistics are decidedly lacking.

One successful role of RadStats has been to support such campaigns to paint a clear picture of hidden issues. The statistics used may have been collected for other purposes, or require new collection or new ways of thinking about estimation. Statisticians and researchers have skills to do that in ways that stand up to scrutiny and so are helpful in giving a campaign a stronger voice. Our newsletter and our publications have done that for campaigns on disability and benefits, for the national health service, for peace campaigning (on nuclear arms), for health and safety at work, for teachers, and for anti-racist campaigns.

It is fun, demanding and engaging and I expect this kind of work will continue in the future. Since statistics follow policy and power, rather than creating it, it follows that communities create their own agenda for data production, not just potentially but necessarily if they are to create the power to do new things. Don't underestimate your ability to make change.

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