

# Draft Policy Statement

The policy statement given below was produced by Liz Atkins, Jeff Evans, John Irvine, Ian Plewis and Stephen Shenfield. It is in no way intended to be a final statement on the policy of the group but rather as something which will generate discussion and perhaps lead to a more definitive position. The statement as given was agreed by all members of the above subcommittee, while the footnotes refer to items either of disagreement or of uncertainty. We hope you will think about it in relation to your own position and it is hoped to have a members' meeting to discuss it on June 4 at LSE.\* (?).

Membership of the Radical Statistics group is open to all those working in or interested in the field of statistics from a politically radical perspective. 'Statistics' is understood as the collection and analysis of data and the process of drawing conclusions or making decisions in situations of uncertainty. In addition, statistics often plays a major role in the formulation of questions and in measuring concepts.

The group was formed in January 1975 by a number of statisticians and research workers drawn together by a common concern about the political assumptions and implications of much of their work and by an awareness of the actual and potential misuse of statistics and its techniques. Members of the group, although holding a variety of political views, are radical in the sense of being committed to helping to build a more free, egalitarian and democratic society.

We see many ways in which statistical work, like the society which it serves, is organised in an authoritarian, constricted and elitist way:-

- the power structures within which statistical workers are employed, and which control the work and the uses to which it is put. (See footnote 1)
- the destructive fragmentation of problems into separated specialist fields.
- the mystifying use of technical language in order to disguise social problems as purely technical ones. The analysis of economic and social phenomena can be complex, but this does not mean that discussion should be restricted only to experts. (See footnote 2).

Although statistics sometimes helps to create the conditions for change, it is usually used to protect the status quo. The group will try to change this situation. In particular, we shall work towards:-

1. Free access to, and free discussion of, the information, political and commercial criteria, and procedures used in decision-making, by all those affected by the decisions. (See footnote 3).
2. The production and publication of statistics needed by the disadvantaged groups in society, e.g. on wealth, income, prices, housing, social services, education.
3. A critique of the way statistics is taught and the development of new curricula, texts, and methods of teaching and assessment.
4. The establishment of links with the Radical Science movement and other similar groups with the aim of co-ordinating our activities. (See footnote 4).
5. An analysis of the historical development of statistics, its emergence as a dominant method in the social and behavioural sciences and attempts to evolve and use new approaches. (See footnote 5).

These points imply the need to clarify the nature, limitations and possibilities of the use of statistics, to articulate and disseminate the basis of statistical methods to the public and to provide statistical assistance to other like-minded groups when requested. (See footnote 6).

\* This will be held in Room E199, meeting in the bar at 5.30 pm

## FOOTNOTES

1. Another point favoured by some of us was:-

- the lack of control by the community and by statistical workers over the purposes and subjects of investigations.

However, it is not altogether clear how much control statisticians should have over the purposes of investigations and that this could be construed as 'statistical imperialism'. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly situations in which statisticians are unable to comment on the limitations of their data or analyses or to have any control over how the results are used.

2. The concept of 'expertise' was discussed at length. Can it be valuable or does it just lead to mystification and to a further distortion of social relationships?

3. Possibly 'statistical information' and 'statistical procedures' would be preferable. Also, should 'Removal of all formal and informal restrictions on these rights, imposed on statistical workers, those affected by decisions and the general public', be added?

4. This raises the questions of how we should communicate and who with? Does 'similar groups' include political organisations as well as radical professional groups, unions, grass-roots action groups etc?

5. It could be argued that this should be widened to 'its relationship with the dominant modes of thought'.

6. Our relationship to the RSS did not receive any particular comment, although it might, in the future, be very important.

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Quote from William Farr, 'Narrative of the Proceedings at the General Register Office during the Cholera Epidemic 1866'

"Personal inspection, the use of maps, such information as we had the means of getting from the registrars, the health officers and other persons, enabled us to track the epidemic week by week through the metropolis. Where testimony is so much biassed by either the interest or power of well-organised companies, or by the fear and ignorance of the public, actual inspection of the people suffering in their houses, and of the mechanism of works either for supplying water or for carrying away sewage, is indispensable. The eyes help the ears wonderfully."

(The well-organised companies are the Water companies)