

## THE INTERPRETIVE ATTACK ON STATISTICS: A RESPONSE

Martyn Hammersley's description of the interpretive<sup>1</sup> position takes account of recent developments in this position (e.g. those emphasising the importance of language in structuring shared perspectives) and also of recent critiques of the position (esp. Hindess). I welcome this contribution to the Newsletter, because I think that the insights afforded by the interpretive position are important ones. I will argue that they can contribute to a radical analysis of social processes - in particular, of the production of official statistics.

In general terms of course, the interpretive approach has always been highly critical of social science behaviourism with its empiricist claims that social description and explanation can (and must) begin and end with observable behaviours. Martyn has shown the basis of the interpretive insistence that such description and explanation requires an understanding of the perspectives (i.e. the assumptions and values) attached to their 'behaviour' by social actors. And these meanings are shared, i.e. social, and not merely 'subjective' in the sense of individual and idiosyncratic.<sup>2</sup>

In considering the production of data by an institution such as the state, interpretive insights lead us to consider the meanings or perspectives not only of the people being studied or enumerated, but also of the various grades of producing officials involved in the processes and decisions of categorising, recording, etc. But, before this, the official definitions of the act or condition of interest (e.g. unemployment or suicide) are developed by another group of officials working within the state - namely, legislators and high-ranking civil servants, including statisticians, who are not immediately involved in the social interactions in which the data are produced; let us call this group the defining officials. Thus we appear to have three groups of actors whose perspectives are likely to be important in the production of official data. Of course possible conflicts between their perspectives and practices need to be investigated - and as more than interpersonal differences.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For my purposes here, I shall consider this term to be interchangeable with 'phenomenological' or 'verstehen' or ethnographic'; 'ethnomethodology' generally connotes a more extreme position which claims that the only legitimate topic of study is the methods by which people make sense of the social world (rather than 'the social world' itself); see e.g. E.G. Cuff and G.C. Payne, Perspectives in Sociology, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> This insight is an important antidote to critiques which dismiss the perspectives of relevant groups of actors as merely 'subjective experiences'. See f.n.7.

<sup>3</sup> Insight into the composition of these two groups of officials and into how these conflicts operate within the British state may be found in Government Statisticians Collective, "How Official Statistics are Produced: Views from the Inside", Ch.10 in Irvine, Miles, and Evans eds., Demystifying Social Statistics, Pluto Press, 1979.

Consider the case of unemployment statistics.<sup>4</sup> Although the official conceptions (articulated by the defining officials) of unemployment, and eligibility for benefit, are basic to the production of these statistics, it is also reasonable to allow that the perspectives of producing officials and those of (various subgroups of) the people being enumerated are important, too. For example, whether a particular person "signs on" presumably depends on whether they can expect to receive unemployment benefit (which depends not only on the rules, but also on their knowledge of them) and/or whether they can expect to get a job (which depends on the economic conjuncture, and on the person and subgroups perception of these conditions). And, within the rules, producing officials have some latitude in interpreting and applying them; for example, they may hassle members of one subgroup more than another when these people are applying for benefit – which in turn may affect the latter's willingness to sign on in the future. And different officials, and different offices, may differ considerably in this respect.

Now, the perspectives of the various groups of actors may or may not be effective in the way supposed above. We need to be able to investigate what effect, if any, they have on the official statistics – and whether it matters to the use we wish to make of them (see below). Interpretive approaches and ethnographic methods<sup>5</sup> offer us one set of tools with which we may at least assess such suppositions.<sup>6,7</sup> Statistical analysis of decisions of different offices and officials may of course also be useful.

The interpretive approach emphasises looking not only for official (proclaimed and supported by 'the system'), but also unofficial, practices. Thus, in education, more than the official curriculum, the 'hidden curriculum' will be important in explaining teachers' and students' actions. Similarly, we should investigate the existence, and extent, of the 'underground economy', where much decorating, building, car repair, and 'daily' work is done without official knowledge, and without trace in official statistics.

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller consideration of this example, see the Chapter by Ian Miles and John Irvine, and that by Richard Hyman and Bob Price, in Section 3 of Demystifying Social Statistics.

<sup>5</sup> Ethnographic methods include participant observation, unstructured interviews and use of documents aimed at 'understanding perspectives'; see the units by Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley in DE 304; Research Methods in Education and the Social Sciences, Open University, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> On state employment agencies, P. Blau, Dynamics of Bureaucracy, 1956, though set in immediate post-war America, may be suggestive. On the production of criminals and criminal statistics, see A.V. Cicourel, The Social Organisation of Juvenile Justice, 2nd ed., 1976. For the results of a recent study comparing the practices of British and Danish coroners in rating the causes of death, see Atkinson, Kessel, and Dalgaard, "The Comparability of Suicide Rates". Br. J. Psych., 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Hindess, on the other hand, implies that we need not bother: "The evaluation of official, or other statistics requires no reference to the 'subjective experience' of enumerators or officials" (p.29 in B. Hindess, the Use of Official Statistics in Sociology 1973).

The possible effects of this on official statistics are complicated. For unemployment and employment statistics, it will depend on whether the people concerned 'sign on' at the same time as they are working 'underground' - and this will depend on economic pressures, ethical perspectives, etc. Total spending in the recorded economy may actually drop when it 'should' rise (if underground workers save some, rather than re-spending all, of the cash paid them).<sup>8</sup> Here is a case where the 'conceptual tools' (in Hindess's sense) seem basically clear, but where limitations in the scope of practical operation of the state mean that the official statistics may be deceptive.

Probably the main criticism made of interpretive approaches is that they simply describe the perspectives of various subgroups, without explaining the social and political conditions which give rise to these perspectives, and which privilege particular ones. I think this is a frequent failing in interpretive work, but not a necessary one. Recent work done by sociologists of education, to name one discipline, and at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, to name one institution, shows that ethnographic studies can be located and explained with reference to social structure and the state. One recent example of what I mean argues that "the processes of self-induction to the labour process constitute an important example of how (working class) culture is related in complex ways to regulative state institutions".<sup>9</sup> In order to understand the production and use of official statistics, we require an analysis of the developing role and function of the state and of the "structure of power within which the ability and motivation of the particular relationships of authority existing between clients and officials, between officials and their superiors, etc."<sup>10</sup>

My second criticism has to do with Martyn's argument that aggregation of official statistics across different situations or different officials is invalid. I would suggest that the validity of aggregation depends on the use to which the statistics will be put. If unemployment statistics are being used to monitor the changing state of health of the economy overtime or the general availability of labour-power, I don't see that aggregation is a problem (though underestimation may be). On the other hand, if the aim is to explain the causes of unemployment, and to combat it, aggregation of statistics across different sub-cultures, social classes and subgroups (e.g. married and single women) may seriously hamper the attainment of these aims.

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<sup>8</sup> These effects are discussed in more detail in recent contributions to the 'Lombard' column in the Financial Times; e.g. Anthony Harris "Black Economy Speculations" and W.L. Luetkens, "For a change, use your eyes". (Feb. or Mar. 1979; sorry I can't be more precise).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Willis, Learning to Labour, Saxon House, 1977 p.3. Other examples include Roger Ingham et al., 'Football Hooliganism': the Wider Context, Inter-Action, 1978 and Rachel Sharp and Tony Green, Education and Social Control, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Miles and Irvine, p.122; See also other chapters in Demystifying, especially Sections 1 and 3.

Finally, I think that the arguments designated by Martyn as "the least persuasive kind .... against statistics" are important. Statistical reasoning and statistical data do not exist independently of practical contexts; they are used in important ways under capitalism, with its highly rationalised decision procedures. Statistics thus help to legitimise the existing social structure, and policy options which are consistent with it.

The fact that statistics are used in this way does of course not provide an argument for ignoring them. On the contrary, it is important for radicals to be able to demystify statistical argument, techniques, and data in several senses: first, to make clear what these arguments, etc. are claiming on their own terms; second, to show whose interests are served by these claims; third, to understand how structures operate so as to mystify and disguise these processes; and fourth, to decide what can be salvaged, reinterpreted and re-used. In this context, the low level of numeracy (e.g. with respect to critically reading tables of statistics) in the population at large should be a matter of concern to us; such widespread disability does not derive merely from the inherent difficulty of statistical materials; people are socialised into it, and we need to know more about how this comes about. Any study of the social processes which produce this disability would no doubt find a component of ethnographic methods (participant observation in classrooms, life history interviews) indispensable.

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