

INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENT STATISTICS AND SOCIAL POWER: A RESEARCH
QUERY

I have been working for some years on the formulation and testing of a sociological theory of industrial accidents. Over this time one point has continually fascinated me - the statistical categories used to officially analyse industrial accidents.

These categories appear as desocialisations of a social product. Changes in these categories thus appear as a potentially useful indicator of the playing out of the relations of force brought to bear by the representatives of various competing 'schools of thought' on accident causation and prevention. Indeed, such changes could well be the reflection of far wider social, political and economic changes that their particular effects on the official categorisation of accidents would suggest.

On the basis of the above reflections I would like to raise a few questions in the hope that some readers might be able to shed light on answers.

(1) Is there any general analysis of the social construction and change of British industrial accident statistics either in preparation or hidden away somewhere? (As far as can be ascertained from bibliographies etc. none are widely available.)

(2) What was the relationship between the theory of accident proneness and the eugenicists? (In 1927 Greenwood and Yule published an article in the Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, this article and Greenwood and Woods report of 1919 to the Industrial Fatigue Research Board appear to have furnished important bases to the concept of accident proneness as articulated by Farmer and Chambers in their 1926 report for the IFRB.)

(3) Most modern tests of significance for variations in industrial accident rates are performed using Poisson distribution. The assumption being that accidents rates occurring in a given workplace are chance events. This may be true for one individual worker as opposed to another working at the same task. A sociological theory of industrial accidents should take the line that, no more than suicide rates in a society, are accident rates in a workplace chance events. From this perspective then it would appear that the use of Poisson should be contested.

This reflection raises the question as to when Poisson was first applied to the analysis of industrial accidents, and to whether there were any worker-employer struggles over its inherent ideological component - the idea that accidents are chance events. In other words, what were the social bases of the employment of Poisson and its continued use as a (now relatively dominant) tool for deciding whether or not changes in industrial accident rates were 'significant'?

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