

The History of the Social Survey - the Social Survey in History

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*Evidence and
Enlightenment*

Outline of the presentation

Objective

Setting the scene

The beginning

The drivers

Support

Evidence and Enlightenment

Objective:

To argue that the history of the social survey is closely intertwined with the history of the welfare state

Viewed in this perspective the social survey takes on social responsibilities far from properties associated with mathematical, statistical thinking

Setting the Scene:

Researcher in the Danish Data Archives

Interests:

- social science methodology
- social consequences of applying certain investigation techniques

The questionnaire as constructor of social realities

The start

In this context studies of the poor in the UK is put as ‘the start’ since these studies significantly point forward to the social survey of today

Acknowledging great efforts elsewhere such as census initiatives and “the bills of London”

The poverty studies

Charles Booth (1840-1916):

Life and Labour of the people in London, 1889

Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954):

Poverty, A Study of Town Life, 1901

Arthur Bowley (1869-1957):

The Measurement of Social Phenomena, 1915

The beginning (1)

Charles Booth (1840-1916):

“Life and Labour of the people in London”, 1889

– Life, labour, the people, London

all incorporating, only geographically limited

– Method

interviews of representatives, hypothesis about causality, discovering poverty caused by social factors uncontrollable by the individual

– Objective

showing that an estimate of 10% poor in London were overstated, finding:

30% were poor

The beginning (2)

Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954):

“Poverty, A Study of Town Life”, 1901

- Poverty, study, town life

touch of an academic approach, subject specific

– Method

employing interviewers, strict definition of concepts e.g. poverty

– Objective

showing life cycle effect taking people in and out of poverty according to life stages.

The beginning (3)

Arthur Bowley (1869-1957):

“The Measurement of Social Phenomena”, 1915

- Measurement, social phenomena

an academic approach, applying statistic techniques

- Method

applying probability based sampling, strict definition of concepts e.g. poverty, standardised questions, face to face interviewing

- Objective

applying statistical techniques to discover social phenomenon

Adding up

Focus:

all incorporating

-> specific phenomena

Causality:

individual factors

-> social relations

Approach:

journalism

-> social science

Data collection:

private investigators

-> trained interviewers

Interviews:

peer interview

-> face-to-face

Sampling:

overall count

-> random sampling

Conceptualisation:

vague ideas

-> standardised question

Analysis:

simple calculation

-> statistics

- >>> Significant steps toward the modern social survey

Drivers of further development

- Development of statistical techniques
 - Galton, Pearson, Spearman & others
- Urbanisation
 - city life causes increased visibility and need for social security
- Computer power, computer power, computer power...
 - electronic processing of large data resources

Support

- Success for research
 - ... in all areas of research activities during the Second World War carried forward as economic support for further research activities
- Foothold in the academic world
 - especially Paul Lazarsfeld's effort
 - establishment of data archives around the world
- A powerful, visible state
 - a keynesian economic understanding
 - a responsive state taking care of the individual
 - demanding a continuous supply of information about society

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Late 20th century:

- The modern social survey positioned as essential knowledge generating tool for social research and the welfare state
- As a constructor of social facts the social survey plays an important role for all of us
- Data archives have become storage place for this continuously evolving knowledge base for modern society
- Given the back ground of the social survey as a product of statistics and (natural) science this key role of the social survey seems far from acknowledged

Evidence and Enlightenment

Contributions from data archives:

- Storage of a broad spectrum of surveys covering a wide range of subjects for society of today and for tomorrow
- Guidance for data documentation and survey design
- Contact to a wide range of audiences
- Data processing of data materials to a high and standardised quality
- Continuous dialogue with the producers of social surveys
- Trendspotter for the social survey community

NOTE: No  on behalf of the DDA!

Readings

Cathrine Marsh (1982):

“The Survey Method - The Contribution of Surveys to Sociological Explanation”

Ian Hacking (1990):

“The Taming of Chance”

Martin Bulmer et al. (ed.) (1991):

”The social survey in historical perspective 1880-1940”

Stuart Reid (1987):

”Working with statistics - an introduction to quantitative methods for social scientists”

... and more...