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Some Problems of Policy-Related Attitude Surveys — With Examples from the Davis-Sinnott Report

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Précis: This paper offers a criticism of some of the problems involved in policy-related attitude surveys. It argues that the assumptions made in order to generate information useful to policy-makers are difficult to defend. The four particular assumptions examined concern the nature of the problem towards which people are presumed to have attitudes, the nature of attitudes themselves, the belief that attitude research is descriptive and finally the relationship between the nature of public opinion and the choice of a research methodology. The argument is illustrated with examples from the report by Davis and Sinnott (1979) on attitudes to the Northern Ireland problem.

I INTRODUCTION

The difficulties involved in doing policy-related research have always presented an acute problem for sociologists and social psychologists (Coleman, 1979, p. 683). This has been particularly the case for social scientists and researchers employed either directly or indirectly by the state. It has proved difficult to contribute to the development of the discipline while simultaneously generating the kind of information considered of relevance to policy makers. For example, the disregard of the work of many rural sociologists by mainstream sociology, and the apparent stagnation of that branch of study, is evidence of the problems of this situation and of its potentially dangerous consequences (Newby, 1980).

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Sample survey methods, and in particular attitude surveys, derive some of their importance and status in the discipline from the solution which they offer to this problem (Coleman, 1979, pp. 694-696). Their use has allowed researchers to contribute to the development of sociology and social psychology through the development and refinement of survey techniques and attitude measures while at the same time contributing to the generation of information which is felt to be useful to policy makers. (On the importance of attitude surveys and opinion polls in the development of empirical functionalism see Baldamus, 1976. See (Etzioni, 1967), on the uses of attitude survey to governments.) Although there is some dispute among its practitioners as to the exact utility and influence which the data derived from attitude surveys have on policy makers, all agree that it does have some, (see Klein, 1976, also Hodder Williams, 1970, Shepard, 1975, Hewitt, 1974). As a result this tradition of research is strongly entrenched and influential.

One important consequence of this increased association of social research and public policy is, according to Coleman (1976) "increased attention, scrutiny and care concerning the correctness of results". This has meant that much of the discussion about such research has focused on what might be called the technical problems of particular pieces of research.[1] The result of this is that other more general problems with such research have been relatively neglected. These problems are not just specific to particular pieces of attitude research but are problems of the tradition of attitudinal research as such. The object of this paper is to offer a critical examination of these more general problems of that tradition.

The major problem with this kind of work is that the assumptions which must be made to generate the kind of information on attitudes that could conceivably be useful to policy makers, are in fact difficult for a social researcher to defend. They are unduly simplistic and lack a secure theoretical basis. It follows from this that work based on these assumptions will be of limited or questionable value both to many scientists and to policy makers.

It could be argued, at this point, that the increased association between social research and policy need not imply that the findings of such research have any influence on policy formation. Indeed Sharpe (1978), for example, has suggested that policy-makers in Britain are less receptive to social science than is usually supposed. Arguably the influence that social science can have depends on whether the policy makers' involvement in research reflects a commitment to action or an alternative to it. In the former case the discussion of the assumptions underlying such research is important. In the latter case, where research is sponsored by the policy maker, either to legitimate

1 For a typical example see the debate about the authoritarian personality study in Christie and Jahoda, 1954.

inaction or to legitimate decisions already made, the discussion here is largely irrelevant.

This discussion will focus on four of the assumptions that are inherent in this policy research tradition. The argument will be made that these assumptions cannot be uncritically accepted.

To illustrate the argument, examples will be taken from a research report by Davis and Sinnott (1979) on the attitudes of people in the Republic of Ireland to the Northern Ireland problem. This report is very much in the tradition of policy-related attitude research. It is concerned, on one hand, with rigorous scientific work and, on the other, with collecting information which will have policy implications in the sense of being useful in the formulation of better or more effective policies or of contributing to discussions about such policies (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 19-24).

However, as this paper is concerned with a tradition of research rather than just a specific example of research, it means that attention will be given to the more technical aspects of their research only where it is necessary to do so in order to sustain more general arguments. These technical aspects have already been dealt with in some detail in other places (see for example, Baker *et al.* 1980; McKeown, 1980; Davis and Sinnott, 1980a). What is being examined here is not so much how this particular piece of research was done; what is being considered are the wider problems involved in working within this tradition.[2]

II THE ASSUMPTIONS EXAMINED AND CRITICISED

The first assumption in this kind of research involves what Carrier and Kendall (1972, p. 218) have called the "consensus approach" to social problems. In order to provide the policy maker with information on the attitudes of the population on particular problems, it has been necessary to assume that the nature of the problems about which, or towards which, people are presumed to have attitudes is unproblematic and available to, and shared by, all in a society. It is, therefore, implicitly assumed that the population, whose attitudes are being researched, share the same general perspec-

2 Attitude and opinion are used interchangeably in this paper. This can be justified on two grounds. The first is that this is in many cases the textbook convention. See for example, Klineberg (1954, pp. 489-501) and Lazarsfeld (1973, p. 77). Indeed Blumer (1969, pp. 90-101) has criticised the failure of sociologists and social psychologists to effectively distinguish "attitude" from other concepts including that of "opinion". The second is the equally common practice of treating opinions as "indicators", "verbal expressions", or "specific manifestations" of attitudes. Here the difference between attitude and opinion is not one of kind but of degree. See, for example, Rokeach (1968, p. 125), Thurstone and Chauve (1929, p. 7), Lindesmith and Strauss (1956, p. 494) and Scott (1968, p. 205).

tive on what the nature of the problems of a society is, and on the ways in which they are problems, as does the policy maker. Given this consensus it is possible to measure people's attitudes to particular problems and to compare the distribution of these attitudes between different social levels in the society.

Davis and Sinnott's work embodies this assumption. They assume that there is a commonly accepted view as to the kind of problem the Northern Ireland problem is – i.e., it is the kind of problem which requires as a solution some particular form of political institution. As everyone is presumed to share this view, they can make a valid choice of a workable and acceptable solution from a limited number of institutional solutions presented to them by the researchers. The researchers can then simply add up the choices of particular solutions and produce statements like "a large majority of people in the Republic of Ireland (68 per cent) choose some form of united Ireland" as a solution (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 141).

There are two related difficulties and one practical consequence involved in accepting this assumption. The first difficulty is that the consensus on the nature of the problem is assumed but not demonstrated. There is a failure to examine the extent to which this consensus exists in the society. As Carrier and Kendall put it (1972, p. 219) "the use of a consensus approach glosses over the question of the extent to which there is consensus about the nature of our society's social problems . . . but it must also invite the prior assumption that everybody agrees about what the social problems of our society are".

The second difficulty is the failure to examine the nature of any such consensus as might exist. The practical consequence in research terms is the uncritical use and acceptance of the official or establishment view of the parameters of the particular problem under investigation.

This again can be seen clearly in Davis and Sinnott's work. They neglect to establish whether what they consider to be the Northern Ireland problem is in fact a view of the problem which is shared by their respondents. They fail to establish what people's perceptions of the nature of the problem are before they examine what people's preferences in the line of solutions are. This was not covered, for example, in their pilot research which was concerned mainly with the refinement of attitude items and measures (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 22-23; Davis and Sinnott, 1980b, pp. 10-11; 20-21). So, in effect, the respondents were not asked for their own view of the problem, as the researchers would claim is the case. They are, in fact, asked for their attitudes to a list of solutions to what the researchers' view of the problem is. And that is a different kettle of statistics.

The authors' discussion of British withdrawal and the defeat of the IRA is a good example of this Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 29). These, they claim, are

not solutions to the problem, rather they are means to a solution. And so they are not offered to respondents in the list of possible solutions to the problem. But such a procedure fails to consider that for many people either, or both, of these options may represent solutions because for them the problem is not one of political institutions, but simply the interruptions of normal life, which can be produced by violence, be it official or terrorist. The neutralisation of either source of violence may therefore constitute a solution to many people's "Northern Ireland problem".

If the nature of the problem is not dealt with to any great extent, the nature of the consensus about the problem, and how this consensus is arrived at, is totally neglected. The authors remain unconcerned about "how and why social problems came to be seen as such" (Carrier and Kendall, 1972, p. 223). Thus they ignore the large body of work which suggests that the designation of a social phenomenon as a problem is seldom the result of social consensus, (see, for example, Becker, 1963; also Hartjen, 1977, pp. 35-60). The social construction of a phenomenon or situation as a problem works through political processes. What becomes seen as the problem is the result of political processes precipitated and influenced by those in a society who are most vocal, most influential and who have access to resources for disseminating opinions or influencing decisions. Such groups have the influence to set the problems about which the public will be concerned and also to delineate the range of opinions that will be available on these issues.[3] They can set the agenda as to what the issues in a society are and, in Morris Janowitz's phrase, they can set the "limits within which public debate on controversial issues takes place" (quoted in Gouldner, 1970, p. 300). In this view the "consensus" about what the problems of a society are and public opinion and attitudes to these problems are the creation of political activity. "The makers of public policy", says Klein (1976, p. 334), "are in an active, not a passive relationship to public opinion".

If this view of social problems and public opinion is correct, and we shall consider it further when we examine the question of the consistency and stability of attitudes, then the nature of attitude and opinion research is fundamentally altered. Researchers in this tradition are not measuring public attitudes or opinions in the way in which they claim. They are simply measuring how successful certain powerful interest groups have been in disseminating their views of these questions. Public opinion in this sense is "little more than a reflection of what those having the ability to employ the media for their own benefit want the public to believe" (Hartjen, 1977,

3 Interestingly, concern has recently been expressed in the United States that the way in which the press presents the results of opinion polls may be a factor in influencing, or indeed in helping to create, people's perceptions of political issues. See Gollin, (1980, pp. 450-457) for a discussion of this and for references to the relevant literature.

p. 55).

A second assumption in this kind of research relates to the nature of attitudes. It is implicit in the idea of attitude research for policy purposes that a policy which takes account of these attitudes is more likely to be successful than one which does not. In other words, it tends to be assumed that if people's attitudes are not taken note of, they will result in consequences which are felt to be undesirable from the policy-makers viewpoint. Thus the social scientist contributes to better policy making by uncovering for the policy makers the content of people's attitudes.

However, there is a problem in all this. If people's attitudes are to assume such importance in policy making or if they are to become the base from which policy recommendations are made, then it is necessary to assume that such attitudes are both consistent and releatively enduring (Shaw 1976; Platt 1971, pp. 34-36). If attitudes are inconsistent, it would be difficult to formulate policies which would accommodate themselves to these attitudes. If attitudes are constantly changing, it would be impractical to change policies often enough to keep in line with changes in attitudes.

This assumption is one which is easily made by attitude researchers but it is one which is very difficult to justify and to sustain. On the question of the consistency of attitudes there is in fact a range of literature available which stresses the inconsistencies in the clusters of attitudes held by people (for example, Converse, 1964; Converse and Duplex, 1966; Davis, H., 1979; Ladd, 1980).[4] Among this cluster of attitudes, Converse (1964, p. 213) remarks that "little constraint is felt, even quite often in instances of sheer logical constraint". Merton (1940, p. 26) supports this view when he says that "tests of consistency imply that respondents never hold inconsistent opinions or attitudes" and "in making this assumption the investigator is using the norms of logic, not the facts of sociology".

It is worth pursuing the question of why people are expected to have stable and consistent attitudes. Arguably, it is assumed that because particular events and issues are important for political and social elites in society, they should also be important to other people in the society. Indeed it is "a common elite assumption that all or a significant majority of the public conceptualised the main lines of politics after the manner of the most highly educated" (Converse 1964, p. 218). Thus the centrality of such issues in peoples lives should place the constraint of logical consistency on the attitudes which they hold.

However, many of the issues about which people are asked their attitudes are issues that often do not appear to be central to their lives and are not

4 These views have of course generated their own critics. For a recent example, see Judd and Milburn (1980) and also Converse (1980) for his most recent reply to these critics.

issues about which people have either much direct personal knowledge or experience (Klein 1976, p. 325; Bogart, 1967). If, for example, the interest of people can be used as a measure of the centrality of the issue for them, then there are grounds to doubt the centrality of the Northern Ireland problem to people in the South of Ireland. Over half of the sample (52 per cent) are only "slightly interested or less so" in this problem (Davis and Sinnott 1979, p. 37). If such issues are of such a peripheral nature to people then, presumably, the constraint of logical consistency is correspondingly reduced. And, as Converse and Duplex (1964) have argued, opinion formation in any real sense appears to decline as issues and events become more remote from the particular individuals or groups involved.

When people are asked to talk about or give attitudes and opinions on questions and issues that are outside their normal range of experience they do not appear to be inhibited by their lack of knowledge or experience or indeed of opinions. Research shows that there are appreciable amounts of uninformed answering in attitude surveys, though the exact size of this is a matter of some dispute (see the discussion in Schuman and Presser, 1980). Instead, as Davis (1979, p. 194) argues, to the degree to which issues do not present themselves as part of people's experiences, then their attitudes are much more likely to be externally derived, derived that is from the opinion forming and consciousness creating institutions in the society. As Klein (1976, p. 332) says, "the level of information about most political issues is very low indeed and hence the dependence on the views of figures carrying authority tends to be correspondingly high". In order to produce attitudes on such issues people fall back on, or make use of, publically purveyed ideology as they understand and perceive it. Their attitudes and opinions can therefore be said to constitute externally mediated perspectives. Any blurring or inconsistencies in these opinions and attitudes are due simply to the imperfect absorption of the publically available ideology.

If many sociologists have reasons to be sceptical about the consistency of attitudes, they would also tend to agree with Deutscher (1973, p. 11) when he says that "there is no evidence that attitude or opinion remain stable through time or under changing circumstances" (see also Butler and Stokes, 1969, pp. 176-182). Indeed there are few reasons offered in the relevant literature as to why attitudes should be stable apart from the inclusion of the criterion of stability in the definition of an attitude (for an example of this see Rokeach 1968, p. 112).

Many sociologists, therefore, would not anticipate that measured attitudes in the general population would be either consistent or enduring (see, for example, Edelman, 1971, pp. 3-12). The Davis-Sinnott research would simply provide them with further evidence for this view. Though the authors claim (1979, p. 19, p. 141) that the attitudes measured in their research are

both consistent and enduring, this assertion is one which they have some difficulty in maintaining. The consistency of the attitudes is contradicted by many of their own findings while their enduring nature is asserted but no supporting evidence is provided and this view is later contradicted and indeed withdrawn by the authors themselves.

Take the alleged consistency of attitudes first. Consider some of these findings. Of those people who feel that a United Ireland is the most practical and acceptable solution to the Northern Ireland problem, 30 per cent feel the government should stop talking about the goal of unity (ibid. p. 64). Seventeen per cent of people who choose a United Ireland do not expect the border ever to disappear (ibid. p. 50). Seventy per cent of respondents think the government should draft a new constitution to assist in bringing about a solution, but this constitution should not drop the claim to Northern Ireland and it should not allow divorce (ibid. p. 66). So they want a new constitution which would retain the two major items which have provoked public discussion of the need for such a new constitution. Among those endorsing a continuation of the link between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 46 per cent favour unilateral British withdrawal (ibid. p. 71). Sixty-six per cent of Catholics in Northern Ireland think the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland should be retained in the Irish constitution yet only 39 per cent of Catholics there favour a United Ireland (ibid. p. 84 and p. 61). Finally, 64 per cent of respondents favour a policy of pressuring the British to withdraw, while 78 per cent argue that the government should insist that the British implement powersharing (ibid. p. 70). So at least 40 per cent of respondents want the British to get out, but also to stay.

If the authors' findings tend to undermine their view on the consistency of attitudes, their view on the endurance of attitudes is contradicted by many of their own comments. The normal meaning of enduring is long-lasting and the authors are prepared, in the early stages of their report, to assert that attitudes are stable and enduring (ibid. p. 19). However, as the report proceeds they come to realise that attitudes tend to be influenced and changed by social and temporal contexts (ibid. p. 101 and p. 150). This realisation paves the way for eventual strategic withdrawal from the original position. In their subsequent reply to one set of their critics, we find that they "agree that attitudes may change over time" (Davis and Sinnott 1980b, p. 38). They do not, however, provide us with any data which would allow us to choose between their different views. As is typical in much attitude research, all of the data are collected at a single point in time. Thus their sets of beliefs regarding the endurance of attitudes cannot be put to any empirical test.

There is, therefore, little in this report which would cause the revision of the view that the measured attitudes are not necessarily consistent or endur-

ing. It also follows that if attitudes do not have these qualities then knowledge of them is not necessarily an indispensable asset for the policy maker. Indeed, it would suggest that the policy maker could experience considerable difficulty in trying to design policies to accommodate to, or to take into account, the measured attitudes of the general population.

The third assumption underlying this kind of work is the belief that attitude research is basically descriptive work. Attitude researchers simply collect the facts and then allow the facts to speak for themselves. They have access to, and command over, neutral scientific techniques which allow them access to public attitudes and which allow them to reproduce accurately the current state of such attitudes. Indeed, it is the presumed value-neutrality of survey techniques which gives, to opinion polls and to attitude surveys, the authority of science. It is this authority which allows the results of such surveys to be used to claim precedence over statements of interest groups as the major indicator of the state of public opinion (for a discussion of this, see Plowman, 1962).

However, survey techniques are not quite as neutral as they appear. Their use gives rise to major problems, though these are not problems of description but of interpretation. It is simply not the case that facts speak for themselves. No set of survey data describes itself. The story which it tells is crucially affected by the interpretations and expectations of the researchers.

Again, the Davis-Sinnott report provides evidence for these contentions. They quite clearly share the belief in the descriptive nature of attitude research. The sub-title of their report, for example, describes it as a descriptive analysis. However, the problems of interpretation involved in "describing" data can be seen very clearly when they discuss the factor analysis of their attitudinal items.

There are no definitive rules in social research about the interpretation of the results of factor analysis. This is particularly so in considering the number of factors to be extracted and also in deciding whether particular items form part of a factor or not. In the latter case, some researchers use a factor loading of $\geqslant .30$ as a decision rule while others take cut-off points as high as $\geqslant .60$ (see Child, 1970, pp. 43-50). The important point is that the decision as to which level to work at depends partly on what the researcher's hypotheses are. He chooses the level which he considers most appropriate to his research problem.

The difficulty here, however, is that hypotheses belong to domain of explanatory research. But the authors constantly claim, as is usual for attitude researchers, that they are engaged in descriptive and not explanatory research. So how then do they interpret their factor analysis? One can, in fact, only infer this from an examination of their analysis.

The criteria they work with appear to have been the desire to find what

they already anticipated would exist, namely, clear-cut, relatively independent and separable attitudes to partition, "Protestant" politics and the IRA (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 94-101). They, therefore, work with a factor loading of $>.40$, which produces for them these three separate and coherent attitude sets. They then further assume that one of these sets, that of attitudes to the IRA, is, in fact, composed of two different sets of attitudes, one to the motives of the IRA and the other to the means which the IRA use. Working with a higher cut-off point, a factor loading of $\geqslant.60$, the factor analysis produces these two sets of data.

The authors seem under the impression, in their original report, that this use of factor analysis is a neutral and descriptive activity. They seem unaware of the implications of the fact that as the choice of cut-off points is partly a matter of subjective judgement the coherence of the factors produced is also partly a matter of subjective judgement and not entirely an artefact of the method of analysis. As such this element of subjective judgement and interpretation is an intrinsic part of all data analysis.

In their recently published reply to the critics of the original report the authors show an awareness of this subjective element in data analysis when they say that "no methodology allows one to dispense with the judgement of the researcher" (Davis and Sinnot, 1980b, p. 42). It is in these terms that they justify the apparently arbitrary use of cut-off points described above. This, however, both gains the point and loses it at the same time. It is true that the choice of cut-off points is partly a matter of subjective judgement. The point, however, is that, once chosen, it is incumbent on the researcher to use the particular decision rule in a consistent fashion. Formal criteria in this sense both acknowledge the role of the researcher's judgement in the choice of a decision rule but also act to limit the play of personal judgement. There is an inevitable element of subjectivism in the choice of such criteria but this subjectivism is controlled by adherence to the chosen criteria. Failure to do so creates the kind of situation discussed by Davis (1970, p. 91) where "the reader wonders exactly what sort of evidence it would take to 'disconfirm' the (particular) hypothesis".

This kind of discussion helps to make an important point about the findings of attitude surveys. These findings are not simply the product of a value-neutral scientific process of data collection and analysis but of a process of analysis in which the researcher's interpretations and subjective judgements play a crucial role. This tends to be ignored by attitude researchers either because they are unaware of it or because it undermines the claims to authority which their surveys often make. The major point, however, is that, despite what attitude researchers may claim, the facts do not speak for themselves, researchers play a part in giving the facts a tone of voice. The greater realisation by policy makers that this is the case might dilute their enthusiasm

for such surveys.

And, finally, there is a fourth assumption underlying this kind of research. This concerns the view of the nature of public opinion with which such researchers work. Although this has been considered earlier, I wish here to concentrate on the relationship between their view of the nature of public opinion and their choice of a researcher methodology. Public opinion tends to be defined operationally in this tradition (Shepard 1975, p. 5). The belief is that to research public opinion, to find out what public attitudes are, you simply interview a random sample of the public, add their responses together and the overall result is a measure of public opinion. Public opinion and public attitudes are simply the aggregation of the views of discrete individuals.

Such views are generally untheorised in the work of attitude researchers. However, they are implicit in their methodologies and especially in their sampling techniques in which every individual in a society is presumed to be of equal significance and to carry equal weight. As Shepard (ibid. p. 6), says, they have "adopted the egalitarian-democratic principle of 'one man, one vote, one value' and have amended it to read 'one man, one opinion, one value'". However, despite the appeal of such ideas, they are, to my mind, basically untenable.

In criticising this assumption, I follow closely the argument of Blumer (1969, pp. 195-208). He claims that to realistically study public opinion we must be faithful to its empirical character. In this he is simply stating a basic methodological principle which suggests that a definition of the phenomenon under study should be established independently of the choice of a research technique with which to study it. In other words we know what public opinion is before we research it.

What then is the empirical character of public opinion? Public opinion is what the words suggest, the public expression of opinion. Such is the nature of our society that the opinions which are expressed in public forums tend to be the opinions of organised groups in the society like trade unions, employers groups, political parties and other interest groups. Leaders and officials of such groups take positions on their behalf and publicly state and argue for these positions. This probably accounts for the high degree of consistency found in the attitudes and opinions of members of the elite compared to members of the mass public.

The expression of these opinions, in the form of speeches, letters, petitions, delegations and so on, is for the very specific purpose of influencing the actions of political decision makers in society. However, given the variety and conflicting interests of such organised groups, their range of opinions will be correspondingly diverse and conflicting. So, as Blumer (ibid. p. 201) concludes, "in any realistic sense public opinion consists of the pattern of the diverse views and positions on the issue that come to the individuals who

have to act in response to the public opinion", "the character of public opinion . . . must be sought in the array of views and positions which enter into the consideration of those who have to take action on public opinion".

A number of points follow from this delineation of the character on public opinion. One is that in no sense does the expression of a group view imply that this view is held equally by all members of the group concerned. As Blumer (ibid, p. 200) points out some may subscribe to the view without actually understanding it, some may be indifferent to it, while some may simply not share it but may not wish to publicly disagree with the group's spokesman. This does not prevent the view being introduced into public discussion as the collective view of the group. A second point, which follows from this, is about the people who act on public opinion. They find that public opinion comes to them in the form of diverse and usually opposed views so if they wish to be responsive to such views they must assess their respective value. This assessment, not surprising, is influenced by the power and prestige of the group expressing the opinion or in Blumer's words (ibid. p. 202) "in this assessment consideration is given to expressions only to the extend to which they are judged to count" (see also Windesham, quoted in R. Shepard, 1975, p. 6; and Crespi, 1980). The result of this is that the opinions of those in structurally important positions are of far more consequence than those of the majority.

The implications of these points for the study of public opinion and attitudes are that a research method which gives equal weight and equal significance to the opinion of each individual in the society is not adequate to the empirical character of the phenomenon it claims to study. The views of organised groups are not simply the quantitative summation of the views of their individual members. Neither do these individuals carry equal weight in the formation and expression of public opinion. In this case, as in many others, the individual is only in a very limited sense a sociologically significant unit. Or as Gouldsbolm (1977, p. 79) puts it, "attitude studies often do not take into consideration factors such as power than tend to structure social action. For most kinds of social action, everyone does not have an equal vote" (see also Galtung 1967, pp. 150-152). It follows from this that attitude surveys, which in their choice of a research method, attribute such significance to individuals are unsuitable to the study of public attitudes and public opinions.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This review has taken four of the assumptions which underpin and often justify the study of public opinions and public attitudes to matters of

political and social policy. In showing that these assumptions are untenable, the claim is being made that such research cannot really claim to be of value to policy-makers and it is inadequate as sociology or as good social research. It leads to an over-ready acceptance of official definitions of problems and so ignores the political processes through which such definitions are created and disseminated. It distorts the nature of attitudes by ascribing logic criteria of consistency and endurance to them, rather than sociological ones. It has a simplistic attitude to research techniques, seeing them as neutral technical devices rather than as techniques which embody in their use subjective and often arbitrary decisions by those who use them. Finally, it works with a view of society and of public opinion which is overly simplistic and which has little theoretical support.

In the long term, such work has little part to play in the development of sociology in Ireland, or anywhere else for that matter. The time has come to make a decisive break with this tradition and to embody in the kind of research which gets wide coverage, the high levels of the critical sophistication which exist in Irish sociology. Such a move need not involve any reduction in willingness to do policy research, just greater discretion in the way in which this research is done. If the evidence of other countries is anything to go by, this latter kind of policy research will not be liked by policy makers. Some of the research stimulated by the Community Development Projects in Britain is adequate illustration of this. However, this should not constitute a deterrent. It is better that the development of sociology in Ireland rests with the theoretical innovativeness of its practitioners than in the passing enthusiasms of policy makers.

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