SOCIAL RESEARCH

by

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Preface

IN any developing field of knowledge, controversy and differences of opinion are bound to exist. When the differences of opinion and the controversial ideas vary extensively, the entire picture tends to give the impression of confusion. In the study of social phenomena, where customs, habits, beliefs, enthusiasms, and ideals all play a part, social research is apt to be modified by such complicated factors. While there is a general impression that social research has not made as much progress as we find in the case of material research, part of this feeling is due to the fact that principles of research which have become reasonably well-established have not been recognized and applied to social situations. Men are frequently so closely entwined with their established beliefs that they resist any attempt to apply the results of scientific studies to social phenomena for fear the result may manifest itself in a disruption of the established order without establishing anything better in its place. They fear that in the wake of social research there will follow a disorganized or unadjusted social situation. Further, social research has frequently manifested itself as a vehicle for changing the social order rather than of understanding the social order. Social research has too often been the tool loudly proclaimed by social reformers as the secret

of the panacea. Elaborate studies of social situations have frequently been made, sometimes with considerable skill in special techniques. However, because of inadequate understanding of social phenomena, with no philosophy of social research, the studies have many times proved to be valueless. Sociologists and other social scientists frequently lament the fact that persons and agencies in a position to supply funds and to make possible the opportunities for adequate social research are not interested. The lack of interest may be due to the unsatisfactory studies sometimes made because of failure to understand the principles and methods of social research.

It is the purpose of this book to present the principles and philosophy of the subject, the lack of which has been at the root of much inadequate research work. The attempt has been made to present the various methods of approach and to indicate the type of inquiry to which they may most effectively be applied. Methods have sometimes been overshadowed by particular techniques—sometimes to such an extent that material which could not be handled by one or another technique, and even more so, material which did not lend itself to a favorite method of research, was cast aside. Each research method has its particular techniques and procedures. It is not the purpose of this volume to present such material. Particularized technical treatment of the different methods of research belongs to special handbooks and technical presentations. It *is* the purpose to present the problem of social research, calling attention to the use which may be made of specific research methods and the necessary interrelation of different methods in an adequate study of any social research project; in other words, to present to the student the trends in the development of social research, the

outstanding experiments in developing particular types and methods, and their application to the analysis and explanation of social causation. While some space has been allotted to the subject of research techniques, it has been done from the viewpoint of indicating their use rather than of presenting the information which would come under the designation of the mechanics and tools of social research.

M. C. E.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Principles and Objectives of Social Research

THE general principles of research have been recognized for a long time. The application of these principles to social situations, however, has not been as extensive nor as effective as in the biological and physical sciences. This has been the case in large part because of the attempt to transfer directly to the social sciences the methods and techniques found effective in the physical sciences, without giving adequate consideration to the social and psychic factors which demanded special techniques and methods. However, we are making progress in social research. We find an increasing accuracy in defining the units of measurement and in the standardization of methods used which enable us to make comparisons. Supporting fields are being developed and refined, thus permitting greater accuracy in analysis and interpretation, and less vagueness in defining the objectives of social research.

Social research is largely based upon the accumulation and comparison of the results of social situations which may be either consciously or unconsciously set in motion. On the background of these scattered observations, which appear

to be complicated and difficult of being compared and analyzed, we gradually build up a theoretical hypothesis. As more and more observations are accumulated, we gradually arrive at a basis for comparison and verification until we have a workable plan. Carey [1] aptly said: "In the progress of knowledge we find ourselves gradually passing from the compound to the simple; from that which is abstruse and difficult to that which is plain and easily learned."

Any particular study contributing to the analysis of a social situation may have value as a basis for generalization only to the extent that it has broken down and simplified an aspect of a more complicated situation. Any new fact is an addition to the sum total of contributions if it results in the modification of the bases for the hypotheses upon which the next project is carried. The development of each step in the methodology of research is the result of a desire to know something and the discovery of an effective way to obtain the information desired. In this connection Cooley stated: "It would appear that a working methodology is a residue from actual research, a tradition of laboratories and work in the field: the men who contributed to it did so unconsciously, by trying to find out something that they ardently wanted to know." [2] We attempt to obtain an understanding of all aspects of a problem in order to reduce the complicated interrelations to some more simple, or, it may be, objective form. In the simpler form, whether it is a principle, a law, a formula, or a statistical summary, we are able to make comparisons and to obtain a basis for determining relationship.

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[1] Carey, H. C., *Principles of Social Science*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1871, Vol. X, p. 32.

[2] Cooley, Charles H., "Sumner and Methodology," *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. XII, March 1928, p. 305.

We pass from generalization to facts almost imperceptibly. When we begin any kind of research it is seldom that we start without any facts or materials from which to construct an hypothesis. We proceed to collect factual data which either conform in general to our hypothesis, or definitely eliminate it, and establish a base from which to generalize anew or to project another hypothesis. Each research project must be considered only as a single contribution to the development of any particular field. Generalization is significant only when based upon a series of studies over a representative section of the area covered by the generalization.

The development of principles in research is popularly assumed to be a result of a sudden inspiration or accident. As a matter of fact, the great steps in science are preceded by laborious study and serious work. It makes an interesting story to say that when Newton was working in the orchard at Woolsthorpe in 1666, the accident of a falling apple suddenly gave him the theory of gravitation. But the works of Copernicus, Kepler, and Huygens on the same subject had prepared the way for Newton. It was only after more than twenty years of additional effort that Newton presented the demonstration of his work to the Royal Society of London.

In scientific investigation and research we cannot separate inductive and deductive methods of approach to a problem. On the basis of what is known of the field or related fields we form a rational hypothesis. Based on specific data, we modify our hypothesis, or make a new generalization which serves as a starting point to which new facts are applied. If the hypothesis is proved to be false, a new hypothesis based on more reliable premises may result. Every social

situation has associated with it such a wide variation of conditions that each assemblage of data gives the appearance of being a new problem. If we add to this the emotional bias of the investigator we may realize why students of social problems need to guard against generalization on the basis of inadequate data.

Social situations, the phenomena which constitute the province of sociology, are primarily the group activities, the interrelationship of these group activities and the resultant processes. Any particularized situation is only a cross section, or an overt manifestation of the entity under consideration. The study of an organization, an agency, or a particular social activity is more than a study of the persons involved, the buildings, or even the organization and structure of the group concerned. It should show a knowledge of its historical growth and development, its relation to other social groups or activities, its social implications, its overt manifestations, its resultant phenomena and social processes. "Like physiology and psychology, sociology has to do with human beings. But unlike physiology and psychology, sociology is concerned not with the individual man, regarded as a living organism having body and mind, but with relations among men . . . not only with the relations between men in association, and with the human groupings in which these relations are manifested, but also with everything that helps to create or modify those relations and the groupings of men." [3]

Of the vast multitude of studies being made, many consist merely of the gathering of data concerning isolated situations, which may be informative, but which are not

[3] Webb, Sidney, and Beatrice, *Methods of Social Study*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1932, p. 3.

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