

The Uses of Social Research

**Social Investigation in Public
Policy-Making**

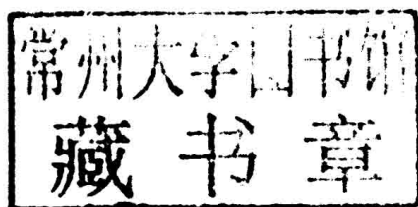
Martin Bulmer



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The Uses of Social Research

The growth and health of the social sciences owe a good deal to the generally held belief that they are socially useful, but is this really so? Do they deliver the goods they promise? In *The Uses of Social Research*, first published in 1982, Martin Bulmer answers these and other questions concerning the uses of empirical social science in the policy-making process, and provides an extended analysis of the main issues.

This title provides a valuable introduction to the patterns of influence exercised by the social sciences on government. It shows how the results of social research feed into the political system and what models of the relationship between research and policy are most convincing. This book will be of interest to students of the social sciences.

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Social Investigation in Public
Policy-Making

MARTIN BULMER

London

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To Joan

Preface

This book appears as part of the *Contemporary Social Research* series, which I edit. The series is concerned with topics in the methodology of social research, with the principles and practice whereby the structure of the social sciences is kept standing. This structure combines two separate elements, theory and empirical evidence. That one without the other is barren and that both are necessary for successful social understanding is one of the central themes of this book, as of the series as a whole.

The series is intended to provide concise introductions to significant methodological topics. Broadly conceived, research methodology deals with the general grounds for the validity of social scientific propositions. How do we know what we do know about the social world? More narrowly, it deals with the questions: how do we actually acquire new knowledge about the world in which we live? What are the strategies and techniques by means of which social science data are collected and analysed? The series will seek to answer such questions through the examination of specific areas of methodology. Titles in the series focus upon specific topics, procedures, methods of analysis and methodological problems to provide a readable introduction to its subject. The intended audience includes the advanced undergraduate, the graduate student, the working social researcher seeking to familiarise himself with new areas, and the non-specialist who wishes to enlarge his knowledge of social research. Research methodology need not be remote and inaccessible. The series is concerned above all to demonstrate the general importance and centrality of research methodology to social science.

The Uses of Social Research deals with the ways in which empirical social research gets used in the policy-making process. There has been a growing interest in the potential usefulness of social science, particularly during the last twenty years, though the roots of this interest are much older. The growth and relative health of the social sciences owes a good deal to the belief that they offer useful knowledge to policy-makers, who are therefore willing to finance both teaching and research on a large scale. What, however, does one mean by 'research', since it is not a unitary term and may mean different things to different people? What is meant by 'use' and 'utilisation'? What models of the relationship between research and policy are most convincing?

Questions of this kind have interested me ever since I spent a short period working in the British civil service in the mid-1970s. The gulf which tends to separate the British academic social scientist (particu-

larly in sociology, political science and psychology) from the world of the politician and administrator is a broad one which needs to be bridged more often than it is at present. 'Social research' inside government tends to be identified with descriptive studies and information-gathering, uninformed by any type of social science theory. A good deal of social science theory on the other hand, particularly in sociology, shows little familiarity with the empirical world, while subjects like social administration which study the policy process are still to a considerable extent wedded to outmoded empiricist conceptions of the nature of social scientific knowledge. One purpose of this book is to criticise such empiricist views of knowledge as failing to gain a proper purchase upon the nature of social phenomena. This discussion draws on examples such as deprivation, handicap and health from the social policy field.

The need for a critical discussion of the uses of social research is apparent if one simply considers the term 'research'. One familiar distinction is that between 'basic' and 'applied' social research. Although this book is concerned with applied social research the distinction is not really a very satisfactory one. The history of the natural sciences demonstrates that many of the most important and far-reaching applications of research have stemmed from basic research findings which have revolutionised or changed the way in which the world is perceived and understood. Among the social sciences, economics and economists enjoy the high esteem that they do (relative to other social scientists, if not absolutely) in part because in Britain the relevance of economics to policy was demonstrated above all through the influence of Keynes and his *General Theory* (1936). Logically there is no reason why basic research may not be used and have practical consequences for policy-making, any more than why applied research may not throw light on more basic theoretical issues and problems.

It is more satisfactory to think of a range of different kinds of 'research', rather than a simple dichotomy between 'basic' and 'applied'. The range of meanings of the term is wide. It may refer to statistical data collection and monitoring of a purely descriptive kind or, at the other extreme, to basic academic social science research to test and refine theory. In between it may have tactical objectives, to help in the administration of a service, for example, or its aims may be strategic understanding of the context of a particular policy, drawing on social science theory as well as empirical studies of the field. Another mode is action research, where intervention and diagnosis proceed side by side. A more ambitious form, so far mainly confined to the United States, is the social experiment which involves both intervention by the study team and a controlled investigation of the effects of such intervention.

'Applied' social science and 'applied' social research are not homogeneous. Social scientists themselves conceive of them in various ways. Policy-makers expect different things from social science, often different in nature. In addition, the contexts in which research is carried on affect its character. Research done 'in-house' in government is likely to be more factual and descriptive; that done in university departments perhaps more theoretical, though the evidence on this suggests that the contrast may be overdrawn. One part of the book looks specifically at the use of social research by governmental commissions, a manageable area for an in-depth study of 'use' and 'effectiveness' and one in which I became interested earlier when editing a collection of case-studies on the subject (Bulmer, 1980b).

The patterns of influence of empirical social inquiry are many and various, not homogeneous. Those who carry out research for policy-makers often have clear ideas of what 'use' their research will be and are then nonplussed, dismayed, enraged or embittered when it is not given the treatment which they considered it deserved. A principal argument of this book is that the applied social scientist does not really work in ways analogous to the engineer or doctor, designing better social mechanisms or structures, means of trying to cure society's ills. Social research and social science rather provide enlightenment and understanding, an angle of vision upon the problems of the world which may influence decision-makers and the policy process but does not provide neat technical solutions that can be applied in any simple manner.

A wide range of literature on social science and the applications of research is referred to in the course of this book. There is a large and increasing volume of literature in this field, spanning several social sciences and the academic and non-academic worlds. No attempt has been made to provide a comprehensive bibliography, but those interested may consult three recent guides to the literature, by myself (Bulmer, 1978, pp. 313-26), by Charles Lindblom and David Cohen (1979, pp. 102-26) and by Carol Weiss (1980a, pp. 289-325).

It remains to thank those who helped in various ways while the book was being prepared. Valerie Campling typed the manuscript and deciphered my handwriting, not only with patience but with exemplary clarity and efficiency. I am indebted to Mildred Blaxter, Nicky Hart and Geoffrey Hawthorn who gave permission for material to be reproduced in Chapters 3 and 4. Part of Chapter 5 previously appeared in the *Journal of Public Policy*. The staff of the London School of Economics and Political Science Geography Department Drawing Office under Mrs E. Wilson drew a number of the figures to their usual very high standards. Stuart S. Blume, Robert F. Boruch, Morris Janowitz and Carol Weiss have at various times discussed with me

issues in the application of social science research. I alone, however, am responsible for the interpretation and line of argument put forward in this book.

MARTIN BULMER
London

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A Historical Perspective upon Applied Social Research in Britain

There is in the development of applied social research in Britain a marked historical continuity. We begin with a discussion of this long tradition of the use of research in policy-making, since it continues to exercise a major influence upon the utilisation of social research in the present day. It is particularly important to realise that this tradition is considerably older and to some extent apart from the history of academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology or political science. The distinction between social *research* and social *science* which runs all through this book has deep historical roots which the present chapter aims to clarify. The emphasis here is upon the historical development of British applied social research, without paying too close attention to what is meant by terms such as 'use' or 'applied research'. These conceptual problems are discussed in Chapter 2 once the scene has been set historically.

Where does the story begin? Any starting point is to a considerable degree arbitrary. Some would argue that it lies in the seventeenth century with the early population statisticians John Graunt and William Petty (G. N. Clark, 1948). Others would point to the beginnings of modern census-taking (1790 in the United States, 1801 in Britain) as signalling the start of modern social inquiry. Others would point to English vital registration and the establishment of the General Register Office in 1837. It can be questioned, however, whether birth, marriage and death registration is 'social research'. The history with which we are concerned, it can be argued, begins later in the nineteenth century when adequate scientific methods for social inquiry were first developed.

These arguments about starting data are to a large extent academic. There is clearly a close connection between the scientific study of social conditions, industrialisation and intensified urbanisation. So the discussion will begin around 1830 and sketch some main developments during the nineteenth century. This is not to ignore developments in the eighteenth century and earlier (see Lecuyer and Oberschall, 1968), which must be part of an adequate history of empirical social research. The history of British census-taking and vital registration will also only be mentioned briefly (Glass, 1973; Susser and Adelstein, 1975).

The Royal Commission on the Poor Law, 1832-4

The influence of English social investigation upon policy-making perhaps became most dramatically obvious with the Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law of 1834. This was the first occasion on which extensive first-hand inquiries were undertaken as part of a government commission of investigation. The commission was set up to review the workings of the Elizabethan Poor Law and to make recommendations to the government for its reform. To do its work, it determined to inquire into the operation of the Poor Law in different areas of the country, for there was very considerable variation in the administration of poor relief. Thus the commission drew up three questionnaires which were sent to all districts which administered relief. This was not a great success – only one in ten of parishes replied – so as a second step twenty-six assistant commissioners were sent out to ‘ascertain the state of the poor by personal inquiry among them, and the administration of the Poor Law by being present at the vestries and at the sessions of the magistrates’. Since not all parishes could be visited, the assistant commissioners were told to select which areas they would visit. The investigators were unpaid, philanthropically minded amateurs, who nevertheless managed to cover 3,000 places, about one in five of Poor Law authorities. Their reports were published in thirteen volumes of appendices (totalling 8,000 pages) to the Report of the commission in 1834. The commissioners believed that when they reported they tendered to His Majesty ‘the most extensive and at the same time the most consistent body of evidence that was ever brought to bear on a single subject’, evidence moreover which seemed to support the recommendations of the report.

The Report itself – ‘one of the classic documents of western social history’ (Checkland and Checkland, 1974, p. 9) – had of course a most significant influence upon social welfare policy, turning it in a direction which it was to hold until the mid-twentieth century. By the Poor Law Report and particularly through the work of one commissioner – Edwin Chadwick (1800-90) (see Finer, 1952) – social inquiry became recognised as a part of policy-making within government.

The demonstration effect of the Report has been greater than its real value as social research. Indeed later scholars have not shared the commissioners’ high opinion of their own work. They have pointed to the fact that much of the Report was written before all the evidence had been collected; that the whole process was carried on in great haste in a matter of months; that much of the evidence collected by the assistant commissioners was impressionistic and tinged with moralism; and the degree of local variation and the complexity of the problems (for example, the relation between local wage levels, unemployment levels and poor relief) was much greater than the commission realised

(see Blaug, 1963 and 1964). 'Of all the empirical investigations before the [eighteen-] fifties, that which preceded the Act of 1834 was the least open-minded, the most concerned to validate the dogmatic presuppositions of political economy' (McGregor, 1957, p. 148). Far from making a dispassionate scientific study of social conditions, the commissioners and assistant commissioners tended to select evidence in terms of their preconceptions about the nature of the problems and the kinds of reforms which were desirable. The Report demonstrated that social inquiry had an important role, but it has not been judged by posterity to be a good example of such inquiry.

This is not surprising. The state of social investigation in the 1830s was primitive, and this resulted in the grave deficiencies in the use of evidence by the commissioners. Nevertheless the 1834 Report served to distinguish social inquiry from policy-making, or political propaganda, or pressure group representations. The idea of objective scientific inquiry into social conditions was given an impetus within the sphere of government which was soon followed up.

The Influence of Chadwick

One of those who was instrumental in this was Chadwick, who in 1834 became secretary to the Poor Law Commissioners. He was a remarkable and extremely forceful public servant, a man of tireless energy and persuasiveness, if not with a personally agreeable temperament. Chadwick was concerned about the effects of insanitary conditions upon the state of the population. He saw a connection between sanitary problems, illness, poverty and the cost of the Poor Law. If there was a link between them, then a way to reduce the cost of poor relief would be to improve sanitary conditions. In 1839, with that objective in mind, he began work which culminated in 1842 in the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population*. This, unlike the Poor Law Commission Report, was a more scientific and objective inquiry. The degree of objectivity is attested by the shock with which it was received by the more well-to-do sections of the population, most of whom existed in ignorance of how the working classes lived. Chadwick himself noted the astonishment with which his account of social conditions was received 'by persons of the wealthier classes living in the immediate vicinity, to whom the facts were as strange as if they related to foreigners or the natives of an unknown country'.

The purpose of the 1842 Report was threefold: it described graphically the appalling social and health conditions in expanding towns; it demonstrated that these conditions were proportionately worse in towns than in rural areas; and it demonstrated the inability of the central and local administration to deal with the problems which they

faced. The first two of these achievements were solidly based on social inquiry. For example, the Report showed that in industrial areas the number of deaths for all classes of the population was greater for the under-20 age group than for the 20- to 60-year-old age group. Only among labourers was this true in rural areas, but whereas in those areas the proportion was 2:1, in industrial areas it was 3:1. Another analysis showed that deaths of adults attributed to epidemic disease were twice as great among the industrial population as among the gentry and professional classes, while the average life expectancy was eight to ten years lower among industrial workers. The deaths of heads of families before the age of 45 placed (it was estimated) 43,000 widows and 112,000 orphans upon the Poor Laws. The Report observed that 'the annual loss of life from filth and bad ventilation is greater than the loss from death or wounds in any wars in modern times'. The 1842 Report had a wide effect, partly because it was well written and presented and partly due to Chadwick's appeal to the economies which sanitary improvement could bring.

Chadwick was not alone in exercising a reforming influence upon mid-Victorian Britain. Others such as Kay-Shuttleworth, Southwood Smith and Sir John Simon (see Lambert, 1963) made important contributions to social and medical investigation and reform. With Chadwick, they were concerned with social improvement, combating the perceived evils of industrialism and urbanism. Few men in the early or mid-nineteenth century luxuriated in knowledge for its own sake; social inquiry had a purpose and an end, the understanding of current social conditions with a view (usually) to some sort of intervention. Some inquiries were undertaken by private individuals, some by and for governments, but generally the same individuals were prominent in government-sponsored inquiries.

Mid-Victorian Social Inquiry

Backing up the work of these individuals was the work of the statistical societies (particularly those of London and Manchester), founded by citizens active in social reform.

The rapidly expanding urban environment of industrialism demanded the measurement of human as well as natural resources . . . the stench of urban poverty drove thoughtful, vigorous, unsentimental middle-class people – doctors, bankers, those experienced in insurance and the like – to the study of social pathology . . . [They] organised themselves up and down the country in statistical and philosophical societies for the investigation of the accumulating consequences of urban and technological growth. (McGregor, 1957, p. 147)