VENSTER OP HET L.S.E. RESEARCH TECHNIQUES UNIT

Because of its interest in survey work of an economic and sociological character, the London School of Economics has always been concerned with the methodological problems raised in the course of such research. Like most other organisations, however, it has been obliged to tackle methodological issues as they arose rather than devise specific tests of the research process itself; and it was not until 1949 that it found itself able to set up a special Research Techniques Unit which would not have to worry so much about the content of a particular field of study as about the techniques used to obtain scientifically valid results.

In the first nine years or so of its existence, therefore, we have seen it concern itself with a number of enquiries expressly
designed to explore the relative effectiveness in the field of different kinds of interviewer. This does not mean that its work has been confined solely to this sphere. Members of the Unit have published papers in factor analysis, regression, ranking, and other problems of the statistical treatment of variables. Attention, too, has been given to aspects of sampling beyond the simple random level. But for the sociologist undertaking survey work himself or utilising for sociological purposes the survey work of others, it is the enquiries into the field performance of interviewers and the use of questionnaires which are the most interesting and valuable.

One of the Research Techniques Unit’s earliest studies was a study of the extent to which untrained volunteer interviewers from university differed from experienced investigators from professional organisations in their capacity to get results. This took the form of a field enquiry in three London districts with three questionnaires, utilising students of the London School of Economics, largely Second-Year Undergraduates, and part-time and full-time employers of the British Institute of Public Opinion and of the Government Social Survey. The amateurs returned only 69.6% of their schedules as compared with 82.5% in the case of the professionals who differed amongst themselves by only 2.4%. ¹)

There was also some difference between amateurs and professionals in the answers they returned, even on factual questions although these differences were not on the whole extensive, nor statistically significant. ²)

The question of differences between interviewers in terms of the content of their returns was the subject of two later enquiries. Both were designed to avoid complications arising from differences in experience and were accordingly confined to investigations employed by market research firms and other similar survey bodies. The first — using a single questionnaire in two districts of London, two large towns and two small towns within 100 miles of London — employed the services of the British Market Research Bureau, the Market Information Services, Research Services, and the British Institute of Public Opinion (in London only).

There was some difference in their relative „success rates” following repeated calls (5.9%) ³) and some differences between interviewers, but they were not statistically significant over the whole schedule. „Although there were significant differences in the response rates obtained by different interviewers working under similar conditions, the differences in the replies they obtained to the questions were, on the whole, no greater than random sampling fluctuations. In other words the difference in
the results obtained by two different interviewers working on separate sets of respondents seems to be no greater than the difference which would have been obtained if the same interviewers had worked on both sets." 4)

The other enquiry made use of six professional organisations — Attwood Statistics, the B.B.C. Audience Research Dept., the British Market Research Bureau, the Government Social Survey, Hedley's, and Market Information Services — this time interviewing on two questionnaires in four districts of London only. On this occasion differences between interviewers working under similar conditions were found to exist although they were not very marked, 5) and the analysis also showed some variation in variability itself from one organisation to another. 6) Thus the most important conclusion of the Unit's work in this sphere so far „is that the differences in the response rates obtained by different investigators are not attributable to chance” 7) whereas other differences may be. Further work is now being undertaken into the main characteristics which specially distinguish volunteers who offer themselves for participation in sociological and marketing enquiries.

In all this work, and especially in the analysis of the results, the Unit has made use of highly sophisticated statistical techniques and impeccable logic. Yet there is about it a certain lack of psychological imagination which is irritating to the sociologist with some training in social psychology. It is clear, that is to say, from such research as that carried out by Hyman and his colleagues on the field techniques employed by the American National Opinion Research Center, 8) that the formulation of tentative explanations for possible differences in interviewer performance produces rather more fruitful results than an empirical approach based on a purely statistical analytical framework. What we already know about interaction between people at the face-to-face level is surely of significance to those who wish to estimate the effect of such interaction on an interview enquiry? and it is surely better to begin with such knowledge than to rely on „common-sense”?

This must not be taken to imply that the work the Unit has undertaken so far is not valuable. Insofar as we must expect to use interviewers of varying years of experience in the work, it is important to know how far we must take experience in account when evaluating their returns, although it would be useful if we could have been told why such differences occur and what we must look out for when employing ex-students on interviewing work for the first time. Similarly, is is useful to know that significant differences are found in the coding performance of different people and in the performance of the same
people at different times, 9) although here again it would be useful to know why these differences occur. Indeed, there is every ground for suggesting that the Unit might consider a programme of research less concerned with differences in interviewers as such as with differences which arise in the interview situation itself, as a product of interaction between two perhaps different personalities. It would also be valuable to know, as one of the Unit's consultants has himself suggested, how far interviewer variability arises from differences among interviewers in the way they put questions, in their manner of interpreting the answers, and in their methods of recording what they are told. 10) Perhaps control of the interview situation from the respondent end will always be beyond our reach but the whole idea of interviewer training and briefing is based on the assumption that standardization amongst interviewers is possible, and it is to the credit of the London School of Economics that it is prepared to spend time and energy on research into this sphere.

J. A. BANKS

4) ibid p. 410.
5) K. Gales and M. G. Kendall: 'An Inquiry Concerning Interviewer Variability' J.R.S.S., Series A, Vol. 120, Table 1, p. 126.
6) ibid Table 9, p. 130.