

COMMENT BY SAMUEL A. STOUFFER†

The authors of this searching and lucid discussion of opinion research have asked me for some comments. The generosity with which they have treated my book would be ill repaid if I quibbled over details. There is, however, one important point upon which I feel moved to comment, not because the authors and I disagree, but because I want to be sure that its implications are not overlooked. The point concerns a query which lawyers, in particular, like to make: If the meaning of each given question is ambiguous or otherwise subject to error, is not the entire research based on such questions meaningless?

The answer is: Perhaps such research is meaningless and perhaps not. But the important point is that we have methods of testing whether or not use of such questions is meaningful.

One such method is the use of a scale. If people who say, "All Communists should be put in jail," all mean the same thing by their answers there is no problem. But the word *Communists* will mean different things to different people. If it were extremely ambiguous, then we would find large inconsistencies in the relationship between answers to this item and answers to other items such as: "If a person wanted to make a speech in your community favoring government ownership of the railroads and big industries, should he be allowed to speak or not?" If we look at a cluster of such items we may find by the technical procedures of scaling that there is no pattern of consistency between answers to the jail question and the others. Then we would know that the jail question, either because of ambiguity or because of some other idiosyncrasy of meaning, is not helpful in rank-ordering people along a single dimension of permissiveness toward non-conformists. Actually, the jail question passed the test of internal consistency in the study being reviewed. This still does not mean that the answers should now be interpreted literally in terms of jailing Communists, but rather that the answers are meaningfully relevant to the problems of ranking people according to their degree of permissiveness.

Furthermore, it should be noted that appropriate scaling procedures should quickly discover whether respondents too frequently were careless in their answers or so indifferent that they answered more or less at random. Indeed, scaling even can serve to some extent (though not infallibly) to uncover lying, because it is hard for individuals to lie with the kind of internal consistency required to produce a good scale.

Finally, a good scale is a more reliable measure than any of the individual items that compose it, just as an average, in general, is a more reliable measure than the individual errorful measures which are added up to compute it.

† Director of the Laboratory of Social Relations, Harvard University.

It is quite possible that training in simple measurement theory may some day be as important in legal training as is elementary exposure to the theory of cost accounting. I am not a lawyer, but I find that the sharply disciplined minds of some of my lawyer friends grasp the essential logic of such problems more quickly and easier than do a few of my less rigorous colleagues with training in psychology or the social sciences.

COMMENT BY PAUL F. LAZARSELD†

The social scientist needs very badly at this moment careful analyses of major research endeavors. The two authors have rendered a real service, not only to the lay public and advanced student, but to the research fraternity itself, which needs continuous self-awareness of its procedures. While one cannot but agree with most everything the authors say, there are two points which deserve special attention, and a few words of elaboration.

A survey like Stouffer's should, in part, be looked upon as a piece of contemporary history. Undoubtedly, there will one day be a great deal of writing on the atmosphere of freedom in the mid-twentieth century, just as there has been much on the medieval mind or on the spirit of the Renaissance. The historian of the future, however, will have survey data at his disposal. Although such data, being relatively precise, invites more immediate generalization and interpretation, it is not different from other historical data. If Lord Acton asserts that power corrupts, the only way to prove it is to look at many instances where people came to power and to see what it did to them, under what circumstances it corrupted them and so forth. We would most likely find that power doesn't always corrupt, and that very often when it appears to do so the relationship is actually the reverse. Corrupt people are sometimes more likely to get to power. In a way, we have the same situation when Stouffer finds a correlation between perception of the Communist danger and permissiveness.¹ Under other circumstances and in other historical situations such a correlation might not exist. For instance, the extent to which people are aware of the danger of atomic warfare probably has very low correlation with the extent to which they engage in war-preventing activities; or if an economic depression or some other major issue were to capture national attention, even in regard to Communism, the correlation which Stouffer found might be much lower. Within his own data one could draw interesting inferences as to the variation of the findings. Groups for which the correlation is relatively low either might not believe

† Chairman, Department of Sociology, Columbia University.

¹ Incidentally, I completely agree with the use of the term "permissiveness" instead of "tolerance." As a matter of fact, that term is being used by a Columbia University group in a survey on academic freedom.