

Introducción

X. A Way of Life

Por **Robert Worcester**²¹

Hola! Welcome to the world of academia meeting survey research. I remember well the meetings I had more than 20 years ago now with several outstanding researchers from South America in the meetings of the World Association for Public Opinion Research. While market research had been around for some decades, and some social research had been done by a few agencies and in some academics based either in universities throughout the Southern Hemisphere, market research for the many consumer goods manufacturing companies, many commissions originating in the United States, only a few, INRA under the late and much admired Helen Dinerman, and George Gaither, did much political and social research, along with the members of the Gallup network.

I was first a member of the American Marketing Association, encouraged to belong in my early days as a McKinsey consultant in the early 60s. I attended my first AMA Conference in 1962 I believe. There I found research as they know it to be a very large dog wagging a tiny tail, research being acknowledged by the marketers as useful, but without a seat at the 'high table'.

A year or two later, I attended a meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, and found that as a 'commercial' market researcher (i.e., working for a profit-making company) I was certainly classed as flying in the back of the bus. I did contribute to both the *AMA Journal* and to one or two conferences, but never really felt at home, being a multidisciplinary/multinational academic/researcher at heart. You know, I've never said that before in just that way.

Then, fighting my way out of the USA, love it as I do, I came to Europe to set up a joint-venture company for ORC where I had done double duty as their CFO and head of international research, having told the chairman when headhunted out of McKinsey to be the chief financial officer that what he wanted me to do would take three or four years and then I

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could hand that job over to someone else and I could then move to Europe to set up their British/European operation. He said then, quite rightly, that I'd have to learn to do research, and from the ground up at that. During that time I sorted out the financial management of the company and attended research trainee sessions, did field interviewing, spent time in coding and DP, wrote questionnaires and reports, was trained as a qualitative researcher, and relished the lot.

Sure enough, three and a half years later I moved to London, as negotiated the joint venture and set up MORI, Market & Opinion Research International. By that time I'd been a member of WAPOR, the World Association for Public Opinion Research and ESOMAR, presented papers at both (years later Professor Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, in line to be President of WAPOR, said that when she saw me speak at the ESOMAR conference in Amsterdam in 1969, that she decided I would be President of WAPOR someday; I followed in her footsteps in 1983-84). At WAPOR I felt I was home, as I felt more at home in London than I ever had anywhere in the USA.

Then, some years later at a WAPOR conference having got to know a group of researchers from Latin America I was surprised to be approached by several, asking me to help them raise the profile and standard of our work by taking part in their companies and giving both management and research training in their countries. After several years and meetings with some others from Latin America, I agreed. Since then I have visited six, four of them with some frequency, and followed their fortunes closely, had many visit me in London, and met them all many times at WAPOR conferences.

I'd taken Spanish in High School. Hated it. "Why bother" I said, "I'll never need it, as where I really want to live someday is London" (then the world's largest city). Little did I know that I would end up as a director of some five Latin American companies! I even gave a speech in Spanish once, in Asunción, which I wrote all by myself. It consisted of just two sentences, not counting the "good evening" and the "thank you" at the end of my (brief) address.

When the MORI International network was at its peak, we used to have annual meetings to tie into wherever WAPOR was meeting, and assisted in the development of the renowned and much respected Latinobarometer, helping to develop its first questionnaire and serving on its Advisory Board for ten years. I have also lectured in several of the Latin American Universities while in the countries, such as at Bela Horizonte and at Catholic University in Santiago.

Together with Elisabeth and Marty Lipset I founded the International Journal of Public Opinion Research, which is now in its 22 year, and why I am so pleased at the Latin American initiative to publish a parallel Spanish language academic journal, so long as they correlate and build synergy into their outputs.

But now, having this opportunity to speak to an audience I don't usually have the opportunity to address, let me share with you what it's like having research as a way of life?

For the research work we do *is* a way of life. It gives the curious, the intelligent and the interested a view of society which is almost unique. It provides a means by which an alert (but not indolent) young person might taste of a broad variety of experiences without becoming too attached to any one stream and therefore limit their opportunity to move upwards in the trade, or outward into a wide variety of occupations and callings.

If then they decide it's a life for them (and there are many easier ways to make a living), then it's a license to be paid for doing something endlessly entertaining and rewarding, in so many ways. If not, it will give them a grounding they will value for life, and will enhance their offer to alternative employers.

To me, public opinion (and we base all our work at least partly on public opinion) is fascinating, and kaleidoscopic in its variety, its breadth, and its opportunity. It enabled me in my early career here to meet with prime ministers and shop stewards, bankers, lawyers, doctors and businessmen, charity workers and ad and PR people, Members of Parliament, and all in my first year in Britain.

We are still working for several clients we began to serve in our first year, 1969, 38 years ago, and for some, have worked for them continuously every year since. These include Shell, BP, Lloyds Bank (including work in the Iberian Peninsula for Lloyds' subsidiary which was called Bank of London and South America) and the British Government, my first ever MORI client. Since then I have had the pleasure of being called upon by a wide variety of clients in both the public and private sectors, and by the third sector as well, in most cases many times, and been round the world several times.

In market research there seem to be generations of ideas. Every 20 years or the same ideas keep coming around as a new generation takes over and doesn't learn, or ignores, what their elders knew before. When I spoke at a conference a year or so ago, when I began to think about the profound changes in our industry during my nearly 40 years in it, I was struck by a mailing from a company in our industry that contained the following acronyms: CAPI, CATI, SPSS, ASCII, RDD, PAF, and such unknown (40 years ago) words such as Excel, mystery shoppers, web interviews, and many others. The first computer I bought, an IBM monster which weighed a ton, required its own air conditioned room, input was from punch cards, RAM of 48k (k!), and cost zillions. Now the Blackberry in my pocket, never mind my laptop, compares to thousands of IBM 1130s and cost a couple of hundred pounds.

Change over the years has come gradually to our industry, but these days the pace of change is accelerating, at an accelerating rate.

The secret to the success of our industry is to be in the business of measuring people's views, and advising clients who want to know what people do, what they know, and their views, and people being people, these change from time to time.

So what is this mecuricial thing called public opinion? I have defined...

...Public opinion is *'the collective view of a defined population'*.

Often thought of and sometimes defined narrowly in the context of politics and elections, it is also a powerful force in other spheres as every market researcher will know, from fashion, culture, music, literature and the arts, travel and holidays, to purchases of status symbols such as cars, jewellery, clothes and styling, in considerations of corporate branding, and in aspects of establishing and promoting corporate and other organizational identities.

I argue that there are five things that researchers can measure with the tools of their trade, and make use of it every day in designing, conducting and interpreting survey data. They are people's **behavior**, their **knowledge**, and their **views**: their **opinions**, **attitudes** and **values**.

Behaviour is what people do, and **knowledge** is what they know (or think they know). The other three are more difficult to define and understand, and much less commonly agreed. The idea of a 'collective view' in the definition of public opinion is designed to incorporate the three levels of thought that people hold and pollsters measure: **opinions**, **attitudes** and **values**. These terms are defined, perhaps rather too poetically for scholarly adoption, as **opinions**: the ripples on the surface of the public's consciousness, shallow, and easily changed; **attitudes**: the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger; and **values**: the deep tides of public mood, slow to change, but powerful.

Opinions are of low salience, little thought about reactions to pollsters' questions about issues of the day, easily manipulated by question wording or the news of the day, not very important to the respondent, not vital to their well being or that of their family, unlikely to have been the topic of discussion or debate between them and their relations, friends and work mates, easily blown about by the winds of the politicians and the media.

Attitudes are the currents below the surface, derive from a deeper level of consciousness, are held with some conviction, and are likely to have been held for some time and afterthought, discussion, perhaps the result of behaviour, and harder to confront or confound. Examples of these are the Scots' support for a separate assembly, held with some force over generations and based on strong beliefs that they are not fairly represented either in Parliament or in Britain's system of government, perhaps attitudes to the taking of medicines or exercise, forms of education, local authority service delivery for services used frequently and by large percentages of citizens such as rubbish collection, street lighting and schools.

While attitudes can be strongly held, of importance to the individual and his/her family, affect them and their family, have been discussed with others and considered, they are subject to change if the individual who holds them learns of new information questioning his/her earlier belief, or by learning that an individual whose judgment they respect holds a contrary view leading the individual to reconsider, or strongest of all, the two together.

Values are formed early in life, learned parentally in many cases, not likely to change, but only firm as one grows older. These include belief in God, attitudes to religion generally, views about abortion or the death penalty or euthanasia, family values, and the like. It is difficult to change these by persuasion, by media discussion or propaganda, or by the positions and arguments of political debate, except over long periods, concerted thought and discussions, a feeling that one is out of step with others they know and respect, and, often, new evidence, changing circumstances or continuing behavioral experiences.

These then are the building blocks we use to study public opinion, to a product class, to a brand, to discover the brand user image, the corporate image (see my paper to the MRS conference in 1970), and in an Esomar paper some thirty years ago, the 'fifth dimension', of the nationality of the country identified with the brand and the company behind the brand.

Market Research and Public Opinion Polling

Surveys measure the collective view(s) of a representative sample (or census) of a defined population at a point in time.'

Surveys for market research, for survey research in the academic/public sector section of our work, and opinion polls are better at measuring 'what', rather than finding out 'why'. Finding out 'why' is the principal function of qualitative research and especially focus groups that major on the interaction of the group rather than the question-and-answer format of the individual depth interview. Surveys cannot tell us what are the likely future actions of the public generally and certainly not the future behaviour of individuals. Polls are not particularly good at exploring concepts unfamiliar to respondents, nor are they good at identifying the behaviour, knowledge or views of tiny groups of the population, except at disproportionate expense.

What are surveys for? In the case of polls conducted for publication by the media, to inform, to entertain, to educate. Polls may also be used to communicate a better understanding to the elite, the opinion former, the politician, the pundit and these commentators on what people are thinking so that they will be better informed and thereby be in a better position to play their own role in the process of diffusion of information to the public and to each other.

Information diffusion is a complex process in the electronic age. And because of their intensity, modern election campaigns are among the most complex of all. Opinion poll results

are, or should be, a help to the public's understanding of this process, offering, as they do, one of the few systematic and objective parts of the information flow.

Surveys for corporate clients not intended for publication, but for the use of the client, as well as opinion polls have (or should have) no axe to grind no incentive to manipulate or guide the decision-making process of the respondent, whether the voter, the consumer or the citizen. They are there not to persuade a person to act in one way or another, to think or vote in a certain way. They are there to provide information about what others think. To think otherwise is not to be in market or survey research, but to be in manipulation, in spinning, in chicanery, and if there are those around us who might think this is an acceptable part of our business should not be in our business.

Some newspaper proprietors and editors are guided by their own desire to see a certain election outcome. Opinion polls are not, and there is no incentive for them to be. This is not the case however of their commissioners, whether the media (public opinion polls), commerce and industry (market research), or the civic sector and academics (survey research), many of whom have their own agendas and who are commissioning surveys either to inform themselves how to manipulate public opinion (private surveys) or for releasing to the media (advocacy polling). It is up to people in our business to ensure that they do not misuse or tools, and more importantly, our reputations, in support of their aim.

The emergence of the new Journal will enhance our mutual understanding of what it is we do it, and why we do it, and this can only be for the good of our own understanding and the understanding of others of the role of survey research, and that can only be for the good.

To Conclude

From time to time I'm asked, 'If you had it to do over, would you choose market research again?', and I'm reminded of the last paragraph of the 'Last Hurrah', an American political novel, at the conclusion of the life of the mayor of Boston, an old-time politician who'd devoted his life to politics, and on his death bed overheard his sister say 'I'm sure that he had his life to live over, he'd do it differently', at which he raised his head and in a strong voice was heard to say: 'The Hell I would', and then died.

Sure there are things I'd do differently, things that I have done wrong, people who I have offended unnecessarily, conmen who have used and manipulated me who if I'd but known, I'd never have befriended, but for a career of intrinsic interest, of constant challenge, of variety and change, of psychic and also financial reward beyond my dreams, market and public opinion research has given me this. If I had my life to live over, would I do it differently? The Hell I would!