

MIRROR OR MONITOR FOR MAN?

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Many social and behavioral scientists, myself no less for the telling, suffer a cruel, perhaps fatal, contradiction between their professional aspirations and private visions. As scientists of individual and collective human behavior, we seek to so well understand men that we can predict their behavior and to be so knowledgeable about every facet and level of human interaction as to foretell the consequences of changes introduced into any behavioral setting. As visionaries, illuminated by by our private internal lights, we yearn for the society where self-conscious brotherhood replaces alienation, where the manipulation of men by men is minimized, where the affirmation of life over death becomes a pervasive ethic, and where dignity replaces alienation or poverty as the stamp of human condition.

These aspirations and visions are incompatible. To live in the world of the triumphant social or behavioral scientist is to live in an Orwellian world come alive, where 1984 is today. At its best such a world would be concerned with the question of towards what ends shall we manipulate men, having by then satisfactorily attained the means to do so, and having

long forgotten how to question the morality of so doing. On a more personal level, we would be purged of the mystery of the human encounter, ecstasy and pain would be robbed of all meaning, and we would throb with all the variation of a well-run home heating system.

Imagine a world where The Power of Positive Thinking was really powerful, How to Win Friends and Influence People did just that, and The ABZ of Loving told it all. And they would, of course, because they would be popular versions of the social and behavioral science textbooks.

At its worst such a world might be a world of death and desolation where the manipulative power inherent in predictive understanding was unleashed in the ultimate of wars and tyrannies. To the brave soul who cries out, "It is not enough to understand the world, you must seek to change it," comes back the echo through desolated time, "...seek to change it my way".



How do we survive in the face of such profound irony between the world that would follow the ultimate successes of our professional lives and the recognition that in such a world we would never want to live? We survive, as we always do, in the face of the unthinkable, by never thinking about it, repressing it, doubting it, or by inverting its meaning. My own survival takes refuge in epistemological doubt. I accept limits in all science on the potential "to know", particularly in my own. Therefore, I am spared the apocalypse, for I lack faith in its coming. This I may note only helps parenthetically, for I have replaced one contradiction with another. If I don't believe in the predictability of human behavior then why am I trying so hard to do so?

But my more immediate concern is with the forerunners of 1984, the choices that even partial knowledge pose to social and behavioral scientists. These issues may be no less cruel and thorny than those I have tried to pose by picturing them in the ultimate. Assuming that readers of this journal are aware of the general concerns of scientists with the social condition of their science, what are some specific questions confronting geographers? I'll pose one question with two aspects, the ways in which we acquire knowledge about people.

Most geographers are for big data banks, most support an expanded range of census questions, most accept in some vague general way the notion that the more we know about people the better off we are. Few geographers, even the growing number of geographers who do not trust their government's policy in Viet-Nam (it lies to them), question the use to which the big data banks might be put. Few of those who are concerned with the right to privacy and opposed to wire-tapping and the like, consider the present attack on the census and its legal power to compel answers, anything but right wing nonsense. And scientists everywhere, do not seem to accept any version of the "ignorance can be bliss" hypothesis.

Turning from the mass collection of data to a more individualized aspect, the Spring issue of Daedalus contains almost 400 pages of discussion on the ethical aspects of experimentation with human subjects. I have never seen a word in any of our journals discussing the ethical aspects of the equivalent issues for our profession. It is not simply the medical profession in which there is a harmful potential in the process of acquiring new knowledge. I could cite many examples from geographic research of intrusive and insensitive

manipulation of people, informants, sources and the like.

But to underline the sticky nature of the dilemmas that confront us, let me turn to my own work in natural hazard research.

It has, I think, high social value and in the research design care has been taken to seek the informed consent of each respondent and to avoid falsification. Nevertheless, I am aware of one disturbing implication of my studies. Over the last 10 years my colleagues and I have administered over 3,000 questionnaires to people concerning their perception of natural hazards. Among those 3,000 interviews, there are some people (the number is quite small) in which the interview was threatening and harmful. It left the respondent anxious, perhaps inordinately so, about a hazard of which prior to the interview he was blissfully or willfully ignorant. The paradox found in such an effect is that I cannot evade it either by the claim for the high social value of the research or by the seeking of informed consent. In a well-designed study, one should provide every informant the opportunity to make his own judgement of the social value of the work in order that he may decide whether he wants to cooperate in

the interview or experiment. Yet it is in that very act of describing the nature of the research, allowing him to consider its social value, and seeking his informed consent, that the awareness of the hazard becomes clear and we inadvertently add to the respondents' anxiety. Nor in my estimation can we retreat behind the convenient rationalization that most human beings in the ordinary course of events cause, unwillingly, anxiety to others. For after all, we rang the respondent's doorbell and we asked to be invited in.

There are no easy and glib answers to the questions posed about the way in which we acquire our knowledge. At a minimum, we can scrutinize our own work with that of others and try to identify those situations in which we seek to manipulate the individuals we are studying, to intrude upon their privacy, and to abuse them (perhaps in untelling ways, often by the abuse of hospitality or confidence). We can ask ourselves whether it is really necessary to obtain our data in this particular way or are we doing it solely because of our own convenience, because of the cost involved, or because we are simply insensitive? We can create institutions for asserting checks and balances on our

work although the ultimate tribunal is the tribunal of conscience. But to give conscience a fair chance the issues must be raised in our graduate schools, discussed in our journals, and talked over at our meetings. Even then, in the final analysis, the most sensitive will find some inherent contradiction in their social role.

It is a long way to 1984, from the fledgling data banks, the scrupulous and honest men of the Bureau of the Census, and the modest assay into survey research by geographers. But the road to hell may be paved with such small decisions, which, if all are made in the same direction, damn us in as unerring a fashion as any Mephistophelian choice.

OUT OF FOCUS

"But while prosperous at the moment, the economy (of South West Africa--ed.) is a precarious one. The occurrence of a protracted local drought, a major economic recession of worldwide proportions, serious internal difficulties in the Union of South Africa, or the imposition of an economic boycott upon South African and South West African goods, could have serious consequences for the economy as a whole."

--Richard F. Logan in Focus, Vol.XI, No. 3, November, 1960.
