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Public Opinion as a Process in Society\*

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Dr. Hartley and I are both social psychologists. As members of a field whose borders lie in other disciplines, it is often possible for social psychologists to disguise themselves (and their insidious purposes) by wearing the hat of a sister social science.

The hat I want to wear this evening, because Dr. Hartley has agreed to deal with the more intimately psychological aspects of our joint subject, is the hat of the sociologist, and to a certain extent of the political scientist. This is not because I'm a legitimate member of these fraternities, but because I'm very strongly impressed with many of their criticisms of the content and aims of contemporary public opinion research. I see in their arguments, which need wider circulation, some inklings of where a portion of opinion research has started to go, and where more will perhaps go in the future. Movement in the direction of studying opinion in the context of social life is both necessary and desirable, if we are to have a science of public opinion as a part of general social science, and as a guide to social practice. One doesn't have to agree with all of their arguments to see an important kernel of truth in them.

Now, given this topic — how opinion develops and operates in the social process -- one could mention the traditional business of pressure groups, propaganda, communication, mass media effects, and so on. A number of us here could no doubt pull out Lecture "X" from our own or someone

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\* A paper presented at the 1950 A. A. P. O. R. meetings in a symposium on "Processes of Opinion Formation". This printed version is substantially a reproduction of the spoken version.

else's social science course; but I doubt that any of us would be stimulated or happy about it. However, one or two basic propositions on social structure and function, which get more than passing mention in even elementary sociology and political science courses, may help place the public opinion process in better perspective.

Initially: what would be a useful starting definition of "public opinion" for our purposes? Recently, there's been a spate of papers on what "public opinion" is. As a result of post-war criticisms of the lack of definition, the volume of papers on this in the Public Opinion Quarterly and International Journal has zoomed. I myself prefer the easy way for a start -- public opinion in its simplest form is the content of what people think or don't think about some issue, regardless of what other attributes of opinion we may also be interested in. The "public" adjective I would like to see applied not only to the population studied, but also to the issue. The issue, as I see it, in one way or another ought to be relevant to the interests of the whole society or a substantial portion of it.

The population thus is the members of society, our "public". Insofar as this public represents an ongoing society, the opinion process is part of that society's functioning. An issue, and the sides of an issue, then, represent a problem in social functioning and proposed solutions. To be sure, a fair segment of the society may not even perceive the issue or attend to it, or have any pertinent information or position on it. It is for analysts of the society to define the existence of an issue for the researchers, when they perceive evidences of some more or less obvious problem of the society that needs solution with some degree of urgency,

and that affects the lives of a goodly portion of the people. The issue may be structured quite differently if at all for the public, and different parts of it. Yet the opinion process in society attains much of its character from these very differences among groups in perceiving the problem, responding to it, accepting or rejecting alternative definitions of what the problem is and what to do about it, and being more or less congruent with reality.

Part of any definition is a statement of the implications of the terms used, as the definer sees them. My notion, thus, is that even the simplest definition of public opinion implies (to me at least) a study of the social structure and process in which opinions occur. It is this approach to public opinion that many of us feel we can fruitfully take. It makes the effort expended more proportionate with the importance of the issue, as long as our research resources are limited. In many ways, it provides a better frame and opportunity for "basic" research than is offered by work on comparatively minor populations and segmental issues. Not all opinion research need be of this character, obviously; certainly, little enough of this sort has been done in the past.

Public opinion can be looked at as the consequent of a set of psychological, social, cultural, political, economic and historical factors. In short, it is part of social life. Thus, opinion or lack of opinion in different segments of our society itself is important, because it is among the important determinants of the nature and form of social action, at least in the American system. In the development of decision on an issue -- and decision need not be conscious, in the development of an outcome, as forces

are brought to bear and interests aroused, opinion arises, grows, and changes, but is part of the organic problem-solving process of an ongoing society. Opinion or lack of any affirmative opinions can facilitate some outcomes, inhibit others, or lead to no action at all.

Indeed, public opinion in societies with totalitarian traditions, strong external social controls and concentration of power, may be of little relevance to the outcome of a problem. In totalitarian societies, opinion may be relevant only to the way an action is presented or its administrative form set up, for ease in getting public conformity to an elite decision, rather than opinion being a medium for direct or semi-direct public participation in decision-making. As a matter of fact, this is only an extreme or limiting case of what is also to some extent true in our society -- except that in our case the extremely limited distribution of power and influence is hardly as great as in totalitarian societies. If not the whole public, at least competing special interest groups or group representatives participate in the American opinion and decision processes. These agencies sometimes provide the means of arousing dormant segments of the public, sometimes provide standards of reference for individual opinion, and sometimes argue the issue pro and con before the public.

If we are to see opinion as part of society's problem-solving process, then to understand the societal aspects of the way opinion develops and affects social action we must look more into the nature of society. Classic Proposition One on the nature of society is that society is differentiated. Groups and individuals vary in social function, in the political and economic power they have; they vary in prestige, in influence,

interests, access to send and receive communications which affect others, in knowledge, official position, and in organization for action. Many believe that these functional groupings, based on relatively common attitudes (with and without direct group organization) are among the principal vehicles for opinion activities oriented toward problem-solving.

Secondly, as the Elements of Sociology have it, society is not only differentiated, it is more or less organized. It has some kind of structure; there are interrelations between groups of various kinds. For example, in our advanced society there is a division of labor in which corporation executives, labor leaders, legislative bodies and government officials have the role or position to make decisions or crystallize solutions affecting the wider society. The channels whereby opinions of their own or other groups affect their decisions (true, opinion is only one of the relevant factors), the limits of the roles and powers of different groups and offices, the effects of special information and responsibilities possessed by experts -- all these are part of structure. Social process is the pattern of interaction within this structure.

I suspect that the practitioners of public relations have been more concerned with and aware of these things than a good many of the researching brethren.

Now all of this may have a very familiar ring -- and it ought to. This is the line taken by Professor Blumer in his paper on "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling"<sup>1/</sup>. Blumer, in this paper, which I conceive as

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<sup>1/</sup> American Sociological Review, 1948, Vol. 13, No. 5, pp. 542-554.

a real shot-in-the-arm (though others have called it a stab in the back), raises many problems of public opinion research which need not be disposed of here. In critiques published along with his paper, Theodore Newcomb and Julian Woodward have done fine disposal jobs. But the weak parts of the paper, Blumer's unnecessary strictures, should not obscure what he has said, and said remarkably well, about the necessity for studying opinion content and process as it develops and operates in the realities of society. It is a paper well worth studying.

I think I can illustrate Blumer's views further by repeating his approach to a method of making this analysis:

"I suppose, as one of my friends has pointed out, that the answer to the problem requires the formulation of a model. We have no such model in the instance of public opinion as it operates in our society. My own hunch is that such a model should be constructed, if it can be at all, by working backwards instead of by working forward. That is, we ought to begin with those who have to act on public opinion and move backwards along the lines of the various expressions of public opinion that come to their attention, tracing these expressions backward through their own various channels and in doing so, noting the chief channels, the key points of importance, and the way in which any given expression has come to develop and pick up an organized backing out of what initially must have been a relatively amorphous condition."

If I may, there are some things to be said about this analysis of Blumer's in particular, and in general.

First -- the backward analysis technique would omit all those opinions and influences that are brought to bear but which never reach the decision-making jugulars he wants to start from. Abortive or disregarded opinion is still a part of the life of the structured society, within which

he wants opinion considered. The consequences of this for further social action (once a policy is in action), the administrative difficulties, the more intense advocacy by groups with frustrated opinion, all these need definition and analysis in an ideally adequate research.

Second -- and perhaps Blumer might have said this had he time or space -- there are many main and subsidiary jugulars -- newspapermen, heads of societies and associations, Cabinet Secretaries, Congressmen. How do these conceive their roles? Are they to lead or follow opinion? What weight does opinion have in their actions? Are they to create opinion of a given sort? Is the advice of a trusted adviser worth more than the opinion represented by special advocates, mass media, and public opinion surveys? What are their sources of opinion? Indeed, before we can follow Mr. Blumer's advice, a lot more needs to be known about the social psychology of individuals and groups in the structures we want to study. But -- we should take these preliminary steps.

Third -- suppose we did what Blumer asks us to do, and did it successfully. What we would have is material for future engineering purposes with regard to a given issue. Compounding case studies for different issues within a single research design within one society may finally tell us something of the opinion process there, and be a start on a science of public opinion.

Fourth -- except in general terms, we are not given in Blumer or elsewhere a description of our social structure which we know to be empirically reliable. Is Blumer's description of society adequate to guide research? Could it not be that we need much more preliminary study

of just how decisions are made, or outcomes occur? Might these not vary with the issue? And furthermore -- what of other cultures and social organizations? We cannot have anything except a very particularistic theory and science of public opinion as a social process if we do not go into cross-cultural studies.

What I have said, really more an expansion than a critique of Blumer, is a task for the long-range research efforts and thought of social scientists in the universities and in commercial research. It is more than any one group can handle. It is excessively difficult to undertake. Yet I believe it is an approach that should be attractive to the frequently frustrated public opinion researcher who wants "to get his hands on social reality", as a colleague put it.

Another work, much in this tradition, but expanding it in special directions, is Gabriel Almond's The American People and Foreign Policy, published this year<sup>2/</sup>. It is a small-sized but highly stimulating book, and is markedly pertinent to this discussion. One part of the work I'd like to refer to is Almond's discussion of elites. According to his description there is the broad mass of the public, unconcerned about foreign affairs and not ordinarily likely to be concerned, for it is an area delegated to specialists, and private life has too many problems for the individual to have him participate in public life. Then there is the "attentive public", or the "informed public", interested but not participating in the competition of one policy against another. Other strata are the "opinion elites" and

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<sup>2/</sup> New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.



"influentials", who do participate, and the "decision-makers". The distributions normally obtained in opinion research need correlation with the distributions of attention, participation, and influence, Almond holds. Sampling stratification does not follow the realities of political stratification. Research on elites would yield more valuable political data than research on masses.

In this short time allotted, I can't do justice to all of Almond's fine job. I'm sure I've oversimplified his views, but there are some things that may be worth mentioning regarding the part of his argument I've presented here, which I think is essentially a reliable report.

First, I don't think that we need at an A. A. P. O. R. meeting to go into any defense of the purposes and value of national cross-section samples. We need, however, measuring and sampling techniques for locating the "elites" -- assuming that they exist in the relatively discontinuous form that Almond postulates and that the differences of attention and influence are not matters of degree. Many of us are not yet ready to make this assumption without more evidence. But, it is this very study of a population cross-section that leads to finding out who in the population (groups) are most attentive, interested, informed, involved. It is certainly one of the relevant techniques of defining "strata" along some of the dimensions of the opinion process with which Almond is concerned.

Secondly, why concentrate research on the elites? Isn't it valuable for solving one of the major problems of our society to find out why the "uninformed", "uninfluential", "inattentive" and "uninvolved" are that way -- and what to do about it? Normatively, Almond's approach is

not as basically related to the "realities" of opinion and the structure of decision-making in a democracy as it would appear. Scientifically, in a research design the study of elite behavior requires a set of controls via the study of mass behavior. We might ask ourselves a twofold question: "If there is or is not interest, participation, and attempts at influence, how does this come about in different individuals or groups? What does this mean, speculatively, for the ability of our society to preserve itself and its values, now and in the future?"<sup>3/</sup>

Furthermore, do we yet know "realistically" the process of decision-making, to whom the decision-makers listen, etc.? We don't know whom the different "opinion elites" influence -- leaders?, masses? -- or the conditions under which their influence is accepted. One question to ask, it seems to me, is independent of a notion of population "elites" or "mass" and makes no such assumptions. The question might be: "What are the conditions under which decision-making in this democracy takes place?" And we might ask the same questions about societies organized in different ways.

Fourth, what Almond tends to underemphasize are the latent interest possibilities (hence, potential information-seeking and attempts at influence) in the public at large. Given a situation in which people see values, interests, attitudes and reference groups important to them as related to decisions-to-be-taken, the formation of opinion in the masses and their political power is not negligible. For this, the social and political

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<sup>3/</sup> cf. New York Times Magazine, April 9, 1950, for pertinent articles by Sidney Hook and Lester Markel.

history of the United States furnishes ample evidence.

Stepping back, now, from particular attempts to view opinion as part of social process, what does all of this seem to add up to? A small number of conclusions suggest themselves.

First: We need research to obtain more verified models of social structure and the decision-making or policy-making process involved in solving (more or less successfully) various types of general social problems in our society, and in other societies. Within this context of social process, the participation and self-concepts implicit in "citizen" and "elite" roles, and the communication and influence channels need closer empirical definition. The analysis of the process whereby opinion of the various "publics" plays its part in societal problem-solving and perhaps undergoes fluctuation would thereby be less divorced from the realities of the ongoing society itself. The analysis would benefit from knowledge of the positions of and group forces impinging on and coming from the different segments of society.

Second: It may seem like heresy for a social psychologist not to accent the need for research on the individual personality and its relation to opinion. Perhaps this is a relative matter; a science of public opinion will have many facets. I have tried to stress here what I believe to be the least developed of these facets of the study of public opinion. Of course, this is a matter of individual opinion -- as is a belief that some of the key social psychological concepts, e.g., "reference groups" and "roles", may be more useful to the present development of this science than more micro-concepts of the individual.

And yet, even within an orientation which stresses social structure and process, there is both room and need for individual psychological analysis. If we study the position of groups in the structure and their power in the social process, there are many "one-man" groups of high power potential. The personality of these individuals, their identifications, their interpersonal relations, their unique role concepts -- these are critical points in social process.

Similarly, where small formal or informal face-to-face groups with high influence on the outcome of an issue are involved, the study of the dynamics of such groups is probably appropriate for the formulation of part of the empirical picture of the larger social process. (Apropos of this, from time to time one hears suggestions that the models, variables, and principles developed for small face-to-face groups can be used as a guide to the analysis of the larger society. Such extrapolation may be possible. In the brief time I have, it is not possible to develop or document my strong doubts on this score.)

Third: The difficulties inherent in the types of research and analyses suggested here are unquestionably enormous. Much of the basic job, however, will eventually be done by those whose main scientific task is the analysis and description of social, economic, and political structure and process. To this, public opinion research, which may need to move faster than academic social science, can make its contribution both by providing basic data and by motivating such work in the academic disciplines. It will still be a big job, and is beyond the resources of any single existing social research agency.

One major difficulty, aside from such difficulties as the creation of adequate concepts and the sheer size of the undertaking, is the problem of access to individuals and small groups in key power, communication or influence positions. Personally, I am not inclined to view the occupants of these loci in society as sinister and secretive. In government and business, for example, there seems to be more and more insight into the need for research on administrative and policy decision-making process. It may be, in the end, that a conception of the contemporary nature of such key points will have to be constructed from the public acts of their occupants. Or it may be that a "selling job" (as the argot of our profession has it) can be done to convince individuals and groups of the value of such research, in their own terms. It is difficult, at this time, to be optimistic or pessimistic; perhaps the pooling of social scientists' and practitioners' experiences in such attempts may throw some light on techniques and problems of research with key figures and groups. The journalist who over many years has observed the same public figures and the creation of policy in some area may have much to offer.

A substitute or partial step in the direction of such research in the wider society, but reducing the size of research operations, might be to do a designed set of community studies, let us say focusing on political behavior, or on some common local issue. This may be a form of marking time, or building up part of the general picture, or sharpening tools and concepts -- or doing research of value in itself in observing public opinion as part of community structure and process. Lazarsfeld and his associates have pointed the way here.

Perhaps this is all we can expect. Perhaps the demands that the sociologist and political scientist critics make upon us can be met only by counter-demands on our part for more and better data and concepts to enable us to do the job. At all events, the criticisms are welcome. The critics may end up by stimulating students of public opinion to widen the context and significance of their research; at the same time they may stimulate the members of their own professions to do what they long ago should have done.