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ScienceDirect
Journal of Vocational Behavior 71 (2007) 97–113
Journal of Vocational Behavior
www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb

The measure of a nation: The USDA and the rise of survey methodology

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Received 7 March 2007
Available online 18 March 2007

Abstract

Survey research has played a major role in American social science. An outgrowth of efforts by the United States Department of Agriculture in the 1930s, the Division of Program Surveys (DPS) played an important role in the development of survey methodology. The DPS was headed by the ambitious and entrepreneurial Rensis Likert, populated by young and talented social scientists getting their first practical experience, and fed by the needs of the US government fighting World War II. The DPS innovations included open-ended interviewing and area probability sampling methodology as illustrated in the War Bond studies and the Master Sample of Agriculture. This paper examines the creation of the DPS, its work, and its legacy.

Keywords: Surveys; Sampling; Rensis Likert; Division of Program Surveys; United States Department of Agriculture; World War II; Master Sample of Agriculture

1. Introduction

In 1938, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Graduate School published a monograph based on a series of lectures given by prominent psychologists to its students. The speakers discussed a variety of issues: Gardner Murphy described the determinants of social attitudes; Herbert S. Langfeld examined the components of experimental

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0001-8791/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2007.03.005

laboratories; and Charles Judd lectured on current developments in psychology (Kaufman, 1938). Interestingly, theirs was a comparatively minor presence compared to what other psychologists were doing at the USDA. A burgeoning survey organization named the Division of Program Surveys (DPS), formed by the USDA in 1939, and directed by social psychologist Rensis Likert was collecting information about the impact of various federal programs throughout the United States. The influence of the DPS was to expand dramatically with the outbreak of WWII. The DPS would play a large part in innovations in statistics, survey methodology, and the practical training of a generation of social scientists. This paper examines the history of the DPS and its legacy to American social science.

2. The Wallace family

The story of the DPS begins with the Wallace family. The Wallaces, who included, Henry (''Uncle Henry'') Wallace (1836–1916), Henry Cantwell Wallace (1866–1924), and Henry A. Wallace (1888–1965) were a prominent Republican family in Iowa (Kirkendall, 1993). As the lives of the three were deeply intertwined (a famous agricultural economist, Henry C. Taylor, once referred to them as an institution), all three merit examination.

Henry Wallace (1836–1916) began his career as a Presbyterian minister in temporary charge of joint missions at Rock Island, Illinois, and Davenport, Iowa during the Civil War. He remained a Presbyterian minister for 15 years until health issues forced him to choose another career (Kirkendall, 1993). A talented and prolific answer, he began writing articles about agriculture and politics for the local newspaper. He eventually became editor of the *Iowa Homestead*, and, later, *Wallace's Farmer*. Wallace's agricultural views showed a desire to educate American farmers to become better businessmen, and better utilize science to improve the quality of agriculture. Wallace's continuing column *Uncle Henry's Letter to a Farm Boy* epitomized his approach, as he encouraged young farm boys to be better farmers than their fathers, and earned his namesake (Kirkendall, 1993). His writings received high praise among agricultural journalists:

> Mr. Wallace, Sr., had a unique and unusual influence as a farm paper editor. Not only did his readers follow him as a leader in aiding the improvement of their business, but also for his gospel. Some farm communities which in the early days could not support a preacher adopted the custom of appointing one of their group to read Mr. Wallace's weekly sermon for the Sunday service. So wisely and intelligently were they prepared that they were acceptable to followers of all christen faiths (Ogilvie, 1925, p. 110).

Uncle Henry's political writings marked him as a progressive throughout his lifetime: ''he had been a champion in the battle against slavery, a warrior against the monopolies in the 1880s, a participant in the Progressive Movement of the twentieth century, including Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive party of 1912'' (Kirkendall, 1993, p. 203).

Perhaps the greatest influence of Wallace was upon his son and grandson, both of whom shared his politics and worked the majority of their lives as newspapermen.

The Wallace name in Iowa became synonymous with agriculture and liberal values. *Wallace's Farmer* appealed to Iowans (and others) with a surprisingly broad array of educational farming material, bible-thumping, and progressive political opinions. It also brought the Wallace name to Washington, DC.