

A. Introduction

We have a rare assemblage here of survey researchers who are gathered to talk not about the substantive findings of our surveys, but instead about operational matters - how to conduct our affairs more effectively - administratively, technically and methodologically.

Most of us are representatives of survey research groups which are typically non-profit and university-connected, and whose research is in the public interest or with scholarly pretensions. We seem to speak the same language and share a sub-culture to a large degree which distinguishes us from other survey groups which are part of the business world.

There are differences which characterize our organizations, and they are many (size, programmatic, emphases, geographic scope, etc.). Despite these, we have a unique opportunity to consider how our organizations may more effectively relate to each other.

I suffer from an arrested Boy Scout mentality coupled with quixotic ideals. I like to think of us as following the time-honored prescriptions of the scientific and scholarly fraternity - that we are dedicated to the furtherance of knowledge, that we are not beset by destructive competition (a little rivalry, perhaps), and that we are prepared to share our experiences and our techniques with our colleagues for the common good (especially when we have more to learn from than to offer our colleagues). We are non-profit, non-competitive. I think we share a serious commitment to advance the state of the art. We (presumably) have no trade or proprietary secrets.

I'm here to make a plea for some degree of cooperation or collaboration beyond what exists now among us. This shouldn't be too difficult. Judging from conversations and discussions going back many years - apparently, no one disputes the importance of this. It's as sacred, honored, respected, unquestioned as motherhood - or, as motherhood used to be. (I'm afraid we'll have to find another symbol). Unlike motherhood, our problem may be sterility, not fertility.

Cooperation may be altruistic, but fortunately it doesn't have to be, because I think that ultimately all of our interests are better served. And the gains from sharing information, practices and services are mutually advantageous.

How many times has each survey organization conducted an independent review of the literature and how often have they scanned scores of questionnaires to see what others have done to measure important variables - conceptually elusive ones like happiness or more objective but still elusive ones like occupation or ethnic origin. There's a tremendous amount of waste and duplicative effort; often what is current and in progress, but not yet reported, is of major interest in survey work. Yet this

information is hard to gain.

B. Why Cooperate?

Well, what are some of the plusses from either pooling our resources on occasion, or from sharing information and experiences at all stages of the research process - not just in the final substantive reports?

There are three orders of "sharing". One is the pooling of information; a second is pooling of materials; and the sharing or pooling of personnel, using each other's facilities (information exchange, data exchange, service exchange).

I find it very useful to be kept informed of what others are doing in the survey field - what studies are in progress and what are their principal parameters. More and more often we coincide with other studies in the central city.

In our own community we launched a study of corporate giving. We found some resistance in our sample of large corporations. The business community was being surveyed simultaneously by several different organizations. When we encountered resistance and confusion among our respondents, we learned that they thought we were one and the same with a study being done by the Chamber of Commerce. Then we found we were treading the same ground as ABCD (the Boston Economic Opportunity agency) and thirdly and fourthly somewhat similar efforts by a local large insurance company and another financial institution located elsewhere. Several of our respondents suggested that we get the information from the other research groups since they felt they had answered the same questions, and in many cases they had.

A clearing house or information exchange would lessen duplication of effort. I also learned from Illinois' useful "Occasional Newsletter" of studies which had similar objectives to some we were planning. We can compare notes on procedures, particularly since they represent a departure from our usual household survey in using a telephone interview.

In addition to a report of studies in progress, I would like to see a freer exchange of house-keeping and administrative data and procedures - costs, response rates and experience (not just overall rates, but for varying size communities and samples - density of population), recruitment and turnover, pay strategies, attrition experience, etc. would be most useful to every university-based research organization.

And, in addition to wanting to know what you're up to, what studies you're doing, where, when and the content, and how you handle personnel and pay matters and other procedures - I would like access to the related forms and documents. I am an inveterate scavenger and eclectic.

We can also share our materials and documents and forms - questionnaires, instructional materials, codes, computer programs. I am less concerned with giving another organization access to my formidable superior products and my own discoveries than I am from the threat to me and all of us by debased currency in this field. At least, I think that good methods drive out bad. It's not only a matter of ethics; it's a question of gaining public support and acceptance and I am as much hurt by poor practices of my own staff as I am by those of any other organization. We have to answer for all surveys and polls and their conduct in the field.

This exchange of documents could be accomplished by a literal exchange of documents among us, or by the creation of a library or archives where they are catalogued in such a way as to provide rapid access and retrieval. For example, it should be possible to get all studies of crime or housing or voting behavior or outdoor recreation, or all questions on a particular - education, group membership, etc. quite quickly from such an archive.

None of the above diminish our own stock in trade - they enhance for each of us, I believe, our flexibility, versatility, skills and knowledge. It doesn't entail any departure from what we are doing now.

The kind of cooperation I have described above is sort of minimal in its implications for interaction among us. It does not involve any changes in our current modes of operation unless we choose to be influenced. We do our own thing and we tell each other about it, and if we like what someone else is doing, or someone likes what we do, we borrow or steal from each other.

Now I want to talk about a different order of cooperation - sharing of personnel, services or facilities. This does indeed introduce a new element (not new in the sense that it hasn't been done, but new in that it requires a different kind of interaction and accommodation between groups.)

There may be times when one's own resources are taxed temporarily or when it is more efficient to call upon another organization for help. The usual model is to sub-contract. For example, we are geared to a Metropolitan operation. There are times when we might want to interview in places where we do not have a resident staff or where our own staff is already fully occupied. In such situations, other survey organization field forces can be called upon for help.

I frequently receive requests from others who want to use our interviewers - to borrow them or hire them. In theory I subscribe to a free market concept. I do not feel that I should stand between my interviewers and other offers - the individual should be able to make his or her own decision without my acting as a gatekeeper - but in practice this works only if we all subscribe to this principle. Reciprocity is not as widespread as I would like.

Or someone else's sampling frame may be taken advantage of rather than making altogether new selections for the same area.

A division of labor in coding may have some efficiencies where each group can capitalize on its own specializations or existing manpower. And I suppose there may be times when centralization of data processing has its advantages.

All of our facilities could be regarded as a large pool; all would gain some degree of flexibility so that any study we contemplate carrying out does not become limited by our immediate resources and, at the same time, our sister group may welcome the opportunity to keep otherwise dormant staff busy. Of course there are risks. We have less control over the product. If we use similar procedures, conventions and practices, the risks are reduced.

Few organizations have a consistent and even flow of work. It's either feast or famine, or peak or valley. And our peaks don't necessarily coincide with those of other groups. Our average Boston field staff consists of 15 interviewers, but our studies always require 5 interviewers or 50 interviewers. Why maintain different field forces for each different national survey research organization in the very same metropolitan area?

And there are other times when access to another group would be helpful - for replication, for pretests, for comparability, for sample supplementation, for validation, to test a methodological procedure. Such services could be on a quid pro quo basis.

In brief, then, our gains may be in 1) cost sharing, 2) greater flexibility, 3) quality, and 4) efficiency.

C. Some Movement Toward These Goals

It's not as though nothing has been done. There are many bilateral examples of collaboration or cooperation or sharing. Some examples are:

1. The University of Illinois, Survey Research Laboratory publishes an "Occasional Newsletter". Could be transformed into a more systematic information exchange?

2. For two successive years now, directors of university-based field organizations have met, first in Ann Arbor at the Survey Research Center, then in Chicago hosted by NORC and another is planned in this coming year at York - in Toronto. It is now an annual event. Although these have been tremendously useful, there is a nagging sense of déjà-vu. Also, the focus is almost entirely on field issues, to the exclusion of coding, sampling, data processing or analysis.

3. Pooling of field resources, with the sample selected centrally, is not uncommon. There have been several instances in which one survey organization has subcontracted to several others to carry when the load was beyond the capacity of the existing staff.

4. Professional associations may present opportunities for communication and interaction both formally and informally. But professional staff is usually split among various disciplines and have difficulty finding each other at the same conventions.

5. The University of Michigan's political behavior consortium is another model for effective inter-institutional collaboration.

6. The several compendia of measures compiled by John Robinson, et.al.

D. Barriers

Barriers exist, but they are not insurmountable. These include apathy, inertia, failure to assume the initiative (minor, but chronic) and the competition for time and dollar.

Nor should institutional and bureaucratic inflexibilities be discounted. Vested interests, conceits, and arrogance (attributes which I share) stand in the way of yielding institutional sovereignty.

Perhaps too little credence is given to rivalry. After all, some of us are competing for the same dollars and prize our distinctive reputations, warranted or not. We may feel more comfortable in controlling our own quality and, in turn, being able to hide our weaknesses and errors.

(Although standardization may be a good which we subscribe to, there is still the risk of stifling creativity or if not creativity, freezing a measure while still in the process of refinement or improvement and forever afterward being confronted with the perpetual need to maintain continuity and comparability - an argument we have all encountered or used).

But really I think our main hurdle is to devise an appropriate mechanism and to proceed cautiously and realistically.

It may be no small problem to reconcile the differences in style, format and methods of diverse survey organizations which are geographically dispersed, each with its own traditions, its own style, its own prejudices, and each imbedded in its own institutional bureaucracy - each with different needs, different emphases, and different levels of tolerance for departures from standards. I remain hopeful, despite these differences, there are large areas of agreement and we need not push beyond the exchange and clearing house function unless it progresses naturally to levels of greater commitment or involvement. Overly ambitious moves may scuttle any effort.

E. Proposed Model

There are a variety of possible models, ranging from a very informal understanding such as presently exists among us, to an elaborate formal organization. Our need is a rather specialized one and I think it would be useful if we could create a quasi-formal mechanism whose

objectives are to reduce effort, reduce duplication, increase flexibility, increase knowledge at a cost, psychological, administratively or fiscally, which doesn't outweigh the gains. It could take the form of a loosely knit federation of survey organizations.

At this stage, why not let one of the major national survey groups take on these functions? Then, guided by a committee, a working secretariat could be created which would serve as a clearing house and information exchange leading to other levels of cooperation, such as a data bank.

And, the secretariat need not be a new creation, but conceivably could be an extension of the field directors conference, or the Illinois newsletter.

F. Conclusion

A council or a committee or small working group could establish some low level goals which are capable of achievement and should not be tremendously demanding; their value should be obvious, or at least testable in the short run, subject to discard or modification and not require a tremendous investment. It shouldn't flounder because of lack of commitment or resources.

As a minimum, let's try to agree to exchange some kinds of data and materials - but it would be more effective if we could manage the next step - that of organizing the materials in such a way that they are usable - so that we can retrieve from them what has been filed. The test will be in the use - and cumulatively, the value should increase at a greater rate than incremental additions to the file.

Clearly, much can be gained by academic units by integrating and organizing university-based survey research facilities.