A session co-sponsored by the Social Statistics Section and the Section on Survey Research Methods highlights the difficulties in communication that can arise between different but co-dependent professions. Eva Jacobs, former Division Chief of the Consumer Expenditure Surveys at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, organized the panel “Speaking in Tongues: How Statisticians, Economists, and Psychologists Communicate Within Their Own Group and Among Each Other.” Nancy Gordon, of the Census Bureau, chaired the session. The panelists were Brent Moulton, Bureau of Economic Analysis, John Ralph, Department of Education, Robert Groves, University of Maryland, and Judy Tanur, State University of New York at Stony Brook. This group discussed how statisticians across the social science and scientific fields work together, yet their productivity is often hampered by their inability to communicate clearly with each other and to cooperate to reach their goals. They described the obstacles to these partnerships and how they may be overcome. The panel addressed six specific questions:

1. What training should students and employees receive to bridge the gap between social scientists and statisticians?

2. How do you incorporate/communicate between different approaches?

3. Give some examples where partnerships have thrived.

4. What are the ingredients of a “Rosetta stone” to translate among diverse perspectives?

5. What steps can be taken to integrate diverse perspectives?

6. What is scientific about the survey measurement process?

John Ralph, who works for the federal government conducting surveys, stated that these surveys have very pointed questions, which in fact, can be quite useful. On the other hand, there is a deep understanding of subject area where specialized words (jargon) have very specific meaning.

Brent Moulton is an economist who has worked with statisticians designing surveys. He stated that each group brings a different background and a different sense of purpose and of what is important. Statisticians focus on variability. Economists recognize that, while this is important, they tend to view variability as secondary. Economists’ concerns are validity of questions, models, measures, and results. Both economists and statisticians can learn from each other but need the different backgrounds to conduct surveys effectively.

Robert Groves is a survey methodologist with an interest in moving behavioral theories of survey errors into measurements because of his role in the Joint Program in Survey Methodology and Michigan Survey Research Center. He interacts with diverse disciplines, all concerning design, collection, and analysis of survey data. He noted that several disciplines have well-established notions of quality of measurement and inference, but they differ, causing miscommunication. Some examples of diverse perspectives would be:

- Reliability and validity in psychology versus variance and bias in survey statistics.
- The attraction of the concept of true values in statistics vs. its absence in psychology.
- Measurement issues focused on the logical gap between concept and measurement in economics versus human response to the measures in psychology versus inference in survey statistics.
- The value of simplicity of estimators for “official” statistics vs. the role of parsimony in models for scientific purposes. Problems that are produced by this.
- Division of labor in work organizations by disciplinary groups; intergroup communication across groups.
- Poor integration of literature (e.g., large developments in cognitive psychology and survey measurement, but no formalizations of statistical models reflecting processes in the common use).
- Continuing conflict between the role of models in estimation (e.g., adjustments for nonresponse and measurement error).
- Problems that are produced by this.
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Judith Tanur teaches sociology. She spoke about the past 50 years of teaching statistics in a sociology department. She felt the need to make a distinction between fledgling sociologists-students and mature professionals.

Sociology students, including most graduate students, have chosen the field in part because of their allegiance to quantitative issues. This is often a trade-off, incompetence rather than a natural lack of quantitative ability. “For our purposes,” she stated, “we need to understand that very often the people in my classes, both undergraduate and graduate, come to the course because the course is required.” So the teaching challenge is in the first case motivational how can an instructor convince reluctant students that quantitative material is not only required, but also relevant, and even interesting? With regard to her colleagues in sociology— that is, the “mature scholars”—vocabulary issues turn out to be roadblocks to communication in such cases. “Often every discipline has its own set of technical terms, its own jargon. Difficulties arise when a term has a meaning in everyday speech different from its technical meaning; even greater difficulties arise when a technical term in one discipline means something different in another.” In this an issue that one must constantly be aware of when attempting cross-disciplinary communication.

Another issue concerns new methodology. There are actually two totally contradictory issues involved here. The first is the reluctance of some sociologists (or probably the less statistically sophisticated practitioners of any discipline) to accept new methods. Why has this barrier been so entrenched during their own training, perhaps many decades ago, than we see the appropriate processes to follow. On the other hand, there can be problems caused by a too-ready acceptance of the latest methodological fashion; such as a fixation on path analysis gave way to a fetish for LISREL methodology (for a while, some of Tanur’s best friends were Lisrelites), to a reflex use of logistic regression. “What does this mean?” he asked. “I am not criticizing these methods per se, just noting that as they become fashionable, researchers cast their problems into forms that seem to be (and, of course, often are) amenable to analysis by the tools at hand. Some of the leading journals tend to build elaborate plumbing as evidence of worth, and the trend is reinforced. There seems no need to abandon well-worn and useful tools just because new tools have been developed—each has its place.”

Meetings toward the formation of a national consortium of university applicants to CFI (the Canada Foundation for Innovation) took place through the summer. Up to 17 universities across the country were bidding for inclusion, including UW! It is largely due to the efforts of Waterloo’s Vice-President for University Research, Dr. Carolyn Hansson, that this area of Ontario succeeded in joining the national group comprising the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, Southern Ontario (funded at UW), Greater Toronto Area (located at the University of Toronto), Quebec (funded at the University of Montreal), and the Atlantic Canada group centered at Dalhousie.

The competition from some other Ontario universities was intense. We pitched the case around the SRC as a focal point to the CFI, noting that the Centre is a co-operative venture between many academic units at UW and in terms of establishing ties with Wilfred Laurier University and the University of Guelph.

The good record of tri-university co-operation in terms of libraries was also a selling point. Professor Hansson worked ceaselessly for the RDC, attending meetings and making countless other interventions, right up to lobbying with the University President. On behalf of all SRC members, we thank Carolyn.

JG & MT.
SSRC recently announced a pilot program for Data Training Schools (DTS). These will be summer courses in survey analysis, running for between one and two weeks. The Survey Research Centre has applied to hold a DTS at Waterloo in late June of this year (2000). The program is highly competitive since just two awards will be made. An organizing committee consisting of John Goyder (Sociology and SRC Co-director), Mary Thompson (Chair, Statistics and Actuarial Science, and SRC Co-director), Shabiran Rahman (data librarian), Jim Brox (Chair, Economics), and Keith Warriner (Chair, Sociology) prepared the application. An eight-day course has been proposed, pitched primarily to graduate students. The course would be credit (pass/fail) based to foster more of a conference atmosphere than a traditional graded course. Researchers in other agencies could also take the course. Faculty would be welcome to sit in on sessions. The course would be team-taught by various people from UW, UC, and elsewhere. A representative of Statistics Canada would visit. The grant would make it possible to offer such a course tuition-free for those not needing academic credit for the work. To be on the electronic mailing list giving further news, send an e-mail to jgoyder@watarts.uwaterloo.ca

Surveys in Progress

If the readers of this newsletter would pass on knowledge of surveys in progress in which members of the Centre have been involved either as consultants or as investigators, we shall note them in future newsletters. Send information to John Goyder, Sociology, PAS, UW campus. At present, we have knowledge of the following:

“(recently completed): Laura Johnson (Urban and Regional Planning), assisted by Jeff Lederer and Emily Head (graduate students in SURP), working with students in PLAN 350. A local area telephone survey using the recently installed CATI lab in MC, addressing the theme of “healthy communities.”

“(recently completed): Patrick Seliske, Waterloo Region Community Health Department; Elmira Industrial Air Emissions Survey.

“Mary Thompson, Statistics and Actuarial Science; Statistical Society of Canada Graduates Survey (mail and online survey).

“Paul McDonald, Health Studies and Gerontology; a smoking cessation/recruitment message study (to begin in March).

“Steve Brown, Statistics and Actuarial Science; a survey of teachers (to begin in April).

Speakers and Seminar Series

Almost all our events take place on Thursday afternoons beginning at 3:30 and going to 4:30/5:00 pm. If you can possibly arrange your teaching schedule to block out this slot, please consider doing so. It would be especially good if graduate students did not have classes that afternoon, so they can attend our sessions. The talks are multidisciplinary and focused on all issues to do with survey methodology, from bootstrapping estimates for standard errors to tips on conducting focus groups. The talks are a core SRC activity, and all members will find it well worthwhile supporting the series with their presence.

The last speaker of the Fall 1999 term was Dr. Greg Taylor, Health Canada, speaking (November 19th) on “National Surveillance Initiatives and Opportunities.” This talk, which the SRC co-sponsored with Health Studies, gave a good statement on the need to address health issues from the viewpoint of environmental causation. Dr. Taylor described the data bases that his department has available for researchers.

On January 27th, 2000, Jagdeep Bachher (Management Sciences, UW) presented on his web-based survey of decision-making criteria used by venture capitalists. By the time this newsletter appears, Jagdeep will have defended his Ph.D. dissertation based on this survey. This was an incredibly hard group to enumerate by survey. Pre-testing indicated their clear preference for a web survey versus more conventional alternatives, but these high-flying capitalist investors were hard to pin down. Jagdeep resorted to personal visits to their offices around the United States and Canada to make a reminder pitch asking the respondents to look at the web survey. He noted his response rate up to 50%, a high figure given the population.

The February 3rd session had Dave Kains of Metroline Research Group Inc. giving an entertaining talk on “The Top Ten Highlighs of Choosing a Career in Market Research.” Among the highlights: dealing with clients who want to manipulate results; running the business from 8 am to 11 pm, six days a week; fielding telephone calls from the west coast in the wee hours of the morning! Dave noted that Metroline increasingly conducts surveys and focus groups throughout North America. Like virtually all other survey researchers, Metroline is facing declining response rates on telephone surveys in today’s world of caller Id, voice-mail, hectic lifestyles, and telemarketing scams.

Upcoming talks:

Thursday, March 16th
Serge Desmarais (Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph), speaking on his research with Jim Curtis on perceived income entitlement by gender; this project combines laboratory experiments with data from the KWMAS98. PAS 2030, beginning at 3:30.

Thursday, April 6th
Laura Johnson, Jeff Lederer, and Emily Head (School of Urban and Regional Planning), speaking on the “Healthy Communities” survey conducted in Fall 1999 using the CBRPESRC CATI lab. PAS 2030, beginning at 3:30.

Tuesday, May 16
Mamdouh Shubair (Health Studies), seminar on a proposed dietary behaviour survey, in connection with his doctoral research. MC 5158A, beginning at 2:30. Tentative.

Consulting Activity

Repeating a note from the winter 1999 newsletter: there is value both personally and for the SRC in keeping accurate records of consulting that faculty members do on various surveys and data analysis tasks. Much of the work is performed without charge, as a collegial service, but the University Senate should know of this dimension of SRC activity when it comes to review our activities in future years. Recent projects in which SRC members have been involved include: the Elmira Industrial Air Emissions Survey; City of Waterloo survey on city government; St. Paul’s College student database project; the UW Graduate Office’s post-graduate student exit survey; the Federation of Students study on tuition fees and family resources.

New members:

Welcome to the following

Patrick Seliske, Health Studies & Gerontology; Shabiran Rahman, Dana Porter Library; Timothy Gawley, Sociology (Student); Christopher Storie, WLU (Student).

Apologies to Steven Salterio, a faculty member in Accountancy, who was listed as a Student member in our last issue.