

FINAL

The Place of NORC in the Development of Survey Research in the U.S.¹

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What we now think of as public opinion research, based on the new technology of sample surveys, came into being in the 1930s, notably through the work of George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley.

Harry H. Field, an ex-pat Englishman, who in 1935 had worked for Gallup in Young and Rubicam's research department, and later formed his own People's Research Corporation to conduct sample surveys, worried that the results of these new sample surveys, which were mostly reported in newspapers, would be distorted or comprised by the political bias of the sponsors. He believed that a non-profit public opinion research organization that would conduct research in the public interest was needed to protect democracy from the potentially politically biasing effects of the media. It would not do market research or even forecast elections. It would offer its national sample and field staff, on a cost basis, to nonprofit organizations and to university social scientists. It would also conduct methodological experiments to improve the art and science of public opinion measurement. With this idea in mind, he set out in 1941 to found such an organization. The fruit of his efforts was the National Opinion Research Center, now NORC at the University of Chicago.

Establishing such a center was not easy. Harry Field, however, had the strong support of the leaders in the world of survey research such as Gallup, Roper and Crossley. The new center would not be in competition with them and would help improve the scientific basis of surveys through methodological research. Gallup introduced Field to Hadley Cantril at Princeton who helped gain the support of leading social scientists such as Gordon Allport at Harvard, Samuel

¹ We are indebted to Paul Sheatsley who over the years schooled the authors in NORC's history, and to Jacob Feldman and Pearl Zinner for their accounts of NORC's early days. See especially Paul B. Sheatsley, NORC: The First Forty Years. NORC report 1981-2.

Stouffer, then at the University of Chicago, and Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia. Their enthusiastic support helped Field secure the necessary financing to turn his dream into reality.

Field was able to attract financial support from the Marshall Field Foundation in New York (no relation to Harry) in the form of a 5 year grant of \$50,000 per year, a fairly hefty sum in those days. (It is worth about \$780,000 in today's dollars). Field realized that he needed to align his institute with a university, both to guarantee its independence and to help attract the type of researchers he wanted to work in the institute. Caleb F. Gates, Jr., a political scientist who was chancellor of the University of Denver and had worked with Cantril at Princeton, offered space and some financial support in Denver. In October, 1941, NORC was incorporated as a nonprofit organization under the laws of Colorado. The board of trustees consisted of the president of the Field Foundation, two representatives from the University of Denver and three social scientists, Hadley Cantril, Gordon Allport and Samuel Stouffer. Even before the formal incorporation, Field had been busy recruiting a small staff of experienced survey researchers, mostly by hiring people from Gallup and Roper.

Field was dedicated to high standards of quality in research, and viewed data collection as the key step in the survey process that would insure quality. Interviewers were the first line workers in data collection, and special attention needed to be given to personally hiring and training the interviewing staff. At that time, interviewers were usually hired on the basis of written applications, personal recommendations and never seen by the central office or a supervisor. They received little or no training either in interviewing or in the specifics of the study they were to work on. It became NORC policy never to employ any interviewer who had not been personally hired and trained for the work, a policy from which NORC has never deviated. At the time, the Roper organization was the only other firm using similar policies, and Elmo Roper allowed NORC to borrow some of his interviewers until NORC was able to recruit and train its own national field staff.

In retrospect, 1941 would not seem to be an auspicious year to start a new non-profit public opinion organization. War was raging in Europe and the U.S. was torn between those who wanted us to intervene and help the British against the Nazis, and isolationists who wanted us to stay out of the conflict. Japan was on its way to conquering much of East Asia and threatening U.S. interests in the region. The entrance of the U.S. into the war in December, 1941, however, turned out to be crucial for getting NORC off to a running start. Hadley Cantril, Paul Lazarsfeld, Elmo Roper and Sam Stouffer, who had connections with many academic, political and business figures, became part of the war effort in Washington. They pushed to establish a place in government for survey research. In the fall of 1941, the delightfully named Office of Facts and Figures was established to collect survey and other kinds of data on the U.S. population. In 1942, the Office was merged into the newly created Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI had a Surveys Division whose job was to monitor civilian morale, to assess the effects of wartime regulations, and to collect data on public attitudes and behavior concerning a broad range of war-related topics.

The OWI Surveys Division was located in New York City and headed by Budd Wilson, a protégé of Elmo Roper. The Division recruited a number of young social scientists who were eager to collect data that would help the government administer domestic war-related policies in a fair and just manner. Their problem was that they lacked a national field staff and did not have people experienced in survey operations—such as translating research objectives into workable questionnaires and training and supervising a national staff of interviewers. There were few alternatives; many trained personnel had been taken into government or drafted into the armed forces; the Gallup and Roper organizations were reluctant to take on government contracts. Enter NORC. The new organization was awarded a contract to be the operational arm of the Surveys Division. NORC rented a small office in the building occupied by OWI. Initially headed by John F. Maloney, an experienced Gallup executive, who was soon drafted into the army, he was succeeded by Paul Sheatsley, who also was working for Gallup at the time.

The war years shaped the development of NORC but not basically in the way that Field had imagined. Rather than being an academic research center attached to a university, most of the work was applied work to help the domestic war effort and was managed by the New York office. The experience, however, enabled the fledgling organization to develop a skilled staff and to conduct some pioneering efforts in social science: the first national measurement of racial attitudes, the role of women in the work force, problems of absenteeism in factories. The OWI staff shared Field's concern for quality and encouraged methodological research and new methods for training interviewers.

The task that faced Field at the end of the war was to build the research staff in Denver and put NORC on a firm financial footing. The dismantling of OWI in 1945 brought an abrupt end to steady flow of work from the OWI and NORC had to face the question of who paid for the public interest. The answer at that time was primarily foundations and only secondarily government. The Field foundation continued its support for few more years and some continuing work came from the Office of Price Administration. During this crucial period, Harry Field was killed in a plane crash in Europe. Fortunately, just before Field was killed, Clyde W. Hart, a former sociology professor at the University of Iowa, had been recruited as Associate Director of NORC. He then succeeded Field as director. Hart convinced the trustees that, to succeed as an important social science research center, NORC needed to be affiliated with a major research university that had a strong social science faculty. Marshall Field, the donor of the Field Foundation, was a trustee of the University of Chicago and was able to convince the University to make NORC an affiliated research institution. Rather than becoming an institute within the University, as did the Survey Research Center at Michigan, which was formed at about this time, NORC continued as a separate non-profit corporation but with the University appointing a majority of the trustees. In 1947, NORC officially moved to Chicago, although it continued to have a small office in New York.

Hart's vision for NORC was different than Harry Field's. Field came from the world of advertising, marketing research and political polling. His vision for NORC was as a nonprofit

polling institute working for the public good. Hart's vision was of a social science research center where academically trained social scientists from different disciplines engaged in investigator initiated research funded by foundation or government grants. This vision became a successful one as Hart was able to recruit distinguished social scientists such as Shirley Star, Eli Marks, and Jack Elinson, as study directors. Some of these appointments were joint faculty appointments with the University, most were at NORC only.

Because of the large capital costs to establish a national sampling frame and field staff, it was difficult to establish a research center that could do more than local studies. This gave a major advantage to scientists at Universities with such centers. The social science research world in the 50s and 60s was vastly different from what it is now. Surveys were conducted with personal interviews in the household. It was very difficult to carry out a national probability sample survey unless you were associated with a research center like NORC or the Survey Research Center at Michigan that had national sampling frames and a national staff of interviewers. The capital costs of establishing a national sampling frame were immense and the necessity of rebuilding the frame after each census put a heavy financial burden on the organizations every decade. The costs of recruiting and training interviewers were substantial.

Peter Rossi, a Lazarsfeld trained sociologist and University of Chicago professor, became director of NORC after Hart's retirement. He wanted to strengthen the ties to the University by having more of the NORC study directors have joint appointments with University departments. But this meant that the study directors would spend more time teaching and have to reduce the amount of time devoted to doing research at NORC. The realities of funding NORC, however, meant that it was necessary to have a large enough research staff to support the national field staff. A national field organization was like a machine; it had to be continually operated to keep it well-oiled or it would rust. Since a study director could not do more than one new study every year or two, the staff had to be big enough to generate a sufficient volume of studies to keep the field staff busy. Rossi did not want to increase the size of NORC's

research staff because there were a limited of opportunities to make joint appointments with the University.

One way to relieve the pressure to become larger was to make the field staff available to scientists in other universities, much like Field's initial vision for NORC. This not only made it possible to provide continuity of work for the field staff, it democratized social science by reducing the advantage of being in a university that could afford its own survey research center. While NORC had done some studies for others, such as the North-Hatt study of occupational prestige, the Stouffer study of Civil Liberties, the Berelson-Steiner survey of American Television Viewing, most of the surveys were designed and analyzed by NORC study directors. Rossi's innovation was to establish the Survey Research Service (SRS) which opened the sampling frame and interviewing staff to surveys designed and analyzed by scientists in other universities or non-profit research organizations. Paul Sheastley moved from New York to Chicago to become the first director of the SRS.

The SRS began omnibus surveys in which social scientists could buy modules that were smaller than would be required for a stand-alone national survey. Later, with the advent of large scale government sponsored social experiments and evaluation studies, such as the Housing Allowance and Medical Insurance experiments, and Job Corps and training program evaluations, NORC became a major data collector for federal statistical agencies and research institutes that carried out program evaluation studies. It introduced dynamism into the organization that resulted in the large organization it is today.

There are a number of themes running through the history of NORC that have been important in the evolution of empirical social science, particularly sociology. The first is an emphasis on methodological innovation and research. NORC championed area probability sampling in an era where quota sampling was the norm. As mentioned, Harry Field was particularly concerned about the quality of the interviewing staff and from the beginning supported innovations in interviewer training and the study of interviewer effects on survey results. This led to the 1954

publication of these studies in the classic Hyman, et al. volume *Interviewing in Social Research*. Seymour Sudman conducted a series of experiments on interviewer pay methods and ways to reduce costs of doing surveys. NORC emphasized imbedding experiments in surveys to test out different wording or question order. Experiments in questionnaire wording were begun in Denver and have continued throughout NORC's history, most notably since the 1980s under the rubric of cognitive aspects of survey methodology. NORC also developed the technology for doing "telegraphic surveys" which enabled the rapid study of responses to natural and man-made disasters, such as toxic chemical spills, the 1964 New York Blackout, the Kennedy Assassination and the Cuban Missile crisis.

A second theme is the use of surveys to track social change. Beginning during the OWI days, NORC conducted periodic surveys of white attitudes toward African-Americans. Periodic surveys of other topics such as attitudes toward civil liberties, medical care costs, and fear of crime were also conducted. The systematic tracking of social trends was finally brought into being in 1972 with the establishment of the General Social Survey (GSS) which has been conducted yearly or biennially since then. The first year of the GSS benefited from the previous surveys in that every item in the survey was drawn from previous surveys so that trend data were available from the beginning.

A third theme is the use of longitudinal data to study change at the individual level. The first study in NORC's bibliography is a panel study of changes in the views about the UN after an information campaign. A large survey of the graduating class of 1961 followed the graduates yearly for the next 4 years and then a final survey 7 years after graduation. A panel study of psychological well-being followed a sample of individuals over a year with quarterly interviews to study the effects of stress and community change on their well-being. The existence of this panel allowed studies on the effects of social trauma, such as the Kennedy assassination and the Cuban Missile crisis, on individual well-being.

Later large scale longitudinal surveys such as High School and Beyond, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 cohort, and many others became staples of NORC's work.

Organizations founded by foundations often do not last long beyond the end of the foundation funding. NORC had some rocky years after the end of Field Foundation support but managed to survive and finally flourish in the expanding world of social research in the 1960s and beyond. Even as it has grown and expanded beyond the campus of the University of Chicago it retains a culture of innovation and methodological rigor that has resulted in practices that were once novel but are now standard methods for the social sciences.