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Indirect Methods of Attitude  
Measurements**

BY IRVING R. WESCHLER

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# Problems in the Use of Indirect Methods of Attitude Measurements

BY IRVING R. WESCHLER

*Social scientists are making increasing use of various indirect techniques of attitude assessment. These techniques, ranging from projective devices to hidden intelligence tests, are intended to elicit "deep-lying" attitudes or personality characteristics which might not otherwise be accessible to the investigator.*

*In this article, the author argues that while these techniques may have considerable scientific value, their use and susceptibility to misuse raise serious problems of both an ethical and a practical character. Dr. Weschler suggests that the formulation of a code of procedure governing the use of such instruments may ultimately be necessary.*

*This article is an expanded version of a paper presented to the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in September, 1950. The author is a Research Assistant of the Institute of Industrial Relations and Lecturer in Psychology at the University of California in Los Angeles.*

The use of indirect methods of attitude measurement has recently come into vogue, and a number of new techniques have been developed which supposedly get at those "deeper level" attitudes which a person may be interiorizing and unwilling to reveal.<sup>1</sup> These indirect devices conceal from the individual the intent of the measurement and allow him to produce responses which would not be freely forthcoming if he were fearful of becoming personally involved. The purpose of this paper is to raise several as yet unresolved questions relating to the use of these new techniques.<sup>2</sup>

Indirect methods of attitude measurement may be constructed and used for

a number of purposes. They are used to explore and test various psychological theories, especially those related to problems of learning and perception. The work of Murphy, Bruner, Postman and many others is dedicated to this particular type of interest. They are used to

<sup>1</sup> See Campbell D. T., "The Indirect Assessment of Social Attitudes," *Psychological Bulletin*, 47, 1, January 1950, 15-38; also I. R. Weschler and R. Bernberg, "Indirect Methods of Attitude Measurement," *Int. J. of Opinion and Attitude Research*, Vol. 4, Summer 1950, pp. 209-229.

<sup>2</sup> The author is indebted to Professors Franklin Fearing and Robert Tannenbaum and to Dr. William Schutz, Dr. Eugene Cogan and Mr. Murray Kahane for suggestions and helpful criticisms.

construct reliable and valid test instruments which may be valuable in the clinical situation as part of a test battery for the assessment of the total personality. The work of Murray and his associates might be mentioned in this particular context. Finally, indirect attitude measurement devices are applied in the actual field situation for the measurement of attitudes held by the members of various groups.

### A Case Study

Typical of these studies, perhaps, is one which the writer completed on "The Personal Factor in Labor Mediation," utilizing the "error-choice" technique for the measurement of attitudes toward labor and management.<sup>3</sup> For purposes of illustration, I would like to refer briefly to this study because some of the ethical and public relations problems which arose during its progress are probably encountered in any kind of investigation using indirect methods of attitude measurement.

The "error-choice" technique, developed for attitude testing by Professor Hammond,<sup>4</sup> utilizes an information test which forces the respondent to choose between two alternative answers, each of which is by intent factually wrong, or controversial, or of such a nature that the correct answer is not easily accessible. This kind of test situation provokes the respondent to select pseudo-facts from memory, and the "direction" of the error is measured as an indication of the respondent's attitude.

Using the "error-choice" technique, the writer developed a test which was designed to measure both information as well as attitudes in the field of labor relations. The test was validated on a group of students, as well as on active

union and management people, and was later incorporated as part of the test battery in a study on "The Personal Factor in Labor Mediation."

The results were, in general, as expected. Union members and students who classified themselves as "pro-labor" scored high in the "pro-labor" direction, as measured by the test, while the management representatives and students declaring themselves to be "pro-management" scored low. When the test was administered to the labor mediators, many mediators who were rated high by their colleagues in terms of their ability to do the job tended to score in the "neutral zone," that is, near the sample population mean, while those who were rated as "poor" by their colleagues scored either in the "pro-management" or in the "pro-labor" zones of the attitude range.

There was no difficulty in validating the first form of our "Labor Relations Information Inventory" with the help of UCLA students and various labor and management groups, especially since the hypotheses and workings of the technique were explained after each administration of the test. Trouble came for sundry reasons from the labor mediators who were not ready to accept the results which had been obtained. A labor mediator usually sees himself as a "neutral" agent who, through his personal skill, is able to bring labor and management together in a settlement of mutual satisfaction. Although many "biased" mediators, as measured by the

<sup>3</sup> See Weschler I. R., "The Personal Factor in Labor Mediation," *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 3, Summer 1950, pp. 113-133.

<sup>4</sup> See Hammond K., "Measuring Attitudes by Error-Choice: An Indirect Method," *J. Abnorm. Soc. Psychol.*, Vol. 43, 1948, pp. 38-48.

test, were rated "good" by their colleagues on performance, the fact that most of them scored far from neutral on the test apparently became a threat to their personal security. The following excerpt from a letter by one mediator is an indication of the feeling which many others may have shared:

"I tend to agree with those mediators who participated in your survey who feel that our confidence was violated and abused when conclusions were reached and publicized which were based to some degree on 'loaded' questions. Those of us who agreed to be 'guinea pigs' in your survey were assured that our replies would be held in strict confidence, and although I may not disagree very much with the conclusions which you have reached, I am questioning the propriety of using the materials which you have collected."

It should be mentioned in passing that none of the individuals participating in the survey could in any way be identified.

#### Trickery or Scientific Method?

When the attitude surveyor presents his subjects with materials and instructions which are not related to the stated purpose of his investigation, it becomes difficult to distinguish between honesty of purpose and deception. Members of the public who are misled into offering a glimpse into "the hidden crevices of their soul," to use one of the time-worn clichés, are not likely to appear enthusiastic on discovering the hoax, even though it may have been carried out for the noble scientific goals of obtaining knowledge and learning truth. The "error-choice" method and many other in-

direct attitude measurement techniques keep the respondent in the dark about the true purpose of the test; or, putting it in less elegant terms, they use an element of deceit to trick the respondent into answers which the experimenter considers more honest.

The widespread use of various indirect methods of attitude measurement creates a series of problems with ethical as well as public relations implications, and any investigator who makes a decision about using these indirect methods might well consider these two related aspects. Although many of us may have rationalized our use of these indirect methods with the maxim "truth, regardless of consequences," the time has come to analyze the consequences that are involved.

From an *ethical* point of view, the social scientist must be concerned primarily with the interests of his subjects and should view with suspicion any attitude investigation which endangers the subjects' security. This is, in essence, a "client-centered" point of view, which places the investigator under a moral obligation to protect the goals and objectives of his subjects and not to undertake any course of action which is harmful to their social, economic or psychological well-being.

From a *public relations* point of view, the social scientist is obliged to consider only those practical aspects of his investigation which concern the smooth functioning of relations with his subjects or the general public. Public relations minded, he has an "experimenter-centered" point of view which looks primarily to the creation of a permissive atmosphere that makes possible the orderly progress of long range research. A research activity may prove to be un-

wise from an ethical point of view, but if the researcher concerns himself mainly with the public relations aspects of his investigation, he should be prepared to deal with some of the following problems: How to treat subjects who discover that they have been duped into revealing their attitudes on one of the new measurement devices, How to deal with the rising distrust of the public toward the techniques as well as the findings of social research, How to reach the public which discovers the manner of operation of these indirect devices, How to prevent possible misuse of the techniques which he is inventing, How to encourage the public to participate in the increasing number of projects which he is contemplating for the future.

#### Questions That Need Asking

Every experimenter who considers utilizing indirect methods of attitude measurement in his investigation might profitably ask himself a series of questions whose answers will help him to deal with some of the ethical and public relations problems which he may have to face.

*The Right to Investigate.* The first question, basic to any kind of attitude investigation, might perhaps look something like this: "Do I have the right to investigate other people's attitudes?" A democratic society presumably protects the right of the individual to his personal privacy and there is no law, other than the Census law or perhaps some local ordinance, which forces him to participate in a polling activity. If the respondent who recognizes the intent of the investigator refuses to take a stand on an issue which the social researcher is interested in, it illustrates a

public relations rather than an ethical problem. Without full participation by his subjects, the social scientist cannot hope to get results which accurately reflect the attitudes of his total population. His job, therefore, is to encourage participation through an active educational program among the general public.

The investigator who is unable to get the subject's permission to test his attitude may find it appropriate to utilize some of the indirect techniques, to which reference has been made. In this instance, the investigator gets cooperation by involving the subject in a situation which does not reveal to him the true intent of the investigation. The subject fails to give the experimenter permission to examine his attitudes, but agrees to participate because he is unable to discern the true nature of the investigator's intentions.

*The Propriety of Deception.* This raises a second vital question that might be posed by the social scientist at this time: "Do I have the right to deceive people in order to get at their attitudes?" It must be understood that the social scientist is in a different situation than the clinician who uses a variety of projective techniques for the purpose of helping the individual make a better, more healthy adjustment. The projective tools which the clinician applies are part of his diagnostic kit, similar to the many other devices which the regular physician uses in his practice. The client knows the intent of the therapist, and even though he may not understand or be convinced of the validity of the various projective techniques, he feels that the therapist has his best interests at heart.

This relationship of trust and confi-

dence is usually not the case when the social scientist uses indirect methods to get at the attitudes of individuals who are quite likely unwilling to divulge their opinions through the use of any of the more direct techniques. The violent anti-Semite, the latent radical, the arch conservative usually cannot be identified in the experimental test situation unless devices are used which penetrate the protective cover with which these individuals surround themselves.

It should be kept in mind that indirect methods of attitude measurement vary greatly in the effectiveness of their disguise. Some of these tools hide only the purpose of their utilization, and a sophisticated subject can easily see the many ways in which the results can be utilized. In this respect, the degree of indirectness of the attitude measurement device is a function of the subject's sophistication and depends greatly upon the frame of reference which the subject brings to the testing situation. Thus, the differential perception of the degree of indirectness produces a variable which partly accounts for the various degrees of tolerance and resistance with which the "duped" subjects react to their discovery of the real purpose of these testing devices. An analogy to what I have in mind can be taken from the field of mental testing. Although an intelligence test usually uses straightforward direct manipulations, many subjects are unaware—at least while taking the test—that their intelligence is being measured. Through the eyes of the unsophisticated subject, the intelligence test appears as an indirect method although the examiner may consider the intent of the investigation quite obvious.

Even if we decide that we do have

the right to deceive people in order to get at their attitudes, there is still an additional point which should be considered. It may not take long before the public in general "catches on" to the operation of the various indirect techniques of attitude measurement. When this occurs, the usefulness of these techniques will be greatly impeded, because they depend for their effectiveness upon hiding the purpose for which they are used. Furthermore, unless precautionary measures are taken to prepare the public for the type of investigations in which the social scientist expects it to cooperate, it may look upon all operations of social science with rising scorn, distrust, or perhaps even fear.

*Misuse of Indirect Techniques.* The third question which the social scientist should ask himself is: "Do I have the right to report on new indirect attitude measurement devices, at a time when these can be misused by unscrupulous politicians or other selfish interests?"

The present political and social climate abounds with instances of witch-hunting, smearing of innocent reputations, and attacking of people because of their political and social beliefs. It is quite easy to imagine that some of the new indirect attitude measurement devices might be discovered by people in various kinds of inquisition movements, and used by them for evil purposes. Although it will undoubtedly take a long time before any of these techniques is valid for prediction at the individual level, I am sure that before too long enthusiastic and unscrupulous practitioners may find these techniques ideally suited for prying into the attitudes of people whom they regard as dangerous.

The "error-choice" test is a good case

in point. No doubt instruments using the "error-choice" technique might be constructed which could be applied to eliminate allegedly "disloyal" citizens from jobs of confidence and trust, to spot so-called "troublemakers" and "agitators" in industrial concerns, or, in effect, to discover "non-conformers" in many other important social areas. The writer hopes that this pessimism is not warranted, although he feels we should consider all possible ramifications.

*Misinterpretation of Results.* Finally there is a fourth question whose pertinence is not limited necessarily to the use of indirect methods of attitude measurement: "What is my responsibility for seeing that the findings which I report are properly interpreted?"

The danger of misinterpretation is especially great in those investigations which utilize the various indirect methods of attitude measurement. The general public, unfamiliar with the background and assumptions of these methods, is likely to read something into the results which may not even be implied in the investigator's formal report. An illustration of this sort of thing comes again from the study of the personal factor in labor mediation. A reporter for one of the large industrial trade publications learned, through personal contact, about the "error-choice" test which was devised to test the mediator's knowledge as well as his so-called "impartiality." He asked permission to see the study, and to quote from it prior to its publication in one of the professional journals. The request was granted, but he was warned to check any conclusions or statements of which he might not feel sure. No more was heard until his story appeared in print, with the headline "Heads-or-Tails Odds Beat

Mediation," and followed by a grossly inaccurate statement of the findings. This reporter undoubtedly felt that he had given an accurate account of the mediator study; his misinterpretations may have been due to a lack of clarity with which the assumptions were originally expressed.

The reliance which the public still seems to place upon the published results of attitude surveys may have a bearing on the question. As Edward L. Bernays has written:

"There is a great danger in the new kind of leadership which polls have produced in the United States—leadership of obedience to polls. . . . The people who pin their faith on the permanency of attitudes as shown by polls, and therefore believe they are accurate forecasts, are often misled. . . . The present belief that polls show a permanent public opinion helps to maintain the status quo . . . the danger to society is self-evident."<sup>5</sup>

This paper has, it is hoped, suggested some of the considerations which should be looked into before the investigator decides on the use of indirect methods of attitude measurement. As the application of these techniques becomes more widespread, some codes will have to be established to provide a guide for the handling of the ethical as well as the public relations problems to which I have referred. At the moment, the writer is not in the position to provide these codes; he will be satisfied if this presentation is found useful as a lead for further discussion and possible action.

<sup>5</sup> Bernays E. L., "Should Pollsters Be Licensed?", *International Journal of Opinion and Attitude Research*, Vol. 3, Spring 1949, p. 9.