



## Contact Email for December 2015

Greetings All,

The year has almost gone, yet it only seems a few weeks ago that it started. When you are young things take forever to arrive. The older you get, life seems to quicken up. One of the things sociology should understand is, that the living of life is not experienced through chronology, or by the calendar. Life cannot be reduced to a category, as beloved by public servants and statisticians. You cannot say that people over 70 cannot do this or that. You cannot say that people over 80 should not be allowed to do this or that. You could change those figures to: 14 and 18, 30 or 40, 50 to 69, and the statement would be just as true. Humanity cannot be classified by numbers. I am reminded of a comment by Leach, from a long time ago. (*Leach, E. (1967), 'An Anthropologist's Reflections on a Social Survey', in Anthropologists in the Field, eds D. Jongmans, and P. Gutkind, Van Gorcum, Assen, Netherlands.*) In citing an earlier study, he observes that 'the numerical apparatus, in which their conclusions are embedded, is very largely, a complicated piece of self-deception'. Trying to reduce life to numbers fits the same description.

Sociological research stands at the intersection of a number of disciplines that include: economics, politics, psychology, history and geography as well as medicine, biochemistry, physiology, education, language development, marketing, housing, regional development, employment and more. This position requires sociology to try to ground individuals, and the events that affect them, into the broader social context of humanity. In the work of these disciplines, the question of social impact is not always recognised or investigated. The inter-relationship of the single event and the total phenomenon need to be part of any interpretation to have lasting significance. As Habermas, one of the most perceptive writers around today, has pointed out:

*Life histories constitute themselves not only in the vertical dimension as a temporal connection of the cumulative experiences of an individual. They are also formed at every moment horizontally at the level of the inter-subjectivity of communication common to different subjects. (1972, 'Knowledge and Human Interests', trans. J. Shapiro, Heinemann, Portsmouth, pp 155-156).*

Dilthey (1961, *Pattern & Meaning in History, Harper & Row, New York.*) makes the same point when he suggests that each individual is, at the same time, at a point of intersection of structures that are part of their life in one way and exist outside them in another. The validity of sociological research lies not so much in its mathematical correctness but in its ability to identify how an individual understands their particular experience of being human and how this is related to what is happening to humanity as a whole.

We are always shocked to discover that others do not see social reality in the same way as we do. In research, it is important to try to understand what a participant recognizes as their social reality, rather than judging them by the reality of the researcher or policy maker. We need to try to understand the evidence they have that makes them believe their understanding of social reality is the right one. Research needs to recognise that people have a 'vertical' and a 'horizontal' dimension and that their understanding of it is unique to themselves. All this doesn't do much for quantitative research. Some quotes from research on ageing I did a few years ago may illustrate the point:

*"There is much I have yet to do, to witness, to taste, to share. I do not think actuarial tables, or my doctor, should fix the parameters of my life expectancy or usefulness. Only I can define old, or elderly, or used up, as it applies to me. I will make the call; and until then, I have a lot of living to do."*

*"Society in general needs to be informed that retirees are an integral part of the community and have earned their right to live out this phase of their life and to contribute to the society in other ways than earning a salary."*

Both of these quotes could be applied to any age group, but finally one about collecting real data:

*Given the time, you allowed us to write our answers, I'm not going to write down something off the top of my head. I need time to consider the questions. If you want a serious answer you should give us these questions separately and a week to think about them, then you might get sensible answers.*

Enjoy the break. Look forward to the things Mitzi & Melanie are planning. I'll be back in the next year of the common era.

Alan Scott, Continuing Education Officer