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PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH AMONG AFRICANS

Ever since the investigation into the Poor White problem there has been a growing realisation of the need for study and research of the social and economic problems of our multi-racial society. Since then they have published a number of historical and sociological studies on the Coloured group and a few on the Indian population; but works based on field research on either of these non-European groups have been few indeed. But the African population has received much attention from social research workers.

There are three motions for African research which may be stated briefly as:-

1. The European requires an understanding of the African since he uses his labour, exercises the function of landlord over his reserve lands, directs and controls the school system and administers his affairs generally.
2. Social Scientists regard the African population in its present differential rate of change and development as a human laboratory for the study of the response of a people to new stimuli and new challenges.
3. The application of Native policy and of differential legislation creates special problems which call for solutions.

For the sake of convenience, rather than scientific order. I propose to deal with the problems of African research in the following order:

- (a) Research among Reserve Africans.
- (b) Research among Urban Africans.
- (c) The difficulties of obtaining current official and business facts and figures.
- (d) The use of trained African scholars.
- (e) African criticisms of Social Research.

(a) RESEARCH AMONG RESERVE AFRICANS.

A knowledge of the culture of the African is basic to all African research. This is a sphere in which the Social Anthropologists have devoted much of their energies.

Anthropological field work among so called primitive peoples presents certain difficulties. Suspicion of the European 'stranger' and distrust of the ulterior motives behind his activities have to be overcome; the goodwill and support of the chief have to be obtained; friendly and cooperative relation

with the people have to be established; a circle of reliable informants has to be built up and a suitable educated person enlisted as interpreter and recorder. In order to visit villages and kraals much travelling, most of it on foot, has to be undertaken.

Through learning and using the native language, gaining access to tribal rituals, ceremonies and tribal courts, participating in certain activities of kraal life and personally observing the life of the people Social Anthropologists have been able to conduct their fieldwork with a fair measure of success.

I shall now pass from a consideration of traditional difficulties and techniques to proceed to indicate difficulties of a different kind.

The Native reserves are areas which come under the jurisdiction of the Native affairs department and private Europeans are not allowed to enter the reserve without permission. That department does not readily grant permission to a European to enter a Native reserve lest he or she, under the guise of research, propagate among the people wrong or dangerous ideas, i.e. ideas inimical to the system of tribal tutelage. European traders and labour recruiting agents and neighbouring farmers distrust an 'outside scholar' on Native affairs who is trying to learn what they themselves have known these many years through direct contact with the African.

The juxtaposition of the Native reserves to European farms, mines and urban Industrial Centres means that the reserve Africans have been drawn, to an increasing extent, into the orbit of Western civilisation. Consequently there is no longer any tribe whose members are still simple, unsophisticated and unacquainted with European ideas and ways of life. Even within the reserves there have emerged groups of Africans who are more vigilant of European investigators and more critical of the results or the practical applications of these investigations.

One such criticism comes from migrant workers many of whom now spend many months, some even years, in urban labour centres. These men on returning to their kraals often speak to their kith and kin about the treatment they have received and the unsympathetic attitudes shown towards them by some European officers (though not all) who owe their positions of responsibility over Africans mainly to their ability to speak the African language and their claim to know the 'Native mind' and African customs. Because of their experiences many of these migrant workers fail to distinguish between the practical anthropologists in the urban and labour centres and the scientific anthropologist who is in their midst

to learn the African language and to understand Native laws and customs. Some regard the activities of the latter as serving to strengthen the former.

The second criticism is, to my mind, of a more fundamental character. While some educated/^{Africans} are glad to have their laws and customs written about, a growing number of educated Africans are becoming antagonistic to anthropological fieldwork because they claim/^{that} its results are used to provide an intellectual justification for a policy of separation which aims at making the African 'proud of that which is his own', retain his distinctive cultural heritage and so retard his progress in assimilating Western civilisation.

But despite these criticisms it has to be acknowledged that the Social Anthropologists have done valuable pioneer work in the study of the functions of African customs, rituals and ceremonies, and Institutions as well as the wider aspects of cultural dynamics.

I shall now proceed to discuss briefly some of the peculiar problems of quantitative research in a Native reserve.

The simple biological family cannot be adopted as a unit of economic measurement because the kraal system means a sharing of food, goods, expenses and incomes by its several households; information concerning births and deaths is given in terms of special ceremonies, local episodes and occurrences, or historical events some of which may be wholly unknown and others only partially known to the investigator; the cultivated fields are often irregular patches of land whose exact dimensions cannot be quoted, agricultural and pastoral yields are not available in terms of definite figures and exact time periods. Money transactions are not yet part of the general life of the people nor is the keeping of records.

Incidental to administrative purposes, the Native affairs department keeps a record of certain social and economic statistics, but some of these are based on estimates while the rest may be either incomplete or not in suitable form. Consequently these records can provide no reliable statistics on births and deaths, population movements, agricultural and pastoral produce consumed and sold, cash incomes and expenditures.

The investigators have therefore to devise their own techniques for the collection of statistical data. The application of such skills and methods have been well demonstrated in these three recent surveys.

- (1) The Folela Health Centre Survey of 1943 which yielded valuable data on the distribution of cattle ownership and on actual milk yields in the kraals of the Umkomaas River Valley in Natal.

- (2) Migrant Labour and Tribe Life, 1943/44, being a study by Professor Schapera of conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate.
- (3) The Keiskammahock Rural Survey, 1947/51. This survey was a good example of team work by experts, cooperation between black and white and the application of interdisciplinary procedures. The four volumes which comprise this report provide a useful background to the material and human problem of rural rehabilitation.

(b) RESEARCH AMONG URBAN AFRICANS.

Research among urban Africans, whether they be residents of municipal townships, or industrial and commercial workers, has been directed towards an understand of the processes of urbanisation and the problems arising therefrom. Because of the dynamic nature of this development and the variety of the factors involved social scientists have devoted their energies towards specific problems.

On the one hand, there are certain conditions which are favourable to the prosecution of research among Urban Africans. The population is easily accessible since it is concentrated in townships compounds or in factories; the people are more accustomed to seeing Europeans in their midst and the investigator can expect better response from those who are Westernised and can speak English or Afrikaans; contacts can be made with organised groups of various sorts, and their leaders; useful vital statistics are more or less available; the numbering and arrangement of houses or the workers factory registration numbers make sampling possible if that is necessary; statistics in regard to social welfare, wages and employment can be obtained.

On the other hand, there are unfavourable conditions to the prosecution of urban African research. In our larger urban centres there are thousands of African squatters who live in unauthorised structures in widely diffused areas. In view of the ever shifting character of the population, the lack of postal addresses or numbering system and the topography of the areas statistical sampling is difficult to apply. With both husband and wife away at work, contact cannot easily be made; there is also among these people an ever present fear of Europeans whether they be police, criminal investigation officers or private persons; nor do they readily accept a strange African unless they know that his purpose is innocent. There are certain difficulties and problems which arise in the actual conduct of research among urban Africans, some of whom are completely urbanised. Some detribalised or partially urbanised and others still having their roots in the reserves. These difficulties I shall now discuss.

Goodwill and Cooperation.

Without the goodwill of the municipal township authorities or the factory management and of the Africans themselves no successful research can be undertaken.

The first task of the investigator is to have a preliminary conference with the Location Superintendent or the factory management so as to indicate the purpose of the proposed research, set at rest any fears or suspicion which this may raise and secure permission to enter the township or factory, as the case may be. Having done that, the investigator should proceed to the second task

namely/.....

namely that of creating contact with the Africans.

The people should be assured that the investigator has come among them not as someone connected with the police or officials and bodies whom they regard as their 'enemies', but to undertake a scientific survey or objective research; then the purpose and motives for the research have to be carefully explained and some indication given of the procedures to which the people will have to be subjected during the course of the research. These steps will go a long way towards allaying the suspicions and distrust of the people as to the real reason or motive for the presence of the investigator.

The Investigators Dilema.

Even with initial goodwill from European and Africans, the investigator will not altogether escape the dilemma to which his presence and activities give rise. He will find that he is watched on both sides of the colour line; if he is seen often in company with or too friendly towards the Location Superintendent or the factory manager or personnel officer the Africans want to know what one says to the other and why they are seemingly so close to each other; if, on the other hand, the investigator is too friendly with the Africans and readily enjoys their confidence the Location Superintendent or factory manager become uneasily curious to know what sort of 'influence' is exerted by or what ideas are being propagated by the investigator. This is the first dilemma.

There is a second dilemma that faces the investigator. The factory manager or the Location Superintendent expect the investigator merely to carry out the research and not to disturb the existing arrangements of discipline and control. The Africans, on their side, expect that both the research and the investigator should help them in their efforts to change the status quo so as to gain better political recognition, trade Union rights and recognition, trading facilities, better houses and better wages. But the investigator is not in a position to help them in these matters, he also cannot guarantee that the results of the research will not be used to the disadvantage of the Africans.

Sampling:

Sampling necessarily involves the inclusion of some families or workers and the exclusion of others. This always raises a difficulty with the people among whom the research is to be undertaken. They cannot understand why one household is selected and the one next to it omitted for purposes of interview and collection of data. Consequently people place false interpretations on the meaning and purpose of/.....

of interview and collection of data. Consequently people place false interpretations on the meaning and purpose of a sample. This may lead to a refusal to cooperate with investigator or to objections in the course of interview.

The above difficulty also arises among industrial workers. In one factory where out of 1,200 workers a sample of 300 were selected, the investigator was subsequently informed by the rest of the workers that those who had been included in the sample had in fact been selected by the management because it only wanted to include "good boys", who would not condemn factory conditions and wages and new workers who could not know much of the real state of affairs.

If the investigator could meet the workers before beginning the survey and explain to them that since there are so many and time is short only a limited, but representative group of workers, will be contacted, the difficulty of sampling can be largely overcome. Unfortunately in many factories, the operation of the shift system renders it difficult for the investigator to meet all or most of the workers.

Lack of questionnaire Consciousness.

The procedure whereby all the questions are asked by one person and all the answers provided by others is one to which the Africans are not familiar. It is therefore necessary in the first place, to explain thoroughly to African householders or African workers why they have to answer a series of questions. In the second place, the questions themselves need to be so carefully thoughtout beforehand and so accurately presented that they will induce the right answers from the Africans. Indefinite, inaccurate or irrelevant answers can cause much difficulty when the data collected is codified and analysed.

Unfamiliarity with Western figures, dates and time values.

The untutored African, like all primitive people, is accustomed to think and deal with things in the concrete and not in terms of abstract figures and dates; nor does he regulate his ordinary affairs according to precise notions of time as does the Westerner. Because of this fact, except among Westernised Africans, it is often difficult for the investigator to collect from most urban Africans statistical data on ages, family composition, duration and wages of previous jobs held, family budgets, periods of unemployment whether in the urban areas or in the reserves. However, with skill and patience even such data can be collected.

Attitudes and Public Relations.

In the investigations with which the writer has been connected questions were/.....

were asked dealing with the attitudes of workers towards various matters with a factory organisation or concerning public relations between the African residents and advisory boards on the one hand and Public authorities on the other hand. But I was never satisfied that such matters can be dealt with by a series of questions and answers inserted with the neat columns of a schedule. The techniques and procedures for the investigation of attitudes and public relations are, as is well known, difficult to manipulate. and yet such matters are essential to an understanding of workers morale and Native public opinion.

(c) ACCESS TO OFFICIAL AND BUSINESS STATISTICS.

Many facts and figures of social economic and political significance to African life are in the possession of Government departments, Provincial Administrations and Municipalities and are not generally available to outside research scholars. The reasons for this position are two fold. In the first place the data collected by these bodies is necessary for governmental or administrative purposes and is therefore regarded as confidential; in the second place these bodies have established their own research departments and naturally pass on such data to their own research staff.

Research scholars are, however, at a serious handicap in this respect. They must either present a report which is not in accordance with the full facts as known to the Government, Provincial Administrations or Municipalities or delay their report till they can obtain such facts and figures.

Again bodies like the Transvaal Chamber of Mines, Chambers of Industries and of Commerce, and to a lesser extent Trade Unions, receive and remit several memoranda of potential interest to research scholars, but these papers and documents are available for research purposes; the same can be said of those few progressive firms which conduct some research into such problems as labour turnover and absenteeism.

Better contacts between the Government (Central and Provincial) Municipalities and Research Scholars is required.

(d) THE USE OF TRAINED AFRICAN RESEARCH SCHOLARS.

Nearly all the social research work among Africans has been undertaken with the cooperation of African assistants. In the majority of cases these men and women have been untrained or partially trained in research techniques and human relations, and necessarily they could only be assigned a subordinate role.

What is now needed are African graduates who are fully trained in the basic social sciences, research procedures and in human relations. Only such Africans can make equal contributions to cooperative research or undertake individual research projects.

While recognising the advantages which a white research worker has by reason of easier contacts with white officialdom and intellectual detachment from the strains and tension of the African scene, a trained African investigator has certain advantages. His appearance among the Africans causes less strangeness and suspicion; he is familiar with their social circumstances and understands their problems; he can share more things with his fellow Africans; he is able to speak to the people in their language and they in turn are more communicative to him.

What I have said above must not, however, be understood as a plea for research apartheid. This is neither practicable nor desirable. Anyone can undertake African research who is properly trained, has the right personality or temperament and bring himself into a sympathetic understanding of the values, thoughts and feeling of the African research subjects.

(e) RESEARCH CRITICISMS AND PRIORITIES.

1. During the course of my activities as a research assistant in the Department of Economics of the University of Natal, I frequently had occasions to discuss with my educated Africans, Trade Unionists and leaders of organisations the value and applications of social research. I found that they did not draw nice distinctions between objective or Scientific inquiry or surveys and investigations undertaken by Commissions and departmental or underdepartmental committees just as they doubted the impartiality of the latter so were they skeptical of the value to them of the former; they argued that the powers that be would either ignore any findings in their favour or only make use of these facts which were in line with their policy.

2. Another criticism is that some of the research at present conducted is directed towards better fitting the African worker for the range of jobs already open to him. For example the National Institute of Personnel Research has been applying aptitude tests to African gold miners for the sole purpose of fitting them to jobs which they already have in the present context on the mines.

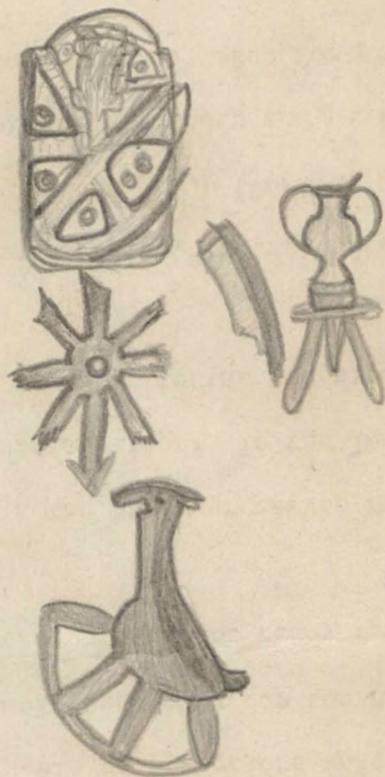
3. It has also been pointed out to me that hitherto social research has been directed towards solving the problems of the Government, Municipalities and employers of labour and not those problems which are regarded by Africans as most urgent. That is why, probably, inspite of the frequent 'solutions' and 'new deal' offered/.....

offered on the European side, the frustrations and difficulties of the Non-Europeans remain substantially unaltered.

4. Africans feel that Industrial research should also be directed towards ascertaining the range of satisfactions which African workers seek to obtain in the labour market. I am not sure that this is a purely economic phenomenon and that this problem can be dealt with by statistical analysis alone. The Americans can teach us something in this type of research.
5. What are the economic and social inequalities in our Society? Are they increasing or decreasing? if so, Why?
6. It is commonly known that rural rehabilitation in the Native reserves have not made the progress which was anticipated. What are the resistances involved? What are the risks which the reserve Africans have to undertake in accepting some of the programmes of this policy? What are the achievable compensations which reserve Africans would derive by discarding their traditional techniques for the new techniques? What measures are necessary to make reserve Africans ready for new tasks and new responsibilities?
7. How can the needs and aspirations of Africans in the Native reserves find clearer articulation in the present machinery of Native Administration? Is the Institution of Chieftainship really able to provide leadership adequate to the new circumstances of African life?
8. Another research priority, from the African point of view, is that of really understanding the sources of the strains, stresses and the group tensions of our multi-racial society. In this regard they feel that the attitudes and policies of the Europeans in relation to the non-European should not be taken for granted but also subjected to scientific inquiry.
9. Lastly, we need to consider very carefully the operation of Government in a multi-racial society. Can a system of government which functions democratically in respect of the Europeans, but dictatorally in respect of the Non-Europeans provide good government?
10. I have tried to indicate problems of African research and the responses of Africans to such research. The matter is important for just as the potter must understand his clay so must the social scientist understand the African human material.

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Collection Number: AD1715

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974

PUBLISHER:

Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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