

## Policy Related Attitude Surveys: Assumptions and Significance\*

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*Précis:* The article first considers a recent argument which rejects policy related attitude research on the grounds that it relies on four assumptions which are said to be untenable. In examining each of the assumptions we show that they are not in fact prerequisites of the approach and suggest what the actual assumptions are in each area. The article then takes up the broader issue of the significance of individual attitudes. This issue is considered in general and in terms of a specific example drawn from the results of the 1981 General Election in the Republic of Ireland. The conclusion is drawn that attitudes are sufficiently relevant to the policy process to fully justify the agenda of applied attitude research.

### I INTRODUCTION

Policy-related attitude research must have a secure basis for its belief in the reasonableness of its presuppositions and in the significance of its findings and, as with other disciplines, it is periodically called upon to give an account of itself on this score. The issues have been raised again in a recent article in *The Economic and Social Review* (McCullagh, 1981) and, on this occasion, they have been set squarely in the context of our published research on attitudes to the Northern Ireland problem.

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Mr McCullagh's article is the latest in the now long line of critical evaluations of our paper *Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland Relevant to the Northern Ireland Problem: Vol. I: Descriptive Analysis and Some Comparisons with Attitudes in Northern Ireland and Great Britain* (Davis and Sinnott, 1979). His approach is to be welcomed in that it raises the debate on to a new plane. Hitherto, critics have professed to accept the methodological tradition within which we worked as valid and useful – though, as we have shown elsewhere (Davis and Sinnott, 1980a; 1980b; 1980c), they misinterpreted this methodology in crucial respects – and have concentrated almost exclusively on trying to find deviations in our study from the generally accepted methodology. Mr McCullagh, however, having accepted without reservation that our study is “very much in the tradition of policy related attitude research” and is “concerned, on the one hand, with rigorous scientific work and, on the other, with collecting information which will have policy implications . . .”, criticises the tradition itself and employs our work as a peg on which to hang his critique of the whole approach (McCullagh, 1981, p. 45). Accordingly, we will attempt to take up the challenge presented to attitude research.

The author begins by stating four assumptions which he regards as the necessary basis of policy relevant attitude research. He proceeds to argue that we employed each of these assumptions, and that the assumptions are “untenable” and “simplistic”, that they “lack secure theoretical basis” and that they “cannot be uncritically accepted”. In Part II we take up the issues of whether the four alleged assumptions are in fact inherent in the approach and whether they were employed in ESRI Paper No. 97. This will clear the way for an assessment of the viability of the assumptions *actually* required in order to carry out policy related attitude research. This, however, is not the end of the matter because the author's discussion of his fourth assumption, which relates to the nature of public opinion, raises the issue of the significance of individual attitudes. This issue also occurs in a more implicit form in other parts of the article. Because of this and because it is an issue of considerably wider importance, we shall deal with it separately in Part III.

## II FOUR ASSUMPTIONS OF APPLIED ATTITUDE RESEARCH

### *Assumption One: The Consensus Approach*

According to the author, applied attitude research requires the assumption that “the nature of the problems about which, or towards which, people are presumed to have attitudes is unproblematic and available to, and shared by, all in a society” (McCullagh, 1981, p. 45). He goes on to specify that the “all” in this proposition includes both the general population and policy makers. This is akin to maintaining that a researcher interested in the problem

of cigarette smoking and health could not study the attitudes of a population of smokers unless the health policy maker, the researcher and each and every smoker shared the same definition of smoking as a health hazard. It is the researcher's job to define the underlying problem and the various factors relevant to it. There is no need whatsoever for those whose attitudes are being studied to be cognisant of or to share this view or for the policy maker to have either the competence or the inclination to define the problem.

Rather than beginning with the assumption that "the nature of the problem . . . is unproblematic", attitude research must in fact begin with precisely the opposite assumption – that defining the problem is a task involving difficulties and disputes. What is necessary is that the researcher consider all relevant aspects of the problem and examine such debate as may exist as to which aspects are most important. The researcher must then select those elements which he considers to be most central and most relevant. To allow himself to be led by some putative consensus as to the nature of the problem would be to abdicate his essentially independent and critical role.<sup>1</sup> Is it then the case that common perceptions among respondents and between respondents and researcher are entirely unnecessary? Of course not. Some minimal common perceptions are necessary in order to elicit valid responses but a shared definition of the problem is not one of them. What is required is that respondents have a common understanding of the words and concepts employed in the questions, that the context of the questions be made clear to them and that the researcher takes all this into account in interpreting the responses.

In dealing with these two issues (the definition of the problem and the necessary common understanding of terms used) adequate preparatory research is vital. This should range from wide background reading on the subject to intensive interviewing of individuals. To take a specific example of the latter sort of preparatory work, in the research reported in ESRI Paper No. 97 we made considerable use of interview material prior to the final field-work. At the commencement of the project we used pre-existing interviews. These included 150 open-ended interviews which were conducted with members of the political elite and in which each respondent was asked the question "What do you see as the essence of the Northern Ireland problem?" The considerable range of the responses to this question refutes any notion of the existence of "an official or establishment view of the parameters of

1. That we did not assume any consensus as to problem definition should have been clear from the very opening sentences of our presentation of our results: "The notion of a 'solution' to the problem in Northern Ireland has many possible meanings. As a result, the question 'what is the solution?' is amenable, not only to conflicting answers arising from conflicting preferences, but to conflicting levels of answer. It is, therefore, essential to clarify what we mean by solution and to indicate how we sought to apply the concept in our research." (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 29).

the particular problem". Further interview material was specifically generated for the project by means of semi-structured interviews with about 60 respondents in various parts of the Republic (see Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 23 and 1980a, pp. 10 and 13). Following analysis of these tape-recorded interviews, we conducted a final set of preparatory interviews with 256 respondents using a structured questionnaire. Despite the fact that we described these two distinct sets of interviews in Paper No. 97 and Policy Research Series No. 3, and despite the fact that we included in Policy Research Series No. 3 a reference to a seminar paper discussing both sets in considerable detail, Mr McCullagh confuses the two, as in the following account:

They fail to establish what people's perceptions of the nature of the problem are before they examine what people's preferences in the line of solutions are. *This was not covered, for example, in their pilot research which was concerned mainly with the refinement of attitude items and measures (McCullagh, 1981, p. 46, our emphasis).*<sup>2</sup>

We have emphasised the important role played by interviewing in the preparatory stages of attitude research because one of the major purposes of such interviewing, especially of the open-ended exploratory interviewing, is to establish the range of people's perceptions of the nature of the problem. This becomes an important input into, but obviously not a determinant of, the researcher's definition of the problem. The other major purpose of these preparatory waves of interviewing is to establish the language and terms in common use in relation to the relevant issues and this information is employed in designing specific questions and attitude items.

Finally, the difficulties of problem definition and the lack of consensus in relation thereto can, and frequently must, be tackled by adopting a catholic approach, that is, by including a variety of themes and approaches to the topic of the research in the final questionnaire. Thus, in our research on the Northern Ireland problem, we allowed for a multiplicity of definitions and approaches. Even in that part of our research reported in ESRI Paper No. 97, we covered, in addition to preferences regarding political and institutional arrangements, the issues of divorce, constitutional change, British withdrawal, policy toward the IRA (general security, penal, judicial and political policies) and general attitudes to partition, the IRA and Northern Ireland Protestants. In the remainder of the research, which we are currently analysing, we focused on territorial, confessional and linguistic aspects of Irish identity and on

2. Because this account involves such an erroneous impression of our preparatory research, we reproduce in an appendix to this article the opening questions of the interview schedule employed in our pilot interviews.

intergroup perceptions.<sup>3</sup> These diverse themes are left entirely out of account in the critique's discussion of the issue of problem definition and the complaint is made that respondents were "asked for their attitudes to a list of solutions to what the researcher's view of the problem is", thus mistakenly imputing to us a single monolithic definition of the problem. The complaint is also made that "British withdrawal and the defeat of the IRA were not offered to respondents in the list of possible solutions to the problem" (McCullagh, 1981, pp. 46-47). This totally neglects the fact that respondents were closely questioned on both these topics. Admittedly, this was under the rubric of "policies" rather than "solutions", but to argue that, because of this, such issues are not part of our view of the problem is mere sophistry, based on a naïve equation of our definition of "solutions" for the purpose of one particular question with our multi-faceted definition of the problem which guided and was embodied in the entire research project.

*Assumption Two: Consistency and Durability*

In this section of the article attention is drawn to an alleged presupposition which is said to require the assumption of consistency and durability. The presupposition is said to be that policy should follow attitudes: "If attitudes are inconsistent, it would be difficult to formulate policies which would accommodate themselves to these attitudes. If attitudes are constantly changing, it would be impractical to change policies often enough to keep in line with changes in attitudes" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 48). The assumption underlying and motivating our research and, we believe, applied attitude research in general is far removed from the accommodationist one here suggested. In our Introduction, having referred to the aim of achieving a correspondence between public attitudes and policy, we specifically argued against the view that this correspondence must be exact at all times or that it must be achieved by means of a one-way flow from public attitudes to the actions of decision makers. We pointed out that any understanding of the democratic process must allow for the possibility of decision makers departing from public attitudes in their judgements on particular issues and for the possibility of decision makers persuading people that a particular course of action is desirable (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 19). In our concluding paragraph we referred to the point with additional emphasis: "In conclusion, we would draw the reader's attention to a point emphasised in the introduction, namely, that attitudes cannot be taken as determining factors in relation to policy decisions. Thus, the study of attitudes does not enable one

3. The wording of all of the questions reported on in Paper No. 97 is given in the text. The entire questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix II of *Some Issues in the Methodology of Attitude Research* (see The Economic and Social Research Institute, 1980).

to prescribe solutions” (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 152).

Turning specifically to the alleged assumption of consistency and durability, our position is described as follows: “. . . the authors claim that the attitudes measured in their research are both consistent and enduring . . .” (McCullagh, 1981, pp. 49-54). Take the question of consistency first. Nowhere on the pages referred to can one find any statement of an assumption of attitude consistency. In fact, on the first page referred to (p. 19) one actually finds an argument to the effect that the identification of potential conflicts between the attitudes held by the same individuals, in other words attitude inconsistencies, *is one of the important contributions* of applied attitude research (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 19-20).

Having apparently missed this statement concerning conflict or inconsistencies between attitudes, the author goes on to cite six seemingly inconsistent findings as evidence that our inconsistent results disprove our assumption of consistency. Not only is it quite evident that we never made the assumption in question but, in each of the six cases he cites, we highlighted the findings concerned, explored the relationship between the attitudes and offered an interpretation. In fact many of the “inconsistencies” turn out to be more apparent than real. For example, 70 per cent of respondents thought that, in the context of steps to bring about a solution to the problem in Northern Ireland, “The Irish Government should draft a new Constitution more suited to our present needs” while, at the same time, 71 per cent disagreed with the view that “The Irish Government should remove from the Constitution the claim to Northern Ireland”. The author observes, with implied amazement at such glaring inconsistency, “So they want a new Constitution which would retain the two major items which have provoked public discussion of the need for a new Constitution” (McCullagh, 1981, p. 50). The alleged inconsistency between these views only arises because of his willingness to impose *his* logic and *his* interpretation of the logic of public discussion on the mass public. This is ironic given that he accuses us of imposing our (or the establishment’s) definition of the problem on people and in view of the statement in his conclusion that the applied attitude research approach “. . . distorts the nature of attitudes by ascribing logical criteria of consistency . . . to them rather than sociological ones” (McCullagh, 1981, p. 55). In commenting on these two findings, we argued that one interpretation of this contrast might be that there is support for an entirely new Constitution which would omit the contentious elements of Bunreacht na hÉireann, but that people feel there is nothing to be gained from changing it in a piecemeal fashion. We pointed out, however, that an alternative interpretation would be that, while it is easy to win agreement to the vague proposition of “a new Constitution more suited to our present needs”, this support evaporates when the specifics of the proposal are

spelled out. We then went on to explore the issue in greater depth by adducing evidence from a question which asked about people's voting intention in a hypothetical referendum on Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 66-70). All of this, we would suggest, is both more helpful and more "sociological" than approaching the data with a naïve incredulity *vis-à-vis* combinations of views which one might personally find illogical.

In dealing with the issue of the durability of attitudes, it is necessary to be quite precise. As indicated in the passage referred to above, the article imputes to us an unqualified claim that attitudes are enduring and goes on to say "... the authors are prepared, in the early stages of their report, to assert that attitudes are stable and enduring" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 50). At no stage did we claim that attitudes have any absolute or unqualified durability. Instead we referred to "... relatively stable attitudes" and to "... more enduring attitudes and orientations" (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 19, 141). Not only did we qualify our claims as to the durability of attitudes in this way, we explicitly discussed the possibility of attitude change and made reference to the possible role of political leadership in effecting such change (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 19).

This brings us to the alleged contradiction between our views on the durability of attitudes and subsequent comments which we made in Paper No. 97 as to the way in which attitude change might be brought about by a change in the political context. The case which we were discussing was the possibility of a change in attitude to Northern Ireland Protestants being brought about by a transition to a united Ireland. There is no contradiction between the suggestion of the possibility of alteration in attitude as a result of fundamentally changed political circumstances and our earlier references to relative attitude stability – no more than it is a contradiction to hold that iron, though solid, will melt under heat. The argument in the critique goes further, however, and says: "This realisation paves the way for eventual strategic withdrawal from their original position. In their subsequent reply to one set of their critics we find that they 'agree that attitudes may change over time'" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 50). Acknowledgement that "attitudes may change over time" does not constitute a strategic withdrawal from the view that attitudes are "relatively stable" – as would be only too clear had our sentence been quoted in full: "We agree that attitudes may change over time, though comparison of our findings with McGréil's findings relating to 1973 suggests that mere passage of time is not a sufficient condition for extensive attitude change in regard to the IRA" (Davis and Sinnott, 1980a, p. 38). Hardly a "strategic withdrawal"!

Finally, on this issue of durability, it is argued in regard to our work that: "They do not, however, provide us with any data which would allow us to choose between their different views". Not only did we not, in subsequent

work, abandon our earlier view that attitudes are relatively stable, but we went on to provide data relevant to the question of the durability of certain of the attitudes with which we were concerned. In ESRI Policy Paper No. 3 we reproduced data from McGréil's 1973 survey (McGréil, 1977), in relation to attitudes to Northern Ireland Unionists and towards the use of violence in Northern Ireland (Davis and Sinnott, 1980a, pp. 37-41). These data support our view as to the relative durability of the attitudes in question. Furthermore, in an article in *Studies* entitled "The Controversy Concerning Attitudes in the Republic to the Northern Ireland Problem", we published responses to two attitude items on the IRA which we had included in a nationwide survey carried out in 1977 (i.e., one year before our main fieldwork). Again the responses to these items confirm the relative durability of the particular attitude to the IRA which we had measured (see Davis and Sinnott, 1980b, pp. 185-187). To this we might now add the results of a recent opinion poll conducted for *The Sunday Tribune* by Irish Marketing Surveys (Irish Marketing Surveys, 1981). This survey included the question: "At this time, do you think the Provisional IRA should continue their campaign of violence or discontinue it?" Eighty-six per cent took the view that "at this time" the Provisional IRA should discontinue their campaign of violence. Having noted the 86 per cent figure, the IMS report went on "6% felt that the Provisional IRA's campaign should continue and a further 8% were admittedly ambivalent on the issue" (Irish Marketing Surveys, 1981, p. 9). When one allows for the different methodological approaches employed here and in our survey,<sup>4</sup> this result is not unduly dissimilar from our finding that three per cent were strongly supportive, five per cent moderately supportive and 13 per cent slightly supportive in their attitude to IRA activities. As such, it provides further evidence of the relative durability of this particular attitude.

#### *Assumption Three: Descriptive Method*

The third assumption is the belief, allegedly held by attitude researchers, that such research is basically descriptive work, in the sense that it is a matter of letting the facts speak for themselves. The author rejects this view on the grounds that "the story which the set of survey data tells is crucially affected by the interpretations and expectations of the researcher" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 51). If the point being made here is simply that, to borrow Popper's

4. In particular, the temporal qualification attached to the IMS question leaves open the possibility that some of the opposition to Provisional IRA violence represents a tactical view of the unsuitability of violence "at this time" rather than a general attitude of opposition to such violence. In other words, the temporal qualification creates a possible bias towards understatement of the extent of attitudes supportive of IRA violence — for, whereas a person favouring such violence "at this time" necessarily has a supportive attitude to such violence, a person opposing such violence "at this time" does not necessarily have an unsupportive attitude to Provisional IRA violence.



analogy, the mind is a searchlight rather than a bucket (Popper, 1972), then we are in wholehearted agreement.<sup>5</sup> It seems, however, that larger claims than this are being made. Thus we read that the findings of attitude research "are not simply the product of a value-neutral scientific process of data collection and analysis but of a process of analysis in which the researcher's interpretations and subjective judgements play a crucial role" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 52). This rather imprecise conclusion is not based on any argument-in-principle as to why and how values enter into social research in general or attitude research in particular. If it were, then one could take up these serious and complex issues. Instead of such an argument we find merely a repetition of a criticism already deployed by others to the effect that we used factor analysis in an arbitrary fashion. This is based on the mistaken view that factor loading "cut-off points" are an absolute and definitive guide to the interpretation of factor analytic results. We have dealt with this issue at some length elsewhere (Davis and Sinnott, 1980c, pp. 128-129). Suffice it to say here that the author's adherence to this erroneous view is surprising given that Child, whom he quotes, refers to the conventional .30 cut-off point as a rule of thumb and an arbitrary criterion (Child, 1970, pp. 45-46).<sup>6</sup> In his discussion of this issue, he in fact goes on to allege that we engaged in the worst form of academic bias — the use of methods that will ensure that the expected result emerges. To quote his own words: "The criteria they work with appear to have been the desire to find what they already anticipated would exist, namely, clear-cut, relatively independent and separable attitudes to partition, 'Protestant' politics (*sic.*) and the IRA" (McCullagh, 1981, pp. 51-52). To this we need only reply that, as made clear in our paper, our original expectation was of four, not three, factors and that this expectation was modified solely in the light of the evidence (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 94-101).

#### *Assumption Four: The Nature of Public Opinion*

In one way, there is not really much to be said on this issue except that the critique is working with one definition of public opinion and that we, in keeping with the tradition of attitude research, are working with an entirely

5. Much is made of the fact that the title of Paper No. 97 included the words "descriptive analysis". As was quite clear in our Introduction, we were distinguishing between description and formal explanation, not claiming that our analysis of the data involved no interpretation on our part.

6. The author is remarkably ambivalent on this issue. Thus, while at one point he agrees that there are no definitive rules governing the interpretation of factor loadings, he subsequently speaks of "a decision rule" which must be consistently applied and of "formal criteria". Something cannot be at the same time a rule of thumb and a formal criterion and it is quite clear from the literature on factor analysis that particular cut-off points for factor loadings are rules of thumb. Thus his reference to Davis' discussion of significance tests (McCullagh, 1981, p. 52) is singularly inappropriate in this context.

different definition. There are, however, three issues at stake: (i) how is public opinion to be defined? (ii) does the attitude research tradition ignore the existence of groups and elites? and (iii) what is the significance of individual attitudes or why bother with individual attitudes at all? We will deal with the first two in this section and postpone consideration of the third and more general issue to Part III.

According to the critique, public opinion is to be defined as “the public expression of opinion” and, following Blumer, as “the pattern of the diverse views and positions on the issue that come to the individuals who have to act in response to the public opinion” (McCullagh, 1981, pp. 53-54). Blumer’s basic point is that, because of the existence and activities of groups in society, different individual opinions carry different weight or significance and that the end product of this part of the political process (“the array of views and positions which enter into the consideration of those who have to take action on public opinion”) deserves to be studied. Political scientists will immediately recognise the point being made and the research agenda it implies. The fact is that this research theme has been pursued by political scientists throughout the twentieth century under such rubrics as group analysis (Bentley, 1908; Truman, 1951), decision and non-decision making (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962), interest articulation (Almond and Powell, 1966) and elite-mass linkage (Luttbeg, 1968; Eulau and Prewitt, 1973), to name but a few. Thus, what the present critique does is to draw attention to certain research questions which, while they are of some importance, are neither new nor under-researched. This would have been a useful, though hardly a pathbreaking, exercise, were it not accompanied by the rather dogmatically asserted *non sequitur* that pursuit of these questions supersedes and dispenses with the necessity of finding out what the attitudes of the aggregate and the various sub-aggregates of individuals in a society are. It is true that there are certain situations and certain issues in which some individuals are more influential than others. It follows from this that the attitudes of such individuals in such situations are in some sense more important than those of the majority. One cannot, however, logically infer from this that the attitudes of the majority of ordinary individuals do not matter at all in such contexts and can be ignored. As we have already noted, this raises the issue of the significance of individual attitudes – the issue which we take up in Part III.

This brings us to the second question: has the tradition of attitude research ignored the existence of groups and of elites? In the previous paragraph we accepted, for the sake of argument, the sharp distinction drawn between traditional attitude research which allegedly focuses exclusively on individuals and the author’s revisionist approach which would concentrate on a group level of analysis. In point of fact, of course, it is extremely naïve to suggest

that the attitude research tradition ignores the existence of groups or of stratification in society. This can be concretely illustrated from Paper No. 97. In our Introduction, we emphasised the importance of a variety of ways in which public opinion is expressed and pointed out that our research should be seen as complementary to those processes rather than as an alternative to them. As examples of such processes, we listed elections, representations to elected representatives, local and national party organisations, *ad hoc* and institutionalised pressure groups, and a free press (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 19). This is hardly the view of a research tradition which is oblivious of groups and their role in society. A more fundamental point is that all good attitude research constantly seeks to break the aggregate of individuals into groups of various sorts – socio-economic groups, organisational groups, the influential and the less influential, etc. Again, an example can be taken from Paper No. 97. In analysing the correlates of various attitudes, we asked whether the more politically attentive and involved stratum of the society was distinctive in its attitudes to Northern Ireland and, if so, in what way? We argued that the relevance of this question lies in the fact that this stratum can be seen as being made up of intermediate level opinion leaders to whom political leaders are likely to be more attentive and who may, in turn, exercise an influence on the attitudes and views of others. We described the results of this analysis as follows:

Those who describe themselves as very or quite interested in politics and who report that they discuss politics very or fairly often with their friends are firstly more anti-partitionist. In so far as this group can be seen as acting as intermediate level leaders of opinion, the effect of their activity is to maintain this central aspect of the traditional nationalist outlook. If such a flow of influence can be assumed, then its impact is not confined to attitude to partition. The more involved stratum differs from the less involved on both dimensions of attitude to the IRA, in both instances in a pro-IRA direction (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, p. 115).

We have quoted this aspect of our data analysis at some length to underline the fact that the critique's conception of the attitude research approach as a research method "which gives equal weight and equal significance to the opinion of each individual in the society" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 54) is a straw-man which is far removed from the practice of our research and, we might add, from that of the attitude research tradition in general.

### III THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES

The author's arguments and his implicit alternative research approach raise

two important general issues regarding the significance of individual attitudes. The first and more immediate issue is the role of individual attitudes in the policy process. The second issue relates to the origin of individual attitudes and in particular to the role of elites in the process of attitude formation.

As already noted, the critique's discussion of the nature of public opinion concentrates on the group processes and structures which mediate between the aggregate of individuals in a society and the decision makers. In this context the emphasis is placed on the role of "trade unions, employers' groups, political parties and other interest groups" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 53). Attention is also drawn to the impact of the opinions of those in "structurally important positions", opinions which, it is maintained, are "of far more consequence than those of the majority" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 54). This raises the question of whether we should bother at all with the attitudes and opinions of this majority or of the aggregate of individuals in the society. The author's apparent answer to this question is that we should not bother. At least this is what seems to be implied in his equation of public opinion with group opinion and in his conclusion that "attitude surveys, which in their choice of a research method, attribute equal significance to individuals are unsuitable to the study of public attitudes and public opinions" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 54). It is implied also in his final clarion call for a "decisive break" with the attitude research tradition.

What is strange about all this is that, in what purports to be a hard-headed, realistic account of public opinion, there is scarcely a mention of the electoral process. Indeed, in so far as there is any mention of it, that mention is oblique and dismissive. Thus, he quotes Shepard's argument that attitude researchers have adopted the egalitarian democratic principle of 'one man, one vote, one value' and have amended it to read 'one man, one opinion, one value' and then comments: "despite the appeal of such ideas, they are, to my mind, basically untenable" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 53). Now the notion of 'one man, one vote, one value' is not just a principle, it happens to have been institutionalised in a structure of competitive elections in a significant minority of the contemporary world's political systems. This structure does not by any means account for all the linkages between individual opinions and the policy process, and as a linkage process it is itself quite complex and in some respects even tenuous. Despite these qualifications, the fact remains that electoral structures are fundamental in any account of the nature and role of public opinion. When these structures are taken into consideration, the significance of individual opinions across quite a wide range of problems and issues is much greater than the McCullagh approach seems to allow. As Anthony King puts it in concluding a recent review of this issue:

If, however, one firm conclusion can be drawn from the last two chapters of the present volume, it is that elections count for a very great deal in the life of democratic nations. They frequently settle major constitutional issues; they influence, even determine, the structure of party systems; they can force changes of government; their results have a far greater impact on the content of public policy than is often supposed. Indeed the present volume, taken as a whole, should have the effect of vindicating the amount of attention that political scientists have paid ever since the 1940s to the forces shaping electoral choice (King, 1981, p. 322).

The vote for National H-Block Committee candidates in the 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland aptly illustrates the importance of the attitudes of individuals. The extent of this vote, averaging 10 per cent in the relevant constituencies,<sup>7</sup> was completely at variance with the expectations of elite opinion. It was achieved despite the fact that the elite was in a position to limit H-Block candidates' access to one of the chief so-called opinion-forming instruments.<sup>8</sup> It produced very significant effects, i.e., the election to Dáil Éireann of two abstentionist H-Block candidates, which fundamentally affected the composition of the Dáil and ultimately even of the government. All of this can only be seen as the product of attitudes which were so strongly held by ordinary individuals that they were expressed in voting behaviour despite all the contrary pressures. It is worth emphasising that this argument as to the importance of individual attitudes holds irrespective of how one interprets the underlying attitude, i.e., whether as a humanitarian attitude or as a pro-IRA attitude.

On the face of it, indeed, there seems to be no way of choosing between the foregoing competing explanations of the H-Block vote, unless that is, one can bring further information to bear on the issue. By way of illustrating not just the relevance of attitudes and attitude research as such but also the relevance of the particular attitude research reported in Paper No. 97, it may be worth pursuing this issue a little further. From the research reported in Paper No. 97 we know that attitude to the IRA is related to residence in

7. For this and subsequent electoral statistics, see *Election Results and Transfer of Votes in General Election (June 1981) for Twenty-second Dáil and Bye-Elections to Twenty-first Dáil (1977-81)*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1981.

8. A Ministerial Order made under Section 16 of the 1976 Amendment to the 1960 Broadcasting Act prohibits RTE from broadcasting interviews with certain categories of persons including members of the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Féin. This affected both H-Block party political broadcasts and the usual news and current affairs interviews with candidates and their spokesmen.

areas adjacent to the border with Northern Ireland, and to political party affiliation. Residents of border areas are more likely to have pro-IRA attitudes. In terms of party affiliation, Fine Gael party identifiers are less likely than Fianna Fail or Labour identifiers to have pro-IRA attitudes (Davis and Sinnott, 1979, pp. 110-124). A regional analysis of the first preference vote for National H-Block Committee candidates shows that it too is related to border-non-border residence.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, an examination of the destination of the transferred votes of eliminated H-Block candidates shows that H-Block voters were more likely to have been Fianna Fail or Labour Party supporters than Fine Gael supporters.<sup>10</sup> With this additional information one can return to the question of choosing between a humanitarian and a pro-IRA interpretation of the H-Block vote. If we assume that it is improbable that humanitarian concern would show just these same relationships to regional and party affiliation variables, then we have grounds for accepting the interpretation that the H-Block vote contained a significant pro-IRA component.

Regardless of this issue, however, the fundamental point is that the attitudes of individuals *not* in structurally important positions played a significant role. Indeed, given the impact of individual H-Block votes, and therefore of individual opinions on the composition of the 22nd Dáil, it is ironic that, in the context of attitudes in the Republic to the Northern Ireland problem, Mr McCullagh should regard the idea of 'one man, one opinion, one value' as basically untenable.

One might add that the difficulty in the argument of the critique would seem to be deeper than either mere oversight in regard to elections or even a dismissal of the electoral process. Referring to organised groups and to the

9. The average H-Block first preference vote in the three border constituencies (Cavan-Monaghan, Louth and Sligo-Leitrim) was 15 per cent, whereas in the six non-border constituencies (Clare, Cork North Central, Dublin West, Kerry North, Longford-Westmeath and Waterford), their average vote was 7.5 per cent.

10. Five of the seven H-Block eliminations were in situations of straight contests between the three main parties – three involved Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour and two involved Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. In both the three-party and two-party contests, Fine Gael was under-represented in the share-out of H-Block transfers in comparison to its usual share of the first preference vote. In the three-party situation the ratio was Fianna Fail 52, Labour 27 and Fine Gael 21 (note that Fine Gael comes in third) and in the two-party context the average ratio was Fianna Fail 60, Fine Gael 40. The margin of Fine Gael under-representation is all the greater, given the swing to that party in the election as a whole. In contrast to Fine Gael's under-representation, it is notable that the Labour Party performs considerably above par in terms of receipt of H-Block transfers. Of the two other H-Block eliminations, one (Waterford) involved a contest between Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin the Workers' Party, the other (Cork North-Central) involved an intra-Fianna Fail contest. Thus, neither case is directly relevant to comparison of receipts of H-Block transfers by the three major parties. It is, however, interesting to note that in Cork North-Central, over half the H-Block votes went to Fianna Fail – the rest becoming non-transferable.

role of the individual in "the formation and expression of public opinion", the article says: "In this case, as in many others, the individual is only to a very limited extent a sociologically significant unit" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 54). The argument which we have just made in regard to elite mass linkage in the wider society could also be made, *mutatis mutandis*, in regard to the links between elites and followers in sub-groups within the society. The point surely is that the sociological or any other significance of individual attitude or behaviour is something which should be determined by empirical research rather than settled in what a reader of the critique could be forgiven for assuming to be an a priori manner.

The second aspect of the issue of the significance of individual attitudes relates to how attitudes are formed. In relation to this issue the individual again appears to be treated as a cipher, being cast in a mainly passive role in regard to opinion or attitude formation. The determining influence of elites extends not only to public perception of problems or issues but also to the range of opinions which individuals hold on these issues. Thus it is argued:

What becomes seen as the problem is the result of political processes precipitated and influenced by those in a society who are most vocal, most influential and who have access to resources for disseminating opinions or influencing decisions. Such groups have the influence to set the problems about which the public will be concerned and also to delineate the range of opinions that will be available on these issues (McCullagh, 1981, p. 47).

In the following paragraph it is not just the political agenda or the range of opinions which are controlled by elites, but the very opinions themselves, in that attitude researchers are said to be "simply measuring how successful certain powerful interest groups have been in disseminating their views on these questions". Finally, the author quotes Hartjen approvingly to the effect that public opinion is "little more than a reflection of what those having the ability to employ the media for their own benefit want the public to believe" (McCullagh, 1981, p. 47). It is remarkable that this argument should be put forward in the context of the attitudes identified in Paper No. 97. This is so because the vociferous and emphatic denial of certain findings in our report by "the most vocal, most influential" people with "access to resources for disseminating opinions" suggests that, in this area at least, public opinion is not a reflection of what elites believe it ought to be, thus casting considerable doubt on the proposition that such elites have the capacity to "delineate the range of opinions that will be available" on issues. This is, admittedly, only one instance. It suggests, however, that it would be best to treat the author's various propositions about the degree to which elites can control public

opinion as hypotheses to be tested. The problem is that his very large assumptions about the extent to which elites can control the attitudes of individuals do not seem to be conducive to an empirical approach. While we would advocate that his theory of elite manipulation of attitudes and opinions should be tested, we would also note that there are alternative accounts of the formation of attitudes which are, in our view, more fruitful. We have explored one such approach and tested some hypotheses derived from it in a recent article (Sinnott and Davis, 1981).

#### IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have examined Mr McCullagh's critique of the applied attitude research tradition as he finds that tradition embodied in ESRI Paper No. 97. His discussion of the problems of applied attitude research is built around what he considers to be four assumptions required by the research approach and exemplified in our Paper. As to the first three assumptions, we have shown that they are simply not prerequisites of applied attitude research. Such research does not assume consensus as to problem definition. It does not assume that attitudes are necessarily consistent and immutable. Finally, it does not assume that the analytic process is a matter of letting "facts speak for themselves", or of letting "survey data describe itself" – in other words, the attitude research tradition is fully cognisant of the role of interpretation in the analysis of data. The author is quite right in criticising the three assumptions of consensus, consistency/immutability and purely descriptive approach. Where he errs is in attributing these assumptions to attitude research in general or to our research in particular. He is in effect attacking three rather rickety straw-men.

The fourth prong of his attack on attitude research is based on a definition of public opinion different from that which is commonly accepted. While this is also irrelevant as a critique of the attitude research approach, this aspect of his discussion is somewhat more interesting in so far as it adverts to some valid research questions. The point is, however, that these questions and those pursued by the attitude research tradition are not mutually exclusive. Not only can they be pursued as independent but complementary research strategies, the attitude research tradition has in fact always incorporated some aspects of the questions mentioned by Mr McCullagh in its own approach.

In contrast to the position adopted by the author in his final clarion call for a "decisive break" with the attitude research tradition, we do not conclude from our examination of the issues raised by his preferred approach that he should not embark on his research project. On the contrary, we would encourage him in his pursuit and our discussion of what we see as the problems involved in his approach is put forward in a spirit of constructive criticism.



In this regard we are considerably reassured by his high estimate of his own discipline (sociology). Given the "theoretical innovativeness of its practitioners" and the "high levels of the critical sophistication which exist in Irish sociology", to which he refers, there can be little doubt but that the problems which we have noted will be readily overcome.

The significance of policy related attitude research, however, hinges on the significance of individual attitudes and we have considered this issue in Part III of this article. Attitudes are significant in a policy sense, first, because of their potential implications and consequences for decision making at all levels and, secondly, because they are not mere creatures of elite manipulation but have a certain force of their own. This latter point does not, however, imply that they are immutable. As emphasised in Paper No. 97, a major presupposition of our research, and, indeed, a fundamental part of the justification of applied attitude research as such, is the view that attitudes can be transformed by the exercise of political leadership. It is our belief that events since the publication of our report have underlined the importance of this point in that, had a determined effort then been made to influence attitudes in a more responsible direction, some of the more adverse consequences flowing from the existence of the attitudes we identified might have been avoided.

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## APPENDIX

Opening questions of interview schedule employed during pilot interviews for the study "Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland Relevant to the Northern Ireland Problem".

1. I would like to begin in a general sort of way – what do you see as the most important problem facing the country at the present time?

IF R MENTIONS N. IRL. AS MIP GO DIRECT TO 3.

2. What should be done about this in your view?

Now among a number of problems, of which the one we have just been talking about is one, we are especially interested at the moment in the problem of Northern Ireland and I would like to talk to you a bit about it.

3. What do you think is the basic problem in Northern Ireland.

IF NECESSARY, i.e., IF CAUSE NOT *EXPLICITLY* MENTIONED

4. What would you say is the main cause of the problem in Northern Ireland?
- .....

## IF SPECIFIC SOLUTION MENTIONED IN ANSWER TO 3 ABOVE

9. What can be done to bring about \_\_\_\_\_ as a solution to the problem?

## OTHERWISE

10. What can be done to tackle the problem?

## IF R IS NEGATIVE OR VERY PESSIMISTIC IN ANSWER TO 9 or 10

11. Are there any steps at all which you would feel would bring us nearer to a solution?

## IF NECESSARY

12. Who should be mainly involved in trying to find a solution?