Editorial

'Trends in Methods' is really too comprehensive a title for a special issue containing articles on soft methods, time-use studies, and action research. There is a trend, however, an undercurrent one is aware of every now and then.

This undercurrent, which the present issue is for the most part about, has been called, among other things, soft methods – the qualitative approach, non-survey methods, total situation sociology, etc. Not all of the papers presented are connected with this, some only have a tenuous connection.

In time-use analysis, for example, activity is studied rather than attitudes or possessions, but the methods are largely the same as in survey analysis. However, there are connections in the research interests which tend to separate time-use analysis from survey analysis proper.

A very crude distinction of the differences between the soft methods and other approaches might be as follows: Social science research is directed towards finding the causes of a social phenomenon, the means of manipulating this phenomenon, and to suggesting the policy for controlling it, as opposed to social research, which is directed towards finding out what the social phenomenon really is in its totality and then presenting it as truthfully and graphically as possible.

As Breslow Rubin (Worlds of Pain, Basic Books, New York 1976, p. 13) said:

... we need also social science that is so designed – qualitative studies that can capture the fullness of experience, the richness of living. We need work that takes us... into the socio-emotional world in which people are born, live and die – real people with flesh, blood, bones and skeletons.

Of course this distinction has no value when unspecified: so what makes it interesting? – the subject: research into living conditions and the well-being of the people. There really is a world of difference here between seeing the problem as one of manipulation and as one of the real life of the people.

The second orientation is the one which adds fuel to the recurrent interest in qualitative analysis, action research, and the like, where the researcher sheds his 'objective', 'hard', 'quantitative' methodological garb in order to compete with writers and journalists (even though there are many instances of action research being used for manipulative purposes).

And recurrent interest it is: we speak of waves of interest in these methods – waves the history of which should be studied much more thoroughly than has been
done up till now. Of course, before development of the technology of research, the difference between the two interests was not clear enough in the techniques used. After the technology was developed, however, there were some who forever abandoned the 'soft' science, there were some who after a period with quantitative methods went back to using other methods, and there were those who never deviated at all.

The role of social and cultural anthropology in the development and preservation of qualitative methods should not be forgotten. Anthropologists never gave up these methods as sociologists changed over en masse to computers, punch cards and multivariate methods. But, on the other hand, the problems which actually interested anthropologists quite often were nowhere near the interests of present day society, with notable exceptions, of course. Most famous studies in anthropology are not directly relevant to modern society. Only lately has there been a change in this in that anthropologists are now doing more studies dealing with modern society and its problems. (A funny mixture of the tradition of 'exotics' and modern society is Slade Lander's study of a Finnish community (1976): here the interest for an American anthropologist obviously lies in the exotic qualities of Finnish modern living.)

In Scandinavia, Åke Daun is perhaps the best known anthropologist to have studied modern society, suburban life and housing problems using soft methods and from an anthropological background. These studies are extremely interesting and readable (Daun 1974).

It is interesting to note that in recent textbooks on anthropology, where the future of anthropology is assessed, much is expected from technological development, and of the possibility of using anthropologists as government advisers in many central aspects of people's lives (see Friedl-Pfeiffer, Anthropology, Harper, New York 1977). Thus, the lure of 'policy science' is taking a hold of anthropology, too. What this means for the science itself is not difficult to guess: we have it before our eyes – sociology.

In sociology, there was never a complete lapse in the use of qualitative methods: but perhaps the late fifties and sixties could be described as a period when hard methods dominated almost totally (and the few who persisted in using softer techniques, did oddball research, as Webb et al. so aptly put in their book from that period (1973) (1966)).

At present we have quite another situation. There is a general feeling that with quantitative, hard methods we have reached the limit, and that not much more can be achieved with hard methods in the study of the real life of the people. Also, theoretically, the hard methods have proved quite fruitless: it remains to be seen whether qualitative methods are intrinsically better suited for the development of theory.

As regards the legitimacy of soft methods, there is not much discussion now: that this question arose previously reflected the all powerful stature of hard methods in the sixties. Now the interesting question is the methodological status of these methods and the theoretical relevance they have. In this respect positions
vary from where they are regarded as part and parcel of one comprehensive scientific orientation, say phenomenology, to where they are regarded as methods completely dependent on the theoretical approach used. With this view, the important question is whether we have a correct theory, not by which methods we do the concrete investigations pertaining to it.

Here I take a middle position. It seems to me that there are indeed some facts which can only be unearthed by certain methods and that methods are more clearly connected with theories, but this connection is not absolute. For instance a Marxist can use either hard or soft methods, depending on his research subject and aims, but certainly some subjects are more conducive to study by soft methods than others.

It is important to understand that soft research is essentially theory-dependent, that it cannot and should not be used autonomously, independently, as has often been the case. Paradoxical as it may sound, ‘theory’ and hard methods have been together in Anglo-American sociology in the sense that a statistical model (say factor analysis) was understood as the theory of the study (in addition to some abstract distinctions presented at the beginning of a report). Of course, there were the speculative theorists: but we are discussing empirical research here. A qualitative study has always been understood as being more in the non-theoretical descriptive side and some have even discounted its use as a basis for theoretical work.

Of course, soft methods can be used without any obvious theoretical connections, as raw material for further study, somewhat processed primary provided with some explanatory notes as in Thomas-Znaniecki or Riesman (1953) to use already more dated examples. The next step would then be theoretical analysis based on this data, as for instance Riesman did in his Lonely Crowd.

It seems that qualitative analysis functions best as a bridge between raw quantitative data and theoretical analyses, that is, as the link which essentially completes and integrates the analysis – concrete analysis of the concrete reality. This has been attempted by many who have failed; the fate of qualitative analysis, however, depends on its success.

There is one article in particular which pertains directly to the above discussion – Ingalill Eriksson’s discussion on the soft methods debate in Scandinavia. Many of the points made above are also made and documented in Eriksson’s article. There is also an example of a qualitative study by Linn Mo, a discussion on the premises of action research by Paul Oquist and a presentation of time-use research from a more theoretical point of view by Dagfinn Ås. One short discussion about a statistical problem is included, as a reminder of the point of view of quantitative research.

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