

# The Problem of Sample Selection in Co-operative Membership Studies

## A Research Note

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Democratic participation in the government of retail co-operative societies is a question which should be of some concern to all co-operators. The current debate in the Movement about the desirability of regional retail societies brings into consideration the nature and causes of active participation in co-operative democracy. The Co-operative Independent Commission Report argued that the then low level of such participation was "an inevitable consequence of the Movement's growth from a small minority organisation to its present national size." (Report, p.17.) The concern of the Commission was that those members who *did* seek to play an active part in the government of their societies should be representative of the whole membership. If this is the case then democratic government is preserved. Inactive members retain their rights, and can exercise them when they choose to do so.

A survey of T.A.S.C.O.S. members carried out by G. M. Ostergaard and M. Currell of Birmingham University (reported in *Agenda*, June 1960), has shown that unrepresentativeness in terms of demographic characteristics was then the case in that society. This is to be expected, as "this difference is in line with the widely supported generalisation that leadership in voluntary associations is recruited disproportionately from those with high occupational status" (*Agenda*, June 1960, p.40). This study also investigated the reasons for which the members joined their society, and perhaps became activists in the government of their society. If participation is to survive meaningfully into what may be an era of mammoth regional retail societies then continued efforts to examine and understand it are necessary.

At the University of Keele a small study of democratic participation in a Midlands society has been carried out. This has had two objects: an analysis of the structure of the society, in order to determine the social forces inducing continued participation in such a voluntary organisation; and a comparison of the activist member with the ordinary member who only shops or saves with the society concerned.

The comparison itself sought two principal types of information. Firstly, it was to be a check on the representativeness of the active membership in terms of demographic factors, political and social preferences, and degree of commitment to the society. Secondly, it was to examine the relationship of the ordinary member with the society, and thus seek an indication of the causes of active membership, or an explanation of the low level of participation. Although it was hoped that the survey might enlighten and inform discussion about democracy in large retail societies, this was not an aim of the study. Research specifically directed to such a question would need to be designed

differently and might have to await the possible establishment of regional societies. Hypothetical situations such as this kind of study would have to envisage, are notoriously difficult for the sociologist.

This article will give a brief account of the approach taken to the research and also outline some of the problems encountered from a methodological point of view. It is hoped that the latter will be of use to others undertaking research in this field, especially in what has proved to be the vexed question of representative sample selection.

#### THE SCHEDULE

The schedule, or administered questionnaire, used in the study sought to elicit information of the sort described above. It was pretested with regard to each of the groups on which it was to be used: the activists and the ordinary shopping member. The latter were chosen just at the doors of a variety of the society's premises and, if they proved to be a member, asked part or all of the schedule. This process, while not altogether satisfactory, provided a few minor amendments to the projected schedule. With the activists a more serious problem occurred.

The expected small percentage of those who could plausibly be identified as activist members of the society was in fact a good deal smaller than had been foreseen. There was concern that the small numbers involved would not permit the use of precise statistical tests. The number of activists was reduced by the need to pretest the schedule. Those used for the pretest could not be included in the activist sample because of possible bias. The pretesting was likely to have caused consideration of the issues and questions involved. There could be no guarantee that answers to the final schedule would have been uninfluenced by such consideration.

A further reduction of the activist population also occurred. Most of those who had been interviewed as part of the research preliminary to the first draft schedule were activists. It was similarly undesirable to use this group either for pretesting or as respondents.

#### THE SAMPLES

The direct lessons of studies such as the Keele one for geographically large societies must be recognised as limited. This follows from the problem of identifying activists. If there is, as the C.I.C.R. appeared to hope, a potential reserve of co-operative activists, who might appear on a major issue such as regionalisation, their very non-participation in the ordinary democratic processes of their societies makes them unavailable to the researcher. Little can be assumed about them: even their existence is hypothetical.

Activists in the society studied were identified by collecting, over a period of time, lists of those who attended members' meetings and auxiliary meetings. A comparison with the T.A.S.C.O.S. study already cited indicates that the above suspicions are not implausible. Activists in that study were identified by the Education department of the society "on the basis of their knowledge of members who attended business meetings or were members of an auxiliary organisation". (G. N. Ostergaard and A. H. Halsey, *Power in Co-operatives*,

Oxford, 1965, p.243.) Yet "... 29 per cent of the active sample had not attended any of the last eight quarterly meetings . . ." (*Agenda*, June 1960, p.43.)

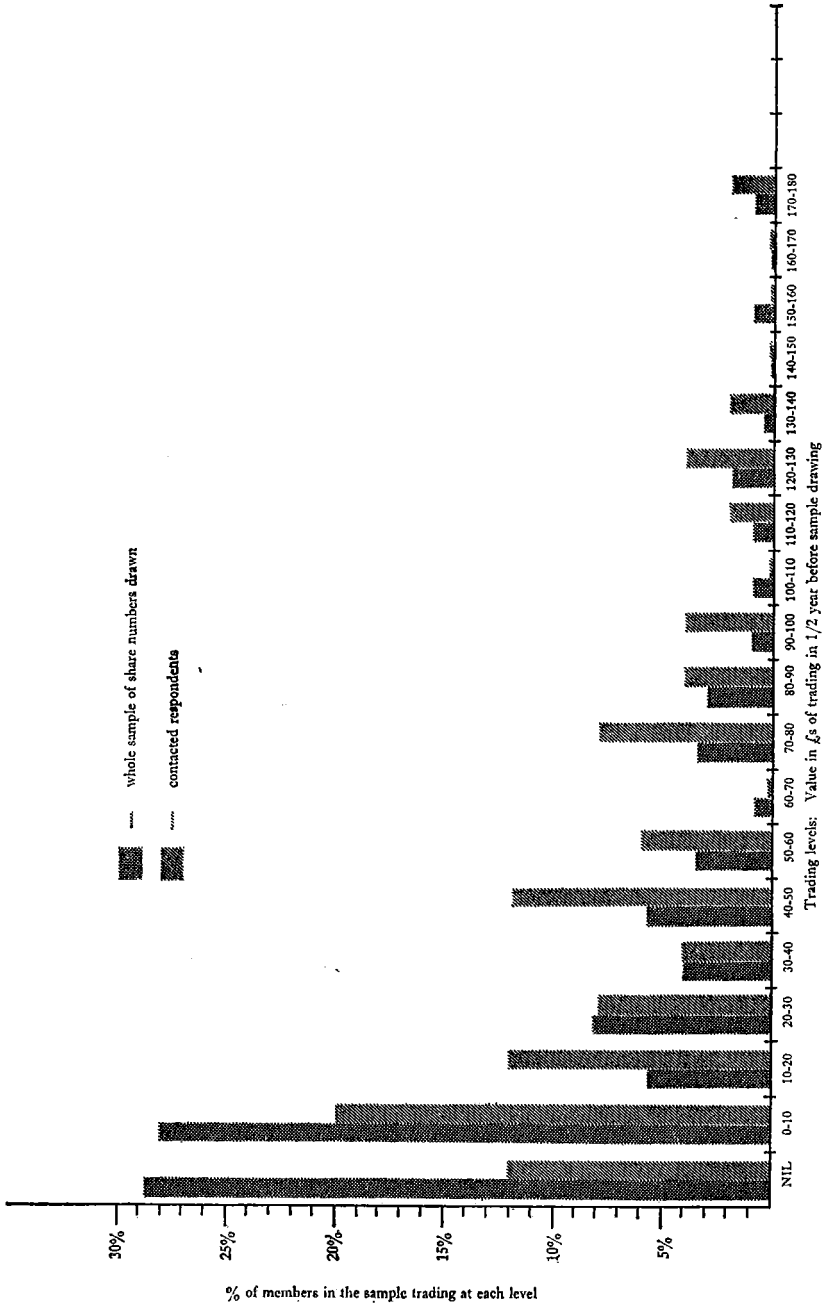
There are clearly serious problems associated with the identification of "activists". If research is to be conducted rigorously, then the limitations in this aspect must be recognised. There would appear to be grounds to argue that the two studies under discussion depend on different samples and populations of active members.

The sample of ordinary members selected for interview was chosen at random from the society's membership list. Its size was dictated by the small number of interviewers available, and was set at 0.01 per cent of the total estimated membership. When it became clear that an extremely low rate of response was occurring, an additional random list of share numbers was chosen. As before, the name and address of the individual to whom each share number had been assigned were ascertained. In addition, certain information about the spending and capital holding of each member was provided. This enabled a check to be made on the accuracy of answers to questions in the schedule.

Other methods of sample selection of ordinary members of the society were considered. One was to take a random selection of the society's premises, to visit these premises on suitable days and to select shoppers just at the door of the premises with as much randomness as possible. Defects in this method are apparent: the probable unrandomness of choice, the omission of members who save and rarely shop, of members who have a weekly delivery made.

Nevertheless, considerable defects became apparent in the method selected. Many addresses, which were given to the society when the member joined, were very old. Not only had street names been changed, and rehousing occurred, but many had otherwise moved inside or to outside the district. Some members had died, up to as much as ten years before. When it was seen to be very troublesome to pursue further a respondent, as much information as possible was found out about the causes of the untraceability. The society has a policy of combing the records about every six years to annul and re-distribute "dead" share numbers. The Rules lay down criteria for such a decision. Many of the share numbers for which it was clearly established that the respondent was dead or had moved out of the district had credited to them trading for the half-year period to which the sample drawing information referred. A number of alternative explanations are available, but there would appear to be no simple way of deciding between them. It is true that most social surveys encounter a measure of non-response some of which proves to be intractable. Nevertheless, the level of non-response which could not be overcome was at a dangerously high level in this case.

The histogram shows, for each level of trading with the society, two percentage values. The first column of each pair is a breakdown of the expenditure pattern of the whole society. It is based on information obtained for all the share numbers. The second column is the expenditure pattern of the respondents to the survey; those members who were actually contacted by the



interviewers. There can be seen to be a difference between those contacted and the whole membership in this respect. The respondents were characterised by a higher level of trading than the whole membership.

It will also be seen that over half of the total sample drawn traded at a rate lower than £10 per half-year. Almost a third of those contacted traded at a similarly low level. It may be that some share numbers found to be effectively "dead" were being accidentally traded on. But it is certainly possible to draw tentative implications for some of the democratic processes in retail societies. The histogram would indicate that many of the members are ineligible for nomination to management boards because of their low trading with their society. This would be a comment upon their ability to participate fully should the occasion arise.

The low level of response, as described above, is partly caused by factors which prejudice democratic processes which depended in any way on contacting members by post. They would also seriously reduce postal promotional efforts carried out by societies.

Of course, it is up to the member to inform his society of any change of address. That this is apparently not done is understandable. It does not solve the researchers' problem of avoiding time-wasting and the often fruitless expenditure of resources and energy. There are perhaps two possible solutions. One, which is the less preferable, is the method known as quota sampling, based in this case on geographical clustering. The other is to stratify a random sample of share numbers by the level of trading done on each number. The sample would be drawn as has been described above, but would then be weighted away from low trading numbers. On the assumption that the society studied in this case is not atypical, a higher trading level indicates the greater probability of contact and response.