Social Research and Sociological Theory: 
Toward an Innovation of Social Analysis through the Questionnaire Method*

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1 Public Opinion Polls and Survey Research as Methods of Social Observation

I entitled this paper “Social Research and Sociological Theory.” Thus, I must start by discussing how I established my argument regarding “social research and sociological theory.” Many arguments might be drawn from this title. My particular interest lies in the social research that is used for building theories of sociology. In this sense, the way I established the argument here is on the same line of R. K. Merton’s discussion on the relationship between empirical research and sociological theory (Merton, 1957).

Next, M. Duverger divides social research, or empirical research, into “methods of analyzing various materials on which social phenomena leave their mark” and “methods of directly observing social phenomena” (Duverger, 1964). The methods I have used thus far include the content analysis method, which is one of the former, and the questionnaire method, which is one of the latter. In this paper, I will focus on the latter. I do so because I think that there are several issues that must be discussed regarding the relationship between the scientific work and its outcomes.

One of these issues is the imbalance between public opinion polls and survey research. Here I would like to position these two techniques within the history of the scientific method, as discussed below. The “method of observing social phenomena” known as the “public opinion poll,” which was largely developed in the US starting in the 1930s, was integrated with what is known as the “causal inference method,” and was methodologically established by P. Lazarsfeld et al. in the 1940s as the “survey research” (Takane, 1979). From another perspective, as suggested by the proverb “necessity is the mother of invention,” techniques for the “description of social phenomena” that were developed based on social needs (which can be divided into ① the political need for surveys to ascertain public opinion in order to maintain the political system of democracy, and ② the economic need for surveys to ascertain the needs of consumers in order to maintain the economic system of a consumer society) ended up being developed into techniques that could meet the “academic need” for “the analysis of social phenomena.” Further, while public opinion polls have been used to examine various timely issues, survey research go further than that, and incorporate aspects of the so-called “General Social Surveys” which examine the various aspects of people’s everyday lives.

A look at the current state of empirical research activities in contemporary Japanese society, as

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compared with the situation in the US and Europe, reveals a distinctive feature, that is, a prevalence of public opinion polls on the one hand, and a stagnation of survey research on the other. Specifically, today in Japan, many public opinion polls are conducted by a variety of institutions, including the national and local governments, the media, polling institutions, and companies. In fact, Japan is a leading country in terms of conducting public opinion polls. In contrast to this prevalence of public opinion polls in the real world, a review of the survey research being performed by universities and research institutions in the various fields of social science, such as sociology, political science and psychology, reveals that Japan is sorely underdeveloped in this regard, particularly compared with the US and Europe. This point is made abundantly clear by an examination of the World Values Survey presided by the University of Michigan in the US, the European Values Studies initiated by Tilburg University in the Netherlands, and the General Social Survey conducted by the University of Chicago in the US and the Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLUBUS) conducted by the GESIS (Gesellschaft für Sozialwissenschaftliche Infrastructure-Einrichtungen) in Germany.

Why is this imbalance between public opinion polls and survey research a problem? I am convinced that it becomes a problem from the perspective of “social research and sociological theory.” Generally speaking, scientific development is achieved through an interaction between models (i.e., theories) and data. If there is too much, or too little, of one or the other, science will not develop (Seki, 1969). In the field of social research on people’s subjective consciousness through public opinion polls, there is a lot of description-oriented data, but little analysis-oriented data; this is not a healthy state of affairs for the development of this field of research. This is because, when looking at the relationship between social research and sociological theory as presented in the discussion by R. K. Merton, the so-called “description of phenomena” (in other words, description-oriented data) alone does not lead to the accumulation of sociological theories (i.e., models).

Thus, my methodological perspective is already clear. My intention is to position the empirical activity of social research (here this refers only to the questionnaire methods of public opinion polls and survey research) in relationship to the scientific work and outcomes from the perspectives of “social research and sociological theory.”

2 The Problems with Public Opinion Polls and Survey Research

In this paper, public opinion polls and survey research are viewed as having no differences insofar as they deal with people’s subjective consciousness (specifically, people’s views, ways of thinking, feelings, and behavioral patterns, or in sociological terms, their attitudes, opinions, and behaviors), but while the former is a method oriented toward the description of people’s subjective consciousness, which was developed based on social needs and focuses on social issues, the latter is a method oriented toward the analysis of people’s subjective consciousness about various aspects of social living, and was developed based on academic needs. However, this kind of differentiation between types is a reflection of M. Weber’s “ideal type”; in reality these two types exist in a complicated mix. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that the problems discussed below are important.

The major factors that must be identified as exacerbating the problems related to these techniques, which will be discussed below, are the global dissemination of public opinion polls and survey research (this might be viewed as an example of “the diffusion of innovation,” an important research topic in the field of sociology) and the heavy use or overuse of public opinion polls and survey re-
search in the various fields of social science.

First, with regard to the former, it is a fact that public opinion polls and survey research techniques that were developed in the US, have been disseminated to regions all over the world. In a sense, again, this might be viewed as an example of a social phenomena explained by the term “cultural imperialism.” The very dissemination of these techniques to countries worldwide is itself quite intriguing from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, but here I will go no further than to point out that this is the case.

Next, with regard to the latter, although a variety of methods of social observation have been developed in the field of social science, particularly in sociology, the questionnaire method “is viewed as the typical method of social research” and “is the most representative research method in contemporary social research” (Naoi, 1985). There have been many arguments regarding the reasons for this. I hypothesize that one of the reasons that the questionnaire method has come into such heavy use (in some cases, overuse) is that, in a field of science like sociology, and where “experiments” as they are conducted in the natural sciences are virtually impossible, both ethically and technically (even though experimental design ideas have been developed), there are many researchers who conveniently try to use the questionnaire method, which has been imbued with authoritative assurance by P. Lazarsfeld et al., rather than boldly try to tackle these kinds of difficult challenges in other ways.

The two trends stated above, that is, the global expansion of the use of the questionnaire method and the priority given to the questionnaire method among the various sociological methods available, are exacerbating the problems involved in working with these techniques.

So, what are those problems? Here I distinguish between public opinion polls and survey research on the one hand, while looking at the common qualities they both share on the other. I use the phrase “questionnaire method” to include both of these techniques. It is the problems with the questionnaire method that I will discuss below. Simply stated, these problems can be summarized in the following two points.

First, a look at the trend toward the heavy use (or overuse) of the questionnaire method suggests the need for a re-examination of the effectiveness of this method. To state the conclusion first, there are some social phenomena that are well suited to inquiry using the questionnaire method, and some that are not. P. L. Berger and T. Luckman conceptually divide the realities of social phenomena into “objective reality” and “subjective reality” (Berger and Luckman, 1966). If we start from this distinction, then it is subjective reality that is best suited for inquiry using the questionnaire method. Naturally a different method should be used for inquiring into objective reality. However, the questionnaire method is often used even to look at this aspect of social phenomena. This is what I find problematic. On the other hand, the questionnaire method has been criticized for not always allowing people to honestly reply their thoughts. However, I have emphasized the fact that the questionnaire method is extremely effective in ascertaining the so-called “recesses of the human heart (the structure of people’s subjective consciousness)”, that is, the “truths” that exist within the “lies” of survey responses, as will be discussed below.

The other is the fact that the questionnaire method has expanded worldwide, a fact regarding which I have developed the following hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire method was developed to ascertain people’s subjective consciousness. Human beings created the concept of temperature, and then developed a tool called a thermometer to measure that concept as objectively as possible. By the same token, the questionnaire method was proposed to measure people’s views, ways of thinking,
feelings, and behavioral patterns. During the ice age, when many parts of the world were covered in a thick layer of ice, the types of thermometers in use today would be completely ineffective. Of course, such a tool would have to be calibrated to measure much lower temperatures, and the calibrations for higher temperatures on today’s thermometers would be unnecessary. Today’s thermometers were created on the premise of offering convenience to many people. The questionnaire method is based on the premise of American society and the American culture in which it was developed. Nonetheless, this method has come to be used in many countries and regions around the world. Is this because those many countries and regions have come to find this to be a useful measurement instrument, or has it come to be used forcibly or without reflection, and without any examination of its effectiveness? My hypothesis is that the current situation is a result of a complex mixture of both of these reasons. On the one hand, as suggested by the discussion about “cultural imperialism,” there is the idea that since the so-called American views, ways of thinking, feelings, and behavioral patterns have permeated places all over the world, the questionnaire method developed in the US will be effective in places all over the world. On the other, there is the idea that under the overwhelming influence of “empirical research based on public opinion polls and survey research,” which the most typical form of the “American type of sociology” (Merton, 1957) that has largely developed in the postwar period, worldwide research is beginning to be assimilated toward that type, and as a result, these techniques are being rapidly introduced without any methodological examination.

The above ideas are hypothetical, and I have not prepared systematic materials and data for offering proof or confirming these ideas. However, it would be highly interesting to conduct a case study to see how each country came to accept the American method, and the most typical techniques of that method, public opinion polls and survey research, in the postwar period.

In the case of Japan, for example, the introduction of the public opinion poll was promoted after World War II by the GHQ (general headquarters, led by the US military) and the Civil Information and Education (CIE) department. The most notable among the various training activities related to public opinion polls conducted under US leadership was the Passin School. Herbert Passin, who would later become a professor at Columbia University studied Japanese at an army Japanese language school during WWII, and as the manager of the CIE’s Public Opinion and Sociological Research Unit, he had an impact on many scholars and scientists at Japanese universities and research institutions. He is also said to have trained many professionals and practitioners in the media and in survey institutions. Thus, it was under American leadership that the foundations were built for the Japanese public opinion polls that would come later (Hayashi, ed., 1986).

At the beginning of this paper, I made a conceptual distinction between public opinion poll and survey research from the perspective of the history of science. What must be emphasized here is the fact that in the early days of the postwar period, survey researches were already starting to be conducted along with above-mentioned public opinion polls. These included the Social Stratification and Social Mobility Survey (SSM Survey) led by Saburo Yasuda, followed by the Survey of the National Character of the Japanese, conducted by the Institute for Statistical Mathematics under the leadership of Chikio Hayashi. I will not discuss the specific content of these surveys here, but I want to confirm that an effort to trace the lineage of survey activities in Japan conducted using the questionnaire method as one method of observing social phenomena, reveals two separate paths that were followed: the path of survey research conducted by scholars and scientists, centered around universities and research institutions, and the path of public opinion polls conducted by professionals and practitioners,
centered around the media and polling institutions. It is important to note that American methods exerted a tremendous influence on both of these paths. Of course, as indicated by the proposition of “Seinsverbundenheit des Wissens” in the sociology of knowledge, this raises concern about problems that may occur (problems like those that would occur if a thermometer created during the ice age were to be used in a tropical climate today) when, in spite of the fact that American methods are premised on American culture and society, and thus can be expected to be limited in their scope of applicability, such methods are used beyond the original cultural and social frameworks within which they were developed.

There are not many empirical studies that can directly address this concern. This is likely a result of the fact that the effectiveness of the American method has been viewed as self-evident (metaphorically speaking, as the global standard), and any scientific work that would normally be invoked to doubt such an idea and empirically verify that doubt has been neglected. My use of the expression “assimilation process” toward the American method with regard to social research activities using the questionnaire method in postwar Japan is based precisely on this historical background.

In terms of the logic of science, when inquiring certain phenomenon (subject), the general procedure is first to carefully ascertain the nature of that phenomenon (subject) by observing it, and then to develop techniques for describing, classifying, and measuring that phenomenon. This also applies to the questionnaire method, as a tool for measuring people’s views, ways of thinking, feelings, and behavioral patterns. When measuring a certain phenomenon (subject) in Japan, the first step is to re-examine the results of various types of intensive observations of the ways of thinking, feelings, and behavioral patterns of the Japanese people (many of which we already have as our intellectual inventory). Then, if something unique to Japan is found, a questionnaire method unique to Japan should be developed. This kind of examinations and efforts to develop such a method has thus far been inadequate. In fact, I would argue that this problem has not yet even been adequately recognized.

In recent years, the above-mentioned issues have begun to be examined empirically, not viewed simply as a matter of impression. One of these empirical efforts was the Research into the Methodology of Intercultural Surveys (MINTS) Project. This project was launched as a joint research project between Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen (ZUMA) in Mannheim, Germany, and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago in the US, and later the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute and I also participated in that project (Mohler, Smith, and Harkness, 1998; Manabe, 2003; Onodera, 2002).

As part of this project, an empirical pilot study (a personal interview survey using a questionnaire) was conducted in the US, Germany, and Japan to examine the cross-national equivalence of expressions (including translation problems) used on response scales of the questionnaires. The central issue in this empirical study was to have respondents decide the response options expressing the degree of each of the following, which are often used as response scales in the questionnaire method: (1) agree/disagree, (2) important/unimportant, and (3) for/against, on a scale from 0 to 20. The respondents evaluated the expressions used in the various response options from the perspective of the “degree of strength.” Thus, for example, on the agree/disagree scale, the respondents were expected to rate the expression “completely agree” as a 20, and “completely disagree” as a 0.

The results were as follows. Because there was additional complexity created by translation problems in the Japanese survey, I will begin with a comparison of the survey results in the US and Germany. The English phrase “Disagree a little” has been translated into German as “Lehne ein bisschen
ab.” However, the average ratings of respondents in the US and Germany on each of these phrases were 7.10 and 6.57, respectively, indicating that the average rating given by the US respondents was somewhat higher than that given by their German counterparts. The issue here is that although “Disagree a little” and “Lehne ein bisschen ab” are equal in word symmetry, they are not so in respondents’ ratings. Translating the English phrase “Disagree a little” as “Lehne ein bisschen ab” in German is a structurally equivalent translation pairing, which was believed the most appropriate way of performing the translation. However, this was not supported by the respondents’ ratings. This suggests that when creating response scales for surveys, it is inadequate to believe that a strict translation will result in the best survey. The big problem here is that while the phrase “Disagree a little” is a natural English phrase, “Lehne ein bisschen ab” is a phrase that did not originally exist in German, but was artificially created to be used specifically on surveys, in conjunction with the introduction of American response options. It must be noted that American methods also exerted a significant influence on public opinion polls and survey research in postwar Germany.

So, what is the response scale situation in the case of Japan? With the aid of the Public Opinion Poll Yearbook: The Current State of Public Opinion Polls Nationwide (an annual publication of the Public Relations Office of the Cabinet Office that reports on the implementation status of public opinion polls in Japan), I tried to sort out the response scales that are in widespread use in Japanese public opinion polls and survey research. Upon doing so, I noticed the following difference in trends with regard to these two types of surveys. Specifically, let’s assume that a survey question asks “Would you approve or disapprove of your own child getting married to a foreigner?” The response options on a survey research would be expressed in five options, lined up symmetrically between the approval and disapproval ends: (1) strongly approve (2) somewhat approve (3) neither approve nor disapprove (4) somewhat disapprove, and (5) strongly disapprove. On a public opinion poll, by contrast, the response options would be (1) approve (2) somewhat approve, and (3) disapprove, with no further division with regard to strength on the “disapprove” end of the scale. Of course, this observation is based solely on personal experiences, and this trend must be systematically, objectively, and quantitatively examined, but nonetheless, it is worth noting that Japanese public opinion polls generally use this kind of three-response scale. Perhaps this means that the influence of the American method is more noticeable in the survey research conducted by universities and research institutions than in public opinion polls, which are generally conducted by the media and polling institutions. This should be examined more fully in future empirical studies. However, it must be said that attempting to achieve Japan’s own unique type of conceptualization and operationalization around various themes, based on observations of the views, ways of thinking, feelings, and behavior patterns of Japanese people is the most important task in the practice of social research based on the questionnaire method in Japan today.

3 Possibilities for the Questionnaire Method

Thus far I have discussed the problems with the questionnaire method. More accurately speaking, however, the real problem is not the questionnaire method itself, but the way the questionnaire method is used. The questionnaire method is a tool for ascertaining people’s subjective reality; it is a tool to which improvements must be made according to the various subjective realities it is intended to measure. Trying to understand the questionnaire method not in the form in which it is used, but in the form in which it should be used, can lead to a renewed recognition of the great potential that lies within
I stated earlier that the questionnaire method is an effective method for ascertaining the “recesses of the human heart (the structure of people’s subjective consciousness)”. I would like to proceed by looking at this element more closely. To do this, I will present an example of a survey on the topic of “political involvement and political information.” I will focus on the analysis of the relationship between two of the question items included in that survey, as shown in the table below (Manabe, 1985).

The vertical axis of this table consists of the categories of respondents who responded to the question “To what extent are you interested in newspaper or television reports on politics?” by selecting each of the response options “Extremely interested,” “Very interested,” “Not very interested,” and “Not at all interested” (labeled “Level of Interest in Political Information”). The horizontal axis consists of the categories of respondents based on their responses to five questions aimed at ascertaining their level of political knowledge by asking them to provide the names of politicians. Those who answered all five questions correctly received a knowledge level score of 5, while those who answered all five questions incorrectly received a knowledge level score of 0 (labeled “Level of Political Knowledge”). These results show the following general trend: as the level of political knowledge rises, the level of interest in political information also rises. However, if we direct our attention to the so-called “deviant cases” that do not follow the basic pattern in the relationship between two variables, a different trend, albeit slight, becomes visible. While 0% of respondents (vertical %) with the highest level of political knowledge indicated no interest at all in political information, the percentage of those with the lowest level of political knowledge, who indicated that they are extremely interested in politics was 8% (vertical %). It is possible that the responses of this 8% constitute a kind of “lie,” for example, a lie in the form of a “response to look good” or an “exemplary response.” However, it is interesting that this kind of lie is only observed in the direction of “having interest,” but is not observed in the direction of “having no interest.” That is, there were no respondents who indicated no interest in political information in spite of showing a high level of knowledge. Had such respondents existed, their lie would have been interpreted as an indicator of their “nihilism” or “cynicism.” A variety of cases have been reported of similar survey results. One of those was a survey of voting behavior in an election. In many cases, the voting rate reported by post-election surveys that ask voters “Did you vote in this election or not?” is higher than the actual voting rate.

What these survey results suggest is that “social norms,” such as the idea that “It is a good thing for people to have an interest in political information,” or “It is good for people to vote in elections” really permeate people’s hearts, such that even in the case of responses to an artificial stimulus like a survey, those norms emerge as the “truth within the lie.” In other words, claiming to be interested in political information, even when one is not, or claiming to have voted, even when one has not, may

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<tr>
<th>Level of Interest in Political Information</th>
<th>Level of Political Knowledge</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extremely interested</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very interested</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very interested</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all interested</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Table 1  Relationship between the Level of Interest in Political Information and the Level of Political Knowledge (Manabe, 1985: 82)  

(%)
be lies, but the truth of the internalization of such social norms within the respondent nonetheless emerges out of that lie.

The kind of response trend described above is known in the field of social research as the “socially desirable response,” but the issues of interest here are the perspective contained within the “recesses of the human heart (the structure of people’s subjective consciousness)” and the notion that the questionnaire method is an extremely effective method for ascertaining this type of information. The problem cannot be explained by socially desirable responses only. For example, A. S. Edelstein found through the analysis of the results of a public opinion poll among US citizens regarding the Vietnam War, that “if the question was framed such that respondents had to choose their answers from among the response options given, 80% or 90% of respondents showed that they have “an opinion” about the war. However, we cannot know from their responses what the actual meaning of their opinions are, given the many different shapes and textures possible, ranging from mere flattery toward the interviewer, to reluctant tacit approval, agreement, or active support” (Schiller, 1973; Edelstein, 1973). In this way, Edelstein gave a sharp criticism of the method of public opinion polls used thus far, particularly of the structure of questionnaires and their wordings. Edelstein thus tried to develop his own new method (Manabe, 2003).

His basic perspective is called the “situational approach,” which calls for the use of open-ended question items. This approach was developed in opposition to the “attitudinal approach.” Of course, the concept of a “situation” has long been used in the field of sociology. A “situation” refers to those consciously recognized aspects of an environment surrounding an individual that are understood to be meaningful based on the interests of that individual, as the actor.

The uniqueness of Edelstein’s perspective lies in the fact that he applied the concept of situation, a traditional concept in the field of sociology, to the questionnaire survey method, or more specifically, to the creation of open-ended question items. That is, when a person responds to a closed-ended question regarding a particular matter, his/her response does no more than inform the researcher of his/her most general attitudes toward that issue. That alone does not provide any information about the degree of the respondent’s situationalization of that matter (for example, in a truly existential sense, whether the respondent is self-involved in that matter). The idea is that the use of open-ended questions facilitates an understanding of the respondent’s actual and deep psychological involvement in the matter in question.

Using this idea and open-ended question items, a survey was conducted to ascertain the relationship between the “level of situationalization of social problems” and “contact with the media” among the residents of three cities in Yugoslavia. The results revealed that “the respondents with higher levels of situationalization had higher levels of contact with many sources of information, among which the print media was identified by those respondents as the most useful” (Edelstein, 1974). Edelstein developed this method even further. To address the question of how respondents define a “problematic situation” in their open-ended responses, he conducted an examination through a detailed analysis of many different survey researches, and constructed problematic situations with six categories: (1) loss of value, (2) lack of value, (3) institutional breakdown, (4) conflict, (5) creating alternatives, and (6) indeterminacy.

What makes Edelstein’s method unique is his idea of linking the specific problems described in daily expressions with the above-mentioned categories indicating how those problems have been situationalized. Specifically, respondents were first asked, “What do you think is an important problem
your country is currently facing?”, and then they were asked, “Please explain in as much detail as possible why that is a problem.” The former is a “nominally defined problem”, while the latter is a “problematic situation.” If a respondent would give “trade friction between the US and Japan,” as an example of a nominally defined problem, there would be significant differences in their responses to why this is a problem. The answer “It is a problem because it makes it hard to manage the company I work for, and my bonuses have been cut” is the way to construct the problematic situation of a loss of value (a loss of value that one previously had). The response, “I have always wanted to be in charge of international communication at my company and achieve self-actualization, but the company doesn’t have any equivalent department, and in this critical situation, I cannot demonstrate my skills,” is a way to construct the problematic situation of a lack of value (lack of the value, which should be intrinsic to a company, of providing employees with a place for self-actualization and benefiting from doing so).

There is no room to provide specific examples for all of the categories, but Edelstein’s method of conceptual construction regarding these two aspects of values (that is, “loss of a value that one previously had” and “lack of a value that should be there”), his theoretical perspective that led to these aspects, and his development of open-ended question items to empirically grasp these aspects are all highly suggestive not only in terms of the methodological issues related to the development of the questionnaire method, but also in terms of the substantive issues of values studies, which have begun to produce many results in recent years.

In joint international comparative studies conducted in the US, Germany, Japan, and Hong Kong, respondents in Japan and Hong Kong have a stronger tendency than those in the US and Germany to construct problematic situations based on the aspect of the loss of value (Edelstein, et al., 1989). Later, Edelstein and I tried to conduct a joint study focused on a comparison of the responses to open-ended questions versus closed-ended questions, in regard to the aspects of the construction of the six problematic situations (Edelstein & Manabe, 1987). Cultivating the seeds of Edelstein’s idea is also important from the perspective of what is being referred to here as “the relationship between empirical research and sociological theory.”

Why is it important? Because the efforts of “conceptualization and operationalization” of subjective reality in these kinds of social phenomena may make the “scientification” of sociology possible, that is, they make it possible for sociology to be approached for the first time “as a science.” According to D. Martindale, sociology inherited its perspectives from philosophy, its materials from the study of history, and its methods from the natural sciences. This is the reason why sociology is regarded as one field of science. Some of the characteristics of a “science” include the general adherence to “objectivism,” “logicism,” “positivism,” and “universalism.” (Martindale, 1960). However, I would like to emphasize the element of “reproducibility,” that is, the attribute that makes it possible for anyone to achieve the same results if they follow specific analytical procedures, and “a clear correspondence relationship between conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement.” This kind of scientification of sociology, even if it occurs in one aspect of the development of sociology, does not apply to the field as a whole. I always highly appreciate the intellectual activities of outside of science, as well as the inquiry of non-scientific directions within the field of sociology. Science is not always perfect. Rather, it is a system of limited knowledge based on certain methodological “promises.” However, that does not mean it can be rejected outright, either. The questionnaire method makes it possible for these aspects of scientification to contribute to the cumulative knowledge regarding people’s subjective
consciousness.

How is this possible? I will address this point by invoking an idea of Saburo Yasuda, which is already regarded as a classic in this field. In other words, it is the idea of “the confirmation of dimension.” The scientification of research on social phenomena, particularly their subjective reality, is only possible by the intellectual exploration known as “the confirmation of dimension” by means of the questionnaire method. According to Yasuda, “dimension” is generally a collective term for referring to things like attributes, traits, characteristics, factors, variables and variates. In the natural sciences and elsewhere, many of the dimensions that must be addressed have already been confirmed, but in sociology, confirming the dimensions that must be addressed is the first step in conducting research (Yasuda, 1960).

So, what exactly is involved in the intellectual exploration known as “the confirmation of dimension,” which is the first step in empirical research? Again, according to Yasuda, the specific processes used in this intellectual exploration can be explained as follows. “One of the intellectual processes for the confirmation of dimension is the subdivision of the dimension. The question items that are to appear on the survey form must be subdivided and created to reflect the confirmed dimension. However, if this type of dimensional subdivision were to be conducted thoroughly, the number of dimensions would swell to a degree that would potentially exceed our cognitive capabilities. Thus, at the same time we subdivide the dimensions, we must also integrate them. The integration of dimensions refers to the consolidation of multiple dimensions into one new dimension that represents them. While the subdivision of dimensions is a process that must be performed during the survey planning process, the integration of dimensions is not performed until the analytical process (Yasuda, 1960).

Dimensions include both “quantitative” and “non-quantitative” types. In terms of the examples provided above, the dimension referred to as the “level of political knowledge” in my survey sample is quantitative, while the dimensions referred to as “loss of value” and “lack of value” constructed by Edelstein are non-quantitative. In the case of quantitative dimensions, expressing the dimension as a number is called “measurement,” but in the case of non-quantitative dimensions, the equivalent process is an intellectual work known as classification. Thus, the attempts to reconstruct the dimensions of “loss of value” and “lack of value,” which were constructed based on the open-ended questionnaire method, this time with a closed-ended questionnaire method conducted jointly by Edelstein and I, can be recognized as attempts to transform non-quantitative dimensions into quantitative dimensions.

Thus, I have been involved in various efforts to confirm dimensions using the questionnaire method.

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Toward an Innovation of Social Analysis through the Questionnaire Method

ABSTRACT

With social research positioned as a technique for building sociological theories, the crux of the problem being discussed here becomes clear. (1) It is the problem of an imbalance between public opinion polls and survey research. On one hand, this is due to the prevalence of public opinion polls, and on the other, the stagnation of survey research. This is not a healthy situation for building sociological theories. Here, I distinguish the former as a technique that was developed based on social needs, focuses on social issues, and is oriented toward the description of people’s subjective consciousness, as opposed to the latter, which is a technique that was developed based on academic needs, to address a variety of aspects of social living, and is oriented toward the analysis of people’s subjective consciousness. This paper looks at the commonalities between the two, referring to them both as the “questionnaire method.” (2) There is a problem involving the heavy use, perhaps overuse, of public opinion polls and survey research, namely, the questionnaire method. Among the social phenomena that exist, there are some that can be approached using the questionnaire method and some that cannot. The current problem is that the questionnaire method is being used with too little regard to whether it is appropriate for a specific research question. (3) It is almost as if the researcher starts with the method, and then uses that method regardless of the nature of the research. Originally, a study began with observations of a subject; methods for approaching that subject were then developed based on those observations. However, in the case of the questionnaire method, this American-made technique was already available, where the research needed to be conducted before observations of the various aspects of people’s subjective consciousness in various societies were made. In Germany, the German expression “Lehne ein bisschen ab” was artificially created as a survey term meant to correspond to the English phrase “Disagree a little.” This is a typical example of this problem.

Looking at these problems, one might begin to think that the questionnaire method should be methodologically rejected, but that is not at all the case. As is the case with many kinds of tools, no method is perfect or entirely without fault. Tools must be used appropriately for their particular purposes. This is where the exploration of the potential uses of the questionnaire method begins. This is an effort to “confirm the dimensions” for the description, classification and measurement of a specific social phenomenon, namely subjective reality (people’s subjective consciousness).

Key Words: public opinion poll, survey research, questionnaire method, subjective reality (people’s subjective consciousness), confirmation of dimensions