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Asking for Justifications: An Aspect of Paul Lazarsfeld's "Reason Analysis"

Hans L Zetterberg

When people act, they simultaneously, if prompted, can speak to justify their acts. Paul F Lazarsfeld found a social psychological goldmine in the justifying type of talk. He developed "the art of asking why," the asking for justifications, into what he called "reason analysis." In an early paper on consumers' choice among brands of soap and other products, he found that about any purchase on the consumer market, that influences from earlier encounters are recalled, relevant attributes of the product are evaluated, and self-reported motives of the buyer can be recorded (Lazarsfeld 1935).

This was Lazarsfeld's first paper on American soil. Its data came mostly from his research at *Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle* in Vienna. A publication from the American Management Association the same year entitled *The Techniques of Market Research from the Standpoint of a Psychologist*, Kornhauser and Lazarsfeld (1935) (reprinted 1955) gives a systematic methodological view of the topic. We may note in passing that Lazarsfeld did not call himself "sociologist" at that time; he routinely started to do this only when he became appointed as such in 1941 by Columbia University. His studies in Europe about unemployment and about vocational choice before he came to America, he called "sociographics," not sociology.

At the core of his analysis of justifications of a choice is Lazarsfeld's "accounting scheme." In an orderly way, it makes the researcher listen to what the actor preferred, liked, and disliked about his previous choice or situation, followed by what he preferred, liked and disliked about his prospective choice or situation, and, finally but equally important, what kind of trigger event caused him to change his course to the latter alternative.

Lazarsfeld could use the same scheme in a study with Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet (1944) on political choice, e.g. a vote for candidates for US president. Some of Lazarsfeld's colleagues on the Faculty at Columbia later used reason analysis in their books, for example, William J Goode (1956) to account for how people decide to get divorced. Many graduate students in the Sociology Department at Columbia University used reason analysis in their doctoral theses. For example, Peter

Rossi (1955) applied it in a thesis *Why Families Move*, and David Sills (1957) used it to explain the joining and leaving associations in *The Volunteers: Means and Ends in a National Organization*.

It is a more recent and very important discovery by French social scientists that accounting schemes are unique to the societal realms. Market activities, industrial, civic, inspirational, celebrity, and domestic activities form different "worlds of worth" with different justifications (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991).

By 1968, Lazarsfeld's reason analysis was so established that it received a 10 column long entry in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. It was presented with a full research context of the art of asking why. The author was Charles Kadushin, a member of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. He had himself used reason analysis in a thesis on why people entered psychotherapy.

Reason analysis itself is a complex act and thus has several stages. First, types of action involved in the subject to be studied are distinguished one from another; second, the act is divided into phases or separate acts, if this is necessary; third, an accounting scheme is developed for each act or phase; fourth, the accounting scheme is translated into a data-collection guide, which is typically an interview schedule; fifth, a calculus of factors must be developed so that the relative weight of different factors can be assessed. Finally, the results of this assessment are tabulated for the sample as a whole or for different segments of it (Kadushin 1968, p 340).

Charles Kadushin points out that "many reason analyses are in unpublished commercial market research." In the early 1930s Paul Lazarsfeld had turned "the art of asking why" into a way of earning a livelihood from market and media research in Vienna where anti-Semitism kept him from getting an academic appointment. In the late 1930s, he entered a rough and tumble effort as an intellectual immigrant in New York aiming for a university position, while surviving by doing market and media research, often with reason analysis. Late in life, in the American academe, he could enjoy the honor of being the celebrated inventor of "Lazarsfeld's reason analysis," as well several similar achievements reviewed by Hynek Jerabek (2006: 28–32).

"The paramount position of subjective material in reason analysis may make some researchers uneasy: actors may not know the "real" rea-

sons for their actions, and the researchers may thus be collecting a set of mere rationalizations. Further, there may be additional reasons behind the ones collected." These words by Kadushin (1968, 342) point to the difference between stating a social theory and performing an investigation by reason analysis. At first, Lazarsfeld did not see the difference. In the first edition of *The Language of Social Research*, a collection of his favorite methodological exemplars, he reprinted a section from the first edition of my book *On Theory and Verification in Sociology* in which I use the model of Rudolf Carnap's logical empiricism to restate some Durkheimian theorems (Zetterberg 1955). Such an illustration to reason analysis was clearly inappropriate, and it was dropped in the 1967 second edition. Reason analysis is not a scientific theory in the sense used by the philosophers of the Vienna Circle, several of whom were Paul Lazarsfeld's personal acquaintances.

AN OBSERVATION ABOUT EMOTIVE TRIGGER EVENTS

In working with reason analysis I have found it rewarding to incorporate a distinction between emotive and rational choice (Zetterberg 2009, 155–160). All three elements in the art of asking why, the previous, the prospective, and the trigger, carry more or less of rational and more or less of emotive charges. In scanning a symbolic environment or part thereof, man initially reacts to the symbols, if any, that have emotive charges, and only in a next step, to the executive and instrumental symbols. In this reaction, negative emotive symbols get greater attention than positive emotive symbols. If all symbols are roughly equally executive, i.e. their emotive meanings are spread evenly or are absent, man exercises rational choice as otherwise takes place only after overcoming initial emotive reactions.

The news media thrive on the need of human beings to scan their environment. "News" is caught by what we know as selective scanning. The negative emotive news turns up first when readers and viewers scan their media. In his book about the New York Times – *The Kingdom and the Power* – Gay Talese (1969) writes that most journalists develop into restless people who focus on the warts of life, on the imperfections in mankind, institutions, and places. "Gloom is their game, the spectacle their passion, normality their nemesis," says Talese about his fellow reporters. More specifically and in other words, media publics fol-

low the above rules of emotive and rational choice, as they are served to them by the editors.

As Lazarsfeld and others have observed, there is an irresistible temptation in mass media to create attention and larger editions by focusing on negative news in big headlines, giving readers and viewers a strong initial emotive choice rather than a rational analysis of news. Another means of biasing a presentation toward emotive choice, is to tell stories more with images than with mere words. The increased dominance of television and pictorial social media such as YouTube in the flow of news, makes John Stuart Mill's optimistic prediction of increased rational choice in democratic publics an unfulfilled hope.

In a political conversion from one party to another or from one ideology to another, the emotive charge of the trigger event, for example, a political scandal or "affair," may be decisive. Normally, however, a convert would long have been aware, not only of the public views of his or her own party or candidate but also the views of an opposition party and candidate. The conversion means that two views change places in his or her mind. A latter view becomes the professed ones after a conversion triggered by the feelings aroused by the political scandal. This can happen suddenly, but the process of learning the new ways has usually been present a considerable time prior to the conversion.

In a democracy, a party's loss from a political scandal depends not primarily on its publicized wickedness or heinousness, as most journalists and commentators think. The main effect on party standing of a scandal is a function of the number of party followers who prior to the scandal have become familiar with an alternative party.

In the main, *political scandals are only trigger events* in a long process of making a voting decision. Such is the experience from the record of several political scandals that Karin Busch Zetterberg and I polled about in Sweden in the last few decades of the past century. Political scandals are trigger events for changes of political preferences that long have been in the making. Thus there is actually much underlying rationality in political conversions that are suddenly triggered by emotively loaded affairs. A scandal hitting a party or candidate has a significant effect only when polls show that many people have since some time leaned away from the party or the candidates that becomes hit by a scandal and have become at ease with an alternative.

The process is apparently the same in religious conversions as in political conversions, as William James noted about the former already

in 1902 (1936, 207), and I found in my first professional paper in sociology (Zetterberg 1952).

A COMMENTARY

It is a sad commentary on education in social science that survey researchers, and pollsters in particular, keep thinking that the question "Why did you make this choice?" is one single interview question, when the research problem calls for at least three separate questions: one about previous choice, one about prospective choice, and one about a trigger event. If you also measure the emotive charges of each you will need even more interview questions. The widespread confusion between client questions and interview questions throughout the entire polling enterprise stands effectively corrected by Noelle-Neumann and Petersen (2005).

That a requirement of questionnaire construction is mishandled is not only a sign of pollster ignorance. It is a product of their market practice of charging clients by the number of questions they ask, and not by the issues they are asked to illuminate. A *client's* single question "why," however, can never be the same as a single question "why" in a *researcher's* questionnaire.

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