

Researcher points
out, the use of
deception in



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Researcher Mayo separated a group of women from the other workers and started varying the conditions systematically to find out how the changes would influence productivity. Each change that was introduced, say providing for better lighting, coffee breaks, lunch hours, new methods of payment, etc., contributed to an improvement in the productivity. With each change, production rose.

Mayo and his associates were delighted in the beginning. When they found that productivity rose no matter which Variables were involved, they became suspicious. Finally, the researchers returned the group to their original conditions and production rose to even greater heights. The experiment revealed that, something was seriously wrong with the researchers' assumptions.

Whatever had caused the change in the dependent Variable, that is, productivity, it was not the independent Variables that the experimenters had introduced. Actually, from this point of view, the experiment was a failure. But the reasons for the experiment's failure have taught sociologists a great deal. It appears that production rose because the women enjoyed all the attention they were getting. They had formed a close-knit primary group highly co-operative in nature.

They had established their own norms for productivity; they knew what effects the sociologists were trying to produce and they had decided to cooperate with them to increase the output. They did their best to please the sociologists. This phenomenon-the contamination of the experiment by the subjects' assumptions about what the sociologist is attempting to prove-is

still known as “ the Hawthorne effect”. The “ Hawthorne effect” reveals one main limitation of the experimental method, when people realise that they are experimental subjects, they begin to act differently and the experiment may be spoiled.

Planned experiments upon human beings are most reliable when these subjects do not know the true object of the experiment. They may be given a rationale, a reasonable exploration of what the experiment is doing. This rationale may be a harmless one but it is a necessary deception which conceals the true purpose of the experiment. As Kelman points out, the use of deception in social research poses the ethical question of distinguishing between harmless deception and intellectual dishonesty, and it may even produce errors in the outcome-(subjects may detect the deception and may begin to act intelligently). The experimental method has a few other disadvantages also. It can be used only for very narrowly defined issues. Further people may behave very differently in the artificial experimental situation, than they would, in the normal situations. Experimenters, may, sometimes, unwittingly produce the effect that they are looking for.

Because of all these limitations, social sciences, excepting of course, psychology, make limited use of planned experiments. We still use them wherever practical. We cannot completely do away with it. It allows the sociologist to investigate specific topics that often cannot be systematically examined under everyday conditions where so many other influences might conceal or distort the processes involved.

Though sociologists often make use of this method, they depend more heavily on other techniques.