

The Sixth Morris Hansen Lecture Opening Remarks

I would like to welcome all of you to the sixth lecture in the series established to honor the accomplishments of Morris Hansen, and the man himself. We are especially honored today to have with us Mrs. Eleonore Hansen, Morris's widow, and three of his four children, Evelyn, Kristine, and James. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of Joe Waksberg's wife, Roz Waksberg, and his son, Mark.

As you know, earlier lectures in this series have dwelt on a variety of subjects on which Morris made significant contributions, such as sample design, measurement errors, the survey interview, the training of statisticians, and the characteristics of an effective national statistical system (the "bureaucratic" setting, as Margaret Martin called it). Today, rather than focus on a single subject area, we visit Morris's tenure at the U.S. Census Bureau between 1940 and 1970, a period sometimes referred to as the "Golden Age" of the Bureau, and view his impact through the research accomplishments of the truly talented collection of colleagues and co-workers he assembled.

I had the good fortune to be at the Census Bureau during most of that period, not as one of Morris's group but, rather, on the other side of the street – involved in planning and carrying out surveys. Certainly, there is no question but that our work benefited greatly from their efforts. However, there was a continuing tension between the mathematical statisticians – and "those other guys," the survey statisticians, demographers, and economists. In the eyes of Morris's staff, we were just obstinate and, maybe, not too bright; we just did not always see, certainly not "immediately and obviously," the truth and beauty of everything they proposed. For our part, they were just a bit arrogant, even occasionally overbearing. And that has not changed; I remember having a discussion with Hal Nisselson some years later in which he cavalierly dismissed and waved away an objection to something he was proposing by reminding me that the sole function of my group was to provide "quarters and rations" to math stats, nothing more. Nonetheless, we co-existed – and even prospered – in large measure, because of Morris himself. And I am not even sure he was aware of his role in "bridging the gap" nor, at the time, were we. However, in retrospect, in talking now with colleagues about Morris, they give him a large measure of the credit for our ability to work together so successfully. Why so?

Well, first, none of us can recall ever seeing Morris lose his temper, or allow his criticisms or comments to become personal. In meetings or discussions, he gave everyone an equal opportunity to speak – whether the most junior or the most senior – and his reaction was always the same – quiet courtesy and complete attention. Oh, he was known to interrupt, often frequently, especially when his questions anticipated your answers. Nonetheless, he focused on the problem at hand, and his comments or questions were always

reasoned and objective, to the issue, never sharp, unkind, or demeaning. Thus, given his example, even if some of us occasionally “fell off the wagon” and got a bit personal or loud, our focus stayed on the issue at hand, and the heat of the debate almost never extended beyond the confines of the individual meeting.

The second point concerned intellectual intensity. Meetings with Morris on one or another problem area were exhaustive and exhausting. Everyone was focused on the issue and it remained predominant throughout. In the words of more than one participant, “you were mentally washed out after one of his meetings!”

Morris also adopted a very pragmatic philosophy in evaluating proposed research – namely, that if theory and practice were to conform reasonably, it was essential to limit design features and operations to those that were operationally feasible. What that meant was that Morris explained in great detail, listened intently, and made the effort to understand and react to the concerns of those who had to implement the idea or carry out the activity. Further, he just assumed that any effort would be a joint partnership or collaborative effort involving the substantive areas as well as the methodological. That approach, too, became the general norm for discussions in the Bureau. That it was successful I think is proven by history.

Another outcome of the climate fostered by Morris’s approach which might not have been anticipated was its effect elsewhere in the Bureau. Exposed to the innovations he fostered, participants in its implementation, and lured by the Bureau’s open and willing climate, each group also looked for ways to improve what they did and how they did it. But instead of pursuing the research interests on their own, they worked as partners, sharing problems and solutions, focusing on a common goal, with each contributing its area of expertise. Given a period of rapid change in government with expanding needs for data, the process became a circular one – a demand for information, a demonstration by the Bureau that it could adapt to the unforeseen requirements and rise to the challenge in meeting the demands, all leading to even more and different demands and challenges. The methodological innovations of this period were accompanied by a major expansion in the scope and content of the work of the Bureau as users became aware of its resources, its flexibility, and its willingness to break new ground. It was a great time to be at the Bureau.

One personal recollection of Morris. Late one afternoon at the International Statistical Institute meetings in Vienna in 1973, Morris intercepted me on my way to meet some people for dinner. He was scheduled as the key discussant for a session early the next morning and had just found he would be unable to attend – some unexpected and very urgent ISI business, I think. Anyway, he asked if I would substitute for him. I was suddenly struck speechless and barely managed a very scared and almost inaudible, “Of course.” He thanked me and then added, almost incidentally, that he had not yet gotten around to writing any comments, but he was sure I would not have any problems! I was up virtually the whole night reading the paper which I did not fully understand and trying to prepare some comments which would not embarrass Morris nor make me look too foolish. Later that afternoon, I bumped into Morris who patted me on the shoulder, said he had heard that the session had gone well and, smiling very broadly (in truth, he was actually laughing), offered the observation that last minute assignments are much easier on your emotions, since you do not have as much time to worry.

Our speaker today, Joe Waksberg, is a person whose career closely parallels that of Morris. He too spent many years at the Census Bureau – 33 years to be exact – and his contributions were both significant and numerous and ranged across census and survey research, study design, sampling theory, and analysis of survey data. At the time he left the Bureau in 1973, he was the Associate Director for Statistical Standards and Methodology, the position which Morris held at the time of his retirement. From the Bureau, Joe made his way to Westat and, once again reunited with Morris (is anyone surprised?), made his presence felt in his contributions to sampling theory, innovative applications of the theory, and research into a broad array of survey methodology issues. I refer you to the biographical statement in the program for some measure of the range of his interests (and also because I would take up the rest of the hour were I to list them all). And, not so incidentally, he has played a major role in Westat's growth into one of the nation's pre-eminent survey research organizations. Today, in addition to his continuing role as Senior Statistician and active participant in innumerable projects, he serves as Chair of Westat's Board of Directors, a position also held by Morris.

Joe is a member of the International Statistical Institute, a member and past officer of the International Association of Survey Statisticians, and an elected Fellow of the American Statistical Association. He was the first recipient of the Roger Herriot Award which recognizes unique contributions to the solution of statistical problems in Federal statistics. He also serves as Chair of the American Statistical Association Advisory Committee to the Census Bureau, has been a member of various panels of the National Academy of Sciences to evaluate specific Federal statistical programs, and is Associate Editor of *Survey Methodology*.

Who better, then, to describe the Hansen Era: Statistical Research at the Census Bureau, 1940–1970. One final note – In this age of Political Correctness, it is obviously incumbent on me to state publicly that I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with Joe for more than 40 years, during which time he has been mentor, teacher, colleague and, above all, friend.

We will have two discussants.

Our first discussant is Professor Margo Anderson of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Dr. Anderson is an American social historian specializing in the history of statistical accounting systems, particularly censuses and surveys, and the agencies of the federal statistical system which produce data. I am not sure how or why or what got Dr. Anderson started on this unusual pathway, but her unique perspective is reflected in her major publications, which include “The American Census: A Social History;” “The United States Census and Labor Force Change;” and the forthcoming “Who Counts: The History and Politics of the 1990 Census,” co-authored with Stephen Fienberg. Dr. Anderson also served as a member of the National Academy of Sciences' Panel on Census Requirement for the Year 2000 and Beyond.

Our second discussant is Dr. Robert Groves, Director of the Joint Program in Survey Methodology, based at the University of Maryland. Dr. Groves also wears a number of other hats – he is Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, Research Scientist at its Institute for Social Research, and a member of the Survey Methodology Research Program at the Michigan Survey Research Center. From 1990 to 1992, he served as Associate Director for Statistical Standards and Methodology at the Bureau of the Census.

He has authored, co-authored, or edited a number of books and many articles on various aspects of survey methodology and survey errors.

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