

# 'THE RAW AND THE COOKED - TWO TYPES OF PUBLIC OPINION

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Abstract: This article details two cases of widespread belief or public opinion. The first deals with levels of social satisfaction and their relationship to income and the second with the public perception of crime prevalence. By contrasting the determinants of these beliefs, the author argues that a distinction can be made between those types of beliefs which are of direct interest to social psychology and those which are not. Borrowing the dichotomy raw versus cooked or natural versus socialised, the author suggests that additional clarity can be added to the study of widespread beliefs by focusing on 'cooked' rather than 'raw' representations.

While some commentators have welcomed the development of an interest in the study of widespread beliefs and more specifically in social representations, the problem of 'vagueness' they raise has still not been resolved satisfactorily (see Jadoha, 1988; Potter and Linton, 1985). This lack of resolution has led to disagreements such as those between Allansdottir et al. (1993), Páez & González (1993) and Augoustinos (1993) over the 'closure' versus 'openness' of the concept of social representation. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the debate about the ways in which widespread beliefs should be understood and studied. While it is not argued that this paper will resolve either the disagreements over the versatility of the concept of social representation or of the problem raised by potentially overlapping meanings of the concepts of attitudes, social representations, ideologies, schemas, identities etc., the intention is to use some empirical work to contribute to the discussion of these issues.

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Below two pieces of research into public opinion are outlined, one of which deals with the perception of social satisfaction and the other with the social perception of crime. By contrasting them, it will be argued that they represent two fundamentally different types of public opinion, one of which is potentially more interesting to social psychologists than the other. It will be suggested that there is in fact a dichotomy of public opinion, whose two parts here are labelled the Raw and the Cooked, an expression coined by the structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. (The meaning of this expression will be further elaborated later in the paper). An acknowledgement of this dichotomy, it is argued, might iron out some of the vagueness of a programme of research into widespread beliefs. If acceptable to those theorists interested specifically in social representations, then a recognition of such a dichotomy may begin to answer Jahoda's (1988) plea for social representation theorists to at least define what a social representation is not even if they continue to refuse to define what it is.

### **PUBLIC OPINION STUDY 1- WEALTH AND SOCIAL SATISFACTION**

The first area of public opinion examined is happiness, in particular, the relationship between happiness and economics. In the mass media, economic performance is given a great deal of coverage. But as Oswald (1994) has pointed out, economic phenomena are not covered because rates of inflation, the numbers of people owning stereos etc. are inherently interesting - they are given coverage because we assume that those changes in economic performance ultimately affect the well-being of humanity. With the possible exception of ecologists, most people agree that higher economic performance is better than lower economic performance because social satisfaction is better achieved in wealthier, more economically productive societies. But again, in his excellent review, Oswald (1994) has noted that this assumption that economics and happiness are related has rarely been tested. It has largely been neglected by psychologists, sociologists and economists.

It was the economist Easterlin (1974) who first suggested that there might be no direct relationship between happiness and wealth. He examined the gradually increasing rates of real income in the US from the late 1940s into the 1960s and found that happiness levels had not changed substantially despite large increases in average real income. He estimated happiness levels by calculating the percentage of people in opinion polls who identified themselves as very happy. He also argued that happiness levels did not differ substantially between rich and poor countries and he therefore suggested that the impact of economics on happiness is relative: we compare ourselves in income terms to people close to us rather than examining our absolute income.

Oswald (1994) has partially challenged this claim. Using GHQ data on stress, he provided evidence that people on lower levels of income do have higher levels of stress. He was also able to show that it is those people on the lowest levels of income in Western European countries who are significantly more likely to commit suicide and that in the UK, as wealth has increased, the suicide rate has declined. However his conclusions, while supporting a wealth-happiness link, are tentative and he acknowledges that the use of suicide frequency as a measure of extreme unhappiness is very problematic.

This author has also attempted to test the relationship using the European Community Studies Cumulative file (the 'Eurobarometer'). This is a twice-yearly survey, compiled by Inglehart, Reif and Melich and funded by the European Union, of all member states and has been ongoing since 1970. The cumulative set of survey data used here stretches from 1970 to 1989 and contains the responses of over 350,000 adult European Union citizens. Some questions have been asked in every survey and one of these is the question - "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?" These scores were transformed by this author, (with typical psychological 'robustness' around statistical theory), into interval measures, making cross-national and time-series quantitative measures of 'happiness' or social satisfaction available and allowing the relationship between these measures and those of wealth to be investigated.

a/ The first comparison carried out was between wealthier and poorer European countries to test whether survey samples drawn from richer countries were happier than those from poorer ones. Using GDP per capita in 1985 US dollars, averaged between 1986 (when Spain and Portugal joined) to 1989, the wealth of each country was measured. The mean happiness levels for each country over the seven survey sweeps in the 1986-89 period were also calculated from the Eurobarometer. The ranks of both can be displayed.

Table 1

The association of ranks between social satisfaction and wealth in 12 EU countries (where scores do not differ significantly, the same rank is assigned).

Country	Happiness rank (the mean of 7 Eurobarometer sweeps, 1986-1989).	Wealth rank (average GDP per capita, 1986-1989 in 1985 US dollars).
Denmark	1	3
Netherlands	2	6
Luxembourg	3	1
United Kingdom	4	6
Republic of Ireland	5	10
Germany	6.5	3
Belgium	6.5	6
Spain	8	9
France	9	3
Italy	10	8
Greece	11	11
Portugal	12	12

A Kendall rank correlation of the two sets of scores was significant, Tied Z value = 2.247, Tied P. value = 0.0247 indicating that there is a significant association between the wealth ranking and the happiness ranking of each country. However this is certainly not conclusive - it might be, for example, that sturdy Northern Europeans are generally more phlegmatic than their passionate Mediterranean cousins. But further evidence is available.

b/ Two economists, Summers and Heston (1991) have developed a set of figures known as the Penn World Table which attempt to standardise varying national accounts

by comparing the prices of several hundred products as well as government expenditure, cost of accommodation and so on. In other words they have attempted to produce an internationally comparable measure of standard of living on a year by year basis. While these figures are not available for Greece, they are available for all the other EU members. We can examine the annual change in happiness rating as the standard of living measure changes from year of entry into the European Community to 1989 for each country. In table 2, the correlations between standard of living and social satisfaction measures annually for each country are shown. (In the Eurobarometer analysis, the social satisfaction measures are actually expressed as dissatisfaction measures but the signs have been reversed to make interpretations of the data easier, i.e. positive correlations indicate a positive relationship between social satisfaction and standard of living). The 'number of observations' section is the number of years about which information is available, in other words the number of years that both Penn statistics and social satisfaction measures were collected.

Table 2

The relationship between social satisfaction scores (from the Eurobarometer) and standard of living measures (from the Penn tables) across annual points of time.

Country	Number of Observations	Correlation Coefficient	Prob. of Pearson's r
Belgium	17	0.133	0.617
Denmark	16	0.200	0.464
France	17	0.006	0.981
Germany	17	0.366	0.150
Ireland	16	0.656	0.005
Italy	17	0.542	0.023
Luxembourg	16	0.028	0.920
Netherlands	17	0.408	0.105
Portugal	5	0.322	0.637
Spain	5	0.380	0.572
United Kingdom	16	-0.221	0.417

While the relationships between social satisfaction and standard of living measures are only statistically significant across time in two countries, Ireland and Italy, nevertheless an overall weak but significant association can be detected. Using only the signs of the coefficients, it can be seen that in 10 out of 11 countries, there is a positive relationship between social satisfaction and standard of living. By chance, if there were no relationship between these measures then we would expect to find that five or six of the signs would be positive and five or six negative. But the probability of 10 of the 11 coefficient signs matching the hypothesis is very small at about 0.0053 or 1 chance in 186. Thus, across time comparisons also provide support for a hypothesised relationship between social satisfaction levels and standard of living<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> That the UK demonstrates a pattern contrary to the hypothesis might tentatively be explained by the political dominance of the phenomenon of Thatcherism for much of the time covered in the sample. Hills (1995), reviewing international changes in income distribution, showed that of EU countries, the UK showed the sharpest increase in income inequality during the late 1970s and 1980s, raising the

c/ The final piece of evidence in this section is the comparisons between different income groups within each country. The Eurobarometer codes each respondent into one of four national income groups. If there is a relationship between happiness and wealth, it should also become evident in intra-national comparisons. Table 3 presents the happiness measures (actually unhappiness since as the levels increase, greater dissatisfaction is indicated) of each of the four income groups by EU country.

Table 3

Mean (un)happiness measures by country and income quartile of respondent in cumulative eurobarometer

Countries	Poorest Income Quartile	Quartile Two	Quartile Three	Wealthiest Income Quartile
Belgium	2.06	1.97	1.86	1.76
Denmark	1.60	1.57	1.48	1.41
France	2.39	2.30	2.20	2.04
Germany	2.16	2.03	1.96	1.87
Greece	2.54	2.36	2.25	2.12
Ireland	2.00	1.90	1.84	1.68
Italy	2.54	2.35	2.25	2.11
Luxembourg	1.90	1.75	1.66 *	1.64 *
Netherlands	1.81	1.75	1.65	1.58
Portugal	2.50	2.43	2.36	2.28
Spain	2.23	2.10 *	2.06 *	1.95
UK	2.06	1.91	1.83	1.73

All income groups within countries differ significantly from one another by SNK except where marked with “\*”.

It can be seen that in every country, the lowest income group are least happy or most unhappy and that changes in income level and unhappiness measures correspond within each country. Each income group differs significantly from each other using a post hoc Student Newman Keuls test except for Spain and Portugal where the intermediate groups do not differ significantly and Luxembourg, where the quite well-off and the very well-off again do not differ significantly.

To summarise study 1, a good deal of evidence has been found which appears to support a direct relationship between income and personal satisfaction or wealth and happiness.

## **PUBLIC OPINION STUDY 2 - 'THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRIME**

The second study of widespread beliefs deals with public opinion about crime.

O’Connell and Whelan (1996) reported details of a survey carried out in early spring, 1994. 1,000 names were chosen at random from the 1992 electoral register (the most recent available) for the greater Dublin area using systematic sampling. A response rate of 64.8% was achieved.

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possibility that income growth was less likely to be shared evenly among the population, thereby undermining the expected widespread increases in social satisfaction.

The respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire which was composed of several sections. The first section (seriousness) asked about their views on the seriousness of 10 different offence scenarios and their responses were gauged by using an eleven point Likert scale. The second section (prevalence) asked them to indicate whether they thought the type of offence mentioned in the scenario had become more or less frequent comparing their perception of Ireland 5 years ago with that of today. Respondents were asked to imagine that the level of crime in Ireland 5 years ago was on the midway point at 6 and to indicate on the scale the present frequency of such offences. Questions were also posed focusing on personal experience of crime victimisation suffered in the previous 36 months. Socio-demographic information was also gathered.

The analysis focused mainly on the results of the prevalence scores (or more accurately, estimations of the level and direction of change in the last 5 years). Table 4 presents the mean prevalence scores and standard deviations of those scores for the ten offence scenarios ordered from most increase since 5 years ago to least increase.

Table 4

Mean estimation of present frequency of ten offences in Ireland, taking 6 as frequency of offence 5 years ago. (The offences are ranked according to the mean score but where offence scores do not differ from each other significantly [ $P=0.05$ ] they are treated as tied ranks \*).

Offence	Ranking	Mean Score	SD
Violent assault	1	9.95	1.58
Burglary	2	9.55	2.00
Cannabis dealing*	4	9.34	2.12
Underage sex*	4	9.32	2.15
Murder*	4	9.30	2.10
Assaults on police	6	8.60	2.29
Fraud on business*	7.5	8.19	2.27
Dole fraud*	7.5	8.18	2.54
Fraud on public	9	7.79	2.42
Corrupt police	10	6.15	2.62
Total		8.62	

The mean prevalence scores, all over 6, suggested that the public believed all offences to be on the increase. The lowest perceived increases were in the areas of fraud; on businesses, the public and social welfare, as well as fraudulent activities by the police. The type of offences which the public perceived as increasing most rapidly was in the area of violence (violent assaults, murders or burglaries, which involve some sort of violence against property), drug dealing and sexual offences. This pattern of greater increase among the more sensational offences suggested that factors other than 'objective' increases, i.e. according to the official rates, in crime prevalence may play a part in determining the public perception of such issues.

The rates of change over the five years between the public and the official estimation were compared for seven of the offences. Unfortunately, two of the offences cannot be compared because of either an absence of official figures (social welfare fraud) or else because the official rate is clearly a poor measure of the frequency of the behaviour

(consensual underage sex). Cannabis dealing, where the increase in the official figures is suspicious, was also excluded although it would have strongly supported the argument made below. For the other seven offences, it was possible to make some realistic estimate of the actual change in offence prevalence. For the official figures, the rate given in 1988 was taken as 100% and the contemporary rate (1993) estimated as a percentage of this. For the public estimate, 6 was the score given to respondents as the rate 5 years ago. Following Davis (1952), every change by one point from 6 was taken as representative of a 10% change. As can be seen in figure 1, there was no relationship between the public estimates and the official figures for the seven offences. This is despite the fact that the Likert scale interpretation of the degree of change (which was constrained by the use of Davis' formula) generally flattered the proximity of public estimates.

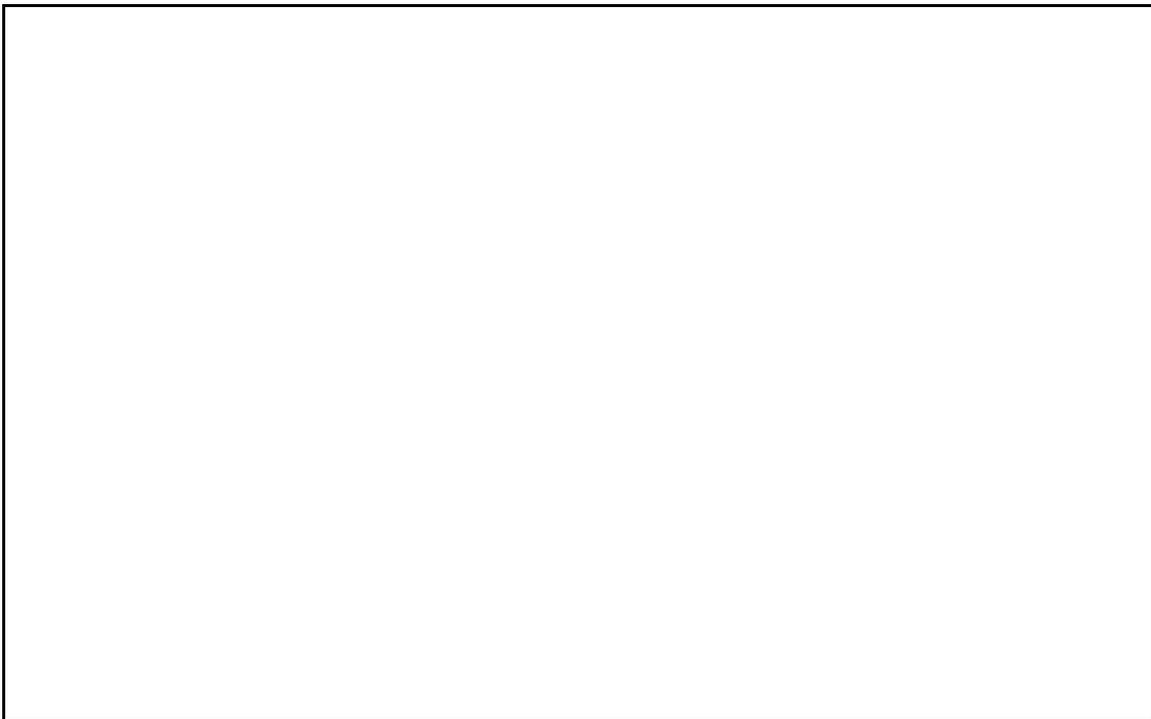


Figure 1  
Public and official estimates of % change in frequency of seven offences between 1988 and 1993.

Finally, non-parametric statistics were used to examine whether the public and official estimates were related in rank order even if the underlying scores did not correlate significantly. Using the eight offences where an official estimate was available, a Spearman Rank correlation coefficient had a probability of 0.588, indicating a lack of correspondence between survey estimate and official statistics.

The seriousness ratings were also used by comparing those seriousness scores for the five offences the public believes have become more prevalent in the last five years with those with the seriousness ratings for the five offences the public believes have increased more slowly. It was found that the more prevalent offences are those which are rated as

more serious. So not only did the public view hold that crime is getting far worse, but it also believed that serious crime is becoming disproportionately worse.

It was also shown that experience of crime victimisation in the three years prior to receiving the questionnaire did not predict crime prevalence estimate, nor did social class but newspaper readership did. In other words it appeared that the public perception of crime prevalence is not related to the reality of crime as measured by official statistics, rather it is independent of these but seems to be predicted by the media picture instead. For further discussion of this media-dependence of the public view on crime, see O'Connell and Whelan (1996) and O'Connell, Invernizzi and Fuller (forthcoming).

### **COMPARING 'THE RAW AND THE COOKED**

Two cases of public opinion have been outlined. The author wishes to argue that a useful contrast can be made between these cases. In regard to personal satisfaction scores, there appeared to be a direct link between public opinion and an underlying economic reality so that one might make a crude but plausible case that it is unnecessary in this situation to place mediating variables between experience and perception. However, in the case of crime perception, the link between the reality, as measured by official statistics, and public perception had been broken. Some other force had intervened and broken the link. Although the evidence was not presented here, the author has elsewhere made the case that the media are instrumental in breaking that link. In figure two, an attempt has been made to diagrammatically represent this contrast in the make-up of both types of widespread belief.

More specifically, it is argued that these cases of crime and satisfaction reveal two types of public opinion, one of which is direct or 'raw' and the other which is indirect or 'cooked'. Levi-Strauss (1970) adopted the dichotomy raw versus cooked when he was conducting anthropological work among the Bororo Indians of central Brazil. Analysing the myths of the tribe, he suggested that raw food was associated with nature and cooked food with culture. Cooking was the process whereby some artificial method such as roasting or boiling was used to change the food from its natural state into something different, something that was now almost unrecognisable from its earlier state. In the same way, it is suggested that public opinion can be either cooked or raw. Expressions of social satisfaction are an example of raw public opinion, driven directly by the underlying reality - in this case economics. Opinion about crime however is a case of cooked public opinion. The public perception here is independent of the underlying reality of crime - some cultural or socialising agent, the media in this case, has transformed the public perception so that it is now unrecognisable from the actual picture of crime. Karl Mannheim (1936) conceptualised ideologies as ideas which are discordant with reality. In this sense, it could be argued that when views about crime are 'cooked', they have become ideological since they are discordant from the reality of crime. Views about social satisfaction, on the other hand, remain raw or non-ideological since their relationship to the economic situation means they are consistent with reality.

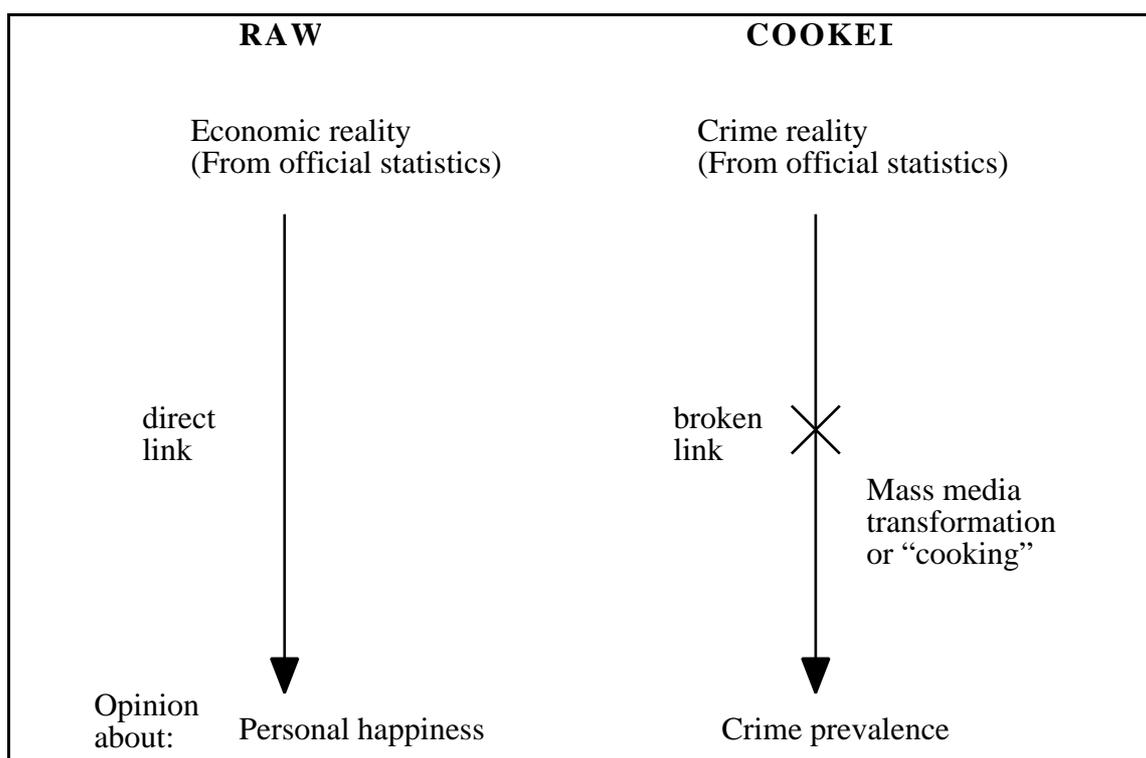


Figure 2

A simple diagrammatic representation of two forms of public opinion.

Similarly, Althusser defined ideology as a “representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1984; 36). Again, we can think of ‘cooked’ public opinion of crime as an imaginary outlook on a real phenomenon. It was suggested above that the inconsistencies between the reality of crime and its cooked image in public opinion were generated by the media. This might operate as follows - in order to sell news and therefore remain competitive, editors and journalists must make their articles and programmes as newsworthy or sensational as possible. Specifically, when selecting crime news, this means that stories dealing with murder, rape and abduction are preferred over those dealing with driving offences, minor fraud and disorderly behaviour (cf. Roberts, 1992). The image of crime the public is sold is therefore a frightening and extreme one, with no relationship to reality. Inevitably public opinion of crime also becomes extreme or cooked. Other suggested ways of cooking public opinion aside from the mass media, of making ideas discordant with reality, are through socialising agents like the school, organised religion, political parties, law, Literature, the Arts, sports, trade unions (following Althusser’s list of ‘ideological state apparatuses’).

If the distinction between the raw and the cooked is accepted, between ideas concordant and discordant with reality, then it may be reasonable to suggest that a social psychology of widespread beliefs should concern itself with the examination of transformed or ‘cooked’ public opinion, of public opinion which has come free of the independent reality, is no longer embedded in it. The task of those social psychologists interested in public opinion is to investigate the process by which that opinion has become transformed (made discordant), the causal agencies responsible and the consequences of

the transformation. In short, raw public opinion while interesting would not be the overriding focus of social psychology, rather it would be those beliefs which have been transformed into something autonomous of social reality. It can be argued that the approach of social representation theorists has hitherto been a focus on transformed rather than raw public opinion. However for the purpose of theoretical clarity, it would be beneficial to formally acknowledge this dichotomy.

By applying this perspective to our understanding of widespread beliefs, then logically the study of widespread beliefs would have the three following dimensions.

1/ **Historical** - when did the transformation of the beliefs from raw to cooked occur ?, e.g. in the context of crime, was there a time when people had a more realistic appraisal of crime prevalence, perhaps prior to press hysteria about crime ? Pearson (1983) has written a fascinating social history which has examined public opinion about crime over several centuries. He concludes that preoccupations with lawlessness “rather than being cast in the historical idiom of *change* .... must be re-allocated within the idiom of *continuity*. The continuities are abundant: both in the actualities of crime and hooliganism, and in the ways in which the problem is perceived and understood. We can see them in the conflicts between generations; in the conflicts between classes; in the perpetual tendency to view the past nostalgically; and also to see the future as posing a threat ... there is the continuing social reproduction of an under-class which as the traditional location of riotous discontent is repeatedly the object of fearful scrutiny within this unfolding history” (p. 212, emphases in original).

2/ **Cross-cultural** - if the transformation of beliefs is an outcome of cultural forces, then how does the degree to which the beliefs have been transformed differ between cultures ?, e.g. how cooked is French public opinion about crime in comparison to the Irish case ?

3/ **Practical/political** - what are the social policy consequences of this artificial rather than ‘natural’ public outlook ?, e.g. are attempts at building a rehabilitative perspective towards offenders doomed to failure when public opinion is skewed? The study by Hall et al (1978) has attempted to link widespread beliefs with social policy. They argued that there was a consensus of widespread crisis in the UK in the early 1970s, a crisis especially in Law and Order. One outcome of this consensus or widely-held opinion was a structural shift in the strategy of policing so that, the authors argue, policing in 1972 became synonymous with policing black British people especially the urban, young, black, male.

### **SOME 'TIMELY CAVEATS**

Two obvious criticisms (and possibly many more) of the suggested dichotomy between the raw and the cooked spring to mind. The first is that rather than presenting a viable dichotomy, the author has merely confounded the contents of beliefs with their structure. So in the examples given above, the reason why personal satisfaction appears to be more ‘objective’ than opinion about crime is that crime views are necessarily about a social object while opinion about personal satisfaction is based on internal evaluations. In other words, social satisfaction views are directly accessible by the individual while views about crime deal with evaluations of a phenomenon ‘out there’, separate from the individual who must therefore rely on an agency like the media. Thus being media-

dependent, his or her views about crime are in this sense inevitably social. However, Herzlich's (1973) analysis of the views of health and illness among Parisians makes this line of reasoning implausible. She was able to show that beliefs about personal health (as directly accessible as views about personal satisfaction) are social, i.e. artificial rather than natural, the appearance rather than the essence. For example, Moscovici highlights the linguistic and therefore social nature of physical symptoms in his comments on Herzlich's study; her "study reveals that the conventional label 'fatigue' relates a complex of vague symptoms to certain social and individual patterns, distinguishes them from those of illness and health and makes them seem acceptable, almost justifiable to our society" (Moscovici, 1984; 43). Therefore the content of the beliefs do not determine the degree to which they have been 'cooked'.

Secondly and more generally, one could easily argue that all public opinion is cooked, that it is nowhere seen in its 'raw' form. While from a logical point of view this is true, from a social psychological perspective it is a truism. Of course one can argue without fear of contradiction that an individual's system of values, cognitions and even his/her 'way of seeing' (to use John Berger's memorable phrase) is social, and thus not raw. And of course in the two examples used above, one could dispute that there is such a thing as 'objective' reality, measurable by official statistics: rather one might claim that crime and economic statistics are themselves the outcome of social processes as ethnomethodologists have been at pains to point out. For example, Atkinson (1978) makes a convincing argument in relation to suicide data that the official figures relating to suicide should be viewed not as corresponding to a real number of events - rather the interesting question is the social organisation, assumptions and methodology by which some deaths are recorded as suicides and some are not. However, social psychologists live in the real world as well and necessarily share the representations of others. In order for them to be able to study the social representations around them from an objective standpoint, (in order that they overcome the problems of indexicality and reflexivity as the ethnomethodologists would say, [cf. Heritage, 1984] or to get beyond "our permanent inability to move outside the hermeneutic circle" as Sumner and Sandberg have written [1990; 165]), they must focus on those opinions, beliefs and representations which have been thrown into clear relief. Thus, although all widespread beliefs are cooked, some are more cooked than others. Gastronomically speaking, social satisfaction measures can be likened to a *salade verte* while public opinion about crime is the *crème brûlée* ! The point being argued is that more visible, more clearly transformed beliefs represent a more interesting and fruitful source of investigation.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this writer believes that the renaissance of interest in public opinion has been progressive. However, Jadoha's demand for clarity remains an important challenge to this renaissance. In comparing two forms of public opinion, it was argued that we can consider public opinion as direct and unmediated or alternatively, as having coming loose or disembedded from the objective reality. It was suggested that social psychology should focus on this latter form of public opinion where it appears that it has been cooked, transformed or made discordant with reality by some social force such as the mass media. When cooked, it is no longer recognisable in terms of its source, the underlying object

which it represents. Accepting that this process of transformation or mediation should be an important focus of a social psychology of public opinion would contribute to theoretical clarity and sound empirical research as well as beginning to answer Jahoda's suggestion of a dangerous vagueness in the approaches taken so far.

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