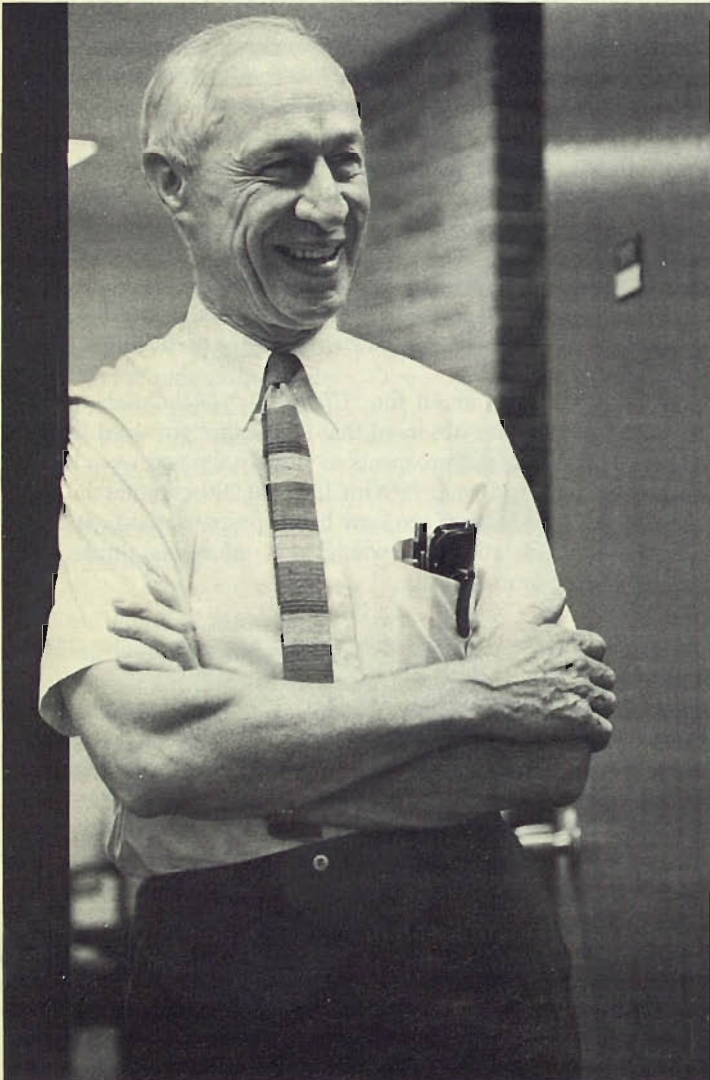


A CHOICES Profile

RENSIS LIKERT

*Social Scientist
and Entrepreneur*

by Leslie Kish



RENSIS Likert's pioneering work on attitude surveys in the 1930s until his death in 1981 has influenced literally all of us. Attitude surveys pervade our lives. We seldom pick up a paper or listen to the news without reading and hearing survey results focused on people's attitudes toward political candidates, world events, or consumer products.

Likert's lifetime efforts to develop these survey techniques contributed much to their reliability and, therefore, their use today.

Early Years

Born in 1903 in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Rensis Likert first went to the University of Michigan in 1922 to study civil engineering. But in his senior year, 1926, he was enticed into a B.A. in sociology and economics and then went to Columbia University for a Ph. D. in psychology. His doctoral thesis, published in 1932 as *A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes* is a classic reference. In it he develops and explains the "Likert Scale" for measuring attitudes. His scale exemplifies Likert's pragmatic, engineering approach to problems. He showed with empirical comparisons that his simple 5-point scale—the Likert Scale—gave statistical results very similar to those of the much more cumbersome, though theoretically more elegant, Thurstone procedure.

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Likert combined engineering, sociology, psychology, statistics, and ethics in his energetic and effective approach to pragmatic problems. After a short period with the Psychology Department of New York University, he became Director for Research at the Life Insurance Sales Research Bureau in Hartford from 1935 to 1939. His research for the life insurance associations on the measurement of effectiveness of different styles of supervision resulted in the three volumes of *Morale and Agency Management*.

New USDA Division

In 1939, the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace (1933-1940), invited Likert to organize the Division of Program Surveys in the Bureau of Agriculture Statistics in order to obtain farmers' reactions and attitudes toward the diverse New Deal programs sponsored by USDA to counter the ravaging effects of the Great Depression. Wallace wanted objective, statistical information from farmers themselves based on the newly emerging field of attitude measurement and statistical sampling methods.

Wallace himself had worked with Professor Snedecor at Iowa State University to establish the Statistical Laboratory and Department of Statistics at Iowa State. They had co-authored a pioneering monograph on "Correlation and Machine Computation" (Wallace and Snedecor 1931).

By creating the Division of Program Surveys in USDA, Wallace and Likert put the emerging ideas of social psychology and statistical sampling to the service of American farmers, who at that time (1939) comprised a large portion of the American people.

The diverse new government programs needed evaluation, and the opinions of the farmers themselves were sought as input for those evaluations. However, because it was both unrealistic and unscientific to expect government employees to objectively evaluate programs they themselves were administering, a new, separate agency was needed to monitor and evaluate the activities of the several USDA program agencies. Thus, the Division of Program Surveys was created in USDA by Secretary Wallace as an independent, separate, statistical unit, some 40 years before Evaluation Research emerged in the United States as a distinct field with its own society and journal. USDA's experience with evaluation in the early 1940s guided by Likert still serves as an example of how independent ER units can serve organizations, in or out of government.

Encouraged by Likert rapidly attracted a dedicated group of people with diverse backgrounds: agricultural economists, agronomists, sociologists, psychologists, journalists, and others. Some worked as field interviewers, others in the offices in USDA's South Building, but there were frequent informal exchanges and collaborations among them.

When Likert decided in the spring of 1941 that his Division needed better sampling methods, he invited me over from the U.S. Census Bureau, where I was head of a section for the 1940 Census of Agriculture. When I confessed little expertise in this new field, Likert reassured me with, "More power to you," his frequent farewell to such discussions. Likert gave me a great deal of freedom in this new job, thus starting me on a career and a lifelong association with him.

The War Effort

The onslaught of the war in 1941 had a tremendous effect. The scope of Likert's Program Surveys expanded overnight on December 7, 1941 from agricultural surveys to a general sample survey center for the federal government. It continued to be housed in USDA, however. Many fine social scientists joined as the survey work expanded from 1942 to 1945, and Angus Campbell emerged

during these years as Likert's chief aide. Several important new interview and sample methods were introduced. National surveys were conducted to support government decisionmaking about problems critical to the war effort, including war bond sales, price control, and rationing. Treasury, State, USDA, and other federal agencies sponsored the surveys.

Likert was always curious about how things worked and how to fix them when they did not. He approached machines and human groups with equal enthusiasm and optimism. Thus he maintained good relations with the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and with the Department, even after 1942, when projects of Program Surveys departed so often and so widely from the core interests of the USDA.

The Post-USDA Years

In 1946, it became clear that the three P's—policy, planning, and programs—were out of fashion in postwar Washington. At the same time, Likert and his researchers were keen to apply their methods to new and broader problems facing the post-war world.

In the fall of 1946 Likert and six associates left Washington to start the Survey Research Center at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Three of the group came with doctorates and three others did triple duty as researchers, teachers, and Ph. D. graduate students—as did many others later.

The University gave us a basement and small payments for teaching. But the University of Michigan's chief contributions were its name and blessing for us to find our own projects, and the right to retain and cumulate the modest overhead funds associated with our projects. This was Likert's and our private enterprise. We all gambled with him.

The Center grew and prospered with luck, growth, and opportunities in the survey field, and with our enthusiasm and industry. Also with ethics: all research had to be open and socially oriented, as well as methodologically sound. Eventually, our enterprise evolved into the prestigious Institute for Social Research directed by Likert with the lifelong collaboration of Angus Campbell and with several of us old timers. The Institute now occupies three buildings on the Michigan campus. It consists of three centers for Survey Research, Political Studies, and Group Dynamics, and an administration for Survey Operations; employs over 100 professionals of diverse disciplinary training amongst 500 employees, and operates a yearly program of over \$20 million.

Most of Likert's time and talent went toward building and maintaining organizations, performing public service, and providing ideas and support for others. But he also found time and energy for over 100 articles and for uncounted public appearances. He had many friends and was often honored by psychologists, sociologists, and management experts, and managers. He was also President in 1959 of the American Statistical Association. At the University of Michigan he was professor of psychology and of sociology. He had great influence in all these three fields, as well as on the theories and practice of modern management.

He found time also for three more books: *New Patterns of Management* (1961), *The Human Organization: Its Management and Value* (1967), and *New Ways of Managing Conflict* (1976), aided by Jane Gibson Likert, his lifelong companion and collaborator. These books based on surveys and studies in business, industrial, and governmental settings, deal with principles of *participative management*. They represent both Likert's principal research interests and his collaborative efforts with many others. The central principles of Likert's "System 4" of participative management are: (1) supportive relationships between organizational members;

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(2) multiple overlapping structures, with groups consisting of supervisors and their subordinates; (3) group problem solving with consensus within groups; and (4) overlapping memberships between groups by members who serve as "linking pins."

Some of Likert's publications were written after retiring from the University of Michigan in 1970. He was impatient, in his 67th year, to apply his ideas of organizational management in a consulting practice, and thus he created another enterprise: Rensis Likert Associates, with headquarters in Ann Arbor and Hawaii. He was active and writing, with especially close support from Jane, until his death in 1981.

A Reflection

I was not the only one drawn into activities which Likert led and into life long associations with him. He attracted many researchers of very diverse talents. He was not a magnetic speaker, and his lectures often wove complex paths corresponding to his multivariate thinking. His listeners were not always clear

about his words, yet left enthused and stimulated to action. Ren stimulated his listeners to solve problems in their own way. He was a rationalist and a problem solver, and a master in human engineering. Ren combined social and mathematical sciences in the service of democratic decisionmaking.

In a special way Rensis Likert symbolizes the many and farflung contributions that the USDA has made to scientific advances beyond the basics of growing crops, but nonetheless essential to the welfare of farmers and citizens. Likert's contributions were primarily in the fields of social research, sample surveys, and evaluation research.

Ironically, the USDA, the institution that encouraged Likert to use attitude surveys on a wide scale, makes only limited use of such surveys. Regardless, this founder and director of USDA's Division of Program Surveys in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics continued for the next 35 years after leaving the USDA to make many remarkable contributions as a founder of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, but also as a scholar, as consultant to both government and business institutions, and also as an academic entrepreneur in the best sense of that word. 