

Soka Gakkai in America: Supply and Demand of SGI (1)

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DR. Machacek and I have decided to divide up the labor. He is going to talk about the substance of our book. I am going to talk about how the book came into existence. Very few books contain within them the story of how they came into existence. I want to tell you that story in the case of our book.

Our story begins with Ms. Virginia Straus, who is the director of the Boston Research Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She wrote me a letter that she was on her way out to Soka Gakkai headquarters in Santa Monica, California; could she come up to visit me in Santa Barbara 100 miles away. Of course my answer was “yes.” I knew, of course, what she had in mind. She wanted a survey of the membership of SGI-USA along the lines of the survey that Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere did for the SGI in the United Kingdom. A survey done well is costly, so I had to be crass and asked her what she had in mind in the way of a budget. When I learned the figure that she had in mind, I then was able to get in conversation with printing firms to ask about the costs of producing a mail questionnaire. I knew about the length of the questionnaire and could estimate what the postage would cost. You see how dull research can be at times.

The outcome was a survey with 1,200 questionnaires. All of the money from the grant of the Boston Research Center went first to pay my assistants, chiefly Dr. Machacek, but there were other graduate students involved in this project. And it paid for the mechanical costs of producing the survey instrument. I myself received no money doing this project. It's not because I am so altruistic. But I knew that, when the researchers are being paid by the group being researched, the author can come in for criticism. I wanted to neutralize that possibility as much as I could. We have, incidentally, received no challenge to the objectivity of our study.

A first step was to get in touch with the leadership in the Santa Barbara region, and visit the community center there. This then led to an invitation to attend a group meeting soon after. We learned that nobody

had membership figures for the Santa Barbara region, or for California, or for all the United States of America. There were no such things as membership rolls in the usual sense in which they are maintained in religious organizations. I did learn that Soka Gakkai International in the United States publishes four publications, two in English, two in Japanese, and the subscription lists for each of these four publications was available to us, given permission at the headquarters in Santa Monica. We had to be in touch with the leadership, therefore, and gain their confidence.

I already indicated that we had the money in a budget for 1,200 questionnaires to be printed. We now had the task of randomly drawing 1,200 names from the subscription lists. As long as the name appeared in at least one list, the person became an eligible member of the universe of SGI members in the United States. We had a pretty good idea of the sorts of questions we wanted answered. So the task before us was to simply find the way to word those questions in a manner that would be understandable. And we had great help by giving the first draft of the questionnaire to some local people in Santa Barbara, and then repeating the process with the group of leaders in Santa Monica.

In April 1997 we sent 1,185 questionnaires with 120 questions, and in the first month we got back 20 percent of those. We got back another 10 percent in the next six weeks. And that began to alarm us because we had only 30 percent. I was used in the past to getting upward of 60 or 70 percent returned. Now, after two and a half months, and having received 30 percent back, we sent another letter including another post card. This letter said, perhaps you lost the first questionnaire, please use the postcard to tell us that you want another copy, and we will send it to you. We knew there would be some people who would not ask for a second questionnaire, so for them the postcard gave them a chance to tell us three things: when did they first encounter Soka Gakkai International, what was their ethnicity, and what was their level of involvement in SGI. We received 54 of these responses.

By the end of August of 1997 we decided to close the collection stage and began an analysis. We ended up with a 37 percent return rate. That turned out to be not all too different from what current return rates are, but not as high as we had hoped. It presented a very serious problem: how representative are the 37 percent of the original 1,185 on the master list? We had three methods of assessing the representativeness of the questionnaires returned to us.

The first was that we knew three things about everybody on the master list. Because their addresses were on the list, we knew the region of

the country they lived in. We knew from their names what their gender is. And we could tell for almost everybody whether they are Asian or not. Thus we could compare the 37 percent we did get with what we would have with 100 percent. And I can tell you three things about this. In terms of region, there was 100 percent matching; no difference at all between the master list and the 37 percent returned. The same can be said with whether they are Asian or not. On gender, the master list had 31 percent male names, while in the sample it was 32 percent. That is close enough for us on the first method.

The second method involved those 54 postcards sent by people telling us three things about themselves even though they did not fill out the questionnaire. On the first—how long they had been involved in SGI—they mirrored exactly the 37 percent of questionnaires returned to us. On the matter of whether they were more or less likely to be Asian than the people who returned, the fact was that there were somewhat more Asians among the 54 postcards. And finally, the people who sent the 54 postcards had a somewhat lower involvement rate. That is hardly a surprising finding, but if there was a difference between our entire sample and the 37 percent of the sample we heard from, it would be that the latter had a somewhat lower representation by Asian members but greater representation by the more involved members.

The third method involved an assumption, and I need to be explicit about this because only if you accept the assumption would my analysis be regarded as reliable. We had recorded the date we received each questionnaire. So we knew for each of them whether they were an early-returner or a late-returner. My assumption is this: As the late-returners are to the early-returners, so are the never-returners to the ever-returners. By this method, then, we got confirmation of the second method finding, which is that probably the Asians are somewhat under-represented and so are the less involved.

The underrepresentation of Asian members is regrettable. As for the underrepresentation of the less involved members, our interest was not in individual members of SGI but in the character of SGI, in its culture, in its spirit, in its effort. The effort and culture of the organization are always going to be more reflective of its more involved members. So had they been underrepresented, I don't think the problem was all that serious.

In the very last question in the questionnaire, we reminded them that their answers were anonymous, but if they would be willing to, and if we wanted to interview them by telephone, would they please give us a telephone number and the best time of day or night to call. A surprising

63 percent gave us this information. Once we had the data analyzed, we selected out the respondents who are most highly involved, those who had indicated a low level involvement, and even in a few cases those who indicated that they might drop out in the future. We then did some 40 or 45 telephone interviews with those three groups of people. We learned some information from them that Dr. Machacek will cover.

We completed our analysis by the spring of 1998, and we wrote through the summer. Our contract with Oxford University Press called for delivery by October 1st, which we beat by a month. The book was published first in Great Britain in March of 1999, and in May in the United States.