



The First World War

In a recent TV programme on the First World War the presenter gave the following figures:

Total killed as a percentage of males aged 15-49 in the period 1914-18

Britain and Ireland	6%
France	13.2%
Germany	12.8%
Scotland	12%
Romania	13%
Ottoman Empire	15%
Serbia	23%
United States	0.4%

The presenter then drew the conclusion from these figures that ‘This was a ‘world war’ alright, but where you came from significantly influenced your chances of surviving it.’

As the presenter is using statistics from the main protagonists in the war, it’s reasonable to assume that he is not making the incontestable, yet insignificant, claim that there were some countries where you would be safer from the effects of the war. Otherwise he could have made the same point even more effectively by using figures of males aged 15-49 living in countries that were not involved at all. Given this, what is unreliable about the conclusion he reached from these figures? Give your reasons.

Answer

The presenter is arguing that this was a world war because it involved not every country, but countries from around the world. But, although he doesn’t use the word ‘involved’, his argument rests on the equivocal meaning of the concept. It means more than one thing. If it means those who were involved in the conflict – the most interesting and meaningful claim that could be made – then his conclusion is unreliable. If you were an American soldier on the Western Front in late 1917 your chances of survival would be no better than a soldier from Britain, Germany or France.

If, however, he means the far less significant meaning of the concept that all those in this age group of all nations that were involved, then, of course, he has to take into account other factors:

- 1 When the country came into the War – the USA only entered the war in 1917, so, of course, there was less time for the US to incur the number of casualties that other countries had incurred;
- 2 The method of enlistment – if it was voluntary, then those who went to war might represent only a fraction of those in this age group for one country compared to another;



- 3 The proportion of a country's population represented by this age group: in those countries with an aging population, this group would be much smaller, so your chances of surviving the War in that country were statistically far greater.

As you can see, this problem illustrates the 'fallacy of equivocation' as much as the misleading use of statistics, but it does underline the importance of being clear about the assumptions that authors use to interpret the statistics they use.