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DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH

Therese L. Baker

Doing Social Research

THERESE L. BAKER
DePaul University

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Doing Social Research

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Doing Social Research

THERESE L. BAKER
DePaul University

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

*T*herese Baker is an associate professor and former chairperson of the department of sociology at DePaul University and director of its Chicago Area Studies Center. She is also the director of the Urban Studies Program. Born and raised in Minneapolis, she received her undergraduate education at Cornell University and graduate education at the University of Chicago (in whose community she has continued to live). Her principal research interest is in changing gender differences in the educational and career aspirations and attainments of American youth. In 1987, she was a visiting scholar at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Stanford University. She has been an advisory editor for *Contemporary Sociology* and *The Sociological Quarterly*, and is currently on the editorial boards of *The American Sociologist* and *Gender and Society*. Professor Baker has taught social research methods at DePaul since 1975.

P R E F A C E

*T*his is a book that I could never have written had I not taught a research methods course for years. It rests on my own experience of delivering the hows and whys of doing social research to college students. But it is also the outgrowth of suggestions from reviewers and other colleagues who have told me how they teach research methods, what they think should be covered, and what they aim to accomplish in their own courses. I have also tried out parts of the manuscript in teaching research methods at my university and have asked students to think about the merits of studying the subject in one way or another.

In writing the book, I have been guided by several principles. I am convinced that the way to get students interested in social research, and to recognize what it involves, is to think seriously about some of the exciting social research studies that have already been done. To consider carefully what researchers did in carrying out their studies, and what they found out, is to begin to understand not only the techniques of social research, but also the motivation for doing it. In other words, by trying to share the experience of doing research with previous researchers, a student can come to know why people are committed to this enterprise.

This doesn't mean that every research methods student has to do a study. But I would like every student who reads this book to know what it would feel like to do social research and to move in the direction of wanting to do it. So I have also tried to encourage students to ask themselves, "Couldn't I do a study? What would I have to do to be able to take a question that I find tantalizing and turn it into a research project?" To achieve this goal, I have tried in the introductory chapter to encourage students to reflect on what they find problematic in their own lives and social situations, or in contemporary social issues, that might tempt them to study these matters.

I have also aimed to make this book eclectic in the wide range of methods discussed. Of course, most individual social researchers tend to specialize, using a relatively small range of methods almost exclusively. And many instructors may prefer to emphasize

some methods rather than others. But a text should give broad options and encourage students to explore the rich universe of social research. Although research styles and preferences may differ, each of the methods described in this text has in the hands of some researchers produced studies of real fascination and value. In considering how they might generate a study of their own, students are invited to decide if one type of method or another would be appropriate to their interests.

Finally, I wanted the tone of this book to encourage a sense of commitment to doing social research. Other texts adopt a more humorous tone, or remain neutral and technical. Neither of these have seemed right to me. Naturally, working on a research project has its humorous moments, and nothing can be accomplished without appropriate techniques. But these do not capture the essence of social research. Students need to see—and will be more generally engaged by—the choices, the challenges, and the excitement of trying to study some piece of social action. And since the object of this book is to welcome students into the social research enterprise, students are encouraged to think that they *can* become social researchers, and that this is an activity, a way of thinking and working, that requires and is worthy of commitment.

This book was greatly enriched as a result of the suggestions of a group of reviewers, themselves social researchers and teachers of social research methods, from institutions across the United States. Let me thank in particular Russell Schutt from the University of Massachusetts at Boston, who read the whole manuscript and offered valuable advice on some of the technical parts of the text. I am delighted that he has prepared the software that accompanies the workbook and has joined me as its co-author. I also want to thank Donald McTavish of the University of Minnesota and Jon Hoelter of the University of Cincinnati for sharing their methodological wisdom with me. George H. Lewis of the University of the Pacific and James McCartney of the University of Missouri provided helpful insights about the creative aspects and policy implications of social research. Scott McNall of the University of Kansas was very supportive while I was in the planning stages, and James Jones of East Texas State University gave me tremendous encouragement as I was nearing the end of my efforts. I also want to thank my colleagues at DePaul, Effat Moussa-Hamouda, for advice on the statistical material, and Judith Bootcheck, for help and suggestions in preparing the computer materials. Important contributions were also made by reviewers who went over the manuscript in part or in its entirety: Mark Abrahamson, University of Connecticut; Pamela S. Cain, Hunter College; A. C. Higgins, State University of New York at Albany; Kathleen McKinney, Oklahoma State University; Dennis R. McGrath, University of Baltimore; Paul Montagna, Brooklyn College; P. Neal Ritchey, University of Cincinnati; Lawrence Rosen, Temple University; Steven Stack, Auburn University; Richard C. Stephens, Cleveland State University; and John Stolte, Northern Illinois University.

My colleagues in the department of sociology at DePaul have generously shared their perspectives on the research enterprise and offered their consistent support while I was writing the book. I especially want to express my appreciation to Dean Richard Meister,

who recognized my commitment to this project and encouraged me in the effort. My thanks, too, for assistance received from the Academic Computer Services staff at DePaul.

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Finally, there are my friends and family to thank. I have talked over, complained about, and worried through many aspects of this text with Bettina Huber, Barbara Laslett, Anne Cohler, and Judy Mandel. My sons, Julian and Felix, were going through high school and entering college as I was writing this book. I have benefitted from the liveliness of my dialogue with each of them. By trying to understand things as they see them, I have been better able to appreciate the way they approach problems and the times they have been growing up in. The support I have received from my husband, Keith Baker, both in this project and in every endeavor I have tried, has been great. Together with his own students, our sons, and others who have worked with him, I have gained from the clarity of his thinking, his exquisite taste in written English, and the depth of his grasp of ideas. To him, I dedicate this book.

Therese L. Baker

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BOXES

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