

STUDYING CITIES AND CITY LIFE

An Introduction to Methods of Research



MARK ABRAHAMSON



"This book provides an accessible and engaging introduction to the wide range of methods used in urban research. Students will benefit from the author's ability to convey complex ideas succinctly and with clarity, and understanding is aided by numerous relevant examples drawn from classical and contemporary literature."

Graham Crow, *Professor of Sociology and Methodology, University of Edinburgh*

Studying Cities and City Life is a textbook designed to provide an introduction to the major methods of obtaining data for use when analysing cities and social life in cities. Major chapters focus upon best practices in:

- field studies (participant observation)
- natural experiments and quasi-experiments
- surveys employing probability and non-probability samples
- secondary analyses of previously published documents.

A separate chapter examines a full range of questionnaires and interviews. Each chapter includes discussion of several case studies, and recently published research employing the method being discussed. This discussion highlights the issues and choices made by investigators in actual studies conducted in cities throughout the world.

This unique book is designed for use in research methods courses that primarily enroll students majoring in Urban Sociology, Urban Studies, Urban Geography, Urban Planning, and related areas.

Mark Abrahamson is Professor of Sociology (Emeritus) at the University of Connecticut.

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Preface

Over the years I have known, and taught, hundreds of students majoring in Urban Studies, Urban Planning, and related programs. They were almost always required to take a research methods course, and that course typically received very mixed reviews from the students. The most discontent resulted from the students feeling that the content of the course was too far removed from what they saw as their future profession. That was surprising to me, given that many of them knew they would later be involved somehow in conducting research, and virtually all of them knew that their future roles would likely require them to be sophisticated consumers of research conducted by others.

After some probing, it appeared that one major problem with the research methods courses the students were taking was that the students could not readily translate the texts' topics and examples into the kind of research questions that seemed relevant to them. Principles of probability involved red and black balls coming out of a box. Experimental design was illustrated with studies of small groups of students communicating with each other by passing written messages through slots in the partitions that separated them. What did any of this have to do with studying cities and city life?

From the above paragraphs, the reader should be able to infer what prompted me to write this book. I wanted urban students to share my

passion for research methods; to appreciate how much the knowledge they obtained from this book would be central to their future careers as city managers, urban planners, and so on.

What title to give to this book posed a problem. *Urban Research Methods* was initially considered, but rejected, because it implied that there are lots of methods that are unique to the study of cities and city life. There are not. A sample survey is conducted largely in the same manner, regardless of whether one is studying attitudes toward the Middle East or people's willingness to commute to work using public transportation. The difference is that when the latter is discussed, the relevance of the methodology to urban students is more apparent because they can readily imagine addressing public transportation issues in their professional roles. Similarly, an ethnographic field study essentially involves the same procedures whether an investigator is studying passengers on a cruise ship or youth gangs in a public housing project; but the latter example makes the relevance of the method more apparent to students of cities and city life. I could go on with other examples, but I think the point is clear.

This book is much like the research methods texts used in many social science courses except that almost all of its applications and examples are relevant to urban students. Another difference is that in the chapter on experimental design, natural experiments are emphasized and laboratory studies are not – for obvious reasons. In addition, because students in Urban Studies, Urban Planning, and so on, are ordinarily in interdisciplinary programs, this text incorporates methods and examples from across the social sciences, from Social Psychology to Geography.

In terms of immediate goals, this text is designed to help students to conduct the research projects that are often part of the methods sequence. In addition, and very importantly, the text is designed to impart the basic principles of the major methods so that in their future roles, these students will be informed consumers: they will be able to critically evaluate studies that purport to inform the professionals who plan and manage cities.

Examples and applications are also taken from cities across the world so that the text will be accessible to students and instructors in most English-language nations. However, more cities from the US than anywhere else are discussed because there are more cities in the US than anywhere else and because social scientists from Canada, the UK, Australia and other English-language nations often study US cities while social scientists in the US less often study cities in their nations. The literature, as a result, is dominated by studies of US cities.

Research methods courses utilizing this text need not have a statistics pre-requisite. A course in statistics would be helpful, but is not required. Where some statistical procedure is an integral part of a research method – for

example, calculating confidence intervals for a sample survey – the statistics are explained in the most non-technical terms possible, with additional (optional) information provided in a statistical appendix.

While this text provides complete coverage of the topics conventionally included in a research methods text, it has deliberately been kept as brief as possible. This is to enable students to get out of the classroom and into research projects quickly in those courses which require students to conduct projects. For courses that are not designed as immediate precursors to student research projects, the relative brevity of the text enables instructors to assign additional readings that can provide students with greater depth in areas that are considered particularly important by the instructor.

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Introduction

Outline

PART ONE: INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- The limitations of personal experience
 - Using systematic research
- Scientific research methods
 - Defining the problem
 - Introducing reliability and validity
 - Reliability
 - Validity
- Theory and research
 - Types of theory
 - Concepts and variables
 - Induction and deduction
- Research designs: An overview and preview
 - Approaching the topic
 - Data collection
 - Data analysis

PART TWO: RESEARCH ETHICS

- Ethical constraints
 - Review boards

- Assessing review boards
- Professional codes of ethics
- Subject protections
 - Informed consent
 - Preventing harm
 - Maintaining confidentiality
- Neutrality
- Giving back to the community
- Notes
- Glossary

PART ONE: INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

What do you suppose are the chances of sighting a colony of giant albino alligators in the New York City sewers or a vampire lurking in the Victorian gardens of London's Highgate cemetery? These are examples of urban legends: stories that have been widely circulated for many years, but are almost certainly untrue. So, how come a lot of people believe any of them? There are probably many reasons. For starters, people have heard the stories frequently repeated in informal conversations where an experience or sighting is specifically attributed to "a friend of a friend." An actual person is alleged to have seen the albino alligators in the sewers or the vampires in the cemetery. Those concrete-sounding details make the stories being passed along seem plausible, and as more people hear them, they in turn help to further spread the tales.

Both the conventional and social media are also sources of information that is sometimes untrue or of very limited validity, but is nevertheless repeated so often that people assume it must be true. The content can involve urban legends, as described above, or can be less fantastic, such as claims that outbreaks of some illness in a metropolitan area have reached epidemic proportions or that the rate at which children in a city are being abducted has dramatically increased. Presumed to be accurate hospital rates of admission or police statistics typically accompany these stories, adding to their apparent authenticity. However, careful analyses would frequently fail to support the assertions of these stories.¹ To be more precise, skeptical conclusions come from careful assessments by trained analysts with access to the requisite data. By contrast, when most people hear about the outbreak of an illness or about children being abducted in a distant city, they do not ascertain the veracity of the stories. They may not have access to relevant data, they may lack the analytical