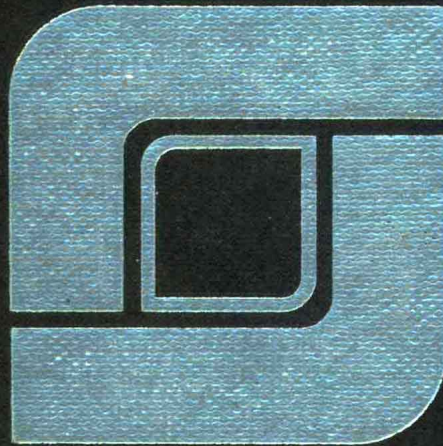


The Practice of SOCIAL RESEARCH

EARL BABBIE



FOURTH EDITION

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DEDICATION

Georg von Békésy
1899–1972

Werner Erhard

Preface

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to the *logic* and the *skills* of social scientific research. First, I want to give you all the fundamentals you need to *do* social research on your own. The acid test of the book in that regard will come when you set out to do an empirical research project, find that the situations facing you do not exactly match anything dealt with in the book, and discover that you are able to create compromises that represent the best bridge between your situation and the fundamental logic of scientific inquiry.

Second, I want to train you as a responsible *consumer* of social scientific research. You will be bombarded with the findings of this kind of research for the rest of your life. To evaluate it effectively, you must be familiar with the accepted techniques for research and know the logic that makes them acceptable. With this knowledge, you'll be able to assess the importance and implications of the research findings presented to you by others.

There is a big gap between the world of research in the abstract and the world of

actually conducting a social scientific experiment. On one side, things are perfectly neat, logical, and "scientific." On the other side, chaos reigns. Subjects don't show up for experiments, interviewers make mistakes and lose questionnaires, people lie and misunderstand, and no findings are as clear and conclusive as we'd like.

It was my desire to bridge this gap—to create a teaching method that would deal effectively with both worlds—that led me to write my first textbook, *Survey Research Methods*. Published in 1973, *SRM* dealt with a specialized area of social research, but we soon found teachers asking for a similar approach in a more general research methods text. In response to this suggestion, I wrote the first edition of this book, *The Practice of Social Research*. The book was published in 1975, and we were delighted to find that both students and faculty found it useful. The book was revised in 1979 and 1983; what you have is the further revised fourth edition.

Acknowledgments

It would be impossible to acknowledge adequately all the people who have been influential in forming this book. My earlier methods text, *Survey Research Methods*, was dedicated to Samuel Stouffer, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Charles Glock. I would like to state again the acknowledgment of my debt to them.

Several colleagues were acknowledged for their comments during the writing of the first, second, and third editions of this book, and I would like to repeat my thanks to them here. Though revised, the present book still reflects their contributions. Many other colleagues were of assistance in the revision of the book. I particularly want to thank the instructors who reviewed the manuscript of this edition and made helpful suggestions:

Kristine L. Anderson, Florida Atlantic University

Gordon Bear, Ramapo College

Shirley Laska, University of New Orleans

Charles McClintock, Cornell University

Kathleen McKinney, Oklahoma State University

Howard Openshaw, Georgia State University

Sidney Stahl, Purdue University

Gayle T. Wykle, University of Alabama at Birmingham

The book, both in its present form and in its earlier editions, is also very much a product of my relationship with Steve Rutter, now Vice-President of Editorial Acquisitions at Wadsworth Publishing Company. Steve is truly a master at his craft, and working with him for more than a decade has been one of the special joys of my life as an author. The book's publication has also been greatly assisted by the efforts and skills of five other people at Wadsworth: Sheryl Fullerton, sociology editor; Debbie Fox and Liz Clayton, her assistants; Gary McDonald, production editor; and Lisa Mirsky, designer.

Ted Wagenaar has contributed extensively to this book. Ted and I co-author the accompanying workbook, *Practicing Social Research*, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. Ted is a cherished colleague, welcomed critic, good friend, and altogether decent human being. I am grateful also for the SPSS^x appendix prepared by Jeffrey M. Jacques, Florida A&M University.

I want to acknowledge a special debt to my friend and colleague Hanan Selvin. Hanan never fails to stimulate and inspire me both in research methods and in life. I particularly honor Hanan's commitment to the responsible use of language and have enjoyed the nits we've picked together.

My wife, Sheila, has contributed to this book in more ways than can be stated. Her insight and support take me always to the horizon of my purpose and allow me to look beyond it.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book on social research to two people who are not regarded as social scientists. The first is Georg von Bekesy, a distinguished physiologist whom I met about four years before his death in 1972. Professor von Bekesy was that rare Renaissance man: a person interested in and insightful about everything, winner of the 1961 Nobel Prize in Medicine-Physiology, possessor of a dozen or so doctorates and fluent in as many languages, an expert in fine art, the gentlest of people, and the *compleat* scientist.

Despite our short acquaintance, Professor von Bekesy gave me a feeling for science that has affected my own research and the contents and spirit of this book. He provided a model of the scientist intent on using science to improve the quality of life on the planet and contribute to the lives of others.

The second dedication is to Werner Erhard, founder of the est training, the Hunger Project, the Breakthrough Foundation, and other organizations dedicated to empowering individuals to improve the quality of life on the planet. While Werner is not a scientist in the customary meaning of that term, he has a profound grasp and appreciation of science that has greatly enhanced the clarity and enthusiasm that I have been able to bring to my writing. Like von Bekesy, Werner offers a model of service to others as a way of being more than just a passenger on Spaceship Earth. He has inspired me to view my teaching and textbook writing in the context of service to others and making a difference in the world.

In this same spirit, I offer this book to you: to support you in learning the skills and logic of social research, to share the challenge and the excitement of it with you, and to encourage you to use what you learn to make your own contribution to the quality of life on your planet.

Prologue

The Importance of Social Research

In many ways, the twentieth century hasn't been one of our better periods. Except for the relatively carefree twenties, we've moved from World War I to the Great Depression to World War II to the Cold War and its threat of thermonuclear holocaust to Vietnam and on to the current concerns over the environmental destruction of our planet. Many sage observers have written about the insecurity and malaise of people who grew up during portions of this century.

A case could be made that these are not the best of times. At the same time, this period in history has seen countless individual efforts and social movements aimed at making the world work. Much of the commitment to creating humane social affairs has arisen on college campuses, and perhaps you find that commitment in yourself.

As you look at the flow of events in the world around you, if you want to make a significant contribution to the lives of future generations, you have a broad range of choices available to you. Environmental problems are many and varied. Prejudice and discrimination are with us still, and there are several different targets for you to focus your attention on. Or consider the fact that some fifteen million people die each year as a consequence of starvation. There is, in short, no end of

the ways in which you could demonstrate to yourself that your life matters, that you make a difference.

Given all the things you could choose from—things that really *matter*—why should you spend your time learning social research methods? I want to address that question at the start, since I'm going to suggest that you devote some of your time and attention to learning about such things as social theory, sampling, interviewing, experiments, computers, and so forth—things that can seem pretty distant from solving the world's pressing problems. The point I'll make in the following few pages is that social science is not only relevant to the kinds of major problems I've just listed, but it holds *the* answers to them.

Many of the *big* problems we've faced and still face in this century have been the result of technology. The threat of nuclear war is an example. Not unreasonably, therefore, we have tended to look to technology and the technologists for solutions to those problems. Unfortunately, every technological solution so far has turned out to be a new problem. At the beginning of this century, for example, many people worried about the danger of horse manure piling up continually higher and higher in city streets. That problem was averted, through technology, with the

invention of the automobile. Now, no one worries about manure in the streets; instead we worry about a new and deadlier kind of pollutant in the air we breathe.

Similarly, we have attempted to avoid nuclear attack by building better bombs and missiles of our own—so that no enemy would dare attack. But that hasn't worked either. Since our potential enemies operate on the same reasoning that we do, they too have built ever bigger and more powerful weapons. There is no technological end in sight for the escalating nuclear weapons race.

The simple fact is that technology alone will never save us. It will never make the world work. You and I are the only ones who can do that. The only real solutions lie in the ways we organize and run our social affairs. That becomes evident when you look at all the social problems that persist today despite the clear presence of viable, technological solutions.

Overpopulation, for example, is a pressing problem in the world today. The number of people currently living on earth is severely taxing our planet's life support systems, and this number is rapidly increasing year after year. If you study the matter, however, you'll find that we already possess all the technological developments we need to stem population growth. It is technologically possible and feasible for us to stop population growth on the planet at whatever limit we want. Yet, overpopulation worsens each year.

Clearly, the solution to overpopulation is a social one. The causes of population growth lie in the norms, values, and customs that make up organized social life, and that is where the solutions are hidden. Ultimately, only social science can save us from overpopulation.

Or consider the problem of starvation on the planet. Each year, some 15 million

people die as a consequence of starvation. That amounts to 28 people a minute, every minute of every day, and 21 of them are children. Virtually everyone would agree that this situation is deplorable. All would prefer it otherwise. We tolerate this level of starvation on the planet in the belief that it is currently inevitable. Perhaps one day someone will invent a method of producing food that will defeat starvation once and for all.

When you study the issue of starvation in the world, however, you learn some astounding facts. First, you learn that the earth currently produces more than enough food to feed everyone without requiring sacrifices from those of us who are eating well. Moreover, this level of production does not even take account of farm programs that pay farmers *not* to plant and produce all the food they could.

Second, you learn that there are carefully worked out and tested methods for ending starvation. In fact, since World War II, more than thirty countries have actually taken on and ended their own problem of starvation. Some did it through food distribution programs. Others focused on land reform. Some collectivized; others developed agribusiness. Many applied the advances of the Green Revolution. Taken together, these many proven solutions make it possible to totally eliminate starvation on the planet. Still, 15 million die each year: 21 children every minute of every hour of every day.

Why haven't we ended starvation? The answer, again, lies in the organization and operation of our social life. New developments in food production will not end starvation any more than earlier ones have. People will continue starving on this planet until we are able to *master* our social affairs rather than being enslaved by them.

Possibly, the problems of overpopulation and starvation may seem distant to you, occurring somewhere “over there,” on the other side of the globe. To save space, let me skip over the conclusion, increasingly reached, that there is no “over there” anymore: that there is only “over here” in today’s world. Instead, I’ll mention some social problems undeniably close to home.

In June 1978, California voters passed by a 2-to-1 margin a proposition setting a constitutional limit on property taxes in the state, effectively reducing municipal government revenues by almost two-thirds, even though official pronouncements prior to passage predicted chaos and disastrous reduction of government services, including fire and police protection. Despite such dire warnings, Proposition 13 passed on a wave of popular frustration with the uncontrollable growth of taxation, and other states have followed in California’s footsteps.

The problems of contemporary American life are manifold. The tax revolt is not only financial but involves the feeling that tax revenues only buy red tape and corruption. It is also related to the general problem of inflation. Workers having trouble making ends meet win pay raises only to find that the cost of living has increased more than their pay, and the good life seems ever more distant.

In one sense, the workers who are losing the battle with inflation are the lucky ones. Millions of others are unable to get work at all, including a growing number of college graduates and even those with Ph.D.s. People who would prefer to support themselves and their families are forced to live on food stamps, welfare, and unemployment payments—at a cost to dignity as well as living standard. The welfare spinoff from unemployment, moreover, creates a heavier tax burden on

those who are losing the battle with inflation already.

Crime thrives, and city streets are now considered hazardous to your health. Each day’s crop of news carries stories of murder, robbery, and senior citizens being mugged and having their Social Security checks stolen. Most criminals who are apprehended never go to prison and those who do emerge more hardened than before.

Problems such as these—and hundreds more—cannot be dismissed as being “over there.” They exist where you live. And problems like these are unlikely to be solved by technology. You and I are the only ones who can solve them. If we don’t take on the challenge, no one will. The question is whether you and I will solve our social problems before they create a final solution for us. So, let’s get on with it.

We can’t solve our social problems until we understand how they come about and persist. Social science research offers a way of examining and understanding the operation of human social affairs. It provides points of view and technical procedures that uncover things that would otherwise escape our awareness. Often, as the cliché goes, things are not what they seem, and social science research can make that clear. One example ought to illustrate this fact.

For years, the general issue of race relations in America has often touched on the special problems facing the black American family. Most have agreed that the black family was matriarchal, that is, dominated by the wife/mother. The white family, by contrast, has been widely recognized as egalitarian with patriarchal traces. The matriarchal pattern of the black family has been seen as a special barrier to the achievement of equality by blacks in America. Indeed, the controver-

sial Moynihan Report stressed the need for changes in the black family.

Several surveys have supported the conclusion that the black family was matriarchal. Asked who made the most important decisions in their families when they were growing up, black respondents in the survey were most likely to say their mothers did. The majority said their mothers exercised more power in the family than their fathers did. Similarly, most black adults surveyed have reported that the wives in their own families make most of the important decisions. The pattern of black matriarchy has seemed clear and consistent.

This documented pattern has produced considerable discussion and disagreement over the years. Political conservatives have often cited it as evidence of an inherent weakness in the character of black males. How, they have asked, can blacks expect to achieve equality when the men are so weak and submissive? Such apparent character flaws, then, have been used for years to explain and justify why blacks have fared so badly in American society.

From a liberal point of view, the facts have been explained quite differently. The pattern of matriarchy has been explained as a product of slavery—when families were forcibly separated—and of modern welfare laws that often force husbands/fathers to desert their families as the only means of obtaining government assistance for them.

These two ideological points of view present the same facts quite differently, then, and the years of debate have not significantly altered either points of view or facts. In 1969, however, two sociologists took a look at the matter from a totally different point of view. What they did exemplifies the social scientific approach, and what they discovered demonstrates the value of that approach.

Herbert Hyman and John Shelton Reed began by confirming that the surveys did indeed suggest a matriarchal pattern in the black American family.* As expected, they found consistent reports from blacks that wives/mothers were more powerful in family life than husbands/fathers. Then they looked at something others had overlooked: the answers given by *white respondents* in the same surveys. What do you suppose they discovered? *The answers given by white men and women were the same as those given by blacks!* Thus, Hyman and Reed concluded that if the black family is a matriarchy, so is the white family in America. Women seem to dominate white families to the same degree that they seem to dominate black ones. Thus, if black men are weak and submissive through some sort of character defect, then the same must be said of white men.

Many of the things social scientists study—including all the social problems we intend to solve—are a source of deep emotion and firm conviction for people generally. The depth of feeling and firmness of position in such cases makes effective inquiry into the facts difficult at best. All too often, we only manage to confirm our initial prejudices. The special value of social science research methods is that they offer a way of addressing such issues with logical and observational rigor. They let us pierce through our personal viewpoints and get a look at the world that lies beyond our normal vision. And it is that “world beyond” that holds the solutions to the social problems we face today.

At a time of increased depression and disillusionment, we are tempted daily to retreat from confronting social problems into the concerns of an ever-narrowed

* “Black Matriarchy Reconsidered: Evidence from Secondary Analysis of Sample Surveys,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (1969), pp. 346–354.

self-interest, despite the cost of becoming insignificant specks of protoplasm on a dust ball whirling through space. Social science research offers an opportunity to take on those problems and discover the

experience of making a difference after all. The choice is yours, and I invite you to take on the challenge. Your instructor and I would like to share the excitement of social science with you.

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