



The Practice of Social Research

Sixth Edition

Earl Babbie

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Dedication

Sheila Babbie

*Also by Earl Babbie
and available from
Wadsworth Publishing Company:*

Social Research for Consumers

Survey Research Methods, Second Edition

Observing Ourselves: Essays in Social Research

Research Methods for Social Work (with Allen Rubin)

The Sociological Spirit: Critical Essays in a Critical Science

Apple Logo for Teachers

Preface

In 1968, I began teaching social research methods for the first time, at the University of Hawaii. The course focused specifically on survey research methods, and I had only six students in the class that first semester. It was my first real teaching experience, and the small class size didn't keep me from planting myself behind a desk on a platform down front, while the students scattered themselves around the large lecture hall.

As the semester progressed, I became more relaxed as a teacher, came to like and appreciate my students, and eventually moved out from behind the platform at the head of the lecture hall. Before long, my students and I began meeting in my office, where I could grab and loan books from my own library as their relevance occurred to me during class meetings. (By the way, if any of those first six students are reading this, would you please return my books?)

The problem that continued to nag at me in the course, however, was the lack of a good textbook on survey research. I ended up using one published by a British researcher, but my students had problems with the strange brand of English used in the text, and I found myself unhappy with the way various topics were covered — or weren't covered at all, in some cases.

Other textbooks I had considered seemed to fall into one of two groups. Some books presented the theoretical logic of research

methods in such abstract terms that I didn't think students would be able to apply any of the general principles to the practical, real world of "doing" research. The other books were just the opposite. Often termed "cookbooks," they presented detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to conduct a survey. Unfortunately, this approach only prepared students to conduct surveys very much like the one described by the authors. Neither the abstract nor the "cookbook" approach seemed truly useful to students, or to their instructors.

One day I found myself jotting down the table of contents for the ideal research methods textbook, which I entitled *A Survey Research Cookbook and Other Fables*. It was organized around three principles:

1. Understanding the *theoretical* principles on which scientific research was based.
2. Seeing how those principles were reflected in the established techniques for *doing* research.
3. Being prepared to make appropriate *compromises* whenever field conditions didn't permit the routine application of established techniques.

The next day, I received an unexpected letter from the sociology editor at Wadsworth Publishing Company, asking if I would

be interested in writing a textbook on survey research methods. Enclosing a table of contents by return mail, I said I would, and I was soon at work on my first textbook.

*Survey Research Methods*¹ was published in 1973. My editors and I immediately discovered some good news, some bad news, and some additional good news. The first good news was that all survey research instructors seemed to love the book, and it seemed as though our book was being used in virtually every survey research course in the country. The bad news was that there weren't all that many survey research courses. The final good news, however, was that many instructors who taught more general social research courses — covering survey research alongside other research methods — were inclined to use our book and supplement it with other books dealing with field research, experiments, and so on. While adjusting to our specialized book, however, many instructors suggested that Wadsworth have “that same guy” write a more general social research text.

By this time, Steve Rutter was sociology editor at Wadsworth, and he and I began working together to design a general social research textbook that would serve the needs of students and instructors. Although it's probably polite for an author to speak of having a partnership with an editor, the partnership Steve and I forged was as real and solid as any profound friendship I've had in life. The other day, I described Steve to someone by saying if I had ever had a brother, it would have been Steve.

One of Steve's particular jobs in the partnership was to sample the needs, opinions, and practices of instructors around the country. The Preface of the first edition of

The Practice of Social Research (1975) acknowledged the assistance of a dozen social research instructors from California to Florida. The resulting book, then, was a collaboration in a very real sense, even though only my name was on the cover and I was ultimately responsible for it.

The Practice of Social Research was an immediate success. It was initially written for sociology courses, but subsequent editions have been increasingly used in fields such as political science, social work, marketing research, and so forth. Moreover, it is being used by teachers and researchers in numerous countries around the world, including China and the USSR.

Basic Approach

I've laid out this lengthy history of the book for a couple of reasons. First, when I was a student, I suppose I thought of textbooks the same way I thought about government buildings: they were just *there*. I never really thought about them being written by human beings. I certainly never thought about textbooks *evolving*: being updated, getting better, having errors corrected. As a student, I would have been horrified by the thought that any of my textbooks might contain mistakes!

Second, pointing out the evolution of the book sets the stage for a preview of the changes that have gone into this sixth edition. As with previous revisions, changes have been prompted by several factors. For example:

Social research technology and practices are continually changing and require that the book be updated to remain current and useful. In my own teaching, I frequently find improved ways for presenting standard materials. Colleagues also frequently share their ideas for ways of teaching specific topics. Some of these appear as boxed inserts in

¹So much for *A Survey Research Cookbook and Other Fables*. It was shipped off to the overflowing graveyard of clever book titles. Other residents include *A Flying Fortress Is My God* (a study of Air Force chaplains) and *The Old Ragged Cross* (declining church attendance in America).

the book. Both students and instructors often suggest that various topics be reorganized, expanded, clarified, shrunk, or — gasp — deleted.

The Sixth Edition

In the previous edition of this book, I said, “Revising a textbook such as this is a humbling experience. No matter how good it seems to be, there is no end of ideas about how it could be improved.” That observation still holds true. When we asked instructors what could be improved, they thought of things once more, and I have considered all their suggestions, have followed some of them, and have . . . chosen to think some more about other suggestions.

Although I’ve made a great many detailed changes in the book, there are relatively few structural changes in this edition. The one that excites me the most is the holographic overview early in the book. I will be very interested in feedback from both students and instructors regarding this feature.

If you are an instructor, you should note that I have moved the chapter on composite measures — “Indexes, Scales, and Typologies” — from Part 4 to Part 2. Some reviewers have suggested this in previous editions, but I have resisted in the belief that students needed a chapter on table construction first. I am hopeful that the new overview will offer enough of an introduction to tables for students to understand the tables used in index construction. Please let me know what you think.

Supplements

Practicing Social Research

This student study guide and workbook Ted Wagenaar and I have prepared continues to

be a mainstay in my own teaching. Students tell me they use it heavily as a review of the text, and I count the exercises as half their grade in the course. I specify a certain number of points for each exercise — depending on how hard it is and how much I want them to do it — and give a deadline for each exercise, typically right after we’ve covered the materials in class. Most exercises rate between 5 and 25 points.

Finally, I specify the total number of points that will rate an A on the exercises, the range of points representing a B, and so forth. From there on, it’s up to the students. They can do whichever exercises they want and as many as they want, as long as they complete each by its deadline. Every exercise they submit gets them some fraction of the maximum points assigned to it. The total number of points they earn from exercises counts for half their grade in the course. I end up with a fair amount of grading during the course, but my experience is that those who do the exercises also do better on exams and papers.

In this edition, Ted and I have once again sorted through the exercises and added new ones that we’ve created in our own teaching or heard about from colleagues. In particular, we have added more exercises for students who have access to SPSS^x, though we’ve kept plenty for those who don’t.

Data Disk

Over the years, we have sought to provide up-to-date computer — and particularly, microcomputer — support for students and instructors. Because there are now many excellent programs for analyzing data, we have provided data to be used with those programs. Specifically, we are providing data from the National Opinion Research Center’s *General Social Survey*, offering students a variety of data from 1000 respondents around the country in 1980 and 1990. As you’ll see, I’ve used this data set for many of the examples in the textbook.

Instructor's Manual

As with past editions, Margaret Jendrek has prepared an excellent instructor's manual to assist in the preparation of examinations. In addition to the usual multiple choice, true-false, and essay questions, the manual provides resources for lecture planning as well as giving suggested answers for some of the student problems in the study guide. Although students may not appreciate examinations as a general principle, I know that they benefit from the clarity Marty brings to that task.

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 again acknowledge 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: Fran Antolini, Duquesne University; Patricia Ewick, Clark University; Tom Guterbock, University of Virginia; David Hachen, University of Notre Dame; Joseph Healey, Christopher Newport College; Richard Herrera, Arizona State University; Elton Jackson, Indiana University; Barbara Keating, Mankato State University; George Kephart, Pennsylvania State University; Philip Morgan, University of Pennsylvania; David Redburn, Furman University; Josephine Ruggiero, Providence College; Karen Secombe, University of Florida; Glenna Spitze, SUNY-Albany; Fred Thalheimer, San Francisco State University; William Tolone, Illinois State University; Ted Wagenaar, Miami

University; and Paul Whisenand, California State University, Long Beach.

The book, both in its present form and in its earlier editions, is also very much a product of my relationship with Steve Rutter, former Vice-President and Editor-in-Chief 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 Serina Beauparlant, sociology editor.

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 late friend and colleague Hanan Selvin. Hanan never failed to stimulate and inspire me, both in research methods and in life. I particularly honor Hanan's lifelong commitment to the responsible use of language and have enjoyed the nits we picked together.

I want to thank Marcia Bickford, who supported my work in tangible and intangible ways too numerous to list.

This edition of the book brings me a spe-

cial, new collaborator in the form of my son, Aaron, newly graduated sociologist, survey researcher, and a fresh source of “how come?” “why not?” and “what if?”

I have dedicated this book to my wife, Sheila, who has contributed greatly to its origin and evolution. Sheila and I first met when she was assigned to assist me on a project I was supervising at Berkeley’s Survey Research Center.² We have worked on

numerous research projects throughout our first quarter-century of marriage, and I suppose we’ll do more in the future. My gratitude to Sheila, however, extends well beyond our research activities. She is a powerful partner in life. Her insight and support take me always to the horizon of my purpose and allow me to look beyond it, and I cannot thank her adequately for that.

²This means Sheila married her boss, no matter what she says today.

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 and the tragedy of Vietnam. The recent thawing of the Cold War and opening of Eastern Europe has been a welcomed relief, though it has in many ways heightened concern over the environmental destruction of our planet.

A case could be made that these are not the best of times. Many sage observers have written about the insecurity and malaise of many of the people who grew up during portions of this century. All the same, this period has generated 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, you can see there is a broad range of choices available to you if you want to make a significant contribution to the lives of future generations. Environ-

mental problems are many and varied. Prejudice and discrimination are with us still. There is, in short, no end to 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, because 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 also holds the answers to them.

Many of the *big* problems we've faced and still face in this century have arisen out of our increasing technological abilities. The threat of nuclear war is an example. Not unreasonably, we have tended to look to technology and technologists for solutions to those problems. Unfortunately, every tech-

nological solution so far has turned out to create new problems. At the beginning of this century, for example, many people worried about the danger of horse manure piling up in city streets. That problem was averted 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. Because our potential enemies have operated on the same reasoning that we do, they too have built ever bigger and more powerful weapons. Now, although the USA and USSR are exhibiting far less nuclear belligerence, there is cause to worry about similar contests elsewhere in the world. There is no technological end in sight for the insane 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.* This becomes evident when you consider 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 you'll find that we already possess all the technological developments needed 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 from starvation. That amounts to 28 people a minute, every minute of every day, and 21 of them are children. Everyone would agree that this solution is deplorable; all would prefer it otherwise. But we tolerate this level of starvation in the belief that it is currently inevitable. We hope that 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 into account farm programs that pay farmers *not* to plant and produce all the food they could.

Second, you learn that there are carefully planned and tested methods for ending starvation. In fact, since World War II, more than 30 countries have actually faced 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 proven solutions make it possible to totally eliminate starvation on the planet.

Why then 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 seem distant to you, occurring somewhere "over there," on the other side of the globe. To save space, I'll not do more than remind you of the conclusion, increasingly reached, that there is no "over there" anymore: there is only "over here" in today's world. And regardless of how you view world problems, there is undeniably no end to social problems in your own back yard — possibly even in your front yard: crime in the streets, inflation, unemployment, homelessness, cheating in government and business, child abuse, prejudice and discrimination, pollution, drug abuse, increased taxes, and reduced public services.

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 illustrates 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.

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 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 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 viewed as a product of slavery — a situation that caused families to be 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; years of debate have not significantly altered either point of view. A few years back, 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 surveys did indeed suggest a matriarchal pattern in the black American family.¹ 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

¹"Black Matriarchy Reconsidered: Evidence from Secondary Analysis of Sample Surveys," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (1969), pp. 346–354.

N 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. 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—generate deep emotions and firm convictions in most people. This makes effective inquiry into the facts difficult at best; all too often, we manage only 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 take a look at the world that lies beyond our own perspective. 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 continually tempted to turn away from confronting social problems and retreat into the concerns of our own self-interest. 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.

Contents in Brief

Preface / xiii

Acknowledgments / xvii

Prologue / xix

Part 1

An Introduction to Inquiry / 14

1. Human Inquiry and Science / 16

2. Theory and Research / 39

3. The Nature of Causation / 66

Part 2

The Structuring of Inquiry / 86

4. Research Design / 88

5. Conceptualization and Measurement / 113

6. Operationalization / 136

7. Indexes, Scales, and Typologies / 165

8. The Logic of Sampling / 190

Part 3

Modes of Observation / 234

9. Experiments / 237

10. Survey Research / 260

11. Field Research / 284

12. Unobtrusive Research / 311

13. Evaluation Research / 345

Part 4

Analysis of Data / 370

14. Quantifying Data / 372

15. Elementary Analyses / 388

16. The Elaboration Model / 409

17. Social Statistics / 429

Part 5

The Social Context of Research / 461

18. The Ethics and Politics of Social Research / 462

19. The Uses of Social Research / 483

Appendixes / A1

A: Using the Library / A2

B: The Research Report / A8

C: GSS Household Enumeration Questionnaire / A15

D: Random Numbers / A26

E: Distribution of Chi Square / A28

F: Normal Curve Areas / A30

G: Estimated Sampling Error / A31

H: A Learner's Guide to SPSS^x and SPSS PC + / A32

Glossary / G1

Bibliography / B1

Index / I1

Contents in Detail

Preface / xiii

Acknowledgments / xvii

Prologue / xix

Holographic Overview / 1

Part 1

An Introduction to Inquiry / 14

Chapter 1

Human Inquiry and Science / 16

Introduction / 17

Two Realities / 17

Native Human Inquiry / 18

Tradition / 19

Authority / 20

Errors in Personal Human Inquiry / 20

Inaccurate Observation / 20

Box: The Inscrutable American

Economy / 21

Overgeneralization / 22

Selective Observation / 22

Made-Up Information / 24

Illogical Reasoning / 25

Ego Involvement in Understanding / 25

The Premature Closure of Inquiry / 25

Mystification / 26

To Err Is Human / 27

The Foundations of Social Science / 27

Theory, Not Philosophy or Belief / 28

Social Regularities / 28

Aggregates, Not Individuals / 32

A Variable Language / 32

Box: The Hardest Hit Was . . . / 35

Main Points / 37

Review Questions and Exercises / 38

Additional Readings / 38

Chapter 2

Theory and Research / 39

Introduction / 40

Motivations for Research / 40

Testing Formal Theories / 40

Exploring Unstructured Interests / 42

Applied Research / 44

Involuntary Research / 44

The Creation of Social

Science Theory / 45

The Traditional Model of Science / 45

Two Logical Systems / 49

Deductive Theory Construction / 54

Terms Used in Theory Construction / 54

Box: Three Little Words / 57

Getting Started / 57

Constructing Your Theory / 58

An Example of Deductive Theory / 59

Inductive Theory Construction / 61

Why Do People Smoke Marijuana? / 61

The Links between Theory

and Research / 62

Main Points / 64

Review Questions and Exercises / 64

Answer to "Three Little Words" Joke
(page 57) / 64

Additional Readings / 64