

James A. Davis



SOCIAL DIFFERENCES
in CONTEMPORARY
AMERICA

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Preface

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

My professional life for the last two decades has centered on what might be called “Price’s Paradox”:

The feature of contemporary sociology that is perhaps its greatest strength—its relatively solid factual base—is underrepresented in introductory sociology textbooks and anthologies, whereas the features of relative weakness—its concepts, propositions, and theory—are overrepresented.¹

I came to sociology from journalism with the aim of mastering sociological theory. Instead, I was exposed to empirical “survey” research and it “took.” To me the excitement of discovery combined with the discipline of method make sociological research an extraordinarily rewarding craft. And yet, as Price observed almost twenty years ago, very little of this excitement, much less the empirical knowledge, comes across in our undergraduate courses.

There have been some changes since 1969, especially in terms of technical developments—the explosive growth in good sociological data and the information revolution brought about by affordable personal computers. But not all the developments have been positive. Our profession seems to be bifurcating into two mandarinates—theoreticians who juggle cloudy, politicized concepts and methodologists who juggle abstruse mathematical formulas. Although the two camps believe they are enemies, they share a disdain for empirical knowledge and a total lack of curiosity about people—the academic parvenu’s fear that if you say something definite, somebody might show you are wrong.² Meanwhile, on the teaching side, the battle for enrollment survival has led us to the craven belief that nothing “hard” can be included in a college sociology course

¹James L. Price, *Social Facts*, New York: Macmillan, 1969, p. iii.

²Howard S. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 1–10.

(for which, of course, we earn the routine contempt of our students).

I used to think the “cure” lay in reforming the standard methods course, shifting it from pious sermons about scientific method to hands-on data analysis. And some progress has been made here, thanks to computers, statistical packages, and data banks. But there has been little cross-fertilization to other courses—if only because we haven’t had the courage to demand methods prerequisites for those courses.

Now, I think the time has come for a brand new attack, a combination of substance and method that blends the classical introductory and methods courses. And that, naturally, is what this book is all about. It is not a methods text with computerized examples, and it is not a standard “intro” text with a few tables thrown in. It is quantitative sociological substance, written for the beginner and drawing on the computer to give students the feel for conducting actual research.

Of course new approaches make new demands on instructors and on students—I do not wish to mislead you on that. Teaching with this text will require a great deal of work from you, and the first time you use it you should be prepared to spend as much or more time doing the laboratory assignments as do your students. In addition, the materials are not really suitable for multiple choice or true-false tests. You will probably have to read scores of essays to measure learning. But let me give you some good news. First, you yourself will find the materials interesting. The lab assignments are not Mickey Mouse, stripped-down exercises but actual data sets of the sort that produce journal articles. Second, you need not shy away from the materials because you are not a statistical whiz. The materials are self-contained, formal methodology is minimized, and the key skill required is “thinking like a sociologist.” Third, the materials seem to generate much more lively class discussions than the standard “concept chopping” does. After a while you will find that you and your students are actually talking to each other in the same language—“the language of social research.” Finally, a detailed instructor’s manual is available from me in care of the Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138.

The Computer Program

“CHIPendale,” the computer program to accompany this text, is an integral part of the course, not a supplement. It would be impos-

sible to use the book and not the data sets. The program and data diskettes are available from TrueBASIC, Inc., 39 South Main Street, Hanover, NH 03755.

TrueBASIC can provide you with prices for diskettes and site licenses (highly recommended), as well as information on other curricular materials using the program. It will also send you a low-cost demonstration disk. I won't quote prices because they change. In general you will find them ridiculously low compared with commercial statistical packages but high if you compare them with the cost of a single supplementary textbook. Hence, I urge you to persuade your department to get a site license—for which you pay a one-time fee allowing you to copy as many diskettes as your students need.

TO THE STUDENT

I don't really have to persuade you to buy this book. The odds are that it has been assigned in a sociology class and you have no choice in the matter. Furthermore, Chapter One gives (in my opinion) an excellent introduction to the intellectual themes that make this text worthwhile. So let me take this space to give you some tips on how to get the most out of the book.

First, you have to do the computer assignments. They are not supplements or illustrations. They *are* the material. The main text asks questions, defines terms, explains data sets, and poses problems; but it (deliberately) contains little or no sociological information. You have to dig that out of the data sets.

Second, do not think of this as a workbook. *Social Differences* is about ideas, not about numbers. The object of each exercise is to help you grasp a sociological concept, not to find a specific number and write it down. The prose is Socratic. Its aim is to prod your thinking, and you will find many of the problems and questions ambiguous. That is also deliberate. Although each laboratory assignment has a specific goal, sometimes that goal is to give you practice in formulating research questions.

Third, don't work up a sweat over the math. There are only two or three equations in the entire book, and you don't have to "do anything" with them. While the materials are not easy and require thought and practice, they do not require any math or statistical preparation.

Fourth, hang in there. The main obstacle to success in the course will be your lack of practice in handling statistical tables. The text will give you that practice, but it can't be done in one lab session. Work all the assignments. Spend some extra time just playing around with the program. Go ahead and do the Tasks even if you aren't absolutely clear on the "theory." Most students experience a "breakthrough" in understanding after a few weeks even if their start was a bit shaky.

Finally, unless your teacher instructs you otherwise, work together on the lab assignments. Since our overall goal is mastery of ideas, not production of printout, you won't be cheating if you put your heads together to attack a problem. This is especially true when you are first getting used to the computer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of institutions gave me money for this project, and a number of people gave me feedback and encouragement. I needed both.

Dartmouth College, Harvard University, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and the Sloan Foundation funded various aspects of the project. And, although the National Science Foundation does not support curriculum development in the social sciences, it does grant funding for the General Social Survey, without which this project would have been impossible. Although no GSS funds were applied to this book, *Social Differences* stands as a fairly complete summary of what I have learned from the GSS in the last fifteen years.

I am also indebted to Beverly Douhan, Alice Mellian, and Suzanne Washington for their assistance in turning a first draft into a crisp manuscript.

In many ways this has been a lonely project for me, since few sociological researchers are interested in teaching and few sociology teachers are committed to empirical research. Consequently, personal support has meant a lot—for which I thank Ruth Bogart, Marcus Boggs, Karen Frederick, John Kemeny, Kent McClelland, Ed Meyers, Carol Mueller, Robert Muellner, Nick Mullins and his Sociology 1000 class, the students in my Sociology 115 classes at Harvard (especially Raul Cadena, Tack Chase, David Lee, and

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Elizabeth Wirick), and all the fellows (male and female) from the Sloan Foundation Summer Workshops at which we put this thing together, took it apart, and put it together again.

James A. Davis

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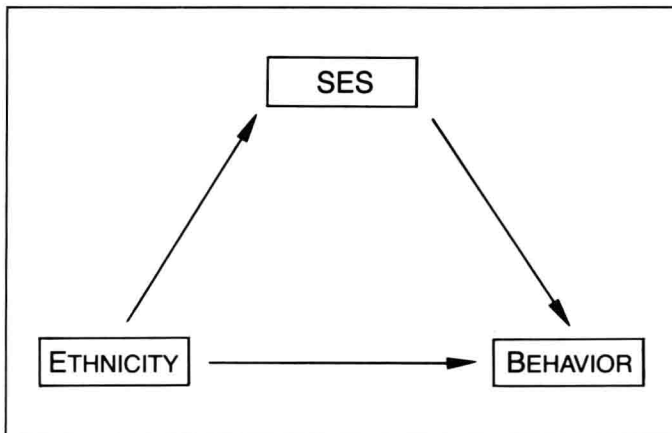
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Introduction



ABOUT SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

This is a data based, inquiry style, introductory book about the macro-sociology of the United States of America during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Macro-sociology means that we are concerned with national-level social structures (ethnic groups, social classes, religious denominations, regions, and major political parties, for example), not with individual people, small groups, business corporations, legislatures, TV networks, and so on.

Introductory means my aim is to teach you basic sociological knowledge, not the hottest new research hypotheses.

Data based simply means based on data. Every conclusion will be supportable by objective scientific data—not just opinions. My goal is to teach you what scientific sociological research has learned about American society, not to pass on the wisdom of the great (dead) theorists of the nineteenth century or the dozens of fuzzy “concepts” that make introductory sociology courses numbing.

Inquiry style means learning by investigation rather than memorization. Along with this book, you purchased, or were given, two micro computer “diskettes.” They don’t look very impressive and are really just glorified phonograph records, but they contain more than three hundred data sets with statistical information about contemporary America and a computer program you will use to analyze that data.

None of the important findings and conclusions are spelled out in the text of the book. Instead, the written text sets up research questions you will answer for yourself by analyzing the data. You will actually be “doing sociology” much the way the professional sociologist does it—by research rather than rote learning or free association. I have taught sociology this way for a decade now, and the vast majority of my students say they enjoy this way of doing business.

ABOUT COMPUTERS AND STATISTICS

The materials here are designed for personal computers. The program was designed by John G. Kemeny and written by Ruth Bogart and Chip Conner at TrueBASIC, Inc., Hanover, New

Hampshire for an IBM PC with a “256K memory.” It has also been adapted for the Apple Macintosh. The program should work on many other brands or models “compatible” with these two market leaders.

You do not need to know anything about computers or computer programs, provided you can turn your machine on, insert a diskette, and type “CHIP2.” (Its name is CHIPendale, “a program to hand craft tables”—which may well be the last element of levity in this book.) This book will tell you everything you need to know to run the program, but I have not included any *machine-specific* information (how to turn it on, which disk drive is which, how to print hard copies of your results, how to use your text editor to revise data sets, and so on) because these things vary model by model—and, it would seem, minute by minute.

You do not even have to type well. The program is *menu driven*. At the bottom of your screen there is always a numbered set of choices (the menu). You tell CHIP what to do next by punching the key for the number you prefer.

By the way, you can’t break it. If all seems lost, just keep punching numbered keys. You will probably get to some safe place of refuge; at worst you will stop the program and have to begin again. (**Rare Exception**—you can erase data files from the diskette, but it would be very hard to do so by pure accident since it requires choosing the Unsave option in the Modify menu and typing in the title of the data set to be blitzed.) But pure accidents can happen. Make sure you, or your instructor, have backup copies of the diskettes before you begin working with the program.

This book does not assume *any* knowledge of statistics. The statistical tools you need and how to find them in CHIP are explained as we go along. The book is organized so the introductory sociological ideas and the relevant introductory statistical techniques are developed together. In addition, the assignments in each chapter start simply and become more complex. Beginners can cover the key ideas by merely doing initial assignments in each chapter. The main stumbling block here will probably be with *statistical inference* or the “margin of error due to sampling variation.” Statistical inference is a beautiful idea and one of the more important tools of modern society; but beginners find it difficult, not because of the math, but because it seems to reverse common sense. The CHIP program can handle a variety of inference problems, and I draw on these features here and there. But exercises

involving inference will be so indicated, and some teachers may wish to skip them. In no case is mastery of inference crucial for following the main ideas.

Regardless of its ease of use, however, CHIP is not a toy. It is a sophisticated statistical package for contingency table analysis which includes a number of features (multi-variate direct standardization, Haberman's standardized residuals, the "weighted least squares" approach to partial percentage differences, and direct calculation of $2 \times 2 \times 2$ interactions) of interest to advanced students.

QUANTITATIVE SOCIOLOGY

This is a sociology book, not a statistics book. It treats ideas about society, not ideas about numbers—but they are *quantitative* sociological ideas. This is so important that it merits explanation.

The case for quantitative sociology—aside from the snob value of the esoteric and inscrutable—might seem to rest on "quality control." Certainly sociologists have no monopoly on drawing conclusions about society. The Op Ed pages of major newspapers teem with weighty analysis, and any assistant professor of English can tell you loads of things about American society and values, drawing on the insights of (currently) immortal novelists and poets. The unique contribution of the sociologist then might seem to be documentation: we base our conclusions on scientific samples, objective measurement, and proper statistical calculations. But if that were all there is to it, I would not embroil myself in the hassle of hawking unmusical "phonograph records." If documentation were the only issue, I could merely assure you my credentials are in order, cite the appropriate references, and proceed to spin my yarn.

But quantitative ideas *are* ideas, not just stamps indicating the numbers have been slaughtered according to the correct rituals. Consider, for example, the notions of equality. They permeate sociology and they permeate this book. But what do they mean? How can you tell whether two people or groups are "equal"? If we are trying for something more substantial than Fourth of July oratory, we need such concepts as *variables*, *distributions*, and *controls*. I submit it is impossible to think seriously about equality without using quantitative ideas. And the same holds true for other sociological concepts such as *mobility*, *stratification*, *careers*, *parental influence*, *social class*, *norms*, and the like. Unless we can talk about them ex-

actly (quantitatively), we are simply flailing our arms about while expressing our deep feelings.

Courses that avoid quantification are teaching “sociology appreciation” not sociology. Such teaching is analogous to program notes for a symphony concert. While good program notes enhance our listening, they are not a substitute for the music. Nobody ever said, “I’m not a trained musician, so I’ll just the read the program notes and skip the concert.”

In sum, quantitative sociology involves not only objective documentation of conclusions, but also a language for talking about sociological ideas. No fancy math is involved (and surprisingly little simple math), but you will need to develop a new way of thinking. This book is designed to help you in this, to get you to think like a sociologist, not just like a statistician.

THE DATA

Sociology likes to pretend it is very old, but it isn’t. Depending on your professor’s taste, the first lecture can begin with the Old Testament or Aristotle or August Comte or whomever you like; it doesn’t make much difference since the great social philosophers have such a tenuous connection to modern sociological research that you can pick and choose at will.

Modern sociological research is a Johnny-come-lately on the intellectual scene. If you want to stretch things a bit you might go back as far as the turn of the century (Karl Pearson or Francis Galton), but the connection is through mathematical statistics, not social research ideas. A more likely beginning is the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago where, in the 1920s and 1930s, empirical sociological research first took foothold in a university. But, in point of fact, the classic Chicago research consisted mostly of field observation, and surprisingly few contemporary research topics can be traced directly back to the Chicago School.

In my opinion the year 1950 (give or take five years) marks the abrupt beginning of scientific sociological studies of the United States. The U.S. Census, of course, goes back to 1790, but its content is narrow, inconsistent from year to year, and until very recently Census data were physically unavailable for reanalysis. The commercial polls (Gallup, Crossley, Roper, and so on) began in the mid-1930s, but their original *quota sampling* designs make it impossible

to take their data at face value; academic sociology prior to 1950 centered on community studies and classroom questionnaires, not the nation as a whole.

But shortly after the end of World War II several things happened to change sociological studies:

- The two leading academic survey organizations, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and the Survey Research Center (SRC), took root at the University of Chicago and Michigan (though neither is tied closely to their sociology departments). Since then, each has completed more than a thousand surveys.
- All major survey organizations adopted multi-stage area probability samples—the most scientifically desirable form of sampling. The obvious result was an upgrading in quality. Less obviously, this standardization meant that most studies by most survey organizations since 1950 could be compared because their samples represented the same national cross sections.
- The late Samuel A. Stouffer, a Harvard sociologist, in 1953 received (from the Ford Foundation) what I believe to be the first research grant for a sociological national opinion survey. The topic? McCarthyism and Free Speech.
- The Michigan SRC began its classic series of surveys of voters in national elections, running from 1952 to the present.
- The Bureau of the Census's Current Population Survey (started in 1940) expanded its sample points from 68 to 230 in 1954, and continually expanded its survey capacity so that by 1980 the CPS alone was interviewing about a million Americans a year.

It is almost impossible to convey the impact of these thirty years on sociology. I began my own graduate study in 1950, and, while my teachers found plenty of books for me to read, I think it is accurate to say, basic Census figures aside, neither students nor teachers knew a darned thing about the social contours of America—or, more exactly, what we thought we knew was not based on hard evidence. Consider these questions: Do Protestants and Catholics differ in their values? How many Americans are up-