METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN SOCIAL SURVEYS

OXFORD SOCIO-LEGAL STUDIES

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Mavis Maclean and Hazel Genn

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1979
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First published 1979 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in Delhi
Dublin Hong Kong Johannesburg Lagos
Melbourne New York Singapore Tokyo

Typeset in Great Britain at
The Pitman Press, Bath
and printed by
Billing and Sons Ltd
Guildford, London and Worcester

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Macleane, Mavis
Methodological issues in social surveys
(Oxford socio-legal studies)
1. Social surveys—Decision making
I. Title II. Genn, Hazel III. Series
309'.07'23 HN29

ISBN 978-1-349-04062-9

ISBN 978-1-349-04060-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-04060-5

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Preface

Large-scale survey work involves a continuous process of decision-making, with a common theme – the conflict between rigorous academic standards and the allocation of scarce resources. It is difficult to identify a critical path for the process, as so many decisions are interdependent, have to be considered simultaneously, and have important implications for the remaining decisions. The situation is often made even more complex in large-scale work by the different perspectives and priorities held by individual members of a project group, who are unlikely in the social science research setting to have had broad experience of large-scale empirical work. The guidance available in the existing literature falls into three groups: firstly, textbook coverage, which may be comprehensive in scope but tends to be lacking in depth on specific issues; secondly, specialist articles, where the conclusions reached depend heavily on the specific circumstances of the project; and thirdly, the methodological appendices of other projects which are inevitably concerned to vindicate the approach taken and perhaps reluctant to reveal the problems involved, or the less academically respectable constraints experienced. This collection of papers does not purport to be a survey textbook, or a project-specific methodological apologia. Instead we hope to offer frank discussion of some examples of the issues to be faced during the course of a large-scale project which are of general interest to those planning work on this scale.

The papers result from work completed between 1975 and 1978 at the SSRC Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Wolfson College, Oxford. Mavis Maclean and Hazel Genn took continuing responsibility for the large-scale survey, under the direction of Donald Harris, with support from Sally Lloyd-Bostock who wrote part of Chapter 3 (Testing for Validity), and from Yvonne Brittan, Sandra Burman, Karen Clarke, Peter Corfield, Keith Hawkins, Jenny Phillips and Geneva

Richardson. Douglas Wood of Social and Community Planning Research made a major contribution to Chapter 6. The research also benefited considerably from consultation with John Utting, Graham Kalton and Seymour Sudman. Philip Whittall contributed to the statistical analyses.