Social Research

SECOND EDITION

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Preface

This is an introductory text on social research and is designed for students undertaking basic-level undergraduate courses in social sciences and related disciplines. Its main aim is to introduce methods and techniques of social research and their methodological frameworks in their diverse and pluralistic nature, and to demonstrate their purpose, relevance and effectiveness.

This book has many distinctive features. First and foremost, it offers a full coverage of the area of social research. Whereas most texts operate in one methodological domain or focus on one specific method or technique, this text integrates all popular methodologies and methods, and presents a relatively complete and pluralistic model of social research, in both theory and practice. In this sense, the text is concise and comprehensive, and offers a large amount of information in a relatively small space.

The text also introduces the most popular statistical techniques employed by social researchers and discusses the use of computers in social research. It also covers a wide area of study, ranging from the traditional research models of positivism and neopositivism to more recent developments in the area, such as grounded theory and feminist research, issues that are rarely presented in other standard texts of social research. Finally, the text presents social research as a dynamic process leading from the beginning to the end, and from questions to answers, showing clearly how researchers progress from one stage to the next, how decisions are made, how options are chosen, and how conclusions are drawn. This is an advantage over the many texts that concentrate on introducing methods and techniques of social research, placing less emphasis on their framework and their processual nature.

This text offers undergraduate students almost everything they need to know about social research: what it is, what it does, how it is used, when it is used and for what purpose, what methods it employs, how good they are, and a multiplicity of issues enabling a clear and critical understanding of modern social research. Obviously, preoccupation with comprehensiveness leaves little space for in-depth analysis and discussion of the elements of social research. Nevertheless, the choice of extent of coverage over intensity of discussion is preferable, because knowledge and understanding of the total context of social research is more important for the undergraduate than intensive analysis of a few specific methods or processes. Such an intensive analysis may be accomplished through further reading, or more specific course work.

As a basic-level text, the book is oriented towards practice and substance, leaving more critical and theoretical issues for the initiated and advanced student. In essence, it offers a solid basis for further developments, and prepares undergraduates for a more detailed study of advanced, specialised and theoretically demanding aspects of research, which might be undertaken, as stated above, in other courses, or for which information may be sought in more specialised literature.

Due to its comprehensive nature and the diversity of issues presented in it, the text lends itself to a variety of uses and diverse services. It can be used in courses with diverse structure, and as a guide to diverse research projects. The variety of issues covered allows students and teachers to concentrate on issues that suit the nature and purpose of their course. As a result, this text might prove to be useful to students of sociology, social work, psychology, nursing, education, administration, politics, and social sciences in general, and can be employed at lower as well as higher undergraduate levels.

The book is divided into four parts. In the first part the historical, theoretical and methodological foundations of social research are introduced. The research process is presented in a series of steps, in the form of a research model. Here, an attempt is made to show how to plan a research project, and to familiarise the reader with the kind of decisions that need to be made regarding the methods and techniques, their relevance and their advantages and disadvantages. In the second part, the process of data collection is outlined in nine chapters. The theoretical formulation of the topic, the most common methods of data collection and the process of data gathering are discussed briefly in this part.

The third part deals with the analysis and interpretation of the data. The bias here is quantitative, but qualitative analysis is not neglected. The mode employed in quantitative analysis is pragmatic and functional: it is important to know how analysis is done and when and how statistical methods are used, leaving mathematics and advanced statistics to the experts. The basic methods of analysis are introduced here but only the most popular statistical techniques are discussed briefly in this part.

The process of writing a report and the rules and standards employed for this purpose are presented in the last part of the book. A glossary of some common terms as well as an index and the bibliography follow this part.

Ideally, this text is written for the beginner who wishes to develop an understanding of social research and who intends to carry out an elementary investigation. Nevertheless, the advanced student may find the book a good model for ordering, categorising and integrating knowledge of research methodology in the social sciences.

The second edition

This second edition has followed several reprints of the original book and extensive communication and discussions with those who had most to do with the book: students and particularly colleagues who reviewed the book and/or used it as a text in their courses. They pointed to needs, options for expansion

and opportunities for adjustment. The suggestions were constructive and resulted in a reorganisation of content, and in minor additions and deletions, which made the text more suitable and more relevant to a variety of student groups. Still, the author's goals remain true to the principles entailed in the previous edition.

More specifically, apart from revising, updating and reorganising, the major changes introduced in the text are as follows: (a) the chapter on surveys was split into two, one on questionnaires and one on interviewing; (b) the order of three chapters was changed; (c) sections on action research and evaluation research were added; (d) the section on ordinal tests of significance was reduced; and (e) computer-aided statistical analysis was added. The SPSS package (Windows Version 6.1.3) is employed. SPSS is one of the most popular programs in the USA, Europe and Australia, and its accessibility and user friendliness (especially in the windows version) makes it the preferred option for many students. Still, manual analysis of data is as fully explained in the text as before.

The inclusion of a discussion of a computer statistical package is one of the major improvements of the text. Computer-aided research design and data analysis has become an integral part of modern research, and the demand for computer skills in social research and for speed and accuracy in analysis is becoming increasingly evident at the level of tertiary institutions as well as to the employers of social researchers. In this sense, *Social Research* is the first text that integrates fully computer-aided analysis with a comprehensive discussion of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

In a nutshell, the second edition retains the strengths of the original book, presents an enriched version of the first edition, includes 19 chapters (one more than the previous edition), contains sections on action research and evaluation research and incorporates computer-aided analysis by using SPSS, and this without changing the size of the text substantially. Students and teachers who found the text useful in the past will find it now even more attractive. It is hoped that in its new form the text will be more effective, more accessible and more useful to students, and suitable to more courses than the old edition.

S. Sarantakos
October 1997

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