

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS

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SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS

An Introduction

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

Martin Bulmer

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M
MACMILLAN

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Preface to the Second Edition

The first edition of this book was produced seven years ago because sociological method was a relatively underdeveloped area from a teaching point of view, and there was a need for new perspectives on it. The material included was intended to encourage reflection, discussion and debate about research methods in sociology, even if the particular *gestalt* of the research process which it adopted did not command universal assent. The first edition was generally well received and used widely in undergraduate and graduate courses on research methodology. A revised edition is therefore timely.

Why does method matter as part of the education and professional competence of a contemporary sociologist? Students and teachers of sociology alike spend most of their academic time talking about the nature and interpretation of social reality. In doing so, accounts of social life are derived from our own social experience as members of a society, and from our location within social structures in that society. Through our families, our peers, our institutional memberships, our interests and our first-hand experiences we play social roles, are socialised into particular patterns of behaviour, and absorb a wide range of socially formed values, beliefs and attitudes. In another and more important sense, however, most sociological knowledge is knowledge at second hand, not derived from our own immediate experience. The social reality being talked is 'out there', beyond the confines of the educational institution in which the academic discourse is being carried on.

For accounts of this real world, student and teacher alike rely to a considerable extent upon the published researches of sociologists and other social scientists, as well as upon more general sources such as the press, television and radio, films, historical and literary

sources, and material deriving from governments, interest groups and other voluntary organisations.

These different accounts of society and its parts vary considerably in their adequacy from a scientific standpoint. All are of potential value in social research, but many of the more accessible – for example, popular journalism and novels – are also the least systematic and potentially more unreliable in their portrayal of particular social groups or social processes. This book is concerned with sociological research methods, and its purpose is to examine the means by which the sociologist gains *systematic, reliable* and *valid* knowledge about the social world ‘out there’, and to indicate some of the ways in which this knowledge is used in the formulation of sociological explanations.

What follows should stimulate the reader to think about some of the main methodological problems in sociology. The book is intended as a source of ideas about sociological research methods which the reader must take up, work out and develop in his or her own work. It aims to convey a sense of what is involved in the process of research, and the practical problems encountered in producing sociological explanations. This volume does not provide an account of a single, unified, cut-and-dried research method because, contrary to what some texts suggest, it does not exist. The emphasis here upon contrasting methodological statements about key issues is deliberate, as a way of pointing up central questions and trying to convey a sense of the complexity of the processes of sociological research.

The title of this book has sometimes seemed a slight misnomer. It is centrally concerned, not with research methods alone, but with the integral connections (which suffuse the best sociological work) between theory, method and substance (the title of the last part of the book). The original conception of the book arose partly from the isolation of many research-methods courses from the main theoretical and substantive concerns of sociologists, and a belief that the connections between theories and methods need to be emphasised more in teaching. It also stemmed from dissatisfaction with the formalism of many research-methods textbooks, which tend to portray research like good military planning, whereas autobiographical accounts of the research process suggest that this is not how it is actually carried out.

A secondary emphasis is upon different *styles* of sociological research. Much writing about methodology (often from widely

differing standpoints) gives the impression that one particular style (or cluster of styles) of research is to be preferred to other styles, about which critical comments are made. This is particularly true about those at either end of the quantitative/qualitative continuum, who sometimes display an intolerance, indeed bigotry, toward styles of research which do not accord with their own view of proper procedure. In what follows the *variety* of approaches to research is emphasised.

Teaching methods of social research sometimes seem to defy adequate solution at both undergraduate and graduate levels, since there are so many different aspects to it and it involves both academic and practical knowledge. What experienced sociologists have to say about their research work therefore has an important role in such teaching; this is also why this book takes the form of a reader. It provides an *introduction* to sociological research methods; it does not provide cut-and-dried answers. The scope and coverage of this book are inevitably selective; particular importance therefore attaches to the suggestions for further reading provided, which make it possible to follow up issues raised and fill some of the gaps. Nevertheless, certain specific omissions should be noted, in case the reader wonders why they are not included.

This collection is not primarily orientated to the detailed discussion of measurement and the quantitative analysis of social data, although Parts 2, 3 and 4 of this book are concerned with these subjects to some extent. This emphasis is deliberate. A number of excellent available texts deal with the contribution of statistical methods to sociology (e.g. Blalock [1960]; Weiss [1968]; Mueller *et al.* [1970]; Loether and McTavish [1974]; Bailey [1978]; Walizer and Wienir [1978]; Backstrom and Hursh-Cesar [1981]). A large and growing literature deals with the analysis of quantitative data at various levels of sophistication (e.g. Zeisel [1968]; Blalock and Blalock (eds) [1968]; Blalock (ed.) [1972]; Heise [1975]; Tukey [1977]; Fienberg [1977]). To add to either would be superfluous.

Nor is this book aiming to describe in detail the different tools of research used by sociologists; it is rather concerned with overall research strategy. Thus although one paper on interviewing appears in Part 5, the large literature on this subject (e.g. Hyman [1954]; Richardson [1965]; Bingham [1959]; Gorden [1975]) and on questionnaire construction (e.g. Payne [1951]; Oppenheim [1966]) is not touched on. Excellent textbook discussions are also available.

Two other omissions, solely for reasons of space, are perhaps

more regrettable. Discussion of general methodological issues, as by Durkheim in *The Rules of Sociological Method* [1964] and by Max Weber in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* [1949], is an indispensable part of studying methods of research. These issues are alluded to in the Introduction and in Part 6, but properly require a much more detailed treatment than has been possible here. Secondly, no attention is given to important ethical and political questions concerning social research. These enter into research in many ways: in the ethical commitment of the researcher in the field (cf. Barnes [1963]; Filstead [1970, Part 6]); in the political aims and ethical consequences of social research (cf. Horowitz [1967]; Rainwater and Yancey [1967]; Sjoberg (ed.) [1968]; Barnes [1980]; Bulmer (ed.) [1982]; Beauchamp [1982]); in the social and intellectual context within which research is carried on (Hughes [1959]; Bramson [1961]; Tiryakian (ed.) [1971]; Payne [1981]; Abrams *et al.* [1981]); and in the need to develop an adequate theory of social research, of the relation between the methodology of social research and its objects. Another book would be required to deal with these fully. Nor does the increasingly salient issue of the utilisation of research receive any attention here, and on this the reader must look elsewhere (cf. Bulmer [1978]; Lindblom and Cohen [1979]; Scott and Shore [1979]; Weiss [1980]; Bulmer [1980c]; Bulmer [1982]).

It is not clear, at least in Britain, that sociological method is any more strongly developed than it was seven years ago. A recent review of the teaching of the subject to postgraduates (Bulmer and Burgess (eds) [1981]) struck a rather pessimistic note, though there are a considerably larger number of British books about research methods today than there were seven years ago. A number of these are referred to in the further reading provided for each section of this book.

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I am indebted to Valerie Campling, who typed the revised manuscript, and to Steven Kennedy of Macmillan, who suggested revising the first edition. It will be obvious throughout how much I have continued to draw on the writings of others about methods of

sociological research, as well as on personal contacts with sociologists in Britain and the United States, too numerous to mention. In the suggestions for further reading and in the notes and references, I have attempted to indicate some of these sources. The first edition owed a good deal to the stimulus of colleagues in the Department of Sociology and Social Administration at the University of Durham before 1974 as well as specifically to the comments of Professors W. Baldamus and J. H. Westergaard. Since then the experience of working briefly in the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, teaching research methods at the London School of Economics, and rather more extensive contact with sociology in the United States, has reinforced my belief in the importance of high quality methodological work. There is still scope for great improvement in this respect in Britain, which is one reason why it seems to me that a second edition is justified.

London, December 1983

MARTIN BULMER