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Edited by John Edwards, R. Scott Tindale,
Linda Heath, and Emil J. Posavac

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PSYCHOLOGY**

Edited by Fred B. Bryant, John Edwards,
R. Scott Tindale, Emil J. Posavac, Linda Heath,
Eaaron Henderson, and Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar

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Edited by

**Fred B. Bryant, John Edwards, R. Scott Tindale,
Emil J. Posavac, Linda Heath, Eaaron Henderson,
and Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar**

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Preface

Many authors have argued that applying social psychology to the solution of real-world problems builds better theories. Observers have claimed, for example, that applied social psychology reveals more accurate principles of human behavior because its data are based on people in real-life circumstances (Helmreich, 1975; Saxe & Fine, 1980), provides an opportunity to assess the ecological validity of generalizations derived from laboratory research (Ellsworth, 1977; Leventhal, 1980), and discloses important gaps in existing theories (Fisher, 1982; Mayo & LaFrance, 1980). Undoubtedly, many concrete examples can be mustered in support of these claims.

But it also can be argued that applying social psychology to social issues and problems builds better research methods. Special methodological problems arise and new perspectives on old methodological problems emerge when researchers leave the laboratory and tackle social problems in real-world settings. Along the way, we not only improve existing research techniques but also develop new research tools, all of which enhance our ability to obtain valid results and thereby to understand and solve socially relevant problems. Indeed, Campbell and Stanley's (1966) seminal work on validity in research design grew out of the application of social science in field settings. In this spirit, the principal aim of this volume is to present examples of methodological advances being made as researchers apply social psychology in real-life settings.

Many methodological problems encountered in applied social psychological research have never before arisen in basic social psychological research. This is because of differences in objectives, settings, and research populations between the two fields. For example, applied research typically requires the establishment of clear, accepted operational definitions of dependent variables—a need that often dictates the assessment of multiple real-world behaviors, as opposed to laboratory analogues or simulations. This has led to the development of novel

research techniques, such as structured diary methods, through which ongoing behaviors can be assessed over time in real-world settings (see Chapter 5, this volume, by DeLongis, Hemphill, & Lehman).

In addition, applied social psychologists often have a greater need than do basic social psychologists to determine the latency and duration of treatment effects in actual application, so as to maximize the policy relevance of results and to facilitate cost-benefit analysis. This has led to the refinement of research procedures, such as time series analysis, which can be used to study groups in real-life settings over long periods (see Chapter 6 by Mark, Sanna, & Shotland). Furthermore, in applied social research there is a greater need than in basic social research to explore variations in the ways treatments are implemented across sites and to discover unintended side effects that interventions may produce. This has led to the creation of techniques for using qualitative data reliably in empirical investigations (see Chapter 10 by Fine & Vanderslice).

Perhaps the thorniest methodological problem encountered in applied social research is the need to draw unequivocal inferences about cause and effect in field settings. The frequent inability to rely on randomized experimental designs in applied research has led to a heightened awareness of specific threats to valid inference and has spawned a host of creative strategies for reducing the plausibility of these threats (e.g., Cook & Campbell, 1979). It has also generated a variety of quasi-experimental research designs, such as the control construct design, that had been unavailable before (see Chapter 8 by McKillip).

This greater use of nonexperimental designs has also led to the refinement of existing analytic procedures, such as structural equations modeling, that are capable of detecting cause-and-effect relationships in longitudinal data (see Chapter 7 by Olmstead & Bentler). In addition, researchers have creatively applied to quasi-experimental data such techniques as meta-analysis that were previously used only with randomized studies, and have improved these procedures in the process (see Chapter 4 by Wortman). Other applied researchers have developed innovative statistical techniques for analyzing data from non-traditional research methods, such as "*N*-of-1" designs, that had previously lacked statistical conclusion validity (see Chapter 9 by Yarnold).

Because applied social research often takes place in established organizational settings, it frequently requires a wider range of research skills than does traditional basic research. Applied researchers, for example, have had to learn how to plan and negotiate research arrangements in real-world settings, so as to obtain required resources (see Chapter 1 by Bickman); how to define research problems and solutions in ways that incorporate the views and priorities of multiple stakeholders (see Chapter 2 by Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, & Fawcett and Chapter 10 by Fine & Vanderslice); and how to communicate research results effectively to those who can use them (see Chapter 13 by Posavac). Applied

social psychologists have also confronted a morass of ethical dilemmas unique to the study of human behavior outside the laboratory, and the insights gained have enabled them to devise research procedures that are both ethical and valid in the real world (see Chapter 3 by Sieber & Sorensen).

Still other instances of methodological innovation in applied social psychology involve new methods that have sprung from advances in technology. A crucial catalyst in many of these cases has been the increased capability and availability of computers, which have made possible such new research techniques as computer-simulated “thought experiments” (see Chapter 11 by Tindale & Vollrath) and electronic field studies (see Chapter 12 by Kiesler, Walsh, & Sproull). One can only wonder what marvelous methodological inventions will evolve as this technology continues to develop.

The specific methodologies addressed in this volume range from commonly used procedures such as meta-analysis, time series designs, and structural equations modeling to less traditional approaches such as structured diary methods, control construct designs, and *N*-of-1 analyses. We have chosen these particular methodologies not because of their prevalence in the field, but rather because they represent the tremendous diversity of approaches to data collection that characterizes applied social psychology. Numerous other methods (e.g., experience-sampling procedures, panel designs, focus groups, large-scale surveys, and a wealth of quasi-experimental designs) could have been included but for space limitations.

Research methods are tools for building knowledge, and knowledge is a tool for solving problems. Thus, research methods are ultimately problem-solving tools. As with other types of human implements, current methods have evolved from earlier methods and have been shaped by the forces of contemporary need, creative ingenuity, and technological expertise (see Clark, 1974; Larsen, 1961). This evolution entails endless trial and error, through which modern research tools are gradually refined by repeated field testing, much like the process of natural selection (see Basalla, 1988; Gilfillan, 1970).

Methodological advances in applied social psychology are driven by the need to solve meaningful practical problems. Tools that function well on the drawing board or in the controlled confines of the laboratory often fail to operate under rigorous real-world conditions, and when existing tools are inadequate, the ingenious artisan either modifies them to suit current needs or fashions new tools to accomplish the task.

This book presents examples of methodological advances being made as researchers turn from basic to more applied work. The authors of these chapters focus on what they have learned about a particular research method by using it to study problems in real-world settings. Drawing on actual cases of research application, they discuss the specific problems they encountered, the potential solu-

tions they considered, and the methodological lessons they learned through hard-won experience.

These methodological applications encompass a wide variety of different content areas. Within the domain of *health and medicine*, for example, methodological lessons are presented from research on drug treatment and health care programs (see Chapter 3 by Sieber & Sorensen), on the assessment of medical technology (see Chapter 4 by Wortman), on stress and coping (see Chapter 5 by DeLongis et al.), and on media campaigns for health promotion (see Chapter 8 by McKillip). Within the field of *community psychology*, methodological insights are presented from research on environmental obstacles to people with physical disabilities (see Chapter 2 by Suarez-Balcazar et al.), on the lives of “street people” (see Chapter 3 by Sieber & Sorensen), and on the impact of community action groups (see Chapter 6 by Mark et al.). Within the realm of *education*, methodological lessons are presented from research on school desegregation and minority achievement (see Chapter 4 by Wortman) and on the restructuring of schools and school systems (see Chapter 10 by Fine & Vanderslice). Within the area of *criminal justice*, methodological insights are presented from research on homicides and mass media violence (see Chapter 6 by Mark et al.) and on jury decision making (see Chapter 11 by Tindale & Vollrath). Within the domain of *interpersonal relations*, methodological lessons are presented from research on friendship development (see Chapter 7 by Olmstead & Bentler) and on the sharing of discretionary information in business organizations (see Chapter 12 by Kiesler et al.).

Although these applications have often yielded different methodological lessons, this variation is more a consequence of using different research methods than of studying different social problems. Methodological problems and solutions, like basic psychological processes, cross the boundaries of different content areas. Through cross-fertilization, lessons learned by researchers in one social-problem area may be used by researchers to avoid methodological problems in other areas.

Considered together, the chapters in this volume also cover many, if not all, aspects of the research process. The topics range from resource planning and problem identification to research design, data collection, analysis, and, finally, communication of results. In this sense, the volume represents a microcosm of the research process in applied social psychology.

The faculty and students of Loyola University’s Applied Social Psychology Program are pleased to have the opportunity to work with the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and with Plenum Publishing Corporation in preparing this second volume in a series on social psychological processes and social issues. We hope that this book on methodological issues in applied social psychology will be useful to students and researchers in social psychology, by showing how the application of social psychology to social problems improves research methodology.

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