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Methods in Social Research

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Methods in Social Research

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PREFACE

This volume was written out of our teaching experience with the students of Princeton University, Wayne University, Ohio State University, Northwestern University, and Pennsylvania State College and is an attempt to meet some of the problems which were part of that experience. Its primary debt must therefore be to those students who have suffered with us in seminars, classes, and projects over the past ten years. The book attempts to steer a course between a simple anecdotal account of research studies with their technical details, and a set of broad generalizations about research methodology. Its aim is to make both the elements of basic logic and the research procedures of modern sociology understandable at the undergraduate level, where the student should first be introduced to them. It has been a working assumption in our classes that such an understanding of research techniques is indispensable to the student, whether or not he wishes to become an active researcher. In the changing field of sociology, the person who is unwilling to learn *how* conclusions are reached cannot judge properly whether or not the conclusions he reads are correct.

It has also been a working assumption of our teaching that no amount of lecture material, summarizing in general propositions what has been learned about research techniques, can communicate to the student the meaning of research or excite in him any of the fascination which the social process possesses. We have, then, attempted to present, where possible, accounts of specific research experiences, taken in many cases from recent unpublished work.

In addition, as teachers, we have tried to see that all the students in such classes obtain actual field experience. This serves two important objectives: (1) it gives some concrete meaning to the general rules and allows the student some basis for learning when these rules do not apply; (2) equally important, it teaches the student who is easily able to criticize published work that it is much easier to criticize on a lofty level than it is to conduct good research. The objection has been made to putting students at work in research that such research is not "good," and that the student therefore has an idea that it is easy. It has been our experi-

ence that no student comes out of such a field experience with a smug feeling that now he is a "trained researcher." Although field experience requires that the teacher devote considerable energy to his course, the difficulties of supervision are reduced somewhat if the outside work is made into a genuine group project.

Perhaps a third advantage to early field experience can be added to the two previously mentioned. This advantage applies more specifically to students who go on to do research at the graduate level. It is preferable for the student to make his blunders at a phase in his development when it costs him much less, than later to make the same blunders in his own research, often after a great investment in time and energy.

Because the complaints, comments, and difficulties of our students have contributed so much to this book, we wish to record here our gratitude to these students for their patience and their enthusiasm. In addition, of course, we wish to thank our many colleagues at other universities who have read and criticized this manuscript, in whole or in part. Many conferences with Melvin Tumin of Princeton University have added greatly to a clearer understanding of the problems which students face on first coming into contact with the difficulties of research. Read Bain of Miami University has helped us by pungent reminders that this idea or that procedure was not clearly expressed. Edward A. Suchman of Cornell University contributed by his detailed criticism of a substantial portion of this manuscript and gave special attention to the chapters on scaling. Several of our graduate students have worked on specific sections of the manuscript in seminars, adding to its usefulness. Among these may be mentioned Nicholas Babchuk, Arnold S. Feldman, Leonard Moss, Irving Rosow, and John Tarini.

As the teacher will recognize, this volume owes much to the thinking of Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and to the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, with which they have done so much creative work. Peter H. Rossi and Alice S. Rossi, formerly of the Bureau and now of Harvard University, contributed several useful suggestions which were drawn from their own research.

William J. Goode
Paul K. Hatt

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