



# General Introduction

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This handbook is designed to meet the needs of disciplinary and non-disciplinary, problem-oriented social inquirers for a comprehensive overview of the critical issues in the methodology of the social sciences and its various and often extremely complex and controversial literatures. In the social sciences the term 'methodology' tends to indicate two increasingly differentiated areas of work—first, methodological issues arising from and related to theoretical perspectives, as in Marxist, functionalist or feminist methodology; and, second, issues of specific research techniques, concepts and methods. A glance at the contents of this book will show that we aim to cover both these fields. Our understanding of the needs of the reader, and thus of the content of the volume, however, requires some explanation.

The world cannot be said to suffer a shortage of works on either of the two kinds of methodology mentioned above. Books explaining techniques and even handbooks on various methods or kinds of methods are common. Nevertheless, there is a daunting

problem for the student or practitioner, as well as for the senior scholar. The problems and disputes over methods are usually not readily accessible. A person trained in a psychology department program in behavioral science methods will, for example, be told that there are 'assumptions' of the kinds of experimental designs that are taught in these programs. But the same person may never be aware of the large and important technical literature on 'selection bias', a specific problem with the assumptions that routinely undermines the applications of these methods—for example, to such standard problems as evaluating the effectiveness of a social service program. Similarly, the readers of published research reports on such topics as the effectiveness of particular social interventions, even if they are reasonably sophisticated, will find it difficult to know what questions an appropriately skeptical reader should ask about the research design.

This volume is an attempt to make these kinds of issues accessible. One way of doing this is by providing technical chapters on a

range of inter-related problems that plague causal inference. The approach is not to provide 'solutions', though solutions to many of the problems are discussed. The approach is to explain the kinds of problems that routinely arise in these settings, and the tradeoffs that researchers are routinely compelled to make in order to come up with the results that are presented as fact. At this level of methodological detail, matters are seldom as simple as textbooks make them appear. Things that we think we know—for example, that minorities are greatly under-reported by the US Census, turn out to depend on reasoning that is more problematic than the original enumeration. Knowing why is crucial to reading in a sophisticated way.

A second daunting problem is the sheer variety of methodological approaches, especially qualitative approaches. These present some different problems of explication. What is 'cultural studies'? What are the distinctive background ideas and theories that motivate it? Why do its practitioners not just do surveys? What is 'grounded theory'? Answering these questions often requires a bit of historical background, and typically requires an introduction to the motivating theoretical ideas.

In each case, however, we have tried to ensure that contributors keep an eye on broader perspectives as well as on the specific topic with which they are dealing. Thus, as Adele Clarke (Chapter 23) notes in her chapter in this book, the relatively delimited approach of 'grounded theory' raises central questions about the overall orientation of the

social sciences. In Denzin and Ryan's discussion (see Chapter 32) of the focused interview, they explain the way in which this familiar method has become a means of recognizing and accounting for the 'postmodernist' recognition of 'different voices'. In discussing the idea of feminist methodology, we have been concerned both to have the theoretical background of such ideas as standpoint theory explained (see Chapter 29), and also, in a second chapter, to discuss the kinds of problems that arise in actual attempts at collaborative action research in the face of different voices (see Chapter 30).

One of the authors we recruited for the volume, after having its purpose explained, replied: 'I see what you are doing: you are surveying the new geography of knowledge.' This volume *is* an attempt to cover a much wider range of approaches and problems than methodology books have traditionally included. One innovative feature of the volume is the extensive discussion of the new situation in which the knowledge of the subjects of the research is incorporated into the research and in which scholars are engaged researchers collaborating with their subjects. We have tried to cover the main problems on which a developed literature exists. But the sheer variety of topics that the omnivorous reader is likely to encounter extends beyond this volume, and will continue to expand. Methodological controversy has gone far beyond the simple conflicts over 'positivism' of the sixties. This volume is an introduction to that transformation.