
The Practice of Social Research

Seventh Edition

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Prologue

The Importance of Social Research

In many ways, the twentieth century hasn't been one of our better periods. Except for the relatively carefree twenties, we've moved from World War I to the Great Depression to World War II to the Cold War and its threat of thermonuclear holocaust and the tragedy of Vietnam. The recent thawing of the Cold War and the opening of Eastern Europe has been a welcome relief, though it has in many ways heightened concern over the environmental destruction of our planet.

A case could be made that these are not the best of times. Many sage observers have written about the insecurity and malaise of many of the people who grew up during portions of this century. All the same, this period has generated countless individual efforts and social movements to creating humane social affairs has arisen on college campuses, and perhaps you find that commitment in yourself.

As you look at the flow of events in the world, you can see there is a broad range of choices available if you want to make a significant contribution to the lives of future generations. Environmental problems are many and varied. Prejudice and discrimination are with us still. There is, in short, no end to the ways in which you could demon-

strate to yourself that your life matters, that you make a difference.

Given all the things you could choose from—things that really *matter*—why should you spend your time learning social research methods? I want to address that question at the start, because I'm going to suggest that you devote some of your time and attention to *learning about such things* as social theory, sampling, interviewing, experiments, computers, and so forth—things that can seem pretty distant from solving the world's pressing problems. The point I'll make in the following few pages is that social science is not only relevant to the kinds of major problems I've just listed, but it also holds answers to them.

Many of the *big* problems we've faced and still face in this century have arisen out of our increasing technological abilities. The threat of nuclear war is an example. Not unreasonably, we have tended to look to technology and technologists for solutions to those problems. Unfortunately, every technological solution so far has turned out to create new problems. At the beginning of this century, for example, many people worried about the danger of horse manure piling up in city streets. That problem was averted with the invention of the automobile. Now, no one

worries about manure in the streets; instead we worry about a new and deadlier kind of pollutant in the air we breathe.

Similarly, we have attempted to avoid nuclear attack by building better bombs and missiles of our own—so that no enemy would dare attack. But that hasn't worked either. Because our potential enemies have operated on the same reasoning that we do, they too have built ever bigger and more powerful weapons. Now, although the United States and Russia are exhibiting far less nuclear belligerence, there is cause to worry about similar contests elsewhere in the world. There is no technological end in sight for the insane nuclear weapons race.

The simple fact is that technology alone will never save us. It will never make the world work. You and I are the only ones who can do that. *The only real solutions lie in the ways we organize and run our social affairs.* This becomes evident when you consider all the social problems that persist today despite the clear presence of viable, technological solutions.

Overpopulation, for example, is a pressing problem in the world today. The number of people currently living on earth is severely taxing our planet's life support systems, and this number is rapidly increasing year after year. If you study the matter you'll find that we already possess all the technological developments needed to stem population growth. It is technologically possible and feasible for us to stop population growth on the planet at whatever limit we want. Yet, overpopulation worsens each year.

Clearly, the solution to overpopulation is a social one. The causes of population growth lie in the forms, values, and customs that make up organized social life, and that is where the solutions are hidden. Ultimately, only social science can save us from overpopulation.

Or consider the problem of starvation on the planet. Each year, some 15 million people die from starvation. That amounts to 28 peo-

ple a minute, every minute of every day, and 21 of them are children. Everyone would agree that this condition is deplorable; all would prefer it otherwise. But we tolerate this level of starvation in the belief that it is currently inevitable. We hope that perhaps one day someone will invent a method of producing food that will defeat starvation once and for all.

When you study the issue of starvation in the world, however, you learn some astounding facts. First, you learn that the earth currently produces *more than enough food* to feed everyone without requiring sacrifices from those of us who are eating well. Moreover, this level of production does not even take into account farm programs that pay farmers not to plant and produce all the food they could.

Second, you learn that there are carefully planned and tested methods for ending starvation. In fact, since World War II, more than 30 countries have actually faced and ended their own problems of starvation. Some did it through food distribution programs. Others focused on land reform. Some collectivized; others developed agribusiness. Many applied the advances of the Green Revolution. Taken together, these proven solutions make it possible to totally eliminate starvation on the planet.

Why then haven't we ended starvation? The answer, again, lies in the organization and operation of our social life. New developments in food production will not end starvation any more than earlier ones have. People will continue starving on this planet until we are able to *master* our social affairs rather than being enslaved by them.

Possibly, the problems of overpopulation and starvation seem distant to you, occurring somewhere "over there," on the other side of the globe. To save space, I'll not do more than remind you of the conclusion, increasingly reached, that there is no "over there" anymore: there is only "over here" in today's world. And regardless of how you

view world problems, there is undeniably no end to social problems in your own backyard—possibly even in your front yard: crime, inflation, unemployment, homelessness, cheating in government and business, child abuse, prejudice and discrimination, pollution, drug abuse, increased taxes, and reduced public services.

We can't solve our social problems until we understand how they come about and persist. Social science research offers a way of examining and understanding the operation of human social affairs. It provides points of view and technical procedures that uncover things that would otherwise escape our awareness. Often, as the cliché goes, things are not what they seem, and social science research can make that clear: One example illustrates this fact.

Poverty seems a persistent problem in the United States, and none of its intended solutions is more controversial than *welfare*, particularly Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Food Stamps. While the purpose of the program is to give the poor a helping hand while they reestablish their financial viability, many complain that it has the opposite effect.

Part of the public image of welfare in action was crystallized by Susan Sheehan (1976) in her book, *A Welfare Mother*, which described the situation of a three-generation welfare family, suggesting that the welfare system trapped the poor rather than liberating them. Martin Anderson (1978: 56) agreed with Sheehan's assessment and charged that the welfare system had established a caste system in America: "... perhaps as much as one-tenth of this nation—a caste of people almost totally dependent on the state, with little hope or prospect of breaking free. Perhaps we should call them the Dependent Americans" (p. 56).

George Gilder (1990) spoke for many who believed the poor were poor mainly because they refused to work, saying the welfare sys-

tem sapped their incentive to take care of themselves. Ralph Segalman and David Marsland (1989) supported the view that welfare has become an inter-generational way of life for the poor in welfare systems around the world. Children raised in welfare families, they asserted, were likely to live their adult lives on welfare.

This conflict between the intent of welfare as a temporary aid (as so understood by most of the public) and welfare as a permanent right (as understood by the welfare bureaucracy and welfare state planners) has serious implications. The welfare state nations, by and large, have given up on the concept of client rehabilitation for self-sufficiency, an intent originally supported by most welfare state proponents. What was to have been a temporary condition has become a permanent cost on the welfare state. As a result, welfare discourages productivity and self-sufficiency and establishes a new mode of approved behaviour in the society—one of acceptance of dependency as the norm.

(Segalman and Marsland 1989: 6-7)

These negative views of the effects of the welfare system are widely shared by the general public, even among those basically sympathetic to the aims of the program. Greg Duncan at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center points out that Census data would seem to confirm the impression that a hard core of the poor have become trapped in their poverty. Speaking of the percentage of the population living in poverty at any given time, he says:

Year-to-year changes in these fractions are typically less than 1 percent, and the Census survey's other measures show little change in the characteristic of the poor from one year to the next. They have shown repeatedly that the individuals who are poor are more likely to be in families headed by a woman, by someone with low education, and by blacks.

Evidence that one-eighth of the population was poor in two consecutive years, and that those poor shared similar characteristics, is consistent with an inference of absolutely no turnover in the poverty population. Moreover, the evidence seems to fit the

stereotype that those families that are poor are likely to remain poor, and that there is a hard-core population of poor families for whom there is little hope of self-improvement.

(Duncan 1984: 2-3)

Duncan continues, however, to warn that such snapshots of the population can conceal changes taking place. Specifically, an unchanging percentage of the population living in poverty does not necessarily mean the same families are poor from year to year.

Theoretically, it could be a totally different set of families each year.

To determine that real nature of poverty and welfare, the University of Michigan undertook a "Panel Study of Income Dynamics" in which they followed the economic fate of 5,000 families over the course of the ten-year period from 1969-78. They found, for example, that 8.1 percent of the families were receiving some welfare benefits in 1978 and 3.5 percent were dependent on welfare for more than half their income (Duncan 1984: 75). Moreover, these percentages did not differ drastically over the 10-year period.

Looking beyond these surface data, however, the researchers found something you might not have expected. During the 10-year period, about one-fourth of the families received welfare benefits at least once. However, only 8.7 percent of the families were ever dependent on welfare for more than half their income. *"Only a little over one-half of the individuals living in poverty in one year are found to be poor in the next, and considerably less than one-half of those who experience poverty remain persistently poor over many years"* (Duncan 1984: 3; emphasis in the original).

Only 2 percent of the families received welfare each of the 10 years, and less than 1 percent were continuously dependent on welfare for the 10 years. Table P-1 summarizes these findings.

These data paint a much different picture

Table P-1 Incidence of Short- and Long-Run Welfare Receipt and Dependence, 1969-78

	Percent of U.S. Population:	
	Receiving Any Welfare Income	Dependent on Welfare for More Than 50% of Family Income
Welfare in 1978	8.1%	3.5%
Welfare in 1 or more years, 1969-78	25.2	8.7
Welfare in 5 or more years, 1969-78	8.3	3.5
Welfare in all 10 years, 1969-78	2.0	0.7
"Persistent welfare" (welfare in 8 or more years), 1969-78	4.4	2.0

Source: Greg J. Duncan. *Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty: the Changing Fortunes of American Workers and Families*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1984, p. 75.

of poverty than what is commonly assumed. Duncan summarized his findings, saying

... while nearly one-quarter of the population received income from welfare sources at least once in the decade, only about 2 percent of all the population could be characterized as dependent upon this income for extended periods of time. Many families receiving welfare benefits at any given time were in the early stages of recovering from an economic crisis caused by the death, departure, or disability of a husband, a recovery that often lifted them out of welfare when they found full-time employment, or remarried, or both. Furthermore, most of the children raised in welfare families did not themselves receive welfare benefits after they left home and formed their own households.

(Duncan 1984: 4-5)

Many of the things social scientists study—including all the social problems we intend to solve—generate deep emotions and firm convictions in most people. This makes effective inquiry into the facts difficult at best; all too often, we manage only to confirm our initial prejudices. The special value of social science research methods is that they offer a way of addressing such issues with logical and obser-

vational rigor. They let us pierce through our personal viewpoints and take a look at the world that lies beyond our own perspective. And it is that "world beyond" that holds the solutions to the social problems we face today.

At a time of increased depression and disillusionment, we are continually tempted to turn away from confronting social problems

and retreat into the concerns of our own self-interest. Social science research offers an opportunity to take on those problems and discover the experience of making a difference after all. The choice is yours, and I invite you to take on the challenge. Your instructor and I would like to share the excitement of social science with you.