

Foreword

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Survey research, based on ever more precise samples of populations, measurements of concepts, and methods of mental interrogation, is little more than a century old. This period—the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries—also is the historical era in which social science redefined its *raison d'être* from societal reform to scientific inquiry. Both developments, of course, are intertwined, for the tools enabling any human enterprise are fashioned for their purpose. Conversely, refinements and embellishments of tools and instruments can alter or expand the tools' original instrumental purpose.

Such research methods as taking probability samples and interviewing representative individuals or households of a whole society advanced apace in America, especially after World War II. But earlier roots, both in the United States and Britain, of today's survey research were laid in the mid- to late nineteenth century by social reformers using less scientific methods. In both countries, the so-called settlement house movements (such as Hull House) used systematic observations and measurements or interviewed public health nurses or other "experts" about conditions of (usually poor) families in local communities. Their objective was to characterize the dimensions of social problems—mostly those attributed to rapidly expanding cities and industrialization—and to use this information as the basis of a liberal political agenda of change. While in Britain there were notable predecessors (Lewis Mayhew) and successors (Seebohm Rowntree), Charles Booth pioneered the use of in-home interviews and systematic data summarization in statistical form in his landmark studies of turn-of-the-century London's poor and the ramifications of poverty. Booth's influence extended into America. Florence Kelley within Hull House—examining child labor and unsavory housing environments

of youth, as well as poverty per se—and W. E. B. Du Bois's classic *The Philadelphia Negro* mirrored Booth in scope and approach. These American developments were accelerated after World War I by the Social Survey Movement and later by the Department of Survey and Exhibits, funded and organized by the reformist Russell Sage Foundation in New York City. (For a succinct summary of this early history, see Bulmer 2001.)

Our modern probability sample surveys expanded rapidly just prior to and after World War II. The impetus came largely from the influences of statisticians, again in Britain (e.g., R. A. Fischer and Karl Pearson) as well as in America. Here, statisticians and sociologists such as Jerzy Neyman, Samuel Stouffer, and Paul Lazarsfeld and political scientists and psychologists such as Howard Gosnell and L. L. Thurstone advanced the statistical precision of sample designs and of the measurement of attitudes, opinions, and reports about behavior. During World War II, Rensis Likert—first at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and later at the Survey Research Center (SRC), which he founded at Michigan—advanced attitude measurement but also the case for probability (over quota) sampling. The coincident emergence of market research and opinion polling as a flourishing industry after 1930 reflected, perhaps, our American style of consumer-oriented capitalism, individualism, and liberal democracy. But this development, too, advanced the modern era in survey research. What distinguishes this era from its reformist ancestry is the premise that the mathematics of probability theory—statistical science—elevates survey methodology from the idiosyncrasies of local studies and individual observers' reports, the imprecision of qualitative assessments, and the political agenda of reformers. Social surveys after World War II made their claim as scientific tools in the hands of social scientists making objective assessments. Whereas in the earlier era the reformist Russell Sage Foundation promoted American advances, in the modern period institutional sponsorship of field development fell to scientific and scholarly organizations, for example, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York City and such offshoots as the Committee on Government Statistics and Information Services of the SSRC and the American Statistical Association. (For a succinct summary of this modern era, see Fienberg and Tanur 2001.)

And so the metaphor of survey research as a telescope on society draws our attention to this intensive interplay throughout the twentieth century between the creation and continual refinement of a scientific tool for social analysis, on the one hand, and of an empirically grounded description and understanding of human behavior and institutions, on the other. As the

tool became more scientific—the telescope’s optics and fidelity improved as the theory and means to do so advanced—so did the results of its application. Throughout the latter half of this seminal period, the SRC and the Institute for Social Research (ISR) of the University of Michigan have pioneered in the science of society. As the chapters of this book so ably demonstrate, the inquiring minds of the SRC’s and the ISR’s scientists—whether they were focused on poverty and income dynamics, electoral politics, health and well-being, or family formation, for example—constantly required and inspired improvements in sampling, interviewing, statistical analysis of data, and other survey methodologies. In a sense, the SRC itself became the telescope, a scientific institution at one and the same time refining a specific set of tools—survey research methodology, a burgeoning professional field as of the early twenty-first century—and, through their application, a scientific narrative of social life in America and in the wider world. And for most of the past half century, hundreds if not thousands of younger social scientists and graduate students from around the world have traveled to the SRC and to the ISR, to this unique telescope on society. They come, even to this day, principally to the SRC’s renowned Summer Institute (and to a companion program administered at ISR by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR]), much as high-energy physicists might travel to the world’s fastest supercollider at CERN in Switzerland for unique research or advanced training.

The history of survey research is first a story about the evolution of extensive and intensive scientific understanding of society. But it also is a history of democracy and some of its foundational principles. Especially in America, modern (random) sample surveys are characterized as giving voice to the people, to all elements of society—not just to its economic elite, to its urbane intellectuals, or to its long-standing citizens. As an objective, scientific tool in the hands of the “politically neutral” analyst, the social survey yields honest numbers for democracy. Since the principal centers of survey research are located at or are adjuncts to major research universities—historically, Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and, of course, ISR at the University of Michigan—the capacity of the telescope is distributed among institutions that promote informed debate, learn from intellectual disagreements, and test ideas against evidence. These institutional values of universities are the building blocks of a scientific as well as a democratic discourse. Surrounded by these values and institutional practices, the focusing and imaging of this telescope on society (i.e., what it looks at and what its revealed data are

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interpreted to mean) lie well beyond the effective control of government or of any particular partisan agenda. (For a summary of the theoretical relationships between the values and cultural institutions of democracy and science, and the link between the two in the case of social surveys, see Sztompka 1999.)

Reality, of course, is a little different from this principled narrative about surveys and popular democracy. For example, survey data, once in the public domain, are subject to many different analytical objectives—some partisan and political and some more driven by scientific curiosity. Governments, at first local but then increasingly national or federal, have collected “political arithmetic” from censuses and state-run surveys for hundreds of years. Also, the artfully purposive phrasing or sequencing of questions in interviews, whether in the hands of academics or partisans, can elicit different responses to nominally the same question or issue. Still, the legacy of survey research and of the accessibility of survey data as an informational tool is a powerful contribution to democratic debate. That legacy also speaks to the ongoing challenge in any democracy to hear the voices of its people and to empower that people with “honestly brokered” information. (For a historical account of the role of social science in social reform and policy-making in the American democracy, see Featherman and Vinovskis 2001.)

At the celebration of its fiftieth anniversary in 1997, ISR adopted a logo that claimed for its institutional mission “social science in the public interest.” There is no better basis for this claim than *A Telescope on Society*. This volume brings into sharp focus the passion for deep inquiry, the quest for ever more precise measurement. It describes a collective, collaborative process of scientific discovery that draws upon many experiences and interdisciplinary expertise. And in its choice of social issues on which to focus this telescope, the book also reveals a legacy of social consciousness, of scientific responsibility, that harkens back to a much earlier era of social science and to its reformist past. This in no way diminishes its contributions as contemporary social science. Rather, it illustrates the dual motivations of scientists as citizens who make their intellectual work useful and accessible to others in this democratic society and beyond. Like ISR, this book is social science in the public interest.

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