

Preface

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In this web-publication, fellows of the Social Science Research Council's International Migration Program reflect upon their experience conducting research on international migration to the United States. Although their essays describe the substantive findings of their research, their main focus is on the multiple methods employed in producing those findings. They discuss the process of focusing research questions, redefining concepts, selecting apt investigative procedures, carrying out research in the face of unanticipated challenges, and analyzing and interpreting the significance of their findings. We believe that their insights into these processes will be useful to social scientists who are formulating research proposals or

who are about to embark on a new research project.

These "stories from the field" provide practical research lessons. They also help to clarify the methods of research and analysis through which social science knowledge is created and can claim authority in informing public understandings and debates about social life. Each sector of society, such as religion, government, business, the military, or the media, produces social knowledge based on quite distinct experiential perspectives. Unlike understandings derived from religious revelation, building a democratic consensus, making profits, securing national defense or journalistic reporting, the validity of social science knowledge derives from making

manifest, and exposing to critique, the process by which meaning is derived from research. Establishing the validity of new social science knowledge usually depends less on the apparent "truth" of research findings, which may or may not be popularly agreeable or easily accepted, but more on the credibility of the procedures by which factual information and interpretations of its significance have been acquired and produced. Equally, the success of an effort to discredit an established social science opinion usually depends on attacking its methodological underpinnings. Ultimately the persuasive power of the social sciences in public life derives from its distinctive methods of arriving at knowledge through explicit and self-conscious methods of



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questioning, investigation, analysis, and interpretation.

Thus, while the public may be most concerned with the findings of research and their implications for public policies and programs – indeed policy makers and administrators frequently demand “executive summaries” free of qualifying footnotes, sources, and methodological explanations – social scientists must be equally preoccupied with their methods of producing such findings in order to determine and defend their validity. Debates among social scientists within and between different disciplines about when certain methods are appropriate and how accurately they have been employed are of course far reaching and at times quite heated, and have resulted in a quasi-hierarchy of disciplines that are recognized, if not universally accepted, to be most authoritative with regard to particular social issues or sectors of society. The saying, “economics is too important to be left to the economists,” reflects both the strength and weakness of the topical hegemony of a

discipline and applies equally to other fields.

A guiding principle informing the creation of the Social Science Research Council in 1923 was that all disciplines of the social sciences have much to learn from one another’s methodologies for carrying out research and arriving at theoretical understandings of complex and important issues in public life. This principle continues to guide the Council today. In seeking to build U.S. immigration studies as an interdisciplinary sub-field within the social sciences, for example, the Council organized a multidisciplinary Committee on International Migration that guided the organization of a variety of activities designed to foster international migration studies as an interdisciplinary field of study, which included a fellowship program that, for seven years, supported predoctoral and postdoctoral research about immigration to the United States.¹

¹ Funding for research fellowships was provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation from 1996-2002 and by The Pew Charitable Trusts for 2000-2001.

The International Migration

Program’s fellowships provided support for individual predoctoral and postdoctoral research projects that were judged to be of potential theoretical significance to the field by selection committees composed of established scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds. Successful applicants had to convince the selection committee members not only that their projects addressed issues of broad significance but also that they had mastered the requisite methodologies of research and analysis necessary to legitimate their findings. After the awards were made and the research was completed, the Council convened the researchers in conferences where fellows from different disciplines presented and compared their findings with reference to common themes. Much of the discussions at those conferences focused on differences and similarities and advantages and disadvantages of the different methodologies and disciplinary perspectives that the fellows had employed.



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Following the final fellows' conference in 2004, three selection committee members, Sherrie Kossoudji, Louis DeSipio, and Manuel Garcia y Griego, realized that the collections of fellows' research essays that had been published thus far failed to reflect an important part of the intensive exchanges that had engaged the fellows during the conferences and had excited them about the contributions of different disciplines. These essays, which had been published in books and special issues of journals, emphasized the insights attained and their contributions in advancing social science and public understandings.² While these publications made clear the methodological underpinnings of their findings, they generally did so retrospectively and without much discussion of how research questions were identified, or how methods were chosen, tested, and adapted in the process of research, analysis, and interpretation.

In other words, the focus on research

² See http://www.ssrc.org/program_areas/migration/ for a description of Migration Program activities and publications.

findings detracted attention from the equally important process of inquiry and doubt through which scholars considered, chose, and employed the research methods on which their findings were based.

Particularly missing were the stories that the fellows had shared with one another, particularly through informal conversations, about dilemmas they confronted in choosing between and deploying various qualitative and quantitative methods, including participant ethnography, surveys, archive retrieval, data set development, or other investigative and analytical techniques. In many cases, fellows had pursued multiple methods of research and had then to figure out how best to combine the results into a coherent combined analysis. While all social science researchers confront similar issues in planning and carrying out their investigations, rarely are these experiences, the choices they entail, or their implications for successful outcomes assessed in ways that can benefit others or aid in future research planning. For this reason the

three editors decided to develop this web-publication of research stories.

The narratives of methodological practices presented here have been selected in part because they address central themes and questions of international migration studies and will be substantively relevant to the research findings of other scholars in the field. More significantly, the experiences of these researchers have broader relevance and can be useful to all social scientists who are wondering how to cope with the methodological issues that will ultimately determine the validity of their findings, both within the social sciences and for the public debates that they hope to inform.

In addition to the persevering efforts of the editors and authors, the publication of this web book has relied upon the collaboration and support of many people beginning with Harriet Zuckerman of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Dr. Zuckerman was the first to imagine the contributions that the Social Science Research Council could make to the study



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of international migration and the social sciences more broadly by organizing annual predoctoral and postdoctoral fellowship competitions, which took place between 1996 and 2002 (<http://fellowships.ssrc.org/intmigration/>). At the Council, we have relied upon and benefited from the gentle editing of Paul Price, publication design of Debra Yoo, communications expertise of Mary-Lea Cox, and web site architecture of Ravi Rajakumar.

