Foreword

The shape, substance and style of the field of social research methodology have undergone considerable change in the last 60 years. In the 1950s the term ‘social research’ was synonymous with the conduct of social surveys and major texts paid little attention to other methods of social investigation apart from a brief mention of observational methods. It was not until the 1980s that we witnessed the development of ethnographic or field methods as an alternative to the social survey – in part a reflection of the changing intellectual problems that the research set out to investigate. Among the problems that emerged was the way in which some research practitioners and their students erroneously began to divide the social world into a sharp division of quantitative and qualitative styles of social investigation – a situation that researchers now readily appreciate is a false dichotomy. Accordingly, the field has been reshaped further with the use of ‘mixed methods’ that appropriately bring together quantitative and qualitative data to better understand the social situation under study whereby quantitative and qualitative research data complement each other.

While these general developments occurred in social research, other trends can be identified in the teaching of research methodology. First, it was no longer sufficient for the field to rely on the teaching of research techniques. Second, the shape of methodology teaching was developed not only by those who might describe themselves as ‘methodologists’ but also by active researchers who began talking and writing about the research process that took us well beyond the world of research techniques. Furthermore, it emphasised how research could not be reduced to a set of standard procedures. Instead, researchers became engaged in discussing various aspects of research including: designing projects, collecting data, analysing data and research writing. The result was that reflections on the research process covered what researchers experienced when doing research.

But the reader might reasonably ask how these trends and developments relate to this volume on Working with Paradata, Marginalia and Fieldnotes.

First, the chapters in this volume extend the terrain of ‘social research methodology’ by broadening out what counts as methodology. Second, as the choice of chapters illustrates, the editors and authors have not
Worked with paradata, marginalia and fieldnotes

confined their attention to quantitative or qualitative studies. Third, the authors examine the work of others through an analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies, some of which are research classics such as Peter Townsend’s volume on poverty, as well as empirical work conducted by key figures in British sociology including Norbert Elias and Pearl Jephcott. However, the focus is not on the substantive material but on an under-recognised aspect of methodology.

By looking at paradata, the authors extend the field of research methodology by examining not only the by-products of data collection but also the interpretation and analysis of data. As a consequence, this takes us closer to the research experience and illustrates how researchers can draw upon a variety of materials that have the potential to deliver an increased understanding of the research process as well as the substantive field of investigation. So we might ask: what could be included in this research material? In attempting to address this issue the following examples can be included (in no particular order):

- Grant applications that might include handwritten notes by the applicant.
- Research correspondence that can include letters, memos and notes between researchers and sponsors as well as the letters and notes that may be written by members of a research team to each other. These days email correspondence has the potential to shed much light on the research process as notes written between team members can be used to analyse the development of the research study.
- Photographs may be taken of research locations or of respondents and research team members (subject to their permission).
- Letters that include handwritten comments by the writer as well as responses generated by the recipient.
- Diaries kept by the researcher that provide additional insights into the research process by focusing on methodological, theoretical and substantive issues.
- Informants Diaries that may be commissioned by the research team.
- Fieldnotes that can include detailed observations recorded by the researcher and may take many forms, including notes on the conduct of a social survey interview as well as the substantive material that may contribute to an ethnographic study.

The list could be endless, and will prompt researchers to think about the paradata that may be gleaned from existing research materials. In this respect, they contribute not only to data collection but also to data analysis and have the potential to highlight strengths and weaknesses
in an investigation as well as providing a greater understanding of the different ways principal researchers may work and the various ways in which members of a large field force engage with respondents and handle research questions. Altogether, this opens up opportunities for a reanalysis of the conduct of some classic studies, as illustrated in several of the chapters in this volume. However, there are a number of other issues that are raised by the discovery of paradata and their use in social research. We might ask:

- Did researchers intend their comments on interview schedules to be used for further investigations? Did they really consider that their notes describing the research location, the respondents and their families, might be quoted directly and used by researchers?
- Is research correspondence appropriate research material? Who owns it, the writer or the recipient?
- Do photographs provide research insights or are they socially constructed depending on the position of the researcher, the angle of the camera lens and so on?
- Are diaries public documents? Were they written for the public domain or are they private intimations for the writer alone?

In short, these questions point to some of the ethical dilemmas that researchers may need to confront in using paradata, marginalia and field-notes in the course of an investigation.

The researcher may therefore face many of the problems shared with other forms of social research. Yet it may encourage the researcher to revisit particular methods to see if their use has been maximised in particular research studies to gain further insights into the research process.

The beauty of this volume is that it has the potential to introduce the reader to a relatively new field in methodology and to provide insights not only into methodology but also into the substantive field of investigation. These chapters clearly illustrate the way in which social research treats all data as having the potential to develop our understanding of the social world. The collection also has the potential to broaden our understanding of social research that is not to be confined in a methodological strait-jacket but opened up for the richness that can be generated by researchers who think creatively about using different approaches to social research.

On this basis we might ask, who are the audiences for this volume? First, it is appropriate for the beginning student who will be assisted to take a wide-ranging approach to social research and to methodology. Second, the experienced researcher may read these chapters with benefit as they point to a range of data that is on the margins of social research methods and
which can augment traditional styles of collecting, analysing and writing up data. Third, research teams may be encouraged to use this volume to consider ways in which they may correspond with each other in order that further data can become available in the research process and the way in which researchers work. Finally, those members of the public who participate in social research may also be encouraged to read this volume to obtain a greater insight into social research and the methodologies used.

Overall, the editors and authors have extended the research repertoire and the contours of social research methodology. This has the potential to invigorate the way in which social research methodology is developed and used to extend our understanding of the social world.

Robert G. Burgess