Introduction

From Door to Door to Digital
The Evolving Social Survey in the Making of Modern Knowledge

Charlotte Greenhalgh and Clare Corbould

The technologies and methods of twentieth-century social surveys are ubiquitous in the early decades of the twenty first century. Today, private companies, political campaigns and news organizations poll, survey, interpret, publicize and monetize the opinions of so-called ordinary people. Notably, people's opinions drive their engagement with large social media platforms and generate profits for global businesses. And yet, the methods used and people who seek to quantify mass opinion are both constantly doubted by people who are invited to participate and by those who comment on researchers' conclusions. In this volume, we show that this apparent contradiction dates back almost as far as the social survey itself. Early social survey projects were lauded by elites for their contributions to progressive social reforms. Researchers suggested that, with greater precision, disadvantaged communities would soon see the benefits. Yet, participants' suspicions about surveys were justified. Since their nineteenth-century beginnings, social survey projects extracted information, exploited their subjects and delivered as much harm as good to vulnerable communities. Across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, researchers, community organizations and governments used survey methods in pursuit of democratic and scientific progress. At the same time, however, their social surveys enabled academic and state stereotyping and surveillance. People have consistently perceived both the promise and the dangers of participation and have recorded their ambivalence in survey returns since the 1900s.

A prosaic history of 'everyday empiricism' developed in parallel with the movement's grander hopes and greater fears. A through-line

of this volume is the persistent sense of failure – of a significant gap between ambition and outcome – among the authors of surveys that did not achieve policy change, did not get published or went unread. This downbeat perspective contrasts with canonical studies of early social surveys in Britain and the United States that identify social survey projects' innovations and intellectual influence. Applied to more recent histories, this shared 'failure' is a productive category for historical analysis that reveals a different kind of international network: less elite, more contingent, but influential in its own way. This body of work collectively argues that the pedestrian, iterative and marginal – rather than the celebrated or methodologically pristine – offer just as much, if not more, to historians interested in the social histories of science, governance and public opinion.

The Social Survey in Global Perspective provides a sequel to the 1991 volume, *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940*, edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bates and Kathryn Kish Sklar.[1] That volume's authors charted the histories of ambitious British and US surveys that developed techniques including standardized interview formats, survey returns and statistics to understand rates of poverty, and published comprehensive social information about the populations of cities. Its authors also track researchers' influential development and application of sample surveys, which reduced the massive resources that had been required to gather information about entire populations in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. We bring insights borne of developments in historical research since 1991 to bear on the topic. These include the postcolonial turn; digitization and new methods of research; the rise of transnational, global and international history; and the continuing strengths in the history of experience, broadly construed. Adopting these approaches, contributors to this volume reveal the surprising afterlives of many 'failed' social surveys – those that were methodologically flawed, lacked influence, or fell short of their stated aims. Despite their apparent shortcomings, such surveys have left behind an unexpectedly rich legacy for historians. They offer unique insights into everyday life, especially when read not as evidence of objective social truths, but as artifacts of contingent, context-specific research encounters.

To tell this history, *Social Surveys in Global Perspective* foregrounds the geographical and institutional 'margins' through its attention to places such as Australia, where social science funding and institutions were weaker than those in the United States or the United Kingdom, and China, where revolution made certain forms of social survey research politically suspect.[2] Additional chapters focus on locations where social survey research was acknowledged to be difficult and even inappropriate,

such as across Germany's Pacific empire, in brothels in interwar Asia, or in sparsely populated rural areas that required serious investment of researchers' time. Others examine how survey work was pursued outside metropolitan universities and sometimes powered by voluntary labour, such as by women's groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. Across these diverse contexts, social surveys were taken up, adapted and transformed by people beyond the metropole, and outside traditional academic structures.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the focus of a significant majority of this research shifted away from collecting and reporting on the experience of vast numbers of 'regular' people. Social research moved instead to canvassing people's opinions and attitudes directly. The classic social survey fell out of vogue among academics, as the optimism that characterized the relationship in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between government, policy making and researchers diminished. Yet the social survey's methods persisted. Grassroots organizers, for example, perceived the rising authority of data that was produced directly by participants and used surveys to pursue political status for disadvantaged groups. States, meanwhile, turned survey methods to new goals in response to wartime mobilizations, postwar migrations, the continuing impacts of colonization and rapid social change.

Our focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries demonstrates that states, organizations and social movements had persistent drives to create comprehensive knowledge about populations. Their survey activities used an expanding set of methods to understand new fields of social life. But not all people were treated in the same way. The tradition of surveying elite opinion on topics such as Pacific law and prostitution in Asia in the 1900s–1920s continued, as contributors show, as late as the 1980s (and arguably today). For instance, the Australian state adopted survey techniques for the purpose of surveilling and controlling Indigenous and refugee populations. In other words, the legacy of the classic social survey was varied depending on the extent to which the state continued to claim primacy in determining each population group's circumstances.

This volume's breadth, tracing the legacies of social surveying through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, reflects the fascinating range of research being done by historians and others on the history of knowledge production. In so doing, the chapters in this collection demonstrate the persistent appeal of survey methods across the rise and fall of the classic social survey, and the rise and fall of widespread faith that social science could provide the data necessary and sufficient for policy change. Ultimately, the volume represents a reaffirmation of the goals and methods of social history. It invites readers to look past the

mythologized origins of social science and consider the dense, sometimes messy and often undervalued materials left behind by projects that may not have succeeded by their own standards – but that are, for historians, invaluable.

Organization

The chapters have been grouped into four roughly chronological parts. Part I, 'The Social Survey beyond the Imperial Metropolitan Centre', explores how researchers transported the aims and techniques of the classic social survey into new realms. Specifically, methods of collecting information about populations that were created in the industrial age were now applied by Westerners in colonial or neocolonial settings.[3] Of course, the classic social survey itself already focused on populations of people who were deprived of power. From the 1880s, Charles Booth mapped the relative deprivation of London's streets, while in the United States, W.E.B. Du Bois wore the leather out on his shoes in 1896 in Philadelphia's segregated neighbourhood and then collated innovative data visualizations of Black life, which were exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition and several subsequent world's fairs in the United States.[4] When researchers sought to bring the thoroughness that supposedly characterized the classic urban study to colonized people, they made adaptations. Notably, researchers frequently made Indigenous peoples the subjects of anthropological participatory observation or state surveillance, rather than opinion surveys. These changes reflected the researchers' and funders' preconceptions about the people they were studying as much as they did the altered demography and settings in which they worked.

In the wake of the First World War and throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, the size of states expanded, as did social science research. The chapters in Part II explore the development of state-sponsored research, which aimed to provide data that would assist in, variously, ameliorating social inequality, improving national productivity and the efficacy of the armed services, and shaping foreign affairs. Such techniques were not only the preserve of the capitalist West.[5] In China before and after the revolution and in India during decolonization, for example, the state extended its investment in surveying its national population. Such expansion of social science in states' policy making reflected perhaps the pinnacle of general faith in science itself, which would fragment from the 1950s forward under the weight of social movements for equality and the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation.

Those middle decades of the twentieth century were also the high point for Westerners' sense that their views and their narratives of experience were of value to the modern polity. Newspapers and other media reported social science and, increasingly, the results from newly established or expanded opinion polling agencies.[6] But while faith in the state coincided with its massive expansion, not everyone benefited and not everyone regarded or experienced the state as a force for good. The chapters in Part III chart the rise of the 'surveyable self' – and of its limits. These chapters examine exactly whose views came to be valued by the state and whose views remained marginal. They explore ways to read the data generated by big social survey projects from the 1940s to the 1980s and ask, in fact, whether reading state-sponsored data about marginal groups 'against the grain' is even possible. Researchers' priorities reflected existing social hierarchies and so their work tended to examine the lives, experiences and views of those who already dominated society. Even those researchers who sought to make recommendations that would improve the lives of those not in the dominant classes, races, genders, or some combination of these, often reproduced dominant power relations.

By the 1970s, the classic social survey that involved researchers going door to door was well and truly over, but its legacy was deep and broad. Part of the reason its currency changed was that people became more familiar with – and remained sceptical of – the methods of research. If they were not themselves the subject of social science surveying, they were made aware of it through its popularization in media. Potential 'informants' in the last quarter of the twentieth century up to today have often also tended to be suspicious of those who arrogated to themselves the responsibility for generating knowledge. It became notoriously difficult, for example, to find participants for longitudinal or life course studies. The diffusion of the phrase 'knowledge is power' reflected a widespread belief that such knowledge was not always developed or held by those who had the best interests of others in mind. Researchers therefore adapted to new populaces who were weary and wary of being sought out, harnessing new methods such as sitting at booths in shopping centres, using the telephone and, more recently, the internet. And yet at the very same time, as the chapters in Part IV show, certain groups whose experiences had been marginalized in social science research – and indeed in society generally – now insisted that their accounts be heard. Even when researchers did not intend it, domestic violence, sex and sexuality now became their objects of study.

Themes

Although the book is arranged by rough chronology, several themes cut across the book's parts and chapters, appearing in nonchronological fashion. We cannot do justice here to the intricacy of each author's arguments and the breadth of the materials and interpretations with which they engage. We want nonetheless to draw attention to three key themes, in addition to that of failure discussed above, that emerge across the volume.

Authors in this book pay close attention to the subjective experience of the researchers themselves, with a range of results. The impetus to pay attention to the experience of researchers derives from a feminist and/or subaltern political commitment to unearthing the labour of those whose names did not necessarily appear on publications or policy recommendations to which social research gave rise. This approach can sometimes restore credit to those who conceived of and undertook research. It can even alter accepted genealogies of whole disciplines, calling to account the reproducing of hierarchies that social research ostensibly seeks to probe.

Wherever there was a celebrated man working tirelessly to survey and interview, there were also women, just as graduate student Isabel Eaton worked alongside Du Bois in Philadelphia, asking questions about women's work in domestic service.[7] The chapters by Clare Corbould, Charlotte Greenhalgh and Michelle Arrow all illustrate the hidden labour of women investigators and respondents. In the early twentieth century, as Corbould's work demonstrates, Black American women investigators were key to the success of projects, not least because of their skill in coaxing out interviews from reluctant subjects. Sometimes, these were even accidental researchers – the wives of the social-scientifically trained male investigators. As the archival materials peripheral to the projects reveal, the women involved did not simply undertake the research as the project's director/s had conceived it; rather, these women took an active role in shaping the research from the field, even when their positions were relatively junior. Greenhalgh reveals how the classic, comprehensive survey had a new lease of life in postwar Aotearoa New Zealand, as feminist activists sought to improve policy regarding that enormous group of understudied people: women. Hundreds of volunteers conducted in-depth interviews with Pākehā and Māori women, aiming to provide the data missing in decades of modern national policy making. From the 1970s, Aotearoa's women's organizations worked hard to publicize findings that were never celebrated in the same ways as the surveys that were completed by academics and high-profile men.[8]

Arrow's account of the 1970s Australian Royal Commission on Human Relationships explores the influence of feminist organizing on what was considered worth surveying. Two of the three commissioners were women, which was unusual, and the methods of data collection reflected the importance of first-person testimony in social movements including women's liberation.

Political commitments and demands without doubt shaped the subjective experience of researchers as well as affecting the parameters within which they asked questions, interpreted data and wrote up findings. Tong Lam and Arunabh Ghosh show how the prevailing politics of the Chinese state set the parameters for research questions and fieldwork. Their chapters illustrate the state's shaping role in the census; in the opening of new schools and departments of statistics; and, after the Revolution, in sidelining researchers who worked in sociology, anthropology and probability. David Goodman and Corbould likewise examine state-sponsored surveys and use social history methods to demonstrate that a centrist, liberal consensus limited the analysis and published findings of research about African Americans' lives and attitudes. They, like Jon Lawrence, also make clear that a consideration of the political commitments of the intervieweers enables a fresh interpretation of the lives of those interviewed. In revisiting postwar social surveying in London, Lawrence explains that although two key researchers collected similar testimony from members of working-class neighbourhoods, they each drew radically different conclusions about the nature of community. The widely read and influential books by researchers offered, as Lawrence suggests, 'strikingly simplified pictures' when compared to the thoughtful and diverse responses of interviewees.

Returning to the raw materials gives special insight into thorny ethical questions about social research, particularly when subjects did not consent.[9] Is it appropriate to read the materials 'against the grain' in such cases? In her chapter, Julia Martínez reveals just how elided were the voices of sex workers from the League of Nations' surveying. And in their analysis of Australian government surveying in the second half of the twentieth century, Katherine Ellinghaus and Jordana Silverstein consider the damage done by repeating the accounts of delinquency and alcoholism that peppered reports about Indigenous people in central Australia and, decades later, refugee minors. They call for us, instead, to 'turn our attention to the surveyors' so that we might understand the nature and purpose of their surveillance. That is the approach taken by Daniel Midena and Anna Echterhölter in their chapter on comparative surveys of legal systems in German colonies. They show that the process of codifying laws produced those very systems at least as much as

reflecting them, an outcome that colonial authorities had hoped to avoid because they feared giving any legitimacy to local social and political order.

A second key theme that tracks through the volume concerns the exchange of ideas between researchers across borders.[10] In nations including China, Australia and New Zealand, as Kate Darian-Smith, Lam and Greenhalgh all explore, broad-scale social surveys took place in the mid-twentieth century as state makers sought to redefine their polities in alignment with others that were considered modern. Researchers in China in the decades before the Second World War trained in US universities, sometimes funded by philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation. For a brief period in the 1950s, as Ghosh demonstrates, social statisticians in China shared expertise on methods with researchers in India. This came to an end once Marxist ideology, which held that postrevolutionary societies were inevitably marching through socialism and towards perfect communism, put an end to random sampling as a hopelessly bourgeois method linked to chance and probability. Researchers in Australia and New Zealand often came from the United Kingdom, moving to the Antipodes to take up prestigious chairs in local universities. They maintained networks across national borders, swapping their own papers and other relevant books and materials. In each place, as in the imperial centres a few decades earlier, their work in gathering knowledge about the populace conferred upon the people their rights and duties as citizens. The very process of surveying could even help produce a desire for a strong state.

And yet, when it came to the very international bodies that might have fostered the best results from such extra-national exchanges, political demands could stifle their outcomes. Martínez's chapter investigates a little-noticed League of Nations inquiry into sex work and trafficking undertaken in Asia between 1930 and 1932 and published in 1933. Martínez highlights the researchers' 'innovative … translocal' method that sought to replicate the 'travels of the women' being trafficked. However, she also shows that the need for diplomacy meant that the 'Travelling Commission' of researchers, whose leadership team hailed from Sweden, the United States and Poland, refrained from making 'uncomfortable comparisons between countries' despite their heightened capacity for overview after visiting 20 countries over 16 months of research.

Indeed, the very idea that there was such a thing as 'normal' behaviour, even if norms were defined in part as national, was a transnational creation. Laura King suggests that English newspapers' surveys of readers helped to create 'an increasingly singular normative version of family life' that would have been familiar to readers in Anglo countries

worldwide.[11] The influence of the press lay in its frequent reporting of social science research, including surveys and polls, and in reporters' ability to take up or mimic the norms and apparatus of social science. But it lay, too, in the idea that certain groups of people or certain parts of the world were more 'normal' than others. The nuclear, heteronormative family that reporting of social science helped to cement as the normative locus for citizenship may have had 'English' or 'American' quirks, but it was fundamentally patriarchal, straight and white.

This book's origin has yielded a useful case study of Australia as a meeting point for transnational patterns of research training, employment and funding in the Anglo world. The country's prominent social scientists in the mid-twentieth century had been educated and hired inside the 'empire of scholars' that had operated across the British Empire since the 1880s.[12] Australian social scientists also benefited from the establishment of large philanthropic foundations in the United States, including the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1911) and the Rockefeller Foundation (1913), which funded scientific approaches to social problems worldwide. Taken together, chapters on Australia by Darian-Smith, Ellinghaus and Silverstein, Arrow, and Zora Simic build a compelling case for the persistent influence of social survey methods from the 1930s up to the present day. Australia's historical record on social surveying underscores the double-sided legacies of social survey methods in settler colonies. Since the 1930s, the Australian federal state has powered surveys to serve the interests of only select communities.

Technological changes have had significant impacts on the evolution of classic social surveys and on what we have called the legacies of the aims and methods of that mode of social research. This is the third and final major theme that runs through the book. For example, the development of cheap motor transportation meant that the social survey could extend beyond the city and into regional and even rural areas, as Corbould's and Darian-Smith's chapters show. Relatively cheap air travel enabled the League of Nations' study of sex workers and trafficking that are the topic of Martínez's chapter. Data collected in the countryside or in the field was processed in a timely way by teams of research assistants who were expert in manipulating temperamental Hollerith tabulating machines. Sampling became a staple of surveying in the 1930s and 1940s and beyond. Teams of researchers stopped visiting every household or individual in a population. Instead, they learned new techniques of sampling, mapping and statistics. By 1969, state support for grassroots researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand included the loan of computers to process the survey data. Advocates and organizers exchanged and

updated their skills in project design, interview techniques and coding. At the same time, the long-established technologies of enumeration, record-keeping and archiving remained politically potent.

King and Simic's chapters point to another significant technological shift: the signal role of popular media and the importance of growing rates of literacy in the evolution of surveying. The widespread consumption of reporting of social science research including by working-class readers of cheap tabloid newspapers and teenage girls' magazines ensured the normalizing and internalization of the idea that people's reports of their own experiences and, in time, their opinions had value to the state, and were even integral to their identity as citizens. Simic's work points to a new means of undertaking research by the snowballing method, which commenced with advertisements on television.

Finally, cheap telephone and internet communications have also altered surveying significantly. Women in the 1970s, as Arrow details, were able to report incidents of domestic violence via a phone-in service. Computing advances since the late 1960s, such as the invention of programs like SPSS and hardware that powered increasingly complicated analyses, produced a wave of mass polling and surveying from a growing number of commercial firms. The development of computer-assisted telephone software that enabled computers to generate random telephone numbers made telephone surveys cheap and efficient, so that private corporations now made ready use of 'market research' in the form of polling and qualitative surveys. This technology was widespread by the mid-1990s. For potential subjects, these promising technologies manifested in the repeat experience of hearing the telephone ring at dinnertime. Overwhelmingly, people declined to participate. Irritation with interruptions grew enough that some governments implemented an opt-in 'do not ring' database with which survey companies had to comply. This enhanced desire for the home to be free of such intrusions dovetailed with growing scepticism about polling. The knock-on effects of this can perhaps be seen in the plummeting proportions of people willing to take part in face-to-face surveying too. While researchers who knocked on people's doors in the late 1960s would have encountered around only 8–15 per cent of people who refused or were unable to answer questions, the nonresponse rate has skyrocketed since and is now about 95 per cent.

Conclusions and Provocations

In the 2020s, historians of social science work with the latest research tools, including digital archives, phones that operate as handheld

scanners, word recognition software and countless programs that store, tag and connect research files and researchers' notes, often using machine learning. When planning this volume, we anticipated that such technological advances would meet many of the challenges of working with social survey archives and their immense collections of raw research data such as survey returns. To our minds, social survey archives provided ideal materials for innovating 'big data' approaches to historical research. We considered the following question: can twenty-first-century historians harness recent technologies to realize some of the unmet ambitions of classic social surveys to produce truly comprehensive social knowledge?

Certainly, digital archives such as Charles Booth's London, the UK Data Service and Mass Observation Online have helped to popularize social science sources among a widening group of researchers.[13] Goodman points to the crowd-sourced digital history project that has made all 65,000 pages of the responses that Second World War soldiers recorded for the US Army Research Branch accessible online.[14] Yet the contributors to this volume overwhelmingly use long-established analytical techniques such as the careful reading and comparison of raw research data and published and unpublished research papers, and investigations of the intellectual, political, financial and social contexts for influential research projects. Likewise, Goodman identifies the highest value to researchers in soldiers' individual responses to surveys rather than their aggregated opinions or the 'over-socialized' conclusions of researchers in the 1940s. Indeed, Ellinghaus and Silverstein encourage historians to refuse enhanced access to records of the lives of research subjects, especially people who did not consent to participate. Ellinghaus and Silverstein restate their commitments to examining the methods and activities of researchers and the long-term consequences of their findings.

By applying techniques of archival research across the histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this book's contributors demonstrate the depth and breadth of the legacy of social surveys in modern life. By taking a closer look at the social scientific data, we reveal new and unfamiliar stories about how they were produced, who was involved in that labour and who benefited from the knowledge. The classic social survey may have been out of fashion by the middle years of the twentieth century, replaced by new forms of surveying and surveillance. Yet, as we demonstrate here, the definitive methods of the social survey continued and determined much about the collection of information, the formulation of policy and understandings of modern selfhood right up until today.

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Notes

1. Bulmer, Bales and Sklar, 'The Social Survey in Historical Perspective.'
2. Macintyre, *The Poor Relation*.
3. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*; Bush, 'Colonial Research'; Manganaro, 'Education for the Future'; Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*.
4. Booth, *Life and Labour*; Du Bois and Eaton, *The Philadelphia Negro*. See also: Englander and O'Day, *Retrieved Riches*; O'Day and Englander, *Mr Charles Booth's Inquiry*; Katz and Sugrue, *W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and the City*; Du Bois, Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, *Du Bois's Data Portraits*.
5. See, for example, Lam, *A Passion for Facts*; Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; Ghosh, *Making It Count*.
6. Igo, *The Averaged American*; Wuthnow, *Inventing American Religion*; Goot, 'A Worse Importation'.
7. Deegan, 'W.E.B. Du Bois and the Women of Hull-House'; O'Day and Englander, *Mr Charles Booth's Inquiry*; McCarthy, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment'; Greenhalgh, 'Social Surveys', 128, 130–31.
8. In contrast, surveys that addressed the lives of working mothers, which were completed by precariously employed women academics, were influential in the United Kingdom. See McCarthy, 'Career, Family and Emotional Work'.
9. See the recent roundtable discussion of historians' uses of raw research material that includes robust defences of the value of historical treatment of survey archives by contributors to this volume: Savage, 'History and Sociology' and Lawrence 'Historians' Use of Archived Material'. See also Corti and Thompson, 'Secondary Analysis'; Corti,

'Recent Developments in Archiving Social Research'; Fielding, 'Getting the Most from Archived Qualitative Data'; Gillies and Edwards, 'Working with Archived Classic Family and Community Studies'.
10. Greenhalgh, 'The Travelling Social Survey'.
11. King, *Family Men*; Bell, 'Putting Dad in the Picture'; Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire*.
12. Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars*.
13. Charles Booth's London, London School of Economics: https://booth.lse.ac.uk; UK Data Service: https://ukdataservice.ac.uk; Mass Observation Online (by subscription): https://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk.
14. https://americansoldierww2.org (retrieved 8 July 2025). The 3,477 responses to the free response question in Survey 32 are available at: https://americansoldierww2.org/surveys/q/S32N.Q78.F (retrieved 8 July 2025).

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