Research Report

Arland Thornton

The Detroit Area Study and Me

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Arland Thornton

Population Studies Center
Survey Research Center, and
Department of Sociology
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

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Introduction

I have been affiliated with the Detroit Area Study (DAS) in several capacities for nearly four decades. This motivates me to take a distinctly personal approach to the subject and talk about my experiences with DAS.

I have been involved with the DAS in three distinct capacities: as a student in my first year of graduate school; as a faculty investigator on the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children, a DAS study that was turned into a three-decade project; and as a faculty investigator on a 2006 student practicum that is a direct outgrowth of DAS. I will talk briefly about each of these three encounters. Then I will mention some lessons that I have learned from nearly four decades of DAS-related activities. I will close with a regret and an invitation.

My Student DAS

I will first talk about my experience as a student in the Detroit Area Study. I arrived in Ann Arbor for graduate school in the fall of 1971 and learned that DAS was a requirement for all graduate students in Sociology. I dutifully enrolled in the three course sequence. In the fall semester I took a seminar where we discussed the theory and questions driving the research project. In winter semester we worked on the questionnaire and did interviewing. The next fall we analyzed the data that we had collected the previous winter semester and wrote a paper from those data.

The DAS that I participated in as a student departed from the usual practice of collecting data from a sample of residents of the Detroit Metropolitan Area. Instead, our study was about businesses and we sampled companies located in the Detroit area. I interviewed three people at different levels in each of three different companies. Since our companies were selected from a list of businesses, I missed out on the experience of block listing and going door to door for interviews.

My teaching assistants for this DAS experience included two people who are very well known to many demographers—Kris Moore at Child Trends and Bob Groves, recently nominated to be the next director of the Census Bureau.

The Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children

My next encounter with DAS started in the spring of 1975. I was finishing up my dissertation and was working at a job at the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center. That spring I gave a paper at the PAA annual meetings having something to do with marital dissolution. To my great surprise, Ron Freedman was in the audience. I had taken Ron’s first year population course, but at that time I was not interested in Taiwan or fertility which were then Ron’s main research interests. Ron was not my graduate mentor or on my dissertation committee. So, I asked myself, what brought Ron to a session on divorce in America?
The next week I learned what brought Ron to the session. Without me knowing it, I had given a job talk at PAA. I am delighted I passed that test. In a post-PAA meeting, Ron told me that his wife Deborah Freedman, Lolagene Coombs, and he were planning to revitalize the Detroit panel study. Deborah would serve as one co-director of the study, and the team was inviting me to be the other co-director. After extensive family and individual soul-searching, I accepted without any idea that this project would be central to my work over the next three decades.

I learned from Ron and Deborah that the study I was joining in 1975 had begun as the 1962 Detroit Area Study. In 1962 Ron Freedman and David Goldberg were the faculty investigators for DAS. In that DAS, they launched a study of the social, economic, and familial factors influencing stability and change in desired, expected, and realized family size. The study began with interviews in the Detroit metropolitan area in 1962 with a sample of women who had married or who had borne a first, second, or fourth child in 1961.

Ron Freedman and Lolagene Coombs interviewed these same women again later in 1962 and again in 1963 and 1966. These data provided the empirical bases for a rich set of published findings concerning stability and change in reproductive expectations and preferences, and the consequences of premarital pregnancy.

At the same time that Ron Freedman and Lolagene Coombs were conducting and analyzing the Detroit data from the 1960s, they became heavily involved in research in Taiwan. This prevented them from conducting follow-up studies with the Detroit sample after 1966.

This is where I entered the picture in 1975. Deborah Freedman and I took the lead in conducting a small pilot study to demonstrate that we could locate and interview the women who had last been interviewed in 1966. We were successful and obtained a grant from NICHD to interview this sample of women in 1977. We maintained the original focus of the study on childbearing, but expanded the study to deal with women’s employment, gender roles, marital instability, and changes in family attitudes and beliefs.

In 1980, the Study became intergenerational as the children who were born in 1961, and who were then 18 years old were added to the study. Both the children and the mothers were interviewed in 1980 and again in 1985 and 1993. Over the 13 years from 1980 to 1993 we focused primarily on the parent and child factors that would influence how the children made the transition from adolescence into adulthood.

This three-decade intergenerational panel study has been a central source of data for documenting the enormous changes in family life during the last part of the twentieth century. It has also been a leader in showing the ways in which parents and children affect each other as the children mature into adulthood. The study has also been influential in showing how the early lives of children affect how they mature through young adulthood and how the various strands of social, economic, and family life intersect and influence each other in multiple ways. In 2007,
Bill Axinn, Yu Xie, and I published a capstone book providing a comprehensive examination of the cohabitation and marriage experiences of the children born in 1961.¹

We were very pleased that in 2002 Erin Phelps, Frank Furstenberg, and Anne Colby identified the Detroit study as one of the top panel studies on any topic. They edited a book highlighting each of these panel studies, and the editors included a history of our Detroit panel in their volume.²

My good fortune in joining with Ron and Deborah Freedman for this Detroit panel study led to additional good things for me. I discovered the amazing data that they had helped to assemble in Taiwan, and in the 1980s I accepted an invitation from Ron and Deborah to join them on their research in Taiwan. This provided the impetus to join with Tom Fricke in studying Nepal—a place where I am still conducting research. And, eventually all of this motivated me to do the reading that led to ideas about the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and developmental idealism—topics that are still motivating my scholarly research and teaching.³

2006 Survey Practicum

This brings me to my third encounter with the Detroit Area Study—or more accurately the daughter of DAS. A decision was made to terminate the DAS earlier this decade and the last DAS was conducted in the spring of 2004, with Ren Farley, Mick Couper, and Maria Krysan as the faculty investigators.

Fortunately, the Survey Methodology Program at Michigan’s Survey Research Center had started a graduate degree program in survey methodology. As part of this graduate program, the Survey Methodology people had started a practicum that was closely modeled after the DAS. It includes the appointment of a faculty investigator, the involvement of students in questionnaire design and interviewing, the production of a data set, and student papers based on the data set. One major difference from DAS is that the Survey Methodology Practicum collects telephone interviews rather than face-to-face interviews.

I was fortunate that I was appointed as the faculty investigator for the 2006 Survey Practicum. My topic was developmental idealism and its relationship to family life. I had a wonderful experience with the faculty, staff, and student participants in the program. I learned some new things about survey methodology and got some new insights into developmental idealism. We also produced a data set that we are still analyzing today. In addition, that DAS experience has been an important building block in extending this line of research to an additional 13 countries.

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Lessons

You would think that someone who has been involved with three different encounters with the Detroit Area Study over nearly four decades would learn some lessons from that experience. Indeed, that has been the case with me. I will share some of these lessons with you, with the hope that one or two may be useful in some way to you. I have 17 lessons to report, so I will present them very quickly.

Every talk might be a job talk.

One good thing often leads to another.

Proposal writing is not the time for modesty.\(^4\)

There are no small jobs.\(^5\)

Data do not grow on data tapes or in data files

A successful study requires the input of many people, most of whom receive little public attention.

It is difficult to write questions by committee.

Data collection projects are not democratic.

Interviewers are crucial to almost everything.

Data are dirty. There are threats to validity everywhere.

Don’t let the perfect get in the road of the good.

Every study is the pretest for the next.

An interrelated set of three:

For a longitudinal project, get the questions right the first time.

Even if you don’t get the questions right the first time, keep them the same any way.

If questions are really, really bad the first time, fix them.

Better is often worse.\(^6\)

Panel Studies often require multiple generations of investigators.

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\(^4\) Deborah Freedman emphasized this one as we geared up for our first proposal;\(^5\) Ron Freedman frequently emphasized this one as Freedman’s First Rule. I have learned by hard experience that you ignore this one at your peril.\(^6\) Better is especially hazardous when it comes to improving old questions.
Regret and Invitation

I close with a regret and an invitation. As I said with my last rule, panel studies often require multiple generations of investigators. Ron and Deborah Freedman wisely understood this principle and in 1975 recruited a young Arland Thornton to carry on the Detroit Panel Study.

I am pleased that with the assistance of many people I have been able to continue interviews with the sample families for nearly two decades. However, I am sorry to report that we have not interviewed these families since 1993. This makes me worry that the current Arland Thornton will not be successful at intergenerational succession and will be responsible for ending an important and long-running project. If there is anyone in the audience today who would like to help me avoid that outcome, please let me know.
The Population Studies Center (PSC) at the University of Michigan is one of the oldest population centers in the United States. Established in 1961 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, the Center has a rich history as the main workplace for an interdisciplinary community of scholars in the field of population studies.

Currently PSC is one of five centers within the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The Center receives core funding from both the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24) and the National Institute on Aging (P30).

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