

Foreword

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Pages xx–xxii of

Scientific Methods for the Humanities

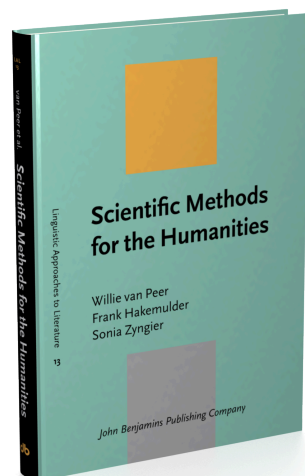
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Foreword



Before you start reading and – hopefully – enjoying this book, we would like you to consider the painting above. What do you see? Many ideas may spring to your mind: the innocence attached to it, the interested and intense look of the children, what the story could be about, the tired look of the lady holding the book, a mother (or grandmother) possibly thinking that the best way to engage the children would be in reading.

But is this what really matters? The theme, the relations established, the mood expressed? Are these the reasons we stop in front of a canvas in a museum and enjoy a certain work of art? Indeed, our question here really centers on what art is. More specifically: how artists provoke emotions in us through their work and how we respond to them. Can we account for these responses, some of which may play an important role in our lives? As students of literature, history, media, culture and the arts you may have pondered on these and other issues concerning aesthetic and affective reactions. Your questions are not new. Since Antiquity they have been raised again and again. Then since the 1970s, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the specific person to whom novels, theater plays, movies, or paintings are directed.

Much has been said and thought about the processes and effects of comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation of literature, the arts, and the media. Especially in the world of the media, where advertising and marketing strategies are so relevant today, these issues play a central role. By and large, the concrete body of research on such processes and their outcomes has grown over the years and there is now a considerable (and expanding) field of scientific studies of cultural artifacts, their processing

and their effects. But you may by now be asking yourself: “How can I start learning about it? How do I enter this field?”

Humanities departments do not have a tradition of empirical research and usually lack the methods required for carrying out this kind of investigation. This book deals with fundamental aspects of scientific methodology to study cultural and artistic phenomena in their diversity, richness, and depth. Its main goal is to introduce you to this methodology, offering systematic guidance through various methods of inquiry, and including a wide variety of examples, exercises and illustrative studies, as well as help for self-instruction and simulation exercises. To make you feel comfortable, we would like to tell you that all materials have been tested and used in course work with students like you in as diverse contexts as Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the Ukraine.

Back to American Impressionist Mary Cassatt’s painting “Mrs. Cassatt Reading to Her Grandchildren”, dated 1888: it may also stand as an illustration of how artists try to hold back the destructive force of Time by immortalizing their loved ones through their works of art. The children will never age, their interest will never wane. The reading will go on throughout time. These brief comments illustrate how we would like you to see scientific studies. We would like you to indulge in the intuitive and naïve posture of the children, forever open to new ways of seeing the world but also bearing in mind that we need measurements and methods to understand what we experience. This work of art reflects the purpose of our book: to learn how we can measure and understand aesthetic experiences, be it through reading a book or reacting to other media.

In this volume you will find initially some general introduction to the field, followed by an Interlude, where we review prejudices against scientific work that prevail in the Humanities. The Interlude has been written in dialogue form, so that you can engage in the challenges we pose. You can then proceed into Chapter 2, which explains underlying concepts from the philosophy of science. Ten subsequent chapters progressively acquaint you with the practical application of research methods. These chapters guide you through the entire process of carrying out a scientific study. They help you formulate your initial idea for a study and provide valuable hints on conducting a proper literature search. We will discuss how a critical reading of the literature available or of the theories of your field can lead to a concrete plan for research. We will look not only at the most prevalent methods, but also how you can pick the one that fits your purposes best. You will learn how to collect and analyze your data. Finally, you will find practical guidelines on how to communicate your results in a way that matches professional standards.

You will find that a number of chapters are dedicated to statistical techniques, which you may need in your research. It is important to note, however, that our aim is

not to provide a complete course in statistics; this would require an entirely different book, or rather several volumes. Here we will explain how to choose the appropriate techniques and how to interpret the results. The word “statistics” does not always have a positive ring to it, to put it mildly, especially not in Humanities. Therefore we place great emphasis on clarity and simplicity so that you can gradually build a thorough understanding of the fundamental concepts of its methodology. We will run you through easy-to-understand, hands-on examples, using original data sets, some of which were collected by students. Exercise materials in the form of databases are provided on a website to help you consolidate your knowledge. And when the time comes to conduct your own study, the text will be a cookbook to you: you may follow the instructions step by step. Our experience using the method of this book is that this can lead to high-quality research. The research abilities you will acquire through reading and doing the exercises are essential to academic training and will prove to be extremely useful inside as well as outside the University.

We hope that you become as enthusiastic about scientific studies of culture as the three of us have been in developing these materials, many of which are also based on our own research in the field. We hope you will join the community of researchers soon.

To all we thank and offer, in return, the volume, which we hope will be useful to many more people.

To make this volume also a true study book, we have provided materials for self-study, which you will find on the website of the publisher, John Benjamins, at www.benjamins.com. Here you will find multiple choice questions (to test your understanding), and materials to work on in simulation exercises. You will be able to try out several methods of data analysis with the help of the SPSS statistics program. In all cases, we also provide extensive feedback on the correct answers to the exercises. We hope to facilitate your introduction into this new world of doing research yourself.

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