

# Anthropology Review Database

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**ABSTRACT:** A short and casual treatise on the failures and possibilities of social science offers some surprisingly sophisticated and timely insights into the origins of our fields, where those fields took crucial and unfortunate turns, and what they might yet become.

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I am preparing a new course for the fall, an integrated social science course (to be offered specifically to teaching-major students) that will survey history, economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and geography. I am quite excited about the course, as it allows me to indulge my interdisciplinary interests, and as I began to think about it, a major question that arose in my mind was the relationship between social science and 'science' in the familiar and popular (and dominant) sense. As all anthropologists realize (and struggle with), the hallmarks of 'science' are experiments, causal statements (ideally, 'laws'), and theories. But anthropologists do not do experiments (early-20th century notions of 'primitive societies' as 'natural laboratories' notwithstanding), seldom arrive at causal statements, and generate a lot of

incommensurable theories. It occurred to me (and this is no great original insight) that a key difference between social science and 'science' is that the subjects of social science, people in action, are agents in their own right, in ways that billiard balls and atoms are not, with their own reasons for behaving as they do. People act (although perhaps not perfectly consistently) on the basis of their reasons, not of causes, and the difference between a cause and a reason is that a cause is an antecedent condition while a reason is a future intentional goal or purpose.

So when I discovered Michael Agar's *The Lively Science: Remodeling Human Social Research*, I was intrigued not only for my own learning purposes but for its potential as a student text. The theme of the short book, as explained in the preface, is that "research on humans in their social world by other humans is not a traditional science like the one created by Galileo and Newton" (p. ix), and I imagine that anthropologists would be neither surprised nor troubled by that claim. Indeed, aside from a few attempts to make anthropology 'more scientific' such as ethnoscience, anthropology has been relatively comfortable as a 'qualitative' (a term that does satisfy me or Agar) or interpretive activity. For the last few decades, anthropology has even pondered itself as literature or poetry, which I would argue (and Agar argues here) makes it no less scientific but a great deal more interesting.

To understand Agar's book may require an understanding of the man behind it, which may or may not be a good post-modern way to approach things. He holds a doctorate in linguistic anthropology from one of our finer institutions (University of California Berkeley) and has published a number of interesting-sounding books which have garnered too little scholarly attention (I admit that I had not previously heard of him), including his 1973 ethnography *Ripping and Running: Formal Ethnography of Urban Heroin Addicts*, his 1986 ethnography *Independents Declared: The Dilemmas of Independent Trucking* which suffered an ignominious publishing death, his 1996 *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*, his 1996 *The*

*Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, and more recently his 2007 *Dope Double Agent: The Naked Emperor on Drugs*, among others. From the subject-matter of his research, it is obvious that he has long been engaged with American culture and what we might call 'the real world.' A few years ago he left the academy and got involved in an initiative called Ethknoworks (<http://www.ethknoworks.com>) where he carries the title 'Chief Paradigm Mechanic' and contributes to innovative directions in ethnography and social science. The book in question here is a small, very casual, self-published piece.

As the first chapter conveys, Agar is clearly frustrated with the state of social science research and has justification for his frustration, given his experience with government, corporations, and funding agencies. What he calls 'behavioral social science' or BSS, he asserts, is committed to the positivistic tradition and more deleteriously to the natural-science paradigm of hypotheses, experiments, and quantitative data. Rightly, he responds that "the rule that numbers are the *only* possible language for science is nonsense" (p. 9), and so he offers an alternative, which he calls 'human social research' or HSR. HSR is defined as "a way of learning, specifically designed for a human interested in figuring out how some others live their lives, followed by a systematic presentation of the results that can be evaluated and challenged" (p. 19), and the book is then dedicated not only to showing how HSR works but how it has strong roots in the seminal literature on social-scientific research.

One of the key figures for the once and future social science is John Stuart Mill, the focus of the second chapter. Everyone knows the name of Mill, but I daresay that hardly anyone actually reads him. Agar provides a useful summary of Mill's thoughts on logic and method, especially inductive logic and his methods of 'difference' and 'agreement.' Unfortunately, according to Agar, successors followed only part of Mill's teaching, emphasizing the value of controlled observation (ideally, the experiment), general laws, and falsification--what Agar calls "the

BSS dream" (p. 27). These strict procedures were hoped and believed to best ensure 'ecological validity' or the applicability of research findings to the wider world.

Agar condemns this model of research as 'reductionism,' perhaps not in the conventional sense but in the sense of reducing as much as possible the number of variables under analysis. But a great deal is obviously (and intentionally) lost in the process, which leads him to ask, "How do we turn the real world into a scientific object and not lose its reality in the process?" (p. 38). This takes him to an even headier discussion in the third chapter of Franz Brentano and Wilhelm Dilthey, who emphasized notions of 'intentionality' and 'history' (in the most general sense, as unfolding reality over time). Brentano, a teacher of the famous phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, "was one of the early figures in Western human social science that too exception to the idea that it and the natural sciences should be lumped together" (p. 69-70) precisely because, unlike natural science, both the investigator and the subject of investigation have 'intentions' or perspectives or subjectivity. "Human social science--or any science of sentient beings for that matter--has to be different because of" intentionality (p. 73). Dilthey, in Agar's estimation, took this attitude even further, insisting that the goal of social science should be "life as lived out there in the world by the humans Dilthey wanted to build a science of" (p. 88). Such a science requires knowledge of 'lived experience,' of patterns of social life, and of the perspective and beliefs of the subject-people themselves. It will also have to unfold over time, since human lived existence is temporal (and, as we increasingly emphasize these days, embodied).

These ideas should sound non-revolutionary to anthropologists, since I think (and Agar seems to think) that anthropology is arguably the most HSR of the social sciences. In the third chapter, he even mentions Malinowski's dictum to take the native's point of view, as well as Clyde Kluckhohn and Karl Heider, and of course our method of participant observation. Later in the book he allows that anthropology is the social science most "built on" HSR (p. 193). He

stresses that HSR is and must be interpretive, even hermeneutic, with which we concur, and he introduces at least one other classic thinker on the question of the 'life world,' namely Alfred Schutz. We could add to the list Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Fernand Braudel.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters begin to flesh out Agar's vision of human social research, employing Stephen Toulmin's 'courtroom model' of argumentation. HSR, Agar proposes, is less like a laboratory and more like a courtroom, where people make a case on certain 'grounds' supported by certain 'warrants.' Ultimately, perhaps like anthropological fieldwork, HSR a la Toulmin is improvisational rather than highly procedural, or what Agar calls 'path-dependent' because "a researcher learns more about the lived experience and intentionality of subjects *after* the research is underway, and the longer it is underway, the more he knows about what he need to learn next" (p. 121-2). HSR thus cannot be merely an experimental testing of preconceived hypotheses, since (1) we often cannot know what the hypothesis might be in advance and (2) our knowledge grows and changes over time as we come more to understand the subjective perspective of the people we study.

Accordingly, in the fifth chapter Agar introduces the notion of 'nonmonotonic logic,' which is "a logic where conclusions can change as more is learned" (p. 136). This leads him through a discussion of Charles Sanders Peirce and 'abductive' logic, a particularly apt term for how we 'capture' the knowledge or meaning of other humans. Abductive logic makes room "for surprises and creation and revision," indeed it is "a creative reaction to surprise" (p. 146), which must be the most common experience of anthropologists out in the field. This takes us inevitably to the question of translation, which is the topic of the sixth chapter. Translation necessarily entails 'meaning' and 'context,' and it involves us in the task of learning the 'language' of another lived reality (even if members of that reality speak our general language, like English). Agar refers to this deeper linguistic reality of a particular group or subculture as a 'languaculture' and rightly notes

that we researchers speak our own dialect of languaculture too. For that reason, "Languacultures of research and subject worlds will never match perfectly" (p. 166), and a large part of our work is to translate the subjects' world into language that our peers and our audiences will understand. He even mentions Laura Bohannon's famous "Shakespeare in the Bush" as an example.

HSR in the end becomes an exercise, for researcher and for reader, of "stretching their own intentionality" (p. 176) through "an encounter with the 'foreign'" (p. 221), which I believe is the very essence of anthropology. In fact, it is interesting to contemplate Agar's argument in the light of Gabriele Schwab's *Imaginary Ethnographies: Literature, Culture, and Subjectivity* (reviewed elsewhere in ARD), which explores fiction as a kind of 'speculative anthropology,' variations of lived experience that do not exist (anymore? Yet?) and thus consist "less in providing information than in facilitating the emergence of new forms of being in language, thought, emotion, and ultimately life, including the emergence of new subjectivities, socialities, communalities, and relationalities" (2012, p. 5).

Of course, Agar wants HSR to be science, not literature or fiction, and in the final chapter he describes a controversial model for scientific human social research, namely Stanley Milgram of the notorious electric-shock experiments. Without a prior hypothesis, Milgram's experiments created a virtual world that informed us importantly and disturbingly about the universal human world. It is interesting to learn that, while we all know that Milgram's studies were ethically troubling, his work was not immediately received as scientific enough and he did not earn much academic credit for it.

In retrospect, I am not sure if Agar's book would be appropriate for my social science students. It is at once a bit flippant and a bit intense. It is, however, important reading. Anthropologists who are not familiar with this stream of our intellectual history (who have not read Mill and Brentano and Dilthey and Toulmin) will gain a lot from it. It is also

interesting and salutary to learn about Agar's scholarly work and his practical experiences with agencies and institutions. One cannot help but feel that most of his criticism is aimed at other social sciences than anthropology and especially at the funding sources and other power-centers that value not only certain kinds of research but certain specific outcomes (the 'war on drugs' is one of his recurring topics). Anthropology, it appears, is doing relatively well as HSR, but we should not rest complacent on our methods, our theories, or our hermeneutic/interpretive perspective. If Agar is correct, and I think he is, we must constantly strive to be intersubjective and scientific at the same time, to recognize ourselves in our research, to find interesting and important new translation possibilities, and to make our discoveries relevant to general audiences and policymakers, even holders of power.

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