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## The Lively Science: A Book Review

Ashley N. Schmidt

University of Central Florida, [ashley.schmidt@ucf.edu](mailto:ashley.schmidt@ucf.edu)

Megan K. Mitchell

University of Central Florida, [megan.mitchell@ucf.edu](mailto:megan.mitchell@ucf.edu)

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### Abstract

A book review on *The Lively Science* by Michael Agar, published in 2021. In this review, we examine the three underlying points around which Agar structures the book, then appraise the book from our lens as novice female researchers. We end the review by sharing a reading guide novice researchers could use to document their reading and understandings.

### Keywords

The Lively Science, book review, qualitative research

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## **The Lively Science: A Book Review**

Ashley Schmidt and Megan Mitchell  
University of Central Florida, Florida, USA

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A book review on *The Lively Science* by Michael Agar, published in 2021. In this review we examine the three underlying points around which Agar structures the book, then appraise the book from our lens as novice female researchers. We end the review by sharing a reading guide novice researchers could use to document their reading and understandings.

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### **Overview of *The Lively Science***

Upon reading Michael Agar's *The Lively Science*, which was a recommended resource for our doctoral qualitative research course, we felt the book is an imperative read for any novice researcher. Agar, an Emeritus Professor and an independent practitioner of anthropology, had worked across various fields and studied social issues ranging from drug epidemics to independent truck drivers. In *The Lively Science*, he presents his lifelong exploration of epistemology of behavioral and social sciences and crafts the metaphorical "messiness" of human social science through engaging stories, pop culture references, and everyday examples. Published initially by Mills Press in 2013 and republished by Routledge in 2021, the book describes how historically, scientists have attempted to study human behavior using the traditional scientific method, but in doing so have gotten it all wrong. Agar explains why, then proposes an alternative framework for how to study humans in their social cultural contexts. In this review, we overview the structure of the book and present a critical perspective from the lens of novice female researchers. We end by sharing a guide that novice scholars like us could use to document their reading of the book and the new insights it provides.

*The Lively Science* is comprised of seven chapters which we chose to organize in three sections. The first section, chapters 1-3, presents the problem of how studying humans and their social lives is being forced into the traditional scientific framework where experimental methods and mathematical equations are valued more than the actions of the humans being studied. The second section, chapters 4-6, proposes a new framework of human social research (HSR), in which the actions and everyday lives of humans are the center of research. In this section, Agar guides novice researchers through this framework and shows how to engage in HSR. Finally, in the last section, chapter 7, Agar identifies the contributions of other social science "mavericks" and the marginalized "missing voices" of the field.

### **Writing Style as a Hook for Novice Scholars**

As novice human social researchers – Agar's target audience for the book – we were instantly hooked by Agar's relatable metaphors, personal stories, humor, empathy, and logic rooted in historical and cultural contexts explained through everyday language. We also appreciated the accessible genre of the book. Through his casual writing style and humor, we felt we got to know Michael Agar not only as a curious and empathetic researcher but also as

a person of witty character and down-to-earth demeanor. Unlike some dense academic books that we frequently encountered in our doctoral education, *The Lively Science* was a refreshing and enlightening conversation with an academic rebel who challenged the status quo and made accessibility a logical approach for how to conduct human social research grounded in epistemology.

Agar's writing is compelled by curiosity and a sincere desire to translate what he learns from participants of his research to the rest of the world. As two doctoral students and aspiring researchers, we were challenged to reconsider and redefine what positivist school of thought has taught us about "real science." We credit the conversational style of Agar's writing and use of relatable metaphors as the bridge that helped us to explore our education and views of science and to make new connections to the vision of human social science Agar offered.

### Arguments Embedded in the Book's Structure

Three key points Agar argues in *The Lively Science* are: (1) the need to distinguish between human and behavioral social science: demonstrating what makes them different and why it matters; (2) emphasis on history and intersubjectivity as fundamental facets of human social research; and (3) researcher responsibility to engage in systematic and transparent practice for the empirical legitimacy of human social science.

In unfolding the first point, Agar discusses how human social science has become a taboo discipline amongst what he refers to as "The Academy." He argues that studying human behavior through the widely accepted means of the traditional scientific method does not work. The positivist scientific method involves forming a hypothesis of predicted outcomes prior to data collection, isolating data to minimize variables from interfering with outcomes, following a linear research design, and using deductive logic to form universally generalizable explanations. Throughout history, the attempt at studying human behavior from the traditional scientific method is what Agar refers to as BSS, short for Behavioral Social Science (a play on words, as he points out that BSS is malarkey). Yet, any deviation from what The Academy has deemed as the right way to conducting empirical science is not considered "real science."

Herein lies the main argument behind *The Lively Science*: to scientifically study humans, a different approach to scientific inquiry must be recognized. Humans are unpredictable; no real explanation about human social science is possible when people are categorized as data points and studied outside of their social environments and cultural webs. Agar argues that no human social culture is generalizable to another, and linear, prescriptive BSS methods do not work for studying the complex webs of human social life. Only through abductive, iterative, and recursive logics can a researcher scientifically study and learn about humans.

Supporting the second point, Agar makes a case for recognizing the intersectionality of people within their historical and social contexts. He argues that no person can be universally described or generalized apart from their cultural contexts, and that researchers are to spend time amongst subjects in the field (not in the lab), observing patterns as they naturally and unpredictably occur through human actions and interactions. "Data" in human social science are found in this intersubjective space where researcher(s) meet subject(s). Agar calls these intersubjective spaces *languacultures*, or systems of social and cultural context in which the languages and cultures of the researcher and the people intersect and signal cultural patterns and meanings. As researchers observe and engage with people in the contexts of their lives, they experience *rich points*, defined as unexpected surprises which lead to deeper learning about their subjects and their cultural contexts.

Agar's third point within *The Lively Science* is that the iterative pivots of continuous, non-linear data checking is part of what makes human social research scientific. As researchers

experience rich points and learn, they are constantly assessing the evidence they construct from patterns observed, testing their claims. Agar (2021) argues that to empirically study human behavior, human social researchers have a responsibility to follow this systematic scientific trinity of evidence, logic, and falsification since “any science requires evidence organized according to some logic with systematic attempts to falsify its conclusions” (p. 67). Agar also argues that researchers have a responsibility to participants and to science to provide a rational translation from the source languaculture (research subjects) to the target languaculture (the scientific and other outside communities). “Whatever it is that happens in that universal space between languacultures, more than one translation is possible, but not any translation is acceptable,” (Agar, 2021, p. 105). Following the scientific trinity of grounding claims in evidence that has time and again withstood falsification will continue to advance the field of qualitative research and persuade naysayers that human social research is an empirical science.

### Critique

After concluding multiple readings of the book, we agree with Agar’s overall argument for why the scientific community needs to adjust their practices to learning about human social science. The most important things learned about humans will be found in patterns and uncertainty rather than numbers. Agar (2021, p. 10) states that the best way for researchers to communicate what is learned about these patterns is through metaphors rather than the traditional equations of BSS. Through numerous examples he also shows how what researchers learn will usually occur as unplanned surprises well into the study, requiring adjustments to the research design along the way. Agar shows HSR as abductive, dynamic, complex, and systematic process to uncovering complex human lives. We found his arguments insightful, helpful, and convincing.

Through his conversational style, metaphors, and comparisons of BSS and HSR approaches to studying human social life, Agar did an excellent job relating his arguments to the novice qualitative researcher. Through reading and dialogue with each other and with Agar’s text, we had opportunities to examine our own views and expand our understandings of research and ways of thinking about human social science. However, we also noticed the missing voices. As females we observed that female and minority voices in both human social research and behavior social science were not directly addressed until chapter seven. Agar articulated the pivotal moments in the history of human social science through the contributions of well-known scholars, most of whom were white men and did not explore the contributions of women, people of color, or other minoritized groups.

Writing *The Lively Science* around 2011-2013 (first publication in 2013), Agar wondered where the women and people of color were in the early human social research story. He did acknowledge voices were missing: “It has been shown, over and over again, how the structures in which we live and work foreground some voices and hide others. The voices that are hidden are usually non-male or non-European ancestry or both” (Agar, 2021, p. 129). Unfortunately, the placement of this statement at the conclusion of the book indicated to us that this critical consideration may have been an after-thought to all the other historical contexts provided within the book. Two females are mentioned in three pages of the last chapter, but the book as a whole fails to include the minority voices he had wondered about.

### Suggestion for Readers and Conclusion

Prior to writing this book review we read the book twice: the first read focusing on the overall message Agar was conveying, and the second focusing on connecting all his stories to the overall message. We both noted we eagerly awaited chapter 6, “When Researcher Meets

Subject,” as it was dangled like a carrot through the preceding chapters with a promise to further clarify the connection of the points introduced. Looking back, we recognize we could have used a reading guide that would have made our readings more beneficial and help us make sense of (and remember) some of the historical moments and concepts discussed. We include our own version of a reading guide (Table 1) with a few of our notes in case such a graphic organizer might be helpful to other readers.

**Table 1**  
*Reading Guide*

Chapter	Title	BSS, Concept introduced	HSR, Agar’s alternative
1	<b>Behavioral/Social Science-An Oxymoron?</b>		
2	<b>Experiments and Real Worlds</b>	Reductionism didn’t work as explanation for purchase of Subaru (p. 26)	Instead of reductionism, finding patterns in everyday life (e.g., marketing departments) is a better way to explain the purchase
3	<b>The Road to HSR is Paved with Everyday Intentions</b>		
4	<b>Taking HSR to Court</b>	Educational policies driven by standardized tests; all other things need to be equal except what’s measured	Toulmin courtroom model; better represents the range of schools, students, teachers, and communities that are impacted by policies
5	<b>The Heartbreak of Monotony</b>		
6	<b>When Researcher Meets Subject</b>		
7	<b>Human Social Science</b>		

In conclusion, this book provides a well-articulated guide to the history of behavioral social science and reasons for human social science to adapt a new framework. The presence of relatable pop culture references, thoughtful metaphors, and intriguing humorous experiences make this book an inviting text for novice researchers to explore *why* considering human actions in context of human lives during the research process leads to better understandings of the world around us.

### References

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### **Author Note**

Ashley Schmidt is a doctoral student in the Mathematics Education track of the PhD in Education at the University of Central Florida. Megan Mitchell is a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction EdD program at the University of Central Florida. They are two doctoral students with a collaborative interest in qualitative research and methodologies. They can be reached at [ashley.schmidt@ucf.edu](mailto:ashley.schmidt@ucf.edu) and [megan.mitchell@ucf.edu](mailto:megan.mitchell@ucf.edu).

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