

MICHAEL AGAR

# THE LIVELY SCIENCE

Remodeling Human Social  
Research

ROUTLEDGE



“Michael Agar and I shared a devotion to the science in social science, though we came at it from different directions. In 2013, in this wonderful book, Mike captured those directions with two labels: HSR (human social research) and BSS (behavioral science research). I’m glad to see this book being re-published so that more students and colleagues can engage with it. Read this book carefully. As with all of Mike’s books, it’s thought provoking and a delight to read. I only wish Mike were here so that I could provoke him back.”

H. Russell Bernard, Director, Institute for Social Science Research,  
Arizona State University, USA

“*The Lively Science* is a brilliant, necessary book. In his trademark kind-to-the-reader style, Agar lifts ‘the fog of academia’ to model evidence-based research for practitioners facing real-world challenges. In the process, he erects sturdy bridges over needless quantitative/qualitative divides for the rest of us. A stunning achievement.”

Deborah Winslow, Senior Scholar, School for Advanced Research,  
Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA

## Books by Michael Agar

### **Culture**

How to Make It Work in a World of Hybrids

### **Dope Double Agent**

The Naked Emperor on Drugs

### **The Professional Stranger**

An Informal Introduction to Ethnography

### **Language Shock**

Understanding the Culture of Conversation

### **Ripping and Running**

A Formal Ethnography of Urban Heroin Addicts

### **Independents Declared**

The Dilemmas of Independent Trucking

# THE LIVELY SCIENCE

*The Lively Science* is Michael Agar's accessible, idiosyncratic, often humorous, and sometimes controversial explication of his own polestar truth: "*Research on humans in their social world by other humans is not a traditional science like the one created by Galileo and Newton.*" However, if the social world is not a lab, neither is it a collection of random events.

The book lays out a clear, straightforward path to carrying out the basic scientific tasks of forming questions and answering them to explore and account for that non-randomness. The author deploys myriad engaging examples drawn from a lifetime of applied and basic research to demonstrate how human science researchers can produce discoveries that are scientifically defensible *and* useful in the real world. Agar grounds his how-to guide in an approachable discussion of epistemology and draws on thinkers whose writings may be unfamiliar to many social scientists. He blends that work with new intellectual tools, such as complexity theory, disasters research, and conversational analysis. The result is an innovative and practical methodology that is true to the realities and surprises of research by and about humans, yet preserves scientific standards of falsifiability, empiricism, logic, and systematic presentation of results.

This book represents the best of Michael Agar's visionary work. With a new foreword by Michael Brown celebrating Agar's enormous contribution to social science methodology, *The Lively Science* is for all researchers who seek to explore the full potential of a human social science.

**Michael Agar** (1945–2017), Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Maryland, USA, was an influential, boundary-defying anthropologist known particularly for his work in ethnographic methodologies, transdisciplinary theory, and policy application. Post-retirement, he founded the global ethnographic consulting company Ethknoworks, LLC and held appointments at

the University of Buenos Aires, the International Institute of Qualitative Methods at the University of Alberta, Surrey University (England), and the University of New Mexico. Trained as a linguistic anthropologist in the Language-Behavior Research Laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley, Agar was the author of nine monographs and more than a hundred articles on topics that ranged widely, including complexity theory, organizational cultures, drug policy, conversation analysis, and independent trucking.

# THE LIVELY SCIENCE

Remodeling Human Social Research

*Michael Agar*

This edition published 2021  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Originally published by Michael Agar with Mill Street Press, 2013

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Agar, Michael, author.

Title: The lively science : remodeling human social research / Michael Agar.

Description: New York : Routledge, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2020042905 (print) | LCCN 2020042906 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367510923 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367510930 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003052395 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Social sciences—Research. | Social sciences—Philosophy.

Classification: LCC H62 .A4253 2021 (print) | LCC H62 (ebook) |

DDC 300.72—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020042905>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020042906>

ISBN: 978-0-367-51092-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-51093-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-05239-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

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**Publisher's Note**

This version of the book was published after the author's death and while every effort has been made to check content, hyperlinks and email addresses may no longer be valid. Michael Agar's website [www.ethknoworks.com](http://www.ethknoworks.com) is still available as an additional resource, and readers are welcome to visit the website.

# FOREWORD

*Michael F. Brown*

PRESIDENT, SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH, SANTA FE, USA

Michael Agar was an anthropologist's anthropologist. I mean that in a double sense. He was deeply committed to fieldwork based on attentive listening and close observation of people in their everyday social worlds. He also relentlessly questioned the moral meaning of his own vocation, subjecting anthropology's practices to the same attention he brought to the lives of the people he wrote about with memorable vividness.

Although I had followed his work for decades and sometimes assigned his book *The Professional Stranger* to my undergraduate students at Williams College, I came to know him only after taking a new job as president of the School for Advanced Research, a century-old center for research in anthropology, archaeology, and Native American arts in Santa Fe. Mike and I found common cause in our professional passions, leading to memorable discussions, occasionally lubricated by pints of IPA, about everything from the social dynamics of managing water resources in Mexico to the challenge of making academic research interesting to the general public.

In Mike Agar I found a rare combination of analytical brilliance and a quirky, self-deprecating sense of humor. He had a sharp eye for ironies yet never surrendered to cynicism. Despite his gilt-edged résumé—Stanford, Berkeley, a half-dozen books with his name on the cover—Mike had no time for academic pretensions. This probably arose from the long stretches of his career when he worked as an independent practitioner of anthropology rather than as a professor. He felt that social research should *matter*, that it should offer a deeper understanding of the complexity of real people while suggesting ways to make their lives better. Although I never heard him mention the work of Melville Herskovits, one of the founders of African-American studies in anthropology, I had the sense that he sympathized with Herskovits's insistence that theory is “a tool always to be held lightly in the hand.”

These qualities are on display in every page of *The Lively Science*, a book that I wish had been available when I was still in the business of introducing students to the craft of ethnography. At one level, the book may be described as a contribution to classical debates about whether qualitative social research is truly scientific. Agar expresses discomfort with the term “qualitative,” in part because he has no objection to counting things, in part because not all qualitative work is scientific. In his view, numbers have a legitimate place in all serious social research. He simply questions a narrow view of science that defines it as a process based on testing hypotheses, the identification and measurement of variables, and the like. Modeling the social sciences on the physical sciences has been misguided from the start, he contends. Unlike the objects of a chemist’s research, which lack consciousness and agency, social researchers study fellow human beings who think, act, and feel. Research subjects live in a particular moment while at the same time embracing a specific history. Whether we recognize it or not, Agar insists, social research involves entering into a relationship with our subjects, an awareness of which must be part of the analysis itself.

Yet despite this difference between the physical sciences and human social research—referred to throughout the book by the acronym HSR—Agar makes a strong case that the best HSR qualifies as science because it is systematic and committed to the presentation of verifiable evidence. As he puts it, HSR must “make a case based on evidence, logic, and falsification with a transparency that allows critical evaluation.” “More than one conclusion is possible,” he says elsewhere in the book, “but not all conclusions are acceptable.”

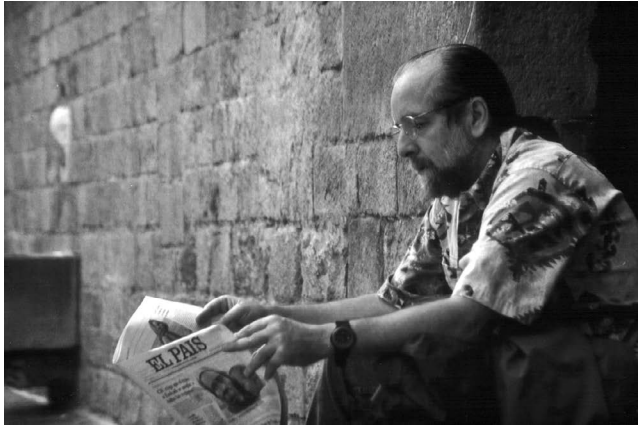
In making a case for the scientific basis of HSR, *The Lively Science* takes readers on an unusual journey through the history of ideas. Agar finds philosophical justification for the superiority of qualitative social research in the work of thinkers rarely mentioned during my professional training and, I suspect, in that of most social scientists. These pivotal figures include Franz Brentano, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Stephen Toulmin, among others. Thanks to Agar’s disarmingly conversational style, this excursion into Western intellectual history is anything but dry. The case studies used to exemplify key points run the gamut from the unexpectedly vehicular—for example, assessing the social forces that led him to choose a Subaru as his personal vehicle—to flirtations with pop culture, as when he cites the protagonist of the long-running detective series *Columbo* as a practitioner of “abductive logic,” a form of nonlinear reasoning identified by the philosopher Charles Peirce.

Mike Agar’s life was cut short by an incurable neurological disease, a terrible loss for the disciplines that he loved, anthropology and linguistics, and for any field committed to study of what he referred to as the “messiness” of human social life. Fortunately for us, the voice of this unusual thinker—insightful, self-aware, irreverent—echoes throughout the book. I expect that it will alter the career paths of more than a few young scholars dissatisfied by forms of behavioral

social science wedded to the pretense that investigators live outside the life-worlds of the people they study. This, then, is a book for those who want to learn more about “the space that a human social world might travel, more about paths not taken and possible paths it might take in the future,” as Agar puts it. *The Lively Science* stands as a peerless meditation on the mission, methods, and world-changing potential of human social research.

# FOREWORD

*Ellen Taylor*



This book is about human social research, and Michael Agar was very good at it. There are reasons for this – a boundless curiosity about the world and people, and an empathy for individual human beings and their lives that he expressed by the rare attribute of truly listening to what people had to say. Empathy is a quality about which he writes in *The Lively Science*. Curiosity is, I think, what he hoped would draw readers to the book. He wrote *The Lively Science* as a guide, a how-to manual, using what he had learned so far in his long and varied career in the hope that readers would continue to reflect on his ideas, use them in their work, and expand the epistemology he suggests in *The Lively Science* to improve and benefit human social research.

If Mike was still living on this earth, I am sure that revising the book would be on his mind, because his intellectual life was always a complex dynamic system – my apology to the complexity theorists. He rarely thought he had the answers, but relished the exploration, and always hoped that what he discovered would actually be useful. He read widely and broadly, often while listening to jazz, and

took great pleasure in conversations with students and colleagues and friends. He was interested in just about everything and immersed himself in new endeavors that he had never explored – for instance, water policy, which he took up after moving to his adopted home of New Mexico, where “whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting over.”

He had a talent for weaving the theories and methods and ideas of lesser-known thinkers, alongside the more well-known “luminaries,” into his work, creating new and interesting schemas. Mike was always of an interdisciplinary slant, drawing on psychology, philosophy, history, ecology, the complexity theory of physics, sociology, and more, in addition to anthropology. In *The Lively Science*, he uses the work of John Stuart Mill, Franz Brentano, Wilhelm Dilthey, Jürgen Habermas, Stephen Toulmin, Stanley Milgram, Edith Stein, among others – all in one book about epistemology. In his career, as well, Mike followed many different paths that were only somewhat loosely bounded by his background in linguistic anthropology and quantitative research methodology, although as he has said, his projects, long- and short-term, have always been linguistic and ethnographic at their core. He took great pleasure in working with practitioners, trying to solve problems in the real world, and applying theory to actual work being done.

Mike wrote nine books, numerous articles and papers, as well as short fiction which he entered (and sometimes won) in writing contests – and being published in the local *Santa Fe Reporter* made him inordinately happy. In his later books, he developed a more conversational style and avoided many of the conventions of academic writing. He wanted his books to be read by smart but “ordinary” people, and his ideas to be made use of, not solely debated at academic conferences. While he could and did succeed at the scholarly writing game, his later work, including *The Lively Science*, is quite different from, say, an earlier book, *The Professional Stranger, An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, though many of the concepts he developed in his earlier work are included, including *rich points*, *language culture*, and *trend theory* explaining drug epidemics, written with Heather Schaft Reisinger. Writing was a craft for him, a process of clarifying his thoughts, and most of all a way of communicating and exchanging ideas.

He was a hiker, a skier, a scuba driver – earning his cave diving certificate and writing about his experiences in the cenotes in Mexico for the *Smithsonian*. He traveled a lot – a year as an exchange student during high school in Austria, Vienna, India, Greece, Mexico and Central America, Argentina, and was more at home in Europe in his drug work because of his support for “harm prevention,” which was not as embraced in the US. He learned to speak Kannada while in India, and he spoke Spanish, Austrian German, and, not surprisingly, also worked in the fields of intercultural communication and language learning. At the end of his life, he tackled the thorny topic of “culture,” that foundational anthropological concept, and how we might look at “culture” differently in a globalized world where you might have more in common with someone from an entirely different “culture” than with your next-door neighbor, resulting in his last book, *Culture: How to Make It Work in a World of Hybrids*.

In a tribute to Mike at the Society for Applied Anthropology meetings in 2017, he was described as: a linguistic anthropologist, a cultural anthropologist, almost an South Asianist, a drug expert, a medical anthropologist, an applied anthropologist, a practicing anthropologist, a public anthropologist, a professional stranger, a theoretical anthropologist, an independent consultant, a cross-cultural consultant, a computer modeler, a complexity theorist, an environmentalist, a water expert, a teacher, a storyteller, an advocate, a mentor, and a friend. Mike would have chuckled at that description, and I can imagine him making a wisecrack about such lavish praise.

*The Lively Science* is intellectually substantial, but it is also fun to read – Mike’s sense of humor and appreciation of irony are evident. So, as Mike might say, *¡dale gas!*, and enjoy the ride.