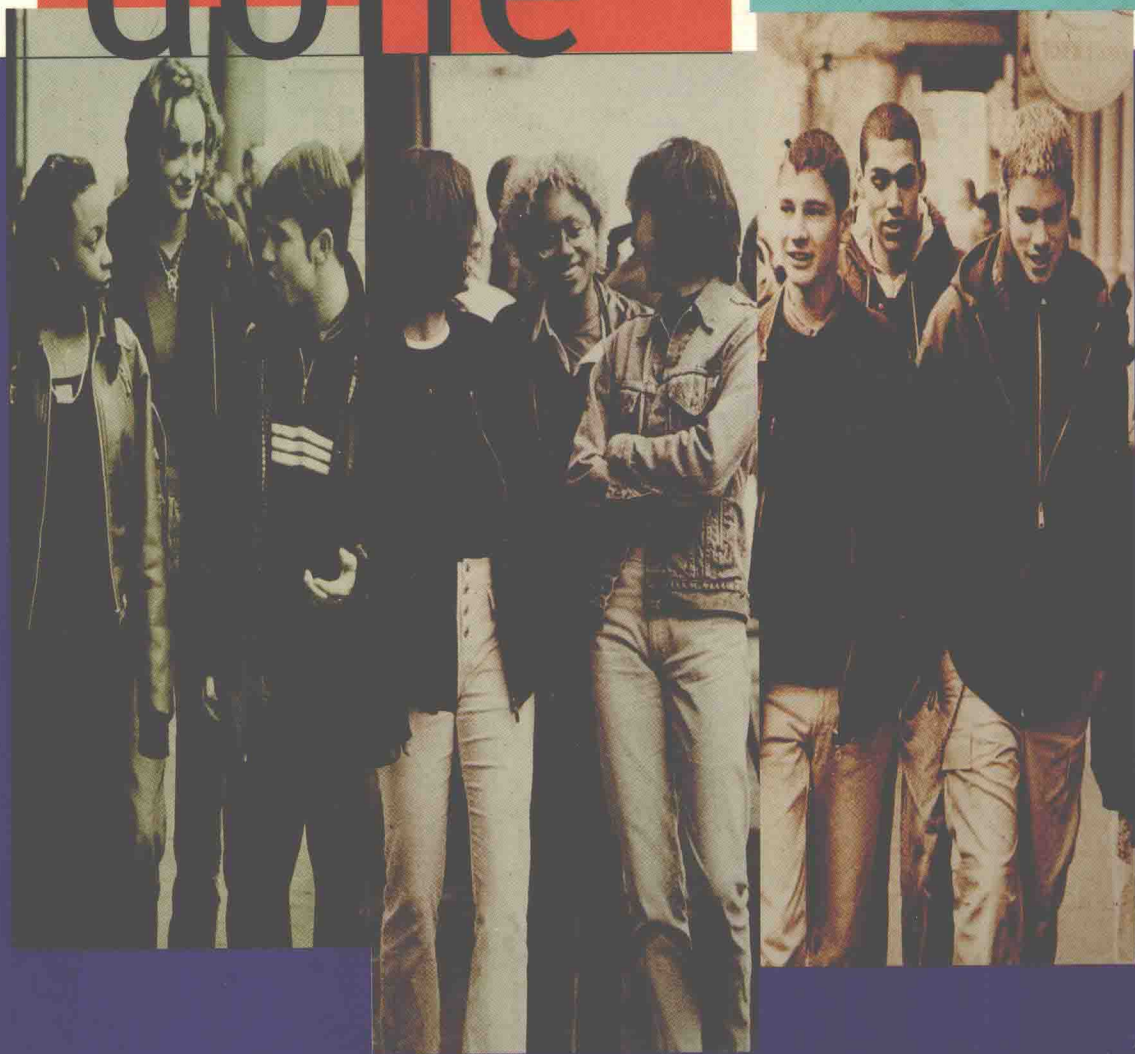


how it's done

AN INVITATION TO
SOCIAL RESEARCH



Emily Stier Adler / Roger Clark

How It's Done

AN INVITATION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

USED BOOK

Emily Stier Adler

Rhode Island College

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Preface

We'd like to invite you to participate in one of the most exciting, exhilarating and sometimes exasperating activities we know: social science research. We extend the invitation not only because we know, from personal experience, how rewarding and useful research can be, but also because we've seen what pleasure it can bring other students of the social world. Our invitation comes with some words of reassurance, especially for those of you who entertain a little self-doubt about your ability to do research. First, we think you'll be glad to discover, as you read *How It's Done*, how much you already know about how social research is done. If you're like most people, native curiosity has been pushing you to do social research for much of your life. This book is meant simply to assist you in this natural activity by showing you some tried-and-true ways to enlightening and plausible insights about the social world.

Special Features

Active Engagement in Research

Our second word of reassurance is that we've done everything we can to minimize your chances for exasperation and maximize your opportunities for excitement and exhilaration, in preparing this book. Our philosophy is simple. We believe that honing one's social research skills is analogous to honing one's skills in other enjoyable and rewarding human endeavors, like sport, art, or dance. The best way isn't simply to read about it: It's to do it and to watch experts do it. So, just as you'd hesitate to teach yourself tennis, ballet, or painting only by reading about them, we won't ask you to try learning the fine points of research methodology by reading our prose alone. We'll encourage you to get out and practice the techniques we describe. We've designed exercises at the end of each chapter to help you work on the "groundstrokes," "serve," "volleys" and "overheads" of social research. We don't think you'll need to do all of the exercises at home. Your instructor might ask you do some in class and might want you to ignore some altogether. In any case, we think that, by book's end, you should have enough control of the fundamentals to do the kind of on-the-job research that social science majors are increasingly asked to do, whether they find themselves in social service agencies, the justice system, in business and industry, government or graduate school.

The exercises reflect our conviction that we all learn best when we're actively engaged. Other features of the text also encourage such active engagement, including the Stop and Think questions that run through each chapter, encouraging you to actively respond to what you're reading.

Engaging Examples of Actual Research

Moreover, just as you might wish to gain inspiration and technical insight for ballet by studying the work of Anna Pavlova or Mikhail Baryshnikov,

we'll encourage you to study the work of some accomplished researchers. Thus, we build most of our chapters around a research essay, what we call focal research, usually previously published, that is intended to make the research process transparent, rather than opaque. We have chosen these essays for their appeal and accessibility, as well as to tap what we hope are some of your varied interests: for instance, crime, gender, aging, attitudes towards rape, drug use and abuse, and others.

Behind-the-Scene Glimpses of the Research Process

These focal research pieces are themselves a defining feature of our book. In addition to such exemplary "performances," however, we've included behind-the-scenes glimpses of the research process. We're able to provide these glimpses because many researchers have given generously of their time to answer our questions about what they've done, the special problems they've encountered, and the ways they've dealt with these problems. The glimpses should give you an idea of the kinds of choices and situations the researchers faced, where often the "real" is far from the "ideal." You'll see how they handled the choices and situations and hear them present their current thinking about the compromises they made. In short, we think you'll discover that good research is an achievable goal, as well as a very human enterprise.

Clear and Inviting Writing

We've also tried to minimize your chances for exasperation by writing as clearly as we can. The goal of all social science, we believe, is to interpret social life, something you've all been doing for quite a while. We want to assist you in this endeavor and believe that an understanding of social science research methods can help. But unless we're clear in our presentation of those methods, your chances of gaining that understanding are not great. There are, of course, times when we'll introduce you to concepts that are commonly used in social science research and that may be new to you. When we do, however, we will try to provide definitions that make the concepts as clear as possible, definitions that are highlighted in the margin of the text and in the glossary at the end of the text.

Balance Between Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

We think you'll also appreciate the balance between quantitative and qualitative research methods presented here. Quantitative methods focus on things that are measured numerically. ("He glanced at her 42 times during the performance.") Qualitative methods focus on descriptions of the essence of things. ("She appeared annoyed at his constant glances.") We believe both methodological approaches are too useful to ignore. Emblematic of this belief is the inclusion of a chapter (Chapter 16) on qualitative data analysis, following a chapter (Chapter 15) on quantitative data analysis. The presence of such chapters is another defining feature of the book.

Moreover, we will introduce you to some relatively new research strategies, such as using the Internet to refine ideas and collect data, as well as more conventional strategies.

Our aims, then, in writing this book have been (1) to give you first-hand experiences with the research process, (2) to provide you with engaging examples of social science research, (3) to offer behind-the-scene glimpses of how professional researchers have done their work, (4) to keep our own presentation of the “nuts-and-bolts” of social science research as clear and inviting as possible, (5) to give a balanced presentation of qualitative and quantitative research methods, as well as introduce recent technological innovations. Whether we succeed in these goals, and in the more important one of sharing our excitement about social research, remains to be seen. Be assured, however, of our conviction that there is excitement to be had.

Acknowledgements

We cannot possibly thank all those who have contributed to the completion of this book, but we can try to thank those whose help has been most indispensable and hope that others will forgive our neglect. We'd first like to thank all the students who have taken research methods courses with us at Rhode Island College for their general good-naturedness and patience as we've worked out ideas that are crystallized here, and then worked them out some more. We'd also like to thank our colleagues in the Sociology Department and the administration of the College, for many acts of encouragement and more tangible assistance, including released time.

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Emily Stier Adler

Roger Clark

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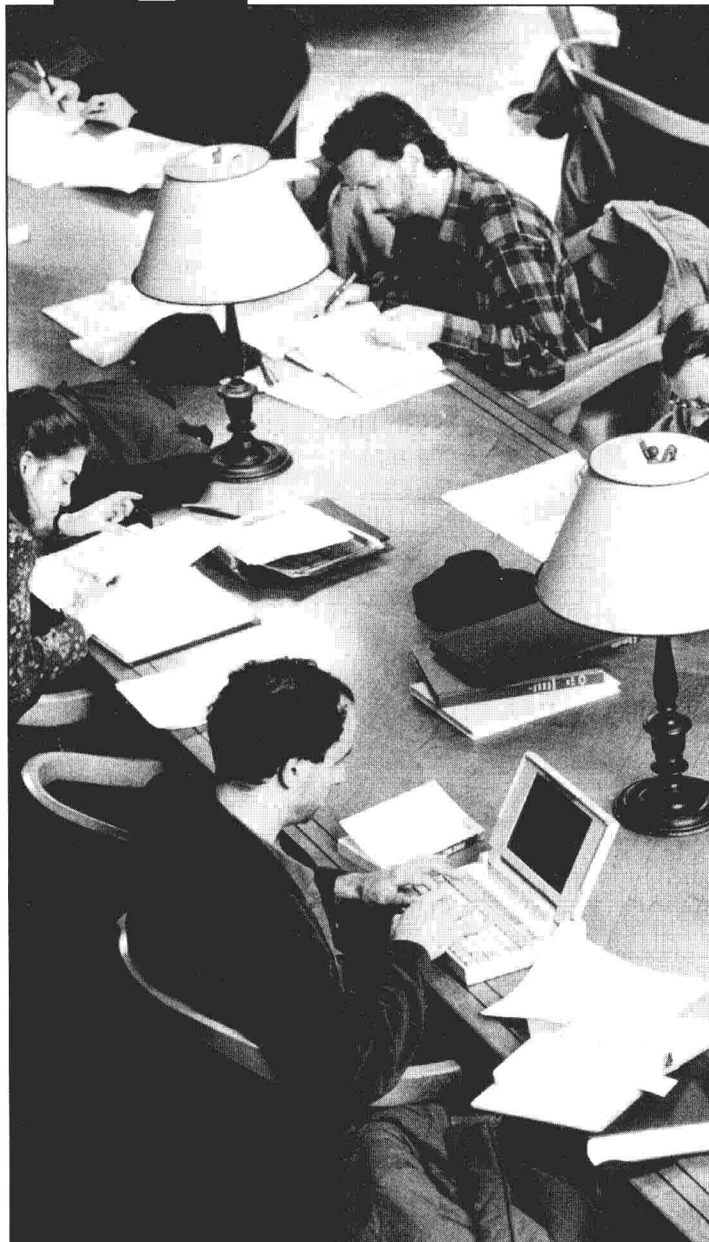
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1

The Uses of Social Research



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Gee. It all seems so much more organized than when I played," Janet thought to herself as she watched her younger brother, Sam, at his soccer game. "For me, it was always fun, always just a game. Sam seems to take it so seriously. I wonder what he gets out of it."

Janet was home for a day from college and had taken Sam to his game. As they drove home together, Sam, who'd been looking out the window at the sky, asked her, "How do we know the earth goes around the sun, and not the other way around?" Janet was momentarily stumped, but found herself answering, not entirely to her own satisfaction, "Because that's what astronomers tell us."

"But it IS how I know it," Janet said to herself, almost as if Sam had challenged her. Then, somewhat less defensively, she asked herself, "How do THEY know it?"

Janet's questions—"How do I know things?" and "How do scientists come to know things?" and even "What do kids get out of organized afterschool activities (like Sam's soccer)?"—are the kinds of things we'll be discussing in this chapter on the uses of social research.

Introduction

Studying social research methods is not so much about acquiring knowledge about the social world as it is about learning *how* to acquire knowledge about *that* world. You might ask yourself: Why should I subject myself to a course on such a curious topic? What good can come of my knowing how knowledge about the social world is arrived at? And aren't there faster ways of coming to such knowledge anyway—like taking a class in the area I'm interested in and learning what others have found out? These are all splendid questions. In fact, we think they're so good that we devote our first chapter to them.

We hope that quite a few of our readers go on and apply their knowledge of research methods as part of their professional lives. We know that many of our students will do so in a variety of ways: as graduate students in the social sciences, as social workers, as police or correctional officers, as analysts in state agencies, as advocates for specific groups or policies, as community organizers, as family counselors, to name but a few.

Even if you don't enter a profession in which you'll do research of the sort we discuss in this book, we still think learning something about research methods can be one of the most useful things you do in college. Why? Oddly, perhaps, our answer implicates another apparently esoteric subject: social theory.

social theory,

a story about how and why people behave and interact in the ways that they do.

When we speak of **social theory**, we're not only referring to the kinds of things you study in specialized social theory courses, although we do include those things. In our view, social theories, like all other theories, are stories about how and why things are as they are. In the case of social theories, the stories are about why people "behave, interact, and organize themselves in certain ways" (Turner, 1991: 1). Such stories are useful, we feel, not only because they affect how we act as citizens—as when, for instance, we inform, or fail to inform, elected representatives of our feelings about matters like welfare, joblessness, crime, and domestic violence—but also because we believe that Charles Lemert (1993: 1) is right when he argues that "social theory is a basic survival skill."

Useful social theory, in our view, concerns itself with those things in our everyday lives that can and do affect us profoundly, even if we are not aware of them. We believe that once we can name and tell stories (or create theories) about these things, we have that much more control over them. At the very least, the inability to name and tell such stories leaves us powerless to do anything. These stories can be about why some people commit suicide and some don't, why some are homeless and some aren't, why some commit crimes and some don't, why some do housework and others don't, why some people live to be adults and others don't. They can come from people who are paid to produce them, like social scientists, or from people who are simply trying to make sense of their lives. Lemert (1993) reminds us that the title for Alex Kotlowitz's (1991) *There Are No Children Here* was first uttered by the mother of a 10-year-old boy, Lafayette, who lived in one of Chicago's most dangerous public housing projects. This mother observed, "But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children" (Kotlowitz, 1991: 10). Hers is eloquent social theory, with serious survival implications for those living in a social world where nighttime gunfire is commonplace.