

## BOOK REVIEW

***Observing Ourselves: Essays in Social Research, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*** By Earl Babbie,  
Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2015, 168 pp.

If you have ever taught an undergraduate course in sociological research methods, you very likely have come across the name of Earl Babbie. For many decades Babbie's excellent text, *The Practice of Social Research*, along with its myriad niche iterations, has dominated the market. And for good reason. Babbie's keen awareness of philosophical and theoretical matters surrounding the research process, accompanied by his sparkling wit, combine to produce readable books that are virtually painless for undergraduate students. *Observing Ourselves* is no exception. First published in 1986, this small volume provides an eminently readable and downright pleasurable introduction to "fundamental philosophical and methodological issues involved in the scientific study of human beings" (vii). Although 29 years separate the first and second editions, the fundamental issues facing sociologists and others who produce empirical work in the human sciences remain largely the same. This volume brings fresh contemporary examples to bear on the problems vexing sociologists, including issues of truth and objectivity, value freedom, impact of the observer, freedom versus determinism, ideological thinking, probability and causation, among others.

*Observing Ourselves* opens with what Babbie calls a "Reflexive Introduction," an absorbing section which draws the reader into the rest of the book. Written to illustrate the serendipitous factor in sociology and social life, this section provides a compelling autobiographical sketch of Babbie's circuitous route into sociology and social research. Babbie, who went on to a distinguished career among the *who's who* in sociology, began life as the stepson of an auto body mechanic, with designs on following in his father's vocational footsteps. Through the nudging of various observant teachers (it turns out Babbie was quite good at math), combined with good grades and what seems like native ability, Babbie ended up applying for and securing a Navy ROTC scholarship to Harvard. His Harvard route to sociology wound through the engineering department and such courses as physics, calculus, German, and cultural anthropology. Fortuitously, abilities he saw as his forte failed to turn into a career path, and latent interests he had scant considered came to occupy center stage in his life – a life spent thinking about, doing, and writing about social research. Along the way to becoming the best-selling textbook author noted above, Babbie worked under (and was significantly influenced by) Talcott Parsons, and then later "Charlie" Glock, "Herb" Blumer, and "Rod" Stark (who he calls his "best friend in graduate school"). Quite a pack of friends and confidants! The whole chronology is really quite fascinating, and serves to remind the reader of the generally unplanned progression, or opportune character, of human social life, something which may remind the Christian reader of the Christian concept of calling, or the unseen, providential

sovereignty of God. Furthermore, the serendipity principle factors prominently in the practice of social research as well.

This modest volume, just 168 pages, is divided into five parts with three short chapters per section. The respective sections are labeled “An Introduction to Inquiry,” “The Structuring of Inquiry,” “Modes of Observation,” “Analysis of Data,” and “The Social Context of Research.” These divisions make this an ideal ancillary reader for an undergraduate methods class. Treatment of the various topics is neither trivial nor cumbersome. Each reading is concise, thought-provoking, and peppered with humor and first-person anecdotes which combine to produce Babbie’s signature charm and appeal. In working through *Observing Ourselves* with sociology students in my methods class, I have found the readings to be both provocative and gentle – they push the reader to consider new ways of thinking about truth and reality, and raise questions about certainty, yet do so within a context not so abstract that the reader either loses interest or succumbs to despair. Babbie’s own struggles with various ways of knowing permeate the work, making its more existential dimensions palatable, and even alluring for students.

Early in the book, Babbie suggests that the image of the scientist carefully framing questions which in time yield truthful answers misrepresents what actually happens in science. To support this claim, he discusses the “half-life” of facts, offering a chart showing the half-life of knowledge in a variety of fields (e.g. religion 8.76 years; history 7.3 years; physics 13.07 years, etc.) and stressing the “tenuousness” of answers in science in general, but particularly in the social sciences. The idea that knowledge – our answers – is to be held lightly organizes much of the rest of the book, which is devoted to helping the reader think about truth, objectivity, vested interests, paradigms, and “the recursive quality of answers in human society” (17). That knowledge and certainty can be thought of as having a “half-life” led to a lively discussion among students in my class, especially with respect to theology as a domain of human-produced knowledge (I teach at a Christian college). If you are looking for a secular version of “We see through a glass darkly,” you will find it here.

Like the issues raised by the half-life of facts, Babbie’s development of intersubjectivity or “agreement” as the basis for “truth” raised existential red flags for my students. Babbie explains that while we equate “seeing with our own eyes” with objective truth, this mode of knowing is best understood as subjectivity, and our greatest assurance that we have reached anything approaching objective knowledge comes when many observers agree on what they are seeing. This is, on the one hand, an unsatisfying operational definition of truth. Mere agreement seems an anemic standard for truth. Undeterred, and with characteristic humor, Babbie develops his point by showing how science declares something as a “fact” only when multiple scientists find the same thing and “agree.” For example, peer review procedures comprise an early stage in the “coming to agreement/declaring truth” process. Bridging off Babbie’s examples, I asked my students why our denomination (my college is in the

Presbyterian tradition) holds “General Assemblies” each summer where theologians and lay-people argue about what particular passages in the Bible mean. I point out that such assemblies argue their way to agreement, and only then declare an interpretation as “truth,” and subsequently publish it in their book of agreements (e.g. Book of Church Order). The resulting statements stand as truth until enough people no longer agree with them, whereupon they re-argue the matter, declare something else truth, and publish revised doctrines – a process not totally unlike Thomas Kuhn’s “scientific revolution.” Some of these truths have a longer half-life than others. And, while this renders truth rather less certain than we might like, it also reminds us of our reliance on faith in a world where we are not God and do not see “face to face.”

In Chapter Four, Babbie discusses the issue of determinism versus freedom. He opens with the observation that for social scientists, “our livelihood depends on determinism, and yet we hope it isn’t true” (47). Furthermore, “social research assumes a deterministic paradigm that fundamentally denies the existence of free will” (47). In effect, we are caught between the moral responsibility required of free agents on one side, and the social scientific understanding that people’s choices are constrained by a variety of causal and environmental factors on the other. For Babbie, the central question is “Do I, do you, exercise choice?” In a compelling example, he engages the reader in a fictitious dialogue about why they received good grades in college as follows:

*Me:* Why did you get good grades?

*You:* Because I studied hard.

*Me:* Okay. Why did you study hard?

*You:* Because I wanted to get good grades.

*Me:* Makes sense. Why did you want to get good grades?

*You:* What do you mean? Everybody wants to get good grades.

*Me:* Maybe, but if everyone wanted good grades as much as you did, then they all would have studied as hard as you and they all would have gotten good grades. (49)

This circuitous exchange culminates in the observation that every reason you might give for your superior academic performance dissolves your free will in the matter. Like C. Wright Mills’ explanation of the connection between “personal troubles” and “social issues,” there are reasons behind reasons behind reasons. And yet we remain moral agents. With my students, I use Babbie’s presentation of these ideas as a pivot point for discussing social determinism, the sovereignty of God, our responsibility to ourselves and others in the face of both choices and constraint, and most of all, how our both/and situation should produce in us a response of humility, faith, and compassion for others.

Another example that communicates the tone of this book is Babbie’s examination of “observer impact” that asks the reader to consider where opinions come from. We all have all manner of opinions, but how were they formed, and how did we arrive at them? Should the U.S. bomb ISIS? Is marriage between an XY intersex woman and an XX woman a gay marriage?

Is it okay for NFL athletes to “take a knee” during the national anthem? And so on. Babbie points out that most of our opinions are manufactured in the moment the observer asks us for them. When asked via questionnaire by an interviewer, or in a church Sunday school class, we search through various categories of experience and formulate an answer, an answer that probably did not exist before the observer (researcher) stated the question. Just think about those complicated amendments we are asked to formulate an opinion about while in the voting booth! In debating this idea with students, I told them about a *National Public Radio* interview I had recently heard that explained some of the complexities of “bombing” ISIS. Through the interview I learned that ISIS often forcefully situates themselves in civilian homes, frequently creating underground tunnels between various residences. To bomb them is to bomb their “host” families. After relaying this information, I ask students to think about whether their answer to the “bomb ISIS” question would have changed in response to this new information. Babbie’s conclusion: “the observer and the observed may be inextricably linked” (95) and “the observer is actually a co-creator of the opinion” (97). And once again, Babbie brings us to confront the reflexive character of social research. Asking and answering questions is not as clear-cut as it seems!

Babbie concludes *Observing Ourselves* with a brief chapter entitled “The First Science.” Sociologists and others who work in the human sciences will find this a satisfying conclusion to the book. Here he recounts the complexities of social science in contrast with the relative simplicity of the natural sciences. Teaching sociology for any length of time quickly makes manifest that our discipline is not generally associated with rigor or complexity, at least not when compared to the natural sciences. Addressing this reality, Babbie explains the unbelievable complexity involved in “simply” choosing a representative random sample from a city. Writes Babbie,

By contrast to what was required to sample households in Oakland, consider a team of chemical researchers who want to conduct experiments on the nature of iron. Do they lose any sleep over the need to make a list of all the iron in the world or go over the best method for sampling from the whole? No, they merely send a lab assistant down to the corner chemical supply store to get three dollars’ worth of iron. (They call it Fe just to impress people with how scientific they are.) (161)

And in summary,

The difficulty inherent in measuring social science variables requires a highly sophisticated appreciation of what’s involved in making distinctions, specifying concepts, testing the validity and reliability of measures, and deciding related issues – matters that do not necessarily come to mind when the measuring is easy. (161)

So there's the book, in summary. Highly readable, consistently entertaining, thought-provoking, and enlightening. I heartily recommend this little volume as a great discussion-starter, as an easy way to raise student interest in the often dreaded methods course, and as a bridge to talking about some of the complexities that lurk within whatever issues you are currently addressing. Babbie hasn't lost his deft touch.

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