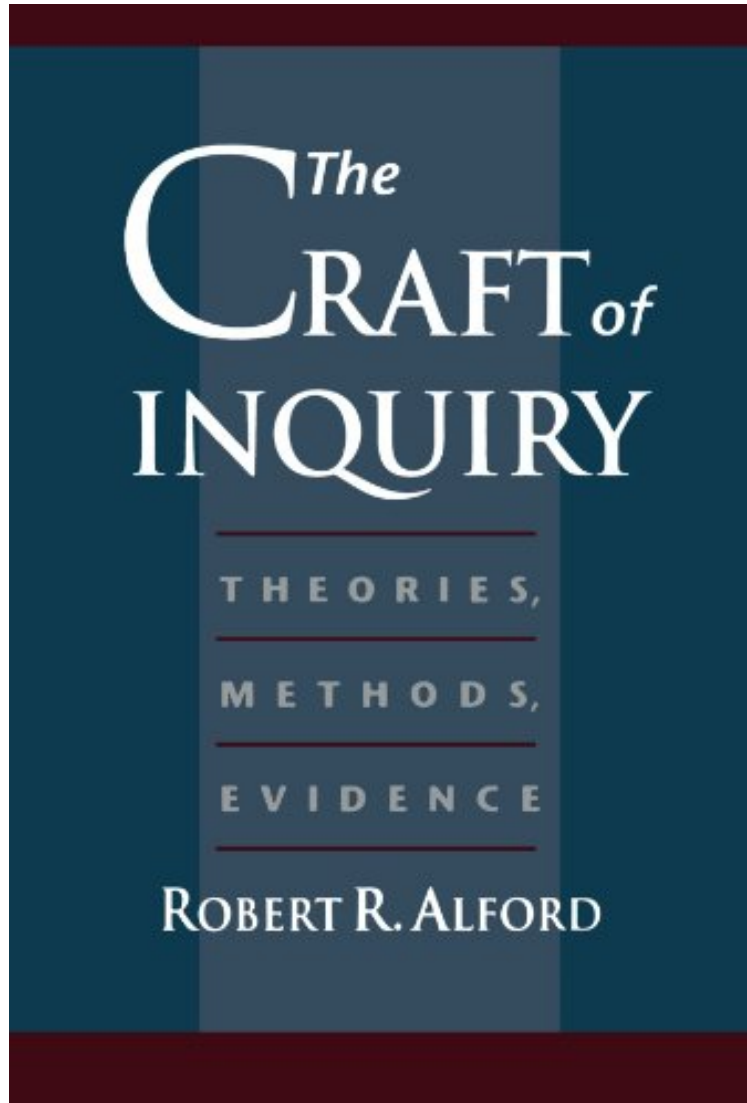


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The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence

Robert R. Alford

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Robert R. Alford : The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. nice for teachingBy kellyvery useful as an introductory book for how to come up with research questions and how to link them to theory.7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. How to do better researchBy not a naturalIn the late '70's when I was a doctoral student in education policy studies, I took a course in medical sociology as an elective. One of the items on the required reading list was Robert Alford's (1975) book Health Care Politics. Alford had done an ambitious case study of health care reform in New York

City covering the past fifty years. Over the decades, from one reform endeavor to another, Alford found remarkable commonalities in the investigative approaches taken, the strengths and weaknesses found in the health care system, and prescriptions for reform. Specifically, once a New York City administration had concluded that lack of adequate health care was a legitimate and serious problem, a commission of prominent, economically successful citizens was formed. In each instance, the commission's charge was to investigate health care resources and delivery, to identify problems, and to propose solutions. In each instance, from one commission to another, New York's health care system was found to be potentially adequate to the task of providing health care for everyone, if only it were properly organized. The notion of "coordination" of services appeared again and again in the reports of the various investigative bodies. After reading the commission reports and investigating archival and other sources of information concerning health care in New York City, Alford reached a very different conclusion. Using rudimentary but useful concepts of dominant and repressed structural interests, Alford explained difficulties in access to health care in terms of social class. The world of health care in New York City was organized so that it met the needs of affluent and socially well situated citizens, while the needs of the less fortunate were effectively suppressed. I recall being impressed with Alford's theory-based judgment that New York City and its health care system were neatly structured in class terms, and that this mode of organization was effectively masked by an ideology of public administration: there was fundamentally nothing unfair or otherwise inadequate about health care in New York City; it was all just a matter of getting resources properly organized. In a very preliminary way, Alford's notions of dominant and repressed structural interests, along with an attendant sanitizing ideology, prefigured the work of the Greco-French Marxist philosopher Nicos Poulantzas. However, when the course's instructor assigned us the task of writing a review of *Health Care Politics*, I was surprised and puzzled by what I produced. I liked the book and have since used Alford's basic concepts in my own work on illiteracy. My review, however, was almost entirely unfavorable, largely on methodological grounds. Recall the time the review was written: the late '70's. Even more than today, the social sciences were suffused with an ethos of overweening positivism. In retrospect, it's embarrassing to recall that just about everything published in a creditable sociology journal had one or more regression-based path models purporting to discern causal processes that explained variation from case to case in just about every outcome measure imaginable. As a result, most of us in the medical sociology class had learned how to evaluate fairly sophisticated quantitative research, but historical case studies were something very different. Now that I have read Alford's more recent book, *The Craft of Inquiry*, I imagine that he anticipated this sort of response to *Health Care Politics*, especially among readers who were not around before the social sciences went overwhelmingly statistical. The continuing dominance of the ethos of positivism is abundantly evident in journal articles and, to a lesser extent, books published by social scientists. However, the last three or four decades have also seen a renaissance of interest in qualitative work, especially that done by ethnographers. For example, in educational research one of the most influential works of the 20th Century was Paul Willis' book *Learning to Labor*, an ethnographic account of reproduction of a tractable working class in Manchester, England. Historical and comparative research, too, has been given renewed interest. One of the best known researchers in this tradition is Theda Skocpol, perhaps the world's foremost student of the circumstances that give rise to revolutions. Her book *States and Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (1979) is widely acknowledged as a contemporary classic. As an ironic aside, when Skocpol applied for tenure at Harvard, her application was denied. Her work, rumor had it, was judged not sufficiently scientific in a sociology department dominated by the mathematical sociologist Harrison White. Whether or not the rumor is true, Skocpol appealed Harvard's decision on grounds of sex discrimination, and she was reinstated. The point of all this is that Alford's text, *The Craft of Inquiry*, was written for a time and place in which the methodological developments illustrated above were concretely manifest in a variety of ways, and social scientists needed to be reminded that their most influential forerunners -- Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Freud -- employed a multiplicity of methods to make tenable inferences, giving their work a lasting richness and influence that otherwise would have been overwhelmed by misguided methodological self-consciousness. In an ideal world, Alford would opt for what he calls a dialectical approach, using a multiplicity of methods, as well as diverse but complementary theoretical perspectives. Alford, however, is a realist. He knows that institutional constraints, pressures to specialize, inclinations of funding sources, and the naturally limited physical, emotional, and intellectual resources of normal people who do research militate against realization of a research program that approximates the best that could possibly be done. Nevertheless, he makes a compelling argument for openness to alternatives and against off-the-shelf, routinized approaches to research and theorizing. *The Craft of Inquiry* has many virtues, but is not a conventional how-to-do-it textbook. As best I can determine, Alford's intention was not to show us how to do research, but how to do it better. As this observation suggests, the book is best used by someone who has acquired a level of maturity in a specific discipline sufficient to enable Alford's analyses of the research of greater and lesser others to strike a responsive chord. The ideal reader, I think, would be someone who has actually done research and has encountered the messy, mind-bending difficulties that force modifications in research questions, raise concerns about the adequacy of definitions of crucial concepts, make clear that available data often puts one in a the-best-I-can-do-under-the-circumstances situation, and makes us wonder if we're really cut out for this sort of endeavor. Alford emphasizes what we all know but are inclined to forget in our own work: there is no such thing as a perfect piece of

research. His analysis of Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte is especially interesting because Alford highlights the backing and filling, changes in direction, re-interpretations, and startling leaps of faith that Marx was forced to make in demonstrating how "the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that enabled a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part." (For what it's worth, I've read The Eighteenth Brumaire twice and haven't found the level of confusion and reliance on guess-work that Alford reports. That's not meant to diminish the quality of The Craft of Inquiry, but it does illustrate the fact that each of us has his or her own lens.) Alford's analyses of Weber's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Durkheim's Suicide are similarly instructive. They reveal both the unanticipated difficulties and theoretical brilliance that went into the construction of these masterpieces. To his credit, when discussing the work of 19th Century giants or contemporary luminaries such as William Julius Williams, Alford freely acknowledges that "rhetorical power," a really compelling account based on imperfect data, dubious conceptualizations, and questionable inferences can make a research-based, theoretically informed work much more persuasive than it otherwise would be. Clearly, The Craft of Inquiry is not a conventional cookbook that presents artificially antiseptic, grossly over-simplified accounts of how research should be done. Tidy little prescriptions such as (1) read the literature, (2) formulate an hypothesis, (3) collect pertinent data, and (4) compute suitable statistics have no place in Alford's book or his world of research. Such clear-cut, sequentially ordered, no back-tracking admonitions deny the craftsmanship that enables disciplined inquiry to help us better understand our social world. Yes, research reports are often written up in this formulaic way, but that is just a gloss, an obligatory cover for the complex processes on which the reports are actually based. This is a good book, one that puts to shame many of the how-to manuals that pass for introductions to social research. I do, however, wish that the author had given more thought to his references to multiple regression analysis. Too often his accounts of the place and limitations of this technique and related multivariate methods are clumsy and misleading. An example is Alford's claim (as I understand him) that independent variables must be statistically independent. In truth, they almost never are, and that's why one of the primary virtues of multiple regression is that each independent variable serves as a control variable for all other independent variables. In the absence of really strong associations, correlated independent variables are not cause for concern. One last thought, Alford warns readers that data should always be collected after research questions are formulated. In my experience, however, the ready availability of a data set that permits a researcher to address interesting issues often precedes the formulation of research questions. This may be one instance in which Alford lapsed into conventional textbookish ways of reasoning. As already noted, The Craft of Inquiry won't teach you how to do research, but it may help you do better research than you're already doing. It's the sort of book that could be written only by someone who had devoted decades to doing research of varying kinds and who has learned the lessons this enterprise has to teach.

Sociology is a challenging discipline, ripe with exciting possibilities. It offers sociologists the chance to choose multiple theoretical and methodological traditions that offer a full range of important questions and ways to answer them. A long standing complaint of many sociology professors, however, is that their students seem to have difficulty moving from problem formation to a theoretical approach and then onto an appropriate research design. In his provocative new book, Robert Alford proposes that the starting point for any researcher in the process and craft of inquiry should begin with an understanding of how to translate elements of his/her own history, personal experience, and issues, which can then be formulated into research questions. Alford presents three basic explanatory approaches to sociology -- multivariate, interpretive, and historical -- as well as examples of each from such luminaries as Durkheim, Goffman, Weber, Marx, and William Julius Wilson. Upon critical examination, Alford finds each of these three approaches either oversimplified or incomplete. To fill this gap, Alford proposes a tripartite approach that examines each approach through the lens of the other two and analyzes the ways these three models of explanation work and relate to one another. The text is intended to show students how research emerges from, and interacts with, theory. It is designed to help students formulate, reformulate, and pursue their own theoretically informed research, as well as provide them with the tools necessary for critically reading the research of others. Using selected examples from both classic and contemporary studies, Alford strives to illustrate the artistic, rather than formulaic, side of research design and presents several ways that research questions can be framed. He also offers a "working vocabulary" to guide novice researchers through the maze of the process. Full of direct, lucid, and informative accounts of actual research efforts, The Craft of Inquiry is engaging and important reading for any student interested in developing strong, effective social research skills, and in becoming a better artist of the craft of inquiry.

"Knowledgeable, reflective, and humane, Robert Alford applies strong colors with a sure hand as he produces a well-crafted group portrait of sociology's multiple personalities." --Charles Tilly, Columbia University
About the Author Robert R. Alford is at City University of New York, Graduate Center.