Why Bother? -- adapted from Linda Davidoff (1987)

As we struggle along from day to day, we all use what might be called a psychology of common sense. Informally, we observe and try to explain our own behavior and that of others. We attempt to predict who will do what and when. Moreover, we often use our knowledge to gain control over our lives. You probably hold opinions on a myriad of psychological topics: on rearing children, making friends, impressing people, handling anger.

Why don't psychologists use informal ways of gathering information and coming to conclusions? Why don't we simply use "common sense"? Let's consider the work of Share Hite (1981) who used informal methods to gain insights into male sexuality. Several years ago she circulated about 119,000 questionnaires--around 7200 were returned to her. About half the respondents knew of her earlier work on female sexuality or had found her questionnaire reprinted in magazines like Penthouse. Though Hite was hardly dealing with a sample representative of men in the United States--let alone all men--her book was titled The Hite Report on Male Sexuality.

When Hite talks about her findings, she makes the sort of statements that you or I might make in conversation. For example, she asked her subjects, "Do you like being in love?" In telling us about their responses, she writes:

Do men like being in love?
Some men, when they fell deeply in love, felt it was not good, that it was something to control or flee from. [Lots of illustrative quotes follow]
Many mentioned that they did not like feeling out of control. [More quotes]
Others said they preferred a more daily, loving relationship to being "in love"...[Again quotes]
A few said love was not that important. [Quotes]
But others liked being in love...

This listing is typical of the way Hite deals with questions; she gives us a sprawling assortment of confessions with little analysis. Her work also lacks precision. In describing the responses of her participants, Hite neglects to tell us which reactions are common and which are rare. She even misleads us into believing that she is giving just that information in choosing words like "many", "some", and "few", without anchoring them in any way to data. When Robinson (1981) analyzed Hite's text, he found that she used "many" in association with percentages 3 times. "Many" men (24%) enjoyed anal penetration and sometimes used it in masturbation. "Many" boys (43%) had had sex with other boys. And once more, "many" men (83%) enjoyed sex even when their partners failed to achieve orgasm. The word "some" covered a broad range of percentages too--from less than 1% to more than 20%. "Few" had a slightly larger range: less than 0.5% to 20%.

She also reaches conclusions without offering evidence to support her claims. She argues, for example, that men grow disenchanted with marriage because they begin to see their spouses as motherly. She insists that rape is a relatively new and novel act. She contends that men reach their sexual peak--measured in terms of orgasms per year--later than the 19 or 20 years that Kinsey's data suggests. Yet her evidence for all of these conclusions varies from flimsy to nonexistent. Her contention about rape--which she makes no attempt to document--is patently false. Rape, unfortunately, has been with the human race for a long time (Sanday, 1981). Her case against Kinsey is unconvincing, "There was hardly a man in the entire study who did not report that his sex life was better than it had ever been before," she tells us. Surely a legitimate social scientist would be skeptical about the credibility of these self-reports. What might Hite have done differently, had she used the scientific method?