THE SOCIO-LEGAL LAB

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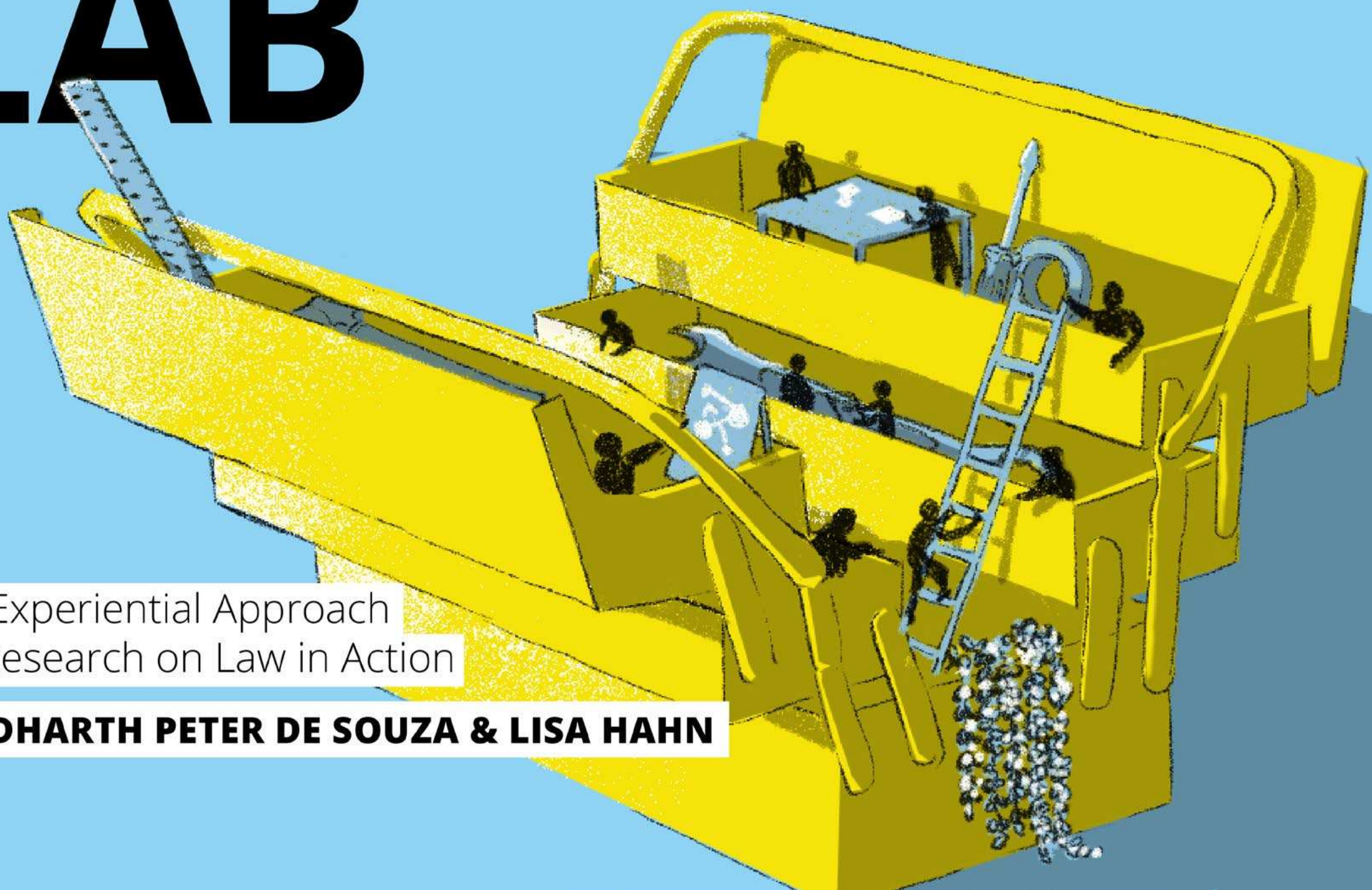

An Experiential Approach
to Research on Law in Action

SIDDHARTH PETER DE SOUZA & LISA HAHN

THE SOCIO-LEGAL LAB: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH ON LAW IN ACTION

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Socio-Legal Research in a Lab

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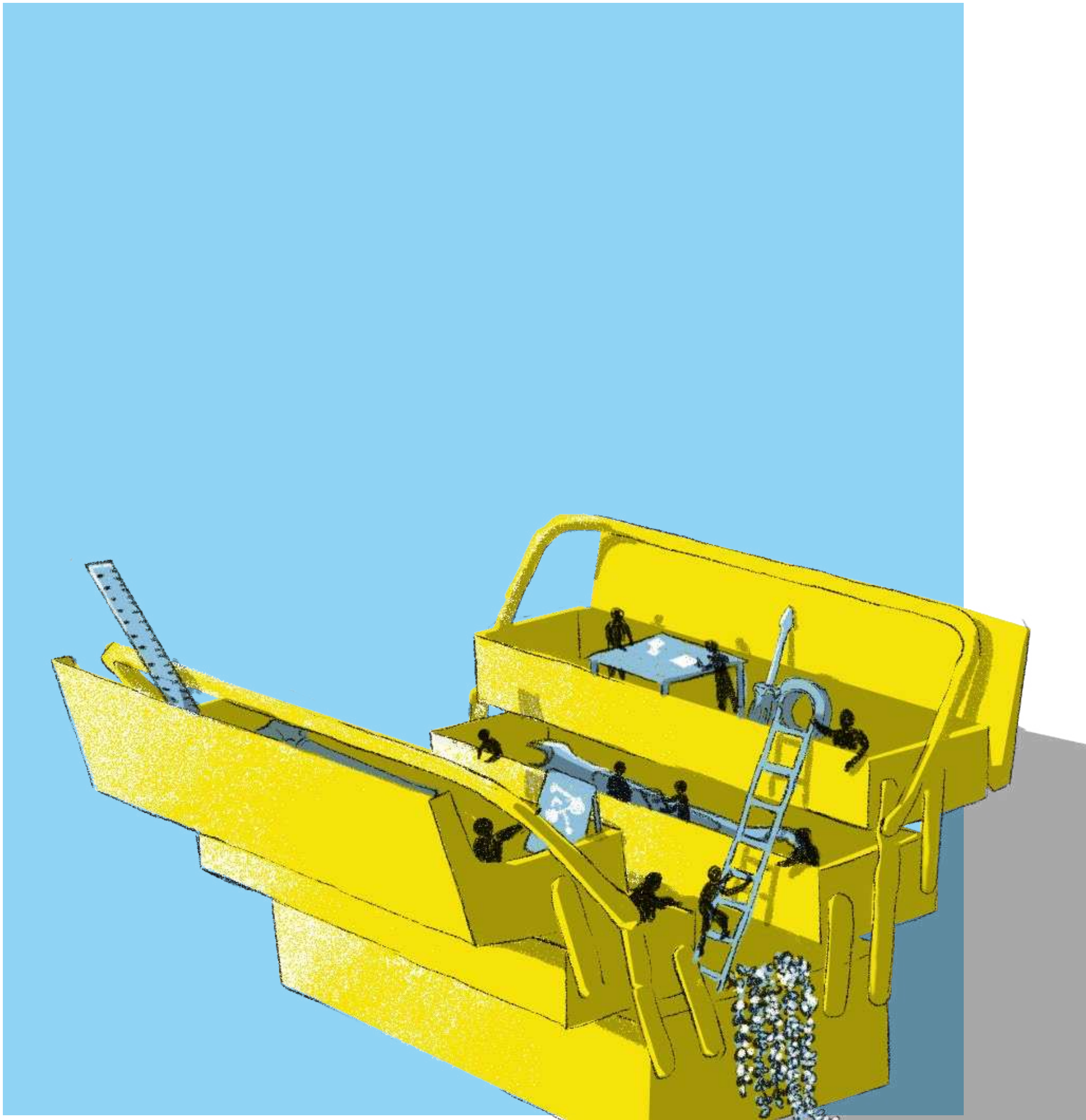
PART 01

Socio-Legal Research in a Lab

CHAPTER 01

Introduction: a Lab Approach to Socio-Legal Studies



CHAPTER 01

A Guide Through the Book

Locating the book

“The Socio-Legal Lab: An Experiential Approach to Research on Law in Action” is an interactive workbook for socio-legal research projects. It employs the idea of a “lab” as a space for interactive and experiential learning. As an introductory book, it addresses researchers of all levels who are beginning to explore interdisciplinary research on law and are looking for guidance on how to do so. The book can be used by teachers and peer groups to experiment with teaching and thinking about law in action through lab-based learning.

Why another book on socio-legal research? There already exist many highly regarded books about the theoretical debates and research methodologies concerning law and society. However, the research process is not only a summation of methods but also a result of the practical realities that a researcher encounters when conducting research. To address this practical reality, we designed this book as a visual and interactive workbook.

It uses a mixture of literature, case studies and games to guide readers through the different stages of socio-legal research. At the same time, it addresses the challenges they might face when they are actually designing and conducting their projects. Throughout the book, we use visualizations as a way to make socio-legal studies more approachable.

Before getting started, this first chapter will provide guidance on how to read this book, introduce what is experiential about our approach to researching law in action and explain the concept of a lab for socio-legal methods.

What to expect?

The overall aim of this book is to provide a toolkit for socio-legal research projects. It is designed to accompany and inspire researchers on their way through their project and to empower them into thinking more creatively about their methods, while also demystifying them.

The book covers different themes and questions that may arise during a socio-legal research project. This starts with examining what research and interdisciplinarity mean and in which forms they can be practiced. After an overview of the research process, we will discuss how research in action is often unpredictable and messy. As a result, we argue that it is important to consider the practical and ethical challenges of doing research, and to reflect on the processes of knowledge production and assumptions that we have as researchers.

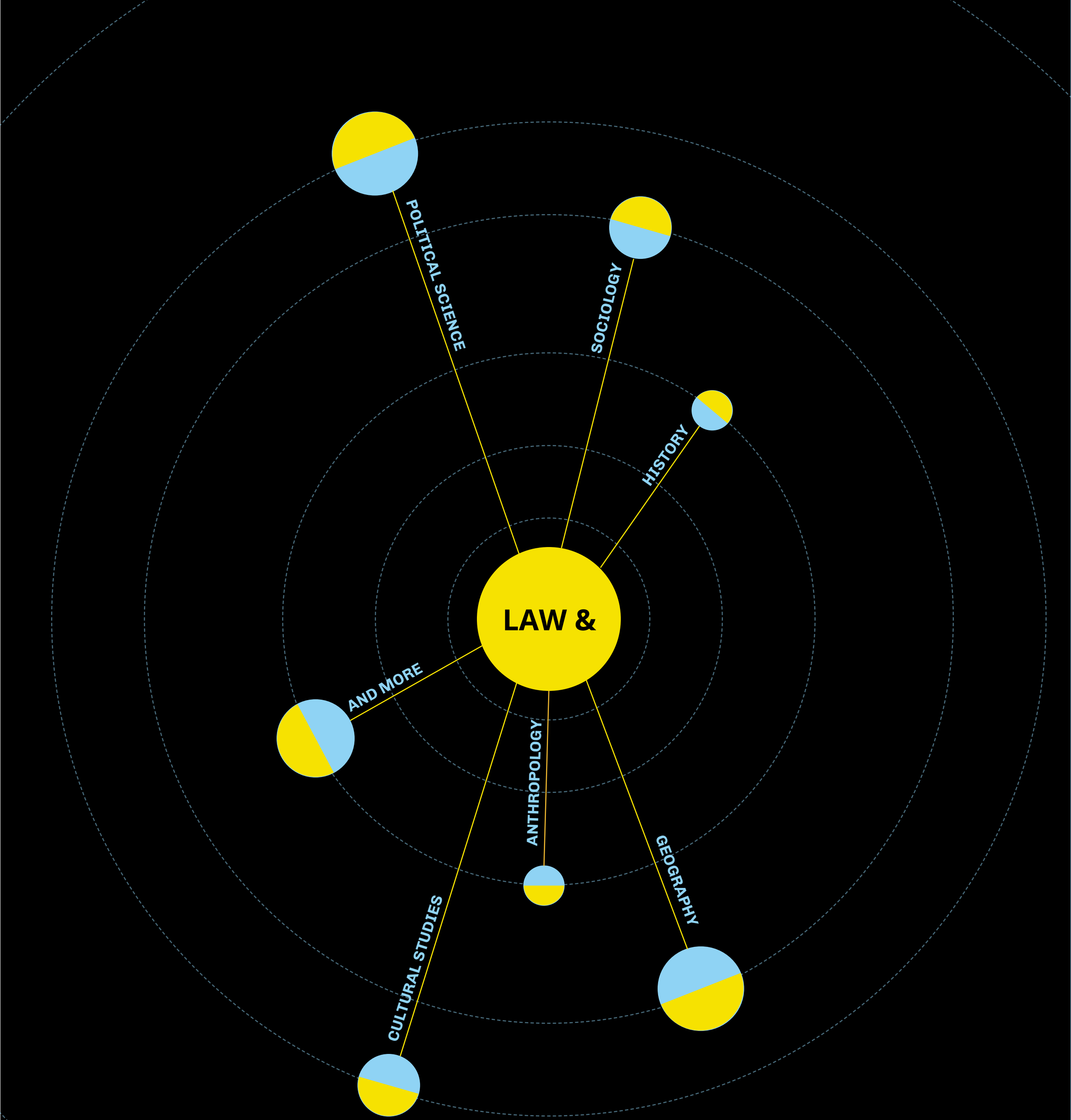
Conducting a socio-legal research project further requires an overview of the theoretical landscape. The book introduces general debates about the nature, functions, and effects of law in society. Furthermore, common dichotomies in socio-legal research such as “law” and “the social” or “qualitative” and “quantitative”, “micro” and “macro” research will be explored, along with suggestions for ways on how to bridge them.

Turning to the application side of socio-legal research, the book delves deeper into questions of data on law and society: where to collect it and how to deal with it in a reflexive manner. It discusses different methods of qualitative socio-legal research and offers ways in which they can be experienced through exercises and simulations. In the research process, generating research results is followed by publishing and communicating them.

We will also explore different ways to ensure the outreach and impact of one’s research by communicating results through journals, blogs and social media.

Finally, the book also discusses academia as a social space and the value of creating and using networks and peer groups for mutual support.

AN INTERACTIVE & VISUAL WORKBOOK


POLITICAL SCIENCE
SOCIOLOGY
HISTORY
LAW &
AND MORE
ANTHROPOLOGY
CULTURAL STUDIES
GEOGRAPHY

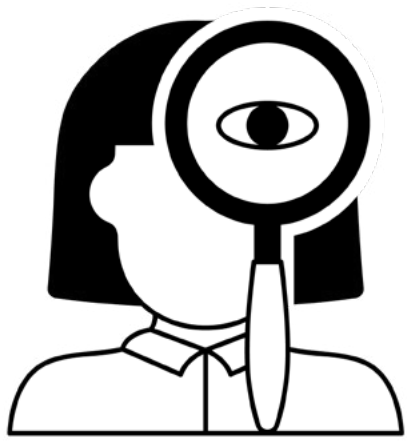
Audiences

Law can be approached from different disciplinary angles: “from the inside”, with a doctrinal approach, but also “from the outside”, by examining its historical background and its social, cultural, political or economical conditions and effects. Everyone interested in engaging with an interdisciplinary perspective on law is encouraged to read this book – regardless of their disciplinary background.

As a guide to socio-legal research, this book tackles disciplinary boundaries by asking overarching questions about the interplay of law and society. These questions have long been studied in various research traditions, for example in US law & society research. However, by taking up debates and examples from both the Global South and the Global North, we hope to make the book approachable for a global audience in English speaking research contexts.

Ways to use this book

“The Socio-Legal Lab“ addresses everyone who starts to empirically engage with questions on the interface of law and other disciplines. Whether you are a student, graduate or senior academic: This book aims to enable you to conduct your first socio-legal research project. It is designed as a supplementary reading to theoretical texts. The book supports students in accessing those texts and applying them through providing summaries, reading questions and exercises. It is also designed for teachers who may introduce socio-legal studies in their classrooms and require techniques and content to do so. Recurring icons throughout the book will indicate specific exercises for each of these settings and audiences.



INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHERS

Exercises for reseachers working through the book by themselves.

TEACHERS AND PEER GROUPS

Inspiration on how to practice socio-legal methods by talking to your peers.

FURTHER READING

Literature to dig deeper into different research topics and methods.

What to read if you are interested in...

Learning & reflecting on design, implementation & impact of projects

CHAPTER 01

CHAPTER 02

CHAPTER 03

Theoretical backgrounds of law in action

CHAPTER 04

CHAPTER 05

Hands-on socio-legal methods

CHAPTER 06

CHAPTER 07

CHAPTER 08

CHAPTER 01

A Lab Approach to Socio-Legal Studies

Why a lab?

A lab is a learning space for experimentation. In the natural sciences, labs indicate *physical* spaces for testing new hypotheses, but this concept can also be applied to the humanities in a metaphorical sense. The lab then becomes a *social* space for trial-and-error. A lab approach to socio-legal studies thus involves establishing open spaces for interactive learning about law in action.

An important component of a lab is to work in groups and develop ideas in collaboration and through co-creation. Groups, however, can take different shapes: they can range from being fixed sets of people who meet often to loose collaborations of people. The emphasis of the group is to be able to test ideas, get feedback, and be willing to build alliances.

Through labbing socio-legal studies, we hope to encourage a different kind of mindset when working through key questions and challenges at the intersection of law and other disciplines. In this process, readers have an opportunity not just to study theory, but also to brainstorm and imagine how theory could be useful in their research projects and how individual projects can contribute to knowledge production in general. Demystifying socio-legal methods can empower students to overcome their methodological anxieties and make the serendipity of methodology-in-action more tangible (Halliday & Schmidt, 2009. pp.2). Building on this idea, we suggest socio-legal methods labs as pedagogical spaces for experimentation, knowledge building and community development (De Souza & Hahn, 2022).

Functions of a lab

+ To understand what kind of methods to use

+ To establish protocols for why certain methods are suitable and others are not

+ To experiment with different methods and theories

+ To review and brainstorm about what works best in conversation and dialogue with others

+ To test out different hypotheses and have a safe space to fail

Using labs for socio-legal studies

There are three steps to experiential learning: information-gathering, framing and testing. This three-step approach informs how one can study a new topic and how to structure a workshop session to build an experiential learning environment (De Souza & Hahn, 2022). Consequently, we also used these three steps to structure the chapters of this book.

01

Information Gathering

LITERATURE, CASES, DATA

The first step in the lab is information-gathering. This involves reading seminal texts about a particular issue, for example on matters related to interdisciplinarity and law, in order to understand how this could be incorporated in one's own research.

+

Next, one can examine examples of socio-legal projects to scrutinize how related questions have been researched by others. These examples can be used to illustrate how a method can be applied, which challenges might arise, and how they could be resolved.

02

Framing

QUESTIONS, CONTEXT, POSITIONALITY

The second step is to frame overarching questions about the state of research and the kinds of issues it raises. Identify perspectives that look critically at the topic and raise questions regarding the context and position of those who are taking part.

03

Testing

FEASIBILITY, DURABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY

The third step is to test the questions that have arisen in the prior steps through a series of activities. This involves exploring whether the project is feasible and what precautions need to be taken in practice to collect reliable data. It is precisely this last step that reveals the difference between research-in-the-book and research-in-action (Hahn & De Souza, 2020).