

The Crisis of Social Research in Contemporary Society

Amare Asgedom ¹

Abstract

In this essay, I argue that social research, especially in developing countries, is in a deep crisis of low social support, poor quality, academic inattention, and commercialization. Particularly in Africa, research is a low-regarded social activity. Government and nongovernment organizations do not have R&D departments and budgets for adapting technologies such as modifying spare parts and/or producing knowledge to inform policies and practices. Governments do not have a research structure and consolidated state budget. Thus, they depend on foreign consultancy services to bridge the knowledge gap or import the spare parts instead of locally producing them. All that is said about research in developing countries is mere rhetoric and uncommitted. In the universities, in addition to the scantiness of courses, a research course is taught by untrained instructors. Anyone in the discipline teaches a research course within the discipline. The traditional social researcher does not exist in contemporary higher education. The traditional researcher is accepted into a community of researchers in the same discipline. Research activity also took the form of examining and re-examining, experimenting and re-experimenting, and repeating his/her efforts until conclusive results are obtained. At present, social research takes the form of collecting and disseminating information (or misinformation) that is not well-tested and examined. The main researchers are consultants (national or international) mainly attracted by money and selected by criteria and people that are incongruent with the purpose of research. In Ethiopia, most books are produced by politicians, theologians and businessmen (and women) teaching society, teachers and professors. I will focus on critiquing social research in light of its contribution to social development.

¹ Professor of Education, CEBS, AAU. Email- asgedomamare@gmail.com

Introduction

Social research is what social “scientists” do. Social “scientists” are those intellectuals who deal with human affairs, distinct from natural scientists who deal with natural (non-social) affairs. Natural scientists have developed the scientific method of research to discover natural laws and control nature. Thus, the scientific method uses control as its means and ends. The laboratory experiment is used as the site and tool for this purpose. They have defined what type of knowledge to discover—the *propositional* type of knowledge. A propositional type of knowledge is knowledge that can only be proved or disproved (true or false type of knowledge). The natural scientist does not study what is good or bad (ethical knowledge) or what is beautiful or ugly (aesthetical knowledge). These two types of knowledge do not lend themselves to the scientific method of knowledge. In the context of social control, you cannot prove or disprove what is good or bad or what is beautiful or ugly. Beauty depends on the eye of the beholder, suggesting the plurality of truth. It is no wonder that social researchers (they call themselves social scientists) subscribe to scientific methodology as their research methods, ignoring the premises and purposes of scientific methodology, control, and discovery. As a result of this popularity, science, and its methods have attained a privileged position in the domain of knowledge. What is not science (the negation of science) started to be called superstition, religion, and prejudice. In reality, however, science means knowledge that deals only with what is true and what is false and takes no accountability for value-knowledge (what is good or bad and what is beautiful and ugly). The latter is left to other types of researchers. But did these researchers develop an appropriate methodology for developing these fields of study? The answer is yes but not well

developed and propagated. It is normative research grounded in a certain perspective and uses logic and critical theory as its methodology. Research outputs that use a normative approach are rare and unpopular due to the paradigm dominance of descriptive/analytical research. My argument is that social research that uses the paradigm of scientific research has misinformed social studies by wrongly applying the natural scientist's methodology (of what is a true or false method) to the detriment of a normative method (what ought to be the case) to study sociology, politics, education and psychology. In reality, the result of social research, in the context of control, has been the accentuation of universal values of greed, psychopath, hate, and environmental destruction. I have used four themes in this essay to support my argument that social research is in crisis. These are poor-quality social research, academic inattention, low social support and commercialization.

Social Research—Poor Quality?

We know that social researchers claim to use the method of natural scientists, the scientific method of research, not understanding the purpose and mission of the scientific method of research. Science aims at discovering natural laws with the ultimate mission of controlling nature (at present, this mission is challenged by society and intellectuals). To accomplish this mission, natural scientists (mainly physicists) have designed a research framework and defined its scope as propositional knowledge (facts, theories and laws). They have developed a research strategy (tools) that rigorously applies mathematics and laboratory experimentation (for control). Only propositional knowledge is fit for this research paradigm. Reducing social inquiry to the scientific method of research is not only neglecting the other human

cognitive interests (Habermas, 2004)², such as the human need for dialogue, emancipation, and aesthetics but also misrepresenting social knowledge in the context of only what is true and what is not. This kind of research necessarily focuses on the present (description) to the detriment of normative research (about the future).

It is not, however, clear why social researchers aspire to the scientific method of research, which aims at control. Could it be the Freudian subconscious drive to control society, the hidden desire for power? The practice of educated elites in modern society suggests no optimism. Of course, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the thesis that social research and social education have contributed little to the promotion of morality and happiness—the purpose of life. Social research in the context of control (social control) at its best, however, could be but promotion of brutality.

The practice of social research in my field, education, is dominated by descriptive surveys whose approach is grounded in frequency counting of individual opinions to explore what is true and what is not true. What is true and what is not true is determined by counting the opinions of individuals in the sample, a truth as defined by the opinion of someone. In opinion surveys, some respondents say a thing exists, and some others say a thing does not exist. But which one is the truth? For instance, **“Is there a pedagogic centre in your school?”** The answer is 20 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 10 percent just agreed, 10 percent had no opinion, 50 percent disagreed, and 10 percent strongly disagreed. What kind of truth can you

²Jurgen Habermas in his book, *Knowledge and Human Interest* has classified the traditional disciplines into three types of cognitive interests (1) technical interest (with a purpose of control), (2) practical interest-- the need for dialogue and human communication; and (3) emancipator interest--the need for autonomy (to be free from internal and external constraints). The first refers to mainly the fields of natural sciences, the second to sociology, history and languages and the third to political science and psychology.

establish from this data? What kind of conclusion can you make? Is there a pedagogic centre in the school? I myself actually asked the MA candidate who was defending his thesis to tell me the truth. I realized that the candidate does not have his own truth aside from what his 'respondents' told him, and they did not tell him anything coherent. Do you need to ask many teachers to establish the presence or absence of a pedagogic centre in the school?

When this MA candidate was challenged to tell the presence or the absence of a pedagogic centre in the school, he replied, "Of course, there is one because the majority agreed." The statistician would make a test of significance to test whether there is a real difference between the agree group and the disagree group in the population (universe) or whether the difference is due to sampling error.

For me, this type of statistical exercise may be plausible only in the field of natural sciences, where truth is the total of individuals, in contrast to the field of social research in which truth (people's opinions) is not the total of individuals. The most critical consequence of this type of inquiry is that most social study subjects in schools and universities are structured mainly in propositional form, subtly transmitting the hidden value, *what-is*, and *what-is-not*. This denies nurturing a critical perspective to society, what is bad and what is good. The latter is called normative research, which inquiries about social affairs with the perspective of what ought to be the case. This type of research demands critical reflection, deep immersion in interpretation, and developing a theoretical perspective to tell what should be good in light of promoting it and fighting the bad.

Social research ought to focus on the perspective *semancipation* (Habermas, 2004), *dialogue* (Buber, 1987; Freire, 1972), *criticality* (Barnett, 1997) and *human interdependence* (Covey, 2011). These research perspectives are helpful in promoting

the development of the morals of individuals and social groups to see one another as not dependent or independent but as interdependent and as part of the self. Viewing others as one's instruments, a value transmitted by existing social studies breeds conflict and violence rather than social harmony. Thus, the perspective of normative research should inform social subjects to replace existing subtly embedded perspectives, what is true and what is false. The new research approach to social inquiry demands not only changing research methods and procedures but needs a fundamental change in belief of the meaning and purpose of social research, which Thomas Kuhn (1970) calls a *paradigm shift* in science³. This shift encompasses a shift from descriptive or explanatory research (from propositional knowledge) to normative knowledge. This knowledge will help me understand that my well-being will depend on the well-being of others and vice versa. Covey (2011) calls this approach as a third alternative in which people see each other as complements and not mere competitors.

Academic Inattention

In my previous discussion, I argued against the method of social inquiry based on its inherent constraints. In this and following discussions, I will use practical arguments to argue against the method of social inquiry. One of them is that the teaching and training of social research is neglected by universities. There are two pieces of evidence for this argument: the number of research courses and the training of research instructors. In most universities and fields, only a few courses (one or two) are offered, even in research methods. Thus, usually, graduate students choose their

³In his book, the Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn wrote that natural science is not infallible. For instance, when scientists abandon their existing belief in a certain theory to give way to a new belief as a result of new findings, he called this change a paradigm shift. Paradigm shift is broad and radical change.

research methods based on previous theses and dissertations. They do their research based on what they see from their seniors and not necessarily based on a deep understanding of the meaning and strategy of these research designs. Consequently, they have produced outputs that are neither stimulating to read nor have any insights. They are often thrown onto department shelves.

No one is sufficiently trained to teach research courses in the universities. Research courses are taught by one in the field who teaches subject area courses. It is assumed that this course can be handled by anyone with a degree. The poor weight given to research courses could reflect research value in the market. The present argument is valid only to social research, as natural science research (experimentation) is embedded in each course of the natural sciences and thus, the natural science field does not suffer from a deficiency of research training.

Low Social Support

The main output of social research is dissemination in the form of books, recordings and art materials. Naturally, a book market develops to support the process. A good example of this natural process is the Athenian book markets that sprouted following the arrival of great thinkers and philosophers (in 400-300 BC), such as Homer the Blind, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Greek merchants crossed oceans and rivers to travel to Egypt to buy papers to supply the robust book market in Greece. One important question here is: Why didn't we have a developed book market? Is the literate a good reader? What is your assessment of readership in Ethiopia? Why or Why not? Without the need to refer to the philosophy of research, my empirical life witnesses that the massive amount of graduate research at my university is neither demanded nor valued by society.

I have observed that even the researcher himself/herself is reluctant to read his/her research again. This suggests disinterest in one's research results. In the Ethiopian context, few social research results circulate in the market. Researchers have not produced enough books to teach politicians and the broader public. Rather, we observe that politicians and theologians are taking the lead in teaching intellectuals, researchers, and the broader society through their books that are available in the market. These books, albeit with some limitations in meeting literal standards, shall impact public opinion formation and change. Of course, the books available in the market are not structured in the traditional scientific model. I enjoy reading these books in the context of a guilty feeling for failing to contribute to public opinion formation and change. I am only a consumer and not a producer (He who does not produce shall not consume). My training could be one of the constraints, yet I cannot evade responsibility. The few books circulating the market are either reprints of books produced outside or authored by politicians and theologians in the country. Most of these books are mainly biographical and novels, distinct from the outputs of social research.

Commercialization of Social Research

The consultancy research in Ethiopia (in social research) is motivated by money and is usually spearheaded by foreign companies and consultants. Ethiopian researchers usually play supportive roles. The research process is carried out as a project with a short period (to minimize cost) and denies any respite for the researcher to reflect on. It takes the form of information gathering and mere descriptive analysis. There is no time to read, explore, and examine the concepts deeply. Data is collected, frequencies are tallied, percentages are computed, and results are reported in a

mechanical way. The report has no novelty (nothing new and inspiring) and lacks public interest and social value.

References

- Barnett, R. (1997). *Higher education: A critical business*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Buber, M. (1987). *I and thou*. New York: Collier Books.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Harder & Harder
- Covey, S. (2011). *The 3rd alternative: Solving life's most difficult problems*. New York: Free Press.
- Habermas, J. (2004). *Knowledge and human interests*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.