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# Culture and the Indigenisation of Quality in Third World Social Research

IAN SHAW\* AND KHALID AL-AWWAD\*

## ABSTRACT

It may appear little more than commonplace to assert the central significance of the cultural and epistemological contexts of societies in shaping the contours and even the very existence of social research within those societies. It is argued in this article, however, that the force of this reality is too frequently ignored or deflected by those who attempt to fashion and institutionalise culturally pertinent social research strategies and programmes in the Third World.

In this paper we attempt a broad brush illustration of this argument through a discussion of social research in the Arab world. We sketch aspects of both Western research and Arab society which accentuate for us the inevitable problematics of social research in the Arab world. Grounded on the assumption that social research in these societies can ignore the impacts of neither Western paradigms nor the scholarly and social implications of a contemporary Muslim worldview, we offer tentative suggestions for ways in which culturally appropriate, yet socially challenging research can become indigenous within the Arab world. While the application of our specific argument is limited at best to the Arab societies of the Middle East, parallel tasks need to be undertaken elsewhere in Africa and the developing world. Indeed, indigenisation is *everyone's* task.

## Western Export Models of Social Research

Impressionistic, *ad hoc* evidence strongly suggests that Arab research – not to mention social research elsewhere in the developing world – is marked by a heavy reliance on quantitative methods, and in particular, survey models.

We find the implications of this both unsettling and paradoxical. Unsettling, because in terms of the potential for significant sociological analysis and understanding of analytic and policy issues, surveys offer at best a partial and limited tool. Paradoxical, because, on the one hand, survey research demands resources relating to population information, language and data analysis that are frequently

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\* Lecturer in Social Work, School of Social and Administrative Studies, University of Wales, Cardiff

\* General Director of Education, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

in short supply, and on the other hand, because survey methodology reflects in a quite subtle manner a paradigm of western pluralism that sits uncomfortably with societies holding distinctive values of social solidarity and homogeneity, authority and the proper transmission of knowledge.

For example, survey research, with its stress on criteria of external validity, demands adequate sampling frames which are rarely available even in urban areas within the Arab world. Informal anecdotes of how access to respondents was negotiated, retold among Arab research students, suggest that a tell-it-how-it-really-is account of how researchers obtain their sampling frames would be very illuminating.

Not that perfect sampling frames are just lying around in western countries, waiting for the researcher to ask for them. Indeed, one of the ironic consequences of the high status of the western survey export model is that Arab researchers may be tempted into an overly sanguine belief about the ease and quality of survey research in the West, and a reluctance to consider the possibility that the problems of research in Arab cultures may simply be the problems of the West writ large – albeit sometimes horrendously large (Bulmer and Warwick, 1993).

We have implied already that survey models must also be viewed through the prism of western pluralism. It is certainly true that beliefs about society held by English-speaking heirs of a broadly Judaeo-Christian civilisation may not be shared by others. Harre (1989: 23) suggests that members of such societies believe that:

1. They are autonomous individuals.
2. Despite being trapped in a web of conventions and an apparently inexorable natural order, they are agents.
3. They have both individually and collectively, a past and a future, and so have histories.

It is against this cultural backdrop that we must place the argument of Hakim that survey research offers one of the most democratic forms of research method. Methods and procedures can be made visible and accessible to non-specialists and specialists working in other disciplines, which makes for a research method more transparent and accountable than many other methods used by researchers (Hakim, 1987: 48-49).

Regardless of whether such assumptions are actually true for all, some or any members of western societies, the egalitarian premises of survey research are sometimes rejected at all levels of society in developing countries. For instance, simple random sampling carries the implicit assumption that the views of an Arab

sheik and a Moslem village woman will be of potentially equal significance in reaching persuasive sociological understandings. This assumption will often be challenged in Arab society both by those in positions of power and those of lower status and influence. Further, respondents may not share with Western individualism the assumptions about the circumstances in which 'truth-telling' ought to be expected.

Related to this, 'conventional' (ie in western eyes) methods of data analysis are assumed by European and American social scientists to be relatively neutral and value-free. Survey researchers, it is presupposed, will almost routinely uncover evidence of variance, and will produce tables, typically in the form of cross-tabulations, which will differentiate replies according to this or that category of respondent. Yet it is not too distant from the truth to suggest that, far from being neutral, such methods of data analysis assume a pluralist society, where, within certain normative boundaries, differences of opinion and behaviour are acceptable and a reflection of 'normal' society.

This was illustrated in a recent extensive questionnaire and interview survey of service standards in public sector organisations in a major Arab country, carried out by one of the authors (Al-Awwad, 1991), which yielded very little differentiation between respondents, allied to a strong tendency on the part of organisation staff to offer conformist responses – conformist both to line managers' perceived views ("what did my line manager answer to that question?") and to the social norms of power holders within that society.

Survey methods in developing countries are sometimes caught in an apparent time-warp, where neither the criticisms (eg Cicourel, 1964), nor the measured defences (eg Marsh, 1982; Bryman, 1988) of surveys are part of the common currency of debate. Thus, while individualism is not inherently endemic to survey strategies (Marsh, 1982: 60-62), it is too frequently reflected in decisions by survey planners in the Arab world to investigate the responses of *individuals* to a given programme, rather than *households* or other appropriate economic or social collectivities (Ibrahim, 1987: 32).

We argue later the strategic potential of qualitative research methodologies in developing countries. For the present we need to point out the way in which survey methods lead to a characteristic approach to substantive policy concerns which is marked more by a investigation and discussion of policies and system-wide features of services, than by an investigation of the realities of programme and service provision and outcomes. In a recent assessment of education research in developing countries the authors point out the implications of this emphasis, where:

*"the kinds of evaluation methods that have typically been used most frequently in developing countries make it difficult to penetrate any marked divorce between policy and practice"*

(Vulliamy, *et al*, 1990: 17).

## Urban Research

In Western countries social research is mainly an urban activity. The same is true in developing countries. It is estimated in Egypt, for example, that 75 per cent of research is done in urban areas in a country where about fifty per cent of people live in rural districts.

The buying of the western export model of research is sometimes linked to a corresponding importation of western research apparatus with a built-in urban bias, purchased by people working in urban organisations. In an eloquent and disturbing analysis of rural development, Robert Chambers argued some years ago that:

*"Not only do urban-based professionals and officials often not know the rural reality; worse, they do not know what they do not know...For academics it is cheaper, safer and more cost-effective in terms of academic output to do urban rather than rural research...Rural research is mainly carried out by the young and inexperienced. For them rural research is a rite of passage, an initiation which earns them the right to do no more, giving them a ticket to stay in town"*

(Chambers, 1983: 6,7).

The 'fifties background of safari research – intrusive, white-run treks to collect and take away research specimens – has changed, but there is still the issue of the relation between indigenous and outside researchers, and the parallel relationship between research and development. Evaluation programmes run the risk of being seen by developing country customers more as a means of attracting resources for development than as impartial or critical reviews of the adequacy of such programmes.

Given the cultural and political context this is perhaps not surprising. Western social researchers sometimes appear to treasure the experience of an embargoed research report as a mark of street credibility during their career development. For researchers within much of the Arab world the political risks inherent in their work are much more real and up front. The development of research evaluations that can

both work within, yet successfully challenge a socially homogeneous parent culture makes a level of demand that is alien to the experience of most radical practitioners or researchers working in the West.

## Knowledge and Research in Arab Culture

From their cultural and epistemological distance, Western academic social scientists, until very frequently, have failed to appreciate the texture of Muslim culture with its implications for the role of the individual, ideas of social solidarity, patterns of reciprocal obligation, and so on. Harre's brief discussion of Islamic moral psychology in the context of psychological paradigms is a rare exception (Harre, 1989: 32). Hence western research and sociology texts transferred to Arab culture will inevitably be experienced as abstract and artificial.

Within Arab Muslim society religious knowledge is both the paradigmatic and the most highly valued form of knowledge. Within a traditional Arab culture the key issue is the culturally perceived relationship between a given field of study and the religious sciences (ie those bodies of knowledge which are thought to elucidate the *Quran*). Lines of continuity rather than discontinuity are sought from 'old' to 'new' knowledge, so that sociology may tend to be seen as old religious philosophy writ large.

This is not to say that there is no scope for 'secular knowledge' within Arab Muslim culture. Though some intellectual innovations are regarded as contrary to Islamic law, others are accepted so long as they do not explicitly contradict those principles. Hence, for sociology or social research methodologies, the question at issue becomes one of where they stand in relation to the religious sciences and secular knowledge. Thus there is an active debate within those parts of the Arab world where sociology is a distinct discipline as to whether there should be an "Islamic Sociology", in which the concepts of sociology are "Islamicised", and a corresponding debate about whether social workers ought to be accountable to religious leaders.

Learning is traditionally carried forward through memorising the *Quran*, based on mnemonic systems. Drawing on research carried out in parts of North Africa, Eickelman has argued that both religious and secular knowledge:

*"throughout the Islamic world are thought to be transmitted through a quasi genealogical chain of authority which descends from master or teacher (shaykh) to student (talib) to ensure that the knowledge of earlier generations is passed on intact"*  
(Eickelman, 1978: 492).

In fieldwork carried out in Morocco, Eickelman found that:

*"Former students emphasised that throughout the long process of memorising the Quran they asked no questions concerning the meaning of verse, even among themselves, nor did it occur to them to do so"*  
(Eickelman, 1978: 494).

Insofar as learning is influenced by such traditional patterns, 'understanding', unlike within western traditions, is measured not by any ability to, 'explain' text, but by the ability to use particular *Quranic* verses in new and appropriate contexts.

An almost automatic Western conclusion from this account will be that such learning systems will lead inevitably to a deadening of any sense of inquiry. Given the wider features of Arab Muslim learning, which include some informal peer learning, this is a risky assumption. However, it does suggest possible reasons why there is a limited indigenous sociological voice in the Arab world, and why the debate about the development of sociology may become drawn into a polarisation of uncritical translated paraphrasing of western sociology and research texts under the guise of Arab authorship, versus an Islamicising of social science to a point where there appear few if any common *motifs* with western sociological enterprise.

Social science and social life end up inhabiting different worlds, and there is a tendency to uncritically adopt structural functionalist theories, backed by a superficial quoting of selected verses from the *Quran* as justification for thus sanctifying a particular brand of theorising. The model of a man (*sic*) of learning is also often allied to accepted popular notions of social inequality as a natural fact of the social order, and a restricted sense of social responsibility to criticise or change society.

Scholars are not in agreement on the extent to which the critical elements of this account should be attributed to either formal or lay versions of specifically *Islamic* culture. Indeed, it has also been argued that it is the *political* rather than *religious* environments of most if not all Arab regimes which are not conducive to either an open, interactive educational process or to a research-generated social critique of political systems (Massialas and Jarrar, 1983:109-113).

An important contribution to this debate is presently being made by those who argue that the writing of the 14th C (Christian calendar) writer, Ibn Khaldun, provides the basis for a truly indigenous Arab-Muslim sociology, through his organising concept of *Al 'Assabiyya*, through which he sought to explain how and why things are as they are (Dhaouadi, 1990).

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a dialogue with this line of argument. Ibn Khaldun's work appears to allow for a theory of social change

within Arab-Muslim civilisation, and offers an explanation which goes some way to avoiding an either/or, political, economic, *versus* religious model of Arab societies. His conceptual organising principle also provides the potential for a genuinely indigenous sociology.

Yet we are left with a number of unresolved problems in setting a direction for social research in the Arab world. Ibn Khaldun's level of explanation leads naturally to a concentration on a rather deterministic, evolutionary grand theorising. What is also needed is a research framework for analytic social policy that stimulates theoretical and empirical work at the levels of professional behaviour, service development and delivery, and policy implementation. We remain unconvinced that this tradition of sociological thinking will prove productive in these aspects of discipline and research development.

Within the cultural context of the Arab world it will prove no surprise that social research tends to be carried out largely by men. The memory of a male Kuwaiti government official, carrying out interview research with mothers about adoption and fostering, mediated through women social workers employed by the state, illustrates the particular challenge that Arab societies face in hearing the voice of women as family members and users of services.

In an interesting ethnographic study of craftswomen in part of Egypt, Lynch observes the neglect of efforts to conceptualise and document women's work, along with the assumption that the woman's contribution is mainly confined to 'housework' and therefore has only a marginal contribution to development. Thus, women's work is regarded as, 'helping out' and not employment and does not show in census or employment figures:

*"Western oriented in education and lifestyle, government bureaucrats attempt to deal with rural issues which they little understand because of class and cultural differences"*  
(Lynch, 1984: 3).

If some such analyses will hold water, how can an ethos of commitment to the indigenisation of quality social research be sustained within the Arab world? We want to suggest that there are five general ways in which this might occur, all of which target the underlying issue of a culturally pertinent social science scholarship. We would advocate first, the development of *scholarly association*, second, a sustained reflection on appropriate styles of *scholarly discourse*, third, the *institutionalisation of quality research*, fourth, the growth of a research methodology which entails a sustained commitment to the value of *qualitative research* styles, and finally, the fostering of a sensitive *reciprocity* with western social science. Each of these must take place within a wider debate about the role of the university and the social value of social science within the Arab world.



### 1. *Scholarly Association*

Professional and academic groups already exist in most Arab countries, and the gradual growth in parts of the Arab world of regular conferences is itself partial evidence of such association. Yet we are asking for something further than this.

To suggest just one example, we do not regard it as being in the long term interests of either sociology or social work for joint associations to act as the main bodies of association. Sociology and social work have long been uncomfortable, yet inseparable bedfellows, at their closest in uneasy coalition, and at their most distant locked in alienated, adversarial conflict. In the words of one commentator, social work and sociology have tried for more than a century to live down their common ancestry (Lee, 1976).

Today echoes of this debate can be heard in countries as varied as China, Taiwan, Canada, southern Africa, Nigeria, the former Yugoslavia, Britain, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden and other European countries as well as in the Arab world. We are not convinced by the substantial literature in the West that argues the essential common interests of sociology and social work – “if only they realised it”. The sharp discontinuity of theory and practice apparently experienced by all social and community workers is for us the essence of a necessary mutual state of critical, creative tension.

However, in advocating scholarly association we are not restricting our thoughts to formal organisations. The fostering of *informal* collaboration and discussion is needed, so that shared *writing* and *collaborative research* can be developed. In a recent conference comment on research activity in Egypt, there was noted “*an observed variety of research subjects with the absence of a scientific coherence between them*” (Sawsan Osman, 1992). Without some such developments on the lines just suggested, Arab social science will continue to be marked by low-level duplication of effort, lack of cumulative, discipline development, and a limited scholarly impact.

The result is almost a caricature of western individualism, with very strong pressure to complete PhD work, which in turn can produce quantity at the expense of quality. Career progress is tied too closely to the chain of masters degree, doctoral degree, publishing at all costs, and thence promotion. This eventuates in pressure to look for the easiest research projects, and the suspicion that plagiarism and the overt misuse of student research may be widespread (Farah, 1976; Nuor, 1987; Khoder, 1992).

## 2. *Styles of Academic Exchange*

We suggested earlier that the ideals and realities of academic life and culture within the Arab world cannot be viewed in isolation from indigenous patterns of learning and education, with their characteristic stance on explaining and questioning, and the associated model of a man of learning. It is at least worth debate as to whether the didactic model of teaching in many Arab schools and universities, with its absence of discursive content, acts against the generation of individual scholarship, and in part leads to the re-cycling of accepted ideas in Arab social science literature.

A self-reinforcing schooling of this kind may in turn yield a reluctance either to give or receive intellectual criticism, and to a lack of appropriate styles of scholarly criticism. Thus conference papers often feel, at least to western ears, like a presentation of justificatory accounts, without any element of self-critical 'testability', and discussion tends to be at the level of generalities rather than of points which may have specific implications for thought or action.

Sociologists in the Arab world need to consider whether the development of sociology has been marked too heavily by an uncritical import of western, especially European, theorising; a widespread reliance on straight translations of western texts; a lack of a culturally specific methodology; and a theoretical generalism which has often led to superficiality.

One way forward will involve the development of good Arabic journals. There are very few journals in the social science field that are indigenous to the Arabic speaking world. The limited collaborative work that does go on seems to be western-led (eg Tessler, et al, 1987). Young scholars completing doctoral work are usually obliged to write in *English* or sometimes *French*, for journals published *outside their own countries*. We are not naive about the difficulties surrounding the establishment of new journals which may be thought to have explicit social or political implications, but remain convinced that the emergence of cross-national sociology journals, perhaps with a sociology of social problems focus, and the nurturing of a younger generation of scholars – men and women – are major issues that must be addressed in the near future.

## 3. *Institutionalising Quality Research*

A common theme of the foregoing has been the need to find appropriate ways of institutionalising an indigenous social science research committed to work of critical quality.

The lack of a research infrastructure is one consequence of the weakness of social science within the Arab world. Physicists, engineers and doctors are understandably valued, whereas a recent, small-scale study of Egyptian researchers

employed in a range of research settings identified inadequate central government policies for social research as the single most important hindrance to the fostering of effective social research (Abo El-Nasr, 1991). If issues of research sponsorship, collaborative activity and the achievement of a culturally specific independence of scholarly work are to be accomplished, then social research needs to develop an institutional base.

Here it is easier to identify problems than to be confident of ways forward. The establishment of independently funded research institutes, of research units within university departments with programme funding, the consolidation of the growing service, development and policy research work currently being undertaken through some of the major charities such as Oxfam (Pratt and Boyden, 1985; Marsden and Oakley, 1990), the provision for funding of research studentships at post-doctoral level, and the establishment of financial partnerships across the divide between higher education and the private sector of industry and business, are all but pointers to a strategy that needs sustained cultivation (*cf* Vulliamy, *et al*, 1990:21-25, who make some of these points in the context of educational research). Such a strategy would involve the development of research outside as well as inside the higher education sector.

#### **4. Research Methodologies**

After a long history of being wedded to quantitative designs, some writers have detected the beginnings of a case study and ethnographic approach within research in developing countries, particularly in the field of education (Vulliamy, *et al* 1990).

With its associated emphasis on methodology as a context-related social process, qualitative research offers a strategy which is more likely to yield an indigenous research. It will open up a range of new substantive dimensions of familiar issues through a focus on the processes of service delivery and organisational life, identify unintended consequences through the ways in which policy implementations depart from scripts, uncover the phenomenology of how change is actually experienced, and foster the curiosity of distance and anthropological strangeness for urban Arab researchers working within their own societies, in rural and urban areas.

#### **5. Reciprocity with the West**

Aspects of the institutionalisation of quality research for which we have argued will entail working with Western organisations such as the Ford Foundation and the major charities. But this Arab/Western dialogue can be no one-way traffic. For

example, the existence and recognition of Islamic/Arab cultures in France, Britain, Germany and elsewhere means that sociology and social research in these nations need to learn from their academic peers in Arab and other Muslim cultures in order to expand and develop their own academic research and practice.

The growing extent of institutional movement means that the transmission of expert knowledge needs to go in multiple directions. While practical considerations may mean that scholars will continue to look to USA/Britain/France for accreditation and expertise, increasingly academics and practitioners need to look to the recognition of indigenous intellectual traditions. The 'metropolitan' centres of learning also need to shed their colonial appropriation of expert knowledge and cultural capital.

In this way – and only in this way – appropriately planned study in the West not only has a continuing role, but paradoxically can prove one of the best ways of developing a culturally relevant social science. We want to witness the development of an international sociology, without accepting the full force of arguments for globalisation (Albrow and King, 1990) which, in our view, run counter to a number of the considerations raised in this paper. Learning in the Arab world will continue for the foreseeable future to depend heavily on the translation of English and French language texts (the appropriate *selection*, high quality *translation*, and educational *use* of such texts are issues in themselves), but the cultural contextualisation of Western scholarship cannot easily be achieved outside the academic communities that generate such material. There is a real sense in which Arab students who have been taught research methodology through straight translations of western texts may at some point arrive in the West not having understood that methodology.

Reciprocity should also entail the careful development of co-supervision schemes for Arab world students, such as the Egyptian Channel Scheme that operates between Egyptian and British universities, and enables assistant lecturers registered for doctoral work in their own university to experience collaborative supervision with a British university, and spend time studying in the United Kingdom.

Exchange must operate at the intellectual level as well as the institutional, and while it is beyond the scope of this article to cover this territory, the risk of neo-colonialism might in part be avoided by arrangements for western scholars to spend limited but fairly substantial periods of time teaching and conducting research in developing countries.

## Conclusion

We have tried to illustrate ways in which the cultural and epistemological contexts of societies shape the fundamental character and existence of social science and in particular social research. We have been conscious in doing so that we have been treading difficult territory, and may not have expressed our position with the even-handedness it demands. Nonetheless, we are convinced that the ramifications of the Western export model of research together with the pervasive influence of Arab and perhaps Muslim traditions of learning and schooling, constitute the environment within which debate about the indigenisation of quality in Arab social research must be conducted.

We have identified a specific agenda of considerations, primarily around the institutionalisation of scholarship, but also in regard to reciprocity in Arab/Western social science and the widening of the paradigms within which research methodology is framed in the Arab world.

While we have limited our illustrations to the Arab world – and in reality to the still more restricted parts of that world with which we are to a greater or lesser degree familiar – it is our view that corresponding tasks face social science elsewhere in the developing world. Social science will otherwise be fundamentally weakened, both in those countries and in the West.

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