

01.09.10/AH - Short Version

Article for The Nation
For Thursday 2 September 2010

Studying Society

ATLE HETLAND

Do we take time to learn from science? And how do we study complex historical and contemporary processes in society? How much do we really understand and how much are assumptions, with major parts remaining obscure to us, even if we use knowledge and the prescribed methods from social and human sciences?

Recently, Professor Robert Nichols from Stockton College in New Jersey in America, while a guest researcher at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, gave a couple of lectures discussing research methods, especially in anthropology as related to Swat and the border areas with Afghanistan, and he drew lessons from the renowned Norwegian Professor Emeritus Fredrik Barth, who carried out anthropological fieldwork in Pakistan in the mid- and late 1950s onwards. If we had studied the works of Fredrik Barth and other foreign and local experts, could the events in Swat over the last couple of years have been less tragic? Can social science research help salvage the situation and make the future bearable, even prosperous for the peace loving people of Swat and their neighbours in the rest of Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Perhaps this is asking for too much of a handful or, perhaps a few hundred scholars with thorough knowledge of the areas in question, who most of the time sit in their study chambers, not taking part in the day-to-day life and politics in Swat, Waziristan, and beyond? And topical just now, can the social sciences help us treat the victims of the floods better, and give advice for rebuilding the communities?

From all these questions, we realize that the world in general is complicated and that the issues in conflict, war and natural disasters are indeed complicated. Social scientists cannot give ultimate answers or predict the future. But they can shed light on issues. I believe that it is a major neglect if politicians and civil servants do not make use of social scientific knowledge and methods in understanding society.

Let us demystify social science research. It is not objective, and we rarely come up with eternal knowledge and everlasting truths. It is often not more than sincere and detailed work. It is systematic studies and analysis, with a good portion of common sense, and certain methods and tools. A journalist may read one book and interview five people. A researcher must read fifty books and interview a hundred people, or maybe one thousand. In other words, research is detailed data collection, analysis and consideration, focused on one specific topic, problem, historic time, etc. And during the process, we learn new things as we keep asking more and better questions. In the end, we will understand more than if we just hastily glanced at issues and problems. If we do that, we may misunderstand rather than understand, because reality is not always what it looks like at the surface. That reminds us that we should never be too certain about results and findings, because we never understand everything. If we become self-righteous and arrogant rather than humble and modest, we should probably look for another occupation than being social science researchers.

A responsible social scientist will have his/her empirical data right. That means collecting enough data from broad and varied sources, and it must represent all or as many aspects as possible of what is being studied, even opinions of people the researcher disagrees strongly with, and data from many disciplines, i.e., anthropology, demography, political science, history, education, gender studies, etc. Since the world is not divided into disciplines, inter-disciplinary studies are often useful, but we still believe that it is best to have the foundation in one discipline as it usually gives more focus and depth.

In the case of the recent tragedy in Swat and the border areas with Afghanistan, social science research includes discussing with and learning from ordinary people, opinion leaders, politicians, people supporting and opposing the current processes, and so on. Obviously, it means collecting data from and about different age groups, men and women, rich and poor, and so on. The social scientist must also be critical to his/her sources and data and be able to judge if the books he reads are objective, if interviewees and respondents are trustworthy, and so on and so forth. A journalist too needs to be critical to his/her informants and the information they provide.

In many ways, the answers we get depend on how we ask questions, what questions we ask and how we interpret and analyze the answers. Thus, the researcher's common sense, and practical wisdom, will be important in addition to following the prescribed research methods.

The 'Zeitgeist' and the scientific tradition of research in a country and in the specific discipline are more important than we generally think. For example, how come that gender aspects were generally not give much attention in social sciences and the humanities earlier, women are after all half of humanity? In history, it was war history and it was men's history, women were not studied and social history was a less prestigious area. It has only changed over the last generations. There is nothing wrong in studying sectors only, but we should then not pretend then pretend we cover the whole society. Such shortcomings tell us that even scientists are not neutral, irrespective of following prescribed methods and styles.

For most social scientists, statistics, surveys and such data is raw material, constituting a small part of their research. If it is not analyzed carefully and other more qualitative data added, surveys are merely opinion polls, providing interesting information and food for thought, but not enough for drawing conclusions with some amount of scientific certainty. Perhaps, the key word in social science research is simply *thoroughness and honesty*, even more than being *systematic*. Reflection and quiet thinking forms an important part of research in the social sciences and humanities.

. I read Barth's book entitled "The Last Wali of Swat" (1985) a while ago. It is a fascinating book, but it is 'just' an interview with the Wali as told to Barth. Obviously, the researcher has played a major role in the selection of questions and presentation of the information, but at the same time, he underlines that it is not his role to change the information. It becomes authentic, contemporary and recent history.

What did I learn from Barth's book? I learned that social science is thorough and accurate work. I learned that the presentation is important, so that the reader will actually read and study the book or report. And I learned that big words and fancy analyses are not needed. As social scientists we can help shed light on issues in a comprehensive way.

Taking data and analysis into action and prescribe solutions, should normally be left to others, notably politicians, civil servants, and importantly, the concerned people must be included. Answers and practical solutions can only be found in a broad and open debate in the specific situations. If researchers can contribute to such a process, and especially providing the background information, I believe we can be proud of calling us social scientists.

Atle Hetland is a senior Norwegian social scientist with yearlong experience from education work for refugees and other needy groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and African countries.
atlehetland@yahoo.com