

## **The Hidden Obstacles to Research and Testing in the Arab Society of Yemen<sup>(\*)</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sociologists, psychologists and their colleagues in the other human sciences in The Arab World can hardly claim of having employed their scientific knowledge to study and solve the problems facing their societies. It seems that they are not only frustrated, but many of them seem to have come to the sad conclusion that it is a waste of time to devote ones life for the study and work in such specialties. That is why, only a small minority of them are known to be preoccupied with sociological or psychological issues. Only a few are grappling with the problem of theory validation and with the problem of testing and measurement. Despite the need for the most basic information and explanation regarding all sociological and psychological phenomena, and despite the many problems which need urgent attention and solutions, the majority are either lethargic or busying themselves with activities that contribute little to knowledge or to the societies' concerns.

### **The Problem**

Focusing on the case of the Arab society of Yemen, this paper will discuss the problematic situation of reseach and testing in the Arab World, its hidden causes and its scientific and social consequences. It is hoped that raising the issue will trigger serious discussions and research which, in turn, could help all to realize that the problem can not wait any longer. It is not only that our psychological and sociological

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ignorance have contributed greatly to the failure of comprehensive development and to the failure of "the civilization project", but also that psychology and sociology had failed even to diagnose any of the problems which have alienated the Arab new generation, and pushed large sectors of young men and women to suicidal behavior, political and otherwise. Moreover, they have done little to help educators stop the alarming deterioration of education, particularly in the area of assessment and testing. We will show here some of the scientific and social ramifications of the problem.

### **Scientific Advances**

It is necessary, first, to point to the fact that Yemeni institutions and policy makers do not look at empirical research in the human sciences particularly in sociology and psychology as an important source of knowledge. Although there are three universities, with departments of both psychology and sociology, and there are two research centers, when it comes to policies, planning and budgeting sociological and psychological research is of low priority. Worse yet, these institutions have been subjected to great pressures not only to neglect such research but also to undermine and discredit it. Hence, psychologists and sociologists can expect little support or protection, even when their very lives are at risk.

Bearing that in mind, and remembering the sad situation of empirical research and testing, little can be expected in terms of scientific advances. For one thing, after decades of studying the Western human sciences in the Arab World, their fundamental theories and constructs are still awaiting systematic empirical validation. This had created confusion, and had opened the door for ideologues, some of whom hardly know anything of the subject matter, to decide on what is universal and what is culture-specific. Thus, rather than building on previous achievements and make further advances, we are contributing to the confusion and distrust of human sciences.

The same thing can be said about testing and measurement. Almost every researcher and Ph.D. candidate makes-up his own measurement tool. Standardized tests are scarce, and most of the imported tests were hardly validated, many of them were simply

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translated. Worse yet, the very use of measurement in the humanities especially psychology and sociology is still rare. Except for counting, published studies appear to have evaded the use of measurement tools, particularly tests that attempt to quantify sociological and psychological phenomenon.

### **Social Applications**

National plans are seldom based on assessment and empirical data. It is as if assessment and empirical data are unnecessary or irrelevant. This is obvious even in such areas as manpower development. It can be traced to early education; when children begin their schooling, they are enrolled without any kind of assessment or testing. They move through the educational ladder and are placed in various tracks of general education and in vocational institutes or colleges without any assessment of aptitudes, abilities,...etc. School testing, which is still traditional, and lack the essential conditions of validity and reliability, is still the only assessment tool used, and the only criterion for educational and professional placement. Behavioral, educational, developmental and disciplinary problems of all ages are still dealt with according to the dominant traditional values and the social control policies.

### **The Hidden Obstacles to Research and Testing**

Many seminars and conferences on "the problems of scientific research" have been organized throughout the Arab World, and hundreds of recommendations have been discussed. However, it appears that since they only focus on the symptoms (government policies towards research, funding, undermining and neglecting the results of previous studies, publication,...etc.) they have not had much impact.

The writer had come face to face with what he had come to believe to be the hidden causes of the problem. Systematic research was not done. However, ten years of teaching and field work helped to identify at least some of them. They were noted during field research which involved national samples, interviews and extensive discussions with adults, adolescents and children of both sexes. It did not take much

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effort to note one or the other on the pages of the books and volumes of short-lived Arab periodicals reviewed. Some of them dominated many of the counseling sessions conducted with college students, and also the thousands of pages written by college students in psychology courses. Finally, as of recent years, they have found advocates among the staff of the very departments which are paralyzed by them.

We turn now to such hidden causes. They include causes related to: 1) the tension between objectivity and judgment, 2) the attitudes towards collecting data about people, 3) the problem of social sensitivity towards major social issues, 4) social expectations, 5) cultural and political problems.

### **Objectivity and Judgment**

The concept of studying man objectively is still unfamiliar. It might take decades of hard work to be accepted. It will have to overcome the resistance of the cherished criterion of assessing others and judgment. For the time being, with value judgment being of high priority, objectivity in assessing behavior and human affairs is often interpreted as sanctioning what is unacceptable.

### **Information About People**

Psychological and sociological data about people's lives, emotions, feelings, and thoughts are hard to come by. There are various reasons for that. First, it has to do with the widespread fear of others. Second, self examination is still a rare luxury. Third, long history of oppression and intelligence activities make asking questions about people threatening. One of the most common requests that people make of God is to 'cover' them and prevent others from knowing their secrets: *sitr*.

### **Social Sensitivity**

As is the case in traditional, patriarchal societies, the Arab person shows great sensitivity towards such issues as sexual matters, women, and religious life. Sexual matters and all matters related to them are not to be discussed openly. The sensitivity towards this issue makes it very difficult for the society to understand and solve many of the existing problems related to sexual life.

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Similarly, researchers are fully aware that women and their lives are not to be considered a subject of open discussions and empirical research. The sensitivity towards the world of women and the nature of the relationship between men and women deprive the society of the information needed for any effective social policies, development and daily social behavior and interactions.

Finally, although religion is the most important determinant of individual's and society's lives, and needs to be taken into account in sociological and psychological studies, objectivity in the study of religious life and behavior is often misunderstood either as atheism, or as an indication of some conspiracy against religion.

### **Social Expectations**

Individuals as well as social groups are expected to live and behave according to the same norms. The concept of individual differences is not recognized yet. When such differences come to the surface, they are judged as unhealthy deviations and as illegitimate rebellion against the society. Negative attitudes towards them are expected of all members of the society. So, when a researcher endeavors to study such differences and treat them with any neutrality, he/she will be surrounded with suspicions. This makes conducting research on many social and psychological problems a risky business.

### **Cultural and Political Problems**

Arab and Moslem intellectuals have been arguing the culture-science issue for decades. However, universities and educators have come during recent years under strong pressure not only to stop teaching humanities but also to show that they are all wrong. They are warned that humanities, particularly psychology and sociology, are Western sciences and threatens our culture. Worse yet, we are warned that most of their theories are part of the Zionist conspiracy against our beliefs and culture. To teach them and/or conduct research amounts to taking part in that conspiracy.

In addition to that risk, field research in psychology or sociology could be met by suspicions as being an act of spying for foreign governments. Spying is no longer limited to political and military matters. For the enemies have shifted their attention to studying the

people, their thoughts and feelings, their wishes and anxieties so as to be able to invade them and dominate them. This fear is expressed by various forces whose followers use every opportunity to warn the populace against such activities. It is necessary to note here that it is true that such information is an important tool in international power struggle, but no society in the world today can hide. What can happen in Arab societies is that their adversaries will collect all the information they need and use it for their own interest while we stay ignorant of ourselves. Thus, instead of protecting our societies, we do a great service to the adversaries.

### **What Should Be Done?**

Since the problems discussed in this paper have not been studied systematically, it is not possible to think of specific solutions at this point. It is important, however, to stress the following:

- The urgency of the situation;
- The need for all Arab academic institutions and research centers to work together to deal with this problem;
- The need for an immediate assessment of the situation of empirical research and testing;
- The need for a comprehensive strategy that aims at getting scientific research and testing play their vital role in both theory building and social applications. A good strategy will have to take into account all dimensions of the problem, particularly the ones delineated in the section of the hidden obstacles.