

# A brief history of social science **research**

**BOOK EXCERPT** A new volume of edited articles examines the emergence of new methods and interdisciplinary avenues within the discipline

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Indian scholars have also expressed their deepest concerns on the state of social science research. The efforts of two of them are stated here. Ananta Kumar Giri's 2004 edited volume entitled *Creative Social Research: Rethinking Theories and Practice* is a very welcome foundational volume, which inspires the very urgently required 'rethinking' in the methods of research in political science and broadly in the social sciences. Giri's introduction sets the moral and ethical tone of his edited volume and its objectives. Max Weber had highlighted the disenchantment of the Western world with the modern world and the problems of living with our own constructed dualities. Giri's volume suggests the re-imagination needed in research to deconstruct the duality and through our ontology and epistemology, 'contribute' to the experience in the making of a reenchanted world: We are positively incomplete, so far as other beings are co-present, enfolded within me, are negatively incomplete, that is unfree. When the whole world of creation is self-realized, when it reflects back its own divinity, then and only then will there be peace... (Giri 2004: 28)

The use of these concepts is intended to look at both the substantive and the processual aspects of research in the social sciences. The entire objective of



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another volume on methods of research is to reiterate that research is a plural, yet interconnected and relational conceptualisation of a field of study. This idea is developed by Giri (2004); he critiques Sen's view of history and questions his assumptions of coherence and unity (Sen 2001). Rather, history has different domains, all of which are interconnected, 'it is neither unitary nor rational'. People have privileged only history as power, but it has other domains as well, history as vision and history as reason. The reason dimension is ignored and power is privileged at the expense of vision. Giri's argument is that all three are simultaneously autonomous and interpretative, where they illumine and reveal dimensions of each other (Giri 2004: 6). The

different essays in Giri's volume provide a powerful critique of present trends in the social sciences.

The question of autonomy in research brings us to the Report of the Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council of Social and Scientific Research (ICSSR), published in March 2007: There is a general feeling that the Council has not made as large an impact in promoting serious social science research as was expected. But it is recognized that this is due to factors beyond its control and reflects the malaise afflicting social science research as a whole. The nature of this malaise and the importance and urgency of redressing it are underscored in the Report. (ICSSR 2007)

The suggestions were sharply

indicative of the remedies imperative to resolve the crisis afflicting the premier social science research institution in India. Partha Chatterjee, erstwhile director of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, the Eastern regional affiliate of the Council, questioned the perspectives of the premier research institution regarding funding of research institutions in the country and the kind of research which they sponsored. One key recommendation by the Review Committee concerned the institutionalisation of a genuinely autonomous Council. However Chatterjee's concern was not really the autonomy of the institution but whether autonomy was genuinely desired and feasible. Many have asserted that over time, Chatterjee com-

mented that for an institution dependent fully on the government for its funds, it was imperative that at crucial levels government nominees should be instituted and that this might help speedy disposal of project proposals and, of course, the quick passage of funds as well! (Chatterjee 2008: 38) This view indicates the fear of researchers of straying too far away from prevailing governmental objectives and, in the process, losing out on favours dispensed. Thus, 'The ideal view is, there must be public criticism...of unacceptable political interference.' (Chatterjee 2008)

We realise that a volume on methods in the social sciences still remains mired in extremely contentious issues. On the one hand, it tries to validate existing methodology in the social sciences that substantiate existing theoretical knowledge and lead to 'credible' policymaking or, on the other, it may vouch for an open methodology that contributes to 'living theories'; these are perhaps the two opposing poles of the debate. We make sense of what we are doing through researching it.

We gather data and generate evidence to support our claims that we know what we are doing and why we are doing it, and we test these knowledge claims for their validity through the critical feedback of others. These then constitute our 'living theories' (popularised by action research). Such an approach becomes imperative today when each individual clamours for the

right of expression. Any preordained universal moral principle militates against a lived form of life. Life should have its own free space not only for formal communication, but for any form of creative expression. Thus, it is in this sense that we need to develop living, demonstrable criteria, which is subject to public scrutiny and critique and yet adds on to knowledge. The social sciences have to struggle inordinately at this because all universities, driven by the market compulsion to produce, have felt the axe in lieu of the natural sciences. The entire perspective towards social sciences is very obvious; downsizing of departments, total eclipse of some of the more expensive centres such as the Human Rights Programme at Roehampton University, London and its submergence with sociology; renaming of departments in favour of greater market-orientedness, all this is visible. But ultimately, the social sciences go much further than the explicit monetary motives as visible in its forced association with the natural sciences (Aleaz 2012). This leads us to a strong proposition of methodological 'assemblage' (Law 2004: 144) or trying out variety in methods to trace and exemplify variegated life.

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