

Field Sociology between Reality and Aspiration a Critical Study of Undergraduate Graduation Research in the Sociology Major

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Abstract:

The study in the field of sociology is based on theories derived from research across its various fields, reflecting the status of sociology among the sciences. What is observed in many sociological studies in Algeria in particular, and in the Arab world in general, is that existing studies are merely processes of measurement or attempts to verify Western theories, so to speak, which renders the science of production a sterile science that does not produce. This results from the incorrect practices upon which sociological research is based. Therefore, through this research paper, we seek to provide a realistic picture of field sociological research, especially within the framework of universities, and the methodology followed in studying societal problems across various sociological fields. Through this, we aim to change the prevailing research pattern, especially in the research of master's and doctoral students.

Keywords: Field research, sociological research methodology, theoretical approach, university, graduating students.

Introduction:

Research work is considered a reflective mirror of the stages of training and methodological practice that the student has undergone during their academic university path, which requires, during its completion, familiarity with the aspects of the specialization in which the research is conducted. This depends on acquired skills, technical competencies, and scientific material that are the result of the student's academic achievement and research field.

It is no secret that the theories taught in our universities are, in fact, what the West has produced within their own environment and which we have imported, deliberately or otherwise, to interpret social reality. Despite the intellectual heritage contained in these theories, we cannot apply them to our social reality. In this context, Mustafa Naji states: "The emergence of sociology in the Arab world was not in response to a specific societal need, but rather an imitation of the Western academic system...." This led to a period of imitation and replication of Western studies without innovation or renewal.

This situation requires today the necessity of developing this field and establishing scientific theories that include the characteristics of our societies and seek to develop them. This is not an easy matter, but it requires initiative on our part.

Problematic:

Interest in theory and theorization in sociological research appears to be very limited, and there is a lack of attention to theoretical orientation within scientific theses, as well as a scarcity of theses in the field of theory. Hence, the problem of the study arises. Regarding theses that relied on theories, we do not know which theoretical orientations (structural functionalism, historical materialism, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, modernity and postmodernity, and others) were most commonly used, nor which theories associated with specific theorists (Parsons, Émile Durkheim, Weber, Merton, and others) were more prevalent.

It is perhaps interesting to identify the theoretical orientations that have guided social scientific research, especially in the preparation of theses for obtaining master's and doctoral degrees, and to identify the extent of interest in theory as a branch of sociology. Scientific research does not, at first glance, require the formulation of theory; rather, it may be derived after extracting research results and determining the appropriate theoretical approach. However, what draws our attention in this study is how the field of theoretical approach is determined for completed or ongoing research, and the methodological method adopted by the student or researcher in their study.

From this emerges the research problem of our study as follows:

How is the theoretical approach to the subject employed, and what is its role in field research?

Reasons for Selection and Significance:

Most sociological research remains confined to shelves in libraries and university laboratories.

Most studies rely on imported Western theories that do not correspond to local specificities.

First: The Concept of Sociological Research and Research Steps

*** Concept of Sociological Research:**

Sociologists define research as: “A set of stimulating, similar, and overlapping processes carried out by one or more scholars in a scientific field with the aim of systematically collecting information that sheds light on an observable phenomenon in order to explain and understand it. It is an attempt to discover knowledge.”

The definition of sociological research does not differ from that of scientific research except in the specification of study subjects, as it focuses on social life and its phenomena, which constitute the subject of its studies. It follows the same path as other scientific research. Sociological research starts from a social phenomenon surrounded by ambiguity or in need of interpretation, and it requires methodological procedures, a plan, and a well-structured design.

*** Steps of Sociological Research:**

There is significant variation in defining the steps of sociological research, as the stages differ from one researcher to another. Some have divided it into seven stages, such as “Raymond Quivy,” which include three main phases: rupture, construction, and observation.

- **The rupture phase:** includes three main stages, namely the initial question, readings and exploration, and the research problem.
- **The construction phase:** in which the researcher builds the analytical model of the study through hypotheses and concepts.
- **The observation phase:** which also includes three stages, namely observation, data analysis, and results.

Others have divided it into six basic stages, such as “Ma’an Khalil Omar,” as follows:

- Selecting the research topic.
- Writing the research proposal (research design and how to conduct it).
- Collecting theoretical and field information and data.
- Organizing the collected information and applying the adopted methodology.
- Interpreting and analyzing the data.
- Conclusion and recommendations.

As for “Fadhil Delyou,” he divided it into three basic stages that proceed according to specific steps: the theoretical framework, the applied framework, and the results.

*** Criteria and Characteristics of Good Sociological Research:**

Choosing a research topic requires the researcher to be precise and careful in selection, and this choice must meet several criteria and characteristics in order to be a good and original research. These criteria include the following:

- **The research topic should be new:** this does not mean new in the sense that it has never been studied before, but rather new in terms of approach. Sometimes a topic may have been previously addressed, but certain aspects were overlooked. Social change also plays a major role in changing research results over time, which necessitates re-studying the topic in light of new variables.
- **The research topic should be feasible:** the researcher must ensure that they are able to study the chosen topic through the availability of scientific material, time, and financial resources.

- **The research topic should be productive:** this grants the researcher legitimacy to study the topic, as research that does not benefit society through its study is not worthy of investigation.
- **The research topic should be specific:** here the researcher's competence becomes evident; the more precisely and scientifically defined the topic is, the easier all research steps become.
- **The research topic should satisfy the researcher's desire and personal inclinations:** scientific research involves immersion in daily research life and may take many years. If the topic is not appealing to the researcher or aligned with their abilities and inclinations, failure in completing it is very likely. Forcing a researcher to study specific topics achieves no benefit for either the researcher or science.

Second: Theory and Approach in Sociology

Sociological literature includes several definitions of social theory. "Thomas Ward" reviewed twenty-seven definitions and concluded that theory is "a logical deductive-inductive system consisting of concepts, definitions, and assumptions that express relationships between two or more aspects of a phenomenon, from which hypotheses can be derived and tested for validity or falsity."

Theory is defined in the Dictionary of Educational and Psychological Terms as "a set of concepts, definitions, and assumptions that provide us with an organized view of a phenomenon by specifying the different relationships between the variables of that phenomenon, with the aim of explaining the phenomenon and predicting it in the future."

Talcott Parsons defines theory as: "A unit of logically and structurally interconnected and mutually supportive concepts, with an empirical reference to reality, in which the relationships between parts allow for the derivation of new hypotheses or generalizations that express empirical regularities."

Despite this variation and difference in defining theory among the pioneers of sociology, we can present a comprehensive definition of theory in sociology that encompasses all its components: "Theory is an organized cognitive and logical system that includes a conception of the reality it addresses. This system consists of concepts and theoretical assumptions with an empirical dimension that enables understanding reality and providing interpretations for it."

*** Concept of Approach:**

An approach is defined as "a probabilistic method of research that aims to encompass a subject according to a specific conception and to verify the resulting knowledge without reaching the level of certain cognition. It is neither methodologically nor theoretically 'comprehensive and exclusive.'"

– **From a methodological perspective:** methods of producing knowledge and verifying it are multiple and not unified.

– **From a theoretical perspective:** the conception and coverage of the subject are partial rather than comprehensive.

*** Concept of Theoretical Approach:**

The theoretical approach refers to any scientific research that has a theoretical reference or background upon which it is based, and through this theory the researcher is able to advance in their research.

The theoretical approach is defined in the Dictionary of Social Sciences Terms as a synonym for intellectual orientation and tendency (approach), carrying multiple connotations, most of which converge on the fact that it:

- That intellectual orientation toward a subject or a particular situation, and this orientation may be objective or subjective.
- The theoretical approach also refers to placing the subject within a theoretical framework and providing the researcher with a conceptual arsenal through which the research path can be drawn and the results interpreted in light of the assumptions of the theory.

*** The Importance of Theory for Sociological Research:**

The debate among sociologists regarding the relationship between theory and sociological research still continues. Some have emphasized the importance of theory in defining the contours of research and in formulating a scientific conception for the researcher about the subject of study, starting from the research problem and ending with the results. Others,

however, have neglected the role of theory and hypotheses in social research, arguing that they divert the researcher from objectivity due to the influence of preconceived judgments.

Nevertheless, we believe that every sociological research has a theoretical reference or background upon which it relies, and based on this theory, the researcher can understand the subject of study and progress in completing the research. Thus, the relationship between theory and sociological research becomes clear. “The research approach is considered a research method, a technique, or a type of research design and its outputs. It is not merely a tool for data analysis; rather, it encompasses all aspects of research, starting from the selection of the research question and ending with answering it.”

“The methodological approach to research is considered the conceptual framework or an inferential and mental method used by the researcher in the study and relied upon to approach the subject under investigation.”

*** Employing the Approach in Sociological Research:**

Sociological research is not merely a large quantity of information obtained from observation or from respondents' answers to questionnaire items. Rather, it must have a theoretical background through which the dimensions of the problem are clarified and the methodological direction of the research is determined. The student is exposed to social, psychological, and economic theories, and “when conducting field research, they often fall into a methodological error by dividing the research into a theoretical part and a field part without linking them. As a result, field research becomes merely operations of data collection through field research techniques, while theories are treated superficially and regarded as merely unrealistic theories studied only because they are part of the prescribed curriculum, or they are placed as a separate title detached from the research. Whereas the proper use of theory requires that it accompany the research from the stage of defining the title up to reaching the results.”

Most books related to scientific research that we encounter do not specifically shed light on how to employ the theoretical background in scientific research. Rather, they only briefly mention it, or it may be completely absent in some books that focus on directly presenting the stages of research and addressing, for example, the research problem, its characteristics, features, and objectives, in addition to how to formulate questions and hypotheses, without hinting at how to employ theories in formulating the research problem and hypotheses, nor at the major role played by the theoretical background in determining the course of scientific research. This greatly complicates matters for the researcher who relies on using it in their scientific research.

On this basis, we will attempt to clarify how the theoretical approach is employed in sociological research:

After selecting a phenomenon to be studied, the researcher must have a general awareness of the various theories that have addressed the subject of the research. Then, the most appropriate theory for the subject is selected by addressing its concepts, where one of the theory's concepts constitutes a variable among the study variables (the title).

Let us assume that the study title is “Social Origin and Its Relationship to Children's Aspirations.” After defining the study title, we search for the various theories that have addressed the concept of social origin. We find that Pierre Bourdieu's cultural theory is the one that established the concept of social origin as a sociological concept expressing the various forms of capital possessed by the family. After determining the theory to be adopted in the study, we attempt to employ this theory at every step of sociological research.

Third: Sociological Practice in the Arab World:

The researcher who examines the reality of sociological practice in the Arab world can immediately discern that this science began with a distorted birth, due to the alienation of Arab scholars from the reality of their societies and their immersion in transferring knowledge from the West. Western dependency thus emerged in its dominant sense, as described by “Fadhil Delyou,” who states: “Sociology grew up in the environment of the dominant human being the prevailing human in the civilizational rather than the geographical sense and the cognitive framework of this latter has become the dominant and prevailing one in thought and research, to the exclusion of other civilizational frameworks.”

Most Western theories that dominate the theoretical heritage and methodological approaches to research have their own social contexts. Dominant Western social sciences stem from a civilization with different references and foundational, intellectual, and ideological bases. Western theories have prevailed due to technological advancement and a historical reference marked by colonialism, which generates dependency, as previously mentioned. This is what Ibn Khaldun meant

when he said: “The vanquished is fond of imitating the victor.” From this perspective, it can be said that it is difficult to generalize social theories and laws due to the absence of empirical validity and the neglect of specificity, despite the Western cognitive system’s claim of neutrality and objectivity to impart a scientific character. Intellectual effort in the field of social sciences has thus remained confined between experimentation, borrowing, and imitation, without transcending Arab society. Researchers’ and scholars’ interest has focused on issues that belong to the stage of self-centered thought in light of particularities that are significant in their original contexts but lack importance in our Arab societies.

In addition, the sociological reality in the Arab world lives under crisis conditions. We agree with “Hijazi” that the real crisis is not in sociology itself, but in those who practice it and in the social issues addressed by the media. Moreover, Arab states neglect this science, viewing it as having no value for society and considering research in its field to be characterized by fragile conditions. Hijazi adds: “Sociology in Arab countries has suffered from theoretical poverty, sterility in scientific production, disconnection from our societies, Arab scholars’ ignorance of critiquing foreign theories, and the intellectual’s sensitivity to authority.”

*** Sociological Practice in Algeria:**

It has oscillated between colonial dependency and attempts to overcome dependency through reforming the higher education system in accordance with the general orientation of the authorities following the adopted approach (the socialist system). This declined in the early 1980s due to the prioritization of experimental sciences over social sciences. Attention became focused on natural and technological sciences in the name of development and change, such that officials came to view this science with hostility and contempt. In addition, events such as the October 1988 events and the security crisis of the 1990s, and the national tragedy they caused in Algeria, had a profound impact on the sociological trajectory. This was manifested in brain drain abroad and the assassination of some scholars. This period represented a setback for sociology in Algeria and was marked by some studies that did not rise to the required level, in addition to weak training, lack of funding, scarcity of sociological laboratories, and the absence of field studies analyzing the social reality of the social and cultural systems of society.

This explains why social sciences have not received their scientific and social due, as reality has shown that most social studies are confined to the theoretical aspect without the applied one, which deprives them of legitimacy as a field science. Moreover, the social researcher lacks the most basic conditions that facilitate the research process. According to a study by Dr. Jamal Ma’touk on the reality of Maghreb sociology, he found that there are factors controlling sociological research. He observed that the high cost of living in Algeria negatively affects the researcher, diverting resources from purchasing books and appropriate tools, and that insufficient income negatively impacts the professional aspect, as researchers focus solely on meeting basic needs.

Political will also plays a role in the sterility of social policies. Many researchers attribute this to political conditions, as one researcher believes that most Arab politicians do not favor social scholars and do not encourage social research in the Arab world. In addition, there is a lack of statistics and quantitative data issued by specialized state institutions, which often lack credibility and are not published for various reasons, further complicating the researcher’s task. We agree that political will contributes to obstructing social research and that the absence of support or necessary political decisions to conduct research increases the difficulty of the researcher’s work.

Indeed, the dominant sociological orientation in Algeria generally holds that “the task of sociology is limited to studying apparent and direct data that avoid the more difficult stance of restructuring reality and extracting its laws and dynamics by transcending phenomena and direct relations to search for the driving forces and active elements in the mechanism of socio-economic structural dynamics,” whereas the true role of sociology, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is to reveal what is unspoken or hidden.

As a result, research within the sociological field in Algeria is “mostly distant from the social problems produced by Algerian social reality and does not respond to the needs of the local community. This indicates that this practice has not yet met the epistemological and social conditions that would enable it to take responsibility for the problems, concerns, needs, and outputs of the social reality in which it exists, interacts, seeks to interpret, explain, and understand. The output of sociological practice is often merely quantitative, manifested mainly in completed research, dissertations, and theses that serve the requirements for obtaining an academic degree rather than responding to social needs, in addition to some books that do not constitute original scientific production so much as they serve academic or even personal necessities in

many cases.” This reality has led to the conclusion that “production in the sociological field in Algeria is almost non-existent, and if it exists, it is not recognized at the global level, despite the increase in the number of sociology departments.”

The two researchers Mohamed El Mahdi Ben Issa and Nasser Boudabza, through their critical and evaluative examination of academic sociological studies, reached several results regarding sociological production in Algerian universities, the most important of which are:

□ Most of the academic research under study did not start from a clear and conscious theoretical approach in constructing the topic. If theory was mentioned, it was done in a formal manner through defining theories and mentioning their main pioneers, without adopting the methodological conceptions of the theories themselves. This led to researchers’ failure in selecting appropriate methods and tools for data collection.

□ The excessive use of questionnaires or forms and the focus on quantitative statistics, along with the exclusion of qualitative research and its tools, clearly show that these studies have taken us back to quantitative functional analysis, which marginalized the sociological analysis introduced by the Durkheimian school. Sociology studies were reduced to tables and statistical percentages, stripping them of their sociological meanings and implications. Statistical quantification became an end in itself rather than a means to investigate causal and functional relationships between the phenomenon and its components, as intended at least by Durkheimian theory. Likewise, the unfocused use of interviews and observation, which are not governed by the required methodological and technical standards scientifically and epistemologically in constructing the research tool, and the mere reference to and definition of them in most of the studied cases.

In all the cases under the current study, we find that they examine the organization as the unit of analysis rather than society, as was the case in classical theories, or the individual with all their cultural and social dimensions, as in contemporary studies. Taking the organization as the unit of analysis led these sociology researchers to move away from their original subject, its methodology, and its scientific tools, and to fall into other disciplines by using a conceptual apparatus that is foreign and extraneous to sociology and to what its pioneers, their followers, and its renewers established. They relied on modern techniques that assist in the technical ordering and classification of data and treated them as methodological and scientific tools. From the study of these cases, we conclude that researchers attempt to explain causal and functional relationships based on statistical ratios, as mentioned earlier. This type of study suits societies from whose reality it was produced.[3]

*** Horizons of Sociology in Algeria:**

The pursuit of defining an identity for sociology in Algeria is an issue that requires intensified efforts by those working in the sociological field.

In studying local society, importing others’ theories without adapting them to the specificities of society constitutes a serious scientific error. These theories should neither be ignored nor completely rejected out of fanaticism. They can enrich awareness and help interact with social forces that carry the potential to change priorities and tasks assigned to this science, in addition to the following:

□ Overcoming prevailing ideological obstacles that adopt a negative stance toward social research and sometimes direct it to serve dominant discourse.

□ Finding theoretical alternatives to Western theories and relying on the Islamization of knowledge as an alternative to Western sociology. A clear example lies in the writings of Malek Bennabi and his contributions to sociology through addressing several civilizational and social issues (the phenomenon of poverty, historical sociology, and his analysis of the civilizational state). The Islamic perspective should also be relied upon as an alternative for studying social reality in Arab countries in general and Algeria in particular, as it is derived from the Holy Quran, which provides leading features of the social system, social justice, and the treatment of social deviance. We agree with Murad Al-Zaimi, who states that after the shortcomings of Marxism and positivism in shaping the future of human life became evident, many Western sociologists argue that sociology should not be a means of social reform, a method of social service, or a platform for guiding people. Al-Zaimi also believes that sociologists themselves bear the responsibility of directly contributing to guidance and counseling toward desired changes. He adds that there is a moral commitment incumbent upon traditional sociologists toward humanity. It is also the sociologist’s duty to evaluate human, behavioral, and social activity, identify sound

phenomena, and work to rationalize them. They should not merely settle for description and measurement as they are, for social life, in his view, is not like inanimate matter or animals.

- Sociology as a discipline is viewed from an inferior perspective, and students are directed to it based on having an average academic level.
- Most sociological research remains confined to shelves in libraries, and even the recommendations of symposia and conferences remain locked within laboratories and universities.

Conclusion:

Sociological scientific research has great importance in our current era, characterized by the multiplicity and complexity of social life and its emerging realities. This imposes the need not to stop at the deceptive and fragile boundaries established by our impressions and imagination, as the beliefs and opinions we constantly form about social reality stand as an obstacle to a more comprehensive and truthful vision of it. Therefore, it is not appropriate to excessively

trust or become overly enthusiastic about the idea that field research techniques can determine certainty in the interpretations we provide. Rather, equipping the researcher with the necessary cognitive heritage, alongside a mind skilled in thinking the sociological imagination and within a genuine understanding of the overall social system, ensures that appropriate frameworks are determined for every interpretive effort.

This aspiration that we seek to clarify in this research paper is not reflected in the academic and research works of scholars affiliated with what is known as Third World countries, where their analyses and arguments sink into attempts to reproduce the same Western visions. This expresses a real state of rupture that has affected them, leading them under the pressure of awareness or fascination to reproduce Western frameworks in interpreting the social changes experienced by their local societies. This later resulted in forming a stereotypical image of a distorted reality, where the concepts, frameworks, and approaches of Western sociology act to dilute facts. Accordingly, and based on the above, our focus will be on presenting a modest reflective attempt to examine the reality of the crisis of sociological scientific research, addressing several questions: What is the content of Western sociological scientific research? What obstacles stand in the way of Arab sociological scientific research? What alternatives can be proposed to activate Arab sociological scientific research and thus define its goals as a profession and practice that responds to societal needs?

If we closely examine Arab and Algerian sociological production, we encounter polished writings about contemporary social phenomena in their societies according to each historical period, harmonizing with the momentum generated by Western writings and concepts that provoke wide debate. Meanwhile, their echo in our context is merely the embellishment of discourse on simplistic phenomena with terms that appear scientific or academic, seeking argumentative legitimacy through such language rather than constructing social phenomena as real sociological data. This has led to the spread of weak Arab thought with limited results and

far removed from addressing real societal issues. Under these circumstances, the conditions necessary for forming a productive and critical Arab intellect remain out of reach, as research becomes a state of confusion, disorientation, and even conflict between a heritage-bound self that tends toward retreat into closed cognitive structures either by reading the past with fascinated repetition or by clinging to it in defense against a false threat constructed by the Arab cognitive structure in defining societal challenges.

The second pole of this intellectual practice is linked to the imported self, which closely follows the steps of Western progress through imitation movements that many Arab sociologists have turned into a substitute profession, compensating for productive social research. This research does not merely observe social problems and reflect on them; rather, it reproduces, in a state of fascination, the achievements of Western sociological theory. This leads to the fading of the historical, specific self, where social reality becomes a mere given acted upon and surrendered to Western social theory tools to present it in a stereotypical form. In this process, the true director is not the Arab sociologist but the actual theorist. Consequently, Western sociology comes to control the Arab intellect's vision of social reality, preventing it from creating its own tools and modes of thinking. It causes the Arab intellect to experience social reality not at the actual level but at the level of pre-formulated ideas. In such a situation, sociological truth becomes alienated from social truth, making the process of seizing and conquering the object as Gaston Bachelard states questionable.

Marginalization:

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