# Aspirational Trends in Social Science Methodology

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*Abstract*
How can we contribute to the evolving discourse on methodology in ways that enable the social sciences to better serve the needs of humanity? How can we help those who are entering the social sciences make thoughtful choices about methodology that enable them to contribute to the betterment of the world? With these questions in mind, this paper examines six underlying trends in methodological discourse and practice that might portend a gradual maturation of the social sciences. Awareness of these trends can inform our contributions to the discourse on methodology as well as our methodological choices.

*Résumé*
Comment peut-on contribuer au discours sur la méthodologie, lequel évolue constamment, de façon à permettre aux sciences sociales de mieux répondre aux besoins de l'humanité? Comment peut-on aider ceux et celles qui choisissent les sciences sociales à faire, en matière de méthodologie, des choix réfléchis qui leur permettraient de contribuer à l'amélioration du monde? C'est dans cette optique que les auteurs examinent six tendances à long terme dans le discours et la pratique liés à la méthodologie, lesquelles pourraient présager une maturation progressive des sciences sociales. Prendre conscience de ces tendances peut éclairer nos contributions au discours sur la méthodologie de même que nos choix dans ce domaine.

*Resumen*
Como podemos contribuir al progresivo discurso sobre la metodología de maneras que capacitan a las ciencias sociales a que sirvan mejor las necesidades de la humanidad? Como podemos ayudar a aquellos que ingresan a las ciencias sociales a que tomen decisiones bien pensadas acerca de las opciones relacionadas a la metodología que les capacita a contribuir al mejoramiento del mundo? Teniendo estas preguntas en la mente, este artículo examina seis tendencias subyacentes en el discurso y la práctica metodológicos que podrían presagiar una gradual maduración de las ciencias sociales. Conocimiento de estas tendencias puede informar nuestras contribuciones al discurso sobre la metodología así como nuestras opciones metodológicas.

## Introduction

People have been generating knowledge about physical and social aspects of reality for millennia. In recent centuries, such efforts have led to remarkable advances in the natural sciences, driven in part by a discourse centered on the question: What are the most effective methods for generating knowledge about the natural world? Though this discourse continues to evolve, it has reached a relatively mature state, yielding a rich body of methodological

insight that has helped propel the natural sciences to remarkable heights, transforming life on this planet.

Alongside advances in the natural sciences, a growing number of scholars in the nineteenth century began approaching the generation of knowledge about social reality in increasingly systematic ways. Some of these social scientists attempted to apply methods developed in fields such as physics to the study of social phenomena—as exemplified by the use of the phrase "social physics" to describe the field of sociology when it first emerged.[1] Thus the idea that humans, and the societies they comprise, could be analyzed as scientific "objects" gained currency.

Though natural science methods were developed to study physical and biological phenomena that exist independent of human agency, social phenomena emerge through, and are continually being transformed by, human agency.[2] This includes the agency of social scientists themselves. Awareness of this difference has increasingly enriched the discourse on social science methodology,[3] as scholars grapple with questions and concerns that have no parallel in the natural sciences.

1 Auguste Comte, who is widely regarded as the founder of sociology, writes: "Social physics is that science which occupies itself with social phenomena, considered in the same light as astronomical, physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena, that is to say as being subject to natural and invariable laws, the discovery of which is the special object of its researchers" (qtd. in Iggers 434).

2 For an in-depth look at this distinction and its implications for the generation of knowledge, see Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*.

3 A comment is in order regarding the terms social sciences, methods, and methodology. The boundaries around what constitutes the social sciences remain contested. In this paper, we adopt a broad conception of the social sciences that encompasses systematic attempts to generate, apply, and diffuse knowledge about aspects of social reality. This includes, for instance, our own disciplinary fields of sociology, communications, psychology, international development studies, urban planning, and public health, as well as anthropology, political science, economics, education, history, and relevant interdisciplinary studies. Social science research methods are practices for collecting data. They range from the use of existing institutional data, to surveys, observation, experiments, ethnographic study and so on. A research methodology is the framework that connects the research question with the choice of methods and justifies their use. Broader methodological discourse has to do with principles, theories and philosophies related to the use of different methods; it deals, for example, with the relative strengths and weaknesses of different methods, their appropriate use, and the development of new methods. Methodology can also apply at a more conceptual level, having to do with assumptions about the appropriate unit of analysis in a study, or the types of causality being considered. Ultimately, methodological discourse reflects ontological, epistemological and axiological premises.

In the social sciences, methodologies modeled on the natural sciences are often called naturalist methodologies or positivist methodologies. They are often associated with quantitative methods that get at empirically observable behaviors and patterns, which are widely accepted and used among social scientists. They also tend to be associated with experimental methods. Accordingly, randomized controlled trials are often perceived as the gold standard in fields such as economics and experimental psychology that tend toward naturalistic methodologies. Such methods are often premised on the objective existence of social phenomena (i.e., a naturalistic ontology), on the search for universal laws governing social existence (i.e., a naturalistic epistemology), and on the value-neutral pursuit of knowledge about social reality (i.e., a naturalistic axiology).[4] Historically, naïve forms of positivism also tended to assume that observations of phenomena can be made in ways that are free from theoretical or conceptual biases.

In contrast, a broad alternative to naturalist methodologies is often referred to as constructivist methodologies.[5] Constructivism emerged from a growing recognition that all social phenomena arise through human agency, along with an effort to integrate insights from the humanities into the social sciences. Constructivist methodologies thus tend to regard social reality as socially constructed (i.e., a constructivist ontology) and knowledge as primarily contextual (i.e., a constructivist epistemology), and often critique existing social forms in relation to liberatory values (i.e., a constructivist axiology). Accordingly, constructivists often employ more qualitative methods that facilitate the study of interpretation and meaning.

The distinction between naturalist and constructivist methodologies is, of course, an ideal-type distinction, as Max Weber used this term.[6] That is, the distinction abstracts two broad constellations of interrelated ideas and approaches from the exceedingly complex discourse on methodology and, in the process, it simplifies. Nonetheless, this widely recognized distinction helps orients people toward a set of methodological considerations that remain salient. Even though constructivist approaches are adopted, to varying degrees, by the majority of social scientists today, naturalistic approaches remain very influential, especially in social sciences connected to policy

4 Ontological assumptions pertain to the nature of being of the nature of existence. Epistemological assumptions pertain to the nature of knowledge and the means by which it can be generated. Axiological assumptions pertain to the values that inform human endeavors.

5 For a book-length discussion of the distinction between naturalist and constructivist methodologies, see Jonathan Moses and Torbjorn Knutsen, *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research*.

6 For book-length examination of this concept, see Susan Hekman, *Weber, the Ideal Type, and Contemporary Social Theory*.

making and other professional practices. This can be seen in the ongoing demand for, and prestige associated with, randomized controlled trials and related methods that are highly quantitative or experimental. Social scientists thus continue to grapple with these methodological questions and concerns, and with the ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises that underlie them.

Despite such developments, we believe the social sciences have not reached a level of maturation that parallels the maturation of the natural sciences.[7] Moreover, the need for the social sciences to mature has taken on existential significance in the twenty-first century. Many social scientists, alongside thoughtful people everywhere, recognize that modern civilization is on an untenable trajectory. How can the social sciences contribute to the construction of more just, peaceful, and ecologically viable social forms? What does it mean for social science methodologies to mature toward this end? How can we contribute to the evolving discourse on methodology in ways that enable the social sciences to better serve the needs of humanity? And how can those who are entering the social sciences make thoughtful choices about methodology that enable them to contribute to the betterment of the world through research practice in their fields?

With these questions in mind, the authors of this essay engaged in a shared reading of texts about methodology, collectively reflected on our interdisciplinary academic observations and practices, and fostered conversations with other social scientists—all in light of our understanding of the knowledge-generating practices of the Bahá'í community and its conceptual framework for social transformation. Through this collaborative interpretation (described in more detail below), we identified a set of evolving trends in methodological discourse and practice that might portend a maturation of the social sciences. Some of these trends are relatively advanced, while others are more nascent. We refer to these trends as (1) integrating diverse ways of knowing, (2) democratizing the generation of knowledge, (3) reconciling universal and contextual knowledge, (4) identifying and applying normative principles in research, (5) fostering discursive reflexivity, and (6) generating knowledge for social transformation.

This collaborative essay invites dialogue on the questions posed above and on the related aspirational trends that we perceive. Before proceeding, however, we feel the need to articulate some elements of the framework and approach that informed this project.

## Framework and Approach

The worldwide Bahá'í community is working for social transformation toward peace, justice, and shared prosperity for all through multifaceted

7 For a similar conclusion regarding the relative maturity of the social sciences, see Farzam Arbab, "Intellectual Life" 17.

efforts that include programs for the education and empowerment of individuals of different ages; community building at the grassroots; institutional capacity building; social action to address the social and material needs of communities; and engagement with the discourses of society. All of these efforts have advanced through learning in action: an organic process where action increases understanding, which then informs further action in an iterative way.

This iterative process is carried out by a diverse, far-flung community, operating within "an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates" (The Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013). Through this process, the community is learning how to apply spiritual principles—justice, unity in diversity, the unfettered search for truth, universal participation, and more—in context-specific ways, to construct new patterns of community life and the administrative structures to support them. The shared framework makes it possible for learning at the grassroots to contribute to and draw on a global process of learning, within which insights are distilled and disseminated by institutions and agencies created, in part, for this purpose.

Through this process, theory and practice advance hand in hand. Knowledge is derived from and ascertained through effective action and distilled through spaces for reflection and deliberation that employ a consultative epistemology.[8] Learning is thus approached in a purposeful manner that responds to the specific needs of communities and populations.

This mode of working for social change rests on the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of science and religion. This is partly an ontological statement: since science and religion both offer knowledge of reality, they must ultimately, in their truest forms, be mutually compatible. It is also an axiological imperative to harmonize science and religion in practice, which places demands on both of them. Science—including the social sciences—must be extricated from dogmatic materialism. Religion must conform to reason, be purified from superstition, and respect the integrity of the evolving processes by which science generates knowledge. Both must begin to function as complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice that contribute to the advancement of civilization.[9]

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8 For a discussion of consultative epistemology, see Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg, "Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Toward a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 19 no. 1 (2009).

9 The relationship between science and religion, viewed as complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice, is more complex than indicated by our brief comments above. For excellent sources on this topic, refer to Farzam Arbab, "An Inquiry into the Harmony of Science and Religion," in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of*

The principle of harmony between science and religion is expressed in the practice of learning in action within an evolving conceptual framework (alluded to above) in multiple ways. The Bahá'í community is learning to draw on the insights of science (along with insights from divine revelation) and is also learning to become increasingly "scientific in its method,"[10] as it seeks to systematically generate knowledge that will enable humanity to address the exigencies of the age. Among these are the existential crises that have arisen, in part, from the operation of the sciences, and the development of technologies, through processes that are unmoored from spiritual principles. In this context, it is important for Bahá'ís to reflect on social science methodologies in light of spiritual principle.[11]

However, our group is not presenting the Bahá'í framework for knowledge generation as a model to be copied in the social sciences. Rather, we ask whether useful insights might be gleaned from the former, with some relevance to the latter (and vice versa). In this regard, we see the evolution of social science methodologies as a process of maturation—though not a deterministic one—that over time can better equip social scientists to address the needs of society (even as the Bahá'í culture of learning is also maturing and becoming better equipped to contribute in complementary ways).

Our approach to methodology is thus exploratory, appreciative, and invitational. Rather than adopting an overly critical stance, we seek to discern the highest aspirations implicit in evolving methodological discourses and practices. We recognize that these aspirations are often overshadowed by other interests and preoccupations. Nonetheless, by identifying and

*Transition: Reflections of Bahá'í Thought and Practice*; Paul Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality*; Todd Smith, "Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 29, no. 4 (2019).

10 Shoghi Effendi, *Statement to the Special United Nations Committee on Palestine* (1947).

11 Previous work on Bahá'í approaches to methodology have evaluated existing methods in fields such as history and Bahá'í studies. See, for instance, Moojan Momen, "Methodology in Bahá'í Studies," *Bahá'í Studies Review* vol. 10 (2001); Sholeh A. Quinn, "Historical Methodology and the Development of Bahá'í Scholarship: Toward Dispelling a False Dichotomy," *Bahá'í Studies Review* vol. 9 (1999); Will C. van den Hoonaard, "Unfreezing the Frame: The Promise of Inductive Research in Bahá'í Studies," *Bahá'í Studies Review* vol. 10 (2001). However, the past two decades have seen significant advances in how the worldwide Bahá'í community is engaged in both academic discourse and other social endeavors, and recent calls to more deeply explore foundational issues related to methodology have highlighted the value of the insights that could emerge from such an exploration. See Arbab, "Intellectual Life"; Universal House of Justice, Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada (24 July 2013).

describing these aspirational trends, we hope to invite dialogue about them and thereby contribute to the further evolution of discourse and practice.

It should also be noted that we are not offering a literature review of the discourse on social science methodology. That discourse is too vast to review in the space of this essay. Rather, we focus on salient insights that emerged from a multi-year systematic process of consultative inquiry. This process arose from a series of annual seminars on methodology hosted by the Association for Bahá'í Studies, beginning in May 2019. From those seminars, a reading group formed to focus on methodology in the social sciences. Over the course of several years, we read and discussed texts on naturalism and constructivism, phronesis, critical realism, participatory action research, and other methodologies that will be alluded to below. We also engaged guests who had deep experience with some of these methodologies.

A subset of this reading group then wrote this essay. In writing it, we drew on insights generated through the aforementioned processes as well as from direct observations of methodological practices, debates, and trends in our respective fields. We also drew on insights gleaned from the knowledge-generating practices of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Once we had a substantive draft, we invited two dozen other social scientists to offer written comments, and then consult together about the content at a weekend seminar.

Through this approach, we came to identify the six aspirational trends in social science methodologies that are the focus of this essay, the first of which we now turn to.

## Integrating Diverse Ways of Knowing

Traditionally, many social scientists have been trained in the dominant methods of their discipline (or subdiscipline) over the course of several intensive years of study, during which they develop the ability to apply specific methods in a "disciplined" manner. However, attention has not always been given to the deeper implications of the methodological framework at play. And these practices continue today, to varying degrees.

For instance, the unreflective adoption of dominant methods in a given field can constrain the range of examinable research questions. This contrasts with the aim of first identifying questions relevant to the betterment of society, and then determining what methodological frameworks are needed to investigate them. An unreflective approach to methods can also result in a lack of awareness regarding how the ways of knowing within one's discipline can be limited (which has both methodological and theoretical dimensions), as well as a lack of appreciation for other ways of knowing.

These problems are captured in the adage, "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." In the case of the social sciences, the hammer

requires years of training to master, and researchers might be evaluated by their peers primarily on their ability to wield it. The resulting lack of openness and reflexivity in social science practitioners has contributed to academic disciplines that tend to be siloed, competitive, and mutually critical. Though some progress is being made in this regard, as discussed below, the authors still witness these tendencies today. This perpetuates unnecessary fragmentation of the social sciences.[12]

The recent growth of multimethod research and interdisciplinary inquiry suggests a burgeoning awareness of the limitations and consequences of the patterns alluded to above.[13] In these trends, we discern an aspiration to overcome fragmented approaches to knowledge generation, driven in part by a recognition that the problems facing humanity are complex and multifaceted, and can only be addressed by drawing on diverse ways of knowing. Stated another way, we discern growing aspirations for triangulation and integration at both methodological and theoretical levels in the search for solutions to pressing social problems.

For instance, in the interdisciplinary research space of public health and urban planning, the question "What are the determinants of collective health and wellbeing?" cannot be answered using a single method, because of the variety of factors and the complex interrelationships between them that must be considered.[14] When this complexity is ignored, access to safe shelter, for example, which is an important determinant of health, is often reduced to an economic or political problem. Policies that support "upgrading" informal settlements (slums) are often promoted as a pathway to improved health outcomes in urban settings.[15] While structural improvements are imperative, a focus on rapid construction

12 The fragmentation of the social sciences has been examined by many authors over the years. See, for instance, Robert Beam, "Fragmentation of Knowledge: An Obstacle to Its Full Utilization," in *The Optimum Utilization of Knowledge*; John Holmwood and Alexander Stewart, "Synthesis and Fragmentation in Social Theory: A Progressive Solution," *Sociological Theory* vol. 12, no. 1 (1994); John Scott, "Sociology and Its Others: Reflections on Disciplinary Specialisation and Fragmentation," *Sociological Research Online* vol. 10, no. 1 (2005). For a more general discussion of fragmentation across the sciences, the classic analysis of this problem is found in David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

13 For in-depth discussion of these limitations, and of the multimethod research and interdisciplinary inquiry that is arising in response, see John Brewer and Albert Hunter, *Foundations of Multimethod Research*; Gary Goertz, *Multimethod Research, Causal Mechanisms, and Case Studies: An Integrated Approach*.

14 See, for example, Mojgan Sami, "Healthy Planning in California."

15 Susan Mercado et al., "Urban Poverty: An Urgent Public Health Issue," *Journal of Urban Health* vol. 84; Ruth Turley et al., *Slum Upgrading Strategies and Their Effects on Health and Socio-Economic Outcomes: A Systematic Review*.

or renovation of housing can deprioritize issues such as access, equity, social capital, social cohesion, sustainability, and culturally appropriate design. However, when researchers and housing advocates employ multiple methods to understand the root causes of informal settlements and the needs of the community, the resulting insights honor the complex local realities that must be addressed to foster collective health and wellbeing over the long term. Such approaches often mix traditional quantitative data collection and analytical methods with participatory approaches.[16] Similar mixed methods approaches are now being applied in research on other determinants of health, which include (but are not limited to) access to healthy food, income equality, access to quality healthcare, gender equality, access to quality education, environmental justice, and racial equity.

These types of interdisciplinary studies employ multiple methods and draw on multiple theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, they span the methodological divide between naturalism and constructivism, alluded to earlier in this paper. They do this by recognizing the interplay of empirically measurable features of social reality (such as objectively unequal health outcomes) with subjective interpretations of social reality (such as the way different populations experience access to housing and how this can harm their relationship to the community and the local institutions, which can in turn exacerbate inequitable health outcomes).

The preceding discussion illustrates the growing interest in problem-driven (vs. method-driven or theory-driven) research. Researchers begin with a problem and let their understanding of the nature of the problem determine what ways of knowing are needed in the search for solutions. Indeed, entire centers of research are being founded on such an approach. For instance, the recently founded Institute for Energy Studies at one of the authors' universities brings together faculty from diverse social science and natural science backgrounds in a collaborative search for socially viable and environmentally sustainable energy solutions.[17]

Many of today's academic fields emerged as scholars from diverse disciplines came together around a shared domain of inquiry. This was the case, for instance, in communication studies (the field of one of this essay's authors). Scholars trained in sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, rhetoric, literary studies, and other disciplines came together to investigate the central role of communication across myriad social contexts. Over time, this multidisciplinary arrangement gave rise to the interdisciplinary field of communication studies, which, as a result of how it emerged, is inherently multi-methodological. Broadly similar patterns can be seen

16 Jason Corburn and Alice Sverdlik, "Slum Upgrading and Health Equity," International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health vol. 14, no. 32.

17 See energy.wwu.edu for more information on this Institute.

in many other fields today, such as Africana studies, development studies, ethnic studies, and environmental studies.

Furthermore, with the emergence of easily searchable repositories of scholarly publications, it is becoming more common for scholars to learn of relevant research outside their disciplines, to draw insights from it and cite it, and in some cases to develop collaborative short-term research projects or long-term programs of research across disciplines.[18]

Across this range of efforts to bring together diverse ways of knowing, methodological inclusiveness can take different forms. For instance, a given field might value complementary methodological approaches, but not every research project in that field needs to employ multiple methods. Rather, some projects might employ one method to build upon or triangulate studies employing other methods. Yet methodological inclusiveness can also mean integrating diverse approaches with complementary strengths within the same study.

For example, qualitative, interpretive research can help define categories or hypothesize relationships between phenomena. Quantitative studies can then ascertain the prevalence of, the patterns in, or the correlations between those phenomena. Further qualitative research can then deepen understanding of the patterns identified by exploring, for example, the pathways of possible causality. In addition, with the emergence of big data sets in many fields, quantitative methods are being used to identify initial patterns in the data, which can then be further explored with qualitative methods, and so on. Social scientists are realizing that instead of just having hammers, we have multiple tools across multiple toolboxes from which to choose those most suitable to the questions at hand.[19] Indeed, as methodological approaches are combined, entirely new tools are developed to collect and analyze data.

18 In one interesting case, a prestigious journal simultaneously received two studies that had the same research questions and datasets but applied two different methods and arrived at similar results. Rather than accept only one of the papers, the journal viewed the two papers as a form of triangulation and encouraged the authors to collaborate on a multi-method co-authored version of the paper. See Claire Robertson et al., "Negativity Drives Online News Consumption," *Nature: Human Behaviour* vol. 7. This case is described in more detail in socialsciences.nature.com/posts/two-research-teams-submitted-the-same-paper-to-nature-you-won-t-believe-what-happens-next.

19 See, for example, Charles Reichardt and Thomas Cook, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 6th ed. Though this entire book addresses the relationship between research questions and choice of methods, chapter 1 ("The Selection of a Research Approach"), chapter 7 ("Research Questions and Hypotheses"), and chapter 10 ("Mixed Methods Procedures") are most directly relevant to the discussion at hand.

However, the aspirational trend identified above remains, to some extent, at the margins of social science research. Several factors likely play a role in this. These include long-established academic norms regarding how research is conducted; the amount of time needed for researchers to become conversant with multiple methodologies; the relative absence of institutional investments, incentives, and support mechanisms; ongoing biases in peer-review and publishing processes; and an inherited status hierarchy that tends to favor naturalistic methodologies (such as those often employed in economics) over more constructivist methodologies (such as those often employed in anthropology).

Having identified the aspiration toward integrating diverse ways of knowing, it is important to acknowledge that disciplinary training remains valuable. Diverse ways of knowing require it. Furthermore, everyone cannot do everything. The question is not whether disciplinary training is valuable, but how scholars can build their capacity to work across both theoretical and methodological differences, and how complementary ways of knowing can best contribute to the betterment of humanity.

It is in this context that we discern the aspirational trend discussed above. The ontology implicit in this aspiration is that social reality is composed of complex multifaceted phenomena that are constructed through human agency, even as those phenomena manifest, in discernible patterns, underlying truths about human existence. The epistemology implicit in this aspiration is that our understanding of these complex multifaceted phenomena can become broader and deeper by integrating diverse ways of knowing. And the axiology implicit in this aspiration is that social scientific inquiry should arise from, and be guided by, the purpose of contributing to the betterment of humanity.

These ontological, epistemological, and axiological aspirations beckon us to move beyond the false dichotomy of viewing social phenomena either as objectively existent and subject to universal laws (and thus amenable to naturalistic methodologies) or as subjectively constructed and inherently laden with context-dependent meaning (and thus requiring constructivist methodologies). This is a theme we will return to later in this essay. In the meantime, suffice it to say that social reality cannot be adequately understood through any single way of knowing, such as a purely naturalist or purely constructivist methodology. As with the particle-wave duality in physics, the principle of complementarity applies. In the social domain, this entails the need for many ways of knowing.

From a Bahá'í perspective, this implies the need for a consultative relationship between social scientists who are generating insights within different methodological (and theoretical) frameworks—a theme that has been explored in prior work.[20] Though a re-

20 See Todd Smith, "The Relativity

view of this work is beyond the scope of the current essay, it is important to note that this consultative relationship has spiritual dimensions, which the Bahá'í community has been consciously learning about. For instance, consultative inquiry requires an effort to quiet the ego and adopt a posture of humility, to cultivate collaborative rather than competitive relationships, and to foster an appreciative and mutually encouraging rather than an excessively critical stance and tone.

Furthermore, from a Bahá'í perspective, the aspiration to integrate diverse ways of knowing into a consultative framework leads naturally toward a recognition of the wealth of both tacit and explicit knowledge that already exists within the diverse populations of the world, along with the latent capacity of people from all populations to become active partners with social scientists (who must also be drawn from all populations) in the search for solutions to the problems facing humanity.

## Democratizing the Generation of Knowledge

The effort to understand social reality, while at the same time contributing to its construction, is an undertaking that belongs to, and requires the participation of, all people, regardless of their background. The social sciences contribute to this undertaking in systematized and specialized ways, having developed distinct ways of knowing, specialized languages and training, and spaces for discourse. Societies support such efforts by organizing institutions and providing funding streams, and these arrangements have been very productive. But these mechanisms and arrangements have been shaped to some extent by expressions of ego, elitism, and other social forces that have distanced the social scientific enterprise from the populations it should ideally be serving. The set of problems this has given rise to are captured in the metaphor of "the ivory tower."

Historically, these problems have included the following: Many researchers have been socially distant from the populations they would ideally be serving and thus have failed to draw upon the tacit or explicit knowledge that already exists in such populations; researchers often come from segments of the population that do not represent the full diversity of human insight and experience, and research has often been conducted on equally narrow segments of the population; research questions have often been determined by the preoccupations of researchers (and funding sources), rather than arising from the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the wider population; and the general public has often faced barriers to accessing research results, which may be couched in arcane vocabulary, hidden behind paywalls, or

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of Social Construction: Towards a Consultative Approach to Understanding Health, Illness, and Disease"; Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg, "Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Toward a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism"; Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality*.

accessible only to those who are fluent in specific languages.[21]

These problems persist, and they alienate people who are not social scientists on multiple levels. Such people may not see themselves as protagonists in knowledge-generating processes around social reality, as "ownership" of such processes is often presumed to lie with social scientists and capacities for participation in these processes are not adequately cultivated in the wider population. Hierarchical power relationships can thus emerge between researchers and research "subjects." Populations often do not recognize themselves in the ways they are represented by social scientists; they may not see their lives and concerns reflected in the topics under investigation; and they obtain no benefit from the knowledge that is accrued, if they can even access it. This contributes to a sense of distrust toward social scientific knowledge claims.

Not all of these problems can be addressed at the level of methodology. However, we discern an aspirational trend in methodology that responds to these problems; we describe it as democratizing the systematic generation of knowledge.[22]

Before elaborating this trend, a note is warranted. While recognizing the essential role the peoples of the world must play in the systematic generation of knowledge, it is important not to romanticize their existing capabilities in this regard, or to assume that everyone can or should be doing the same things. Latent capacities need to be fostered and developed across every population, so that all of humanity can participate, every individual according to their talents and interests. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the value of certain forms of specialization, such as social scientific training, within the broader enterprise of knowledge generation. The question is not whether there is a role for specialization, but how it interacts with broader processes of capacity-building and social transformation.

21 For discussions of these themes see, for example, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Against Culture*; Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*; Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine, and Ara Norenzayan., "The Weirdest People in the World?," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* vol. 33, no. 2–3; Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating, eds., *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences*; Michael Burawoy, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* vol. 70, no. 1; Richard Wallen, "Taking on Commercial Scholarly Journals: Reflections on the 'Open Access' Movement," *Journal of Academic Ethics* vol. 2.

22 A note is in order about our use of the word "democratizing" due to the prevailing political connotations of the word. The word democracy comes from the Greek *demokratia*, which combines the words δῆμος, or *demos*, meaning people, and κράτος, or *krátos*, meaning power. In this sense, we are not alluding to contemporary systems of governance. Rather, we are alluding to methodologies that seek to release the power, or raise the capacity, of all people to contribute to the generation of knowledge.

Furthermore, it would be easy to conclude that the problems we now associate with the "ivory tower" metaphor result solely from the consciously self-interested actions of power-seeking elites wanting to monopolize the control of knowledge. Such concerns are not without merit. But it is also important to recognize that, historically, literacy has not always been universally possible, schooling has been costly, and access to specialized forms of education has been limited. Undeniably, some of the barriers to education have been based on bias and bigotry, and have discriminated against broad swathes of humanity whose latent capacities were ignored. All of this, and many other historical conditions and forces, factored into the early development of the social sciences and the institutions that housed them.[23]

Today, we discern growing aspirations to move towards more inclusive, equitable, participatory, and democratic structures and processes in every domain of social existence (some countertrends notwithstanding). These movements have their parallel in many academic structures and processes, such as how decisions are made in academic institutions, how academics are educated and trained, and how social scientific knowledge is reviewed, refined, published, and shared (again, some countertrends notwithstanding). In the latter context, these movements have also been shaping, to some degree, the methodological discourse and practice of social scientists. Moreover, such movements go beyond how data is collected and analyzed or which concepts and theories gain prominence. They encompass a rethinking of the distinction between "researchers" and "researched," as well as "expert" and "lay person," and of their respective roles in formulating research priorities and questions. They also include a reconsideration of the underlying nature of data collection and analysis. In the process, they seek to address problematic power relations, tendencies toward othering, and extractive relationships between researchers and researched.

One family of methodological approaches that illustrate this aspirational trend are those that seek to expand the circle of those participating in the research process beyond formally trained social scientists, and to perform research as a type of social action. These include Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community Action Research (CAR), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), and other related approaches with different inflections. All of these approaches seek to expand participation in the research

23 It is beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to catalog all of the historical conditions and forces that shaped the development of the modern social sciences. Among them are many forms of oppression and exploitation that deprived this developmental process of the contributions of entire populations.

process; build capacities for collaborative modes of systematic inquiry; enact research as a form of collective social action; and extend the generation, diffusion, and application of knowledge beyond the academy.[24]

For example, in response to a deepening economic crisis and growing food insecurity in Central Appalachia, the Food Justice Lab at West Virginia University has collaborated, for more than a decade, with an emergent coalition of farmers, social service workers, nutritionists, doctors, state administrators, elected officials, food pantry directors, and citizen advocates working to advance food justice in the region through community-based participatory research. The Lab describes its role as one of accompaniment within this collective process of generating and applying knowledge for social change. To date, this process has advanced through three interrelated multi-year cycles of learning through action and reflection. Throughout this process, a humble, open, collaborative posture was adopted; a long-term set of relationships was fostered; and systematic action-research methods were employed, as participants learned how to co-create pedagogical and organizing tools to empower local communities as protagonists of food system change.[25] Other studies have employed participatory action research methodologies to democratize the generation of knowledge about a wide range of pressing social concerns, from the development of more equitable and effective educational systems to the social and economic empowerment of racially marginalized communities.[26]

Another related movement in methodology has been to center Indigenous ways of knowing and related knowledge-generating social processes.[27] Indigenous research methods are grounded in Indigenous worldviews and values, and they tend to prioritize community collaboration, cultural relevance, self-determination, and

24 See, for example, Karen Hacker, *Community-Based Participatory Research*; Robin McTaggart, "Principles of Participatory Action Research," *Adult Education Quarterly* vol. 41, no. 3; Nina Wallerstein et al., "Shared Participatory Research Principles and Methodologies: Perspectives from the USA and Brazil – 45 Years after Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'," *Open Societies* vol. 7, no. 2.

25 Bradley Wilson and Joshua Lohnes, "Food Justice Accompaniment Research: Theory and Social Praxis in West Virginia," *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* vol. 7.

26 See, for example, Elizabeth Drame and Decoteau Irby, eds., *Black Participatory Research*; Huma Kidwai et al., eds., *Participatory Action Research and Educational Development*.

27 See, for example, Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*; Elizabeth Sumida Huaman and Nathan Douglas Martin, eds., *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Research Methodologies: Local Solutions and Global Opportunities*; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies : Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

the well-being of Indigenous peoples. They emphasize ethical considerations such as respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge. And they share a commitment to decolonization and challenging dominant research paradigms that have historically marginalized Indigenous communities.

For example, a number of Pacific Island nations share the Indigenous concept of talanoa, which refers to a culturally distinct mode of conversation and storytelling used to strengthen relationships, share ideas, gather information, and resolve problems. Based on this practice, talanoa research methodology has emerged as a prominent Indigenous framework in parts of the Pacific.[28] One recent study employed this methodology to assess the impact of Temporary Labour Mobility Programmes initiated by New Zealand and Australia to meet domestic labor needs by offering temporary work to people from low-income Pacific Island nations. In theory, such programs are also intended to contribute, reciprocally, to the economic needs of migrant workers and to economic development in those workers' home countries. This study engaged workers from Samoa through talanoa conversations about their experiences with these programs. These conversations revealed how limited the reciprocal contributions of the programs were, and offered nuanced insights into how such programs could become more effective in this regard.[29] Other studies have employed talanoa methodologies to examine a wide range of phenomena—from understanding culturally distinct forms of political commentary[30] to assessing the efficacy of programs intended to foster culturally meaningful family well-being outcomes in the health, education, economic, cultural, and leadership domains.[31]

Across these democratizing movements, efforts are often made to deconstruct the role of the "expert" and to foster capacity for knowledge production across lay communities, toward ends that are increasingly determined by such communities. Such approaches raise questions about the role of specialized social scientific training; about how social scientists might best collaborate as equal partners with those from the wider community; about how humility can be fostered among social

28 Timote Vaioleti, "Talanoa: Differentiating the Talanoa Research Methodology from Phenomenology, Narrative, Kaupapa Maori and Feminist Methodologies," *Te Reo* vol. 56/57.

29 Stephanie Perkiss et al., "Exploring Accountability of Australia and New Zealand's Temporary Labour Mobility Programmes in Samoa Using a Talanoa Approach," *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* vol. 35, no. 4.

30 Vilsoni Hereniko, "Clowning as Political Commentary: Polynesia, Then and Now," *The Contemporary Pacific* vol. 6, no. 1.

31 Debbie Sorensen Seini Jensen, and Wilmason Jensens, "Whānau Ora and Talanoa: Generating and Using Knowledge to Achieve Pacific Family Wellbeing and Prosperity Outcomes," *Pacific Health Dialog* vol. 21, no. 4.

scientists in this regard; and about how to foster the capacity of communities to become meaningful partners in the systematic generation of knowledge.

Though these democratizing aspirations can now be discerned in the social sciences, they have been met with resistance from some conventionally trained social scientists. In addition, structural obstacles exist at the level of research funding, publishing, tenure and promotion, and so forth. For instance, research of the kind alluded to above often takes longer than traditional research, so it does not fit easily with grant-funding cycles or academic review timelines. In addition, its value is not always recognized by those who are funding or reviewing research—or those who are hiring young scholars interested in such approaches. Furthermore, traditional peer-reviewed journals, which have historically been hidden behind paywalls, are ill-suited for the dissemination of such knowledge within the communities that generate it. As a result, the authors have observed that democratizing methodologies still tend to be marginalized, or inadequately supported, in many academic settings.

The growing experience of the Bahá'í community, and the culture of learning it has developed, is coherent with the broad aspirations discussed above. It is also a source of possible insights regarding the future potential of these trends, even while bearing in mind that its context is distinct. For instance, the Bahá'í community is learning a great deal about how to raise capacity among participants—capacity for generating, diffusing, and applying knowledge within a movement of social change—through systematic training and accompaniment. The community is also learning how to construct new patterns of community life, and new administrative structures, that support these capacity-building and knowledge-generating processes. There is, of course, much more to be learned in this context. But much has already been learned.

## Reconciling Universal and Contextual Knowledge

As alluded to above, the modern social sciences emerged in the shadow of the natural sciences, which were making great strides in their efforts to discover universal laws and principles governing physical reality, from the laws of physics to the principles of natural selection in evolutionary biology. The search for universal truths of this kind is consistent with a naturalistic methodology. Not surprisingly, many early social scientists adopted this approach, based on the assumption that social reality is governed by similar laws and principles. A lot of knowledge within the social sciences has been, and continues to be, generated in this way.

However, the urge to identify universal laws and principles—combined with the limits of conveniently accessible populations and the assumptions underlying classical statistics—has often resulted in social scientists drawing unwarranted generalizations based on

unrepresentative samples.[32] These and other pressures within research settings have, among other things, contributed to a replication crisis that has undermined confidence in social scientific research.[33] In addition, naturalistic methodologies have also tended to obscure the inevitable need to interpret data about social reality, which in turn raises the question of who is interpreting data. Some aspects of such problems can be addressed within the practice of naturalistic methodologies, but some require other approaches. At the same time, it is also important to recognize that the search for universal laws and principles does not exhaust the full range of valid and important types of knowledge social scientists can and should be generating about social reality.

More constructivist approaches focus, in part, on the generation of knowledge about context-specific aspects of social reality, such as intersubjective systems of meaning, social norms, and other cultural patterns or culture-specific institutional structures. By analogy, there is much to be learned from the study of unique, localized ecosystems, and such knowledge is essential in applied sciences such as agriculture. In this regard, what is "true" can vary within different boundary conditions. However, in the social sciences, context-specific "truths" are more complicated due to the role played by human agency in the social domain. How does one systematically generate knowledge about intersubjectively constructed "truths" that can change over time, even within a given context, sometimes in response to the knowledge that is generated about them?

In this regard, constructivist approaches tend to rest on the premise that all social phenomena are continually constructed and reconstructed through human agency, within unique cultural and linguistic contexts, which yields an almost infinite diversity of social expressions. Furthermore, many constructivists focus on the myriad ways different social realities are shaped by self-interested, competitive, and oppressive relations of power. "Critical constructivists" thus tend to focus on explicating or critiquing the particular ways power is expressed in different cultural or historical contexts.

Like their naturalist counterparts, constructivist methodologies have made important contributions to our understanding of social reality. However, they can lead in the opposite direction, toward extreme relativism and the rejection of universal laws or

32 Henrich et al., "Weirdest People."

33 Traditionally, the scientific method relies on the ability to replicate studies to confirm or refute initial findings. The replication crisis in the social sciences refers to the problem that many published research findings cannot be reliably replicated or reproduced by other researchers. The replication crisis is is not limited to the social sciences. Notably, the credibility and validity of much medical research has been called into question by work such as John Ioannidis, "Why Most Published Research Findings are False," *Public Library of Science – Medicine* vol. 2, no. 8.

principles in the social domain. All social inquiry, in this latter view, should be context dependent. (Ironically, critical constructivists often implicitly assume that oppressive power relations are one of the few universal truths about social reality).

Beyond this impulse toward relativism, it is also important to recognize that constructivist approaches, by ignoring or dismissing the search for universal truths, limit in their own ways the range of valid and important types of knowledge social scientists can and should be generating about social reality. Again, the principle of complementarity should apply when considering the relationship between naturalist and constructivist approaches. It is not that most social scientists fail to acknowledge the existence of universal and contextual forms of knowledge. Rather, they often assign greater value to one or the other. And, more generally, the social sciences have not yet produced many models for integrating these two co-equal forms of knowledge and understanding them in a relational manner. Stated another way, many social scientists today acknowledge the limits of both positivism and constructivism, and can thus be considered post-positivists. Post-positivism acknowledges the existence of objective truth but asserts that efforts to comprehend reality are inevitably incomplete, as they are influenced by our values, experiences, and biases. By encouraging the use of mixed-methods and triangulation in qualitative and quantitative research, post-positivism has provided a framework for many scholars seeking insight into universal truths about reality while recognizing the multi-faceted nature of reality as it is expressed and glimpsed in different contexts. The challenge remains to develop models that integrate these co-equal forms of knowledge and understand them in a relational manner. Nonetheless, we discern an aspirational trend toward reconciling universal and contextual knowledge.

For instance, early empirical work on emotion recognition focused on looking for universality, such as the way activating certain facial muscles to form a smile will convey happiness in a way that is recognizable across many cultures. Soon, however, researchers found a pattern of cultural specificity[34]—that people were more accurate at identifying emotions such as anger and fear on the faces of people from their own culture compared to the faces of people from a different culture. Hundreds of studies subsequently delved deeper into the underlying reasons for these findings (including the existence of bias, cultural "dialects," variation in display rules and frequency), engaging a broader range of researchers who brought new perspectives. One realization that eventually emerged was that, whereas emotion had initially been conceptualized in a largely individualistic way, as something

34 Hillary Anger Elfenbein and Nalini Ambady, "On the Universality and Cultural Specificity of Emotion Recognition: A Meta-analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 128, no. 2.

centered within a person's physiology, a more nuanced understanding became possible when emotional expression, perception, and interpretation were understood as depending on the relationships between people and the context.[35] Thus the lens of contextuality yielded universal insights.

In reckoning with the relationship between universal and contextual truths, the experience of the Bahá'í community is again illuminating. The Bahá'í framework contains premises about human nature and social reality that we assume to be universally valid, such as the inherent nobility and latent capacities of every soul, and the universal operation of integrative and disintegrative social forces propelling humanity toward a new social order embodying the principle of the oneness of humanity. Within this framework, ever-expanding circles of participants engage in localized processes of learning that generate myriad context-dependent insights, from which are distilled universal patterns that contribute to the evolution of the globally shared framework within which localized learning then continues to advance. This bi-directional process of knowledge generation simultaneously flows from the particular to the universal and from the universal to the particular. Furthermore, the Bahá'í community has created institutional structures, from the local to the global level, that support these bi-directional processes.

## Identifying and Applying Normative Principles in Research[36]

The naturalism that the social sciences initially borrowed from the natural sciences tends to rest on the following "positivist" premises: "facts" are distinct from "values"; the former are valid or objective forms of knowledge while the latter are merely subjective

35 For insights into this sequence of developments, see Lisa Feldman Barrett, "Context Reconsidered: Complex Signal Ensembles, Relational Meaning, and Population Thinking in Psychological Science," *American Psychologist* vol. 77, no. 8; Ursula Hess and Konstantinos Kafetsios, "Infusing Context Into Emotion Perception Impacts Emotion Decoding Accuracy: A Truth and Bias Model," *Experimental Psychology* vol. 68, no. 6; Yukiko Uchida et al., "Emotions as Within or Between People? Cultural Variation in Lay Theories of Emotion Expression and Inference," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* vol. 35, no. 11; Katherine Greenaway, Elise Kalokerinos, and Lisa Williams, "Context is Everything (in Emotion Research)," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* vol. 12, no. 6.

36 The word normative can be used in two ways: in a descriptive manner that denotes prevailing norms, or in a prescriptive manner that denotes ideals. We are using the term in the latter sense. The phrase normative principles is roughly synonymous with the phrase spiritual principles as used in the Bahá'í community—or with the understanding that there are foundational truths about how humans ought to live if we hope to develop our latent potentialities individually and collectively.

preferences or cultural constructs; science must therefore focus on the discovery of facts, in a value-free manner. Many early social scientists, in their efforts to model themselves after the natural sciences, adopted these premises.

Today, even in the natural sciences, these premises are increasingly problematized.[37] At minimum, the notion that science advances in a value-free manner is now widely questioned. On the most basic level, the advancement of science depends on the values of curiosity, rationality, honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity. Beyond these foundational values, the direction of scientific inquiry is driven by which questions scientists believe to be most valuable at any given time. These assessments of value derive, in part, from the complex life experiences and subjectivities of the researchers. In addition, researchers also have to work within institutional reward systems and funding schemes that reflect the values of the respective institutions (including governmental, military, commercial, and philanthropic entities). Thus, neither the natural sciences nor the social sciences can ever be value free.

When it comes to values that drive the direction of research, efforts to democratize the generation of knowledge, discussed earlier, are attempting to address this concern. As the range of participants widens and diversifies, a wider range of values is driving research. In this context, many social scientists are becoming increasingly reflexive about their own values, and increasingly attentive to the values of those they study or partner with.[38]

Another problem that has been recognized with the fact/value dichotomy is this: the positivist premise that "facts" are categorically distinct from "values" is questionable—at least for some types of values.[39] Is it not a fact that every soul longs to be treated with justice? Is it not a fact that injustices hinder the unfoldment of latent human potentialities? Is it therefore not a fact that a soul who is freed from the captivity of selfish instincts would desire to see others treated with justice? And is it not a fact that oppressed communities will invariably, at some point, struggle to overcome injustice? For

37 See, for instance, Sandra Harding, ed., *The Science Question in Feminism*; Sandra Harding, *Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues*. Sandra Harding was one of the founders of feminist epistemology, which argues that we need to become more reflective about the way values—especially the values of dominant social groups—shape the practice of science. Though some aspects of her work have since been criticized, she helped advance an understanding, moderate versions of which are now widely accepted (as opposed to more extreme postmodern versions), that values can shape the questions scientists ask, what research gets funded and published, how objects of study are conceptualized, how evidence is interpreted, and so forth.

38 See, for example, Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*.

39 For a deeper examination of this issue, see Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality*.

Bahá'ís, as for many others, these value-laden truths are understood as objective facts about social existence. If this understanding is valid, then the positivist distinction between facts and values is a false dichotomy—at least for some types of values.

Historically, the false dichotomy between facts and values contributed to the moral relativism that now permeates much of society.[40] If all values have no objective reality, and are merely subjective preferences or cultural constructs, then there is no basis for distinguishing between those foundational values—or normative truths—that lead to human flourishing and other values, interests, preferences, or biases that undermine it. For instance, if all values are relative, then who is to say that collective human flourishing, itself, is a more desirable goal than the social Darwinist domination of the strong over the weak?

Though this last point may be less relevant to the objects of study examined by natural scientists, it is profoundly relevant to the social sciences, which seek to understand the dynamics that govern social existence. However, even those who tend to take values most seriously in the social sciences—those tending toward constructivist approaches—sometimes deny the existence of foundational normative truths and assume that all values are socially constructed. This picture is complicated by highly critical approaches to constructivism, which tend to focus on oppressive relations of power and tend to be motivated by social justice. Thus, while adopting relativistic perspectives on other values, those who adopt such approaches are unable to justify their own underlying commitment to social justice in a coherent manner, because doing so requires the premise that justice is a foundational normative truth.

Some social scientists have tried to side-step this problem by adopting a narrowly pragmatic posture concerned with "what works," rather than trying to justify and apply first principles. For instance, in the field of education, the question of which pedagogical approaches should be adopted can be assessed by examining which ones appear to work best—for example in relation to mastering certain content, developing certain skills, etc. But even in these contexts, the question of what works best can only be answered within an implicit framework of values related to the purpose of education in the life of students and in society. Do we want students who can out-compete their peers on standardized tests, so that winners can be sorted from losers within a culture of contest? Or do we want students who can solve problems with their peers in collaborative learning processes, so capacities for collective endeavor can be fostered across entire communities? Thus, the question of "what works" leads to very different answers within cooperative or competitive, emancipatory or oppressive, value frameworks.

40 For an accessible discussion of this problem, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, chapters 2 and 3.

In light of all the considerations discussed above, many social scientists now recognize that it is impossible to conduct research that is not shaped by underlying values, and that all knowledge produced by such research also has normative consequences. In response to this recognition, we discern an aspirational trend among some social scientists to explicitly identify and consciously apply normative principles in their research. For instance, feminist programs of research have been doing this for decades now. At the center of such research tend to be principles such as the equality of the sexes, social justice, empowerment, caring, and compassion. Another example is the program of research and practice that has more recently emerged around fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in organizational contexts. The normative principles at the center of this research have become synonymous with the program of research itself. Indeed, the identification and relative prioritization of different principles is an explicit and ongoing conversation within this field, as other principles such as social justice (SJ), belonging (B), accessibility (A), and cultural empowerment (CE) are proposed or incorporated into such efforts (e.g., SJEI, DEIB, ADEI, DEICE). In this example, one can also clearly observe ongoing processes of learning about what works, and what does not, in efforts to foster the embodiment of such principles in organizational contexts (as many early efforts have proven at least partially counter-productive).

Efforts to identify and apply normative principles to the betterment of society reflect an axiological stance. But ontological and epistemological premises capable of justifying this stance are also needed. Otherwise, it will not be possible to arrive at a wider consensus regarding the legitimacy of such work as social science.

One effort to address these ontological and epistemological concerns can be seen in critical realism, which offers a framework in which the possibility of foundational normative truths can be seriously considered. Critical realism is a philosophical framework that seeks to understand the relationship between the social world and our knowledge of it.[41] It was developed, in part, as a response to the limitations of naturalism and constructivism, and it can be understood as a post-positivist paradigm.

Critical realism recognizes that there is an external social reality that exists independently of our perceptions and beliefs about it. It accepts that our knowledge of this reality is imperfect and is influenced by various social, cultural, and historical factors. It aims to bridge the gap between this external reality and our subjective understanding of it by uncovering the hidden structures, mechanisms, and causes that shape social phenomena. In

41 For in-depth explorations of critical realism, see for instance Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* and *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*.

other words, social phenomena are not merely constructed by human ideas or language. They have underlying structures and mechanisms that shape their form and behavior. This is the critical realist ontology—sometimes referred to as transcendental realism—and it encompasses the possibility of foundational normative principles that enable human flourishing.

Epistemologically, critical realism recognizes that our knowledge and understanding of social reality are limited and fallible. It acknowledges the influence of social context and subjective factors on our interpretations of reality. However, it argues that while our knowledge is fallible, it can be improved through rigorous investigation into underlying structures and causal mechanisms. Toward this end, it encourages critical examination of both dominant and alternative explanations of social phenomena. This involves analyzing the contradictions, power relations, and social processes that shape and maintain social phenomena.

In this regard, critical realism represents one possible approach to an ontological and epistemological justification for "critical" justice-oriented programs of research within the social sciences, along with programs of research concerned with other normative commitments. But it does not adopt a relativistic approach to all normative principles. Nor does it dogmatically prescribe a specific framework of normative principles. Rather, it suggests that the still-inadequately understood normative principles governing social existence need to be investigated, discovered, and then applied.

The approach taken by critical realism includes systematically reasoning backward from observed patterns to possible causal mechanisms and principles. This entails the collection of rich bodies of empirical data (both quantitative and qualitative), finding patterns in the data, and redescribing those patterns using theoretical concepts. Critical realists often refer to these processes of reasoning as abduction. This process goes beyond the mere thick description of empirical patterns. It attempts to generate theoretical explanations for such patterns, acknowledging the provisional nature of these explanations. Critical realists then apply what they often call retroductive reasoning, which involves identifying contextual social conditions that enable a causal mechanism to take effect.

What this methodological innovation offers is a way of exploring the possibility that normative principles—such as oneness, justice, and love—are foundational features of, or causal forces operating within, social existence. Yet it does this in a way that recognizes the always-tentative and evolving nature of our ability to theorize about these truths. It thus complements the principle-driven programs of research alluded to above (i.e., feminist research, DEI research, etc.), by suggesting an ontological and epistemological basis for such research. In doing this, it moves beyond extreme value relativism while bringing a posture of humility to value realism.

At the same time, critical realists draw on the conceptual and theoretical contributions made by principle-driven programs of research. They do this when they engage in the abductive search for plausible explanations of empirical social patterns.

Taken together, these approaches offer the possibility of increasing social scientific confidence in the existence of foundational normative truths—as such truths are tested against reality over time. These combined approaches also offer the possibility that different understandings of these normative truths might converge, or their complementarity might be increasingly recognized, over time. We are not suggesting that critical realism is the only, or the ultimate, framework that enables these possibilities. Rather, we are suggesting that it embodies an aspiration to do so.

Once again, insights can be gleaned from the experience of the Bahá'í community. The Bahá'í framework is premised on foundational normative truths—or spiritual principles—such as: Humanity is one and division, conflict, and oppression blight our well-being and advancement; diversity is a source of richness and strength, and human prosperity depends on universal participation; and human beings have an inherent nobility that can be fostered for individual and collective flourishing. For Bahá'ís, divine revelation provides insights into these truths beyond what we might learn through experience or science, partly because it speaks to as-yet-unrealized human potential and social possibilities. We can develop deeper understandings of these truths as we strive to put them into practice. Moreover, our diversity gives us different insights into these truths, and these truths express themselves differently in different contexts. Nonetheless, Bahá'ís accept, as an article of faith, that while we only understand them partially, these normative truths are embedded in an objective reality. They act as real forces within social processes. Thus, when we align our efforts for social change with them, those efforts will be more effective. And our cognizance of them in our search for knowledge will provide deeper insights. Over time, the verity of these normative assertions will be demonstrated in practice if efforts founded upon them are fruitful—that is, if they lead to human flourishing and shared prosperity.

## Fostering Discursive Reflexivity

Naturalism's relatively untroubled view of the relationship between reality and human understanding has, as discussed above, been challenged by a range of concerns in the social sciences. Social reality is constructed through intersubjective systems of meaning, and studying social reality thus has an inherently interpretive dimension. Social reality is continually shaped and reshaped by human agency, and even the process of studying social phenomena influences this shaping and reshaping. Distilling universal truths from the almost infinite diversity of cultural and historical contexts is an exceedingly challenging

endeavor. Knowledge can be shaped by and perpetuate the power, interests, values, and norms of those who participate in, or fund, its generation. And so on.

In addition, in the second half of the twentieth century, the ways that language mediates our understanding of reality became an object of increasing attention, giving rise to "the linguistic turn"—or the "discursive turn"—in the social sciences and humanities. Within this movement, the focus of study became the many ways that language and discourse structure our perception of the world and shape our thoughts (in this context, discourse can be understood as the patterned use of language in relation to a given theme). In other words, language was no longer seen as a neutral conveyer of meaning. Rather, linguistic constructs enable and constrain what is possible to think and say, with profound social implications.

Consider, for instance, the concept of "race"—a concept that does not correspond categorically to any meaningful distinctions within human biology yet served as one of the intellectual foundation stones for an entire social order. This concept was uncritically employed by natural and social scientists for generations, in ways that often helped to justify the social order the concept helped give rise to. Even today, invoking the concept as a means of understanding its social impacts can inadvertently reify and perpetuate the concept in our minds, which has led to a discursive "color-bind."[42]

Such concerns about language and discourse grew, in part, out of "poststructuralist" forms of critique. At the core of poststructuralist thought is a concern with the relationship between knowledge and power—with the latter generally understood as domination. Such concerns call for critical self-reflexivity about words, concepts, categories, narratives, assumptions, observation statements, moral beliefs, value statements, and other constructs that are both linguistic and cognitive. All such constructs presumably have histories—or "genealogies"—that can be studied in order to reveal the ways that relations of power have shaped them and operate through them.[43]

These movements have given rise to methodological approaches that "denaturalize" and "deconstruct" inherited linguistic and cognitive constructs, making it easier to question them and think beyond or outside of them. For these methodological approaches, the objects of study became linguistic and cognitive constructs—and the discourses they constitute—rather than the reality those constructs refer to.

42 Jabari Mahiri, *Deconstructing Race: Multicultural Education Beyond the Color-Bind*. For related discussions of this theme, see also Barbara Fields and Karen Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*; Sheena Michelle Mason, *The Raceless Antiracist: Why Ending Race Is the Future of Antiracism*.

43 Seminal texts on this genealogical approach include Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*; and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

Poststructuralists try to problematize dominant (or hegemonic) discourses, and thereby disrupt the prevailing field of power relations in ways that open more space for subjugated discourses.

This approach to discourse has yielded many important insights into the historical contingency of notions that are widely taken for granted, the social implications of their being taken for granted, and the possibility of other ways of knowing and being. However, poststructuralism itself—at least its strong version—is unable to advocate for specific ways of knowing and being, in part because its relativism makes it impossible to adjudicate between them, and in part because it assumes that all ways of knowing and being (including any it might advocate) are ultimately constituted by problematic relations of power.

This has not prevented thinkers with value-based commitments, like feminists and Marxists, from drawing on poststructuralist methodologies. Indeed, most poststructuralist analyses appear to be motivated by underlying values such as social justice. This presents a challenging contradiction to poststructuralist thought. Poststructuralism cannot acknowledge the foundational nature of any values, yet implicit values are intrinsic to the organizing logic of poststructuralist methodologies.

These limitations and contradictions notwithstanding, we discern in these movements—poststructuralism and the broader linguistic/discursive turn—an aspiration to foster critical reflexivity about underlying structures of thought, including social scientific thought. This aspirational movement is distinct from the more general tendency, which has become endemic in the social sciences (and humanities), of privileging critical over appreciative modes of inquiry.[44] Yet this movement and the more generalized modes of criticism are related, inasmuch as both can lead toward excessive criticism. In addition, both can be premised on an implicit theory of change that focuses primarily on tearing things down, and not on building things up. Critique is undoubtedly warranted when inherited linguistic and discursive constructs are oppressive. But some inherited constructs are also valuable, emancipatory, and connected—even partially—to deeper truths about social existence. Such constructs can be built upon. The analysis of inherited linguistic and discursive constructs therefore requires both critical and appreciative modes of inquiry.

Poststructuralism offers no approach to the latter. The history of ideas, on the other hand, is a related interdisciplinary field that predates poststructuralism, but later began to draw on some poststructuralist approaches (such as its methodology of critically tracing the genealogies of ideas and paying attention to marginalized intellectual

44 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 30; Casper Bruun Jensen, "Experiments in Good Faith and Hopefullness: Toward a Postcritical Social Science," *Common Knowledge* vol. 20, no. 2.

histories).[45] This field of study encompasses critical and appreciative modes of inquiry, as a means of examining the development and evolution of human thought over time. It focuses on intellectual and philosophical concepts, theories, and movements that have shaped societies and cultures throughout history. It seeks to understand how ideas emerge, spread, transform, and impact societies within specific historical contexts. And it does this by critically analyzing and evaluating ideas while also appreciating their historical significance and intellectual contributions. As a field, the history of ideas does not represent the fulfillment of the aspirational trend we have identified here. But it can be seen as one current within this trend.

The conceptual framework guiding the work of the Bahá'í community shares the premise that language and discourse play a significant role in constituting social reality. Thus, the Bahá'í community has been consciously developing a shared vocabulary, associated with a framework of concepts that are being progressively clarified, that enables a culture of reflective learning through action. Furthermore, one of the areas of endeavor about which the Bahá'í community is actively learning is how to contribute to the discourses of society with increasing efficacy, as a means of contributing to the advancement of civilization.

Through these processes, Bahá'ís are increasingly recognizing the need for transformative change on multiple levels: attitudes and behaviors, or hearts and minds; social structures and institutions; and the intellectual foundations of civilization itself.[46] The aspirational trend identified here offers ways of systematically excavating those intellectual foundations and critically examining them—which is essential to human progress. When this is combined with appreciative modes of inquiry, it enables us to identify not only those elements that should be discarded, but also those elements that are worth preserving and building upon. For Bahá'ís, this can be understood as a process of sifting inherited constructs, in light of the spiritual truths contained in divine revelation and the experience of the Bahá'í community as it learns how to apply those truths in purpose-driven processes of social transformation.

Furthermore, overcoming oppression is a central element of the processes the Bahá'í community seeks to advance. Examining the relations of power that have shaped the generation of knowledge—which is an important aspect of the aspirational trend discussed above—is particularly

45 Refer, for example, to the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. See also David Runciman, *The History of Ideas: Equality, Justice and Revolution*; Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; Runciman, *The History of Ideas: Equality, Justice and Revolution*.

46 Farzam Arbab, "Intellectual Life."

germane to this process. Bahá'u'lláh describes the search for truth as a fundamental duty for every soul. And He explains that when this search for truth is clouded by the discourse propagated by self-interested actors, this constitutes the most grievous form of oppression.[47] Bahá'u'lláh also offers a more expansive conception of power, beyond its competitive and oppressive forms. There is little doubt that self-interested, competitive, and oppressive expressions of power have shaped language, discourse, and knowledge. But the human spirit is also endowed with ennobling powers—the powers of love, compassion, altruism, cooperation, unity, and justice, to name only a few—that have played their own role in shaping language, discourse, and knowledge. Releasing these constructive forms of power in every population is necessary for building a just and united social order, and our social analyses must help us understand this.

## Generating Knowledge for Social Transformation

The natural sciences seek to explain aspects of physical reality, as they are. These aspects of reality came into existence through cosmological, geological, and biological processes that were independent of human agency. The applied sciences then seek to apply this knowledge to the construction of technologies that, at their best, improve the human condition—even though technologies can also be developed that threaten human well-being. Either way, the applied sciences have clearly been transforming the conditions in which we live. In response to this transformative impact, there is growing concern regarding the purpose to which we put the applied natural sciences and the paths of technological development they make possible.

The social sciences are differently, and in a sense more deeply, implicated in transforming the reality they study. To understand why, one needs to distinguish between the pure and applied natural sciences (which is, of course, another ideal type distinction). The applied natural sciences are undoubtedly transforming the conditions of human existence in the ways alluded to above. But in the pure natural sciences, the mere act of describing and explaining physical reality does not generally transform that which it describes (observer effects and other issues notwithstanding). This is because, generally speaking, that which is being described came into existence independent of human consciousness and human agency. In the social sciences, however, describing and explaining social phenomena can directly impact those phenomena. This is because social phenomena emerge—causally—from the exercise of human consciousness and human agency, and both of these can be influenced by the descriptive and explanatory models of social scientists.

The concept of the double hermeneutic illuminates this point (Giddens 20–21). Hermeneutics refers to

47 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán.

processes of interpretation. The double hermeneutic refers to the way processes of knowledge generation about social reality simultaneously derive from and influence the ways we interpret social reality, which in turn influences how we enact or construct social reality. On a societal scale, the double hermeneutic can be seen in the way economic research is shaped by prior assumptions and concepts, and the research findings can then shape the behavior of individuals, the decisions of institutions, and the functioning of entire economies (observations of which can then further inform the assumptions and concepts that drive subsequent research). Economic models even shape other disciplines and their objects of study, to the extent economic constructs have colonized thought in other fields.

Of course, social scientists have long understood the society-shaping power of their work. For instance, social scientific research has at times been harnessed to political and commercial projects of mass manipulation, as an instrument of elite interests. Social scientific research has also been applied to many projects motivated by the purpose of improving social well-being, including the well-being of marginalized groups. When we look at methodological innovations that align with the latter pro-social purposes, we discern a wider aspirational trend toward generating knowledge for social transformation.

For instance, the various forms of action research alluded to in the section on democratizing the generation of knowledge are all motivated by this purpose. Methodologically, they tend to engage in collaborative and iterative processes of action and reflection that enable them to investigate social conditions, tentatively identify patterns, test their ideas against reality, and collaboratively work to improve those conditions. Such approaches to the generation of knowledge embrace the double hermeneutic, in part by eliminating the distance between the "subjects" and "objects" of learning, and in part by leaning into the ways that the generation of knowledge can purposefully shape human consciousness and agency.

Another methodological innovation that illustrates the same underlying aspirational trend is phronesis. This approach is based on a contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, which referred to the "practical wisdom that comes from an intimate familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of any particular social practice" (Schram 16). Phronetic social science is founded on the premise that the social sciences cannot and should not emulate the natural sciences, because of their human subject matter. Instead, social science research is best equipped to produce a different type of situated knowledge, one that informs and enhances practical wisdom. This wisdom grows out of a researcher's intimate familiarity with practice in distinct contexts. From this perspective, "the natural sciences are better at testing hypotheses to demonstrate abstract principles and lawlike

relationships, while the social sciences are better at producing situated knowledge about how to understand and act in contextualized settings" (16–17). By advocating for context-sensitive research such as case studies, phronetic social sciences allows researchers to use their judgment throughout the inquiry process and to draw upon multiple methodological tools, along with multiple theoretical frameworks, to best understand the complexities of the social problem they are investigating.

Though phronetic methodologies generate context-sensitive forms of knowledge about social transformation, they have not yet offered a systematic means of distilling universal patterns and principles from the accumulating body of context-dependent insights they generate. The same can be said of community-based participatory action research. What is needed, in this regard, are systems and approaches capable of integrating (a) the generation of a large body of context-sensitive knowledge with (b) the distillation of universal patterns and principles from that body of knowledge.

An illustration of this integrating capacity may be found in the field of prejudice reduction, which is focused on reducing bias toward members of different racial, national, religious, and other identity-based groups. Research on this topic tends to be situated within the particular social challenges of a given context, such as race relations between Black and White people in the United States, attitudes between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, interactions between groups in Israel and Palestine, attitudes towards migrants among Europeans, and more. A growing body of situated knowledge is being generated at this level. At the same time, across these diverse settings, the field of prejudice reduction research is distilling some underlying, arguably universal, principles for reducing animosity and improving empathy between groups. The power of intergroup contact, the role of education, the importance of social norms as conveyed both by peers and institutions, and the value of narratives that provide insights into (and evoke empathy for) others' lived experiences, have emerged consistently across this research, and have been taken up by people and organizations striving to tackle the continuing challenges of prejudice and discrimination.[48]

In this latter example, we can see the aspiration to generate knowledge for social transformation becoming

48 John Dovidio et al., "Cooperation and Conflict within Groups: Bridging Intragroup and Intergroup Processes," *Journal of Social Issues* vol. 65, no. 2; Sohad Murrar and Markus Brauer, "Overcoming Resistance to Change: Using Narratives to Create More Positive Intergroup Attitudes," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* vol. 28, no. 2; Elizabeth Levy Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," *Annual Review of Psychology* vol. 72; Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, "How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-analytic Tests of Three Mediators," *European Journal of Social Psychology* vol. 38, no. 6.

integrated with the aspiration to reconcile universal and contextual forms of knowledge. It is not difficult to imagine such processes becoming further integrated with the aspiration to democratize the generation of knowledge, and other aspirational trends we have been exploring in this paper.

Yet again, the experience of the Bahá'í community is illuminating in this regard. The generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge within the Bahá'í community is explicitly and unapologetically tied to a long-term project of social transformation: the construction of a global civilization that embodies, and gives full expression to, the principle of the oneness of humanity in all its diversity. In other words, purpose becomes a central organizing principle for the generation of knowledge. Concepts, questions, methods, and approaches are all developed and refined in light of how they contribute to this purpose. It is in this context that Bahá'ís are developing a universally inclusive, participatory, and democratized culture of learning in action. And this process generates context-dependent and universal forms of knowledge.

## Conclusion

The aspirational trends sketched above do not exhaust the kinds of movements that can be discerned in social science methodologies. The trends discussed in this paper also express themselves in different ways, and they have advanced to different degrees, in different fields. And though these trends have been distinguished for analytical purposes, they are deeply interrelated and mutually informing.

These trends have been identified because they all have some resonance with elements of the framework guiding the work of the Bahá'í community. In sum, the Bahá'í community is learning how to foster practices, and how to cultivate requisite spiritual qualities, within a consultative approach to the investigation of reality that enables participants to integrate diverse ways of knowing. Through systematic training and accompaniment, the community is learning how to raise capacity among ever-widening circles of participants, from all strata of society, in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge. Such participants engage in a bidirectional process of knowledge generation that simultaneously flows from the particular to the universal and from the universal to the particular. This process is facilitated by institutional structures, the development and refinement of which are among the objects of our learning. We seek to apply spiritual principles in every area of learning, through processes of action, reflection, consultation, and study. Such principles inform our analyses of the patterns unfolding through our efforts. This is enabled, in part, by reflexive attention to the language we are developing, along with the associated concepts this language enables us to articulate, apply, and progressively clarify—including an expansive conception of power. This attention to

language and thought—including concern with the intellectual foundations of the current social order—is also expressed in our participation in the prevalent discourses of society. And all of this is explicitly and unapologetically tied to a transformative social purpose.

In relating these features of our framework to methodological aspirations we discern in the social sciences we are not suggesting that the Bahá'í Faith constitutes a social science. We are drawing these connections because the Bahá'í community, in order to realize Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity, is committed to the systematic generation of knowledge about spiritual, physical, and social aspects of reality. Broadly speaking, the Bahá'í commitment to the generation of knowledge about social reality is shared with the social sciences. In this regard, we see complementarity rather than sameness. Such complementarity raises a number of questions: How might we best conceptualize the relationship between these distinct, and partially overlapping, systems of knowledge and practice? How might each draw upon, and contribute to, the advancement of the other?

Setting those important questions aside, for the moment, the more immediate purpose of this essay is to invite greater reflexivity about the methodological choices we make as we enter, or practice, the social sciences. We hope it is clear from our discussion that methodological choices carry profound social implications. And, though some people are thinking deeply about this, social scientific discourse on the whole does not pay adequate attention to these issues.

In this context, we re-assert our belief that methodological discourse and practice in the social sciences have not reached the maturity they must one day reach, in order for the social sciences to assume their inherent role and responsibilities in the advancement of civilization. We also re-assert our conviction that the need to cross this threshold of maturation has taken on existential significance.

We hope this essay will, in some humble way, contribute to these processes of maturation by stimulating dialog and learning along these lines. For those of us who are studying, or working in, the social sciences, we would do well to ask: How can we contribute to methodological discourse and practice in ways that advance the aspirational trends identified above—and others not identified here—to hasten the maturation of the social sciences? What are the spaces in which we can offer such contributions, with a humble posture of learning, alongside others who share these aims? How can we accompany young people, as they enter the social sciences, so they can carry forward these processes in conscious, purposeful, and self-reflexive ways?

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