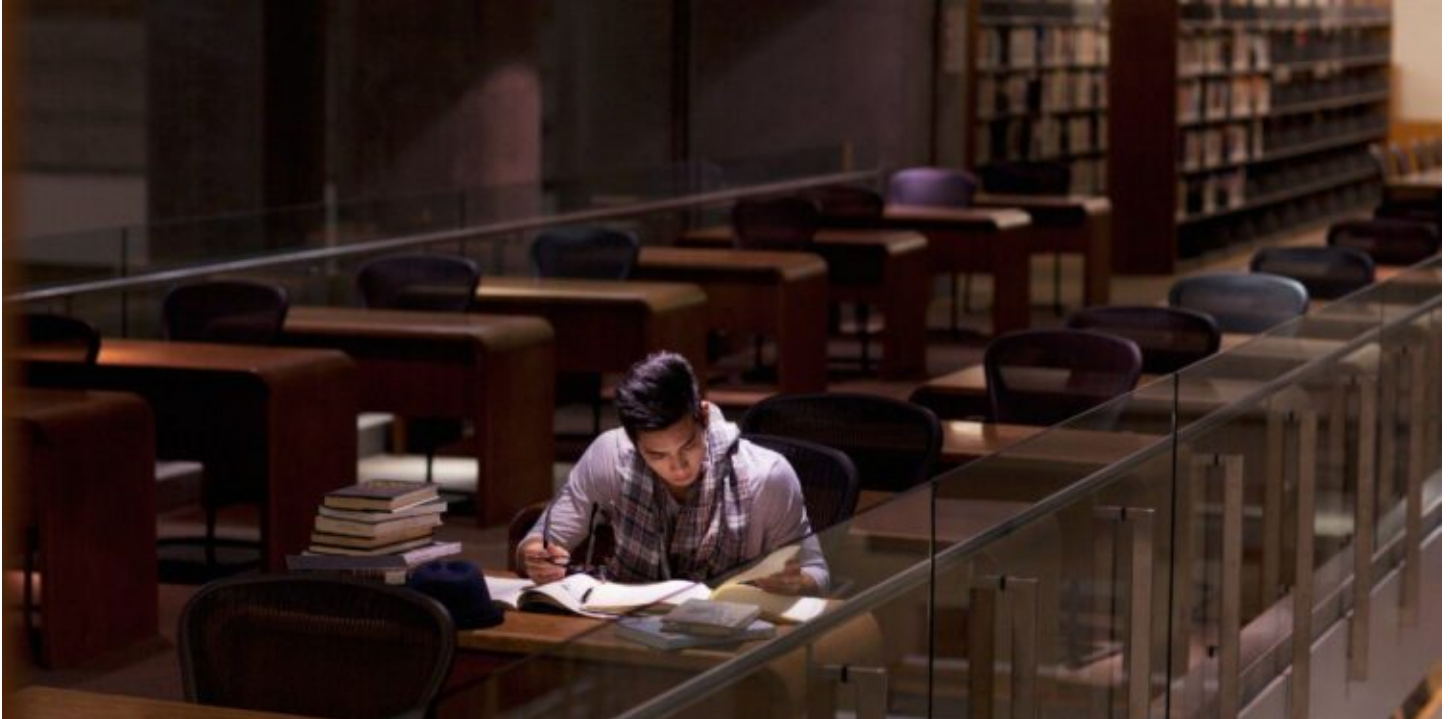


Research for The Sake of Research

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On a fog-drenched morning in Lahore, huddled up, in their typical academic attire, are this group of professors and researchers. There is a peculiar sense of haughtiness in the air, so peculiar that it is only trumped in its sadness by the bland tea and the vanilla biscuits on offer.

It is tea break during an academic conference, and I find myself in that difficult predicament of acting all formal and being replete with academic verbose. Researchers and academics from all over the world have congregated here to present their findings and research outcomes. Yet two and a quarter days have gone by and I am still to hear a novel idea let alone a telling research outcome. All I hear are the same old stories packaged by their exponents as groundbreaking findings – trying to pass off as academic innovation, their bare attempts at garnering more publications in peer-reviewed journals – with some of those very peers sitting gregariously in their audience nodding their heads in appreciation.

For instance, one professor from the all-mighty Oxford University vehemently championed her research finding that it is also important to talk to and influence male relatives in a family if we are to increase female electoral participation. Another professor from a slightly less mighty university rambled on for a good hour, only to conclude with the finding that giving a combination of in-kind assets and cash to the poor instead of just cash is a more effective strategy for taking them out of

poverty. Now for a layman, these might be interesting pieces of information, but for most social scientists these are well-established findings. Such research findings might have been novel when they were first reported, but no longer have any novelty attached to them. Add to the fact that the two professors probably spent a significant amount of public money, since donor money is also public money in a worldwide sense, conducting their surveys and experiments puts the entire academic enterprise in somewhat of a conundrum.

Let me clarify plainly before we delve any further. I am not against academic research. I am just against research when it's done for the sake of research and adds little to no value to existing knowledge in its subject matter.

Academic inquiry is fundamentally important when it comes to pushing the boundaries of existing knowledge in any field. Indeed, without the geniuses of researchers such as Avicenna, Newton, or Einstein – we would be much poorer as a species. On the front of social science, the likes of Ibn-Khaldun, Smith, Marx, Freud, and others were profound thinkers and researchers who pushed the boundaries of existing knowledge, and without whose contribution to their respective fields we would be much deprived in all so numerous aspects.

A former academic colleague of mine once narrated a story of how she almost snapped at one of her thesis defense committee members when they asked her about the practical and policy implications of her research. She maintained that she was a researcher foremost and that policy implications were not of her concern nor among her motivating factors. A somewhat similar story was once narrated to me by a professor of mine – he recounted the time when the Nobel Laureate Dr. Abdus Salam was asked during a seminar in London about the practical applications of his research – to which he replied, with visible annoyance on his face, “practical applications? – none whatsoever!”

The one and arguably the most crucial difference between the two stories is that while Dr. Salaam, given the novelty of his research ideas had the luxury of not giving any immediate heed to practical applications – most of us researchers do not have this luxury. Particularly, those of us who undertake what I would call research for the sake of research. I do realize that it is not within all of us to come up with novel ideas. Perhaps mere probability dictates that there needs to be a lot of substandard, average, and run-of-the-mill research, for there to be novel ideas among the haystack. But even if this was to be true, the uncalled-for haughtiness that most of my academic brethren carry with them is thoroughly unjustified. Research for the sake of research is just part of an academic industry that helps to keep professors and researchers employed. Repackaged research findings are not actual research – but still, if for our own self-interest, we were to stick to such research – we should abandon the arrogance that permeates our ivory towers and dare not say “I am a researcher, I don't care about policy implications.”





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