

The Methodology for Prioritising Iran's Social Problems

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective in scientifically examining social problems is preparing the grounds for solving them. One of the essential steps in designing concrete practical measures to address social problems is determining the order of priority between social problems, as social problems are innumerable, while a society's resources in resolving them are limited. Iranian researchers have made several attempts at prioritising Iran's social problems. Yet, in addition to being very few, they suffer from several methodological flaws that drastically diminish their credibility. In the article at hand, we will first analyse the key concepts of social problem and methodology. Thereafter, we will examine the various methods and criteria used in the most credible studies available that have attempted to prioritise Iran's social problems. From this examination and analysis, we have inferred five principal theoretic steps that need to be observed in the prioritisation of social problems so as to ensure the credibility and practical applicability of the article: (1) deciding who determines the priorities, (2) defining a particular theoretic approach, (3) drafting a comprehensive list of prospective social problems, (4) ensuring the homogeneity of the proposed social problems, and (5) defining a clear and distinct criterion for prioritisation.

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INTRODUCTION

Social problems have existed since the very beginning of human social existence. With the advent of modernity, however, there has been a drastic escalation in the degree and variety of social problems owing to a wide range of reasons, including epistemic

transformations, social upheavals, and demographic shifts. In response to this escalating trend, social scientists have made it their primary concern to study and address these problems (Moidfar, 2008, p. 11). Social issues partake of certain qualities and features that prevent scientific research regarding them from ever reaching the point of exhaustion; their volume and variety continues to increase rather than decrease. Some of these qualities and features are as follows.

- (1) In most societies, social problems are always growing. We would be hard-pressed to locate a society that has succeeded in eliminating or even reducing its social problems.
- (2) Social problems tend to expand, constantly encroaching on new areas of social life.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the capacity of human societies in addressing and resolving social problems is limited. It is nearly impossible to expect that societies should be able to find the theoretical solutions to social problems, translate these solutions into practical measures, and implement them while keeping pace as the problems emerge and develop. Furthermore, another factor to keep in mind is the order governing the relations of the theoretical solutions and the consequent practical measures to one

another. The theoretic engagement in scientific endeavours to find the solution to some problems can pave the way for finding the solution to further problems, just as implementing the solutions to and eliminating some problems can potentially lead to the practical resolution of other social problems or at least to a reduction of their intensity. Considering these two factors—the disparity between the rapidity with which social problems develop and the pace at which societies can address them, on the one hand, and the different sequence of relations that hold between social problems and their solutions, on the other—in addition to the aforementioned qualities and features of social problems help us better understand the critical importance of prioritising social problems and determining the appropriate order in which they must be addressed.

The study of the social problems of Iran—a country with a rich history and a dynamic and vibrant culture—naturally faces the same challenges highlighted above. Additionally, however, two key facts render an examination of Iran's social problems even more difficult. The first is that until a decade or two ago, compared to political and economic problems, social problems received very little attention in Iran. Second, once social problems rose to the same level of prominence as that of political and economic problems, they faced yet another obstacle, which was the fact that the methods

used to deal with them suffered from serious problems, in theoretical investigation as well as in practical implementation. One problem, in both theory and implementation, relates to determining the order of priority between social problems, compounded by a chronic failure to duly acknowledge the strong relation that ties them together. In conducting theoretical examinations and in implementing the practical measures intended to address social problems, little concern has been given to prioritising them, and when there has been some level of prioritisation, the criteria and factors used have lacked sufficient comprehensiveness. Furthermore, there has been a persistent failure to realise that social problems are inextricably interrelated and that there is more than one way in which two social problems can be interconnected. These two general shortcomings about the theoretical examination of social problems and the practical measures taken to address them have severely impaired and limited their effectiveness.

The available studies on social problems in Iran can be grouped into two general categories. One category comprises studies that scrutinise one or more social issues in a descriptive or explanatory methodology and offer solutions for them. The second category consists of studies that conceptually

analyse a social problem and consider how it can be addressed. The latter studies are generally considered to precede the former studies. Studies of social problems in Iran generally fall into the first category. The present study, however, belongs to the second category. What we seek in this article is specifically to study the methodologies underlying the available prioritisations of social problems in Iran so that by comparing and contrasting the relative advantages and disadvantages of each, we may arrive at a better understanding of the most appropriate method in prioritising the social problems in Iran. With the better understanding, we can hope to solve these problems. The better understanding is first step to solve them. To this end, we will analyse the meaning of social problem and methodology, look at the available prioritisations of social problems in Iran, and scrutinise the criteria and factors underpinning these prioritisations, enumerating their comparative pros and cons. We will then present five steps that we perceive as essential to any study that aims to prioritise Iran's social problems.

Research Background

In this section, it is provided an overview of the studies that have attempted to prioritise Iran's social problems in table format to simplify.

Table 1
An overview of the studies that have attempted to prioritise Iran's social problems

Research Title	Author	Year Conducted	Statistical Population	Sample Size	Method	Results	Classification
Owlaiyyatbandi asibha wa masa'el ejtema' i dar iran ("Prioritisation of Social Problems and Issues in Iran")	Motamedi (2007)	1385 AHS [2007]		823 individuals – managers and other employees of Iran's State Welfare Organisation (Sazman Behzisti)	Delphi (three rounds)	Most important: joblessness, opioid addiction	Social problems and issues; family-related issues; other issues and problems
Moshkelat ejtema' i dar owlaiyyat iran ("Social Problems of Priority in Iran")	Rafiyee & Madani (2008)	1387 AHS [2008]		41 individuals – managers, professionals, experts	Delphi (four rounds)	Most important: opioid addiction, joblessness, violence	Least important: inequality in the implementation of laws and enjoyment of civil rights
Arzeshha wa negreshhaye iranien ("The Values and Views of Iranians")	The Office of National Projects, The Ministry of Culture, and Islamic Guidance (2000)	1379 AHS [2000]	Individuals over 15 years of age in 28 capitals of provinces		Survey	Most important: joblessness, high prices	
Arzeshha wa negreshhaye iranien ("The Values and Views of Iranians")	The Office of National Projects, The Ministry of Culture, and Islamic Guidance (2000)	1381 AHS [2002]	Individuals over 15 years of age in 28 capitals of provinces	451 individuals	Survey	Most important: economic problems, joblessness	
Motale'eh shenasa' i wa owlaiyyatbandi asibhaye ejtema' i shaye' dar manateq rusta' i ("Studying, Identifying, and Prioritising the Prevalent Social Problems in Villages")	Amir Ahmadi (2005)	1384 [2005]	Villages of ten provinces		Survey	Most important: poverty, joblessness	
Ta' ammoli jam'e eshenakhti dar tashkhis wa ta'yin owlaiyyat masa'el ejtema' i iran ("A Sociologic Reflection Aimed at Identifying and Determining the Priority of Iran's Social Issues")	Yusefi & Akbari (2011)	1390 AHS [2011]	Four national surveys	36429 individuals	Secondary analysis	Most important: economic issues, social issues	Social issues, cultural issues, political issues
Owlaiyyatbandi masa'el ejtema' i wa farhangi ostan esfahan ("Prioritising the Social and Cultural Issues of the Province of Isfahan")	Esmaili (2005)	1384 AHS [2005]	The municipalities of the Province of Isfahan		Survey	Most important: joblessness, opioid addiction	Least important: environmental problems, problems arising from inadequate social education

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Conceptual Definition

Methodology

The terms *method* and *methodology* are often used interchangeably, and this is a very unfortunate mistake (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). As defined by Blaikie, *method* consists in the techniques used for gathering and analysing data. *Methodology*, on the other hand, refers to discussions of how research is done, or should be done, and to the critical analysis of methods of research. Methodology also deals with logics of enquiry, of how new knowledge is generated and justified... Methodology includes a critical evaluation of alternative research strategies and methods. (Blaikie, 2000, pp. 8-9).

Giddens accepts research methods as real techniques used to study social life (Giddens, 1993, p. 676), but he defines methodology as the study of logical questions relating to research (p. 679).

Therefore, it would be correct to describe methodology as a second-order knowledge that reflects on another piece of knowledge, which means that methodology is logically subsequent to method. There is no discipline, no science, no research that is devoid of method. After the fact, once the scientific research and investigation has been undertaken, the method that the researcher utilised in the process and the path that he traversed is re-examined and reflected upon, and it is this re-examination and reflection that constitutes methodology. As such, methodology is the observation of the ways in which a research is produced

(Jawid, 2012, p. 8). That, therefore, is what this article is about. The available research projects that have been done on determining the order of priority among social problems presuppose various factors and criteria and proceed via different *methods* in pursuing their subject of research. This article aims to critically evaluate the methods pursued in these research projects, and so this article is a methodological investigation in the proper sense of the term.

Social Problem

As pointed out in the introduction, the current state of research on social problems in Iran suffers from two shortcomings: one, lack of due consideration of their order of priority, and two, a chronic disregard for the fact that social problems are often interrelated in many ways, theoretically as well as practically. In addition to these two shortcomings, the available prioritisations are plagued by some fundamental flaws, and it is precisely these methodological flaws that we intend to examine in the present article. Considering the aforementioned flaws and shortcomings, there are two primary reasons that compel us to consider—here and in the process of our methodological examination of the available prioritisations—the definition of social problem. Prior to specifying these two reasons, however, it is worth mentioning that the existing definitions of social problem are of one of two kinds: they are either general definitions or definitions arising from specific theoretical standpoints.

The first reason that inclines us to examine the meaning of social problem

relates to the difficulty that is caused by neglecting the importance of prioritisation. In many general definitions of social problem, one particular feature is highlighted despite the wide-ranging differences, which is “to motivate people to eliminate the problem” (Crone, 2011, p. 1; Loseke, 2017, pp. 6-7). The motivation to eliminate social problems ipso facto leads to the subject of prioritisation, as there are naturally many problems in every society, not all of which can be eliminated simultaneously. As such, people, generally, and a society’s leaders, specifically, are bound to prioritise their social problems with recourse to clear criteria to be able to meaningfully strive to eliminate them. Thus, the need for prioritising social problems is included within and highlighted by the general definitions of social problem.

The second reason for analysing the definition of social problem is related to the flaws of the available prioritisations. Prioritising social problems naturally begins with preparing a list of the problems. To prepare a list, we must first identify the problems, which in turn requires that we

have a clear definition of what a social problem is. Identifying actual problems is impracticable without being in possession of a clear definition. Thus, the first step in any attempt at prioritising social problems is to offer a clear and distinct definition of what a social problem is. One of the fundamental problems that bedevil the research projects that attempt to prioritise Iran’s social problems is their inherent ambiguity concerning what a social problem is.

We will now briefly consider several definitions informed by different approaches concerning what constitutes a social problem, and, by comparing and contrasting them and showing how their differences affect the process of identifying social problems, we will demonstrate how each of these definitions impacts how we prioritise social problems (For the seven definitions of social problem, which stem from seven different approaches, we draw on *The Study of Social Problems: Seven Perspectives* by Earl Rubington and Martin Weinberg (2003)).

Table 2
Comparing the various definitions of social problem

Approach	Features of Social Problems			
	Definition	Causes	Situation	Consequences
Social pathology	Flouting moral expectation	Failure in socialisation	Social environment (technology, etc.)	Becoming devoid of human traits
Social disorganisation	Failure of laws and regulations	Social change	Dissolution of the circumstances contributive to dynamic equilibrium	Change in system and individuals
Value conflict	Opposition to values of certain groups	Conflict of values and interests	Intergroup conflict and competition	Jeopardising greater values, making values more transparent
Deviance	Becoming disenchanted with the prevalent norms	Inappropriate socialisation	Increase in opportunities to learn ways of deviation	Founding deviant societies
Labelling Theory	Social reaction to alleged violations	Concern on the part of people or elements of social control about the subject	The labeller's benefitting from the resultant environment	Intensification of deviation
Critical Theory	The state consequent on the enslavement of the working class	Class domination	Scope of domination, class consciousness and conflict	Increase in crime rate
Social constructionism	Fluid and problematic cultural circumstances	Efforts by people to compensate for their dissatisfaction	Process of interaction between accuser and accused	Indeterminable and fluid
				Reforming the failing institutions
				Restoring the parts of the system to equilibrium following diagnosis
				Agreement, compromise, force
				Increase in primary group's contact with patterns of deviant behaviour
				Revising the definitions, eliminating the benefits consequent on labelling
				Political activity for bringing about reform or revolution
				Researcher's attention throughout the process of definition to reconstruct

The aim in specifying these various approaches to defining social problem is to demonstrate the fundamental impact that one's approach has on the proffered definition and, in turn, the latter's fundamental impact on identifying social problems. To shed more light on this, we will compare two approaches along with their suggested definitions. We will take the pathological and the constructionist approaches as two samples. According to the social pathology approach, society is an organism that can be considered healthy when it properly performs its functions. Desirable social behaviours indicate that the society is in good health, and undesirable behaviours signal its disease. In this light, a social problem consists of the act of defying society's moral expectations, and the main cause for the occurrence of this disease in society is an individual's failure in socialising. The constructionist account, however, of the definition of social problem and its cause is drastically different. This approach views a social problem, regardless of what is taking place in a society, as that which the people of a society identify and define as a social problem. Whether there is an objective circumstance that may or may not exist in society, and may or may not have caused a certain conception of a social problem to take shape in the minds of the people, is irrelevant to how a social problem is defined. The pathological

approach is strongly attentive to objectivity, whereas the constructionist approach has little concern for objectivity. The key point to bear in mind here is that depending on which definition we side with, the social problems we identify will look very different. As such, failure to acknowledge the significance of how we conceptualise *social problems* will undoubtedly impair our attempt at prioritising them and will distort the results we seek to obtain because of such prioritisation. There are ample samples of such distortion in the available research projects that have sought to prioritise Iran's social problems.

Research Method

There are a variety of ways in which we can define our method of research. From the viewpoint of the variable of setting, this is a library research. From the viewpoint of data material, it is a qualitative research. From the viewpoint of the object variable, it is a theoretic foundational research. In terms of its substance, it is exploratory-descriptive. The method of data collection used in this article is content analysis. The instrument employed in data collection is cataloguing (For an explanation of terms, see Jawid, 2012, pp. 85-98). For our critical evaluation of the methods used in research projects concerned with identifying social problems in Iran, it has been our sincere intention to reconstruct the internal logic of the criticised

material and to truly penetrate the meaning intended by the authors. Naturally, however, the interference of the writers' personal convictions and biases cannot be entirely ruled out, but we have tried our best.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Critical Analysis of the Available Prioritisations of Iran's Social Problems

In "*Owlawiyyatbandi asibha wa masa'el ejtema'i dar iran*" (which would translate as "Prioritisation of Social Problems and Issues in Iran"), Hadi Motamedi (2007) takes the views of the officials and the employees of Iran's State Welfare Organisation as the basis in determining the order of priority of Iran's social problems. After two rounds, he presents a list of social problems in Iran and then goes on to determine which problems have priority. He divides social problems into three classes: social problems, family-related problems, and miscellaneous problems. He attempts to prove that the social phenomena he points to are in fact social problems by citing their frequency in the body of statistical data that he presents.

There are several severely damning points that we can elaborate in our critique of this study.

- (1) Quantity and frequency are inadequate measures for proving the validity of a thesis. Solid theoretic grounds—including, among others, a clear and

technical definition of what a social problem is—are required for this purpose.

- (2) Should a researcher deem it appropriate to presuppose frequency as the criterion for identifying a social phenomenon as a problem, he must unambiguously assert this, rather than merely touching on it in passing and amid an overwhelming volume of explanations and data that can only be confusing to the reader.
- (3) In order to statistically demonstrate that a purported social problem is in fact a social problem, the researcher must have access to a sufficient statistical database. In the research in question, the researcher lacks such a sufficient database, and the statistical resources that he has at his disposal are insufficient in proving that the social phenomena he cites are in fact constitutive of social problems.
- (4) The research fails to offer a clear definition of what constitutes a social problem, and the researcher fails to identify any approach as underpinning the research. For this reason, in addition to the fact that it is unclear whether the cited phenomena are social problems, the relations between the purported social problems are not at all clear, and therefore it is difficult to pass judgment as to whether they are in fact social problems or not.

- (5) Due to the fact that the presented list of problems was obtained “in various meetings with experts in the form of brainstorming sessions” (Motamedi 2007, p. 337), the list can in no way be considered exhaustive.
- (6) The problems listed in this study are not consistent and congruous. The researcher fails to distinguish between subjective problems and objective problems, major problems and minor problems, and general problems and particular problems. For instance, the problem of runaway girls is placed alongside joblessness, dropping out of school, and such overarching rubrics as youth problems, unstable families, and prisoners. Such indiscriminate assortment of social problems renders a meaningful comparison of these problems impossible.
- (7) Many of the cited problems are grossly overlapping, such as *running away from home* and runaway girls.
- (8) The presented classification lacks any logical theoretic pattern as its basis. This is evident in the juxtaposition of social problems and family problems, which is not supported by any sound theoretic or technical justification. Even worse is the class of “miscellaneous problems”, which is devoid of any substantive meaning and content and thus cannot be assigned any true value, and as such one cannot arrive at any results by comparing it to its two counterparts.
- (9) The respondents offer orders of priority solely based on their distinctive personal views and opinions without there being a shared understanding as to common criteria for prioritisation. Considering the stated objective, this flaw alone suffices to undermine the credibility and validity of the research.

Ali Yusefi and Hoseyn Akbari (2011) base their research article entitled “*Ta’ammoli jame’eh shenakhti dar tashkhis wa ta’yin owlaiyyat masa’el ejtema’i iran*” (which would translate as “A Sociological Reflection Aimed at Identifying and Determining the Order of Priority of Iran’s Social Issues”) on a secondary analysis of two available surveys: (1) a three-wave survey entitled “*Arzeshha wa negareshhaye iranian*” (which would translate as “Values and Outlooks of Iranians”) that determines how the Iranian people prioritise social problems and (2) another survey documenting how the Iranian elite, government officials, and the intelligentsia, view and prioritise social problems. The two researchers adopt the constructionist approach in defining social problems, and they clearly indicate this choice: “In the constructionist approach,

identifying and prioritising social problems is done either by a considerable number of ordinary people or by a number of prominent figures. Both classes (the people and the elite) play a significant role in shaping, identifying, and prioritising social issues” (Yusefi & Akbari, 2011, p. 207).

Several notable points may be specified by way of critiquing this study.

- (1) The theoretic approach of the study is inconsistent with the practical method that the authors pursue. How can one expect to arrive at the subjective constructs of the people, the officials, or the intelligentsia by means of a questionnaire comprising of closed-ended questions?
- (2) The problems cited in this study, like the previous study, lack congruity and consistency. Such disparate problems as dearth of cultural centres, theft, and tenancy are grouped together, and in the final analysis these problems are placed side by side with such general rubrics as the problem of democracy, social problems, and defining religious role models.
- (3) The authors of this article fail to demonstrate how the cited problems correspond to the theoretic definition and approach purportedly undergirding their research.
- (4) The criteria used in determining the order of priority of social problems remains unclear and undefined.
- (5) When there is no clear criterion for prioritising, it would lend greater credibility to the survey if there is more homogeneity among the respondents. This, unfortunately, is not the case regarding the study in question. The respondents of the basic study—the three national surveys that serve as the basis on which the study in question relies—are random individuals from various towns, villages, and regions, who may, depending on their peculiar living conditions, have distinct criteria and factors in mind for the prioritisations they suggest.
- (6) In addition to geographic dispersion, the lack of a unifying timeframe diminishes the credibility of the study even further. For example, the inhabitants of villages in the three national surveys have offered their responses at different timeframes, while it is genuinely possible that the national and regional circumstances may have undergone some change in the different timeframes in which the surveys were conducted, and this exacerbates the aforementioned problem of geographic discontinuity.

“*Moshkelat ejtema’i dar owlawayyat iran*” (which would translate as “Social Problems of Priority in Iran”) by Hasan Rafiyee and Saeed Madani is presumably the most credible of the available studies. It was conducted in accordance with the Delphi method and in four rounds. In the first round, the authors presented their definition of social problem to the panel of experts. The presupposed definition of *social problem* in this study is that ratified by the High Council of Social Welfare and Security:

A social problem is an undesirable social phenomenon that adversely impacts quality of life and the most significant values agreed upon by the [Iranian] society and that, due to its harmful social causes or consequences, requires social intervention to be rectified, mitigated, or contained (Rafiyee & Madani, 2008, p. 197).

In the second round, with the help of the experts, they devised two separate lists, one of the proposed social problems and the other of the proposed criteria. By criteria, they mean “the rules or criteria for identifying the social problems that partake of a higher priority insofar as social planning and intervention are concerned” (ibid). After proposing and settling on the agreed-upon list of social problems and prioritising criteria, they prioritised

the social problems following the matrix model. The experts on the Delphi panel were selected purposefully rather than randomly from among individuals with at least one of two characteristics:

1. Having written an article or a book or conducted a research project related to the study subject, or
2. Having professional experience pertinent to the study subject or administrative experience in a government or nongovernment organisation involved in work related to the study subject (Rafiyee & Madani, 2008, p. 195).

In other words, two groups of experts have participated in determining the order of priority: academic professionals and experienced administrators.

Three critiques come to mind in relation to this study.

- (1) One shortcoming in this study is its sole reliance on the opinions of the experts in drafting the primary list of social problems instead of providing the experts with a comprehensive and accurate list as a tentative list they could work from, which makes it possible that the experts may have missed some important social problems. A case in

point is that based on the definition presented in more traditional works in the field of social issues and problems in Iran, such prevalent habits as lying and flattering may have been added to the list, but they were left out presumably since the experts were not working from a tentatively drafted comprehensive list.

- (2) Some of the listed problems—such as joblessness and joblessness of the educated class—overlap.
- (3) The problems grouped together lack compatibility and congruity. Objective problems—such as joblessness—are listed next to such subjective problems as lack of social confidence and declining social capital. The list juxtaposes such non-legal problems as malnutrition and traffic congestion with such largescale legal problems as organised crime.

This study is relatively successful in defining social problems and in identifying them considering its proposed definition, and it can also be considered successful in setting forth and consistently implementing clear and distinct criteria for prioritisation. That which detracts from the credibility of this study more than anything else is the inconsistency pervading the social problems it enumerates, and this inconsistency naturally harms the accuracy of the order

of priority that it posits, for in the process of prioritisation it compares problems that are not genuinely comparable and that cannot, correctly speaking, be considered rivals competing at the same level. The various social problems that this study lists should be assigned to different arenas and their order of priority examined in their respective arenas, and it is only when we view them from this perspective that we can properly devise and carry out plans to satisfactorily address them.

The above three articles critiqued, are as far as we will go in this article by way of examining the conducted studies of social problems in Iran. We cannot cover all the conducted studies, for we are constrained by the limited size of this article and some of the conducted studies are unavailable. Several the conducted studies were commissioned by governmental or private organisations that have refrained from publishing their studies, and so these studies are inaccessible. Furthermore, several the available studies are either regional in scope, and thus do not cover all of Iran, or lack even the minimal standards of professionalism and acceptability. Yet, in order that our readers should have at least a general idea of these studies, we offer a cursory evaluation in the following chart.

Table 3
A cursory evaluation of conducted prioritisations of Iran's social problems

Study Title	Author	Whose views provide the basis of prioritisation?	Does the author identify an approach in defining social problem?	Does the study present a comprehensive list of social problems?	Are the suggested social problems congruous?	Are the criteria for prioritisation clearly and distinctly defined?
Owlawayyatbandi asibha wa masa'el ejtema'i dar iran ("Prioritisation of Social Problems and Issues in Iran")	Hadi Motamedi	Government officials	No	No	No	No
Moshkelat ejtema'i dar owlawayyat iran ("Social Problems of Priority in Iran")	Hasan Rafiye Saeed Madani	Administrators and experts	Yes	Partially	No	Yes
Arzeshha wa negarashhaye iranien ("The Values and Views of Iranians")	The Office of National Projects, The Ministry of Culture, and Islamic Guidance	General public	No	No	No	No
Arzeshha wa negarashhaye iranien ("The Values and Views of Iranians")	The Office of National Projects, The Ministry of Culture, and Islamic Guidance	General public	No	No	No	No
Ta'ammoli jame'eshenakhti dar tashkhis wa ta'yin owlawayyat masa'el ejtema'i iran ("A Sociologic Reflection Aimed at Identifying and Determining the Priority of Iran's Social Issues")	Ali Yusefi, Hoseyn Akbari	General public	Yes	No	Partially	No
Mas'aleh shenasi wa owlawayyatbandi asibha wa masa'el farhangi (mowred motale'eh: ostian ilam) ("Identifying Problems and Prioritising Social Harms and Cultural Problems (Subject of Study: IlAm Province)")	Khalil Kamarbeygi and Mojtaba Rashidi	Administrators and experts	No	Unknown	Partially	No
Owlawayyatbandi asibhaye ejtema'i dar shahr waramin ("Prioritising Social Problems in the City of Varamin")	Maedeh Qorashi Nasim Nematizadeh Arefeh Hasani	General public	No	No	Yes	Yes

Five Proposed Steps Essential to a Credible and Effective Prioritisation of Social Problems

1. Deciding Who Determines the Priorities

The first step in the process of prioritising social problems is determining the objective sought by the prioritisation, and the objective is determined by those undertaking the prioritisation: the various groups of people who bring their preconceptions and their experiences—as products of their social, economic, and cultural standing—to bear on what social phenomena they identify as social problems and how they arrange them in order of priority. In the various research studies conducted in Iran, the researchers have sought out different target groups. Some of these studies distinguish three target groups: the general public, the officials and administrators, and the experts. These studies also indicate the order of priority preferred by each target group (Mohammadi, 2001; Table 1). These studies highlight a very important point, and that is the noticeable difference between the prioritisations each of these three groups proposes.

Now, as already mentioned, one of the essential factors that compel us to prioritise social problems is the need to take practical measures to resolve these problems. As the subject of this study is a methodological examination of the conducted prioritisations, we are compelled to inquire concerning the following question: To what extent can we rely on the different prioritisations offered

by these three target groups in drafting a comprehensive plan to address, in a national capacity, Iran's social problems? Put differently, each of these groups regards society from its own distinct perspective and in line with its own peculiar outlook, and it is in light of this distinct perspective and peculiar outlook that the members of these groups identify and prioritise social problems. It would seem then that relying solely on one of these three groups for identifying and prioritising social problems would seriously undermine the practical results that we seek from any given study. Serious problems can result if, for instance, we decide to identify social problems based exclusively on public opinion. One possible problem is that studies that rely solely on public opinion tend to overlook the problems and priorities of the minorities. If our identification of social problems is directed only by the most general expectations and opinions of the general public, there is a good chance that we will fail to notice the special needs of such minorities as people with physical disabilities or impairments. Another possible problem is that relying solely on the opinion of the general public tends to distort social studies and administrative plans and causes them to lose sight of "the existing social order," for, generally speaking, macrostructures tend to remain hidden to the general public, which is more inclined to see the objective, the particular, and the behavioural and is less likely to discern the macrostructures. Therefore, in their attempt to define, identify, and prioritise the

problems of a society as vast as a country, they must bear in mind that their study must take the vastness of the administrative task into consideration and thus include the input of all social groups in Iran so as to ensure comprehensiveness.

2. Defining a Particular Theoretic Approach

The second step in the process of prioritising social problems is defining what a social problem is. Our definition of social problem is in large part determined by the theoretic approach governing our study. A very frequent problem that plagues most of the studies that attempt to prioritise Iran's social problems is the failure to clearly indicate the adopted approach. Without a clearly specified approach, it is impossible to have a definition, and without a definition, any attempt at identifying social problems would result in failure, for in the absence of a clear definition of social problem, the researchers and the participants lack a clear criterion for determining which social phenomena are problems and which are not. Furthermore, without first drafting a list of potential social problems, it would be a waste of time to embark on prioritising them. As shown above, a number of the studies conducted in Iran fail to offer a clear definition of social problem and, consequently, they identify and prioritise social problems based on personal and subjective views.

In addition to the importance of the adopted theoretic approach for defining social problems and the importance of the definition for the process of identifying

social problems, it is critical to be mindful of the close connection that binds the first and second steps in the process of prioritisation. To arrive at a correct order of priority of social problems, the adopted theoretic approach and the defined objectives of a study must correspond. When two researchers or two organisations embark on prioritising social problems for entirely different objectives, the respective approach they choose must be consistent with their objectives, and so they cannot necessarily adopt the same approach. As an example, the mayor's office and the judicial branch of the national government are charged with entirely different duties and responsibilities in the Iranian society. Yet, both are in some way responsible for social problems, and so in this respect they share a common sphere of activity while also shouldering clearly distinct functions. Thus, it is only natural that if these two government entities commission studies to identify and prioritise social problems to use the results in improving their effectiveness, they are pursuing different objectives and are searching for different sets of problems, for their responsibilities and functions are different. Thus, owing to their disparate functions, they seek different social problems, and this difference in the choice of social problems is the result of differing definitions, and this difference in definition, in turn, is the result of adopting different theoretic approaches (it is worth noting that different approaches inevitably produce different definitions, but it is not necessarily true that having the same approach will yield the same definition.).

As such, a very important point that must be taken into consideration in selecting a method for prioritising social problems is the correspondence between a study's objectives and its approach. If a researcher fails to bear this key point in mind, the results that his or her study produces may not translate into practical measures that can realise the objectives for the sake of which he or she conducted the study in the first place.

3. Drafting a Comprehensive List of Possible Social Problems

The third step in prioritising social problems is drafting a list of social problems in view of the chosen definition. At this stage, there are two important methodological points that need to be observed. The first point is that it is crucial that the drafted list of social problems be exhaustive, and the failure to ensure the exhaustiveness of the list will have a direct impact on the prioritisation process. It is on the basis of this list that social problems are prioritised, and this means that if this list is not exhaustive, the credibility of the consequent prioritisation of social problems will be undermined considerably. For, the absence of even a few important social problems on this list will mean that they will not be included in the order of priority, and this methodological flaw will then carry over and become evident in the practical stage when the results of the prioritisation are put into practice. To succeed in satisfactorily preparing such an

exhaustive list, the researcher, in addition to adopting the right theoretic approach and the appropriate definition to correctly identify social problems, must be careful to choose a method that is most effective in diminishing the possibility of missing any social problems. For instance, it would be insufficient to base our list of prospective social problems on, as seen in some of the conducted studies, surveys of limited groups of people or the brainstorming of some individuals, and then use this list in prioritising social problems, which will in turn be utilised in establishing practical policies to implement in addressing social problems.

The second point is that the researcher, having given his chosen definition of social problem and having identified social problems in light of the chosen definition, must demonstrate that the social problems he has identified are in fact social problems. What takes place in this process is that in light of his chosen definition, which develops out of the adopted theoretic approach, the researcher comes up with a certain criterion that he then uses in designating certain social phenomena as social problems. It is very natural to expect that the researcher ought to clearly delineate his reasons for identifying the particular set of problems that he has identified so as to allow those reading his study to know on what basis he has made his choices and to possibly engage in a meaningful critique of his methods.

4. Ensuring the Homogeneity of the Proposed Social Problems

The next key point that a researcher must bear in mind, after drafting an exhaustive list of prospective social problems based on his chosen definition and in light of his theoretic approach, is to make sure that the problems on this list are homogeneous. This homogeneity requirement is dictated by a clear logical principle. To legitimately compare two discrete phenomena, they must be consistent and congruous so as to be logically comparable, for if two things lack logical comparability, we cannot legitimately make judgments based on their juxtaposition. It would be a mistake, for example, to place social problems pertaining to subjective and cultural matters next to those concerned with objective matters or to compare large-scale and structural problems with small-scale problems and then proceed to prioritise them. The distinct groups of social problems must be homogeneously categorised in view of their proper scope and prioritised within the context of their specific scope. To indiscriminately list all the incongruous social problems together would definitely preclude a meaningful study that would result in effective practical measures. How can we meaningfully compare the weak work ethic in Iran with the problem of runaway girls and prioritise between the two? They are fundamentally two incongruous problems that are incomparable. The crucial methodological point that any study must take into consideration is to ensure the congruity and consistency of the studied problems, in the absence of which

no sound comparison or conclusion can be drawn, and so to ignore this crucial point would drastically diminish the credibility of the study.

One of the ways in which the failure to observe consistency and congruity in the prepared list of social problems based on clear and logical categorisations (by incorporating, for instance, such distinctions as subjective vs. objective, material vs. cultural, small-scale vs. large-scale) can distort the results of the study is that the less noticed but still very important problems tend to be eclipsed and side-lined by the more visible social problems, whose degree of importance is not necessarily any more than the former. For instance, the absence of the cultural tendency to honour the law is sure to be overshadowed by such salient social problems as joblessness, poverty, opioid addiction, government corruption, and divorce. Due to this methodological flaw, the role of the researchers or study participants who are responsible for the prioritisation takes on an increased importance compared to a situation in which the right methods are used, for they—working from their personal experiences and preconceptions—tend to give greater priority to those social problems with which they are more intimately engaged, unaware that many of the problems they have considered are not even comparable as they pertain to widely different domains.

In the process of prioritising social problems, ensuring the consistency and congruity of the social problems under consideration functions as the crucial link

that connects the third step—preparing an exhaustive list of prospective social problems—with the last step, which is the actual prioritisation of social problems is critical. Without this crucial link, even if the first three steps of the prioritisation process are executed flawlessly, the entire process would be jeopardised, thus fundamentally undermining the legitimacy of the results of the prioritisation.

5. Defining a Clear and Distinct Criterion for Prioritisation

The fifth and final step in the process of prioritising social problems is determining a clear and distinct prioritising criterion. One of the more impactful and frequent errors that occur in the available prioritisations of Iran's social problems is the absence of a clear and distinct prioritising criterion. The importance of heeding this condition is logically obvious. When faced with a prioritised order, the first question that may arise is what criterion underlies the prioritisation. A study that cannot answer this very preliminary question clearly suffers from a fundamental methodological error. Of course, there need not be only one criterion. It is possible to apply multiple methods and then feed all methods into a matrix diagram to arrive at one uniform order of priority. The key point is to define one or more criteria and to consistently and meticulously apply them in the prioritisation process.

There are numerous criteria that can be utilised in prioritising social problems. The extent of a problem's reach, the severity of

its harm, and the degree of its social impact are a few examples of possible criteria. If we choose to work with *the extent criterion*, it is essential to have comprehensive and accurate statistical data of the target society in order to determine the extent of every social problem's reach to thereby prioritise social problems. If we instead opt for *the severity criterion*, the social problems that cause the greatest and most irreparable injury will take precedence. As such, homicide, fatal accidents, and other such injuries that result in loss of life will occupy the very top of the order of priority. *The social impact degree criterion* is analogous in meaning to Durkheim's definition of *crime* as an offence to the society's "collective conscience." Certain social problems—such as rape and paedophilia—strongly affect the society's sentiments, and so naturally people expect a swift and severe punishment for the perpetrators. Now, when considering which of these criteria one should use in the process of prioritisation, the researcher must take several factors into consideration. Arguably, the most determining factors are the objectives of the study and its theoretic approach. Yet, determining our research criteria is always a complex issue and therefore cannot be simplified in the form of universal formulas. We cannot, for instance, say that whoever takes such-and-such approach in defining social problems must by extension adopt such-and-such criterion in prioritising social problems.

A very critical flaw affecting the available prioritisations of social problems in Iran, to which an allusion was made in

the introduction, is neglecting the web of interconnections between social problems. A very helpful criterion for use in a study of the order of priority that is meant to serve as the basis for a comprehensive plan to address a country's social problems is *the degree to which a problem can impact other social problems*. Taking this criterion into consideration can considerably increase a plan's efficiency and efficacy in combatting social problems. For example, a very prominent social problem in Iran that merits a top place in the order of priority of social problems in view of many criteria is the high volume of motor vehicle crimes and road accidents. It is a problem that entails a host of other social problems: from the bankruptcy of Iran's insurance industry, to the excessive rate of fatalities, and to numerous emotional, psychological, and behavioural problems from which families suffer as a result of losing one or both parents. Neglecting the web of interconnections that exists between these problems, government officials and administrators tackle the motor vehicle problem with a one-dimensional approach: they considerably raise the monetary value of traffic fines every year and expand the amount of inner- and inter-city roads monitored by traffic cameras in the hope of reducing motor vehicle crimes and accidents. A more holistic approach, however, would be to acknowledge the often multi-pronged interconnections of social problems, to prioritise social problems in view of this criterion, and to thereby address the loaded problem of motor-vehicle-related crimes and accidents in a more fundamental

and long-term fashion by laying emphasis on and devising plans to strengthen the social sense of respect for law, a key cultural factor that can help in reducing many crimes and resolving many other social problems.

CONCLUSION

Vigorous attempts are being made in Iran to fundamentally and scientifically address the existing social problems. To succeed in these attempts, there needs to be a fundamental re-evaluation in conducting the studies dealing with social problems. Simply addressing one or more social problems will not go a long way in resolving social problems. The sociological studies that are conducted to this end must aim to shed light on the conceptual interconnections of social problems. One of the best ways in which this can be achieved is studying the order of priority between social problems.

In examining the research that has been conducted in Iran so far, we considered seven studies concerned with the prioritisation of social problems in Iran, three of which we analysed in depth. What our analysis showed was that the available studies are, for the most part, methodologically flawed, and this greatly diminishes the credibility of their prioritisations and undermines their conclusions.

After examining the available studies of social problems in Iran, we presented five key methodological points that are critical in ensuring the integrity and credibility of any study that aims to prioritise social problems. These five are, in summary, as follows. (1) It is important to bear in

mind that depending on the social group we consult in determining the order of priority of social problems, we will arrive at different results. Furthermore, if we wish to survey the views of all the three main groups of people—general public, academic experts, public administrators—there are certain methodological requirements that ought to be observed. (2) Due to the existence of drastically different approaches to social problems and the separate ways in which they impact our identification and prioritisation of social problems, it is crucial to define a specific approach according to which we carry out our prioritisation of social problems. Neglecting this key point will obviously result in theoretical flaws that will show themselves in the practical results that we wish to draw from our study. (3) A comparison between social problems to determine their order of priority is incomplete and ineffective if done without first drafting an exhaustive list of all prospective social problems in view of the approach adopted in the above-mentioned second point. Once we have such a list, we can then legitimately embark on prioritising the social problems by comparing all or, where sanctioned by a sound logic, a selected number of them. (4) Examining and prioritising social problems without first ensuring that the social problems under consideration are consistent and congruous can potentially lead to a lopsided and inconsistent prioritisation. When the social problems being considered are made consistent and congruous, the results are more accurately distinguished, more

logically cogent, and more practically efficacious. (5) For an effective and sound prioritisation, it is necessary to work on the basis of a carefully defined criterion, for various criteria produce various results, and the absence of a determinate criterion will render the conclusions of our study unreliable.

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