

Why social sciences matter ?

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Abstract

In terms of benefit to society, the social sciences have traditionally been held to lag behind in comparison to natural sciences, engineering and medicine. The findings and impact of social science projects cannot be so readily gauged by the basis of number of papers, patents or spin-offs. For the most part, therefore, a ‘direct benefit’ for society cannot be demonstrated. However, research in the social sciences and humanities is of particular relevance to the transition process. It can help identify the need for reform in sectors critical to a country’s political stability and socio-economic development, such as inter-ethnic relations, protection of minorities, nation-building, good governance and state-building. The aim of the social sciences is not introspective self-observation, nor is it limited to the critical analysis of society. They also seek to draw attention to problem areas and alternative courses of action within society itself. Precisely through this function, the social sciences are also able to nurture the hope, or the illusion, that their discourses and findings have an impact on society, on public opinion, and on policy making. Research findings can contribute to the identification of new forms of discrimination and exclusion, and to alerting policy-makers to the need to address these issues.

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Introduction

“No public policy can be developed, no market interaction can occur, and no statement in the public sphere can be made, that does not refer explicitly or implicitly to the findings and concepts of the social and human sciences”.

Bjorn Wittrock

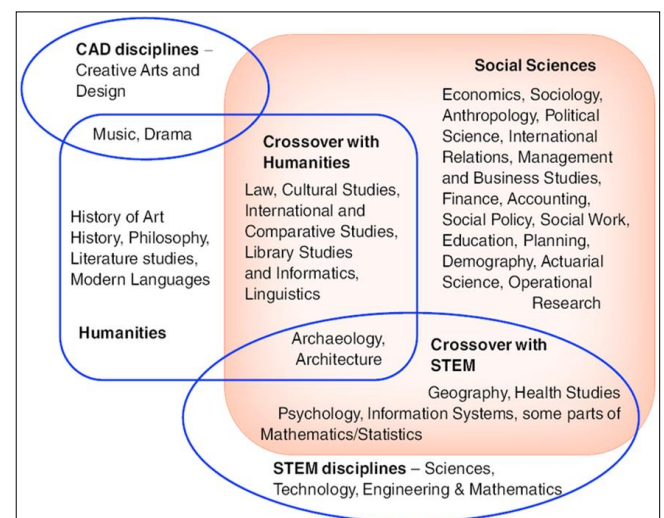
The social sciences are an integral and indispensable part of modern societies. The social sciences were created and institutionalized in the nineteenth century precisely to serve a fundamental human concern: the need to understand the forces driving human societies and by extension the reasons behind social ills. The social sciences were designed to investigate the complex interactions of people. The institutionalization of the social sciences in the nineteenth century marked a significant milestone in humanity’s study of itself. In the course of the twentieth century the social sciences solidified their status. New disciplines were created, university departments and faculties were institutionalized, and social scientists made the move as experts into public administration or began working for private enterprises and research institutes. In the Western part of the world the social sciences, especially in the United States, provided tools for policy design and became part of standard operating procedures in policy analysis. The belief in the capacity of social engineering to deliver modern societies from various problems bolstered the conception of the social sciences as truth-establishing and problem-solving.

The social sciences have a privileged role to play in setting up public participation in policy making. They have a crucial role to play in helping bridge the divide between publics and political authorities. Precisely because of their social and intersubjective nature, the social sciences can assist in the transition to more inclusive democratic systems. Facilitating tripartite dialogues between citizens, decision-makers and analysts over social issues should be a priority

for the social scientific community. This is one of the most important contributions the social sciences can make towards the achievement of greater social progress and human development.

Social sciences and other disciplines

The social sciences are often defined as the disciplines that are in between the humanities and the natural sciences. The social science discipline group spans across a very wide range of subjects shown in Figure 1.



Source: LSE public policy group

Fig 1: The social sciences and how they relate to other disciplines

Many social sciences overlap extensively with the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) discipline group. The common features of the disciplines grouped as social sciences in Figure 1 are:

- They focus on the study of contemporary human societies, economies, organisations and cultures and their development.
- The intellectual spine of all these subjects is provided by formally set theories, developing logically consistent models, often utilizing mathematical notation.
- They focus a great deal on systematically collecting data and information using well-worked out and rigorously tested methods, with most branches making significant use of quantitative data.
- All social sciences look for ‘laws’ of social development, for patterns of association and causation that make sense theoretically and can be evaluated by careful empirical investigation.
- Finally, the social sciences strongly share or seek to emulate standards of good science and of effective scholarship as developed in the physical sciences, stressing the importance of using carefully checked data, analysing data rigorously, replication of information, critical testing of evidence and critical engagement with theories and models, and a conditional acceptance of ‘knowledge’ only to the extent that it survives falsification.

Two models of knowledge transfer

We can distinguish two models of social scientific impact. The first can be called the ‘Limestone Model’ of result transfer (Bulmer, 1982). In this model, the results of social science research are metaphorically pictured as slowly permeating society, like water seeping through and slowly shaping limestone. In such a model of transfer of results, the social sciences have only an indirect and cumulative impact, and the only thing that researchers have to do is to present their findings in a readable way. As such, the transfer of scientific knowledge is regarded as open-ended and as providing only general orientations.

The second model of results transfer could be called the ‘Engineering Model: it is problem-centred, instrumental and control-oriented (Bulmer, 1982). In this model, social scientists are compared to engineers: they have expertise, they wait for instructions and they are capable of doing the job.

Both practitioners and policy-makers need knowledge to make decisions and to act. Such knowledge can come from several sources, including personal experience. It can also be produced by social scientists. The social sciences can generate information and evidence that can be used in decision-making processes. In other words, social sciences make policy-process scientificated. The ultimate goal of the social sciences is to generate knowledge that can be of relevance for all those who want to change a given situation. The social sciences need to be brought into the public sphere by promoting research that brings together researchers, those who play a role in the phenomena being studied and those who are in a position to make decisions about the phenomena being studied. Only in such a way will the social sciences be able to contribute to changing the world – rather than merely interpreting it.

In transitional countries, research projects examining the dynamics and direction of political, economic and social change contribute to an understanding of such processes. They impact on public communication, on the perception, identification and resolution of current problems. These projects have the power to change society.

What do political leaders need to know about the world in order to be able to govern it properly? Who can, and who should, tell them? This is where the social come into play. The most ambitious goal of modern-day social sciences is to develop theories that explain observed facts as the effects of their causes.

Social sciences enable us to throw a spotlight on our own society and they question and deconstruct the mythologies that circulate and proliferate in any society.

The social sciences cover a wide array of complex issues and disciplines. A listing of the main social sciences and policy areas would include:

- Health
- Education
- Social Security and welfare
- Justice, law and order
- The family and children
- Multiculturalism
- Ethics, human rights and equal opportunity
- Social Accounting
- Income and wealth distribution
- The trade-off between equity and efficiency
- The equitable distribution of resources
- Housing and community services
- Labour relations and conditions of employment
- Provision of power, water, gas and other essential services and infrastructure such as urban public transport.

Importance of social sciences

The physical and natural sciences are important to our understanding of the world and the use and development of technology and techniques in for example agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and environmental protection and rehabilitation. The importance of the social sciences can be indicated by listing some of the core areas of the social science professions and disciplines. These include:

- Enhancement of physical and mental health
- Treatment of diseases, ailments and a large number of health conditions
- Identifying dietary needs and nutritious foods
- Identifying the living conditions needed for a healthy life
- Provision of education at primary, secondary and tertiary level
- Development of and training for new skills and training to enhance people’s capabilities
- Ensuring the availability of social welfare, such as disability and old age pensions, assistance for families and the disadvantaged
- Attempting to ensure that there is a reasonably equitable distribution of the economic wealth of a nation through taxation and other redistributive mechanisms
- Providing social justice through legal and administrative actions
- Promoting ethical practice and sound governance
- Preservation of law and order
- Protection of minors and disadvantaged groups
- Ensuring a safe working environment and appropriate working conditions
- Provision of the necessities of life in areas such as water, power, gas and transport
- Ensuring high standards of public sector management

- Working in an interdisciplinary manner on issues involving socio-economic policies, regional development, environmental development, globalization and science and technology policies.

This, not exhaustive list, demonstrates how important the social sciences are for a modern stable and democratic society.

The social sciences have moved to an increasingly central place in our understanding of how our societies develop and interact with each other. The social sciences play a key and more integrated role in contemporary knowledge development.

1. Social scientists help us imagine alternative futures

Social science can open up debate and give us a say in shaping our collective future. The social sciences developed as a field of study during the nineteenth century. Social science helped people understand the consequences and application of the new technologies of the age, such as steam power. The growth of railways and factories not only transformed the economy and the world of work, but also changed forever the way people organised their family lives and leisure. Today nanotechnology and advances in medical research will have a significant impact on the way we live. They present us with a bewildering range of ethical, legal and social issues. But it isn't enough to rely on the scientists. We also need social scientists to analyse and critique what's going on. That way we will make informed choices that shape the future.

2. Social science can help us make sense of our finances

Social science is not just important for the future but for what's happening now. A range of social scientists – not just economists but also psychologists, sociologists and political scientists, for example - can help us understand the economic crisis and weigh up decisions we make for ourselves and those which governments make on our behalf. Without this kind of analysis, we may feel like pawns in a global game of chess. With the knowledge and understanding that social science offers us, we will feel empowered to act for ourselves, and to influence decisions being made on our behalf.

3. Social scientists contribute to our health and well-being

From sports sociologists to public health experts, from those interpreting medical statistics to those evaluating policies for our care in old age, social scientists are working hard to make sure that our health, leisure and social care services work to best effect. Social geographers at the University of Sheffield, for example, have shown that those of us who don't follow eating advice are not simply weak-willed or ignorant. Our eating habits are influenced by a whole range of circumstances. Some apparently unhealthy choices may seem rational: if the person doing the shopping knows that others will simply not eat the healthy option and it will just go to waste, they may simply not buy it. So it's no good just giving people a booklet on healthy eating. Effective nutritional advice needs to be tailored to people's everyday lives and contexts.

4. Social science might save our life

Psychologists at the University of Liverpool spent time in a steel factory to work out what needs doing to create a safer

environment. Accidents at work happen even in the best regulated companies that provide staff training and take all necessary precautions. A top-down imposed safety regime simply doesn't work. It's when people see unsafe work practices as unacceptable and take decisions as teams that workplaces become safer. Employers need to see people as individuals who take their lead from those with whom they identify. These principles have also been shown to work in crowd control. When those responsible for crowd management at football matches are trained in techniques which take this into account, there's virtually no trouble.

5. Social science can make our neighbourhood safer

One common myth is that if we take measures to reduce crime in one neighbourhood the criminals simply move on, leading to increased crime in another area. Sociologists at Nottingham Trent University worked closely with police to reduce crime through a method involving scanning for crime patterns. They were able to identify patterns that regular police work had not picked up, so avoiding guess work and lost time. A technique called situational crime prevention developed by the same team is now regularly used by the police, working with the public and private sectors to prevent crime. Together they make things more difficult for would-be criminals. For example, in one area there was a serious problem of lead being stolen from community building roofs. By working with dealers in the scrap metal market, and persuading them to keep records, it then became too risky to buy what might be stolen lead.

6. We need social scientists as public intellectuals

In our fast changing world, there is a place for the social scientist as public intellectual. Social scientists have a duty to make their work interesting and engaging to the rest of us. They need to explain not only why social science is relevant but do it in a compelling way. Then we will want to listen, read and find out more. Perhaps more social scientists will have to become active listeners, talking more often to the public, each other and to scientists. Then we can get all the disciplines around the table together. In a knowledge-based world, we need people who can integrate a variety of different types of knowledge, and that come from different intellectual roots and from a range of institutions to work together.

7. Social science can improve our children's lives and education

All societies and all governments want to show they are doing the best for children. Yet too often education reform seems to take place without regard for the best interests of the learners. Education research shows that many parents, particularly parents of younger children, are more concerned that their children enjoy school, than that they are academic stars. By working with students of all ages to understand their perspectives on schooling, researchers at the universities of Cambridge and Leeds have discovered new insights into what makes effective schools, and what makes for effective school leadership. We just need to listen to children, provide structured opportunities for them to give their views, and prepare adults to really listen.

8. Social science can change the world for the better

We can generally agree that world needs to be a safer place where all people can enjoy basic dignity and human rights.

This is the case even when we can't always agree on what we should do to make this happen. Social scientists working in interdisciplinary teams have made their mark in the area of human welfare and development. They are concerned with the social and economic advancement of humanity at large. They work with government institutions, UN organisations, social services, funding agencies, and with the media.

They are influencing the work of strategists, planners, teachers and programme officers in developing and growing economies, like India, to influence development so that it impacts on the lives of the poorest members of society. For example, social scientists from the Delhi School of Economics are cooperating with colleagues at University of London to explore the impact of legislation in India to guarantee minimum wages for rural unskilled manual labourers on the lives of women. They found the new law provided opportunities for some women to become wage earners where none had existed before, reducing the risk of hunger and the chances of avoiding hazardous work. But they also identified barriers to women benefitting from the changes, including harassment at the worksite. Those working in development studies are then able to support women's ability to benefit by looking for creative solutions to such problems.

9. Social science can broaden our horizons

For debates about feminism, peace, ecology, social movements, and much more, social science offers each of us new perspectives and new ways of understanding. Whether our idea of relaxation is visiting a museum, watching serials, or chatting online, social science encourages a fresh look at our everyday activities and culture. Social scientists at the University of Leicester are making an impact on museums across the world, with the goal of making them more inclusive, able to challenge prejudices, inspire learning and be more relevant in contemporary society. One example is their work with the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow to involve local communities and international visitors alike in engaging with exhibitions on a range of social justice issues from sectarianism to gay rights, through programmes including arts workshops and residencies.

10. We need social science to guarantee our democracy

Social science offers multiple perspectives on society, informs social policy and supports us in holding our politicians and our media to account. The Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy at Goldsmith's College, London is monitoring how transformation from traditional to digital media is examining the move away from traditional journalism and politics to where we as citizens try to be community journalists, presenting our own accounts on-line. The work brings together specialists in media and communications, sociology and politics. Individual citizens may feel empowered by this but there are risks in turning away from traditional journalism, including fewer opportunities for in-depth analysis and critique of powerful interests. This work by social scientists is critical in protecting a modern and transparent democracy.

Conclusion

Social sciences build social understanding, encourage civic efficacy, teach critical thinking, instill character and provide us with an understanding of our role as a citizen in

democracy. Study of social sciences will enable one to think critically and analyse information while gaining a broad understanding of human behaviour and the way societies operate. Social science has probably never been a more important area of study than it is today, and probably never has it been less acknowledged for the immense contribution it can make to understanding human behaviour and social processes. Social science encompasses a range of areas including economics, sociology, philosophy, psychology, political science and geography, all of which combine to help answer or contribute to an understanding of life's big and small questions. Social sciences are as important as the natural sciences to the society.

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