

Introduction to Social Science: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief introduction to most of the basic areas of Social Science. This includes an introduction to the term itself, then brief discussion of some of the areas of Social Science, including philosophy, anthropology, aesthetics, religion, morals, ethics and many other areas of study.

Keyword: Social Science and Social Science Areas, Definition of Science and Social Science, Academic Disciplines, History of and Development of Social Science

What is Social Science?

The social sciences comprise academic disciplines concerned with the study of the social life of human beings and individuals. It includes such areas as philosophy, anthropology, culture, aesthetics, religion, economics, geography, history, law, political science, psychology, social work, sociology, linguistics, and more. So the term ‘social science’ covers a very broad area.

However, although we will briefly mention various areas of areas of social science, we will concentrate on a smaller number of social science areas that are particularly related or associated with business. This means we will examine a smaller number of social science areas in more detail.

First, then, and very briefly, a small amount on the history of social science. Social science has been round a long time and we know about some of the earlier developments of social sciences from the earliest written records which date back 3,000-4,000 years. These came from countries like Egypt, ancient Greece, Persia (modern Middle East states), China and India.

Often these early written records don’t tell us very much about how the people lived at those times but we can get a glimpse of their lives from these records but very often, these records were mainly about rulers, kings and emperors but we still can get some ideas also about ordinary people and how they lived in those countries at that times.

The word “science” is older than its modern use. Under the influence of positivism, (a methodological approach to understanding things) the word has become a short-form for “natural science”. It is a recent development that society has become the object of an organized body of knowledge which can be standardized and taught objectively, while following its own rules and methodology.

As indicated, written records began to develop about 4,000 years ago, and all ancient societies began to develop certain religious beliefs which were usually animist or related to nature, also once rulers or ‘kings’ began to emerge, they were also usually associated in some ways, with religious beliefs & practices.

It would appear the first people to really begin to study ‘philosophy’ in a more systematic way, were the Ancient Greeks, who produced some of the world’s foremost philosophical thinkers (to this day). People like Aristotle, Socrates and Plato. This was about 2,500 years ago.¹

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Philosophy is generally distinguished from other ways of addressing these questions by its critical, generally systematic approach and its reliance on reasoned argument. The ancient Greek word for philosophy is 'love of knowledge'. Another early philosophy which developed to become a religion was Judaism, (the Jewish religion) which goes back over 3,000 years. And 2000 years ago, we saw the birth of Jesus Christ, a Jew, and in the first 100 years after his death, we saw the beginnings of the development of Christianity.

We also saw the development of Eastern philosophies, early Chinese and Indian philosophies. Confucius, for example, lived around 500 BC (2,500 years ago) and his philosophy even today impacts on modern China & on a number of other Asian countries, including Japan, which was developed from China and was heavily influenced by Buddhism.

Early Indian philosophies were also important and such major religious beliefs as Hinduism & Buddhism came from these philosophies.

In the Western world, Christianity continued to develop and gradually became more & more dominant although the ancient Greek philosophies have continued to play a major role in Western development. In the Medieval period (around 1000-1400 AD), one of the most important Christian philosophers was Saint (St.) Thomas Aquinas, a Catholic philosopher.

Again, in the Eastern & African continents, from about 1,000AD (1,000 years ago), saw the development of Moslem philosophies and the Moslem religion. Modern Western philosophy dates back to about 1600AD, about 400 years ago, particularly in Britain, Germany & France. This became increasingly important from about 1700 AD on.

The 18th, 19th & 20th centuries have been times of great change. In 1776, the American War of Independence, which was won by the Americans, meant that America (which later became the USA) was the first colony to gain political independence from a colonial power. The development of the USA is associated with the concept of Democracy.

About that same saw the invention of the steam engine which meant that production and transportation could be mechanized. So we saw the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the development of factories & mass production for the first time, initially in Britain but spreading quickly to the rest of Western Europe & to America. With this development, we also saw the development of Economics as a Social Science (much more about Economics later).

Another significant political development (but based on philosophical ideas) of the late 1700s was the French Revolution and the violent overthrow of the French monarchy and aristocracy, who had ruled France for hundreds of years. Later, in the 19th century, we saw the development of other political and economic philosophies, one of the main ones being Marxism.

Ultimately, Marxism became Communism, a political system which led to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which saw the violent overthrow of the Russian king (Tzar) & his family, & the aristocracy and their replacement by a Communist State (which lasted in Russia until 1991) & was 'exported' to other countries, the main one being The Peoples Republic of China, (PRC) so called 'Communist China', where, of course, Communism still rules today.

In the last 100 years, philosophy has increasingly become an activity actively practiced and taught within the university environment, and accordingly it has grown more specialized and more distinct from the natural sciences. Much of philosophy over this period concerns itself with explaining the relation between the theories of the natural sciences and the ideas of the humanities or common sense.

¹ Note: Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems concerning matters such as existence, knowledge, truth, justice, validity, mind & language.

There have obviously been many philosophical ideas over the centuries and many doctrines, however, it is beyond the scope of this course to discuss even the major doctrines in any more detail than we have already. I now want to briefly examine some of the major 'Sub-branches' of Social Science before we begin to concentrate on some of these 'sub-branches' more specifically. I have already spoke about philosophy & philosophical thought so I will now concentrate on other Social Science areas.

Anthropology

Anthropology is the holistic discipline that deals with the integration of different aspects of the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Human Biology. It includes Archeology, Prehistory, Physical and Biological Anthropology, anthropological Linguistics, Social and Cultural Anthropology, Ethnology and Ethnography. (Holistic=the tendency in nature to form 'wholes')

It is an area that is offered at most undergraduate institutions (certainly in most developed or developing countries). The word 'anthropos' is from Ancient Greek for "human being" or "person". Sociocultural anthropology has been described as "the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanistic of the sciences".

Culture comes from the Latin word meaning "to cultivate." It generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance. Cultures can be "understood as systems of symbols and meanings that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another". Thus, we might talk about "Country cultures", we can talk about "religious cultures", "political cultures", "Organizational cultures", etc.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is commonly known as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste. More broadly, scholars in the field define aesthetics as "critical reflection on art, culture and nature". Aesthetics is a sub-discipline of axiology, a branch of philosophy, and is closely associated with the philosophy of art. Aesthetics studies new ways of seeing and of perceiving the world.

Religion

A religion is a set of beliefs and practices, often centered upon specific supernatural and moral claims about reality, the cosmos, and human nature, and often codified as prayer, ritual, or religious law. Cosmos is a complex and orderly system, such as the universe; the opposite of chaos. Chaos is the irregular unpredictable behavior of determinated, non-linear systems. Chaos is beginning to replace bureaucracy as a science of organizations.

Religion also encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, and mythology, as well as personal faith and religious experience. The term "religion" refers to both personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction.

In the frame of European religious thought, religions present a common quality, the "hallmark of patriarchal religious thought": the division of the world in two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane. Religion is often described as a communal system for the

coherence of belief focusing on a system of thought, unseen being, person, or object, that is considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine, or of the highest truth.

Moral codes, practices, values, institutions, tradition, rituals, and scriptures are often traditionally associated with the core belief, and these may have some overlap with concepts in secular philosophy.

Religion is also often described as a “way of life” or a Life stance. The development of religion has taken many forms in various cultures. “Organized religion” generally refers to an organization of people supporting the exercise of some religion with a prescribed set of beliefs, often taking the form of a legal entity. Other religions believe in personal revelation.

“Religion” is sometimes used interchangeably with “faith” or “belief systems” but is more socially defined than that of personal convictions. There are many other areas of Social Science such as Economics, Geography, History, Law, Political Science, Psychology, Social Work, Sociology, Sports Science, and even more but I do not have time to explore them today.

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Ethics

Another important aspect of social science is ethics or ethical issues. Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right or wrong, often addressing disputes of moral diversity. Of course, ethical considerations apply in all cultures and sub-cultures. What is regarded as ‘ethical’ in one country or region, may not be so regarded in other countries or regions. There are many areas that can be discussed under the umbrella of social science but I have to finish at this point due to time considerations.

Economics

Economics is the social science that studies the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. The term economics comes from the Greek for house and custom or law, hence “rules of the house(hold)”. Modern economics developed out of the broader field of political economy in the late 19th century, owing to a desire to use an empirical approach more like the physical sciences. (Empirical means something derived from or guided by experience or experiment). A definition is “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses”. Scarcity means that available resources are insufficient to satisfy all wants and needs. The subject thus defined involves the study of choices as they are affected by incentives and resources.

Areas of economics may be divided or classified into various types, including: Microeconomics and macroeconomics. Positive economics (“what is”) and normative economics (“what ought to be”). Mainstream economics and heterodox economics (heterodox economics means not in agreement with accepted beliefs). Fields and broader categories within economics. One of the uses of economics is to explain how economies, as economic systems, work and what the relations are between economic players (agents) in the larger society. Methods of economic analysis have been increasingly applied to fields that involve people (officials included) making choices in a social context, such as crime, education, the family, health, law, politics, religion, social institutions, and war.

Education

Education encompasses teaching and learning specific skills, and also something less tangible but more profound, the imparting of knowledge, positive judgment and well-developed wisdom. (Tangible is real, actual, substantial; profound is situated at great depth, coming as if from the depths of one’s being)

Education has as one of its fundamental aspects the imparting of culture from generation to generation (socialization). To educate means ‘to draw out’ (from Latin), or to facilitate the realization of an individual’s potential and talents. It is an application of pedagogy, which is a body of theoretical and applied research relating to teaching and learning and draws on many disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, computer science, linguistics, neuroscience, sociology and anthropology.

The education of an individual human begins at birth and continues throughout life. Some even believe that education begins after conception and before birth while the baby is still in the mother’s womb. For some, the struggles and triumphs of daily life provide far more instruction than does formal schooling. Family members also usually have a profound educational effect.

Geography

Geography s a discipline can be split broadly into two main subfields: human geography and physical geography. The former focuses largely on the built environment and how space is created, viewed and managed by humans as well as the influence humans have on the space they occupy. The latter examines the natural environment and how the climate, vegetation, & life, soil, water, and landforms are produced and interact. As a result of the two subfields using different approaches a third field has emerged, which is environmental geography.

Environmental geography combines physical and human geography and looks at the interactions between the environment and humans. Geographers attempt to understand the earth in terms of physical and spatial relationships (spatial means pertaining to or involving or having the nature of space).

The first geographers focused on the science of mapmaking and finding ways to precisely project the surface of the earth. In this sense, geography bridges some gaps between the natural sciences and social sciences.

Modern geography is an all-encompassing discipline that seeks to understand how the world has changed in terms of human settlement and natural patterns. The fields of Urban Planning, Regional Science, and Planetology are closely related to geography. Practitioners of

geography use many technologies and methods to collect data such as remote sensing, aerial photography, statistics, and global positioning systems (GPS), using satellite technology..

Remote sensing is the small or large-scale acquisition of information of an object or phenomenon, by the use of either recording or real-time sensing devices that are not in physical or intimate contact with the object. GPS is a system of satellites, computers and receivers that is able to determine latitude or longitude on Earth by calculating the time difference for signals from different satellites to reach the receiver.

The field of geography is generally split into two distinct branches: physical and human. Physical geography examines phenomena related to climate, oceans, soils, and the measurement of earth. Human geography focuses on fields as diverse as Cultural geography, transportation, health, military operations, and cities. Other branches of geography include Social geography regional geography, geomatics, and environmental geography. Geomatics is the discipline of gathering, storing, processing and delivering geographic information or spatially referenced information.

History

History is the continuous, systematic narrative and research of past events as relating to the human species; as well as the study of all events in time, in relation to humanity. Narrative is a story either in writing, speaking, poetry, prose,(writing that resembles everyday speech), images, song, theater or dance

There is debate over history's classification in an academic sense. Some countries regard history as an Humanity where others classify it as a Social Science (but this is rather pedantic & does not concern us). (Pedantic means often concerned with small details).

History can be seen as the sum total of many things taken together & the spectrum of events occurring in action following in order leading from the past to the present and into the future. Spectrum is a range of values of a quantity or a set of related quantities, rules,, activities, e.g., the whole spectrum of 20th Century thought. The historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidence to research and then to write history.

Law

Law in common language means a rule which (unlike a rule of ethics) is capable of enforcement through institutions. The study of law crosses the boundaries between the social sciences and humanities, depending on one's view of research into its objectives and effects.

Law is not always enforceable, especially in the international relations context. It has been defined as a "system of rules", as an "interpretive concept" to achieve justice, as an "authority "to mediate people's interests. & as "the command of a sovereign, backed by the threat of sanction".

However one likes to think of law, it is a completely central social institution. Legal policy incorporates the practical manifestations of thinking from almost every one of the social sciences and humanities. Laws are politics, because politicians create them. Law is philosophy, because moral and ethical persuasions shape their ideas.

Law tells many of history's stories, because statutes, case law & codifications are build up over time. And law is economics, because any rule about contracts, torts, property law, labour law, company law and many more can have long lasting effects on the distribution of wealth.

Linguistics

Linguistics is a discipline that investigates the cognitive and social aspects of human language. Cognitive means an inherited pattern of thought or action. The field is traditionally divided into areas that focus on particular aspects of the linguistic signal, such as syntax (the study of the rules that govern the structure of sentences), semantics (the study of meaning), phonetics (the study of speech sounds) and phonology (the study of the abstract sound system of a particular language).

However, work in areas like evolutionary linguistics (the study of the origins and evolution of language) & psycholinguistics (the study of psychological factors in human language) cut across these divisions.

The overwhelming majority of modern research in linguistics takes a predominantly synchronic perspective (focusing on language at a particular point in time), and a great deal of it aims at formulating theories of the cognitive (understanding) processing of language. However, language does not exist in a vacuum, or only in the brain, & so many aspects explore language in its social context.

Political Science

Political Science is an academic and research discipline that deals with the theory & practice of politics & the description & analysis of political systems and political behavior. Fields and subfields of political science include political economy (really economics), political theory and philosophy, civics and comparative politics, theory of direct democracy, national political systems, cross-national political analysis, public administration, public law, judicial behavior, public policy, & others. Political science also studies power in international relations and the theory of Great powers and Superpowers. Political science is methodologically diverse, i.e., there are many ways in which it can be studied.

Political science, as one of the social sciences, uses methods & techniques that relate to the kinds of inquiries sought: primary sources such as historical documents & official records, secondary sources such as scholarly journal articles, statistical analysis, case studies, etc.

Psychology

Psychology is an academic and applied field involving the study of behaviour and mental processes. Psychology also refers to the application of such knowledge to various spheres of human activity, including problems of individuals' daily lives and the treatment of mental illness. Psychology differs from anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology in seeking to capture explanatory generalizations about the mental function and overt behaviour of individuals, while the other disciplines rely more heavily on field studies and historical methods for extracting descriptive generalizations.

In practice, however, there is quite a lot of cross-fertilization that takes place among the various fields. Psychology is a very broad science that is rarely tackled as a whole, major block.

Although some subfields encompass a natural science base and a social science application, others can be clearly distinguished as having little to do with the social sciences or having a lot to do with the social sciences.

Social Work

Social Work is concerned with social problems, their causes, their solutions and their human impacts. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social Work is the profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life, and to the development of the full potential of each individual, group, and community in society.

Social refers to human society or its organization. It is a social science involving the application of social theory and research methods to the study and to improve the lives of people, groups, and societies. Social work incorporates and utilizes all the social sciences as a means to improve the human condition.

Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local & indigenous knowledge specific to its context. Indigenous means traditional or local.

The social work profession draws on theories of human development and behaviour and social systems to analyse complex situations and to facilitate individual, organizational, social, and cultural changes.

Sociology

Sociology is the study of society and human social action. It generally concerns itself with the social rules & processes that bind and separate people not only as individuals but as members of associations, groups, communities, and institutions and includes the examination of the organization and development of human social life.

It is a social science involving the application of social theory and research methods to the study of the social lives of people, groups & societies, sometimes defined as the study of social interactions.

Sociological methods, theories, and concepts may inspire sociologists to explore the origins of commonly accepted conventions. Sociology offers insights about the social world that extend beyond explanations that rely on individual quirks and personalities. (A quirk is a peculiarity of behaviour).

Sociologists may find general patterns in studying the behaviour of particular individuals and groups. This specific approach to social reality is sometimes called the sociological perspective.

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