

Social Sciences

Salt Lake Community College | General Education

Social Sciences (SS) at SLCC:

- Political Science
- Sociology
- Psychology
- Economics
- Anthropology
- Criminology
- Family Studies
- Communication Studies
- History

What Do Social Scientists Study?

It's a given that social scientists study human behavior. Consider:

- Culture and institutions
- Beliefs, and opinions
- Cognition
- Human development
- Conflict and cooperation
- Race, class, and gender
- Social norms and aberrant behavior
- Power and what is accomplished with it



Jarek Tuszynski, Creative Commons—U.S. Supreme Court

Inquiry in the Social Sciences

Social scientists engage in theory-driven explorations of individual and social behavior. The kinds of questions social scientists ask often come from established **theoretical perspectives** that consist of concepts, definitions, and a body of scholarly literature that has developed over time. As you take a social science class for general education, make sure you understand the various theoretical perspectives that exist in the discipline you are studying.

Many social scientists employ the **scientific method** in ways that are essentially indistinguishable from natural scientists—although studying people adds layers of complexity to the task. Other social scientists eschew formal science in favor of rigorous interpretations, analyses, or in-depth case studies. They may do so because historical events and contemporary social phenomena are too complex for simple causal models to address, or because people are too self-aware to be measured and studied without distorting results. Nevertheless, all social scientists adhere to **empirical**, formalized methodologies.

What Do You Think?

1. The social sciences and the natural sciences both embrace the scientific method. What do you suppose are the differences in methodology used and conclusions drawn between the social and natural sciences? Think about how their different subjects impact methods and conclusions.
2. What are the merits and limitations of the following two broad approaches to social science research: Statistical inferences based on large amounts of quantitative data, and conclusions drawn from in-depth examination of one or a few case studies.
3. To what extent can human behavior be predicted? If we have information about human behavior in current studies, how confident can/should we be in making predictions based on that research?
4. Can people draw different conclusions from the same set of data or observations? Why or why not? Can you provide an example of data or observations that either can or cannot be subject to multiple interpretations?

The theoretical perspectives in various disciplines drive the development of **hypotheses**. For instance, if a perspective called elite theory is correct, we might hypothesize that public policy better reflects the preferences of the wealthy elite than it does the wishes of the broader public. To test the hypothesis, what kinds of **careful observations** could we make and what sorts of **data** might we collect? Should we design a laboratory experiment to test our hypothesis, or would it be better to examine actual policies and political preferences?

Regardless of their methodological choices, most social scientists share with natural scientists the imperative that hypotheses need to be **testable**, meaning that they can be tested to see if they represent accurate or inaccurate explanations of human behavior. The testability of its hypotheses separates science from belief systems that are grounded in faith.

Again, like natural scientists, social scientists submit their work to a process of **peer review**—the scrutiny of other scientists who strive to replicate or refute their findings—at conferences and in scientific journals. Controversies often erupt in the social sciences when some scholars try unsuccessfully to **replicate** the findings of other scholars. Studies that can be replicated—that is, repeated with similar results—have more scientific credibility than do studies that cannot be replicated.



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