**Lecture 2: An Overview of Social Sciences**

1. **What is Social Science?**

Social science is the branch of science devoted to the study of societies and the relationship between individuals within those societies. The term was formerly used to refer to the field of [sociology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology), the original "science of society", established in the 19th century.

Social science is the study of peoples and societies.

• ***Social*** refers to the relationships between people in a society.

• ***Science*** is the organised and systematic study of things and how they work.

Hence, Social science tries to understand how society works. It looks at how people in society relate to each other and to their environment. It can include the study of individuals, families, groups, organisations or whole countries. For example, a social scientist might want to understand why some people in society are rich and others are poor, or how building a dam on a river will affect the lives of people who live by the river.

People have different ideas about how society is or should be. This makes social science different from natural science like biology, chemistry or physics. For example, we know humans need food and oxygen to survive. These are *scientific facts*. Social science studies human behaviour and relationships and the effects that they have on society. Many things about people and society are more difficult to claim as 'facts'. For example, how people's views about religion or politics affect development. It is likely that social scientists will get different answers depending on who they ask.

**2. The Importance of Studying Social Sciences**

**2.1. Prevailing Perceptions of the Social Sciences**

* social science is a non-utility subject. From the initial stages of schooling, it is often suggested to students that the natural sciences are superior to the social sciences, and are the domain of ‘bright’ students. As a result, low self-esteem governs the classroom-transaction process, with both teachers and students feeling uninterested in comprehending its contents.
* Social science merely transmits information and is too centred, on the text, which is required to be memorised for examinations. The content is considered to be unconnected to daily realities . In addition, social science is viewed as providing unnecessary details about the past. It is also felt that the examination paper rewards the memorisation of these superfluous ‘facts’, with the learner’s conceptual understanding being largely ignored.
* Not many desirable job options are open to students specialising in the social sciences. In addition, it is felt that the social sciences are bereft of the ‘skills’ required to function in the real world. This produces the impression that the subject is redundant.

**2.2. Why is Studying Social Sciences Important?**

Studying social science is valuable for personal, community, work and education reasons. Social science studies human behaviour and relationships. We are all human and we all experience or relate to the things studied in social science. Learning about different issues and how they affect people helps us see things from other points of view and in new ways. That is important for understanding (and for being part of) the communities that we live in.

Increasing our knowledge of human society is as important as learning more about mathematics, physics, chemistry, or engineering. Thus, we cannot benefit from the findings of natural sciences unless we can develop societies in which human beings can live happy; satisfying and meaningful lives. Albert Ainstein, in this sense, claimed that ‘ Politics is more difficult than physics and the world is more likely to die from bad politics than from bad physics’.

 The skills that we learn from studying social science are useful for many kinds of work. Employers often look for these skills. They include conducting research, working with others (cooperating and collaborating), problem solving, and decision making. These skills are needed in industry, business, government, non-governmental organisations, and education.

**2.3. Conducting Research in SHS**

 Research means systematically studying something and creating new knowledge about it. Three important steps in research are data collection, thinking critically, and analysis.

• **Data collection** means systematically searching for and collecting information (data) about the thing you are researching. Data can include written material, interviews, or surveys, etc.

•**Thinking critically** means not accepting everything you read or hear. Instead, it involves thinking for yourself, recognising opinions and bias in what other people say and write and questioning those things.

• **Analysis** means to look closely at data in a systematic way to try to understand how it relates to the central research topic.

Conclusions about what the research has found are then drawn from the analysis and the research is usually presented in a written report.

Therefore, the social sciences are essential to provide social, cultural, and analytical skills required to adjust to an increasingly interdependent world, and to deal with political and economic realities.

**Practice**

**Exercise 1.** Are these statements true or false? If false, say why? **exercise**

**1.** Social science might study one person or an entire community.

**2.** Biology, chemistry and physics are examples of social science.

**3.** Natural science can establish facts about the physical world.

**4.** Social scientists always get the same results when they study the same thing.

**Exercise 2.** Match the skills a-c to the examples (i-iii) that best demonstrates that skill.

**a.** data collection **b.** thinking critically **c.** analysis

**i.** Mr X interviewed people from 30 households in her village about why some people there could not access medical care.

**ii.** Mr Y sorted what people said in each interview into categories: people who live in towns and people who live in the country; men and women; and employed and unemployed.

**iii.** Ms X didn't believe what she read on the website of a factory about protecting the environment. So she read reports by environmental groups about the factory and spoke to local people.

**Exercise 3. Categorising – Social Science Skills**

**1.** In scenarios below, decide if each sentence describes

**a.** data collection

**b.** thinking critically

**c.** analysis

**d.** presenting conclusions from research.

 ***Note that*** Some sentences might describe more than one skill.

**2.** Explain your answers

a. A new road is being built through your town. You want to find out more about its effects on people, the economy and the environment.

b. You collect and read newspaper articles about the planned road.

c. You read one article carefully and notice it only talks about how the road will be good for the town and not any problems that it might cause.

d. You look online to find out about the person who wrote the article and see they are working for the road building company.

e. You then search online for information about the results of an environmental **impact** assessment for the planned road the company had submitted to the Ministry of Conservation.

f. You conduct interviews with people living near where the road will go.

g. You read each interview and place concerns people mentioned about the road into three categories – **livelihoods**, economy and environment – to see which of those concerns occur the most.

h. For each of the three main effects, you break them down into concerns held by men and concerns held by women, to see if they are the same or different.

i. You write a report about what you found from your analysis of the interviews and distribute it to the people affected by the road and to the company building it.