

The social in social science



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Introduction

In a complex and rapidly changing world, social scientific study examines how we produce things, communicate, govern ourselves, understand our environments, and how to solve the problems we face in the organisation of social relations and processes. This course provides a basic overview of how social science contains deeply embedded cultural assumptions and outlines the important relationship between philosophical thinking and practical research methods in social sciences.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Postgraduate study in [Sociology](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- describe why and how we study social phenomena
- outline how theory can help us to deal with complex evidence
- give examples of the most appropriate theory
- identify which concepts are most useful for the task
- explain how hypotheses are generated.

1 What does the philosophy of the social science offer?

Why study the philosophy of the social sciences? Before we can answer this question we need to ask briefly a whole series of preliminary questions, such as:

- Why do we study social phenomena?
- How do we study social phenomena?
- How does theory help us to deal with complex evidence?
- Which theory is the most appropriate?
- Which concepts are most useful for the task?
- How do we generate hypotheses?
- What makes our evidence and arguments plausible?

In short, social research involves a great number of choices and we need to use some kind of criteria in order to judge which are the best ones to make. This is what the philosophy of the social sciences offers, a way of making sense of these complex and difficult choices. Now, before you think the philosophy of social science is 'the best thing since sliced bread', that it solves all the problems you will normally encounter as you prepare to engage in actual research, there is another issue that you must consider. The philosophy of the social sciences encompasses a whole series of competing standards and criteria that offer different ways in which the above choices can be understood and assessed. This diversity of rules and standards of scientific knowledge is a product of the variety of actual research in both the natural and the social sciences. The philosophy of the social sciences contains as much disagreement as any of the areas of social research with which it comes into contact. The philosophy of the social sciences provides a range of alternative ways of thinking through the questions involved in social research.

Much depends on what you want to achieve in your research. Do you want to establish objective knowledge? Do you want reliable or valid data? Do you wish to communicate your research to a wide audience or a specific scientific community? Your answers to such questions will have an impact upon which perspective within the philosophy of the social sciences most closely relates to your own research strategy. This course begins to explore these diverse choices. The general purpose of this course is to introduce you to the problems and issues involved in social research. The specific purpose of this course is not to provide any answers but to set out a range of questions and debates that are relevant to social researchers. As societies change and social problems are redefined, the social sciences have to respond to be effective.

Now, with these issues in mind, let's turn to the structure of this course. Following this introduction, there are three sections:

- [Section 2](#) deals with the challenges facing social scientists in their attempts to understand and explain what is going on around us. As social scientists, we are faced with the task of coming to terms with a complex dynamic world. This means that social researchers have to ensure that their theoretical tools and assumptions are appropriate to the tasks they face.

- In [Section 3](#), we look at social science as a 'situated practice', that is, embedded in the very social relations it attempts to explain and understand. This leads us to assess how situational factors influence research practice. At this stage, it is sensible to highlight two aspects of what it means to be situated: **social situatedness** (in terms of a particular culture with its own distinctive values and debates) and **historical situatedness** (in terms of the particular tradition of thought). Understanding social science as a situated practice is a theme that is emphasised throughout this book as we address the context in which the various approaches in the philosophy of the social sciences emerged. This is related to their arguments about the character of knowledge and the rules of scientific method.
- [Section 4](#) acknowledges the important connections between the changing social world, which we all have to cope with, and the development of concepts and theoretical frameworks in the social sciences. We explore how it is possible to bridge the gap between detached scientific knowledge and the human component of the relations and processes which social scientists attempt to represent. In particular, we draw upon the arguments of Alfred Schütz, whose approach also recommends that social science should attempt to find ways of communicating its ideas and evidence widely to all members of society.

Situated knowledge – each form of social knowledge is located within a historically specific culture. Scientific knowledge is no exception.

The relationship between social scientists' knowledge and everyday life raises questions about how detached social research should attempt to be.

The relationship between the researcher and those being studied thus becomes a dialogue, rather than the social scientist simply imposing an authoritative voice upon the object in question. In this way, social scientific practice not only opens up new options for how we study the social world but also provides an opportunity for drawing upon a wider range of human knowledge and experience. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the three main themes of this course.



Figure 1 Working your way through the course.

This course begins to explore what 'science' means, in relation both to contemporary social science and everyday life. Scientific knowledge is often described as **objective knowledge**, which means that it can be taken as a true account of something and that scientific explanations can be applied universally, that is, in all situations. In addition to being universal in scope, if knowledge is considered to be objective then it is also assumed to be detached from subjective experiences in any one situation. In this way, objective knowledge is detached from the specific object under investigation at any point in time. In such instances there is the possibility that these objects are treated as manifestations or examples of a more general scientific law or an underlying causal process.

Objective knowledge is universal in scope and detached from subjective experiences.

As you work through this course, think very carefully about what it means to be scientific when studying social relations and processes. In particular, think about whether it is possible and desirable to try to create objective knowledge. Consider also whether social science should involve an explicit attempt to make the concepts used in research connect to the lived experiences of the people being studied.

2 Facing the challenges in the social sciences

2.1 The challenge of change

We are living in a very complex and rapidly changing world. Social science does not exist in a vacuum: by its very nature, social scientific study directly considers those things in life which are close to our concerns as human beings – how we produce things, communicate with one another, govern ourselves, understand our varied environments, and how to solve the problems we face in the organisation of social relations and processes. The social sciences offer a way of dealing with all of these issues. However, the ways in which we produce, communicate, organise and so on vary enormously as well, and they are themselves constantly undergoing processes of change. Social scientists need to produce convincing explanations for these changes and identify appropriate responses to them. To do this we have to deal with the wide range of theories and methods available. In short, studying social existence with some degree of success involves recognising and responding to a series of challenges.

The challenges facing the social sciences as bodies of knowledge and as practical guides to action are much more difficult today than previously. The institutions and social processes (such as the state, the national economy, the human personality, the environment and societies) which served as traditional objects of analysis have all undergone or are presently undergoing dramatic transformation, and in some cases are being superseded by new objects and new ways of investigating them. To demonstrate this challenge, let's consider briefly three interrelated processes: globalisation, environmental change and the communications revolution.

- The precise character and dimensions of globalisation are still open to dispute. However, the spread of networks between businesses, academics, political movements and so on seems to operate without respect for national boundaries. This raises questions about attempts to explain these changes in terms of concepts which are focused upon national environments in isolation from wider patterns of human activity.
- The relationships between social and physical environments are also barely understood, which makes understanding environmental change even more difficult. The problems which have emerged, from global warming and ozone depletion to acid rain pollution, have led many social scientists to forge new interdisciplinary links and to reassess the role of the natural sciences in contributing to the study of environmental problems. In addition, environmental ethics have led some social scientists to think more carefully about the instrumental attitudes to natural things.
- The transformations in communications (the Internet, interactive television, electronic information and transnational media companies using satellite technology to transmit programmes beyond the control of any particular nation-state) are notable for their global impact and for forcing us to rethink the relationship between technology, language and social relations, as well as opening up new opportunities for communicating over vast distances.

These three processes are clearly interrelated, for globalisation would make little sense if it did not involve consideration of global communications and environmental problems. These examples illustrate just three of the many significant challenges to the social sciences in defining the things which should be studied.

2.2 The challenge of methods

The methodological challenges facing the social sciences are best outlined in the form of a series of questions about how we should engage in research and what kind of research attitude is appropriate.

- Should social scientists look to the assumptions and methods developed in the natural sciences or develop their own assumptions and methods?
- Do the objects which we study in the social sciences, such as the self, society, the economy, ideology or democracy, really exist or are they convenient fictions we have grown to trust?
- Can social life be reduced to simplified relations where it is possible to say that x may be related to or cause y , or is everyday social life more complex than this?
- Is it possible for social scientists to bridge the gap between attempts to build general explanations, that hold good across a range of similar situations, and attempts to understand the complexity of one concrete situation?

In this course we begin to define these questions and problems, and recognise their importance rather than formulate any definite answers. All of these questions are closely related to one another and stem from an underlying problem with the scientific study of social relations. In the natural sciences it is assumed that the objects of analysis (for example, atoms, DNA, forests, mountains, planets) are clearly separate from the researcher. For the time being, we will not challenge this assumption but instead concentrate upon its implications for studying people. The treatment of objects of analysis as separate from the researcher is more problematic in the social sciences. For example, when we study the family, education or culture, we are part of these things, for we live, think and communicate within them. Social science has to wrestle with the problem of human beings creating explanations about themselves and their society when they are part and parcel of that society. Even when social scientists think about and describe their theories and findings they use words, analogies and metaphors whose meanings are tied to the society of which they are a part. Social scientists are part of their own object of analysis.

These issues provide problems for a social scientist who wishes to be separate from the object of study, in the manner of natural scientists. Social scientists who attempt to do this can be said to be detached but they can never be fully separated from the object. Clearly, when we study a rock or a tree we are not actually part of these things although we can act upon them. This conundrum is often referred to as the **subject-object problem**. Conventionally, the researcher is seen as the subject and the thing being researched is taken to be the object, but in social science we are both the subject and object of our own knowledge. When we study social life we are also studying ourselves. So, we have to find a way of assessing evidence from everyday experience. Either we can dismiss everyday experience as irrelevant in the pursuit of hard facts and objective **scientific laws**, or we can self-consciously embrace it and use it fruitfully in order to gain insights into aspects of social existence which would otherwise remain unnoticed. When we study social

institutions and cultural forms, in quite a fundamental way we are studying ourselves, and social scientific practice should acknowledge this.

Subject–object problem This is a problem because it indicates the different ways in which social scientists have studied people. The subject object problem focuses our attention on the relationship between the researcher and the things studied. It also highlights the way in which there are crucial differences between social science and natural science.

Scientific laws The development of scientific laws is seen as the ultimate goal of scientific practice – however, as with everything else there is considerable disagreement about what constitutes a scientific law.

These problems become even more acute when we study an institution with which we are all intimately familiar. Imagine you wished to study the family as your object, you would be faced with a range of research choices, of which we shall consider two:

- How do you define the family?
- What exactly is it about the family that you wish to study?

The problems in defining clearly what a family is, and what is the most appropriate form of research method to study an aspect of the family, provide a useful illustration of the subject–object problem. Studies of family life in the mid-twentieth century tended to assume that the nuclear family (with two parents of the opposite sex and their offspring) should form the basic course of analysis. Many of the social researchers involved in this field drew upon their own experiences of family life to define their object of analysis. In so doing, forms of family life which did not conform to this criterion were defined as abnormal or deviant and placed within the broader category of social problems. This form of distinction was very much in line with the moral and cultural discourses in the West during this period. Contemporary researchers accept a greater plurality of family forms (single parent, gay and lesbian families and so on) and generally avoid the particular formation of concepts of the 1950s and 1960s. All social researchers have experienced some form of socialisation, so that when they identify their objects of analysis as ‘conjugal roles’ or ‘sibling rivalry’ these concepts have a personal and subjective dimension. Even the language used has an inescapable symbolic content.

Social researchers, then, view the family in various ways. For some, it is the basis of a strong and stable social order, as in some branches of sociology which focus upon the functions of the family. For others, it is the mechanism for reproducing power relationships in society more generally, as well as distorting personality development. This was illustrated by feminist analyses such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and by radical psychiatrists such as R.D. Laing. In *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing identified conflictual family relationships as the cause of schizophrenia. In the cases he examined, he discovered that children who ‘interiorised’ the conflict between parents were more likely to experience mental illness in their subsequent lives. Furthermore, it is worthwhile considering for a moment how Laing came to fix upon this relationship. In childhood, he experienced such relationships within his own family environment. These may have had an impact on his choice of research topic as well as on his subsequent line of argument. Such personal experiences could have provided a unique perspective on such relations, but they could also have narrowed his consideration of alternative explanations of schizophrenia. This example serves to highlight the way in which social science cannot

and should not be separated from subjective experiences. By recognising the relationship between the construction of scientific concepts and social relations we can develop a better understanding of human existence. Personal experiences and participation in social institutions all affect the practice of social research.

You may wish to study issues around which there is considerable public controversy. Moreover, you face a choice of research techniques. These choices can have a considerable effect upon the outcome of your research. For instance, if you ask for responses to standardised questions from a large number of families you may be able to compare the results between one group and another. However, if you spend a greater amount of time with a smaller number of families you may produce richer and more revealing insights into family lives. But you may also encounter problems in trying to generalise to other situations. These choices reveal how difficult it is, in practice, to separate the **context of discovery**, where we decide what it is we want to study and how it should be studied, from the **context of justification**, where we attempt to interpret the evidence we have collected and explain the social processes involved.

Context of discovery This is concerned with the situation where the problems which deserve attention and investigation are identified and defined – the grounds for identifying such things are the product of a wide range of factors, such as the emergence of anomalies which don't fit existing knowledge, the recognition of holes in the research literature, and the values of the communities and institutions engaging in research.

Context of justification This is concerned with the actual conduct of research, of collecting evidence, testing ideas and hypotheses, and of interpreting, applying and evaluating the evidence. In practice, since research is a lived activity, it is often difficult to distinguish between the context of discovery from the context of justification.

2.3 The challenge of terminology

Probably the biggest challenge that you will encounter is acquiring a command of the terms and concepts of this field of knowledge – even the words ‘philosophy’ and ‘science’ can seem off-putting. In your reading around this course you will come into contact with a wide range of ‘-isms’, ‘-sophies’ and ‘-ologies’, some of which you may have encountered in previous studies. Actually, these terms are best seen as shorthand for groups of assumptions and ideas about the way the social world is organised and the most appropriate methods for studying it. Although they save us from repeating the same assumptions over and over again, there are dangers in becoming over-dependent on these shorthands. In sticking rigidly to a set of methodological principles, we can become inflexible. Some of these concepts have become so widely established that they have the same status as articles of faith – they are taken for granted as true. As social scientists you will encounter unexpected social phenomena for which conventional approaches are no longer adequate in providing a plausible explanation. In such situations you will have to innovate with your existing theoretical assumptions and research methods and you may decide that even the fundamental assumptions need to be rethought.

The existence of specialised terminology and language poses a significant challenge to anyone trying to study a social science. Over the last hundred years, each social scientific discipline has carved out its own space and, in defining its own distinctive object of analysis, has equipped itself with a specific set of concepts and references which hold meaning only for those who work or hope to work within it. Most of the key concepts are open to disagreement and, as you read through this course, you will begin to identify the ways in which science itself is a contested concept and can mean very different things to different approaches in the philosophy of social science. In addition, frequently used concepts, such as experience, causality, theory, models and scientific method, may have very different meanings in each social scientific discipline. These may also vary from everyday uses of the same terms. Everyone who has studied in the social sciences has encountered this problem at some point and most of us still do. Another good reason for using shorthand concepts for collections of assumptions and ideas is that they provide a shared language for the discussion of complex ideas.

Activity 1

Now select the first of the four readings, which are all from recent social research on housing and homelessness. [Reading A](#), 'Owning and renting houses', an extract from *A Nation of Home Owners* by Peter Saunders, concentrates on empirical trends in housing. In [Reading B](#) you are asked to 'read' a documentary photograph of a homeless woman. In [Reading C](#), 'The homeless', Jean Conway adopts a more campaigning approach in this extract from *Capital Decay, An Analysis of London's Housing*. Finally, [Reading D](#), 'The meaning of home', from 'The Experience of Homeless Women' by Annabel Tomas and Helga Dittmar, considers responses to in-depth interviews with women in Brighton conducted by Tomas.

Compare and contrast these examples in order to make a short list of the similarities and differences between them:

- Make notes on how they define their objects of analysis.
- What do you think they are attempting to achieve?
- Can you identify the audiences for each of the examples of social research?
- Which of these studies would you consider to be scientific?

Which of these examples attempt to take sides and provide a voice for powerless individuals? Whose voice is most audible in each of the extracts? Is it that of the researcher or that of the people being studied?

You should also consider whether any of these readings demonstrate political bias and, if they do, what political values are involved.

Keep these examples in mind when you work through Activity 2 later in this course.

READING A

Owning and renting houses

Peter Saunders

All studies of council house sales show that buyers have higher incomes than other tenants – ... the mean income for the heads of households who bought was twice that of those who continued to rent. Studies also show that buyers are disproportionately middle aged and are often drawn from

households with more than one earner. In Aberdeen, for example, 75 per cent of sales have been to multiple-earner households ... and sales have been concentrated among households where the principal earner is in secure employment, where he or she is in a skilled manual or a non-manual occupation and where the family is of a conventional nuclear type. ...

There is in Britain a worrying gap opening up between what have been termed the 'middle mass' and the 'underclass'. This division is, of course, generated by factors other than the housing system, but it is coming to be most vividly expressed through housing differences and it is reproduced through tenure-based inequalities. However it is defined, the underclass appears to be concentrated in the least desirable parts of the council housing sector. State rental has today become associated with low incomes, high dependency on state benefits, high rates of unemployment and disproportionate numbers of single parents and single elderly people. When council tenants do have jobs, they are increasingly likely to involve unskilled or semi-skilled employment.

The residualization of the low paid and the economically inactive on what remain of the nation's council estates (for much of the best housing has been sold into owner-occupation) does not simply reflect existing economic inequalities but actually contributes to new ones. While home owners of all social classes share in the expansion of the country's wealth by virtue of their ownership of domestic property, those who remain in the council sector (many of whom would like to buy) are deprived of the chance to benefit from the rising value of the house or flat they live in. Instead, they face the prospect of indefinite rent payments (subsidized where necessary by housing benefit). As the home-owning middle mass gets wealthier, those who are trapped in state housing stay exactly where they are. Socialist defenders of state housing call this 'rent pooling'. Tenants themselves call it 'money down the drain'.

Source: Saunders, 1990, pp. 320, 369.

READING B

The homeless woman: a documentary photograph



Figure 2

Source: Photograph by Jacky Chapman, Format.

READING C

The homeless

Jean Conway

While some homeless people actually sleep on the streets, thousands more do not have a permanent home and move between various types of unsuitable and insecure housing. There is no measure of the scale of this housing need. The number of homeless households accepted by the London boroughs has been steadily rising over a long period – from 4,000 in 1971 to over 12,000 in the mid-1970s and over 24,000 in 1983.

The incidence of recorded homelessness is far greater in London than elsewhere, with 4.6 households per 1,000 resident households accepted in London compared with an average of 2.3 for England; for Inner London the figure was even higher at 6.6 households per 1,000 resident households.

But these figures only show those whom the authorities were obliged to accept under the Homeless Persons Act, notably excluding most single people and childless couples. Thousands more do not apply because they know they will not be accepted, and do apply but are rejected.... This suggests that there is a massive problem of homelessness in London, only a small proportion of which is officially measured or dealt with by the statutory agencies.

Yet these agencies are overwhelmed. In spite of giving one in three lettings to the homeless, over three quarters of the boroughs resort to using bed and breakfast accommodation for some homeless people because they are unable to give them council housing. In December 1983 there were over 3,000 homeless households in temporary accommodation in London,

including nearly 2,000 in bed and breakfast hotels. This is obviously a highly unsatisfactory response to the problem, both for the family and for the boroughs ... It may be cheaper for a borough to build or acquire a house for letting than to keep a family in bed and breakfast.

The London boroughs are clearly swamped by the scale of homelessness and are unable to cope with the problem. At the same time, they are failing to rehouse many people from the waiting list, to carry out adequate decanting programmes for modernization schemes, and to meet other pressing housing needs. The continuing housing shortage and consequent difficulty in obtaining accommodation suggests that London will be unable to provide a decent home for many of its residents for the foreseeable future. ...

Examination of London's housing situation suggests that there must be a London-wide authority to deploy London's resources effectively in order to meet needs which are unevenly spread. This function is vital because:

- the scale of housing need remains beyond the abilities of individual boroughs to tackle alone;
- need is unevenly distributed across London, as are the resources to tackle the problems;
- by their very nature, some housing problems and activities cannot be effectively tackled on a borough basis;
- each borough programme needs to be fitted into a co-ordinated approach for the metropolis as a whole.

Source: Conway, 1984, pp. 59–61, 72.

READING D

The meaning of home

Annabel Tomas and Helga Dittmar

The need for a practical understanding of homeless women's lives motivates and underpins the life historical and experiential approach adopted in this study. Homelessness is seen as a life process and the lives of homeless women, and the stories they tell about their lives, are examined and specified in terms that are appropriate to a social understanding (Blasi, 1990). There is a concern in this approach to frame the issue of homelessness in terms of an agent, contending with a set of social problems, rather than as an individual entrapped in history, or borne along by an unspecified disease process. People are viewed as active participants in the experience, negotiation, and (re)creation of their personal and social histories. They are understood to be purposive, resilient and goal-directed in their creative use of symbols, space, language, and ritualised behaviour, even as these activities are seriously curtailed (Fiske, 1991; Glasser, 1988; Jackson, 1988; Snow et al., 1988). Furthermore, whether people are constrained or enabled, they experience, negotiate and are creative, not only in practice, but also in the stories told about this practice. The stories homeless women tell *about* their experiences *of* housing are considered

especially important, since we understand them as 'going beyond' the event, offering an evaluation of it. Thus, a life history narrative offers an important source of data (Bruner, 1990), and a useful resource to an understanding of homelessness, and by implication, the meaning of 'home'. ...

In our study, interview data are seen as displaying cultural realities (Silverman, 1985), neither true nor false, but simply 'real'. Interview data, from this point of view, are not one side of the picture to be balanced by observation of what respondents actually do, or with what an observer may say. Instead, realism implies that such data reproduce and rearticulate cultural particulars in given patterns of social organisation. It is in these patterns of social organisation, expressed in a life history narrative, that the experience of housing and the meaning of home for homeless women is sought. ...

One difference between 'home' and 'ideal home' spontaneously expressed by eight of the securely housed women, but not expressed by the homeless women at all, was the probability of attainment. For example, "I know what I want, but I don't know if I'll get it", and "Well, that's what I would like". This suggests that these women were differentiating in their definition between home and ideal home. In their responses to the question 'What would be your ideal home?', all 12 securely housed women said that their ideal home would be a place of warmth and belonging surrounded by family and friends. In addition, a number of material attributes were highlighted, such as a desirable location (e.g. "a cottage in the country"), more space indoors and outdoors (e.g. "somewhere with a big garden and plenty of room"), or a greater level of material wealth (e.g. "the usual – roses in the garden, honey in the cupboard"). In the definitions of 'ideal home' given by securely housed women such material features are foremost, and the 'ideal home' is therefore more than 'a place (house) of warmth and belonging (home)'. In the same way that the defining features of 'house' (safety and security) had been assumed in their definition of 'home', so too, was 'warmth and belonging' (home), assumed in their definition of 'ideal home'.

The hierarchical and progressive nature of securely housed women's distinctions between house, home and ideal home are consistent with the current theoretical proposition of there being an intimate link between the experience of housing and the meaning of home. The positive connotations attached to the concept home as a place of psychological significance dependent on, yet over and above, the safety and security of four walls and a roof, was clearly expressed. The psychologically meaningful home appears to have arisen from the reality of their housing histories – safety and security in housing. ...

However, turning to the homeless women, it is apparent from their responses, that the distinction in meaning between a 'house', a 'home' and an 'ideal home' is not so easily rendered. Only three of the 12 homeless women could confidently define any difference in meaning between a house and a home. Nine of the 12 homeless women had great difficulty. Unlike the securely housed women who readily understood the question, most of the homeless women responded with uncertainty by asking such questions as "What do you mean?", "A place to stay?", "Is there a difference?", or "Um ...

I don't know ... Do you mean a children's home?". They appeared to have difficulty with the question itself, as well as finding it hard to provide an answer. Those three who did define a difference did so as follows (the names given here are pseudonyms):

1. A house is just a house ... it's where people live with you. A home is somewhere I can go that doesn't close the door at 10 pm ... somewhere that's mine. Ideal home ... no-one ... I don't want no-one living there. (Daphne, 31 years)
2. If you have your own home you can come back when you want... um ... somewhere I can be alone. (*and a house?*) It's not mine. At the moment where I am it's full of people. Ideal home ... A mansion of course! ... it would be far away... (*laughing*) ... a different country if possible. (Pat, 37 years)
3. A home is where you can stay, you have the run of the place. A house I imagine you don't. It's not yours. A home is somewhere nice. (*Ideal home?*) would be a four-bedroomed house. (Mandy, 33 years)

Whereas for securely housed women, the house is defined in terms of its neutral independence, and home as dependent on the social relations contained within it, for homeless women, a house is someone else's house where other people live with you (dependence). Home is a place of your own where you can be alone (independence). With the exception of "somewhere nice", expressions such as 'warmth' and 'belonging' were not mentioned at all by homeless women.

Again, as could be expected, and in line with current theorising, the relationship between a homeless woman's experience of housing (abuse and relocation) and her definition of 'home' (safety and security) is clearly expressed. However, whilst the securely housed women's definition of home appears to reflect their experiences of housing, the definitions of home given by homeless women appear to reflect their unmet needs for housing. The house of safety and security that securely housed women had assumed, homeless women had not yet achieved, neither in the reality of their housing histories, nor in their definitions of house and home. ... For homeless women, the identity-related concerns of 'home' were not so easily abstracted from the physiological requirements of a place of safety. The fact that nine homeless women could not articulate any difference in meaning between a house and a home may also suggest that the relationship between 'housing' (as a place of safety and security) and 'home' (as psychologically meaningful) has been severed completely. In this case the definition of 'home' as meaningful would be expected to be confused with the experience of housing as abusive, suggesting that the house/home distinction is not so easily rendered in the absence of safety and security. ... Finally, homeless women did not consider themselves to be homeless. None of the 12 women would accept being called homeless. They said they were not homeless because they lived somewhere. Thus, they were neither 'homed' according to the housed women's definition nor 'homeless' according to theirs.

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Source: Tomas and Dittmar, 1995, pp. 497–8, 503–5.

These four brief examples of research on homelessness demonstrate how varied social research can be, but also how important it is to be careful in one's own choice of research techniques. Some social researchers attempt to keep their distance from the object in question in order to remain objective or to gain an overall picture. Nevertheless, this does not prevent cultural values and even moral judgements from entering the research process in fundamental ways. A great deal of policy-oriented research on topics such as housing or poverty have political objectives built in. For instance, Peter Saunders in [Reading A](#) develops a case for the operation of the free market as a way of satisfying housing needs. This account of the problem and proposed solution is founded upon 'neo-liberal' political and social values, which view individual freedom as a central part of a smoothly functioning market economy. This approach assumes that human beings can and should act in terms of their own self-interest, and that if all individuals are left to their own devices the consequences will be the best possible outcome for everyone. In particular, Saunders recommends that all council house tenants should take out mortgages or loans and enter the private housing market. According to the 'neo-liberal' position, 'homelessness' and 'poverty' are personal troubles rather than social problems and, therefore, not the responsibility of the state. For Saunders, state intervention distorts the housing market and produces unsatisfactory outcomes, such as the growth of inadequate state housing schemes. If we contrast this with Jean Conway's account of homelessness in London, in [Reading C](#), we can see a very different approach which reaches the opposite conclusions on the role of the state in housing policy. For Conway, 'homelessness' is a social problem rather than a personal lifestyle choice. This approach raises the need for a social policy response by the state authorities. So we can see that each of these examples suggests a very different view of where the boundary between private choices and public responsibility lies. This has demonstrable consequences on the nature of the research practices in each case.

Other social researchers become much more involved with those being studied and try to provide a personal and vivid account of the everyday experiences of the homeless and what their situation means to them. These are not mutually exclusive options and

some social researchers have shown themselves to be inventive in combining a range of research strategies. In [Reading D](#), the empirical research carried out by Annabel Tomas attempts, much more explicitly, to understand the gendered dimensions of research on homelessness by focusing upon what home and homelessness mean to homeless women. Actually, most existing research concentrates upon homeless men, or treats the experiences of homeless men as universal, so that homeless women are invisible. The photographic representation of a homeless woman ([Reading B](#)) has the appearance of a close and personal representation, but we also need to address the control of the documentary researcher over the representation. The image is designed to tell a particular story and may reflect the presumptions and prejudices of the researcher rather than offering an authentic account of the experiences of the homeless woman depicted. Social scientific knowledge is shaped by the values and aims of researchers, and the choice of research methods can reflect this.

2.4 Thinking through the challenges

In addressing the challenges of the social sciences, we have emphasised the ways in which social researchers are themselves located within a particular social and cultural context and that it is worthwhile to consider the implications of this for social science. This leads us to consider if, and how, our own position in society has an impact upon the way that we produce social scientific knowledge. In short, we should consider how much we draw upon our own values, assumptions and identities when we develop concepts, formulate arguments and collect empirical evidence. One way in which social scientists can deal with this problem is to adopt the methods of the natural sciences and attempt to be detached from their object of study. But how detached should we be? As you saw in Activity 1, a more detached perspective, like that of Saunders ([Reading A](#)), does not provide the same kinds of understanding that a more involved method provides, like that of Tomas ([Reading D](#)). Yet both have useful and interesting things to say. In [Section 3](#) we explore in more detail what it means to be part of the object we are attempting to study. In other words, what does it mean to be situated in a social or historical context?

2.5 Summary

In a rapidly changing world, the objects of analysis with which the social sciences are familiar (such as the state and the national economy) no longer seem to operate in the same way and are possibly becoming redundant. New problems and issues are emerging which demand innovation and flexibility.

The jargon of the disciplines in the social sciences can become a barrier to understanding. As a starting-point, you should simply treat terms as labels for sets of assumptions and ideas and compare different uses of the concepts.

The last challenge, or rather a set of choices, relates to theory and method in the social sciences. Should we continue to assume that it is desirable to study social objects in the manner of the natural sciences (traditionally defined), or reject scientific procedures in the study of social life, or redefine what we mean by science?

3 What does it mean to practise social science?

3.1 Theorising situations

This course explores the processes through which we comprehend the world around us. When it comes to understanding and explaining the way that social life operates, social scientists draw from a conceptual tool kit, just as we possess a conceptual tool kit for watching a movie or as a spectator at any sports event. There are times when all human beings feel that something appears to be plausible or appears to be false and we are quite aware that others would disagree with our own point of view. We may wish to comment critically on the story-line of a film or make comparisons between a sports team's performance now and a similar event five or thirty years previously. In both of these everyday situations, we are using the same conceptual skills which are present in effective social scientific research. Theory is an essential part of the social sciences. Charles Lemert suggests that theory is a 'basic survival skill' (Lemert, 1993, p. 1) and perhaps it is best seen in this light, as a multifaceted Swiss army knife with a variety of uses and the possibility that we may use a particular tool in a new way to resolve a problem or meet a new challenge. Theory is an important component of all human practices, from mundane tasks to social scientific research.

Although theory works at a whole series of levels, there are common characteristics which can be identified in the things we do, from the most abstract to the most ordinary everyday levels. For instance, when you awake every morning you engage in a complex series of tasks of varying levels of complexity, ranging from brushing your teeth to finding your way to work. This means that you have to initiate a series of reflections about the world around you. Let's take the example of making your way to work. Generally, we do not see this as complicated or problematic until normality comes to a halt when you leave your means of payment at home by mistake or a public transport strike prevents you getting from A to B. When routines break down we have to theorise the situation we are in and plan our actions more carefully. All activities can have the appearance of being routine and untheorised but they still have a theoretical dimension. We simply take our theories of how the world works for granted, as unquestionably true. Similarly, the activities engaged in by social scientists can be just as habitual and routine, whether these involve the construction of an experiment in child psychology, the preparation of a list of questions for an interview, or the processing of data within a theoretical model of the economy or voting behaviour. Usually, it is only when these research tools no longer work that social scientists begin to rethink the assumptions behind them – and sometimes, not even then. In other words, social science involves a wide range of tacit assumptions which become so deeply embedded that it is hard even to identify them.

3.2 What does it mean for knowledge to be

situated?

Scientific knowledge has been frequently portrayed as universally true. If this were the case then there would be no fundamental disagreements, for what counts as true would never change. However, what has been considered scientific in the past is now often seen as archaic or simply odd. The opposite approach would be to say that truth is relative – no one view is superior to any other. Both of these positions are simplistic. Contemporary defenders of science would argue that science is improving and that the misinterpretations and flaws of the past were simply ‘poor science’.

The approach adopted in this section is that we should take seriously the issue that science has changed over time and varies across cultures. This approach tries to establish why certain views of science are taken to be plausible at certain points in time in particular societies. For instance, you may have used alternative health therapies. One of these, Chinese medicine, includes sets of assumptions about the holistic relationship between mind and body. This is at odds with the mechanical approach of Western medicine, which clearly separates physiological disorders from mental states. This does not mean that what we consider to be scientific is a fad or fashion but that we need to consider what makes a particular conception of scientific method plausible and privileged. Western medical science is founded upon the assumption that the mind and body are separate things and that the body can be understood as a complex machine made up of tissues, cells, bones, fluid and so on. In such a view, illness is a mechanical malfunction which can be remedied with appropriate treatment. Unlike this mechanistic view of the body, Chinese medicine rests upon the assumption that mind and body are intimately connected. This means that treatment should not only involve a recognition of emotional and mental states but also work with the body to repair itself. The practitioners of both mechanistic and holistic medicine consider their knowledge systems to be scientific and each claim in the West and in China is plausible within its respective cultural location.

To situate science is to establish its location. By situating the traditions in scientific method we can begin to have a clearer insight into contemporary approaches. We can also make more informed judgements about which assumptions and methods are most appropriate for our own social research. In order to understand the ways in which knowledge is produced and communicated at any point in time and place, you should consider the ways in which scientific knowledge is situated. Science, as a social practice, is situated in two ways:

- knowledge is situated socially through the cultural and institutional life of a given community;
- knowledge is situated historically by examining the shared traditions of knowledge production.

In the search for the universal principles of scientific method, one feature of the history of science, the context within which knowledge is produced, is often neglected. This does not mean that we have no control over scientific knowledge, for, as a human product, the form and the content of social science are very much the product of the assumptions and methods of social scientists and will change accordingly.

This course focuses upon approaches towards the natural as well as the social sciences. This is a reflection of the extent to which social scientists have drawn upon the philosophy of natural science to justify their own work. You will also have your attention drawn to the way in which we establish criteria as to what constitutes scientific or non-scientific

knowledge. All forms of social scientific knowledge are based upon human practices within institutional environments.

All such criteria are grounded in human practices and the academic and commercial institutional environments in which natural and social science take place. By identifying the cultural assumptions upon which the social sciences have developed, it is possible to begin to identify the impact of social science in society. In addition, by being sensitive to the way in which research is produced, we can also begin to spot the assumptions and values which are often left unstated in social scientific research. Not all researchers make their value positions as explicit as Saunders or Conway in Readings A and C. Scientists are often seen as remote and detached from everyday experience, a view that they themselves have often been quite happy to promote. The desire to be **objective** in social science can create a distance between the researcher and the object under consideration (in this case, human beings and the relations between them). This distance can lead to the mental constructs of the researcher being imposed upon the object rather than account being taken of the complex existence of human actors and their own institutional environments.

Objective When we say that knowledge is objective we are making authoritative claims about its standing. Actually, objectivity is an essentially contested concept in the philosophies of science and the social sciences; it is usually invoked to convey a sense of truthfulness and to offer a cloak of legitimacy for a particular story – it is a mark of authoritative knowledge.

While all models in the social sciences simplify social life in order to make it understandable, there are also dangers in providing a one-sided or partial account, especially where the experiences of those being studied are distorted or even ignored. There is an implicit danger in any attempt to attain objective knowledge, that what appears to be obvious to one group of researchers at a particular point in time is often treated as matter of fact. Indeed, what we take as objective truth has changed so much and so frequently that it is worthwhile regarding all such claims with suspicion. For example, if we take the treatment of women's experience in social scientific research, we find that the concerns of women have been primarily defined in terms of masculine perceptions of women's role in society. So, for instance, in studies of social mobility and educational attainment the class position of women has often been defined in terms of the occupational position of the father or husband. More subtly (and very rarely challenged) theories of female voting behaviour are packed full of assumptions about the traditionalist and religious orientation of women, concluding that women are more conservatively inclined than men. Social scientists simplify the complexity of social life to make it more understandable – but it could also mean that they make biased/misinformed judgements in social science. Similarly, the discussion of 'race' and ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s was largely conducted in the voice of those who were not part of the cultural groups identified as an object. In this way, crude stereotypes often go unchallenged in the social sciences. Black identities are frequently expressed through the concepts and terms of reference of white ethnocentric social science. The problem of ethnocentric knowledge is the way in which we do not often acknowledge how our own cultural location shapes our ideas. As tacit knowledge, ethnocentricity is hard to identify. This can be seen in the ways in which broad umbrella labels such as 'black', 'white' and 'Asian' have attained a factual status in many areas of social science. There is a danger that we end up treating such labels as nouns rather than adjectives. By identifying a group of people as 'blacks' or

'Asians' you fix the identity of the people involved as manifestations of an objective category and ignore cultural differences. When defining social identities, social scientists have often translated prejudices into objective categories.

Always ask yourself what values underpin the choice of concepts and the way in which an object of study is defined. Values are a key component of any investigation of the social world, even if there remains a tendency to hide one's own value position. In the next section, we consider an approach which acknowledges the cultural location of knowledge and turns it around to good use. We explore one attempt to build a bridge of understanding between our everyday experiences of the events around us and the detached scientific knowledge of specialists. This approach allows us to move closer to the meanings of the people being studied and how they understand their own activity, while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from the unreflective habits of everyday life.

3.3 Summary

Social scientific inquiry, like all human practices, operates through a set of taken-for-granted assumptions and draws upon the same skills we use in everyday life. It is difficult to separate the treatment of facts in social science from deeply embedded cultural values.

Social scientific knowledge is situated in two ways: *historically* in terms of the shared values and guidelines transmitted from previous studies in the social sciences, and *socially* within a specific cultural and institutional context.

4 Connecting the social sciences to everyday life

4.1 A situated practice

In the previous sections we considered the challenges facing the contemporary social sciences and the issues raised by thinking of social research as a situated practice. You will already have identified the ways in which the social sciences are complicated by the problem of researchers attempting to know and understand the social world they inhabit. At this point it is useful to develop a checklist of the ways that this has affected social research practice.

- The definition of objects of analysis reflects the taken-for-granted assumptions of the social researcher (as is seen when considering gender and ethnicity within social science).
- Social researchers select research methods (ranging from surveys to in-depth interviews) in order to fulfil certain purposes (such as the interviews with homeless women in [Reading D](#)).
- Political values can affect the purpose and character of social research (as in the examples of the policy implications of research in Readings A and C).
- Personal experiences are often involved in research in quite subtle ways (such as R. D. Laing's motivations for considering family relations as a cause of mental illness, discussed in Section 2.2).
- Social researchers often enter into the activity of gathering evidence on the basis of a particular conception of what is a normal or abnormal state of affairs (such as a 'normal family').

This is not an exhaustive list, but simply sensitises us to the importance of thinking through what we do when setting out on a research project. We should always consider why we are doing social research in a particular way and why we have rejected other ways. It is important to reflect upon the way in which we define objects of analysis and select a particular problem to investigate, and why we consider one approach to be more useful than another in providing the ideas and evidence we need.

4.2 The perspective of the stranger

One way in which it is possible to build links between everyday experience and social scientific research is to adopt the approach recommended by the philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schütz (1899–1959). As a refugee from Austria in the late 1930s, he found himself transported to America and encountered considerable difficulties in reorienting himself to new conditions and a new culture. This personal experience of not having familiar bearings, and of encountering the impact of cultural differences, sensitised him to the problems of how we perceive and understand social life as well as how we communicate our understandings to others. Schütz argued that in both social science and

in everyday life we use 'types' or mental constructs, which allow us generally to predict how others around us are likely to behave. By stereotyping the behaviour and motivations of others, we are able to identify predictable patterns around us which enable us to think through a situation and act.

In the social sciences, we also use types to make sense of empirical evidence but we deny that these types are based upon our common-sense stock of knowledge and treat them as objective things (as if they really do exist in the way that we imagine them). Schütz recommended that we should follow the 'postulate of adequacy' whereby ideas had to link lived experience with scientific knowledge. Each concept or idea in a 'scientific model of human action', if it is to be considered as adequate, must be constructed in such a way that it is understandable in terms of the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday life. Stereotypes are useful in the organisation of evidence, but they hold dangers if they are seen as real things. A scientific statement is considered to be adequate when it accounts for everyday experience and is understandable to those who live in the relations being studied (Schütz, 1953, p.34). To illustrate, Schütz provides an account of how this form of social analysis can produce insights into the events and relations around us. He asks us to imagine the built environment of a city as our chosen object of analysis and imagine three viewpoints about this urban setting and city life. Types are one-sided exaggerations or simple conceptual devices (stereotypes) for comparing our experiences.

- *The person on the street*, someone who is simply at home in a particular place, operating through tacit knowledge, getting by without the need for much deep reflection.
- *The cartographer*, someone with the expertise to map urban environments, but who maintains a degree of detachment from the object and is unable to comprehend what it is like to live in such a place. We can treat this as a metaphor for the problems of much of social scientific practice.
- *The stranger*, someone who is passing through, but who needs to establish an adequate grasp of existing social relationships in order to get by. The stranger is neither unreflective like the person on the street nor trapped within the narrow vantage point of an academic specialism (Schütz, 1943).

These three 'types' help us to understand the relationship between everyday language and experiences and the terminology of scientific study. 'Strangers' have a unique vantage point, able to participate in everyday life yet still maintain a degree of detachment. Indeed, Schütz was drawing upon his own common-sense experiences as an Austrian refugee (a stranger) in New York, where he had to acquire enough working knowledge to survive without ever really fitting in (Schütz, 1944). While the person on the street has a 'working knowledge' of the situation and can follow the vague rules which have worked well before, the social scientist tends to have a specialised knowledge limited to a particular aspect of urban life, such as housing distribution, traffic flows, population movements, or even waste disposal systems. One of the issues you will encounter when doing social research is whether to be detached from or involved in the processes, relations and institutions with which social scientists are concerned.

For example, economists who attempt to develop models of the economy using computer simulation programs (that is, econometrics) do not actually go and find out about the purchasing decisions of all members of a society. They do depend on existing statistical information which at some point will have been constructed through contact with consumers, producers and government officials. The point of econometrics is to develop a big picture of the economy and to make predictions about what will happen if the present

situation continues or when some of the relationships change. Like all other kinds of social scientific practice they have uses, but they also have limitations. Econometric models are used to establish broad patterns of economic activity and, at the end of the day, this is what governments need to make policies. However, they cannot account for the complex ways in which people behave in real markets. Just as there are difficulties if you become too detached, if you become too involved in the lives of the people and social relations you are studying, you can lose sight of the aims and objectives of your research. In such situations, where the researcher is unable to stand back from the taken-for-granted assumptions of the people involved, the research will not really convey what is actually happening. This is not simply a product of the choice of research technique, for even an econometric forecast can be detached in one sense but still be based upon the taken-for-granted assumptions of a particular set of cultural values. So, as a social scientist, the attitude you will have towards finding out about people's lives will be just as important as your choice of research method.

Social scientific research could, however, bridge the gap between the level of detached and often obscure scientific terminology and the level of everyday practical knowledge by adopting the vantage point of the 'stranger'. This acts as a bridge between social scientific accounts and the everyday experiences of those being studied. The 'stranger' sees beyond the lived experiences of everyday life, but is not so detached as to lose contact with the people being studied. In this way, Schütz suggested, a wider audience could also use social science research and social scientists could avoid preaching to the converted. This example itself addresses this concern to make scientific practice connect to everyday life. By using the three types – the person on the street, the cartographer and the stranger – and by asking us to be strangers, Schütz is actually demonstrating the technique of communicating complex ideas to a broader audience. In this case, the types are instantly recognisable in everyday language and Schütz's approach draws from this to build those bridges of understanding to social scientific knowledge (Schütz, 1943, 1946, 1953).

Activity 2

Compare and contrast the three illustrations reproduced below and make notes on what they tell you about the situation they represent.



Figure 3 The stranger in a crowd.

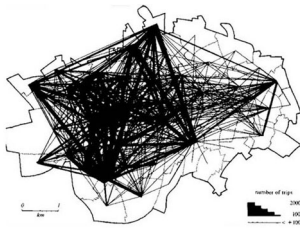


Figure 4 Complexity and detachment.

The London tube map, designed as a comprehensible and reasonably accurate guide (in terms of its function) which makes sense to transport users and to social scientists.

Click to view ['tube map'](#)

Now that you've had a chance to compare and contrast these illustrations, here are some points you may want to think about. In [Figure 3](#), the 'stranger', in the centre of the picture, has to stand back from lived experience in order to understand what is happening and, in the process, constructs a more detached viewpoint. [Figure 4](#), by Schütz's criteria, is too complex and detached for us to make sense of what it means to travel in the space represented. Although it provides a detached account of transport flows which is technically accurate, it does not attempt to connect with the human experiences of the people involved in these processes. In addition, it is very difficult to interpret even if you are trained in the social science involved. The London tube map however, provides an example of how it is possible to bridge the gap between everyday life and social science. In terms of its capacity to convey information accessibly, the tube map offers a model of good social scientific practice.

Compare and contrast these three examples in Activity 2 with the three ideal types identified by Schütz. Now return to Activity 1 and reconsider the four examples of research on housing and homelessness. Do any of the readings in Activity 1 find ways of making connections between everyday life and social scientific knowledge?

These examples remind us of the importance of making social scientific knowledge accessible to people beyond the narrow group of social scientists who no longer need to be convinced in any case. It also reminds us that effective social science can convey complex relationships without baffling the audience, while at the same time providing an effective guide to action. The London tube map is often regarded as a masterpiece of design because it is able to convey so much information in such an accessible way. Social scientists should have similar aspirations in the design of their research and the presentation of their evidence.

The preference for 'detachment' and 'objective' characteristics in many areas of social science raises another important question about the social sciences. Why is there such a strong desire to adopt the label of science when studying social objects of analysis? Part of the answer lies in the legitimacy social researchers acquire when they are seen as scientific. Science is often strongly associated with truth and progress which is a legacy of the Enlightenment belief in the power of human reason since the eighteenth century. Research institutions which can convincingly portray themselves as scientific appear to do well in securing government funding for research. When the Social Science Research Council was reorganised as the Economic and Social Research Council by Keith Joseph (then Education Secretary in the first Thatcher administration), the loss of status was also reflected in reduced funding. Science is more than just a name, for it holds connotations of authoritative knowledge. To describe a statement as scientific is to indicate that it is 'true' or at least that it is as close to 'truth' as we can achieve. In order to understand how this came to be, we need to examine the emergence of scientific ideas in history, the application of these ideas to the study of social life and human relationships, and the character of scientific knowledge itself.

4.3 Conclusion

If social researchers are to be effective in understanding people, they need to be detached from common sense (the perspective of the person on the street). However, they should not be so detached that they fall into the trap of imposing their own categories upon the object without regard for the experience of those involved (the perspective of the expert).

The standpoint of the 'stranger' provides a way of mediating between the detached position of the scientist and the personal experiences of everyday life. This serves as a way of grounding social science in human processes and relationships rather than treating scientific knowledge as though it is divorced from subjective experiences.

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Figure 4 Institute of British Geographers; *Tube map*: London Transport Museum
[Reading B photograph](#): Jacky Chapman/Format.

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