

Part I Introduction

Social Science and Its Methods

chapter

1



After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define social science and explain why it is important
- List the various social sciences
- State the nine steps that make up the scientific method
- Discuss some reasonable approaches to problems in social science
- Differentiate the historical method from the case method and the comparative method
- Distinguish educated common sense from common sense
- Explain why a good scientist is always open to new ways of looking at issues

Theories should be as simple as possible, but not more so.

—Albert Einstein

On September 11, 2001, eighteen men boarded airplanes with the intent of crashing them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the White House or Capitol. They succeeded with three of the planes, causing enormous destruction. The fourth plane crashed, but thanks to passengers who discovered the hijackers' plans and attacked the hijackers, the destruction of the White House or Capitol was prevented. What forces drove the hijackers to undertake such action? What forces led the passengers to organize together to thwart them? What might have prevented the hijackings? Such questions fall under the purview of **social science**—the scientific study of social, cultural, psychological, economic, and political forces that guide individuals in their actions.

Formal social science is relatively new. Nevertheless, a vast amount of information has been accumulated concerning the social life of human beings. This information has been used in building a system of knowledge about the nature, growth, and functioning of human societies. Social science is the name given to that system of knowledge.

All knowledge is (1) knowledge of human beings, including their culture and products, and (2) knowledge of the natural environment. Human culture has been changing, and knowledge about it has been gradually accumulating ever since the far distant time when humans first assumed their distinctively human character. But until rather recent times, this knowledge was not scientific in the modern sense. Scientific knowledge is knowledge that has been systematically gathered, classified, related, and interpreted. Science is concerned with learning the concepts and applying those concepts to particulars, rather than just learning a vast amount of information.

Primitive peoples acquired much of their knowledge unconsciously, just as we today still begin the use of our native language and acquire many of the basic elements in our culture unconsciously. For the most part, they accepted the world as they found it, and if any

Chapter 1 Social Science And Its Methods

Albert A Gayle



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