5. The ability to organize and write a paper that effectively presents and supports your thesis
6. The ability to employ the formal conventions of research papers in the social sciences

THE INQUIRY PROCESS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Social sciences such as psychology, anthropology, political science, sociology, economics, and education developed much later than the natural and physical sciences and so are comparatively young disciplines. Because social sciences emerged after the enormously successful and influential natural and physical sciences, they understandably adopted much of the scientific method—its goals, procedures, and standards. The field of sociology, for example, has been called the science of social organization; psychology has been called the science of the mind. Many social scientists today study people using the scientific method: they develop hypotheses and design and conduct controlled experiments to test those hypotheses.

A notorious example of a controlled social science experiment was conducted by Stanley Milgram, a Yale psychologist, during the 1960s.¹ Milgram sought to determine to what extent ordinary individuals would obey the orders of an authority figure. Through his experiment, he wished to probe the psychological processes that allowed the Germans to carry out mass human exterminations during World War II. Using simulated shock experiments, which were admittedly controversial, Milgram showed that an alarming proportion of adults (65% of those tested) were willing to inflict severe and, as far as they knew, permanent damage on strangers simply because they were instructed to do so by an authority figure—in this case, the experimenter. The conclusions Milgram drew from this experiment are frightening:

This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority. A variety of inhibitions against disobeying authority come into play and successfully keep the person in his place.²

The research process used by Milgram closely follows that of other scientific research. His research began with a question: How could Hitler have succeeded in marshaling so much support from those who were
called on to carry out his inhuman orders? After sufficient preparation, Milgram set out to determine the extent to which ordinary individuals would obey immoral orders. The psychologists were surprised by their results, which showed a large percentage of normal people obeying immoral orders from an authority figure. From the results, Milgram was able to verify that, indeed, there was something in human nature that could explain the behavior of so many Germans during World War II. Many of the people who followed orders to annihilate others were not brutal, sadistic monsters, he stated, but rather normal people who acted out of a sense of duty and obligation to their country and their leader.

The Importance of Observing Human Behavior

A great number of the experiments created by social scientists are designed to observe human behavior. Because the goal of any science is the systematic, objective study of phenomena, the social sciences must limit themselves to studying those aspects of humans that are observable. The only objectively observable part of humanity is behavior. We cannot observe human emotions or consciousness directly, but we can observe the behavior that results from feelings and thoughts. The social sciences, consequently, have focused heavily on behavior and thus have been called the behavioral sciences. The Milgram experiment is an example of a behavioral-science experiment. Milgram observed how his subjects behaved in a carefully controlled experimental setting to arrive at his conclusions about why people act as they do.

The Importance of Understanding Human Consciousness

Many people, both within and outside the social sciences, have felt that this objectification of observable human behavior produces a false picture of human beings. The real “inside” of a person may be missed when only outward behavior is observed. Human beings are conscious beings; we have thoughts, feelings, and intuitions that are private and never seen by others. Some in the social sciences argue that because we cannot observe consciousness directly, it is not a proper subject for scientific study at all. Others take the position that it is not only appropriate to study human consciousness but also essential, because consciousness is what makes us uniquely human. Modern social scientists have developed methods of exploring human consciousness that are admittedly subjective but nevertheless reveal important information about how people think and feel. Such methods include case studies of individuals, clinical evaluation, psychoanalysis, and hypnosis.
Social scientists also study the interaction among people in societies. A social scientist attempting to discover social rules and conventions is somewhat analogous to a natural scientist attempting to discover laws of nature. The social rules and conventions adopted by a particular society are important for understanding human behavior within that society. For example, a Polynesian native accustomed to using shells as money would have a rude awakening in an American marketplace where, by convention, slips of paper are traded for goods and services. The slip of paper Americans accept as a dollar bill has meaning only within our particular set of social conventions. Much of the work done in social sciences attempts to describe and define the social laws, rules, and conventions by which people operate within societies.

An example of a social scientist whose work has been important is the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud, who sought to describe and predict the complex operation of the human subconscious mind. Freud also sought to apply his theories of individuals to the operation of human beings in societies. In one of his last books, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he expressed his views on the broad question of the human being’s place in the world. Freud posed this question: Why is it hard for humankind to be happy in civilization? Through his years of preparation and study, Freud was able to posit the hypothesis that unhappiness is due to the inevitable conflict between the demands of instincts (aggression and ego gratification) and the restrictions of civilized society:

If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. In fact, primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct. To counterbalance this, his prospects of enjoying this happiness for any length of time were very slender. Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security.

Freud’s sociological theories have been as influential as his psychological theories. Verification of this particular hypothesis—that instinct and society conflict—was achieved through Freud’s extensive citation of examples taken from psychological case studies and from primitive and modern societies (including the Soviet Union and the United States). Through these examples, Freud showed that human instincts are in conflict with society’s constraints.

Researchers in the social sciences attempt to describe and predict human behavior and human relationships in society. Barzun and Graff, in their text *The Modern Researcher*, observe that “the works of social sci-
ence that have made the strongest mark on the modern mind have been those that combined description with enumeration and imparted the results with imaginative power." The work of Freud is a classic example of the way good social science research combines an understanding of individual human behavior and consciousness with an understanding of how people are organized and influenced by the societies in which they live and operate.

Objectivity versus Subjectivity

In the sciences, researchers attempt to remove their own particular preferences, desires, and hopes from the experimental process as much as possible. Scientific researchers are looking for "objective" truth. However, because each researcher as observer necessarily brings background preparation, knowledge, and experience to the situation, it is seldom possible to remove the researcher from the research altogether. But what about social science researchers? Can they be as objective as natural or physical scientists in their search for knowledge and understanding? Many would charge that subjectivity and values are inescapable and necessary parts of social science research. The social scientist studies people, social systems, and social conventions. As a person, the researcher is necessarily a part of the system being studied. Perhaps this is not altogether a bad thing. A social scientist’s own beliefs, attitudes, and values can contribute to his or her understanding of what is being observed, even though he or she can, to a certain degree, demonstrate detachment from a situation and function as a relatively impartial observer. But the question of objectivity and subjectivity in the social sciences is not easily resolved, because it is not always possible to know exactly what subjective influences are affecting "objective" research. The issue of subjectivity versus objectivity is the cause of much ferment and continual debate within the social science fields as these young disciplines seek to define for themselves an appropriate method, whether it is modeled after the scientific method or something quite different.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the general goal of inquiry in the social sciences?
2. Why are social sciences often called behavioral sciences?
3. What is meant by the understanding of human consciousness?
4. What is the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in the social sciences?
NOTES

11. I am indebted to Professor John Deethardt of the Texas Tech University Speech Communications Department for passing on to me this assignment and student response.