

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Social Science Is a Form of Service that Improves Quality of Life for People Around the World

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By Arthur Lupia, PhD, Assistant Director for Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences, National Science Foundation

If you are reading these words, chances are you are a social scientist or someone who cares about social science. Either way, I am grateful to you and everyone who devotes significant parts of their lives to social science's development and practice.

Social science is a distinct and valuable form of service. Social science helps us understand ourselves, our relationships to others, and our relationships to the world. The insights that we provide change people's lives every day. For example, a wide range of public and private sector organizations are using our insights to take on a broad array of very big problems. These problems include global poverty, national security, child development and neighborhood safety. Around the world, social science discoveries are helping entrepreneurs, first responders, and many others provide essential services with greater precision and efficiency.

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Today, the social sciences provide insights in so many areas. From neurons to neighborhoods, and from neighborhoods to nations. At each level, social scientists are making amazing discoveries. This is particularly true of young scholars. Methodologically and demographically, our newest generation of social scientists are more diverse and powerful than ever before. Working together,

multiple generations of basic and applied social scientists are giving students and practitioners new capacity to better manage the challenges and opportunities of our time.

Studying humans is difficult. Our objects of study have a tendency to argue back. Human beings sometimes prefer explanations that produce a good feeling at a particular moment over explanations that offer a surer path to our aspirations but make us feel less good.

A related challenge is that unlike quarks, leptons, or cells, our objects of study can sometime read the predictions that we are making about their behavior. Some of them, upon reading our predictions, can change what they are going to do. In many of the social sciences, we need to make predictions that are not only accurate at the moment that we make them, but also able to survive the affected parties reading about them and changing their minds in ways that render them false. So, social science is not just hard science—it is very hard science. And we're up to the task. Every day. Striving for the next breakthrough. Cumulatively more effective in explaining human behavior than ever before.

Social science is needed today more than ever. We are interconnected in so many ways. Some interconnections yield understanding and improve relationships. Others have more questionable consequences. Social media, for example, offer numerous platforms for people who seek attention at the expense of understanding. Social science, at its best, provides a counterbalance to such forces. Social scientists have abilities to help us evaluate hypotheses about our world

not by whether they draw likes or clicks, but by their correspondence to rigorous reasoning and detailed data. Social science allows us to sort conjectures about the consequences of our action by their fidelity to carefully recorded observations. By providing this service, we give people around the world a greater capacity to understand one another and build better tomorrows.

Social science, in my view, is a distinct form of service to society, particularly when societies need a path to shared understanding. The social sciences, in all of their glorious incarnations, can offer that path by producing findings and insights that are *intersubjective* – that is, seen as legitimate from many perspectives. Intersubjectivity can be a powerful ally when fighting problems such as poverty or seeking to improve educational outcomes – contexts where we really do need to understand where the rubber hits the road. The social sciences, when conducted rigorously and honestly, produce inquiries and insights whose validity can span the great variety of beliefs and commitments that characterize many human societies.

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There are other times when societies cannot agree on what their challenges are or about what outcomes are most desired. Here, too, social science has an essential role. If we want to see it, social science can offer important clues about why people disagree. It can validate the existence of multiple points of view and reveal commonalities in situations that first appear to entail only conflict. In all such cases, it can offer a distinct source of hope for people who want to find new ways to manage shared problems.

Looking forward, I believe that a golden age of social science is upon us: a golden age of greater social scientific discovery, more effective communication about the value of social science insights, and broader impacts. At the National Science Foundation (NSF), [we are working to set the stage for social science’s next transformation](#). In the coming months, we will be working to stimulate innovation in developing scientific areas in areas such as Human Networks and Data Science, Strengthening American Infrastructure, Security and Preparedness, Ethical and Responsible Research, as well as all of the core areas of research that we already fund.

In closing, I am grateful to everyone who devotes significant parts of their lives to the development and practice of social science. Because working together, we have tremendous capacity to improve quality of life for our families, our communities, our nation, and people around the world.



ARTHUR LUPIA, PhD, is an Assistant Director of the National Science Foundation and serves as head of the National Science Foundation (NSF) Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (SBE). He is also the Hal R. Varian Collegiate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. Dr. Lupia’s research and related public work examines processes, principles, and factors that guide decision-making and learning. His efforts clarify how people make decisions, and choose what to believe, when they lack information or face adverse circumstances. His work on civic competence, information processing, how voters learn and science communication has influenced scholarly practice, public policy, and classroom teaching. Lupia has been a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, a Andrew Carnegie Fellow, and is a recipient of the National Academy of Sciences Award for Initiatives in Research. He earned his bachelor’s degree in economics at the University of Rochester and his social science PhD at the California Institute of Technology. Previous to arriving at NSF, he served as Chairperson of the Board for the Center for Open Science, as chair of the National Academies Roundtable on the Communication and Use of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and as a member or leader of many scientific advisory boards.



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