

THE HUMANITIES AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: CONTRASTING APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Both humanities, as well as social sciences, concern themselves with human lives and human nature. The difference lies in their approach as social sciences are sciences and adopt a more scientific approach, whereas humanities are descriptive and make use of analytical methods to explain concepts. This is why one finds lots of explanation in social sciences but a lot more understanding in humanities.

I. INTRODUCTION

While the disciplines and approaches of the humanities and the social sciences each seek to understand and appreciate the human condition, they rely on contrasting ways of knowing and methodologies to do so. What distinguishes the humanities from the social sciences, for example, is not so much a subject matter and topic – a playwright, a behavioral psychologist, a historian, and a literature professor could each be dealing with the same subject, for example, gender identity – but it is rather the mode of approach to any given question and the resulting analysis or interpretation.

II. SOCIAL SCIENCES BACKGROUND

The social sciences are embedded within the **scientific paradigm**, premised on critical ontological principles that can be traced back to Aristotelian Materialism (to Aristotle of the 4th Century BC), and to the Cartesian Dualism (René Descartes of the 17th Century). Science uses the tools of **empirical deduction** and **rational induction**, based upon **objectivity**, with formally accepted standardized styles of texts and categories, applying such legitimizing tests as **reliability** and **external/internal validity**, with the goal of replicating phenomena and generating **new knowledge** through an analysis, for pure and applied scientific purposes, to **explain human behavior** (as groups and/or individuals).

As an extension of the natural sciences, social science research emphasizes **empirical methods** that seek to explain causality of events. This method can be expressed in either a **quantitative design**, which approaches social phenomena through quantifiable variables and evidence, often relying on statistical analysis to create valid and reliable claims, or in a **qualitative design**, which emphasizes understanding of social phenomena through direct observation, communication with participants, or analysis of texts, and may stress contextual and subjective accuracy over generality.

A social science professor would seek to be as an observer as if behind a thick glass pane, separating subject (researcher) from object (what is researched). With qualitatively or quantitatively designed methods, the social scientist would attempt to rigorously observe and/or measure the behavior of individuals and/or groups in their interactions, and would seek to provide a descriptive or predictive model that explains the events observed. A psychologist might ask, in studying a rite of passage, what are the variables that contribute to the identity and self-esteem of the members of a community? A sociologist might ask, in studying a rite of passage, what are the contributing variables that strengthen social solidity of a community? How do political and economic variables contribute to social stratification within a community? What functions might a rite of passage provide individual identity and social transitions, as well as community solidarity?

The **behavioral and social sciences include** anthropology-physical anthropology- archaeology, American studies, Latin American studies, Native American Studies, economics, geography, often history and linguistics, political science, psychology, sociology, and sometimes public administration.

III. HUMANITIES BACKGROUND

The humanities are a discipline that can be traced back to such playwrights and poets of Shakespeare, and the personal essay and memoir writing of Montaigne, both of the 16th Century. The humanities continue the ontological premise of Cartesian **Dualism**, though there are some noticeable cracks and sometimes holes in the glass pane. The humanities still seeks to provide an imagery of what is on the other side of the glass pane, but substitutes the role of material reductionism and formal objectivity with an emphasis on the role of various forms of human thought, from rational thinking, to imaginative and reflexive thinking. In the instance of reflexive thinking, it can result in the subject and object tending to become interwoven and indistinguishable, hence the cracks and holes in the glass pane.

While not a black and white distinction, the **interpretative methodologies** of the humanities disciplines are thus typically distinguished from the positivist and empirical methodologies of the natural and social science disciplines, and the creative and imaginative endeavors of the arts (e.g., performing arts, music, visual arts). Such humanities interpretative methodologies, for example, include hermeneutics, literary criticism, phenomenology, and in the discipline of ethnography, "thick description." The legitimizing tests in the humanities can include such criteria as authenticity and trustworthiness. Some the earliest examples of texts that expressed a "humanities quest" by a community (and that lend themselves to a humanities interpretation) can be found in American Indian narrative cycles of Coyote and Salmon (since time immemorial), the Sumerian Gilgamesh (2500 BC), Homer's Iliad and Odyssey (850 BC), the Jewish Torah (880-600 BC), the Hindu Bhagavad Gita (600 BC), the Synoptic Gospels (100 AD) and the Muslim Koran (609-32 AD). In applying an interpretative methodology, the goal of the humanities is to **understand meaning and purpose**, and generate **wisdom**.

Thus distinguishing the social sciences from the humanities are two critical humanities attributes: an interpretative methodology and the goal of wisdom.

To “interpret” certainly seeks to render something meaningful and understandable, serving to inform, enlighten, instruct. Likely first expressed in the 14th century Middle English, “interpret” is derived from the Latin, *interpretārī* – “someone who serves as an agent, a negotiator.” Hence, to interpret certainly seeks to (1) generate new knowledge, rendering something meaningful, be it culturally or historically distant, be it something more immediate but veiled in some fashion. But to interpret also seeks to (2) render that knowledge accessible, applicable, relevant, that is, linking and integrating. Indeed, “negotiating” known and knower. To interpret entails an element of rendering knowledge empathic, of projecting the knower into the known, acknowledging what the interpreter brings to the interpretation and what is accessible and relevant to the audience! To successfully interpret is to be self-reflexive. To successfully interpret is to know your audience. While applied as for theological purpose, an interpretative method has affinity with the Jewish Midrash and Muslim Tafsir [interpretative traditions](#).

The Idaho Humanities Council states that “through [the] study [of the humanities it seeks to] yield wisdom.” Wisdom is that deep understanding that goes beyond knowing; to thicken and extend our understandings; to apply; to engage that knowledge in civic life, both locally and globally; to address the challenges faced by humanity; to take up the “big questions.” The humanities enable us to reflect upon our lives and ask fundamental questions of value, purpose, and meaning in a rigorous and systematic way.

In applying an interpretative methodology, acknowledging there are cracks and holes in the glass pane, the goal of the humanities professor is to provide understandings and appreciations of the meaning and purpose of human interactions, framing those appreciations by asking the “big questions,” and perhaps generating some “wisdom.” A humanities professor might ask what are the symbolic meanings, as understood by participants, of the various stages of a rite of passage? How is the metaphor of a rite of passage reflective of the growth, maturity and perhaps changes in a given community? How is human condition itself reflective of a series of rites of passage? How has a student’s own life experiences and rites of passage contributed to his or her sense of self and of community?

The humanities include cultural anthropology and ethnography, often history, languages and linguistics, literature, and philosophy. The humanities also includes the reflection and theory in creative writing, in the performing arts of music, dance and theatre, and the reflection and theory in the visual arts of painting, sculpting and architecture.

IV. SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES OBJECTIVES AND DEFINING CRITERIA

4.1 Social Sciences

1. Application of an empirical, rational, and objective methodology (use of validity and reliability tests) to present the “facts”
2. Function is to analyze, explain and possibly predict human behavior (as groups and/or individuals)
3. And to generate and produce new knowledge (factual information)

4.2 Humanities

1. Application of an interpretative methodology (use of text analysis, reflective thinking and acknowledgement of audience) to render something meaningful for others
2. Function is to better appreciate the meaning and purpose of the human experience – both broadly in the nature of the human condition, as well as within each unique individual (student), i.e., his or her self identity and purpose
3. And to reveal wisdom – to better explore and address the “big questions” and meet the challenges in the human condition

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