10 reasons why you need social science

We know that Britain's social scientists are world leaders in their fields, but why do we need them? And if they weren't around to analyse what's going on, would you miss them?

Audrey Osler suggests 10 reasons why you need social science:

1 ***Social scientists help us imagine alternative futures***. Social science can open up debate and give us a say in shaping our collective future. The social sciences developed as a field of study during the nineteenth century. Social science helped people understand the consequences and application of the new technologies of the age, such as steam power. The growth of railways and factories not only transformed the economy and the world of work, but also changed forever the way people organised their family lives and leisure. Today nanotechnology and advances in medical research will have a significant impact on the way we live. They present us with a bewildering range of ethical, legal and social issues. But it isn't enough to rely on the scientists. We also need social scientists to analyse and critique what's going on. That way we will make informed choices that shape the future.

2 ***Social science can help us make sense of our finances.*** Social science is not just important for the future but for what's happening now. We all resent paying to withdraw our money from cash machines. Charges can amount to £120 per year. Social scientists working on behalf of the Runnymede Trust found that this doesn't just this depend on where we live, but that black and minority ethnic people are more likely to live in areas where they're forced to pay. This put pressure on banks to ensure we all have access to machines that don't charge. A range of social scientists – not just economists but also psychologists, sociologists and political scientists, for example - can help us understand the economic crisis and weigh up decisions we make for ourselves and those which governments make on our behalf. Without this kind of analysis we may feel like pawns in a global game of chess. With the knowledge and understanding that social science offers us, we will feel empowered to act for ourselves, and to influence decisions being made on our behalf.

3 ***Social scientists contribute to our health and well-being.*** From sports sociologists to public health experts, from those interpreting medical statistics to those evaluating policies for our care in old age, social scientists are working hard to make sure that our health, leisure and social care services work to best effect. Social geographers at the University of Sheffield, for example, have shown that those of us who don't follow eating advice are not simply weak-willed or ignorant. Our eating habits are influenced by a whole range of circumstances. Some apparently unhealthy choices may seem rational: if the person doing the shopping knows that others will simply not eat the healthy option and it will just go to waste, they may simply not buy it. So it's no good just giving people a booklet on healthy eating. Effective nutritional advice needs to be tailored to people's everyday lives and contexts.

4 ***Social science might save your life.*** Psychologists at the University of Liverpool spent time in a steel factory to work out what needs doing to create a safer environment. Accidents at work happen even in the best regulated companies that provide staff training and take all necessary precautions. A top-down imposed safety regime simply doesn't work. It's when people see unsafe work practices as unacceptable and take decisions as teams that workplaces become safer. Employers need to see people as individuals who take their lead from those with whom they identify. These principles have also been shown to work in crowd control. When those responsible for crowd management at football matches are trained in techniques which take this into account, there's virtually no trouble.

5 ***Social science can make your neighbourhood safer***. One common myth is that if you take measures to reduce crime in one neighbourhood the criminals simply move on, leading to increased crime in another area. Sociologists at Nottingham Trent University worked closely with police to reduce crime through a method involving scanning for crime patterns. They were able to identify patterns that regular police work had not picked up, so avoiding guess work and lost time. A technique called situational crime prevention developed by the same team is now regularly used by the police, working with the public and private sectors to prevent crime. Together they make things more difficult for would-be criminals. For example, in one area there was a serious problem of lead being stolen from community building roofs. By

working with dealers in the scrap metal market, and persuading them to keep records, it then became too risky to buy what might be stolen lead.

6   ***We need social scientists as public intellectuals.*** British society is sometimes said to be anti-intellectual. Yet in our fast changing world, there is a place for the social scientist as public intellectual. This doesn't have to be a succession of boring grey talking heads, such as you can find on French TV any night. That's enough to cause anyone to start channel surfing. Social scientists have a duty to make their work interesting and engaging to the rest of us. They need to explain not only why social science is relevant but do it in a compelling way. Then we will want to listen, read and find out more. Perhaps more social scientists will have to become active listeners, talking more often to the public, each other and to scientists. Then we can get all the disciplines around the table together. In a knowledge-based world, we need people who can integrate a variety of different types of knowledge, and that come from different intellectual roots and from a range of institutions to work together.

7   ***Social science can improve our children's lives and education.*** All societies and all governments want to show they are dong the best for children. Yet too often education reform seems to take place without regard for the best interests of the learners. Education research shows that many parents, particularly parents of younger children, are more concerned that their children enjoy school, than that they are academic stars. By working with students of all ages to understand their perspectives on schooling, researchers at the universities of Cambridge and Leeds have discovered new insights into what makes effective schools, and what makes for effective school leadership. We just need to listen to children, provide structured opportunities for them to give their views, and prepare adults to really listen. Today even OFSTED, the school inspection service, has to listen to children's viewpoints.

8   ***Social science can change the world for the better.*** We can generally agree that world needs to be a safer place where all people can enjoy basic dignity and human rights. This is the case even when we can't always agree on what we should do to make this happen. Social scientists working in interdisciplinary teams have made their mark in the area of human welfare and development. They are concerned with the social and economic advancement of humanity at large. They work with government institutions, UN organisations, social services, funding agencies, and with the media.

They are influencing the work of strategists, planners, teachers and programme officers in developing and growing economies, like India, to influence development so that it impacts on the lives of the poorest members of society. For example, social scientists from the Delhi School of Economics are cooperating with colleagues at SOAS, University of London to explore the impact of legislation in India to guarantee minimum wages for rural unskilled manual labourers on the loves of women. They found the new law provided opportunities for some women to become wage earners where none had existed before, reducing the risk of hunger and the chances of avoiding hazardous work. But they also identified barriers to women benefitting from the changes, including harassment at the worksite. Those working in development studies are then able to support women's ability to benefit by looking for creative solutions to such problems.

9 ***Social science can broaden your horizons***. For debates about feminism, peace, ecology, social movements, and much more, social science offers each of us new perspectives and new ways of understanding. Whether your idea of relaxation is visiting a museum, watching soaps, or chatting online, social science encourages a fresh look at our everyday activities and culture. Social scientists at the University of Leicester are making an impact on museums across the world, with the goal of making them more inclusive, abler to challenge prejudices, inspire learning and be more relevant in contemporary society. One example is their work with the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow to involve local communities and international visitors alike in engaging with exhibitions on a range of social justice issues from sectarianism to gay rights, through programmes including arts workshops and residencies.

10 ***We need social science to guarantee our democracy***. Social science offers multiple perspectives on society, informs social policy and supports us in holding our politicians and our media to account. The Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy at Goldsmith's College, London is monitoring how transformation from traditional to digital media is examining the move away from traditional journalism and politics to where we as citizens try to be community journalists, presenting our own accounts on-line. The work brings together specialists in media and communications, sociology and politics. Individual citizens may feel empowered by this but there are risks in turning away from traditional journalism, including fewer

opportunities for in-depth analysis and critique of powerful interests. This work by social scientists is critical in protecting a modern and transparent democracy. Just think what might happen without it!