

A2

SEMINAR 9 Social Sciences

- 1 Sociology is the science with the greatest number of methods and the least results.
Henri Poincare (French mathematician, 1854-1912)
- 2 The first rule of sociology: things are not always what they seem.
Peter Berger (American sociology and theology professor, 1929-)
- 3 If you torture* data enough, they will finally confess*!
Clifford Geertz (American anthropologist, 1923-)
- 4 The sociological imagination enables us to grasp* history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. *C. Wright Mills (American sociologist, 1916-1962)*

Discussion Questions

- 1 What are social sciences?
- 2 Is the study of society a science?
- 3 What are some differences between social and natural sciences?
- 4 Are natural sciences more “scientific” than social sciences?
- 5 Are there any “general laws” in social sciences?
- 6 Could you name any methods used in social sciences?
- 7 Why are interdisciplinary* and multi-theoretical* approaches widely used in social sciences?

Summary Writing

The abstract or summary of a statement, thesis*, paper, or other document is a shorter version of the originals providing its gist* (main idea). The aim of a summary is to give the reader a clear, objective, accurate and balanced account* of a written or spoken text. After reading the abstract, someone may decide to read the whole document (or in the case of a public presentation, attend the meeting at which the document will be read out and/or discussed). The abstract or summary should be understandable even when read separately from the original.

Task 1 – Read the following characteristics and decide which you think a summary must have in order to be effective.

- a) The same order of facts and ideas as the original
- b) Similar wording to the original with occasional phrases exactly the same
- c) Different sentence patterns* from the original
- d) Additional information which the original writer omitted*, but which help to understand the subject
- e) A personal comment on the subject
- f) Simpler vocabulary than the original
- g) Key points of the original
- h) References to figures, tables, or sources
- i) No more than 20% of the total length of the source
- j) Use of the first person singular

Task 2 – Using the knowledge regarding the characteristics of an effective summary (from Task 1), read the short text below and decide which of the following summaries are effective.

All social sciences are “multi-theoretical”, that is, they are characterized by major theoretical disputes* and controversies*. It is difficult to identify clearly, with identical labels for all disciplines, the various positions that are held. Scientists are repeatedly faced with the challenge* that there is no obvious* and straightforward* answer to

social problems, and they often disagree just as, for example, economists disagree over the causes of a country's economic crisis, and policemen and social workers disagree over the causes of such problems as vandalism. However, the fact that there is no certain or "one true" explanation of social problems or disagreements between social scientists is a virtue* rather than a drawback*, because they show the relevance* of the social sciences to the controversies and dilemmas facing society.

Adapted from: Potter, David et al., ed.: Society and the Social Sciences, Open University Press, London, 1987, pp. 4-7.

Summary 1

Social sciences (e.g. economics, geography, political science, psychology and sociology) have been described as multi-theoretical studies; in other words, social scientists hold various theoretical positions. This is considered a virtue rather than a defect.

Summary 2

The multi-theoretical character of social sciences is discussed. Theoretical controversies and the non-existence of one certain answer to social problems are seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage as they reflect controversies within a society.

Summary 3

All social sciences are "multi-theoretical", that is, they are characterized by major theoretical disputes and controversies, various positions are held, there is no obvious and straightforward answer to social problems, and disagreement is frequent, for example, over the causes of a country's economic crisis, over the causes of such problems as vandalism. But, the fact that there is no certain or "one true" explanation of social problems or disagreements between social scientists are virtues rather than drawbacks because they show the relevance of the social sciences to the controversies and dilemmas facing society.

Summary 4

In my opinion, the paragraph dealing with the idea that all social sciences are "multi-theoretical" is right, because I think that all the supporting arguments, such as theoretical controversies or no single obvious and straightforward answer to social problems, are very true. However, I tend to disagree with the opinion presenting such a situation as an advantage of social sciences.

Summary 5

This paragraph describes the nature of social sciences. General characteristics are shown and partly evaluated. A comment on the relation between social sciences and society is mentioned.

Advice:

In a short summary, you may follow these steps:

- a) read the passage carefully several times
- b) decide on the essential points, then write down key words and expressions that remind you of them
- c) expand your key words into a sentence or two

Example:

Some scientists and students as well as some other people from the non-academic environment do not like the idea that the word 'science' is applied for both natural and social sciences. They express their disapproval* of the use of the term 'science' in the context of the social sciences, such as sociology, economics or political science, claiming* that the fundamental principles on which science is based, which are exactness, precision, unquestionable certainty and the clear ability to formulate general laws that are applicable to the natural sciences such as chemistry and physics, do not reach the same level in the social studies and therefore should not be called sciences.

Key words:

some people
disagree
'science'
social sciences vs. natural sciences
lack of exactness, certainty and ability to formulate general laws

Summary:

Some people object to the use of the word 'science' in the social sciences on the grounds that such studies do not have the same degree of exactness, certainty and ability to formulate general laws as is found in the physical sciences such as chemistry and physics.

Task 3 – Read the following extracts concerning differing sociological views (and arguments) about post-modernism and try to summarize each of them in one or two sentences.

Sociological Views on Post-Modernism

Not all sociologists agree with the idea that we, as a society, are living in a post-modern phase of social and intellectual development. Further, many sociologists argue that "post-modernism" is actually a non-concept; that is, it describes a situation that owes more to the philosophical musings* of "post-modernist" writers than to a valid* description of reality. In this respect, such writers sometimes use the concept of "late-modern" or "late Capitalist" society rather than "post-modern" society. It is, as they say, a small but important difference of interpretation.

Jonathon Gershuny:

"I am not very keen on postmodernist social theory. My view is that it reflects little more than a gap* in the development of mainstream* social theory. Postmodernists conclude that we have reached the end of the grand theory and that now we must retreat* to something altogether less ambitious in our attempts to understand society. My conclusion, by contrast, is that we must search for new theories".

Ken Thompson:

"The concept of postmodernism has served a useful function for sociological theory in a number of ways. The underlying assumption* in sociological theories of modernity and modernisation was that all societies were evolving in the same direction, characterised by increasing rationalisation and secularisation. Postmodernism has been extremely useful in various fields of sociological interest for focusing attention on tendencies that are the reverse of those predicted. To take one example, the sociology of religion has had to take notice of religious revivals in various forms of 'fundamentalism', especially those linked with ethnicity, nationalism and cultural identity".

Michael Rustin:

"The developments usually thought of as 'postmodernism' have had some productive consequences for sociological theory. For example, they have highlighted the importance of consumption as a major aspect of life; they have focused on the role of information; they have called into question some of the undue certainties and authoritarianism of modernist ways of thinking. However, I think there is a systematic tendency for writers influenced by these ideas to 'turn a blind eye'* to persisting structural forces in our society and to suggest there is more freedom of choice than there is in fact".

Philippa Jones:

"Postmodernism has two distinct aspects: the first refers to art, aesthetics and media production; the second to knowledge and its production. Modernism refers to the belief in the possibility of humans acquiring the Truth and, in the light of this true understanding, reconstructing their world, thereby achieving progress. Postmodernism refers to the belief that such a view is wrong, arguing that no human being is capable of knowing the truth, only a Truth. This links postmodernism to relativism – the view that humans can only know reality from a particular, culture-bound, historically-specific point of view. Here the argument is that even the criteria by which we judge truth or falsehood are themselves relative to time and place".

Adapted from **Sociology Review**, Vol. 8, No. 2, November 1998, viewed at <http://www.sociology.org.uk/p1quotes.htm> on 7.5.2003.

Grammar – Countable and Uncountable Nouns

- 1 Today's news (**is / are**) very interesting.
- 2 How much (**damage / damages**) (**was / were**) there after the attack?
- 3 (**That is / Those are**) all his (**knowledge / knowledges**) of economy.
- 4 I need some (**information / informations**) about practical lessons.
- 5 They have been given a lot of important (**advice / advices**) at the faculty meeting.
- 6 You did not support your arguments with enough (**evidence / evidences**).
- 7 How much money (**is / are**) needed for the project?
- 8 Language students need a least some (**linguistic / linguistics**).
- 9 (**Ethic / Ethics**) (**is/are**) the most difficult part of this course.
- 10 This week is better as we have (**less / fewer**) (**homework / homeworks**).
11. I feel we are making (**progress/progresses**).
12. This conference was attended by (**fewer/less**) delegates than the other one.
13. When the fire started, there was (**total chaos/a total chaos**).

Vocabulary

1. to confess	přiznat se
2. to torture	mučit
3. *to grasp (to understand)	pochopit
4. *interdisciplinary	mezioborový
5. *multi-theoretical	zahrnující mnoho teorií
6. *thesis (dissertation)	teze (disertace)
7. *gist (main idea)	hlavní myšlenka
8. *account	zpráva
9. *pattern (structure, form)	struktura, tvar
10. *to omit (to leave out)	vynechat
11. *dispute	spor
12. *controversy	sporný bod
13. *challenge	výzva
14. *obvious	zřejmý
15. *straightforward	jednoznačný, přímý
16. *virtue	klad, přednost
17. *drawback	nedostatek
18. *relevance	důležitost, významnost
19. *disapproval	nesouhlas
20. *to claim	tvrdit
21. musings	přemítání, hloubání
22. *valid	platný
23. *gap	mezera
24. *mainstream	hlavní proud
25. *to retreat	ustoupit
26. *assumption	předpoklad, domněnka
27. "to turn a blind eye"	„přimhouřit oko“

Word bank

1. social problems	sociální problémy
2. to deal with problems	zabývat se problémy
3. to face/to be faced with problems	čelit problémům
4. to sort out/solve problems	řešit problémy
5. social conflicts	sociální konflikty
6. controversial issues	kontroverzní otázky

7. contemporary society	současná společnost
8. consumer society	konzumní společnost
9. class society	třídní společnost
10. classless society	beztřídní společnost
11. just society	spravedlivá společnost
12. social justice	sociální spravedlnost
13. economic problems	ekonomické problémy
14. far-reaching consequences	dalekosáhlé důsledky/následky

APPENDIX

Home reading task – Read the following extract from an academic journal article and decide which of the summaries are satisfactory.

EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEORY (Roger G. Masters, Dartmouth College)

Human nature has been at the foundation of thinking about politics since the ancient Greek philosophers developed the concept of nature as we know it in the West. As political philosophy is conventionally taught and studied today, however, human nature is no longer the subject of scientific inquiry in the precise sense. Instead of formulating hypotheses and subjecting them to empirical tests, political theory in the twentieth century has generally been viewed as a study of the ideas and history of famous thinkers who wrote about human nature and politics.

The tradition of political philosophy arose and flourished in the hands of thinkers who did not make such rigid distinctions as those now practiced in our universities and our intellectual life. Plato's *Republic* presents an educational curriculum that includes the disciplines we call mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology, as well as those we consider to be philosophic and political in character. Aristotle wrote at least as widely on matters of biology and physics as on politics or ethics. In both Lyceum and the Academy, not to mention other ancient schools, the contemporary divisions between scholarly disciplines did not exist.

The irony of the gap between what Snow called the Two Cultures is the proliferation of scientific research that bears directly on political theory (see, e.g. Alexander 1979, 1987; Gruter and Bohannon 1983; Ruse 1986; Wislon, 1975, 1978). Evolutionary biology makes possible a deeper understanding of human origins and the emergence of political institutions. Neurophysiology, neurochemistry, experimental psychology, ethnology, and ecology may provide empirically based information about human nature. In the last generation, the fossil record of human origins has been greatly expanded, and the mechanisms of inheritance (the structure and function of DNA) understood for the first time; and the science of social behaviour among animals has been enriched by direct observation in the field, by laboratory experiment, and theoretical models of natural selection.

Although there is an emerging sub-field in political science known as biopolitics (Corning 1986; Schubert 1989; Somit 1976; Thorson 1970; Watts 1984), the study of human nature and politics from the perspective of the life sciences has not yet become an accepted approach in any of the social sciences. It seems fair to assume that this state of affairs is not likely to survive the continued advance on the natural sciences. Over the next generation, barring nuclear war and the demise of advanced civilizations, research in the life sciences will doubtless expand our knowledge and our ability to manipulate biological phenomena. The political process must sooner or later be fundamentally affected by the power to change not only the environment but also the behaviour and genetic composition of humans themselves (Blank 1981; Kass 1971). As a result of these trends, I suggest that a „naturalist“ perspective is emerging, making it possible to view human politics from a perspective consistent with both the tradition of Western political philosophy and the findings of contemporary biology (Masters 1989a). Rejecting the view that social science will be totally absorbed by (or „reduced“ to) biology, I presume that human behaviour is in many important respects unique in the natural world. But unlike those social scientists who have ignored biology or assumed that its introduction into the study of human behaviour is ideologically motivated, my analysis seeks to overcome the gulf between scientific research and human self-awareness.

A more specific approach to political theory must address the age-old theoretical questions of human nature and the state. Biological research can illuminate our understanding of human nature by considering the foundations of human selfishness and altruism, of our participation in social groups, of human languages and cultures, and of politics itself. The origin of the centralized state can, for example, be explored by linking contemporary theories of natural selection to the study of social cooperation in political philosophy, the game theory, and history (Alexander 1979; Margolis 1982; Masters 1983; Schubert 1989; White 1981). Although such an evolutionary perspective on human society has often been attacked as ideologically biased, careful analysis shows not only that evolutionary theory is consistent with a wide range of political opinions but that the denial of a natural foundation of human behaviour is itself often ideologically motivated. (Caplan 1978; Kaye 1986; Masters 1982.)

American Political Science Review, vol. 84, no. 1, March 1990.

Summary 1

An excessively narrow focus in the field of political theory has ensured the exclusion of valuable insights from many scientific disciplines. Findings in biology might have a significant bearing on political thinking in practice. They could illuminate understanding of human nature and its relation to political systems.

Summary 2

Biological research will sooner or later have a bearing on political theory and behaviour. The study of the way human beings behave and major discoveries in areas such as the mechanisms of inheritance have led to the possibility of scientific findings being adopted in theoretical and practical politics. Though it might be thought that such findings can be ideologically adopted, analysis indicates that this is not necessarily the case. For example, evolutionary theory may be compatible with a wide diversity of political views.

Summary 3

The study of political philosophy has been based on the concepts of ancient Greek thinkers. As a result, it has failed to draw on findings in a wide range of scientific fields which study human nature. This state of affairs is unlikely to continue, as research in the life sciences makes it more possible for us to manipulate the environment and human behaviour. A 'naturalist' perspective may emerge which will view human politics from an angle based on findings in biological research as well as traditional political thinking. Such a biological basis for political theory need not be politically biased.

Summary 4

Contemporary political theory is not based on a scientific study of human nature. Though human nature lay at the heart of thinking about politics in ancient times, today's divisions between disciplines ensure that the extensive findings of scientific research in fields such as evolutionary biology, experimental psychology and ethnology have so far had little bearing on social science. Though there is a new sub-field in political science known as biopolitics, most political theory involves the study of the ideas and history of famous political thinkers. Masters predict that, in view of continual advances in the natural sciences, a 'naturalist' perspective is appearing which will embrace the findings of contemporary biology. Research in this subject can throw light on many important aspects of human nature that affect political behaviour. For example, the existence of the centralised state may be linked to human behaviour through the study of theories of natural selection.

Summary 5

It is important to study human nature as well as politics. The ancient Greeks studied every kind of subject and made connections between one subject and another in a way that it is not possible today. As the scientific study of human nature progresses, it will be possible to make the kind of connections between politics and human nature which Greeks made. The significant change will be that there will be a scientific basis to these connections as well as a theoretical one.

Summary 6

Science and politics must be studied apart but the former may have increasingly useful insights for political theory and practice as its range of knowledge expands. Subjects such as neurophysiology, neurochemistry, experimental psychology and ecology can furnish empirically based information about human nature. The sub-field in political science known as biopolitics is likely to gain increasing acceptance. Eventually, it might be possible for changes in the environment and in human behaviour to be brought about through political processes. Such changes will have a firm basis, unlike the political theory that has so far been taught and studied.

Summary 7

The status of politics as a true science must be reinstated. Since ancient Greek times, it has not been considered on an equal footing with subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and biology. With the widening of scientific disciplines into increasingly specialised subjects, it is likely that a scientific study of politics will become the accepted approach. Such a study will draw on the findings of other subjects while remaining ideologically unbiased. It is through this approach that human society may eventually find a basis on which truly altruistic behaviour can be built.