GEQ1000 Asking Questions
Economics (Social Science) Segment
Video 1.1
Introduction

Hello everyone. Welcome to the Social Science segment of Q! I am Kok Hoe from the Department of Economics at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Introducing the social sciences

The social sciences refer to a group of disciplines that study human society – how we humans make decisions, how we interact with one another, how we craft customs, norms and institutions.

Are the social sciences really "sciences"?

Like our counterparts in the natural sciences, social scientists make observations, take measurements, generate theories, run experiments and test hypotheses.

But in one sense we have not been as successful as the natural scientists. We have not found the social equivalents to Newtons' Laws. What "laws" we have found describe tendencies rather than constant mathematical relationships.

Let's take an example from economics. The Law of Demand states that when the price of a good or service rises, the quantity people choose to purchase falls, other things being equal.

But it doesn't say how much the quantity will fall when price is increased by a given amount, say, a dollar. This is because the amount is going to be different for different goods. It is also going to be different for the same good in different times.

Measuring a relationship between price and quantity demanded for any good is therefore going to be difficult. Extrapolating from the measured relationship to making predictions is also risky, because you will never know for sure if the measured relationship is stable. Other things just don't stay equal over time.

On top of all this, for some goods the Law may not even hold. Goods that impart snob appeal, like pricy handbags, may sometimes see rising orders when the price increases!

To many, this is far too fuzzy, vague and imprecise to be considered a scientific law. And there are some who doubt that social science is of value if it cannot replicate the successes of the natural sciences.

The problem – humans!

The key reason why the social sciences do not have sharp laws and predictions lies in the subject matter. We study humans and human societies, and that gives us a myriad of problems. I do not plan to go into all of these problems. Philosophers of social science would do a much better job of that. Check out the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy on sections pertaining to social science if you are interested in learning about this.

What I will do instead is to look at some of the processes by which social scientists try to discover regularities and tendencies about the social world. Through this, I hope to show some of the problems that social scientists face, and how we try to overcome them. You can then decide if trying to apply science to understanding the social world is useful or even possible.

This week's lectures

In the first set of lectures we will look at program evaluation, which is the process by which we measure the effectiveness of a policy, a program, or an intervention.

Whether a policy intervention works is a fine question in itself. But we want to look at program evaluation more generally, as an example of providing questions we must ask ourselves whenever we try to establish cause-and-effect relationships in the social world.