

LESSON 1



Discovering the Social Sciences

What do social scientists do?

Introduction

Why are some people rich and others poor? How can studying the past help us live better today? These are the kinds of questions that social scientists ask.

Social scientists study the ways people live in groups. Their field is called social science. Some social scientists study small groups, such as families, and others study large groups, such as nations. Think about some other examples of groups that a social scientist could study. Your class is an example of a small group, and your school is a larger group. Some social scientists may study the groups in schools.

How do people spend their money? What physical features lie around us? How do political leaders use their power? What happened in the past? By asking and answering these questions, social scientists learn about the economy, geography, politics, and history of the groups they study. Social scientists want to understand why people behave as they do. To find out, they watch people, ask questions, and study written records, such as legal documents, letters, and news stories.

They also study other artifacts, which are things people have made. Your clothes are a kind of artifact, and so are all the things you carry in your backpack. Items in your classroom like a globe, pencil, and desk are artifacts, too. What would a social scientist learn about you by studying these artifacts? You might be surprised by the answer!

Social Studies Vocabulary

economy

geography

history

political science

◀ Social scientists study how people live in society. They do so by searching for clues and asking questions.



Civics



Economics



Geography



History

Analyzing prices is one way to study an economy. An economist might examine a shopping receipt to learn about spending habits.



1. The Social Science of Economics

You find a dollar in your pocket. Should you spend it on a snack or save it for a new comic book? You might think that no one cares about how you choose to spend your money, but that is not true! Some social scientists are economists. They are very interested in the choices people make about money every day.

economy the way people in a community use resources to meet their needs and wants

Economists study the **economy** of a city, state, or country. An economy is the way people in a community use resources to meet their needs and wants. We all need food, clothing, and shelter, and we all want things that we don't really need. You may want a new game, and your parents may want a new car. In the economy of the United States, a variety of resources meets people's needs and wants.

Economics is the study of how people make, buy, and sell things. Economists want to know how people decide what to make and what to buy.

Think of yourself as an economist. You are studying how families decide what to buy. What artifacts might help you? Here are a few ideas:

- price tags
- receipts
- coupons
- advertisements
- items your family bought recently

2. The Social Science of Geography

You are on a trip somewhere new. Nothing looks familiar. You don't recognize the countryside, the buildings, or even the people. You begin to feel a little lost. Finally, you ask yourself, "Where am I?"

You could use some help from another social scientist called a geographer. Geographers study **geography**. Geography is the study of Earth.

Geographers like to know where places are on a map. They study Earth's surface to find out what physical features lie around them. They also study climate and plant and animal life.

Geographers use maps and globes to show the features of our planet's surface. Land, water, plants, and animals are part of nature, so they are called natural features. Towns, roads, bridges, and dams are built by people, so they are called human features.

The United States has a great range of natural and human features. It has mountains, deserts, rivers, and lakes. Our nation has large cities filled with people and buildings. It has tiny towns, miles of highways and roads, and vast empty spaces.

Think of yourself as a geographer. You are studying the natural and human features of your community. These artifacts and natural objects might help you in your studies:

- maps
- weather records
- newspaper articles
- buildings
- wildflowers
- birds' nests

geography the study of the natural and human features of Earth's surface, and its climate and life-forms

Learning to use maps is an important part of thinking like a geographer. Geographers also study how humans impact and are impacted by Earth.



3. The Social Science of Political Science

You are riding your bike down the street when—*bam!*—your front wheel hits a pothole and you fall to the ground. As you pick yourself up, you grumble, “This is dangerous! Who’s in charge of fixing the streets, anyway?”

This is just the type of question a political scientist might ask. Political scientists are interested in who is in charge. They want to know how people get the power to run a city, state, or nation. They also look at how the people in charge use their power.

political science the study of governments and how they work

Political science is the study of governments. All groups—even families—have some sort of government. A government is a system for deciding what is best for the group. Its main job is to make and carry out rules and laws.

These rules help people live together in peace. Governments also supply things that people need. Your local government provides things that you need, such as schools and safe streets.

Suppose a political scientist is visiting your town. What artifacts might interest him or her? Here are a few ideas:

- election advertisements
- stories about government
- information about how and where to vote
- newspaper articles about laws

Political scientists study all types of government. City councils like this one are an example of local government.





This old school photograph is an artifact that might interest a historian. What do you think a historian could learn from this photo?

4. The Social Science of History

Your class takes a field trip to the cemetery. Your assignment is to make a rubbing of a tombstone and report on it to the class. When you read the tombstone, you think, “I wonder how many people buried here were related to this person.” Now you are thinking like a historian.

History is the study of the past. Human beings have been around a very long time so we have a lot of past to study. Historians, however, are most interested in the last few thousand years, which is when people began leaving written records.

The first question historians ask is *What happened in the past?* To find out, they study all kinds of artifacts, including records made by people in the past. Once historians know what happened, they ask other questions to help them interpret or understand the past, such as *Who took part in these events? How did these things happen? and Why did they happen this way?*

Suppose you have been asked to write a history of your family. What artifacts would help you? Here are some suggestions:

- birth certificates
- baby books
- family photos
- letters
- diaries
- family treasures

history the study of the past



The objects in your backpack are artifacts. What kinds of questions would a social scientist ask about them?

5. Thinking Like a Social Scientist

Now that you know more about social scientists, can you start thinking like one? In order to think like a social scientist, you must first ask questions about what you are studying.

Try this experiment: choose one object from your desk or backpack to study, and ask yourself, *What kind of social scientist would be most interested in this artifact? An economist, a geographer, a political scientist, or a historian? What would that person want to know about this artifact—who made it, how much it cost, where it came from, or something else?*

One class of fourth graders tried this experiment with a pair of shoes. To their surprise, the shoes turned out to be a rather interesting artifact.

The students found out that all four types of social scientists could study the shoes that the class chose. The class broke up into four different groups, and each group came up with questions that one type of social scientist would ask about the pair of shoes. Read each group's results.

Social Scientist Questions

An economist might ask these questions:

1. How much did the shoes cost to make?
2. How much did you pay for them?
3. Why did you choose to buy these shoes instead of another pair of shoes?

A geographer might ask these questions:

1. Where were these shoes made?
2. What route did the shoes travel from the factory to your shoe store?

A political scientist might ask these questions:

1. Are there any laws about making these shoes, and did the maker follow them?
2. Who was in charge of buying this pair of shoes?

A historian might ask these questions:

1. How have shoes changed over time?
2. What is the history of these shoes?
Who made them and when, and why?
What has happened to these shoes since they were made?



Lesson Summary

As you have learned, the social sciences are the study of how people live in groups. Some social scientists study small groups like families, and others study large groups like nations.

Social scientists want to understand why people behave as they do. To find out, they watch people, ask questions, and look at written records and other artifacts.

Economists are interested in the choices people make about money, so they look at what people make, buy, and sell. Geographers want to know what lies around them, so they examine human and natural features. Political scientists study governments, so they explore political power. Historians study the past, so they analyze items like old letters and photographs to learn what happened in the past.

Social scientists help us understand society, past and present. There is a lot more to learn.

The First People in Your State

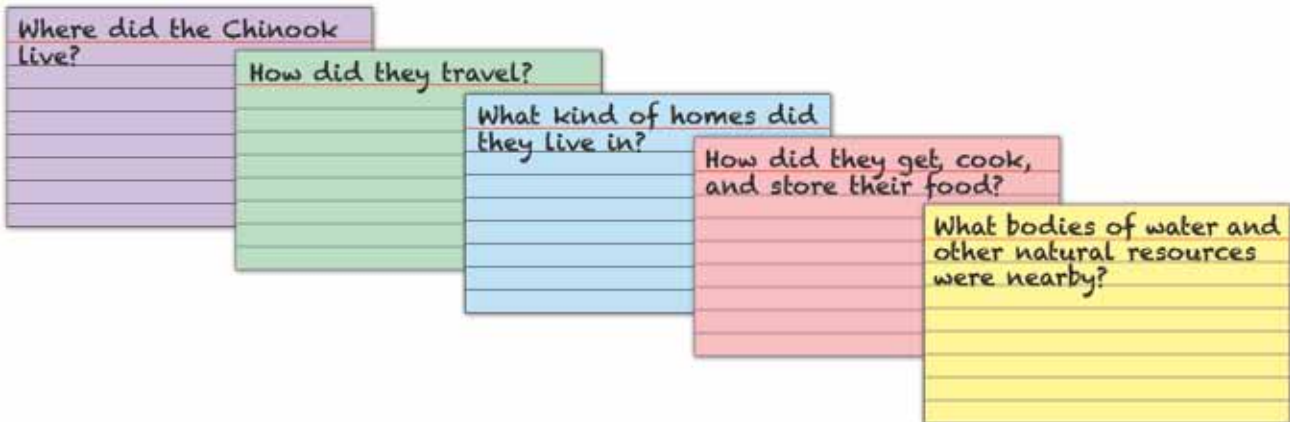
Long ago—before your state had highways, buildings, and stores—its first people lived there. Like your community, they had transportation, homes, and ways to get food and other goods. What was life like for the first people in your state? Social scientists, such as archaeologists and historians, look for answers to this important question. They look at artifacts, and they research the history of different places. You can learn about your state’s first people by doing research in the library and on the Internet.

To learn about the lives of the first people, you need to find out: Who were the first Americans in your state? There may have been several groups, so choose one to learn about. For example, the Chinook people were one of the first groups to live in what are now the states of Washington and Oregon.

Next, think of other supporting questions about the first people. For example, you might ask, “What kind of natural resources were nearby?” and “What kind of homes did they live in?”

Write one supporting question on each index card. Research each answer and write it below the question.

Write several questions about your state’s first people on index cards. You will try to answer these questions through research.





Find Answers!

Now, perform research to learn how the first people lived. Use sources that are both online and in books. For example, you might read the Web site of an organization that writes about the group's history. Write down facts on the index cards that will help answer your questions. As you research, save or draw pictures of artifacts.

Use your research to answer this question: Did natural resources affect the first people in your state? Write an explanation, and support it with your research. Include your pictures of artifacts. For example, the Chinook made houses out of trees from the nearby forests. They also hollowed out trees to make canoes. They also traveled on the Columbia River, and the river and ocean provided fish to eat.

Draw a poster explaining the ways the people used natural resources. Display your poster in the hall for other students to see. Then create a digital presentation to show and discuss with your family.

You will create a poster by researching facts and pictures of the first people that lived in your state. For instance, you might use this image of a Chinook house if you live in Washington.



Clues from Cahokia

In southern Illinois, a large mound rises from the ground, but it is not a natural hill. People built it long ago. Who? Why? How? These are questions social scientists ask. How do social scientists help us learn about life long ago?

“What a strange looking hill!” you might think as you walk toward the mound. “It’s squared off instead of round. Look, the top is flat and it has different levels. Is it really a hill?”

archaeologist a social scientist who studies the past by looking at artifacts people have left behind

These questions and observations show that you are thinking like an **archaeologist**. Archaeologists are a special kind of social scientist. Like historians, they study the past, but they don’t study people’s written records. To find clues about the past, they hunt for and examine objects that people have left behind.

This huge mound, called Monks Mound, is one *giant* artifact! It is about as tall as a ten-story building, and it is the largest of several mounds in the area. Archaeologists have learned that the mounds were part of a long-lost American Indian city called Cahokia.

How did archaeologists begin their explorations at Cahokia? What did they find?

The Monks Mound is located in the state of Illinois. It might just look like a hill, but it is actually a huge artifact!

Monks Mound at Cahokia





An archaeologist carefully sifts the soil in search of clues about the past. Geographers help archaeologists figure out where to look.

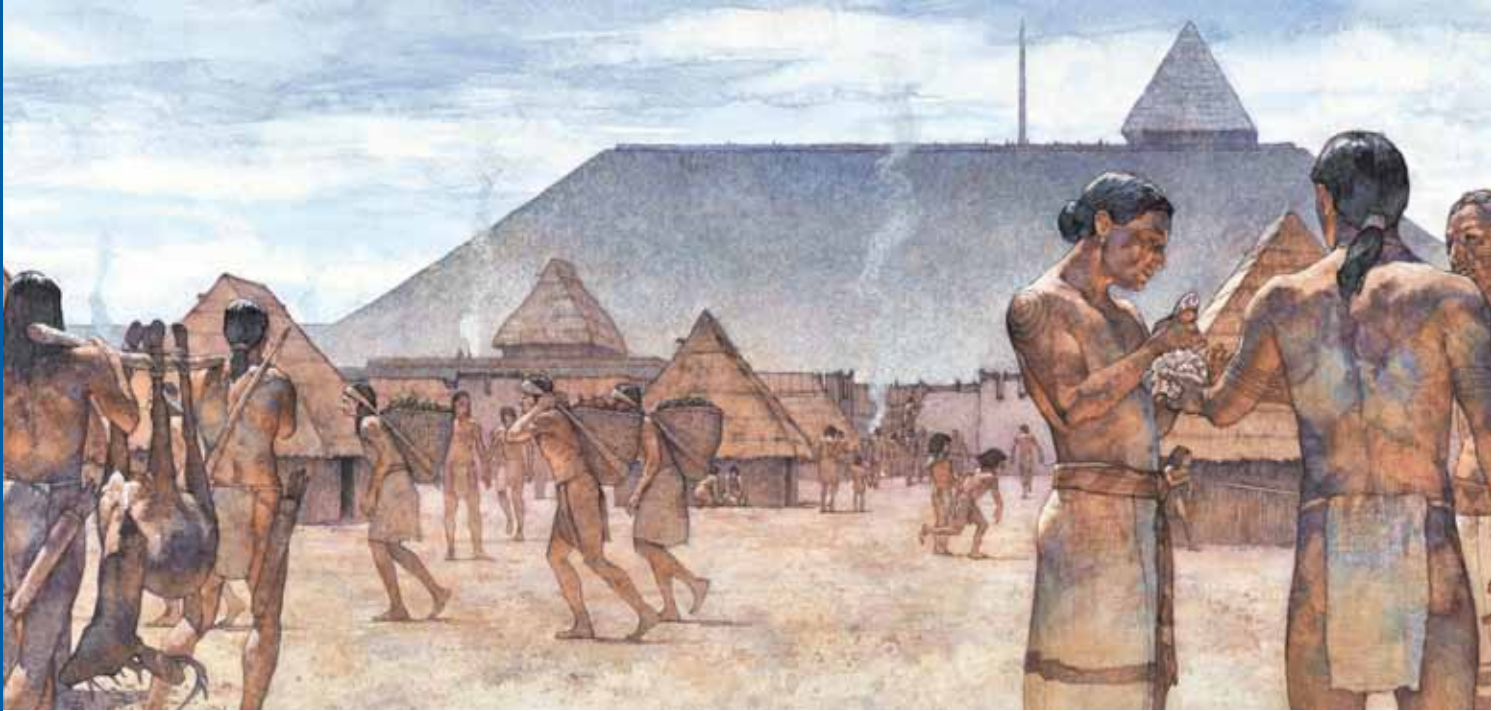
Help from Geography

The people who built Monks Mound left the area more than 600 years ago. Why did they build these mounds? The people left no written language. So how can we know?

Luckily, there are archaeologists eager to search for clues. Modern-day archaeologists use high-tech tools to look in the ground and underneath the soil that has collected on top of these very old structures over time. They also dig into the soil for clues—slowly and very carefully.

Before they start investigating, archaeologists need to figure out where to focus their attention, so they turn to geography for help. They look at the land and think about where people might have lived. Are there places where it is easy to get water? Are there fertile places to grow food? They also study areas that appear to have been changed by the people who lived there. This helps archaeologists choose the likeliest places to search for more clues.

Archaeologists have made many discoveries at Cahokia since the 1920s. One of the most exciting was at the top of Monks Mound, where they discovered the remains of a large wooden building. It stood on top of the hill about 850 years ago and was probably the biggest building in the city. Here was a wonderful clue about life long ago.



Archaeologists teamed up with political scientists to reconstruct what life was like in Cahokia one thousand years ago. An artist based this drawing on the findings of these social scientists.

Help from Political Science

Archaeologists now knew that a building once stood at the top of the great mound. But what was it for?

Nothing they found on the mound explained it, so they turned to political science for help. Political scientists study how people organize into governments. To make such a large mound, thousands of people would have had to work together. These people must have had leaders. Could this explain the building atop the mound?

Picture the scene a thousand years ago. Everywhere you look, people are at work. Some are in the vast fields beyond the city, raising corn for food, while others dig soil from pits and place it in baskets. People carry the heavy baskets to the foot of the mound. Up and up they climb, until at last, exhausted, they drop their loads. Slowly, very slowly, the mound grows taller. Who is in charge of all this work?

Convincing thousands of people to move more than 22 million cubic feet of soil takes powerful leadership! Political scientists say that a group of high-ranking nobles may have ruled Cahokia. They may have lived on top of this mound, while the people lived in the city below.

Help from Economics

Archaeologists now knew that nobles ruled the large, rich city, but how had the city grown so large and become so wealthy? Archaeologists turned to economics for help. Economists ask questions about resources. What resources did Cahokia have?

One of the resources they had was the rich soil along the Mississippi River that allowed people to grow as much food as they needed. This also meant that more people could live in one place and that not everyone had to work in the fields or hunt for food. Some people could work on building a great city.

Rivers were another resource because they served as water highways for trade. Traders brought salt to Cahokia in canoes. They also carried shells from the Gulf of Mexico and copper from the Great Lakes. People used these things to make objects of great beauty. Archaeologists have found carved-shell jewelry, copper ornaments, and stone figures.

Why did people leave? Nobody knows exactly, but part of the answer may be that people *used up* the resources. Archaeologists believe that the Cahokia cut down trees and farmed the same fields until the land could no longer support so many people. Today, the mounds at Cahokia are an important monument. Thanks to the work of social scientists, we now know that, long ago, a large, lively city existed in this place. ♦



Artifacts similar to this Cahokia head pot tell us something about culture. The pot shows what early American Indian tattoos might have looked like.