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CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKING WITH SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SCIENTISTS IN A COLLABORATIVE SETTING

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Many communities use collaborative processes and groups to pursue common goals. Social science can aid in these processes. For successful application of social science in a collaborative setting, practitioners can benefit from basic understanding of social science is, how it may be conducted, and how to engage with social scientists. It is important to assess the quality and rigor of available social science, its applicability to a collaborative's interests, and the skills and capacities of potential scientific partners. This fact sheet and its companion were created to assist collaborative groups supported by the High Desert Partnership in Harney County, Oregon.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SCIENCE

Science typically is knowledge that has been gathered and organized systematically using techniques for making observations, interpreting results, and generalizing them. The broad goal of science is to offer and revise theories that explain phenomena, both by gathering data to empirically test existing theories and by developing new concepts. Social science is focused on understanding the behaviors of individual people or collections of people. Each social science discipline has its own history, standards, and common approaches. But each also has a wide range of topics and methods, and has changed over time.

Social science studies can generally involve qualitative and/or quantitative research methods. Methods are how researchers structure their inquiry, gather and analyze data, and prepare results. Qualitative research is non-numeric and quantitative is numeric. These approaches can be used separately or combined. Social science research may rely on primary or secondary data sources. Primary data collection is that conducted by the researcher themselves. Some common primary data collection approaches are interviews, surveys, focus groups, or participant observation. Common sources of secondary data are federal, state, and local governments, who annually or otherwise regularly collect, compile, and make available information from populations and categories within those in a standard way for researchers to analyze.

What do social science disciplines study?

- **Psychology:** human behaviors
- **Sociology:** social groups
- **Anthropology:** humanity
- **Political science:** governance
- **Human geography:** how people and the environment interact
- **Economics:** businesses, markets, and economies; and efficient allocation of resources

Although all science has standards and methods, social science studies human phenomena and is therefore less "deterministic" and more "ambiguous" than some natural sciences.¹ Natural resource management often emphasizes use of "best available science" to guide decision making. It is also important to recognize different principles for best available science in a qualitative approach, and particularly when the research is originating with/from the community.



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USING SOCIAL SCIENCE IN A COLLABORATIVE SETTING

The following considerations may increase effective use of social science in a collaborative setting:

- **Understand how to work with scientific processes:** The scientific process requires the scientist to identify researchable problems and questions that, if answered, contribute to scientific theories and concepts. Social scientists also typically must complete an ethics approval process before conducting research with human subjects, which may add time and confidentiality requirements. Not all questions that a community may have are readily researchable or suitable for peer-reviewed publication. Ideally, a scientist and collaborative would work to find research questions and ways of sharing knowledge that would meet mutual goals. Establishing early shared understanding about a collaborative's questions and true interests, and the capacity of available or new social science to answer them, may improve the ability of the scientist to aid the collaborative in exploring what they really want to know. It is useful to recognize that: 1) there are different ways to gather social science data, 2) some are better suited than others depending on the research question, and 3) different approaches demand different types of involvement from community members.
- **Choose scientific partners carefully:** Scientists at an academic or government institution generally are evaluated on their productivity in publishing research, teaching classes, serving on committees, and other duties. If a collaborative is interested in working with a scientist, it would be useful to learn more about that person's job duties, funding sources, and if and how the collaborative's interests fit with those; as well as the person's skill sets and orientation towards doing applied and community-driven research. Capacities such as flexibility, good communication skills, the ability to face scrutiny and conflict, the patience to handle changes in timeline and process, and the respect to not dictate the collaborative process are also key.

- **Facilitate the interplay of scientific information and values:** In a collaborative setting, science may be best seen as a "discussion support tool", rather than a "decision support tool", as it provides insights, but does not solely direct decisions. Moreover, social science does not automatically generate clear solutions that will be accepted by all, just because it is science that concerns humans. Social science cannot guarantee social license. But it may help illuminate areas of conflict or controversy, explain why those exist, and suggest tradeoffs or approaches to address them. Within a collaborative, it may be useful to have clear expectations and strong facilitation to incorporate science (of all types) alongside values. For example, during and after presentations by a scientist/s, dialogue should create opportunities for collaborative members to openly discuss how what they have learned may connect to not only their but also others' values; i.e., one stakeholder might be asked to recount what they value and their desired outcomes, and another asked to then describe anything that they heard in the science shared that would help inform the other's interests and meet their goals.²



FOR MORE DETAILED INFORMATION

[Fact Sheet #23: Collaborative Processes and Connections to Community Wellbeing](#)

[Working Paper #102: Connecting Collaboration to Wellbeing in Harney County](#)

¹ Bhattacharjee, A. 2012. Social science research: Principles, methods, and practices. Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=oa_textbooks.

² Seager, S.T., Ediger, V., and Davis, E.J. 2015. Aspen Restoration and Social Agreements: An Introductory Guide for Forest Collaboratives in Central and Eastern Oregon. The Nature Conservancy, Portland, OR. 64 p.