

Lily Kong

Some years ago, in a conversation about the relevance of research to society, my university colleagues and I discussed how important it was that a wider audience understands the issues and developments in various academic disciplines, so that they can see relevance in what academics do. The scientists in the group pointed to the weekly dedication of two pages in The Straits Times to science and technology and commented on how useful it was to dedicate attention to the world of scientific discoveries and technological innovations.

In a spirit of generous sharing of good practice, my scientist colleagues encouraged the social scientists in the group to lobby The Straits Times for dedicated space to address issues germane to the social sciences. At this juncture, a fellow social scientist, with a wry smile said, "No need. The rest of the paper is about the social sciences."

And so it is: the sorts of research that academics undertake in the humanities and social sciences deal with every aspect of our lives - fertility rates, bilateral relations, crime, social cohesion, inflation, unemployment, healthcare accessibility, legal reforms, sports, arts, food, identity, and the list goes on.

Even in the domain of science and technology, the social sciences and humanities are critical to an understanding of how scientific discoveries and technological innovations are relevant to humanity, and how they are to be harnessed for the betterment of society. I am reminded of the movie title Everything Everywhere All At Once. The social sciences and humanities deal with every aspect of our lives.

For the hordes of fans flocking to Taylor Swift concerts, or the homemaker addicted to K-drama, or the young couple considering whether to get into the queue for a Build-To-Order flat (BTO) or to shoot for a resale flat on the open market, or the sandwiched generation adult struggling to look after a parent with early onset dementia and an unemployed adult child, the last thing they are likely to care about is what academics do. Their perception of the professional life is likely to be dominated by an image of privileged eggheads living in their ivory towers, indulging in the luxury of reading, ruminating and writing, when, elsewhere around them, everyday life challenges confront.

But as we have seen in recent months, the economic influence of Taylor Swift is significant, spurring tourism and bringing money into the economy. The decision to bring her to these shores may have delighted the Swifties, but the calculations behind it were underpinned by the discipline of economics. Similarly, when taxi drivers and customers debate about national interest, international relations or business choices - the stuff of social, political and economic sciences - it reflects their interest in the social sciences and, indeed, makes them amateur social scientists in their own rights.

FROM K-DRAMA TO BTOs

Popular culture more generally is very much grist for the social sciences and humanities mill. Ardent K-drama fans and their families may benefit from insights that humanities and social science researchers shed on individual psyche, family relations, cultural diplomacy, and more besides. For example, my colleague who was rather concerned about his mother's addiction to K-drama, learnt from social sciences research that there are positive effects of the addiction, and not just deleterious ones.

This is not to deny the negative outcomes - such addictions had indeed impacted their family time together as research and existential experience have shown they would, but research has also shown that K-dramas have the ability to help individuals cope with their own struggles. It helped my colleague understand better how helpful it was to his mother as she transitioned from work to retirement. It also helped him understand her consumption choices and how the values and attitudes of his mother's K-drama fan club were being shaped.

Social sciences can also provide insights into everyday decisions, such as those facing the young couple deciding between a BTO

# Humanities and social sciences - everything, everywhere, all at once

Often misconstrued as esoteric academic disciplines, the social sciences and humanities significantly impact our daily routines and life choices.



or resale flat. Choice overload from available options can lead to indecision or hasty, suboptimal choices. Behavioural economists help to explain why individuals often deviate from rational decision-making in such situations. With some awareness of such psychological dynamics, couples can improve their decision-making processes and select what best fits their needs and aspirations.

At the same time, deciding on the location of the BTO or resale flat calls on geographical considerations and spatial imaginations that geographers study. Research has long shown how residential mobility is often influenced by spatial and locational preferences honed through familiarity, and emotional bonds with environments developed over time, factors which sometimes may override more practical

considerations. For the sandwiched generation adult, managing dual pressures of caring for an elderly parent and supporting an unemployed child, is a multi-faceted challenge. There are the psychological pressures that attend, the physical strains that accompany, and most certainly, the financial burdens that need short-term handling and longer-term planning. On this last note alone, one can certainly benefit from insights into risk aversion and decision-making biases that affect financial decisions, in both everyday budgeting and long-term investment planning.

PROVIDING THE 'WHY' FOR THE 'WHAT'

The massive impact of digitalisation on everyday lives, especially with generative AI as the new big brother on the block,

has perhaps skewed attention and resources still more towards Stem (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines, in education and research. Yet, it is critical that we recognise social sciences and humanities as indispensable for understanding the dynamics that shape our world, providing the essential "why" that complements the empirical "what" of scientific inquiry.

What is apparent from the examples above is that the social sciences and humanities do not just deal with theoretical abstractions with limited relevance or impact on the practicalities of everyday life. Indeed, they deal with life in all its joys, complexities, opportunities and challenges.

Science and technology tell us "what" can be done - for example, what vaccines can be produced with known science

and technology; what speed and distance can be covered by electric vehicles with what level of reduced carbon footprint when compared with petrol-run vehicles; and what depth of underground construction can be achieved with extant engineering prowess, creating what capacity for housing, offices, and other infrastructure, just to cite a few examples. But science does not tell us why vaccines are embraced by some and rejected by others; why car owners are not rushing to convert to electric vehicles; and why technologies to build underground would not lead to housing shortages in land-scarce cities being addressed more rapidly.

The answers to these questions often lie in psychological, social, cultural and economic factors. Human behaviour frequently resists change due to psychological factors and

ingrained habits. The inconvenience of lengthy battery-charging and the higher retail prices create barriers to EV adoption, even when EVs offer environmental benefits.

Vaccine hesitancy stems from peer influence, amplified by the rapid spread of misinformation online. Cognitive biases further distort risk perceptions and amplify fears. The lack of direct sunlight, and the fear of living underground, including the cultural association with death and burial, limit the types of uses that the underground can be put to. Addressing these issues requires more than technological fixes; it necessitates policy interventions grounded in a thorough understanding of human motivations, social mores, economic dynamics, and cultural symbolism.

Hence, the social sciences and humanities are not handmaidens to Stem. Without the social sciences and humanities framing the great issues of the day and providing the "why" for what needs doing, and the "why" of what will or will not be done, the "what" that science and technology enable will be inadequate.

Steve Jobs, at Apple's launch of the iPad2 in 2011 said, "Technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing." Indeed, the social sciences and humanities inspire and inform technological innovations, critique and contextualise them, urging that they are aligned with human values and needs, and recognising when they cause unintended harms or exacerbate existing inequalities.

THE SINGAPORE SITUATION

In Singapore, student interest in disciplines has varied. There was a time when engineering disciplines had their heyday but computer science rules the roost today, it would seem. So often, I would hear young people say how interested they are in the social sciences and humanities, but choose a professional degree like law or a "practical" degree like business for their career prospects.

I encountered an egregious expression of such a view when I was asked, some years ago, how it was that I could rise in university management and leadership with a geography degree.

Yet, many leaders in all walks of life - banking, retail, media, education, public policy, entrepreneurship and more - hail from a social sciences and humanities background.

The need to demonstrate the value of social sciences and humanities could not be more pressing. Scholars of social sciences and humanities would do well to foreground the impact and value of their work, not only in academic terms, but also in terms that explicitly address social challenges and needs.

We must expand channels of communication and engagement with diverse audiences, to share insights and findings, and to solicit feedback and dialogue. We need to collaborate across disciplines and sectors, to harness the synergies and complementarities of different perspectives and approaches.

In a poignant scene from Everything Everywhere All At Once, characters Evelyn and Jobu Tupaki contemplate their place in the multiverse and are reminded of their insignificance. When Jobu ponders how "every new discovery is just a reminder...", Evelyn asserts, "we're all small and stupid". Despite the vastness of our universe and its unpredictability, the social sciences and humanities attest to our shared humanity, presenting opportunities for wisdom amid the chaos.

And so, to the question of relevance, the social sciences and humanities are more relevant than ever today. They help us understand ourselves and others, our past and present, our values and aspirations. In such ways and more, they are building blocks for innovative thought and practical implementation of solutions. For Singapore, these disciplines constitute a collective strategic asset that will enable the country to move forward - into a more equitable, sustainable, and compassionate future.

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