

# LSE100 Assessed Essay 2011

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## THE QUESTION <sup>1</sup>

‘Understanding the causes of things’ requires the social scientist to be aware of the trade-off between generalising across cases and understanding individual cases. What are the implications of this for conducting and using research in the social sciences? Answer with reference to at least two of the four Lent term modules: Poverty, Climate change, Culture and Great events (Cold War).

## THE ESSAY

The social sciences is an eclectic composition of academic disciplines bound by the ambitious aim of ‘understanding the causes of things’; social scientists seek not only a description of observed phenomena and their causes but explanations of the links between them. The presence of multiple causes, confounders, probabilistic causes and the reflexivity of cause and effect in reality is concoction for complexity. Questions used in research by social scientists, therefore guides them to examine the complexity at particular levels and on particular aspects of the subject.

The questions define the level that the social scientist engages the issue at; big questions inevitably force one to focus on the general picture while small questions compel one to concentrate on the details and intricacies of specifics. A trade-off between generalizing across cases and understanding individual cases in social sciences thus emerges. To ‘understand the causes of things’, research would need to move in both direction and, depending on the aims of users, general and specific findings will need to be used in concert. This essay will address the way the aforementioned trade-off manifests, contrasting the approaches taken by different disciplines and the constraints created on the conduct and use of research. It will also discuss the associated implications and the need to manage this trade-off in a bid to ‘understand the causes of things’.

### *Trading-Off Generalizations & Specificity*

Generalization is not always at odds with specificity; in the absence of diversity and complexity, understanding just an individual case can always allow us to make perfectly valid general statements across cases. Indeed, basic models in Economics assume homogeneity of agents in order to make general statements about the outcomes of their interactions. Unfortunately, that assumption almost never holds: answers to small questions on specific cases

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would not suffice to answer big questions while the answers to big questions are simply too reductionist to answer small questions. Asking ‘how many people in the world live on less than a dollar a day?’ is different from asking ‘why are there poor people?’ Big, general questions require the aggregation of answers to small, specific questions. Booth’s Poverty Survey presented in Morgan (2011) exemplified an aggregation of answers to small questions to present a big picture of poverty in London.

### *Conducting Research*

The trade-off implies that in answering general questions, we would inevitably miss out the answers to specific questions or vice versa. The disciplines adopt different research methodologies within the parameters of these questions. As Leunig (2011) suggests, economists approach problems with a set of models while historians prefer to examine evidence in absence of any models. Anthropologist, on the other hand, make use of ethnography. Social scientists inevitably focus primarily on the conclusions yielded by their methods and approaches. The economists would often make assumptions about human behaviours so that they can work out the outcome of a system of interactions. Anthropologists’ emphasis on empiricism leads them to examine detailed evidence and even experience culture so as to build a rich, multi-dimensional picture but of just the subject of interest. The result is a narrower view of the world for each discipline.

Moreover, social scientists inherit the implicit assumptions and groupthink that comes with the discipline. Beliefs about the subject matter are reinforced through reading the research within the discipline. Implicit in Stern’s (2009) urging for action against climate change is the notion that people do care about their future. Stern (2011) presented the argument, “to assert that science points to no serious risk seems irrational given the evidence; to assert that we can adapt to whatever happens seems reckless” . Therefore, when exploring the problems associated with getting industries to reduce emissions, it would be natural to suggest that solutions need to exploit the self-interest, rational behaviour by altering incentives.

However, Astuti (1999) reveals that the Vezos, people living on the western coast of Madagascar, disregards the future in their conduct of daily lives; they are completely aware and even take “great pride in [their] lack of wisdom, in the short-termism of [their] economic decisions, in [their] alleged inability to save and plan for the future” . An anthropologist who looks into the climate change issue would immediately exclaim that there’s no such thing as a general solution to climate change since cultures differ across territories and social groups.

By selecting a discipline in social science, one has already chosen to prioritize generality over specificity or vice versa. One needs to overcome these constraints within the discipline when trying to understand issues. The implication of this trade-off is then the need for interdisciplinary dialogues, exchanges and research where an array of methodologies can be adapted from the various disciplines to examine an issue. By doing so, we achieve the dual perspective of generalizations across cases and specific cases so as to ‘understand the causes of things’.

### *Using Research*

The use of research is defined by the aim of users. In particular, when applying research to policy-making, the findings used would be related to the level at which the policy decision is made. Specific details may be obscured and neglected in the use of general research to aid decision-making. At the same time, there are great difficulties trying to apply broad findings to specific cases. The proportion of the world living under dollar a day was adopted to monitor global poverty under the Millennium Development Goals, yet it obscures the complex causes of poverty and risk being reductionist in approach to poverty reduction (ie. Provide hand-outs to the poor). Simon (1999), referring to development agencies trying to monitor their progress with poverty reduction: “The challenge is to achieve a trade-off between measurability – which requires standardization – and local complexity,” echoes this strongly.

Likewise, understanding of specific cases cannot be easily applied across cases or transferred between them. Yan’s (2008) research into McDonalds’ in Beijing may prove useful in understanding the success of western fast-foods in China but cannot be applied to the spread of McDonalds’ in other economies. Similarly, Keller’s (2008) exploration of the cultural roots of local resistance against conservationist policies in Madagascar provides no ideas on managing defiance of the deforestation regulations in Brazil.

Nevertheless, there are important lessons from individual cases for policy-making at global and national levels. We learnt from Dietz (2011) that climate change could be managed with global emissions trading as demonstrated by economics research into production and incentives; there is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementing that - the scheme needs to adapt to local culture and norms. Indeed, Allerton (2011) illustrates the importance of understanding of local cultural beliefs when making policy-decisions through the case of a failed development project to raise guinea-pig production amongst peasants in Ecuador. One can easily extend this to the issue of climate change management policies at national level: a country trying to prevent deforestation might face defiance and possibly violent resistance from local communities because of cultural elements like the Malagasy ethos identified by Keller (2008).

The trade-off means that users of research must not completely disregard specific cases when making high-level policy decisions. Having effective institutions and clear long-term objectives to manage climate change, as forwarded by Stern (2007) would not quickly bring about action, without considering the specific geopolitical issues around the world surrounding climate change presented in Giddens (2009).

Nor should one be trapped in the constraints of the understanding of a specific case that one fails to see that the potential of adapting general ideas. Keller (2008) highlighted the conflict between the conservationist and the people of Masoala, seemingly without hopes of resolution. Economic research by Ostrom (1990) into governance of commons would suggest that the local population could be empowered to take responsibility of their lands and the conservation of it. The trade-off hence indicates that research from different perspective should be used in together so that an issue can be evaluated at different levels and research findings can be applied more meaningfully.

## *Conclusion*

Essentially, the implications of the trade-off in the conduct and use of research is that our approach should ideally allow us to manage this trade-off such that we have a choice to look into any specific case or to generalize across cases. Mechanisms have evolved to overcome this trade-off and achieve the benefits of the complementary nature of generalizations and specific understanding. Footnotes for elaboration out of the scope of the main study as well as appendices carrying case studies represents attempts to overcome the trade-off. Researchers force themselves to engage in the issue at multiple levels and users of research could, depending on their aims, select the parts of the research to look into.

Through increasing dialogues between disciplines, one could overcome the problems of specialization and get social scientists to engage in their issues at levels they have previously disregarded. Innovation in aggregation of evidence such as the use of composite indices is an important breakthrough. The Human Poverty Index attempts to aggregate multi-dimensional data in meaningful, comparable way while also allowing us to breakdown the figures into its components to understand specific dimensions of poverty better. Users can deconstruct findings of a research into different components at different levels and pick the parts that are relevant to their aims.

The issues studied by social sciences surround human agency and are thus necessarily complex. To ‘understand the causes of things’ would thus require a proliferation of different perspectives in order to overcome the trade-off between generalizing across cases and understanding individual cases. In the process, we lose the ability to simplify and reduce the complexity but we gain a more truthful picture of the world we reside in.

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