

Table 4.11 Assumptions of Disciplines in the Social Sciences

Discipline	Assumptions
Anthropology	Cultural relativism (the notion that people's ideas about what is good and beautiful are shaped by their culture) assumes that systems of knowledge possessed by different cultures are "incommensurable" (i.e., not comparable and not transferable) (Whitaker, 1996, p. 480). Cultural relativism has been the driving ethic of anthropology for generations, but it is being challenged by feminists, postcolonialists, and advocates for other marginalized groups on the grounds that relativism supports the repressive status quo in other cultures (Bernard, 2002, p. 73). ^a
Economics	Modernist approaches predominate. Modernist economists assume that the same dominant human motivation (rational self-interest) transcends national and cultural boundaries, in the past as in the present. Also, they assume that both usefulness and value are implicit in rational choices (on which they prefer to focus) under conditions of scarcity. Postmodernists assume that all things, including economic motivation and behavior, are intimately bound up with the situatedness (i.e., the cultural, political, and technological context) of those engaged in these activities and thus are not generalizable (Cullenberg et al., 2001, p. 19).

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Political Science	Political science has been influenced primarily by history, but more recently it is being influenced by theories from sociology, economics, and psychology. Consequently, its assumptions reflect whichever discipline and theory it is drawing from at the moment. Modernists assume rationality: "Human beings, while they are undeniably subject to certain causal forces, are . . . in part intentional actors, capable of cognition and acting on the basis of it" (Goodin & Klingerman, 1996, pp. 9–10). Behavioralists (who are also modernists) assume that political science can become a science capable of prediction and explanation (Somit & Tanenhaus, 1967, pp. 177–178). Proponents of the scientific method of research assume that empirical and quantitative, rather than normative and qualitative, analysis is the most effective way of knowing political reality (Manheim, Rich, Willnat, & Brians, 2006, pp. 2–3).
Psychology	Psychologists assume that "data obtained through systematic empiricism allow researchers to draw more confident conclusions than they can draw from casual observation alone" (Leary, 2004, p. 9). Generalizations about larger populations may be inferred from representative sample populations. Psychologists also assume that group behavior can be reduced to individuals and their interactions and that humans organize their mental life through psychological constructs.
Sociology	Assumptions vary widely in this discipline. Empiricists assume an independent social reality exists that can be perceived and measured through gathering of data. Critics of modernism assume that our perceptions of social reality are filtered through a web of assumptions, cultural influences, and value-laden vocabularies, that individual human behavior is socially constructed, with rationality and autonomy playing modest roles at best; groups, institutions, and especially society have an existence independent of the individuals in them. People, they assume, are motivated primarily by the desire for social status (Alvesson, 2002, pp. 2–3).

Table 4.12 Assumptions of Disciplines in the Humanities

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Art and Art History	Modernists assume that the intrinsic value of the object is primary. Radical art historians—i.e., Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical, and poststructuralist—“share a broad historical materialism” of outlook: that all social institutions, such as education, politics, and the media, are exploitative and that “exploitation extends to social relations, based, for instance, on factors of gender, race, and sexual preference” (J. Harris, 2001, p. 264). In general, these critics assume that intrinsic values remain primary, but understanding the social context completes one’s grasp of the work (p. 264). ^a
History	Modernist (positivist and historicist) historical scholarship rests on the idea that objectivity in historical research is possible and preferred (Iggers, 1997, p. 9). In general, social history (e.g., Marxian socioeconomic history, the Braudel method, women’s history, African American history, and ethnic history) assumes that those whom traditional history writing had ignored (the poor, the working class, women, homosexuals, minorities, the sick) played an important but unappreciated role in historical change (Howell & Prevenier, 2001, p. 113).
Literature	Literature (broadly defined) or “texts” are assumed to be a lens for understanding life in a culture and an instrument that can be used to understand human experience in all of its complexity. Texts “encompass the continuous substance of all human signifying activities” (D. G. Marshall, 1992, p. 162). Another assumption is that these texts are “alien” to the reader, meaning that “something in the text or in our distance from it in time and

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	place makes it obscure.” The interpreter’s task is to make the text “speak” by “reading” the text using extremely complex skills so as to give the text “meaning.” <i>Meaning</i> is “an intricate and historically situated social process” that occurs between the interpreter and the audience (i.e., reader) that neither fully controls (pp. 159, 165–166).
Music and Music Education	Modernists assume that empirical investigation produces verifiable and objective “knowledge” (i.e., in the sense of infallible theories, laws, or general statements) and “truth” that is context free. Postpositivists (interpretivists, critical theory advocates, gender studies scholars, and postmodernists) deny the possibility of objectivity because human values are always present in human minds (Elliott, 2002, p. 99).
Philosophy	There are two schools of thought about how to get knowledge. Rationalists assume that the chief route to knowledge is the exercise of systematic reasoning and “looking at the scaffolding of our thought and doing conceptual engineering” (Blackburn, 1999, p. 4). The model for rationalists is mathematics and logic. Empiricists assume that the chief route to knowledge is perception (i.e., using the five senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch and the extension of these using technologies such as the microscope and telescope). The model for empiricists is any of the natural sciences where observation and experiment are the principal means of inquiry (Sturgeon et al., 1995, p. 9).
Religious Studies	Religious studies often queries faith, and the history of religions focuses on understanding man as a religious being. One key assumption of the discipline is that there is something inherently unique about religion, and those who study it must do so without reducing its essence to something other than itself, as sociologists and psychologists tend to do. A related assumption is that even though religion is freighted with human emotion, objectivity is possible (Stone, 1998, p. 5).