Breaking the Mould: My Journey from Science to Social Science

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Introduction

I was always a natural science student throughout my school and college years, and one of the top performers among my classmates. During my school years, I was encouraged to choose natural science subjects under the belief that natural science held greater prestige, and that one could only grow in life if they majored in natural science. I passed my school with the highest grades and earned a gold medal for my excellent performance, setting me on the path society had laid out for me. When it came time to decide on my college subjects, my family, friends, and teachers expected me to choose biology or mathematics, steering me toward becoming either a doctor or an engineer. In my country, Pakistan, these were the only two respectable career choices. Anything else was considered a compromise, a failure, or, at best, a hobby.

The preference for careers in medicine and engineering has historical roots, as colonial governments emphasised education in these fields to support infrastructure and health sectors, critical for economic development and administrative control (Thomas et al., 2024; Wang & Shi, 2024). These colonial and post-colonial education models laid the foundation for societal preferences that persist today, especially in Asian countries. The enduring appeal of these professions is largely driven by their association with financial stability, elevated social status, and family honour. This pressure limited my study options to becoming either a doctor or an engineer. I opted for subjects that led to the engineering path. I gained admission to one of the leading colleges in Pakistan and soon started my college life. My family, teachers, and even friends believed that I would either be a doctor in a white coat or design groundbreaking technologies. But something never quite clicked for me.

The Missing Connection between Science and Society

During my engineering studies at college, I understood the laws that govern this universe and some complex equations and formulas that solve problems. Yet, there was always one question

in my mind that always stayed with me: How do these things impact society and particularly human behaviour?

I have always been fascinated by cultural conflicts, political behaviour, and psychological patterns. My attention often wandered toward public messaging and advertising, such as billboards on streets, which were early indicators of my curiosity about consumer behaviour.

My perspectives towards the world and how it works shifted after I attended a talk about the future of social sciences at a college campus. I signed up for the event, not even knowing what social science meant. That session answered many of the questions that had been on my mind for years. I realised that while natural science explains the physical world, social science helps us understand human actions, motivations, and systems. This resonated more deeply with me.

I decided to change my field to psychology and business administration. I did not take this decision lightly; it involved resisting years of external pressure and navigating internal confusion. I felt apprehensive but hopeful. Leaving behind a conventional and prestigious path created anxiety, but there was also a sense of liberation and purpose. The initial backlash was intense, friends and extended family members questioned my decision, accused me of wasting my talent, and predicted failure. Their scepticism only strengthened my determination to demonstrate the social sciences' value.

Research suggests that social sciences play a vital role in shaping equitable and sustainable societal outcomes, from governance and justice to innovation and policymaking (Bastow et al., 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Holmwood, 2010). In addition to this, interdisciplinary research combining social sciences and business administration enhances the study of concepts like institutional voids in international business by utilising theories and methodologies from disciplines such as political science and anthropology (Dieleman et al., 2022).

I now recognise that success is not just about conforming to societal expectations. It is about aligning your work with your values and passions. I recommend that any person who faces this situation should seek peer support, consult academic mentors, and reflect more systematically. These approaches might make the transition of career of other people smoother.

Facing the Backlash

When I announced my decision to switch to social sciences, the reactions from the surroundings were intense and, of course, negative.

"Why would you throw away your brilliance for something so uncertain?"

"You could have been an engineer, a scientist! Why waste all your life?"

"What about your career?"

"Social sciences? But what will you do with that?"

These criticisms hurt, but I knew I was choosing a path that aligned with who I truly was. My parents supported my choice, which gave me the emotional resilience I needed. This tension

between societal values and personal ambition is especially pronounced in South Asian cultures, where academic worth is often tied to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

The disregard for social sciences is not unique to South Asian countries. Even in countries where these disciplines are more accepted, they remain underrated compared to STEM. Moreover, the economic imperatives of countries often lead to prioritising STEM education to foster innovation and compete in a global marketplace (Kuschel et al., 2020). Yet research shows that integrating social science with STEM results in more innovative and effective solutions (Thompson Klein, 2004). Research identifies that integrating social sciences with STEM fosters innovation, inclusivity, and real-world problem-solving by enriching education, broadening perspectives, and enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration (Kuschel et al., 2020; Zhan & Niu, 2023).

Finding Purpose in Social Sciences

Today, I have no regrets. I excelled in natural science, but I found true meaning in the social sciences. My PhD project examines consumer behaviour with a specific focus on artificial intelligence. This research reaffirms that science and social sciences are deeply interconnected. Creating technology without understanding people is incomplete, as it is made for humans. The social sciences provide a critical lens through which we can understand how technology can serve humanity by promoting equity, well-being, and democratic participation, while minimising harm and unintended consequences.

Maayda Shahid *is a PhD Scholar at the University of Roehampton researching virtual influencers and consumer behaviour. Her work has been published in the International Journal of Emerging Markets and examines themes from digital purchasing to knowledge acquisition. She also led a funded project promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for international students in the UK.*

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