

## What are the most-cited publications in the social sciences (according to Google Scholar)?

*Drawing on citation data that spans disciplines and time periods, **Elliott Green** has identified the most cited publications in the social sciences. Here he shares his findings on the 25 most cited books as well as the top ten journal articles. The sheer number of citations for these top cited publications is worth noting as is the fact that no one discipline dominates over the others in the top 20, with the top six books all from different disciplines.*



There has been an **increasing focus** on citations as a measure of academic productivity in recent years, in part due to the increased ease of access to data from Google Scholar since it was launched in 2004. While there has thus been a large amount of interest in how scholars can obtain higher numbers of citations, there has been comparatively little attention to examining what publications actually obtain huge citation counts. There has been **one study** from *Nature* in 2014 of the top 100 most cited publications using data from Google Scholar, which included papers across all academic disciplines. Due to higher citation counts in the natural sciences, the list thus included very few publications from the social sciences (with only one spot in the top ten), of which a large number were actually methodology textbooks.

As such it is worth constructing a similar list, but just for the social sciences. I used Google Scholar to create a list of all publications which drew more than 20,000 citations, which I sub-divided into books and journal articles due to the fact that some disciplines tend to publish more in one format than the other, as well as methodology publications (including econometrics and statistics as well as qualitative methodology) due to the fact that methodology publications tend to be cited as if they were textbooks and can thus attract much higher citation counts than other publications.



Image credit: [Archives New Zealand](#) (CC BY-SA)

I included the following disciplines in my list: Anthropology, Economics, Education, Geography, Linguistics, Management, Philosophy, Political Science and Psychology. I thus excluded publications from both the humanities and the natural sciences, which in some borderline cases meant that I had to decide whether a publication belonged in the list due to its subject matter. In such cases I tended to decide based on the author's degrees and/or professional title in order to maintain some degree of objectivity: thus I included Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) as she has a PhD in philosophy despite holding a professorship in a Literature department, but I did not include Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) as his PhD is in English literature. On the natural sciences side I similarly chose to exclude Lofti Zadeh's 1965 article "Fuzzy Sets" despite its use in the social sciences as Zadeh holds a PhD in Engineering. In cases of books with multiple volumes such as Karl Marx's *Kapital* I combined the citations for all volumes, and I confronted the problem of works published in multiple languages by only including citations of English-language editions for publications initially published in English, and citations of both the original language and English-language editions for works published initially in other languages. (In all but one cases this algorithm captured the two highest amounts of citations for foreign language publications. The one exception was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), whose Spanish-language edition has more citations than its original Portuguese-language edition.)

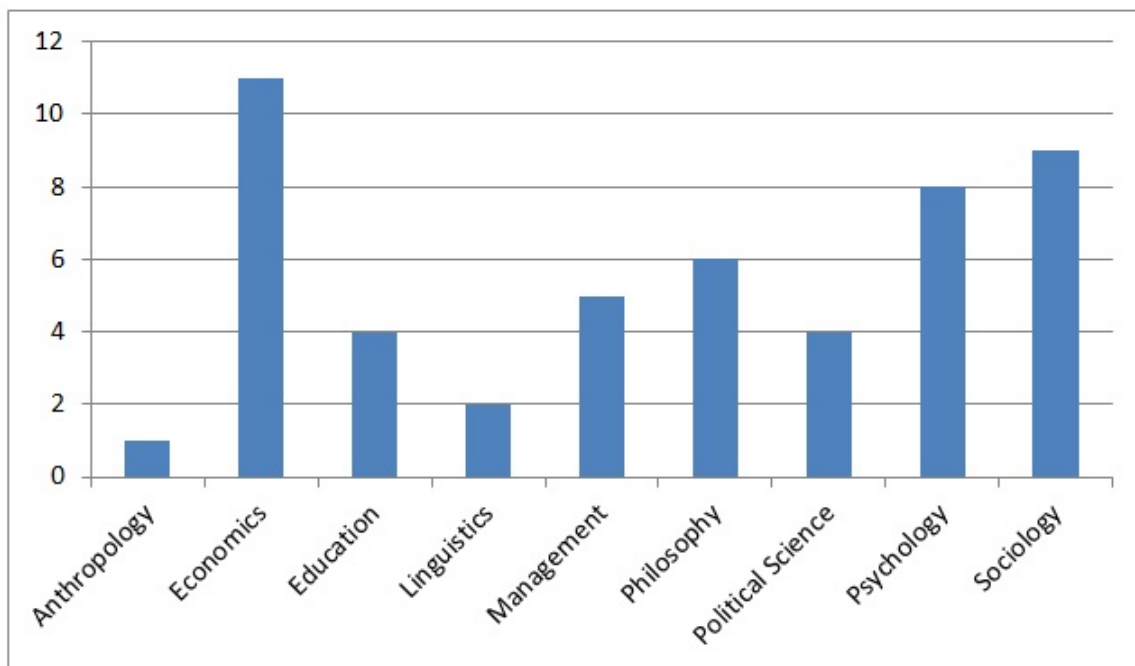
I begin with the list of the top 25 most published books in Table 1. Several things are immediately apparent. First is the sheer number of citations for the most-cited books: the most cited book, Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, has more citations than the entire body of work of such noted social scientists as John Stuart Mill (74,807 citations), Daniel Dennett (67,625), Avinash Dixit (61,112) or Steven Pinker (58,574). Secondly, no one discipline dominates over the others in the top 20, with the top six books all from different disciplines. However, if we expand our analysis to the top 50 books, as seen in Figure 1, economics dominates over other disciplines, followed by sociology and psychology. In contrast geography is totally absent from the list, with its highest-cited book, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), coming in at 65<sup>th</sup> on the list, and no other book in anthropology has more than 20,000 citations other than Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

**Table 1: The 25 most cited books in the social sciences**

Book	Author	Date*	Discipline	Citations
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions	Thomas Kuhn	1962	Philosophy	81,311
Diffusion of Innovations	Everett Rogers	1962	Sociology	72,780
Pedagogy of the Oppressed	Paulo Freire	1968/1970	Education	72,359
Competitive Strategy	Michael E Porter	1980	Economics	65,406
Imagined Communities	Benedict Anderson	1983	Political Science	64,167
Mind in Society	LS Vygotsky	1978	Psychology	63,809
Discipline and Punish	Michel Foucault	1976/1977	Philosophy	60,700
A Theory of Justice	John Rawls	1971	Political Science	58,594
Social Foundations of Thought and Action	Albert Bandura	1986	Psychology	55,324
The Interpretation of Cultures	Clifford Geertz	1973	Anthropology	48,984
The History of Sexuality (3 Volumes)	Michel Foucault	1978-1986	Philosophy	47,955
Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation	Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger	1991	Education	47,627
The Fifth Discipline	Peter M Senge	1992	Management	43,876
Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance	Douglass North	1990	Economics	43,411
Culture's Consequences	Geert Hofstede	1980	Management	42,144
The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life	Erving Goffman	1959	Sociology	40,573
Das Kapital	Karl Marx	1867-1894	Economics	40,237
Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste	Pierre Bourdieu	1984	Sociology	39,729
The Social Construction of Reality	Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann	1966	Sociology	38,845
Metaphors We Live By	George Lakoff and Mark Johnson	1980	Linguistics	38,723
Stress, Appraisal and Coping	Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman	1984	Psychology	38,665
Communities of Practice	Etienne Wenger	1999	Psychology	37,775
The Economic Institutions of Capitalism	Oliver Williamson	1985	Economics	37,651
Motivation and Personality	Abraham Maslow	1954	Psychology	37,614
Attachment	John Bowlby	1969	Psychology	37,318

\* Single-volume books originally published in a foreign language are listed twice, with the English-language edition listed second.

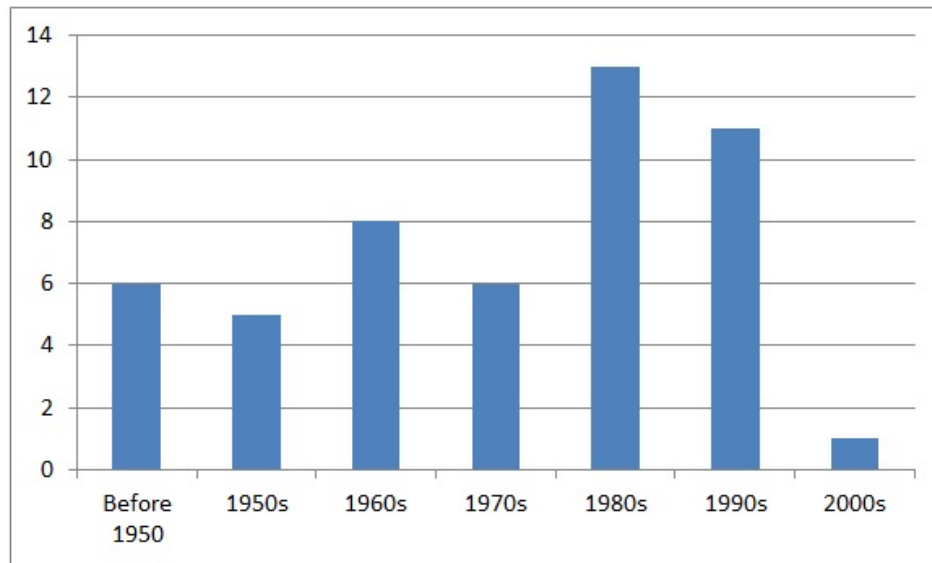
Figure 1: Books by discipline among the top-50 most cited books in the social sciences



Third, there is a distinct inverted-U shape curve to the date of publication, with books published between 1960 and

the early 1990s dominating over both older and newer books. In Figure 2 I plot the distribution of date of publication by decade for books in the top 50, which shows that the 1980s and 1990s dominate over other decades. The only books in the top 50 published within the last 20 years are Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2001), Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) and Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (1999); on the other end the only two books published more than a century ago are Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (published initially in German between 1867 and 1894).

**Figure 2: Books by date of publication among the top-50 most cited books in the social sciences**



Indeed, given the strong trend towards recent publications it is useful just to examine the top ten most cited books published before 1950, which I list in Table 2. As in the top 50 economics dominates over other disciplines, with six of the top seven spots; in contrast there are no books published in anthropology, geography, linguistics, management, or political science before 1950 with more than 20,000 citations.

**Table 2: The 10 most cited books in the social sciences published before 1950**

Book	Author	Date*	Discipline	Citations
Das Kapital	Karl Marx	1867-1894	Economics	40,237
The Wealth of Nations	Adam Smith	1776	Economics	36,331
Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy	Joseph Schumpeter	1942	Economics	33,025
Mind, Self and Society	George Herbert Mead	1934	Sociology	32,721
The Theory of Economic Development	Joseph Schumpeter	1911/1934	Economics	31,145
General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money	John Maynard Keynes	1936	Economics	29,131
Theory of Games and Economic Behavior	J. von Neumann and O. Morgenstern	1944	Economics	25,969
The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism	Max Weber	1905/1930	Sociology	25,276
Democracy and Education	John Dewey	1916	Education	25,159
The Organization of Behavior: A Neuropsychological Theory	Donald O Hobb	1949	Psychology	22,518

**\* Books originally published in a foreign language are listed twice, with the English-language edition listed second.**

It is useful to compare the list in Table 1 to a list of the top 10 most cited methodology books, which can be found in Table 3. As expected, the numbers of citations are incredibly high, such that merging Tables 1 and 3 would result in methodology books taking up half of the top 10. Another point to note here is the much better representation of

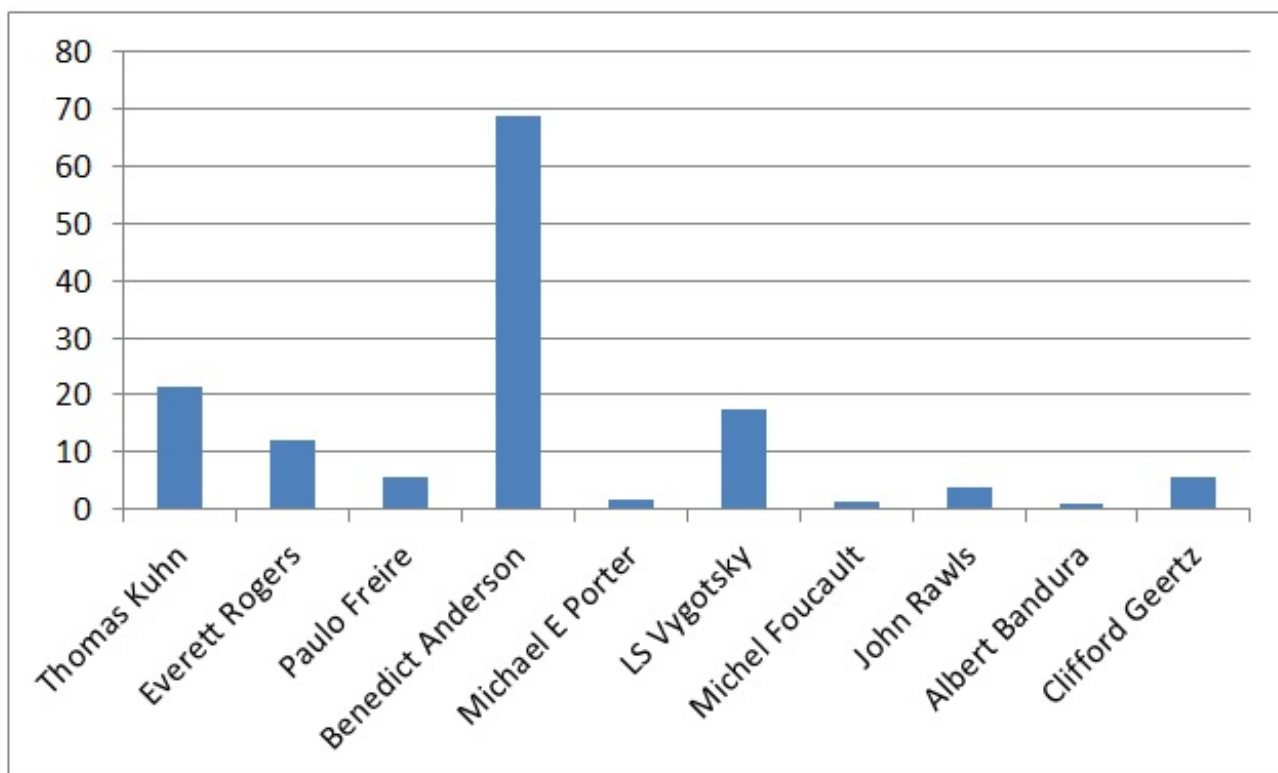
female authors in Table 3, where three books have at least one female co-author and one, *Using Multivariate Analysis* (1989), is authored by two women. In contrast the highest non-methodology ranked book authored or co-authored by a woman is *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* (1989) by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman at #19, followed by Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* at #27.

**Table 3: The 10 most cited methodology books in the social sciences**

Book	Author(s)	Date	Citations
Applied Multiple Regression/Correlation Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences	J. Cohen, P. Cohen, S. West and L. Aiken	1975	131,033
Case Study Research: Designs and Methods	Robert Yin	1984	107,931
Psychometric Theory	Jim Nunnally	1967	80,196
The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research	Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss	1967	78,385
Multivariate Data Analysis	J.F. Hair, R.E. Anderson and R.L. Tatham	1979	70,700
Qualitative Data Analysis	Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman	1984	59,829
Using Multivariate Statistics	Barbara Tabachnick and Linda Fidell	1989	57,324
Econometric Analysis	William Greene	1990	54,524
An Introduction to Probability Theory and its Applications	William Feller	1950	51,825
Naturalistic Inquiry	Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba	1985	51,169

Another useful exercise is to compare the top ten books in Table 1 to the second-most cited books by the same authors as a measure of consistency. One would expect the ratio to start relatively high and then decline if the gap in citations between the second-most cited books was smaller than for the most-cited books, and indeed as expected the first three authors in based on the ranking in Table 1, Thomas Kuhn, Everett Rogers and Paulo Freire, all have higher ratios than the last four on the list. However, the clear outlier here is Benedict Anderson, whose second-most cited publication, his 1998 book *The Spectre of Comparisons*, has only 979 citations, for a ratio of 68.6 to 1. One point to observe about Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is that, like some other books on the list, many if not most of its citations tend to be references to its title (i.e., that nations are “imagined communities”) rather than anything actually inside the book, leading [one author](#) to write about *Imagined Communities* that “rarely has a critical best-seller been so popular and so ignored at the same time.”

**Figure 3: Ratio of most-cited publication to second-most-cited publication for authors among the top-10 most cited books in the social sciences**



**Table 4: The 10 most cited journal articles in the social sciences (excluding methodology articles)**

Article	Author(s)	Journal	Date*	Citations
The Moderator-Mediator Variable Distinction	R. Baron and D. Kenny	J. of Personality and Social Psychology	1986	58,442
Theory of the Firm	M. Jensen and W. Meckling	J. of Financial Economics	1976	56,683
Self-Efficacy	Albert Bandura	Psychological Review	1977	48,208
Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage	Jay Barney	J. of Management	1991	45,404
Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk	D. Kahnemann and A. Tversky	Econometrica	1979	39,558
The Theory of Planned Behavior	Icek Ajzen	Organizational Behavior and Human Decision	1991	38,590
The Strength of Weak Ties	Mark Granovetter	American J. of Sociology	1973	37,248
Belief, Attitude, Intention and Behavior	Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen	Philosophy and Rhetoric	1977	36,575
Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases	D. Kahnemann and A. Tversky	Science	1974	36,356
Markets and Hierarchies	Oliver Williamson	American Economic Review	1973	33,731

Finally, I examine in Table 4 the top 10 most cited journal articles, excluding methodological articles. (If such articles were included they would occupy three of the top six spots, starting with E. Kaplan and P. Meier’s 1958 article “Nonparametric Estimation from Incomplete Observations” from the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*.) Here the list is dominated by economics and psychology, with four publications each; in contrast the top ranked article in political science is R. Axelrod and WD Hamilton’s 1981 article “The Evolution of Cooperation” in *Science* at #22, with no articles from anthropology, education, geography or linguistics with more than 20,000 citations. Another thing to note is the relatively low numbers compared to Table 1, where there are seventeen publications with more than 40,000 citations compared to only four journal articles.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### About the Author

**Elliott Green** is Associate Professor of Development Studies in the Department of International Development at the LSE. His research on ethnic politics, decentralization and development in Sub-Saharan Africa has been published recently in such journals as *Comparative Politics*, *Economic Development and Cultural Change* and *International*

*Studies Quarterly*, among others.

- Copyright 2015 LSE Impact of Social Sciences - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.