



February 22, 2019

Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR)  
National Institutes of Health  
31 Center Drive, Building 31, Room B1C19  
Bethesda, MD 20892

**Society for Public Health Education's (SOPHE) comments on the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) Revised Definition of Behavioral & Social Sciences**

Dear OBSSR Staff:

The Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) welcomes the opportunity to comment on OBSSR's revised definition of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (BSSR).

SOPHE is a 501 (c)(3) professional organization founded in 1950 to provide global leadership to the profession of health education and health promotion. SOPHE contributes to the health of all people and the elimination of health disparities through advances in health education theory and research; excellence in professional preparation and practice; and advocacy for public policies conducive to health. SOPHE is the only independent professional organization devoted exclusively to health education and health promotion. Members include some 4,000 behavioral scientists, faculty, practitioners, and students engaged in disease prevention and health promotion in both the public and private sectors. Collectively, SOPHE's national and chapter members work in universities, medical/health care settings, businesses, voluntary health agencies, international organizations, and all branches of federal/state/local government.

**Comments on Revised Definition**

SOPHE commends OBSSR for placing high value on the definition of social and behavioral sciences and the interplay of each on environmental processes. To that end, we recommend a few changes to the language of the proposed definition for clarity:

1. We recommend that the definition "Social" include the terms 'social media' and 'online environments' to increase facilitated interactions between and among individuals. We recommend the bullet to read as follows:
  - a. "Social" refers to the interactions between and among individuals, and to the activities of social groups, institutions, and environments, including family, community, school, workplace, economic, cultural, online/social media and policy environments.
2. In the first paragraph preceding the bulleted definitions, we recommend including the term 'environment' as a causal/explanatory determinant external to a person. We recommend the paragraph to read as follows:

- a. To further the behavioral and social sciences, researchers study the interplay between behavioral and environmental activities, focusing on causal and explanatory processes that occur not only within a person (e.g., genetics, neurobiology, emotion, cognition) but also external (e.g., physical environment, familial, community, and societal influences).
3. Additional grammatical changes are recommended for the the definition as follows:
  - a. The complex, bidirectional impact of the external influences – the environment on behavior and behavior on the environment – are essential to the understanding of how behavior and the environment interact to affect health and well-being. This broad perspective on the underpinnings of behavior, from genetics to societal influences, provides the behavioral and social sciences with a unique perspective on those dynamic interactions that can influence health outcomes across an individual’s life course and across generations.
  - b. The multi-disciplinary nature of BSSR is both a challenge and an opportunity. The contributing disciplines of BSSR often have differing scientific approaches, methods, definitions, vocabularies, and hypotheses. This broad and complex research landscape, however, provides a comprehensive fundamental and applied knowledge base to understand behavioral and social processes and how these processes impact health and well-being.
  - c. For the purposes of monitoring the behavioral and social sciences at the NIH, a project (e.g., grant application, funded grant, contract, etc.) is considered BSSR if any one of the dependent (predicted) variables or the independent (predictor) variables of the project is a “behavioral” or “social” phenomena as defined above. Behavioral or social moderator or mediator variables also may be sufficient for a project to be classified as BSSR if these variables are relevant to study the hypotheses.

Thank you for consideration of our comments. As an organization at the forefront of health education and health promotion research, we welcome every opportunity to engage and collaborate with other like-minded behavioral and social science investigators in academia and industry, health care professionals, patient advocates and advocacy organizations, scientific or professional organizations, federal agencies, and other interested members of the public.

SOPHE looks forward to working with NIH OBSSR on policy guidance that improves our nation’s population health and strengthens behavioral and social science research. Please contact Dr. Cicily Hampton at ([champton@sophe.org](mailto:champton@sophe.org)) or 202-408-9804 with any additional questions.

Sincerely,



Elaine Auld, MPH, MCHES®  
Chief Executive Officer