

Varieties of Interdisciplinary Social Science

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The social science disciplines took separate shapes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1920s, leading researchers were already discussing the need to overcome disciplinary division. The Social Science Research Council was founded partly with this goal and the very word “interdisciplinary” seems to have been forged in this context.¹

Interdisciplinarity had – and has – special importance for the social sciences. In the first place, because the disciplinary divisions are recent their arbitrariness is more immediately evident. The social science disciplines do not reflect like their counterparts in the humanities ancient quarrels over the relationship between truth or philosophy and rhetoric, fiction, poetry, or art. They are less clearly joined by a sense of the unity of science or scientific method than are the natural and physical sciences – partly because they contain within them both sides of the late 19th century struggles over “idiographic” and historicizing vs. “nomothetic” and generalizing approaches to knowledge. Neither are the disciplinary divisions of social science readily understood as reflecting levels of analysis (as is sometimes suggested for the natural and physical sciences). To be sure, August Comte imagined such a hierarchy with sociology as the Queen of the Sciences but for him sociology simply meant social science, including but not distinguishing what today we might call economics, political science, anthropology, and psychology as well as sociology in its more specific sense.

The main distinctions among the social sciences reflect the notion that at least modern societies are differentiated into states with their organization of power, more or less self-regulating economies, and civil society – initially understood as including the economy but also conceptualized as voluntary and self-regulating. Hence politics, economics, and sociology. Anthropology took shape as the study of others to European civilization: “primitive” societies, those Europeans conquered and subjected to imperial rule, and those judged to be of “earlier” evolutionary standing whether they were properly historical or contemporary. For many, the field methods of anthropology put it in the same particularizing camp as history. But anthropology also brought forward a notion of culture as an integrated whole and thus another semi-autonomous dimension to the differentiation of modern societies. The model of differentiation of spheres in modern societies has been challenged – for example by the attempt to maintain political economy as a field of study, or by the integration of cultural and sociological analysis. It remains a primary basis for the differentiation of the social sciences, however, even if less and less coherent. This chapter will also consider, however, cross-cutting differentiations which are sometimes the basis for interdisciplinary work as well as disciplines. These include attention to history, geography or spatial relations, and psychology.

¹ Roberta Frank, “‘Interdisciplinary’: The First Half Century,” *Items*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (September 1988), p. 73; and David L. Sills, “A Note on the Origin of ‘Interdisciplinary,’” *Items*, Vol. 40, no. 1 (March 1986).

The present chapter will trace the history of major agendas and initiatives in interdisciplinary social science, including the area studies fields, the pursuit of quantification and large scale statistical data, the rise of communications studies, research fields related to professional fields as in law, business, and public health, and contemporary issues such as cyberinfrastructure for the social sciences and the implications of new communications and research technologies for interdisciplinarity. It will focus mainly on interdisciplinary research and secondarily on the relationship of interdisciplinary research to education and policy.

The chapter will ask what factors have shaped the greater or less success of interdisciplinary initiatives and their changing character. In this we will look at the network structures of collaboration as well as compare cases that issue in enduring and quasi-autonomous fields to those of more temporary character. The chapter will stress the importance of problem-focused interdisciplinary agendas ranging from economic development to race relations to migration and more generally of problem-focused work to achieving effective interdisciplinary collaboration. And it will consider the role of methodological innovation in interdisciplinary research including both earlier cases like the spread of survey research and more recent ones like studies of networks and complexity.

The chapter will conclude with attention to needs and prospects for interdisciplinary social science today including those related to the transformation of the institutional bases for research (especially but not only universities), to internationalization of social science, to changing relations to the natural and physical sciences, professional schools and humanities fields, and to new technologies. It will also touch on challenges including difficulties of peer review and the continuing dominance of disciplines over evaluation structures.