

EDITORIAL

Interdisciplinary Research in Social Sciences and Humanities: Bridging Methodologies and Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract

Research approaches to understanding the complex issues that the world is grappling with have emerged within the social sciences and humanities, and this has prompted interdisciplinary research collaboration. In this editorial note, the editors discuss the importance of interdisciplinary research and the fact that it brings together different approaches and concepts for producing new ideas. There are some advantages as well as some challenges to such integrative but multi-faceted approaches, including the ability to produce more sophisticated explanations regarding the individual human as well as society and culture. The editors present a number of case studies and relevant theories to argue for the need to build interdisciplinary infrastructures which in effect advance collaborative and flexible scholarly practices. Finally, the editors argue for the need of investment in academic departments, alignment of research thinking, and sufficient volume of ideas that can be brought together to benefit from the interdisciplinary nature of the fields of social sciences and humanities.

Introduction

Globalization is increasing the amalgamated depth of social, cultural, political and economic problems requiring deeper solutions that cannot be provided by a single discipline. Interdisciplinary research defined as a synthesis of approaches, theories, and methods across different areas has become fashionable in many corners of social and human sciences as a way of grappling with complexities (Frodeman et al., 2017). It signals the understanding, which undoubtedly has been in existence, that the intricacies of human life and the functioning of the world system cannot be captured through a single scholarly lens. The social and ethical research undertaken is likely to transcend boundaries through interdisciplinary collaborative research because some researchers rely on human society, its experiences, and culture. As there are strengths, there are equally weaknesses in attempting to bridge various methods and theories. For example, sociological insights embedded in the study of social relations and anthropological insights embedded in the study of social and cultural practices are notions of the benefits of interdisciplinary research. However, it means dealing with some epistemological and methodological problems due to amalgamation of different scholarly traditions (Repko et al., 2019).

This editorial discusses the contours of interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and humanities, focusing on its potential for transformative knowledge generation. The discussion is divided into three main sections: (1) Importance and need for interdisciplinary research, (2) Methodological and theoretical integration and (3) Institutional and practical considerations for encouraging interdisciplinary research. What the editorial tries to do is trace some concrete ways in which interdisciplinary research is being carried out, hence contributing to solving complex societal problems and influencing both academic and practical contributions. This holds true not only concerning the integration of disciplines but also for a methodology trying to answer questions and problems which cannot be dealt with satisfactorily within one discipline.

The basis for such research is that as societal issues become more complex, they do not fit neatly into traditional academic silos. Global challenges such as climate change, for example, require knowledge from environmental science, economics, sociology and ethics to build integrated solutions (Klein, 2021). Issues like artificial intelligence and ethics are necessarily interdisciplinary, needing input from computer science, philosophy, psychology, and law, for example.

It would be fair to assert that newly developed theories and methods have greater chances of emerging within the intersection of disciplines than if each discipline were to work alone and independently. For example, feminist studies have embraced interdisciplinary work by integrating history, sociology, and literature to analyze gender injustices. Rather, this type of intersections adds richness to feminist theory for productive as well as for policy advocacy

(Harding, 2015). In addition, interdisciplinary research is consistent with the movement towards the broadening of knowledge and inclusion of interested parties. For instance, practitioners, community members and policy makers can be included into interdisciplinary projects which are likely to result in meaningful and beneficial work. This engagement angle is consistent with the evolving world of knowledge from being isolated in academia to one that is all embracing (Nowotny et al., 2001). The role of combining theories and strategies is the most critical factor that determines the efficacy of interdisciplinary research. The existence of many paradigms in methodologies enables scholars to adopt the strengths of various methods such as qualitative ethnographic methods and quantitative statistics. For instance, studies on moving from one country to another may consist of statistical data supplemented with ethnographic interviews reflecting the experiences at two ends of the macro micro perspectives continuum (Castles et al., 2013).

Theoretical integration is the process of putting together different epistemological and conceptual frameworks. This may prove tricky as some disciplines are bounded by quite different paradigms. For example, the individualistic approach of psychology may prima facie contradict an emphasis on social structures that sociology professes. Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990) and other interdisciplinary frameworks on individual agency and structural relations can however show how these problems can be overcome. As case studies suggest, integration of different methods and theories is not only feasible but desirable as well. For instance, the case of urban poverty shows the research results with the use of spatial and economic models, as well as ethnographic studies allowing the existing nexus of geographical distance, economic deprivation, and social interaction to be unveiled. Such approaches are illustrative of the additional benefit of adopting the mixed methods strategy (Dawadi, Shrestha & Giri, 2021). However, the promise of methodological integration also brings challenges as in this case there is an expectation that the researchers will gain multi-disciplinary skills and overcome differences in epistemology. Also, multi-expert cross-discipline collaboration, where different specialists share their expertise, can help with these issues. Equally important, an atmosphere of respect and desire to learn should be nurtured to facilitate the bridging together of methodological and theoretical gaps as suggested by Repko et al, (2019).

Promotion of interdisciplinary research necessitates proper framework and implementation of clear policies. First, it should be noted that universities and other research centres are key players in promoting such research disciplines by providing some resources, building centers, and networks for collaboration in research. For example, the creation of the Santa Fe Institute (SFI), a complex, interdisciplinary research institute has made it possible to address such problems through teamwork. Other factors also contribute a lot in helping researchers cope with interdisciplinary research. For example, graduate programmes that incorporate interdisciplinary training such as dual-degree programs, and interdisciplinary seminars enables scholars to master on how to integrate different fields at a higher level. In addition,

developing interdisciplinary literacy early at the undergraduate level can serve as a basis for conducting integrative research later in life (Frodeman et al., 2017).

Other practical means to realize interdisciplinary research include application of integrative frameworks like systems thinking and design thinking, to inform joint investigations. These methods provide ways of breaking down complex issues and finding possible overlaps between areas of study. Furthermore, these scholars note that applying information technology and data-sharing websites can enhance interdisciplinary collaboration by allowing the replacement of various data sets as well as analytic tools (Klein, 2021). Barriers to interdisciplinary research remain, including silos between disciplines, funding, and evaluation models that are fascinated with core disciplinary products. To resolve these barriers, it calls for a change in the culture of universities to begin appreciating these types of contributions. This also involves adjusting tenure and promotion policies to accommodate interdisciplinary publications as well as building interdisciplinary mentoring networks (Repko et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary research across the social studies and humanities disciplines combines the principles of theory and methodology of various disciplines and thus enriches the existing body of knowledge. However, interdisciplinary research is not devoid of challenges, owing to the political and cultural nature of societies. The culture of sharing risks and demonstrating support to collaborative research projects as well as promoting joint training and new ideas remains elusive. Or when prioritising one tradition of research over the other fails catastrophically. While educational and societal contexts are being favoured with the interdisciplinary nature of the research processes, a distinct solution is still needed: scholars have to be very attentive to border constructs and methodological integrity. Education and society find themselves in constant change, which can sometimes act as a limiting factor. Otherwise a profound contribution which integrates all traditions and disciplines will fall short to address societal issues. Innovative interdisciplinary approaches will continue to remain a key priority within academia and the society at large.

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Bio Notes

Evans Kwadwo Donkor is an Associate Professor in the Sculpture Technology Department, Takoradi Technical University, Ghana. He is best known for his composite sculptures made from scrap metals and discarded automobile parts and other industrial detritus. Donkor has a PhD in Arts & Culture from University of Education, Winneba. As an artist, he strongly believes in bringing every material to life, reshaping and attaching the various components, giving old materials a new purpose as well as a bit of soul. He is an Editor of Adom Social Science and Humanities Journal.

Dickson Adom is a pluridisciplinary researcher in the Department of Educational Innovations in Science and Technology, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. He is known for his innovations in using indigenous knowledge systems in nature conservation and environmental sustainability projects in schools and local communities. He is an Editor of Adom Social Science and Humanities Journal.

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