

Disciplining interdisciplinarity

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Gerd Jüttemann (Ed.), *Entwicklung der Menschheit – Humanwissenschaften in der Perspektive der Integration*. Lengerich, Germany: Pabst, 2014. ISBN 9783958530041 (hbk).

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This is a German book whose title translates as *Development of Humanity: Human Sciences from the Perspective of Integration*. The editor, Gerd Jüttemann is a psychologist from Berlin who has devoted much of the last 30 years to promoting the field of historical psychology. That field is already an interdisciplinary enterprise and here he has something much more grandiose in his sights: the establishment of a new discipline, or “meta-discipline” as he prefers to call it, that goes under the name, “Integrated Human Science.”

Jüttemann tries to justify the need for this meta-discipline in the introduction, “Integrated Human Science – Contours of a Meta-Discipline” (p. 15). He suggests that while each of the human sciences has its specific object of investigation, the areas between them have been overlooked. Unfortunately the topics that are covered in the individual chapters of the book provide little support for this contention. They include religion, weapons, war, slavery, industrialisation, and capitalism, topics which have already been covered extensively in subjects like sociology, economics, and history. Jüttemann also insists on providing a meta-theory for this meta-discipline and, as the title of the book suggests, the notion of development is central to it. This is a major theme of both Jüttemann’s introduction and the concluding chapter by Rolf Oerter, which is titled, “Cultural Higher Development: Possibility or Illusion?” (p. 331). Here the author comes down firmly in favour of the former. The idea that contentious and value-laden issues relating to human progress can be turned into scientific questions seems excessively naive and adds a theoretical dimension to the project that could alienate many people who would have otherwise been sympathetic towards it.

Attempts to integrate the human sciences have much in common with the more familiar attempts to integrate the various approaches to psychology. Neither can be done in an a-theoretical way and one person’s approach to integrating them may be unpalatable to someone who favours a different approach. Even the view that there are certain categories of knowledge and that a certain discipline belongs to one or more of these categories reflects our theoretical commitments. For example, the term, “human science” is of relatively recent origin and tends to be more popular in Europe than in North America where the term “behavioural science” is more frequently used. This is not merely a difference

of nomenclature. Some North American psychologists would argue that psychology is not a human science because it studies not just the behaviour of human beings but that of other species as well. This view would also see less of a difference between psychology and the natural sciences than the term "human science" implies.

What are the prospects of this meta-discipline coming into being? There have been many attempts to integrate what are variously called the human, social, or behavioural sciences over the years. All have been unsuccessful and there is no reason to suppose that this attempt will be any more successful than its predecessors. Academic positions, along with conferences, journals, and research grants, are usually centred on the traditional disciplines and we usually have to be affiliated to one or more of them whether we want to or not.

I have no problem with the goal of interdisciplinarity, merely with the way in which it has been conceived. For those of us who want to overcome the limitations that disciplines provide, the idea of solving the problem by creating another discipline may seem bizarre. It does not question the existence of the various disciplines, a point that is underlined by the dubious assertion that each of the human sciences has its specific object of investigation. One topic that I would have liked to see is a discussion of how the various disciplines arose and the social functions that they serve. For example, social anthropology has sometimes been described as "the sociology of Black people." People in 19th-century Europe obviously thought that the study of so-called "primitive" societies required a different discipline from the study of their own. Now that this assumption is less frequently made, the borderline between the two disciplines has become less clear. Similarly, the idea that one can study the human psyche without taking society, economics, culture, and history into account seems to be predicated on the belief in a universal human nature that exists independently of these things.

In spite of these problems, the book serves to remind us that all of the disciplines that are concerned with human beings are engaged in a common task. This point is of particular relevance to psychology. Although it has common interests with many disciplines, these common interests have been differentially pursued. Traditionally it has sought to establish connections with the prestigious and well-funded natural sciences and to downplay its ties to the social sciences and humanities. The book provides a glimpse of the interesting and socially significant topics that psychology could engage with if only it would abandon its obsession with being a natural science. It would also do no harm to have different explanations at our disposal. Sometimes social, economic, or historical explanations are more appropriate to specific phenomena than psychological explanations. Having nothing more than psychological explanations to offer can lead to the psychologisation of these phenomena and some might suggest that one of the social functions of psychology is to fulfil this role.

Although the various disciplines that are concerned with human beings seem to be firmly entrenched, we have some room to manoeuvre within them. We can read the literature of the social sciences and the humanities and use it as inspiration in our own work, both in terms of its subject matter and the theories that we employ. We could also promote interdisciplinary areas of knowledge and the institutions that support them. It might also help to reflect on why these different disciplines were created and why they continue to exist.