Consilience as a New Discipline

Thomas Scheff  (1.3 k words)

Most disciplines and sub-disciplines consider their particular specialization to be valuable in itself, and somehow superior to other disciplines. Most sociologists want to keep it “pure,” which means non-psychological. In academic psychology, the desire is to keep it “scientific.” Neither of these paths nor those of other social science and humanities disciplines have led to much progress. This note proposes that interdisciplinary and inter-level (micro-macro) work on the human condition is absolutely essential, and reviews ideas by Pascal, Spinoza, A. Koestler, and E. O. Wilson. Any discipline, sub-discipline or level can be used as a valuable stepping-off place, but to advance further, integration with at least one other viewpoint seems necessary at this time. Two brilliant examples are The Civilizing Process, by the sociologist Norbert Elias, and Freudian Repression, by the psychologist Michael Billig. Koestler’s idea of “binocular vision” may prove to be particularly rewarding. Perhaps a useful first step would be organize an institute for consilience in the social sciences and humanities.

Durkheim’s study of suicide gave birth to modern sociology, showing that there is a social component in causation, independent of individuals. This is an important first step, but it is not much help for understanding suicide, because the relationship is tiny. The more obvious meaning of Durkheim’s findings and its replications is that the social component is NOT the major cause, or even one of the most important causes.

In his book on consilience (1998), the noted biologist E. O. Wilson proposed that the physical sciences have made huge advances but the social sciences and humanities have not. He argues that most physical science progress has been made when separate disciplines or sub-disciplines have combined: biophysics, physical chemistry, and so on. His plea for integration within and between the social sciences and the humanities was made more than twenty years ago, but there has been little response (Slingerland and Collard 2012).

Wilson has several pages of criticism of each of the major social science and humanities disciplines, including economics, psychology, and history. One of his comments on sociology concerns a quote from a leading sociologist of his time (Coleman 1990):

“The principal task of the social sciences is the explanation of social phenomena, not the behavior of single individuals.”

Wilson takes issue with this idea, still strongly held by most sociologists, by noting that biology would have remained stuck in its 1850 position if it had remained at the level of the whole organism, refusing to include cells and molecules. Perhaps in the beginning, pure sociology was a virtue, but treating it as the only way has become a vice.
One step toward consilience would be to encourage some scholars to become generalists after their initial training and research experience in a discipline or sub-discipline. This step would not compete with disciplines, but increase the number of those who attempt to integrate. At present, the number of generalists seems far too small. A second step would be to establish and institute for consilience. The last step would be departments specifically oriented to consilience.

Although not cited by Wilson, Koestler (1967) had proposed an idea similar to, but broader than consilience that he called “binocular vision.” By that he meant being able to entertain two contradictory points of view simultaneously, by moving quickly between them. He thought that this kind of vision was necessary for ALL advances in understanding.

Paths toward Consilience

One of the first philosophers of science, Spinoza, outlined what amounts to a method for achieving binocular vision about humans. He proposed that human beings are so complex that to even begin to understand them, one needs to move rapidly back and forth between “the least parts and greatest wholes.” What he called least parts were concrete particulars; “greatest wholes”, abstract ideas, concepts and theories. (Sacksteder 1991; Scheff 1997).

Human beings use this method unthinkingly in their daily life. Everyday discourse would be impossible to understand in any other way, since if taken literally, it is fragmented, ambiguous, and incomplete. In this case the least parts of discourse are the words, gestures and paralanguage, and the greatest wholes the meanings constructed from these least parts.

It is possible for researchers to use integrative methods consciously in order to breakdown rigid disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries. Within sociology, there are many sub-disciplines such as qualitative and quantitative, micro and macro, social structure and social psychology, and so on, with very little congress between them.

The need for change and integration may be even greater in psychology. At least in sociology, the various sub-disciplines and points of view allow for some flexibility. But in academic psychology, there is close to one point of view: only “scientific” research is allowable, using scales and/or experiments. One of the many problems with this approach is that in almost all studies, the amount of variance accounted for is even less than the in the sociology studies reviewed above.

A clear example of the failure of a dogmatic adherence to “science” is the some TWENTY THOUSAND studies of self-esteem studies that use scales. For the last thirty years the findings have been very close to zero, and not increasing, yet these studies continue, only slightly
abated (Scheff 2011). This scandal applies to most applications of scientific psychology and social science.

Two Examples of Integrative Studies

The sociologist Norbert Elias’s extraordinary study (1939; 1994) involved a textual analysis of etiquette and educational manuals over a 500-year period of European history in five languages. By close examination of the texts, he found evidence that as shame took the place of physical punishment, it also became increasingly invisible. Although this study is widely recognized as his masterpiece, it has not gotten the credit it deserves. One reason, perhaps, is that as he demonstrated the invisibility of shame in modern societies, his own study is less visible than it should be for this reason.

A study of Freud’s cases and his letters by the psychologist Billig (1999) used a close textual analysis to reconstruct the psychoanalytic theory of repression. His study showed that repression seems to be caused by social practices: parents teach children to avoid certain issues (such as sexuality and anger) by distracting them to the point that the children learn to also distract themselves. It would seem that psychoanalytic theory, which is entirely psychological, needs to be reconstructed with a strong social component.

Connecting many disciplines, Lehrer (2007) has proposed that literary figures like Walt Whitman, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf foresaw developments in current studies of self psychology and of neuroscience. This book provides brilliant examples of benefits from integrating social science and literature.

Although not mentioned by Lehrer (2007), the early scientist/ theologian Blaise Pascal (1660) also proposed a solution to the enmity between science and the humanities. He thought that advances in understanding require both “the spirit of geometrie” (system) and “the spirit of finesse” (intuition). Intuition creates new ideas, system is needed to test their validity and refine them if they are valid.

Conclusion

Studies that report no findings or findings close to zero have no practical value to our society. It therefore seems clear that there should be parts of all social and literary disciplines trying consilient or other new approaches. This may be the most important issue facing social science and the humanities at this time.

References


