

The Case for More Generalists

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The noted biologist E. O. Wilson (1998) has called for "consilience" (the interlocking of perspectives) between realms of knowledge. He pointed out that many current advances in the sciences have involved integrating disciplines (e.g. biophysics, biochemistry, astrophysics). Wilson also stated that such integration is notably absent in the social sciences and humanities. Each discipline goes its own way, ignoring other disciplines.

One step toward consilience would be to encourage some scholars to become generalists after their initial training and research experience in a discipline. This step would not be to compete with discipline, but to increase the number of those who attempt to integrate. At present, the number of generalists seems far too small.

One of the first philosophers of science, Spinoza, outlined what amounts to a method for integrating the social/behavioral sciences. He proposed that human beings were so complex that to even to begin to understand them, one would have 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).

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

A recent article of mine (2011) suggests how the work of two different authors, Cooley and Goffman, if used in concert, can expand the range of their work far beyond their own viewpoints. The article shows that Cooley stated two very general hypotheses about the looking glass self, but didn't provide enough detailed examples to allow them to be understood and applied by the reader. Goffman, on the other hand, was a fountainhead of lively examples and new concepts, but didn't provide sufficient propositions that would allow the reader to fit Goffman's and the reader's examples into them

It is possible for researchers to use integrative method consciously in order to breakdown rigid disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries. Within my own discipline, 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.

Needless to say, there are also dogmas that block efforts to integrate with other disciplines, particularly psychology. The idea of a "pure sociology" that is structural rather than psychological is upheld by most working sociologists, to the detriment of progress in the field.

In the first really outstanding sociological study, Durkheim (1905) showed that suicide rates were consistently related to religion. In the various regions of France and Switzerland in which Catholicism was dominant, suicide rates were lower than in those regions dominated by Protestantism. These differences were stable, year after year. With this study, Durkheim established that there was a social cause of suicide independent of particular persons. Subsequent

studies have supported Durkheim's findings. Clearly, if one wants to understand suicide, one should not omit social components.

The point which the pure sociologists ignore is that the differences between Catholic and Protestant rates are quite small, accounting for only 8 % of the variance. The small size of the difference means that many Catholics commit suicide and many Protestants do not. Even if we had a measure of alienation more exact than religion, this aspect alone might still be a poor predictor of suicide. The complexity of suicide will require more than one causal factor. That is to say, it will require contributions from other disciplines in addition to sociology.

All sociological research faces this same problem. Quantitative sociologists point with pride to the work relating income attainment to class origins (Blau and Duncan 1967, and subsequent studies by others). Yet these studies show that class of origin accounts for only 16% of the variance. These and similar studies all suggest that if we want to understand the causation of social phenomena, we will need to include psychological, economic and possibly biological factors as well as social ones.

The need for change and integration seems to be even greater in psychology than in sociology. At least in sociology, the various sub-disciplines and points of view allow for some flexibility in approach and discussion. But in academic psychology, there is virtually 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 this failure of "science" is in 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, yet these studies continue, only slightly unabated. There is something drastically wrong with a "science" that continues to conduct studies that have no findings (Scheff 2011).

Studies in sociology and psychology that report findings close to zero have no practical value to our society. It therefore seems clear that both disciplines need to try consilient or other new approaches.

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 over the period studied, 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 Billig (1999) used dialogue 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. This latter idea

hints at the possibility of recursion in human processes, two steps in Little Hans, many steps in the Ratman. It would seem that psychoanalytic theory, which is almost entirely psychological, needs to be reconstructed with a strong social component.

My own historical study (1994) of the origins of WWI and of the rise of Hitler in Germany attempts to integrate social, political and psychological elements at the macro level. It appears that the French experienced their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1871) as a humiliation, leading to anger and the plotting of revenge against Germany. Similarly, the Germans appeared to have felt humiliated by their defeat in 1918, leading to Hitler and WWII. This study analyzed many least parts in governmental documents, media contents, and popular books from the eras that were studied. The evidence supports the social-emotional hypothesis that hiding shame with anger leads to revenge, and that revenge, in turn, brings on counter-revenge.

These three studies concern least parts at the verbal level, and also after the fact. Because she used videotapes, Retzinger's study of marital quarrels (1991) takes place in the moment, and uses not only verbal but non-verbal elements (gestures and paralanguage). With a systematic method of locating emotion episodes, she showed that all of the rapid increases of anger by one party were preceded by a statement from the other party that caused hidden shame in the person, who then became angry. This study integrates the social and psychological causes of interpersonal quarrels, at the micro level. Her finding of the micro link between hidden shame, anger and aggression is supported at the macro level by my study discussed above, which links hidden shame to aggression at the macro level.

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

Conclusion

One last suggestion involves gaining self-knowledge. It seems likely that understanding others is highly dependent on the degree that one understands one's self. The classic adage "Know thyself" often turns out to be extremely difficult to achieve, even in small measure. What can generalists, and all others, for that matter, do in this regard?

For many years I have thought that psychotherapy was the best answer. But lately, because of my own experiences, I have begun to think that an easier first step might be meditation. Not that meditation itself is easy, but in many ways simpler to use than psychotherapy, and certainly much less expensive.

My suggestion is to mediate every day, without fail, but only after getting some instruction. A workshop is best, but there are also books and recordings that can help, such as the Kornfield book and disk (2004). Chapter 6, particularly, will ward off the kind of discouragement that many beginners feel. I propose that mediation can bring many benefits, and one of them is increasing knowledge of self.

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