

PUBLISHING

IMPORTANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN SOCIAL WORK: AN INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

Antoine de Saint Exupéry wrote in his book *The Little Prince*:

“Your planet is very beautiful,” he said. “Has it any oceans?” “I couldn’t tell you,” said the geographer. “But you are a geographer!” “Exactly,” the geographer said. “But I am not an explorer. I haven’t a single explorer on my planet. The geographer is much too important to go loafing about. He does not leave his desk. (Wisemes & Karanika-Murray, 2009, p. 1)

This short anecdote shows us in a very simple way the limitations associated with academic specialization and compartmentalization of disciplines. Regardless of the competence of a scholar, this professional will always be restricted by parameters imposed by the discipline. Our respective academic disciplines indicate what is important, what we should search for and what we should study. Apart from the limitations associated with the parameters of our discipline, the interest in what happens outside our discipline is considered beyond our responsibilities. This attitude can be problematic and limiting, given that social problems are not generated in sciences, and therefore they do not belong or correspond with any discipline (Wisemes & Karanika-Murray, 2009, p. 2).

According to the CFI (Canada Foundation for Innovation), innovation is a process starting with the generation of knowledge through research (Phillips & Shaw, 2011). The implementation of such knowledge is expected to eventually provide benefits for society in general. In other words,

innovative research must offer applications and practical benefits. Some methods for innovative research include: ethnography of the implementation, spatial methods, development of models for the assessment of interventions, research methods for the study of hidden and hard-to-reach populations, and *interdisciplinary research projects* (Phillips & Shaw, 2011).

The history of interdisciplinarity in USA has gone through three stages. The first extends from the First to the Second World War, the second from the Second World War to 1960 and the third from the 1960 to the present day (Salter & Hearn, 1997). Interdisciplinarity in USA focused on a movement of educational reform during its first historical stage. That approach in research was considered the antidote against fragmentation of sciences and knowledge. In turn, the stage after the Second World War was marked by a debate on interdisciplinarity in social sciences. Some suggested that interdisciplinarity should mainly focus on methodological and instrumental aspects of research without trespassing the boundaries of each discipline. This kind of interdisciplinarity aimed at solving problems associated with post-war economy. Others insisted in the conceptual integration of knowledge, which led to the creation of academic areas of study. This second approach initiated an epistemological challenge towards the parochialism of theories and isolation of disciplines. The third historical stage extends from 1960 to the present day and is characterized by the professionalization of the interdisciplinarity movement,

which has been possible thanks to the creation of two organizations. The first one, INTERSTUDY, is an entity founded in 1980 which gathered scholars and government and industry representatives. The second one is the Association for Integrative Studies, which was mainly constituted by scholars interested in epistemological aspects of interdisciplinarity (Salter & Hearn, 1997, pp. 27-28).

Many will question which conditions tend to promote interdisciplinarity. According to Cheng, et al, (2014), interdisciplinary research teams are usually created in an attempt to better understand a new phenomenon, formulate new and better research questions, provide better answers to the existing research questions and contribute to the body of knowledge of certain disciplines.

The interdisciplinarity efforts that arise in response to such conditions can be instrumental or conceptual (Salter & Hearn, 1997, p. 29). The former type is a pragmatic approach mainly interested in solving problems. This approach claims that interdisciplinarity must have a solid background in diverse disciplines, further recognizing the need to investigate outside the parameters of such disciplines.

On the other hand, conceptual interdisciplinarity is more interested in theoretical, epistemological and pedagogical aspects of research. The supporters of this kind of interdisciplinarity claim that the circumscription to a single discipline obstructs and delays the pursuit of truth and knowledge accumulation (Salter & Hearn, 1997). They assert that the limitations imposed by diverse disciplines create a fragmentation of knowledge and, as a result, produce valueless units of knowledge.

In an effort to identify and document the advantages linked to interdisciplinarity, a group of Italian researchers conducted a study aimed at discovering whether the interdisciplinarity research projects produce more publications with a broader success among the academic community in comparison to projects and researches performed by a single discipline (Abramo, D'Angelo & Di Costa, 2017). The results of the study suggest that the studies and publications conducted by interdisciplinarity teams tend to enlarge the number of future interdisciplinarity collaborations and the number of readers and quotes from these publications. This is the particular case when the researchers belong to different but related disciplines. On the other hand, Cheng, et. al, (2014, p. 643) maintains that interdisciplinarity investigations hold the ability to produce inclusive theories with greater validity or explanatory power than any other discipline by itself.

Likewise, Wisemes and Karanika-Murray (2009, p. 2), identify several benefits associated with the interdisciplinarity research studies.

These advantages include that interdisciplinarity studies can lead to great discoveries, enable to obtain more objective perspective from researchers outside our academic circle, identify gaps or omissions in the body of knowledge of our discipline, solve complex applied type problems, promote the ideal of unity of knowledge, conduct more flexible research projects, enhance communication and resource mobilization and facilitate the defense of our academic freedom. Our efforts to integrate knowledge belonging to different disciplines will lead us to expand the boundaries of our respective disciplines. This process will turn us in mediators of knowledge and enablers of dialogue and synthesis (Lyll, et al, 2011).

Other benefits associated with interdisciplinarity research include the chance to perform a more interesting and exciting work, which generates greater satisfaction, flexibility and the power to develop a bigger and more diversified repertoire of research methodologies, produce more creative approaches to respond to a problem, develop new perspective which can enable the elimination of myths, help the development of the ability to successfully communicate with diverse audiences, conduct researches with greater relevance for real life, acquire a higher understanding of complex phenomena, and achieve groundbreaking advances and a bigger complementarity (Lyll, et al, 2011). Among other things, these authors suggest that the interdisciplinarity research projects are more beneficial regarding its cost and efficiency in the long term given the synergy produced by the collaboration.

Finally, we would like to refer some of the success indicators in interdisciplinarity research. According to Morss (2018, p. 1-3), successful interdisciplinarity projects enable the complete intellectual participation of every discipline represented in the study creating this way a multidirectional collaboration. The successful projects also have the ability to formulate new questions for research, develop new methodologies, produce a deeper knowledge, respond to more complex questions and innovate in the intersection of diverse disciplines.

We trust that these lines will encourage the envisioning and tackling of topics from different perspectives, which will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the social problems that we deal with, which are becoming progressively more complex.

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