

# The Scope of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

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# THE SCOPE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

HAROLD KAPLAN\*

There seem to be three separate questions out on the table. I'm not sure which one to charge at first. I take it the main interest at this Conference has been the question of whether people in the social sciences should be asked to come over to this building. The second question, which perhaps interests me a bit more, is whether we should come, if invited. That is, what possibly we could get out of the experience. And then, thirdly, there is Professor Mohr's very eloquent existentialist critique of modern social science. Perhaps I can make my position known very briefly by beginning with the last point and then working back to the first two.

In case any of you are undecided about the matter let me reassure you immediately that Professor Mohr is wrong, almost from the beginning. I don't know if I need say anything beyond that. Obviously this sounds authoritative enough. These are, of course, very fundamental, philosophic questions and I don't suppose that one can do them justice in a few minutes.

Of course, scientific knowledge involves a partial view. That's really what science is — the development of a number of different partial views. There seems to me to be nothing wrong with this as long as one avoids this other mistake that Professor Mohr referred to, namely, assuming that one's partial view is the real thing.

What I've never been able to understand in listening to Professor Mohr and his crowd is the relationship between two statements they always make. One statement introduces radical skepticism into all of our experiences. How do we know that the things we are sensing about an object correspond to the reality of the object. I think that this is the kind of radical skepticism that science shares. This skepticism would turn one's attention to broad problems of epistemology and methods of knowing. The second proposition that Professor Mohr and his cohorts reiterate is that our knowing of the thing should be guided by the thing itself. I'll be damned if I can jump from one statement to the other. I've seen these two statements juxtaposed often enough. But if we are to be radically skeptical about the very process of knowing, how are we to organize our knowledge on the basis of the thing itself. They tell us that we are to let the thing itself guide us; but they don't tell us what the thing is and how we're to know what it is. I really think that scientists begin with an essentially phenomenological assumption, namely, that all knowing is partial knowing. Now, you don't know a situation, you know things about it; and you make the best with what you know.

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As for this other business about the social scientists being guilty of bad faith and selling out on their social obligations, I can only say that this is a point that Max Weber and Emile Durkheim would have understood very well since those two developed the concept of functional differentiation. Surely, Professor Mohr is aware of the notion that individuals play a variety of roles. I've never been able to understand why so many existentialists and existentialist psychiatrists think that the psychiatrist/client relationship should be extended to all relationships, that somehow there is to be only one role that all people play, and that, if a scientist tries to play a more specific role he is selling out on all the other roles.

There is a qualitative difference between pure knowledge and applied knowledge. Pure knowledge is an attempt to build up some systematic but partial knowledge; it seems to me that applied science is an attempt to bring to bear these partial systems of knowledge on a concrete problem. This distinction between pure and applied is relevant to the question of interdisciplinary collaboration. In my view, there are two kinds of interdisciplinary collaborations. You can have a group of so-called pure scientists come together and be interested in gaining something from the other person's theoretical perspective or methods of knowing. Out of this, perhaps, will come some further refinement in their own separate disciplines. There might even be some fusion of disciplines. Perhaps a new discipline would be created out of this. The other kind of collaboration occurs when a group of pure scientists come together and contribute what they can to a concrete problem. It seems to me that urban studies programmes and urban studies centres involve collaboration of the latter kind.

The urban area is simply a locale in which a number of things occur. When one creates an urban studies centre, one is simply asking a number of different disciplines to come and say what they have to say about urban phenomena. The end product of this kind of collaboration, I would think, would be some kind of programme for reform or change. It doesn't seem to me that you can produce a new discipline called urban studies. I don't believe there is any such thing as a science of urban affairs. I've seen the phrase environmental science and I don't think there's any such thing as that either. In effect, the constituent disciplines bring what they have but each discipline remains largely the same. It seems to me that the constituent disciplines rarely achieve much from this kind of collaboration. A psychologist bringing what he knows about urban life to a forum on urban problems may contribute something; but I don't think he'll come back feeling he knows more about the psychology or urban life. Perhaps concrete solutions, which would improve the quality of urban life, might come out of this collaboration. But, in terms of basic principles, each discipline goes back to its home base relatively untouched.

The last basic problem that seems to be raised here might be phrased in this way: can science save us? If we call a bunch of scientists together to consider a moral/social problem are we going to come up with any better answers than we would if we were to collect 500 plumbers in one room and have them go at some of the moral and social problems of the day. This again,

of course, is a common and much debated problem in the philosophy of social science. In my view we cannot go from statements of fact to moral conclusions. To ask the scientist to come up with moral answers is to demand of science what it cannot do. It's quite true that sometimes scientists play the expertise game and try to convince you that their expertise makes them better at moral judgments. But this is a shell game, and I think it ought to be unmasked. The scientist can perhaps contribute to more informed moral choices, but he cannot produce moral conclusions without nonscientific, moral premises lurking somewhere in his argument.

Finally, what is the relationship between the scientist and the practitioner? Can the practitioner benefit from what the social scientist has to offer? This, I think, depends on what the practitioner wants to know. In many cases, I would assume that the practitioner's knowledge is better for the kind of problem he's dealing with. But I would hesitate to agree with the view that common sense, everyday knowledge is always superior to the rigorous, partial images that emerge in the social sciences.

