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Editorial: Pluralism and Normativity in Interdisciplinary Research

The label of 'interdisciplinarity' is often accused of grouping a variety of different (and often incompatible) approaches and methodologies – in fact, almost as many as there are scholars and research communities pursuing interdisciplinary inquiries. Far from being a sign of disunity and weakness, however, this very fragmentation exemplifies the common concerns underlying interdisciplinary research: a willingness to express a plurality of viewpoints, to mediate between different perspectives in a context-sensitive and overtly goal-directed way, and to use a combination of representational tools without necessarily reducing them all to a single, unifying perspective on the issues and/or phenomena to be researched.

It is in this spirit that the papers and commentaries to be found within this issue of the GJSS attempt to diversify and enrich the toolbox of models, perspectives and terms available in order to set up and interpret the experience of fieldwork (whether the latter be an anthropologically, sociologically, politically or gender-defined space of inquiry). They provide case studies and arguments against the usefulness of research based on a

linear, univocal, one-sided or 'one-sited'[1] methodology. In fact, they read social scientific research as intrinsically pluralistic: in its goals (overtly political – such as Lamers' concern with the normative impact of the imagery of poverty created by pro-Africa fundraising, or more analytically oriented – like Hamner's study of queer television discourse); in the settings and time-scales that are employed (as exemplified by Cons' analysis of the symbolic and political significance of constructing and using maps); and in the representational tools that are selected to depict the objects of inquiry (ranging from Jentzkowitz's and Brunzel's 'tracks' to the various ways of using core variables, as illustrated by Takei in the case of race and ethnic relations).

Implicit to the recognition of intrinsic pluralism is the perception of 'disciplined' research[2] as risking to be trapped within its own vision of the world, rather than using that vision as a starting position to explore other types of understanding. The main trap of disciplinary thinking is the uncritical acceptance of specific methods and analytic tools, irrespectively of the specific features of the objects under investigation, the interests of the

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[1] See 'Ethnography through Thick and Thin' (Marcus, 1998) as example of the decades-long advocacy of the need for multi-sited research by anthropologists.
[2] I here define disciplinary research broadly as any area of study that is rooted in a single type of literature and perspective on the world, to which a research community is committed.

researcher and of the intended audience. Of course, training within a specific discipline is necessary to provide an in-depth understanding of the history of a method and of its possible uses. First-hand experience in applying that method is also a crucial phase in the education of a researcher. Yet, knowledge and experience of a method or model should be accompanied by a critical assessment of what that method or model actually does and does not yield. This is sometimes difficult to achieve, since research students tend to be shielded, institutionally as well as intellectually, from contact with approaches to social reality differing from the ones that they are trained to use.

The authors of the papers within this issue challenge this situation. They explore different ways to make sense of complex social realities without uncritically subsuming them under a unique description or a single theoretical perspective. They do not take for granted at least some of the ways in which specific features of reality are selected for in-depth analysis. Representation necessarily involves simplification and abstraction, whether carefully planned or hastily improvised as a response to unforeseeable fieldwork experiences. The challenge to interdisciplinary research is not to reify such simplifications and abstraction from the real. All representation and analysis elucidate some aspects of the social world relative to a specific perspective: it is thus important to reflect critically on the reasons for choosing a specific representation and the way in which it is relevant to the

arguments and topics under investigation. Thus, the representation and analysis of social realities require a normative choice among several available tools, which has to be justified according to the interests and objectives of the researchers (whether epistemological, ethical or else).

Here is, then, the point where I would like to draw reflection by the readers of this issue. This is the idea that the recognition of pluralism in research tools and methods, which is arguably a core virtue of interdisciplinary approaches, calls for a heightened awareness of the normative consequences of choosing specific tools and perspectives for inquiry. Within each of those papers, the author opens up the black box of her or his methodological struggle with the choice of representational tools and of epistemic and political goals that are most adequate to his or her competences and interests, as well as to the skills and interests of his or her audience. They solve the struggle in very different and perhaps incommensurable ways: Cons rounds up his discussion of maps with a suggestion for 'counter-mapping'; Lamers indicates the unavoidable ambiguity of using images of poverty that both encourage and hinder political responses to it (by making it visible but also, at the same time, too familiar and thus entrenched to our understanding of Africa); Hamner illustrates some ways to 'be adventurous' with one's fieldwork, by avoiding binary distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods; and Takei condemns the homologous treatment of race and ethic issues in the United

States and Japan by pointing out ways to gear methodological strategies to cultural differences. These are certainly highly fragmented results, highly discontinuous in methods and normative positions. Yet, I hope readers will find inspiration and insight precisely by comparing the ways in which each of these analyses establishes its own norms for what an adequate understanding of a phenomenon may be.

Let me add a few notes about the recent developments within the GJSS, which is in the process of tracing its own institutional and research spaces and making choices geared to our interest in intellectual freedom and exchange. We are happy to announce that, starting from the next issue, GJSS will initiate an official collaboration with Amsterdam University Press as our official publisher. Thanks both to AUP's genuine interest in our project and to the generous sponsorship of the increasing number of institutions affiliated to our research network (http://www.gjss.org/aboutus_ack.shtml), the journal will remain available for free to all interested readers. Starting in 2006, we shall also host a series of special thematic issues, edited by postgraduate guest editors, alongside our general publications. This will allow us to maintain our characteristic openness in accepting quality submissions from all kinds of areas in social science, while at the same time issuing more systematic reflections around specific issues (either at an abstract level, as for instance when reflecting on the question of pluralism or gender in social science, or by tackling emerging areas of interdisciplinary interest, such as

research on sound and time-scales). If interested in suggesting a topic or project, or simply to communicate your thoughts and comments on our work, please write to editor@gjss.org.

References

Marcus, George E. (1998) Ethnography Through Thick and Thin. Princeton: Princeton University Press.