

The contribution of an inter-disciplinary approach to studying and/or practicing development.

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The contribution of an inter-disciplinary approach to studying and/or practicing development.**Introduction**

In this paper, I examine the basis for and contribution of an inter-disciplinary approach to studying and practicing development. I then attempt to enrich this perspective by highlighting the epistemological implications that have emerged from the participatory research paradigm, which embraces alternative forms of knowing and raises numerous questions for disciplinarity and knowledge production more generally.

'Development' is a contested idea with competing definitions. Chambers' definition of 'development' as 'good change' (Chambers 2005, p.186) opens the question of what 'good' means and who defines it. Provoked by these questions, I frame development as an essentially normative project of human emancipation, which enables all people to acquire agency, learn and co-create their own futures in a manner which ensures well-being and the flourishing of human potential for present and future generations. As such, development is closely linked to ideas of knowledge and power and the ability to shape 'reality'. Drawing on complexity thinking (Cilliers 1998, pp.2-6), I take the position that reality is complex, dynamic, deeply interconnected and evolving. However, predominating accounts of reality have tended to remain within narrow disciplinary framings which can be understood as providing essentially fragmented depictions of reality.

Disciplines and the cost of fragmentation

As a "system of rules" for the construction of knowledge' (Harriss 2002, p.487), disciplines have their own self-referential logic and norms of validity. Each discipline has evolved to have its own specific foci, methodological biases, set of assumptions, and forms of logic. By and large, the dominant trend across disciplines has been analytical reductionism with a strong positivist bias (Cilliers 1998, p.2; Reason & Bradbury 2006, p.4) in both the natural and social sciences. In effect, disciplines can be understood as filters whose very foci, logic and methods determine what can be observed, experienced and known and in which the particular worldviews of those involved in producing the knowledge become entangled with the structure of that knowledge.

While analytical reductionism has allowed a tremendous rate of progress and knowledge generation,

it appears to have led to an increasingly fragmented way of knowing (Cilliers 1998, p.2). Meanwhile, certain disciplines, such as economics, have enjoyed a disproportionate share of attention and authority (Paehlke 2001; Kanbur 2002, p.477). The knowledge produced within such disciplines has been both influenced by the dominant (geo)political interests of the times and instrumental in shaping (geopolitical) discourses, including 'development', in ways that emphasise certain aspects of reality over others. To the extent that discourse legitimises and even conditions action, as elaborated in Foucault's 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1977 in Gaventa & Cornwall 2007: 177), such biases have contributed to a variety of flawed policy decisions and interventions to which many of the contemporary 'crises' of the world may be – at least in part – attributable. Examples arguably include food shortages, widespread poverty, climate change, failed states and Third World debt, rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation and farmer suicides (for example, in India) amongst others. James Fergusson's account of flawed World Bank policy in Lesotho based on a de-contextualised definition of employment is a case in point (Fergusson, 1990 in Harriss 2002, p.489). The accumulation of many such seemingly minor errors over large swathes of the world can translate into serious problems.

Toward an integrative paradigm: inter-disciplinarity and complexity

Clearly, if either the study or practice of development is to avoid at least some of the pitfalls of such fragmented ways of knowing, both students and practitioners of development must cross existing disciplinary boundaries and norms. In order to achieve this, dialogue is required across disciplinary boundaries; disciplines must open themselves to critiques from other disciplinary approaches that may appear to be inconsistent with their established 'system of rules'; and collaborative processes of knowledge creation must be pursued by combining approaches and methods and applying them to real world issues. Examples of such efforts do exist. For example, the field of economics has seen the introduction of diverse fields such as behavioural economics, institutional economics, environmental economics and ecological economics (Gowdy & Erickson 2005) as the subject has come into contact with psychology, political science and the natural sciences.

More generally, systems thinking, which emerged 'through a critique of reductionism', holds that 'valid knowledge and meaningful understanding come from building up whole pictures of phenomena, not by breaking them into parts' (Flood 2006, p.117). Efforts made by early pioneers

such as Ludwig von Bertalanffy who developed the theory of open systems and Gregory Bateson who formulated cybernetics have today evolved into the richly inter-disciplinary study of complex adaptive systems. The Santa Fe Institute established in 1984 was founded for the study of such systems, and emphasises that the “[u]nderstanding of complex adaptive systems is critical to addressing key environmental, technological, biological, economic, and political challenges.” (SFI | About SFI. Available at: <http://www.santafe.edu/about/> [Accessed November 8, 2008]). Such inter-disciplinary research into cross-cutting features of the empirically observable world has resulted in the emergence of 'complexity science', which provides powerful insights into the nature of reality at both theoretical and practical levels (Cilliers 1998; Ramalingam & Jones 2008). Many of these insights challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions about how the world works that have characterised much development theory and practice in the last century and, arguably, amount to a 'paradigm shift'.

However, the bridging of disciplinary divides is not without its challenges (Harriss 2002; Kanbur 2002; Max-Neef 2005). The absence of common languages and frames of reference presents a considerable impediment to communication across disciplinary boundaries. There may also be deeper reasons underlying some of the more intractable tensions which appear to exist between disciplines – namely those which arise when communication is attempted across different epistemological divides. Guba and Lincoln (2005, pp.204-205) argue that the greatest divide is between positivist or post-positivist paradigms and the 'new paradigms' (characterised by the 'post-modern turn') as the latter, in rejecting objectivity and offering alternative, broadly inter-subjective epistemological foundations, constitute a fundamental challenge to the lingering hegemony of positivist epistemology. Indeed, they bring positivism into crisis, and with it, those disciplines that retain most strongly their positivist orientation. Thus, while efforts at bridging disciplinary divides must be pursued in order to gain a more wholesome understanding of the world, it is to the epistemological front that attention must be turned.

Knowledge for what, for whom, and of what kind?

In the context of development, the 'post-modern turn' raises the very serious questions of who is generating what knowledge and what it is being generated for? Equally importantly, it asks who has been excluded from these processes? In Chambers' words it confronts us with the question: “whose

reality counts?" (Chambers 2005). A summarised account would locate the academies and state institutions of former colonial powers and the US as being at the centre of this knowledge production process, with the World Bank, the IMF, other international and multinational institutions and agencies, corporations and vestigial post-colonial bureaucracies as vehicles for applying this knowledge. While this is a great oversimplification, it is nonetheless a truth which resonates with many development critics. The excluded have been the voiceless: the poor, the marginal, women, indigenous communities and, more generally, the Third World. By and large, these groups have historically lacked the access, opportunity and support to participate effectively in shaping the knowledge that has come to define much of their reality; as Habermas might say, the colonization of their life-world (Kemmis 2006). They have been amongst the most subjugated in the 'matrix of domination' (Collins 2000, chap.10).

Accentuated by the serious ethical implications of the poor performance of development efforts to date – with 'ecological devastation, human and social fragmentation, and spiritual impoverishment' arguably being outcomes of 'progress' itself (Reason & Bradbury 2006, p.4), the concern with knowledge and power has understandably grown, as elaborated by Gaventa and Cornwall (Gaventa & Cornwall 2007, p.177). These authors go on to present some of the core epistemological critiques of the dominant positivist method that have emerged from within the field of participatory action research:

First, [...] the positivist method itself distorts reality, by distancing those who study reality (the expert) from those who experience it through their own lived subjectivity. Second, [...] traditional methods of research especially surveys and questionnaires - may reinforce passivity of powerless groups through making them the objects of another's inquiry, rather than subjects of their own [...] may reduce the complexity of human experience in a way that denies its very meaning, or which reinforces the status quo by focusing on what is, rather than on historical processes of change. Third [...] in so far as 'legitimate' knowledge lies largely within the hands of privileged experts, dominant knowledge obscures or under-privileges other forms of knowing and the voices of other knowers." (Gaventa & Cornwall 2007, p.178)

Building on this critique, the participatory paradigm seeks to address these shortcomings and sees emancipation as a goal of knowledge creation:

“what is empowering about participatory research is the extent to which it is able to [...] create more democratic forms of knowledge, through action and mobilisation of groups and people to act on their own affairs, in a way that also involves their critical reflection and learning.” (Gaventa & Cornwall 2007, p.182)

Engaging in the co-creation of such knowledge with co-subjects, entails going beyond existing epistemological boundaries and expanding what constitutes valid knowledge. Park proposes a broadening of the framework of acceptable knowledges to include representational (both functional and interpretative), relational and reflective forms which he associates respectively with three forms of power: 'competence, connection and confidence' (Park 2006, pp.85-90). Black feminist epistemology, as a rich example of an epistemology of the oppressed, emphasises knowledge by valuing 'personal experience', 'empathy' with co-subjects and 'accountability' to the spoken word as criterion for valid knowledge (Collins 2000, chap.11). Heron and Reason further expand ways of knowing to include experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing and practical knowing (Heron & Reason 2007). Within each of these alternative conceptualisations of knowledge, 'knowing what is out there' features as only one of several ways of knowing, each claiming significance in diverse and often practical contexts. Such forms of knowledge challenge the established paradigms upon which most formal institutions are based and are, accordingly, often marginalised by them.

Beyond disciplines: Ways of Knowing and What to do.

Acknowledging the validity of diverse ways of knowing, and the ethical or normative dimension of knowledge generation and 'development' more generally, demands that the student or practitioner of development re-consider their entire epistemological and axiological framework. It implies that the contribution of an inter-disciplinary approach to development, defined broadly as an emancipatory process, is fundamentally tempered by epistemological considerations, by questions of what constitutes knowledge and whose knowledge this is. This presents a fundamental challenge to traditional disciplinary boundaries. If the life-worlds of the marginalised are essentially complex

and ought to be described by those who experience them on their own terms as argued by Chambers (2005), then which single discipline can possibly cope with the complex, local realities experienced by local people in different parts of the world? It is only when 'outsiders' such as development practitioners, researchers and students cross disciplinary boundaries, challenge their own epistemological positions, make systematic efforts to understand reality in 'insider' terms, and reposition themselves as reflective facilitators of participatory knowledge generation processes that development can take place.

The multitude of disciplines which exist today within contemporary academic institutions provide a well-spring of knowledge, methods and approaches that can be interrogated, applied and adapted to development efforts. The insights garnered within particular disciplines have been and can be used to challenge and enrich those acquired within other disciplines. This can and should play a critical role in reducing the damage that is done by top-down policies and decisions that continue to treat the voiceless and disenfranchised people as objects of development. However, as I have tried to articulate in this paper, there is a pressing need to recall that development is about people, not as objects but as subjects; as agents of their own destiny. Enabling people to construct their own knowledge that works for them, in their own terms, is an enterprise which calls for moving beyond disciplinary boundaries toward new epistemological and methodological configurations. No doubt this will demand rethinking and redefining words such as 'quality', 'rigour' or 'validity' (Guba & Lincoln 2005, p.205-209), but I believe it is crucial enterprise. I therefore echo Harriss' call that "research priorities should be set by the practical problems that development involves, more than by the puzzles that are generated out of theoretical speculation" (Harriss 2002). The only difference is that in place of 'problems' I would use 'changes' and in place of 'development involves' I would put 'people desire'.

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