
INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES- STUDY OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract:

The complexity of relationship between nature and society has led to the emergence of interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary is a process of answering a complexity of question of the society through amalgamation of knowledge from different streams through academic disciplines. Interactions between humans and their natural environments has led to many global challenges related to water, forest, air, urbanization, waste management and others. These global challenges demand the exploration of the problem with the interfaces of various disciplines. These interfaces can be in the form of borrowing concepts, models, approaches, theories, tools and others. As the purpose of research is to find solutions to the problems, it demands the problem-oriented collaboration that increases the relevance of interdisciplinary approach. This unification of various academic disciplines has also led to emergence of new inter-discipline like geo politics, nanoscience and others. In Social sciences we observe this in the amalgamation of various disciplines such as Economics, Political Science, Sociology, Psychology, etc. This helps us to be more critical in our thinking and creative in problem solving. Hence this paper put forth that interdisciplinary approach enriches the growth and sustainability of every academic discipline and also leads to the emergence of new disciplines such as Public Policy that offers effective solutions to the issues boggling the society. The study of public policy must be interdisciplinary in focus, because public programs and public policy problems are complex and they transcend beyond the understanding of any single discipline. As Laswell states 'Policy Sciences' is a framework to set the process of comprehensive, integrated understanding concerned with policy. This integrated understanding requires an inter-disciplinary approach to formulate policy design and execution to deal with the complex problems of our Society.

Keywords:

Interdisciplinary, social science, research, public policy.

Introduction:

Ever since the appearance of the social sciences as separate domains of inquiry in the late nineteenth century, an interplay between social sciences has occurred between movements for greater specialization on the one hand and efforts at interdisciplinary integration on the other hand. August Comte, envisaged a unified social science towards the end of the nineteenth century. Many organizations like American Social Science Association were struggling hard to keep the social sciences together and focused on solving human problems. But the centrifugal forces of specialization and professionalization associated with the industrialization of America spurred the establishment of one separate social science discipline after another. Many scholars disagreed with this and pioneered interdisciplinary research is altering the way in which researchers engage in the scientific research and funding agencies also focused on strengthening interdisciplinary process. Many argue that this transition is slowly beginning to change what it means to undertake research. In areas such as cognitive neuroscience, behavioral economics or cultural studies, interdisciplinary research has emerged as a key mode of knowledge production (Bondebjerg, 2015; Callard et al., 2015).

Development of Interdisciplinary Approach:

The transition towards interdisciplinary collaboration is manifold. It emanates from within the scientific community as research progresses and new scientific problems emerge that are not confined to a single disciplinary perspective. It is also derived from the world of politics. In numerous instances, policymakers and funding agencies call for researchers to address the grand societal challenges of globalization-led economic, ecological and demographical change (Langfeldt et al., 2012). Many of the challenges associated with interdisciplinary research increase with the cognitive distance between disciplines including, among other things, the development of a common theory language and methodology. Even though the societal impact of interdisciplinary research is widely recognized by funding agencies and policymakers, there is relatively little evidence about the incentives and barriers to engage in interdisciplinary research. To gain more insight into the nature of interdisciplinary collaboration, the Humanomics Research Centre in Copenhagen has carried out a survey of attitudes towards interdisciplinary research among 1100 Danish humanities scholars in 2016. They looked at different strategies for engaging in interdisciplinary research, as well as different modes of interdisciplinary research to identify barriers and possibilities for collaboration (Budtz Pedersen and Stjernfelt, 2016). The survey shows a large percentage of researchers were involved in inter-disciplinary research activities. They also consider that inter-disciplinary research is important. Further there may exist several (non-congruent) reasons for why researchers engage in interdisciplinary research work: 1. Researchers belonging to a well-established discipline with a strong consensus on basic principles, traditions and career structures (such as linguistics, classics and historiography) are involved in multidisciplinary research activities. 2. Migration into an interdisciplinary field (that is, a field of research that is not defined by disciplinary capture, such as gender studies, media studies, cultural studies or area studies) is also a possibility 3. It is also observed that it is not easy to bring about a difference between inter-disciplinary, multidisciplinary and other collaborations, as there are no uniform definitions.

Application of interdisciplinary approaches in Social Sciences:

The use of an interdisciplinary approach enables scholars to study about the social sciences from various standpoints. Most academicians are drawn into understanding various disciplines from interdisciplinary perspectives. It becomes challenging to embark on a study of the social sciences issues that humanity faces without employing an interdisciplinary approach. The people and the challenges that they face, are too diverse and they require to be addressed from all possible angles.

Social scholars garner satisfaction from studying the means through which human beings seek solutions to a myriad of societal problems. On the other hand, society has to stick to certain aspects of the organization to solve social problems and achieve its goals. All these societal goals require an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses all possible means of achieving viable solutions. It has been often observed that it is “difficult to imagine studying historical content without examining the roles of persons (sociology), their motivations (psychology), where they lived (geography), the influences of spiritual beliefs (religion), rules that govern behavior (political science and anthropology), or how people negotiate for their needs and wants (economics)” (Lattuca, Fath, & Voigt, 2004, p. 25).

Similarly, an interdisciplinary approach to social sciences might involve a substantial connection to foreign languages, arts, science, and mathematics. An interdisciplinary approach to social sciences is not the sole solution or methodology that is currently available to academicians. However, this approach has proved to be quite effective in assisting scholars, educators, and society to solve their problems. The main goal among educators is to assist students to gain knowledge, develop insights, achieve problem-solving skills, be self-sufficient, and eventually develop a natural thirst for learning. All these objectives can easily be achieved through an interdisciplinary approach to learning. This clearly outlines the advantages of using an interdisciplinary approach to the study of social sciences. There have been deliberate attempts to promote coordination, cooperation and integration amongst social sciences approaches, it is also widely held that social science scholars have been narrowly provincial in their perspectives of relative disciplines. The point which we seek to develop is that the inter-disciplinary approach is more a means for the internal development of each of the separate social sciences than it is for the establishment of a unified, integrated, all-inclusive discipline. It is a tool and a stage, rather than an end in itself.

The idea of interdisciplinary also makes the approach critical in its analysis as it gains momentum to absorb knowledge objectively within and outside one's own discipline. The social sciences have become the area where the most ardent and ongoing debate occurs regarding the meaning and importance of interdisciplinary and its role in the “Scientific Society”, as well as of “Science in Society”. There has been interest in the approach to interdisciplinary and the application of it since a very long time in history. While academics seem to conclude that there is a deeper understanding of contemporary society it requires an interdisciplinary approach, the application of this approach in higher education and sciences, is still complex. The history and evolution of the interdisciplinary concept through the times is described, discussing major challenges that have influenced today's higher education and research, and has created the demand for interdisciplinary approach.

Examples of interdisciplinary teaching across the Indian society are often spoken of and the factors impeding interdisciplinary studies are examined. Within the contexts of interdisciplinary is integration of knowledge, concepts or techniques of several disciplines that helps to create new knowledge or a deeper understanding (Seipel, 2005). The knowledge, concepts, methods and approaches of several disciplines that are compared, combined and applied in such a manner resulted in deeper understanding of a problem. Disciplinary approach is characterized by the search for an optimal solution, while interdisciplinary approach seeks alternative solutions. Interestingly, interdisciplinary has dual nature. It can be described as a process, i.e. interdisciplinary is a way to solve, analyze or explore complex issues (e.g., socio-economic problems). This represents the so-called instrumental interdisciplinarity. One can say that in this case the interdisciplinary approach turns disciplines and subjects into instruments to explore a topic, problem or idea (Klein, 2006). The other result is the reorganization of a discipline and creation of new knowledge, the so-called cognitive interdisciplinarity (Shove, Wouters, 2004). 'A crossing of frontiers' of academic disciplines and the creation of new disciplines are seen as the ultimate and at the same time the most controversial form of interdisciplinarity (Davidson, 2004). Examples are emergence of newer disciplines like public policy, geopolitics, nano science, environmental science and others.

Interdisciplinarity and Emergence of Public Policy:

Public Policy emerged as an academic discipline in the year 1960 encompassing various disciplines of social sciences like sociology, economics, public administration and others. In 1951, when Harold Laswell, published his essay "The Policy Orientation", policy science as a social science subject and practice, in the book titled, *The Policy Sciences*, coedited by Daniel Lerner, he labelled policy sciences as "society relevant knowledge". Policy Sciences according to Laswell (1971) is framework to set the process of comprehensive integrated understanding concerned with policy. Public policy is not merely a technical function of government; rather it is a complex interactive process influenced by the diverse nature of socio-political and other environmental forces. These environmental forces that form the policy context led to the variation in policies and influences the output and impacts.

Policy making is not a simple rather a complex dynamic process involving series of actions and inactions of varieties of groups with varieties of interests at different stages. However, this integrated understanding requires an interdisciplinary approach to deal with the complex problems. Public policy being the fundamental principles underpinning the set of rules and regulations are applicable to host of social, moral, economics, ecological and other aspects of society. As they cover a wide gamut of issues like law public health, transportation, urbanization, sanitation, environment, education and others. All of the issues concerning human life are complex and complicated in nature as they require policy design and execution with an interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, Palmer (2001) says, 'Knowledge has been in a state of flux- a continual process of reconfiguration'. He further states that 'the real-world research problems that scientists address rarely arise within orderly disciplinary categories and neither do their solutions'. In such situations interdisciplinary approach becomes immensely relevant as it helps in comprehensive understanding and resolving issues of complex nature. Interdisciplinarity is not just about any kind of dialogue between the two or more disciplines rather a more intense convergence of different disciplines which addresses the challenges of complexity. Therefore, Laswell

rightfully puts across that, “a policy orientation has been developing that cut across the existing specialization. The orientation is twofold. In part, it is directed towards the policy process, and in part, towards the intelligence needs of policy”. He also described as, policy sciences must not be compared with applied social sciences or with applied social and psychological sciences. The stress in this approach is upon the fundamental problems of man in society.

Application of Interdisciplinary approach in Public Policy:

Public Policy studies emerged as a discipline of study because of the growing concern of specific contextual policy problems, to identify the causal determinants of policies and relationship between policies and social settings. Policy studies also seeks to understand the nations do and the procedures followed for the same. Hence policy studies lay emphasis on the policy cycle focuses on formulation, implementation and evaluation of its outcomes. These focuses of policy studies demand the interlinkages between various disciplines depending on the nature of policies that are made for example, tools of analysis needed in the areas of health, energy and ecology seeks interventions of natural sciences. Apart from policy analysis, Policy studies also emphasize on the applied dimension and relevance to the real problems faced by the society. This desire to provide relevance seeks information from various disciplines to add immediacy and significance to research findings to achieve positive goals to improve the society. Public Policy can therefore be defined as a discipline which uses knowledges from various disciplines for analyzing the processes of formulation and implementation of public interest connected with the improvement of human life. It extends beyond traditional single social science discipline in both its thematic structure and as well as in its methods of investigation. Delon and Steelman (2001) argue that public policy programs were originally grounded in the ideal of “the integration of knowledge across discipline”.

The policy studies research always look out for a specific set of methodologies and call upon a range of tools and methods from different sciences in order to achieve the analyze of the public policy problem and to find the best explanations for policy questions and alternatives.

One of them being the comparative research method. Generally speaking, the comparative research methods provide a greater degree of knowledge on the administrative and political context, and on the features of public policy. In view of some scholars applying comparative method in policy research helps to conduct an enquiry of “cross-national study of how, why and to what effect government policies are developed” (Heidenheimer et al., 1975). The main goal of this development was to support the improvements in this field of research.

The comparative research not only helps in understanding the importance of contextual factors (political structures, societal settings etc.) of policy making but also extremely important for policy innovations, policy termination, policy convergence, policy diffusion and others. Comparative public policy is an important area of study cutting across major disciplines in social science (Adolino and Blake 2011; Castles 1998; Heidenheimer et al. 1990; Rose 2005). It carries both academic and policy significance.

In recent years, comparative policy research is gaining strength and influence because of the growing awareness of the limitation of isolated and compartmentalized knowledge of traditional academic disciplines in policy applications and the pressing need to acquire theory guidance and empirically proven knowledge for resolving serious policy problems under a globalized environment. There is realisation amongst scholars that a single theoretical lens inevitably narrows the comprehensiveness and scope of its inquiry. While compartmentalization of knowledge can be taken as specialization of knowledge and gives the advantage of theoretical strength of a disciplinary approach, compared with an interdisciplinary approach, their outputs of research are often too partial and fragmented for providing a complete analysis of a public problem to meet the expectations of scholars and practitioners of policymaking (Raadschelders 2005; Riggs 1991, 1998; Welch and Wong 1998).

Challenges of Interdisciplinarity in Comparative Policy Research:

Advance in comparative public policy research holds the promise of moving both theory and practice forward not only in public policy but also in many major disciplines in social science related to public policy (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Heidenheimer 1985; Pontusson 1995; Rose 2005). With its interdisciplinary nature, comparative public policy research can enhance theoretical development through integrating the theoretical lens and strengths of knowledge of different disciplines.

Building on a problem-based or issue-based approach, comparative research uses “policy” as its major unit of analysis and significantly contributes for integration of theory and practice. It can enrich the content and perspectives due to contribution of various disciplines on the one hand but also cause concerns of overlapping boundaries and confused identities with other studies and disciplines. It also demands scholars and researchers involved in research to have a very high level of knowledge and skills, which would include knowledge of different systems and institutions across countries, contexts and disciplines. Apparently, it is very difficult to meet such expectations for an individual researcher. This issue of “competence” has been a chronic problem long identified as an obstacle hindering the development of comparative public policy (Feldman 1978). Therefore, it will be more reasonable to seek for collaboration with research conducted on a team basis. Collaborative research team of scholars can represent a wide and diverse background in disciplinary and methodological training from their respective disciplines. For example, universities should create more avenues for collaborative projects and programs that promote joint cooperation of scholars from different disciplines.

Conclusion:

This paper contends that interdisciplinarity helps in the progression of an academic discipline both in theory and practice. Disciplines like Public policy go forward by integrating theories from different disciplines and creating knowledge that is not only actionable for designing effective policy tools but also generalizable across countries, institutions, and contexts. It represents an attempt to overcome the barrier of compartmentalization of knowledge in the traditional social science disciplines which limits the scope and comprehensiveness of analysis of public policies and also meets the

expectation of building socially relevant knowledge in providing insights on solving major public problems in a globalised interactive world. It is also important for us to realise that it is not easy to conduct research only with interdisciplinary method as it triggers an identity crisis without a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework that can be owned by single discipline. In terms of Przeworski and Teune (1970), the missing element of researches from comparative and interdisciplinarity vein is known as the need for a “meta language”. The role and significance of interdisciplinarity and its coexistence with the traditional disciplinary approach is presented, leading to the conclusion that despite contradictory opinions, interdisciplinary and disciplinary approaches do not compete; instead, they are rather complementary. Despite a number of successful examples, social scientists indicate that the implementation of a cognitive interdisciplinarity is a very difficult and challenging task yet not something unattainable. To sum up we can say that the interdisciplinarity approach sets new trends in the modern system of education and in the field of research it thereby fosters development of critical thinking, analytical skills, ability to work with complex issues, multiplies the sources of information, promotes collaboration and teamwork, thereby finds a creative approach to different life challenges within the discipline of Social Sciences.

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