Interdisciplinary Work and a Search for Shared Scientific Standards

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I wish to address four related themes that run throughout our discussions. In doing so, I find much about which I agree with the other panelists although I might modify certain propositions in ways that may alter these propositions so significantly as to be critical.

The Conceptualization of Politics

I define politics more broadly than Elinor Ostrom's conceptualization emphasizing rules. Though I include the study of rules, I also include power and influence that occur outside of rule-designated areas, and include a normative component that considers all of our interactions with others. I also ask whether there are patterns of behavior that occur so frequently, regardless of historical or cultural specificity, that we truly may talk about a social science. My own work has focused on self-interest and sociability, or what I am increasingly coming to see as an innate need for human connection. I would like future discussions to focus less on a tension between these two phenomena—as frequently occurs in the debate between rational choice and communitarian theorists, for example—and to focus more on understanding how both these proclivities emanate from a basic need for human flourishing.

Specialization, Accessibility and Rigorous Science

In our attempts to better understand politics as I have broadly defined it, I think the problem is not specialization itself but rather the kind of specialization and narrowing of vocabularies that results in intellectual isolation. Specialization is probably part of any scholarly endeavor; but we need border crossers—to use Susanne Rudolph's lovely phrase—who speak clearly but precisely about findings in one area that may be relevant for another. We certainly expect this in medicine, for example, and would think it unconscionable for a good cancer researcher not to try to communicate results of her work to nonspecialists and the general public. We would expect her to use language accessible to prospective patients when alerting us both to specific empirical findings and to the areas where the experts disagree. We also expect the cancer researcher to follow a clearly stated, systematic set of procedures that allow the researcher to determine what parts of existing knowledge are correct and under what conditions particular findings will hold. I see no reason why political scientists cannot do the same, although I recognize that these are rare skills and that the current discipline does not reward them sufficiently. I agree with Bob Jervis that intellectual honesty is the core of scientific inquiry and that we must always remain open to the possibility that our original ideas are incorrect. A corollary of this is a concern with empirical observations and with some method of examining data that is both replicable and systematic. A second corollary of this would be modesty; if our best ideas of yesterday can be shown to be wrong, given better data or improved techniques of analysis, then so can our ideas of today. Modesty and science make good bedfellows, a point several other panelists also make.

Pluralism and Diversity of Methodology

In graduate school, one of my favorite books was V.O. Key's *Southern Politics*. It wasn't that I was a particular devotee of southern politics; but I was fascinated by the variety of ways Key examined the phenomenon that interested him. Voting records and voting patterns, constitutions, surveys, roll call analysis, media reports, speeches both public and in the legislatures—my memory is vague on the details now but I recall being struck by how Key looked at all facets of the diamond. Perhaps because of the impact Key's research methodology had on me, I remain baffled when scholars are disdainful of researchers who employ techniques that differ from their own. Why wouldn't we want to use as many different tools as we can find to understand what interests us? When the tools reveal different findings—different facets of the diamond, if you will—we need to think about why that is the case and to ask how the particular approach we follow and the tools we use will influence or even determine what we find. (In this, I agree with both Susanne Rudolph and Rogers Smith in emphasizing research that is problem rather than method-driven.) However, not all techniques may be as reliable as others, and each may have limitations. There are difficult issues to sort out in assessing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502000513 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the value of particular research methodologies and I hope future discussions will focus on this important topic. But within these important constraints, my strong preference is for methodological pluralism, not out of a democratic spirit of openness—although I certainly cherish such a spirit—but rather because a responsible pluralism is good science.

Interdisciplinary Work

The very nature of scholarship perhaps works against the interdisciplinary communication I advocate. Certainly, existing academic life rewards those who work in well developed and widely recognized existing fields. I may be reflecting my own eccentric interests, which have hip-hopped back and forth within social science from politics, history, economics, and psychology to ethics and political theory and, recently, cognitive science and linguistics, as I try to understand what drives human beings as we deal with each other. There are tremendous start-up costs in doing such work. One constantly feels uninformed and ignorant. The discipline does not reward such work, preferring to give jobs, publications, and prizes to those in more traditionally defined and recognized subfields. One constantly faces questions of differential vocabularies and methodological standards for assessing data. But I believe such cross-disciplinary work has enormous potential to enrich our understanding of politics and I do not believe knowledge can be compartmentalized along rigid disciplinary lines.

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Let me argue my case for encouraging interdisciplinary work by turning to one of the most basic and contested current debates in our discipline, the one concerning rational choice theory and its validity. In doing so, I echo Bob Jervis's point that specialization is necessary yet poses problems. It may lead to other subfields' researchers reinventing the wheel and may hinder communication with the general public and with nonspecialists in other fields, since we develop specialized vocabularies. I echo Russell Hardin's comments that much of the intellectual insight originates outside the discipline of political science. (I might disagree with Russell on where the intellectual action is, finding it less in economics, which seems incredibly stuck in its own narrow paradigm, and more in cognitive science.) But there is a lot of fascinating work in fields that political scientists seldom integrate into their discussions of rational choice, and our work is the poorer for it.

Consider two examples. (1) Recent work in second-generation cognitive science[1] tells us a great deal about the mind's limitations in processing information. This research suggests that the mind resembles an iceberg, with most of our memory existing below the surface. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999), this means that the mind exists in the body and therefore is subject to physiological constraints that limit the philosophical assumptions of an abstract mind. The implications of this for rational theories of human behavior are immense.[2] If Lakoff and Johnson is correct, then models of decision making that rely on conscious processing of relevant information will be seriously limited.

(2) Another critical assumption of rational choice theory concerns the extent to which self-interest is a critical part of our innate nature. Some political theorists (Cropsey 1977; Myers 1983) have argued that contemporary social science overemphasizes the importance of self-interest and ignores other aspects of a basic human nature. There now exists exciting work in animal behavior and child development to support this claim that self-interest is but *one* of the innate drives in human beings. Yet this literature has not been part of the political science debate on rational choice, even though it is widely known in the general public, as measured by its discussion in the *New York Review of Books* or the *New York Times Book Reviews*.[3] I conclude that the absence of such work in our political science debate reflects not its specialized vocabulary so much as the narrow intellectual isolation that is the real enemy of knowledge.[4]

What are the implications of this for those of us concerned with broad issues of political science? Let me return to just one of our original questions: Is there an insurmountable tension between scholarly specialization and pluralism and accessibility? No. But there are other difficult problems to address concerning the derivation of widely accepted standards for assessing our scientific work. How do we judge the reliability of particular research methods? What standards do we use to assess work? Simply advocating methodological pluralism is not enough. We need some agreed-upon standards. The reasons why are readily evident if we return to my medical metaphor, and ask how we decide to tell the cancer patient that laetrile is not as good a treatment as chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery. Economists and many political scientists advocate the predictability rule, in which a method, analysis or model is good if it accurately predicts an election or voter turnout, for example. But not all political analyses lend themselves to such a simple assessment procedure, and discussions of this important topic will be one area to which I hope we devote some attention in the years ahead. I hope we do so in a genuine spirit of cooperation and intellectual exchange, and not in a partisan defense of intellectual turf.

Notes

1. I speak of work such as Lakoff and Johnson's (1999), not the earlier work by people like Kahnemann, Tversky, and Slovic, which has been well incorporated into our discussions.
2. See Nussbaum 2001 for a recent of how emotions influence thought.
3. See any of the recent works by DeWaal (1989, 1996) or Kagan (1989, 1998), for example.
4. I hope that the newly proposed Perspectives on Politics and the relatively new Annual Review of Political Science will attempt to alleviate some of this problem.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502000513 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502000513 Published online by Cambridge University Press