
REVIEW: Interdisciplinarity and Wellbeing: A Critical Realist General Theory of Interdisciplinarity

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Roy Bhaskar., R, Danermark, B. and Price, L (2018) Interdisciplinarity and Wellbeing: A Critical Realist General Theory of Interdisciplinarity Routledge Studies in Critical Realism, London: Routledge. pp.173.

This text attempts to develop a critical realist general theory of interdisciplinarity and explore its application to health and well-being. It is structured into three broad sections. The first chapters provide a short general discussion of the problems arising from current conceptual debates around interdisciplinarity, and an assessment of how it can be justified as a means of conceiving and articulating the social world. This is effectively an exercise in 'clearing the terrain' of extant approaches to interdisciplinarity, focusing on the theoretical problems that limit attempts to move such an approach from aspiration to analysis. The centre of the book is five chapters that articulate a lecture course by Roy Bhaskar - the leading intellectual figure in the development of critical realism - on critical realism and interdisciplinarity from 2009 (credited as being given in Oslo in the preface and Orebro, Sweden in the introduction). They provide a foregrounding for the discussion of interdisciplinarity and wellbeing. This critical realist approach is then applied to issues of health and wellbeing, with the intention of both demonstrating what value it adds to health

and wellbeing research, and contributing new insight as to how interdisciplinarity should be understood and used.

The fundamental premises behind the text will be familiar to anyone who has been involved in discussions about how to stretch analysis beyond disciplinary lines without losing rigour and criticality. Claims for interdisciplinarity, and other formulations in the same 'language game' - trans-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity (with or without hyphens - I prefer the hyphenated form but will use the format the authors use for this review) - tend to be broadly associated with creativity, criticality and a more nuanced, sophisticated and wider reaching research project. In the rhetoric of scholarship, these claims extend to a wide range of very different and disparate approaches to research. Whilst this diversity might itself be a condition of stepping beyond disciplines, there is a general sense that it more reflects some rather undertheorised, inconsistent and unreflective approaches. 'Imagination' is achieved by 'recognising' different disciplinary approaches, which can amount to drawing magpie-like from different disciplines or their vocabularies, in a superficial and variable way that makes the reading of interdisciplinary studies a 'pick and mix' of sophistication and frustration. Part of the debate has drifted down an entirely unproductive dichotomisation of 'stale and rigid disciplinarity' against 'absences of thoroughness, coherence and discipline in argument and analysis in interdisciplinarity'.

Hence the claims of this text are to develop a critical realist approach that provides ontological and theoretical underpinnings and schematisations to ensure interdisciplinarity does not become a synonym for undisciplined eclecticism. A critical realist approach avoids 'unilinear reductionism, addictive atomism, and naive eclecticism' (p.1) in order to develop an approach that is able to engage critically, as only interdisciplinarity can, with 'the open-systems character within which practically all events occur' (p.2).

The (perhaps too short) first section of the text draws what it sees as the main features of interdisciplinarity as currently manifest in the literature: the driving forces that motivate it; definitional debates; its failures to meet its claims; its personalistic approach; institutional and organisational issues and bibliometric issues. It then dwells on a seventh feature that underlies all of them, which is that the pervasiveness of disciplinarity precedes interdisciplinary work and as such supplants needed philosophical and theoretical debate at

a metatheoretical level, and often prescribes self-limiting approaches to moving beyond a disciplinary focus. This sets up the need for critical realism to fill the void.

Whilst this is a logical approach to framing the absence in order to prescribe the solution, it is ironically short on surveying the literature and does not provide a contextualisation of the development of interdisciplinary approaches over the last forty years and the different factors - institutional, political, intellectual, within and between theoretical traditions - that have brought us to this point. One simple observation - Marxist, feminist, anti-racist and disability traditions of thinking have at their foundations different forms of critique of disciplinarity as an intellectual and institutional construct, but this is hardly acknowledged. The 'absence', then, is by no means as absent as they suggest, and there is work to be done mapping these different analyses and laying out the terms of debate around disciplines and their borderlines. One of the most important antecedents to interdisciplinarity in the last 70 years was the 'cultural turn' from the 1950's where cultural theory and analyses developed in the social sciences and social and political analyses took increasing prominence in the arts and humanities - yet there is no sense of considering these developments.

The middle of the book is Bhaskar's lectures on critical realism, articulated principally by Price in textual form. This gives rise to a reflection on the composition of the text, which is by no means as coherent as Danemark and Price would suggest, and it does raise the question of how to pursue this sort of writing project. Danemark and Price had both collaborated with Bhaskar to different degrees prior to his death in 2014, and they shared a common focus on a critical realist approach to interdisciplinarity. The composition of the text reflects a process of taking Bhaskar's lectures and building context and application around them. Danemark and Price then share the attribution to the remaining chapters noting that Bhaskar has completed his contributions to the introduction and conclusion, and 'commented on early versions, or at least the outlines, of these chapters' (p. viii).

Undoubtedly, the inclusion of unpublished and unfinished work by Bhaskar will generate a wider audience, but it is not clear how far it benefits or compromises the focus of the text. For example, the written articulation of Bhaskar lectures might be of interest of themselves and edited alongside other unpublished lectures and be of interest in the way Foucault's *College De France* lectures have become indispensable sources for Foucault

scholars. They would also be valuable, as in Price's articulations here, in avoiding the criticism of Bhaskar's writing that it is often overly complex to the point of incomprehensibility.¹ Could the authors have acknowledged their debt to Bhaskar differently? There is little doubt Routledge would see the value to their series and to a purchasing audience of Bhaskar as author, but as it is, this approach does produce a text of three distinct and disjointed parts. The lectures have a value as a presentation of Bhaskar's general ideas, but do not join coherently with what is before or after.

The final essays have their own problems. Ironically, wellbeing is discussed very much as 'health and wellbeing' and in the context of a health paradigm. This completely overlooks a substantial and emergent body of literature that takes an interdisciplinary approach to conceiving well-being in relationship to what has come to be framed as 'happiness industries' and 'wellbeing' projects within late capitalist markets and institutions, or philosophical debates around flourishing, or post-humanist, nomadic, phenomenological and Deleuzian explorations of the affective and embodied as well-being.

Their discussions do raise questions about how we should explore issues such as: placebo effects and healing; the architecture of processes and classifications of medical conditions; the notion of interdisciplinarity in institutional provision; and the operation of epidemiology through the example of HIV. That said, there are literatures both within and across disciplines that raise the issues that are not covered effectively here, and that challenge the constitution of medicalised discourse within health institutions and the benefits of multi-agency team working in instantiating (with various degrees of success) interdisciplinary discussion. Whilst they make a point of referring back to the vocabulary of critical realism to underpin the value of their claims, it is no means clear how critical realism *distinctively* adds critical value. Indeed, the text reads more as if the authors are trying to draw together threads of past work and packaging them to develop a coherent and sophisticated engagement with the subject matter. That effort is not persuasive. This does not diminish the value of some sharply observed critical comments on the topics they discuss, but the sum of parts does not leave a whole that provides what it claims - a general

¹ See http://www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm and Bhaskar's honourable mention in 1996

theory of interdisciplinarity played out and illustrated through an exploration of wellbeing. That is a disappointment and a missed opportunity.