Universities – and Society!

Marilyn Strathern

Abstract: Universities offer environments apparently favourable to open-ended and exploratory research, especially when interdisciplinarity is embraced as an aim. But this is not always quite the invitation it seems. Under the aegis of accountability, a bureaucratic form of interdisciplinarity is reframing the ways society is imagined and drawn into the scientific enterprise. Some problems for Social Anthropology are sketched briefly.

I want to ask if it is simply an idiosyncratic perception of mine, or of more general import, that one bureaucratic form of interdisciplinarity seems already, quietly and unremarked, to be shaping our discipline. If it is of general import, then it is compounded by an interdisciplinary migration of which most anthropologists are aware but ignore—yet which, again bureaucratically speaking, is not without consequence.

Why should interdisciplinarity be of interest in the present context? And what is the connection with society? Let me set the scene a bit, adding a caveat that some of what I say may in fact be unfounded, or at least one could hope that were the case. Parts are also speculative.

Common Understanding

The interest is encapsulated by Helga Nowotny (2003), writing about scientific knowledge production. Her preferred term is ‘transdisciplinarity’, which rests on ‘a common theoretical understanding’ and a ‘mutual interpenetration of disciplinary epistemologies’ (Gibbons et al. 1994: 29). It disrespects disciplinary and institutional boundaries alike,¹ and its reach into core disciplinary practices carries the expectation of new theoretical models and new institutional forms. However, I stick to ‘interdisciplinarity’ as a shorthand for a field that is not always defined so radically—it covers the more widespread invocation of a common framework to be shared across disciplines and to which each contributes their bit, or simply the alignment of different skills (‘multidisciplinarity’): bringing disciplines together in contexts where new approaches arise out of the interaction between them.²

Nowotny’s point is that what is happening in disciplines is also happening in society at large—a breakdown of functional differences between separate domains of social life, the emergence of multitasking skills, diversified companies and, in the form of bodies such as NGOs, ‘ways in which various kinds of stakeholders organise in shaping social reality’. Yet what initially appears as an analogy then takes the form of an organic dovetailing—of convergence or co-evolution, in her words. For, the society that is also changing becomes itself a factor in the production of knowledge and its interventions form one of the platforms for the new applications of knowledge. Engaging thus with society
creates a ‘context of application’, with the rider that ‘the context speaks back’ (Gibbons 1999; Nowotny et al. 2001). It also creates, Nowotny adds, a ‘context of implication’, with the corollary that questions about the (social) implications of scientific practice must first be asked in scientific laboratories, recognising that the question will be answered in multiple ways. Only in this manner will scientifically reliable knowledge also become knowledge that is socially robust. This is one way in which ‘society’ is imagined as drawn into the scientific enterprise (Strathern 2004a).

Now the involvement of society, whoever its representatives are (Callon 1986), signals a diagnostic feature of the new knowledge production. The feature is summed up in one word: accountability. Accountability, as she spells out, is not just a matter of personal responsibilities; it is a formal process of ‘institutional responsibility’, and one of the forms it takes is acknowledging the interests of users. What is being acknowledged is the user’s right to know what is going on in the very organisation of knowledge production. ‘You know to whom you are accountable. There are certain procedures to make things visible that are otherwise invisible’ (Nowotny 2003: 3). In other words, institutional responsibility for output flows into responsibility for (visible) self-management as a (responsible) institution.

There is an interesting rhetorical confluence here. Reaching beyond disciplines somehow merges with reaching beyond academia. They appear commensurate virtues. For, in either case the key task, on the academic’s part is to manage knowledge (output) in such a way as to make it disseminatable. Clarity of purpose in dissemination is the first step towards accountability. Dissemination orients the nature of the scientific enterprise in certain directions: the communicable act moves into prominence the relation with the stakeholders, with those ‘for whom’ the research is being done (Gibbons 1999).

What is happening here? Accountability is being wheeled in as the motivation for science taking society into account. At the same time society, no longer simply the recipient of knowledge, has an input into it. There is a kind of generalised accountability, then, that is served by bringing in outside parties, who at the level of communication have parity of sorts. After all, models of communication suggest two-way as well as one-way flows. Of course, partnerships require the conservation of distinctness. Non-scientists may be interested parties—but the point is that their interests are distinct from those of the knowledge producers, even if they ‘mingle’ their knowledge in. The conjunction is familiar to anthropologists: accountability is envisaged as the outcome of a transaction, and it is the transaction itself—science’s engagement with society’s representatives—which keeps the two sides separate.

Accountability appears, then, as at once (1) a moral stance towards the wider world (the ‘context’ now invited to speak back) and (2) a set of procedures for verification. Greater visibility appears to answer both. What is verified is performance (Munro 1999), and what must be generated are systems of performance measurement. Here I want to pick up two small strands from the iconic status that interdisciplinarity has come to assume in contemporary research policy.

Compulsory Comprehensiveness

As to that iconic status, the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy in The Hague has published a report, called One Plus One is More Than Two
(AWT 2003), on promoting interdisciplinary research. Their preferred term is multidisciplinarity, which I shall use in talking about their document. Beginning by saying that the Netherlands is not really lagging behind in this field, it lays out ways in which the government might intervene by funding more interaction, building up networks, developing comprehensive multi-area research questions, identifying thematic areas where multidisciplinarity will flourish, and so forth. It sees bringing in society as crucial to this activity, largely in terms of highlighting societal problems as problems that only multidisciplinary approaches can address. And it takes the rhetorical steps I have been describing.

It advocates an increased flow of knowledge between universities and non-university thematic research institutes; second, networking between universities and the ‘outside world’ should be strengthened (by, in its phrase, ‘building up social capital in personal networks’); third, it is important to create ‘a clear front-office function’ for societal issues—problem-based and demand-oriented. It adds a number of suggestions as to how one could manage the situation, through secondment, selective funding and so forth; but they are rather more than suggestions. For example, at bullet point 5 (out of 8) under the heading ‘Several alternatives for developing more comprehensive research questions’, we find: ‘Incorporate compulsory mechanisms into the funding conditions that will ensure that comprehensive research questions are actually formulated and maintained.’ Compulsory mechanisms? While an anthropologist can only applaud the initiative to take wider contexts into account, particularly the recognition that crucial social dimensions to issues should not be overlooked, this is not a trouble-free road to TU (total understanding). Note the outcome of managing the situation through policy measures: it looks as though research questions will be driven by the desire for the ensuing research to be multidisciplinary.

The Dutch Council found universities a problem. Universities are lagging behind non-university research institutes when it comes to multidisciplinarity (AWT 2003: 17). Much of this is laid at the door of the standard university structure, which separates disciplines from one another. The AWT identifies peer review as another such ‘bottleneck’. Moreover, its focus on ‘themes’ is a focus on problem-oriented, task-specific research-to-find-solutions types of questions which then become ‘comprehensive’ by virtue of the many disciplines brought to bear on them. (‘The council advocates an approach that facilitates the development of integrated questions. The parties involved should seek each other out at an early stage and formulate the key questions together’ (AWT 2003: 28).) The Council means it when it says that it will ensure that questions really are comprehensive and will have to be monitored.

Not quite so prescriptive in the UK, interdisciplinarity (and I revert to the more usual UK word) has nonetheless been high on the agenda of some research councils for some time, and is now enjoined for all (DTI 2001b). But I want to suggest that we do not have to wait for plans to mature and funding to appear. In so far as the UK is concerned, an interdisciplinary migration of ideas, which most anthropologists are aware of but ignore, is already propping up a bureaucratic form of interdisciplinarity that is shaping the practice of anthropology itself. These two strands—the interdisciplinary migration of ideas and the bureaucratic interest in interdisciplinarity—I want to pursue below.

In taking them in turn, I would not want to be read as buying into the military metaphors that mean to be under
attack is invariably harmful. It is certainly not the case that I would want to defend disciplines as such; I do want to point to what has been going on, quietly and generally unregarded, in UK research funding, and to ask what kinds of enquiries might be swept away in a similar desire to be ‘comprehensive’.

Migrating Questions

The first strand: interdisciplinary migration. This is something on which anthropologists have been commenting for years, in a rather bemused way, but have not necessarily regarded as any particular challenge to themselves. I refer to the appropriation of the concept of ‘ethnography’ by other disciplines. It is often watered down to mean nothing more than talking with people. In that form it may be rightly disparaged as non-rigorous, undefined and generally woolly and, like focus groups, should probably be struck off the register of research practices! The problem for anthropology comes when anthropologists want to use it and find themselves in a competitive context such as the field of research grant applications in the UK. The anthropologist applicant who uses the term may assume an informed readership who realises what complex and involved processes that ‘ethnographic method’ stands for, how packed the phrase is. But its now debased currency means that it may well be read quite differently by scrutineers from other disciplines. The problem for anthropology comes when anthropologists want to use it and find themselves in a competitive context such as the field of research grant applications in the UK. The anthropologist applicant who uses the term may assume an informed readership who realises what complex and involved processes that ‘ethnographic method’ stands for, how packed the phrase is. But its now debased currency means that it may well be read quite differently by scrutineers from other disciplines. A deliberately interdisciplinary tenor breeds suspicion of disciplines that keep themselves to themselves. Nothing is taken on trust and all should be accessible to all; social science research methods should be broadly recognisable to everyone, with a dash of specialism where needed.

In such a climate one would not be surprised to find that everyone supposedly knows what ‘ethnography’ means. A practical outcome would be anthropological applications getting knocked back for espousing ethnographic methods. The ‘method’ simply does not carry weight, precisely to the extent that bowdlerisation of the concept has rendered it trivial. If it is true, what anthropologists should be worried about are precisely the bureaucratic implications of this conceptual drift.

The second strand is the new bureaucratic interest in interdisciplinarity. I see this as arising from a marriage between the need for relevance, advocated off and on since the 1970s, and the deliberate fostering of interdisciplinary groupings which has resulted in a huge burgeoning of centres, networks and so forth. An adjunct here is the perception of increasing need: global interventions get more dire; ethics committees blossom with unthinkable issues; the fragility of the techno-industrial infrastructure is not just a matter of sewers crumbling but of self-cancelling power grids; poverty spirals and world health appears the most precarious goal of all. The need is to see issues as ‘problems’ that require interdisciplinary ‘expertise’ (e.g. Callon 1998; Barnett 2000). This is not just a matter of being relevant and certainly not just a matter of doing applied work: there is something quite close to a new formalism, orthodoxy almost, in relation to what constitutes a research question as such. And as to why disciplines are useful: they offer expertise.

I suspect that many UK colleagues just regard these developments as extra to the kind of projects they are involved in, get excited (as I do!) when the opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaboration arises, are relieved/pleased to be seen to making a practical contribution to human well-being, and will take an interdisciplinary research proposal as meeting current expectations, but otherwise will not worry
too much. They may have some sense of anthropology being disadvantaged when judged by other disciplines because of its peculiar methods, but may well think that otherwise things continue as usual. Indeed so they might when the Research Councils state that they also remain committed to funding ‘blue skies’ (and response mode) research, and when there is a small but definite stream of recognisably ‘anthropological’ projects that get funded. It sounds churlish to suggest that this very welcome commitment is part of the problem.

Nonetheless, here is a five-step scenario from a hyper definition of disciplines to their disappearance. While the trajectory is fantasy, individual components are drawn from real life.

(1) Social anthropology is appreciated for its specialist knowledge in certain areas. It is regarded as particularly good for various types of enquiry that everyone knows about: overseas, first nations, small communities, religious cults and so forth. ‘Blue skies’ ventures are encouraged.

(2) This appreciation is the precondition for remoulding disciplines as ‘sources of expertise’. We are all (only exist as) experts. Anthropology can find its seat at the table—and in relation to a particular problem the kind of ‘expert’ advice an anthropologist can offer will be weighed against other sources of expert advice.

(3) It is assumed that expertise is ‘recognisable’, although this assumption has its costs. By way of example, an anthropologist in the best disciplinary tradition may be searching for a context in which to situate a problem, but it may seem to colleagues that the anthropologist is simply facing in another direction, off beam, introducing unnecessary complexity. For disciplines become judged by how well their expertise matches the problems. (The fit is supposed to be relatively transparent; the ‘problem’ already defined – Sarah Green, pers. comm., March 2004).

(4) Disciplines are also judged by how well their own expertise matches their own research questions. Perhaps other expertise (‘research capacity’) is already there. Queries raised about anthropological research appearing to venture into ‘occupied’ areas may have little to do with hard territorialism—I deliberately introduced the anthropologists’ musings about the abuse of ethnography as an example—but everything to do with soft territorialism. Adjudicators from other disciplines simply become puzzled as to how social anthropology expects to add anything, for example, to political science or international law, when there are professional experts around. So an anthropologist wanting to study organisations might be disqualified because people in management policy or organisational behaviour are already doing so. At its extreme, anthropological ‘ignorance’ about what is happening elsewhere in social science disqualifies practitioners from turning certain topics into research objects. These are ‘interdisciplinary judgements’.

(5) Anthropologists start finding it difficult to get backing to explore certain new fields. For engagement in other fields for the sake of the discipline carries little weight. The notion that it might be of
advantage to the development of social anthropology as such that it venture into new terrain, regardless of who is already occupying it, simply has no purchase. Incidentally, blue skies research has to take exotic forms—venturing where other experts already exist cannot be termed ‘blue skies’! In short, if we were ever to reach a point when it became obvious that an anthropologist was not going to get funding for a research agenda because it was only intended to enrich or enhance or broaden the discipline, disciplines would have vanished.

The Problem of Expertise

Let me bring the speculation to a close with an analytical comment on the notion of expertise. Jeanette Edwards (2001) has questioned the relationship between the kind of scientific literacy that lay participants in the flow of scientific knowledge could be expected to acquire and the often acute, non-scientific commentary of a social and political kind that they are prepared to offer—in observations about interest groups, access to resources, government regulation and so forth. These are people, she says, who for the most part profess to know little about science but who clearly know a great deal about the place of science in the contemporary world in which they participate.

This is a good antidote for the ILP, the Imagined Lay Person (Maranta et al. 2003). A group of researchers familiar with Nowotny’s agenda have cast a critical eye over the notion of the public, people and lay persons who are invoked in appeals to communicate findings (in this case scientific ones) not only across disciplines but across the expert-lay divide in society. In the same way as the Dutch Council Report recommends setting up ‘meeting places’ for face-to-face interaction, the notion may be made as a matter of developing person-to-person relations, or creating spaces where minds can ‘meet’. Yet the agora which Nowotny et al. (2001) call the public space in which society ‘speaks back’ to science is primarily a conceptual space. That is, it exists in the allowances that people make for certain kinds of views. If this is so, then its inhabitants are primarily conceptual persons.

Maranta et al. (2003: 152) coin the acronym ILP, Imagined Lay Person, to underline the fact that the voices of lay people enter the agora ‘as conceptions in the mind of the scientist’. ILP’s are ascribed certain selective characteristics: ‘the ILP is not a sociologically comprehensive representation of lay persons but rather an action in the knowledge production which ascribes epistemic and functional competences to lay persons’ (Maranta et al. 2003: 154). Experts who include ‘lay persons’ in their strategies may be construing them as a ‘concerned’ electorate, as ‘users’ of knowledge, as conservers of values, as waiting only to be educated, as Luddites, and so forth. In fact lay persons in the flesh can be awkward—as in one case of a focus group brought in to enrich scientists’ research findings on the climate with their (the group’s) political and practical concerns. In other words, their epistemic status included political competence. Only, as it happened, their practical concerns turned out to be an intense interest in the scientists’ politics!

One might say (the authors do not) that the lay person is doing the same in relation to the expert: creating a conceptual expert. For example, the authors argue that ‘ignorance’ can be seen an epistemic competence of sorts. Quoting Michael (1996), they point out that ignorance can work as the mark of authority of the lay person
who draws boundaries round his or her knowledge: it implies a practical, collaborative functionality with the expert.

The purpose of their paper is, in a manner of speaking, an ethnographic one: to ask what role the ILP plays in scientific knowledge-making. In the course of the enquiry, they identify three kinds of ILPs: individualised (people motivated to pursue particular objectives such as reading a scientific magazine); representative (participants standing for some segment of society); and generalised (an aggregate such as citizens or consumers). That in turn leads them to define the conditions under which expertise may be successful. Despite my comment about how ‘experts’ are in turn imagined by lay people, as Edwards’ interlocutors were doing, the authors’ interest is asymmetrically focused on the experts’ constructions. But I just wonder whether we could also develop a reciprocal model.

Borrowing from Maranta et al.’s (2003: 154) brilliant depiction of ILPs, perhaps we could begin asking more systematically than we do about IDEs – Imagined Disciplinary Experts. The aim would not be to unmask disciplinary stereotypes (awestruck or insulting) or assumptions about what other people do (idealised or misguided). Rather, the aim would be to ask questions about the functional utility of ‘disciplines’. Disciplines would have to be taken in relation to one another (much would obviously depend on this or that concrete context). What job does the idea of ‘anthropology’—or ‘ethnography’—do in an economist’s or sociologist’s scheme of things? ‘Disciplines’ would thus be understood as inhabiting conceptual spaces, occupying diverse epistemic niches in the diverse views of others. In fact, I would almost be tempted to develop a research proposal to follow this through. Only I fear that (before the work was done) existing space would already be taken up by ‘knowledge workers’ or by experts in ‘interdisciplinary management’. Who would consider an anthropologist had any special expertise in the matter?

Marilyn Strathern is Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, England.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to colleagues in CBA (research group in Comparative Studies of Biotechnology and Accountability, Cambridge) for their stimulus, and to Dr Monica Konrad for her pertinent questions on this topic, and thank Jeanette Edwards, Sarah Green and Tom Osborne for further comments on the text. The original impetus came from Don Brenneis, Cris Shore and Susan Wright, who organised the panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Chicago, 2003. A version was subsequently given at the 2004 meetings of the UK and Commonwealth Association of Social Anthropologists (‘The “Disappearing” of Anthropology in a Surfeit of “The Social”, convenors Jeanette Edwards, Andrea Stöckl and Marilyn Strathern). Many thanks to colleagues and fellow panellists on both occasions.
Notes

1. Nowotny sees the ‘trans’ of transdisciplinarity as resonating with the ‘trans’ of transgressive. An alternative/overlapping set of definitions informs the AWT (2003) Report: in their language, multidisciplinarity refers to all possible forms of research between scientists from different disciplines; interdisciplinarity points to the degree to which working methods and research results are integrated; while transdisciplinarity ‘focuses on the degree of cooperation between scientists and representatives of other sectors, such as public authorities, the business community and users’ (AWT 2003: 14).

2. This section is adapted from Strathern 2004b.

3. Nowotny (2003: 7-8) writes: ‘in order to [ful]fill the potential of transdisciplinarity, the notion of users must be extended. If knowledge is transgressive, then the whole range of reverse communications must be opened’. The question of why research should be done ‘for’ anyone in the first place arises—in part, but an important part—from the need to justify public expenditure.

4. My warm thanks to Emma Rothschild, who led the UK’s Council for Science and Technology sub-group on the Arts and Humanities in relation to Science and Technology (DTI 2001a), for a copy of the report. The report specifically aligns itself with thinking that is going on in ‘many countries’, and indeed traverses ground that will be familiar from more than one milieu. I take it as a diagnostic of a kind.

5. The next bullet point recommends that policy workers (at a high level—don’t delegate to juniors) should be trained ‘to develop comprehensive research questions’.

6. Many non-university research institutes have a clear, thematic [viz. problem-oriented] approach and offer an environment in which multidisciplinary research can flourish. (…) The situation is very different in the universities, where there are many forces at work that inhibit the development of multidisciplinary research’ (AWT 2003: 17).

7. However, the Council goes out its way to say that there should also be room for ‘monodisciplinary research’. (Note that discipline-based research now becomes marked as just one kind of research.)

8. This is only half a joke! Of course, it is unlikely ever to be the case policy-wise; the scenario I am imagining are all those little cues that give an adjudicator sense (say) that research methods are not rigorous.


10. Note the way the need may be stated, but then disappears in the realisation that things are happening anyway, only to reappear when disciplines are listed (so disciplines are useful for monitoring interdisciplinarity!):

   There is a growing need for multidisciplinary research. Scientific, social and technological issues have become so complex that most cannot be answered from a single perspective. (…) Genomics, proteomics, speech technology and nanotechnology are just a few of the fields that are developing like wildfire because they bring insights from different disciplines together.

   Societal issues, too, increasingly require input from a range of disciplines. The problems in the health care system cannot be dealt with exclusively by producing more medical technology. Sociological, demographical, psychological, ethnological and administrative research (…) are equally important. (AWT 2003: 11)

11. One of the outcomes of interdisciplinary committees is the inevitably representative status given to those who are the sole members of a discipline or subdiscipline.

12. Members of her research group at the Collegium Helveticum, ETH Zürich.

13. Agora is the description for ‘the new public space where science and society, the market and politics, co-mingle’ (Nowotny et al. 2001: 203). Nowotny et al. go on to say that this space is populated by the products of an enlightened educational system (and, we add, is media informed), and is made up of ‘multiple publics’ and ‘plural institutions’.

References


Callon, M. 1986 ‘Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay’, in J. Law (ed.) Power,


DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) 2001b Quinquennial Review of the Grant-awarding Research Councils, London: Office of Science and Technology.


