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# **THE CASE FOR CROSS-DISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND WELL-BEING**

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**Abstract:** Arguments for cross-disciplinary research in development studies have been applied recently to work on poverty, inequality and well-being. However, much research on these issues remains fragmented and, in particular, the intellectual barrier between economics and the other social science subjects continues to be powerful. In this paper, we review the prospects for cross-disciplinary research (both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary); and, examine the ways in which forms of being ‘disciplined’, and the linkages between disciplines and professions, constrains such research. We also introduce the papers in this collection and explain their relationship to the quest for cross-disciplinary research on poverty issues. Our conclusion is that cross-discipline working should be promoted and that both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches can benefit research on poverty and well-being, provided that their specific merits and demerits are evaluated in relation to the research task in hand.

**Keywords:** poverty, well-being, inequality, methods, theory, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity

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*“If we ask academics why poor people are poor... different disciplines will answer... in their own unique ways; each with certain kinds of data, certain methods, certain habits of thinking... in most substantive areas [of the social sciences] there is what to outsiders seems like an amazing lack of reciprocal knowledge”.* (Abbott 2001:142)

## **1. Introduction**

At the end of the nineteenth century, partly as a response to the ebbing of Christian religious belief, a new secular humanitarianism increasingly coloured British public opinion. It focused attention on a social phenomenon that had previously been accepted as natural and inevitable, if unfortunate – the poverty of those in the lower ranks of society. This new humanitarian feeling of concern for the poor produced its own scientific analogue. It motivated a new, positivist science of society, which went well beyond the informational eclecticism and the political partisanship of Engels’ ground breaking *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). People now believed that the compassion of concern for the poor should be tempered by a sense of proportion, and that this could be best provided by thorough and intelligent enquiry into numerical information. The aim of social research was to give a sober statistical account of the extent and nature of poverty, and thus to provide the evidence base for a properly measured social policy response (Himmelfarb 1991:3-18). Key exponents of this approach were Charles Booth (1892) in London and Seebohm Rowntree (1901) in York.

During the twentieth century, however, research on poverty became increasingly specialized, as the methods of study were gradually refined to make them more penetrating and sophisticated. However, the benefits of specialization brought with them various costs, most particularly an erosion of the overall coherence of the concept of poverty. Those working in different subject areas of social science, such as economics, anthropology, human geography, sociology and political studies, have undoubtedly done much illuminating research into many aspects and dimensions of poverty. However, communications between researchers in different areas have been remarkable largely for their absence: this has particularly been the case between economics and the other social sciences. Throughout the 1990s, while economists have attempted to define and measure global poverty with increasing precision, researchers taking an anthropological perspective have advised that ‘...poverty is a myth, a construct and the invention of a particular civilization’ (Rahnema 1992:158).

There are general reasons, then, arising from the splintering of theoretical and applied knowledge, for believing that the adoption of a more cross-disciplinary research strategy would strengthen the coherence and social relevance of the results that researchers generate. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that the study of well-being and poverty is a particularly appropriate subject for cross-discipline research. John Knight (1991:26) put the point well from the economist’s perspective.

“If we are ultimately concerned with things like poverty, hunger, inequality, ‘people’s capabilities to be and do things’, and so on, and with

policies to make improvements, then we must recognise that economics is interdependent and cannot be isolated.”

Such recognition leads in the direction of cross-disciplinary research, defined as any analysis or policy recommendation based on questions, concepts or methods of more than one academic discipline. Yet as long as many economists still claim that economics can be ‘contaminated’ by the ‘softer’ disciplines of other social sciences, it will require considerable energy, intellectual courage and integrity to design and implement a cross-disciplinary research strategy on poverty and well-being.

When we speak of social science, we have a particular set of subjects in mind, and it is useful at the outset to specify our coverage. Our focus is on economics, sociology, anthropology, politics and human geography. Much of our discussion will contrast economics with sociology, anthropology, politics and human geography (henceforth SAPG)<sup>1</sup>. To two potentially important subject areas we pay limited attention. The first is psychology, often formally classified as a science, rather than a social science, in UK universities. Psychology, and even social psychology, has less frequently engaged with development studies or the analysis of well-being, poverty and inequality in the context of developing countries.<sup>2</sup> However, very recently, economists and social psychologists have begun to work together and in future psychology may well demand greater attention. The second is philosophy. Every social science draws on philosophy, in one

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<sup>1</sup> This is Jackson’s (2002) SAP with human geography added. We have added human geography as in the UK, parts of Northern Europe and USA geographers of development studies have played an increasingly active role in research on poverty, inequality and well-being over the last 10-15 years.

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception is the World Health Organisation’s WHO-QOL project, which developed and applied an instrument for assessing the quality of life in one hundred different fieldwork sites. The abridged version of this measure, which draws on work in 32 localities, covers more second and third world countries than first world countries (see WHOQOL Group, 1998, table 2).

way or another, in search of answers to its specific ontological, epistemological, methodological and conceptual problems. Yet philosophy can provide them with neither a Platonic method of acquiring knowledge infallibly nor an Aristotelian map of all branches of knowledge. In this introduction (and in the articles that follow), reference is made to the contributions of social scientists who have drawn on philosophy (especially Amartya Sen)<sup>3</sup> and philosophers who have ventured into social science (such as Martha Nussbaum). The large and growing body of work on well-being produced by philosophers is not explored, however.<sup>4</sup>

A generation ago, Michael Lipton (1970) made the classic statement, from the economic viewpoint, of the case for a cross-disciplinary dimension in poverty research. Yet the arguments of 30 years ago may not be persuasive today, and may be in need of revision in the light of recent intellectual developments. With this in mind, we re-assess the case for cross-discipline research on poverty and well-being, to see how much validity it retains and where it needs to be supplemented. In the course of this re-assessment, we introduce some relevant key ideas from the cross-disciplinary collection of papers that follows.

The next section considers both the reasons why cross-discipline research is essential for future investigation of poverty and well-being, and the incentives that have favoured ever

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<sup>3</sup> Also see the work of researchers focusing on development ethics such as Crocker (1992), Gasper (2004), Goulet (1971; 1995), Nussbaum (2002), Qizilbash (1996) and Clark (2002a,b), inter alia. There is also a vast literature in mainstream philosophy on the subject of well-being. One of the most notable contributions by a contemporary philosopher is Jim Griffin's (1986) book, *Well-Being: It's Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*. For further references to the well-being literature see Clark (2002b).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Clark (2002b) proposes that an 'empirical philosophy' of well-being might advance the understanding of well-being by detaching from social science disciplines and engaging with the views and experiences of 'ordinary people' in a logically rigorous manner.















































































