New Books in the History of Science: Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science

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Contents

Henry Murray's Experiments 21

Harvard's Department of Social Relations made history in the 1950s and 1960s as the most ambitious program in social science in the United States.

Dedicated to a synthesis of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines, the scope of its ambitions were matched only by the scope of its failures.

Patrick Schmidt's new volume *Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science: The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022) documents the history of SocRel, as it was called, in intimate detail.

It paints a colourful and carefully researched picture of the personalities and events that are central to the department's story, ranging from the austere theoretician Talcott Parsons to the hallucinogen-ingesting Ram Dass.

In this episode, Patrick talks to host Alex Golub about SocRel as well as the wider context of the Cold War academy in which it was situated.

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Alex: Welcome to the New Books Network.

Patrick: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to New Books and Anthropology, a podcast channel of the New Books Network.

I'm Alex Golub, a professor of anthropology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and today we'll be talking to Patrick L. Schmidt, author of Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science, The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations, published by Roman and Littlefield in 2022.

Patrick, thanks so much for being here today.

Alex: Thank you for having me.

Patrick: So we always start the podcast by learning the story of how this book came to be and what led the author to write it and you have a particularly interesting story about this because this book has been in process for a long time.

So can you tell us how it was that you came to write this book?

Alex: Certainly.

I was an undergraduate at Harvard, and in my junior year, I was concentrating in psychology and social relations, which was the successor department to social relations.

In my junior year, I had done an independent study on the history of psychology at Harvard, which I enjoyed very much and that sort of got me acquainted with the story of social relations, which, of course, sort of broke away from psychology and one of my professors said, you know, it might be interesting to do your honors thesis, your senior honors thesis, on the history of the social relations department, because many of those professors are still here and I'm sure they would be willing to be interviewed.

So I thought that sounded like a lot of fun to do a thesis that was based in part on these interviews.

So my senior year, I interviewed 28 faculty members, administrators, and others that were familiar with the department, even critics of the department, B.F. Skinner,

for example, I was not in the department, but he was very critical of it and that's how I came to write the book.

That's how I came to be interested in the topic.

Patrick: And so just for a background of people who aren't familiar with the book, the social relations department lasted from the mid-1940s to basically the late 1960s and you were doing this in the In the 70s.

Alex: 1977, fall of 1977 and spring of 78.

Patrick: And social relations was supposed to be the great post-World War II, synthesize everything, make social sciences a natural science, unify all of the disciplines.

It was a huge moonshot at an institution that had all the prestige and resources it needed, with tremendous amounts of resources from the Carnegie Corporation and others, and it famously was not successful.

So this was, when you began to study it, you must have been in mind that it was something of a tragic department, or at least an interesting story to tell.

Alex: Yes, and the course of the professors I talked to, who were two of the founders, Talcott Parsons and Henry Murray, they, of course, did not dwell on the failure so much, but others did and I try to be fair that these scholars, although they didn't – they failed to create an interdisciplinary science, they nonetheless did very important work in their constituent fields.

It just wasn't interdisciplinary for the most part.

Patrick: And so that was in the 70s, and this book has just recently come out, so there must have been a gap there.

Can you tell us a little bit about how the book came to be published after you originally conceived it as an undergraduate project?

Alex: Well, one of my professors and one of the professors that I interviewed was the sociologist David Riesman and he had been a member of the department from 1955 until the termination of the department in 1972.

He was not on my thesis committee, but he got a hold of the thesis and read it, and he sent me a four-page, single-spaced letter encouraging me to publish it and he said, I have, and here's a few suggestions of things that you might consider if you do and I was graduating, and even though he was a superstar at Harvard and a very prominent sociologist, I didn't do anything with it because I was going off to Washington and I came across a letter almost 25 years later in a box in my parents' home and I was reading the letter, and I was sort of just struck by how wonderful it was that this professor took the time to write me, a mere undergraduate, with such kind words and took the time to make these suggestions and of course, as I was more mature, you know, in looking at this, I thought, wow, this, I really should do something with this and, you know, honor this man and get this story out there and that's really what prompted me to do it.

In addition, I had been a I've been approached with scholars asking me permission to quote from my undergraduate thesis, people that were writing things that touched on the department.

So I thought there was an audience for it as well.

Patrick: Yeah, and Riesman, for people who don't know or have not heard before, was really one of the most famous, not just academics, but intellectuals of the 1950s.

His book, The Lonely Crowd, was sort of one of the first indictments of conformity and consumer culture in the 1950s.

This would be like, I'm trying to think of what a major intellectual today, who would sort of be of Riesman's position.

It would be like if that person was to tell you that this was worthwhile and should try to publish.

I'm not sure what an intellectual, I'm not sure who Riesman's equivalent would even be today.

Alex: No, I mean, I guess on the left, there's Chomsky, you know.

There's, I don't know, but yeah, you're right.

I mean, he had, his book, The Lonely Crowd, is still the best-selling sociology book of all time.

That was published in 1951.

He was on the cover of Time magazine.

When he died, there were articles in The New York Times about his influence on on academia, but also his books reached the general public and broke through to the general public in a way that had never really happened before for a social scientist and he was a public intellectual.

He was very involved in the anti-nuclear movement.

He was consulted on higher education.

That was kind of his specialty.

He was consulted on higher education by numerous presidents.

So yes, he was a very, very important person, but he would take the time to talk to a student like me and encourage me and yeah, he's one of the people I dedicated the book to.

Patrick: Yeah, and you know, one of the central theses of his book is that there's a distinction between being outer-directed and inner-directed, that people in American society today, by which he meant the 1950s, were forced to seek approval from society and their neighbors rather than doing things because they really wanted to do them and because they had the drive to do them and although things have changed a lot in America since the 1950s, I feel like a lot of my students at university today, and maybe even me, they look at social media and likes and all of these sorts of things, and they're still trying to be inner-directed, but they have to be outer-directed.

So I suspect Riesman maybe still has something to teach us today.

Alex: Yes, yeah, absolutely.

I mean, he was a far-ranging intellect and So it would be wonderful to know what he would think of all this social media explosion now.

Patrick: So he came along a little bit later on in the story.

Maybe we should start getting into the book a little bit.

The book is in many ways driven by personalities because Sakhra, which is I guess how you say social relations, Socarel itself was driven by the personalities of a small number of people who wanted to found a new department, I guess mostly because they were unhappy in the departments when they currently were.

Could you tell me a little bit about this group you call the Levelers and how it was that they first got this idea together?

Alex: Sure.

I mean, the Levelers go back to the mid to late 1920s.

at Harvard, and the four levelers were Gordon Allport, very well-known social psychologist, Henry Murray, a clinical or sort of abnormal psychologist, Talcott Parsons, we mentioned sociologist, and Clyde Kluckhohn, one of the first social or cultural anthropologists and they were all rising young, but rising stars at Harvard in the late 1920s, early 1930s and they were very frustrated in their existing departments, partly because they were interested in new theories, particularly Freud.

The psychoanalytic thought had arrived at Harvard and this was kind of a bit of a bombshell that arrived.

The traditional departments didn't want to have anything to do with it, particularly psychology and this caused a lot of frustration on the part of the levelers who wanted to incorporate psychoanalytic thought in their research.

with the exception of Gordon Allport, who was a little less excited about Freud for personal reasons.

But the fight about this was the most intense in the psychology department because it upset their traditional powers in that department who were trying to make psychology more of a science because they had recently broken away from the philosophy department and now here was this theory that was not scientific at all and so this caused a huge rift or division in the psychology department.

Patrick: Yeah, and it's so interesting.

Today we look at disciplines like sociology and psychology, and those are the standard disciplines.

But back then, these disciplines were brand new, and they had branched off from other more established disciplines, and they were still sort of fighting for their legitimacy when the levelers, began wanting to innovate.

Alex: Yes, you're absolutely right and that's why the senior members in those departments, I mean, those departments were already fragile and young, you know, as you mentioned and now this sort of threat came along that was going to make them look, you know, less scientific, not serious.

In psychology, Psychology at Harvard was dominated by experimental psychologists, people like B.F. Skinner, who at that time was a graduate student.

They looked at people like Henry Murray and others that were using psychoanalytic thought in their work.

They looked at them as mystics and cultists.

Didn't want them in the department, didn't want them in the discipline at all.

I mean, nationwide, they tried to sort of expunge them from all the formal organizations and associations of the discipline of psychology.

Patrick: And you mentioned Alport being a little bit more ambivalent.

Is he the person who went to go see Freud? There's this wonderful tale about someone going to see Freud in your book.

I wonder if you could just tell listeners that story.

Alex: Yes, that's correct.

He was a newly minted PhD from Harvard, from the traditional psychology department, but he was interested in, because he had also studied in Germany, so he was interested in what we now call sort of social psychology or personality psychology and so he was traveling through Europe and he wanted to meet Freud.

So he set up a meeting and he arrived, was ushered into Freud's, you know, room, and There was total silence.

I mean, Freud was not speaking to him or anything.

So Alpert sort of said, well, I'm going to break the ice.

I'm going to tell him about this little boy I saw on the train coming over here, the little boy and his mother, because the little boy was complaining about the dirt and he said, yes, I don't want to sit next to this dirty man, and the seat is dirty, and the mother was scolding the boy and so Allport sort of thought Freud might find this interaction interesting and after he told him about this little boy, then Freud looked at him and said, and was that little boy you? And of course, Alport was so flabbergasted.

He said, what is this guy reading into this little story? Like, this is just too much, that this psychoanalytic thought is reading too much into just, it's just a story.

It's nothing more than a story and then Galport's wife later, decades later, said that they think what happened is that Freud thought he was, that Alport was a patient.

They had come to see him.

So when he just started talking, Freud sort of responded as if Alport had been his patient.

But that sort of turned Freud or Alport off a little bit.

I mean, he was still interested in the interior mind, you know, and personality psycho and he was, and that separated him from the people like B.F. Skinner and Edward G.

Boring and Carl Lashley, who was an animal psychologist, that was a big thing back in those days.

So yeah, that's the story of Alport's meeting with Freud.

Patrick: And I think you say in the book too that, you know, Alport wrote this off as some sort of misconnection or confusion, but then...

Then you interviewed some people who said like, oh yeah, Alport was obsessed with dirt, and so maybe he didn't understand that Freud was on to something or something like that.

Alex: Yeah, that was his friend and colleague, Henry Murray, who was another one of the levelers, and really was one of the principal conduit for bringing psychoanalytic

thought into the American academy and of course, that made Harvard ground zero for this, you know, this, what I call a sort of civil war between the psychologists.

So yeah, Henry Murray laughed about, you know, Freud and Alport's meeting and he said, well, you know, Freud kind of nailed Alport, because Alport was really a stickler for, you know, having his desk very orderly, for having everything be very clean.

He didn't think much of the unconscious.

So they thought that Freud kind of had Alport's number, you know, as it were.

Patrick: And one of the great things about this book is how many of these little details and sort of personal stories you put together in the course of your research.

The book is very, very closely researched, not just dealing with internal documents and gray literature, but also with some of these stories.

So I think that this is going to make the book more appealing for readers.

regardless of their academic interest in these topics or not.

I think it's just a good tale with a lot of very interesting personalities in it.

So yeah, I thought that was great.

Can you tell me a little bit more? So this got started in the 20s, but it was really after World War II that things really started getting going and you highlight the role of the war in changing how people thought about research.

Can you tell me a little bit about these people's war service and then the post-war environment that would make Harvard receptive to the creation of the social relations department?

Alex: Well, throughout the '30s, the Levellers had been meeting together secretly, clandestinely, to promote their idea of creating an interdisciplinary department, of merging their disciplines, because they thought there was no reason to have these sort of arbitrary distinctions between and among the disciplines and they had made a proposal to Harvard to create a new department and they also had written sort of a manifesto of sorts called a common language for the area of social science.

So they were already working in this direction and then, when World War II occurred, that was a real turning point, because the government employed over 1,000 psychologists and other social scientists in the war effort and they were studying all sorts of things.

One of the groups, there was a group in the war department called the Foreign Morale Analysis Division, which Clyde Kluckhohn was part of and their task was to study the morale of our enemies, the Germans and the Japanese, particularly the Japanese, because we knew so little about the Japanese at that time and they thought that, okay, well, anthropology was well-suited to this because they could study, I think it's Margaret Mead that coined the term studying culture from a distance and that's what Clyde Kluckhold and others were really doing.

They were reading, they were interviewing people, they were reading newspapers, everything, pulling everything together, trying to get a handle on how the Japanese would react to certain actions we would take.

So that was a huge, and it was successful.

They got a lot of credit after the war for this.

But they also used psychologists in a number of different ways.

They wanted to figure out, well, how do we sell, how can we sell more war bonds? You know, how can we get the public to really support the war effort? So they had psychologists looking at that.

Henry Murray, one of the levelers, became the chief psychologist for the Office of Strategic Services which was the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency and he was doing a number of things.

The most important work he undertook was how do you break down spies? Like if we capture a spy, how do you interrogate them to get information out of them? What's the most effective way to break them down? And conversely, how do you screen soldiers that would make good spies for us that could not be broken down.

So that's what he was doing and that becomes relevant later in the late '50s at Harvard.

So this was a real– and the other major factor in all this is that all these social scientists were working without disciplinary distinctions, without departmental distinctions.

The government, the military just wanted answers and they could care less what you called yourself, what department you were in.

They put them all in a room and said, give us the answers.

So that really forced them to work without boundaries and of course, the Harvard group loved this because this validated, legitimized their vision.

So when they got out of the war, they felt very confident of their vision for an interdisciplinary department and of course, the United States was the superpower in the world and had all this money and there were all these grandiose dreams of what the social sciences could accomplish in terms of changing the world and so that all came together in quite, and Harvard was really the epicenter of this enthusiasm for remaking the social scientists, social sciences rather.

Patrick: So they had success in interdisciplinary work, and then they also had now resources and so they were confident, and they were also able to talk Harvard and the administration into allowing this to happen.

one of the interesting things about your book is that you focus on the role of deans and administrators, which not all intellectual histories of academia do, but you also then tell the story of how the deans were persuaded to get this thing on board as well.

Alex: Yes, the dean played a crucial role in this because it's really the Levellers plus Dean Paul Buck, who was very influential as a dean because the president of Harvard, Conant, was off very much involved in the war effort.

So as dean and provost, Paul Buck was extremely influential.

He was a history professor and a professor of the social sciences.

He had won a Pulitzer, very distinguished professor, and the Levellers kept approaching him to convince him of the need for this department and at first, he was

not enthusiastic, but he gradually began to see that there was something there to this interdisciplinary vision and then also a more pedestrian problem that he had was that he thought some of these professors might leave if they didn't get what they wanted, particularly Talcott Parsons, who by then was the biggest star of the bunch and he had, Parsons had received a very generous offer from Northwestern.

to come set up a new department there and it was a huge amount of money and so he basically went to Paul Buck and, well, he wrote him.

He put it on paper and he said, listen, if things don't change at Harvard, you know, I'm probably going to go to Northwestern and by the way, I'm going to let everybody know why and that it's your fault.

Basically, this was pretty, pretty gutsy move.

for somebody to make and to flex their muscles in the academy that way and he didn't do it in a conversation.

I mean, he put it in a letter, so.

Patrick: Well, and that's all the better for historians such as yourself who can find that letter and track it down.

But then in addition, you said that Parsons was one of the people that you interviewed, is that correct?

Alex: Yes.

Patrick: I was made to read Parsons when I was young.

I think perhaps some younger academics might not be assigned him, but they still live in his shadow in many ways.

Can you just tell us a little bit personally when you interviewed him, what kind of person he was? What was his personality like? His writing is so aesthetic and formal.

It's difficult to get a sense of what the man was like, what his personality was like.

Alex: This is partly based on what other people have written and what other people have told me about him, because I interviewed him for a couple hours.

He was, I want to say he was like 80, 79 or 80, and I believe he died the following year.

But he was a very quiet man.

I mean, he was a towering intellect.

I mean, whatever you think of him or whatever a person thinks of him, and his contributions.

He was a major force in sociology, and he trained 3 generations of really well-known scholars today.

But he was a very quiet person.

He never responded when he was attacked by other sociologists, or his theories were attacked.

He never responded and his followers were sort of upset with him, you know, that he wouldn't engage and sort of defend his his views.

But he was a real gentleman, a very sweet man.

He took a lot of time with me.

But that was kind of his personality and his students, his PhD students, his graduate students just adored him and when he retired, there were just a couple very big events that they put on for him, both in the United States and I think in Heidelberg, where he got his PhD.

Patrick: It's so funny.

I think we often expect academic impresarios like this to have big personalities, but it sounds like he had quite a restrained personality.

Was he a New Englander?

Alex: You know, I don't think he was.

I want to say he was from Colorado and his father was a minister, but he did.

He was educated at Amherst and then he went to Heidelberg to get his PhD and he was fluent in German.

He translated Weber's The Protestant Ethic and brought it into the United States, brought it into the American Academy.

I mean, he was a very influential, very sophisticated, worldly guy, but, and he had few big ideas.

I mean, when he died, When he died, the New York Times had a piece that was written by his colleague, Daniel Bell, another well-known Harvard sociologist and Daniel Bell entitled the New York Times piece, Talcott Parsons, Nobody's Theories Were Bigger.

Patrick: Yeah.

Alex: I mean, that really says it all.

I mean, even though he had a quiet sort of personality, Nobody had bigger ideas or theories, and he swung for the fences, you know, as they say, and although he missed in terms of social relations, he still had major, major contributions to sociology and is still one of the most important ones of the 20th century.

Patrick: I suppose maybe that mix of ambition as well as tact and diplomacy that can be useful when dealing with people in institutions as well.

He talked briefly about Pitram Sorokin, who I gather was much more flamboyant, and that kind of flamboyance sometimes doesn't work out as well.

Sorokin, I guess, was a Russian sociologist who was invited to shore up the sociology department, and he and Parsons have several sort of little feuds that you describe wonderfully in your book.

Alex: Yes, that was also another motivating factor that Parsons, Parsons originally was in the economics department.

That's what his degree was in from Heidelberg and he already had this idea for a big all-encompassing theory of social behavior and he sort of saw that economics wasn't going to do it.

Economics couldn't explain human behavior in a way that he had in mind.

So he left to join the very small sociology department, of which Sorokin was the chairman and Parsons was immediately frustrated because Sorokin was less interested

in the newer theories of Durkheim and Weber, certainly no interest in Freud and Parsons just thought this was going in the wrong direction.

This sort of, sociology is history or philosophy was just not where sociology should be going and so although initially they got along, they started fighting and huge fights until finally Paul Buck engineered that Sorokin would step down and Parsons would replace him as the first in sociology, and that was the first step to then creating the Department of Social Relations.

Patrick: So let's talk about that.

The social relations department was founded, you have in the book, the day, the hour, and the minute that it was founded, because the faculty who were voting on it wanted to get home by a certain time and I don't want to, I think we'll leave that for people to read.

It's a wonderful story that starts your book.

But I want to make sure we cover everything and so let's just move on briefly to the social relations itself when it's first created.

They have tremendous resources.

Tell me about those heady early days of success and growth, the first couple of years of that department.

Alex: Well, it began in 1946 and as we already discussed, I mean, these were heady days in general.

in the academy, in the United States generally, post-World War II, enthusiasm about changing the world and these professors thought they were going to participate in it.

But it was a big deal to start a new department.

Particularly, no one else had a department like this.

You had these four different sort of sub-disciplines.

social psychology, clinical psychology, cultural anthropology, and sociology.

So there was just administrative challenges to doing this.

But, you know, people were so enthusiastic that they just said, well, we're, you know, going forward in all these different directions to set this department up.

So there was huge enthusiasm.

But it was difficult for the graduate students coming into this because there was no underlying theory pulling all this together.

So there was huge, huge excitement, but also fear from the graduate students because they didn't quite know what was expected of them and there was a pro seminar that had all the different elements, different constituent disciplines represented, but there was no underlying theory that pulled it all together.

So that was always a problem that was lurking, you know, there in the background.

But the huge enthusiasm for changing, changing not just the academy, but the world was there and a bit of hubris, as I say in the book, that they were going to, you know, engineer such big, big changes.

Patrick: So they had the money, they didn't, but they didn't have the theoretical unity that they were supposed to have and they were also, they weren't all in the same space.

Space plays an important part in your book and that was one of the reasons I liked it, because in my experience as an academic, who has control of space is like what 90% of the disputes are about.

It's amazing.

So they were all scattered all over.

Is that right?

Alex: Yes, yeah and as I say, there was as scattered geographically as they were intellectually.

Right.

The Henry Murray had his psychology clinic in an old house off campus and Talcott Parsons and Gordon Allport were both in the same building.

They were in Emerson Hall.

which had housed the philosophy department and so that was quite a distinguished address for professors to have and then Clyde Kluckhohn was, he, we're skipping ahead a bit, but he was, they had started the Russian Research Center, and he was made chairman of the, the head of that, rather, in a very strange sequence of events.

So, they were all over the place, and it did not contribute to unification at all.

Patrick: Maybe we should talk a little bit about Cluckhohn and his career.

You know, we've talked about Parsons as an important importer of Max Weber and an influential social theorist, but there are many left critiques of the Department of Social Relations, or maybe not even left, but it definitely had its enemies.

There are many, the Chicago School of Sociology felt like it had been steamrolled by Parsons.

Many of the academics who were working there, like Kluckhohn, were working for the three-letter agencies in the national security state.

without maybe, this is David Price's claim, who you cite in the book, without thinking about the difference between working against a declared enemy during World War II versus spying on the people that you're doing fieldwork on.

So, and you also mentioned that Murray's focused on interrogations, both finding people to do them and to take them.

So there is a sort of a dark side about this that I want to make sure that we focus on as well and that Russian Research Center was taking, was doing covert work at the same time.

Tell me a little bit about the relationship between the graduate students who were getting their degrees in social relations and the Russian Research Center that Kluckhohn was at and the work that it was doing.

Alex: Well, to me, this is one of the more fascinating developments in this whole history, particularly post-World War II, is that the foreign policy intelligentsia, but particularly the Carnegie Corporation, who had so much money and was so influential

back then, along with the State Department and the CIA and others, decided we didn't, we the United States, we didn't know anything about the Soviet Union.

I mean, it was a closed society.

You know, how could we get up to speed on our new, you know, enemy here? And so they decided that they were going to establish and pour a lot of money into an institute to focus on the Soviet Union and so they started casting around, well, where are we going to put this institute? Well, let's put it in a university.

OK, well, the logical choice back then would have been Columbia, because that's where all the Russian scholars were.

But instead, they chose the Harvard Department of Social Relations, because Charles Dollard, who was at the Carnegie Corporation, had been good friends with Clyde Kluckhohn and was aware of what Kluckhohn and Parsons and others were doing it social relations.

They thought this interdisciplinary approach to studying behavior was really an important development and so they decided, well, we're going to put this Russian research center at Harvard, which was somewhat controversial, but even more controversial.

They picked an anthropologist to run it, Clyde Kluckhohn, who knew nothing about Russia.

No, absolutely nothing.

No background in it.

But the theory.

Patrick: He was an expert on Navajo.

Alex: Yeah, his claim to fame was studying, using Freudian psychology to study the dreams of the Navajo Indians.

But his other claim to fame was what he did in World War II.

studying the Japanese from a distance and making informed guesses about how they would react to certain things.

So in a way, the Carnegie Corporation and the State Department and the CIA thought, well, he's the perfect person to run this because that's what we have to do.

with the Soviet Union because it's a closed society.

We can't, you know, we can't just get in there and study things the way we would like.

So this really raised a lot of eyebrows in academia, well, and throughout the foreign policy world, that they chose a cultural anthropologist with no background in Russia to be the head of this institute.

Patrick: And partially this is because their logic was If you have the science to do it, you don't have to be an area expert.

as long as you have the science, you don't need all of that.

I guess what some people would have said is the old-fashioned area experts who, you know, grew up there or were expatriates from there, it didn't matter.

If you knew the methods and the techniques, then you could get stuff done scientifically.

But there was also, just to highlight in your response, there was like a old boy network factor here.

Basically, the guy who was responsible for handing out the money at Carnegie just happened to be good friends with the people who ended up receiving it, right?

Alex: Absolutely and in addition to the Russian Research Center, which got some money from Carnegie, but it was a social relations department that got even more money from Carnegie to start something they called the social relations laboratory, which was not a laboratory in the conventional sense of test tubes and everything else.

But Parsons was so fixated on creating this aura of scientism around this new department that he called it a laboratory, but it was sort of a clearinghouse for funding the research that they were undertaking, but he called it a laboratory and the Carnegie Corporation gave it huge amounts of money and then, of course, they also gave money to the Russian Research Center, but the Russian Research Center also got money directly from the US government, from the CIA, as a matter of fact.

Patrick: And there were other institutions.

So as an anthropologist myself, I know Clifford Yeerts is one of the most famous anthropologists and his research was funded in some way by intelligence agencies, or he was part of a project that had a defense agency side to it as well.

So this was something that continued on in Harvard, not just in the Russian area, but I guess that was the, if I remember correctly, the Mocha Kudo Project, which was directed by Doug Oliver or something like that.

So those resources were everywhere around there.

Alex: Yeah and as David, the wonderful book by David Price, who really gets into the sort of Cold War scholarship and, you know, he details some of this, but Clifford Geertz was one of the star products of social relations.

I mean, he's got his PhD there and he studied with both Cluckhon and Parsons and I quote him in several places in the book because he looks back on what he called the golden years of social relations in those first five years and he talks about the, you know, the wonderful exuberance, but also the kind of the crazy I think he used the word academic roller coaster ride for graduate students.

But yeah, he was one of the star pupils of Claquin and Parsons.

Patrick: And one of the other strange things, I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but one of the other strange lines out of the social relations department is that many of the people who became involved in post, what they called in the 80s, postmodern anthropology, were people who had gone to Sokrel and to do their PhDs and then a lot of their sort of more postmodern work was a reaction against the kind of scientific rigor that they established there.

So if people go and read some of the early works of, you know, George Marcus or other people like that.

Sometimes it's hard to tell who it is that they're arguing with if you come from an anthropological tradition that's more humanistic, but they're arguing with social relations.

So oftentimes, this Cold Warrior program didn't just produce Cold Warriors, it also produced A backlash, which is, of course, I mean, talk about backlash.

The final section of your book documents the rise of the counterculture and its relationship to social relations.

You want to tell us a little bit about that?

Alex: Yes, yeah, certainly.

Patrick: Or return to anything.

I'm sorry, I don't mean to move too quickly if you want to comment on something I've just said or something like that.

Alex: No, no, the other person I was going to mention in terms of the backlash was even within the department itself.

There was a professor of psychology.

He received his PhD from the original Department of Psychology at Harvard, a guy named Jerome Bruner and Bruner, very early on, was very unhappy with what was going on at Harvard because he, although he joined social relations, because he thought he sort of believed in that vision.

He became unhappy very quickly because he said, it doesn't make any sense to have two different kinds of psychologists.

This is very harmful to the disciplines and he said, you've got the psychologists like B.F. Skinner studying rats and Carl Ashley studying animals and not focusing on the interior mind and then in social relations, you've got Henry Murray studying abnormal psychology and there's nobody just studying how people think, how the average person thinks.

How do they learn? So he sort of broke away.

He stayed in the department, but he established the cognitive, I think it was called the Cognitive Research Institute and he got a lot of money, grant money to do this.

So he sort of broke away and really created what's known in psychology as the cognitive revolution to sort of as a backlash to what was going on at Harvard to study, well, how do normal, quote, normal people think and learn? Because that was missing.

So I just wanted to add that when you bring up these reactions to what was going on in social relations and creating sort of new fields or sub-disciplines or whatever, that was a very important one.

Patrick: Yeah, thank you so much for adding that.

It's true.

Ironically, a lot of work did come out of social relations that was very synthetic and interdisciplinary, like Bruner's, and very influential.

Bruner is read by anthropologists and many other people.

I mean, it's just his work is excellent and it's accessible and it makes sense to many different people wearing many different hats.

But it wasn't the kind of interdisciplinarity that I think some people might have anticipated they would have had.

Parsons wanted a system.

That's my impression.

Whereas many of the interdisciplinary thinkers like Riesman and others, they were or Bruner, it was their willingness to experiment with new things without boundaries that proved so fertile, rather than, I think, what Parsons thought, which was, we're just going to create a Euclidean geometry for the social, and it's going to be nothing but rules and procedures and then that would be what good interdisciplinarity is.

Alex: Yeah, I think that's a good kind of summary of what was taking place.

I mean, and I feel somewhat sorry for Telcott Parsons, because he didn't have many – he was sort of dragging along the department in that direction, and he didn't have really many supporters.

Even the fellow levelers, you know, kind of dropped off and were doing their own thing.

just as they always had, and they were not that interested in creating this overarching, social theory of behavior.

So he was kind of on his own, and they tried to write this book called Toward a General Theory of Action, and they got a lot of money, again, from the Carnegie Corporation and so that was in 1951, because Parsons realized They had no theory.

They created this department, but they had no theory, so they tried to catch up and it was a bit, putting the, they had the cart before the horse, so to speak.

So they got this money from Carnegie and they spent a lot of time writing this book, which was a failure and it was really just Parsons kind of all alone trying to, you know, drag the department in that direction.

Patrick: Yeah.

It's funny.

I often wonder whether they would have been more successful if they had less resources and had to make do or had to be held to account a little bit more.

There was just so much money sloshing around.

People didn't have to worry about what their official story was or working with others in a situation of scarce resources.

It's funny.

It's funny how these things work.

Alex: You really touched on something important there because the Social Relations Laboratory, which was sort of the clearinghouse for channeling the money to different research, it had no, there was no research program.

I mean, there was no, it just kind of went wherever, you know, they, you know, kind of whoever wanted the money.

There was no, overarching intent to try to focus the research at all.

There was no research program and in fact, Reisman, when he arrived in the mid-50s, he was sort of shocked because he had always heard about, oh, this laboratory and they have all this money and then he got there and he said, hey, there's nothing here.

I mean, there's a lot of money here, but there's no overarching program.

So he was really critical of this laboratory And it didn't build any kind of, towards anything.

Patrick: So, this is good news for those of us at cash-strapped public universities.

Just goes to show you can be small but mighty and sometimes Sometimes that's what you need.

It's just that good things can grow out of less resources.

That's the lesson that I take from that as someone who does not work at Harvard.

Alex: Yeah, you have to be more creative and yeah, absolutely.

Patrick: So I do want to make sure that we wrap up this story without going too much longer and I want to mention this final section where we talk about student unrest, because once again, your research here was very, very good.

You tracked down individual articles in the newspaper and you track the individual trajectories and histories of these students and you ultimately show that social relations, well, you can tell me.

I was going to say that the student unrest and faculty experimentation with psychedelics dealt the death blow to the department, but maybe I'm putting words in your mouth.

Can you tell me the story about the turbulent 1960s in social relations?

Alex: Well, You're right, and that's really what I was trying to say in the book, that the department, although it had all these superstars, there's no doubt about it, they had all these superstars, they had a lot of money, but there was no there there in terms of a theory that was creating a new science or even creating a new department or new discipline.

Nobody else in academia followed Harvard's example.

They were out there all alone.

So you had this kind of shaky edifice already and then in 1959, Timothy Leary arrives at Harvard, and he joins the social relations department as a clinical psychologist interested in studying people, you know, in real-life situations, how to be helpful.

It wasn't sort of some abstract research.

He was interested in you know, personality psychology, abnormal psychology, how you how you help people in a clinical sense and he was a mainstream psychologist when he joined Harvard and but the first summer after he joined, he went to Mexico and he tried the magic mushroom for the first time and that just he said that was a religious experience.

He was convinced that this was going to change the world, certainly change psychology and in terms of how to help people and then he found a colleague at Harvard, a like-minded colleague, a guy named Richard Alpert, who later became famous as Ram Dass, a spiritual leader.

But the two of them at Harvard, you know, became a duo, and they decided they were going to focus on research using psilocybin.

So they, this was sort of the fall semester.

They immediately set about the three different experiments.

I say experiments, but they were pretty loosely structured and not very, very scientific.

But they were, and I should back up that Timothy Leary was able to get a huge supply of the synthesized drug from magic mushrooms, the psilocybin.

He was able to get that from Sandoz, the drug company.

Patrick: They just like shipped it to him.

Alex: No one thought anything about it.

He had a Harvard stationary, Department of Social Relations.

He wrote a letter saying, hey, I'm doing some research on psilocybin.

I'd like to have some and they said, certainly, here's a huge supply and let us know how it goes.

I mean, it was pretty unscientific exchange.

So he had the supply and what he and Albert did in these three different experiments, one, they would just give students the drugs and have them write about their experience.

Then they did, at the Andover Seminary, they did the, they would give these students psilocybin, hoping to induce a religious experience.

But these are people who are.

Patrick: Planning to be ministers?

Alex: Yeah, And then they did an experiment at Concord Prison, where they gave the psilocybin to inmates, and they were ostensibly trying to track if this would reduce recidivism and Leary claimed he had great success, but There's not really, there doesn't seem to be much documentation that was successful.

So they had these three experiments going on.

The one that caused Harvard the most, the administration the most heartburn, was giving the drugs to the students.

Because Leary and Alpert weren't doctors, and this clearly had an effect on your mind and Harvard at that time was just kind of waking up.

This was now 1960.

Other drugs were around.

Students were experimenting and this was a big problem for Harvard.

Huge debate, fight.

Leary and Alpert said, hey, academic freedom, we can do the research we want to do it.

You can't tell us anything.

Besides, this is the University of William James, who famously experimented with nitrous oxide and it's perfectly fitting that it be done here.

Harvard said, listen, these are undergrads.

We have a responsibility for their physical well-being, and you have to stop.

So this went back and forth and back and forth, and huge debates within the department and then it got in the public domain and there were some articles in the

New York Times started appearing and Harvard put it, said, okay, you can no longer give the drugs to undergraduates and Alpert violated that.

He gave it to an undergraduate friend of his, a guy named Ronnie Winston, who happened to be the son of the jeweler, Harry Winston, the famous jeweler and so he was fired for that.

Leary was not fired.

He just stopped showing up.

So it's sort of in line with his saying, turn on, tune in, and drop out.

He just stopped showing up.

So they took his name off the payroll.

But so they were gone.

But what happened was, and I say in the book, I think this incident really kick-started, in a way, the counterculture you know, the drug culture in the early '60s because the United States in general, society, was not aware of psychedelic drugs.

It was sort of limited to some college campuses.

But there was an article in the New York Times, there was a huge article in Life Magazine written by a Harvard undergrad, Andrew Weil, and then Saturday Evening Post and others.

So all of a sudden, this scandal was out there and linking social relations department with the drug counterculture and sort of educating the rest of America to what was going on in these campuses.

Patrick: And for people who aren't of the 60s generation, Timothy Leary and Ram Dass are iconic figures.

I mean, they're they're symbols not just of the psychedelic movement, but really of the 60s as a whole, I think, right? I mean, these are people who, if you ask anyone who was young in that period, everyone would instantly know.

It'd be like asking about JFK or something like that.

Alex: Yeah, absolutely.

I mean, they were big and Timothy Leary was on his way to becoming this guru of the counterculture.

Richard Nixon identified him as the most dangerous man in America and that is what led Nixon to push this legislation, which was the Controlled Substances Act in 1970, which prohibited all research in psychedelic drugs because it wasn't illegal.

What Leary was doing, I mean, it wasn't illegal.

Psilocybin wasn't illegal, you know and then Nixon, and that stopped all the research and it's somewhat ironic that now in, well, last spring in 2022, Harvard started researching psilocybin again at the medical school.

So I think Larry would be, wherever he is, he would be kind of chuckling about Harvard coming around to acknowledging the important potential of psilocybin, although it's being done at the medical school with doctors, highly sort of regulated, but nonetheless, I think he would find it funny and then Ram Dass wrote the very bestseller called Be Here Now, which helped solidify his reputation as a spiritual leader.

Patrick: Yeah, and it's amazing at the time they were, today we have very strict human subjects regulations and you have to get, agreement signed where you give people, prior informed consent of what they're gonna do.

None of that happened in this.

They just gave people drugs, psychedelic drugs, and then asked whether they saw God afterwards.

It's remarkable.

Henry Murray's Experiments

Alex: Yeah, And the other big, I guess, failing or when you mentioned informed consent, Henry Murray had done some experiments in the late 1950s that were based on the work he was doing in World War II for the CIA in the OSS, which was how do you break down spies? Well, he was continuing to do that type of research at Harvard, but he was doing it on undergraduates.

Patrick: Right.

I mean, it sounds like he was basically interrogating undergraduates to see if he could break them.

Alex: Yes, yes and one of those students was a very young, sort of socially awkward student, had some brilliant, he got in when he was 16 years old and that student was Ted Kaczynski.

Patrick: The Unabomber.

Alex: Yeah, so for three years, Henry Murray did this excruciating traumatizing experiment on Ted Kaczynski and Ted Kaczynski, when he was apprehended and he was talking about this in preparation for his trial, he said that was the worst experience of his life.

Patrick: My goodness and Murray also had some sort of weird, ***** **** relationship with someone or he wrote a book about that.

Alex: There was a biography of his, a biography that was written with his consent.

It came out after he died and it basically explained or described what people at Harvard sort of knew, is that he had been having this sadomestochistic relationship with a woman, not his wife, for about 20 years and Yeah, it was, quite a revelation and some people suspected that this sadomastochistic outlook of his, or tendency, played a role in his life, his pursuit of these experiments where he was, interrogating people and traumatizing them, People speculate it was all of a piece.

Patrick: It just sounds like a nightmare.

Alex: And there was no, and speaking of informed consent, Murray, because Kosinski was only 17, so Murray had to get consent from Kosinski's mother.

But he didn't tell his mother what the experiment was about.

He just said, this is an experiment to help us understand man better and help the future generations.

So he didn't explain the traumatizing aspect of the experiment and the mother is, I have a quote from her, and they were asking, well, why did you give this consent? And she said, well, I thought these, I knew that, I knew that Teddy had issues adjusting, and I thought these nice psychologists at Harvard might help him.

Patrick: Yeah, people had more trust in institutions back then.

Alex: Yeah.

Patrick: Maybe it's a good thing that we don't today.

Yeah.

It was a different time.

It was a different place as well.

Not every place is Harvard, which has the kind of reputation where people would think, oh, you know, my son went to Harvard, so everyone there must be the top and must always be acting with the greatest of propriety.

Can you tell me about the student activism as well? That's the other prong of it.

Alex: Yeah, Well, that started in the fall of 1968.

There was a group of radical students, some of whom were Students for Democratic Society, which at that time was the largest radical student group in the United States, and they were a leader in fomenting the sort of protest and unrest on campuses against, principally against the Vietnam War and this group convinced a anthropology professor at Harvard, a young one, to sponsor this new course that was going to provide a radical critique of American society and it sort of, it sailed through in terms of approval, because Harvard, on the face of it, that doesn't sound too alarming.

Yeah, okay, you take this perspective and look at American society.

Sociology was a part of the department.

It sort of made some sense.

But of course, they didn't know that the SDS was involved and when the class was, it was called Social Relations 148, was in the fall and the course was very popular, and it had very lax, shall I say, requirements.

Rumors started floating around that they weren't gonna, they were gonna get grades.

randomly to people.

They weren't going to require any exams or papers.

Everybody was going to get an A.

the reading list in some sections, because it was so big that they had sections, weekly sections with teaching assistants and the teaching assistants were from the SDS and sometimes they were people that had no connection to Harvard whatsoever, which was a violation of the of the Harvard Corporation rules back then.

So this was, the president of Harvard saw a poster for the course, and he said, what is this course about? Is this a joke? Is this a parody? What is going on here? But the course was already off and running, so the administration couldn't really stop it.

And, but they were, the professors were very upset.

that this sort of joke of a course was taking place.

Not a joke in every section.

I mean, some of the reading lists had, legitimate books and articles on it, but for the most part, it was kind of a farce and well, but there was a second semester to it, Social Relations 149.

By then, the reputation would build up, so the department, it became the largest course at Harvard.

over 800 students and it's even credited with priming the pump in the sense of, it wanted to be, the organizers wanted to be a bridge to get Harvard students who were leaning left, but they were sort of apathetic, they weren't active, and they wanted to make a bridge to get them to be active in terms of the protests and they succeeded in that because in April of 1969, there was a famous student takeover of the administration building at Harvard and they held the building until 400 National Guard were called to haul them out and 13 of the students arrested were section leaders in this course, as well as the professor who sponsored it.

So it clearly had played a role in making the students more active.

But this was the final straw for the administration in terms of this department.

They just thought it was out of control and for many, it also divided the faculty among the more liberal faculty and the more conservative ones who just stopped talking to each other.

There was such division.

Patrick: So I guess at that point, there weren't a lot of people who were invested in the department itself.

It had been sort of fragmented ideologically.

That course, as you say in the book, the social relations offerings for undergraduates had always sort of been considered to be very lightweight and now they appear to have degenerated further and then you have these other people.

Murray's, I think, misbehavior was not discovered until later.

But Ram Dass and Timothy Leary, they had created waves and so then I guess it just got to a certain point where people wanted to shut it down and no one wanted to stand up and save it.

Alex: Yeah, that's true and then the other factor that's important is that the newer faculty members at Harvard, they had no interest, first of all, they had no memory of why the department was founded, you know, what the mission, original mission was, they could care less.

I mean, they, you know, as a young scholar, I mean, you can appreciate this, they wanted to be a successful psychologist, a successful anthropologist.

They didn't want to be a successful social relationist.

That was not the way to get ahead in your career.

So for them, they just thought this was a strange department, very cumbersome, because you had basically what had happened is the sub-disciplines had become mini departments and then there was a bigger department, social relations, on top of them.

So if you were an anthropologist or you were a social psychologist, you had no direct relationship with the dean.

You had to go through this vehicle of social relations and so each of the sub-disciplines felt that they weren't getting enough hires, enough space, enough anything.

So you had all this academic politics and administrative problems on top of an academic venture that lacked any unifying theory and then you had these black eyes like Sacral 148, 149, the Leary-Alpert incident and you put all this together and finally in 72, it fell apart.

Patrick: Yeah.

So looking back on it now, When you interview people, do people feel like it was a success or a failure? How do the people who are involved with the department look back on it and remember it today?

Alex: Well, in terms of the, and I've talked to some graduate students as well who are around, as well as recalling my conversations with the professors in the department, But I would say overall, people have to acknowledge that it was a failure.

I mean, there is no discipline of social relations.

There's no science of social relations.

So the book that they created, Toward a General Theory of Action, was a failure.

So you can't help but conclude that the venture failed in that sense.

But I'm always very fair in saying, look, this was a department of superstars.

They still individually did incredibly important work.

You know, David Reesma and Talcott Parsons, Gordon Allport, Jerome Bruner, David McClellan, you know, on and on and on, you know, stars in their field.

In addition, they produced superstars.

You mentioned Clifford Huerts.

I mean, that's one and a number of sociologists.

There's, you know, at Harvard, at the Kennedy Graduate School right now, there's a psychologist, Howard Gardner, who is very much a sort of interdisciplinary in his approach.

He writes about multiple intelligences.

He brings in sociology a bit, anthropology, and into his work.

So there still has some, you know, ongoing effects on the academy.

So it's not a failure in a total sense, but it was a failure in the original mission statement.

Patrick: Yeah.

Well, and I suppose to a certain extent, what was the likelihood that, you know, this was going to utterly succeed and transform the discipline.

I think whenever people have these grand visions, oftentimes the thing that lasts and that's important is not the realization of the grand vision, but all of the energy that went into it, this sort of thing.

Alex: Yeah, I mean, it was a, no matter how you look at it, was an extremely interesting department, did good work and I don't think anybody should feel, sad that they participated in it at all.

So.

Patrick: Yeah.

Well, thanks so much.

Not boring.

Social relations, the story of social relations is not a boring story and the book that you have is also not at all boring.

It's a wonderful and vivid story about a really exciting time.

So thanks so much for writing this book.

I want to let you go.

I could gossip with you for a lot longer, but I know that we're running up to time.

So I want to let you go.

Before I let you go, can you tell me what else you're going to be doing or thinking about or publishing now that this book is published? Is this something that's still of interest to you that you're going to pursue?

Alex: I'm giving it some time before I come up with a new topic to investigate in this area.

So for now, I don't have any plans to do any more research in the area of the social sciences.

Patrick: I wonder whether there's a Reisman biography.

If there isn't, we need one.

Alex: Well, yeah, there was somebody that started one that I read about, and then I think he must have dropped it because I could never, I never found out anything more about it.

But people continue to write about him.

I'm reading this wonderful book by Louis Menand at Harvard called The Free World, and he's talking about the post-World War II Cold War period and this explosion and art and social sciences and all over and he spends about seven pages on David Riesman.

So I just started reading that.

I was very heartened to see that, that people are still talking about him and his contributions.

Patrick: Well, thanks again for taking the time to write the book. I really appreciate it.

Alex: Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Patrick: Once again, for all of our listeners, that was Patrick L. Schmidt, the author of Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science, The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations and you can find that published by Roman and Littlefield in 2022.

I'm Alex Golub. I hope you all have a good day. Take care.

The Ted K Archive

Alex Golub
New Books in the History of Science: Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science
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