

Harvard Is Once Again The Center of Psychedelics

A Conversation with Patrick Schmidt

Jeff Schechtman

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Nowhere was that more true than in Harvard's establishment of a Department of Social Relations.

With figures like Timothy Leary, Ram Das, and Ted Kaczynski, as part of the faculty, it was an epicenter of its time.

Today Harvard is restarting psilocybin research and launching a new center for the neuroscience of psychedelics in association with Mass. General Hospital.

So it's a good time to look back at the antecedents of this effort.

Patrick Schmidt has written about it in his new book **HARVARD'S QUIXOTIC PURSUIT OF A NEW SCIENCE**.

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Mentioned in this episode: Ted Kaczynski, Ram Dass, Timothy Leary,

Jeff: Welcome to the program. I'm Jeff Schechtman.

If our current era is one of politics, technology, and economics, it's fair to say that the 60s were an era where social science, self-reflection, and cultural anthropology ruled the day and if places like Stanford and MIT are the intellectual hubs of our day, Harvard was the intellectual hub of the 1960s.

Nowhere was that more true than in Harvard's Department of Social Relations, where figures like Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, and Ted Kaczynski were part of a faculty that was the epicenter of its time.

Today, Harvard is restarting psilocybin research and introducing a new center for neuroscience of psychedelics at Mass General.

So it's a good time to look back at the antecedents of this current effort, and we're going to do it with my guest today, Patrick Schmidt.

Patrick Patrick is currently an attorney in Washington.

He's a graduate of Harvard, Georgetown, and Johns Hopkins, and has done extensive research over the years on Harvard's Department of Social Relations.

He writes about it in his new book, Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science: The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations.

It is my pleasure to welcome Patrick Schmidt here to the program.

Patrick, thanks so much for joining us.

Patrick: Well, thank you for having me.

Jeff: Well, it's a delight to have you here.

Tell us a little bit about the origins of Harvard's Department of Social Relations. How did it originally come together, and what was its original mission?

Patrick: The department was established in 1946, but it had its origins going back to the 1920s.

Because at that time, these disciplines that were their constituent disciplines of social relations psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology were very young disciplines.

They were just starting in the 1920s.

So there was a lot of uncertainty about what the disciplines were and this was particularly true in psychology.

The psychology at that time was ruled by experimental psychologists, behavioral psychologists, if you will.

The one example that your listeners might recognize is B.F. Skinner. the famous behavioral psychologist and they were, they wanted to make psychology a science.

They wanted to, they believed that you could only study what you could measure, what you could observe, as opposed to the interior mind.

If someone had a phobia, if they had some other issue, that was off the table.

That was not part of psychology, which today we find, extraordinary because that's what we think of as psychology and then drop into this atmosphere at Harvard, all of a sudden, psychoanalytic thought arrives in the form of Freud and Jung and there were a couple of psychologists at Harvard that were very interested in this, thought it was very important to incorporate this in their studies and it caused a huge divide in the psychology department at Harvard.

The experimentalists wanted nothing to do with this.

They thought this was sort of a cult or some mysticism and wanted nothing to do with it.

It caused a huge headache for Harvard because these psychologists weren't even speaking to one another in a relatively small department.

Cultural anthropology was also starting as a sub-discipline of anthropology, which previously had been an archeology-oriented discipline and there was one anthropologist at Harvard, Clyde Kluckhohn, who wanted to incorporate Freudian psychology in his study of the Navajo Indians.

This caused problems in the anthropology department.

Sociology, likewise, was a very uncertain young discipline, and one of its leading lights, Talcott Parsons, wanted to incorporate Freudian psychology, but also was interested in newer theorists in sociology, such as Durkheim and Weber.

So these three disciplines were having a lot of fights and arguments about what the disciplines were and these group of four professors at Harvard got started meeting.

One was two from psychology, one from sociology, and Clyde Kluck, who I mentioned from anthropology.

They started having sort of secret meetings to map out a new department, a new discipline, a new science even and it was going to be interdisciplinary.

It was going to involve all their disciplines and it was going to include Freud and Jung and others and they wanted to break from the traditional disciplines.

So that was going on at Harvard and then these psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists got the big break in World War II.

Because in World War II, the government started hiring psychologists, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists to study all sorts of things, the morale of our enemies, the morale of our own troops, how it could be improved, very pedestrian topics, such as, well, how can you sell more war bonds? And all of a sudden, what had been very sleepy disciplines became Cinderella's at the Ball.

They were invited to Washington to contribute and the other aspect of this is they were doing it without the distinctions of the departments.

They were doing it all together.

in an interdisciplinary fashion and when they got, when the war ended, they wanted to keep this.

They said, well, why, we don't really need these artificial distinctions between and among departments.

We'd like to continue that in academia, and it sort of fits with what we were trying to do at Harvard before the war.

So this was all coming together for this group.

You had the, the, the fights that causing great headaches for the Harvard administration, but you also had this new approach that was developing and given credence through the research that was conducted in World War II and finally, in 1946, this group of professors convinced Harvard to create this new department for them and it was largely championed by Talcott Parsons, a very famous sociologist at the time, but he was what I call the intellectual ringleader of this group and so there was a lot of ferment after World War II in the social sciences and as you mentioned in the introduction, Harvey was at the epicenter of this what I call exaggerated expectations for social sciences.

So that's what really all came together and in 1946, Harvard did indeed create this department.

Jeff: And talk about the faculty and the way some of these people that are now famous or infamous, I guess, became part of the faculty.

Patrick: Well, one of the most infamous, you mentioned Timothy Leary, he joined the department in 1959.

He was a mainstream psychologist.

at the time, a clinical psychologist interested in studying and helping people in everyday situations.

I mean, he was not doing abstract sort of research.

He was brought to Harvard by David McClellan, another very well-known psychologist and McClellan felt that Harvard needed— the clinical psychology program needed something to get it going and so he found Timothy Leary and thought Leary could do that, although Leary did get things going, not quite in the way that McClellan wanted and so Leary joined the faculty as a lecturer in 1959.

That summer, after he started at Harvard, he went down to Mexico and tried the magic mushroom for the first time and this was a revelation to him.

He considered it a religious experience.

He believed that this was the future of psychology and of helping mankind.

So when he returned to Harvard, he began the psilocybin project, although he later started calling it the psychedelic project, once it really sort of took off.

He had three different aspects of this research, but basically it was giving the synthetic drug psilocybin, because it was impractical to give the mushroom to people, so that didn't work.

So Larry found the drug company Sandoz, who was making the synthetic substance, and he wrote a letter to Sandoz on Harvard Stationery saying, Hey, I'd like to, could I get some of this for my research? That's really all he said and they sent him a huge supply, and with nothing more than, Well, let us know how it goes.

So it was quite an unscientific exchange and he was off and running.

Then he had this huge supply of psilocybin in the form of these tablets and he was joined in this effort by a professor who was already at Harvard studying personality psychology, clinical psychology, and that was Richard Alpert.

Richard Alpert later became known as Ram Dass, became a spiritual leader of the counterculture and wrote a famous book called Be Here Now.

So the two of them joined forces to do this research and it became quite controversial because they were giving drugs in the experiments.

They were giving drugs outside the experiments.

to graduate students, undergraduates, Harvard became— the administration became alarmed, and the other psychologists in the department became alarmed.

They felt that Leary and Alpert were not doing the research in a rigorous scientific manner.

Leary countered, and his defenders said, well, there's academic freedom.

This is a Harvard professor, we value this, he can do what he wants.

So the battle lines were drawn, thus and that sort of bumped along for a while until Harvard finally said, OK, you cannot do research anymore on undergraduates.

That's forbidden.

Alpert broke that rule because he gave drugs outside any experience.

He gave it to his young undergraduate, Ronnie Winston, who was the son of the famous jeweler, Harry Winston and Albert was fired.

Timothy Leary was not fired.

He just stopped showing up and so the Harvard took his name off the payroll.

But that incident at Harvard, in my view, helped really propel the drug culture of the 1960s and the reason I say that is because previous to these events at Harvard, the general public was unaware of psychedelic drugs.

It was only after the Harvard controversy got in the New York Times, Life Magazine, Saturday Evening Post, and about five other magazines, that it sort of burst onto the

scene across the nation, and people became aware of psychedelic drugs and then, of course, Larry left, and he was proselytizing for drug use.

He moved on to LSD. This department and the controversy there helped launch all of that.

Jeff: What positive things, in looking back at it, what positive... things came out of this from an academic perspective.

Patrick: Yeah, the department as a whole, I think, first of all, I have to say that they started the department without a firm theoretical foundation.

They had ideas, they had written some internal white papers on what they could do, but they hadn't really thought it through.

They didn't have a solid theoretical foundation.

So there's a lesson in that for universities and institutes today that want to do something interdisciplinary, because that's sometimes thrown around as a bit of a buzzword and what it turned out to be was really more multidisciplinary.

There were still the same disciplines.

They were just working side by side under one umbrella.

So that's one of the lessons.

In terms of the positive part, there were some professors and many of the graduate students that did incorporate this ethos of interdisciplinary approach in their work and research.

So it did have some lasting effect on many of the— well, I shouldn't say many, but several of the graduate students who became very well-known scholars in their own right.

So that's quite a positive aspect and of course, these superstars at Harvard in this department were still doing great work.

It just wasn't interdisciplinary for the most part.

So those are all positives that came out of this.

Jeff: Tell us a little bit about how it started to wind down.

What brought it to an end?

Patrick: Well, after they failed, they got a large sum of money from the Carnegie Corporation to try to prove their theory.

So, three years after the department was founded, they decided, Okay, we better You know, you better find out what we have here and so they got a huge amount of money from the Carnegie Corporation to study this and write a book, which they did.

The book really didn't work.

It failed.

They didn't establish a new interdisciplinary science and after that, the department just sort of limped along as a multidisciplinary venture.

But it was very cumbersome because you had these mini departments within one department.

So the psychologists would meet as a group, but then they'd have to participate in a departmental meeting with the sociologists and cultural anthropologists.

Some of the anthropologists were still part of the old anthropology department, so they had actually three meetings they had to attend.

So this is very, very cumbersome.

The other problem for the department that contributed to its demise is that the job market and the rest of the academy was still organized around the traditional disciplines.

So if a graduate, a PhD graduate from Harvard that did study in social relations, there was no degree of social relations.

They still had a degree in social psychology because Harvard only gave the social relations degree to undergraduates.

But if you came out of social relations as a, let's say, a social psychologist, you still had some explaining to do.

If you were going to be hired by, say, University of Chicago, you had to explain, well, I was in this department.

I'm really a social psychologist, though, and here's what I did.

So there was that aspect.

Graduate students were a little concerned, even though they had the name Harvard behind them.

There was this disconnect between the academy and the job market and what Harvard was doing.

So you had the cumbersome structure, you had the job market, and then you had a series of controversies and scandals that just divided the faculty on personal grounds, on professional grounds, and then finally on political grounds and it just became a little too much for this unwieldy structure to bear.

Finally, it fell apart in 1972 and I can speak to the incidents.

One of the incidents was the Leary episode, because that divided the faculty and people started to mistrust one another, the faculty members and that sort of snowballed and became a bigger problem with the controversy around a course that had been infiltrated by the students for the Democratic Society in 1968 and 1969.

That was really one of the final straws in dividing this faculty, giving it a black eye, not only within Harvard, but outside of Harvard, just like the Leary episode did and those cumulative effects of those things, really.

Finally, the sociologists got set up and said, we're out of here.

We want our own department and Harvard said, okay, this has been a good run, but it's over and they took the social psychologists and clinical psychologists and put them back with BF Skinner.

In his group, sociologists had their own department, and the cultural anthropologists went back to the archaeologically-oriented anthropology department.

Jeff: How did you personally get so interested in this department and its history?

Patrick: Well, as an undergraduate at Harvard, I became interested in history of science, and I did an independent study on the history of psychology at Harvard, which had a very interesting evolution.

It was really William James promoted psychology.

It came out of the philosophy department at Harvard and in the course of doing that research, which I very much enjoyed, then I became aware of the social relations department and some of those professors that were involved, at least two of the founders were still at Harvard and agreed to be interviewed, as well as others.

B.F. Skinner, who was a critic, so I interviewed him, I interviewed Talca Parsons, Henry Murray, who had done the unfortunate experiment on Ted Kaczynski, although we didn't know that at the time and about, well, a total of 28 professors.

So I had this great sort of oral history aspect, and then I did conventional documentary research, and that was my senior honors thesis and I really enjoyed doing that.

It was great fun to interview these giants of the social sciences of the 20th century and after a lot of additional research, interviewing, talking to graduate students, I was able to turn this essay into a book.

Jeff: And talk about what's going on at Harvard now in terms of the Center for Neuroscience of Psychedelics, the way in which it may reach back to some of the lessons from this history, et cetera.

Patrick: Well, Timothy Leary would be quite amused by this, that 60 years after he left Harvard under a cloud for his psilocybin research, Harvard is now returning to do this research and they are using the name psychedelics in the name of the center.

Although it is being done in the correct way this time around, in my view, because it's being done at the medical school by doctors and medical researchers.

So this time around, they are doing it the right way, and it's being done in other places too, Johns Hopkins, New York University, Berkeley.

But it is interesting that it's 60 years later, Harvard is now looking at psilocybin, and by all accounts, psilocybin is getting some positive results, although it's very early, but positive results in terms of treating PTSD.

as well as some other issues.

Jeff: And to what extent is there a realization of the history of all of this, and to what extent does that actually get talked about now in terms of the work that's being done and concerns about some of it?

Patrick: I think the concerns now are less, if we're talking strictly about the research on psychedelics, because it's being done in medical schools now.

I mean, it is a compound, it is something that affects your brain, and Tim Dilleri was not a medical doctor, neither was Alpert, and they were giving this out to students and there were reports of some very bad reactions by undergraduates, which particularly alarmed Harvard, we'll never know because records are all sealed, but now I think it's being done in the correct way and so I think there's much less, of those concerns from the early days and I think really though, I mean, to his credit, he did identify psilocybin as something that could be helpful, right? He went about it this wrong way, but he did identify it as something and unfortunately, some people believe that because of the controversy he engendered, He set back the research.

I mean, there was a stigma to researching in psychedelics.

So he may have set back the future research because people didn't, there was a stigma to it and people didn't want to get involved into it.

Jeff: And when you talk about this today, when you talk to people at Harvard about it, how do they look back on this history? Do they look back on it fondly, or do they look back on it, and does it make them uncomfortable?

Patrick: Well, it depends on who you talk to at Harvard.

I haven't talked to anybody in the administration yet about what they think of this, covering these issues.

I have talked to some of the graduates of the department and for the most part, although they recognized that there was a failure to come up with a new science, a new discipline, they enjoyed their time and they thought it was very helpful to their work and their approach, the interdisciplinary ethos, as opposed to actually having a firm underlying theory, but just the approach of looking at other disciplines, seeing what's useful, seeing if it can be brought into your own research.

So there are not only the professors in the department, but many of the graduates, or not many, but several high profile graduates did incorporate this into their work and found it very valuable and of course, they had the controversies and the scandals and so on, and nobody's very happy about that.

But, that's sometimes happens in universities.

Jeff: Patrick Schmidt. His book is Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of the New Science.

Patrick, I thank you so much for spending time with us.

Patrick: Jeff, thank you. It's a great pleasure.

Jeff: Thank you.

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