

# Book Review: Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science

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April 2, 2024

Patrick L Schmidt,

*Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science: The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations*, Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, 2022; 249 pp. (includes index): ISBN 9781538168288 (cloth)

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**Keywords**

Department of Social Relations, Harvard University, social science, Talcott Parsons, unification of science

This thoughtful, well-researched, well-written, informative, and engaging study is well worth reading for anyone seriously interested in the history of social science in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Its relevance, moreover, is international as well, given the strong influence of social disciplines in the United States of that era on the development of their counterparts elsewhere, including in Europe and the Soviet Union, but also in Latin America, Israel, and Japan.

The author is uniquely qualified to tell the story, having researched the topic for an undergraduate honors thesis at Harvard, and having held a position in the Social Relations Laboratory. Schmidt's location at Harvard also provided direct access to numerous key participants who were interviewed. In addition, the author developed a personal knowledge of the local context that was not available to later researchers, such as myself, who had to rely on archival materials in order to reconstruct events.

Schmidt sets out to examine the 'failure' of the Department of Social Relations (1946–1972) to 'provide theoretical integration' of the fields it encompassed. The overall frame of the narrative is the familiar, but still useful, 'rise and fall' model. The author carefully weighs the relative impacts of a series of factors, including personalities, academic politics, problems of managing growth, and public scandals involving departmental faculty.

Schmidt characterizes the establishment of Social Relations as 'a daring experiment by a conservative institution' integrating social anthropology, sociology, social psychology and clinical psychology (p. 1). Here, the question that might be raised – perhaps an unanswerable one – is exactly who consciously sought an integration of fields, rather than simply a pragmatic reorganization of certain troublesome small departments. I am inclined to think that there might actually have been only one 'true believer' in the mission of integration: Talcott Parsons.

Schmidt traces the emergence of Social Relations to events in the 1930s involving intradepartmental conflicts between dominant factions and 'rising faculty stars' of which there were four: Gordon W. Allport and Henry Murray (Psychology), Talcott Parsons (Sociology), and Clyde Kluckhohn (Anthropology). This quartet, adopting the name of 'The Levellers', began to meet privately and to discuss organizational alternatives. A key to the eventual outcome was the rise of social historian Paul H. Buck to the position of Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, where he exercised

unusual power due to the wartime absences of President James B. Conant. Social Relations was, in a sense Buck's creation, for it would not have come to be without his active sponsorship.

Schmidt does a very good job of detailing the dynamics of conflict within the three academic units, which limitations of space preclude from discussion here. But perhaps I should call attention to the importance of Allport, which has often been overlooked. Entering Harvard during the World War I era, Allport majored in psychology with a minor in social ethics and later earned a Harvard Ph.D. in psychology. Following 4 years at Dartmouth, Allport returned as an associate professor and a leader in the development of social psychology. By the late 1930s, he was chair of Psychology, president of the American Psychological Association, and editor of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. At the time he participated in developing reorganization proposals in the early 1940s, Allport was far more prominent than was Talcott Parsons, with whom the Social Relations project has often been identified.

Regarding Parsons, it is important to bear in mind that the thesis of 'convergence', or the project of unification, appeared in Parsons's early major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), which outlined a division of labor among the 'sciences of action' (including economics and political science). Without this thesis, and without Parsons's belief that a 'great movement' was developing across disciplines (p. 40), it is doubtful that Social Relations, and its claims of integration, would have appeared.

Schmidt's treatment of sociology is somewhat limited. It is, for instance, an oversimplification to say that Pitirim A. Sorokin and Carle C. Zimmerman, who led the department, approached sociology merely as the 'philosophy of history' (p. 26). While it is true that Sorokin was moving in this direction, he taught a range of courses. Zimmerman, meanwhile, taught mainly rural sociology and sociology of the family. When Social Relations was launched in 1946, moreover, Parsons can hardly be characterized as an aggrieved junior colleague, since he had been made both full professor and the chair of Sociology in 1944. But Schmidt should be commended for connecting the story of sociology with the earlier experience of the largely forgotten Department of Social Ethics (1906–1931).

Schmidt is also quite right in asserting that 'World War II changed everything'. In particular, as the author notes, the war led to the valuation, even idealization, of interdisciplinary collaboration. This provided a basis for Allport, Parsons, and their allies to warn Buck in 1943 that established academic fields would be revealed as 'anachronisms' in the postwar era, and that Harvard would be left behind if it did not seek leadership in this transition.

As Schmidt shows in detail, Social Relations was divided from the very start into four separate 'wings' composed of members of the four disciplines. The department offered an undergraduate degree in Social Relations, but graduate degrees continued to be given in the individual fields. As the new unit grew, quite dramatically, it began to function almost as four distinct units. Attracting hundreds of undergraduate majors and large numbers of graduate students, it became nearly impossible to administer. The

announced project of theoretical integration was also hampered by the fact that new generations of faculty in Social Relations did not share the vision of its founders (p. 115). Meanwhile, the clinical psychology wing became untenable and was dropped in 1967. At the same time, renewed interest in economic and political sociology (e.g. ‘power elites’) worked against the unit’s claim that psychology, sociology, and anthropology were the primary or ‘basic’ social sciences that should be integrated.

I learned quite a lot from Schmidt’s treatment of major scandals that did serious damage to the department’s image and reputation. The dismissal of psychologists Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, in spring 1963, for their involvement with psychedelic drugs and undergraduates gained much notoriety in mass media (pp. 124–125). Several years later, a junior anthropologist, Jack Stauder, was terminated for trespassing during the ‘forcible occupation of University Hall’ in spring 1969 (p. 147) that was led by Students for a Democratic Society. Stauder’s course on ‘Radical Perspectives on Social Change’ also led to criticism of the department, in part because 19 of its 45 sections were taught by Harvard undergraduates, some of whom did not believe in traditional course grades. Henry Murray’s ‘disturbing experiments’ of 1959–1962, which deliberately stressed participating students, would likely also have brought disrepute to the department, but they did not become publicly known until 2003 (pp. 168–169). One of Murray’s experimental subjects was Ted Kaczynski, who later became the mail-bomb terrorist known as the Unabomber.

If Social Relations was in a sense doomed from the start, it was also arguably, as the author emphasizes, a noble experiment. Even the most severe internal critics, such as George C. Homans, acknowledged this (p. 159). And this, no doubt, is why many people continue to find it of interest today. Indeed, one might ask whether such ‘bold experiments’ are possible in the present academic world, or whether a university like Harvard could again aspire to intellectual leadership, nationally and internationally. Would it not be better for us all if there were more efforts like Social Relations, however ‘quixotic’?

### **Author biography**

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International Sociology Reviews, Volume 39, Issue 2, 154–159.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809241236835>

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