Patrick L. Schmidt Discusses His New Book Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science

John Shannon

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Author Patrick L. Schmidt speaks with Radio Free Galisteo's John Shannon about his new book - Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science: The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations.

Schmidt tells the little-known story of how some of the most renowned social scientists of the twentieth century (Including Talcott Parsons and Timothy Leary) struggled to elevate their emerging disciplines of cultural anthropology, sociology, and social and clinical psychology.

Also - The re-emergence of the study psychedelic drugs at Harvard is discussed.

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John: This is John Shannon with Radio Free Galesteo, and today I am speaking with author Patrick L. Schmidt, who has written Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science, The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations, published by Roman and Littlefield.

This is a very interesting school that produced a number of interesting professors, scientists, researchers, and I'll let you talk about that as we go on.

But just could you, if you could just give us a quick overview of the book and how you decided to start writing it?

Patrick: Okay, well, thank you very much for having me.

The book is a history of the Department of Social Relations, which Harvard created in 1946. It lasted approximately 25 years. It was disbanded in 1972.

The founding of the department was in large part due to two factors.

One was there was a lot of interesting research during World War II by the US government that used behavioral scientists, psychologists, cultural anthropologists, and sociologists to study many things.

The morale of our enemies, what, for example, what would the Japanese do if we invaded? Would they fight to the end? What would the Germans do if we took a certain action? It also got down to the nitty-gritty of, well, how do you sell more war bonds? How do you get our people to buy into the war effort? And how do we improve the morale of our own troops? So this was a big change in mid-century for these psychologists and cultural anthropologists and so on to be called to service in the government because nobody paid a lot of attention to them before this and all of

a sudden, they were sort of the Cinderella at the ball and they also worked together without these departmental restrictions.

They were just working side by side, instead of these separate silos of departments and when the war ended, they said, hey, we should do this in the academy.

We don't need these arbitrary distinctions between the departments and they convinced Harvard to do this and Harvard did it, partly because Harvard believed in the vision, and partly because some of the psychologists were fighting like cats and dogs with the traditional psychologists.

The traditional psychologists being the experimental psychologists, such as B.F. Skinner, who your listeners may know him, a famous behavioral psychologist who really believed you could only study what you could measure, what you could observe.

These newer psychologists were interested in the interior mind and how you can focus on things like, morale and phobias and all these interior things and Harvard also solved the problem it had by taking the newer psychologist and putting them in this new department.

So they stopped all the fighting in the traditional departments.

So that's really, in a nutshell, how this department got started and then it had quite an interesting history from there on out and I got interested in it because I went to Harvard College.

In my senior year, I did my honors thesis on this subject and at that time, many of these famous founders of the department were still around.

They were still at Harvard, and they agreed to be interviewed.

So I interviewed 28 faculty members and others, including B.F. Skinner, who was very critical of this whole thing.

So that's really how I got into it and then many decades later, after a lot more research and looking at correspondence and speeches and interviewing some of the graduate students, I was able to put the book together.

John: You interviewed a great number of folks who were part of that department.

It has some standouts who are, I guess, both notorious and otherwise, who did some really great work.

But Timothy Leary, for example, was in that department.

Also, Henry Murray was in that department and I'll let you speak to both of their trajectories and what they contributed.

Who would you say, though, really made a huge positive impact by being able to be in that sort of silo-free environment?

Patrick: First of all, I have to give credit to the intellectual ringleader of the founding of the department, a sociologist, perhaps the most famous American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, who was really pushing Harvard to do this and he believed that he could come up with a social theory that would unite all the social sciences, all the social sciences, rather and it would have more explanatory power than government, economics, and history.

I mean, this guy was a big thinker and when he died, his colleague, Daniel Bell, another famous sociologist, wrote in the New York Times with a headline that said, Talcott Parsons, colon, nobody's theories were bigger and he thought he could, in one theory, encapsulate all of the social scientists, all the social sciences.

So he was the ringleader and one of the most famous, as I said, sociologists and theorists in the United States and in the world.

Others that also contributed greatly, there weren't so many of them and another one that comes to mind was David Riesman, who came to the department a little bit later, a famous sociologist who wrote still the best-selling sociology book in history called The Lonely Crowd.

which he published in the early 1950s.

He was on the cover of Time magazine in 1954.

He was a mentor of mine and in fact, he's the reason I published this book, because when he read my thesis, he said, you should publish this and so many decades later, I honored Professor Reisman's request by doing that and there were just so many professors in that group.

Clyde Kluckhohn, a very famous cultural anthropologist.

one of the first anthropologists to break away from what people call the stones and bones anthropology.

Anthropology previously had been a very archaeologically oriented discipline.

He brought in Freudian psychology to study the dreams of the Navajo Indians and he really helped push along with people like Margaret Mead, very famous anthropologist, not at Harvard, very famous.

So he was one of the professors who created, not created, but really promoted cultural anthropology as a discipline and there were just a number of others.

I could go on for more time than you have.

John: Sure.

Patrick: And then they also trained many, many great scholars that went on to do great work in their own right.

So that's a whole other discussion about the graduates from the department.

John: So they planted a lot of seeds, basically.

Patrick: Yes.

John: Including yourself.

Let me jump back to some of the, I guess, what's become questionable characters that came out of the department, Timothy Leary, for example, and his experimentation with LSD and was he doing LSD and psilocybin also, or is it psilocybin someone else? And the reason I'm asking is because it seems it's kind of come full circle.

Just full disclosure, I'm a combat vet, and now I've seen that the VA is actually looking into psilocybin as something that might actually be effective in treating PTSD.

So from, you know, this counterculture Timothy Leary to all the way back to, you know, was he right to begin with? Should he be given some credit now?

Patrick: Yes.

Well, I'll talk a little bit about Timothy Leary and then get on to your very good point about the current research.

Timothy Leary came to Harvard in 1959 as a mainstream psychologist.

He was studying personality psychology.

He was a clinical psychologist.

So he was looking at ways to help people in everyday life, as opposed to abstract sort of research and he was brought in to get, in the words of the man who brought him in, David McClellan, to get things going.

at Harvard and he did get things going, not quite in the way that Professor McClellan thought, because after his first year at Harvard, he went down to Mexico that summer and he tried the magic mushroom for the first time and this was a revelation to him.

He said it was a religious experience.

He believed that this was a future of helping mankind.

He was absolutely convinced that this could help people in so many different ways and when he came back to Harvard, he started the Harvard Psilocybin Project to study psilocybin and he basically got, it was impractical to give mushrooms to people.

So he was able to get the synthetic drug, a company called Sandoz was able to synthesize the drug.

He wrote him a letter on Harvard Stationary saying, hey, I'd like, could I get some of this for my research? And they said, sure and they sent him a huge batch of it, which he used for years, giving it out to various people.

So that's how he, and he became very controversial at Harvard because he was giving this to his, first of all, he wasn't a medical doctor.

I mean, you know, let's get that out there and he was giving the drugs to students undergraduates and graduate students under very loose conditions and a lot of his fellow psychologists in this department were furious and they wanted to stop it and so there's this huge fight.

It really hurt the department because they were fighting all the time and Harvard said, oh, you've got to stop this or you've got to involve medical doctors and there was, it went on for 2 1/2 years because Harvard values academic freedom.

So there were a lot of people were saying, well, look, he's a Harvard professor.

He can research the way he wants.

We give people freedom to do this.

So there was this back and forth that went on for 2 1/2 years.

He was joined in this by his partner, Richard Alpert, who went on to become known as Ram Dass.

He became a guru of the spiritual movement, wrote a famous book called Be Here Now.

So Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert were really doing these experiments and giving drugs to students in these experiments and Alpert was giving drugs to students outside the experiments.

He was fired.

Timothy Leary just stopped showing up.

He was not fired.

He just stopped showing up.

So Harvard took his name off the payroll.

You know, that's what happened there.

John: Literally dropped out.

Patrick: Yes, Turn on, tune in and drop out.

That was his catchphrase.

But now getting back to your very interesting point, that 60 years later, just this past spring, Harvard started studying psilocybin again and through the medical school, though, and a project at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and it's called the Center for Neuroscience of Psychedelics.

They're even using the word psychedelics.

I mean, they're not even...

So Timothy Leary would find this all quite amusing that 60 years later, Harvard is coming around to studying it again.

Although I would say they're doing it in the right way by involving medical doctors and medical researchers and doing it within the medical school and Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley, New York University, Johns Hopkins, they're also doing this and you're exactly right.

I mean, one of the promising areas of research is to treat PTSD.

John: Yeah, no, I just, it was fascinating.

You know, I mean, I was a little kid in the 60s, and I remember hearing about Timothy Leary, and of course, he was part of popular culture even today.

So to see, kind of full circle of this use of psychedelics now for, I guess, as you pointed out, something that he originally thought was going to make a change for people.

Interesting stuff.

Okay, I don't want to focus on some of the crazy things here, but Henry Murray had a relationship with Theodore Kaczynski, who we all know as the Unabomber and I'll bring it up.

We've had another person on before who was an influence of Ted Kaczynski, and it's John Zerzan, who's an anarchist philosopher.

So it's always, whenever I see Ted Kaczynski come up somewhere, it's an interesting connection.

Tell us how Murray, influenced, talk about planting a bad seed, I guess.

How did that occur?

Patrick: Okay, well, first of all, it came to light that Henry Murray was doing this very traumatic three-year experiment on Ted Kaczynski.

It didn't come out until the 1990s, after Henry Murray had died and when the Unabomber was apprehended.

So at the time, it didn't really affect the department, except in retrospect, historically, it's another sort of black eye.

John: Right.

Patrick: Like the controversy with Timothy Leary, this was a department that was, you know, some people at Harvard thought it was a department where anything goes.

It was just too loose.

So just to put it in context of the timeline.

But again, in the same time frame as Timothy Leary in 1959, Ted Kaczynski got accepted at Harvard when he was 16 years old.

He was brilliant.

But he was very socially awkward, shy, had some issues adjusting and Henry Murray had been the chief psychologist for the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the CIA in World War II.

His special area of research was how do you break down spies under interrogation? How do you do a stressful interrogation that is so stressful the spies will give up their information.

John: Goodness.

Patrick: He kept doing that research at Harvard in the 1950s, except now he was doing it on students.

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Patrick: He would pick students that were either extremely confident, extremely well adjusted, or others that were on the other side, like Ted Kaczynski, and he and his colleagues handpicked Kaczynski for this three-year-long experiment and the basis of the experiment was that at first they were very friendly to these students and they would ask them to share their dreams, their thoughts, their hopes, their philosophy of life and they would go on for months just being pals with them, making them seem like they were the smartest kids at Harvard, you know, that what they had to say was so important.

But then they flipped the switch and then they started tearing them down.

How their ideas were stupid, they were stupid and were physically uncomfortable.

They would strap them in a chair, they would put lights on them like an interrogation and that was part of the stress they tried to inflict.

Now they went on for three years and his lawyers in the 1990s, after he was apprehended, asked Kaczynski, why did you keep going? Why did you keep returning if it was so awful? He said, well, I wanted to show them that I could take it and I am not saying that Henry Murray or Harvard created the Unabomber.

I'm just saying that this was an episode that was unfortunate, something that was, again, a black eye for the department.

Even Ted Kaczynski's brother, who had turned him in, stops short of blaming Harvard for creating his brother, but he does blame Harvard for unethically traumatizing his brother.

John: Yeah.

Patrick: You know, and in his cabin, he had very few personal effects in his cabin, but he did keep one article that was referencing the experiments.

So he kept this that whole, whole time.

So it was something that obviously affected him, affected him very much and I also would say that the experiment was done unethically because they didn't get the proper consent from Ted Kosinski's mother.

I mean, he was, by the time the experiment started, he was 17.

So Henry Murray sent a letter to his mother without explaining what the experiment was.

He just said something vague about, well, this is to help study man, so we can help mankind, some, very vague stuff, which was not at all true and his mother thought, oh, well, this, maybe they can help my son because, Teddy has got a lot of issues and these nice psychologists at Harvard, perhaps they can help him, which of course was very sad because Henry Murray was not helping Ted Kaczynski in any way, shape or form.

John: No, indeed.

As you put together your thesis and then ultimately this book, what would you say is the most surprising thing? And don't tell us if it's something you want to have people stumble across in the book, but what do you find to be one of the most interesting things that came out of your research into this book?

Patrick: Well, I would say a couple things.

First of all, I was just amazed at just how much intellectual ferment there was in the United States in mid-century, even before the war ended.

People were looking in all sorts of disciplines at new ways, new approaches.

In Harvard, maybe this was in starker relief because they had some of these particular professors.

So mid-century America in the social sciences was just a cauldron of ideas and people looking at all these different things and the enthusiasm about what the social sciences could do, how they could really help mankind.

I mean, these people were not shy at all.

I mean, they thought they could solve the world's problems.

I mean, they were coming up with things like modernization theory and area studies, which they could figure out, let's make the world modern and if we just do that, then all these countries will be like us and democratic and happy and peaceful.

They had all these big ideas and all sorts of directions.

So that to me was very, very exciting.

That just overall atmosphere of enthusiasm at the time was very exciting and then the department, the way it intersected with so many different aspects of U.S.

social, cultural, even political, history.

You bring in these big thinkers, and then of course you had the Timothy Leary episode and the episode at Harvard and at this department really kicked off the drug culture in the United States.

I mean, and the reason I say that is because before that controversy, before that scandal became a national story in the New York Times, the general public didn't know about psychedelic drugs.

John: Right.

Patrick: We didn't know about Second Dog of Drugs until the scandal with Timothy Leary at Harvard got in the New York Times, Life Magazine, Saturday Evening Post, about five other magazines.

All of a sudden, boom, it was out there.

So when I say this department and the controversy with Timothy Leary kicked off the drug culture, I mean it.

I don't think that's an exaggeration.

John: Wow.

So American media.

by proxy that is also responsible for the psychedelic drug culture in the 60s and 70s.

Interesting.

Okay.

All right.

So this is an academic question and so Professor Parsons was trying to do a unified theory of social sciences.

Correct.

Okay.

So I'd be remiss.

I'm a Cornell grad.

So how did Yuri Bronfenbrenner's idea of human ecology differ from what Parsons was looking at? Or is he sort of one of these guys who was on the boat with Parsons? And if you're not familiar with it, then great.

If you have an opinion, I'm willing to hear it.

Patrick: Well, I'm not familiar with his work, but I'm going to go look at it right now.

His name didn't come up in my review of Parsons' work.

But Parsons, of course, was, he was out there on his own and his guiding lights were Weber and even Freud and others.

But I'm unfamiliar with the professor you cited, although I'm going to go sort of look at it right as soon as we finish.

John: This is no Ivy League rivalry thing, so.

Yeah, Yuri Bronfenbrenner was out of Cornell, and that was kind of his, I guess, that department was much less spectacular in its social impact than the one at Harvard and as you talked about Parsons, it brought to mind that this concept of human ecology, it isn't just the mind, it isn't just your social interaction, it's, you know, it's not your genetics, it's everything.

brought together that forms the human entity.

Patrick: That is very relevant to the way that Parsons and the others who started the department, because when they distilled down what they were trying to do, they would say, we want to study man as he functions in society, meaning everything.

So this holistic approach that you're referring to is very much what they were after.

John: Yeah and for all I know, he was influenced by what Parsons was doing, and it was as an offshoot of that.

So this department saw its decline and end in the early 70s.

What prompted that?

Patrick: There were several things.

First of all, the fact that they were never able to come up with this theory to unify the disciplines.

They tried, they got a lot of money from the Carnegie Corporation in the early 50s.

to try to come up with a theory, because they didn't have one before they started the department.

They had these ideas, but they had no concrete theory.

They got all this money from the Carnegie Foundation, spent three years trying to write it.

They did publish a book, but they failed.

It didn't work.

So after that, it was really just like mini departments within one umbrella, multidisciplinary as opposed to interdisciplinary.

The psychologists did their thing, sociologists did their things, the anthropologists did their things and Harvard kind of let that go because it was full of superstars and inertia.

So it was, but it was very cumbersome, you know, because the psychologists had their little department and they would meet together, but then they would have to all meet as a group with the others and it was just a nightmare administratively.

That was a big problem and after a time, the younger professors coming into Harvard, who didn't even know about the origins of the department, they were looking around and saying, well, why is this so strange? Why do we have this? And the job market also never changed.

The rest of the academy was still organized, psychology, sociology, anthropology.

So the job market was Harvard was out of sync with the job market.

If you were a graduate of this department, you sort of had to explain yourself.

Oh yeah, I got this degree, but I'm really a psychologist.

So that's, if you're looking for a psychologist, you've come to the right guy.

But they had to explain.

Even though it was, you had a degree from Harvard, that was great.

You still had some explaining to you about your background.

So that, you had all those types of problems and then you also had these controversies that divided the faculty, starting with Timothy Leary.

People just kind of got fed up with each other, liberal versus conservative and that became an issue in 1969 because the Students for Democratic Society hijacked one of the department's biggest courses and this caused a real problem at Harvard and in this department and that was sort of the one of the final nails in the coffin, if you will, because it split the faculty so badly on political grounds.

The conservatives versus, and Harvard at that time was, as was Cornell and other places, Columbia, Berkeley, it was already a firestorm going on and then you had this course where the social relations unwittingly gave permission to the Students for Democratic Society to run one of their courses and it was a, and the course was dedicated to proselytizing to convert students to radical politics.

They didn't make any points about it and there is some evidence that the course played a role in the takeover of University Hall, which was the big event that spring of 1969 at Harvard, where the students threw out the dean, or assistant dean, and took over the administrative building and yet the governor had to call in the National Guard to get rid of the students and so this controversy about this course, social relations, was one of the final straws for a lot of the faculty that were more conservative.

They said, look, I can't be in this department anymore with these people who tolerate this sort of nonsense in academia and the sociologists were the first to leave.

They said, we're out of here.

We want to go back.

We want to have our own department.

We went out and they got out and once they got out, then the whole thing fell apart.

John: It's an interesting parallel, I think, if we look at the way politically conservatives are attacking the academy in general today as just being a woke incubator for people.

It seems that that's happening on a large scale for academia in general.

What are your thoughts?

Patrick: This is just something that's kind of always been there, the conservative versus liberal divide, if you will and I think it's even more stark now and partly because there are people that are fanning these flames and I think making even more of it than there is, for example, taking the term woke, which was about racial justice and now it's a pejorative term somehow, you know, twisting things around and the media, of course, with social media, which we didn't have back then, fans the flames even more.

Now people are talking about critical race theory.

They don't even know what it is.

They're throwing around the word woke in ways that far removed from what it actually means.

But I think social media is playing the role in, as I said, fanning the flames, making these issues even bigger than they had been.

I mean, who knows if they had social media back in the 70s, what that would have been like, that would have been.

John: Yeah, my goodness.

We've now seen how quickly it's taken on life in our current century.

I suppose if leaflets could have been distributed as easily as tweets, you might have seen something very similar back then.

Patrick: Yes.

John: The book is Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of New Science, the Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations, and the author is Patrick L. Schmidt.

Patrick, where can people find this book?

Patrick: It can be found at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, indiebound.org, and also my website, which is patrickschmidtauthor.com and Schmidt is spelled SCH.

M-I-D as in David, T as in Tom and that also has the links to where the book can be found.

John: And for our listeners, we'll make sure we have Patrick's website as part of the podcast, and you can just link straight up to his website and find more information about him and his books.

Patrick, any final thoughts today?

Patrick: Well, thank you very much for having me.

It's been a great, interesting discussion for me and final thoughts, I would just say to universities that are thinking of doing an interdisciplinary department or institute, they should think very carefully as to whether they really have something that's truly interdisciplinary or are they just using sort of a buzzword, if you will, to pursue something that they haven't fully thought through?

John: Good advice and thank you so much for joining us today.

For Radio Free Galisteo, I'm John Shannon.

The Ted K Archive

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