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

When Harvard University decided to combine anthropology, sociology and social psychology, they opened up a Pandora's box of problems.

Tim Brinkhof

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Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science (Rowman & Littlefield) by Patrick L. Schmidt

Harvard, a place of tradition and legacy, does not take kindly to proposals for major organisational restructuring. Yet, in 1946, a group of scholars did just that when they received permission to combine the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and social psychology into a single department. The birth, life and death of this department, called the Department of Social Relations, are described in detail in Patrick L. Schmidt's new book *Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science*.

It is no coincidence that Social Relations opened its doors after the Second World War, a conflict whose origins and implications Harvard's "Big Three" – the disciplines of history, economics and government – struggled to explain. Social Relations not only copied an interdisciplinary model already in use at other Ivy Leagues, but also gave faculty the freedom to pursue emerging theories and areas of study that were not receiving adequate attention inside their respective departments.

The department of psychology was especially narrowminded in this regard. Prior to the establishment of Social Relations, psychology at Harvard was dominated by experimental psychologists. They were called "experimental" not because they were interested in exploring uncharted territory, but because they wanted to study the human mind through observable behaviour only, pushing professors Henry Murray and Gordon Allport – interested in invisible mental processes – to join Social Relations.

Schmidt captures the intellectual drama that accompanied the development of the department. Conflicts of interest or ideas are thoroughly explained and livened up with quotes from faculty. Especially memorable is the recollection of Allport's awkward meeting with Sigmund Freud, whose fixation with the unconscious bothered him almost as much as Harvard's focus on behaviour.

In theory, Social Relations was meant to be an interdisciplinary program. In practice, it was more multidisciplinary, with students and teachers sticking to their primary disciplines. One of the department's founders, sociologist Talcott Parsons, wrote *Towards a General Theory of Social Action* in an attempt to unify the discipline, and create

"social relations" as a new science, but the social psychologists in the department remained unconvinced, as did many sociologists.

Why write a book about a failed intellectual project? Firstly, because of what was achieved along the way. Internal division did not stop the Department of Social Relations from delivering outstanding scholarship. As the Iron Curtain dropped, the department's Russian Research Center provided Washington with intel on the Soviet Union. Led by anthropologist and Social Relations founder Clyde Kluckhohn, the centre studied all aspects of Soviet life to determine how it would respond to attacks from the American military. Scholars say it showed research can be politically motivated while still being academically sound.

Social Relations disintegrated in the early 1970s when anthropology, sociology and social psychology were once again separated into their own departments. This was due in part to a PR crisis which ensued after professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass) gave psilocybin and mescaline to undergraduates as part of their Harvard Psychedelic Project, promoting drug use on university grounds and establishing themselves as counterculture icons.

At the time, the Leary-Alpert scandal damaged Social Relations' credibility in the academic world. Today, with attitudes towards psychedelics changing and research into their medical and mental benefits resuming, the project's legacy is being reassessed. Equally controversial upon its inception – and retrospectively ahead of its time – was a 1968 course called Social Change in America, which examined imperialism, race and labour amid mounting student protests against the Vietnam War.

Schmidt's book is not only an instructive story of intellectual hubris and academic scandal. It also offers insight into ongoing debates over education, knowledge, power and progress. The author's biography might seem unusual, as he is neither a historian nor a social scientist, but an attorney in Washington D.C. However, he was present on the scene, having written his honours thesis at Harvard on the history of Social Relations, just after the department's demise. The Social Relations department might have approved, given their open-minded approach to hiring people. For example, in 1959, the faculty welcomed David Riesman, a former lawyer who'd entered academia through the virtue of his independent research. He went on to a fellowship at Yale where he wrote *The Lonely Crowd*, considered to be a landmark study of American character.

In the case of *Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science*, the unorthodox approach has borne fruit. Through meticulous research and compelling writing, Schmidt has taken a set of dry, inaccessible institutional records and turned them into a gripping intellectual drama. Best of all, he's managed to do so without sensationalising his subject or shying away from semantics. A must-read for anyone interested in how educational systems are developed and their effect on the way we view the world.

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