

CHAPTER 4

Fourth perspective: multi- and interdisciplinarity

In the previous chapters we have seen that the student of International Studies must learn to navigate the 3-D chessboard of the local, the national and the global. Traditionally, these three dimensions are also represented by different academic disciplines: Anthropology to study the local, Sociology and Political Science to study the national, International Relations to study the global. To this we may add the multiple disciplines that are represented by the 3-I's: *Interests* are studied by disciplines like Economics and Political Science; *Ideas* by Religious Studies, Philosophy, Arts and Literature, Law, History; *Identity* by Cultural Anthropology, Linguistics, Area Studies. How to navigate this multitude of disciplinary approaches?

Multi- and inter-disciplinarity

Academic disciplines tend to highlight a particular angle of a situation. For instance, people may fight each other because of a lack of resources (that is a typical economical perspective), or because they dislike each other (that would interest anthropologists), because the other has customs that are considered blasphemous (Religious Studies), because the other is breaking rules (that's how lawyers look at it) or because leaders have whipped up their people with inflammatory rhetoric (Communication Studies and Linguistics). International Studies wants to provide a framework of study that enables the student to use as many academic perspectives as are needed to understand a particular global complexity. Ideally speaking, the perspectives of as many different disciplines as possible should be represented in the study of this one topic, but even the combination of two or three disciplines will already yield more and newer insights than the use of a single discipline.

Combining two or more disciplines is called the **multidisciplinary** approach. This is beneficial to reaching a better understanding of the issue at hand, but it also poses a challenge to the student because it adds to the already complex 3-D chessboard that is International Studies. Not only does one need to zoom in and out from the individual to the global level and back, and to move from one place on the globe to another; one also may have to switch from one academic discipline to another. The academic scholar specialized in one discipline will scoff at this approach: it is too much and will therefore harm the quality and detail of the research. That may be true. But what the International Studies student will be able to do that the specialist cannot, is to connect the dots across various geographical

and disciplinary areas, which may result in a better understanding of global complexities than a mono-disciplinary specialist will be able to assess.

Another approach that some scholars advocate is to take the elements of various disciplines and merge them in a new, coherent framework that is tailor-made for the study of the issue at hand. This is known as the **interdisciplinary** approach. This requires a high degree of knowledge of the academic disciplines that one intends to synthesize. Most researchers, however, remain in their mono-disciplinary field, and if they venture into multidisciplinary research, they usually do so by cooperating with colleagues of different disciplines to jointly study the issue at hand, each from their own disciplinary angle.

Multi-disciplinarity is the use of more than one discipline to understand the issue at hand. **Inter-disciplinarity** is the mixing of more than one discipline, thereby creating hybrid disciplines that provide new perspectives on the issue at hand. Since disciplines have become specialized fields of study, each with its own terminology and methodologies, it is relatively easier to use a multi-disciplinary approach (which only requires that the student has mastered the selected disciplines or cooperates with those who have mastered them) than to create a new and academically sound interdisciplinary approach.

Theory and methodology

Every discipline in Humanities has developed its own set of methodologies and theories. A **theory** offers an explanation of what we observe. Theories do not represent truths but provide ways of understanding. Neither are theories scientific laws that accurately describe, determine and predict how things work. The more accurate a theory is in explaining events, and the wider the range of situations that the theory can be applied to, the more valid it will be considered.

Different disciplines may ask different questions and therefore develop different theories. For instance, if one is to study the demonstrations in Hong Kong against Chinese rule in 2019, does one look at it from a political, sociological, international, cultural, media, or other perspective? Framing theory can be helpful when taking the political perspective, social movement theory when taking a sociological perspective, Orientalism when taking the perspective of Western media coverage, post-colonialism when viewing the situation in the context of Hong Kong as a former British colony. Not all theories are valid to a particular case: it is up to the student to select the one that is most helpful in understanding the issue at hand.

Theories are explanations of what we observe. These explanations are not hard truths ('this is so') but offer degrees of plausibility ('this could be understood in that way'). A theory will be considered more valuable if it is a) simple in its premises, b) proven accurate in its use, and c) applicable to more than one situation.

A **methodology** describes the manner in which research is carried out. It first involves the selection of period, actors and data. For instance, in the case of the 2019 demonstrations in Hong Kong against Chinese rule, should we study the Chinese government or the Hong Kong demonstrators, or perhaps the international media, the local police force, the parents of the demonstrators or the Hong Kong media? And is the data for the research collected by means of interviewing the main stakeholders, or going through newspaper articles or court records, or cataloging graffiti and slogans, or checking posts on social media, or perhaps a combination of these? Once these determinations have been made, the student needs to select the appropriate academic method by which to collect and interpret this information. For instance, Literature Studies have methodologies to interpret and understand written texts and oral presentations, Anthropology has elaborated methodologies to collect information from people (by means of interviews, participating observation, autobiographical research, etc.), History focuses on primary sources that are the written and oral sources of the actors themselves. The main purpose of these methodologies is to build a research approach that leads to an understanding of the research topic that is comprehensive, balanced and unbiased and, most importantly, that leads to information that is verifiable – in other words, information that can be checked and would yield the same outcome if it were to be repeated by others.

In the course of working in various disciplines and with various theories and methodologies, the student of International Studies will also be confronted with various **epistemologies**. This stands for the systems and processes of knowledge that are typical to a particular religious, cultural or political environment that the student is studying. The Western academic environment, for instance, has its own epistemology which is based on a rational system of deductive reasoning, with a focus on the individual, and a division between the religious and the secular spheres. Confucian or Islamic epistemologies, to name two other examples, may use very different paradigms. For instance, the divine is an intricate part of Islamic thinking, and the collective is central to Confucian thinking. Different epistemologies may therefore give very different outlooks on the same topic of study.

Epistemology is the approach to knowledge and how to arrive at it. A particular religious, cultural, or political environment can have its own epistemology, each with its own foundations, methods, and truth validation.

The challenge for the student of International Studies is to find ways through the myriads of epistemologies, theories and methodologies. The student should bear in mind that methods and theories are tools that are meant to make research easy, not to complicate the student's life as a researcher. The standards set by academic disciplines may sometimes appear as straightjackets or restrictive molds, but they are merely guidelines to come to research results that are academically sound. At the same time, the student of International Studies should keep in mind that the goal is to understand the 3-D dynamics of the topic of study, which requires a broader view than most other fields of study require.

Further reading

- Stanley R. Barrett, *Anthropology: A Student's Guide to Theory and Method*, University of Toronto Press, 2009
- Willem B. Drees, *What are the Humanities for?*, Cambridge University Press, 2021
- Jeffrey Thomas Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux, Chapters 1 ('Why Theory?'), 2 ('Author/ity'), 4 ('Subjectivity'), in: *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012
- Cathy Nutbrown and Peter Clough, *A Student's Guide to Methodology*, Sage Publications, 2012 (3rd edition)