

The compartmentalisation of social science: What are the implications?

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IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE OF *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, editor-in-chief Kerstin Stenius referred to the idea that by looking at society through the lens of alcohol [and drugs] one can uncover general societal conditions and mechanisms and pin down contemporary social change (Stenius, 2015, p. 243). This made me very happy, as it is such a strong argument for the social science study of substance use and policy in the Nordic countries. In fact, I think almost all Nordic researchers in this area of research may at some point have employed this argument in applications and manuscripts when discussing the general relevance of their work. And rightly so: we can be very pleased with the length and breadth of perspectives and expertise that the field possesses and represents.

As a field, we have the right to claim our space in the theorising of our root disciplines, demonstrating how our work can serve society as a whole. We should be better at this. Every once in a while we should ask ourselves to what extent we acknowledge and understand general trends, tides and zeitgeists. To what extent are we, by our academic peers in other thematic areas, viewed as part of the development of general social theory? Based on my own experience during the past five years as an externally funded university researcher in Finland, I am afraid that I am inclined to answer “increasingly little” to all of these questions. But before going into the reasons for this, I would like to make the distinction between basic and applied science, as it is such an important distinction for understanding our field of research.

Roll-Hansen (2009) describes the difference between basic and applied science as that between science and politics as social institutions:

Science is dedicated to managing and increasing knowledge of general validity, and basic research is its dynamic element. The role of politics is to produce agreement, decisions and collective action. Applied science can roughly be understood as the area of intersec-

tion between science and politics. It depends highly on advanced scientific knowledge and methods but is dedicated to the solution of practical economic, social and political problems rather than the further development of such knowledge and methods. (Roll-Hansen, 2009, p. 2).

Roll-Hansen (2009) argues that it is important to make this distinction because it is more profitable for the development of both forms of research. I tend to agree. Our work can serve both special interests and society at large, it can be both basic and applied at the same time. But we are better equipped to draw on both paradigms once we have recognised, understood and named them. Also, when basic science is of great practical or political value, or when applied science achieves general validity and recognition in general theorisation, this can be observed and appreciated for what it is.

The applied side of knowledge production is well covered in alcohol and drug research, even dominating the field. I suspect that this domination has become greater still in recent years, detaching the field further from its social science root disciplines such as sociology, social work and political science. In Finland and recently in Norway, alcohol and drug research has moved closer to the public health field also in a structural sense, being integrated in or merged with national bodies of public health. This is why we

should scrutinise the role of sector research¹ and its ability to integrate and interact with basic research. This could be an indicator of something beyond the ability to come up with solutions to specific practical problems, namely of how good we are in discovering new phenomena and new ideas of general interest.

There is tremendous goodwill and good intentions among Nordic alcohol and drug researchers in sectoral research to uphold active contacts and interaction with basic research and teaching conducted in higher education environments. Still, there may be reason to be concerned over this relationship getting increasingly watered down – a concern that was, for example, raised during the Nordic alcohol and drug researchers' assembly (NADRA) in Stockholm in 2014 and which was specifically expressed in fears of an inability to incorporate new theorisation. Sector research and the basic general core disciplines are gliding apart due to increased demands and competition. While these demands are shaped slightly differently, they have in both types of settings resulted in a trend of *compartmentalisation*.

In the social science root disciplines, the theoretical platform has grown tremendously dense with age, scope and rapid societal changes, and also simply because critical research is an institutionalised mode of knowledge production. At the same time, competition has increased and academics have become less mobile between thematic fields. The thematic

1 By sector research I refer to institutions and centres that are appointed or secured by government (to different extents and in different types of settings) to conduct research and development in the fields of addiction/alcohol/drug research.

compartments have become narrower and narrower in focus: instead of a gathering of general sociology of health, there are likely to be research networks on gene testing, nutrition, health systems, etc., and these hardly communicate between themselves. Also, the increasingly specialised narrow compartments compete in general value and sovereignty for relevance in understanding society at large.

What worries me somewhat is that alcohol, drug and/or addiction research has not managed to acquire an established tag and compartment in the system, and has thus not been able to claim a position in the general disciplinary movements. I would like to think that this is because it is such a dynamic field with such a general scope that one is able to move freely between compartments. But if this is the case I reckon it will be increasingly harder to do so in the future.

While the general academic disciplinary fields are getting thematically more compartmentalised, the sector-based alcohol/drug/addiction research field has become a compartment of its own, setting off towards its problem-formulated and praxis-oriented horizon with public health and cognitive sciences as good travel companions. This is an institutionalised research paradigm that struggles with public and governmental pressure for quick deliverables and accountability; challenges to public confidence in service provision; and cost pressures on health and welfare spending. All of this easily results in a situation characterised by evidence-based orthodoxy (see Burton & Chapman, 2004). In the background lingers the “problem formulation” which can be distilled down to “people do things that are bad, un-

healthy, harmful and costly for society”. Because they need to deal with a temporal setting (“this problem right here and now must be solved”), researchers are forced to concentrate on estimating and eliminating risks for decision- and policy-makers. In the wake of public administration cuts, ministries no longer have the labour force to prepare legislation and oversee its implementation, so they turn to researchers in sector research institutes to do this. The contractor requests that research should quickly provide them with evidence of the best way to proceed in consideration of a changing political agenda. Naturally, this request will never demand a ten-year project on larger societal developments and trends, with thick theoretical monographs as a result.

In Finland, national research and development institutes are shrinking in size, and university researchers are externally funded. Instead of investing in permanent research professionals, strategic research programmes in areas such as inequality, globalisation and innovation in welfare production are announced for everybody to apply for. Researchers are required to hook up with actors both in the public domain and business life in order to be enough sensitive to needs in society. There is, however, no apparent research establishment for the strategy projects to land in: all funds will be used for contracting short-term employees, who look into the selected questions both in institutes and universities. Such short-term appointments – which already are one of the greatest weaknesses in the Finnish research funding system – further fragments and specialises knowledge production. For strategic research programmes to ac-

tually work and produce meaningful and valuable knowledge, it matters less if the researchers are placed in universities or in research institutes. What is more crucial is guaranteeing the autonomy – and time – that is necessary to plan, set up and complete a research project. This is simply not possible in the structurally compartmentalised and fragmented contexts of contemporary knowledge production.

Whether we are associated with basic or applied knowledge production, we may ask what these different yet related trends of compartmentalisation will lead to in the field of social alcohol and drug research.

Some time ago I heard an art historian say that a good indicator of whether you are contemplating an art work by an amateur or by a professional is that while the former will be adding detail after detail, the latter may do the same but will never lose track of the composition and entirety of the work. I am afraid that both basic and applied research have been taken over by attention to detail. There is neither time nor other resources for work beyond them. All stages of knowledge production have, in the compartmentalised format, become so advanced and complicated that the career achievement of scholars risks becoming that of an amateur artist: a pile of small papers, articles, reports, thematic units

that are stuck in a “repeat mode”. In this text I have tried to take a step back and see the larger picture. Sadly, I associate the developments with a scene from the film *Madagascar* (2005), where zoo animals in cargo boxes are thrown from a ship into the ocean. The cargo boxes float apart in enormous high-running surges, while the animals sit in their separate boxes and do not have a clue of where they are or where they are going.

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