



# Sociology and psychology: What intersections?

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## Abstract

This article is the introduction to the special issue ‘Sociology and psychology: what intersections?’ In addition to presenting the articles included in this issue, the present text outlines the general stakes of interdisciplinarity between psychology and sociology. It argues that interdisciplinarity requires a specific conversion work between disciplines and that, in the particular case of sociology and psychology, importations and exportations of concepts and ideas have existed since the beginning of these disciplines.

## Keywords

interdisciplinarity, psychology, social psychology, sociology. sociology and psychology

What points of intersection can be found between sociological and psychological theories and practices? When are sociological and psychological conceptions compatible or contentious? What is interdisciplinarity about?

Valued by many funding organizations (Lyall et al., 2013; Rylance, 2015) and induced by the segmentation of academic fields in topics, ‘interdisciplinarity’ has become an often-uncontrolled focus point within the academic world. Indeed, the conditions under which research projects are interdisciplinary remain unclear, and often are more rhetorical than actual (Segal, 2005; Jacobs and Frickel, 2009). Are we doing interdisciplinary research when our research team includes scholars from different disciplinary fields? Are we producing interdisciplinary results when we analyze data with concepts from different horizons in the same paper? Do we practice interdisciplinary

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methodology when we combine methods from different traditions? As attractive as this word sounds – who is against the *principle* of interdisciplinarity?– *doing* interdisciplinary research nonetheless requires consequent theoretical reflection (Alvargonzález, 2011) and significant ‘conversion’ work between disciplines (Thoits, 1995; Lemieux, 2012). Beyond the apparent ease of combining various concepts and ‘layers’ of reality (the bio-psycho-social model), we shall consider the often incompatible epistemological worldviews that these concepts and ‘layers’ potentially entail.

## Sociology and psychology: dangerous liaisons

These questions are even more striking between disciplines whose research objects are made of the same materials, such as sociology and psychology. The continued schisms between sociology and psychology partly result from the history of these disciplines, as well as the institutional ways they have distinguished themselves from one another. This history has generated very different conceptions of human action, social conditioning, consciousness or normativity. For this reason, interdisciplinary liaisons are dangerous, in the sense that they threaten to erode disciplinary identities and epistemologies which have mainly been constituted through distinction and opposition. Even within supposedly integrative fields, such as criminology, social work or management, these liaisons, in fact, looks more like juxtapositions or selections of one perspective than the result of well-elaborated and documented integration work.

The fact is that such interdisciplinary liaisons do not take place in a neutral social space: the binary opposition between the individual and society, which bases and is (re)produced by the disciplinary division between ‘the social’ and ‘the psychological’, mirrors the dominant psychology-driven representations of the self in contemporary societies (Porter, 1996). This point has been particularly well developed by Norbert Elias (1969), who emphasizes the double obstacle, corporatist and representational, to the crossing of boundaries between social sciences and psychiatry. To defend the position of their discipline in a competitive academic field, sociologists, like psychiatrists and other specialists in the field of psychology, tend to accentuate their specialization, and therefore to reproduce, in the sophisticated forms of the *Homo sociologicus* and *Homo psychiatricus*, the fictive opposition between ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’. Significantly, this opposition lies at the very foundation of the individualistic ideology of Western societies:

As expression of a specific type of self-experience, which is common in the more developed societies of our time, the sharp division between what goes on ‘within’ a person and what goes on ‘without’ is justified. As a factual statement about human beings, it is not . . . The notion of an invisible wall separating one individual from another, and the whole family of concepts based on the idea that the ‘essential’ self of one individual is hidden away ‘within’ from that of all others, are by no means shared by men of all human societies . . . Small children have no ‘walls’ of this kind, or, to be more precise, no self-experience of such walls. Nor do they grow as part of men’s nature automatically. (Elias, 1969: 128)

Historicizing forms of self-consciousness has enabled Elias to pursue the dialogue initiated in Germany, particularly around the Frankfurt School, between sociology and psychoanalysis (Joly, 2010). In an interview with the French historian Roger Chartier, Elias points out that ‘without Freud, [he] couldn’t have written what [he] wrote’, and that ‘[Freud’s] theory has been essential for [his] work . . . , all his concepts (ego, super-ego, libido, etc.) [being] very familiar to [him]’ (Chartier and Elias, 2000: 4; our translation). But he also emphasizes that the psychological structures discovered by Freud, allowing us to consider ‘the human being as a process’ (see also Elias, 2010), are socially and historically situated:

Freud, throughout his life, studied the men and women who lived at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and, in the manner of the natural sciences, forged his concepts as if the structure of personality was that of all human beings . . . He actually gave universal value to a given type and dated personality structures. (Chartier and Elias, 2000: 4; our translation)

More recently, extending the reflection on these historical processes of psychologization, Nikolas Rose’s Foucauldian reading of the history of psychology suggests that, if the twentieth century can be considered ‘the century of psychology’ in the West, it is not only because of the legitimacy of psychology as a certified profession and academic discipline, but because it has made up the kind of society that we inhabit, and the kinds of people we have become:

Human beings in these regions came to understand themselves as inhabited by a deep interior psychological space, to evaluate themselves and to act upon themselves in terms of this belief. They came to speak of themselves in terms of a psychological language of self-description – the language of intelligence, personality, anxiety, neurosis, depression, trauma, extroversion and introversion and to judge themselves in terms of a psychological ethics. This was not just a process of individualization: we also witnessed a psychologization of collective life, the invention of the idea of the group, large and small, of attitudes, public opinion and the like. (Rose, 2008: 447)

In addition and in relation to influencing how the social works, any psychological theory relies more or less explicitly on a (somehow performative) conception of how the social works (Ravon, 2006). This is why monitoring this conception of the social through time is of theoretical importance. By focusing on the history of social psychology in the United States, John D. Greenwood (2004) describes the gradual abandonment, since the 1930s, of a sociological conception of the ‘social’, rooted in *collective representations* (following Wilhelm Wundt or Émile Durkheim), for an impoverished conception of the ‘social’ reduced to the ‘*external*’ influence of individual attitudes by groups or others. The attitudes themselves, and the psychological processes that underlie them, are considered universal and historical invariants. This conception of the ‘social’, which, according to Greenwood, was in line with the attachment of most social psychologists to the (individualistic) values of autonomy and rationality, is only prolonged by the more recent and growing pre-eminence of biological and evolutionary models. While the

twenty-first century will probably be the century of neuroscience (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013), whose claim to be able to solve the mysteries of sociality – in particular, human cooperation (Tomasello, 2009) – may make sociology fear that it will definitely lose its authority over the definition of the ‘social’ (Ehrenberg, 2010), critical vigilance regarding the representations of individuality underlying commonly accepted disciplinary divisions is perhaps more important than ever.

In sum, not only do the boundaries between sociology and psychology rely on the *progressive differentiation* of epistemological conceptions regarding the self and the social, this also has a *performative effect*, generating confusion between research objects and research perspectives. This means that thinking within a discipline as well as interdisciplinary thinking, beyond mixing concepts and comparatively assessing research hypotheses, engages a political stance on what the social world is and should be. In this regard, the ‘politics of psychology’ (Prilleltensky, 1994) are a specific case because they are diffused not only in universities but through therapy (Haslam et al., 2018), where the increasing domination of cognitive-behavioral therapies symbolizes the dynamics of individualization that pervade contemporary Western societies (Dalal, 2018), promoting a rampant representation of ‘calculable minds and manageable individuals’ (Rose, 1988), whose motivation force would outweigh the burden of social structures.

## The variable links between sociologies and psychologies

A simple observation will serve to open the dialogue: sociology and psychology not only differ in approaches *between* each other, but also *within*. In this regard, an examination of these two disciplinary sets, with attention to their constituent diversity, shows that epistemological distances can be found inside and not only between them, opening the way to varied interdisciplinary configurations. This is shown, for example, by the work of Charles Camic (1995), comparing the local history and (inter)disciplinary ecology of three departments of sociology in the United States (Harvard, Columbia and Chicago) between 1890 and 1940. Camic argues that interdisciplinary links are made of locally and institutionally designed ‘interdisciplinary interactions’, contrasting the early University of Chicago, where disciplinary boundaries were not institutionally enforced, from others. Because, despite these practical and theoretical links, each disciplinary field produces a mythicized narrative of its own specificity, we consider that unpacking the classics constitutes a privileged way to open up interdisciplinary reflections.

Symbolic interactionism, as a main theoretical trend in sociology, and social psychology as a main theoretical trend in psychology, are deeply related since they share the same origins, such as Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead’s works, themselves influenced by pragmatist philosophers who ventured into psychology (William James) and education studies (James Dewey). Charles Cooley took the most radical position in this regard. He refused the distinction between sociology, social psychology and psychology in the same way he refused to study separately the ‘individual’ and ‘society’: ‘A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals’ (Cooley, 1992 [1902]: 36).

Interestingly, Cooley's legacy has both benefited from this cross-disciplinary perspective, he is considered a pioneer in sociology *and* in social psychology, but has also been partly forgotten in the politics of disciplinary distinction (Ruiz-Junco and Brossard, 2019).

Beyond symbolic interactionism, whose reputation is to be close to psychology, other theoretical trends have been developed upon more implicit links to psychology. This is particularly the case with Max Weber, whose 'social psychology' (Weber, 1946) has been little clarified (Spencer, 1979). The psychological motivations of human action are nevertheless crucial to Weberian sociology. What is called 'psychological rewards' (*psychologische Prämien*) in Stephen Kalberg's translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2001: xxix) aims to account for the role of 'salvation premiums' in religious conduct. Max Weber bases this reflection on his previous work on the 'psychophysics of industrial work' (Weber, 1924), in which he seeks to distinguish his theory from approaches to work performance relayed by the highly individualistic psychophysiology of work that was emerging during his time. Conducting observations in a textile factory, Weber underlines the high productivity of 'young women from a specific religious background, namely for women from Pietist homes' (Weber, 2001: 25). He then highlights the features of what is now commonly associated with 'Protestant ethics':

The capacity to focus one's thoughts in addition to an absolutely central element—the capacity to feel an 'internal dedication to the work'—are found here unusually frequently. Indeed, these qualities combine with an organized approach to economic activity that, on the one hand, calculates earnings and their maximum potential and, on the other hand, is characterized by a dispassionate self-control and moderation, all of which increase productive capacities to an unusual degree. The foundation for perceiving work as an end in itself, or a 'calling,' as modern capitalism requires, is here developed in a most propitious manner. (Weber, 2001: 25)

While symbolic interactionism and Weberian comprehensive sociology, as well as the historical sociology developed by Elias, may be considered the closest sociological theories to psychology, some other contemporary trends have strengthened their dissociation from psychological perspectives, such as feminist scholarship, their re-reading of classical psychological works (Matthis, 2004) and assessing how gender has been considered in psychology (Crawford and Marecek, 1989; Bohan, 1993). This takes the shape of a critical, retrospective assessment of the knowledge produced, raising questions, such as 'how to integrate women in psychology?' and later 'how to integrate a constructivist perspective to gender in psychology?' This is also the case of Marxist, post-Marxist and/or conflict theories. Despite its long history of discussion with psychoanalysis ('Freudo-Marxism'), Marxism has often been taken as an opposition to the psychological analysis of human actions, in favor of an emphasis on structures, inequalities and class conflicts: a radical interpretation defended by Karl Popper (1968) himself. However, one could argue that Marxism and post-Marxism contain an inherent social psychology, from the notions of alienation and commodity fetishism, that highlights the psychological permeability of human minds to modes of production and, in turn, their effect on modes of

production, to more recent concepts, such as immaterial work (Lazzaratto's (1996) notion of immaterial work), which also emphasizes the mental dimension of social life. Contemporary scholars have shown the deeply embodied aspect of social structure and inequalities, one of the most striking examples being the 'intimate apartheid' that Bourgois and Schonberg (2007) identify in the ways that drugs users from various backgrounds differently experience drug-taking.

In other words, sociological theories often (and maybe necessarily) rely on postures regarding the self, the individual, the mind, or even the unconscious. Thus many commentators have noted that the most foundational approaches in sociology draw on – more or less explicit – psychological epistemologies. Among notable examples are theorists who have, what is more, been accused of sociologism, such as Talcott Parsons and his developments on 'Freud's contribution to the integration of psychology and sociology' (Parsons, 1958), or Émile Durkheim. The latter is known to have insisted, in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, on the need to break with all psychological reasoning: 'every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may rest assured that the explanation is false' (Durkheim, 1982: 129). In fact, in the French disciplinary ecology of the late nineteenth century, Durkheim was mainly opposed to two approaches. On the one hand, he opposed the naturalizing approach of many psychologists of his time, such as Théodule Ribot or Pierre Janet, who, discovering biology, studied the physiological causes of individual behavior to develop 'psychophysiology'. On the other hand, he refuted Gabriel Tarde's psychologizing approach, which, seeking to distance itself from psychophysiology, still explained social phenomena through individual mechanisms, the best known of which was probably imitation (Tarde, 1903). If the influence of Durkheimian sociology, which gradually eclipsed Gabriel Tarde's intellectual heritage, could explain the early rupture in France between sociology and psychology (Castellan, 1970), this reading neglects the complexity of Durkheim's relationship with psychology (Mucchielli, 1994). As Bruno Karsenti points out, Durkheimian sociology is defined

both against and within psychology... On the one hand, it must be distinguished from psychology, where individualistic reduction, the fundamental epistemological risk for the objective determination of social facts, is threatening. On the other hand, it is violently reduced to it, since it is essentially as a mental phenomenon that the social fact asserts itself as an active phenomenon, capable of effectively determining individual ways of being. (1995: 301; our translation)

Considering that individual consciousness can only be explained by collective representations, Durkheim described his sociology as a particular form of 'social psychology' (Durkheim, 2005: 276) or 'sociopsychology' (Durkheim, 1984: 286). This sociopsychological program, which Bernard Lahire claims to be part of in this special issue, grandly inspired French sociology, from Maurice Halbwachs to Pierre Bourdieu, whose links to psychoanalysis (De Gaulejac, 2011; Steinmetz, 2014; Darmon, 2016; Mauger, 2017) and cognitive developmental psychology (Bronckart and Schurmans 1995; Dimaggio, 2002; Lizardo, 2004; Lignier and Mariot, 2013), via the concept of habitus, have been extensively discussed. In the second half of the twentieth century, this program was also

rediscovered by a group of social psychologists, who, attentive to social representations, saw in Émile Durkheim their founding father (Moscovici, 1988). They then paved the way for more general reflections on the contribution of sociologists to a sociological psychology (Doise and Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1989).

As these various examples show, sociological interdisciplinarity is not exactly the cutting-edge approach advertised in many contemporary research projects, at least on paper, but a long-term principle structuring the practical construction of knowledge, albeit set aside by distinction mechanisms proper to disciplinary narratives. In other words, the history of social and psychological perspectives show that importations and exportations, far from being exceptional, stand at the core of our disciplinary canons.

### Three questions

Therefore, it is not exactly as if we need to ‘reconcile’ perspectives separated by overwhelming rifts. We need less a reconciliation, then, than to refine two types of missing links. First, we need to organize knowledge regarding what is considered ‘individual’, ‘psychological’ and ‘sociological’ or ‘social’. What do these notions exactly mean? A research project underway,<sup>1</sup> which aims at deciphering the various conceptions of what is ‘social’ in mental health-related publications, shows that ‘social’ has at least thirteen different meanings: ‘social’ media as opposed to ‘in-person communication’, ‘social’ stigmatization as opposed to ‘self’-stigmatization, ‘social’ services as opposed to ‘mental health’ services, ‘social’ factors as opposed to ‘individual’ factors, ‘social’ representations as opposed to ‘scientific’ representations, ‘social emotions’ (empathy) as opposed to self-related emotions, and so forth. How to make sense of and organize these notions, especially the rather fictive distinction between self-related and social phenomena? Second, we need to struggle against the myth of self-evident interdisciplinarity, criticized at several points in this introduction, according to which it suffices to bring various conceptions together, independently of their epistemological universes of production, to make an interdisciplinary approach. We observe a lack of ‘conversion work’ (Lemieux, 2012) in contemporary theory, and this special issue is a call to consider this argument.

We thus propose to address three questions. First, *how and with what epistemological precautions can we transgress disciplinary boundaries?* This question is exemplified, in the present issue, by the article by sociologist Bernard Lahire, who advocates a new ‘psychological sociology’. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu, Lahire first developed this ambition through the study of individuals who are statistical ‘exceptions’ – pupils from working-class backgrounds who were successful at school (Lahire, 1993). Elaborating on this approach, Lahire progressively developed a sociology ‘at the scale of the individual’, a contribution that contradicts the cliché, according to which, centering on individuals and their interiority does not fit most epistemological standards in social sciences. Lahire explains the theoretical foundations of his perspective, tracing its inspirations back to Aristotle and Hume, clarifying the relationship between this sociological program and psychological and cognitive sciences. Such theoretical elaboration illustrates the depth of conceptual work required to transgress the boundaries of one’s disciplines, here through a return to the philosophical origins of psychological and sociological perspectives. Indeed, unveiling those common roots, going back to the

Greeks, allows the primary questions upon which generations of scholars have worked and built disciplinary fields to be rediscovered.

The second question is: *how and with what epistemological precautions can we develop cross-disciplinary theoretical, conceptual and methodological importations?* These importations and exportations give rise to the problem of ‘conversion processes’ (Lemieux, 2012), which would make the use of psychological concepts epistemologically valid in a social science research setting, and vice versa. Two articles in this issue directly address this challenge.

On the one hand, psychologists Douglas E. Sperry, Peggy J. Miller and Linda L. Sperry aim to renew developmental psychology through a cultural approach which necessitates the importation of qualitative and quantitative methods from anthropology and the social sciences. They promote ‘ethnographic psychology’ (Miller et al., 2003), deviating from the usual ways of studying children in developmental psychologists: experiments whose results are mathematically analyzed. Experimental approaches, they argue, often forget the social contexts that, beforehand, have shaped the studied behaviors. In the same way as Lahire, they note the complexities of interdisciplinary importations and exportations. However, they reflect on a prominent countervailing example of a failure to bridge disciplines: the supposed 30 million word ‘gap’ in the verbal environments of poor children, compared to their more affluent peers. They propose an interpretation of the reasons for this failure in order to present the results of a project that combined qualitative methods (archived ethnographic data) and quantitative methods (word counts) to challenge ‘the gap’.

On the other hand, based on an ethnographic study of the socialization of children, sociologist Wilfried Lignier presents an attempt to link Bourdieu’s sociology and Vygotsky’s cultural psychology. Lignier advances that sociological perspectives to embodiment risk downplaying the structuring role of symbolic realities throughout the socialization processes. He sees the seminal work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky as a way of solving this problem, paying attention to how individuals constantly integrate their socio-historical context, by using individually the symbolic tools this context provides in their everyday lives. Lignier argues that this theoretical combination could lead to a significant contribution to contemporary understandings of the process of socialization, both sociological and psychological.

Finally, this issue intends to address a third question: *how can we make interdisciplinary criticisms constructive?* This question implies considering and assessing the implementation of interdisciplinary research programs, which often give rise to epistemological tensions between professionals across different disciplinary backgrounds.

Thus, sociologist Amy Chandler describes the ‘curious disconnects’ between and within psychology and sociology in the interdisciplinary emerging field of suicidology. She notes that, although suicidology is indebted to Durkheim’s *Le Suicide*, contemporary suicidology is dominated by clinical, quantitative methods that dismiss the sociological aspects of suicide. To deepen this observation, Chandler focuses on some studies, by both sociological and psychological researchers, of the relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and suicide. Identifying the differences, incompatibilities and



coherences between perspectives, she outlines a potential site for mutual engagement for a psychologically engaged sociology, and a sociologically engaged psychology.

Finally, observing the spread of neurosciences in an increasing number of research areas and its consequences on the ‘making up’ of subjects (Hacking, 2002), sociologist Matt Wade discusses the epistemological and practical conditions under which collaborations between neurosciences and social sciences may be relevant. Wade studies three cases of ‘pragmatic collisions of interdisciplinary actors,’ and their position regarding the epistemological validity of these initiatives – criticizing in particular the socio-historically blinkered perspective of the second. He concludes by highlighting the extensive potentiality of this rapprochement with the neurosciences.

To conclude, this special issue aims to show how the making of sociology-psychology interdisciplinarity does not simply consist in juxtaposing ‘individual’ and ‘social’ aspects. Rather, it interrogates the epistemological and methodological conditions of some disciplinary intersections, in a way that especially reinforces sociology as a discipline able to discuss psychology’s tools and research objects.


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