

Interdisciplinarity

Michael 2006;3:53–4.

This issue of *Michael* draws attention to a problem which in no way is new to any scholar: Interdisciplinarity.

The problem comes to sight in different disguises. One of them deals with the objects for study, e.g. in the social sciences, where a process might be so complicated and context-linked that reviews seen from different professional angles will result in quite different perceptions of the reality. An example: In this issue of *Michael* Stewart presents a complicated and multifaceted topic where the history could be written from many points of standing, successfully synthesizing the aspects into a balanced overview (1).

Another problem of interdisciplinarity lies within the professions and scientific communities themselves. Scientific reductionism may easily be accompanied by a certain scientific arrogance towards others who address the same objects from other points of origin.

As a rule, cooperation and combined efforts will yield more results than the sum of the single contributions would have done. Most people who have been engaged in successful interdisciplinary work will probably agree on that.

Interdisciplinarity is difficult. But why?

Admittedly, there may be psychological explanations, also sometimes with good reason, to why many researchers defend their field eagerly and look with scepticism on intruders. However, more interesting are the obstacles which may be sought in the organisation of research in the academic world. Scientific topics are often linked to special institutes or working groups which then on the one hand takes responsibility for the crucial work of developing methods and setting standards, but which on the other hand because of this specialisation are weakened in their ability to put their achievements into a proper context; that is to discuss implications with the same scientific depth as they cover their discipline.

Even if it may be felt as a violence against the academic freedom, some organisational changes seem both possible and desirable in order to get around this interdisciplinary problem. University departments and research institutes could to a larger extent set up their activities according to a matrix model leaning on a dual division into a set of scientific groups and project groups: The work in scientific projects could be arranged in a way where scholars with different scientific background simply are forced to work together in project groups with the same, defined objectives. Then the interdisciplinary element becomes an undisputable part of the way of working, at the same time as the scientific standards of the different fields are held.

However, when people are reluctant to interdisciplinary work and cooperation across conventional borders, there also may be reasons for that. In the paper by Gradmann presented in this issue (2), the discipline of medical history in Germany is an example of the dangers of being consumed, if the cooperation and integration is not properly steered through scientific arguments.

Obstacles to interdisciplinarity and cooperation sometimes also have to do with language and culture. Although such barriers should have diminishing importance these days, they still exist. Even if a large amount of ongoing research is published in English, work of general interest also for good reasons is published in other languages, addressing readerships and scientific communities which nevertheless should attract interest. In this issue of *Michael* we therefore bring some book reviews in English on non-English works which we think deserve attention. Of course an English review brings the reader no language proficiency in the language of the author of the book, but if interested, you could then take direct personal contact with the author.

Interdisciplinarity remains as a problem, but this fact should not be a hindrance to try to do something to it.

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References

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2. Gradmann C. German medical history since the 1960s: Challenges and perspectives. *Michael* 2006;3:103–15.