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Comparison of Methods and Interdisciplinary Possibilities. The Case of Literature Reviews in Social Work and in Nursing Sciences

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Abstract

The reflections on interdisciplinarity cover several dimensions. One, among them, concerns the nature of what occurs between two disciplines. Does inter-disciplinarity relate to an intention, to a metatheory, to the object, or to a method? It is this ultimate space that we propose to study, supported by Resweber's (2000) proposition, putting the study of the homology of forms forward as a promising way to better understand the interdisciplinarity. Therefore, we have modelled the literature review methods for social work and nursing in order to clarify what expresses, on the plan of the method, either some form homologies or else some interdisciplinary possibilities

Keywords

Methodology, Interdisciplinarity, Social Work, Nursing, and Literature Review

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Comparison of Methods and Interdisciplinary Possibilities. The Case of Literature Reviews in Social Work and in Nursing Sciences

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The reflections on interdisciplinarity cover several dimensions. One, among them, concerns the nature of what occurs between two disciplines. Does inter-disciplinarity relate to an intention, to a metatheory, to the object, or to a method? It is this ultimate space that we propose to study, supported by Resweber's (2000) proposition, putting the study of the homology of forms forward as a promising way to better understand the interdisciplinarity. Therefore, we have modelled the literature review methods for social work and nursing in order to clarify what expresses, on the plan of the method, either some form homologies or else some interdisciplinary possibilities. Key Words: Methodology, Interdisciplinarity, Social Work, Nursing, and Literature Review

Introduction

The reflections on interdisciplinarity cover several dimensions. One among them concerns the nature of what occur between two disciplines of interdisciplinarity: That is to say, the interstitial sphere into which the meeting of both disciplines takes form. Does interdisciplinarity relate to an intention or a metatheory? Is it located in the object, in the action, or indeed in the method (Hamel, 1997)? It is this ultimate space that we propose to study, supported by Resweber's (2000) proposition, putting the study of the homology of forms forward as a promising way to better understand the interdisciplinarity. We present here a research project in order to reflect on the important topic relevant to the scientific quality of research from a concrete case, the literature review. The study of this very important scientific activity increases our understanding of the real practice of interdisciplinarity.

This present study follows research (Couturier, 2001) that deals with the interdisciplinary practices of social workers and nurses in social services agencies. We were shocked by the different disciplinary conceptions of the literature review, a fundamental activity in research. Therefore, we have modelled the literature review methods for both disciplines concerned in order to clarify what traduces, on the plan of the method, their forms, and consequently their interdisciplinary possibilities.

Interdisciplinarity and Literature Reviews

According to Mathurin (1995), the area of debate on interdisciplinarity unfolds on two axes. Around the epistemological axis, the interdisciplinarity is considered as

scientifically necessary to the understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon. For instance, to understand the global phenomenon of aging, it's necessary to put biomedical searchers and social researchers in dialogue. This emerging knowledge can elucidate the global picture of the complexity of aging. From this perspective, the matter is to recombine the unity of Man (Proust, 1992), fractured into as many disciplinary specialities needed to reach the indivisible part of a phenomenon in the old positivistic way of thinking. Hamel (1995, 1997) underlines that in this perspective the interdisciplinarity goes under the production of a metatheory that allows making bridges between the diverse substantives theories produced in the scientific space.

For the second axis, the pragmatic one, the debate lays down interdisciplinarity as a practical crossbreeding (Bibeau, 1991) between different actors at the moment of sharing a common space of work (Gusdorf, 1988). Characterised by the co-action between concrete actors, this space allows the emergence of diverse invisible successes (Faure, 1992) constituting indicators of a work transformation, notably of scientific work. From this point of view, the interdisciplinarity takes place at the occasion of a meeting around shared objects, at the favour of an applied mode of problem resolution (Klein, 1996) that mobilises all knowledge, from any origin, and is necessary to reach the pragmatic objectives of action. For instance, expert knowledge and common sense knowledge are both used in the clinical judgements of nurses or social workers. Lenoir, Rey, and Fazenda (2001) point out this composition of knowledge by the circum-disciplinarity concept coming from diverse sources in order to accomplish an effective action as an hermeneutic circle, as a circular movement of interpretation and re-interpretation of a complex phenomenon. In this regard, the two disciplines under study meet around common objects; social and health problems that engages them voluntarily or not in an inter-professional collaboration (Couturier & Chouinard, 2003). Lastly, we are thinking that, at the crossing of these two disciplinary fields, the question of methodological relation to the objects, to the knowledge projects, and to the action necessity allows us to think of the question of interdisciplinarity on research activity scheme in an innovative way.

Unity of the Method and Literature Reviews

In an important book treating interdisciplinarity, Crapuchet and Salomon quote Gusdorf who reminds us that "The unit of methodology cannot take place outside of a methodology of unit; itself being based on a research of the human's unit" (1992, p. 230, free translation). In this unifying perspective, the literature reviews constitute an underlying activity of the generic process of research (Quivy & Van Campenhoudt, 1988) for which "the cumulative nature of science, trustworthy accounts of past research are a necessary condition for orderly knowledge building" (Cooper, 1998, p. 1). The combined and global character of knowledge invites, therefore, the researcher to consider the peripheral knowledge to its discipline (Deslauriers & Kérisit, 1997). In this perspective, the literature reviews possess methodological specifications whose regulations need to be respected. According to Granger, these regulations allow the "formatting of the scientific languages" (Granger, 1967, p. 56). These regulations are however more or less explicit in a systematic way, according to the disciplines. In spite of the specifications and its underlying character to the scientific activity, the literature reviews are sometimes pushed to the status of a shadow activity. If the distinct ways of doing each discipline possess

indeed their virtues, their conditions, their potentialities, and their limits we nevertheless think, in an applied perspective, that it is possible to explore the conditions of a methodological crossbreeding favourable to the emergence of an “inter language” (Apostel, 1972, p. 79) of operational significance; a component of a favourable condition to interdisciplinarity. According to Klein (1996), crossbreeding creates a new condition for efficient researches to resolve complex and *in vivo* problems.

Method and Analysis Frame

The goal of the research consisted in documenting the disciplinary conceptions (in social work and nursing sciences) of a fundamental activity in research, the literature review, in order to clarify the methodological passages between both disciplines. These groups characterize themselves as in the actual interdisciplinarity situation in service professions, in Québec. Without talking about a real meta-analysis (Egger & Smith, 1997), a concept referring explicitly to the quantitative analysis of data coming from a corpus of research results (Rosenthal, 1991), we have accomplished an *analysis* of over 100 literature reviews, half in nursing sciences and the other half in social sciences. The matter was not to make a meta-analysis of the research results, but rather to have a look over the *ways of doing*. The method we used was one of embedded and theoretic inventory of writings (Cooper, 1998), centred on the analysis of the formatting.

The criteria of inclusion of the literature reviews were: (1) scientific articles of the English or French language originating from the nursing sciences or the social sciences; the institutional affiliation of the authors authenticating and (2) texts indicated in their title wording, key words, or summary that the main goal was to present a literature review. In the nursing database CINAHL, we obtained 1352 results under the key word “literature review”. This number of inputs was first reduced to 672 results and then to 128 when selecting the type of article under the “review articles” rubric while intersecting the criteria. We then analysed the 50 most recent results distributed by less than three years. In social work, we accomplished the same operations from the database Social Work Abstracts (SWA). However, it was not necessary to circumscribe more since this operation permitted us to obtain only 63 articles spaced out over a period of 13 years. According to us, this temporal scattering does not only link the numeric disproportion of the two professional groups, but is moreover an effect of the way the literature reviews are conceived and achieved. Apparently, the literature reviews in social work would not be an autonomous and sufficient modality of scientific activity. The literature review is reduced as a preliminary action to a forthcoming scientific research.

The idea was to describe the diverse relations, from a set of formal criteria that the groups of researchers maintained with the literature reviews project. We understand this over analysis of the literature reviews as an inductive analysis of content, close to what Krippendorff points out as “content analysis” designs (1980) or what Rosenthal presents as the activity of “summarising relationships” (1991, p. 7). The parameters of the designs we wanted to clarify are principally those following.

- How the object builds: problem implementation, relations to the theories of reference, conceptualization of the object.
- How the knowledge project builds: method, social legitimacy, institutional link up.

- How the results build: on the epistemological scheme, on the plan of the repercussions of development or application, on the scheme of the trails of research or of reflection at the term of the exercise.
- How the strategy of knowledge spreading builds: readership aimed, modalities of presentation of the research products.

From these parameters, a reading chart was elaborated and pre-tested. We classified each text in a codification tree built from the previous criteria. For each parameters, we realized an inductive content analyse with the help of NVivo (1.3) software. This allowed us to identify the thematic structure for each discipline. We then “modelized” this structure in order to compare both disciplines. This comparison gave us the opportunity to elucidate the common and distinctive characteristics of knowledge building strategies (Cooper, 1998) of these two traditions. On the analysis scheme, we made a simple calculation around the parameters presented before and a profound analysis of the content formatting for each one of these parameters with the help of the codification tree. The research results present important tendencies for each discipline.

Review of Literature and *Review of the Writings*: Two Research Models

In a general way, we observed clear differences, even up to its publication, in the ways of conducting a review of literature. In nursing sciences, the *reviews of the writings* in whole present a narrow problematic centered on a need of knowledge well defined and often clinical, where in social sciences, they are employed overall in the objective of a reformulation of the research problem. For the nursing sciences, we are facing exercises, the form being very explicit and well commanded as if the specifications of the reviews of the writings were of the most precise, and overall, of the most imperative. The rules for a scientific review of literature must be followed: They are not good advice for good practices, but imperative instructions to scientific publications. In fact, the structure of the text itself shows the specifications in question. In social work, the forms are diverse and the methodological strategies most of the time implicit, indeed tacit. Social work borrows from writings and rarely aims at a unique summation.

Surrounding the construction of the knowledge project, the tendency in nursing sciences is to normalise the practice of the nurses, notably while looking to unify the language regarding a knowledge corpus. In this perspective, the cumulating of knowledge authorises the procedure of the intervention to make. The idea is however to discover and tell the *truth*, notably in the objective of producing guides of practice. In this way, the reviews of the writings do not aim at conceiving or implementing a question into disciplinary reflection, but rather aims at demonstrating the state of the art by adding knowledge produced in research. In this aspect, the reviews of the writings often have an objective to support the action of the clinicians. The research and the proposed intervention seem, in this way, to be an obvious continuity for everyone. In social work, the review of literatures is often multi-finalised. It could serve at the same time to implement a question into the formulation of the research problem, to sustain a point of view, to refer to the debates, and to make explicit the theoretic relationship of a research.

More specifically, the research results in nursing sciences clearly develop according to the positivist principals, putting quantification forward as the main way of the proof construction. In a certain way, the reviews of the writings incorporate results (understanding the treated data) rather than putting it into a typology of meanings as is often the case in social work; the field of concepts dispersal. More often than not, the writings are in this perspective materials rather than data. Once again, social work distinguishes by an epistemological pluralism sustaining the idea that the incorporation of results in itself is not sufficient to the production of knowledge. As well, the tendency in social work is that the reviews of literature have however less the form of a proof than the one of a mastered dissertation. Several kinds of knowledge are then requested in the demonstration. As an example, a case analysis could be used in the discursive strategy of the researcher in order to sustain, contradict, or else, to qualify the point of views prevailing in the literatures in question.

Regarding the nursing sciences, the theoretic repercussions in terms of training or application, and of trails of research or reflection, are often perceived at the term of the exercise as prescriptive guides for practitioners' use. For example, the reviews of the writings can refer to new medications or new tools that require cumulating the knowledge in order to guide the practice and this, in the objective to sustain the efficiency of the cares and services. In social work, the reviews of literature invite the reader to turn towards the conceptualisation in regards to clinical approaches, paradigms, strategies, and programs of prevention and clinical interventions. It is rather a contribution to the debate more than a proposition of a "protocolarization". At the end of our analysis, we see in social work a methodological practice, the literature review with several narrative levels: ontological, epistemological, political, etc.

In the way the limits are exposed in the reviews of the writings, we have observed a certain community regarding the will to criticise the writings inventoried. The methodology of study is often questioned, most particularly when it refers to a sampling being too small. Likewise, both disciplines inspire to a deepest inscription of researches in the empirical tradition. Apparently similar, this critic thus hides many divergences on the operational scheme. In nursing sciences, the solution resides on the part of a big scientific character by the longitudinal mastering of the data, the narrowest control of the sampling, or again by the methodological unification. In revenge, social work underlines the necessity to better justify the research empirically instead of discursively; to diversify the samplings and to enlarge the variability of methods in order to ensure the problematization is as complete as possible.

Lastly, concerning the strategies of knowledge spreading (addressees, presentation of the products, etc.) both disciplines challenge similarly the milieu of research as much as the one of practice. In nursing sciences, the idea is to sustain the professional acknowledgement by demonstrating the scientific character of the discipline, whereas in social work the reviews of literatures have often been presented as a reflection on the practice or on the professional group itself. In nursing sciences, the primary reader aimed is a specialised nurse, eventually researcher, and secondary are the designers of the programs. According to our analysis in social work, the primary reader is mainly the disciplinary group.

Discussion

The reviews of literature in social work does not seem to have a complete status of research activity in itself, but rather represents a methodological tool used at different ends, according to various ways to do. In fact, it is the epistemological summation of knowledge that distinguishes both groups. In another article (Couturier & Carrier, 2004), we present the very difficult relation between social workers and evidence-based practice model. This topic is a relatively new debate in the profession supported by the actual interdisciplinary context we identify.

We nevertheless were strongly surprised to notice that beyond the differences both groups reflect their limitations to each other as a necessity to import other ways to conceptualize, and realize their literature reviews on the methodological plan. Therefore, several reviews of literatures in social work present the difficulty of generalising the data as a limit, while the nurses remind of the necessity of verifying the empirical significance of objective data incorporated by their reviews of the writings. The inter-disciplinary here is becoming evident where there appears a passage between the disciplines and an area of possible transactions.

Finally, both disciplines thus converged around the intention of employing the reviews of the writings in order to “make the discipline,” to discipline a succession of discourses on nursing sciences or on social work. For the first one, the matter is to unify the glossaries. For the second one, it is rather to sustain the legitimacy of a discipline that constantly needs to have its pertinence, its objects, and its missions reminded.

Conclusion

We see it; divergences are in total more numerous than the convergences. Is this destroying any interdisciplinary impulse? No, far from it! For its fecundity, the interdisciplinary crossbreeding requires the deep acknowledgement of the value of difference. In fact, we identified two passages that allow going from one disciplinary world to the other. The first one concerns the necessity for each other to be attached to the entirety of knowledge in order to tackle the objects in their complexity. In other words, whatever the epistemological orientation of the reviews of the writings is there seems to be a common intention related to the efficient problems’ resolution facing the practice. Even more important, we were shocked by the analysis of the limits of the reviews of the writings as the researchers formulated them. By the reflected picture of the methodological practice of colleagues, each group makes reference to the fragmentation of its canonical methods to expand the disciplinary reflection. This desire of the other is indisputably one of the principal conditions of the interdisciplinarity development.

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