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COMMENTARY ON:

**Cultural Sociology and Other Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity in the
Cultural Sciences**

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Even though this paper is clearly exploratory, I think it is fair to say that Diana Crane has done it again. She is masterful in discerning large, significant trends from fine-grained empirical investigation. In this paper, hearkening to her classic analysis of “invisible colleges” and her pioneering forecasts of futures of cultural sociology, she reveals how the growing intellectual exchange among scholars from different disciplines helps shape cultural sociology. It is worth pondering, for example, that while cultural sociology and cultural history both draw on cultural anthropology as well as poststructuralism, sociology as opposed to history also draws on structuralism but does not much draw on either cultural studies or postmodernism. The original version of this paper, presented at Harvard during an anniversary symposium of the American Sociological Association’s Section on the Sociology of Culture, made clearer the empirical basis of her preliminary claims.

Another contribution of this paper, characteristic of Crane’s work, is its useful typology of relations observed among different disciplines. The distinction between *multidisciplinarity*, denoting a low level of disciplinary integration, and *transdisciplinarity*, denoting a high level, is little-drawn but quite useful. And the model that she herself proposes, that of *free-floating paradigms*, is also especially trenchant, even though it is usually ignored. As Crane notes, “culture” has burgeoned as a topic across the disciplines in no small part because scholars in all fields have familiarized themselves with a common body of major cultural theories—from Levi-Strauss and Barthes to Foucault

and Bourdieu to Gramsci and Habermas. Indeed, one of those major theorists, Clifford Geertz, helped mobilize invisible colleges of cultural scholars across disciplines by demonstrating the resonance of the free-floating paradigms of his time, in his famous essay on thick description. (The exegesis of that and other essays by an inter-departmental reading group at my university in the late 80's helped spark the formation of the first interdisciplinary doctoral program in cultural studies in the U.S.) This paper renews inquiry, which has largely lain fallow since Geertz's seminal essays, into the ways these free-floating paradigms travel across disciplines.

I want to launch the conversation about this wonderful article by interjecting a few suggestions of my own for promoting interdisciplinary work that is more transdisciplinary than multidisciplinary. Even strictly disciplinary work is *dialogic*, since every discipline incorporates fundamental differences of semantic presuppositions—“architectonic” variations of voice, intention, and method, for example, whose combinations result in such distinct intellectual orientations as atomism, pragmatism, structuralism, and poststructuralism. And, as suggested by the “fractal” model of interdisciplinarity that Crane discusses, boundaries of intellectual difference *within* disciplines also map boundaries of intellectual difference *among* disciplines. To be transdisciplinary, therefore, is to bring the conflicts within one discipline into full dialog with the conflicts within another. Much more common, alas, is a form of intellectual poaching—when a scholar supports a particular position within his or her own discipline by selectively invoking congruent findings from another, without weighing the counter-arguments from that other discipline. Moreover, since each discipline is defined in large part by standards of relevance for its evidence, it is sloppy (and indeed dishonest) to invoke findings from another discipline without first parsing the varying conceptions of warrant that help differentiate the two disciplines from each other. Finally, it is necessary to recognize that full dialog may not even be possible. Poststructuralists, for example, conceive the very desirability or rules of dialog differently than pragmatists. But if they are right, there are limits to transdisciplinarity—even despite the influence of free-floating paradigms in common.