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**Cultural Sociology and Other Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity in  
the Cultural Sciences<sup>1</sup>**

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is the relationship between cultural sociology and approaches to culture in other social science disciplines. What are the characteristics of the theoretical environment in which cultural sociology is operating? The paper begins by reviewing the literature on interdisciplinarity. Many authors argue that interdisciplinarity is increasing or should be increasing, but the general consensus is that disciplinary isolation is the norm. From this perspective, the relationships between disciplines can be understood in terms of *trading zones* in which fields in different disciplines have little in common, theoretically or empirically. Interdisciplinary communication in 'trading zones' requires that participants laboriously construct a set of terms that permits them to exchange ideas.

Alternatively, I propose that clusters of fields in different disciplines are linked by *free-floating paradigms*. Participants in disciplines that share 'free-floating paradigms' are able to communicate with one another more readily. The paper presents evidence for the second interpretation, drawn from survey articles in disciplinary handbooks. Disciplines and fields in which the study of culture draws from the same pool of paradigms and models and shares a set of lines of inquiry with cultural sociology include traditional disciplines, such as anthropology, communication, geography, history and psychology and interdisciplinary fields, such as cultural studies, communication, feminist theory, material culture, science studies, and visual culture. Interdisciplinary fields, particularly cultural studies, perform an important role in diffusing paradigms across disciplinary boundaries. Free-floating paradigms are associated with the work of major theorists, such as Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Bourdieu, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Clifford Geertz, Bruno Latour, Adorno, Gramsci, and Habermas.

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The subject of this paper is the relationship between cultural sociology and approaches to culture in other social science disciplines. What are the characteristics of the theoretical environment in which cultural sociology is operating?<sup>2</sup> Many authors argue that interdisciplinarity is increasing or should be increasing, but the general consensus is that disciplinary isolation is the norm. From this perspective, the relationships between disciplines can be understood in terms of *trading zones* in which fields in different disciplines have little in common, theoretically or empirically. Interdisciplinary communication in 'trading zones' requires that participants laboriously construct a set of terms that permits them to exchange ideas.

Alternatively, I propose that clusters of fields in different disciplines are linked by *free-floating paradigms*. Participants in disciplines that share 'free-floating paradigms' are able to communicate with one another much more readily. The paper presents evidence for the second interpretation, drawn from survey articles in disciplinary handbooks.

First, I discuss the literature on interdisciplinarity.<sup>3</sup> What do theories about interdisciplinarity tell us about the characteristics of academic disciplines and the relationships between academic disciplines?

Second, I show how cultural sociology fits into an interdisciplinary field of studies of culture. What are the characteristics of this interdisciplinary field? What are its implications for the relationships between cultural sociology and other cultural fields?

### **The literature on interdisciplinarity**

There are some indications that interest in interdisciplinarity in the natural and social sciences is increasing today. Interdisciplinarity is said to be one of the most popular catchwords in present-day knowledge politics (Schmidt, 2007). An international conference on interdisciplinary social sciences has been held each year for the past three years in Italy. Although the concept of interdisciplinarity has been around for almost a century (Abbott, 2001), the phenomenon itself is becoming more prevalent.

Boundaries between disciplines seem to be becoming more permeable (Coast et al., 2007). One result is the appearance of highly interdisciplinary fields that acquire the status and resources of disciplines in some universities, rather than being specialties within established disciplines. This phenomenon has analogies to what is taking place in non-academic forms of culture, where

popular genres are increasingly fusing with other genres to create new forms of a particular type of culture, for example, music where this phenomenon is particularly noticeable.

Why is interdisciplinarity increasing? One hypothesis might be that interdisciplinarity is increasing because of an enormous increase in the diffusion of scientific information that is taking place in part because of the Internet and in part because of sophisticated databases that provide abstracts and often the full text. Researchers are frequently exposed to ideas from other disciplines which they may integrate with ideas in their own fields.

Another reason that is frequently given for the increase in interdisciplinary research is that some scientific problems can only be solved using ideas and methods from more than one discipline. Foundations and government agencies are said to encourage interdisciplinary research because their staff tend to believe that breakthroughs are more likely to occur at the intersections of disciplines (Strober, 2006: 316).

In order to understand interdisciplinarity, it is useful to review the definition of a discipline. An academic discipline has an epistemological foundation and an institutional base. A discipline constitutes a way of knowing and has distinctive tools, concepts, methods, and language (Coast et al., 2007: 16). Disciplines are usually synonymous with academic departments which ensure their continuity by training new generations of students. In other words, disciplines are firmly established social structures for the organization of knowledge (Greckhamer et al., 2008: 312).

This idealized picture is complicated by the fact that some disciplines have more than one epistemological base and, as a result, may be only partially integrated. If Jonathan Turner (2006) is correct, different specialties within sociology are unlikely to have a high level of consensus on epistemology, ontology, and methodology, leading to a situation in which there is overspecialization in the discipline without integration of different fields. If this is the case, collaboration across specialties in sociology may be as difficult as collaboration across disciplines.

I have identified four models of the relationships between disciplines (see Chart I):

The first model is *disciplinary isolation*. This is the model that underlies a great deal of the literature on interdisciplinarity. This literature tends to see disciplinary isolation as the norm and interdisciplinarity, cooperation between disciplines, as the exception. Cooperation between disciplines, when

it does occur, varies considerably, depending on the level of integration between the disciplines concerned.

Multidisciplinarity refers to a low level of integration between researchers in different disciplines (Coast et al, 2007: 499). In this situation, researchers from different disciplines work collaboratively “without altering their individual disciplinary epistemologies or methodologies or theories” (p. 500). In other words, the disciplines don’t share epistemologies, methods, or theories. This is considered to be one of the most frequent forms of interdisciplinarity.

Transdisciplinarity represents the opposite situation: “a very high degree of integration where theories, models and methods merge” (p. 500). This form of interdisciplinarity is the most difficult to achieve because it requires that researchers understand and can work within two or more disciplinary paradigms. In other words, “transdisciplinarity provides conceptual frameworks that transcend the (relatively) narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews” (Greckhamer et al., 2008: 313).

Transdisciplinary fields are sometimes referred to as “interdisciplines” which have been defined as “hybridized knowledge fields that are constituted by intentionally porous organizational, epistemological and political boundaries” (Frickel, 2004). Between the two ends of this continuum, there are varying degrees of integration of two disciplinary perspectives.

The second model is *the ‘fish-scale’ model*, developed many years ago by the social psychologist, Donald Campbell (2005). Campbell also subscribes to the model of disciplinary isolation. He attributes the prevalence of disciplinary isolation to what he calls ‘the ethnocentrism of disciplines’. Academic disciplines and university departments defend their territory and resist external influences. He argues that a more appropriate model for the relationships between academic disciplines would be what he calls the ‘fish-scale’ model in which each narrow specialty would be like a fish scale that would overlap with adjacent specialties in the same discipline and in closely related disciplines. Instead, because of the ethnocentrism of disciplines, specialties primarily overlap with specialties in the same discipline, leaving gaps in areas where cooperation between disciplines is required.

The third model is Andrew Abbott’s *fractal model* of academic disciplines. Abbott analyzes differences between fields and disciplines in terms of oppositions between epistemological commitments, such as positivism/interpretation, analysis/narrative, realism/constructionism, and social structure/culture. Instead of meaningful communication between disciplines and specialties, Abbott argues that conflicts between different

points of view tend to be resolved superficially through renaming and relabeling.

The fourth model which involves '*free-floating paradigms*' is the one which I am proposing. I am suggesting that communication between cultural fields within social science disciplines occurs because of a set of free-floating paradigms or theoretical frameworks that all these disciplines share in varying degrees. The emergence of several highly interdisciplinary fields has facilitated the process of communication between these disciplines. I am arguing that a set of fields constitute what might be called "the cultural sciences" and share a pool of paradigms. <sup>4</sup> As a result, these disciplines are able to exchange ideas and research findings. Jacobs and Fricke (2009: 50) who present data on the prevalence of specific ideas and terms in various fields state that: "The data strongly support Crane's (2008) contention that some concepts successfully diffuse across the humanities and sometimes the social sciences as well."

My question is: how does this fourth type of interdisciplinarity affect cultural sociology? Specifically, what is the relationship between cultural sociology and studies of culture in other disciplines?

### **Cultural specialties in the social sciences**

Some indications concerning the interdisciplinary environment of cultural sociology can be obtained from examining two recent volumes, the *Handbook of Cultural Analysis* (Bennett and Frow, 2008), which examines several social science disciplines and fields, and a handbook of sociology of culture entitled the *Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture* (Jacobs and Hanrahan, 2005b).

The editors of the *Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, Tony Bennett and John Frow, suggest that, as far as the study of culture is concerned, these disciplines and fields are not entirely distinct entities with separate histories and their own theories. Instead, there seems to be a broad consensus across these disciplines and fields about what culture is and how it should be studied. In other words, the study of culture is an enterprise that links several disciplines and fields and several types of subject matter.

What sort of consensus underlies the "cultural sciences"? Jacobs and Hanrahan (2005a; see also Jacobs and Spillman, 2005) argue that this consensus consists of the idea that social, political and economic structures are embedded in patterns of everyday life and interaction and in systems of meaning-making, such as discourses, beliefs, and negotiations among social

actors, that perform important roles in generating and maintaining social institutions.

Bennett and Frow state that “previously distinct fields of study had converged in a more complex and multidisciplinary understanding of the mutual embeddedness of social and cultural phenomena.” They (2008: 17) argue that culture can no longer be identified with a single concept. Instead, it is identified with “a network of loosely related concepts that has been shaped by the relations between...different fields.” The fields include both social sciences and humanities.

Similarly, Jacobs and Hanrahan in their introduction to the *Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture* (p. 10) state that the authors in their volume

“employ a wide range of conceptions of culture. Culture is variously conceived—in related but distinct ways—in terms of discourses, practices, meanings, performances, boundaries and schemas, as well as values, norms, and systems.”

There appears to be a convergence in cultural disciplines around the study of the interrelatedness of social and cultural phenomena. Instead of each discipline having its own unique theories and models, a number of free-floating models and paradigms are used in different disciplines. Fields vary in their selections among these models but there appears to be a set of ideas that provides a basis for present and future work in the cultural sciences. This does not imply that there is necessarily a high level of consensus in and across these disciplines <sup>5</sup> but that discussion and controversy is taking place around roughly the same set of paradigms with more or less emphasis on certain paradigms depending on the discipline. For example, Lamont (2008) has documented the existence of tensions between cultural sociology and cultural anthropology. Disputes between the two fields indicate that members of these fields share a set of ideas about which they are able to disagree.

### **What are the cultural sciences?**

What I am calling the cultural sciences have emerged in approximately the past thirty years. Their development coincides with what is often called the ‘cultural turn’, which led to an enormous change in the importance of all forms of culture in understanding social processes and social identity.

The cultural turn led to the unsettling of disciplinary boundaries in which, according to one author, “mutual contamination is rampant” (Ang, 2008: 243).

Another author (Leitch, cited in Ang, p. 243) says: "Each discipline is always infiltrated by some other disciplines(s)." He calls this situation "postmodern interdisciplinarity" which he defines as "the defacto and unstable intermixture of the disciplines without...resulting in a new, postdisciplinary synthesis." <sup>6</sup>

For my definition of 'cultural sciences, I have used many of the disciplines and fields that appear in their volume. I have divided them into 'traditional disciplines' and 'interdisciplinary fields' (see Chart II).

What is striking about the cultural fields in traditional disciplines is the extent to which they draw upon a shared set of theories and models from other disciplines in the group. The cultural fields in traditional disciplines have moved beyond disciplinary isolation and draw insights from other disciplines on the list and use some of the same theoretical paradigms. For example, cultural anthropology has informed cultural sociology, cultural history, and some aspects of the study of cognition in cultural psychology (Walkerdine and Blackman, 2008).

The interdisciplinary fields have never been isolated. With the exception of post-humanist science and technology studies, these fields merge theoretical perspectives from several different disciplines. They correspond to the concept of transdisciplinarity in the literature on interdisciplinarity. In other words, these fields are "interdisciplines".

For example, Barker (2004: p. xvii) says that:

"it has always been difficult to pin down the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear-cut substantive topics, concepts, and methods...Cultural studies has always been a multi- or post-disciplinary field of inquiry that blurs the boundaries between itself and other 'subjects'."

Another example is the field of material culture which has been defined as the study of "the ways in which artifacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities (Woodward, 2007: 25). It has been described as follows (p. 27):

"The first characteristic that defines the contemporary field of material culture studies is its interdisciplinary approach...Interdisciplinarity refers to studies of material culture that make use of multiple disciplines...as complementary elements of their explanation. In this interdisciplinary model, no discipline is given authority over

explanations of material culture as each is seen to enhance the insights of the other.”

Feminist theory has been described as “a synchronic configuration of debates” in which there is “no doxa, no ideology and no platform” (Pollock, 2008: 250).

By contrast, what has been called post-humanist science and technology studies, which is focused around actor network theory,<sup>7</sup> is interdisciplinary in its subject matter but not in its theoretical base. It rejects the idea of academic disciplines with stable disciplinary identities, preferring to study the substance of a very wide range of fields, including the sciences and the humanities (Pickering, 2008). It has been called an ‘anti-discipline’.

### **Origins of theoretical consensus in the cultural sciences**

As I have already suggested, theoretical consensus in the cultural sciences is based on the existence of several paradigms and models that are shared by many of these disciplines and fields. How can one trace these connections? I have relied on disciplinary handbooks and textbooks in which editors, in their introductions to these volumes, or authors of specific chapters present a global view of their field.

Most of the paradigms in the cultural sciences are consistent with the hypothesis concerning the cultural embedding of social phenomena and the analysis of cultural practices that constitutes a world view for the cultural sciences. Each of these frameworks is associated with the names of specific scholars whose work has diffused to other disciplines and fields.

First, there are several paradigms that are associated with the work of major French theorists: structuralism, identified with Lévy-Strauss and Barthes, post-structuralism, associated with Foucault and Bourdieu, and postmodernism, associated with Lyotard and Baudrillard.

Cultural anthropology, identified with Clifford Geertz and, to a lesser extent, with Mary Douglas, has provided a methodological orientation toward interpretation rather than explanation. Actor network theory, identified with Bruno Latour among others and associated with post-humanist science/technology studies, has been another source of ideas. Finally, scholars associated with cultural studies have integrated ideas from several theoretical perspectives.

A number of additional frameworks have also influenced some of these disciplines and fields, including the following: critical theory (Adorno), literary studies, political economy, neo-Marxism (Gramsci, Althusser), postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis (Lacan), and the concept of the public sphere (Habermas). The influence of some of these paradigms has been greater in the past than it is at present.

Chart IIA attempts to show some of the influences of these models on cultural fields in the five disciplines. Cultural anthropology and cultural geography have been heavily influenced by this set of frameworks. Cultural psychology (focused around the study of multiculturalism) is more peripheral.

Based on the citations in the *Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, it appears that American cultural sociology has been most influenced by cultural anthropology and poststructuralism, particularly as represented by Bourdieu and to a somewhat lesser extent by Foucault, and, to a lesser extent, by the other frameworks. Occasionally, in the past, cultural sociology has been criticized for its neglect of some of these ideas, for example by Ron Lembo in the sociology of culture section newsletter (Lembo, 2000; see also Long, 1997).

Instead, American cultural sociologists are more likely to be influenced by two other frameworks, critical theory and Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Margaret Archer (2005), in her introductory chapter to the *Blackwell Companion*, exemplifies the tendencies in the field as a whole. She cites references that are associated with cultural anthropology, critical theory, poststructuralism, the public sphere, and structuralism.

Chart IIB shows the influences of these models on the interdisciplinary fields. Cultural studies, material culture and visual culture have been particularly influenced by these frameworks. Dominated by actor network theory, posthumanist science and technology studies is virtually immune to these influences, with the exception of poststructuralism as exemplified by Foucault (Pickering, 2008).

Another way of demonstrating the existence of the "cultural sciences" is by looking at the extent to which similar lines of inquiry have emerged in these fields. Chart III shows that many of the lines of inquiry that cultural sociologists study are also studied by their peers in other cultural sciences. Presumably other cultural sciences will have different approaches to these problems but their findings should be relevant for cultural sociology. These lines of inquiry provide potential areas of contact between cultural sociology and cultural fields outside sociology.

## **The unique role of interdisciplines**

Finally, what role do interdisciplines perform in bridging disciplines and in the formation of interdisciplinary clusters like the cultural sciences? In the past, cultural studies has performed a unique role in the cultural sciences in integrating many of these theoretical frameworks, for example, literary studies, structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, critical theory and neo-Marxism. Toby Miller (2006: 1) describes cultural studies “as a tendency across disciplines, rather than a discipline itself”.

Beginning in the 1970s, cultural studies helped to propel the cultural turn in the social sciences and performed an important role in unsettling established disciplinary boundaries (Ang, 2008). In a sense, cultural studies has served in the past as a kind of crossroads for certain types of theoretical ideas about culture. One can hypothesize that, by incorporating theoretical ideas from other disciplines and fields, it opened channels of communication with those areas through which it sent ideas back to them. In other words, it may have created two-way exchanges of information. For example, Burke, a cultural historian (2008: 121) points to the role of cultural studies in the development of cultural history: “Retrospectively, it now seems obvious that the rise of cultural history to prominence in the last quarter century or so is linked to cultural studies, even if the relations between the two groups of practitioners have not always been close.”

Cultural studies, along with cultural history, was also important in developing a new definition of culture in geography in the 1980s, which led to the study of new and more diverse subject areas by geographers and ultimately to the field of cultural geography (Anderson, 2008: 47).

The relationship between cultural sociology and cultural studies has sometimes been acrimonious (for example, Sherwood et al., 1993) but it does not appear to be the case that this is due to conflict between paradigms and models. On the contrary, it has been argued that the two fields have many similarities and that their conflicts are more political and methodological than theoretical (Inglis, 2007). In comparison with cultural sociology, cultural studies is more concerned with the politicization of culture. According to Ang (2008: 241), “it is the articulation of ‘culture’ and ‘politics’ in concrete contexts that is central to cultural studies.” Another difference between the two fields is that research in cultural studies is primarily qualitative and ethnographic rather than quantitative.

In the late nineties, Elizabeth Long (1997) attempted to bring about a greater exchange of ideas between cultural sociology and cultural studies. Significantly, Long's volume is cited by only one of the 28 authors in the Blackwell Companion. Janet Wolff (1999) has discussed the neglect and misunderstanding of cultural studies by cultural sociologists.

Whether cultural studies will continue to perform such a central role in the future is unclear (Grossberg, 2006), as older models evolve and newer ones emerge. Cultural studies, which originated in Britain, is changing as it becomes institutionalized in academic settings in many other countries and depoliticized. In the future, its role in integrating the cultural sciences may be performed by other interdisciplines, such as material culture and cultural geography, or by an interdisciplinary field in a traditional discipline.

## **Conclusion**

Spillman (2008) argues that trading zones emerge when it is difficult to establish lines of communication between disciplines or specialties within disciplines. What is the difference between fields that develop trading zones as a means of communication and fields that are linked by free-floating paradigms?

I argue that trading zones develop when fields do not share any frameworks of analysis and must therefore construct a mutual, 'pidgin' language in which to communicate and to exchange 'goods and services'. By contrast, fields linked by free-floating paradigms should be able to communicate with one another more readily. I am not claiming that trading zones do not exist. Instead, I am suggesting that we should not only be thinking about differences within and between disciplines but also about similarities and connections between disciplines.

To summarize, in contrast to the trading zone hypothesis, there appears to be a fairly large terrain in other disciplines and fields that draw from the same pool of paradigms and models and that share a set of lines of inquiry with cultural sociology. In other words, there are other planets in our cultural universe which are inhabited with recognizable forms of cultural life.

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## CHART I

### MODELS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINES

#### 1. Disciplinary isolation vs. multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity

Conference website: <http://compassconference.wordpress.com>

2. 'Fish-scale' model vs. disciplinary omniscience (Campbell)

3. Fractal model of social science disciplines (Abbott)

4. Interdisciplinarity as free-floating paradigms and interdisciplinary fields

**CHART II  
INFLUENCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORKS**

**A. Traditional Disciplines:**

<b>Disciplinary</b>	<b>Influenced by:</b>					
<b>Cultural fields</b>	<b>Cult.Anthr.</b>	<b>Cult. Stud.</b>	<b>Struct.</b>	<b>Poststruc.</b>	<b>Actor-Netwk</b>	<b>Postmod.</b>
Anthropology	-	x	x	x	x	x
Geography	x	x	x	x	x	x
History	x	x		x		x
Psychology	x			x		
Sociology (U.S.)	x		x	x		

**B. Interdisciplinary and other fields:**

	<b>Influenced by:</b>					
<b>Cultural fields</b>	<b>Cult.Anthr.</b>	<b>Cult. Stud.</b>	<b>Struct.</b>	<b>Poststruc.</b>	<b>Actor-Netwk</b>	<b>Postmod.</b>
Cultural studies	x	-	x	x	x	x
Comm/media		x		x		
Feminist theory			x	x		x
Material culture	x		x	x	x	x
Sci. studies/technosci.				x	x	
Visual culture	x	x	x	x		x

**CHART III**

Conference website: <http://compassconference.wordpress.com>

## A PARTIAL LIST OF OVERLAPPING LINES OF INQUIRY

### Topics studied in cultural sociology that are also studied in other cultural sciences:

Audiences: communication/media studies

Class and culture: cultural history, cultural studies

Consumption: cultural anthropology, cultural geography, cultural studies, material culture

Collective memory: cultural history, material culture

Cultural industries: communication/media studies

Gender: cultural anthropology, cultural history, cultural studies, feminist theory

Globalization: cultural anthropology, cultural geography, cultural studies, feminist research, science/technology studies

Identity: cultural studies, material culture

Institutional cultures: cultural geography

Material culture: cultural anthropology, cultural history, cultural studies, material culture

Media/popular culture: communication/media studies, cultural studies, science/technology studies

Multiculturalism: communication/media, cultural anthropology, cultural psychology

Public spheres: cultural anthropology, cultural history

Race and culture: communication/media, cultural anthropology, cultural psychology, cultural studies

Technology: cultural geography, material culture, science/technology studies

Visual culture: cultural history, material culture, visual culture

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the Second Cultural Section 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium: Cultural Sociology and Its Others, July 31, Boston, MA, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In comparison with the sociology of culture which has generally been concerned with organizational and institutional influences on various forms of culture, particularly the arts and popular culture, cultural sociology emphasizes the centrality of cultural aspects of everyday life and investigates a wide variety of substantive topics (Jacobs and Hanrahan, 2005a).

<sup>3</sup> For an exhaustive and critical review of the literature on interdisciplinarity, see Jacobs and Frickel (2009).

<sup>4</sup> My use of the term, cultural sciences, is not meant to imply that all these fields conform to the methodological canons of the natural sciences. Since we generally use the term, social sciences, to refer to a set of disciplines that study social phenomena, it is appropriate to refer to fields that study culture as cultural sciences. I do not intend my use of the word, science, to imply a consensus about scientific method across these disciplines.

<sup>5</sup> Critical theory, neo-Marxian theory, and production of culture are most committed to the idea that culture emerges from social structures and institutions and less amenable to the type of consensus being discussed here.

<sup>6</sup> Recently, the cultural turn has begun to be redefined as the 'practice turn' in which the emphasis is placed on practical activities (i.e. what people are actually doing, for example, the activity of consumption), representations of practical activities, and their performance (Warde, 2005: 134; see also Coudry, 2004; Schatzki et al., 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Humanist science and technology studies (science studies) is identified with theory and methods from sociology and the sociology of knowledge within sociology (Pickering, 2008: 294; Jasonoff, 2000).