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Beyond Disciplinary Borders: A Case for Epistemological Pluralism as the Emerging Paradigm in Interdisciplinary Research

Priyanshi Mathur*

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: priyanshi.mathur@vgu.ac.in

Abstract

Contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship converges on a single demand: that the social sciences abandon the fiction of a single, culturally unmarked epistemology in favour of epistemological pluralism — the principled commitment to treating multiple knowledge traditions as legitimate and mutually corrective sources of theoretical and methodological insight. This chapter argues that epistemological pluralism is not one emerging paradigm among several but the organising logic connecting the most significant methodological developments of the past two decades: the WEIRD critique of universal sampling, the rehabilitation of indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems, the turn toward integrative research design, and the reconceptualisation of validity as a property of arguments rather than instruments. The chapter situates this argument within the Kuhn–Feyerabend debate on methodological constraint; examines the Indigenous–Western dialogue — particularly Bharatiya Manovigyan — as the site where epistemological and power stakes are highest; traces the methodological implications for research design and validity; and argues that the institutional changes required demand structural reform, not individual goodwill. The chapter concludes with three unresolved tensions that constitute the genuine research agenda for a pluralist social science.

Keywords: Epistemological Pluralism, Interdisciplinary Research, Bharatiya Manovigyan, Indigenous Knowledge, Validity, Transdisciplinarity, Power Asymmetry.

Introduction

The Crisis of Disciplinary Silos

The architecture of modern knowledge rests on a paradox. The very institutional structures that enabled the spectacular advances of twentieth-century science — the specialised department, the peer-reviewed journal defined by a single discipline, the tenure system that rewards depth over breadth — have simultaneously

produced a profound fragmentation of understanding. Problems that do not respect disciplinary boundaries find themselves orphaned: climate change is as much a political economy problem as an atmospheric science problem; poverty is simultaneously medical, psychological, historical, and structural. The social determinants of wellbeing cannot be contained within any single disciplinary container.

This chapter makes a specific, bounded argument: that the most important of the emerging interdisciplinary paradigms is epistemological pluralism — the principled recognition that no single knowledge tradition holds a monopoly on valid insight, and that scholarship is constitutively enriched when produced at the intersection of different ways of knowing. Complexity science, open science, feminist standpoint epistemology, and critical realism are all independently significant developments; what the chapter argues is that epistemological pluralism is the meta-level commitment that connects them, and the one whose implications are least fully worked out in the existing literature.

Between Kuhn and Feyerabend: What Makes a Paradigm 'Emerging'?

- **Paradigm Shifts and their Limits**

Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) gave intellectual life both a vocabulary and a theory for understanding how knowledge systems transform. A paradigm, in Kuhn's sense, is the entire constellation of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by a scientific community that determines what counts as a legitimate problem, a valid method, and a satisfactory solution. But Kuhn's framework has a specific limitation relevant to this chapter: it treats scientific communities as essentially homogeneous, competing within a shared institutional arena. It has very little to say about what happens when traditions with different epistemological foundations — different not just in their theories but in their assumptions about what knowledge is, who can produce it, and for what purposes — are brought into contact. For that, we need Feyerabend.

Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1975) radicalised the Kuhnian insight. Where Kuhn argued that paradigm change is irrational in process but rational in outcome, Feyerabend argued that the very standards by which we judge 'better' are internal to paradigms and therefore cannot adjudicate between them. His slogan 'anything goes' is routinely caricatured as relativist licence; what he actually meant was that the history of science shows no single methodological rule that has not, at some important juncture, been violated by scientists we retrospectively regard as right. The implication for this chapter is significant: epistemological pluralism might seem to risk collapsing into Feyerabend's anarchism. The answer is that constraints must be reflexively established rather than dogmatically assumed. Pluralism is not the view that anything goes; it is the view that the criteria for adjudicating between

knowledge claims must be negotiated across traditions rather than imposed by the dominant one. The difference between relativism and pluralism is precisely this: relativism forecloses comparison, while pluralism opens it up to explicit, contestable, multi-tradition deliberation.

- **Multi-, Inter-, and Transdisciplinarity Distinguished**

Multidisciplinary research brings multiple disciplines to bear on a common problem while each retains its own methods and frameworks — the disciplines do not substantially alter one another. Interdisciplinary research involves genuine integration: disciplines are modified in the encounter, concepts migrate across fields, and the resulting framework cannot be attributed to any single parent discipline — the emergence of cognitive science from psychology, linguistics, computer science, neuroscience, and philosophy exemplifies this. Transdisciplinary research extends integration beyond the academy entirely, involving communities, policymakers, and practitioners as co-producers of knowledge: not 'knowledge translation' but co-production, shaping research questions, methods, and validity criteria from the outset. A purely monodisciplinary social science is already a methodological fiction; the only question is whether the interdisciplinary entanglements are acknowledged and theorised, or buried under the pretence of disciplinary purity.

The Indigenous–Western Dialogue: Why This Case, Why Now

- **Choosing the Case**

Of all the possible illustrations of epistemological pluralism in action, the dialogue between indigenous and non-Western knowledge traditions and Western academic social science is chosen here for two structural reasons. First, it is the site where the epistemological stakes are highest: this is not a dialogue between adjacent disciplines sharing broadly similar ontological commitments, but between traditions that differ at the level of what knowledge is, what the knower's relationship to the known is, and what research is ultimately for. If pluralism can be made to work here, it can be made to work anywhere. Second, the methodological implications are most concrete and tractable here — the solutions developed in this context have generalisable value.

- **The Universalism Critique and Its Own Limits**

The dominant tradition of Western social science has been built on a broadly universalist ambition: to discover laws and mechanisms that hold across contexts, cultures, and historical periods. Yet the universalist programme has carried with it assumptions so deeply embedded as to be largely invisible: that categories developed within Western European and North American contexts are adequate containers for capturing human experience across its full diversity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) documented the systematic distortions that accompany knowledge production about non-Western cultures by scholars embedded in colonial

power structures. Vandana Shiva showed how Western technological rationality destroyed sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems under the banner of modernisation. Raewyn Connell's Southern Theory (2007) made the structural argument explicit: mainstream social science theory is not universal but Northern, produced from particular geopolitical positions and silently encoding those positions as the default.

The WEIRD critique — the demonstration by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) that the vast majority of psychological and behavioural research uses samples that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic, yet generalises as universal — is the most widely cited expression of this problem. It is important, however, not to use it naively. The WEIRD framing has its own critics: scholars who argue that the 'Western vs. non-Western' binary it relies upon is itself a distorting simplification, and that the WEIRD critique risks reproducing an essentialised geography of knowledge even as it critiques universalism. The point is to treat it as one node in an ongoing, contested conversation — not a settled corrective.

The power asymmetry at the heart of this conversation deserves explicit theorisation. It is not sufficient to note that colonial history has distorted knowledge production. What must be faced is that the distortions continue: who controls the journals in which valid research is established? Who sits on grant committees that determine what questions are fundable? Who defines 'methodological rigour' in tenure reviews? Epistemological pluralism cannot be achieved by individual acts of scholarly goodwill if the institutional architecture that allocates legitimacy and prestige continues to systematically disadvantage non-Western knowledge traditions. Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology (1991) and Roy Bhaskar's critical realism (1975) both insist that the social conditions of knowledge production are not external to the epistemic value of knowledge claims: a pluralism that ignores this insistence is decorative rather than transformative.

- **Bharatiya Manovigyan: From Constructs to Research Design**

Bharatiya Manovigyan — the tradition of psychological inquiry rooted in classical Indian textual and philosophical sources — exemplifies what is at stake in this dialogue. Classical texts including the Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the Upanishads, and the Charaka Samhita contain sophisticated theorisations of mind, consciousness, emotion, and psychological wellbeing. Scholars such as Rao (2008), Paranjpe (2002), and Dalal (2011) have argued that these frameworks are not merely historical curiosities but living theoretical resources that generate research hypotheses unavailable to mainstream Western psychology.

Consider the construct of Sthitaprajna — the Gita's term for the person of steady wisdom, characterised by equanimity in the face of pleasure and pain and an

integrated relationship between cognition, affect, and action. Where Western psychological resilience is typically theorised as a capacity for recovery after adversity, Sthitaprajna is better understood as a dispositional orientation that modifies the person's relationship to experience itself, before adversity arrives — a state achieved through sustained contemplative practice, not a trait variable measurable by self-report in the absence of that practice. This has direct implications for measurement design, for the relationship between cross-sectional and longitudinal research, and for the role of practice-based intervention in psychological science.

What would a research programme grounded in this construct actually look like? The first phase would require deep conceptual mapping: working with scholars embedded in both the classical textual tradition and contemporary psychometrics to identify the internal dimensions of Sthitaprajna, the boundary conditions that distinguish it from adjacent constructs (such as Vairagya — non-attachment — and Dharana — focused concentration), and the behavioural, physiological, and experiential indicators the tradition itself treats as evidence of its presence or absence. The second phase would develop a new instrument — not a translation of an existing Western scale, but one whose item content reflects the distinctions the tradition draws, assessed through cognitive interviewing with practitioners and scholars. The third phase would test psychometric properties in samples that include practitioners with sustained contemplative experience alongside general population samples — a design choice that reflects the tradition's own understanding that Sthitaprajna is a capacity developed through practice, not normally distributed in the general population. The methodological challenges this pipeline faces — conceptual equivalence, norm-setting, criterion validity in the absence of established gold standards — are precisely those the next section addresses. The Bharatiya Manovigyan case makes the methodological demand concrete — but the design principles it requires extend well beyond this single dialogue.

Methodological Implications

Epistemologically pluralist research requires integration not just at the level of combining quantitative and qualitative techniques — the standard mixed-methods move — but at the level of the theoretical frameworks within which data are interpreted. This requires researchers to be transparent about which assumptions they are importing from which tradition, what the tensions between those assumptions are, and how they propose to navigate those tensions in the specific context of their inquiry. Culturally adapting existing instruments requires more than forward-and-backward translation: it requires systematic examination of conceptual equivalence — whether the construct as theorised in the source context exists in the target context, whether it has the same internal structure and boundary conditions, and whether item content is appropriate to the cultural context in which the instrument will be used.

The deepest methodological issue, however, is validity. Across traditions, the question becomes: valid relative to whose theoretical framework? Whose criteria of adequacy? The conventional psychometric response — multi-group confirmatory factor analysis, measurement invariance testing — addresses these questions within the logic of quantitative psychometrics, which itself carries epistemological commitments that may not be shared by all traditions brought into dialogue. A more adequate response reconceptualises validity not as a property of instruments but as a quality of arguments — the claim that a particular body of evidence, produced through particular methods, warrants particular theoretical conclusions. On this view, articulated following Messick (1989) and extended by van de Vijver and Leung (1997), validity is always contextual, always defeasible, and always open to challenge from traditions that ask different questions. This means that a finding produced within the framework of Bharatiya Manovigyan is not invalid simply because it cannot be replicated using Western instruments. Making the theoretical framework and purpose explicit becomes an irreducible part of the research report itself — not a footnote, but the central epistemological move that makes pluralism intellectually defensible rather than merely aspirational.

Institutional and Pedagogical Dimensions

The methodological challenges described above — developing conceptually adequate instruments, designing integrative research, renegotiating validity criteria across traditions — share a common characteristic: they cannot be solved by individual researchers acting alone. They require sustained collaboration, institutional resources, extended timescales, and communities of practice that span disciplinary and national boundaries. What looks like a methodological problem is, at its root, a structural problem. If the methodological agenda of epistemological pluralism is to be realised, the institutional architecture that enables or forecloses that agenda must be deliberately transformed.

This means promotion criteria that value integrative work, funding streams that require rather than merely permit interdisciplinary teams, and institutional cultures that genuinely value community partnership. The power asymmetry identified in Section 3 reappears here: calls for epistemological pluralism ring hollow if scholars positioned to contribute non-Western frameworks remain concentrated in contract positions, chronically underfunded settings, or institutions with limited access to publication infrastructure. Structural reform that addresses this asymmetry is not peripheral to the epistemological project; it is constitutive of it. In the pedagogical domain, cultivating interdisciplinary thinking requires presenting knowledge as constructed and contested, engaging students with primary texts from multiple traditions, and designing assessments — open-ended problems, reflective portfolios, presentations to non-academic audiences — capable of capturing integrative reasoning that conventional examinations cannot.

Three Unresolved Tensions: An Agenda Rather Than a Conclusion

A conventional conclusion would restate these moves and call for further research. What this chapter offers instead is three genuinely unresolved tensions — tensions that are not bugs in the argument but features of the problem, and that constitute the real research agenda for a pluralist social science.

The first tension is between pluralism and accountability. Epistemological pluralism holds that the criteria for adjudicating between knowledge claims must be negotiated across traditions rather than imposed by the dominant one — but negotiation requires participants with roughly comparable voice, and the power asymmetries documented in Section 3 mean that such comparability rarely obtains. How does a pluralist research community maintain standards of intellectual accountability without those standards becoming, by default, the standards of the most institutionally powerful tradition in the room? This is a genuine methodological problem that the literature on participatory research and knowledge co-production has begun to address but not resolved.

The second tension is between depth and breadth. Genuine interdisciplinary research requires scholars to achieve real competence in more than one tradition. But the specialisation demanded by contemporary academic careers makes this extremely difficult, and arguably impossible to maintain without institutional support of a kind that is currently rare. Who bears the training cost of pluralism? If it falls primarily on scholars from non-dominant traditions — who are already expected to be fluent in the Western canon simply to publish — the demand for pluralism risks becoming an additional burden on those least positioned to carry it.

The third tension is between the ambition of the framework and the granularity of the evidence. The persuasive weight of a macro-level argument for epistemological pluralism depends on the accumulation of meso- and micro-level demonstrations: completed studies that operationalise non-Western constructs, validated instruments that survive cross-tradition scrutiny, research programmes that show in detail what integrative design looks like in practice. The argument from aspiration is available to anyone; the argument from demonstration requires decades of painstaking work. The gap between these two registers is the real measure of how far the project of epistemological pluralism has to go. These tensions are not reasons to abandon the project — they are the places where the project's intellectual work is most urgently needed, and where the next generation of interdisciplinary scholars will do its most important work.

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