Stefanie Ortmann
guest editor &
Sabina Leonelli
managing editor
editor@gjss.org

Unity in social science?

What do we mean by unity in social science? Which types of unity exist and in which ways can they be achieved, if at all? Is the process of unification likely to increase the understanding provided by individual sciences? Is unification an unattainable ideal, which is nevertheless useful as a heuristic guide to social scientific research? Is it a necessary ingredient of scientific theorising, or, on the contrary, does it constitute a danger to the diversity of approaches and methodologies characterising the social sciences?

The present issue - the first of a series of thematic issues that *GJSS* plans to publish once a year – reflects on these questions through a wide spectrum of approaches and expertises. The authors and editors of these papers came together in a workshop titled 'Unification in the Social Sciences?' which was held at the London School of Economics and Political Science on the 24th and 25th of September 2004. We are grateful to Max Steuer, Hans Radder and Peter Abel, who encouraged this work both intellectually, in their role of invited speakers, and practically, by helping us in organising the event. Several participants and commentators, including several members of the *GJSS* board, also contributed to making the workshop into a stimulating venue for discussing this theme and for providing feedback and further inspiration to the contributors to this issue.

An almost obvious sense in which unification is needed within social science emerges as soon as one considers interdisciplinary research. This is because the integration of approaches coming from different disciplines (which we take to broadly characterise all

types of interdisciplinary projects) requires what might be called *small-scale unification*, so as to create a coherent approach towards the analysis of a specific issue. In this relatively unambitious, yet important sense, unification is a necessity within the social sciences. There is also, however, *large-scale unification,* which takes inspiration from the abstract laws that are said to characterise the physical sciences. Within this view, all social science should or could, irrespective of the specific context or issues at hand, be unified by reference to a general theory or methodology.

Typically, a variety of disciplinary approaches and themes characterises the papers within this issue. Dominic Holland interprets the *ontological stance* put forward by Roy Bhaskar, together with other representatives of the philosophical school known as Critical Realism, as constituting a promising, non-reductive foundation for unification in both the social and the natural sciences. A response by Jeroen van Bouwel highlights some problems posed by critical realist methods and theory, thus raising interesting questions concerning the feasibility of Holland's project. A different proposal comes from Rasmus Winther's sophisticated comparison between biological and sociological forms of reasoning and theorising. Winther recognises different *styles* of pursuing scientific research, which he posits as crucial elements to be considered within a unification project. Marcel Scheele and André van Dokkum are less interested in methodological issues than Winther. They propose, each in his distinctive way, to emphasise the role of *concepts* and conceptual distinctions (such as the ones made within analytic philosophy). Scheele demonstrates how unification can be achieved by a conceptual analysis of the notion of institution as it is used across the social sciences, from sociology to law. Van Dokkum turns instead to theories about *types* and hierarchical levels in science, as put forward by both cultural anthropology Gregory Bateson and a number of analytic philosophers. In the concluding piece, Peter Caws traces the roots and basic motivations for scientists' attraction towards unifying strategies. His account points to the *human sciences*, rather than the natural sciences, as the most credible foundation for pursuing unity within social scientific theories, while preserving their disciplinary pluralism.

Given such diversity, it is perhaps surprising to acknowledge that all the contributors to this issue are interested in the second type of unification, which we defined as large-scale unification. This preference is even more telling when considering that the original title of the London workshop, which we left deliberately vague, encouraged both negative and positive answers to questions about the feasibility and fruitfulness of unification. Through the arguments contained in this collection, two points are immediately made clear to the reader. The first is that large-scale unification holds a firm grip on the scientist's imagination, despite the success of decidedly anti-unificationist approaches such as postmodernism, post-structuralism and constructivism (which incidentally are not discussed by any of the papers, not even by Holland, despite the critical post-positivist potential of Critical Realism). The second point, made especially clear by Caws and Winther, is that there are reasons for this fascination. No matter how sceptical one can be about the actual prospects for unification, its attractiveness as an ideal remains strong. The possibility of unity among different disciplines is strongly associated by many social scientists to the possibility of increasing the scientific credibility of social science as a whole, especially in the face of the so-called 'hard', natural sciences. Further, unification strategies are tempting from the pragmatic point of view: what could be more efficient than finding laws, or concepts, or methodologies that hold throughout all of social science and allow for sweeping generalisations to be applied in all domains? And indeed, there are cases in which the focus on unity makes it possible to summarise and generalise the theoretical and normative implications of a series of specific approaches; in which it allows to apply ideas developed within a single discipline to one or several others, sometimes with very fruitful results; and provides tools for insightful critique.

All these pro-unity considerations stem from a meta-scientific perspective and are formulated as such. It is evident that most papers presented here are thoroughly inspired by analytic philosophy and/or philosophy of science. André van Dokkum discusses explicitly the advantages to be gained by exploiting philosophical views within social science, while Marcel Scheele provides a demonstration of this argument for the study of institutions from the legal, social, political and economic perspectives. The adherence to

an analytic approach comes, however, with certain assumptions that we would like to briefly discuss here, especially with an eye to implications for the practice of the sciences in question. One such assumption concerns the nature of concepts as something that can be fixed and clarified – either by unifying the social sciences through a process of increasing generalization (in which more particular meanings are 'shedded' and we are left with a core, as in Scheele) or by the transfer of concepts from one discipline into another (in the example given by Winther, from biology to the social sciences). The possibility that conceptual transfer between disciplines has a metaphorical quality – that the meaning of the concept is necessarily adapted to the disciplinary context within which it is being used – remains unexplored. Instead, there is a great trust that the transfer of concepts in themselves makes a given body of work interdisciplinary – that the concepts somehow transform their host discipline rather than the other way round.

This, in itself, is an interesting stance, and one that is not at all self-evident for someone working on actual empirical research. It often happens that the meaning of concepts cannot be stabilized, but changes according to the context in which they are being used. If this is the case, a researcher that borrows concepts from other disciplines cannot but adapt them to the disciplinary framework that he is socialized into, thus changing their meaning and practical applicability. The occurrence of this process, as well as its significance with respect to unification methods, is especially evident within issue-based interdisciplinary research, much of which employs a variety of different approaches and perspectives in order to explore a topic in as many ways as possible. Here, unification is made difficult both by the practical difficulty of transferring concepts between disciplines and by attempts to unify them while making them 'rich' enough to be applied in empirical research (as opposed to the philosophical exercise of upward abstraction that is rather uncritically supported within many of these papers). Such research does not necessarily require large-scale unification. It might be argued that the fact that, within certain contexts, the full understanding of a social phenomenon may well require more than one approach, more than one way of formulating questions and viewing social ontology. In some cases, a persistent differentiation between different modes of social

enquiry may be what makes interdisciplinary research potentially so rewarding. This certainly points towards a more collective model of research. Attempts at large-scale unification, be it the subsumption under one broad understanding of social ontology as proposed by critical realism according to Holland, or the further abstraction and generalization of concepts as proposed by Scheele, may not always necessarily bring insight.

This last point is taken up within Van Bouwel's discussion of Holland and we believe it to constitute an useful lense through which to read this whole issue. These papers present strong arguments for the usefulness of unification within certain contexts and point to interesting ways of pursuing this ideal, each of which deserves full consideration within social scientific practice. Are there contexts, however, in which unification becomes a sterile, even misleading ideal? We hope this issue to become a stimulating source of reflection on this issue and many more. If interested in responding to any of these papers, or in sending a relevant contribution, please contact us.