Advancing interdisciplinary research on institutions: a typology of research questions

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research is conducted into the formal and
informal rules of human interaction: institutions.

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Introduction: The challenges of multi- and interdisciplinary research

In order to conduct high-quality research on institutions for open societies, we will often have to engage in multi- and interdisciplinary research. Such research brings together knowledge and insights from different disciplines on a particular topic or research question.

Multidisciplinary research, in essence, puts different disciplines alongside each other to analyze a topic or question. It provides a broader range of perspectives on a topic and a wider set of perspectives on a question. And hence our understanding of that topic as well as the analyses on offer, will be richer. *Interdisciplinary* research goes one step further, and aims at *integrating* the insights of different disciplinary perspectives on a research question or topic, and developing new methods and conceptual frameworks that allow such interdisciplinary research to thrive. Interdisciplinary research demands from scholars and students a willingness to engage with other perspectives, and attitudes of genuine respect and curiosity to what other disciplines have to offer.[1]

In some countries, including the Netherlands, there is a broad and growing commitment to multi- and interdisciplinarity, in educational programs as well as in research agendas. In ideal circumstances, this is facilitated by enabling the material preconditions, such as well-funded multi- and interdisciplinary Bachelor- and Master programs, the establishment of professorships with an interdisciplinary focus, and funding for interdisciplinary collaborations in research activities. In ideal circumstances, the opportunities for scholars engaging in interdisciplinary research should not be worse than for scholars engaging in disciplinary research – think of the availability of jobs, the availability of excellent journals to publish one's research, the practices of research funding, and so forth. My sense is that the degree to which the material support, incentives and reward structures of contemporary academia supports rather than discourages interdisciplinary research, differs significantly between countries, and have a very real effect on the prospect for interdisciplinary research.[2] Yet in this Think Paper, I do not want to focus on those material structures, but instead focus on some epistemic challenges to doing multi- and interdisciplinary research.

EPISTEMIC CHALLENGES TO MULTI- AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Even under ideal circumstances of material support and proper structures of incentives and rewards that foster multi- and interdisciplinary research, there will be epistemic challenges for students and scholars engaging in multi- and interdisciplinarity. Let me mention just two. First, the vast majority of scholars have themselves only studied one discipline in depth, and hence only speak one disciplinary language, know the corresponding set of methods, and are often well-versed in the debates on a certain

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1   See Repko and Szostak (2017), esp. pp. 68-75.
2   For discussion, see Lyall (2019).

topic from one specific disciplinary angle. This might no longer be the case in the near future, though, since there is now an abundance of interdisciplinary educational programs, up to the PhD level. Moreover, at more and more universities, including Utrecht University, interdisciplinary education takes a more central role also in educational leadership and the development of frameworks for eduction.[3]

Second, being trained in a discipline, or a 'school' or 'tradition' within a discipline, often comes with a specific epistemic socialization. In some disciplines, research quality translates into 'rigor', which is operationalized as modelling and quantitative analysis, while in other disciplines epistemic norms dictate that one should spend enough months or years doing one's own fieldwork and/or collaborating with specific groups in order to do good research. These disciplinary socializations often become the 'second nature' of scholars, and one is not always aware of their influence on how we do research. But clearly, differences in these (sub-)disciplinary epistemic norms can lead to difficulties for multi- and interdisciplinary collaborations.
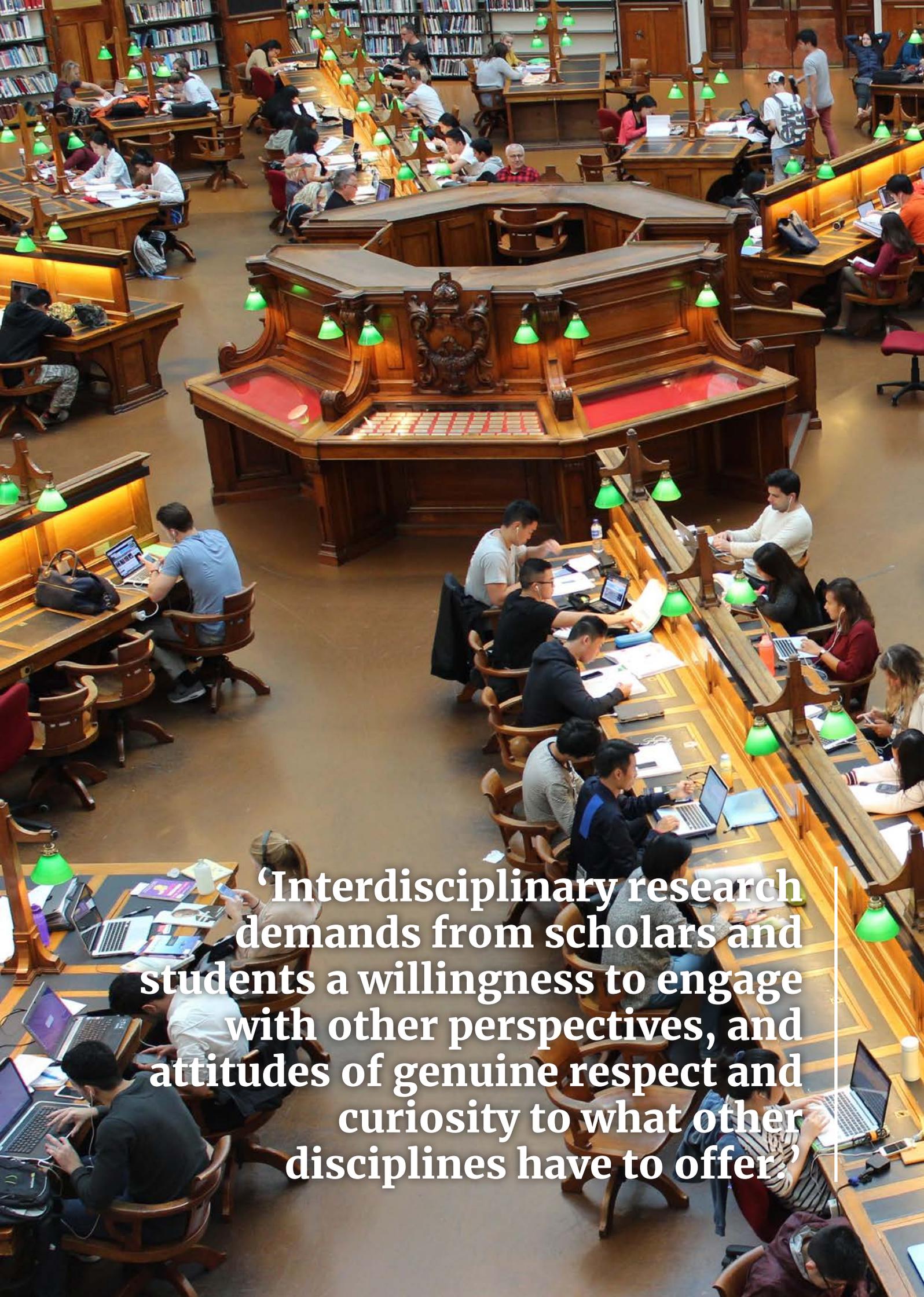
How could we deal with these epistemic challenges to inter- and multidisciplinarity? One line of response to the challenges is provided by the structures of incentives, costs, risks and rewards that characterize contemporary academia and research funding. Learning how a scholar from another discipline conducts research takes time, a lot of time. And this is time that could otherwise be used to do research that is either easier to do (and hence will in probabilistic terms more quickly lead to publications), or else time that is insufficiently facilitated by research funding. The discussions on the problems with adequate funding for public research and higher education, as well as on the nature of the modern research university, are thus directly related to the prospects of high-quality interdisciplinary research. A more adequately funded university, in which there is genuine time to do research and less focus on output metrics, will be an environment in which high-quality interdisciplinary research is more likely to flourish.

TYPES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Another line of response to tackling epistemic challenges to multi- and interdisciplinarity is to develop and disseminate a set of basic common-ground concepts, tools and insights that can help to enable and foster multi- and interdisciplinary communication. This Think Paper is trying to make a modest contribution to building that tool box, by discussing the different *categories or types of research questions* that scholars across different disciplines are asking. The typology that I will propose has emerged from the experience of engaging for more than two decades in multi- and interdisciplinary research and teaching, in which I noted that the first step at which cross-disciplinary conversations go awry is in not properly asking the question: "What *kind* of question is this researcher asking?".

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3 See e.g. Van der Tuin, Van de Poel and Bland (2022) for a statement of interdisciplinary education at Utrecht University.

'Interdisciplinary research demands from scholars and students a willingness to engage with other perspectives, and attitudes of genuine respect and curiosity to what other disciplines have to offer.'

In other words, based on my experience as a teacher and a scholar, I have become convinced that the first step in enabling and fostering multi- and interdisciplinary research is to properly understand the *kinds* of questions people ask, understanding the difference between these questions, and appreciating the contribution that different kinds of questions bring to research and scholarship.

It is certainly not the case that each discipline only does one or a few types of research, and hence that the types of research that will be presented in this paper can be divided along disciplinary lines. Some types of research are much more common in some disciplines than in other disciplines; yet at the same time some disciplines are internally divided because of these different types of research. Hence a better understanding of these types could also improve understanding between different 'schools' within one discipline. I will briefly return to discuss the exact relation between disciplines, interdisciplinarity, and the proposed typology of research questions in the concluding section of this paper.

The typology of kinds of research that I propose entails 9 different types (or categories) of research that scholars engaging with the study of institutions can engage with. Research on institutions can be (1) conceptual, (2) descriptive, (3) explanatory, (4) interpretative, (5) evaluative, (6) prescriptive, (7) predictive and (8) research developing visions. In the following eight sections, these different types of research are explained and illustrated. Section 9 briefly discusses another type of research, namely the development of research methods and

frameworks, which enables and supports these 8 types of research. The final section closes with some concluding reflections.

Note that the types of research are *analytical types*, and hence in practice one work of scholarship can (and often will) involve several of these types. In addition, this typology is not set in stone. It is a tool that should ideally help us when we study, teach, do research, and, perhaps, when we write grant applications. It is an instrument that should help us in those academic activities. Thus, if there is another typology, or a modified version of this one, that serves these purposes better, we only have reasons to adopt the better typologies. This is a conversation to which all members of the academic community are invited. But for now, let's start the conversation by describing the different types of research.

BOX: types of research for the study of institutions

1. conceptual research
2. descriptive research
3. explanatory research
4. interpretative research
5. evaluative research
6. prescriptive research
7. predictive research
8. research developing visions
9. methods, frameworks and other supportive research

'The first step in enabling and fostering interdisciplinary research is to properly understand the kinds of questions people ask, understanding the difference between these questions, and appreciating the contribution that different kinds of research bring to research and scholarship.'

1 | Conceptual research

Conceptual research is about the meaning and understanding of terms that we use. For example, the very notion 'institution' has to be properly conceptualized before we can use it. Otherwise, how can we know we are talking about the same thing when we use that term? In this strand of research, conceptual work is done on how best to understand a certain notion, or to investigate whether the conceptualizations proposed by others are sound, or could instead be improved (given that science and scholarship is a process of standing on the shoulders of those who did research before us). This type of work also analyzes how a term is used in the public domain, or by others, and uses the conceptual work to investigate whether the concepts are used properly, and if not, what needs to change.

Take, as an example, the conceptual work on the notion of 'institutions'. Several definitions have been given in the literature. Take the definition given by Robert Goodin (1996: 21–22): "A social institution is, in its most general characterization, nothing more than a stable, valued recurring pattern of behavior".... A central defining feature of institutions is "the stable, recurring, patterned nature of the behavior that occurs within institutions, and because of them. ... In an institutionalized setting, behavior is more stable and predictable... that very stability and predictability is, to a very large extent, precisely why we value institutionalized patterns and what it is we value in them."

Conceptual research might lead us to ask the following questions. Is Goodin correct in adding the qualification 'valued' to that definition? If not, can we give examples of where we do not value the behavior that institutions generate? Yes, we can. For example, widespread corruption in politics and public administration surely are not valuable, and at best only valued by those who gain net from this behavior – yet it can be such a stable and widespread pattern of behavior that it is difficult to escape it. Such a line of conceptual analysis would then lead to a modification of Goodin's conceptualization, by dropping the adjective "valuable" in the first sentence.

Another, more fundamental question that one might ask when doing conceptual work is whether institutions should be defined in terms of behavior. According to Geoff Hodgson (2006), the durability (or sustainability) of institutions depends on the expectation that they create certain behavior of others, but institutions themselves should not be defined in terms of behavior, because it "would mislead us into presuming that institutions no longer existed if their associated behaviors were interrupted. Does the British monarchy cease to exist when the members of the royal family are all asleep and no royal ceremony is taking place? Of course not: royal prerogatives and powers remain, even when they are not enacted. It is powers, not the behaviors themselves, which mean that the institution exists. Nevertheless, such powers may lapse, and institutional dispositions may fade, if they are not exercised with sufficient frequency. Furthermore, the only way in which we can observe institutions is through manifest behavior." (Hodgson 2006: 3).

Hodgson's conceptual work then leads to the following definition of institutions (Hodgson 2006: 2): "Institutions are the kinds of structures that matter most in the social realm: they make up the stuff of social life. The increasing

acknowledgement of the role of institutions in social life involves the recognition that much of human interaction and activity is structured in terms of overt or implicit rules. Without doing much violence to the relevant literature, we may define institutions as systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions.".

The definitions provided by Goodin and Hodgson, and our own work in discussing and probing them, as well as possibly providing new definitions, is an example of conceptual work.

Another task of conceptual work would be to ask whether there are closely related notions, and how they differ. For 'institutions', such notions exist, such as 'organization'.[4] Hodgson (2006: 8) puts it as follows: "Organizations are special institutions that involve (a) criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from nonmembers, (b) principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge, and (c) chains of command delineating responsibilities within the organization." Another subcategory of institutions are social norms, which are widely shared norms in society that express both an empirical and a normative expectation. Importantly, violations of that norm will be punished by others who have internationalized the norm, e.g. by shunning the norm-violator (Bicchieri 2016).

In institutional analysis, conceptual research is required for all institutions we study, such as 'money', 'debt', 'parenting', 'work', 'care', as well as for normative notions that we use in evaluative and prescriptive research will be discussed below, such as 'welfare', 'sustainability', 'equality', 'fairness', 'efficiency', 'legitimacy' (Bovens *et al.* 2020) and many, many

more. For example, Gädeke (2020) has argued that a proper understanding of the notion of 'domination' must take its essentially structural character into account. This is crucial for an analysis of social institutions, since otherwise we risk misconstruing domination as perpetrated by individual wrongdoers, rather than understanding that it is a feature that pervades society. Similarly, in a contribution to the conceptualization of 'accountability', Bovens (2010) distinguishes between accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism. In the former case, accountability is used primarily as a normative concept, and is seen as a positive quality in organizations or officials. In the latter case, accountability is used in a narrower, descriptive sense, and the focus is on the way in which these institutional arrangements operate.

Conceptual research also needs to ask the question: What makes one definition better than another? This too is subject to extensive debate and disciplinary differences. In many disciplines, competing definitions are assessed in pragmatic terms, for example, whether they can be operationalized for empirical research. In other contexts – such as the field of "conceptual engineering" – conceptualization can be assessed in normative terms (Chalmers 2020; Burgess, Cappelen and Plunket 2020). For example, it should be asked whether the concept can help us improve (aspects of) a situation, what Haslanger (2000, 2020) calls the 'ameliorative function' of concepts.

Concepts form the foundation of much of the subsequent types of analysis to which we will now turn.

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4   In fact, in the Dutch public sphere, "institutions" as it is used in academic discourse is often mistakenly translated as "instellingen" (organizations).

2 | Descriptive research

Descriptive research provides empirical descriptions of a certain phenomenon (in the past or present), or the evolution of a certain phenomenon (hence, its change over time). Take 'the borders of a country' as an example of a legal and political institution. One might describe how the borders of the Netherlands have changed over time, or how the territory of what is currently the territory of the Netherlands mapped (or did not map) onto changing national borders, and so forth.

Another example of descriptive research are the demographic characteristics of those who are affected by, or make use of, certain institutions or policies in society. For example, Begall and Van der Lippe (2020) examined the question to what extent access to and use of organizational policies related to work–life balance, flexibility, training, and health is stratified by education. In particular, they asked whether organizations with a larger proportion of highly skilled employees are more likely to provide access to organizational work-family policies and whether higher skilled employees are more likely to report access to organizational work-family policies.

One particular form of descriptive research regards what people think about certain phenomena, hence *their judgements* of certain phenomena. For example, a multidisciplinary team within Institutions for Open Societies investigated, based on a novel survey using vignettes, whether the Dutch population judged that one can say that at some point at which the material standard of living rises, one becomes too rich (Robeyns, Buskens, Van der Rijt, Vergeldt & Van der Lippe, 2021). Occasionally, someone mistakenly thinks that this is *normative* research, but this is rather empirical descriptive research about a normative notion. It is about finding out what a population thinks about something; it is carefully describing (and possibly, measuring) what respondents think.

Descriptive research can be about phenomena that do not require conceptualization, since they are either purely a matter of definition, or at the conceptual level these phenomena are pretty uncontested. Perhaps the notion of "national borders" is such a phenomenon, although there are of course always specific borders that are disputed (but that is another matter; the question here would rather be whether the *notion* of a geographical border is disputed). Another phenomenon that at the level of conceptualization is not contested is the number of people alive in the world at one point in time, hence estimates of global population.

However, descriptive research can also be about phenomena of which the concept itself is essentially contested, hence phenomena that are much less clear-cut. In those cases, descriptive research is about notions that first need to be conceptualized, that is, their precise content needs to be fleshed out and argued for. An example is the quality of life or welfare: there are deep disputes about what that notion stands for (e.g. Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Robeyns & Van der Veen, 2007).

And this is independent of another set of scholarly disputes, about how it could be measured (e.g. Boelhouwer 2010; Van Bavel, Hardeman & Rijpma, 2019).

Descriptive research is sometimes one stage in a research project in which different types of research are combined. In many cases, a research question must rely on conceptual research, which is used as the basis for descriptive research, since we need to have a good understanding of what the phenomenon is we are interested in (the earlier mentioned purely definitional or conceptually uncontested phenomena are exceptions). By producing valuable insights, descriptive research can serve an important goal in itself. It can also be an important stage in a larger research project in which different types of research come together; it is often what is done before scholars move to explanation, interpretation, or evaluative and prescriptive analysis, to which we now turn.

3 | **Explanatory research**

When scholars conduct explanatory research, they aim at explaining why a certain phenomenon occurs, why it persists or declines, why it has evolved the way it did, and so forth. This category of research is used to explain phenomena in almost all disciplines.

Here are some examples of this type of research as it has been done by scholars affiliated with Utrecht University's Institutions for Open Societies network. Scholars have examined the role of institutions in explaining differences in entrepreneurship over time and space (Bosma, Sanders & Stam, 2018). These differences alone are interesting from an analytical and policy point of view, but require explanatory (institutional) research to be better understood. Another example are studies that have offered explanations for the spatial diffusion patterns of innovations from differences in institutions across regions and countries, such as in the case of Uber (Punt et al., 2021a) and energy cooperatives (Punt et al., 2021b). Other scholars have sought explanations for why informal institutions as social networks can promote trust between, for example, buyers and sellers (Buskens & Raub, 2013). Van der Lippe and Lippényi (2020) examined the role of a supportive organizational context in making working from home facilitate the combination of work and family. Specifically, they addressed to what extent perceptions of managerial support, ideal worker culture, as well as the number of colleagues working from home influence how working from home relates to work–family conflict.

Explanatory research often starts with observations that prompt a question or prompt one to look for underlying causes. An example of such an observation is that despite formal gender equality, the gender division of labor persists. Or, the observation that the extensiveness of contracts varies between buyers and sellers although they exchange similar products. Often, an explanatory hypothesis is formed based on these observations and/or the results from previous research. This is the theoretical part of explanatory research: one must have a plausible account of how and why one believes something can be explained in a certain way. From that theoretical part follow hypotheses that can be tested empirically. For example, Buskens and Raub (2013) illustrate such theoretical arguments based on game-theoretic models and provide evidence summarizing a combination of quantitative survey and experimental research, typical methodologies used to address explanatory questions.

Of all types of research, explanatory research is probably the most publicly visible of academic research; indeed, sometimes it seems that the wider public understands the practice of science as being *all about explanatory* research. One reason why interdisciplinary research is sometimes so difficult is because explanatory research has a higher status in the academic social order than other types of research, whereas for genuine interdisciplinary collaborations one needs an equal status of all types of research. Explanatory research needs either conceptual work (which is needed for theory development), or descriptive

research, and often it would greatly benefit from being informed by interpretative research on the same topic (see next section). A project that engages in explanatory research might of course start from the conceptual work, theory development or descriptive analysis done by other scholars; after all, academic knowledge production is a collective enterprise in which different types of research need, or support, other types of research. But since individual scholars are often specialized in one or a few types of research, and since some disciplines are specialized in some types of research, a research project that engages with several types of research will often require collaborations across disciplines and research specialisms.

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4 | Interpretative research

Interpretative research wants to give insights that help us to better *understand* aspects of an issue or a phenomenon. 'Explanation' and 'interpretation' reflect, to some extent, the distinction between *'Erklären'* and *'Verstehen'*, which is canonical in the history of the philosophy and sociology of knowledge production.

But we don't need to be dragged into the complications and details of that historical debate, to appreciate that there may be forms of research that enhance our understanding, but not by explaining (the causes of) phenomena, but rather by focusing on a contextual, layered, qualitative interpretation of a phenomenon. Interpretative research could take theoretical as well as empirical forms. Political philosophers and ethicists tell us which concepts and distinctions we can apply to better see what is at stake in a particular situation, such as the question whether we should use notions of individual or institutional responsibility when thinking about climate action (or why endorsing that distinction is putting us on the wrong foot). Scholars who have built up expertise in the study of artificial intelligence not only explain how we should understand the developments of these technological changes in society, but also what kind of questions this raises for public values in society, and other macro-level societal changes.

Interpretative research can overlap with conceptual, descriptive and explanatory research, but it ultimately has a different goal: it aims at giving an interpretation of a situation that makes us better understand the situation in a number of important respects. It aims at equipping the reader or listener of interpretive research with a more solid, richer, multifaceted understanding. This also often occurs because the interpretative scholars draw attention to factors that are of relevance to a proper understanding of the phenomenon, and that a partial analysis might overlook.

An example of a study that is conceptual-interpretative is the development of the metaphorical lens of a tree to conceptualize and properly interpret the complex process of online platformization: the interpenetration of digital technical infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks in different sectors of society. Regulators and lawmakers may use this conceptual approach to envision effective antitrust or anticompetition measures to regulate the tech industry (Van Dijck, 2020). Empirically, research that aims to understand the motivations and meanings of certain practices and social norms, often done by means of ethnographic methods or in-depth interviews, could be classified as interpretative research.

Scholarship can be of great value to society by providing such interpretations. Scholars are generally experts, and this allows them to quickly judge what the salient features are about a certain phenomenon, and how to separate aspects that are crucial and weighty for a proper understanding from those that are trivial. This also explains why media constantly solicit interpretations and explanations from scholars, since scholars can provide the depth of insights that a non-specialist cannot provide, simply because non-specialists lack the knowledge needed to properly interpret a certain situation.

5 | Evaluative research

Evaluative research is research that starts from, or develops, explicit value judgements (judgements about something being good or bad, or, when it is done comparatively, being better or worse). Since evaluative research is based on values, norms and normative principles, it must rely on prior conceptual research – either done as part of the evaluative research, or done in earlier work and on which the evaluative research can build.

Evaluative research centralizes certain norms or values but also relies on conceptual research, descriptive research, and explanatory research. For example, suppose one asks the evaluative question whether the implementation of an unconditional basic income would be, all things considered, desirable or not (Robeyns, 2018). Answering this question requires knowing which public values or normative principles would be affected by the implementation of a basic income – a question political philosophers have been trained to answer. However, most public values can be understood in multiple ways, so the next step is providing the arguments for adopting one conceptualization of a public value rather than another. Next, for each of those public values or principles, we then need empirical analysis of what the expected effects of a basis income on that value would be. Since a basic income doesn't exist on the scale and size on which it is generally proposed, one has to argue for the most likely effect based on descriptive studies of similar institutional changes, such as the implementation

of parental leave, or from small-scale basic income experiments, or policies or experiments that are sufficiently similar in design to provide insights. For example, this was done for 'What works', a social policy experiment in Utrecht that aimed to anser the question how to guide those on social assistance towards paid work or other forms of social participation (Groot, Rosenkranz, Sanders & Verlaat, 2021).

Another example of evaluative research done on institutions is the work by Bovens and Wille (2017) on the rise of political meritocracy. Their work explores the domination of higher educated citizens in political participation, civil society, and political office in Western Europe. It discusses the consequences of this rise of a political meritocracy, such as descriptive deficits, policy incongruences, biased standards, and cynicism and distrust. The book goes beyond description and explanation, by also looking at ways to remedy or at least mitigate some of the negative effects of diploma democracy, and hence combines descriptive, evaluative and prescriptive reserach.

Evaluative research is *normative* in the sense that it includes value judgements in research: it states that certain things are desirable goals (such as having more valuable options for how to live one's life, enjoying a higher quality of life, enjoying basic civic liberties and democratic rights, or the elimination of poverty). Sometimes these goals are made explicit, and arguments are given for why these are desirable goals, or references are made to the work of other scholars

who have provided those arguments. Sometimes these goals remain implicit, either because it is a no-brainer that certain goals are desirable (such as the reduction of terrorist attacks affecting a peaceful democratic population) or because it is assumed, though not argued for, that a certain goal is desirable. It could also be the case that the norms are given and embodied in legislation; legal scholars thus frequent engage in evaluative research when they ask whether a certain policy (proposal) or action respects a particular set of legal norms, such as the constitution, or the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

It is also possible to map the normative implications of possible policies or interventions, in terms of a range of values and principles, without drawing an overall conclusion. In that case these normative implications are studied, but the question whether, all things considered, this institution or phenomenon is desirable, depends on how one weighs different public values and normative principles, which is a decision that is left for the public or policy makers to make. Such kind of study is what one could call 'a normative audit'.[5]

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5 See *www.crookedtimber.org/2020/04/03/normative-audit-as-a-method-for-political-philosophy/*

6 | Prescriptive research

Prescriptive research takes evaluative research one step further, by telling us what needs to be done: which policy should be implemented, which institution needs to change and in what way, and so forth. Obviously, prescriptive research never amounts to more than advice to policy makers or others, since scholars and researchers have no more power than the power of their arguments based on their research. Ultimately, it is up to those who have genuine decision-making power (which could be a CEO, a head of the department of human resources, a minister, or any other powerful person or organization) to make the choice to follow the advice or not.

Sometimes the goals of prescriptive research are given by the clear articulation of those goals by some parties in society. For example, discrimination against people of color or people with a migration background is widely condemned; hence, scholars could rightly take this as a desirable societal goal and develop recommendations on how to reduce such discrimination. The same holds for policy recommendations that aim at reducing, or ideally eliminating, poverty.

Studies with prescriptive research can take its guiding values and goals from several sources, including from parties in power who commission a study explicitly asking for prescriptions based on an integrative (a-political) scientific analysis. This has been the case with the "Commissie Regulering van Werk (2020)" (Committee

Regulation of Work), initiated by the Dutch ministries of Social Affairs and Employment, Legal Affairs, Internal Affairs, Economic Affairs, and Finance, of the Dutch government. This committee was asked to analyze to what extent the current regulation of work in the Netherlands is future-proof, and to propose the direction of a better new institutional design.

7 | Predictive research

Sometimes, scholars try to predict how certain phenomena will work out in the future, and for that reason they develop a model that will predict what will happen to that phenomenon. For example, the predictions that the very interdisciplinary academic community of climate scholars and scientists makes regarding the effects on climate of different climate mitigation strategies, which have been published in the influential reports of the IPCC now for more than 30 years.[6]

As human beings living on this planet, we need these predictions, since we need to have not only concrete suggestions and proposals about what to do to stop the increase of the concentration of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere, but we also need to know what the predicted effects are of different strategies. In this case, prescriptive research and predictive research are closely intertwined.

Another example is when scholars, because of their study of certain areas and the expertise they have gained, expect a certain outcome that they think is of importance. For example, some economists predicted the deep financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent recession – which was overlooked by most economists because the most widely used models were unsuited to see the financial crisis emerging (Bezemer, 2009). This also led to new interdisciplinary approaches developing early warning signals for better financial regulation (e.g. Battiston et al., 2016).

Predictive research may sound like speculative futurology, but it has several important roles to play. It dovetails with explanatory research, in formulating the hypotheses in terms of which existing explanatory theories are tested. Predictions are also essential for prescriptive research, for example, in clarifying the effects of various policy options. And it contributes to the underpinnings for the development of practically relevant visions on how things could be different, a form of research to which I now turn.

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6 See *www.ipcc.ch/*

'Predictions are also essential for prescriptive research, for example, in clarifying the effects of various policy options.'

WE
CARE
ABOUT
THE
FUTURE

8 Visions: Research that envisions valuable futures

Many scholars also see it as their task to provide more ambitious outlines for future arrangements that could inspire or help politicians and citizens. Indeed it has been argued that one of the core responsibilities of universities is to contribute to such visions and blueprints (Putters, 2021).

Some researchers might become advocates of such views. In political philosophy and legal scholarship, it is very common for scholars to advocate certain institutional proposals. For example, Claassen (2018) has developed an elaborate and detailed theory of social justice for liberal societies. In economics too, there are clear defenders of, say, free-market based institutional proposals, versus those who defend policies that follow from Keynesian or institutional economics. Another example are the proposals that have been developed for what should replace the current welfare states (e.g. Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Shafik, 2021).

This category or type of research is oriented towards change, and is clearly building on research done in other types of research. It also has a much stronger synthesizing nature than the previously discussed types of research, incorporating many results from other research into a *coherent* vision.

9 | Methods, frameworks, and other supporting research

Finally, a last type of research that is relevant in multi- and interdisciplinary contexts is the development of methods to conduct all the other types of research discussed so far. At one end of the spectrum, in cases such as for conceptual analysis, we are looking at methods that are similar to being trained to become an artist: it is like a craft that one learns from sustained practice, and from enjoying the (informal) training from working with a scholar who has much more experience in doing that kind of research (the comparison with how painters learn to paint is not entirely farfetched). At the other end, we are looking at quantitative methods that are based in a combination of applied mathematics and statistics, and for which being recently trained with the most novel statistical tests may provide the best starting point to conduct high-quality research.

The development of methods can take place at a very detailed and technical level, akin to the development of a very specific technique. It could also take place at a somewhat broader level, e.g. when frameworks or approaches are developed that could be applied to set up an entire study. For example, Douglas, 't Hart and Van Erp (2020) have developed a funnel framework to identify, assess and interpret cases of successful public governance, as well as failures in government.

One challenge to interdisciplinary research is that most scholars are trained in one (sub-) discipline, and hence also know advanced methods in only one discipline. As a consequence, there is a real risk of a rather limited understanding of what exactly scholars using very different methods are doing. In many cases, scholars are experts in one set of methods, but mere amateurs in other methods, and not always able to recognize the true limitations of their own not-knowing. In order to advance interdisciplinary research, there thus seems to be a real need for a specific kind of research into methods, that focuses on integrative methodological research, that brings together methods and frameworks from different disciplines, and makes it easier to communicate between disciplines. While this Think Paper has focused on other types of research than the development of methods, both can provide the grounds for misunderstandings and frustrations in interdisciplinary collaborations, as well as within disciplines in which different types of research are done, with their corresponding methods.

10 | Conclusions

This Think Paper has aimed to provide an overview of the different types of research that scholars analyzing institutions can ask. Having such an overview is important for several reasons.

First, it is simply important for readers of research that has been done by others (whether they are students or other scholars) to properly understand what kind of research question the author is asking, and not to mistake one type of question for another. A stronger awareness of the many different categories of science and scholarship that are possible should create more understanding within discplines that are internally diverse with respect to types of research, but also more understanding in multi–disciplinary and interdisciplinary encounters and collaborations. All too often, valuable research is unjustifiably denigrated by those who happen to have different research aims.

Second, scholars may unwittingly make claims in their paper that are of one type, without having provided the required (theoretical or empirical) research that is needed to make such claims. For example, sometimes descriptive claims are made but are not backed up by research or references to previous research (or one is cherry–picking

empirical claims since they best fit what one tries to argue for); or an article contains evaluative or prescriptive claims without arguments or references to work where these arguments have been developed, and without being aware that this, too, is a mode of knowledge production that has its methods and epistemic standards. It is important to know the limits of one's knowledge.

Third, since some disciplines are specialized in one particular type of research, it should help interdisciplinary conversations if scholars and students have a more comprehensive understanding of the different types of research that scholars of institutional analysis make. If we want the future of academic research to be more interdisciplinary, we must also make sure that we have the tools, menu options and roadmaps that facilitate such research.

Finally, it is important to stress that this typology is an instrument to help us understand the full landscape of research on institutions. If the instrument can be improved, we should improve it. In other words, every reader of this Think Paper is hereby invited to propose modifications to the typology that has been presented, or indeed, to provide other typologies that might prove to be more helpful instruments.

'Since some disciplines are specialized in one particular type of research, it should help interdisciplinary conversations if scholars and students have a more comprehensive understanding of the different types of research that scholars of institutional analysis make.'

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