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Motivations for doing Interdisciplinary Research: Results from an Australian Qualitative Study

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Abstract: While the literature provides a strong conceptual justification for Interdisciplinary Research (for example: Klein 1990, 1996; Sherif & Sherif, 1969) and a number of studies document the benefits and challenges of such studies (such as: Slatin, Galizzi, Melillo & Mawn 2004; Rhoten, 2004; Lynch 2006; Jacobs & Frickel 2009), there are surprisingly few empirical analyses of the reasons why individual researchers become involved in Interdisciplinary Research projects. Responding to this gap in the extant literature, the current study was undertaken to identify individual influences and motivations for participating in Interdisciplinary Research projects. In this paper we report findings that emerged from 30 interviews with researchers from a wide range of disciplines, as well as different stage of career, on the major reasons why they are drawn to Interdisciplinary Research. As part of the paper we also report the extent to which participants agreed or disagreed with a variety of pitfalls identified in the literature as potential impediments or deterrents to individuals becoming involved in Interdisciplinary studies.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, Multidisciplinary, Motives, Influences, Barriers

Introduction

WHILE A RANGE of authors provide a strong conceptual justification for interdisciplinary studies, and a long list of advocates promote the institutional and societal benefits of such research1, a contrasting and rather bleak picture exists of the interdisciplinarian’s scholarly life. According to the extant literature, seemingly insurmountable barriers lie waiting to confound academics committed to pursuing interdisciplinary studies. At the macro level academics can expect poor funding opportunities and at the meso level interdisciplinary researchers are confronted by unforgiving administrative arrangements. Meanwhile, at the micro level interdisciplinarians must deal with issues of disciplinary intolerance and epistemological divides (Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, 2005). Indeed, faced with so many obstacles, we wondered why academics would want to conduct interdisciplinary research? This small-scale qualitative study explores the personal motivations of 30 interdisciplinarians and their perspectives on the purported challenges of doing interdisciplinary research.

It’s not easy being Interdisciplinary

The humorous yet pessimistic heading above, taken from an editorial published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, captures the pervasive glass-half empty tenor to be found in much of the literature on the practice of interdisciplinary research (Lynch, 2006). For example, various chapters in the much anticipated *Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research* (2010) detail the hardships and difficulties that have been associated with interdisciplinary studies. In one chapter, Pfirman and Martin (2010) characterize the world of the interdisciplinary scholar as stressful, demoralizing and frustrating owing to poor recognition by disciplinary peers, diminished publication possibilities and the need for greater investments of time (among other things). In another chapter, Graybill and Shandas (2010) discuss the difficult and uncertain career pathways of doctoral students and early career academics trained in interdisciplinary research and teaching.

In a similar vein, the landmark report ‘Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research’ by the National Academy of Sciences (2004) describes at length a variety of institutional impediments to undertaking research with an interdisciplinary focus. These include: the limited resources available for interdisciplinary research; existing academic reward systems not recognizing interdisciplinary work, and; the conflict that can emerge through different university department policies and procedures. Prior research has also pointed to problems associated with the functioning of interdisciplinary teams. For instance, Slatin, Galizzi, Melillo and Mawn (2004) outline how issues of trust, communication, leadership as well as differing perceptions regarding concepts, questions and methods can potentially undermine interdisciplinary collaborations. Furthermore, drawing on her field experiences, Campbell (2005) describes how conflicting norms and expectations regarding authorship and publication are likely to be encountered by the interdisciplinary researcher.

Against this backdrop of hurdles and obstructions, we present the initial results of an empirical study that sought to understand why a cross-section of Australian academics engage in interdisciplinary research. The paper also examines the extent to which the experiences of this group reflect prior assessments of the problems of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Method

Participants

Thirty participants were interviewed for the current study from three major Australian Universities located in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia (17 participants were male and 13 female). Overall, less than one-quarter were early career researchers, with a clear majority at either a senior or professorial level. When asked to self-rate their level of experience with interdisciplinary research, 16 felt they had a significant level of experience, 5 said they had a reasonable level of experience and 9 indicated they had only a little experience.

Sampling

A combination of criterion, maximum variation and simple random sampling techniques were used for the study (Patton, 2002). The first of these (criterion sampling) involved
identifying a population of researchers who were actively involved in interdisciplinary projects. This was achieved by examining information available publicly on university and government websites reporting the recipients of competitive interdisciplinary research (IDR) funding grants. Then, using maximum variation sampling, grant recipients were categorised into seven disciplinary orientations: Arts & Humanities, Business and Economics, Education, Law, Engineering, Medicine and Science (Williams & Van Dyke, 2006). A total of 50 participants were selected randomly from across these areas and contacted via email with an invitation to participate in the study. Thirty agreed to participate in an interview resulting in an overall response rate of 60%.

**Interview Procedure**

Interviews were conducted either by telephone or in person and ranged from 25-90 minutes in duration. All interviews were undertaken using a qualitative semi-structured approach to ensure that informants were asked the same set of questions while also allowing opportunities to explore topics raised by the interviewee.

Interviews were organised into three major components. The first group of questions sought to provide a snap shot of the participants’ disciplinary background and history of working on IDR projects. The next aspect of the interview asked participants to respond to an open question regarding key motivations and influences associated with their involvement in IDR. Finally, participants were invited to comment on a series of barriers and disincentives to conducting IDR, and indicate the extent to which these were significant in their work.

**Data Analysis**

Following the completion of the interviews, digital audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded, beginning with a preliminary set of codes based on the interview questions and a review of the literature. Codes were then maintained, adapted, added to or collapsed following further close reading of the interview texts. Next, all major ideas were displayed under thematic headings on matrices of the type proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). These displays, in combination with verbatim quotes from the transcripts, are a particularly rigorous way of dealing with qualitative data.

In the next section of this paper we present the study’s findings in two parts. First, we examine reported motivations and influences for doing interdisciplinary studies. This is followed by an examination of the participants’ responses to a range of barriers to conducting interdisciplinary research. Where quotes have been used these are identified by an audit trail indicating participant number and primary discipline orientation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Findings**

**Motivations and Influences**

Our analysis of informant responses led to the identification of four overarching categories of influence regarding participant involvement in interdisciplinary studies. While these are presented below as distinct themes, in most cases multiple and overlapping motivations were provided as reasons for engaging in interdisciplinary work.
A Desire to Solve Complex Problems

By far the most commonly reported motivation was a recognition that the increasingly complex medical, social, economic, environmental, and political problems participants faced in their work could only be solved by drawing on multiple disciplines. This belief, reported by over two thirds of participants, was summed up well by one respondent who described how the focus of his research, water resource management in Australia, was innately:

complex, a wicked problem…[with] no end point…and many different dimensions, so if a solution is to be found it cannot be done solely on the basis of bio-physical dimension of water [as] the social and economic aspects need to be explored as well (Int. 8, Hydrologist).

Other researchers commented similarly on the need to ‘reach out and work with people who have skills beyond your own discipline to solve problems…scientists can’t be polymaths’ (Int. 3, Clinical Neurologist). Continuing this theme, a political scientist explained to us that ‘in terms of intentional decision-making a large part of it is understanding that problems such as human rights are inherently complex…one disciplinary stance doesn’t fully encapsulate them’ (Int. 22, Political Scientist).

One immediate observation that can be made about these comments is their close correspondence with the rhetoric underlying the current push for interdisciplinary research (IDR), namely that ‘interdisciplinarity is supposed to integrate knowledge and solve problems that individual disciplines cannot solve alone’ (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009, p. 47).

The Drive to Produce Relevant and Useful Outcomes

A second and related motivation that participants believed compelled their involvement in interdisciplinary projects, was an overriding concern for ‘generating something useful and practical like treatments for people with disease’ (Int. 25, Neurobiologist), ‘making a society that is more equitable’ (Int. 11, Architect) and ‘having an impact by getting traction in the world of social policy’ (Int. 27, Historian). Indeed, for nearly two thirds of participants, producing applied and real-world outcomes was a principle raison d’être for adopting an interdisciplinary approach. That is to say, the purpose of evoking interdisciplinarity was ‘instrumentally’ oriented rather than being ‘concerned specifically with theoretical issues, epistemology, pedagogy, and the disciplining of knowledge’ (Salter & Hearn, 1996, p. 29). While Salter and Hearn somewhat narrowly describe instrumental interdisciplinarity as serving the interests of government and industry, for our participants there seemed to be broader reasons, as the following quotes illustrate:

If your focus is on changing the nature of the thing you are dealing with then you won’t be worried about the disciplinary boundaries you cross. You will search to find the tools that are most appropriate. If you focus on the outcomes you want to achieve you will get involved in the disciplinary approaches that are relevant to reaching the outcomes (Int. 4, Epidemiologist seeking to reduce the impact of communicable diseases among intravenous drug users).

It comes down to your personal value set…I’m interested in doing useful things for other people. It makes me feel good if I can see that the work that I’m doing is relevant
and making a difference” (Int. 15, Hydrologist working on ways to improve farming sustainability).

In addition to these higher-order purposes, some participants also articulated a range of ancillary reasons for conducting IDR. These have been tentatively labelled as ‘opportunistic’ and ‘intrinsic’ motives.

Opportunistic Motives

Just under a third of participants outlined a number of ways in which interdisciplinarity had provided a means to an end. For instance, several participants admitted candidly that part of the attraction toward interdisciplinarity had been because ‘it made it much easier to get grant funding when you present a project as IDR …there is a push in that direction, so it increases your chance of success’ (Int. 2, Chemical Engineer). Meanwhile, a social worker conducting research in the area of gerontology explained that ‘there are new funding sources set up to promote IDR…[and this provides] an opening, and opportunity to promote an agenda I have been pushing for a long time…but was difficult to raise and get [funded] previously’ (Int. 9). Finally, a researcher specialising in international law stated bluntly that:

There is a strong feeling that if you are going to be strategic about putting together a successful application for grants that you should hit the word interdisciplinary as much as you can. Or multi-disciplinary to make it more attractive (Int. 28).

Other participants (particularly early career academics in untenured positions) mentioned that interdisciplinary projects had provided employment opportunities (Int. 13, Cultural Studies researcher). For instance, the increased resources for these types of studies had meant positions could be obtained on IDR teams, which was particularly attractive to those who did not feel at home in one discipline (Int. 6, Rural Health researcher). In some cases, the promotion of IDR in university departments had meant that career incentives existed for those who could demonstrate an active engagement with this prioritised area.

Intrinsic Motives

Lastly, nearly a quarter of respondents offered a variety of comments that pointed to intrinsic rewards they had associated with participating in IDR studies. For example, a number of interviewees expressed the view that doing interdisciplinary research ‘is fun…I’m having a great time reading all this stuff’ (Int. 24, Economist) and that such studies provided the ‘chance to be involved in cool and exciting projects’ (Int. 17, Engineer). A sizeable portion of this group also spoke to us about the appealing social dimension of IDR collaborations. The following quotes provide a composite picture of this additional reason for choosing to become involved in interdisciplinary research:

When I look at those who do IDR and those that don’t there does seem to be a difference with how much they enjoy engaging with people. I really enjoy engaging with people and different types of people. I didn’t need to have this sort of job but have definitely chosen to ensure my work is set up this way. (Int. 12, Otolaryngologist)…I’m a people oriented researcher which is unusual for computational science and I’m driven by
thinking that I could work well with a person. Working in your discipline you can run into the same faces so it’s good to extend beyond that (Int. 14, Computer Scientist)…I guess I just enjoy working with people rather than in isolation (Int. 5, Public Health researcher).

**Perceptions of Barriers**

In the final part of the interviews participants were invited to comment, from their experience, on a range of purported barriers to conducting IDR. The results of this exercise are reported below.

**Time**

The first of the barriers we presented to participants was the issue of ‘time’. In the main, interviewees did not consider this to be a significant factor impeding interdisciplinary research. Twelve respondents were firmly of the opinion that the time required for IDR projects was ‘not anymore time consuming than other research. Research done well is research done well and takes time!’ (Int. 1, Health Care researcher). Two other participants went so far as to say that IDR teams could be more time efficient than other types of study, explaining that in their experience:

You can fast track a lot by bringing people together. You have a greater coverage of the literature, what the available evidence base is, a wider range of methodologies to allow you to consider what might be appropriate in a given context, you have a wider range of networks you can call on, you have a critical mass of researchers that can be called on too (Int. 5, Public Health Researcher).

Indeed, only five interviewees indicated that issues such as ‘communicating different sets of ideas and getting into the same headspace’ required more time in IDR projects (Int. 16 Engineer). However, several of these same respondents prefaced their comments by saying that although the start-up of an IDR project could require more effort ‘time spent early really accelerates the process later on’ (Int. 23, Humanities researcher).

**Funding**

There were mixed responses regarding the funding of IDR. While most did not feel that interdisciplinary-oriented research was an underfunded area, seven senior and professorial academics singled out the Australian Research Council (ARC)\(^2\) as having a particularly poor record for supporting IDR studies. As one person put it, obtaining funding from the ARC:

…is phenomenally difficult. They just don’t know how to manage them, handle it, send them to the wrong referees, get absolutely harpooned by people who don’t understand a component of the research projects and it is a huge discouragement for people. It is like pearls before swine (Int. 26, Ecologist).

\(^2\) The ARC is the leading government funding body for Australian researchers and academics.
Despite this perceived lack of support by Australia’s preeminent research funding agency, many commented there were, nevertheless, other national and state funding programs that were supportive of IDR, as well as partnership opportunities with non-government and industry groups. Others added that an appreciable growth in university funding for interdisciplinary research had occurred in recent years.

**Disciplinary and Epistemic Divides**

While various advocates of IDR have noted that disciplinary conflict can be a serious challenge for interdisciplinary projects (Repko, 2008), two-thirds of our participants did not share this point of view. Of these, one third suggested a more overriding factor was the ‘personality of the people involved’ (Int. 26, Ecologist). This point was illustrated well by an experienced interdisciplinary researcher who explained that:

> There are some people from outside your discipline who can’t get into your headspace and likewise me into theirs. But I don’t see that as a disciplinary thing but rather a personality thing. That is one of the most important things in collaborative research within or across disciplines is the personal interaction (Int.3, Clinical Neurologist).

Because of the importance of the personal factor, respondents said they took great care when choosing who to collaborate with. In their opinion, open-mindedness, enjoying working with others, displaying ‘epistemological humility’, good negotiation skills and being trusting of each others expertise had proven more important than disciplinary and epistemic differences.

At the same time, a handful of interviewees did indicate that issues of disciplinary-specific concepts and jargon could, if not actively managed, lead to situations where ‘everyone seems to be speaking a foreign language’ (Int. 27, Historian) or where ‘people appear to be talking past each other without any in-depth appreciation of what others are saying’ (Int. 15, Hydrologist). However, this issue was not widely reported, with participants commenting that interdisciplinary projects tended to attract people who were willing to work past such barriers. Furthermore, respondents suggested role clarification, clear governance structures and other fundamentals of effective project management including the establishment of communication protocols help to ensure ‘everyone is comfortable with how things proceed’ (Int. 5, Public Health researcher).

**Diminished Publication Possibilities**

Twenty-three out of the thirty participants stated emphatically they had not found that interdisciplinary projects limit or reduce publication options. While they acknowledged that issues such as authorship, intellectual property and writing styles needed to be handled sensitively, respondents considered IDR participation as ‘having increased publication possibilities because you can publish components of the research across each of the participating disciplines journals’ (Int. 6, Rural Health Researcher). Participants also felt there was a growing receptiveness among editorial boards to accepting and even welcoming manuscripts stemming from interdisciplinary studies. Even so, a few interviewees identified a number of top-tiered disciplinary journals, especially those from the field of economics, as appearing unwilling to publish interdisciplinary research.
University Structures and Policies

Overall, there was a feeling among our participants that their universities had embraced the general ethos of interdisciplinarity, which they explained was evident in the establishment of interdisciplinary research institutes, interdisciplinary seed funding programs and the discourse of senior university management. Nonetheless, many respondents said that in spite of this, institutional barriers to conducting IDR remained. Several interviewees stated that certain departments appeared ‘mystified’ by IDR, with this type of research viewed as ‘not the main game’ (Int. 9, Social Worker). Others were quick to single out economics as being a field where their colleagues, as well as department executives, ‘see absolutely no value in interdisciplinary stuff…that’s just the way it is’ (Int. 20 and 24, Economists).

However, by far the most common complaint concerned the administrative structures of universities, which were not considered to be conducive for IDR collaborations. One person summed up this entrenched barrier in the following way:

I do think that many universities understand that the world has gotten more complex than the extant disciplines allow, and so they understand that something has to evolve. But they have no sense administratively how to do this…most universities are still run from the 19th Century disciplinary bastions. The practical stuff is how you put a currency system into the existing accounting system. Given the disciplines are usually the faculties really, and they are the business units, how do you get across that…break down the silos and put in place a set of funding and new accountancy procedures that don’t just replicate old practices (Int. 23, Humanities researcher).

Another concern for some interviewees was the possible ‘disconnect’ between their University’s support of IDR and ‘and how funding is allocated in the higher education sector’ (Int. 22, Political Scientist). For example, participants explained that the Australian government’s Excellence in Research for Australia policy, involving a ranking of journals and academic output, was encouraging academics to retain a narrow disciplinary focus. Furthermore, as noted above, a major and prestigious source of University research funding, the Australian Research Council, was widely perceived to be unsupportive of interdisciplinary studies.

Detrimental to Career

Opinions were divided over the impact of interdisciplinary research on career progression. For those who described their disciplines or departments as having a ‘natural’ interdisciplinary focus (e.g. Public Health, Social Work and International Law) participating in IDR projects did not negatively affect their career and could even enhance their chances of promotion (Int. 5, Public Health researcher). Others, including academics from Engineering and Humanities, explained that so long as they produced expected outputs (such as publishing regularly) IDR held no disadvantages to their career.

In contrast, about half of our sample were concerned that department and university promotion systems implicitly discriminated against interdisciplinary researchers. For example, eight senior and professorial participants observed that promotion continued to be based on disciplinary specialisation. With this in mind, several participants stated that doing IDR could be unwise for early career academics and advised that a safer option was to ‘just stick
to what you know and churn our papers’ (Int. 3, Clinical Neurologist). Meanwhile, another interviewee pointed out that:

People who rise fastest are those who have a narrow focus on which they make good progress. Because they have a narrow focus in a particular area they can get a lot of recognition in that area relative to their overall research output because it is recognized by one group of people. So I think that recognition is easier in disciplinarily-focused research and that helps to get promoted. You are more dispersed if doing IDR.

In fact, two researchers who identified themselves as having a strong interdisciplinary orientation believed they were turned down for promotion because their research and publication output was viewed as lacking disciplinary depth. Finally, an early career academic who was interested in focusing solely on IDR worried that there were few prospects for ongoing employment (Int. 13, Cultural Studies researcher).

**Study Limitations**

It is important to note a number of limitations associated with this study. One obvious criticism that could be made is the small number of participants. As such, our findings may not be generalisable to other groups of interdisciplinary scholars. A related issue is the explicit focus on Australian university researchers. The particular geographic location of the study could mean that the experiences and views of our sample are unique and not representative of scholars in other countries and settings. Another possible limitation is that many of our respondents had recently received interdisciplinary grants or related funding. As a consequence, some participants may have responded more positively than might otherwise have been the case. With these considerations in mind, the initial lessons outlined below should be regarded as tentative and provisional in nature.

**Lessons Learned**

For those considering undertaking IDR, one lesson that emerges from our study is not to be too easily dissuaded by the literature’s somewhat negative portrayal of interdisciplinarity. According to our participants, barriers such as time, team functioning and resource constraints are not appreciably more problematic in interdisciplinary studies than for single or multidisciplinary projects. Indeed, the general view of respondents was that any new study requires a substantial investment of time in order to be successful. Similarly, the effectiveness of interdisciplinary projects are also contingent on standard features of good research management, such as rapport building, effective communication and role clarification. Furthermore, participants did not feel that interdisciplinary research was noticeably underfunded, nor likely to diminish publication possibilities. Respondents also reported few irresolvable disciplinary or epistemic problems. Instead, with remarkable consistency, our participants felt that choosing interdisciplinary partners who had good interpersonal skills, were trustworthy and open to new perspectives helped to ensure that philosophical differences became ‘grist for the mill’. However, researchers need to be aware that within some academic departments IDR may be detrimental for career advancement.
For vice chancellors, deans and senior university administrators, another noteworthy lesson is the importance of moving beyond ‘talking interdisciplinary talk’ to addressing structural and administrative barriers to conducting IDR. Consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g. Rhoten, 2004), our participants felt that existing university policies and procedures (particularly those regarding the management of grants across departments) were not optimal for fostering the development of interdisciplinary projects. An additional concern for our Australian participants was the peer review process of the ARC. This major funding agency was viewed as ill equipped for assessing IDR proposals and, as such, posed a significant impediment to the promotion of interdisciplinary scholarship. Lastly, an issue raised by many respondents were the perverse incentives underlying university support of interdisciplinary research. For instance, a number of participants felt that undertaking IDR could be counterproductive to career progression as the criteria for academic promotion in some fields continues to reflect narrow disciplinary expertise.

Despite these difficulties, we were struck by the optimism of our participants and their strong desire to use interdisciplinary research as a vehicle for solving intractable problems. This motivation appears to reflect what the literature describes as ‘instrumental interdisciplinarity’ (Huutoniemi, Klein, Bruun & Hukkinen, 2010). As we have noted earlier, some authors have critiqued an instrumental orientation to interdisciplinary research on the grounds that:

Problem-focused, or instrumental, interdisciplinary research is particularly vulnerable to the external logic of corporate interests as it can leave unexamined the assumptions behind the delineation of “problems” to be studied, the sources of its funding, and the social, political, and economic implications of the “solutions” it offers. Here we can see how the rubric of “interdisciplinary” functions as a kind of Trojan horse, smuggling external, political and economic interests inside the walls of the academy’ (Hearn, 2003, p. 10).

While we agree it would be naïve to ignore the issue of extra-academic influences on IDR, talk of ‘Trojan horses’ and hidden corporate agendas implicitly portrays researchers as devoid of agency. In contrast, most of our interviewees seemed to embrace an instrumental orientation in an active and positive manner, with the intentional and laudable goal of generating applied outcomes that were relevant and useful for individuals and society. For example, a cross-section of the substantive problems addressed by these participants included: social isolation among older people; renewable energy; computer modelling of disease transmission; and sustainable urban development.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore the perceptions of Australian University researchers regarding both motivations and obstacles associated with undertaking interdisciplinary research. Unlike previous accounts, our findings paint a somewhat rosier picture of the everyday experience of interdisciplinary scholarship. They also reveal that the reasons for doing interdisciplinary research appear to be driven by a combination of instrumental, intrinsic and pragmatic motives. A valuable contribution to the literature on interdisciplinary research would be larger scale empirical studies to determine if the results of this study reflect the attitudes and experiences of researchers in other contexts. Such research could also elaborate further on our initial attempt to unpack the motivations of interdisciplinary scholars.
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