‘Jack of all trades’? The negotiation of interdisciplinarity within geography

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between interdisciplinary studies and research and researchers’ positionalities, both within and beyond geography. The profound degree to which researchers’ assumptions, expectations and attitudes (which in turn are affected by their personal backgrounds, training, location, etc.) influence the very notion of interdisciplinarity, and what it involves and consists of, is often neither noted nor appreciated. This paper will illustrate, particularly through personal examples, how positionality is part of the circuit of knowledge production, informing academic research, employment and publishing to no small extent. The boundaries of interdisciplinary research are shown to be under constant negotiation, still far from mutual understanding or consensus, a fact which explains the often uneasy identification and negotiation of oneself as an interdisciplinary scholar. The paper concludes by making recommendations at individual and institutional level on how to overcome some of the constraints imposed by researchers’ positionalities to the promotion of interdisciplinary research.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the interdisciplinarity of geography in relation to the increasing interdisciplinarity emergent within academia, which can be understood as the linkage amongst the categories of natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities (Donald, 1990; Fisher et al., 2005; Stotesbury, 2003).

In a recent review of the future of geography, Thrift (2002) concluded by saying that geography has absorbed (and exported) ideas and tools from many sources in order to help recognise and understand the myriad new geographies constantly being brought into existence (Thrift, 2002). The development and expansion of those myriad new geographies is one reason that interdisciplinary work has been gaining popularity amongst geographers. It is evident that not every aspect of the discipline of geography can be or needs to be interdisciplinary, but it is equally evident that some areas (such as development and environmental studies, for example), benefit from and even require interdisciplinary conceptualisations, approaches and methodologies.

This paper focuses on a discussion of how the positionality of researchers plays a crucial role in interdisciplinary studies and research, both within and beyond geography. It will argue that the expectations, attitudes, and approaches of researchers, and their very conceptualising of interdisciplinarity, are all influenced by their personal backgrounds to a considerable degree, although the extent of this influence may be neither noticed nor acknowledged. It will demonstrate, through examples derived from the authors’ own experiences, how positionality is both informed by, and informs, disciplinary contexts. It will trace this circuit of knowledge production and illustrate that the boundaries of interdisciplinarity are being constantly drawn and redrawn.
and continue to be understood differently by members even within the same discipline.

This paper builds upon a paper published in a special issue of *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* (Lau and Pasquini, 2004), which discussed how we joined the Department of Geography at Durham in the autumn of 1999 to commence our Ph.D.s, and how having come from non-geography backgrounds, we then proceeded to engage in interdisciplinary research. The inspiration for that first article sprang from our discovery of shared feelings of tension in being interdisciplinary, of an uneasy identification of ourselves as geographers, and of a common struggle to find a disciplinary niche. Thus prompted to try to understand the reasons for our struggle to negotiate a place and identity in our new disciplinary homes, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with seven human geographers, five physical geographers and two anthropologists (chosen for their strong links to geography), all of whom had experience of supervising interdisciplinary students or a professed interest in interdisciplinary research.

The material we collected revealed that despite generalised positive responses to the notion of interdisciplinary research, this could not be taken at face value, since respondents did not always share a common definition or understanding of interdisciplinary research, nor indeed did they have a common understanding of what geography encompasses. Analysing the interviews, we gained a better understanding of the theoretical and conceptual complications of engaging in interdisciplinary research, and the practical obstacles facing interdisciplinary scholars. These included mastering multiple approaches and methodologies, the difficulties in securing research funding and publishing in high-ranking journals, negotiating positions within and across rigid research groups, and seeking employment. Consequently we understood that our difficulties in negotiating an identity and place within geography stemmed at least in part from the fact that there exists no common understanding of what constitutes interdisciplinary research.

In this paper, we build upon these lessons, exploring our three years of post-Ph.D. experiences in the light of an apparent growing emphasis on interdisciplinarity and an increasing call for interdisciplinary studies. A re-discovered interest in bringing together physical and human geographers led to a special session held to promote discussions between physical and human geographers at the September 2003 RGS-IBG conference in London, followed up by a similar session at the IGC/RGS-IBG meeting in Glasgow in August 2004. More broadly, there are signs of interest within academia in projects which cut across disciplinary boundaries. For example, NERC/ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council/ Natural Environment Research Council) have for the past six years been funding a scheme for joint research studentships (see Evans and Randalls, this issue), and more recently, three of the UK research councils (ESRC, NERC, and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)) have jointly funded an interdisciplinary programme on Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU). Bodies such as the Leverhulme Trust also place special weight on ‘the removal of barriers between traditional disciplines’ in research projects that they will support (<http://www.leverhulme.org.uk/about/>).

Notwithstanding these new trends, we argue in this paper that the successful promotion and execution of interdisciplinary research, both within geography and in allied disciplines, will require more than goodwill and sympathy. It will require radical changes in the ways in which the scholars of the future are trained, and to that end, it will require substantial rethinking of existing disciplinary assumptions, approaches, theoretical foundations, boundaries, and aims.

### 2. A Three-way interdependency

The rise of mono-disciplines has in part been due to the orientation of Western culture and consciousness towards analysis since the eighteenth century, rather than toward synthesis (Baigent et al., 1982; Radway, 1988). “In accordance with this tendency, modern scholarship lays inordinate emphasis on specialisation – which, as the modern university attests, implies and entails the segregation of knowledge into distinct ‘disciplines’. In consequence, the diverse spheres covered by our inquiry have traditionally been segmented into quite separate compartments. […] Indeed such ‘experts’ tend generally to regard fields other than their own with considerable suspicion – spurious at worst, at best irrelevant. And eclectic or ‘interdisciplinary’ research is often actively discouraged as being, among other things, too speculative” (Baigent et al., 1982).

In recent years however, interdisciplinary studies have become popular (Galvich-Tejeda, 2004; Gunasekara, 2004), and many research articles now contain the term ‘interdisciplinary’. Horwitz (2003) comments that: “Interdisciplinary research is a linchpin of major scientific progress and innovation”. Academic literature is increasingly peppered with this term, but what precisely does it refer to, or encompass in its definition? Is there a commonly accepted understanding of interdisciplinarity across the disciplines?

In many articles, absence of definition when the term is employed appears to imply the assumption of a universally-accepted definition but, in actuality, labelling of projects involving multiple disciplines has been inconsistent (e.g. Jakobsen et al., 2004; Bruce et al., 2004; Musacchio et al., 2005), and there is no clear-cut agreement on the meaning of interdisciplinary. As Sillitoe (2004) explains:

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1 Of course, the segregation of knowledge into disciplines does have its benefits. As Harris (2002, p. 487) explains: “When we speak of an academic “discipline” we imply not just particular subject-matter but also the existence of “a system of rules”—reproduced through training—for defining that subject-matter and the ways in which it is to be studied. This creates conditions that make for the cumulation of knowledge partly by establishing the basis for differentiating between “knowledge” and “opinion.”
“Different degrees of interdisciplinarity have been distinguished, defined largely by functional interaction, with the proliferation of labels. Undisciplinarity (Sands, 1993) is where disciplines work independently. Multidisciplinarity (Rhodes et al., 1986), cross-disciplinarity or additive multidisciplinarity (Lockeretz, 1991) is where a group of researchers from different disciplines contribute to a problem, and may confer, cooperate and coordinate their work. [...] Interdisciplinarity (Sands, 1993; Rhodes et al., 1986) or integrated multidisciplinarity (Lockeretz, 1991) is where teams interact and collaboration extends to joint activities and shared responsibility. Transdisciplinarity (Sands, 1993) or non-disciplinary multidisciplinarity (Lockeretz, 1991), or recently pluridisciplinarity, is where joint thinking leads to integration around common axioms and research is issue based with no disciplinary distinctions [...]” (p. 8–9).

The following randomly selected examples from recent articles illustrate how definitions of interdisciplinarity (versus other labels which are used to describe projects comprising more than one discipline) vary. Harris (2002), for example, sees the phrase ‘cross-disciplinary’ as including the concept of ‘multi-disciplinarity’, when arguments from different disciplines are set side-by-side, and distinguishes this from ‘interdisciplinarity’, where there is an attempt to integrate the theoretical and methodological frameworks of different disciplines. For Winnacker (2003) “Interdisciplinarity is thus evolving from a research philosophy that increases the interaction between disciplines to one that also includes societal issues”. Max-Neef (2005) explains that multidisciplinary teams carry out their analyses separately, from single disciplinary perspectives, with no efforts at integration; pluridisciplinarity implies cooperation between disciplines, occurring usually on a common hierarchical level, with no coordination (e.g. combinations of history, sociology and language); whereas interdisciplinary research is “[...] organized at two hierarchical levels. It thus connotes coordination of a lower level from a higher one” (p. 6) (an example being when agriculture coordinates and gives purpose to disciplines such as chemistry, soils, sociology and biology). Others still distinguish between different forms of interdisciplinarity. Rapport et al. (1998) (cited in Jakobsen et al., 2004) see interdisciplinarity as the coordinated interaction across multiple disciplines but clarify that in unidirectional interdisciplinarity, potential integration of knowledge is controlled by one dominant discipline, whereas in goal-oriented interdisciplinarity, integration is guided by the identified issue being researched.

In terms of our own definition of interdisciplinarity for the purposes of this paper, and taking into account both our personal academic histories (which have clearly coloured our own understanding), and the lack of consensual definitions, we have evolved a working definition, which is open-ended rather than exhaustive. We intend to work with a definition “which embraces notions of the porosity of disciplinary boundaries, and the combination and synthesis of methodologies and techniques” (Lau and Pasquini, 2004, p. 50). The interdisciplinary endeavours which particularly interest us in this article are those which bridge the three broad categories of natural sciences, social sciences and humanities.

Interdisciplinary work, of course, aims to reduce segregation of knowledge by building workable bridges between otherwise compartmentalised knowledge, with the objective of integrating ideas, concepts, and methodologies from various disciplinary traditions in order to promote a more complete understanding. Advanced interdisciplinary work might even aspire to bring about theoretical and methodological marriages leading to an ever more productive hybridity of disciplines, capable of analysing and perceiving a complex world in a comprehensive, nuanced, holistic and sensitised manner. Advocates of interdisciplinarity see this approach as strengthening the understanding of experts in their fields in relation to the rest of the world, an approach which would not be at the expense of the depth of expertise (contrary to pessimistic assumptions expressed by a number of the respondents in our study in the Durham University Department of Geography).

However, one impediment to the initiation and exploration of interdisciplinary work is that much of it still begins by taking for granted the grounds that have founded particular disciplines (Radway, 1988). Radway explains that certain assumptions are made, based on what appears to each discipline to be the commonsense approach, and this may actually block the process of understanding, hindering the perception of how new linkages may be made.

In 1997, Gillian Rose established the case for situated knowledges, emphasizing the need for reflexivity on the part of researchers to recognise that the production of knowledge, the results obtained, the type of research embarked upon, all in large part reflect the positionality of the researcher. “[...] subjugated and critical knowledges work from their situatedness to produce partial perspectives on the world. They see the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent; siting is intimately involved in sighting” (Rose, 1997, p. 308). For this paper “positionality involves taking into account the factors which contribute to the shaping of a person’s identity, perspectives, worldviews and angles of perception. These factors can include such things as a person’s gender, age, race, nationality, religion, education, training, travels and experiences. Positionality does not seek a deterministic reduction of a person’s identity or work towards the sum of these influencing factors. Rather, positionality involves acknowledging these powerful influences so that they can be taken into account during the process of research” (Lau, 2004, p. 65). Readers are referred to authors such as Hall (1991), Harding (1991) and McDowell (1992) for a more comprehensive discussion on positionality.

From this it follows that if the very definition of interdisciplinarity is necessarily under constant debate, this may be in large part due to the myriad positionalities of spectators
of, and actors in, interdisciplinary research. The interdependency of one’s positionality and one’s understanding of interdisciplinary research is an issue which has too seldom been explored, although clearly fundamental to the approach to and reception of interdisciplinary research. This interdependency has been relatively unappreciated, and the word interdisciplinary has accordingly lost much of its intellectual purchase.

Even within a discipline such as geography, which has historically brought together natural and social scientists and those working in the humanities, there is no shared understanding of the concept of interdisciplinary research precisely because this depends on the positionality of the person attempting to pinpoint the concept.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the very meaning of geography is contested, and depends, just like interdisciplinary research, on the positionality of the geographer attempting to define it, keeping in mind that academic geographers may not necessarily hail from a geographical background. “Equally, with changing and evolving conceptions of interdisciplinary research, the definition of what makes a geographer or what constitutes the discipline of geography is also a continually changing one, which in turn will lead to changing positionalities. We appreciate that the definitions of disciplines and the porosities of their boundaries are in a constant state of flux given the strong interdependence of these concepts […]” (Lau and Pasquini, 2004, p. 63).

Drawing as geography does from the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities, as a discipline it is advantageously positioned to engage in interdisciplinary work. However, occupying this position is fraught with tensions due to the difficulty of negotiating an acceptable middle ground (in terms of ideologies, research approaches, priorities, methodologies, etc.). Therefore, the most abundant and fruitful interdisciplinary work carried out by geographers has been across cognate disciplines, and less so across the three broad academic categories (natural sciences, social sciences and humanities). The result is perhaps the sense of a threat to the coherence of geography as an integrated discipline.

The emphasis of this paper on the role of positionality in influencing the interpretation of interdisciplinary amongst geographers is not intended to be reductive, deterministic or formulaic. It is simply to foreground this issue of the interdependency of these elements and to acknowledge how each impacts upon and changes the other, in a continual process.

3. Cartographies of comprehension

The authors both joined a Department of Geography after very different and non-Geographical educational and research backgrounds. These personal histories are outlined in the Appendix.

The experience of joining a Geography Department at doctoral level, given these backgrounds and the positionalities they produced, was fraught with anxieties over the authors’ academic identities, a sense of not being in the right place, of being viewed as a curiosity by other ‘real’ geographers, and of struggling at every level to carry out interdisciplinary research while trying to fit into the new department. This led to a more formal exploration of the questions of interdisciplinary research through a series of interviews with lecturers of the Geography Department, University of Durham.

Respondents initially and generally reacted favourably to the idea of interdisciplinary research because ‘the sparks fly, there is more electricity’ (Snowdonia), it ‘challenged preconceptions’ (Vesuvius) and was ‘the way for the future’ (Kilimanjaro). However, as the interviews progressed, this sanguine view was rapidly tempered by more complex reactions, demonstrating different platforms of understanding regarding interdisciplinary research, as well as controversial feelings towards geography as a discipline.

It became swiftly apparent that respondents often did not share common definitions when discussing interdisciplinary research. In some cases, different terms would be used interchangeably. Interdisciplinary was occasionally replaced with crossdisciplinary (Matterhorn, Everest). Several respondents clarified that what was called interdisciplinary was often a team-based approach, i.e. multidisciplinarity. Vesuvius explained that a research programme could transcend disciplines, but individuals tended to be rooted in their specialisms. Indeed, true interdisciplinary could only be achieved if the partners in a research project worked together side-by-side in the field for a long time (K2 and Everest), but this only rarely occurred (K2).

The next layer of complexity was constituted by where respondents thought interdisciplinary research was taking place. There were roughly three groupings: geography linking with other disciplines, links within geography between different geographical research groups, and a third smaller group reflecting on both. These varied, implicit or explicit definitions of interdisciplinary research naturally coloured the course and content of each interview.

As Thrift has suggested, there is evidence of human and physical geography splitting apart (Thrift, 2002), and in his opinion, this has been encouraged by a lack of mutual trust. To this, we might add that mutual understanding and common ground is also becoming increasingly threatened in the process of the increasing separation of human and physical geographies. The idea of integrating physical and human geography found particular support amongst physical

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2 This section draws on material that was first published in Lau and Pasquini, 2004. Meeting grounds: perceiving and defining interdisciplinarity across the arts, social sciences and sciences. Interdisciplinary Science Reviews 29(1), 49–64.

3 Our sample size was, of course, small and our conclusions should not be assumed to be representative of the Department of Geography.

4 To protect the anonymity of our respondents, they have been given synonyms and named after mountains, in keeping with a geographical spirit.
We approached geographers and human geographers with an interest in development. However, sceptical voices were found amongst the human geographers, some of whom were ‘surprised that the subject is still holding together’ (Matterhorn). For many the difficulty in reconciling human and physical geography stemmed from the way in which training in geography had changed over time. Established senior geographers did not see interdisciplinary research as anything new (McKinley, Snowdonia, Everest, Huang Shan). Indeed, in a ‘traditional’ geography degree you would have studied both human and physical geography (K2). Everest explained: ‘The old school geographer had a very broad background, but they are disappearing as they get older. The younger colleagues tend to be a lot more specialised, and so in a sense, narrower.’

In conclusion, this section has shown that differing understandings of and attitudes towards interdisciplinary research depend very much on the diversity of geographers. It was quite apparent that specialism, attitudes towards geography as a discipline, age and type of training received, all played a significant part in shaping the ways in which the respondents positioned themselves in respect to interdisciplinary research. It is likely that many other factors (e.g. gender, area of expertise, seniority) also influence this to varying degrees, but the sample size was too small to gauge this.

However, although all respondents were positive about interdisciplinarity, the key point remains as to whether this demonstration of goodwill is more widespread, and whether it translates into concrete measures and the availability of suitable funding.

4. Three years down the line...

4.1. Challenge 1: Finding employment

In the last three years we, as interdisciplinary scholars, have stepped out into the working world of academia, where our first concern has been to find employment. Seeking one’s first job in an oversaturated market was not expected to be easy, and indeed, was not. Even so, the slope we have climbed has perhaps been steeper than that faced by others. Both of us have had our credentials queried. Why should anyone consider someone who has “diluted” their Ph.D. with extraneous and multi-disciplinary material?

As Etna explained, the career prospects of interdisciplinary researchers are likely to be context-dependent since “People can play both sides, and the interdisciplinary card, but it can also be a disadvantage because they are not sufficiently specialised – people are dabbling in different things”. Our experiences suggest that because posts requiring academics with interdisciplinary skills are few and far between at the present time, many interdisciplinary researchers are forced to apply for specialist posts. However, when competing for jobs within a specific discipline, it is possible that candidates who have followed a single disciplinary track are given short-listing priority, because interviewers feel more confident that those candidates will have achieved certain standards in the course of their Ph.D. studies, unlike candidates who may have been at risk of “diluting the pure science” (Taurus) with unrelated material from multiple disciplines.

In our experience, even if the interview stage is reached, there remains the difficulty of convincing potential employers that training has been adequate. One interviewer, following a job presentation on Nigerian farmers’ perceptions of the impacts of different fertiliser amendments on soil commented: “This is all very interesting. But have you actually done any soil analyses?” (The same material had been the basis of a presentation which received interest and positive feedback in geography, but was obviously of far less interest in an agriculture department with a UK focus.) In the course of the actual interview, the position of the same interviewer on interdisciplinary research was made very clear by the statement that the Department had trained socio-economists who did the type of work which had been presented, and so the interest was in somebody who would concentrate on the science, and that the area to be covered by the appointment would require a candidate whose expertise was scientific. The implication was that specialists were what was wanted, rather than interdisciplinary scholars. The result of the interview was that an offer could be made, provided future research efforts focused exclusively on soil biology, and that the interdisciplinary (and overseas) elements were discarded.

In terms of reception of research which cuts across natural and social sciences, this experience is one of the most negative examples, but in other interviews it was also necessary to ‘reassure’ some of the interviewers that in spite of there being social science elements, the work was sufficiently ‘scientific’. This experience is also applicable across other faculties where interviewers are also concerned with whether the interdisciplinary candidate is sufficiently expert. These all seem to be echoes of the view of interdisciplinary scholars as ‘jack of all trades and master of none’ (K2, Vesuvius, McKinley).

4.2. Challenge 2: Establishing our academic credentials

Having eventually found employment in sympathetic institutions, the challenge for us to promote our interdisciplinary research is far from complete. In publishing our research, we find that some kinds of interdisciplinary work do not easily find a place in high-ranking journals, since these journals have usually become high-ranking because they target a specialist audience. In some cases, inter- and multidisciplinary research is explicitly encouraged by a number of high-ranking journals, but the targeted research

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5 K2 also asserted that only people taking a ‘traditional’ geography degree could be considered ‘real’ geographers.
tends to be restricted to ideas of interdisciplinary only across limited, selected, predetermined subjects. Journals encouraging interdisciplinary research which spans the natural and the social sciences, or the social sciences and the humanities or even the natural sciences and the humanities are extremely rare and are generally perceived to be of lower impact.

Because our research spans these broad groupings, we tend to find that it falls between journals, and is thus returned by editors because it does not fit the subject area of the journal, before it is even assessed for its quality. When we do find a suitable journal, we tend to find that the editors who genuinely welcome and encourage interdisciplinary submissions, still fail to perceive that an interdisciplinary piece should be evaluated according to a joint set of criteria, not two different (and often conflicting) sets of criteria! Thus, in the case of the natural/social science submissions, invariably the articles have been sent out to a natural scientist (physical geographer) and a social scientist (human geographer). All too often, reviewers assess a paper’s strength in relation to their specialisms (even if they are not fully aware of this mind-set), and its integrative strength is rarely taken on board. Because of this, reviews can be very difficult to reconcile even when they are broadly supportive.

Our publication endeavours have obviously not covered the full range of possible journals, but various colleagues who carry out interdisciplinary research report similar experiences. For this reason we maintain that if the reception of interdisciplinary research is to improve, one step in the right direction will be to change the reviewing practices of avowedly interdisciplinary journals.

Getting our research published in good-quality journals is of course just the first move towards establishing our academic credentials and ensuring that we can maintain our positions in the academic world. Peer-review continues to take place in other forms, one well-known form being the Research Assessment Exercise. The RAE 2008 will constitute a further evaluation of our work, another hurdle that needs to be surmounted in order to assert the value and merits of interdisciplinary research. Although the RAE 2008 does make special provisions for interdisciplinary research, the approach taken is not encouraging.

Referring to the Panel H Criteria and Working Methods document (<http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2006/01/docs/hall.pdf>), point 7 of the UOA 32 Geography and Environmental Studies section reassures that interdisciplinary outputs will be ‘judged in terms of their overall quality rather than by reducing them to the constituent parts for specialist assessment, as experience suggests that such a procedure often fails to recognise the benefits and strengths of interdisciplinary work’ (p. 42). The sub-panel members are expected be able to judge some elements of interdisciplinary work because of their wide expertise and experience in working in a setting where the combination of different approaches is the norm. In the event where specific expertise does not exist within the sub-panel, cross-referral or specialist advice may be sought, the panel maintaining the responsibility for the final judgement of its overall quality.

However, points 52 and 53 under the Generic Statement on Criteria and Working Methods would seem to imply that interdisciplinary research is considered to be an output that, although produced under a particular unit of assessment, actually falls within the domain of another sub-panel; accordingly these outputs can be referred to specialist advisers or cross-referred to other sub-panels.

Thus, whereas the Geography and Environmental Studies section would appear to understand and acknowledge the existence of pieces of research which combine different approaches, and need to be judged holistically, the Generic section does not. Interdisciplinary research, therefore, has some hope of receiving a fair ‘hearing’ if submitted to the Geography and Environmental Studies sub-panel, but overall, the RAE 2008 proposed solution of sending a piece of work that does not quite fall under the remit of one particular sub-panel to another sub-panel (or even worse, to a specialist) is highly unsatisfactory and very likely to result, once again, in the poor estimation of interdisciplinary efforts.

4.3. Challenge 3: Continuing to promote interdisciplinary research amongst colleagues

Through our work and experiences, we continue to witness how difficult it is to develop truly interdisciplinary endeavours and research, precisely because even interested scholars do not fully realise the degree to which their academic positionalities affect their stances to and understandings of interdisciplinary research. The following account will illustrate this point.

One initiative within the Department of Geography of Durham is to promote interdisciplinary work within the university. To this end, a small team and one of the authors conceived and organised a series of workshops from 2004–05, entitled “Writing, Culture and Identity in a Postcolonial World”. These workshops were one of the initiatives of the Lived and Material Cultures Research Cluster of the Department of Geography in Durham, and sought to reach out to departments in all the three faculties (Science, Social Science and Humanities) in discussing topics which would be broad enough to be inclusive and applicable to as many as possible.

One workshop was held just before Christmas 2004, and the topic of the discussion was Weapons of the Weak. The workshops were customarily conducted using the format of having two speakers (from different departments) present for 10–15 min each, and then opening the forum to discussion, questions and debate. In this particular workshop, Dr. Diana Collecott from the Department of English Studies began proceedings by presenting a paper on language as a weapon of the weak, discussing the novel use of signifying, subversive, and coded language on the part of the dispossessed and disempowered, and illustrating her points with selected quotations from the work of women writers, such
as Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall and Jean Rhys. Prof. Jonathan Rigg from the Department of Geography was the other speaker, and he presented his thoughts beginning with an introduction to various academic texts which he brought and passed around, highlighting the work especially of James Scott, from whose book title the topic of the workshop was inspired. Prof. Rigg discussed the situation of factory workers, landless peasants, and the interaction of these groups with their managers, landlords, and people of authority.

It was unsurprising to find the topic interpreted so differently, and focusing on vastly differing ideas and subjects, and indeed the topics of this series of workshops have been constructed with the express purpose of being broad enough to be inclusive of many interpretations and to encompass many viewpoints. However, the speakers, each having expressed their enjoyment of one another’s presentations, also expressed pleasant surprise at how each handled the topic, and also the manner of presentation. To each, the other’s presentation (in terms of both style and content) was a complete novelty, the approach and material entirely new and previously unknown, and in the course of discussion, there was a courageous attempt to begin to understand one another’s starting points and unvoiced premises, and to explore each other’s theoretical framework and methodologies.

It so happened that in this particular workshop, the audience primarily consisted of two groups – staff and students from the Departments of Geography and English Studies. It was clear that for each group in the audience, the presentation by the speaker not from their department dealt with material and theorists previously unknown to them. Everyone realised that the language of the other discipline was unfamiliar and not entirely accessible, but the effort on the part of participants to reach out and understand across disciplines was a heartening sight to witness.

Nevertheless, for both the presenters and the audience, it was a struggle to find a common currency of language in which to communicate and trade ideas, and to find common intellectual ground on which to meet. The extent of the struggle was clearly unexpected, which demonstrated how members of each discipline may be largely unaware of the degree of specialisation of his or her discipline, assuming their disciplinary language to be common currency, and not realising each discipline labours under the same mistaken notions. It was not until they met in the same space, in the same forum, and co-presented on the same topic, that it became clear the extent to which there were conflicting ‘cartographies of comprehension’ and conception, that there was a very real gulf between the understandings of each discipline. It was only in the confusion and struggle to understand one another that members of each discipline became acutely aware of their own academic positionalities, and the extent to which these had affected their initial response to and understanding of the topic. One’s own positionality is of course most evident when challenged or put in contrast with others. It was a revelation to those present to find that others could interpret the same topic in such different ways! It is precisely this type of realisation that represents the most valuable outcome of such a genuinely interdisciplinary forum, which seeks to integrate the premises, methodologies and theoretical concepts of more than one discipline.

Despite the obvious struggle needed to reach beyond one’s own discipline, the discussion that took place in this workshop was clearly of value and interest to those present, especially those most willing to try to learn new languages of discussion and to build interdisciplinary bridges. The willingness to engage, despite the struggle it required, was what augured most positively for the future of such interdisciplinary forums and workshops and consequent research, although the level of difficulty and struggle is a sober reminder of the huge amounts of goodwill, openness and effort which this will still require.

5. The way forward

We have argued herein that understanding attitudes towards, and consequent development of, interdisciplinary research largely rests upon individual positionality. Within geography, the understanding of interdisciplinary research is also affected by the understanding of what constitutes geography, which in turn is also dependent upon positionality. As positionality changes, so do individual understandings of both geography and interdisciplinarity. The three concepts are interdependent, and each one influences the others, so that all concepts are in a constant state of flux.

Our interviews in the Department of Geography, at the University of Durham, illustrate how positionality affects attitudes towards interdisciplinary research. We have also provided up-to-date examples from our last three years of work which also emphasise the importance of positionality.

The question that remains is how we can overcome the limitations our positionalities impose on us in our quest to promote interdisciplinary research. On an individual level, the first step is to recognise explicitly, and to be transparent about, the fact that personal intellectual histories influence perception and understanding of interdisciplinary research. The second step is to overcome the deep-seated feeling that our own training reflects the ‘correct’ or ‘best’ approach to research, something that multidisciplinary research does not challenge. The third step is to work closely with respected friends and colleagues in different disciplinary fields; the more removed the fields, the more striking the lessons are likely to be, particularly if working together encompasses the whole research process, from inception to execution to write-up.

When we embarked on our first paper, we did not imagine how challenging a process it would be. The data collection process for our paper was relatively straightforward, but the analytical stage was more problematic. In the first instance, we decided to analyse the data separately and produce an abstract for the other to read. Although familiar
with each other’s work, we were bewildered to find that despite reaching conclusions that we could both agree with, our approach to data analysis had been completely different, and that we had picked up on quite different points. We thus had to negotiate a mutually acceptable method of data analysis, and this was followed by endless negotiations (read: heated and passionate debates) about the contents of the article, its structure and presentation. We were surprised to find how extensively our training had shaped our idea of what made a good paper, and how difficult it was to overcome these mental barriers and accept a compromise in approach and in style. We were even more surprised to find that we could tussle for a long time over the choice of a single word. We realised that words convey and contain not only meanings, but also feelings, judgement values, implicit assumptions, and thus finding a suitable compromise might require lengthy explanation and wrangling, and occasionally extensive trawling through a thesaurus!

The overall process was undoubtedly challenging at times, and writing this second paper together once again called into question various tacit assumptions and expectations, the most significant one being whether the theoretical component should be presented before or after the case study information. The good news is that the process does get faster with time and practice. Although we continue to learn from each other, and we find that each new joint endeavour raises new challenges, we have learnt to negotiate more quickly, especially with the background experience of each other’s positionalities and underlying premises and assumptions.

Although there already exists a considerable range of exciting interdisciplinary endeavours between cognate disciplines, there is still considerable suspicion towards interdisciplinary efforts which attempt to span different faculties, which draw from very different academic traditions. Geography, standing as it naturally does at crossroads between natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities, is ideally positioned to promote interdisciplinary research. If geographers are serious in their goal to re-discover the exciting areas of overlap between human and physical geography, it will be necessary for them to recognise the extent to which positionality plays a role in the negotiation of interdisciplinary work. For established disciplinary scholars, more practice of being interdisciplinary is the only route to the modification of intellectual attitudes. For young geographers, it would appear that training in both physical and human geography is necessary in order to forge open, flexible minds and attitudes (which runs counter to the recent developments in some Universities, including Durham, which run parallel human and physical geography degrees).

The next step for geography as a discipline should be to start developing a set of quality standards, against which to judge interdisciplinary research, that are not simply the summation of the standards of good research for human geography and the standards of good research for physical geography. Only when geographers stop perceiving interdisciplinary scholars as ‘Jack of all trades and master of none’, and start recognising them as ‘Master of several’, will geography be able to navigate to the forefront of interdisciplinary research endeavours in a meaningful and inclusive way.

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Appendix

Lisa Lau is originally from Kuala Lumpur, a Malaysian of Chinese descent. She studied in the Malay medium for her first eleven years, took Cambridge A levels, and then completed her BA in English Literature (1997) and MA in African-American Literature (1999) in the Department of English Studies, University of Durham. Her Ph.D. focused on South Asian women’s literature, positioning her research at the crossroads of literary, cultural, and geographical studies, and bridging the divide between literature and the social sciences. Following her doctoral research, she became an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Durham and a researcher at the University of Northumbria, working on projects in the field of urban and economic geographies. She held both posts for a year before taking up a fixed term lectureship in October 2004 at the Department of Geography, University of Durham. She is currently on a fixed term lectureship in the University of Huddersfield and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Durham.

Margaret Pasquini has dual Italian–UK nationality, and was born in the UK but spent all her childhood and teenage years moving between Italy and various other countries, including Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Kenya. She followed the Italian schooling system, and after finishing at a Liceo Scientifico Sperimentale she moved to the University of York, UK to read Ecology, Conservation and Environment. Her BSc (1999) was followed by a doctoral programme on soil fertility management strategies in irrigated peri-urban vegetable production in Nigeria at the Department of Geography, University of Durham. In 2003, she held a temporary lecturing post for six months in the same department, and has been employed since October 2003 as a postdoctoral research officer at the CAZS Natural Resources, University of Wales, Bangor. One of her responsibilities has consisted
of the development of grant proposals, which have ranged from peri-urban agriculture and indigenous vegetable varieties in sub-Saharan Africa, through alternative educational systems for herd boys in Lesotho and conflict and natural resources in West Africa, to water, health and governance issues in East and Southern Africa. In her first year in Bangor, she collaborated closely with the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth.

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