

Putting Humpty Together Again: Contextualizing interdisciplinarity as disposition in abuse research

Musings from the MMFC Conference, UNB, Fall 2018

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
All the King's horses and all the King's men,
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Lately, I have been mulling about how interdisciplinarity in the context of the incredible design form of an egg: it is truly an evolutionary marvel. Its three-dimension arch shape is one of the strongest architectural forms on earth (Bailey, 1994). As a result, the egg can withstand a hen settling its weight to roost over it, or even the exerted pressure of the entire human body; however, it is also delicate enough to allow for the beak of a chick or a gentle tap on the lip of a mixing bowl to penetrate it. The nature of this domed structure enables its delicate composition: its tenuousness possible because of its strength of form.

This intentional tenuousness, and how it can illustrate a key element of intersectoral research, kept returning to me as I enjoyed a recent conference hosted at the University of New Brunswick. The season's first snow swirling, framed by the room's picture windows, was a backdrop to the dozens of professionals from multiple fields, all convened by the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre and its Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults Research Team for the Abuse of Older Women: A Community-based Approach conference.

The conference itself, by being called a ‘community-based approach’, held an implicit priority for intersectionality. From the welcome address by the indigenous Elder-In-Residence, Imelda Perley, to the keynote, Dr. Janice DuMont, each placed significant emphasis on the intersectoral and interdisciplinary importance of research in this field. As an interdisciplinarian, I want to explore the notion embedded in the conference that it is insufficient for any issue as complex as elder abuse to be addressed within the silo of one single discipline or field, and to do so through character of Humpty Dumpty.

Let’s allow for the imagery of an egg (and this pushed even further to be anthropomorphized as Humpty Dumpty) to be an articulation of the differences of interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity. If we rely on Lewis Carroll’s allusion of Humpty Dumpty as an egg (Phillips, 1971)¹ we can explore the idea that the greatest strength of interdisciplinarity lies within what is considered perceived weakness in traditional disciplines. If we imagine the distinct disciplines as the proverbial Humpty Dumpty, his topple from the wall as a susceptibility to uneven forces is an understatement. Interdisciplinarity, in fact, considers the act of the ‘great fall’ to be an element of the research rather than a pitfall to avoid. It makes space to imagine what might emerge if putting Humpty back together again were to reimagine this form. How might we conceive of a way to assemble Humpty into something new and more comprehensive from its component pieces?

This essay explores the idea of interdisciplinarity as a disposition; from this, to conceive of how the greatest contributions of the emergent field of study are fostering an integrative, critical spirit approach to the process of learning in the pursuit of answering the question ‘what don’t we know

¹ rather than the historical version claiming Humpty Dumpty was a cannon felled by a blast atop St Mary’s on the Wall in 1648 to protect Colchester during King Charles The First’s English Civil War

that matters?’ From this aporetic stance can emerge an intentionally tenuous relationship that favours exploratory collaborations over prescribed fields of study. By employing disruption, interdisciplinarity as a field of study can strengthen disciplines and address fragmentation within academia.

While interdisciplinarity is a field of study, I want to explore it as a disposition. The elements of strength of the field emerge from this foundation. A brief example from the field of philosophy of education will help illustrate this idea. The generalizability of critical thinking is divided into two components: reason assessment and critical spirit component (Siegel, 1991). A philosophical disposition: the metatheories of epistemology, ontology, and axiology, are articulations of the understandings of the ways of knowing; ways of being; what is valued (Daly, 2007; Miller, Baird, Littlefield, Kofinas, Chapin, Redman, 2008). I find resonance within both the former and the latter as they pertain to interdisciplinarity; however, for the purposes of this brief essay, the latter – the disposition of critical thinking – is most informative.

Unlike the methods, theories, and methodologies of research, these dispositions need not be rendered explicit or even acknowledged within research. They do, however, provide the frame upon which these components find their mutual resonance. This element of critical thinking is the ‘critical spirit’: “[p]eople who possess the critical spirit value good reasoning, and are disposed to believe, judge, and act on its basis. It is this genuine valuing, and the dispositions, attitudes, habits of mind, and character traits which go with it, which constitute the core of the critical spirit” (Siegel, 1991, 26).

In the context of interdisciplinarity, the importance of a disposition, of a critical spirit, is elemental to the disruption that is prioritized in critical thinking and critical theory (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Interdisciplinarity is a means by which to articulate the respective positions and paradigms of disciplines, to consider how they are connected, to conceive of that interconnectivity into an ability for emerging research, teaching, and service breakthroughs may occur, and more generally, to locate disciplines within academia. Interdisciplinary disruptions can strengthen disciplines by containing its fracturing to purposive and manageable mechanisms. The fragmentation of research, teaching, and service practices within disciplines has become an area of interest within academia, particularly in the social sciences (Canadian Sociological Association, 2012). The interdisciplinary field is an area of study that provides academia with a way to address fracturing within disciplines, focusing instead on collaboration and the emergence of new areas of interest that are not bound by the limits of disciplinary dogma.

The complexities of permeating disciplinary boundaries can accomplish more than pasting or stapling together multiple disciplines (Gehlert, 2013), or of considering elements of another discipline into one's research. Interdisciplinarity is an integration of complexities into an emergence of perspective (Holley, 2009) that may otherwise go unnoticed. By relying on the expertise of others and working in a collaborative context, the practice of research can benefit from more deeply articulating complex ideas - and to present these to a broader audience. The complexities of research that merit the comprehensive analyses of interdisciplinarity are such that no single researcher, field, sector, or mechanism is sufficient to address them. The field can also encourage the rigor that is potentially problematic when researchers conduct multidisciplinary work and employ processes from other disciplines with which they are

unfamiliar (Benson, 1982): we can rely on the expertise of others to inform and guide the field at every stage. We can also use this reflective and reflexive process to acknowledge their own role within the work, and what assumptions and unintended consequences might impact the process and results (Whitfield and Reid, 2004).

Just as the nursery rhyme foretells, the fragments after the fall cannot be returned to their pristine, original form, no matter the effort of neither horses nor men. Interdisciplinarity, however, aims to crack the shell open, and to conceive of another way to see the egg and shell live beyond its original form - to even consider an entirely new one. Interdisciplinarity considers what may happen rather than preserving an intact and perfect form of evolutionary genius, and regard what may be possible by breaching these boundaries.

Introductions around the conference room at the MMFC Conference illustrated that there are multiple sectors whose responsibilities in delivering integrated care to elders who have experienced abuse illustrate the benefits of intersectoral work and interdisciplinary research.

What might the coroner witness about a home situation that a police officer does not have time to probe; and, how might a social worker become engaged with someone who is not in the system?

What other questions are we not asking if we do not look outside our own perspective; and thereby, what goes unarticulated as a result?

Interdisciplinarity is not a disintegration of the confines of the disciplines, but a disposition to operate without the adherence to rigid parameters that define each discipline as distinct. This is valuable for two reasons: to address the fracturing of disciplines, and to conceive of the

unintended consequences that may be otherwise overlooked. Interdisciplinarity is more than proverbial glue for the King's horsemen; it is a reconceptualization of how to assemble Humpty Dumpty in a completely new configuration – perhaps one that even might allow for him to perch atop the wall without fear of falling. Or, perhaps a shape that will address his fall without breaking in the first place.

As for the shell, it is not the substance but its form that gives it strength. The aporetic and critical thinking stance of interdisciplinarity lends it a fragility; yet, when well-articulated, it is their form that gives the concepts strength. A person can exert all their might on an egg when held with even pressure, and the shell remains unaffected. The demise of the egg – of rigid adherence to disciplinarity - is uneven forces. With the lightest of taps, what in one instance was impenetrable then is irreparably fragmented. Interdisciplinarity can position this as an intended consequence.

Humpty, and by extension, conferences of this nature, show us facets of interdisciplinarity by those of the disciplinary as well: the strength of fragility – of assuming a disposition of exerting uneven forces; of integration of complexities into emergence; and the potential for reimagining a new form at the point of breaking. By honing an expertise in purposive reconceptualization, of problematizing conventional approaches, its framework and strength of shape establishes the ability to then crack the proverbial egg and embrace the fragility of its tenuous form. In bridging the gaps and cracks, of the spaces between disciplines, interdisciplinarity actually reinforces the ability for the disciplines to remain within their boundaries, and to collaborate with experts in the

disposition of interdisciplinarity to consider the complex elements of what permeates the eggshell.

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