

Falling into the Gaps

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I am grateful to Emma Craddock for the space she has given to reflecting some of my views in her commentary on interdisciplinarity. What strikes me about her piece is the very positive and grounded way in which she seeks to find value in the interdisciplinary projects she has encountered. These include some training experiences that may have fallen short of their hopes, but nevertheless represent active attempts to reach across disciplinary boundaries and enrich students' understanding particularly of methodological issues relevant to their fields.

I am appreciative of Emma's ability to hold together a critical awareness of the difficulties and ideological assumptions of the interdisciplinary project, alongside a pragmatic wish to find ways of working with others and to remain alert to the range of theoretical and methodological perspectives that might be used to frame any particular research project. In this context, the argument that she references from my paper about interdisciplinarity being related to a fantasy of completeness (the unattainable ambition to create a "theory of everything") is perhaps less important to her than the 'however' clause that she inserts when describing this view. "However," she writes, "I would argue that the interdisciplinary project should be a relational one, rather than one which seeks to attain an all-encompassing theory of knowledge. Indeed, I believe in encouraging and fostering relationships between and across disciplines by immersing oneself within disciplines other than your own (of course, without losing your roots within your 'home' discipline). Building relationships between and among disciplines may be the best way forward in the current academic culture and a step towards avoiding falling into the gaps between disciplines when attempting interdisciplinarity. My own experience suggests as much" (2). I think there is some slippage here, between a genuine "however" argument that it is possible to develop a 'relational' model of interdisciplinarity and a stronger assertion that such relationships might prevent researchers 'falling into the gaps between disciplines.' I might accept that a relational approach is possible and advantageous (though I would prefer simply to call it 'cooperative') but not agree that it can have the effect Emma hopes for. Specifically, I think the language of *ownership* in her remarks ("disciplines other than *your own*"; "without losing your roots within your '*home*' *discipline*" emphases added) reveals a retreat into disciplinarity rather than a genuine focus on the 'inter'. This retreat is very familiar; it is produced both by the processes of academic socialisation and by the anxiety of 'falling' that Emma also indexes. When in danger of falling into gaps, people characteristically cling onto whatever feels like their home ground.

In promoting transdisciplinarity rather than interdisciplinarity, which was one strand of the talk that Emma draws on, I was trying to edge away from the reassurance of disciplinary spaces (rather than away from the edges of experience). I can see that I might have confused things by structuring my talk around a critique of the fantasies underpinning interdisciplinarity; but the point was not to offer a defence of traditional disciplines – or even of 'disciplining' in the sense of organising and constraining what researchers are allowed, and allow themselves, to do. More importantly, I am not sure

that I would want to avoid the sensation of 'falling into the gaps'. It could be, for instance, that it is precisely in these gaps that the most interesting and significant issues lie. This argument is partly psychoanalytic — it is the mistakes, the unexpected omissions, the misunderstandings and contradictions that say most about what is going on — and partly sociological, having to do with power. In particular, it registers the significance of what might be called the 'margins' over the 'centre'; which is to say, that it is sometimes from the 'gaps' and especially from the position of 'falling' that we can see most fully how things are actually structured. In an article from some time ago, Lisa Baraitser and I described the experience of marginality as one that might be essential to the production of the 'new', and we explicitly employed the metaphor of falling to articulate this.

We are arguing that in focusing on marginalia we should attune our narrative consciousness to the slight gaps, the moments of brokenness, running-on, contradiction or slippage, not in order to delve down through them to what is more true, but rather to harness their energy in order to examine what happens next — what these gaps allow to happen, what comes about as a consequence of narrative's scratched surface. The motion here is one of disappearance and reappearance, but our attention is turned not to the gap that people fall *into*, but rather what happens when they climb out. Our evocation of the margins also contains within it a sense of being open to danger; indeed, it holds a very specific paradox: people allow themselves to be caught unawares, and this element of surprise is the crucible in which newness is formed. They find the pit in front of them, and both fall and jump into it. (original emphasis, Frosh and Baraitser 2008, 75)

Falling into the gaps between disciplines might then be a necessary experience if we is ever going to climb out transformed, or in a position to transform how we see the world.

My argument in the paper on which Emma draws is in line with this and tries to push away from the 'inter' of interdisciplinarity towards the 'trans(formative)' of transdisciplinarity. I suggested, as Emma notes, that interdisciplinarity is a response to the demonstrable inadequacy of single discipline approaches to the complexity of social life, but that it carries within it the hope of achieving 'unity of knowledge'. This hope, which in psychoanalytic terms can be theorised as a fantasy response to the problem of how to deal with dissolution, is consoling, enabling, sometimes empowering or therapeutic. But it is a fantasy, and therefore simply a version of a very strong general tendency both to deny the existence of conflict and to seek an integrative, reparative response to difficulty. This fantasy of integration is not in itself malicious, but it allows us to disavow the threat that comes from the actual incommensurability of otherness in the world by imagining that everything can be brought together as one. We can all work together from our different perspectives (the theme of *multidisciplinarity*); we can draw on each other's work in order to create one integrated story about the social world (*interdisciplinarity*). But we cannot achieve the idealised unity — that is the real 'problem' — and maybe we *should* not.

This might seem slightly startling, but it is one of the insights of a number of new critical perspectives, from radical psychoanalysis to postcolonial studies to psychosocial studies. The point is that the fantasy of integration and oneness is not merely utopian; it also hides the conditions of power that make it viable. It suggests that we can gather together everything into one whole, when actually the reason that they are separate is because some positions dominate others. To use Gayatri Spivak's (1988) terminology, for instance, 'subalterns' cannot simply be brought together with colonial powers; the very existence of the latter depends on othering the former as deficient and different. For example, psychoanalysis cannot be used unconditionally as a meta-theory once we become aware of how deeply rooted it is in colonial assumptions and modes of practice. Its vocabulary of 'primitive' mental states, for instance, is bound up with assumptions about the contrast between 'savage' and 'civilised' humans, the former assumed (by Freud, 1913) to be similar to civilised children and to be fixed in a stage that is precursory to full psychological being. This does not mean that psychoanalysis cannot be of use in postcolonial settings; indeed, one of the founding texts of postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*, is an openly psychoanalytic text that subtly reworks Lacanian ideas in this other context. But it does mean that psychoanalysis cannot simply stand its ground and speak about the postcolonial subject; it also has to face the challenges to its autonomy and integrity that comes from this critical other, much as it has had to do in its dialogue with feminism. Differing approaches, with their own histories and investments, may be in 'relational' dialogue with one another but if they have critical content, they will also be *opposed*: and it is precisely the jostling for supremacy that makes an integrated position seem possible, when in actuality it is simply the perpetuation of domination, or the substitution of one form of domination for another. One might have to recognise that contradictions exist, and give up on the idea that the social world is one in which any amount of interdisciplinary collaboration can pull us together.

It is in this context that I am interested in the idea of *transdisciplinarity*, understanding it as a term for approaches that are antagonistic to disciplinary boundaries and instead promote dissolution of them in the search for freer and broader critical work. This is an attempt to find a way of approaching knowledge as unstable and provisional and to demonstrate this by unsettling the very knowledge that is generated. In psychosocial studies and other social sciences, some of the ways in which this is achieved is through the different modes of *reflexivity* that operate. This is not just the reflexivity that positions an observer, which all graduate students learn to respect and often acknowledge by describing themselves in terms of their class, race and gender attributes. It is, rather or in addition, a destabilising mode of reflexivity that asks questions about each statement of understanding; that recognises the radical reflexiveness of subject positions that means that as information is produced, so the situation changes; and — most of all — that comprehends how research participants really are subjects, with the capacity to use the research situation to generate and alter their own understanding of the world. These differing modes of reflexivity — positioning the researcher, changing the situation, generating new subject narratives — require a fluidity of approach deliberately transgresses disciplinary affiliations. What is being opposed here is a fetish of methodological and disciplinary purity: intellectual work is thought of as a kind of

machine, or perhaps better (to use a more organic analogy) a mode of gathering or gleaning (Baraitser 2009). It grabs what it can from what lies around, putting it together in novel ways, trying things out, returning to base, chipping away at assumed truths in order to uncover the mixture of assumptions, wishes, social forces and unconscious complexes that give them the form that they have.

The outcome of all this is a set of unstable practices that certainly promote a sensation of falling into gaps, with its attendant anxiety. There is very little to hold onto, except the community of other 'trans' researchers who are falling alongside us, but there is a lot of kinetic energy generated in the fall, and the possibility of bouncing back up again if too many limbs are not broken. More prosaically, there can be problems with PhD examiners and grant reviewers, despite the strong rhetoric promoting innovative interdisciplinary work. So a fall it genuinely is. The comment Carl Jung allegedly made about James Joyce and his unstable daughter Lucia comes to mind (Ellman 1982, 69): they were, he thought, "like two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving." Perhaps that is the differentiation we should seek.

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