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Collaborative Review, Part I, *Being an Interdisciplinary Academic*

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## **Interdisciplinarity as Unique**

An oft repeated observation in Catherine Lyall's recent book, *Being an Interdisciplinary Academic*, states that the phenomenon she describes are "not unique to interdisciplinarity." The text, which draws from the analysis of interviews with UK based academics who received awards to pursue interdisciplinary graduate degrees, as well as, senior university administrators, often tacitly returns to mull over this observation. What, if anything, makes interdisciplinary research and the professionals who engage in these pursuits unique? And, how should universities begin to create institutional structures that can support the distinct (unique) challenges faced by these practitioners?

In this collaborative dialogue, Samantha Fried, Kari Zacharias, and myself will return to these questions through critical engagement with the key themes and arguments made throughout Lyall's book. This response, Part 1, will provide a short overview of the book, attending to its proposed interventions and methods of analysis. Yet, before turning to this discussion, we must acknowledge a personal stake in the topic of Lyall's work. All three of us were trained in interdisciplinary methods and approaches – all at the graduate level, some at the undergraduate level. As graduate students, our research examined different interdisciplinary environments including research institutes and graduate programs. Additionally, we all currently work in postgraduate positions that encourage 'team science' or interdisciplinary engagement. Our excitement in reviewing this book was born out of a want to better understand the experiences of others who participate in this often ill-defined academic practice.

## **Interdisciplinarity as Personal**

Lyall also admits to a personal stake in the subject matter. She notes early on that her academic training left her without a "strong disciplinary affiliation" that continued throughout her academic career (12). Yet, as her research demonstrates, disciplinary affiliation provides just one pathway for academics to be socialized into the academy. Lyall takes seriously that professional identities also emerge amongst groups who engage in interdisciplinary research and settings. This observation acts as the practical undercurrent flowing throughout the book. She cogently demonstrates that academics who conduct interdisciplinary research share similar social experiences, practices, and modes of crafting knowledge. The correlate, as well as the larger emphasis of the book, is that these scholars also share similar professional struggles, challenges, and barriers as they navigate careers in higher education. Once recognized as a group, Lyall presumes, institutions can better respond to and plan for collectively shared concerns.

That being said, the research design of this project creates a very narrow scope of defining who counts as an interdisciplinary practitioner. Lyall's primary source of data comes from interviews with scholars in the UK who were trained with grants from the UK Research Council and who remain employed in academic settings. Those who left the academic job market after completing one of these grants, or pursued interdisciplinary research without funding, were excluded from the study. She argues that, "the lessons that these interviews

offer should be equally applicable to those from the wider interdisciplinary research community as they are not subject specific”(10). While the subjects discussed by participants may be representative of a larger ‘interdisciplinary identity,’ the geographic and programmatic narrowness of the study offers a space for continued conversation and critical inquiry.

For instance, what does interdisciplinarity look like when its situated within a discipline, as is the case with Science and Technology Studies (STS)? How might this contrast to the training acquired through participation in an Interdisciplinary Graduate Education Program (IGEP) sponsored by a university, or an Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship (IGERT) funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF)? Or, how are interdisciplinary identities formed through participation in undergraduate programs or colleges that encourage disciplinary breadth? Over the course of the following dialogues, each of us will contextualize our experiences as participants of different structures of interdisciplinary training within Lyall’s empirical observations. In weaving our personal experience into this work, our goal in this discussion is to understand how cultural, structural, and geographic difference might diversify the accounts of ‘soft voices’ presented in the text.

### **Interdisciplinarity as Policy**

The desired outcome of Lyall’s book is to provide suggestions on “how to govern interdisciplinarity and support interdisciplinary careers”(7). Her intervention is a structural one aimed at provoking actionable change at the level of the university. Indeed, the audience for this text appears to be those working in administrative positions in higher education. At times, the text reads more like a report than a manuscript. Each chapter is short, jargon free, and finishes with a box of summarized talking points. Readers who desire more theoretical heft on professional identity construction or the institutional history of cross disciplinary research programs would best look elsewhere. Fortunately, Lyall provides a comprehensive appendix (Appendix B) for those looking to dive further into these interrelated topics.

The analytic categories used in the book appear specifically tailored for an administrative audience as well. Lyall uses the analytic of ‘soft’ and ‘loud’ voices to frame the divides she details between senior administrators (loud) and interdisciplinary academics (soft). The move to contextualize her research within the performativity of socialized professional identity, excludes other, more critical modes of analysis that might ostracize actors in the very institutional structures she is proposing to change. This approach requires Lyall to draw attention to disunities between the two voice types as roadblocks preventing professional growth and programmatic success. She often demonstrates how listening to the ‘soft’ voices of researchers, lecturers, and professors can inform institutional changes often made by the ‘loud’ voices of academic administrators.

The format also serves as an example for practitioners in STS and Science and Technology Policy on how to distill qualitative research into actionable objectives for a targeted audience. For example, Chapter 4, ‘The Nets We Weave: Consequences for Interdisciplinary Capacity Building’, is ostensibly the chapter most engaged with social theory and the social production of scientific knowledge. Lyall draws from her interviews with administrators and academics to reveal a divide in what each group states to be the ideal time to begin an interdisciplinary

research program. The administrators generally thought scholars should begin conducting interdisciplinary research following training in a specific field or discipline.

This contrasted with the descriptions of practitioners who often remarked that on the perceived benefits of training for breadth early in one's career. For instance, as Lyall points out,

Not 'fitting' can be an intellectual advantage, enabling greater critical capabilities to flourish, and although awardholders appreciated the benefits of specialisation and admired researchers who had carved out their own niche, they also realised that it did not suit their temperament and were "interested in too many things (65).

Not only does Lyall reveal this divide, she uses the chasm to suggest that administrations embrace interdisciplinary Ph.D. training as program of skill acquisition and the "communal values, beliefs, and techniques" of a shared cultural 'habitus' (71).

In conclusion, Lyall proposes two new 'logics' of interdisciplinarity. First she suggests a logic of intention, that institutions must be explicit in their purpose in creating interdisciplinary training programs. Secondly, she suggests a logic of commitment, where institutions need to commit institutional resources to overcoming barriers faced by those who are the recipients of interdisciplinary training (92). While these are eminently actionable goals for administrators, it is unclear what separates Lyall's logics from the similar challenges faced by formal disciplines. The current pallor of the academic job market, the lack of diversity in faculty hires, and the overreliance of precarious labor to man the helm of university classrooms, makes me suspicious that changes in institutional governance will adequately address the needs of those laboring as interdisciplinary academics.

These conclusions lead back to the question posed at the introduction of this dialogue: What, if anything, makes interdisciplinary research and the professionals who engage in these pursuits unique? Our continued dialogue will explore this further - but I want to propose in closing that situating interdisciplinarity as a unique epistemological pursuit and social formation might work against larger goals for recognition and reduced barriers for access. Instead, I wonder about what can be learned in better tracing the dependencies and shared struggles and complexities between our disciplinary and interdisciplinary colleagues.