Interdisciplinary Labour: Researchers' bodies at work

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Abstract

This reflection explores the anxiety and physical sensations felt by some scholars when navigating interdisciplinary research. The author describes personally experienced physical and emotional challenges faced during collaborative research, emphasizing the lack of common language and knowledge, and arguing for greater acknowledgment of these embodied experiences. The aim is to foster more honest and productive interdisciplinary dialogues, highlighting the importance of addressing emotional and physical responses to being able to succeed in collaborative research settings.

Keywords: interdisciplinary research; collaboration; emotions; feelings; anxiety; body

In an interview performed by N. Katherine Hayles, Jennifer Serventi, Senior Program Officer for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) – one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States – says: 'It's OK if participants are uncomfortable' (**Hayles, 2012: 35**).

What Serventi is referring to in this introductory chapter to Digital Humanities, underneath the subheading 'Collaboration', is the discomfort experienced by some mixed methods researchers who participate in interdisciplinary projects. As scholars working on interdisciplinary projects, we are not only contributing to the 'intellectual synergies created when computer scientist [sic] and humanists work together', which can give rise to positive emotions, such as excitement (**Ibid**) – we might also struggle with feelings of discomfort and anxiety, according to Serventi (**Ibid**). In the interview, Serventi later adds the adjective 'momentary' to discomfort, signalling its temporality; with time the anxiety will eventually cease.

Arguably, this passage in Hayles' book also tells another story: performing interdisciplinary research can cause bodily experiences and sensations, probably to a higher degree than in non-interdisciplinary settings. Anxiety is felt in the body. It signals that something is amiss, and a strategy to avoid discomfort might take place. I will put this into perspective by sharing with the reader a scene stemming from my own experiences as PI for a mixed methods research project, which might stimulate conversations among other interdisciplinary researchers.

In January 2020, on our 4-year project's third meeting taking place in a seminar room at Lund University, Sweden, one of the Language Technologists in the group, coming from Computer Science, started to explain supervised machine learning and its advantages for the social scientists in the group; me, who is an Ethnologist, and my colleague who is a Sociologist (we are both also media scholars). For the very first time in our rather senior academic lives, we were enthusiastically invited into the domain of computing. Among other text mining methods, topic modelling was explained to us, as well as argument mining, aspect-based sentiment analysis, and Jaccard distance, with their adhesive concepts such as generative process, variational Bayes, and expectation maximation algorithm. Acronyms were also used, such as TM (Topic Modelling) and LDA (Latent Dirichlet allocation).

It is an understatement to say that this spontaneous lecture led to a brutal awakening regarding my scientific limitations. The insight hit me physically. After having listened to my project colleague for a good two hours and also having tried to engage myself in 'discussions' – I use quotation marks here as it was not a discussion in the real sense of the word, but more talking past each other – the air in the meeting room became steadily harder to breathe.

Step by step, facial expressions went through visible transformations, from enthusiasm and hope to dreary and weary, or at least this is what I thought I witnessed. I could even track down a glance of desperation in the eyes of the ever-so-patient computer scientist, but perhaps it was a reflection of my own gaze as it successively darkened. I remember myself repeating the same basic questions as if I suddenly had become indolent: 'But what does supervised machine learning really mean?', 'Jaccard distant reading, you said, could you explain that further?' I wouldn't call it 'conflicts over epistemic values' (**MacLeod, 2018**). This was something else.

My mouth went dry, and then yet another strange physical reaction occurred: My hearing started to shut down. At a deeper psychological level, it probably had something to do with my having convinced myself and everyone around me at the age of twelve that mathematics was not a school subject for me. It wasn't such a big thing back then, I had other skills, but now I was suddenly reminded of this massive knowledge gap – and it was not a pretty sight.

Then the sweating started. I could feel my palms become humid. Discretely, I tried to wipe them on my trousers. After having said goodbye to each other in a mood that only could be described as mutually disappointed, an alarmist 'what if question' successively took over my whole body, making my stomach twist: 'How could I have been so naïve to think that I understood any of these theories and concepts, and, in addition, how they would be successfully mixed with my own qualitative research? Would this even work, at all?!'

So, what do these physically experienced mixed feelings tell us? Well, every so often during project meetings I have experienced a lack of a common language, connected to the lack of common knowledge. Bluntly speaking, I have felt dumb many times around in the sense of feeling stupid, mainly due to the lack of words and concepts, which naturally affects both the hearing (metaphorically speaking) and the talking, sometimes hindering me from participating and engaging myself fully in conversations during meetings.

Since the 20th century, the Swedish word dum (dumb) has lost its etymological connection to döv (deaf) and stum (mute). In a reminiscent way, the English word dumb departed in the late 1800s from words connected to speaking and hearing, such as deaf and mute. Here, I aim to reconnect them – dumb, deaf, and mute –to shed light on the mixed methods dumbness that I have experienced, in my body, and thereby unpack the discomfort that participants might experience in interdisciplinary research: It is, again, caused by a reduced capability to 'hear' and speak. In comparison, established qualitative methods seem easier to understand. They do not require a mathematical language to be

described; mostly, they are called what they are: in-depth interviews, participant observations, close reading, etc. The metaphorical term 'fieldwork' gives anyone who hears it at least a vague picture of what it might mean to work there, out in the field.

I'd like to think that interdisciplinary research has something to learn from ethnographic disciplines and their scientific approach towards bodies and emotions. 'The idea that ethnographic experiences are "embodied" – in that the researcher learns and knows through her or his whole experiencing body' has been recognized in much existing methodological literature within the ethnographic disciplines, sums the multidisciplinary social anthropologist Sarah Pink (**2015: 27**), accurately pointing to their phenomenological origin. Whether they come from the social sciences, the humanities or the technological disciplines, mixed methods researchers also learn and know through their experiencing bodies. They just don't talk about it.

In fact, most researchers do not take into account their bodily experiences, as if researchers did not have bodies to begin with. This positivist ideal is easily traced, also in social science research, and has been challenged by experts in postmodern and feminist theory, such as Laura L. Ellingson from Communication and Gender Studies, who in her piece 'Embodied knowledge: Writing researchers' bodies into qualitative health research' writes that 'the erasure of researchers' bodies from conventional accounts of research obscures the complexities of knowledge production and yields deceptively tidy accounts of research' (**Ellingson, 2006: 299**). I agree with Ellingson, and I believe this applies to other fields as well.

In short: There is a palpable difference between successfully applying for funding for an interdisciplinary project, and performing the research, and I might not be the only one who has plunged enthusiastically into this kind of collaboration only to then – with damp palms and a beating heart – questioning the whole idea. I contend that putting words to bodily experiences and (negative) emotions will lead to a less tidy and more honest dialogue between interdisciplinary researchers, which, I believe, will also have a positive effect on the results that are being produced. Mansilla, Lamont & Sato's important question (**2012: 2-3**) 'How does the emotional experience of collaborators affect the development of their [interdisciplinary] project', could, suggestively, be expanded through another, more concrete question: Where in the body does the emotional experience of interdisciplinary research take place, and what sensations does it bring?

Finally, how did it go for our mixed methods project? In fact, Serventi was right; the discomfort was momentary, and we have, together, successfully performed and published our mixed methods research (**Hammarlin et al. 2024; Hammarlin et al., 2023**). The reasons behind our success are many and complex, and we attempt to explore them in other texts. Nevertheless, I still believe that interdisciplinary work is more demanding than other types of research, and was I to start the project all over again, I would have begun by addressing this head-on, maybe formulated like this:

> *Guys, doing interdisciplinary research will be laborious; we will feel it almost like a pain in our bodies. But as with all bodily exercise, the reward will come with some delay. So, let's be patient.*

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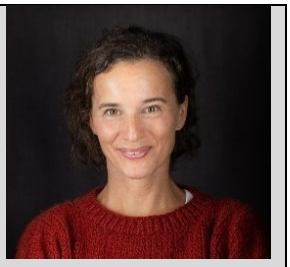

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