Meta-Research

Each discipline focuses on particular things, and has its own ways of understanding of 'how the world works'. Perkins (2006) calls these 'epistemes'. We could also describe them as 'meta-discourses': higher level thinking that allows people to discuss research questions at a level that is sufficiently abstract to encompass different kinds of material… One might say that interdisciplinary research, in essence, requires a 'meta-meta discourse': a level of abstraction that rises above specific disciplinary viewpoints to articulate the things that connect them. For example, the *Hearing the Voice* project has overarching questions about how we conceptualise and represent phenomenological experiences. In dealing with tipping points in physical landscapes, financial markets and social trends, the *Tipping Points* project also has broader questions about how we think about sudden changes, how we measure or predict them, or how metaphors of tipping points permeate multiple dimensions of life. (Strang and Bell 2015[2012]: 12-13)

The notion of interdisciplinarity is fundamentally an aim to reunite areas of knowledge that have, over time, divided into (putatively) distinct and mutually incomprehensible areas. This paper questions these assumptions, proposing, in accord with theologian Nicholas Lash, that from the perspective of underlying purpose, such distinctions are illusory. Lash urged the academy to grasp the ultimately connected structure that underlies all disciplines: 'Not-withstanding the accelerated fragments of specialised academic activities, we trample in each other's territory, sing each other's songs, whether we want to or not'.
His intriguing essay, *Contemplation, Metaphor and Real Knowledge*, challenges established assumptions about the way disciplines construct the world of thinking, ideas and research. His implicit claim is that interdisciplinary thinking returns us to our contemplative core (rather than pushing us to peripheries) and, by regenerating intellectual flows between disciplines, creates new, rather than merely parallel, conversations and outcomes. Such new dialogues are the essence of 'interdisciplinarity'…

So familiar are we with the current canonical list of academic subjects, that 'interdisciplinarity' is commonly seen as a super-addition, a structure built over the foundations of the fragmented disciplines themselves. This may be true in practical and organisational terms (and accurately describes 'multidisciplinary' activity as we have defined it), but we would suggest that interdisciplinarity takes us to a place on 'deeper' than its disciplinary constituents, and that Lash's view provides a more satisfactory account of its transformational potential. (McLeish and Strang 2014: 6)
…. Anthropological experience with diversity is helpful here too, drawing attention to the potential for localised cultural knowledge to be translated into internationally shared

theoretical concepts. Writing, for example, about the crosscultural utility of concepts such as aesthetics, Morphy observes:

> *Archaeologists and anthropologists are inevitably involved in the process of developing an analytic meta-language that is used in the analysis of data and the interpretation of culture.* (Morphy 2005: 51)

As this suggests, the analytic commonality that enables IDR lies at a theoretical level, composed of the ideas that flow through and connect the actors within disciplinary areas. This may be why interdisciplinary ideas often emerge not in specific disciplinary 'territories', but in the exchanges between them. (McLeish and Strang 2014: 10)

Extract from: Strang, V. 2006. 'A Happy Coincidence? Symbiosis and synthesis in anthropological and indigenous knowledges', in *Current Anthropology.* Vol 47. No 6. pp 981-1008.

Anthropology, as a discipline, is based upon the construction of an externalised intellectual space through which it is theoretically possible to observe and understand the self and others through the comparison of cultural differences and commonalities. Anthropological discourse presents this externalised space as a collective endeavour in which practitioners share the same conceptual language. At its heart lies a belief that the abstract categories of anthropological theory are cross-cultural, and provide what Morphy (2005) calls a 'meta-language' that enables ethnographers to gather and compare knowledge about their own and other cultural groups, and so contribute to an understanding of what it means to be human.

In Hegelian dialectical terms (1977), a collective 'meta-discourse' requires a critical shift from subjective experience to objective inquiry. Turner suggests that this is a particularly Western mode of being: 'Cartesian dualism has insisted on separating subject from object, us from them. It has, indeed, made voyeurs of Western man' (1982:100). But while such analytic detachment may be particularly valorised in Western societies, it is by no means confined to them. As Miller observes, all human consciousness relies upon a dialectic in which information is objectified, differentiated and then reintegrated (1987:25).

It may be useful to consider scientific discourses as an attempt to preserve the 'objective' moment in this dialectic, concretising it into a heuristic artefact – externalised knowledge – that enables collective analysis. This frames the development of anthropological theories as a process through which reflexive analyses are articulated and reified. Through this creative reification, anthropology provides an intellectual space for observational detachment that allows people to deconstruct and critique their own beliefs and knowledges, and place these alongside ethnographic comparators, as Geertz put it 'seeing ourselves among others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds'(1983:16). Such conscious reflexivity not only frees scholars from their own preconceptions, but also opens the door to the consideration and inculcation of other forms of understanding.

I would argue, therefore, that – distilled from a wide diversity of interpretations – the external space of anthropological inquiry is one of objective cross-cultural comparison. (Strang 2006: 982-983)