

## Geographers out of place: institutions, (inter)disciplinarity and identity

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### Abstract

Ten years ago, the decision was taken to close Brunel University's Department of Geography and Earth Sciences and its undergraduate programmes. Since this time, most of the human geographers have remained at Brunel, but now work from beyond the boundaries of conventional academic Geography. In this paper we argue that this situation, which is not uncommon for geographers in the UK and elsewhere, has significant implications for both individuals and the discipline more broadly. Through our everyday experiences of interdisciplinary working, this paper reflects on what it means to be a geographer working outside of 'Geography'. The paper examines the implications of this at three different yet related scales: the immediately personal scale in terms of identity and individual academic performance, the institutional scale and its organisation that can lead to the presence/absence of academic subject areas, and then finally the disciplinary scale with its attendant spaces of knowledge generation, dissemination and protectionism. Our arguments are framed by neoliberal-led higher education changes and conceptualisations of institutions, (inter)disciplinarity and identity, and point to broader significances for the shape of the discipline.

**Key words:** *Geography, institutions, interdisciplinarity, identity, higher education*

## **Introduction**

Ten years ago, the decision was taken to close Brunel University's Department of Geography and Earth Sciences and its undergraduate programmes, with the final cohort of Geography students graduating in 2007. Since this time, most of the human geographers have remained at Brunel, but now work from beyond the boundaries of conventional academic Geography. In this paper we argue that this situation, which is not uncommon for geographers in the UK and elsewhere, has significant implications for individuals, but also raises questions for the discipline more broadly. Building on Simon and Graybill's (2010) argument that the everyday experiences of interdisciplinary working are lacking, and through our professional experiences and inevitably attendant individual stories, this paper reflects on what it means to be a geographer working outside of 'Geography'. In particular, the paper examines the implications of this at three different yet related scales: the immediately personal scale in terms of identity and individual academic performance, the institutional scale and its organisation that can lead to the presence/ absence of academic subject areas, and then finally the disciplinary scale with its attendant spaces of knowledge generation, dissemination and protectionism. Across these three scales and throughout this paper, Johnson's (2002: 422) comment that historically, "winning and sustaining a place for Geography involved political struggle" resonates strongly.

The paper is split into three sections. Firstly, we contextualise our experiences in relation to the neoliberal-led restructuring of universities that is, among other things, leading to a dismantling or reconfiguring of disciplinary departments. Secondly, through self-reflection on "how positionality is part of the circuit of knowledge production" (Lau and Pasquini, 2008: 552), we consider how working 'outside' Geography and on 'non-Geography' degree programmes has led us to renegotiate our identities as Geographers in ongoing and diverse ways. We consider identity, both as a collective of Geographers and as individuals with unique experiences, histories, personal biographies and career trajectories. Here we

consider interdisciplinarity as an important consequence of academic practice in a post-Geography institutional configuration and, in doing so, highlight that such processes are not uniform and produce a diversity of experiences. Thirdly and by way of drawing some concluding thoughts, we identify ways in which these changes might interest the wider discipline of Geography and critically explore strengths and dilemmas arising from this. Though this paper draws on our own very specific set of experiences it is not meant as an introverted commiseration, but points to a wider set of concerns which we believe are of relevance to geographers variously positioned in relation to formal academic Geography settings.

### **The neoliberal geographer?**

Geography is a continually evolving discipline, both in relation to its subject content (Johnson, 2002, Clifford, 2002; Lambert and Hopkin, 2014) and the way in which it is institutionally organised within schools (Winter, 2012) and higher education (Banski, 2013). Although debates about the state of Geography are as old as the discipline itself (Gregson, 2003, Castree et al, 2007; Sharpe, 2009), evidence from UK University departments has highlighted its vulnerability as it (along with many other disciplines) has faced difficult times (Martin, 2002; Findlay and Werritty, 2010). Undergraduate recruitment to UK Geography programmes has fluctuated (Castree et al, 2007; Hill and Jones, 2010) linked closely to the subject's perceived economic and disciplinary value, and place and popularity in the national curriculum (Lambert and Hopkin, 2014; Winter 2012, a and b). While there have been some openings, a number of Geography undergraduate programmes and academic departments have closed in recent years (for example, the undergraduate degree at Strathclyde University (see Chan, 2011)), while others have faced re-organisation or merger into larger units (Findlay and Werritty, 2010). The shifting fortunes of academic Geography are not limited to the UK, with the USA, Australia and elsewhere experiencing the closure and

consolidation of university level programmes (Banski, 2013; Dobson, 2007; Johnson, 2002; Murphy, 2006).

There are complex and multiple reasons for these developments in the discipline. Winter (2012 a) Thrift (2002), Clifford (2002), Gregson (2003) and Demeritt (2008), among others, provide in-depth discussions of the role of fluctuating interest in Geography in schools, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Research Excellence Framework (REF), and other external factors such as shifting preferred institutional configurations, the increasing focus on interdisciplinarity, and changing political and economic settings. A key driver behind all of these is the rise of neoliberalism with its emphasis on marketisation. As we deliberate here, labouring in what Dowling (2008) calls the 'neoliberal' university has increasingly become a task of uncertainty and often insecurity for many academics, including geographers.

The 'neoliberal' university is replete with targets. A pervasive audit culture, epitomised in the UK by the former RAE and the current REF as well as the National Student Survey, has dramatically changed the terms of engagement in academia and has transformed what it means to be an academic. As the individual is of interest to the state for what s/he can contribute to its strength (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986), primarily in terms of productivity and economic output, so the academic is of interest to the university for what he/she can contribute in terms of producing graduates, publications, research grants and the rather nebulous 'impact' (Rogers et al, 2014). Situated within a prevailing discourse of corporate managerialism (Winter, 2009), for the most part, academics actively perpetuate this normative code of academic participation, indicating that it represents a mode of "ethical self-control and self-governance" (McDowell, 2004: 153; Dean, 1999) which is both a necessary means of survival and mode of self appreciation. A 'self-regulating' subject and the affecting of personal action are evident, and as academics we create and perform a

neoliberal academic subjectivity for ourselves (Shepperd, 2006). Despite some ruptures of resistance, by and large academics have internalized such these changes, accepting that this is how it is and how we should be working, a sense that we are responsible for our own continued academic existence and employment. Such examples of neoliberal governance render the individual responsible, transforming structural concerns into a problem of 'self-care' (Lemke, 2001).

Demands for efficient and productive academic subjects have received considerable attention, but the impacts of neoliberalism on disciplinary identities have remained largely hidden. Yet there are a number of ways in which this is provoking a profound reworking of the disciplinary structures of universities, not least through the increasing emphasis in higher education on accountability and efficiency which inevitably provokes competition for resources between disciplinary communities. The leadership of such neoliberal-led managerialist structures is concerned less with academic/ disciplinary integrity than with functionalist management of financial balance sheets and rising profiles in research assessments and league tables (these being interconnected as league tables and other indicators impinge on income for research and from student fees) (see Olssen and Peters, 2005). Universities endeavour to build functioning 'academic' units that balance student fee and research income and maximise overall RAE/ REF scores (and associated funding). For many academics, therefore, 'self-care' involves negotiating repositionings in relation to disciplinary restructuring.

Brunel University's recent history offers insight into the workings of, and changes within, a neoliberal institution, particularly in relation to the crossing of disciplinary boundaries. In 2004, the university was restructured into seven multi-disciplinary schools. This removed the relative independence of seventeen discipline-based departments which had been directly responsible for managing their own budgets and staff. The emphasis on cost and efficiency

savings as a rationale for restructuring, together with a focus on promoting interdisciplinarity as a response to the funding priorities being identified by research councils and other funding bodies, suggests that the move had neoliberal logic. Such was the focus on interdisciplinarity that subjects (now programme areas rather than departments) were discouraged from identifying themselves as the departmental entities they had previously been, and more zealous heads of new schools strove to eliminate these subject allegiances. Such moves were resisted by staff that refused to abandon these, both for reasons of professional identity and student recruitment.

Geography was a particular casualty of this restructuring. Despite its significant increase in research grant income since the 2001 RAE, university-wide reputation for excellence in areas which would now be defined as student experience, and international reputation for work on geographies of children and young people, its relatively small staff size (14fte members), low student recruitment (c.50 almost exclusively 'home' students in the final intake) and lack of profitability rendered it vulnerable and were used as justifications in 2004 to close the department in 2007. (This is an experience echoed by Chan (2011) in relation to the closure of Geography programmes at Strathclyde University.) Moreover, it was clear that university management failed to understand a discipline which contained Geography's diversity, or paradoxically, its interdisciplinarity. Questioning whether it was a science or a social science, it became clear that nobody quite knew where to locate Geography in the new school structure. The perceived 'failure of internal coherence within geography' identified in Bracken and Oughten's (2006: 371) review of articles published in *Transactions* and Sharpe's (2009) more combative appraisal of Geography's coherence as subject may, indeed, have contributed to its demise as a degree subject at Brunel (see also Demeritt. 2009).

Following a rearguard battle to retain Geography at Brunel, and a new vice-chancellor who was less of a proponent of neoliberal higher education changes, the subject was salvaged in terms of research, and returned in the 2008 RAE. Some of the physical geographers moved to a newly formed Institute for the Environment, and the formation of a research-based Centre for Human Geography created a home for human geographers. The predicament as to where to locate the Centre persisted, however. For two years, for institutionally pragmatic reasons, the centre moved to Education. Here we were able to develop teaching programmes linking Education and Geography (though not named and promoted as such) based on our particular fields of expertise (for example MA Education pathways on sustainability, gender and children's rights), and cultivate research partnerships with Education colleagues (for example, on institutional geographies and internal exclusion in UK secondary schools and gendered geographies of lifelong learning and training for work). But, just as we were establishing ourselves, the university felt its organisational interests were best served by moving the Centre to Social Work. As a consequence of restructuring, yet another renegotiation of disciplinary identities has been required, entailing the disciplining of identities and performance of new teaching and research subjectivities.

### **Disciplining identities**

In what follows, we reflect on this process of disciplining our academic selves and identities, and the performance of new subjectivities by telling our collective and individual stories of how we negotiated change and made multiple, yet partial, academic 'boundary crossings' in response to changing contexts. By doing so, we point to a wider set of concerns that this embraces for those (re)positioned and thus working 'outside' of mainstream academic Geography. That we have had to make these moves and done so from different vantage points and stages in our academic careers is significant and has shaped our individual responses. In particular, we have been caught between pressures to become more

'interdisciplinary' in our teaching and research activities, and a desire to defend and reaffirm our identities as Geographers.

Higher education is made up of a number of different communities, or what Becher and Trowler (2001) have described as 'academic tribes', who create their own practice-specific identities (see also Petts et al, 2008). However, while discipline-based communities are defined by shared beliefs, methods and expertise (Kogan 2000), their boundaries can be blurred as academics cross disciplinary borders (James 2007). Academic identity may therefore be conceptualised as constantly evolving whereby "...identity combines multiple forms of membership through a process of reconciliation across boundaries of practice" (Wenger 1998:163).

The crossing of disciplinary boundaries can lead to interdisciplinarity. The term 'interdisciplinary' has been variously defined (see Lau and Pasquini, 2008) including as "the collaboration of several disciplines [whereby] concepts, methodologies, or epistemologies are explicitly exchanged and integrated, resulting in a mutual environment" (Palmer & Sparks 2006: 1776) and "the synthesis of two or more disciplinary approaches applied to the study of a common research problem" (Simon and Graybill, 2010: 357). The crossing of disciplinary boundaries is increasingly favoured by research funders, many of whom are more interested in effectively addressing particular issues and problems than maintaining the integrity of disciplinary borders (Schoenberger 2001; Simon and Graybill, 2010). For example, the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK has given the pursuit of interdisciplinary research as a key priority in its strategic plan (Economic and Social Research Council, 2009). Many British universities have also started to reflect the value attributed to interdisciplinarity through promoting cross-disciplinary research units, centres and programmes.



While interdisciplinarity is often prompted and promoted through institutional intra-departmental collaboration (Lau and Pasqini, 2008 and Harrison et al, 2008), from a place beyond formal Geography, enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity and the crossing of disciplinary boundaries can prove unsettling, problematic and anxiety-provoking. As Sibley (1995: xvi) has argued, “the production of knowledge involves both the exclusion of knowledge which is deemed dangerous and the exclusion of some categories of intellectual”. Disciplinary cultures work to harmonise, integrate and police borders, and are inherently bound up with power relations (Schoenberger 2001; Gibney, 2013). This operates not only at the level of the discipline, but also at a subdisciplinary level. For example, a recent editorial in *Political Geography* recognises the power and responsibility of journals and journal editors in shaping a subdisciplines trajectory and explains the dilemmas of this:

“How can we reconcile serving as subdisciplinary gatekeepers when our own aspirations, and those set by the founders of this journal, seek to storm intellectual barricades and push back frontiers” (O’Loughlin et al, 2011: 1)

Gate-keeping activities such as journal editing draw and police boundaries whilst simultaneously encourage *some* border-crossing initiatives. Disciplinary and subdisciplinary cultures therefore define who has the authority to speak, about which facts and subjects, and through which processes and means (Schoenberger 2001). As Sayer (1999) argues, disciplines are both parochial and imperialist in nature because they work against understanding the multiple truths of the world in which we live, by filtering out alternative questions and approaches, and they attempt to colonise areas traditionally associated with other disciplines (see also Gregson 2003).

Sayer (1999) suggests that disciplinary processes and identities are also associated with academic egos and the process of acquiring cultural capital. Personal and professional identity is certainly something that is important here. For an academic who has invested much time and effort creating disciplinary assets, interdisciplinarity threatens to devalue

those assets through the introduction of new professional and intellectual contexts (Schoenberger 2001). Equally, academics are human beings like everyone else and take comfort from belonging to their disciplinary community. But communities, and the idea of communities, often function to exclude and homogenise, just as much as they create conditions for inclusion (Rose 1990; Young 1990).

Interdisciplinarity can therefore be understood as potentially problematic, because crossing boundaries challenges and rearticulates social power relations within disciplines, and may threaten both the professional and personal identity of individual academics (see Lau and Pasquini, 2008). The stakes can be high, and the odds are stacked up against interdisciplinary practice, not to mention the more ambitious postdisciplinary practice desired by writers such as Sayer (1999) and Gregson (2003).

To return to our institutional trajectory, the 'blurring of boundaries' has been clearly etched onto (some of) our academic bodies. The fragmentation of Brunel's Department of Geography and Earth Sciences has had a profound effect on our professional academic identities. As Wenger (1998: 149) argues, "...we define who we are by the ways we experience our selves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify our selves". Our academic identities have had to be (re)negotiated by our daily practices, experiences and interactions with academics outside of Geography.

Our academic identities are also inextricably linked with personal life histories and biographies. As individuals we bring to work our 'biographical baggage' (Collinson 2004), shaped by age, gender, sexuality, relationships, economic status, etc, which influences the way we experience being academics. 'Who' we are also affected how we *felt* about the changes at Brunel – our own private 'punctum' or private wound for the loss of Geography (Barthes, 2000; Chan, 2011). As Bondi et al (2005: 2) argue, our own positions as authors

merit comment here as “...emotions are situated within, and co-constitutive of, our working (as well as social) lives”. Our emotional response to the closure of Geography was clearly embodied as collectively feelings of dread, worry and loss were pervasive – and as individuals we felt varying levels of insecurity, reflecting again our individual histories and career trajectories.

In an era of (increasing) job insecurity in academia, we have all felt some uncertainty as to our futures at Brunel, but the threat for those on temporary contracts is inevitably much more imminent. This is the case both for the two lecturers (John and Emma) who made the transition from the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences on temporary contracts, and for Peter, employed as a postdoctoral fellow and a member of the Centre for Human Geography. The insecurities induced by our repositioning relate not only to our futures at Brunel, however, but also within the wider academic employment market, and not only to our employment prospects but also our academic identities.

As Brunel has traded strongly on being ‘research led’, the need to publish and bring in research grants posed new questions for us relating to our academic identities: Where do we publish? Should we aim at Geography journals, Education journals or (with our latest divisional home) Social Policy/ Social Work journals? And what do we research? Can we afford to stay (too narrowly?) defined as Geographers or should we demonstrate our flexibility and indispensability by making links to our new subject area? For some of us at least, there has been a shedding (of parts) of our old disciplinary identity and the opening up and adopting of new identities. Emma and John, on fixed term contracts whilst moving from Geography to Education, undertook crucial personal and academic repositionings as they sought to establish research collaborations with new colleagues which, as we explore later, has been fruitful in many different ways. However, as Schoenberger (2001:373) notes, this strategy can also be problematic, since “for young, untenured scholars in particular,

interdisciplinarity is quite risky because it makes your work hard to evaluate, or, rather, the disciplinary cultures at issue will tend to undervalue it because it does not conform to their own value standards” (see Gibney, 2013). This is far from an unusual experience as Lau and Pasquini (2008) articulate in relation to their academic identities and experiences on PhD completion. We also found a second problem, in that we were creating new ‘Geographers in Education’ identities when we were institutionally uprooted once more and relocated to our current home in Social Work.

Not all of us engaged similarly in this re-examination and re-configuration of academic identity. While some of us were faced with an immediate need to demonstrate alignment with Brunel’s institutional objectives, those of us who felt less insecure within the institution were acutely aware of our repositioning within the wider disciplinary context – within the disciplinary institution of Geography. For Nicola and Fiona in particular, loss of disciplinary identity was a more prominent threat since, as discussed earlier, academics invest much time and effort creating disciplinary assets, which new interdisciplinary contexts can threaten (Schoenberger 2001). Repositioning within Brunel therefore drove a quite different academic self-disciplining; a drive to commodify ourselves as Geographers. Rather than publishing in new fields, a strategy of publishing only in Geography reduced the likelihood of absorption into another discipline. The recreation and reaffirmation of our academic identities at Brunel highlights how the academic self “may take many forms, and may encompass individual practices of modification and resistance” (Halford and Leonard 1999:103).

However, we were not simply autonomous social agents deciding how to reconfigure our academic identities, but were subject to external assessment from other colleagues. To demonstrate our academic indispensability, we had to make our CVs available to our new Heads of School who circulated them for scrutiny amongst our new colleagues. The CV in academia “can be seen to instantiate a disciplining of the academic self to meet the

strictures of liberal individualism and ‘merit’” (Berg, 2006: 765). For those of us on temporary contracts, they were a bid for job security through the commodification and disciplining of the academic self: to ensure our academic bodies aligned with institutional objectives. This process was one of under playing some aspects of our academic self and promoting others that fit with the new positioning. Moreover, at no point were we offered the chance to see the CVs of our new colleagues, heightening our sense that while we needed to renegotiate our academic place, those we were joining did not have to undergo the same process.

While our institutional location and its past decision-making has made it challenging for us to speak explicitly of Geography in terms of teaching, while we have collaborated with our new colleagues, collectively we have made efforts to defend the ongoing existence of Geography at Brunel in other ways, through the establishment of a research centre, organising a launch conference, thematic workshops and seminar series, 2008 RAE submission (though not for the 2014 REF) and continuing web presence. These have been geared to maintaining the profile of ourselves as Geographers, at Brunel and beyond, confirming our identity to ourselves and externally, as well as providing collegial spaces from which to generate new research and teaching activities. Moreover, in our new home of Social Work, we have been defined by some colleagues as ‘Geographers’ as a way of establishing us as outsiders. This may have strengthened our allegiance to our research ‘home’ of the Centre for Human Geography, which has provided us with an ex-patriot sense of belonging, but has also provided a haven for others self-identifying as geographers, though working in Social Work.

### **Concluding thoughts: disciplinary identity**

As we have demonstrated in this paper, though we all do continue to identify as Geographers and engage in geographical teaching, research and publication, the restructuring that has taken place at Brunel has had significant consequences for us as individuals, for our identities and for the geographical work that we perform in order to

construct those identities. We recognise that we are by no means alone as geographers who have (either voluntarily or reluctantly) crossed disciplinary boundaries into other institutionalised subject areas. However, what we want to suggest, by way of drawing some closing thoughts from our own embedded experiences, is that there are inevitably significances for the shape of the discipline more broadly of such academic crossings and significances that should be more fully recognised.

Boundaries and barriers have long been a staple for human geographers for the inclusions and exclusions they can produce and sustain, and they are useful concepts for thinking through academic positionings and belongings. The clearest contribution is undoubtedly the initiation of greater interdisciplinary collaboration and its potential dynamism as suggested here:

“...boundaries provide opportunities for crossings. These crossings, in turn, beget borderlands that take their on distinct characteristics – hybrid entities that give the entire system its dynamism – and experiences that force one to question the naturalness of bounded territories and grounded identities” (O’Loughlin et al, 2011: 1).

While disciplines are privileged as producers and containers of knowledge (Pain, 2010) it has been working outside of Geography that has forced us to more forcefully occupy ‘in-between disciplinary positions’ (Pain, 2010: 223). As already mentioned, our (temporary) Education base helped us to work collaboratively with Education colleagues to galvanise our contribution to teaching and research on geographies of education and training. Now our new Social Work base has helped us develop debates within new and innovative geographies of care and wellbeing and is encouraging us to explore issues around the spatialities of professional care and social work, and connections with environment and environmental justice. We have begun to teach about these connections, as well as contribute to debates in Social Work (and Geography) on these issues.

Four of us now teach on Social Work BA and MA degrees; buoyant professional programmes which attract a more non-traditional cohort of students than Geography, and lead to professional qualifications with specific professional bodies and benchmarks with which we must comply. In addition, the Centre is responsible for an interdisciplinary MA in Children, Youth and International Development, which attracts a high proportion of international students. All of us have had administrative/ management responsibilities (e.g. as Head of Social Work Division, Admissions Officer for Social Work, or as Research Ethics Officer for the School of Health Sciences and Social Care) that have required us to gain a much broader understanding of the cultures and operation of academic and professional programmes beyond Geography. We have also engaged in cross-disciplinary ventures in research, a challenging process albeit with some positive outcomes. Our new positions have offered the potential to hold a Geographical lens to new areas traditionally seen beyond the realm of Geography (e.g. education, adult learning, social care) and to work with others to shed new light on the traditional substance of Geography. Or, in the words of Cook (2011: 222) “to be guided by the promise of a question the answer to which has not been determined in its asking”. If nothing else then, labouring in the neoliberal University has demonstrated to us that institutional and disciplinary positionings are often temporary, with the very real need to demonstrate interdisciplinarity. This, as Aitken (2010) ponders, has seen a shift from ‘I am’ to the potentially more transformational ‘I do’.

That we have begun to explore interdisciplinary teaching and research, often in challenging circumstances for ourselves, and for our new colleagues, is a by-product of restructuring, rather than an argument for it. Although each of us have different views about the relative strengths and weaknesses of this, our stories here have greater currency and resonance for Geography as a discipline. Our experiences over the last few years (like others) have reconfigured the possibilities, options and challenges for Geographical research and

teaching which those working in named Geography Departments and teaching on Geography degree programmes are not necessarily exposed to. As a discipline and with its related institutions, apparatuses, communications and journals, including the journal here, Geography perhaps needs to more fully recognise and speak to the increasing number of Geographers who work outside of formal Geography Departments, and secondly, to better value the quality, innovative and cutting edge work that is done 'beyond' its conventional disciplinary and subdisciplinary borders and academic Departments and programmes.

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