

# On Becoming Inter-Multi-Transdisciplinary

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I had always thought of myself as being in the clan of social constructivists due to my interest in identity formation, symbolic interactionism, psychoanalysis, and socio-cognitive psychology. I first became interested in communication based on the idea that meaning is not locked into a solid relationship with some objective state or entity. Instead, it is socially constructed, fluid, and can be different to different people. What I call a “chair” is based on my experiences with objects others have called “chairs,” and thus my conceptualization of the object “chair” may be entirely different from others’ conceptualization, and yet we all agree on the word-object link because we communicate with each other. Semiotics makes the world go ‘round.

When I first heard that as an undergraduate, I leapt from pre-med to communication studies. I still feel a special kinship with this idea of the social construction of meaning. However, I cannot label myself solely as a constructivist – nor could I associate myself with any one discipline. I see them all as interconnected, some maybe more apt than others given specific circumstances, but all very useful as one attempts to understand the nature and identity(s) of humans, their interrelationships and actions, and the systems and networks in which they find themselves. This is not to be wishy-washy or to be criticized for lacking any allegiance and alignment. Especially for popular culture studies, I believe that all disciplines are welcomed and necessary.

Indeed, I also see the place for positivist ideas. While science facts can be largely socially constructed (again, because they are communicated through a language that is itself a set of agreed upon meanings and thus not truly reflective of an objective reality), it is difficult to argue that there is not a truly physical presence that is not just our interpretation of it. Gravity exists, regardless of whether we agree on it; only our understanding of gravity is socially constructed, and highly subject to change should a new way of measuring it be agreed upon. DNA is DNA and is not subject to the problems of fluid and unfixed identities in the same way as the organism it created. Humans have heartbeats, neural pathways, and digestive systems; all biological functions not in need of emancipation, although how our medical professionals engage with them may require such liberation. Yet a human

is more than just a sum of its chemical, biological, and physical sciences. From a human's thoughts to a human's interactions with others, at both micro and macro levels, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand humans by simply measuring them with technological gadgets and fancy scales based on questionable reliability and validity testing.

Does that mean non-positivist assumptions are best suited for studying humans and their idiosyncrasies, as some qualitative researchers have insisted? I don't believe that any more than I believe qualitative and quantitative should be rivals; that if one is qualitative, one must also be anti-quantitative, as we are sometimes made out to be. Every ontology, epistemology, and methodology have their strengths and weaknesses, just like every research method is good in some circumstances and less so in others.

At the foundation of my "system of knowing" lies the importance of understanding how humans interpret themselves, their surroundings, the people they engage with, or any other phenomena. To understand their interpretations requires an understanding of how this interpretation is constructed: how sense and meaning are made and then utilized by the human in this process of interpretation. Now, there may be occasions (which are more common than not) where the power structures in which this process of interpretation occurs need to be explored; both as an external observer imparting my own interpretations unto this relationship, and as an internal investigator, in dialogue with the human to understand their construction and interpretation of this power structure. Whenever possible, to truly understand the dynamics of power structures, a combination of this external observation and internal investigation should occur simultaneously, perhaps to the extent that one's observations are shared and discussed with the human, for the dual purpose of understanding and emancipation.

So how does a researcher know that what is characterized in their analysis is a valid representation of what exists? The part of me that favors objectivity and neutrality is at war with the other part of me that realizes such is not possible when it comes to humans. It may not be possible with any phenomenon, as the famous quote says that just by observing an atom, one inherently changes it. The same is true for *cinéma vérité*. Even though it claims to be a recounting of life as it unfolds, the very fact that the camera must be pointed somewhere means that everything else occurring around it is not being captured. The camera is being selective in what is to be recorded, and any claims for objectivity are lost at this point. However, acknowledging both the informant's and the researcher's subjectivity and

disavowing the concepts of objectivity and neutrality is also a slippery proposition. How can one be certain that the interpretation of an interpretation is a valid interpretation? Is it even possible to truly know another's perspective unless one can find a door into the subject's subconscious and literally interact with that person's life as that person, a la *Being John Malkovich*?

The only way I can personally resolve this problem is by incorporating a level of triangulation into research, at all levels of the pursuit of knowledge. This goes for more positivistic approaches to the world as well. The best way to understand an atom is to throw it into interactions with other atoms, to try out a combination of scenarios and glean bits of data from each scenario. Bounce a neutrino off gold, what happens? How about helium? Pass it through an electromagnetic field? Or in absolute zero conditions? Each new way of measuring, of theorizing, the nature of the atom can reveal new information. When this new information is put together, then the picture will emerge, slowly and surely, and in such a fashion that it may be possible to reliably replicate each scenario.

The same can go for human behavior: to truly know a human, you must observe and interact with that human in a variety of situations and measure this human with a variety of tools. Perhaps in situation A, biology takes precedence, while in situation B, the human's identity as being a bisexual African American woman will have more impact in determining their attitudes, cognitions, affections, and behaviors. Yet how can one know or even predict this human unless the subtleties and complexities are understood? I agree wholeheartedly that quantitative science with its reliance on statistics is applicable to a collective mass only. In those instances, when a human deems it necessary to act like the collective, then those statistics are probably a valid way of understanding a human. In the instances when a human's individual differences, be they biologically or socioculturally determined, matter more, then statistics do not matter, and one must engage in more ways of theorizing and measuring a person. Then, just to complicate and make it fun, all these quantitative and qualitative scenarios need to be combined to understand that person, to gain a more valid insight into the human as a being, doing, feeling, perceiving individual.

Knowledge is too complex to be gathered all at once in one fell swoop and claim that one has a valid understanding of some phenomenon. No one way of theorizing and measuring a human, or any phenomenon for that matter, will accurately represent the "truth" of that entity. Yet there is truth out there, lest one wishes to

engage in a sort of nihilism and claim nothing exists, that the world is merely the construction of a dreamer.

Can a critical scholar, a post-structuralist, a phenomenologist, or a statistician claim to have the only valid way of representing something? Alone, no, I don't believe so. Can combining all their epistemologies and methodologies claim such representational power? Perhaps, but there is always the possibility that such combined power will still not account for everything. Science, what it is and the way of conducting it, is constantly in motion, and this fluidity renders it akin to the very same entities it strives so hard to understand. Essentially then, when it comes to humans' actions and interactions, I can absolutely see how blending all the quantitative and qualitative schools together can produce a greater means for understanding humans.