

## Forum

# Dossier Interdisciplinarité Interdisciplinarity and young rural researchers

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**Abstract** – The European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) organised a round table discussion for young rural researchers at the XXI ESRS Congress, 22-26 August, 2005 in Keszthely, Hungary. In the discussion, participants focused on interdisciplinarity in rural research from their own personal points of view by analysing their profession in terms of interdisciplinarity. This paper compiles and summarizes these presentations. The review sheds light on the realities experienced by young rural researchers in four different countries: France, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Finland. Mélanie Gambino and Eva Kučerová examine it as an educational issue, while Petra Derkzen and Ella Mustakangas use their own institutional settings to pinpoint some aspects of interdisciplinarity in rural research in their countries.

### Mots-clés :

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**Résumé** – **Jeunes chercheurs ruralistes européens face à l'interdisciplinarité.** La Société européenne de sociologie rurale (ESRS) a organisé lors de son XXI<sup>e</sup> congrès, tenu à Keszthely (Hongrie) du 22 au 26 août 2005, une table ronde animée par de jeunes chercheurs ruralistes. Au cours de ce débat, les participants ont discuté du thème de l'interdisciplinarité dans les recherches concernant la ruralité. Les jeunes chercheurs ont débattu autour de ce thème en prenant comme point de départ de leur réflexion l'analyse de leur propre situation professionnelle. Ce compte rendu reprend les présentations des participants, qui ont tous fait de l'interdisciplinarité un défi personnel. La réalité à laquelle les jeunes chercheurs ruralistes doivent faire face est mise en évidence pour différents pays : la France, la République tchèque, les Pays-Bas et la Finlande. Mélanie Gambino et Eva Kučerová ont envisagé l'interdisciplinarité comme une question liée au travail et à la formation universitaire, alors que Petra Derkzen et Ella Mustakangas ont examiné leur cadre institutionnel pour souligner certains aspects de l'interdisciplinarité au sein des recherches sur la ruralité dans leurs pays.

## Introduction

The European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) organised a round table discussion for young rural researchers at the XXIth ESRS Congress, 22-26 August, 2005, in Keszthely, Hungary. The idea was to bring representatives of the young research generation to the round table to discuss rural research from the perspectives of interdisciplinarity and applicability. Both topics are highly

relevant in European rural research. Regarding interdisciplinarity, an earlier conference by Karl Bruckmeier<sup>1</sup> was a call to face the interdisciplinary challenge in rural sociology<sup>2</sup>, and the ESRS congresses are themselves good examples of it. Beside sociologists, participants came from a range of disciplinary backgrounds: geography, environmental economics, social psychology, political science and religion studies, to name a few. Also, every rural specialist probably has to face the issue of applicability

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<sup>1</sup> During the 20th Biennial Conference of the European Society for Rural Sociology, Sligo, Ireland, 18-22 August 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Natures Sciences Sociétés* has been quoted among his references.

at some point in his/her career. For young researchers, the applicability question becomes important for example when they leave academia and start working in a more practically oriented environment.

In the round table discussion, participants focused mainly on interdisciplinarity. According to our understanding, interdisciplinarity involves familiarity with the components of two or more disciplines and applies to four dimensions of academia: knowledge, research, education and theory (Thompson Klein, 1990: 27; Nisani, 1997: 203). The definition highlights the interaction process and exchange of ideas between individual disciplines. For us, it has worked as a practical tool in considering the most essential and, hopefully, the most interesting issues for young researchers in some European countries.

Most of us have chosen our academic career and have been faced with this topic in our work, which made the given assignment intriguing. Our task was not to engage in a theoretical discussion but to present what we young researchers think about our profession. What is our own scientific approach to rural research in terms of interdisciplinarity? What are our chances of working as rural researchers in our countries? Moreover, it was suggested that we also discuss our intellectual and emotional attachments to rural research and rurality in general.

We describe here how interdisciplinarity affects the personal experiences of young rural researchers. They show that interdisciplinary approaches are not the easiest way of practising research. There are different kinds of stumbling blocks related for example to the practices of academic institutions and of science itself (Fry, 2001). Some of them were pointed out by Petra Derkzen, who warns against doing interdisciplinary research for its own sake. Interdisciplinary studies should always be based on real problems and not directed by funding interests.

The review also shows that interdisciplinarity is closely related to the other discussion topic, the applicability of rural research. Our research motivation often arises from the belief that our work has relevance in more policy-oriented environments. There are surely scholars for whom the applicability of their work is not the primary source of motivation. Research itself can bring joy enough to work as a scientist. However, we believe that in both cases social context matters. As Eva Kučerová notes, experienced scientists can give crucial support to younger ones in their way of approaching their doctoral thesis. We hope that experienced researchers can also find the partnership stimulating.

The relation between rural and agricultural research is discussed by Petra Derkzen and Ella Mustakangas. They deal with a topical issue. The European-wide discussion on the multifunctional role of agriculture is continuing, and a "new rural development paradigm" tries to

re-position agriculture in rural research by explicating the potential linkages of agriculture in different regional contexts (e.g. Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000; Darnhofer, 2005). These discussions are in line with the efforts made in the Agrifood Research Finland (MTT)<sup>3</sup> and Wageningen University. The arguments for gathering rural and agricultural research around the same table are about recognising the need to analyse agriculture as a social and spatial phenomenon.

For young researchers, interdisciplinarity is also a matter of professional identity. This point is highlighted by Mélanie Gambino who writes about interdisciplinarity as a personal dilemma. Her experience stems from French research but also applies to other countries. In rural studies, we find ourselves easily growing out of our initial subject when starting on our academic journeys. At the same time, we probably need to give up the idea of specialisation, which may be tempting in terms of aspirations to work outside of academia. However, if we have the courage to see the world from different angles and remain in academia, the experience can be most rewarding. For us young researchers, interdisciplinarity may imply personal development trajectories, internationalisation and fresh insights for our scientific efforts.

### **Mélanie Gambino: Interdisciplinarity in rural studies – a French point of view**

Practising interdisciplinarity appears as an evidence in rural studies because the feeling of being a ruralist can be stronger than that of being a representative of a single discipline. This may be due to the fact that in French research, "*le rural*", i.e. rural matters, as a research topic is not the private ownership of any one discipline. Rural matters are investigated by a range of scientists representing sociology, economy, geography, history and agricultural sciences. Indeed, the study of rural matters is shared with several disciplines that have created branches focusing on it. According to M. Jollivet (1997), "rural sociology [...] has never claimed the absurd status of appropriated discipline" (personal translation). Rural sociology and rural geography, for example, explore rural matters as a social construct or as a way to think global social change. But considering "*le rural*" as a construct has implications: every element and dimension of this construct can be investigated by every branch of the disciplines focusing on it. Rural matters can thus be regarded as a very complex research object, and interdisciplinarity is a means of addressing this complexity.

Being a ruralist becomes even more a reality because rural matters have been institutionalised and are the

<sup>3</sup> MTT is an abbreviation for the Agrifood Research Finland in English and in Finnish for *Maa- ja elintarviketalouden tutkimuskeskus*.

concern of a wider community of actors than that of researchers alone. Moreover, instead of focusing on rural geography or rural sociology, we prefer investigating the link between rurality and other phenomena. I believe that the study of rural matters becomes more like the study of the network revolving around rural matters than of the object itself. Because of the complex nature of our research object, we need to analyse the nexus of interrelated phenomena that cannot be reduced to one single dimension (Thompson Klein, 2004). Interdisciplinarity can be seen as a useful way for managing our research and for keeping it going in the most intelligent and scientific way. These remarks explain why ruralists adopt interdisciplinary approaches so easily.

Calling ourselves "ruralists" by no means solves all the problems related to the practice of interdisciplinary research. We are commonly educated in one single discipline, which creates problems when we start our doctoral studies. While working on our doctoral thesis in one discipline we discover and apply other disciplinary approaches since our own discipline is seldom sufficient to explore rural matters as a whole. This working process easily creates the feeling that you are non-specialized, although you do indeed try to specialise. The situation can be exasperating.

For young researchers, interdisciplinarity can thus be frustrating because it gives the impression of impossible specialization, or even the feeling that you do not master anything. Moreover, the image of researchers dabbling at everything superficially often attaches to researchers who practise interdisciplinary studies. The practice of interdisciplinary research is problematic for young researchers as it erodes their efforts towards becoming specialists. The use of new concepts and unfamiliar methods faces us with the need to educate ourselves further in order to progress in our work. Therefore there is constant stress regarding our professional status, *i.e.* the kind of specialists we are - of a discipline, of our study object or a master of a particular method? Does the simple use of methods from other disciplines make us into interdisciplinary researchers?

### **Eva Kučerová: Interdisciplinarity and applicability in Czechs rural research**

In stating that the borders between sciences were eroding and that sciences were undergoing many changes and crises Huizinga (2000) was referring to research becoming more interdisciplinary. For my part, I believe that interdisciplinarity is also tied with applicability. Both aspects are present in this paper.

One could imagine the situation of emerging young scientists crossing over a river or walking across a bridge towards the world of experienced scientists. The way in

which young scientists cross the bridge has a considerable influence on their professional approach. The most important thing for the birth of new intellectuals is the presence of experienced scientists. They are the ones who lead us into the scientific world, introduce us into scientific community and, finally, guide us to the other side of the bridge.

Reading about science is not enough. Becoming a scientist demands that you understand the possibilities and limitations of science. The experiences young scientists will have depend on national characteristics of how research is to be done. Speaking from the standpoint of a doctoral student in the Czech Republic, I can pinpoint both positive and negative sides. On the one hand, it is very important that a doctoral student meet an experienced scientist who is keen to enrich his/her work. In this respect, I have been lucky in that I was able to work with experienced colleagues who have been devoted and open to the ideas of young researchers. In the Czech Republic, these were Helena Hudečková and Michal Lošťák, and at the international level Imre Kovách, Hilary Tovey and Giorgio Osti. I hope that my colleagues may have the same luck.

On the other hand, the downside of our system is the expected contribution that doctoral students have to make to our educational system. In our system doctoral students are regarded as "qualified workers" who are fit to be more or less responsible for the curriculum without the backing of experienced colleagues. Consequently, these students become easily overworked and their own work may no longer be able to develop further. Thus, what we lack are stronger relations between young researchers and experienced colleagues, *i.e.* partnership and learning.

The profound change in our political system over the last decade has brought changes in science too. For both experienced and young researchers, the way we do and organise science has changed and this has created new challenges. A new type of political pressure has affected the freedom of intellectual development (Huizinga, 2000; Guenon, 2002). The principal challenge for universities is the reorientation from conventional lecturing to more problem-oriented research approaches. The modernisation of teaching and the use of new methodologies may provide better solutions for real-life problems, simultaneously strengthening practically oriented social research (Greenwood and Levin, 2003).

Rural sociology is an example of practically oriented social research. The empirical character of rural sociology and rural studies in general sustain and strengthen change from theoretically oriented science to more problem-oriented approaches, which are needed to devise solutions to social problems. Moreover, it can strengthen a new trend in science, the use of projects as a means of research. Science is increasingly organised

through projects. The “project market” has an important role in rural studies as also in local rural arenas. We may see this project market as a new redistributive system based on projectification, which is becoming a post-modern symbol of adaptability and contingency and a dominant redistributive unit (Sjöblom, 2003). Key actors of projectification, such as designers, administrators and practitioners, have to use their own knowledge to produce a “new kind of knowledge” (Kováč and Kučerová, 2006).

When young researchers approach the other end of the bridge, they will be changed in many ways. They might be disillusioned in their expectation that rural sociologists have the power to change rural life. On the other hand, they may have learnt to use sociological imagination in their scientific work regardless of project limits and institutional barriers or any other limitations to intellectual production. They may also have gained experience in the process of projectification. They know that nowadays science is submitted to a merciless market situation, which tends to encompass not only intellectual work but also the organisation of research such as designing applications and financial management. Further, they have probably become familiar with cooperation in different kinds of research consortiums both in their own field and in crossdisciplinary research settings. Finally, they may learned to use their sensitivity and acquired skills in interaction between expert and lay knowledge.

Young researchers need even greater skills than those mentioned above to become outstanding young researchers who are intellectually sensitive and able to combine intellectual and managerial activities. The story of the seagull in Richard Bach’s novel “Jonathan Livingstone Seagull” is a symbol of the position of young researchers. The seagull did not refuse the beauty of flying as he wanted to understand truth. He wanted more than the everyday seagull routine like flying around looking for food. He wanted to fly to higher spheres. This deepened his understanding of life and made him stronger to keep direction in flying, even in fog, developing his own knowledge and skills (Bach, 1999). Similarly, the same ambitions could be expected from young researchers. Sociology, as Baumann says, does not imply the end of our effort to understand society, but the stimulus for further intellectual interest (Bauman, 1996).

### **Petra Derksen: Beta-gamma integration in a Dutch agricultural university**

As a young researcher with a background in sociology working in the Department of Rural Sociology I do not have direct experience with working interdisciplinarily in research. Working interdisciplinarily amongst different related disciplines within social

sciences is challenging not least because of the structures of academia. Academic education is still mostly organized along single discipline lines, and the scientific reward system is based on publications in disciplinary journals. Moreover, barriers may exist in interdisciplinary work such as the use of language, your own disciplinary jargon and the use of particular research methods. One particularly difficult aspect of interdisciplinary work, especially for young researchers, is the possible cognitive constraints; it is hard to become an expert in two or more disciplines, and yet in-depth knowledge of different disciplines is needed for carrying out genuinely interdisciplinary research (Heintz and Origgi, 2003).

These barriers are even more prominent in collaborations between social and natural sciences. But as many scholars note, integrated or holistic knowledge is needed in order to understand the complexities of current societal challenges, not least in the domain of agricultural sciences. Wageningen University has undergone a major reorganization aimed at modernizing agricultural sciences. The process has been called “beta-gamma integration.” Alongside the classical study of isolated life processes, the object of agricultural sciences has been broadened to integrate the technical and social dimensions of agricultural practice, for example by exploring the relations between ecology and agriculture as a social practice (Schakel, 2003: 230).

The process of “beta-gamma integration” has many forms in education and in research. One example of interdisciplinary education is the “MAKS” program, which is a social science M.Sc training for students with a B.Sc in natural sciences. In research, my colleagues in the Department of Rural Sociology are involved in research projects together with colleagues from the natural sciences. One of these projects aims at improving nitrogen efficiency at farm level, which is an example of a project investigating interrelations between ecology and agriculture. In fact, several disciplines were involved in the project: agronomy, soil science, animal nutrition, animal production systems, plant production systems, rural sociology, agricultural economics and science and technology studies.

However, the researchers did not regard their project as being interdisciplinary. Although the study stimulated cooperation and dialogue between single disciplines, the researchers applied their own established methodologies and published in their own disciplinary journals. Other colleagues are currently involved in an interdisciplinary project which started solely because of funding opportunities. The project involves researchers (including doctoral students) from three disciplines and two countries and involves close cooperation with stakeholders/lay people in the regions under investigation. Especially for the doctoral students this is a difficult project to work in. They have to produce an individual thesis which may not fit in with the project’s primary aim to

produce an integrated research output. In addition, they have to cope with the tension between their individual work and the time consuming struggle to reach a common understanding, as well as with the dynamics of (inter)disciplinary politics.

These examples show that there is a trend strengthening interdisciplinarity in rural research. Generally in science the growing interest in interdisciplinarity has resulted in intense theoretical debates (*e.g.* Thompson Klein, 1990) and in the incorporation of interdisciplinarity in research grant schemes. However, the latter does not go without problems because it can lead to research proposals with empty interdisciplinary rhetoric; it is tempting to formulate proposals in order to meet the criteria for grants (Sperber, 2003). Moreover, there is a risk that projects start because of collaborative opportunities and not because of real research problems that need investigating. We should therefore be careful that interdisciplinary research is not done for its own sake alone.

### **Ella Mustakangas: Institutionalising “the rural” in Finnish agricultural research**

I will focus on interdisciplinarity in rural research in Finland and, in particular, analyse the relation between rural and agricultural research. This topic is very familiar to me because my professional background is based in environmental economics and agricultural studies at the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Helsinki. I have also had the opportunity to follow up the process of anchoring rural research into the agenda of a Finnish agricultural research institute, MTT Agrifood Research Finland.

Agricultural sciences have typically been interested in production and profitability, while rural research has focused more on people and approached the change in rurality as a social issue. Right now, however, there seems to be a growing interest for analysing this dichotomy (Thomson, 2001), and, in particular, for seeking links between agricultural economics and rural social research (Harvey, 2004). In the case of MTT, such a need emanates from MTT's role in Finnish rural and agricultural development. MTT is the largest agricultural research institute in Finland and one of the largest institutes in Nordic countries in agricultural and food research. It employs 900 people at 18 different locations across Finland.

Research in MTT has been based on biology, technology and economics and no political or social sciences are mentioned in its mission statement (MTT Agrifood Research Finland, 2005). However, strengthening rural research in MTT can be regarded as a consequence of the structural change of agriculture. When MTT was founded more than hundred years ago, agriculture was

still the main source of livelihood in Finnish rural areas. At that time, agricultural research was much about rural research. As the structural change in agriculture went on, research became more and more sector-oriented and divided from the analysis of rural change. The specialisation of agricultural research has been one reason for bringing rural research back in the focus of MTT.

In MTT, one main bottleneck – and a crucial point in terms of interdisciplinarity – has been the dialogue between natural and social sciences. Basically, natural sciences have very limited contact with social issues. This has made it more difficult to bring rural aspects for example into biological research. On the contrary in environmental and technological research the gap has been easier to bridge. For example, the study of landscape and architecture has developed fruitful links with rural issues.

In economic research, the integrated approach is most readily found in the agricultural policy studies, thanks to the integration of EU rural and agricultural policies and the emergence of the so-called second pillar. However, it is worth mentioning that the theoretical frameworks in rural research and agricultural economics are still very disconnected. The study of agricultural policy has strong roots in neo-classical economics, and few rural researchers speak the same scientific jargon as economists. Also in business management more efforts are needed to communicate with rural research. In terms of research topics, however, some integration has emerged. One example is farm business diversification, which is studied both from the business management point of view and from the perspective of political and implementation studies.

MTT has 13 regional research units around the country. As their research topics originate in local situations, it is not unusual that their researchers participate in the development of their region, for example in municipal decision-making or in regional development alliances. The personal relationship with rural development affairs can make rural aspects more concrete, a motivation to seek a more interdisciplinary approach to local agricultural development.

In MTT, some researchers have a background in development studies. This has been an important feature facilitating rural research. Many popular concepts such as bottom-up approach and local empowerment have been coined in development studies and later adopted here in Europe. Although MTT does not have a particular unit for development studies, the knowledge of these researchers has been an asset in strengthening rural research in the institute.

The interesting question is to what extent interdisciplinary efforts are based on one's personal mission or even are a matter of personality. It goes without saying that some scientists are more interested in rural affairs

than others. One explanation can be practical needs. When we are asked to give policy recommendations by looking very closely at change in rural areas the questions become more complex and diverse. This focus can easily reveal that a single discipline is incapable of answering our questions.

Being open to different points of view does not necessarily mean discarding the analytical role. As a rural sociologist Marc Mormont pointed out in the ESRS Summer School in France in 2004 that we should be able to make a distinction between political and scientific problems. Many concepts, such as governance or multi-functionality, are strongly framed by political discourses. I think that Mormont's piece of advice is most relevant in interdisciplinary rural research.

Personally, I have got the most inspiring insights from a political scientist and two social psychologists. I have learned that to be an interdisciplinarian you need to appreciate both your own analytical efforts as well as others'. When you are faced with a different way of seeing, you have two options: either turn your back or become interested. It has been rewarding to realise that there can be different kinds of interpretations of the same problem, and that they can all be valid at the same time. . . Interdisciplinarity is a very human challenge.

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