Issue Highlights:

- Early career engagement with interdisciplinarity
- Food activism challenges to gender & cultural roles
- Intersectionality & agency in Nigeria
- Gender equality & empowerment in India
- Reflections on the meaning of explanation

Exchanges is a scholar-led, peer-reviewed, diamond (non-fee charging) open access, interdisciplinary, online-only journal dedicated to the publication of high-quality work by researchers in all disciplines for a broad scholarly audience. Since 2013, the title has attracted innovative research articles, critical essays and interviews from emerging domain experts and early career researchers globally. The title also publishes scholarly work by practitioner authors and independent scholars.

A Managing Editor-in-Chief based at the University of Warwick oversees development, policy and production, while an international Editorial Board comprised of early career researchers provide advice and practically contribute to editorial work. Associate editors are recruited to participate in producing specific special themed issues. Exchanges usually publishes two issues annually, although additional special themed issues are periodically commissioned in collaboration with other scholars.

Exchanges' major missions are to encourage intellectual exchange and debate across disparate research communities, along with developing academic authorial and editorial expertise. These are achieved through providing a quality assured platform for disseminating research publications for and by explicitly cross-disciplinary audience, alongside ensuring a supportive editorial environment helping authors and editors develop superior academic writing and publishing skills. Achieving enhanced contributor esteem, visibility and recognition within these broader scholarly communities is a further goal.

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Where Have All the Reviewers Gone? Long time passing - Editorial, Volume 12, Part 2

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Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?
Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?
Where have all the flowers gone?
Young girls have picked them everyone.
Oh, when will they ever learn?
Oh, when will they ever learn? (**Seeger et al., 1962**)

Introduction

Welcome to the thirty-first edition of *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, our slightly delayed first one of 2025. As always if you are a new reader, thanks for joining us and read on to learn a little more about the journal. Alternatively, if you're a returning reader welcome back too. In this editorial you will find some editorial insight, advice on how you can contribute to future journal issues, alongside an overview of the contents of this issue. There's also an update on our various social media channels for continuing conversations outside these pages.

Reviewer university challenges

If there's one theme I've heard repeatedly from my Board and associate editors over the past year, it's the increasing challenge of getting ready, willing and able peer-reviewers on board to assist us. This isn't a new problem, *per se*, which is one of the reasons why during the onboarding and initial training of new team members I stress how much time, care and attention they'll need to pay during their review stage activities! This learning outcome generally comes shortly before I go on to also explain the potential heartache editors will likely experience after identifying a 'perfect reviewer', only to have the person in question decline to review at best, or simply not respond at worst.[i] Practically speaking, we are a small journal meaning we only have a modest database on-hand of previous authors and other willing volunteers potentially able to review for us. Additionally, given our interdisciplinary interests this means this already slender pre-registered database of possibly willing souls is often insufficiently deep or broad to be deployed against freshly submitted manuscripts on topics we've not tackled before. Hence, at times it can

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undoubtedly be a considerable challenge to find the right people quickly, and even more so to successfully engage them in assisting with our quality assurance activities.

There are also related issues to consider around those members of the *academic precariat* within our reviewing community[ii]; typically for *Exchanges* these are those newer scholars who are often on short, fixed-term contracts, often working multiple small jobs across two or more universities simultaneously (**OECD, 2021; Pugh & Ioppolo, 2024**). Since *Exchanges* has always styled ourselves as being a journal 'by and for early career researchers', as a result many of our past authors and reviewers are typically members of this group. Naturally, with shorter contracts they are also motile in their careers, meaning email addresses they registered with us a scant few months earlier are more likely to fall dormant or defunct as their career or employer changes. This is one of the reasons why I try periodically to reach out to our reviewing community to elicit holistically which addresses are now invalid – or indeed to uncover formerly registered reviewers who no longer wish to participate.[iii]

Incidentally, for any reader who is thinking 'Don't you get notified when an email bounces?' – the regretful answer is 'No, not when we use the system messaging'. This is a lamentable artefact of the Open Journal System (OJS) platform we use to publish *Exchanges*, and its local configuration. In casual conversation with members of the technical support team I've been led to believe these bounced messages, notifying us of a dead account *are* aggregated somewhere on the Warwick University Press' Journals site. However, it's never been part of the platform I've been able to access, but perhaps one day that will change – I wait in hope!

Unsurprisingly then as the journal continues to grow and evolve, myself and my editorial team spend a lot of time seeking out and approaching new, potentially willing reviewers through our contacts, our editorial community, institutional websites of host and partner institutions and the like.[iv] Identifying someone who might be a good reviewer for any given paper is rarely an easy, or rapid, task especially when some institutions hide away the key information on their researchers from non-local access! I have lost track of the number of departmental and school pages I have visited comprising simply a list of staff members but lacking in any subject details. Even when we do find someone who looks a potentially good match, some individuals can be less willing to proffer expert opinion outside of their perceived specific disciplinary niche. Given the interdisciplinary nature of many submissions to *Exchanges*, you can understand how this can add to our headaches.

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So, hampered by technology, the fissile nature of early career contracts, and the natural challenge of identifying the right people for the reviewing job, there remains the greatest editorial obstacle: getting a researcher to agree to review! How responsive individual academics are to our review invitations varies – some are delighted to be asked – reviewers to be treasured! They are though, in my long experience, the rare ones. Others are less enthusiastic, but willing participants who do an excellent job of work for us. I think I might class myself in this group when I am asked to review for other titles – especially when it happens to be the third or fourth review request, I might have received that month! Sadly, and I speak as someone who has also had to decline a few invitations to review himself, many may have no desire or ability or time to engage with our reviewing tasks. While as an editor this is an operational frustration, as an academic myself I can quite understand. Given how even academics outside the precariat[v] have a *lot* of competing tasks on their agenda within personal and professional lives alike, declining a review request or simply ignoring it seems a likely outcome.

Practically speaking though, even once we have found the 'right' person – and as we need a minimum of two reviewers an article that should really read 'persons' – I suspect, some of my editors might argue a major challenge still remains: getting any willing reviewer to complete their assignment on time. Given there is no contractual or legal obligation upon reviewers to complete any review assignment, just their personal generosity, to encourage them we must simply rely on appealing to their better nature and sense of collegiality across the global academy.[vi]

Which brings us to the crux of the problem today: fewer and fewer researchers are willing or indeed able to review for us. Like every other journal, we are dipping into a rivalrous, finite and evaporating ocean of talent. Similarly, like most of the academic publishing world, *Exchanges* is built atop an unstable Jenga tower of free-labour.[vii] One of the underlying assumptions of this model is that while not *every* academic will be willing or able to review, there will always be a sufficiently 'healthy' surplus of those who can and do engage so you will *eventually* have sufficient reviewers. Another assumption, or perhaps presumption, is the expectation scholars will demonstrate a collegiality and commitment to the academy in many varied ways over and above their salaried work. Career progression assessments and job interviews used to draw such extra-curricular work into the harsh light of day for scrutiny. So, there was once an enlightened self-interest imperative to be a reviewer, although how effective such an intangible imperative was, varied between individual scholars, their personal perspectives and career trajectories. Arguably though today, such efforts are less recognised, with a focus on research outputs becoming paramount in academics' career ambitions.

(**Irfanullah, 2025; Spector, 2024**). This perception has certainly been reflected in my conversations in recent years with scholars old and new.

Presently though, academia is under a series of increasing tensions and stressors, which are serving to disrupt this model and creating significant questions over its sustainability. Take the UK for example, where *Exchanges* is based. Currently unprecedented financial tensions across the university sector are seeing drastic job cuts as institutions seek to balance their financial books due to a near perfect storm of funding stressors (**Standley, 2025; Tode-Jimenez, 2025**). Thus, good scholars are finding themselves suddenly either mired in inordinately competitive job hunting within or without of the higher educational sector. From my own experiences of recruitment, these are all tasks which take no small amounts of 'free' time. Not to mention my understanding that working in the commercial, governmental or non-profit sector means accounting for your employment time even more, being able to 'gift' some time to be a reviewer feels like one of many things such people won't be doing. Even where scholars might like to 'keep their hands in' and maintaining a link with the academy through reviewing. Frankly, I would also imagine many of them will also be feeling less than collegiate given the suddenness with which their services may have been dispensed with. Not to mention, practically speaking from an editorial perspective, having left their universities behind, any email address we have for them may also be defunct![viii]

Those remaining in the rump-academy are in scarcely a better position; taking on departed colleagues' teaching, administration and research loads as staffing resources diminish while demands on their productive labour time increases being a common enough consequence. Yet this additional intellectual, educational and administrative labour is being demanded of them while university staff continue to experience a near existential fear over their own continued employment too. For the academics this is a dreadful situation.[ix] From an editorial perspective it is scarcely better. With even less time, facility and understandably willingness to act as reviewers, our once ocean of potential peer-reviewers is beginning to look at best more like an increasingly evaporating inland sea. Meanwhile, the number of journals continues to rise, even as the 'publish or perish' imperative continues to serve as a significant inducement for all scholars to continue to be voluminous in their outputs.

This is a perhaps a simplified assessment of the current impacts of the ongoing financial crisis on the university sector, but these issues do represent a significant threat to the quality-assured scholarly communication field as it is currently configured. Perhaps, with fewer scholars employed, it might be rationalised that fewer papers will be

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produced and thus a smaller number of reviewers needed. I fear this is rather a reductionist perspective. More likely it will see journals, such as ourselves, suffer a continued 'reviewer-drought' and consequently struggle to progress manuscripts through review in realistic timescales, increasing frustration for authors and editors alike. I would suspect any drying of the reviewer wellspring will be less of an issue for the more 'prestigious', well-resourced generally commercially-run titles, where the residual 'kudos' for reviewing more likely adheres than for titles like *Exchanges*. While there are researchers, like myself, who pride ourselves on our more ethical choices of whom we will review for, I am under no apprehensions that for many academics a more pragmatic, career-centric mode of operations remains the norm.

All of which conspires to make my job, and that of my editors, ever harder. Bearing in mind the increasingly salinity of our regularly over-fished 'sea of reviewers' – and I may be overstraining this aquatic metaphor here – should we perhaps more regularly cast our net wider and further abroad? Some argue this would be a healthy alternative serving to bring more underrepresented regions into the reviewing lens (**Nakamura et al., 2023; Irfanullah, 2021**)! However, there as in our local seas, there are those with much bigger, and more enticing nets! Another suggestion offering hope is to encourage more early career researchers (ECRs) to engage as reviewers. Here at least we have a small home advantage in that from our creation we have encouraged and approached ECRs to become involved in the reviewing process. Yet there are suggestions that many ECRs are reluctant to take up the opportunity, seeing it takes away time from other, more 'essential' career progression activities. As noted earlier, reviewing doesn't offer the same career enhancing benefits as achieving funding or publishing outputs, so you can understand their reluctance. Consequently, reviewing as a routine academic task can be deprioritised or simply ignored by many in the group (**Wróblewska et al., 2024**). I would concur that personal experience running *Exchanges* these past seven years, along with insight from by editorial team members, sadly underscores such perceptions as these as accurate ones.

Depressed by all this? Sorry! While I am somewhat downhearted by this turn of events, perhaps 'professionally frustrated' would be a more accurate position.[x] This piece began life as a minor investigation and partial explanation to our readers about how and why peer-review can seem to take so long to complete, yet it became something more in the writing. Have I reached a gloomy conclusion that peer-review as we know it is now an endangered species, suffering its own 'climate collapse' meaning we must look to pivot to new forms or formats of quality assurance? Perhaps.[xi]

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Nevertheless, *this* represents the background and one of the (many) challenges we face in keeping the journal viable and operational today. It is also why when we do find willing reviewers, and thanks to the considerable efforts of my editorial team we do again and again, who deliver on time and with a scholarly rigour, I find it is a moment worth celebrating! On a related note I was even more delighted recently when our regular collaborators at the National Centre for Research Culture worked with us to put out a call for new reviewers (and editors) to assist us in the production of our 3rd collaborative special issue for them.[xii] My hope is a few of these research culture reviewers might stay on board and help us look at other papers too…that is assuming their own jobs are any more stable, which is, by no means a certainty.

So, why did I share our woes? Well, as noted, this isn't an issue impacting *Exchanges* in isolation. Speaking to other journal's editors I know they're experiencing the same tensions to a greater or lesser extent. I did it to partly highlight to authors and readers one of the major reasons why it can take so long to progress manuscripts through our review and feedback process. It's also a tribute to those reviewers who do continue to make such contributions to us and other journals, and to whom I am deeply grateful. But in part I also wrote this to hopefully inspire anyone who's read this far in the editorial to consider registering as a reviewer for us if they haven't already! I think my gratitude here will be obvious.

Registering is an easy enough process to complete yourself, but I am also happy to set people up as reviewers on request and even offer some light coaching, if that might be preferable. You may also be pleased to know that as a modest volume journal we rarely make regular or routine demands on reviewers – although I know some enthusiastic reviewers wish we did! Along with my personal gratitude, you might gain the personal satisfaction of helping a scholar-led journal, run entirely for the benefit of its contributors, editors and readers. Helping support a grassroots publishing operation should, if nothing else, make yourself feel justifiably proud of your future contribution and demonstratable collegiality!

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Papers

After that exploration behind the editorial curtain, it is time to turn to what you, the reader, are most interested in: the issue's articles. As always, while we hope to bring you more, review outcomes are never automatically positive! Nevertheless, what we do have in this issue are delightful and insightful in equal measure, I think you'll find. A number of articles here were submitted for a potential special issue (Gender & Intersection), which regretfully has failed to coalesce sufficient accepted submissions for an entire edition. As such, they're presented here to celebrate these authors' insights, with one or two more due to appear in our autumn/winter issue of *Exchanges* later this year.

Articles

Firstly, **Sharon Adetutu Omotoso** and **Bolatito Kolawole** bring us fresh insights into the research landscape of Africa. In *Intersectionality and Detrimental Agency in Nigeria's Researchscape*, the authors consider what intersectionality offers in terms of uncovering hidden oppressions within this domain. Taking a historical approach the authors also probe into how intersectionality methodology may have benefitted academia even while it has uncovered restrictive practices within it. They continue by debating the conception of how possession of an 'intersectional wand' confers agency and status on certain research narratives within the realm ([1](#)).

Critical Reflections

Moving to our critical reflective pieces, **Yvette Yitong Wang** and **Simon Gansinger** offer insights into a fascinating symposium which explored how reasoning operates across the disciplines and what the debates revealed to them. In *What Does It Mean to Explain* the authors consider explanation, particularly its relationship to interdisciplinarity moving on to consider if *explanation* can be more powerful than *description* alone? Through these and various other explorations, they reach a final provocation concerning the 'disruptive potential' of authentically interdisciplinary knowledge-exchange forums ([22](#)).

Continuing our interdisciplinary debates are **Abiodun Egbetokun** and colleagues, who share aspects of their own debates and explorations of what it means to embrace interdisciplinary practice: a topic close to our hearts at here *Exchanges*! In *The Labour of Thought* the authors posit how to effectively engage with interdisciplinarity on any practical or pragmatic level can be a complex and complicated endeavour, requiring no-small amount of time and effort. Especially for early career researchers, who are increasingly encouraged to become interdisciplinarians this can be a tricky work/life balancing act. The authors therefore draw on their own experiences, crystalised through a British Academy facilitated event, to

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illustrate practical lessons for any early career researchers seeking to become 'interdisciplinary scholars' in an effective and timely manner (**33**).

We then move to our two Gender and Intersectionality pieces, with firstly **Anlia Thelekkatte** and colleagues offering us a study on *Gender Equity and Women Empowerment*, in India. In this insightful and fascinating piece, the authors take as their central thesis the pioneering Kudumbashree programme in Kerala. The programme, in seeking to better enable regional women has adopted a micro-enterprise approach, and the authors offer us insights into its operations and ambitions, along with its participants and effective societal impacts. While the programme has achieved some modest successes, Thelekkatte and colleagues offer a critical evaluation and look to the future. In this modality, they propose how having now overcome its early challenges and moved to a successful mode of operations, the programme could be expanded to offer positive support to a much wider range of regional women (**51**).

Our final piece this issue is from **Martina Arcadu** and is a tasty consideration of *Gender, Care and Food Practices*. Within the article Arcadu offers critical insights and explorations relating to food activism. They explore how such activism can offer routes for rethinking and re-evaluating traditional gender-based food related roles, despite often deeply embedded cultural contexts and local 'norms' representing challenges for any changes. The author suggests how such food activism can serve positively to create social support mechanisms through which women's roles and activities can be influenced, empowered and restructured. In this way they can achieve not only positive personal outcomes but also gain greater agency and societal influence (**62**).

As always, we hope our readers find something of interest or stimulation in this varied and interesting collection of work. Our thanks as always to all authors for their contributions.

Calls for Papers

As always, we would like to remind all readers and potential authors of our various other open calls for papers. You might also wish to register for our email newsletter or engage with following our social media to keep up with our very latest announcements and opportunities – you will find the links for these towards the end of this editorial.

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Opening the format

Firstly, I would like to highlight a small revision to *Exchanges*' format submission policies. From the start of May 2025, we have increased the maximum word count at submission for *peer-reviewed articles* of all kinds to 8,000 (previously set at a maximum of 6,000). This follows discussions with our publisher, and a number of authors, in recent years. We hope this increased scope will offer authors an increased flexibility and space to expand on their thoughts, ideas and research findings. Author guidance on the journal site has been revised, and should you want to read more about this change, you will find further details over on our blog. Incidentally, the lower limit for these manuscripts remains at 4,000 words. Word limits for all other formats (critical reflections, conversations and book reviews remains unchanged).

- [Word-Limits Raised to 8,000 for Peer-Reviewed Articles](#)

Open calls for papers

Exchanges also continues to invite and welcome submissions throughout the year on any subject, especially those which can either demonstrate a degree of interdisciplinary thinking or research or are written for a wide-academic audience. Hence, while articles which draw directly or indirectly on interdisciplinary methods, methodologies, praxis and thinking are warmly welcome, this is *not* a pre-requisite. Hence, any topic, written in a manner suitable for a broad, scholarly, academic audience is likely to be accepted for consideration in our pages. Likewise, articles from researchers, practitioners and independent scholars are all equally welcome. See our [Selection Policy](#) for more information.

Deadlines: There are **no manuscript submission deadlines** on our open call and submissions will be considered throughout the year. Manuscripts therefore may be submitted for consideration via our online submission portal at any point.

Formats: Manuscripts can be submitted for consideration as traditional **peer-reviewed** research or review article formats, which will undergo a rigorous, double-anonymised external review process. Alternatively, they may be submitted under our **detailed editorially review** formats – briefer works which often are able to transit to publication faster.[xiii] Editorially reviewed formats can be especially suitable for first-time authors, or those looking to embrace reflexivity, posit an opinion or share professional insights. It is notable that all article formats receive extensive reader attention and downloads.[xiv]

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Requirements: Word counts and requirements for all content formats vary and prospective authors are strongly encouraged to review our Author Guidance ahead of submission.[xv] Where an exception to these standards is required, authors should discuss their anticipated manuscript with the Chief Editor ahead of submission. Manuscripts passing our review processes and accepted for publication will subsequently appear in the next available regular issue, normally published in spring and autumn.

Review: All submitted manuscripts undergo initial scoping (suitability and initial quality) and originality checks by the Chief Editor before being accepted for further editorial review consideration. Manuscripts seeking publication as research articles additionally will undergo one or more rounds formal peer-review by two or more suitable anonymised assessors. Editorial decisions on manuscript acceptance are final, although unsuccessful authors are normally encouraged to consider revising their work for later reconsideration by the journal.

Authors: Notably, *Exchanges* has a mission to support the development and dissemination of research by early career and post-graduate researchers (**IAS, 2024**). Consequently, we are especially pleased to receive manuscripts from emerging scholars or first-time authors, although contributions from established and senior scholars are also welcomed.

Further details of our open call requirements can be found online (**Exchanges, 2024a**). Or to begin your submission journey visit:

- exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/submission

Informal approaches

As Editor-in-Chief, I welcome approaches from potential authors to discuss prospective article ideas or concepts for *Exchanges*. However, abstract submission or formal editorial discussions ahead of a submission are *not* normally a prerequisite, and authors may submit complete manuscripts for consideration without any prior communication.[xvi] During the submission process authors are encouraged to include a *Note to Editor* outlining the article format or call under which their manuscript is to be considered or any other considerations they wish to bring to my attention.[xvii]

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Author fees

Exchanges is a diamond (or platinum) open-access, scholar-led journal, meaning there are **no fees or charges** for readers and author alike. All published content is made freely available online to readers globally (**Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013; Bosman et al, 2021**). Furthermore, authors retain all rights over their work, granting *Exchanges* first publication rights during submission as a pre-requisite for publication consideration. *Exchanges* is also happy to support translations of our published articles subsequently appearing in other suitable journals, and requests only that a link back to the original piece is incorporated for completeness. Authors may wish to consult *Exchanges'* journal policies for further information on how we handle author contributions (**Exchanges, 2024b**).

Further advice for prospective authors can be found throughout the *Exchanges* and IAS websites (**Exchanges, 2024c, IAS, 2025**), as well as in our editorials, podcast episodes and blog entries.

Forthcoming Issues

I would hope that our next publication won't be too many months away and will comprise one of our special issues currently percolating behind the scenes. As these are each advancing at different rates – largely based on reviewer and author responsiveness – there's a little educated guesswork needed here to suggest which one will appear first. Personally, I suspect it may be the Research Culture '25 issue – but I am quite prepared to be happily surprised by one of the others!

Special issues aside, our next regular issue will be during the autumn, sometime around or just after October. While it is too late to submit a peer-reviewed item for inclusion in that issue, editorially reviewed items submitted up to the early summer months (June/July) stand a very reasonable chance of exiting review to publication readiness by then! As always, watch our social media channels or subscribe to our newsletter for more about our future publishing plans for 2025 and beyond.

Acknowledgements

As always, I would like to offer my thanks to all those people who helped make this issue a reality. A special thanks to Abbie Pritchard who has begun to act as Assistant to the Editor in recent months for her invaluable assistance, insight and exceptional graphical design work! If you haven't yet seen one of our new *Exchanges* calling cards designed by Abbie, get in touch with us.

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My thanks too to all our authors for their vital intellectual contributions towards this edition as well. Likewise, my thanks to our Editorial Board for their continued support and efforts on behalf of *Exchanges*, and the [Institute of Advanced Study](#) for their continued underwriting of *Exchanges*' strategic goals and operational missions.

Continuing the Conversation

Exchanges has a range of routes, groups and opportunities for keeping abreast of our latest news, developments and calls for papers. Since the last issue we've had a couple of substantive changes. Firstly, like many in academia we deemed our presence on X/Twitter to no longer be in keeping with the principles of openness and integrity on which this journal is founded. Additionally, Warwick closed the Warwick Blogs site in March, which meant we had to find a new home for our editorial blog – the link to which you'll find below. As many of these socials are interactive, please do make use of them to engage us in conversation!

Bluesky:	[@ExchangesJournal](#)
Editorial Blog:	[exchangesdiscourse.wordpress.com/](#)
Linked.In:	[www.linkedin.com/groups/12162247/](#)
LinkTree:	[linktr.ee/exchangesjournal](#)
Newsletter:	[www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A0=EXCHANGES-ANNOUNCE](#)

The Exchanges Discourse Podcast

The new year has brought a new focus to the podcast. In 2025, alongside inviting on past authors to talk about their papers and work, we've been reaching out to various people doing interesting things in scholarly communications. Hence, we've episodes looking at academic podcasting, early career monographs and the national open monographs scene too. Hopefully, we'll soon have some more, and certainly if you or a colleague think you might like to appear in conversation on our podcast, then do get in touch! All episodes are free to listen on [Spotify for Podcasting](#), and many other podcasting platforms. You can also find a full listing of past episodes from this year, and all previous ones, on the *Exchanges* website.

[exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/podcast](#)

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Contacting

As Editor-in-Chief I am always pleased to discuss any matters relating to *Exchanges*, our community, contributions or potential collaborations. My contact details appear at the start of this editorial.

Dr Gareth Johnson holds a doctorate in cultural academic publishing practices (NTU) and degrees in biomedical technology (SHU), information management (Sheffield), and research practice (NTU). His diverse career spans academic library leadership, applied research, and senior roles within regional and national professional bodies. Since 2018, he has served as Editor-in-Chief of *Exchanges*. Gareth's professional interests include academic writing, scholarly communication, social theory, power dynamics, counter-capitalism, and political economics. He has expertise in editorial practice, distributed team management, strategic leadership, stakeholder engagement, and effective communication. A committed advocate for academic agency, he has long championed scholar-led and community-driven publishing initiatives. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and the creator and host of the long-running podcast *Exchanges Discourse*. Outside academia, he is also co-director of a property management company.

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Endnotes

[i] This situation has not been assisted, it is fair to point out, by the ongoing (at time of writing) communication glitch the Warwick iteration of OJS has been suffering with. See more about this issue here: https://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/announcement/view/69.

[ii] While I've been writing this over the last few weeks, and as more job cuts have been announced across the UK higher education sector, I am beginning to conclude that simply to be *any* academic today in Britain is to be a member of the precariat. A depressing thought.

[iii] I am currently in the process of running this exercise for 2025 – thank you to all those who responded to my messages! Last time (June 2022) I approached around a quarter of our reviewers – only those without listed research interests, uncovering around 10% of accounts to be associated with 'dead' email addresses. It also revealed around a further 5% who expressly requested we discontinue to call on them for future reviews. For the May 2025 exercise, I've approached around 90% of our reviewers, which seems to indicate about 20% of these account emails are no longer valid.

[iv] In *extremis* we also ask authors for lengthy lists of potential reviewers for us to pick from. While some major journals use this as a first choice for reviewer identification, for *Exchanges* this is very much a final fallback, as we seek as much to maintain as much anonymity as possible within the reviewing process.

[v] See note ii above for thoughts on if anyone is outside this today.

[vi] I've been asked periodically my thoughts on rewarding reviewers tangibly. This is a very complex issue, to respond might take up the entire editorial, but simply put the crux of my position is (a) once the multi-billion-dollar commercial publishers of the world embrace this position, rather than profiting enormously on the backs of academic free labour exploitation, then I might think about it. Also (b) *Exchanges* makes no income and is run entirely from the generosity of Warwick, and thus there are no discretionary funds from which I could draw any payments. Shifting to embrace some form of revenue generation for our title rather runs directly against my personal and professional ethics, so I'm unsure how we'd ever square this circle. Perhaps the next Chief Editor might have different views though, whenever I depart! See for interest (**Irfanullah, 2025**)

[vii] As I mentioned in the previous note, we don't make any income or profit, being rather run entirely for the benefit of our authors and readers, thanks to the generosity of our host institution.

[viii] I'm aware other countries, such as the United States of America and the Netherlands, also have scholars under existential and career challenging tensions from political shifts which will reduce their ability to be

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willing reviewers too. Since I am based in the UK, with a primary experience of this nation's research scholarship, I'm not sufficiently informed to make a similar assessment. Although, I am deeply sympathetic to any scholar finding their career choices under unprecedented assault – and not simply from a pragmatic editorial perspective.

[ix] And to be honest, all university staff too. I have many friends and colleagues in professional service and administration roles who have been facing some tough work choices and environments in the past few years. My focus is purely on the academic community here as they are our primary 'stock' of reviewers, rather than dismissing the very real problems staff across institutions are facing.

[x] There are far more existential and concerning threats to the global population than peer-review, not that I'll need to remind readers who may well have been doomscrolling through the news feeds only moments earlier.

[xi] In case you are interested in my take, briefly, and with many caveats 'yes'. Although, for *Exchanges* our platform deployment and technical development challenges rather precludes us taking any experimental steps for the foreseeable future. But, I am ever mindful of the potential to embrace new and perhaps more effective routes to maintaining quality assurance in publishing.

[xii] If you are interested in registering to help us review papers for this issue, or even to get involved as an associate editor, please do get in touch! The editorial work won't be kicking off until early 2026 so there's plenty of time to express your interest.

[xiii] **Editorially Reviewed Formats**: e.g., Critical Reflections, Conversations (interviews) or Book Reviews. As these do not undergo external peer review, but a detailed editorial review and revision process, they are also usually able to be more swiftly published in the journal. While the acceptance rate is higher for these types of material, those which fail to meet our required standards in any respect will be declined and returned to their authors.

[xiv] **Top Articles**: This diversity of format interest is frequently reflected in our annual Top Articles list, which appears in the IAS annual report, and on our blog usually in January of each year.

[xv] **Word counts**: For the purposes of considering a submissions' word count, we do not typically include abstracts, references, endnotes or appendences. Submissions slightly over/under our required word count limits will, at the Chief Editor's discretion, still be initially considered for review. However, any significantly in excess will normally be declined and returned with revision guidance to their authors.

[xvi] **Expressions of Interest**: We do on occasion solicit expressions of interest ahead of submissions for special issues, as promoted on our Announcements page, blog and other social media channels. For regular (open or themed) issue submissions though, authors may submit their manuscripts without any prior contact.

[xvii] **Formats**: For more on the formats, word counts and other requirements for any prospective submissions, see: https://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/guidance#formats

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Intersectionality and Detrimental Agency in Nigeria's Researchscape

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Abstract

This study presents Nigeria's researchscape as an archetype of sites where intersections of multiple identities of gender, race, and class are performed. Despite the acclaimed strength of intersectionality to unearth hidden oppressions, its commitment to addressing the oppressions it uncovers requires scholarly scrutiny.

The study takes a historical approach regarding intersectionality to probe into what comprises any intersectional focus in academia and how much the researchscape has benefitted from intersectional methodological thinking. Using methods of critical analysis and deconstructive argumentation, 'Detrimental Agency' is introduced to highlight how positionality and reflexivity influence multiple layers of oppression in academia, depending on who possesses the 'intersectional wand'.

Keywords: detrimental agency; intersectionality; intersectional wand; researchscape; higher education

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Introduction

A sunny afternoon in November 2022, at a Nigerian Federal University offered itself to a gathering of people from all walks of life to listen to a lecture titled 'Exploring the Impact of Intersectionality in Academia and Research.' As is the new-normal culture, non-Nigerian audiences also joined the hybrid event online from their various countries. Delivering a public lecture on the campus of a Nigerian Public University is no mere feat, particularly as a woman, one who is not an alumnus of the 'first generation' public university and just approaching professorial cadre. The subject would generate much controversy among University Management, academic staff, students, and the general university public. The academic environment consisting of such diverse stakeholders and players is what this study describes as a 'researchscape'- an academic landscape with varying expertise, experience, and power-play. It could also be described as the campus ecosystem. The public lecture audience mix is expectedly diverse (now with global audiences in virtual attendance), not only in gender, race, and class, but also in interests, consequently requiring the speaker's depth of wit, knowledge, and charisma. Post-lecture interests requiring transcription of the lecture led to the invitation of a doctoral student from the Federal University where the event was hosted. Having bagged her Bachelors from outside Nigeria, she is often described as 'privileged'; an identity marker which predisposes her to discrimination. This presents us at intersections of class, gender and ethnicity on the researchscape, and reflexively accentuates the site of our intersectional journey in this study.

Kimberlé Crenshaw popularised the idea of intersectionality in 1989. As a legal theorist, she uncovered the compound discrimination at play when black women brought forth a case for employment discrimination based on their race and gender. Still, their allegations were denied due to a lack of complaints from black men and white women respectively (**DeGraffenreid v. G.M. Assembly: 1976**). Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlighted how the intersection of race and gender in this case produced a unique type of discrimination that black men and white women were not privy to. Therefore, she exposed how intersectional subordination is frequently 'the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of dis-empowerment' (**Crenshaw 1991: 1249**). The concept of 'intersectionality' arose during a period in which states and governing bodies began paying increasing attention to women's affairs globally. For instance, the United Nations dedicated 1975-85 as the UN Decade for Women ushering world conferences on women in Mexico, in 1975, Copenhagen, in 1980, and Nairobi, in 1985. In 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms

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of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In Nigeria, the pursuit of the tenets of CEDAW and other related international protocols spurred the establishment of Women's Research and Documentation Center (WORDOC) in 1987, at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. By 1988, WORDOC midwifed the National Commission of Women now known as the Federal Ministry for Women's Affairs (**WORDOC Newsletter, 1988**), and as women's studies progressed, this brought with it, the need to recognise and respect women's particulars amidst universals, just as the waves of women's studies also began to spread across campuses.

Stemming from concerns such as the individual's sense of self, conformity to social stereotypes, sexual preference, and political ideology and activism, women's studies have grappled with debates on whether human identities are predetermined or subject to self-determination, whether they are fluid, under threat, and what futures exist for identities. Such questions perhaps informed Kathy Davis' assertion that learning the ropes of feminist scholarship means attending to multiple identities and experiences of subordination (**2008**). Accordingly, divergent conceptions concerning how feminism is conceived, defined, practiced, theorised, and communicated have produced various types of feminism including white feminism, black feminism, third-world feminism, and African feminism(s). The urgency of distinguishing women's lived experiences within the varying conceptions and theorisation also arose. Despite the controversy that surrounds feminism as both a concept and ideology, feminist scholarship has remained at the forefront of theorising around social exclusion, justice, equity, and space-making. Thus, intersectionality can be said to have been borne out of this 'crisis of difference' across feminist scholarship as it addressed the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: the acknowledgment of differences among women.

Intersectionality is multifaceted; as a theory (**Mohammed, 2022**), a concept or heuristic device (**May, 2015**), a reading strategy for doing feminist analysis (**Collins, 2015**), a mechanism to understand individual experiences, and a means to theorise identity, as well as a property of social structures and cultural discourses (**UN Women, 2020**). Despite these numerous angles, Crenshaw's work in intersectionality provided a pathway to identify immediate challenges of overlooked experiences and struggles of women of color. It captured multiple jeopardy, specifically the 'triple jeopardy' of class, race, and gender (**King, 1988**). Observing the unique interactions of these identity markers and their resultant consequences highlights the notion that all oppressions are connected. One can barely succeed in doing feminist research without proper acknowledgment of differences, and how each new category of inequality, renders people more vulnerable, more marginalised, and more

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subordinate (**Davis, 2008**). For instance, a group of women in a classroom may all experience marginalisation on some level in society due to their gender, but differences among them in terms of ethnic background, marital status, age, and childbearing status may produce a varied set of challenges and lived experiences that their other female counterparts may not relate to. Even if the room were to be narrowed down to only pregnant women, the women's experiences of pregnancy may differ starkly.

Arguably, underlying assumptions of intersectionality embody a two-pronged analytical approach. First, it requires thinking across categories (**Yuval-Davis, 2006**) and examining how categories such as gender, race, and class intersect. Secondly, it suggests the need to identify and focus on 'sites' where multiple identities are performed (**Staunæs, 2003**). In this instance, academia serves as one such site in which multiple identities are performed and subsequently, a space in which intersections exist. Still, the question may be posed, why academia?

Academia is a fast-moving, dynamic space where all stakeholders are expected to keep up with the cycle of trends in research and development. The academic cycle consists of professors (teaching and research), upcoming middle-level researchers, university administrators, students and various support service providers. It is within this cycle that university management is organised. The cycle is saddled with research, teaching, mentoring, and community service, and each plays a significant role in the lives of stakeholders. The community of practice comprising such diverse stakeholders and players is what this study describes as a 'researchscape'; an academic landscape with varying expertise, experience, and power-play. The academia has nursed what some scholars have termed 'traditional equity research 'or a process of 'dissolving people's identities into broad, unchanging classifications' which aligns with a data-driven performance culture in universities, such as disaggregating populations according to designated categories (gender, ethnicity, social class, first language, first-in-family status) (**Naylor, Coates & Kelly 2016**).

Mari Matsuda's manner of asking 'the other question' can serve to illustrate what intersectionality could look like in academia and research. Matsuda claims that when she sees something racist she asks, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When she sees something sexist, she asks, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' And when she sees something that looks homophobic, she asks 'Where are the class interests in this?' (**Matsuda 1991: 1189**). Matsuda's words reflect Crenshaw's notion of intersectional subordination and the idea that multiple forms of oppression may take place concurrently.

Given intersectionality's origins within the US and its unique racial history, one wonders whether intersectionality fits within diverse contexts. On

this, studies have provided varied responses to similar questions concerning the applicability of intersectional frameworks amidst regional variations. Some scholars have suggested that in the United Kingdom, social class has been a key focus, particularly concerning gender (**Archer, Pratt & Phillips 2001; Burke 2009**). More generally, John (**2012**) points out that in Europe and Asia, ethnicity, religion, and migration status are more salient than race. Despite the academic grounding present within these assessments, they remain subject to the perspectives and identities of the scholars themselves. Drawing on an intersectionality lens requires the recognition that even in a European context, Black Europeans or Europeans from minority backgrounds may have very different notions of the degree which race factors into daily life. So, while some have suggested that the question of race may not be pertinent when discussing intersectionality on the African soil (**Nnaemeka, 2022**), like the analysis above, the question must be asked, 'which African soil'? In countries like South Africa, for instance, with white settler populations, and in many cases, whose societies are organised according to racial hierarchies, the question of race becomes extremely important. If one recognises sexism and classism within the Nigerian context, how much does racism play a visible role? In a predominantly black context like Nigeria, race would likely feature less in an intersectional lens but rather encompass categories like age, ethnicity, ability, class, and gender which create a disadvantage to individual groups much more than race. Still, even in Nigeria, while race may be of limited concern in the day-to-day, practices such as skin bleaching, colorism, or the elevated place of foreigners in certain segments of society, may still speak to the existence of a racial lens, that may perhaps manifest itself in the form of proximity to whiteness or Western contributions. Thus, the question of race in Africa is an intersectional analysis of itself and requires an examination of the specific context, the meaning of 'race' and the positionality of the researcher.

As social, economic, and political activities within this space continue to define identities while popular generalisation of stakeholders in the space continues to shortchange a wide range of actors, especially women (**Omotoso, 2020a**), research that solely relies on a gender lens can no longer be viewed as comprehensive if it is not equipped to recognise and account for other identity intersections. By implication, understanding intersectionality's impact within academia and research cannot be complete without a full grasp of its conceptual roots within feminist studies, women studies, gender studies, and critical race theory collectively. Three questions can guide discussions regarding intersectionality in academia;

1) What comprises any intersectional focus in academia

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2) What methodologies are engaged and how do these contribute to the production of knowledge?

3) Does intersectional thinking always address the multi-layered oppression it uncovers?

To answer these questions, this conceptual paper problematises current issues in Nigeria's researchscape with an aim to assess the effectiveness of intersectional frameworks, while also identifying areas within the Nigerian researchscape that could benefit from intersectional methodological thinking. In illuminating these areas, it introduces the concept of detrimental agency and complacent positionality to discuss instances in which intersectionality may produce adverse or detrimental outcomes, particularly as it pertains to curbing women marginalisation. We have refrained from using any institution as case study because the intention of this article is to offer conceptual frameworks and critical reflections for future empirical studies on Nigeria's (Africa's) academia.

The remaining part of this work provides a general analysis of intersectionality's nuances within academia, drawing specifically from examples within Nigeria. Furthermore, we argue that agency is often downplayed in intersectional discourses. We consider women's agency in the academia on one hand, and the agency of the systems, which often earn them the 'intersectional wand' on the other hand. We further interrogate how agency in intersectional thinking can be detrimental, before we proceed to discuss how players in the academia utilise their intersectional wand to generate and sustain detrimental agency. Subsequently, we discuss emerging issues from Nigeria's researchscape followed by the concluding section.

Intersectionality in Nigeria's Researchscape

Nigeria has 274 universities as of 2024- (63 state universities, 62 federal universities and 149 private universities (Statistica.com, 2025). The entire researchcape engage in stakeholder recycling, with management, academic staff, administrative staff and students drawn the from same pool emanating from across federal, state and private institutions. To understand what comprises any intersectional focus in Nigeria's academia, the Federal Character framework must be interrogated. Described as an integrative mechanism for inclusive representation (**Ojo, 2009**), the practice of inclusive representation through affirmative action policies covering consideration of categories such as age, sex, gender and ethnicity (**Okoye et. al 2021**). It calls for reckoning with the country's plurality in recruitment, distribution of administrative and political offices and power as well as the resources of the country (**Obiyan & Akindele, 2002**). While the federal character constituents are more pronounced in the federal

institutions, state and private entities also have similar frameworks covering indigeneity, faith-based and class-based considerations. Additional considerations also include institutional generations- whether first generation, second generation and so on (Olabode 2015); and new capitalist trends exemplified in internal revenue generation among federal and state institutions, as well as tuition and infrastructure issues within the private university systems.

In a country of over 200 million population and more than 250 ethnic groups (**Worldrometer, 2025**), Federal Character aims to promote fairness and equity in representation and resource allocation to protect interest of minority groups and ensure that the many ethnic groups, vulnerable populations and religious inclinations are protected. However, Nigeria's researchscape feigns intersectional thinking in composition and operations. Complications arising from such intersectional thinking continues to toxify the researchscape. Key identified areas affirming feigned intersectional thinking are examined below:

Admission

University admission methods frequently disaggregate student populations to make admission available to students whose makeup satisfies established qualities of student body diversity. In the particular context of the United States of America, this disaggregation has often led to tensions among groups, especially within the affirmative action space. The large amounts of black immigrant populations in the USA that have benefited from affirmative action policies that favor 'Black students' as a homogenous group, has drawn criticism from groups of African Americans (**Rimer & Arenson, 2004**). Similar challenges occur within the Nigerian context as it pertains to the use of quotas to align with the nation's principle of Federal Character. Agbaire (**2022: 8**) notes that 'gender is not considered in Nigeria's national quota-based policy for equitable higher education admissions even though there are strong indications that this is an important domain of inequalities'.

The admission process at universities demonstrates some of the problems that may arise in light of feigned intersectional thinking within academia. The admission quota system introduced in 2000 allows for 45% candidates to be admitted based on merit, 35% based on locality and 25% to cater for the educationally less-developed (**Salim, 2003**). For example, the quota system is expected to be applied to rectify recognisable imbalance in education opportunities between the southern and northern parts of Nigeria. While this is admirable, there can also be concerns about which type of Northern Nigerians? Does this type of disaggregation consider the differences between a Yoruba student from Kwara state and a Hausa student from Sokoto despite both being from Northern Nigeria? When

gender is considered, what happens when for instance male northerner cannot fill their quota while there is excess demand from female northerners? Also, if religion is a criterion, how will the crises of more muslim northerners be balanced against minority Christian northerners? Often time, nepotism creeps in to dislocate intersectional thinking. This contributes to reasons why agitations against marginalisation in admission processes continue to ravage the country. A case in point arises with the recent crisis of the Joint Admissions Matriculations Board (JAMB) in the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) 2025 examinations, where 'what began as a technical glitch has spiralled into a crisis of accountability, ethnic distrust, and tragic consequences, raising urgent questions about Nigeria's education system, governance, and the culture of impunity that shields public officials from repercussion' (**The Cable News, May 15, 2025**). Intersectional considerations in higher education admission is still an area of concern for women applicants 'because the admission system does not explicitly address process challenges nor recognise gender differences and discrimination' (**Agbaire, 2022: 24**).

Classrooms, Curriculum, Appointment and Promotion

These contexts are also important aspects of intersectional thinking in Academia. In terms of curriculum, there exists an intersectional angle to the exercise of producing knowledge in general and decolonising knowledge in particular. As an instructor, understanding the various backgrounds of students within the classroom space in terms of family background, economic access, ethnicity, and so on, can aid in teaching and curriculum development to ensure that contents meet the unique needs of students as well as the needs of the communities they will be serving after the academic programme. Further for consideration could be how intersectionality is factored into the development of graduate and professional programmes vis-a-vis makeup of students admitted for professional programmes such that they make provisions for groups including nursing mothers, mature students, politicians, and public office holders to build capacity and augment their skills while still on the job. At a multi-disciplinary roundtable session for young female academics (**WORDOC, 2024**), attention was called to how women's individual agency has aided their admission of into undergraduate programs across Nigerian universities in the last decade but finds an insignificant number of women returning for graduate programs. Innovations such as Distance Learning Programs and Open University options reflect intersectional thinking which has permitted hitherto marginalised or excluded groups to education. Still, many Nigerian universities' classrooms do not provide sufficiently for people with disabilities, nursing mothers among other facilities that attest to such an intersectional thinking.

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Outside of the classroom, staff appointment and promotion are often downplayed angles of intersectional thinking. Women are susceptible to career gaps created by nurturing roles including maternity and childcare. The various stages of promotion exercises- departmental-faculty, internal and external assessments among others often predispose women to misogynistic and discriminatory practices. For instance, studies have engaged with role entrapment and spatial entrapment (**Omotoso, 2020b**), revealing how women are often kept at the middle level and lower echelons in higher education leadership (**Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle 2006**). Regular staff audits should not only reveal ages, number of years in service, and achievements, but also 'who' is recruited, how are they promoted, and how well the system balances the staff mix. Researchscapes' intersectional thinking must be both holistic and forward looking in terms of human resource, training and capacity strengthening.

Universities' Public Events and Students' Activities

The academic environment frequently plays host to events that engage students, the larger university, and the public. Often, these types of events are held in galleries on the top floors of buildings, which attendees can only access via staircases. Adopting an intersectional approach in the planning of such events would seek to address the challenges of inaccessibility for people with disabilities (PWDs) at these events. One can also ask to what extent campus infrastructure, and student halls of residences make such provisions for those with similar physical restrictions.

As researchscape lend itself to intellectual activities, it is also a unique space for organised agitations. University campuses often serve as the nexus for activist organisations and student organising. The recent #EndSARS movement in Nigeria in 2020, for instance, took place across Nigeria and garnered wide support from student populations. Even within this movement, intersectional considerations played an important role as protestors soon asked questions about who is qualified to protest, particularly as queer Nigerians met outcry as they highlighted their negative encounters with the police due to their sexuality (**Omotoso & Opesade, 2025**). They were promptly informed not to bring 'sex matters' into the struggle, even when it was obviously inevitable. In cases like this, intersectionality unearths hidden, yet important nuances which connect gown with town. These reflections attest to the importance of intersectional thinking in curriculum development, project management, recruitment and promotion, knowledge production, and students' research.

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Overall, as Nigeria's researchscape remains a practical site to interrogate intersectionality, priority must be given to intersectional research; a venture which must commence with clarity of methodologies for intersectional thinking and planning. The next section presents a brief discussion on methodologies in intersectional research.

Methodologies in Intersectional Research

Beyond classroom and administrative matters, it is noteworthy that values surrounding multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity make room for an appreciation of diverse subjects, thoughts, and ideas. These arise from research questions that ask, 'Who is not in the room,' or 'What were the other people doing?, as research methods are engaged within a given study. This implies the need to incorporate intersectionality at the conception stage of any research. This is needed in light of the increasing demands of grant funders for research proposals prepared with a Gender Diversity Statement to describe the identity backgrounds of the research team and beneficiaries, particularly according to gender and racial lines among others. Such process recognises that 'different methodologies produce different kinds of knowledge' (**McCall, 2005: 1772**) and research benefits from a multiplicity of perspectives and positionalities.

Peer review is another area of the research process in which intersectional thinking can offer many advantages. Despite widespread blind review culture, it offers an opportunity for self-reflexivity and the awareness that the reviewer cannot superimpose personal views into scholarly articles. In the last few decades, professions and disciplines are increasingly no longer associated with a particular gender, allowing for diversity in knowledge production. As research from scholars begins to incorporate intersectional principles, so too does it begin to influence student projects to follow suit. The culture of internal and external examiner interventions allows for graduate students to probe the space for intersectional thinking within their works. They are also challenged to consider the diversity within the so-called homogenous groups under study.

There are several ways to do intersectional research. These methods are not limited to the humanities or even the social sciences, rather they apply across the board. Intersectionality can feature conveniently in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods of research drawn from interpretative, phenomenological, auto-ethnography, case studies, and statistical analysis among others. Within statistical analysis, for instance, an intersectional lens may prompt the researcher to not just consider women as a homogenous group but also to consider their educational attainment, marital status, and physical (dis)abilities, and probe how these additional identity categories may also impact findings.

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Discussions in the sections above have presented the limitlessness of intersectional thinking, describing how it can serve as an analytical resource and identity marker to understand varying approaches to leadership, crisis management, teaching, and physical planning in higher institutions. At this point, it is pertinent to examine whether intersectional thinking always addresses the multi-layered oppression it uncovers. The next section of this study will focus on possibilities and scenarios that expound the limits of intersectionality.

Agency and Intersectional Wand in Researchscape

Suffice to say that discourses on intersectionality emerged from women's experiences and realities, an intersectional approach in researchscape introduces a new dimension for inclusive leadership and administration. To commence this section, attention must be paid to agency- a less-hyped feature of intersectional thinking.

Agency depicts a conscious awareness and display of capability for the decisive pursuit of specified goals without fear of discrimination, disadvantage and violence. Agency for women involves taking risks and responsibilities across spaces. It features women's ability to influence decisions, root for collective action, and inspire positive change. Just as Sen (**1999**) prescribes an inevitable intersection between women's agency and women's well-being, 'women's agency is operative when it results in a fundamental shift in perceptions so that women can define self-interest and choice' (**Mishra and Tripathi 2011: 59**). Agbaire (**2022**) notes how dimensions of agency contribute to understanding conflicts between women's personal goals in higher education, and societal expectation especially with regards to mapping mainstream equity policy directions.

With regards to academia (which is the foci of this study), agency plays out in intersectionality, as women feature in each of the subjects earlier discussed- taking researchers', scholars', and administrators' ample amount of agency to incorporate intersectional thinking into systems, be it recruitment, admission, promotion, research, and campus economics. Inferentially, agency implies access to a wand that can find and fix problems. Here, a wand is taken as a symbol of office, often connected with authority, power and intelligence possessed by persons and often affording them ability to find solution to difficult problems. An intersectional wand is a tool composed of a conscious ability to influence systems, the authority to determine organisational directions and the courage to take responsibility for consequences of ones' actions. An intersectional wand signifies well-rounded problem-solving strategies while keeping in mind the diversity of persons and circumstances within systems. Bearing in mind that no one must be left behind, agentic persons in the academia are constant users of the intersectional wand.

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While researchscape have kept its problem-solving nature, intersectional thinking has opened new areas of concern for which any leadership can be recognised as inclusive. Nigeria has witnessed significant representation of women at top university management levels. Since Prof Grace Alele-Williams who was first female Vice-Chancellor in Nigeria (1985), over 30 women have also been appointed as Vice-Chancellors across the country. Also significant are the women Deputy Vice-Chancellors and University Librarians. Although, this figure is low compared to their male counterparts, Omotoso (**2020b: 81**) acknowledges 'structured interventions developed to encourage more women to enter leadership positions in universities'. Importantly, women's resilience in deploying their agencies have paved way for the progressive success recorded. Again, that these agentic moves are mostly not in solidarity slows down the pace of achieving the desired space making goals. Yet, it is dangerous to ignore possibilities that intersectional wands are held and used, not only by women but also by other structures and systems of the academe, and their actions or inaction affects the campus ecosystem. When intersectional wand is held by male-centric administration, gender may be downplayed for other constituents to thrive.

Also, when women who do not have gender agenda are in leadership, other categories of the intersections may take precedence over gender. This is seen in some women leaders in researchscape who describe themselves as feminine and not feminist. It begs the question- what would a gender mainstreamed researchscape offer to Nigerian education or to any educational system at all? This is examined in the next section under detrimental agency.

Can Agency in Intersectional Thinking be Detrimental?

Studies have questioned the multifacetedness of agency (**Hays, 1994**), having recognised how women's agency is 'differently …exercised in various socio-political contexts' (**Eduards, 1994: 182**). They decry how agency is often embedded in social structures (**Giddens, 2008**); how social structures, institutions, cultures, and groups undermine women's agency (**Collins, 2008**); and how agentic women are autonomous yet subverted (**Davis, 1991**). Intersectionality is widely understood as a framework used to spotlight hidden oppressions. Howbeit, beyond acting as a pointer to multiple oppression, does intersectionality help in unravelling the puzzle it has found? Such an analysis foregrounds problematic outcomes that may arise with the adoption of an intersectional approach in academia. On this, McCall, (**2005: 1772**) expresses that 'intersectionality has introduced new methodological problems and, partly as an unintended consequence'.

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A situation wherein what is supposed to be a measure of strength becomes weaponised to promote weakness and foster oppression has been described by Omotoso & Ogbebor as 'detrimental agency' (**2023**). Detrimental agency depicts 'the trivialization of women's resilience, an undermining of women's voice and autonomy, and its upturn into an instrument of subversion' (**Omotoso & Akanni, 2024: 130**). Oftentimes, the agentic woman, variously described as the 'empowered' (**Dosekun, 2023**), 'upwardly mobile' (**Gqola, 2016**), and 'hairy' (**Omotoso, 2020c**) become a victim of detrimental agency as 'her very empowerment becomes the putative sign that she might be morally disreputable' (**Dosekun, 2023: 1438**) resulting in new forms of delegitimation. For instance, having a supportive family background could be considered a positive attribute that could aid a woman to progress in her career and add strength to her academic productivity. Nonetheless, her agency at the family level could become detrimental perhaps, if she is considered for a promotion or a grant, and the grantmakers decide that she does not deserve institutional support since she has a supportive family structure. What leads to detrimental agency in most contexts are qualities and attributes which could have qualified a person, but weaponised by systems to discredit or disqualify women. Here lies the intersectionality of detrimental agency itself. When women wield their intersectional wand, they may be accused of promoting pro-feminist policies and subverting men in the system. Alternatively, patriarchal decision-makers could choose to capitalise on a woman's seemingly flourishing career to create artificial obstacles at the institutional level. In another example, a female academic staff should be entitled to all benefits offered by the university and pertaining to her status (this is agency), however, her agency becomes detrimental when she is denied access to housing allowance because her spouse works within the same system who already has access to the benefits. While these examples serve only hypothetical, they highlight how agency depends on the cultural nuances and norms of a given site and socio-economic contexts consequently becoming disadvantageous.

Crenshaw proceed to spotlight 'intersectional subordination', which showcases how 'the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities…create yet another dimension of disempowerment' (**1991: 1249**). For example, a woman may be denied headship of her department on grounds of i) being a foreigner married to a Nigerian, ii) being at child-rearing stage, iii) having a spouse who is from a minority ethnic group iv) living with disability. It is possible for a woman to combine some or all these vulnerabilities. When for example, being the only woman in a department interacts with disability and being at child-rearing stage, new dimensions of disempowerment are created. This case showcases intersections of gender, race and class.

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While Crenshaw's intersectional subordination is about how various vulnerabilities reinforce each other, detrimental agency emphasises not on vulnerabilities, but on agency- how the voice, autonomy, and resilience built by women turn around and becomes an instrument of subversion in the hands of oppressors. This places detrimental agency at a converse to intersectional subordination. In intersectional thinking, detrimental agency is characterised by its capacity to show how a person's food is another person's poison; how strength in one context can become weakness in another; and how roleplays and role reversals impact on the lives and livelihoods of women and men across spaces. Just as Fraser calls for 'a coherent, integrated, balanced conception of agency, ...that can accommodate both the power of social constraints and the capacity to act situated against them' (**Fraser 1992: 17**), detrimental agency may be addressed by offering critical analytic platforms to identify it and determine how a person's combination of attributes are in due course understood, evaluated and galvanised. Ultimately, the perpetuation of detrimental agency in intersectional thinking rests largely with the person(s) handling and wielding the 'intersectional wand'; it ensues when agency is weaponised to render women vulnerable.

Emerging Issues in Intersectional Discourses from Nigeria

Having established that intersectional thinking may be marred by detrimental agency, the Nigerian researchscape provides a tangible platform to observe how stakeholders use their intersectional wands. Suffice it to say that anyone who displays a level of awareness of the existence of intersections has an intersectional wand that serves to identify and point out unobserved or overlooked intersections in the forms of strengths and weaknesses, agencies, and subversions. This same may be wielded for either beneficial or damaging ends. The use of an intersectional wand depends largely on positionality and reflexivity.

Positionality traditionally describes a methodology that requires researchers to identify their degree of privilege through factors of race, class, educational attainment, income, ability, gender, and citizenship among others (**Duarte, 2017**). It affords people the opportunity to consider their origins, ideologies, 'epistemological assumptions (an individual's beliefs about the nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature and agency (individual's assumptions about the way we interact with our environment and relate to it)' (**Holmes, 2020: 1-2**). Positionality suggests a consciousness that researchers' bias may creep into studies, in administration personal ideals and experiences may foster bigotry and redtapism. Positionality may then become complacent when the recognition of one's degree of privilege, (or in some cases the lack of it) becomes a tool for fostering the oppression of others. It is possible that

intersectional thinking within academia can create an environment in which complacent positionality proliferates. For instance, complacent positionality of the oppressor could occur when someone in the dominant group deliberately retains an idea and continues with existent discriminatory patterns even amidst resistance. The dominant group may occasionally make small accommodations such as hiring from the minority group, not to create any systemic change, but rather to appease or pander to the oppressed and shut down further protests. This occurrence affirms tokenism (**Omotoso & Akanni, 2024**), since, amid any protests for representation, the dominant group can point to the token minority member on the team or concession, as evidence of the institution's progressiveness despite remaining unwaveringly loyal to existing power dynamics. Complacent positionality can also reveal itself within the oppressed group, - a person in the minority group, who uses the assurance of intersectional consideration to retain personal gain while discountenancing the need to end specific forms of oppression is using their intersectional wand in detrimental contexts. As an example, the sole woman in an academic department could refuse to engage in efforts to tackle systemic oppression by failing to mentor and bring in more women. She may leverage her minority status for her gain and use it to retain herself as the only woman in the department.

Thus, complacent positionality enables haphazard use of an intersectional wand. Possible outcomes of haphazard use of intersectional wand are as follows:

- it could afford researchers the luxury of robust fieldwork which would only result in inconsequential conclusions for their study population. This is exemplified in instances where university selects a community as an outreach zone where data is gathered but no significant impact of the research conducted can be seen in such communities.

- It could be used to entrench dominant, yet unfamiliar research methods across faculties of an institution. In response to multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, there is a possibility of an imposition of certain research methodologies, particularly on graduate students as perpetuated by a dominant class in university leadership. Intersectional thinking in research should afford a recognition of, and regard for multiple research methodologies, giving room for faculties to compare notes, to widen their methodological horizons and thrive.

- It could, by feigning inclusion perpetuate a certain class, gender, ethnic and religious group at the expense of others. This situation may be likened to how, in mainstreaming gender, women in higher education leadership are often trapped in role and spaces (**Omotoso, 2020b**)

These all point at how detrimental agency as failure to critically address intersections in researchscape does not produce expected results of sustainable development. With just a few of many possible scenarios, the intersectional wand is a requirement for the researchscape, but it must be wielded without complacent positionality if it will address incessant policy somersaults and other forms of oppression in higher education.

Conclusion

The study began with an appreciation of intersectionality as a concept, theory, and framework which have succeeded in spotlighting multiple layers of oppression across spaces in the last few decades. Using Nigeria's researchscape as an example, evidence was drawn to show how intersectional thinking could work across sectors of higher education such as admissions, appointment and promotion, research, mentoring, and so on. It calls for researchers to ask who is included or excluded in social research and to consider how findings are affected by this oversight. Regarding methodology, intersectional approach was examined to prompt deeper scrutiny of the researchscape. We also established how agency is under-emphasised in intersectionality and how agency could become detrimental in intersectional thinking.

The concepts of detrimental agency and complacent positionality further call for reflections concerning the effect that an intersectional approach has on study populations and the entire researchscape. Namely, does adopting intersectional approaches merely empower a few while retaining existing power structures or does it produce structural change? So too does this analysis prompt the researcher to consider who holds the 'intersectional wand' or decision-making authority to determine how certain identity markers are perceived and how social change would be achieved.

Notwithstanding, as intersectionality continues to aid in revealing hidden oppressions, attempts to appraise its impacts and envisage inclusive thinking and actions within academia emphasise an urgent need for critical diversity literacy aimed at the transformation of societies as led by academia. Ultimately, as shown through the above discussions, intersectionality serves to establish that 'there are several routes to the market square' and research cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' endeavor. How laudable intersectional thinking would be in a system depends largely on

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who wields the intersectional wand and how well intersectional analyses lead to action research and the desired change.

Acknowledgements

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What Does It Mean to Explain? An interdisciplinary symposium report

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Abstract

We summarise and reflect on the symposium 'Let me explain: Reason-giving across disciplines', held at the University of Warwick's Institute of Advanced Study in June 2024. The event brought together scholars from four faculties to discuss the concept of explanation and its relationship to interdisciplinarity. We pick out four questions that participants found especially stimulating: Is a good explanation really more than a good description? How does agency change the structure of explanations? Who explains to whom? And what does interdisciplinarity mean for the practice of explaining? We end by highlighting the refreshingly disruptive potential of genuinely interdisciplinary forums of knowledge-exchange.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity; explanation; research communication; research culture; AI

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Introduction

We all do it. Biologists do it, lawyers do it, art historians do it, even philosophers do it (on a good day). No matter their field of research, academics *explain* stuff. The question *Why?* is the prime mover of scholarly activity, and explanations are what follows from this impetus.

Yet do we all do *the same* when we provide explanations? Explanations are sometimes taken to be statements that render a phenomenon understandable by providing the correct reasons for why something happened, or why someone acted in a certain way, or why the things are as they are. But disciplines often have their own ideas about which kinds of reasons can perform this function, how they must be presented, and what phenomena are capable of being understood. One academic's elucidation is another's obfuscation. We all explain, but what we mean by an explanation is itself in need of one.

Against this background, the University of Warwick's Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) hosted a symposium titled 'Let me explain: Reason-giving across disciplines' on 10 June 2024.[i] The event, organised by Simon Gansinger (who also co-authored this paper), brought together scholars from Warwick's four faculties who were asked to explore the assumptions of their explanatory practices and to identify opportunities and potential challenges for inter- and transdisciplinary explanations. The symposium began with a panel on 'Explaining *explaining*: On the meaning of asking *Why*', chaired by Manuela Marai (Department of Classics and Ancient History), followed by a panel on 'Explanatory paradigms in interdisciplinary settings: Challenges and opportunities', chaired by Joana Almeida (Centre for Applied Linguistics). In the final segment of the event, members of the audience were invited to join presenters for a concluding plenary discussion.

In this report, we first summarise each presentation. We then highlight four themes that discussants kept returning to throughout the event: the conceptual proximity between explaining and describing; the problem when and how to account for agency in explanations; the role of power in the context of reason-giving; and pragmatic differences across disciplines in communicating explanations. We conclude with some thoughts on the need to develop paradigms and practices that facilitate the generation, transmission, and application of genuinely interdisciplinary explanations.[ii]

The Symposium

In his talk 'Explanation and causation: Some ongoing problems in biology', Andrew Cooper (Department of Philosophy) discussed the notion of explanation in relation to causation. Teasing out the philosophical aspects

of biological enquiries, Cooper used the halteres of dipterans – secondary wings that do not generate lift for flight – to illustrate changing approaches to *Why*-questions. Why do halteres exist?

Cooper introduced Aristotle's four causes or explanations (i.e., the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final) to analyse the explanatory approaches of modern philosophers and scientists. For example, Newtonian physics refers to natural laws to explain the make-up and motions of the natural world. However, it can only describe *what functions* halteres play – it cannot illuminate *why* halteres are the way they are.

To answer this question, later theories of biological evolution invoke the process of natural selection. However, Cooper suggested, these explanatory attempts also do not sufficiently address the *Why*-question but are, once again, directed at *What*- and *How*-questions. What is left out of the picture is Aristotle's 'final cause', that is, the reason for which something is done or takes place – yet exploration of this final cause is necessary if we take *Why*-questions seriously. Cooper concluded by highlighting a recent attempt in biological research that reintroduces teleological explanations by recognising the agency of organisms in shaping their environment and adapting themselves to it.

The next panellist, Steve Fuller (Department of Sociology), discussed how the idea of explaining, as well as its relationship to describing, has changed over time. In a presentation on 'Overdetermining and underdetermining explanations', he first compared Aristotle's view to the modern approach. Whereas Aristotle endorses 'a patchwork conception of the world', according to which different things have distinct essences and hence are not subject to a single overarching explanation, modern science aims at universal laws that can explain as much as possible. However, whether science has the authority to explain was at times a delicate question. In the 17th century, attempts to probe into the laws of the natural world were associated with speculating about 'the mind of God'. While some scientists, such as Isaac Newton, diplomatically claimed to do no more than to describe God's creation rather than to explain it, others, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, contended that even descriptive science aims to understand God's all-good, all-powerful essence. In the 19th century, the relation between description and explanation changed again. As private enterprises challenged the academic monopoly on the production of knowledge – think of the industrial revolution – universities strove to defend their institutional prerogatives by re-defining the purpose of scientific enquiry: they do not simply offer descriptions, practical solutions, or technological innovation – they offer *explanations*, epistemic tools that help us navigate the present and guide future research.

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Fuller suggested that this institutional shift occupies the social sciences to this day. Should human behaviour be subject to explanatory research or should we be content with describing or understanding the complexity of the social world? Some scholars argue for a 'final cause' in human history, with history moving towards a pre-determined end. Others contend that history is completely open-ended and could go in any direction at any point. Fuller proposed a third option: although history may have a default path, human actions taken at critical moments can change its course dramatically. Research plays an important part in identifying, utilising, and explaining these moments.

Adela Glyn-Davies (School for Cross-faculty Studies) kicked off the second panel with a presentation on 'Designing / Making / Meaning', in which she investigated how her own field, design studies, is driven beyond disciplinary preconceptions by the very nature of its subject matter. Glyn-Davies began by noting that the 'process of designing is a process of sense-making': whatever is designed must make sense to both the designer and the users. But the meaning of artefacts, spaces, or programmes changes across time and people. 'Since design is never finished', Glyn-Davies cautioned, 'it's never done understanding'. For both the researcher and the practitioner of design, it is critical to understand not just which needs the product responds to, but also how it can make itself available for new purposes.

Methodologically, Glyn-Davies argued, such an endeavour is inherently pluralist. Rather than fixating on isolated problems, good designers are, first and foremost, informed by a holistic view. 'Systems-thinking understands that everything around it is interconnected', she emphasised and highlighted some parallels between designing and explaining: 'If we dig deeper why a symptom comes up in a system, we're also getting a much better understanding of causation.'

Matt Spencer (Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies) shifted the focus from practices of understanding to explanations-as-objects. In a talk titled 'Security vulnerabilities and the efficacy of explanations (in the wrong hands)', he asked: Why wouldn't we think of cyber security vulnerabilities as 'bundles of explanatory knowledge'? Spencer elaborated on this proposal with reference to a vulnerability called Rowhammer, which corrupts computer memory as a result of high-volume repeated accesses being made to memory cells in RAM. Put simply, 'Rowhammer' is the name we give to a collection of information about a specific type of manipulation that can be applied to computer systems. On an interventionist account, this is also what explanations do: they provide information on 'how things work', information that generates the capacity for purposeful manipulation.

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Does this mean that Rowhammer *explains* the memory system that it targets? Spencer wanted to resist this conclusion. Rowhammer is better understood as a bundle of provisional and evolving explanatory knowledge, which researchers, cyber security professionals, chip designers, and electronic engineers can draw on to understand how systems they care about may be vulnerable to illicit tampering or subversion. Explanatory knowledge of this kind links up multiple spheres of practice which share a concern in the possible manipulation of digital technology, thereby helping them define, understand, and defuse the risks that computer systems are exposed to.

The panel ended with Carla Toro's (Medical School) exploration of interdisciplinarity in mental health research ('When is mental health unhealthful?'). Toro, a long-term researcher of schizophrenia, shared that she started her academic career from the biomedical model of mental health, which views psychological disorders primarily as biological diseases which conventionally require pharmacological interventions. Only later, when she joined Warwick, did she work together with social psychiatrists, who stress the psychological impact of social connections and are consequently less focused on medication as a first line of treatment.

Toro argued that the encounter with new paradigms of mental health was not just valuable to herself, as a researcher. A holistic notion of mental disease is crucial to clinicians as well, since patients can benefit from a diverse range of interventions, some of which might go beyond the biomedical model. By reflecting on her own journey towards an interdisciplinary understanding of schizophrenia, Toro illustrated the epistemic and practical barriers to scholarship that aims to be open-minded in its choice of paradigms, as well as the potential that such scholarship holds.

Four Questions

While each presenter considered the overarching question of the symposium – What do we do when we explain? – from a different angle, shared observations quickly emerged. Across both panels, discussants noted that social factors influence which phenomena we take to be worthy of illuminating, that explanations often travel with difficulty from one discipline to another, and that it is important to think outside of one's academic box in order to generate novel solutions and fruitful puzzles for further research. This critical piece explores four questions that audience members picked up on in the Q&A sessions and that continued to occupy the workshop participants.

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Is a good explanation really more than a good description?

First, and as already indicated, the discussion returned repeatedly to the relation between descriptions and explanations. Descriptions carry no ambition to disclose causalities. They are epistemically *flat*, providing a fuller picture of an object without looking into the 'Wherefrom' and the 'Wherefore' (that is, as Cooper discussed, Aristotle's efficient and final causes). On the face of it, explanations are epistemically *deep*, in that they dig into the hidden origins of a phenomenon, for example, by giving a justification for why something happened instead of merely offering more details of the event.

The longer we look at it, though, the less clear it becomes how to draw the boundary between flat, descriptive accounts and explanations. Sometimes, we lack understanding not because we are in the dark about the causal structure of the world but because we only have a partial view of the matter. Imagine looking at, for the first time, a tiny portion of Pieter Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*. You want to understand what is going on ('Why is this man climbing a ladder?'). But to understand, you first need to see the whole painting, or have it described to you. By adding complexity and context, descriptions can perform the kind of meaning-making functions that we conventionally associate with explanations.

Arguably, this indicates that explanations and descriptions cannot be separated *ontologically*, that is, with respect to their context-independent nature, but only by looking at their function in acts of reason-giving. An explanation responds to an explicit request or a perceived need for clarification. Depending on what exactly is requested, descriptions can fulfil this function. Even more than that, the same statement – e.g., 'They are building the Tower of Babel' – can be explanatorily innocuous at first and later attain explanatory significance ('Oh, now I get it – they are building *the Tower of Babel*!'). If this is true, then the boundary between explanatory and non-explanatory statements is pragmatically defined: it comes down to whether it allows us to make sense of a phenomenon that we did not understand before.

How does agency change the structure of explanations?

A second theme that occupied participants throughout the day concerns the role of agency in explanations. To illustrate, consider the following: Which kinds of facts do you need to include in your explanation to answer a question like 'Why did Helene destroy Anna's car?' It all depends on what kind of entity 'Helene' refers to. If Helene is a person, we will typically want to know the facts in the light of which she acted. Did she destroy Anna's car intentionally? If she did, what was on her mind? Did Anna do something to her that could justify such an action? In short, our

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explanation will draw on the reasons that Helene had when she performed the action.

However, Helene might not be a person but a tropical cyclone, in which case it will be wholly inappropriate to explain Anna's misfortune as the result of an action. Before we get into the business of explaining, we need to establish whether our *explanandum* involves agency or not. If it doesn't, we can't (and we shouldn't) put ourselves into anyone's shoes to understand what happened. All we need is sufficient clarity about the relevant causal factors: the force of the storm over North Carolina, the net weight of a Ford F-150, Anna's ill-fated decision to park it on the riverside, et cetera.

Sometimes, however, this pre-explanatory challenge – Are we looking at an action or at 'stuff' simply happening? – is tricky to settle. Participants were especially vexed by the problem of what to make of ever-more sophisticated AI-models, whose behaviour is often unpredictable even for their developers. In the discussion, a cautious consensus developed that this might best be understood as a normative question: How ought we to relate to AI? Ought we to deny that computers act for reasons? Ought we to reserve the dignity of agency to humans? Here, explanatory puzzles intersect with broader philosophical ones.

Who explains to whom?

In the Q&A, a participant raised the following issue: 'Is the idea of explanation useful when we enquire into social lives? [...] "Let me explain" [the title of the event] suggests that I am capable of giving an explanation to someone else' – and that that other person better listen up! Now, should academic researchers, a group of people not exactly representative of society at large, explain to the non-academic public what the world is like? In other words, who explains what to whom with which authority?

It is tempting to give in to a sceptical attitude towards academic explanations that is itself reflective of a postmodern turn in some academic disciplines. Traditionally, university researchers are seen as authoritative knowledge producers and the public as passive consumers. In contrast, in the postmodern condition, there is a rejection of 'meta-narratives' or 'grand narratives' that claim to offer universal truth, objective knowledge, and all-encompassing explanations about individuals and society.

On the one hand, a good measure of doubt towards explanatory authority, especially one's own, is certainly valuable. Researchers would do well to be sensitive to epistemic injustices caused by uncritical explanatory practices. For example, unexamined power-differentials can lead to social scientists adopting a patronising stance towards the people that might

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benefit from their research. On the other hand, as a rhetorical gesture of protest, 'Who explains to whom?' can become the vehicle for a dismissive attitude towards truth-seeking in general. More productively, the question should inspire us to investigate how one formulates and negotiates meaning in processes of explanation. For instance, what do I mean by explaining? How do I explain? How do I position myself and my audience in the explanatory narrative I offer? How do I relate to other perspectives and how do I deal with alternative or conflicting explanations and their underlying worldviews? How do I engage with other views while presenting my own perspective? Whom am I addressing? What do I assume about my audience?

By asking these practical questions, researchers can engage with the idea of explanation in a more nuanced way, using it thoughtfully and reflectively to navigate the complexities of their work. Rather than abstract entities in the heaven of knowledge, explanations are communicative acts among flesh-and-blood beings, all with their own interests, needs, insights, and biases, and they should be treated as such.

What does interdisciplinarity mean for the practice of explaining?

Throughout the symposium, two forms of interdisciplinarity were on display. The first involves engaging with and integrating multiple disciplinary perspectives or paradigms within one's research project. The second concerns interdisciplinary communication, namely, relating and explaining one's own research to audiences with other disciplinary backgrounds.

Interdisciplinarity-as-plurality-of-perspectives has for some time received significant attention within the academic community. In contrast, interdisciplinarity-as-communicative-practice is much less discussed and theorised, even though many research events, such as this symposium, foster conversations across disciplinary divides. Crucially, though, at events like these, we can observe much more than the exchange of specialised knowledge. All participants, including organisers, speakers, and audiences, bring with them specific assumptions about how to transmit knowledge, which they have developed by getting socialised into their respective institutional cultures. For instance, two people from different departments might have vastly different ideas regarding the modality of one's presentation, the genres of one's speech, communicative purposes, linguistic resources, the forms of events, appropriate activities at events, and the rules around face-to-face interactions, Q&A sessions, and group discussions. These culturally shaped assumptions and practices in turn shape the processes and outcomes of knowledge exchange. As a result, what may appear accessible and normal to some people may be alienating and excluding to others.

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The five speakers at this symposium opted for different formats, including presentation slides, spontaneous oral speech, oral speech based on prepared bullet points, and delivering a prepared text. Group discussions at the end of the symposium revealed heterogeneous reactions to these presentational styles: some showed a strong preference for slides, finding pure oral talks difficult to follow; some were shocked by the practice of reading out a written text; some found the spontaneous delivery of thoughts engaging and impressive. Arguably, both the speakers' choices and those audience reactions expressed their assumptions about what constitutes a 'normal' academic presentation and how a research exchange event 'normally' looks like. Even the very choice of a symposium as a forum for academic exchange reflects the research culture of its organiser. Most *inter*disciplinary communication relies on pre-established forms of *intra*disciplinary communication. However, if interdisciplinary communication is to negotiate and transcend the established boundaries between disciplines, then shouldn't we also negotiate and eventually transcend the very forms in which we communicate and exchange knowledge?

Concluding Remarks

This final theme connects to what we took to be the central takeaway from the symposium, which concerns the power of interdisciplinarity to disrupt paradigms and challenge institutionalised patterns of thought and speech. Research cultures are difficult to break into and even more difficult to break out of. As students, researchers learn how to explain effectively; and as teachers and writers, they pass on what they have learnt. Disciplines can be thought of as giant cycles of reason-giving that keep turning in virtue of the continuous momentum of repetition.

Being an academic researcher requires us to prove – to university administrators, funding bodies, hiring committees, publishers, colleagues, and students – that we can do our bit to keep the spinning top afloat; that we know what to say, how to say it, and what the point of saying it is. Against the background of this demand, it takes strength to pause and reflect on the academic customs that have become second nature to us. It is an effort that is repaid not in citation numbers but in understanding. By decentring from the explanatory traditions we participate in, we gain insight into the paradigms that influence our research, language, and professional identity; and we may be enabled to revise, for the better, our practices of reason-giving.

Interdisciplinarity may or may not be valuable for its potential to improve the impact of research – it all depends on our stance towards a given research paradigm. However, a more profound value lies in the counter-paradigmatic, centrifugal force freed by interdisciplinary encounters: in its

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ability to unsettle established networks of knowledge, by challenging our habits of sense-making, so that we may make place for the sense of wonder that made many of us ask *Why?* in the first place.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

[i] https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/researchandnetworks/calendar/upcomingevents/symposium/ [Accessed: 17 March 2025].

[ii] The literature on what it means to explain fills entire libraries. For a selection of consequential publications, see (**Achinstein 1977; Alvarez 2010; Dancy 2000; Friedman 1974; Hempel and Oppenheim 1948; Kearns and Star 2008; Mittelstadt, Russell, and Wachter 2019; Nozick 1983; Pearl 2009; Turner 2010; Woodward 2003**).

The Labour of Thought: Reflections on interdisciplinarity in practice

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Abstract

In this reflective article we explore interdisciplinarity in practice. We begin from the position that interdisciplinary work provides great potential and acknowledge that it has become increasingly visible in discussions on the role that research can play to answer complex questions. By definition, interdisciplinarity transcends academic silos and enriches knowledge by integrating frameworks, methods and approaches across diverse disciplines. However, as our reflections identify, interdisciplinary can be a complicated, complex endeavour that requires careful thought. For instance, it is a non-trivial endeavour to find a common language, build coherent teams or gain a shared understanding of research problems - all of which is required for truly interdisciplinary work. It is important, therefore, to understand the labour of thought involved in conducting interdisciplinary work and achieving effective interdisciplinary collaboration. This article brings together the reflections of six early career researchers from a diverse range of disciplines. In this article we explore both the theoretical challenges and opportunities of interdisciplinary research, as well as the practical application of this work. The impetus for this work comes from a British Academy Early Career Researcher Network event in September 2024 where we discussed the relevance of interdisciplinary research to ECRs.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary research; research culture; research methods; collaboration

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Introduction

Interdisciplinarity is often touted by academic and policy leaders as the future of research in a complex and interconnected world (**Woolf, 2017; Thompson, 2022; Baty, 2023**). Working across narrow disciplinary perspectives and methodologies is seen as a necessary practice for progress on global challenges such as achieving net zero (**Patterson et al., 2023**) and navigating the growth of artificial intelligence (**Lim and Chase, 2023**). When done successfully, interdisciplinary research often has greater impact (**Hu et al., 2024**) and leads to better long-term funding success for researchers (**Sun et al., 2021**). However, making this work successful, and enabling interdisciplinary researchers to thrive in competitive environments, remains largely an individual endeavour with little sense of shared practice or clear recognition for interdisciplinary work.

Interdisciplinary research is high risk, high reward (**Leahey, 2018**). The net zero concept illustrates this aptly. Achieving net zero involves much more than technical or engineering solutions; it also requires insight from public policy, economics, behavioural sciences and beyond. Integrating methods, approaches, definitions and frameworks together across these disciplinary areas is a non-trivial coordination challenge. There is a real risk that things do not work out well. Yet the potential rewards are substantial: integrating diverse perspectives proffers more comprehensive solutions and strategies—spanning emissions reduction, sustainable technology development, social acceptance and facilitative policy measures. With growing numbers of early-career researchers adopting interdisciplinary approaches to tackle major challenges, a clearer understanding of how to support and encourage interdisciplinary working is needed to sustain an effective and inclusive research sector.

Practising interdisciplinarity in research—breaking down the walls of academic silos and bridging between different frameworks of knowledge and ways of working—is a subtle art, and a significant labour. This article engages with the *labour of interdisciplinarity*: the wider work of research, collaboration, communication, funding, and impact required to bring interdisciplinary change into the world. Interdisciplinary work takes *time*, to think, to learn, and to bring to fruition. It takes *resources* to fund research teams that bridge multiple disciplinary epistemologies and skill sets. It takes significant *collaboration*, including developing, managing, and maintaining the relationships with other researchers and non-academic partners that so often characterise interdisciplinary research. And because of these, interdisciplinarity is structurally *vulnerable*: expertise and authorship are often distributed, making credit and reward more difficult to assign; research time is often longer and may be seen as less productive;

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conflicts and contradictions in working across disciplinary epistemologies may create interpersonal tension and interact with disciplinary power dynamics; and research value is constantly questioned in research systems built on disciplinary foundations. These characteristics have specific impacts on early-career researchers, who are often in precarious employment or struggling to progress and are held to discipline-based standards on short timeframes (**Andrews et al., 2020**). These challenges are further complicated by competing perceptions of the value of STEM disciplines compared to social sciences and humanities in research and education (**Olmos-Peñuela et al., 2014; British Academy, 2020**).

This article presents practice-based reflections from six interdisciplinary researchers on what makes interdisciplinary work well in practice. Our reflections on this fundamental question provide a starting point for engaging with substantive aspects of shaping future interdisciplinary practice and building shared understanding in response to key challenges such as:

- How do we leverage the tensions, risks, and contestations inherent in interdisciplinary work as valuable assets, enabling us to challenge disciplinary norms and surface new insights and high-impact questions?

- In a moment of negotiating the metricisation of interdisciplinary labour (**Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel, 2022**), how do we make interdisciplinary labour more sustainable and support interdisciplinary researchers to succeed?

We build on discussions begun at the British Academy Early Career Researchers' Network 'Collaboration of the Faculties' event on interdisciplinarity in September 2024.[i] This article is intended to serve as a catalyst for further discussion around how we work effectively across disciplines, how we understand interdisciplinarity as a term and how we ensure equitable and transparent working when collaborating.

Interdisciplinary labour often involves both maintaining diverse, or even conflicting, perspectives on the same questions while also bringing together a coherent voice that draws on all contributing views. We make this tensioning process tangible in this article using the process of collective writing, designed to bring together multiple voices and perspectives engaged in the 'continuous struggle for meaning-making' (**Jandrić et al., 2023**). Each author contributed an individual reflection on the shared theme of the experience of interdisciplinary work, which are included and individually credited in the following section. We then engaged in a collective reading of all reflections and collaboratively authored the introduction and concluding reflections of this article with a

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shared voice. This created a 'diffractive writing' process (**Jarke & Bates, 2024**) that materialised in the text of this article the harmonies and tensions between authors and makes tangible the multiplicity of collaboration. Our process, and the disciplinary and interdisciplinary tensions reflected shaping the article as a coherent whole, forms a clear illustration of the need for building shared understanding of the nature of interdisciplinary work and the individual and collective labours required for its production.

Reflections

Engaging interdisciplinarity

We first feature three reflections on different aspects of labour involved in interdisciplinary work: navigating what interdisciplinarity means in practice; the challenge (and opportunity) of multiplicity inherent in interdisciplinary research; and the process of constant translation faced by interdisciplinary research and researchers.

Interdisciplinary research: one paradox and a three-level opportunity-challenge mix: Abiodun Egbetokuen

Interdisciplinary research, that is, working across disciplines, sits at the crossroads of academic ideals and practical challenges. Major research stakeholders, including universities, funders, and policymakers, generally praise interdisciplinarity. They sometimes create incentives for it through special funding programmes such as the British Academy's International Interdisciplinary Research Projects Scheme which aims 'to develop new international interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences.' (**British Academy, 2024**)

Paradoxically, interdisciplinarity is sometimes penalised in academic recruitment, promotion, and appointment decisions. For instance, tenure committees sometimes favour narrow specialisation. This paradox suggests that interdisciplinarity is a multi-level construct, one that must be understood and nurtured at all its levels because progress on one level does not necessarily suggest all-round progress.

The challenges and opportunities of interdisciplinarity are best understood by looking at it on the three core levels at which it typically takes place.

The first level is problem definition. Research activity can be deemed as interdisciplinary if it addresses a problem that transcends disciplinary boundaries, for instance, climate change, gender equality and digital transformation, among others. However, researchers frequently frame issues through the biases of their own disciplines, which can limit the scope of what interdisciplinary collaboration might achieve. Moreover, power imbalances between disciplines often shape how problems are

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framed. Dominant fields may unintentionally (or intentionally) steer the problem definition toward their own priorities. For example, in climate change research, natural sciences often overshadow social sciences in framing 'solutions', even though human behaviour is central.

On its second level, interdisciplinarity is about the methodological approach to solving problems. Research is interdisciplinary if it deploys methods and approaches from different disciplinary areas. Yet, true interdisciplinarity goes beyond simply gathering diverse methods. It requires deliberate integration of the different methods to bring depth and a nuanced approach to problem solving.

On the third level, interdisciplinary collaboration affords a broader range of possible outputs and outcomes than a single discipline. From conventional academic papers to innovative, media-based products that speak to a broader audience. But reaping these benefits is not easy because communication within interdisciplinary teams is sometimes difficult. Different disciplines bring unique languages and assumptions about the expected outputs and outcomes of collaboration, which can make conversations challenging. Power relations further complicate this process. Disciplines with higher institutional prestige or funding leverage may dominate decisions about outputs such that they inadvertently prioritise formats familiar to their field (e.g., journal articles over community workshops).

Ultimately, success in interdisciplinary work requires intentional, strategic planning and communication on these three levels. I know this first-hand because I have degrees across three different disciplines: engineering, management, and economics. In my personal experience as a researcher, I have found that operationalising interdisciplinarity is a non-trivial task, even for the most experienced. As it turns out, most of the difficulties stem from ignoring the nuances or failing to acknowledge that interdisciplinarity is a continuum rather than a discrete phenomenon. As a thought experiment, the reader is invited to decide which of the following is truly interdisciplinary:

- a project that integrates methods from different disciplines but focuses on narrowly defined research problems.

- a research team made up of colleagues from closely related disciplines but that addresses a complex problem requiring insight from multiple disciplines.

Perspectives will vary regarding the examples, and this draws attention to the fact that there is no one-size-fits all approach to interdisciplinary research. Yet, true interdisciplinarity needs to be clear on how it matches the three core levels described above. A tree is a helpful imagery for this

purpose. Shared understanding of research problems would be the roots that support the trunk of interdisciplinary methods which ultimately lead to branches, leaves, fruits and flowers of diverse outputs and outcomes. A healthy tree requires all the different parts.

In(ter)disciplining: Ed McKeon

Interdisciplinarity is a verb disguised as a noun. Necessarily lacking adequate definition, it is better considered in terms of collaborative action and performance – or more precisely, as an art and a practice. As everyone involved in the arts knows, generalisation is problematic (starting with the definition of 'art'). It particularises. Interdisciplinarity is not one thing, then, but there are family resemblances in practice. I briefly note three, each arising from a question of motive force.

One can start with problems acknowledged in their complexity, such that no single discipline can provide answers or solutions. These can be 'wicked problems', but more often these approaches address concrete issues, practically, in specific contexts. For example, the *Music, Noise and Silence* project led by the Science Museum gathered together curators, museum professionals, and musicians with specialists in Sound Studies, Cultural History, and Science and Technology Studies to consider ways of exhibiting music and sound technologies and objects (**Boon et al., 2017**). This can be a catalyst for action with variations on cross-, multi-, trans-, and inter-disciplinary practices (depending on personnel, budgets, decision-making structures, etc.,). We begin with the end.

The efficacy of a discipline's boundaries and its capacity to reproduce itself can erode, its methods and knowledge seeping into other domains. It becomes 'impure', in(ter)disciplined. Music would be one example (embracing everything from 'noise' to 'silence'), philosophy – arguably – another. At the Collaboration of the Faculties event, I presented an example of this with my co-author Eun Sun Godwin, considering the ways in which orchestral conductors have been figured as exemplars for corporate leadership. This approach arises with a gap.

Last, in(ter)disciplining can open with a conversation that discovers common interests with different perspectives (like this collective writing on interdisciplinarity). It starts in media res.

No single approach is 'right', but one may be more suitable than another for a given situation. We need to cultivate capacities to recognise these differences and to apply ourselves accordingly.

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Translating interdisciplinary concepts between disciplines: Claire Sedgwick

Interdisciplinary research is often an act of translation where we need to consider the different ways that concepts, methods, and disciplines can be interpreted. Furthermore, when we research interdisciplinarily we are also often engaging with different research cultures, assumptions, and norms. It is important to consider how we translate our research effectively, but also how we recognise and respect the different epistemologies that exist within and between disciplines. This can be challenging- as Urbanksa et al (**2019**) note there is in-group bias especially around the distinction between so-called 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. However, they also note that interdisciplinary work itself increases the appreciation that researchers have for research outside of their own discipline. It is important then, to understand interdisciplinary research as a space of challenges and opportunities.

Whilst interdisciplinary research can play an important role, both in terms of broadening potential solutions to research problems and in enriching the kinds of research problems that are asked in the first place, it is important to consider how we translate our research effectively and equitably to researchers in other disciplines. We need to consider what is gained and what is lost when we step outside of our disciplines and how we can ensure that value complexity is not lost through over-simplification.

My own experience as a researcher is one of interdisciplinarity, although this movement between disciplines has often been accidental rather than intentional. I began my academic career with Bachelors and Masters degrees in English Literature before moving onto a PhD in Feminist Media Studies. Currently I would say I research in Cultural Sociology. Although by no means premeditated, I think these shifts reflect an eclectic attitude towards research. However, as others have reflected, such shifts need careful reflection and explanation, especially when mapping out a research trajectory that does not follow a straight line. Throughout all of these shifts I've needed to learn new disciplinary languages and norms, beginning with the assumption that my fluency in one discipline does not guarantee the same fluency in another. Furthermore, my current role in research impact and engagement means that I spend much of my time working with researchers from disciplines very different from my own and therefore in a constant state of learning new disciplinary knowledge and norms. These disciplines have different cultures and approaches to research. Interdisciplinary research can open up avenues. but also lead to conflict where researchers are coming at the research question from radically different perspectives. Effectively translating ideas across disciplines involves determining shared understandings whilst at the same

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time ensuring that potential conflicts and divergent understandings are not ignored. In this respect, interdisciplinary research can be as much about understanding who you're translating to as it is about the translation itself.

Bridging Theory and Practice: Disability Studies as an Interdisciplinary Imperative: Aikaterini (Katrina) Tavoulari

The intersection of disability studies with other disciplines represents a crucial frontier in academic discourse, demonstrating why interdisciplinary approaches are not merely academically enriching but practically essential. As Davis (**2016**) argues, the field inherently demands multiple perspectives to fully grasp its complexities. Examining disability through multiple lenses (medical, social, cultural, technological, and political) provides a more comprehensive understanding that directly influences real-world outcomes.

Far beyond the binary distinction between impairment and disability that Oliver (**2013**) initially proposed in 1983, contemporary disability theory has evolved into a rich tapestry of intersecting frameworks that challenge fundamental assumptions about human variation, social organisation, and the built environment. While Oliver's social model marked a crucial paradigm shift (**Shakespeare, 2006**), its true significance lies not in the simple impairment-disability dichotomy, but in how it catalysed a profound reconceptualisation of embodiment and social participation.

This theoretical evolution manifests particularly in the dialogue between disability studies and architectural theory. According to Erkiliç (**2011**), Universal Design transcends Mace's original principles, emerging as a radical reimagining of spatial justice that questions the very notion of 'normal' bodies and behaviours. Hamraie (**2017**)'s groundbreaking work reveals how Universal Design, rather than merely accommodating difference, fundamentally challenges the ableist assumptions embedded in modernist architecture and urban planning. Through this lens, accessibility becomes not an afterthought but a critical lens for examining how built environments reproduce or challenge social hierarchies.

The medical humanities have similarly undergone a transformative critique through disability theory. Contemporary patient-centred care models represent not just a procedural shift but a fundamental epistemological challenge to traditional medical authority. By incorporating disability rights perspectives, these frameworks expose how medical knowledge itself is socially constructed and how clinical practices can either perpetuate or disrupt patterns of marginalisation. Recent work of Iezzoni and Agaronnik (**2020**) demonstrates how disability justice frameworks are reshaping the understanding of health equity, moving

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beyond individual accommodation to address systemic barriers and institutional ableism.

These crossroads demonstrate that no single discipline can adequately address the complexities of disability experience. While a medical perspective might focus on individual impairment, what Shakespeare (**2006**) calls the 'medical model', a purely sociological approach might overlook crucial biological realities. As Linton (**2005**) notes, the power of disability studies lies in its ability to integrate multiple perspectives while maintaining a critical stance toward traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The beauty of interdisciplinary work in disability studies lies in its practical applications. When universal design principles merge with urban planning, people create more accessible cities – a point powerfully illustrated in Imrie (2012)'s work on inclusive urban design. When disability theory informs policy making, societies create more inclusive legislation, as seen in the theoretical foundations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (**Scotch, 2002**). Similarly, when medical humanities engage with lived experiences, healthcare delivery improves (**Charon, 2006**).

This theory-practice synthesis is not just academic exercise, but vital for creating meaningful change. Through interdisciplinary dialogue, research societies transform theoretical insights into practical solutions, ensuring that research addresses not just intellectual curiosity but also human needs. Besides, as Kafer (**2013**) argues, the future of disability studies depends on its ability to bridge theoretical frameworks with practical advocacy.

Curating interdisciplinarity work: Una MacGlone

As a researcher investigating music participation, creativity and wellbeing with children who have disabilities, an interdisciplinary approach was required for the following reasons: 1. In Community Music contexts, knowledge and practice in the field often do not fit into one arts discipline neatly. Skilled Community Musicians can operate across musical genres and in more than one arts discipline, for example, by incorporating drama or art with music (**MacGlone, in press**). 2. Overarching aims in community music contexts are not necessarily improvements in musical skills. There may be goals for improving wellbeing; social skills or to develop creativity and agency (**MacDonald et. al., 2012**). When music is the vehicle for developing non-musical goals, an interdisciplinary lens is essential to appreciate processes and outcomes. 3. My research is often with disabled people and people with various health conditions; therefore, participants may have different communication needs and different communication styles. This demands bespoke combinations of methods to capture engagement and communication in and through music.

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My approach is informed by a pragmatic theoretical position, it places value on empirical inquiry, experiential knowledge, and interdisciplinary scholarship – reflecting diverse ways of knowing (**Dewey, 1916/2005**). Through my research I've explored the interdisciplinary interplay between music and psychology, community music, music therapy and improvisation, for example:

Figure 1: Interdisciplinary Interplay – Author's Personal Model
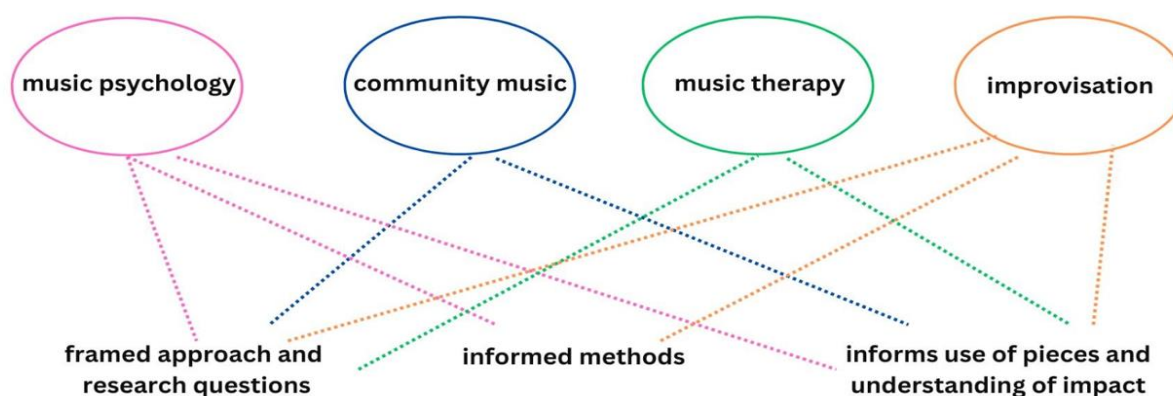
Music Psychology, concerned with human behaviour around in and through music itself contains contrasting paradigms, in qualitative and quantitative approaches. Using mixed methods (an increasingly common approach in examining impact of artistic activities) means that the researcher must reconcile these paradigms and decide for herself how to mix qualitative and quantitative methods – how they are weighted, sequenced and their relationship to each other (**Cresswell & Plano-Clarke, 2018**).

Context is important, for example, working with an inclusive music organisation, required reading Community Music literature. Thinking about wellbeing impacts can usefully be informed by Music Therapy, but there is an issue here; Music Therapy is delivered by a qualified Music Therapist (my practitioners were not therapists but worked towards wellbeing goals). This discipline has expanded however, a sub-discipline of Community Music Therapy is establishing its own literature and practice which can inform group music practices which have health and wellbeing as a main focus (**Stige & Åaro, 2013**).

Improvisation has been written about through the lens of the other three disciplines I mention, but here my creative practice as an improvising musician and educator informed conceptualisations of musical and multimodal communication between practitioners and participants. This brief sketch is a way of describing how, for me, disciplines collided and

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informed each other. Understanding this interdisciplinary narrative is crucial for articulating complexities of my research topic.

Space for Interdisciplinarity

Finally, in the spirit of action on interdisciplinarity, we feature a reflection on interdisciplinary research culture and the need for explicitly interdisciplinary spaces in research, particularly for early career researchers.

Interdisciplinarity and early career research culture: Denis Newman-Griffis

Why do we do interdisciplinary work? Amidst measuring, teaching, and applying interdisciplinary skills, we benefit from pausing to reflect on why and how to support interdisciplinarity.

As Foucault (**1966**) and Latour (**1987**) have memorably illustrated, disciplines are dynamically constructed and constantly reshaped in living research practice. The world, people, and selves we study are poorly contained by discrete disciplinary boxes in the day-to-day: studying new cell biology questions may depend on changing social practices in pesticide use; understanding social media impacts on conception of the self may require computational analysis of thousands of posts. Many early career researchers aim primarily to tackle pressing, cross-cutting challenges in the world; these are typically the outcome of complex systems of interacting factors that actively erase disciplinary bounds. Interdisciplinarity thus has significant strengths and appeal for early career researchers eager to make a difference (**Nissani, 1997**).

Nonetheless, disciplines have material meaning and impact in practice: where one gets a job, discusses research, publishes new work, etc., are all deeply rooted in discipline-based structures. Interdisciplinary work is therefore often disincentivised by academic structures built to favour discipline-based performance measurement and reward, separating researchers and research processes into siloed administrative structures and communications channels (**CASE, 2021**).

Supporting the vital labour of interdisciplinarity therefore requires supporting those who engage in it, especially early career researchers bringing new perspectives despite discipline-based headwinds. Interdisciplinary communities, both formally constituted and informally convened, can help provide this support and exemplify a more inclusive research culture. The authors of this article are members of two such growing communities, the British Academy's Early Career Researcher Network (ECRN) and the UK Young Academy, each materially supporting the growth of early career UK leaders who escape disciplinary bounds.

These communities testify to the wider need for interdisciplinary networks at all levels, from individual institutions to international convenings.

In a moment when many boundaries are being forcefully re-asserted, such spaces are more vital than ever to resist disciplinary balkanisation and connect those who are best equipped to make a difference, regardless of identity or category. Political, academic, and sectoral borders cannot circumscribe learning and action. New transdisciplinary insights and methodologies help to work across not only different disciplines, but different knowers and types of knowledge (**Lawrence et al., 2022**). These wider ways of thinking must actively reshape wider research culture as well as methodology.

Space for interdisciplinarity must be complemented with the knowledge and skills that underpin interdisciplinary work. Spaces such as the ECRN and UK Young Academy address the first step of bringing together interdisciplinary voices around a shared table. We must then collectively address the next step: building shared interdisciplinary practice and craft.

Shaping the labour of interdisciplinarity as something to be measured, valued, and taught is essential to achieving wider research agendas on interdisciplinarity and bringing more interdisciplinary research to real-world impact (**Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel, 2022; Cantone, 2024**). This requires investment from research leaders at all levels, and a willingness to set aside the strictures of disciplinary separation. Investment in interdisciplinarity will grow a stronger base of early career researchers and future research leaders and yield outsized returns in research that responds to the complex problems of today's world.

Meta Reflection

Taken collectively, our reflections are themselves an illustration of the diversity of perspectives, emphases, and challenges involved in the labour of interdisciplinarity. Beginning from a shared theme and shared event, our individual contributions reflect on quite distinct elements of interdisciplinary work: its multi-level conceptualisation; its dynamic and self-challenging practice; the complexity of its communication; its constant and overlapping dialogues; its curation amidst disciplinary collisions; and its relationship to wider research culture. These are tightly interwoven in interdisciplinary practice, yet too often addressed in isolation when working to advance agendas of interdisciplinarity.

Our apparently simple exercise of reflecting individually and collectively on interdisciplinarity thus draws us back to the *labour* of thought, in our title, and as a supplement or corrective to the maieutics or midwifery of thought celebrated in the Socratic tradition. Without labour, no midwifery;

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without midwifery, the perils of unaided birth. Five themes emerge from these short contributions:

Following Abiodun and Aikaterini, interdisciplinarity is nuanced, and it emerges between theory and practice. To bowdlerise Kant, theory without practice may conceive but does not birth; practice without theory imperils the nascent approaches that societies need to deal with change.

Following Una and Claire, interdisciplinarity is contextual. Natality individualises, to paraphrase Arendt: every interdisciplinary problematic is similarly different, not referenced to a norm.

Following Ed and Denis, in(ter)disciplinarity is not singular but has variants - to push the metaphor, birthing thought may equally arrive through Caesarean, test tube, or parturition.

Following Claire, interdisciplinary research has multiple audiences and requires translation. Native tongues are constructed, not natural, and for thought to speak requires plasticity of language. It requires polyglotism.

Following Denis - and in the spirit of this enterprise - interdisciplinary work requires communities. It is not parthenogenetic, even if its miraculous birthing often takes place away from the centres of power, in more humble environments.

Acknowledgments

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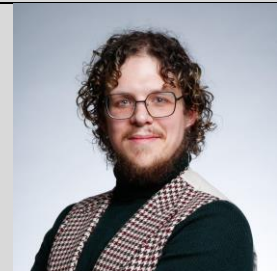
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Gender Equity and Women Empowerment: A case study of Kudumbashree in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Kudumbashree, a pioneering women-centric program in Kerala, India, addresses gender equity through a multifaceted approach. This mission empowers women by providing skill development programmes and fostering micro-enterprises. The programme boasts a three-tiered women's network, offering training in various fields like traditional crafts, hospitality, and IT. These programs equip women with skills for self-employment or salaried work, boosting their economic independence and social mobility. Neighbourhood groups within the network provide a supportive learning environment, crucial for overcoming social barriers faced by women entering the workforce. Kudumbashree also supports micro-enterprises by offering financial aid and training to women entrepreneurs. While successful ventures exist, challenges remain. Limited marketing and branding restrict some enterprises to local markets. Additionally, reaching out to women from underserved communities requires targeted strategies. Collaboration with industry experts, establishing marketing and sales teams, and encouraging innovative business ideas are potential solutions. A supportive business ecosystem at the state level could further empower Kudumbashree women. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on its strengths, Kudumbashree can continue to empower women, fostering socio-economic transformation in Kerala.

Keywords: empowerment; enterprises; gender equity; skill development

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Introduction

The Kudumbashree Mission has been a major success in the Indian state of Kerala with its customised women-centric approach, which has stood out as a pioneering model due to its variety in bringing in equity values and multifaceted functioning aspects. The scheme has focused on women's empowerment, higher women workforce participation, and poverty alleviation to bring gender equality.

Kudumbashree Mission is a visionary programme ideated and implemented by the Government of Kerala as a part of the state's poverty eradication mission (SPEM). The word Kudumbashree stands for 'the prosperity of the family' and originates in the state's language of Malayalam. Kudumbashree now represents the ambitious mission and the network of four to five million workers directly and indirectly involved in the project (**Kudumbashree Mission, n.d.**). It was set up in 1997 after long deliberations and discussions involving the Government of Kerala and the task committee, which was set up after the decision to decentralise, share, and transfer the powers of co-administration with local institutional systems such as Panchayati Raj. During the same time, the People's Plan campaign was making rounds, aiming to bring in democratic decentralisation on three fronts: administrative, fiscal, and political[i] (**Kudumbashree Mission, n.d.**).

The mission has two broad objectives: to improve the living standards of women, particularly in rural areas, and to help them achieve economic security to remove poverty by helping them set micro-credit systems and enterprises, thus strengthening their livelihood, and leading to the improvement in socio-economic status (**Kudumbashree Mission, n.d.**).

The Mission follows a three-tier hierarchical system for its network for women, starting with neighbourhood groups (NHGs), followed by area development societies, and then community development societies at the local government level. The membership is open to adult women, and the membership limit is one per family. Even though it started off in a few districts, in 2015, in many different phases, the program was extended throughout the state. In 2011, the Central Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) recognised the mission as a part of State Rural Livelihoods missions (SRLM).

Kudumbashree stands as a pioneering initiative in promoting women-led enterprises in a region where such concepts were relatively novel. Its sustained success and global recognition as a model for women's empowerment are testament to its effectiveness. To further enhance the impact of Kudumbashree, we aim to critically assess its functioning and identify areas for improvement. By understanding the strengths and

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weaknesses of the program, we can propose evidence-based recommendations to optimize its future performance.

The study used a mixed, transdisciplinary perspective approach combining quantitative and qualitative insights gathered through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions during field visits. Sample populations were chosen from three districts of Kerala - Thrissur, Kannur, and Ernakulam among Kudumbashree workers, and Government officials. The data was collected from *Ayalkootams* (neighborhood groups or NHGs), *Ward Samithy* (Area Development Society/ADS), and *Panchayat Samithy* (Community Development Society/CDS). Secondary data collected focused on the present functioning of the programme combined with future possibilities.

Our fieldwork and interactions with Kudumbashree workers identified several shortcomings in this state government initiative that require attention. While Kudumbashree has potential, to promote and bring gender development and empowerment its functioning and operations, particularly in micro-enterprises, could be significantly strengthened. One area for improvement lies in marketing. Introducing brand marketing strategies and increasing subsidies for Kudumbashree product production could enhance their market visibility and competitiveness. Additionally, the skill development initiatives under Kudumbashree could be further developed to better equip members with the necessary skills for success.

This study highlights the potential for socio-economic transformation through gender and economic development, scalability of income-generating ventures, social inclusion, women's entrepreneurship, labor force participation, and gender equity. Let us delve deeper into two key areas that offer opportunities for improvement.

Skill Development

Skill development programs within Kudumbashree help empower women and foster their economic freedom. This plays a significant role in gaining economic and social freedom among women. Kudumbashree, through its various schemes like Employment through Skill Training and Placement (EST&P), Gender Self Learning Programme, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)[ii], and Acquiring Resilience and Identity through Sustainable Employment (ARISE Skill Campaign), provides skill development training to empower women and help them secure jobs in the market. The skill development programs are conducted through campaigns, workshops, and classes. After the training sessions, placement is given through job *melas* (a local fair where goods are sold and brought), post-placement support and migration support centres for those placed

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outside the state. To date, 1,17,247 trainees are beneficiaries of DDU-GKY.[iii]

These skill development programmes assist women in developing their abilities, gaining financial independence, and achieving social mobility. Kudumbashree's emphasis on gender equality benefits not only individual women but also families and communities. The program's strength lies in the diversity of skill development options available. Kudumbashree caters to a wide range of interests and requirements by offering traditional crafts, hospitality, information technology, and personal development programmes. This flexibility ensures that women can select programmes appropriate to their goals, whether they want to start their own business, receive vocational training for salaried professions, or improve their life skills and confidence.

The programme is delivered through women's neighbourhood groups (NHGs), creating a friendly learning and networking atmosphere. This is especially useful for women who face social barriers when entering the workforce. Women in these meetings can share their experiences, overcome their concerns, and receive peer encouragement. The NHG is a safety net, making the learning process less scary and more likely to succeed. However, Kudumbashree has faced several challenges when it comes to undertaking skill development initiatives. Internal power struggles between functionaries at the ADS and CDS levels, as well as conflicts among group members at the local level, have hindered effective skill development initiatives.

The program's limited autonomy for members has left women vulnerable to local gender norms and the influence of existing power holders. This has restricted their ability to participate fully in skill development programs and express their preferences and opinions.

Additionally, the politicization of Kudumbashree's functioning and the overburdening of its members with multiple responsibilities have further hampered skill development efforts. These challenges have contributed to the program's difficulties in providing effective and accessible skill training to its members.

While the range of programmes available is remarkable, ensuring these skills remain relevant to the changing work market is critical for long-term success. Kudumbashree can expand its reach by performing frequent research on job market trends in Kerala and other Indian states. The programme can dramatically boost graduate employability by customising programme offerings to meet trends and market demands.

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Equipping women with entrepreneurial skills is a crucial step, but further support is required beyond training for their businesses to thrive. Despite its success, Kudumbashree confronts difficulties in reaching out to women from underserved populations, such as lower *castes* (a division of society based on differences of wealth, inherited rank or privilege, profession, occupation, or race) or tribal groups. These groups frequently confront extra social and economic challenges that may limit their ability to participate fully in the programme. Kudumbashree can create targeted outreach strategies to promote participation from diverse groups, addressing the specific needs and challenges these groups face. This includes collaborating with community leaders, offering additional support services like childcare or transportation assistance, and providing culturally sensitive training modules. Partnerships with industry experts can also help adapt programmes to specific skill sets required in the workplace. By collaborating, stakeholders may build a more complete support system for women looking to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Microenterprises

Microenterprises in Kudumbashree empower women by enabling them to achieve financial independence. The Kerala government, through Kudumbashree, provides funding for entrepreneurship schemes such as the Rural Micro Enterprises Scheme and Yuvasree. Kudumbashree enterprises operate across various domains, including production, services, trading, and sales and marketing. Women, individually or in groups, can apply to start microenterprises by submitting their business plans to receive financial support from Kudumbashree. Initially, these women receive subsidies to mitigate business risks. Despite having a robust network of Kudumbashree entrepreneurs in Kerala, enterprises often face setbacks once they gain momentum. While catering units and restaurants tend to succeed, individual ventures such as apparel, handmade toiletries, and handicrafts struggle over time. The primary reason is the lack of a sustainable customer base. These products often compete only within their neighbourhoods due to limited marketing and branding efforts. Although Kudumbashree provides training to women entrepreneurs at the outset, it may not effectively equip them to understand market dynamics and plan their businesses accordingly. Regarding product sales, Kudumbashree microenterprises lack uniformity or a robust statewide network. They typically sell their products during annual fests or *melas* organised by Kudumbashree or opt for home-based sales. Unfortunately, both strategies are seasonal and do not guarantee stable revenue.

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While Kudumbashree has achieved significant success in poverty alleviation, its microenterprise ventures have faced several challenges that hinder their sustainability and income generation. One of the major issues faced by these microenterprises is marketing. Lack of proper marketing strategies and limited market access for products have significantly impacted their ability to reach potential customers. Additionally, supply chain challenges, such as shortages of raw materials and difficulties in maintaining quality standards, have further constrained their operations. Technological limitations also pose significant challenges for Kudumbashree microenterprises. Insufficient access to modern technology and equipment hampers their productivity and competitiveness. Moreover, limited funding and rising costs of raw materials have exacerbated financial constraints. These factors have contributed to the struggle of many micro enterprises under Kudumbashree to generate stable income and maintain sustainability. Despite its initial success, the initiative now faces the challenge of adapting to a changing economic landscape and addressing the specific needs of its micro enterprise ventures. A recent study by SIDNET in several panchayats revealed that the Kudumbashree program has not significantly benefited Below Poverty Line (BPL) workers and has failed to reach its intended audience. Contrary to its intended role as the primary income generation option for BPL households, Kudumbashree in many cases is limited to providing additional income for educated and middle-class women who often participate in flexible ways (**Shihabudheen, 2013.**)

Many women abandon their businesses within a few months of starting due to challenges in attracting customers and recovering their initial investments. Infrastructure is also critical; inadequate storage facilities, transportation, and processing units hinder smooth business operations. Since microenterprises require working capital, women often resort to loans, which can become a financial burden. Family pressures sometimes lead to women quitting their enterprises.

The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad has published a report highlighting the need to broaden the scope of the program to include all those who wish to participate and decentralise the mission to facilitate local orientation. These recommendations suggest that Kudumbashree could be more effective in addressing the needs of BPL households by becoming more inclusive and adaptable to local contexts. There is immense potential if efforts are made at the state level to create a supportive business ecosystem for Kudumbashree women. Customised and localised micro-enterprises could reflect specific localities' authentic culture and traditions, offering diverse products such as food, handicrafts, and apparel. Such initiatives could even boost the tourism sector if elevated to

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a pan-India level. Kudumbashree can potentially become a brand representing Kerala's rich culture and traditions.

Kudumbashree's recent memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Amazon Saheli marks a significant milestone. Through this collaboration, Kudumbashree products gain visibility on Amazon's shopping app and website. However, to maximise success, several critical aspects need attention. Amazon Saheli's collaboration with Kudumbashree represents a promising step in enhancing market access for rural women entrepreneurs by showcasing their products on a global platform. However, critiques of Amazon Saheli highlight significant concerns regarding power imbalances and sustainability. One key issue is the dependence on corporate platforms, which may leave small producers vulnerable to policy changes such as commission rates and product visibility algorithms, reducing their bargaining power. Additionally, the benefits of such collaborations often favor larger, more resourceful producer groups, potentially sidelining marginalized entrepreneurs who struggle to meet quality or scalability demands. Critics also raise concerns about the commodification of culturally significant products, which risks diluting their authenticity to cater to global market tastes. Furthermore, from an epistemic perspective, these platforms can impose external knowledge systems that dictate production norms and pricing, undermining local autonomy and traditional practices. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that initiatives like Kudumbashree's partnership with Amazon Saheli foster true empowerment and equitable growth.

To further enhance the effectiveness from Kudumbashree's side, there is scope for improvements within the program itself. By addressing certain challenges and exploring innovative strategies, Kudumbashree can continue to empower women and drive social and economic change. First, ensuring product quality and effective marketing strategies is essential for capturing market share. Women entrepreneurs cannot achieve this alone; they require support from efficient marketing and sales teams. Second, Kudumbashree should encourage young participants to bring fresh ideas beyond traditional businesses. An innovative cell that manages sales, marketing, advertising, and social entrepreneurship tasks can drive growth. Lastly, policy coherence and proper coordination within the existing ecosystem will propel Kudumbashree women to new heights.

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Enhancing Kudumbashree's Effectiveness: Policy recommendations for key challenges

To enhance the effectiveness of Kudumbashree's skill development and micro-enterprise programs, policy measures should prioritize alignment with market demands and tailored support for underserved populations. Regular job market analyses can inform the design of training programs, ensuring they remain relevant to emerging industries and enhance employability. Additionally, targeted outreach strategies, such as community-specific campaigns and the provision of childcare, transportation, and culturally sensitive training, can increase participation from marginalized groups, including women from lower castes and tribal communities. In particular, establishing crèche facilities would alleviate a significant barrier to participation by offering essential childcare services, thereby allowing more women to engage fully in entrepreneurship and training initiatives.

For microenterprises, sustained support beyond the initial setup phase is crucial. This includes providing ongoing mentorship, improving access to infrastructure, and developing comprehensive marketing and branding strategies to enable entrepreneurs to scale their businesses. Expanding e-commerce integration through platforms such as Amazon Saheli and other online marketplaces is vital for better market access, alongside implementing quality control mechanisms and digital marketing strategies. Further, organizing businesses into enterprise clusters, where women entrepreneurs collaborate within specific industries can foster shared resources, innovation, and stronger market linkages. This clustering approach would encourage economies of scale and strengthen the resilience of micro-enterprises. Finally, fostering a supportive business ecosystem through public-private partnerships, enhanced micro-financing options, and coordinated policy efforts can significantly boost the long-term viability of Kudumbashree enterprises and further the social and economic empowerment of women in Kerala.

These policies aim to address key challenges such as maintaining skill relevance, improving market access, and ensuring business sustainability. By focusing on market-oriented training, post-launch support, e-commerce expansion, and enterprise clustering, Kudumbashree can create a more robust pathway for women's economic independence, contributing to their upward social mobility. A unified policy framework that integrates financial incentives, infrastructure development, crèche services, and strategic partnerships will enhance the impact of these programs, promoting inclusive growth and broader economic development.

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Conclusion

Even after being an ambitious programme that ran successfully, we believe that Kudumbashree can further empower women and foster economic growth once these implementation challenges are rectified.

Despite its success, Kudumbashree faces challenges in reaching women from underserved communities, including lower *castes* and tribal groups. These groups often encounter additional social and economic barriers that hinder their full participation in the program. To address these challenges, Kudumbashree can implement targeted outreach strategies. These may include collaborating with community leaders, providing additional support services (such as childcare or transportation assistance), and offering culturally sensitive training modules. By partnering with industry experts, the program can tailor its initiatives to match specific skill sets required in the workplace. Through collaboration, stakeholders can create a more comprehensive support system for women seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Efforts at the state level can create a supportive business ecosystem for Kudumbashree women. There is a need for quality Products and effective Marketing: Ensuring product quality and implementing effective marketing strategies are crucial for capturing market share. Women entrepreneurs need support from efficient marketing and sales teams to succeed. They should empower young participants to bring fresh ideas beyond traditional businesses. Establishing an innovative cell to handle sales, marketing, advertising, and social entrepreneurship tasks can drive growth. Coherent policies and proper coordination within the existing ecosystem will propel Kudumbashree women to new heights.

There is a potential for socio-economic transformation catalysed development, scalability of income-generating ventures in major areas and levels of concern government, and administration, social inclusion of various communities like transgenders, encouraging entrepreneurship among women, labour force participation, and gender equity.

By recognising its strengths and addressing areas for improvement, the program may continue to positively influence women's lives while contributing to a more inclusive and prosperous Kerala.

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Gender, Care and Food Practices: A critical reflection on traditional roles between activism and resilience

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Abstract

In times of increasing insecurity, women often emerge as key figures in coping with crises through contexts of care. This article aims to critically reflect on how food and specific forms of food activism, such as Ollas Comunes, allow for a rethinking and re-evaluation of traditional gender roles related to food. These roles, which are deeply embedded in social and cultural narratives, constitute the foundation of shared social representations. Historically, women's participation has been constrained to the private and domestic spheres, with a focus on matters related to household management and food preparation. Nevertheless, women's social movements of care that focus on environmental, food, and basic needs issues are gaining prominence and creating spaces for activism and resistance. The literature indicates that women's groups, frequently emerging from pre-existing informal networks, serve as vital resources during emergencies, providing a crucial service that is implicitly included in reconstruction policies. Their proactive involvement is based on a broad and deep knowledge of everyday realities and responds to the specific needs of the target community. These women-generated spaces, in which food serves as a central symbol and resource, allow women to respond to immediate needs, share ideas and knowledge, and promote community resilience. Despite significant challenges, including those related to legitimacy and social integration, these movements continue to develop and organise, becoming essential vehicles for social support and community resilience. This critical analysis demonstrates how food, through women's activism, can serve as a potent instrument for empowerment for these social actors who are acknowledged in the public sphere. The innovative actions undertaken by these groups address not only basic needs but also promote the creation of material and social structures capable of redefining women's gender roles in care and society. This, in turn, makes them more powerful and influential.

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Introduction

The intersection of gender, care, and food practices is a field of study of critical importance in the contemporary socio-cultural context, particularly in light of growing concerns about environmental sustainability and social justice.

Those who identify as female often assume a central role in care activities, both within family dynamics and in the broader social sphere. Concurrently, they are profoundly engaged in the production, distribution, and consumption of food at the private, intimate, and familial levels, within the home, as well as in the public sphere. This intricate nexus necessitates a comprehensive critical analysis to fully comprehend the dynamics of power, resistance, and social transformation at play. Historically, women's roles have often been confined to the private, domestic sphere, with a focus on household management and food preparation. In recent years, however, women-centred social movements focused on care, the environment, food, and meeting basic needs have gained prominence, opening up new spaces for activism and resistance and shedding new light on gender roles. Empirical studies and research demonstrate that women's groups, frequently constituted through pre-existing informal networks, emerge as pivotal resources in crisis and emergency situations, providing indispensable support that is tacitly integrated into reconstruction strategies and often unacknowledged. Their active participation is based on detailed and in-depth knowledge of daily life, which enables them to respond effectively to specific community needs. A key and necessary movement to address in this reflection is ecofeminism, which links struggles against women's oppression with those against environmental exploitation. In addition, the ethics of care, as described by psychologist Carol Gilligan, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the fundamental role of caring practices in social functioning and for identifying strategies for enhancing these practices to promote social change. Gilligan proposes ethics based on relationships and mutual responsibility, in contrast to the ethics of justice traditionally associated with male roles (**Gilligan, 1982**). These two concepts provide a valuable analytical framework through which to examine the ways in which caring practices, including food preparation, can be perceived not only as domestic tasks but also as acts of resistance and empowerment. These specific contexts, in which food serves as a central symbol and resource, operate according to distinct logic from those of collective initiatives. When activated, they initiate a process of individual and

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community engagement based on alternative principles, which in turn generates new forms of collective participation and interaction.

The objective of this critical reflection is to examine and analyse in depth the intricate web of relationships between women and food. It will focus on the tensions that exist between the roles traditionally assigned to women in the food context and the potential transformations that can emerge when such practices become the object of activism for community resilience.

The reflections presented in this article are based on a critical review of secondary literature on the topic of ecofeminism and food activism practices, as well as selected case studies that support the argumentation. The case studies selected for analysis represent women's initiatives situated within socio-economic contexts that are characterised by vulnerability. Specific focus was placed on movements that utilise food as a vehicle for resistance and solidarity. The selection criteria were based on the relevance of the cases to issues of ecofeminism and the ethics of care, the impact of the initiatives on community resilience and women's participation, and the availability of sources detailing the socio-cultural context and effects of these initiatives. A total of five case studies were examined, encompassing different geographical contexts. These included Ollas Comunes in Latin America, particularly in the contexts of Chile and Peru (**Fort & Alcázar, 2023; Catacora Salas & Gutiérrez Suárez, 2023; Hiner et al., 2022; Salas-Herrera et al., 2021**) and other forms of urban and rural food activism (**Calcagni, 2023**). The presented cases illustrate the ways in which women use food not only to meet immediate nutritional needs but also as a vehicle for political engagement and social transformation. This article will begin by drawing on the concepts of ecofeminism and the ethics of care to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the intersections between gender, care, and the environment. Subsequently, I will reflect on food as a specific expression of gendered care, emphasizing how food practices are shaped by women's traditional role narratives. Finally, I will analyse women's food-based activist movements, demonstrating how these initiatives alter gender dynamics and foster community resilience. The objective of this study is to demonstrate how food and its associated practices are not merely taken for granted aspects of daily life, but that through women's activism, they can be transformed into powerful tools of empowerment for communities.

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Ecofeminism and Ethics of Care: A conceptual analysis

The conceptual and political movement of eco-feminism, which emerged in the 1970s, represents a theoretical approach that emphasises the inherent connection between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature. This relationship has its roots in millennia-old history, as evidenced by the works of Barad (**2017**), Pandey (**2017**), and Millner (**2021**). The term 'eco-feminism' was first coined by the French philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her treatise *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. This movement aims to challenge the patriarchal paradigm of domination by promoting an ideology that is interconnected with and supportive of the natural world (**Adams, 2023; Glazebrook, 2023; Herles, 2023; Mediavilla, et al., 2023**). At its core, eco-feminism posits that power structures and gender inequalities are inextricably linked with the exploitation of environmental resources. The conceptual foundations of eco-feminism can be found in indigenous traditions and local community resistance movements, which have consistently advocated a relationship of mutual respect and care for the natural environment. Ecofeminism, which emerged as a response to the need to establish a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, in fact, does not refer to women in the general sense but rather focuses on specific groups of women, predominantly marginalised or belonging to particular geographical and cultural contexts. For instance, indigenous and rural women are often the primary subjects of this discourse, given that their livelihood practices are inextricably linked to the natural environment and the stewardship of local resources. Indeed, in many societies, these women assume the role of guardians of biodiversity, preserving agricultural traditions that are based on sustainable management of natural resources. The close link between women and nature is undoubtedly shaped by living conditions and livelihoods. Therefore, ecofeminism acknowledges the existence of diverse experiences among women, which are influenced by social, economic and geographical contexts. To illustrate, in rural areas of the Global South, women are frequently the primary food producers and custodians of local and ancestral knowledge pertaining to agriculture and natural resource management. Conversely, in urban contexts, they may engage in the promotion of sustainable food systems through community initiatives (**Assan, 2014; Glazebrook et al., 2020**). This plurality of experiences demonstrates that ecofeminism is not a unified movement but rather a network of disparate voices and practices unified by a common struggle against the oppression and exploitation of natural resources. Nevertheless, it is only in recent decades that this approach has been theoretically formalised in the context of feminist activism. Eco-feminism critiques the prevailing model of development and progress, which is

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based on the unlimited depletion of natural resources and the commercialisation of the natural world. Instead, it promotes a vision that is focused on care, sustainability, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

In this context, the concept of the ethics of care, as developed by psychologist Carol Gilligan (**1982, 2011**), is useful for reflection, offering an alternative to the traditional male code of ethics that emphasizes the importance of care, interdependence, and attention to the particular situation. In her seminal 1982 text, *A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Gilligan posits that women develop an ethical sensibility characterized by care and responsibility that differs from the traditional male ethical approach based on principles of autonomy, rationality, and impartiality. Gilligan (**1982**) posits that women tend to evaluate moral issues on the basis of relationships and empathy rather than abstract rules or self-interest. This ethical perspective on care is of significance in the analysis of gender dynamics and feeding practices. It highlights the prominent role of women in providing care, both in the private context of family dynamics and in broader societal contexts. In the domestic context, women frequently assume primary responsibility for food preparation, family nutrition, and the management of food resources. This role is not limited to the private sphere; rather, it extends to the public sphere, where women are often involved in caring activities within communities, voluntary organizations, and other social institutions. Furthermore, the ethics of care underscores interdependence and the significance of grasping specific social circumstances and contexts, thereby offering a valuable conceptual framework for comprehending the intricacies of relationships between food practices, gender, and the natural environment.

The following section presents a comprehensive examination of the role of food as an expression of both eco-feminism and the ethics of care. This section will examine how food practices exemplify the tenets of mutual respect and environmental stewardship espoused by eco-feminism and how they reflect the focus on relationships and social responsibility emphasised by the ethics of care. This conceptual connection will demonstrate how food practices are influenced by gendered values, ideologies, and power dynamics.

The Role of Food in the Articulation of Ecofeminism and the Ethics of Care

Food is not merely a source of nourishment; it also plays a pivotal role in the ethics of care and eco-feminism, influencing numerous aspects of human life. Indeed, the preparation and sharing of meals extend beyond

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the mere satisfaction of physical needs, representing acts that are intrinsically linked to care, respect for the environment, and the building of social relationships, particularly in communities where the kitchen is considered the heart of the home. These occasions present opportunities for individuals to come together, share experiences, and reinforce familial and social bonds. In addition to its role in social interaction, food plays an important role in human emotionality and psychology. Meals not only satisfy the palate but also contribute to a sense of identity and belonging through the transmission of culinary traditions and food-related rituals. In this context, the act of caring is manifested through the preparation of nourishing and appetizing food that benefits both the body and the mind. The act of preparation, sharing, and food choice demonstrates a commitment to self-care, care for others, and environmental stewardship. This commitment to caring for oneself, others, and the environment fosters an interconnected vision of solidarity with the larger world around us.

From the perspective of eco-feminism and environmental sustainability, food choices assume a broader meaning. Food practices reflect a personal and collective ecological footprint, with a focus on responsibility to the environment and future generations. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of the current climate crisis and environmental degradation, where food choices have a significant impact on the health of the planet. Women play an important role in promoting sustainable and environmentally sound food choices (**Britton & Price, 2014; Cooley, 2015; Halloran, 2015; Sachs & Patel-Campillo, 2014; Williams**-**Forson & Cognard-Black, 2014; Allen & Sacks, 2012; Mares, 2012**). In addition to their role as guardians of traditional knowledge related to food cultivation and preparation, women are also custodians of local food traditions. The transmission of this knowledge and the practice of biodiversity-friendly agricultural practices demonstrate that women are deeply concerned with environmental issues. It is not uncommon for women to be the primary agents of conservation efforts related to local crops and biodiversity. Furthermore, their active involvement extends to supporting local producers and promoting sustainable agri-food supply chains. This tangible commitment translates into the development of more sustainable food systems and improved agricultural practices that respect both the surrounding ecosystem and local communities.

It is important to note, however, that this work is largely invisible, essentialised, and devalued. It is often considered a natural task that is not worthy of social or economic recognition. The societal expectations placed upon women in relation to food and care work are oppressive and limiting. The pervasiveness of cultural norms and patriarchal structures perpetuates the idea that these tasks are the exclusive domain of women,

thereby relegating them to subordinate roles within the domestic sphere. This distorted view of women's food work is not only unjust but also harmful, contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and limiting women's potential for empowerment within communities. In this sense, feminist food studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the intersections of food, gender, and other socio-cultural factors. This critical approach examines the ways in which gender issues impact the entirety of the food chain, encompassing both production and consumption, as well as their reciprocal influences. In addition, the concept of food citizenship underscores the entitlement and obligation of citizens to engage actively in all phases of the food system. This entails promoting equitable access to food, participation in decision-making, and environmental sustainability.

Women's Food Activism: Case studies and emerging challenges

The concept of activism is understood here as playing a central role in promoting sustainable food practices and advancing gender equity. Activist organisations and movements considered here are committed to responding quickly to concrete emergencies and promoting equitable access to food resources by advocating ethical, affordable and sustainable forms of food production and consumption (**Borghoff & Teixeira, 2021; Graf, 2022; Mitra, 2021**). Moreover, activism facilitates the re-appropriation of traditional food practices and improves the knowledge and skills of local communities. To gain a deeper understanding of the interconnection between gender, care and food practices, it is essential to examine case studies and exemplary practices. For example, in many rural communities in the global South, women are the main actors in food production and ecosystem management (**Fort & Alcázar, 2023; Hiner et al., 2022**).

A review of case studies, such as Ollas Comunes and Comedores Populares, reveals community initiatives that address challenges related to food access and provision in situations of vulnerability and need (**Moon, 2022; Fort & Alcázar, 2023; Catacora et al., 2023**). Ollas Comunes are community initiatives that are widespread in many countries, particularly in Latin America. They consist of the rapid creation of community kitchens where people come together to prepare and share meals. Often led by women's groups or grassroots organisations, these initiatives are designed to ensure access to nutritionally sound meals for all, particularly those who are economically or socially disadvantaged. Ollas Comunes play a key role in the fight against hunger and food insecurity by providing crucial support to people who would otherwise not have access to nutritious food. These initiatives often arise in response to a variety of crises, including

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environmental disasters, armed conflicts and famine. Moreover, these community kitchens play a symbolic role, functioning as spaces of encounter and solidarity where individuals can share experiences, resources and mutual support, thus contributing to the building of social networks and individual and community resilience.

One particularly noteworthy case study is that of the Ollas Comunes in Peru, which has been described in detail by Fort and Alcázar (**2023**). This study examines the emergence of Ollas Comunes in the most vulnerable areas of Lima during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the central role of women in this process. These women were not only responsible for the procurement and distribution of food but also for providing care in an environment characterised by extreme scarcity. The period under examination in this study is from the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 to the beginning of 2021. The women involved in these initiatives contributed significantly with their resources: the provision and generation of space, the loan of equipment, and the dedication of time. They have also generated new spaces of empowerment and solidarity in these places. Despite the lack of initial support from public policy, this informal organisation has, over time, become a significant social force and reference point for the community, both in terms of food security and as a symbol of resilience after the crisis.

Another significant case study is the research conducted by Catacora Salas and Gutiérrez Suárez (**2023**) on Ollas Comunes in the southern region of Lima. This ethnographic study was conducted between September 2021 and January 2022 and focused on residents of La Nueva Rinconada, a highly precarious area within the Pamplona Alta district. The study shows how, again, it was women who took a central role in organising the Ollas Comunes, which proved to be an effective means of addressing food insecurity exacerbated by the advent of the pandemic. As one of the participants explained,

> *So what are we going to eat? ' And at that moment, all the carts came to help all those who had communal pots and pans while we had none. And from there we ran upstairs, we ran downstairs, to get the food, and we never got it because they said 'they have to have their pot to give the food. If you don't have it, you don't have it.' So we decided to prepare our own pot, all of us, so that we could give our life. And so, in this way, we started cooking, and from this date on, we continued, we never stopped.* (**Salas & Suárez, 2023: 7**)

This statement exemplifies how these women understood social dynamics and consequently quickly mobilised to form their Olla Común, to secure vital food donations and provide for their families and neighbours. The case study demonstrates how the broad and distinctive social and cultural

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knowledge typical of women, much of it also rooted in Andean traditions and memories, was mobilized in an urban context with the goal of ensuring food security and collective well-being in a context of extreme vulnerability.

Also in Chile, Ollas Comunes have emerged in both Valparaíso and the Ñuble and Bío-Bío regions. In Valparaíso, women have played a crucial role in organizing food solidarity networks, continuing a long tradition of feminist and community organizing. As one participant explained,

> *Although there are some men, the majority of the Ollas Comunes are women. The men are the organizers, but the women are the ones who do everything... I think women are always supportive, more than anything else, because you always help those around you. (…) We organized a communal pot, where we worked with other women. We prepared portions of food that came from donations from the Church and some NGOs at the time. We had a vegetable garden, where we had shifts every 15 days or something like that to go and find … ingredients, potatoes, squash, chard, what was planted, and cook...Then, at some point, a literacy workshop was also born, which was my first teaching experience.* (**Hiner et al., 2022: 715**)

As the quote makes clear, women are the engine of action in these contexts and starting from an emergency, in this case food emergency, they are then able to expand the power of action by transcending the merely nutritional task, evidenced by the birth of a literacy workshop. This historical memory of resistance helped to quickly reactivate the community during the pandemic (**Hiner et al., 2022**) while promoting a sense of belonging and collective identity through shared food practices (**Salas-Herrera et al., 2021**).

Finally, also in Chile, the ANAMURI (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas) movement offers another example of how women, particularly indigenous and peasant women, have used food practices as a form of resistance (**Calcagni, 2023**). Founded in 1998, ANAMURI has deep roots in the women's and peasant movement that opposes neoliberal policies that threaten food sovereignty and access to natural resources such as land and water. The women of ANAMURI, from rural and indigenous communities such as the Mapuche, Aymara and Diaguita, are committed to the conservation of peasant seeds, which are considered a key resource for maintaining agricultural self-sufficiency and biodiversity, as well as valuable sources of memories and traditions. This quote sums up their perception of the role they are playing in challenging the dominant food system,

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> *We are the peasant, rural and indigenous women who feed the world with healthy and clean peasant production systems, who struggle every day against agro-industrial food systems that manage monocultures and industrial animal production with perverse systems of production and animal mistreatment* (**Calcagni, 2023: 174**)

The care work of these women is not limited to the domestic sphere but involves community management of resources, struggle for land rights, and active participation in agroecology and food sovereignty initiatives. This movement has also enabled women to become active agents in shaping new agricultural and environmental policies, as evidenced by their participation in Chile's constitution-making process in 2021.

However, these initiatives often face considerable obstacles, including social legitimacy, integration into the larger social framework, resource management, and cultural discrepancies that can affect the effectiveness and success of their efforts (**Calcagni, 2023; Molony, 2022**). Nevertheless, there are indications of resistance. Activism related to food practices is of particular importance to women, as it offers them the opportunity to transform their daily experience of care into meaningful political action and to do so through the creation of a new and powerful public space. Ollas Comunes and other forms of food activism are thus real places of encounter and activism that challenge the usual operational logic of public space. In these community kitchens, women discuss, organize, and act collectively, demonstrating their capacities in the public sphere in a way that transcends the traditional caring role assigned by society. In these innovative spaces, women demonstrate a new approach to action and practice by generating communities that are more inclusive, resilient, and attentive to the differences and needs of all. In contrast to conventional operational logics of public space, which often exclude or marginalize women, these initiatives propose a new model of participation and empowerment based on recognition, sharing, solidarity and collective action. In this context, food is the third element that becomes a flywheel of resistance and solidarity, a tool for nourishing the community and building a sense of belonging and solidarity within it (**Moon, 2022; Stovall et al., 2015; Swan & Psarikidou, 2024**). A deep and conscious reading of the social power of these spaces of action within the public sphere and the full recognition of their transformative potential would make it possible to reaffirm the role of women as true agents of community change and to be able to actively include them in decision-making processes and in the construction of public policies that are more sensitive to collective needs.

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Conclusions

The main intent of the reflection was to propose a redefinition of the role of food in contemporary society in parallel with a critical rethinking of traditional constructions of gender narratives. Thinking of food as trivial or taken-for-granted every day or domestic and private matter represents a restrictive perspective. Food turns out to be a political and social battleground in which gender and power dynamics are inextricably intertwined. Food practices not only reflect the gender inequalities present in our society but can also be used as tools of resistance and social transformation.

The analysis of the cases presented demonstrates how the concept of empowerment for women goes beyond simply improving material conditions and resolving the emergency in a short time. For women, empowerment translates into the acquisition of organisational skills, the ability to negotiate resources with local authorities and aid providers, and, most importantly, the reconfiguration of their role within the community. Initiatives such as Ollas Comunes transform local contexts, generating real networks of solidarity that strengthen social cohesion. At the individual and collective level, empowerment manifests itself in the fact that women are able to address an experience of economic and social vulnerability by then further transforming it into an opportunity to strengthen the community fabric and promote greater social equity. The personal interest women show in these actions and contexts takes the form of a desire to improve their own living conditions and those of their neighbours in their entire community through actions that combine everyday pragmatism with political resilience. These aspects have a lasting impact on the community: women, initially motivated solely by the need to provide food security for their families, become figureheads and political leaders in their communities, showing a strong shift in focus of action toward the collective interest. The empowerment gained and exercised, therefore, is also not limited to the individual but expands, contributing to the support of community resilience and the ability to cope with future challenges. They also initiate a real process of identity production (on a personal and collective level), which acts as a strategy for gaining visibility and political centrality as well as fostering a reflection on the positions of subaltern groups that invoke and construct an essence to achieve political, economic and/or social goals. Through these acts of care and resistance, women demonstrate how food practices can act as powerful tools of social transformation, capable of generating profound changes in both gender relations and existing power structures.

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It is therefore of utmost importance to take a more expansive, critical and intersectional approach to food: rather than being viewed as mere domestic tasks assigned to a specific gender, food practices represent a crucial arena in which individuals can express their agency and power in social space. By engaging in activism around food, women can transform their personal and private experiences into a meaningful form of social action. By broadening perspective and seeking to move beyond binary logic, contributions from people of all genders in this field are valuable, as they can facilitate significant changes in our understanding of social problems and our strategies for addressing them. Ultimately, it is only through a collective effort to recognize and amplify the voices and experiences of all people that we can hope to build a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

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Endnotes

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