

Ever since I started working in research, I was lucky enough to work in interdisciplinary settings - starting with small research groups, up to an ERC-funded multi-teams collaboration.

I have thus interacted with researchers from a variety of backgrounds and thought I would make public my two cents of wisdom on the topic. I would like to suggest a few things that can make scientific collaborations across disciplines or fields of expertise go slightly more smoothly, and at least *feel* more mutualistic.



Westerner and Arab practicing geometry
(Anonymous painter, 15th century)

Here are my two cents:

1 - **Ask what you can bring to the table to the other person**, do not only think of what you will get out of the collaboration. On a very personal note, it feels to me both challenging and extremely rewarding to think in terms of what you can bring to fields you would usually not interact with. On a least personal note, it can be very useful to have a clear picture of what your collaborator expects from you. Especially when crossing interdisciplinary boundaries, your collaborator's expectations might not necessarily match what you would yourself expect to be your part, and collaborators can have -slightly- romanticized representations of what you actually do.

2 - **Try to understand the other's discipline's « aesthetics »**. By aesthetics, I refer to this feeling that a scholar has about some of the research in their field: it is beautiful/good. Making a good paper doesn't use the same ingredients and recipe in different disciplines. What makes a beautiful study or paper depends on the discipline's own aesthetic canons. Not every type of evidence is weighted in the same way in every discipline - mathematical models and simulations, for instance.

Similarly, even between subfields of experimental psychology, some might be more or less sensitive in terms of statistical power and sample size, or exclusion criteria: both developmental and comparative psychology tend to have smaller *N*s as a result of their participants/subjects availability, as opposed to how easy it is to recruit adult participants, and social psychology experiments which can easily reach several hundreds of participants. Being 'raised' in one tradition gives competence and instinctive feeling of what is right *within this tradition*. Because interdisciplinary often means

you are out of your field, your intuitions might be off – you might get the same gut feeling of ‘wrongness’, yet it won’t be as relevant to you as usual. A way to approach this problem is simply to ask your collaborator to describe to you what makes a great study in her own field. The person in front of you has made the same type of investments in her own research topic that you did about your own, and has good reasons to suggest the things they suggest. Learn to **trust** them.

3 – Figure out what are your collaborator’s sacred values. ‘Sacred values’ are things you don’t negotiate about. And, after a few years of academic life, I feel like we all have our own sacred values, forged by experience and passion for our topics of inquiry and methodological tools. Those sacred values, just as aesthetics, have good reasons to be in place. Determining what matters most for a collaborator gives a good roadmap of which elements you should let them have decisional power on, and which ones might have more room to accommodate your own values and aesthetics.

Those first three points can be achieved through one’s own change of behavior but, I would add; it shouldn’t be expected that the other person will do the same effort. The next points, on the other end, relate more explicitly to coordination, and cannot be achieved on one’s own.

4 – Spending some time figuring out how both your lexicons/vocabularies work is never a waste of time. It is incredibly easy to talk past each other or to build on ‘wrong’ assumptions. In particular, it happens rather often that the same term or word is used to mean different things, or, that each ‘side’ uses its own word to talk about the same thing.

In other words, this intends to make sure that common ground is *actual* common ground – and has the upside that it forces us to reach some kind of conceptual clarity before starting any work.

5 – Agree on what to do, not (necessarily) on what to think. You do not need to agree on everything! It is one of the perks of interdisciplinary research. What is required for successful collaboration is to reach agreements on actions to be completed. Trying to convince collaborators on every -even barely related- point you touch on can be a considerable loss of time and energy. On the side, it is also a waste, as you might not get some of the insights your collaborator would otherwise have.

In the end, most of it boils down to trying to include a bit more perspective-taking in our scientific discussions. I do try to put my money where my mouth is and apply these few thoughts in my own interactions with scholars from other fields—but I am also aware that I don’t always manage to do so—in good part because aesthetics and sacred values refer to things that it is hard to get detached from.

And many thanks to Christophe Heintz for encouraging me to write those thoughts down.