

<http://somatosphere.net/2014/07/the-collaborative-turn-interdisciplinarity-a-cross-the-human-sciences.html>

## The collaborative turn: interdisciplinarity across the human sciences

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Questions of health, medicine and science have long animated sub-disciplinary attentions in the social sciences and humanities. Recently, however, research around these topics has taken a marked collaborative turn. If topics in the medical and health sciences were once straightforward objects of study for anthropological, sociological or philosophical analysis, increasingly, to work ‘on’ such topics often means also to work both ‘with’ and ‘through’ them. While this collaborative turn has been enacted in distinct ways, shaped by national and regional institutional structures and epistemic communities, for many in medical anthropology, the sociology of health and illness, the medical humanities, and science and technology studies, ‘science’ and ‘medicine’ are not simple disciplinary specialities. Instead, they are desired collaborators, allies, and co-producers, for an interdisciplinary research complex that is less invested in institutional or philosophical dividing-lines *between* the ‘biological,’ ‘social’ and ‘human,’ and much more committed to exploring the ways in which social life, conceptual labour, and biological existence run *through* one another.

This development has many antecedents. They include the emergence, in recent decades, of a bioscience-based research-complex (for example in epigenetics, in social and developmental neuroscience, in global health and infectious disease research) that has deepened our understanding of the co-constitution of the social and the biological in many areas of health and disease. Equally significant is the ongoing development of an international funding infrastructure that favours large-scale, interdisciplinary approaches to ‘big questions’, and research (from whatever discipline) that has a direct impact on health outcomes. Simultaneous with these developments, the epistemological politics around issues such as climate change, global health, and other pressing concerns, have shifted the stakes of critiquing certain forms of expert knowledge – a development that marks (but does not exhaust) a broader wearing-out, in social and cultural theory, of suspicions around the biology and materiality of the body, the relationship between inheritance and

cultural and social life, the place of scientific expertise, and so on.

“The collaborative turn” – which will appear as a series of essays on [Somatosphere](#) – seeks to open up a critical dialogue on collaboration and interdisciplinarity across medical anthropology, medical sociology, and the medical humanities. It also addresses the emergence of similar issues in allied health sciences – not least in epidemiology, demography, and the other population sciences – where on-going re-alignments of ‘health’ and ‘the social’ also generate complex (and not always comfortable) spaces of collaboration and hybridity. Finally, we include recent efforts to engage patient and provider publics (and counter-publics), including ‘participatory’ interdisciplinary initiatives framed in terms of co-production, ‘involvement’ and/or ‘emancipation.’ If interdisciplinary collaboration around medical and scientific topics is often taken as a good in itself, questions remain about the bases on which, and purposes for which, collaborations are established. There is much to be optimistic about in collaborative endeavours. But the epistemological, ontological, and institutional complex that has come to organise and propel this future (or futures) has been the object of surprisingly little scholarly attention from medical anthropology and sociology, or from the medical humanities – even as it has come to reshape the fields in which those disciplines operate. Indeed, it is not always clear in whose name the promissory future of interdisciplinary collaboration is promoted (both inside and outside the academy), with what desired benefits, with what goals, and with what broader-scale effects. Nor is there always clarity about conditions under which the question of collaboration and interdisciplinarity emerge; especially across different national and disciplinary contexts, there is little attention to the terms under which different epistemological perspectives are drawn together. The series thus asks: what is fundamentally at stake in collaboration around topics in health, medicine and science? What does it mean for scholars in the social sciences in the humanities (and sometimes users and practitioners) to learn to live in such collaborative terrain? And how can such questions open up analysis of a broader collaborative turn, of the ways in which unruly questions in health, medicine and science are understood today, and of how the social sciences and humanities are coming to be entangled in this understanding?

We invite submissions for this series from scholars working in the social sciences and humanities of medicine, health and science as well as from researchers and practitioners in the biosciences and medicine. Please contact us with a short (250-500 word) proposal at [admin@somatosphere.net](mailto:admin@somatosphere.net). There is no strict deadline and submissions will be considered as they are received, although we hope for posts in the series to begin appearing in the Fall of 2014.

*"The collaborative turn"* is collaboratively edited by Des Fitzgerald, Nev Jones, Suparna Choudhury, Michele Friedner, Nadine Levin, Stephanie Lloyd, Todd Meyers, Neely Myers, and Eugene Raikhel.

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