THEORISING SUPPORT FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS USING COMMUNICATIVE GENRE AND 'RULES OF THE GAME'

Ninna Meier (corresponding author), Associate Professor,
Department of Sociology and Social Work,
Aalborg University,
Kroghsstræde 7,
9220 Aalborg Oest
DK
Email: meier@socsci.aau.dk

Trish Greenhalgh, Professor,
Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences,
University of Oxford,
UK

Gemma Hughes, Associate Professor,
School of Business,
University of Leicester,
UK

Chrysanthi Papoutsi, Associate Professor,
Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences,
University of Oxford,
UK

Abstract

Qualitative social scientists working in medical faculties have to meet multiple expectations. On the one hand, they are expected to comply with the philosophical and theoretical expectations of the social sciences. On the other hand, they may also be expected to produce publications which align with biomedical definitions and framings of quality. As interdisciplinary scholars, they must handle (at least) two sets of journal editors, peer reviewers, grant awarding panels and conference audiences. In this paper, we extend the current knowledge base on the 'dual expectations' challenge by drawing on Orlikowski and Yates' theoretical concept of communicative genres. A 'genre' in this context is a format of communication (e.g. letter, email, academic paper, conference presentation) aimed at a particular audience, having a particular material form and socio-linguistic style, and governed by both formal requirements and unwritten social rules. Becoming a member of any community of practice involves becoming familiar with its accepted communicative genres and adept in using these. Academic writing, for example, is a craft that is learned through participation in the social process of communicating one's ideas to one's peers in journal articles and other formats. In this reflective paper, we show how the concept of a communicative genre can sensitise us to the conflicting and often dissonant expectations and rule systems governing different academic fields. We use this key concept to suggest ways in which faculty can support early career researchers to progress in careers which straddle qualitative social science and medical science.

Keywords: Sociology; Academic writing; Genre; Early Career Researchers; Support

The 'decoupled' expectations of qualitative social scientists

Qualitative social scientists who work in medical faculties are usually all too familiar with the conflicting expectations of disciplinary traditions which have been built on different (and often incommensurable) assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the definition of academic rigor and what (therefore) counts as quality (Albert et al., 2015). To use the language of Bourdieu (2004), scholars in qualitative social science and medical science work in different *fields*, each of which has its own agreed intellectual capital and networked power relations. Socialization of interdisciplinary scholars into the faculty includes the ability to 'decouple' two competing sets of pressures and shape a dual stream of outputs – one aimed at their medical colleagues who typically value objectivity over reflexivity, method over theory, large over small sample sizes, and empirical studies over 'thought pieces', and who also typically dominate grant panels and the editorial boards of the highest impact-factor journals - and one aimed at their disciplinary peers who view research as inevitably perspectival, generally prefer depth over breadth, and are rarely interested in data without theory (Albert et al., 2015).

Eakin (2016) has reflected on the 'transgressive' space of qualitative social science within medical science. As well as lamenting the dismissal, downgrading and subversion of qualitative methods by many (though perhaps not all) medical faculty, she also observes that clinically-trained researchers may be handicapped by *"a deficit of concepts or theory to draw on when analyzing qualitative material. Such students also often have inadequate writing skills for the highly language-dependent research process of [qualitative research]"* (page 110). She offers four potential (and partial) solutions: creation of institutional authority for high-quality qualitative research through 'organizational presence'; discouraging the kinds of superficial qualitative studies that are all too common in healthcare and making the case for methodological depth over breadth; teaching survival skills that allow scholars to meet expectations without compromising their values

or methods (e.g. *"adapt their methodology to subvert, circumvent, or appease the expectations of non-qualitative 'gatekeepers' [such as supervisory committees, funders, and journal reviewers] without violating a project's philosophical integrity and interpretive potential"* – page 113*),* and forging supportive communities of practice to meet scholars' needs for support, assistance, legitimacy and belonging. In a similar vein, Mitchell and Clark (2021) offer justification and permission for qualitative researchers to not be "*beholden to objectivist principles privileged in the research community"* (page 1).

We seek to build on these authors' work by turning an analytic lens on the particular formats and styles of communication which early (and indeed established) academics are expected to produce— both in written form (such as a journal article) and also as performance (such as a conference presentation). We argue that these *communicative genres*—especially the genre *par excellence* of academic communication, the journal article—along with social rules for their use, must be learnt and honed before a novice researcher can gain acceptance by, and make progress in, a particular academic field.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, we summarise and critique literature on what 'academic writing' is, how it is learnt and how it should be taught. We then introduce the notion of communicative genre, initially coined by Yates and Orlikowski (1992), and explain how it might help us theorise the struggles of early-career interdisciplinary researchers, particularly in relation to the milestone of publishing their first academic paper in the field of health. We explain how genres are linked in genre systems and embedded in social practices and 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 2004). We examine the contrasting (and conflicting) genre rules of qualitative social science and medical science before offering some suggestions for how best to support early-career interdisciplinary academics who need to learn to play by two (or more) sets of rules. Finally, we

reflect on the implications of such support for improvements in interdisciplinary career progression and academia more generally.

Academic writing—a social practice that is learned through participation

Most university courses, whether at undergraduate, postgraduate or PhD level, include training on the 'skills' of academic writing. These courses place varying emphasis—depending on the discipline—on engagement and reflection, grammar and style, or disciplinary techniques and conventions (Bailey, 2017). Though we acknowledge exceptions, the implication of many of these courses is that learning to write academically is an individual and largely technical achievement (involving, for example, learning the different sections of an academic paper, what kinds of things to put into each section, and how to put sentences together to construct logical arguments, and gaining fluency and speed) (Bailey, 2017).

Some scholars have addressed academic writing as a social and professional work practice carried out in a specific organizational and institutional context. This literature includes some classic ethnographies in which social scientists spent time with academic groups studying how they generated, affirmed, documented and circulated what they recognized as 'facts' (Knorr-Cetina & Mulkay, 1983; Latour & Woolgar; Lynch; Will & Moreira). These studies focused on the enactment of science in the laboratory or the field – and, in particular, how knowledge was brought into being through discussions and interactions among scholars. Related streams of scholarship have studied academic writing as the social practice of knowledge production occurring through dialogue (Cloutier 2016; Tusting et al., 2019), as method of intellectual inquiry (Goodall Jr, 2018; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005), and as a key way in which the researcher (such as an anthropologist) engages with the field and situation they seek to study (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Different qualitative traditions within the social sciences have different rules and expectations for 'quality' academic writing—see for

example (Belgrave et al., 2002; Ellingson, 2006; Gilgun, 2005; van Manen & van Manen, 2021; Wolcott, 2002)—though these differences are not the main focus of this paper.

The ethnographic studies described above have demonstrated that while academic writing has a solitary component, it is also a collaborative and social activity involving cycles of talking with colleagues, reading and feeding back, and writing back and forth with co-authors, editors, and reviewers. Van Maanen (1996) coined the term 'textwork' to depict such practices, which he described as 'mundane, practical, learned and omnipresent' (but rarely talked about) and involving 'the disciplined use of language' (1996: 377). Despite this evidence of academic writing as a social practice, systems of academic publishing, performance management and promotion continue to treat it, by and large, as an individual activity.

Other scholars studying academic writing have focused more centrally on the texts produced by academics. In her book *'On writtenness: the cultural politics of academic writing'*, for example, Turner (2018) deconstructs the expectations of the academic community for features such as strength of authorial voice, clarity, consistency, originality, and logical flow of arguments. Writtenness, she suggests, is an 'ideological regime' in which scholars are trained and become – in both senses of the word – disciplined. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1998) work on reproduction and the symbolic economy, Turner shows how academia's hidden inequities are both produced and reproduced through the so-called 'quality standards' of academic writing.

Genres and genre systems

As we explore how early-career academics become acculturated in, and accepted by, one or more academic communities, it is worth considering a key rite of passage—the preparation, revision and publication of their first academic paper. To theorise this important milestone, we draw on previous work on genres of organizational communication (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992) which is widely known within the organizational studies literature but has not, to

our knowledge, been applied to examine the challenges of and support to interdisciplinary early career researchers. A genre, in this context, is a socially accepted format and style of communication used for a particular audience and purpose. Examples of communicative genres include letter, email, memo, school report, Tweet, birthday card, academic article and conference presentation. In all these examples, there are particular assumed audiences and appropriate and less appropriate words, vocabularies, and structures to use (along with illustrations and symbols – or not). In each case, the novice author must learn not only *what* to write but also *to/for whom* and *how* to write it—and indeed, *when not* to communicate in this genre.

As Yates and Orlikowski (1992) point out, any communicative genre is necessarily embedded in a social process; its enactment is subject to structural, linguistic, and substantive conventions. Like other social practices, communicating with and through a particular genre requires human agency and is open to human interpretation. As structuration theory depicts, academics are not cultural dopes; they stretch and bend the rules of communication in ways that suit them; gradually, the genres and the social practices around them change, thus progressing—and, occasionally, transforming—their academic field and the institution of academia (Stones, 2017).

According to Yates and Orlikowski (1992, p. 300), a genre is a 'typified rhetorical action in the context of socially defined, recurring situations.' Genres as rhetorical actions acquire their meaning from the social situation and context (Miller, 1984). These recurring rhetorical situations contain three main elements: an exigence, an audience and constraints to decisions or actions. For the academic journal article, for example, the exigence is getting an article published; the audience consists of peers and other users of research; and constraints include people, events, objects and relations.

People with the power to *constrain* rhetorical actions are also those with the power to enable the same action—for example, research funders, journal editors, peer-reviewers, and higher

education managers (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). They may constrain/enable via their 'gatekeeping' function (e.g., by approving or denying research funding, accepting or rejecting a draft for publication) or in their capacity to provide or withhold the conditions necessary for academics to generate published outputs (e.g., form and tenure of employment, material conditions, work hours, teaching loads, open-access publication fees). Much has been written about the former, but the latter are at least as important in the generation, refinement and publication of the paper.

The conference presentation is a communicative genre in its own right, but it is also an event which may enable the rhetorical action of getting one's academic journal article published. Attending a conference enables access to particular communities or networks of practice (for example, by attending in-person 'niche' discussions) and fosters direct interaction with scholars who work in this field (for example, by asking and responding to questions in an oral presentation). However, travelling to a conference entails access to funding, transport and (depending on location) compliance with national visa entry requirements – drawing attention to the need for material and social resources over and above the everyday objects that may enable (and whose absence severely constrains) the production of a journal article including such things as a workstation and computer.

Network analyses and qualitative studies have shown that the number and strength of social relations within academia are a strong predictor of academic progression in general and academic publishing in particular (Blackford, 2018; Epstein & Elhalaby, 2023; Godechot, 2016; Jensen & Jetten, 2015; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Co-authoring a paper with a senior academic can strengthen an early-career academic's social connections to more established academics. Social relations may also foster invitations or recommendations to review a manuscript or write an editorial or commentary by someone well-connected in the network, both of which help the new academic gain experience, though reviewing is usually unpaid, time-consuming, and largely unacknowledged

work within the academic system. The relational aspects of the genre system are greatly fostered by being part of a group that has a strong tradition of publication and a structure for involving early-career researchers in the process. Being part of a social network within academia is important because academia has a collegial culture which traditionally operates via a 'favour' economy (Bergquist, 1992).

The genre system

The *genre system* is the system of interdependent communicative genres and linked social practices and socio-material relations in which these genres are employed and have meaning. To research a genre system, Yates and Orlikowski (2002) suggest asking six questions: Why has it emerged (and what is its socially recognized purpose)? What does it consist of (what are the constituent genres of the genre system—for example, wedding invitation and reply)? Who does it involve (e.g., who is allowed to use a particular genre to initiate communication, and with whom)? How are people expected to use the genre/system (i.e., what are the norms around using it)? When are people expected to use it—and when should it not be used? Where are people expected to use it? In other words, genre systems structure who communicates, how, with whom and the time[s] and place[s] where communication happens.

The genre system of which the academic journal article is a key component consists of a series of genres enacted in a typical (though not universal) sequence: [1] internal presentation of a rough draft or an idea to the research group (e.g. by reading a text aloud in the humanities or as a Powerpoint presentation in the sciences); [2] external presentation at seminar or conference; [3] initial outline of an academic article sent to co-authors (who might also be supervisors), with notes, memos and tracked-changes in response (along with multiple iterations circulated and improved); [4] first draft of submitted journal article, along with covering letter to editor; [5] peer reviewers' comments, along with letter from editor; [6] revised draft of article, along with covering letter to editor and

reviewers (steps 4 and 5 may be repeated); [7] pre-publication version of the article, perhaps uploaded onto a preprint server; [8] published academic journal article, indexed on scholarly database, perhaps accompanied by a press release with a summary for a lay audience; and [9] in some disciplines, post-publication peer review (online 'rapid responses') and authors' response. The use of press releases and social media to announce the publication of an article will for some authors represent additional steps to be enacted along the way. After publication, the article is added to the CV and the official bibliography of the authors and helps document 'expertise' within an area, for instance in an application for funding or a new position. The early-career academic may be unaware that the initial internal presentation of their work to the small group of known colleagues is probably the forerunner of a published article or that social interaction in relation to it (help to identify a topic, supportive and constructively critical comments on the presentation) is oriented to helping them learn the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 2004).

Learning the rules of communicative genres

Genres are enacted by social rules regarding both form and substance (Yates & Orlikowski, 2007). The fledgling academic preparing their first PowerPoint presentation for an internal seminar, for example, consciously acquires knowledge of the software, the skills to make a presentation and various 'house style' rules such as how many slides to make, how much text is 'too much' or adequate, and how to label graphs or present quotes. They also learn, usually vicariously by watching other researchers' presentations, the expected 'lines to take'—how much background and context to explain, the expected balance between methods, theory and findings, when and how to acknowledge the input of supervisors, collaborators, funders and research participants, what kinds of questions to expect from the audience and how to respond to these. The early-career interdisciplinary researcher who brings a PowerPoint presentation to a humanities seminar may find an absence of technology and an audience that is instead expecting them to read from a printed essay. This

individual quickly learns that 'success' is achieved by taking a short and highly structured PowerPoint file to a medical conference (where presentations last 10 minutes) and a lengthy printed text to a humanities conference (where they can last 45 minutes or more).

There are parallels for written genres. The early-career researcher will need to learn to identify a journal, find and follow its guidelines for authors, mirror the structure and style of articles previously published in that journal, and follow authorship and conflict of interest disclosure conventions. This is done through repeated practice and—if supported by supervisors and peers—through participation in the practice of getting an article published. Thus, the novice academic learns to both *produce* and *reproduce* the institutionalised genre of their particular academic group. Learning the rules is considerably more complex for interdisciplinary early-career researchers, because not only do ideologies, conventions, social norms, and practices multiply when one works across disciplinary fields, so do the unarticulated expectations of 'appropriate' behaviour, knowledge, and skills that one must be able to navigate.

Through the process of structuration, experienced academics can—up to a point—challenge convention and modify the genre (thus editing and even transforming the social rules and therefore the institution) in every act of communication (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). But editors and reviewers are powerful gatekeepers to publication and can place constraints on academic writers who stray 'too far' from the established genre rules for an article to be recognized as such within a given academic sub-community. Early-career interdisciplinary researchers may need help to navigate the not fully articulated requirements of social science and medicine as complex and highly institutionalized fields, especially if they are not fortunate enough to be part of research groups that provide social learning opportunities and support during this process.

Two aspects of this structuration process are central to our examination of the academic journal article as genre. First, the idea of 'the relevant social community' as an entity, which exists in

the world and can be identified by the writer for the contribution they want to make. Second, the term 'enough' as measure of when a communicative action adheres to genre rules to a satisfactory degree and may therefore pass as an instance of a certain genre, i.e., 'an article' within the academic field one is trying to contribute to. Both aspects involve the exercise of judgement to establish which audience to write for and how to write recognizably and credibly for this particular audience. Such judgement, we believe, is developed over time and in collaboration, through repeated participation in the social practice of a research community where people are willing to and feel safe sharing both positive and negative experiences with writing and getting published.

However, identifying a 'relevant' community is only a first step. There is no guarantee that the members of this community agree on which amount of genre rules constitute 'enough' to be recognized as legitimate. In fact, upon scrutiny, the notion of the relevant community may begin to dissolve, and new questions emerge, such as *What constitutes a community? What is membership and who are members?* For practical reasons, an early-career researcher may define a relevant community as 'scholars working and publishing within a specific area of research' and membership status can be assigned based on inclusion in the first group. This leaves early-career researchers to consider which specific field they are working in. In social science, there can be several answers to this question depending on what phenomenon one is interested in, which research context this phenomenon is studied in, and which theoretical lenses one uses to analyse the empirical material. In more medicine-aligned disciplines, the 'community' may be defined more in terms of preferred methods—for example 'people who do pragmatic randomised controlled trials', 'people who follow population cohorts for several years'—or particular organ-based clinical domains - e.g., 'cardiology', 'endocrinology'. The interdisciplinary researcher must become adept at working across different communities and navigating an insider/outsider role for each.

Genre rules in qualitative social science and medical science

An early-career researcher working at the interface between social sciences and medicine encounters contradictory sets of genre rules. Medicine's genre rules lie firmly within what Bourdieu calls the 'empiricist repertoire' characteristic of formal experimental research: *"the style must be impersonal and minimise reference to social actors and their beliefs so as to produce all the appearances of objectivity; reference to the dependence of the observations on theoretical speculations disappear; everything is done to mark the scientist's distance from his model; the account given in the 'methods' section is expressed in the form of general formulae.*" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 22). Assiduous attention to method (which should be reproducible across contexts and over time), technical precision, measures to eliminate 'bias', and cross-checking (for example, comparing the observations of two observers and demonstrating inter-rater reliability) are highly valued.

In contrast, the social sciences tend to value theory over method, interpretation over measurement and originality over reproducibility. More prosaically, social science values long articles with theoretical and methodological reflections and discussions over short, condensed ones and unstructured abstracts over structured ones. Additionally, those social scientists who have survived the somewhat Darwinian experience of climbing the career ladder in a faculty of medicine also value the skills to 'face multiple ways', speaking the language and accessing the resources of the dominant discipline but also protecting what is actually valued in their own. Eakin, for example, comments that: *"Students need to be made "critique-ready": able to distinguish and avoid post-positivist methodological procedures flimsily retrofitted in qualitative clothes, such as "member checking" and "coding reliability" as forms of validation, "saturation" as a measure of analytic sufficiency, and "themes" as objective findings awaiting discovery in the data. Students can be coached on the crucial survival skill of being able to articulate convincingly and without recourse to jargon the methodology of qualitative research to scientific audiences not familiar with such*

approaches to knowledge, including fielding questions about sample size, generalizability, bias, replicability, and other positivist preoccupations that perennially haunt (and terrorize) qualitative research students in the health field." (Eakin, 2016, p. 113).

How can early-career researchers be supported in interdisciplinary writing?

As outlined above, we can understand the rhetorical action of getting an article published as consisting of a series of smaller steps that are embedded in a genre system and influenced by potential constraints and enablers: people, events, objects and relations. In such a system, certain elements concern 'production' (of articles, successful grant applications, graduated students, etc.) while others—and often less acknowledged elements—concern maintenance of the system. Inspired by Baraitser (2017) we use the distinction between production and maintenance to explore the kind of less acknowledged and often overlooked work that goes into developing *and* sustaining an academic environment, for instance organized as well as informal occasions for social learning, peer discussions, and equal opportunities for support. The practice of maintenance ideally occurs on multiple levels at the same time and involves efforts to officially support, organise, and sustain an academic environment in which people thrive, feel safe to share and give feedback, and develop their thinking and their research practice.

Many forms of maintenance work, as Star and Strauss (1999, p. 20) have shown, can easily become "expected, part of the background, and invisible by virtue of routine (and social status)." In academia, where incentives and career paths are highly individualised, maintenance work practices tend to be viewed as low status activities that do not further a researcher's career, even if they are valued by others. As a consequence, maintenance work risks being both systemically under-recognized and unevenly distributed, i.e., practiced by only a portion of the faculty.

The lack of recognition of maintenance work compared to production work leads to what Star and Strauss (1999) term 'functional invisibility' and contributes to exacerbating inequity in

academia. This inequity can arise because of the lack of organizational recognition for maintenance work combined with time pressures in academia, which leave individuals in a constant balancing act between focusing on one's own career and achievements measured as published articles, grants, and research projects against focusing on contributing to the academic environment, the research group/field, and the people involved (Korica, 2022). The balancing act is perhaps made more complex by the often international networks of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001) that many researchers are part of, because they illustrate that the physical location of a workspace (often a department or a research unit) does not designate the only relevant academic environment that needs to be maintained.

Box 1 offers guidance for established scholars to support early-career researchers' interdisciplinary publishing.

Box 1: To support interdisciplinary early-career researchers and PhD students:

Facilitate opportunities for formal and informal social learning of academic writing—for example, via mentoring, occasions for conversations about writing as both a process and product, and peer writing groups for support and feedback. Identify and include faculty members and affiliates, who work across disciplines, in mentoring and support activities. These may include senior faculty members sharing their experiences with interdisciplinary academic writing in workshops or sessions such as 'how I did my interdisciplinary PhD' or 'writing data analysis in qualitative health research'.

Formally recognise both potential challenges and contributions of the interdisciplinary approach in a research program or department, for instance in written material or when introducing new staff. Organise occasions for senior faculty members to share experiences and discuss e.g., supervision and feedback practices, quality criteria for interdisciplinary academic writing, or publication strategies with ECRs. Departments can also organise a network for supervisors/mentors, who support

interdisciplinary ECRs, where members can discuss challenges and share experiences with supporting ECRs amongst themselves.

Provide staff with resources for ideas aimed at supporting the academic environment for interdisciplinary research, for instance inviting guest scholars, organise occasions for ECRs to train in presentation skills, or developing small, in-house topic- or theory/method-specific conferences that integrate disciplines.

Actively resist (by refusing to produce or reproduce) 'publish or perish' ideals. Support departmental conversations about the risks (e.g., to academic reputation and integrity) involved in academic writing, especially for the interdisciplinary researcher, for instance at department seminars or workshops.

Place academic writing and genre systems on the agenda for interdisciplinary PhD training alongside research methods, ethics, and presentation skills. Develop PhD courses and seminars on how to navigate the genre system and potential constraints/enablers in both social science and medicine.

Acknowledge and reward maintenance work for instance through distribution of responsibility for support activities across senior faculty. This can be done by developing an ECR support program with a range of activities that senior faculty members/research groups can sign up for. The responsibility for such activities should be shared among tenured staff and it should be clear that being responsible for such activities is an important and valued way of contributing to the academic environment of the department. Conversations about the significance of these activities can be included in hiring and promotion talks, and they can be included in job postings. Formal recognition

and distribution of responsibility is an essential step in making this maintenance work 'visible' and acknowledged from a system's perspective, which in turn is important in order to ensure that conditions for this work do not reproduce inequalities—for example by being carried out mainly by junior academics or become gendered or racialized.

The suggestions in Box 1 make explicit many aspects of academic work that are usually implicit or hidden. We propose them so that the department and the faculty that make up the primary academic environment of interdisciplinary early-career researchers clearly articulate and acknowledge the task and potential challenges inherent in writing and getting an interdisciplinary article published. We believe that department heads can and should get involved in supporting interdisciplinary ECRs through organising support activities, rewarding senior faculty's engagement, and by formally recognising the challenges that interdisciplinary ECRs may face. Senior faculty can contribute by attending activities, signing up as mentors, sharing their experiences, expertise, and networks – and by inviting ECRs to learn through participation. Such actions will not solve the considerable structural hurdles facing early-career researchers working across the disciplines of social science and medicine, but they may help navigate them in a more sustainable and equitable way. Early-career researchers should also play an active role in shaping supportive environments, by proactively seeking training and advice from peers and senior colleagues with relevant interdisciplinary experience, and collectively organising opportunities for peer learning and exchange, rather than accept they must negotiate the complex process of writing across boundaries on their own.

Concluding reflections

The academic journal article is the primary symbol of scholarship and getting an article published is an essential academic milestone. However, disciplines have different views of what academic writing is and what constitutes 'a good article'. In medicine, academic writing is mainly

understood as the product of a research process in which researchers collect and analyse data, and then (through 'writing it up') report on what they discovered. In social sciences, the act of writing itself is understood as a scholarly process – a method of inquiry that recognizes the process of thinking and reflecting through writing. This difference in approach to academic writing means that the two fields come with different beliefs and norms about how the research/writing relationship is understood, the collective work that goes into getting an academic article published, and therefore different approaches to supporting the early career academic working across disciplines.

A reviewer of a previous draft of this manuscript pointed out that not all social science is theory-rich (arts-based approaches, for example, may not be), and that within the social sciences there are numerous approaches to academic writing depending on the sub-discipline (a point which, whilst correct, is beyond the scope of this paper). We acknowledge examples of medical faculties around the world where impressive efforts have been made to blur the disciplinary boundaries between social sciences and medicine. For example, one of us is a Visiting Professor in a medical faculty in Norway where innovative approaches are used to teach sustainable development to undergraduate medical students (Engebretsen et al., 2023). But such examples underscore rather than undermine the main point we are making in this paper—that countering the 'decoupling' described in the introduction requires vision, sustained collective effort and resources; it occurs only in rare exceptions.

For the most part, then, interdisciplinary early-career researchers in medical faculties must continue to navigate a complex institutionalised landscape when they conduct and attempt to publish their research. Based on published studies and our own experiences, we have suggested a range of steps that supervisors, faculty members, research group managers, and department heads can take to support interdisciplinary scholarship in general and early-career researchers in particular.

One long term outcome of foregrounding and supporting interdisciplinary scholarship and publishing is that such activities might have influence on multiple levels. Beyond local individual and departmental effects, we expect efforts to support early-career researchers in getting published also function as important elements in developing and maintaining interdisciplinarity in research communities and publishing as a good in itself—as a way of tackling complex questions, grand societal challenges and expanding knowledge production practices in academia and society.

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ORCID iDs

Ninna Meier https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3472-3077

Trish Greenhalgh https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2369-8088

Gemma Hughes https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2930-1125

Chrysanthi Papoutsi https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1189-7100

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