TRANSDISCIPLINARY MOBILITY:
TRANSCENDING ACADEMIC SILOS WHILE TRANSITIONING THROUGH A RESEARCH CAREER

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REFLECTIONS ON A PERSONAL JOURNEY

- PhD Geography, Durham/Bolivia
- 2 x 3 year Fixed term lectureships, Leeds: Geography & Latin America; Politics & Development Studies (Brundtland & SD)
- Lectureship, London: International Environmental Policy
  - Fieldwork in multi-disciplinary teams; PRA methods

➢ Nodes in the life course: marriage, children, relocation

- UCC: Geography ⇨ Food Studies, sustainability, transdisciplinarity, community engagement

SILO ARCHITECTURE OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

- Most universities competitively engaged in deep, specialised research:
  - Fine-grained analysis leading to discoveries, insights into diseases, black holes
  - ‘Excellent’ research measured by grants, peer review publications (& belatedly ‘impact’)
  - Sustains powerful disciplinary boundaries, encourages proliferation of sub-disciplines, and replicates silo structures

FRAMING 'WICKED' PROBLEMS

- An era of complex, multi-dimensional, multi-scalar challenges with high levels of uncertainty, interdependency, & stakes
  - What we know, what we don't know, & WWDKWDK!
- Post-normal science (Funtowicz & Ravetz 1993) & 'Mode II' knowledge production require utterly new ways of working
- Interdisciplinary & multidisciplinary cooperation: assemblages of different conceptualisations & understandings
- Transdisciplinarity: requires a true integration of concepts, assumptions, theories, methods, & interpretation, as well as trust & inclusiveness.

CONNECTING DRIVERS OF CLIMATE CHANGE WITH SOCIAL PRACTICE

- Earth system processes play out at the level of communities
- Key challenge to make them more resilient to withstand hazards. This means working with stakeholders to co-design research & co-produce knowledge
  - Cork flooding: OPW - build higher walls! Or holistic catchment management?
- Involves connecting Big Science to Social Practice to understand (& to model & calibrate) complex feedbacks
- Energy policy: dominated by technical (generation & supply) issues & economics (pricing). But neither physics or economics understand social context of demand.
- Energy use an outcome of lifestyle shaped by income & human resources

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CAREER

- Global challenges & regional impacts basis of research agendas
  - Challenge-led inter-/transdisciplinary research programs
  - Research ‘with impact’: problem-solving & ‘making a difference’
- Growing opportunities for researchers not bound by disciplinary norms
- Not only Earth/environmental-human societal systems coupling
- Ageing; mental health; disruptive manufacturing; smart cities; material
- Challenge is to create new institutional bridges to span entrenched funding structures, disciplinary norms, working practices

CONCLUSIONS

- Not all researchers will be suited to the collaborative style of TD
- Early career researchers instrumental building (inter-)national networks to shape research agendas and influence funding agencies
- Will be confronted by disciplinary gatekeepers defending status quo
- Requires: space for disruptive initiatives within the academy; time to build trust & to align different knowledges; & inclusive ways of working
- Irish universities have been responsive to the knowledge economy agenda; the task now is to support a vital socio-ecological transition for 21st C
- For that huge opportunities for researchers to transcend – and to eschew - disciplinary silos in favour of transdisciplinary challenges