Beyond Our Silos

While we are joined as co-authors of this piece, the two of us met each other in a different context: as journal associate editor and prospective author. Both of us are committed to interdisciplinary work (Pamela is a nutritionist and qualitative researcher within an interdisciplinary health science department, while Alyshia is an anthropologist with a primary appointment in an ethnic studies department who largely collaborates with colleagues in public health), and yet we found our initial interactions were challenging as we negotiated different perspectives. What could have been a frustrating dead end of communication resulted instead in a fruitful ongoing conversation.

These conversations about our differences challenged our disciplinary assumptions and resulted in new ways of thinking about our work as scholars of foodways. For example, through her research, Alyshia notes confusing nutrition education messaging for Mexican immigrants to the US. While immigrants tend to have favorable health outcomes early in their settlement in the US and these outcomes decline with greater duration of settlement, many immigrants are given the advice to modify their eating habits. “Mexican food” is often characterized as high fat and unhealthy in ways that sometimes lead people to consider their own cultural foods as “cheat” foods or guilty pleasures. In general, here in the US we are relatively uninformed about the eating habits, particularly of people of rural and indigenous Mexican origin. Alyshia’s work as an anthropologist and ethnographer brings new dimensions to understanding foodways.

Through our conversations we began to question our existing frames of reference and epistemologies. Our discussions led to transformative learning—the same type of learning we promote in our education of future scholars at our respective universities. If we experience growth by challenging our own ways of doing things, then why, in general, do we tend to be siloed professionally?

We have observed several benefits about the generative capacity of transdisciplinary work. Reading, writing, interacting, and publishing with others from different fields obliges disrupting some of the disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological silos that often prevent those of us in these different academic fields from collaborating or even reading one another’s work. For example, looking beyond nutrition science at other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology can expand understanding about cultural foodways and contextual factors of health. Nutrition professionals tend to focus on individual-level change versus focusing on more distal social determinants of health such as life-course factors, discrimination, social norms, poor housing, and low wages. If we do not consider sociocultural context, we run the risk of misunderstanding and placing undue burden on individuals.

Most research is very often and necessarily narrow in scope. But, added together, our differing perspectives can sometimes add up to a coherent picture of a problem. We can bridge the gap between the perspective of someone focused primarily on the tail with another focused mainly on the elephant’s ears. Interdisciplinary work requires us to reconcile differing perspectives and orientations in a way that makes us poised to address big issues with greater force and coherence.

This bridging work is not easy. We must actively listen to each other and develop tolerance for different, and even incompatible approaches. Humble and open-minded interdisciplinary collaboration can foster openness to new thinking, broaden our minds, and increase our tolerance for intellectual risk. Doing this can strengthen our commitment to solving the stubborn puzzles of our time.

Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia, EdD, RDN
JNEB Associate Editor/Professor
Rutgers University, School of Health Professions, Piscataway, NJ

Alyshia Galvez, PhD
Professor/Acting Chair
Department of Latin American and Latino Studies, Lehman College, Bronx, NY