

Challenges to Interdisciplinarity: Development of Arena Work in Gender Research Collaborations

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Abstract

The article discusses the challenges of working with hybrid teams within the overarching programme Challenging Gender, with its interdisciplinary theme groups and its arena for joint reflection and theoretical development. The intellectual exchange over concepts with heterogeneous meanings across hybrid themes may lead to many debates and controversies over allegedly joint concepts and be experienced as time-consuming exercises that give meagre results. The article analyses the interaction within hybrid themes and between themes on the arena. The anticipated dynamics in the process of arena work required both flexibility and adaptability, and the work was developed in several stages. Two important steps were the outlining of core statements and core questions at the heart of each theme, and letting themes actively challenge the research questions of other themes. The article stresses the importance of exposure to methodological and theoretical pluralism to create scientific development and intellectual excitement.

Keywords: gender, interdisciplinarity, research collaboration, hybrid teams, arena work

1. Introduction

Gender studies, which began as a contested area, is now recognized as a legitimate field of scholarship and is well established within systems of higher education. Although recognized as an interdisciplinary effort from the outset, for decades gender studies has also been nourished by profound contributions from diverse disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences, and more recently also supplemented by an increasing body of knowledge within the medical sciences. The challenges associated with interdisciplinary work, that is, balancing diversity and depth with integration, are thus well known within the field of gender studies. In contemporary discussions among gender scholars in Sweden, this balancing act is often called “standing on two legs”, and it has turned out to be very important when discussing the composition of research panels and quality assessment groups.

When, in recent years, Swedish research councils have begun targeting special funding for larger, overarching research programmes in gender studies, this has resulted in a new development in the field. Founded as it is on interdisciplinary efforts and having *gender* as its common ground, what happens when gender studies enters this new stage of development – aspiring to achieve new hybrids of knowledge in interdisciplinary research collaborations? How are these additional challenges to interdisciplinarity dealt with?

In the present article, we discuss the challenges associated with working with hybrid teams within an overarching research programme. We do not attempt to evaluate the project in terms of scientific production, but to focus on the processes of intellectual exchange between teams. Although interdisciplinary communication may be enriched by the interaction between representatives of different hybrid fields, the challenges of working with hybrid teams are well known. The intellectual exchange over common concepts that have heterogeneous meanings may also give rise to growing debates and controversies over these seemingly and allegedly joint concepts (cf. Maasen 2000, p. 182-3) and may be experienced as time-consuming exercises that generate meagre publication results. Our case is the research programme Challenging Gender (henceforth *CG*) and its arena for reflection and theoretical development. The programme started in 2006 and after almost five years, in autumn 2011, it was time to reflect and summarize. The present article is the product of a joint effort by three authors representing different positions within the programme.ⁱ

2. The research programme Challenging Gender

A proudly presented press release from Umeå University in November 2006 reported the success of the University's gender scholars in the competition for excellence grants from the Swedish Research Council.ⁱⁱ Previous research has shown that defining and measuring excellence often rules out women scholars (*Gender and Excellence in the Making*, 2004). This specific gender excellence grant made it possible for a research field in which most researchers are women to increase its status and for many women scholars to achieve their best results in terms of scientific productivity.

Gender studies already had a solid platform at Umeå University, thus fulfilling several criteria for developing excellent interdisciplinary research programmes. The Centre for Women Studies was founded in 1987; it coordinated research seminars and offered undergraduate and graduate level courses. Since the 1970s, gender research had been carried out within all faculties, i.e. Arts and Humanities, Social Science, Medicine, Teacher Education, and Science and Technology. The National Graduate School for Gender Studies was established in 2001 and provided training for graduate students from a variety of disciplines and faculties. Gender research had also been successful in the internal ranking of research areas at Umeå University. In 2005, it was listed among the top-20 strong research areas, and in a new ranking from international panelists in 2010, gender research was listed among the top 14 strong research environments at Umeå University. The submitted application to the Swedish Research Council in 2006 was the outcome of a joint effort to combine several disciplines throughout the University.

The overall purpose for *CG* was to produce high quality international gender research and thus build a platform for a centre that would become an internationally highly regarded Centre of Gender Excellence – a centre attractive to researchers worldwide. The more specific aims of *CG* were to challenge gendered structures (in law, health, school, social welfare etc.), thereby also challenging existing knowledge and practice in these academic fields, and moreover to challenge gender theory.

The work has been built on three cornerstones: *interdisciplinarity*, *internationalization* and *openness/collaboration*. *CG* included five broad themes (*Democracy/Social Justice*, *Emotions*, *Violence*, *Health*, *Normalization*) and a steering group consisting of a research leader and theme leaders. The themes were connected by an "arena for reflection and theoretical development" (see Figure 1). The research organization of *CG* also included an international reference group with six gender researchers from different countries.ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 1

All themes, each representing hybrid fields, gathered researchers from several academic disciplines, thus forming hybrid teams. The theme leaders had special responsibility for leading the work in the themes and appointing funding for researchers in the theme. Each theme faced specific interdisciplinary research challenges that had emerged from previous and ongoing collaboration. The theme *Democracy/Social Justice* explored how globalization and Europeanization are placing new demands on democracy and social justice, while at the same time putting more focus on local governance and local contexts than previously. The theme *Emotions* analysed the gendering of emotions/emotionality in the Scandinavian countries and how emotional narratives form a relevant research field. The theme *Violence* included two distinct study areas: the study of gendered violence and power relations within the family and intimate relations, and the study of public policies for intervention and prevention of gender-based violence. The theme *Health* focused on how changes in gender regimes influence health and how gender is constructed in health science, practice and education. The theme *Normalization* had its base at Mid Sweden University and focused on cultural normalization processes: the demands for conformity and sameness (in gender relations and also in other power dimensions involving "race"/ethnicity, sexuality, class, age/generation). In the following, we will use examples from the themes Emotions, Violence and Normalization.

3. Setting up an arena

In order to give the researchers working with the themes opportunities to present ongoing work to those working with other themes, a joint arena was set up. The aim was described in the application as follows: "to create an interdisciplinary arena for reflection and theoretical development and make this arena the base for broad international comparisons and collaboration." Besides work within the themes, the aim of *CG* was to use the concept "challenge", with all its critical and compelling dimensions, and the arena was created to deepen the interdisciplinary challenges.

Thus, in the attempt to create an additional level of interdisciplinarity, the arena was designed to connect the overall programme, to transcend disciplines and cross research themes. The arena work was also conditioned by rotating obligations. The theme leaders were responsible for planning the seminars and were obliged to participate. The researchers funded by the programme were also expected to participate and to share their knowledge at arena seminars, which were held 2-4 times a year (1-2 days at each occasion). Quite often these meetings were combined with meetings held with the international reference group, thus underlining the importance of sharing thoughts not only through written communication, but also through personal meetings, including social activities.

The arena work turned out to be a special challenge and implied several experimental forms of collaboration. The term “arena” has different meanings. In our case, we used the word mostly in the sense of “a realm in which important events unfold”. But we also used its spatial connotations. We actually situated ourselves “on the arena”, we had discussions “on the arena”, we planned for events “on the arena”, and we travelled “to the arena”. The word arena was also used to show the importance of “all of us in the programme” and how we could be understood as an entity. That it would be an important place and entity was taken for granted. The arena events would help us see, understand and reflect in new and different ways. Nevertheless, questioning the work has been a common part of our experiences in the arena.

Despite the doubts being raised, the overriding feelings were hopeful – we would be getting to know new people, gaining new insights and being challenged in a positive way.

4. Out on the arena

Twenty researchers from 11 disciplines attended the first arena seminar in 2007. This composition of disciplines turned out to be quite characteristic of the seminars to come: many people, several disciplines, and several perspectives. Although the participants could change from occasion to occasion, connections to the themes served as an entrance into the discussions. During one of the first seminars in 2007, we had very broadly oriented discussions about the aims, ambitions and scope of the arena. We defined common concepts that would be dealt with on the arena, and each of these concepts was elaborated upon to reach a common understanding. Thus, we wanted to challenge, change, contextualize, compare, understand, define and analyse the chosen concepts. We discussed possible empirical areas, both as a continuation of earlier work, but more importantly as a result of what we hoped would emerge in the form of new kinds of collaboration. Our initial work concentrated on different theoretical areas, for example contextualization, the sex-gender distinction or various theories dealing specifically with interdisciplinarity. We also had specific literature review seminars, seminars in which our own work in progress were discussed, and different kinds of analytical exercises.

5. Travelling towards the unknown and the desire for structure

Collaboration in the arena was planned to be open-ended, working as we were from the clear expectation that new ideas and theoretical developments would emerge in between the themes. As this meant that the large and diverse research group was in effect “travelling towards the unknown”, there was a need for structure. First of all, the days for arena seminars were scheduled well in advance, and were to run a couple of times a year, for the duration of the programme. For those who were funded, participation in the arena seminars was mandatory, as stated in the contract for the year of funding. Exciting as such open-ended endeavours may be, experiences of extreme lack of time are common in academia today. Without the obligations with regard to seminar attendance, there was a risk that some/many would have taken a short cut and abstained from participating – weighing gained time in the short run against the as-yet-unknown ideas that were to emerge.

Another foreseen risk was fatigue. As compared to research where stated research questions and empirical material invite attention, the stated open-endedness entailed a strain. Not knowing what, if any, tangible results would be obtained might make it difficult to know what to focus one’s energy on. By rotating responsibility for the arena seminars between the five themes, members of each theme had ample opportunity to come up with different points of departure and make suggestions for analysis and discussion that built on the expertise and competencies included in their respective theme. Moreover, hosting an arena day also meant that theme members could present their research and discuss it with the larger research group. The rotation of responsibilities helped to prevent the threat of fatigue.

The work on the arena was amorphous in many ways. There was a continuous change of participants, change of methods and disagreements on how to proceed. Some valued the insecurity and the indefinite process, and some were eager to have more factual results, such as articles, conference papers, etc., as outcomes of the arena work. A few regarded it as a complete waste of time and decided not to participate. As a result, methods for maintaining a collective memory turned out to be essential. This was accomplished through reflections and feedback after each seminar and by writing reflective notes for each theme. These reflections also mirrored the continuous interchange of knowledge within and between themes.

6. Challenging themes within the arena

As our two guiding concepts within the overarching research programme were *challenge* and *gender*, the aim was set for each participating theme, i.e. to actively challenge the chosen key concepts and associated research within their respective themes. But how the impetus of challenge was to be manifested as challenges in the arena work was not settled from the beginning, nor was the input expected to take on the same form for the different themes. On the contrary, the anticipated dynamics of the arena work process required both flexibility and adaptability, and the joint work in the arena seminars was developed in several stages over the years. Two important steps in this development will be described below: outlining core statements and core questions at the heart of each theme, and letting each theme actively challenge the research questions of the other themes.

6.1. Outlining core questions and core statements

Indispensable cornerstones in interdisciplinary collaboration are the joint efforts made to read and comprehend texts from the participants' various disciplines, and to strive towards writing that does not involve a great deal of tacit and implicit intradisciplinary assumptions and presuppositions (cf. Lattuca 2001, p. 119 ff.; Andersson & Kalman 2010, p. 205). The degrees of difficulty such efforts entail should not be underestimated, and having *gender* as an overall common object of study does not minimize the difficulties. Academic training largely involves the appropriation and embodiment of ways of thinking, reading and understanding, not least the ability to recognize what counts as a relevant problem (Polanyi, 1969, p. 148). This implies that conduct and attitudes concerning what counts as legitimate ways of establishing knowledge, based in one's own discipline, are incorporated along with a simplified understanding of other ways of establishing knowledge (cf. Andersson & Kalman, p. 206 ff.). Thus, the challenges associated with interdisciplinary readings are twofold: lack of receptiveness when reading and blindness to the pre-understandings of one's own subject or discipline. Within CG, this challenge was present both within the interdisciplinary themes and even more so in the arena seminars.

Thus a decisive step was taken to facilitate common readings in seminars. Members of each theme were invited to outline core statements and core questions that would highlight theories and aspects at the heart of their own theme. These statements and questions were then tested as analytical tools, the function of which was to guide and facilitate our joint interdisciplinary reading of texts in progress.

The outcome of such readings was expected to be twofold. Based as they were in the core statements and questions, these common readings also helped structure the input the text in question received from the discussion. Moreover, members of each theme reading the text were able to see what happened to their own core statements and questions when they were used by researchers in the other themes – in relation to the very same text. What meaning did others give to the statements and questions of one's own theme? This way of working enabled us to systematize our interdisciplinary process and further gave us two forms of output in the process that might serve as a basis for continued theoretical reflection.

For instance, participating in the readings of other themes might cause members of a given theme to consider adjusting their tentative core statements and refining them based on comments made on the arena. Comments from other themes sometimes even served as an impetus for members of a theme to reflect on and assess what tacit assumptions they actually did share within the theme – and to identify those they did not share. This meant taking a step back and focusing on the articulation of these commonalities and differences so as to further future dialogue within the theme as well as on the arena.

Gender – as the stated common ground at the outset of the overarching research programme – was a subject that repeatedly invited discussions at the arena seminars. To what extent did it constitute a common ground, and if so in what way? Thus our joint, as well as disparate, understandings of this key concept were thoroughly, albeit not exhaustively, debated at more than one occasion.

6.2. Themes challenging themes

One of the most important aspects of interdisciplinary work in research concerns the assessment of how different perspectives may influence one's own research (Andersson & Kalman 2010, p. 206). This insight led to another decisive step in our work in the arena seminars: that of letting one theme challenge the other themes. One example of such a challenge will now be given from the theme of Emotions.

The overall assignment within the theme was to explore emotions and to challenge assumptions about emotions made in the research from a gender perspective. Thus when members of the Emotions theme were hosting an arena day, they chose to challenge the other themes participating in *CG* concerning the potential of letting emotions be part of the analytical framework of the ongoing research projects of other themes. To provide some orientation concerning what they intended by this invitation, they started from a statement on how emotions often are taken to be of an uncertain nature or classification, and how they tend to turn up as a (at times problematic) residue when what happens in the world, and when our knowledge of the world, is to be sorted or classified. They further wrote:

Often problems are framed, and “maps” are made, in ways that make us lose sight of the emotions inherent to the phenomena we are exploring, or in ways that neglect the importance of these very emotions. But there is great creative potential in using emotions as an analytical category. One example of this is the United Nations report “The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003” that differentiated between “slums of hope” and “slums of despair”. This analytical difference pointed to different processes, along with differing trajectories and directions for human action.

The other themes were then asked to consider and discuss how one or more of the basic research questions of a project might be informed/transformed by making use of one or more of the emotions *sorrow, anger, fear, hope, love* as analytical category(ies). “How would the use of one or more of these emotions affect your research question(s)? What difference might the use of emotion as an analytical category make in terms of sorting, explicating and analysing your empirical material?”

There were several spin-offs from this arena seminar: some reported that it had a decisive impact on the development of their individual projects or research questions, and that it also influenced work in the subsequent arena seminars.

7. Working in a theme from the inside and out onto the arena – a delicate balance between safety, the unknown and stimulating intellectual moments

What was it like to be involved in a theme in relation to the arena? The following is an analysis of the theme Violence as understood mainly by the theme leader. It does not reflect shared memory work by the whole research theme, but builds on meeting minutes and the theme leader's individual memories. However, experiences expressed by the theme participants are also added. It serves as one example of the processes that occurred when participants moved from the safety of the small group to the unknown of the large and constantly changing arena.

Research on gender and violence has a long history of multi-disciplinarity, i.e. many different academic disciplines deal with research on gender and violence, although often not through shared research agendas and common projects (Jordan, 2011). Integrated inter-disciplinary work is much harder to carry out. Jordan argues that university structures and organization are obstacles to such inter-disciplinary efforts directed at violence against women (Jordan, 2011). Further she claims that the research designs are still not ready for an integrative approach to violence research, as each discipline works in line with its own theoretical and methodological approaches. Here, we will argue that the structure and organization of *CG* laid the foundation for collaborative work between our disciplines in the theme Violence.

Work in the theme Violence was arena work in itself, as the theme consisted of researchers from the disciplines public health, law, sociology, education, social work, history and ethnology. Being such a diverse group of researchers, it was important from the outset to start working with key concepts and basic assumptions that we brought into the theme from our own “disciplinary homes”. What we had in common was of course a focus on researching gender and violence, but using an array of methods and theories. We have spent several seminars outlining the differences and similarities between us.

We have presented our different theoretical bases, such as basic feminist theory, social theory, health theories, feminist legal theories and masculinity theories. We have also discussed in some detail our methodological grounds – such as qualitative approaches in discourse analysis, Grounded Theory, content analysis, and narrative analyses. This has been a constant struggle, which has also encouraged us to think in broader perspectives. Based on this internal work, we developed a sense of “we” and a feeling of togetherness.

Thus strengthened by our new unity – out onto the arena we travelled! This journey has been less smooth, but still exciting and stimulating in several respects. At one of the very first arena seminars, the theme problematized gender and violence and emphasized the importance of contextualization, as theme members investigate gender and violence in a variety of cultures and countries, not least in low- and middle-income countries. The links between our theme and the theme Emotions were obvious to us, and we hoped to develop collaboration with them by linking projects. One of the researchers in the theme expressed it as follows: “...there is an emotionalized understanding of violence on the arena”. In addition, aspects of violence that we took for granted seemed to become exceedingly problematic when we encountered new perspectives, not least from the theoretical foundations of the theme Emotions, which presented theories that none of us in the theme Violence were familiar with. This created uncertainty among the researchers in the theme, but it also strengthened the “we feeling” of the group. During later arena seminars, we realized that links could also be found with all of the other themes. Violence and gender connect to health issues, normalization processes, emotions, and democracy and social justice.

At one arena seminar, we discussed memory work as a methodology in gender research. The theme Violence summarized the experiences of that exercise with mixed emotions of happiness, frustration, anger, insecurity, inferiority and “not being good enough”. Here again, we can see that the arena was a challenging as well as intensely emotional meeting point, producing both satisfaction and frustration.

Despite these complex experiences and sometimes harsh feelings, the theme members’ reported experiences of arena work were mostly very positive. They emphasized that there has been an open atmosphere and characterized the work as an encounter between skilled and engaging researchers. The mixture of foci and the variety of methods on the arena during the years have been fruitful for development of the theme, not least when the theme itself presented texts or problematized its concepts and theories for the wider arena. This increased the reflexivity of the group. It has been an eye-opener in that it has revealed other perspectives and research approaches that would have remained concealed without the arena work. And the international reference group has been key to discussions of the on-going gender research at Umeå University. The networking effect is another important feature that was highlighted by members of the theme Violence.

In sum, the theme has benefited from exposing itself to the arena. This exposure has demanded effort, and brought about emotions and frustration on our part. It has challenged theme members’ individual discursive understandings and surely stimulated new thinking and reflections. Further, the theme Violence members have gained insight into and an understanding of the variety of academic methods and perspectives that were present on the arena. The desire on the part of theme members to connect with other themes and form joint projects has not as yet been put into practice, but certainly exposure to the arena has caused researchers belonging to the theme to modify and integrate new aspects of their research on gender and violence. One of the major challenges has been to realize that the focus on violence often creates uncomfortable situations, and members of the theme have sometimes experienced themselves as “party poopers” or “party killers”. Members of the theme Violence often experienced a certain kind of unease on the part of other participants every time they started talking about the gender and violence research they were conducting. There was a feeling among the violence researchers that underlying arena work was the notion that it should be happy, joyful and comfortable. So what Ahmed describes as the “feminist killjoy” in relation to others – who are not feminists – was in this environment of gender researchers experienced *within* a feminist context (Ahmed 2010). However, it is not until recently, after almost five years, that the theme has developed into a research team that focuses on common research questions, joint research applications and co-authorships across disciplinary boundaries. This points to the importance of the duration of inter-disciplinary work, so that trust and familiarity with each other’s theoretical and methodological schemes have time to grow and develop.

8. Challenging the common ground – disclosing differences

At two of the arena seminars, we worked with very concrete “hands-on” exercises from children’s books. These exercises have clearly shown the differences in procedures and favoured theoretical perspectives between disciplines and themes, but also shed light on the constructive dialogue that could emerge. One of the exercises involved the theme groups pretending to be editors/publishers, reading the book text, and thereafter deciding on future publication or rejection, with due consideration and arguments to back up their decision. Everyone seemed to enjoy this exercise and thought it was interesting, thrilling and fun. The result of the exercise was a surprise for several of the arena participants, as it revealed quite different stances and decisions regarding whether or not to publish. To the majority – as it seemed – the content of the book was perceived as exciting, intelligent and fun, and the pictures were considered artistic and excellent. They all argued for publication and listed reasons – mostly deriving from postcolonial theory – for their decision. In contrast, a few participants found the book ethnocentric, old-fashioned, colonial and disrespectful. They considered it a violation of ethnicity and as degrading of certain cultures, although they also understood the sharp irony and humour in it. They did not recommend publication as a children’s book. They were now heavily questioned by the arena and several of those who were very positive tried to convince them that they were wrong in a sense, and that they had not understood the subtlety and refinement of the text. The discussion also revealed that those who were positive were mainly from the arts and humanities and that those who were negative came from health and social sciences research.

This example may serve as a basis for a discussion of the difficulty associated with doing interdisciplinarity. The discussion in this exercise came to a crossroads at which no one had the power to draw the line or decide on a route. It was just a matter of accepting the clashes, facing diversity and understanding that the same text can be interpreted quite differently depending on the reader’s scientific roots and perspectives. When attempts are made to integrate and do interdisciplinary research, such diversity and contrasting opinions may hamper real integration and instead reinforce difference and contradictions. Once at a senior level of research, however, it is important to strive for the ability to relate to the spaces and gaps between different views on science and knowledge. As Andersson and Kalman note: “[g]aps are a reality, and they need to be both identified and assessed [. . .] However, gaps may also be a tool for understanding and learning about oneself and one’s own academic worldview, not only about the views of others” (2010, p. 206-7).

9. Concluding remarks

Interdisciplinary challenges were faced and dealt with in several ways. First, by organizing CG into the five themes, in-depth endeavours were facilitated within each theme. The themes were formed as hybrid research groups, which varied with regard to level of disciplinary diversity. Second, the arena work was an ongoing and parallel activity not only designed in an adjunct effort to safeguard integration and interaction between the different hybrid fields, but also with the expectation that new ideas and theoretical developments might emerge in between themes. Third, interdisciplinarity was considered a self-evident, but also rather unstable condition that required reflection and a steady working method.

The notion that interdisciplinarity is something new is a myth that may be due to the persisting tendency of university systems to use disciplinarity as a foundational aspect of their structure (cf. Salter & Hearn, 1997, p. 3 ff). Although research is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, such that the academic landscape is being altered by new social and cognitive forms (Klein, 2000, p. 3), still “an apparent paradox emerges”: while “[n]ew programs, centres, and activities proliferate”, interdisciplinarity is seemingly impeded (p.7). The fact that the research programme was located at a university centre focusing on gender research was vital. Further, the core objective of this centre, Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, is interdisciplinarity, which facilitated the process of networking and of interdisciplinarity. In addition, it offered a firm organizational structure for this joint venture that engaged researchers throughout the university. Although the already existing interdisciplinary organization and network of the centre was favourable for the process, the research programme required a firm structure and organization of its own. The fact that the research was organized through hybrid teams, that is, the groups pursuing the themes of the programme, provided an important base. Next, having a joint arena for pursuit of the common objectives of the different hybrid teams – all of which had a common focus on gender – was decisive. Not only did it provide an opportunity to enrich the common interdisciplinary platform by sharing research and results, but working jointly on the arena also meant that, in the context of recurrent discussions, joint concepts were transferred and enriched with discipline-specific knowledge (cf. Maasen 2000, p. 182).

Yet because the objectives of work on the arena were rather open-ended, a well-planned structure was required, with scheduled intensive meetings several times a year, where responsibilities were rotated and with the mandatory participation and commitment of funded researchers and theme leaders. One positive result of developing the arena work was further that it helped us expose and scrutinize what turned out *not* to be shared and common ground, both within and between themes. Lack of common ground within a theme that might have passed unnoticed would at times be exposed through the need to spell out discipline-specific notions in the challenges brought forth in the arena work. In the in-depth discussions that sometimes followed such exposures, the identity of a hybrid team might be strengthened as their joint field of research gained a more visible profile through cross-disciplinary communication with other hybrid teams.

It is without question that several advancements have been made both on the meta-theoretical and micro-theoretical levels, for instance publications such as Bränström-Öhman et al. (eds.) (2011), Fahlgren, S (ed.) (2011), and the special issue of *Violence Against Women* (2010:16) in which several participants of the theme Violence were published. Another sign of advancement is the increasing number of high quality publications coming from and new research grants given to the gender research environment at Umeå University and Mid Sweden University. The positive evaluation from The Swedish Research Council in 2011 further supports the significance of this advancement (*Evaluation of "Centres of Gender Excellence"*, 2011: 7).

Whether this advancement has been accomplished within the arena or in the themes is difficult to judge, but it is most certainly the very stimulating interplay between the hybrid themes that has played a significant role. All in all, scientific development has been a result of the arena work, regardless of what we call it: intellectual excitement, insight, imagination, creativity, or new ideas. We started with well-grounded knowledge about our differences and the interdisciplinary challenges. Because scientific consensus was never played out as an ideal, we were able to maintain our methodological and theoretical pluralism. This pluralism is a strength, and the work on the arena has been a way to celebrate and encourage pluralism (Tourish 2011:376). We researchers involved have been permitted to play dual scientific roles, both to be regarded as experts in our disciplinary fields, but also (quite often) accepted as pathbreaking newcomers in the interdisciplinary arena discussions.

As has been shown, the development of research in the hybrid teams has benefitted from the challenges of working together with the other hybrid teams in intensive seminars – on the arena. But as has also been shown, developing interdisciplinary research takes time and effort, and requires persistence. The joint work on the arena has also developed based on our firm decision to cooperate, through multidisciplinary to interdisciplinarity. This work requires continued persistence and opportunities, such as the arena seminars. We hope to further accomplish sustained interdisciplinary cooperation between hybrid teams in years to come, provided we are able to continue collaborating on the arena that was developed.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Professor Ellen Annandale for bringing the idea for the article to an arena meeting in April 2011. We would also like to express our gratitude to Associate Professor Annelie Bränström Öhman for her valuable comments and to the Swedish Research Council for financing the programme.

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Notes

ⁱ Professor Britta Lundgren was the research leader, Professor Ann Öhman leader for the Violence theme and Associate Professor Hildur Kalman was a researcher within the Emotions theme. Ann Öhman is also Director of the Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, the home of the Challenging Gender programme.

ⁱⁱ The other two funded programmes were: GenNA (Nature/Culture Boundaries and Transgressive Encounters) at Uppsala University and GEXcel (Center of Gender Excellence) at Linköping University and Örebro University.

ⁱⁱⁱ Members of the International Reference Group were Prof. Raewyn Connell, University of Sydney, Prof. Gabriele Griffin, University of York, Prof. Margaret Davies of Flinders University, Prof. Johanna Niemi of Helsinki University, Prof. Philomena Essed of Antioch University, and Prof. Ellen Annandale of University of Leicester.