

327 The collaborations you do not get by pressing a button: hierarchical tensions in large collaborative research clusters in the social sciences and humanities

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The collaborative turn in STEM and particularly in Big Sciences is well-consolidated and more recently it has also reached the SSH (Olechnicka et al., 2019) as the collaborative model based on large research clusters has been translated – if not imposed – onto the SSH alongside excellence agendas (Borlaug & Langfeldt, 2020). This qualitative study deploys grounded theory approaches and includes 30 informants belonging to all academic ranks. Preliminary findings reveal the ubiquitous presence of hierarchical tensions, but what are they properties? Where can they be found? What does it mean for collaborations? I suggest to approach these tensions across spaces and places (Livingstone, 2003; Massey, 1994), in formal collaborative settings or informal spaces; delving into the access to the research cluster; and comparing experiences beyond the research cluster. Hence, this paper also sheds lights on the impacts excellence agendas have on the collaborative practice in the SSH.

Full paper

I will present at the Conference the second paper I am currently working on as part of my doctoral research project. The collaborative turn in STEM and particularly in Big Sciences is well-consolidated and has been in-depth studied. More recently, however, this turn has reached the SSH (Olechnicka et al., 2019) and the collaborative model based on large research clusters has been translated – if not imposed – onto the SSH alongside excellence agendas such as the German Excellence Strategy (Borlaug & Langfeldt, 2020). This study approaches collaborations through qualitative and grounded theory lens by interviewing 30 participants across all academic ranks. It deploys an asymmetrical research design (Stöckelová, 2016) as it focuses on three research clusters belonging to the SSH and one STEM cluster. It assumes that collaborations are neither bad nor good and that `multiplicities` of doing of collaborations and articulations – yet unexplored for the SSH – are possible (Mol, 2002).

The so-called Excellence Clusters in the SSH have by far more than 100 members belonging to all academic ranks and are structured around research areas (RA). Each RA has its own research seminars with varying criteria regarding the participating academic ranks. One significant tool to foster interdisciplinary work across the RAs are the inter-area research seminars, which can be applied by any of the cluster's members and are funded for a defined period of time by the cluster. Remarkably, preliminary findings reveal the ubiquitous presence of hierarchical tensions when collaborations are done by the informants – and not only at the collaborative formats within and across the RA. What are the properties of these hierarchical tensions? Where can they be found? What does it mean for collaborations?

I suggest to approach hierarchies across spaces and places (Livingstone, 2003; Massey, 1994), exploring the explicit or underlying hierarchical mechanism and the tensions they creates in relation to the doing of collaborations in the SSH. The following spaces have been identified.

First, formal collaborative spaces such as those described above are a central element of the research clusters. Here, the imposition of the seminar's topic, the almost compulsory participation, unequal gender relations and trust issues create hierarchical tensions. Especially distrust seems to be strongly related to these tensions as some of the study's participants express serious doubts on the academic quality of these seminars as a consequence of what is perceived as imposed decisions that erode the needed trust for engaging in collaborations. Second, and in contrast,

in informal settings, at the research cluster's corridors or at its common rooms, the absence of hierarchies also underscores the importance of trust and mutual learning for establishing collaborative relations.

Third, the very access to the research cluster is based on mechanisms that can be described as hierarchical and that might create from the beginning a strong dependency relation. For instance, doctoral researchers do not choose their topic, but apply to previously decided topics. One professor remarks how this undermines the "creative drive", stressing that in other countries early-career researchers do not apply to positions with a predefined topic. In that very relation, a fourth aspect refers precisely to the comparisons made by the informants. Accordingly, collaborative work has other hierarchical dynamics abroad. This points at different academic cultures in the SSH and how different hierarchical or less-hierarchical relations create different collaborative dynamics.

By approaching these different spaces, a typology of hierarchical tensions within the research cluster will be created. Such a perspective allows to explore in-depth new and established ways of collaborating in the SSH. Furthermore, these dimensions are approached by focusing on participants across all academic ranks, rather than using ranks as a dimension in itself. By creating a typology of hierarchical tensions that delves into specific associated mechanisms, this paper also sheds light on the way how excellence agendas influence the doing of collaborations in the SSH.

References

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