

“Leave the niche”



Heike Solga is director of the research unit on Skill Formation and Labor Markets and professor of sociology at the Free University of Berlin.



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Sociologist Heike Solga and economist Dorothea Kübler discuss their “bridging” project and the opportunities, successes, and pitfalls of interdisciplinary research.

Why did you decide to undertake a research project together beyond your respective disciplines?

Kübler: Interdisciplinary work always needs a little extra push. The WZB designates a special budget for such bridging projects. It provides an incentive for researchers to think about topics that would benefit from being studied from different disciplinary perspectives. In our case, Heike Solga and I realized that my methodological work in experimental research fits well with the training market research in which Heike Solga is very well versed. Our aim was to apply different methods from those commonly used in each discipline in order to gain insights that would otherwise not have been possible.

What are these common methods?

Solga: In sociology we mainly use data from surveys, some of which we collect ourselves. There is growing interest in other methods, such as field experiments, which are widespread in economics. Because Dorothea Kübler and I had already talked about our mutual interest in studying issues relating to education, it made sense for us to join forces for a project.

What did your joint project look like?

Kübler: Our research project consisted of two parts. The first was a field experiment in Berlin, in which we sent fictitious applications to companies that offered apprenticeships. In the application documents, we varied certain features of the applicant. We want-

ed to find out whether grades or social competences were more important for success in applying for a position.

The second part went in a similar direction. Thanks to Heike Solga's good contacts with the German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, we were able to insert a survey experiment into their annual survey of companies. Using a factorial survey based on vignettes consisting of the CVs of fictitious applicants, we tried to discover whether applicants for training schemes are discriminated against on the basis of different variables, like their gender, for example. We also wanted to know whether applicants who do not start their training directly after school are penalized for having a gap in their CV for whatever reason, and we looked at the impact of measures such as the “prevocational training year,” which is intended to prepare school graduates for the labor market if they have not obtained a training place. This measure is often criticized for stigmatizing the participants and therefore being counterproductive in the search for a position.

And what did you find out?

Solga: The field experiment showed that applicants with good grades and high social competences have the best chances of finding a training place. That's not surprising. What is interesting is that applicants who had poor grades but a high level of social competences were more successful than those with good grades and a low level of social competences. In other words, companies are more likely to look at the social virtues – traditionally indicated by means of the so-called Kopfnoten (assessments for behavior at school) – than at the applicant's cognitive competences. After the experiment, we discussed our findings with managers in Berlin. We learned from these discussions that companies are willing to accept a lower level of cognitive competences because they

can compensate for this deficit, to a certain extent, during training. However, they do not tolerate deficits in social behavior, such as a lack of diligence or reliability, because these traits are more difficult to develop.

Kübler: The survey experiment showed that women are disadvantaged when applying even if they meet the same requirements as the men. Their applications will be rated less favorably than those of male applicants, with this effect particularly noticeable in male-dominated industries. By contrast, men who apply for training occupations with a high proportion of women, encounter no disadvantages. One surprising result of the field experiment was that older female applicants for apprenticeships were not discriminated against as strongly as we would have expected. In fact, the most popular applicants among companies were those who had been out of school for two years and had completed at least one year in prevocational training measures. At least in Berlin, participating in prevocational programs does not seem to stigmatize its participants.

Where do you see the added value of the interdisciplinary approach?

Solga: We sociologists had to hone our arguments in discussions with the economists. We also use economic theories in our discipline, for instance when studying human capital. In a bridging project, of course, these notions are discussed more intensely,

and perhaps from a different perspective. It is definitely necessary to be more precise when using ideas and concepts.

Kübler: That was also my experience. In economics, we often find that we have blind spots in our arguments because we pay less attention to certain aspects of human behavior than does sociology. Many of our assumptions are based on the individual, on that person's rational behavior. Economists are interested in the social background, but it often remains a black box for us. We control for these effects in our models, but we lack the theoretical notions. Sociology can provide them.





Solga: I remember our discussion on the possible stigmatization of apprenticeship seekers. This phenomenon can be explained in different ways. One theory is that human-resource professionals follow the earlier decisions of their peers. If there are gaps in the CV, managers assume that previous applications were unsuccessful because the candidates were insufficiently qualified. Another theory suggests that deeply rooted general stigmatizations could also play a role. This explanatory approach would tend to be the one pursued in sociology. If we had studied the matter only within our own discipline, we would very quickly have headed for this

explanation. By working with Dorothea Kübler and her team, we saw that the matter is not that clear.

And where did the interdisciplinary nature of your project cause problems?

Solga: There were actually no problems, but interdisciplinary research does require clear agreements, especially when junior researchers are involved. They have to publish in their respective discipline because a great article will hardly be noticed by their own community if it has been published in the journal of a different discipline. We made sure that we could use the results of this study within our own disciplines as well so that participating in the project would be an asset for the careers of our younger scholars. If Dorothea Kübler and I had worked on the project alone,

it would have been different. In our position it is does not really matter what we add to our list of publications.

Are there professional journals that combine sociology and economics and are also read in the community?

Kübler: There are, but they are not necessarily those with the highest ranking and that's what's most important at the beginning of a career. It is also worth noting that the logic of writing differs from one discipline to another. For example, if I use methods that are not mainstream in my field, I have to discuss the

benefits and potential shortcomings in much greater detail. We also refer to different bodies of literature. *Solga*: Here we have to be careful not to overload a study. It is important to be able to present a coherent research story. Constantly switching between disciplinary perspectives would hinder this.

Do we need more interdisciplinary research, especially in the social sciences?

Kübler: That's a difficult question. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) keeps addressing this matter. There are sometimes suggestions that as many projects as possible – or even all of them – should be collaborative and interdisciplinary. I think that is going too far. There is definitely fantastic research that is not interdisciplinary at all and we should not impose other approaches on them. Interdisciplinarity should not be an end in itself, but should be driven by the particular research question. What is interesting, is that when new interdisciplinary research fields, such as neuroeconomics, develop and become established, they become less and less interdisciplinary. They form their own canon of methods, have their own professional journals, and become a new discipline.

Solga: It's simply good to bring in and try out different perspectives. In this sense interdisciplinary research can help scientists leave their small niche and invite new input. The social sciences, therefore, definitely need more places to meet and more bridging projects.

The interview was conducted by Harald Wilkoszewski.



Research glows

Keywords from WZB research displayed in windows like the spines of books. An evening stroll along Reichpietschufer in December 2014 was worthwhile: The WZB was decorated like an Advent calendar, with the brightly colored windows arousing curiosity about what we were working on. Incidentally, the staff created this project over punch and cookies.

The WZB façade as an Advent calendar (Photo: David Ausserhofer).