

Revisiting Interdisciplinarity in Geography: A Qualitative Study of the “Third Conversation” in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

Collaborative efforts between multiple disciplines have increased in importance when solving global challenges such as climate change, urbanization, pollution and environmental degradation, and social inequality. Geography, which includes both social sciences and natural sciences, is uniquely positioned among disciplines that allow interdisciplinary scholarship to occur. This paper presents a critical analysis of Simon and Graybill's (2010) concept of the “third conversation,” which promotes normative evaluation of the interdisciplinary experience through reflexive processes. The author undertakes an in-depth qualitative analysis of the actual article to identify the conceptual framework, methodology, and findings. The findings of the analysis present several of geography's strengths, including integrative methods and spatial relationships; however, barriers and ambiguities impair geographical communications. The relevance of the use of interdisciplinary ideas is supported by the recent release of the National Education Policy 2020 in India, yet there are still institutional and methodological barriers present. The author concludes that the “third conversation” is a remarkable model to propose better interdisciplinary collaboration through reflexive practice and communication.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, Geography, Third Conversation, Reflexivity, Interdisciplinary Research. India.

Introduction

Research into complicated and multifaceted worldwide issues (such as climate change, urbanization, environmental damage, and societal inequity) can't be solved with just one area of knowledge (disciplines) (Klein, 1996; Lele & Norgaard, 2005). Thus, the interdisciplinary framework of research is developing as a way to produce more complete and useful solutions for these worldwide issues by combining multiple fields of knowledge, various research techniques, and different points of view about research.

In India, interdisciplinary research has been highlighted by numerous recent educational changes (for example, the National Education Policy 2020 focuses on the need for multidisciplinary educational models that will help solve global problems by developing new products or procedures that will create economic stability). Thus, if higher education institutions follow the University Grants Commission and National Council for Educational Research and Training's Guidelines, they will provide a multidisciplinary research model for addressing India's national policy goals of sustainable development, urban development, and environmental sustainability.

Geography has both historic and scientific relevance; therefore, geography's role within contemporary research paradigm shapes the future of geographic research. From a historical perspective, geography has historically had both geomorphological (earthly) and anthropological (human) focuses which represent two different but

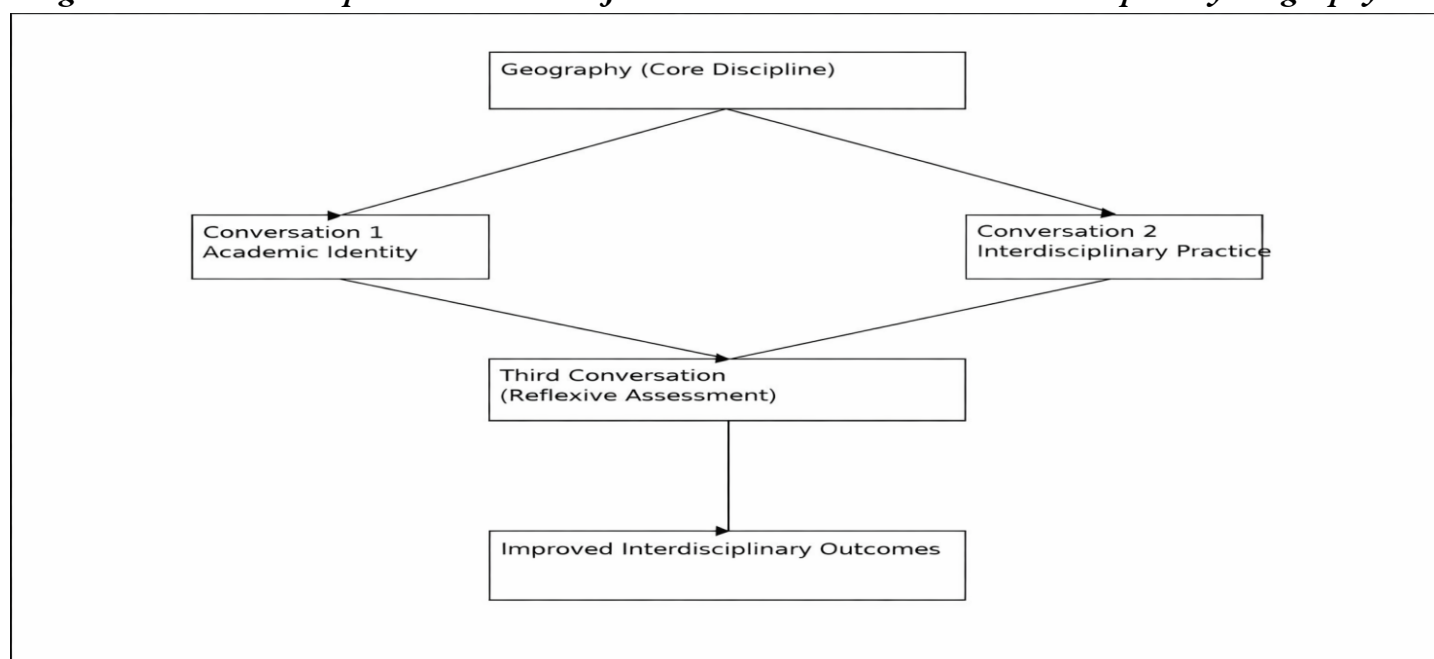
interrelated aspects of geography that have a shared relationship through physical and social sciences (Evans & Randalls, 2008; Petts et al., 2008). Geography is also very informative in terms of spatial relationships, interactions between humans and the environment, and the socio-economic and ecological processes that have influenced the world we live in today. Geography's many interdisciplinary aspects also make it an ideal contributor to interdisciplinary research, especially in urban ecology, sustainability and environmental management. Therefore, the actual role of geography in an interdisciplinary framework or the contributions will ultimately have a significant impact on the body of knowledge; however, this impact is not well studied and therefore not well defined.

Geography in Interdisciplinary Contexts: The Initiation of Third Dialogue is an article by Simon G. L. and Graybill J. K. (2010) addressing the lack of exploration surrounding the location and perception of geography within interdisciplinary research. In their review, two general types of discussions are identified: (1) the position and perception of geography as an academic discipline, with respect to the contributions made through academia as well as with regard to seeking to articulate disciplinary significance and (2), the practical components associated with working across disciplines (e.g. communicating/collaborating; institutional barriers inhibiting/interfering with interdisciplinary collaboration). The two types of discussions offer some insights; however, neither examines the lived experience of interdisciplinary collaboration nor how geographers are perceived by those outside the discipline of geography in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The authors of this article offer a solution to the third kind of conversation through a reflective and collaborative approach by providing insight into how both geography and the community of geographers exist within a multi-channel environment. They have investigated the theoretical contributions and expectation of the discipline(s) as well as the interpersonal relationships between the community and the expectations through the use of a multi-institutional relationship.

This review paper will assess how the author has developed their intended outcome or goal with respect to their methodology and support for the rationale. Also it will evaluate how the third type of conversation will be applied to help develop a better understanding of geography's identity within interdisciplinary research and the possibilities for enhanced collaboration among academics in the context of higher education in India today.

Figure 1: Linked Conceptual Framework of the Third Conversation in Interdisciplinary Geography



Source: Developed by the author based on Simon & Graybill (2010)

Overview of the Article

According to the article, discussions related to interdisciplinary issues within geography typically consist of two lines of inquiry. The first line examines geography's position and identity in relation to other disciplines in the larger academic community. Geography's status as an intellectual discipline in relation to other disciplines and how it constructs a definition of its own discipline is the primary focus. The second line of inquiry considers the practical aspects associated with being an interdisciplinary researcher, specifically issues regarding collaboration, communication barriers, the integration of diverse methods, and the institutional impediments associated with conducting interdisciplinary research.

While these two conversations have provided significant insight into both the theoretical and practical aspects of being an interdisciplinary researcher, the authors suggest that there are still important dimensions missing from the literature. Specifically, they assert that there is little understanding of how collaborators in other disciplines experience, interpret, or assess geography in practice and in real-world situations of interdisciplinary collaboration, thus limiting our understanding of the practical relevance and effectiveness of the discipline in conducting research collaboratively.

The writers create a "third conversation" concept to fill the gap by focusing on reflexive assessments. Reflexive assessment refers to critically evaluating how we infer geography's meaning, its role in our lives, and how we use geography in interdisciplinary contexts, particularly concerning the viewpoints of those outside the discipline of geography. The third conversation focuses on three aspects of holistic interdisciplinary collaboration – how we perceive each other's (non-geographers') respective disciplines and areas of study, how we communicate with one another in this respect, and how we interact across disciplines. The intent of the third conversation is to enhance mutual understanding between disciplines and improve interdisciplinary collaboration through continuous improvement.

Key Themes of the Study

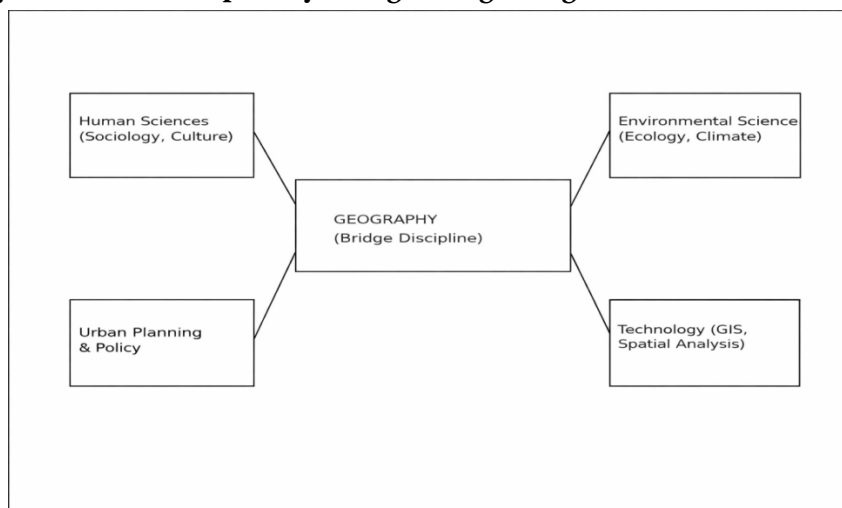
Geography as an Interdisciplinary Discipline

Geography as an interdisciplinary science is both valuable and unique because it integrates both the human (social) and the natural (environmental) in one study. In contrast to many other disciplines, which tend to examine either the social or the natural world, geography allows us to consider both the human and the natural aspects of issues.

A geographer can use their understanding of how humans and natural environments interact to develop a more comprehensive view of the contemporary global issues we face today. The authors suggest that geography is well-suited for analyzing complex issues like climate change, urban ecology, sustainability, and resource management because it focuses on spatial, temporal, and place-based relationships between local, regional, and global processes. The interdisciplinary nature of geography offers many exciting possibilities for creating interdisciplinary perspectives to promote collaboration among multiple disciplines, including environmental science, sociology, urban planning, and policy studies.

Many different research methodologies are available through geography's methods of doing research (for example: qualitative - ethnography, critical theory; or quantitative - spatial analysis and GIS) contributing to geography being flexible enough to be able to do various types of research across many different areas of study.

Also, the author suggests geography as being a "bridging" science (the combination of natural and social science) and thus allows for research to be done in an interdisciplinary way (or comprehensive) by using both a broad, space-oriented approach and a critical perspective when analyzing information.

Figure 2: Geography as an Interdisciplinary Bridge Integrating Human and Environmental Perspectives

Source: Developed by the author based on interdisciplinary geography literature.

Two Existing Conversations

The article identifies two dominant strands of discourse that have shaped scholarly discussions on interdisciplinarity within geography. While both conversations offer valuable insights into the discipline's role and functioning, they remain limited in capturing the full complexity of interdisciplinary engagement.

(A) Geography and the Academy

The first conversation mainly deals with the issue of identity, positioning and intellectual status of geography in the academic world. This includes defining what geography is as an academic discipline and how it relates to other disciplines. Scholars engaged in this conversation emphasize on geography's integrative nature and its relationship between the natural and social sciences.

This strand also represents ongoing attempts to claim and consolidate the academic importance of geography through defining concepts such as contribution, theory, and method. Concern for geographical boundaries, coherence, and distinctiveness with relevance in a wider interdisciplinary context often come up in debates within this strand.

However, while this perspective provides important insights to the disciplinary identity of geography, it remains largely theoretical and inward-looking, focusing on perceptions of geography within academia rather than the practical realities.

(B) Making Interdisciplinarity Work

The second conversation provides insight into the practical and operational features of an interdisciplinary environment. It explores the processes, barriers and techniques for implementing interdisciplinary research and collaboration. Specific topics discussed within this strand include the difficulty of establishing productive collaborations between scholars from different disciplines; overcoming communication barriers created by the use of different terminologies and frameworks for understanding; and overcoming institutional constraints caused by rigid departmentalizing and evaluation systems.

This conversation also identifies issues with methods such as integrating different research methodologies as well as the importance of collaboratively developing a common understanding regarding research objectives and outcomes. Finally, the importance of teamwork, respect for each other and the commitment to build a common base of knowledge among participants in order to successfully create an interdisciplinary environment is stressed, although this strand appears to primarily emphasize on the structural/systemic component rather than the individualised/experiential dynamic characteristics of those involved in interdisciplinary settings.

The Third Conversation

In offering their main contribution to the topic, this article develops the idea of a ‘third conversation.’ This conversation is intended to be a bridge that goes beyond the limitations of existing conversations about what is understood as being interdisciplinary. The two previous conversations have discussed the issue as either based on placing geography in its disciplinary context or discussing the practical aspects of how interdisciplinary collaborations occur. This third conversation introduces a new perspective that is more reflexive and experiential. This perspective helps frame the need to examine critically how geography is implemented, communicated, and perceived in real interdisciplinary contexts.

At its core, the third conversation is founded on the notion of reflexive evaluation; that is, it is a systematic and critical examination of how geography is conceptualised by geographers as well as by those who are collaborating with geographers in other disciplines. By considering the perspectives of non-geographers, the third conversation offers a better understanding of the characteristics of geography and the contributions geography can make to interdisciplinary research.

This conversation focuses on the perception of geography by others within the context of collaborative ways of working (i.e., as understood by others when working together). This article illustrates that people’s perceptions of geography can differ greatly, based on what they understand as having the integrated and critical attributes of geography to those who have confusion about what geography encompasses (and how it’s perceived). These different views demonstrate the need for good communication, clarity, and mutual understanding when working across varying disciplines. By considering these differing perceptions of geography, the third conversation sheds light on how knowledge from each discipline is received and understood when crossing boundaries.

The third conversation also seeks to improve collaboration between disciplines through the identification and addressing of practical challenges encountered in interdisciplinary collaborations. It is intended that geographers will consider their communication style, methodology, and way of working with, and communicating with, disciplines outside of geographic sciences in order to encourage greater collaboration and inclusivity. This suggests decreasing jargon used by their discipline, improving their explanation of the key concepts used by their discipline, and discussing how their knowledge can be practically applied (useful) in interdisciplinary collaborations.

Thus, the third conversation is a major shift from abstract conversations to grounded experience. The third conversation provides insight on how geography can play a role in interdisciplinary working; and offers a framework to enhance existing collaborative research practices through the application of reflexivity, dialogue, and shared learning.

Methodology of the Study

For this research, we chose a qualitative strategy. Our goal was to investigate how geography is perceived and applied in interdisciplinary programs within Indian universities. We felt this was the appropriate venue of inquiry so that we could study individuals’ experiences, views and opinions related to working inter-disciplinarily. We studied particular interdisciplinary programs at different educational institutions of higher education throughout India, including both central as well as state universities, where academics with diverse backgrounds collaborate in the pursuit of research. Participants in this study represented disciplines such as anthropology, biology, geography, earth science, urban planning, environmental studies, and public policy from a wide range of disciplines allowing us to obtain an integrated understanding of the interactions between these varied disciplines. Initially, this study contacted approximately sixty individuals for potential participation. Of those contacted, 45 provided usable responses; however, our selection process did not randomly select respondents. Rather, we deliberately selected respondents that were currently active in those academic environments that integrated

multiple disciplines to ensure that the responses we collected came from individuals who truly had appropriate knowledge and expertise regarding the research topic.

To gather data on the contributions, strengths, limitations and interdisciplinary role of geography, a short structured questionnaire with four open-ended questions was used. The use of open questions allowed participants to provide in-depth answers that were both nuanced and specific to the context of their responses.

Data were analysed using a thematic coding approach; all responses were reviewed thoroughly, coded and grouped into categories of emerging themes and sub-themes. To ensure that the findings were valid and reliable, the coding process was conducted systematically and themes were cross-verified multiple times to establish the consistency of the outcomes and to reduce any level of subjective bias. This methodology identified repeated occurrences and produced meaningful insights into the areas of interdisciplinary engagement.

Despite having a robust and conceptually sound methodology for reflexive inquiry, there are still some limitations to this study. The small and particular sample used for this study limits the generalisation of the results from this study to all higher education institutions in India. Further, as the study was based only on qualitative research methodology, future research could add mixed methods of research, including interviewing and validating quantitatively, in order to reinforce the empirical validity and broader applicability of the results.

Major Findings of the Study

The findings of the study highlight the significant role of geography in interdisciplinary research through its integrative capacity, spatial perspective, and critical analytical approach. For better clarity and academic presentation, the findings are categorized into the following themes:

1. Strengths of Geography

The fact that geography is able to bring together both the natural sciences and social sciences makes it a particularly powerful cross-field area of study / research. In addition to focusing on how things are related spatially, geography also focuses on how humans interact with the environment and the impact this has on place. Given these areas of study, researchers will have an overall better understanding of global problems that exist (such as climate change, urbanisation or sustainability) than through studying them through only one or other discipline (natural science or social science). In addition, geography uses a wide variety of methods and methods of analysis, both qualitative (e.g., ethnography, critical theory) and quantitative (e.g., GIS, spatial analysis), increasing the discipline's ability to cross borders between different academic disciplines and making it a very significant bridge discipline for researchers conducting interdisciplinary research.

2. Challenges Identified

While geography has a lot to offer, there are also many challenges that prevent geography from fully contributing to other disciplines. One major challenge is that geography tends to use a very complex vocabulary and terminology that varies depending on the discipline being used. As a result, it has been difficult for those from different disciplines to communicate effectively with one another.

Additionally, because geography is unclear about what it means to be a discipline, those who do not have a background in geography are often confused as to the scope and contributions of this discipline. The differences in methodology and ambiguity in the conceptual frameworks used across disciplines can also create barriers to collaboration. All of these challenges show that there needs to be a greater degree of clarity when communicating and articulating the geographic knowledge available to the development of interdisciplinary scholarship.

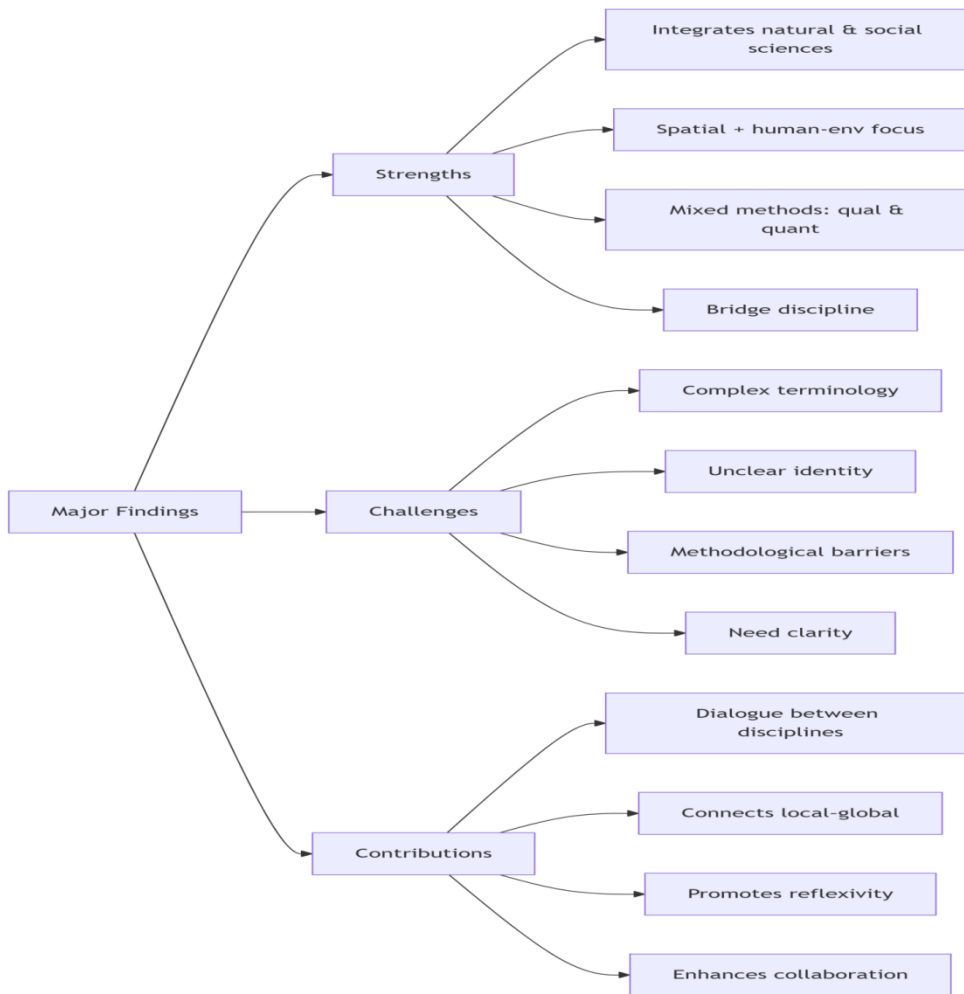
3. Interdisciplinary Contributions

The research indicates that geography plays a vital role in interdisciplinary research through the establishment of a dialogue between disciplines and contributing to the development of critical and global thinking. The

capacity for geography to connect local, regional, and global processes increases the depth of understanding about socio-environmental issues.

In addition, geography contributes to enriching interdisciplinary research through the promotion of reflexivity, which means that it encourages scholars to critically reflect on their own disciplinary perspectives while engaging with others. In turn, this creates the opportunity for scholars to develop a greater understanding of one another's areas and therefore enhances collaborations between scholars as well as increases the overall success of interdisciplinary research.

Figure 3 – Major findings of the study: Strengths of Geography, Challenges Identified, and Interdisciplinary Contributions



Source: *Author's own analysis. The diagram synthesizes qualitative themes derived from the study's results on geography's role in interdisciplinary research.*

Critical Evaluation

Strengths of the Study

This study is a source of many advantages that give impetus to geography and interdisciplinary or interdisciplinary research in terms of collaborating across disciplines.

The primary contribution is the identification of a new theoretical construct known as a "third conversation," which offers new ways of conceptualizing and understanding collaboration across interdisciplinary research

practices, both through formal discipline-based relationships and informal experiential or reflective sources of knowledge.

Discussing how geography is a means of understanding and describing geographic practices and perceptions creates an opportunity for greater understanding and potential for improving cooperation across disciplines—not only does this give rise to new collaborative research opportunities; it also provides ways to do collective studies of interdisciplinary research using geography as a form of understanding.

Empirical evidence is used to evaluate how and why disciplines engage within collaboratives; qualitative data from an interdisciplinary Urban Ecology Studies program is included to enhance the credibility of the argument for the role of geography and our perceptions of geography in this process.

The researchers involved in this project made significant discoveries regarding real-world issues that create barriers to working across disciplines. Their focus on understanding each participant's perspective of "lived experience" provides insight into the numerous challenges of cooperative research environments, including communication issues between different fields; misunderstanding the nature of one another's subject matter; and differences in approaches to the work (to name just three examples).

Additionally, this project adds an important aspect—promoting reflexivity in the actual research process. This implies that it will be valuable for scholars to conduct self-assessments and remember the importance of being critical towards themselves when engaging with multi-disciplinary research because doing so involves reconciling multiple viewpoints/approaches/methodologies (etc.)

By having this emphasis on reflexivity, not only does it increase the level of academic rigor associated with conducting the research, but it will result in better collaboration among researchers from various disciplines in a more successful manner.

In summary, due to these aforementioned characteristics of the research project, it represents an important contribution to both geography and to interdisciplinary research—providing both original theoretical contributions and also practical applications.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides extensive contributions, it also has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. One of the main limitations of this research is the relatively small and selective sample taken from a limited number of interdisciplinary programmes at higher education institutions across India. As a result, the findings are not likely to be representative of the various institutional contexts throughout the country, for example: central universities; state universities; and private institutions respectively.

Another significant limitation of this research relates to context-specificity. Interdisciplinary practices in India do not have uniform structures across institutions and are often quite different depending on the context, including: resources; institutional support; academic culture; and implementation of interdisciplinary policies respectively. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from this study's selected programmes may not easily be applied to all higher education settings in India.

Finally, the study is limited in terms of the representation of various subfields of geography. While the study provides emphasis on the human and nature–society perspectives of geography, it does not include enough information from other important areas of geography (i.e., physical geography; geospatial technology (GIS); remote sensing) that would provide additional perspectives on the topic of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The research was conducted primarily using a qualitative method with open-ended questions and a thematic analysis approach to data collection and analysis. This type of study gives detailed insights into the issue, but

without any quantitative measures or statistical validation, the strength, reliability and generalisability of the data may be limited.

This is true in light of the Indian context, in which interdisciplinary research is an emerging area of study, and policy frameworks (such as the National Education Policy 2020) are still being developed. Therefore, to increase the generalisability of interdisciplinary education in Indian universities, future research should involve a greater number of varied samples, and also include mixed-method designs. These approaches will help improve the empirical validity, generalizability, and policy relevance of these types of research conducted within an Indian university setting.

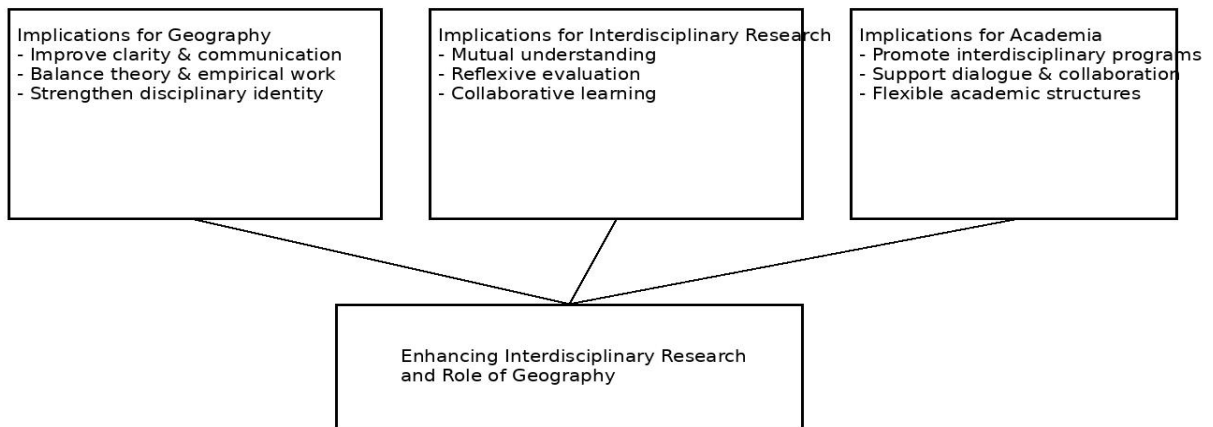
Implications of the Study

The findings from this research will have a very important impact on 3 areas: geography, interdisciplinary research, and higher education institutions. They also suggest ways to improve communication between disciplines, provide clarity of the various disciplines, and encourage reflexive practices amongst scholars. The findings present a strong need for institutional support through flexible academic structures and collaborative research environments. There is also a strong alignment between the findings of this research with the national policy frameworks, specifically the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which calls for a multi-disciplinary and holistic approach to education, and the need for reform to support and promote interdisciplinary research in Indian Higher Education.

Figure 4: Implications of the Study in Geography and Interdisciplinary Research

Source: Author’s own construction based on study findings

Implications of the Study



Conclusion

The present study makes a significant contribution to the discourse on interdisciplinarity by critically examining the role and perception of geography through the lens of the “third conversation.” Moving beyond traditional debates on disciplinary identity and the operational challenges of collaboration, the study emphasizes the importance of reflexive evaluation in understanding how geography is practiced and perceived within

interdisciplinary contexts. This shift from abstract theorization to experience-based analysis provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the discipline's position in contemporary research environments.

The findings reveal that geography holds substantial potential as an integrative discipline due to its ability to bridge the natural and social sciences and to address complex global challenges through spatial and relational perspectives. However, this potential is constrained by several challenges, including communication barriers, conceptual ambiguity, and lack of clarity in disciplinary identity, which often limit its effectiveness in collaborative settings.

In the context of Indian higher education, the relevance of interdisciplinarity has been strongly reinforced by policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020, which advocates for multidisciplinary learning and research. Despite this progressive vision, institutional rigidity, uneven implementation, and methodological limitations continue to hinder the full realization of interdisciplinary practices.

The study highlights reflexivity as a crucial mechanism for enhancing interdisciplinary engagement. By encouraging scholars to critically reflect on their own disciplinary approaches and to engage constructively with perspectives from other fields, reflexivity fosters improved communication, mutual understanding, and collaborative efficiency.

In conclusion, the 'third conversation' provides a transformative framework for advancing interdisciplinary research by integrating reflexivity, communication, and experiential understanding. Strengthening institutional support, methodological rigor, and interdisciplinary dialogue will be essential for realizing the full potential of geography in addressing complex global and national challenges.

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