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**Navigating across Disciplines
in Migration and Mobility Research:
A Practical and Reflective Account**

Working Paper #41
December, 2025

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Navigating across Disciplines in Migration and Mobility Research: A Practical and Reflective Account

The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. It aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed at the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises eleven research projects at eight universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel, as well as the ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences.

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Abstract

This working paper draws on the experiences of three scholars involved in the research project “Evolving (Im)Mobility Regimes: Migrant Workers’ Entitlement and Precarization in Times of Crisis”, conducted within the framework of the ‘nccr-on the move’. The project integrates sociological and legal perspectives and combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Drawing on current interdisciplinary literature and our collaborative experience, we explore the conceptual, methodological, and structural challenges of interdisciplinary research, including epistemological and methodological tensions, differing timelines, and publication challenges. Through practical and reflective accounts, we identify pitfalls and propose practices for future interdisciplinary research, emphasizing the importance of early epistemological dialogue, conceptual clarity, structural support, and mutual respect across disciplinary lines. More specifically, our findings point out that successful collaboration between sociologists and lawyers requires (1) open and honest conversations about concepts, methods, and career paths; (2) mutual understanding and openness to compromise; (3) adequate time and financial resources, and (4) careful planning, making interdisciplinarity a demanding yet worthwhile pursuit.

Keywords

Interdisciplinarity, Multidisciplinarity, Mixed-Methods, Social Science, Law, Research

Acknowledgments

The authors drafted, wrote and edited this working paper collaboratively. All three are first authors; regardless of potential disciplinary approaches how to structure the authors’ names.

This research was supported by the nccr – on the move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation grant 51NF40-205605.

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1 Introduction

Interdisciplinary research, i.e., research involving at least two different disciplines, has gained increasing interest and importance in recent years and has been actively promoted within academia. However, collaborations between lawyers and sociologists have been – and often still are – approached with scepticism and distrust due to differences in disciplinary language, distinct perception and use of law, contrasting ways of thinking, and training with dissimilar aims (Willock 1974; Campbell 1974). Indeed, some scholars have questioned whether such collaborations “will flourish or even should be encouraged”, warning that “the price to be paid for “getting on” with one another” might “be too high” (Campbell 1974, 13). Others highlight that, despite efforts to foster interdisciplinary exchange, the two disciplines “remain frustratingly apart” (Banakar and Travers 2002, 1, as cited in Ervasti 2008).

Nevertheless, more optimistic voices exist. For instance, Willock (1974) argues that lawyers can guide sociologists “through the thickets of the law” (ibid, 6), while sociologists can help lawyers create “a better understood and more responsive law system” (ibid, 12). Such collaborations can be particularly fruitful in the field of migration – an area where complex and far-reaching legislation profoundly shapes people’s lives, practices, and ways of being. In this context, legal scholars contribute by analysing laws, their developments and related processes, while sociologists explore the ‘why’ and ‘how’ behind migration law and its effects on everyday life (Cope 2023). It is therefore not surprising that migration research is often described as an “interdisciplinary field of research par excellence” (Borkert 2018, 60).

Regardless of whether benefits or drawbacks of interdisciplinarity are emphasized, scholars broadly agree that interdisciplinary research efforts must be critically reflected upon. In this working paper, we – two legal scholars and one sociologist involved in a larger interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research project – take on this task. We reflect on the interdisciplinary nature of our collaboration, the challenges we have faced, the pitfalls we have observed, and the lessons we have learned over the course of our three years working together. Thus, this paper examines the collaboration between researchers from the two distinctive fields: sociology and law, conducted within the framework of a ‘nccr-on the move’ project on migrant workers’ evolving precarities in times of crisis (nccr-on the move 2025a). Therefore, it does not constitute a reflective account on socio-legal studies in which law and legal processes are analysed from a social scientific perspective (see e.g., Banakar and Travers 2005).

This working paper starts with a non-exhaustive literature review on the definition and concepts of interdisciplinarity research, highlighting the meaning of the term, as well as the barriers and good practices recognized in the literature (chapter 2). Acknowledging other forms of research that go beyond one discipline, such as trans- and multidisciplinary, we focus on interdisciplinarity to, first, mirror the cornerstone of the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) studies on migration and mobility, and second, to correspond to the intended design of the project we collaborated on. Upon this review, we briefly share the context of our research project (chapter 3), before we address a practical account in chapter 4 on our own experiences navigating disciplinary boundaries during the past three years of working together. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the discussion and reflection of three major pitfalls of our teamwork, and the lessons learned from them. Finally, in

the conclusion, we bring together these candid reflections on our collaboration and revisit the long-standing question: can lawyers and sociologists truly “get on with” one another (Willock 1974, 3)?

2 Interdisciplinarity

2.1 A Definition in Progress

Scholars collaborating across disciplines or with professionals from other fields use different typologies to describe what kind of research they are doing. Terms such as *interdisciplinary*, *transdisciplinary* and *multi- (or pluri-) disciplinary* research are employed to refer to the varying levels of interconnectedness among disciplines and the degree of conceptual and methodological integration in a single research project (Borkert 2018; Choi and Pak 2006; Darbellay 2024). However, the definitions of these terms remain part of an ongoing scientific debate, making it difficult to distinguish them clearly (Newman 2024).

The Oxford Dictionary defines “*interdisciplinary*” as involving “two or more different subjects or areas of knowledge” (Oxford Dictionary 2018). Accordingly, the prefix “inter-” emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between disciplinary approaches and boundaries. The goal is to develop shared methodologies and perspectives by deconstructing disciplinary knowledge in order to create innovative and holistic findings, or even to establish new disciplines (Borkert 2018; Choi and Pak 2006; Hesse-Biber 2016).¹ Thus, interdisciplinary research operates in two dimensions. First, research projects can vary in their level of interdisciplinarity depending on the extent to which they integrate concepts, methods and knowledge from different academic disciplines. Second, the degree of interdisciplinarity may depend on the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds among the team members (Gibson et al. 2019; Newman 2024). Yet, the literature remains inconclusive on whether interdisciplinary research inherently requires collaboration between individuals from different specializations, or whether a project can be considered interdisciplinary on its own – i.e., by formulating an interdisciplinary research question, combining conceptual perspectives and methodological approaches – regardless of the number or disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers involved (Newman 2024).

In contrast, *transdisciplinary* research aims to create “a completely novel brand of scientific inquiry” by, for example, bringing together researchers and non-scientific actors (Newman 2024, 139). Transdisciplinary research embraces role release and role expansion, thereby transcending (“trans-”) disciplinary boundaries to examine entire systems in a dynamic and holistic manner (Choi and Pak 2006; Darbellay 2015). Social work is a discipline that exemplifies this approach (Nurius et al. 2017; University of Neuchâtel, n.d.). Finally, *multi- or pluri-disciplinarity*, considered as the most basic form of disciplinary collaboration, involves multiple (“multi-”) disciplines working on a problem either in parallel or sequentially, without challenging or crossing their disciplinary boundaries (Choi and Pak 2006; Gibson et al. 2019).

¹ For examples of (successful) interdisciplinary research collaborations, see e.g., Copenhagen Business School (CBS) and DEA (2017) and medifas.net (2025).

In summary, all these definitions and approaches share the assumption that distinct scholarly disciplines exist and that there is an added value in combining and integrating these different disciplinary traditions to varying degrees.

2.2 A Research Practice in Progress

In addition to discussions on the definition of interdisciplinarity, the barriers and enablers of interdisciplinary collaboration play an important role in literature. However, empirically grounded analysis of the factors that facilitate and promote such collaborations is still lacking (Newman 2024).

Despite this, scholarship generally agrees that interdisciplinary collaborations – characterized by their “360-degree vision and integrated approach” – are better equipped than disciplinary endeavours to address the complex and pressing challenges of our time (Borkert 2018, 58). This strength is attributed to the fact that issues such as climate change or migration often cannot be adequately understood using the knowledge and methods of a single discipline (Bose 2012; Brister 2016; Gibson et al. 2019; Newman 2024). Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration is said to foster “creativity, innovation, and outside-the-box thinking” by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds (Newman 2024, 135). Findings from such projects are thus increasingly recognized as being of fundamental importance in addressing and advancing solutions to social, technological, medical, and scientific problems (Nissani 1997). In this context, it is not surprising that interdisciplinary collaboration has been actively promoted through top-down initiatives over the past 30 years (Levitt et al. 2011; Zhou et al. 2022). Today, a wide range of grants and training programs require interdisciplinary approaches (see e.g., National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) or Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS)). Furthermore, new centers of excellence have been established at universities to explore specific challenges from multiple disciplinary perspectives (see e.g. Gibson et al. 2019).

Despite its compelling advantages and the development of specific instruments to promote it, interdisciplinary research is characterized by a need of greater resources (particularly time), is more difficult to produce and publish, and involves higher risks for both research projects and the academic careers of researchers (Brister 2016; Gibson et al. 2019; Lach 2014; Newman 2024). This is largely because interdisciplinarity compels researchers to move beyond their disciplinary cocoon and engage with “opposing and, sometimes, conflicting styles of thought, research traditions, methodological ideologies, and disciplinary languages” (Borkert 2018, 67; see also Campbell 1974).

According to Brister (2016), the resulting epistemological and methodological disagreements can be grouped into four categories: (1) facts and background knowledge, (2) evidentiary standards or rigor, (3) causal explanations, and (4) research goals and values. Interdisciplinary collaboration therefore requires an intensive and foundational exchange of terms, concepts, data, and methods to formulate suitable research questions and objectives. Accordingly, one should not assume that interdisciplinarity naturally yields productive synergies (Hesse-Biber 2016). On the contrary, such synergies – those capable of deconstructing disciplinary boundaries and knowledge – are hard-won and require sustained, close cooperation throughout the entire duration of the research project.

2.3 An Academic Identity in Progress

Scholars engaged in interdisciplinary research must be prepared to tolerate ambiguity and paradox, handle conceptual overload, and commit to disciplinary detachment. This process also demands openness, appreciation for other perspectives and methodological approaches, and humility in interactions with colleagues from diverse backgrounds (Borkert 2018; Lach 2014). Interdisciplinary engagement also requires the capacity to re-integrate and translate one's research knowledge, practice, and identity into new contexts (Hesse-Biber 2016). This openness and willingness to step outside one's disciplinary comfort zone is no small task, especially considering prevailing structural barriers.

Academic training and career paths are typically embedded within distinct disciplines, which are grounded in orthodox visions of legitimate scientific practices (Darbellay 2015; Hesse-Biber 2016). Taking the example of law, it requires specific professional knowledge to work as a legal practitioner (Repko et al. 2020). As a result, pursuing an interdisciplinary trajectory may negatively affect both a scientific and professional advancement of a lawyer (Newman 2024). Interdisciplinarity may also importantly shape academic identity. Through education and professional socialization, scholars internalize disciplinary knowledge, norms, and practices, which often foster distinct "tribal" behaviours within academic communities (Becher 1989; Foucault 1971; Henkel 2000).

Disciplines not only provide methodological and theoretical orientations but also offer a sense of identity, community, and security of operating within a clearly defined domain. Consequently, scholars tend to exhibit loyalty to their disciplinary affiliations (Lattuca 2001). While avoiding oversimplification, it can nonetheless be observed that members of traditional disciplinary communities typically occupy clearly bounded positions within the academic field. In contrast, interdisciplinary researchers often adopt more fluid and unconventional positions negotiated at the intersection of multiple disciplines.

3 Context: The Research Project

The context of our research project is within the framework of the 'nccr-on the move', a National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) focusing on migration and mobility studies. NCCRs are a key instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) to support long-term research initiatives on themes of strategic relevance for the country (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation n.d.). More specifically, the 'nccr-on the move' aims to advance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond by connecting disciplines, such as sociology, geography, social anthropology, history, demographics, economics, and law. Thus, the aim of the 'nccr-on the move' is doing interdisciplinary research. Since its launch in 2014, it has funded a total of 49 research projects. During its current and final funding period (2022-2026), 11 research projects based at eight Swiss universities examine the impact of various crises on migration and (im)mobility from an interdisciplinary perspective (nccr-on the move 2025b).

One of these 11 projects, entitled "Evolving (Im)Mobility Regimes: Migrant Workers' Entitlement and Precarization in Times of Crisis" (nccr-on the move 2025a), provided the framework for the

interdisciplinary collaboration we reflect upon in this working paper. Thus, our collaboration took place in the context of a top-down initiative by the Swiss government in which interdisciplinarity is actively promoted (Gibson et al. 2019; Levitt et al. 2011; Zhou et al. 2022).

More specifically, our project aimed to shed light on how crises trigger changes in law and policy and how such events affect migrant workers, examined from two disciplinary perspectives. From a legal point of view, we investigated how laws concerning migrant workers change in times of crisis. From a sociological perspective, we examined how crises influence the working and living conditions of migrant workers and how they cope with these precarities and evolving circumstances. Therefore, our project could not be classified as a socio-legal study, as our analysis did not focus on laws, its implementation, and legal processes from a sociological perspective (Banakar and Travers 2005). Rather, it combined legal and sociological insights equally in order to produce new and innovative knowledge on the effects of crises.

A total of seven researchers were intended to contribute to the project: four from sociology and three from law. This diverse and balanced team composition was aimed at mitigating the risk of ‘disciplinary capture’ – a phenomenon in which “the standards, value commitments, and methodological presuppositions of one discipline [...] consistently take precedence over other disciplines” (Brister 2016, 84). That said, the team is relatively large. In fact, Hesse-Biber (2016) argues that interdisciplinary research teams work most effectively with four to six members.

In addition to bridging disciplinary perspectives, the project combined both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative analysis relied on existing datasets, tracking the evolution of various precarity indicators and a precarity index over time for different groups of migrants and native individuals. The qualitative component was based on narrative interviews with migrants working in the hospitality and catering industry. Participants were asked to talk about their migratory and professional trajectories, working conditions, relationships with employers, and their financial, legal, familial, and housing situations. Finally, the legal analysis started with the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) and continued with a detailed and in-depth review and analysis of international, European and national migration law and respective case law. While the quantitative and legal analyses were conducted for Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, the qualitative study focused on Switzerland and Portugal.

The data collection and analysis were carried out by three postdoctoral researchers – two from sociology (each employed at 40%) and one from law (employed at 70%). The project was led and coordinated by four professors from different Universities (of Applied Sciences) with diverse disciplinary backgrounds across law, social work, and sociology.

4 A Practical Account: Navigating Disciplinary Approaches

4.1 Creating an Understanding of Key Terms

One of the main challenges in interdisciplinary collaboration lies in communication, due to differences in disciplinary language, core concepts, and (un)shared terminologies (Austin et al. 2008;

Brister 2016; Lattuca 2001). To mitigate potential misunderstandings and establish a common communicative foundation early on, we organized the first team meeting in autumn 2022, shortly after the project's official launch. It quickly became clear that we needed an overview of key terms, their definitions and usage to collaboratively study how crises trigger changes in law and policy and affect (im)mobile migrant workers. Terms and concepts that required clarification were “precarization”, “crises”, “migrant workers” and “(im)mobility”.

Our intense debates around the term's “migrant” and “migrant workers” exemplify the scope of the terminological and epistemological challenges we faced at the outset (see e.g., discussion in Borrelli and Ruedin 2024). In law, courses on concepts and theories related to migration and mobility are rare or non-existent, depending on where the person studied. Terms such as migrant workers and mobility are used only as stated (if at all) in legal frameworks. In this context, migrants are non-nationals, i.e., persons who do not hold the citizenship of the state in which they reside. Additionally, legal frameworks – at least within the European Union (EU) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), of which Switzerland is also a member – further distinguish between EU/EFTA citizens and third-country nationals, with research often focusing on one group or the other. A migrant worker is also defined in legal instruments, for example in article 2 of the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* (ICRMW, 1990), as a person who is not a national of the country in which the work is performed.

While legal studies emphasize status (i.e., citizenship) as the defining criterion for identifying a migrant, sociology recognizes a wide variety of migrant categories – many of which are subject to ongoing debate. These categories may be based on citizenship, place of birth, or the birthplaces and citizenships of an individual's parents, as in the case of a person ‘with a migrant background’. However, such categorizations are increasingly being questioned. On the one hand, scholars have criticized the unreflective adoption of administrative categories (Anderson and Blinder 2024; Dahinden 2016; Dahinden et al. 2020). On the other hand, their adequacy and relevance for analysing migration phenomena and lived experiences of mobility have also been challenged (Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2020; Robertson 2019; Will 2019). In addition, dominant categories in migration research are often constructed along several dimensions: time (e.g., permanent, temporary and seasonal migrants), space (e.g., internal and international migrants), location (emigrants and immigrants), and direction of the movement (e.g., home and host country, return migrants). Further distinctions are made based on the state's perspective (e.g., ‘legal’, ‘illegal’ and transit migrants) and on the primary motivation for the move (e.g., labour and retirement migrants) (Collyer and de Haas 2012). However, these categorizations are also contested. Indeed, they often presuppose the nation-state as the central starting point for analysis and risk oversimplifying the complex realities of human mobilities (see e.g., Collyer and de Haas 2012; Piccoli et al. 2024; Tomás 2023).

Considering these differences, we eventually agreed to rely on the ICRMW's definition of a migrant worker due to its comprehensiveness and flexibility. For example, this choice allowed us to keep the option open to conduct qualitative interviews with cross-border workers and refugees working in Switzerland. However, this compromise did not fully resolve the disciplinary and epistemological differences mentioned above. In the quantitative part of the project, we define migrants as individuals born outside Switzerland – a decision constrained by the use of existing datasets. While our primary

interest was in individuals who had migrated as adults, the quantitative analyses also include individuals who migrated as children and completed part or all their education in Switzerland, as well as Swiss nationals born outside Switzerland. The qualitative part, on the other hand, focuses on individuals who migrated as adults specifically for work-related purposes. Finally, the legal analysis concerned, *inter alia*, the situation of persons forcibly displaced from Ukraine (thus, irrespective of their place of birth or age, and detached from the work-related migration motives) and their access to the labor market (Łysienia and Kurt 2025). While these groups overlap to some extent, they remain analytically distinct within the project due to the available data and the specific research interests of the individual team members. These persistent differences must have been carefully considered when developing joint results and outputs in order to avoid over-generalizations.

To summarize our preliminary deliberations and document key decisions made at the start of the project, one of the legal scholars drafted a concept note outlining the contours of precarization and highlighting key aspects and entitlements relevant to the precarization of migrant workers (Bornemann 2022). The note also specified the project's central focus on crises with an economic component, namely, the financial crisis in 2008/2009, the euro crisis in 2010, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

As these explanations show, we sought pragmatic solutions that would respect the diverse epistemological perspectives, methodological approaches, and research interests represented in our team (see also Hesse-Biber 2016). While these decisions initially appeared sufficiently clear and narrow, with the project's progress we observed that our analyses are not always complementary. Nevertheless, these discussions and pragmatic decisions helped to establish a shared communicative framework within the team. At the same time, such a pragmatic approach entails the risk that the full interdisciplinary potential of the project may not be realized.

4.2 Creating an Understanding of Methodologies

Epistemological differences can lead not only to challenges in communication but also to methodological difficulties. Indeed, depending on the disciplines involved in a project, approaches to acquiring and interpreting knowledge, as well as standards of scientific rigor, can be inherently distinct (Brister 2016; Lach 2014; Pedersen 2016, see also Campbell 1974). We encountered similar difficulties in our collaboration.

Legal research is desk-based. Lawyers analyse publicly available documents such as laws, regulations, ordinances, parliamentary debates, press releases, and case law. In addition, scholarly legal articles, books, and commentaries must be consulted. There are a few specialized legal databases that centralize many of these documents yet checking original sources such as governmental and non-governmental organizations' websites remains crucial. In conducting legal research, lawyers read and interpret these materials to address their research questions. Put simply, the data in legal research consists of documents in various forms, and the methodology – meaning where to find relevant material – depends on the research question posed. In the context of the research project underlying this working paper, the legal analysis focused specifically on migration law. It thus examined the

access that migrant workers – as defined by the ICRMW – have to the labour market in the six case studies, as well as how respective laws have evolved in response to crises.

This approach differs importantly from that of sociology, where data collection and analysis methods are central components of the scientific process. In this project, the quantitative analysis relied on existing datasets, namely, the Labor Force Survey (LFS) and the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). The LFS provides quarterly data on individuals aged 15 and over, residing in private households in EU member states, candidate countries, or EFTA countries, concerning their participation in the labour force. In contrast, the SILC offers data on income, poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions in the EU. Drawing on these datasets, the quantitative component of the research project specifically examined the working conditions of migrants, how these compare to those of ‘native’ workers, and how they evolve during times of crisis across the six selected case studies.

For the qualitative part of the project, expert interviews were first conducted to refine the research questions and define the group under study. Subsequently, narrative interviews were carried out with migrant workers in the hospitality and catering industry in two mountain regions, guided by a pre-developed interview guide. This guide included questions addressing legal aspects (e.g., obtaining and renewing legal status, access to social benefits) as well as quantitative aspects (e.g., wages, working hours, part-time employment). It also contained questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, to explore the role that this health crisis – framed as such by political, economic, and societal stakeholders as well as the media – played in the participants’ lives.

The combination of data sources and methodological approaches resulted in two main difficulties. First, the “variables” used to study and measure precarity were predetermined in the legal and quantitative components, as both relied on data that had already been collected or was publicly available. While this helped to circumvent certain methodological differences, only the qualitative part had the flexibility to incorporate conceptual considerations of precarity into the research design and to formulate questions that explicitly bridged the qualitative and legal, as well as the qualitative and quantitative parts. Second, this conceptual-methodological challenge was further exacerbated by temporal discrepancies. While legal data were available from the outset, access to quantitative data required navigating extensive bureaucratic procedures, and the qualitative data had to be collected, transcribed, and, in some cases, translated. These temporalities in methodologies challenged our interdisciplinary collaboration as our timelines differed.

These methodological differences cannot be reduced to a mere distinction between primary and secondary, or quantitative and qualitative, data analyses. If, for example, we had conducted a quantitative survey for our study, the measures for precarity could have been aligned between the quantitative and qualitative parts of the sociological study. However, such an alignment would still not have been possible between the sociological and legal parts of the project, as legal documents, including those relating to migration law, would not have provided any new, additional information on the same precarity measures. Furthermore, the divergence in timelines between the legal and the quantitative sociological study, which is also based on existing datasets, emphasizes that temporal dynamics are not only attributable to the difference between the usage of primary or secondary data, but also to the modalities of access to this data. These can vary greatly between legal and sociological

data, as in the latter case personal information is involved. Therefore, the underlying methodological logics of the two disciplines differ fundamentally and need to be duly taken into account in interdisciplinary endeavours involving legal and sociological approaches.

4.3 Creating Regular Communication

To reduce misunderstandings related to terminologies, concepts, methodological approaches as well as standards, and to regularly discuss results, it is crucial to establish regular communication, understood as continuous exchanges in person or at distance (Lyall et al. 2011; Lyall and Meagher 2007). Such routines also help strengthen team spirit and reinforce the notion that members are working toward a shared, novel research goal, rather than merely being part of a “team of convenience” (Gibson et al. 2019, 58).

However, creating these communication routines – especially those enabling in-person contact – was hindered by the geographical distance between participating institutions and team members (e.g. 275 km between Geneva and Zurich). This challenge was further exacerbated by the limited working hours of postdoctoral researchers, who were employed at 40% or 70%. Hence, we have met about three to four times per year, always for several hours, to share updates and to discuss the next steps. Some of these meetings were scheduled without a previously clearly defined objective, while others had a specific purpose (e.g., preparation of the annual report or policy brief). In both cases, an agenda was sent out at least one week in advance to ensure a focused discussion. Following each meeting, a summary email was sent to all team members outlining the most important decisions and discussion points to keep track of progress.

In retrospect, the team meetings certainly strengthened our team spirit, as we combined our project-related discussions with lunches to wrap up our debates and to get to know each other better. These meetings also helped us to stay informed, address administrative issues collectively, and make joint decisions. However, administrative issues often took up a large part of these meetings, leaving limited time for substantive discussion. After jointly selecting the six case studies for the project, we did not fully use the opportunity to sustain the discussion and to engage in an in-depth exchange of our conceptual understanding of precarity and the data and variables available to conduct these analyses. As a result, in-depth interdisciplinary dialogue on precarity and the effects of crises on the legal and economic status, as well as the working conditions of migrant workers, did not receive adequate space.

4.4 Creating Synergies and Outputs

Nevertheless, the researchers involved were able to leverage synergies and produce collaborative outputs, both within their disciplines and beyond. For example, Mey and Kurt (2024) – a sociologist and a lawyer – explored in a blog contribution how the tightened National Foreigners and Integration Act, introduced in 2019, deters migrants from applying for social benefits. Furthermore, sociologists employing quantitative and qualitative methods worked together on conference presentations (at the Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association 2024 and the Neuchatel Graduate Conference 2024), focusing on precarious work in Switzerland and the impacts of crises. These presentations ultimately

served as the basis for a blog post that illustrated the experience of a migrant worker during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tomás and Ludwig-Dehm 2025). In addition, the team members organized several interdisciplinary events to foster a better understanding of legal and social science approaches to migration during times of crisis (“Vulnerabilisation of migrant workers during crises, Swiss Sociological Association (SSA) 2024 Congress” 2024; “(Counter) Narratives on Migration in Times of Crisis – Interdisciplinary Workshop” 2025; “Workshop on The Precarity of Labor Migrants in Global South and Global North States” 2025).

These discussions and collaborations also inspired team members to initiate interdisciplinary work with researchers outside the project. For example, Łysienia and Tomás contributed to a non-academic publication on the lived precarities of displaced Ukrainians with S permits, focusing on the forms of waiting produced by the Swiss system (Oldfield et al. 2025). This publication brought together geographers, social anthropologists, sociologists, and legal scholars. Finally, Tomás and Schüpbach (2025) – a sociologist and an economist – jointly examined how the introduction of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) has affected the legal and working conditions of (temporary) migrant workers in the hospitality and catering sectors, which they presented at the Migration Conference in Greenwich. These examples illustrate how interdisciplinary collaborations can promote curiosity and openness toward future projects that transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Throughout these collaborative efforts, we encountered additional misunderstandings during the writing and publication processes. Writing jointly across disciplines – such as sociology (or social sciences more broadly) and law – often reveals disciplinary frictions. These may arise from differences in text structure, literature use, concepts, methodologies, referencing styles (e.g., footnotes vs. in-text citations), and even the choice of academic journals targeted for submission. Many journals maintain a strong disciplinary (and even intra-disciplinary) focus, making it difficult to submit articles based on mixed-methods or interdisciplinary approaches (Gibson et al. 2019; Newman 2024). This limitation is compounded by the double-blind peer review process, which can be more challenging for interdisciplinary publications, especially when co-authored by scholars from different fields (Brister 2016; Newman 2024).

This challenge is evident even in disciplinary publications submitted to interdisciplinary academic outlets. One example is a working paper written by Łysienia (2025), a legal scholar in the project and co-author of this paper. It has been peer-reviewed by respected academics, however not legal scholars. Accordingly, the reviewers primarily recommended more conceptual and methodological development. While these comments were understandable within the reviewers’ disciplinary frameworks, they did not align with the approach to academic writing in legal scholarship, where methodological sections are typically absent. Instead, legal writing relies heavily on detailed footnotes to cite relevant materials and to support arguments. Thus, the quality and quantity of footnotes are the legal data, which reflect at the same time the methodology adopted by the author(s).

5 A Reflective Account: Pitfalls and Lessons Learned

The above practical account has already outlined the challenges we – i.e., the three authors of this paper – faced in our interdisciplinary collaboration and how these difficulties shaped our individual

contributions, and our ability to position ourselves within (our respective) academic fields, as well as the project as a whole. These challenges can be summarized in three key areas: (1) finding the right balance between pragmatism and harnessing the interdisciplinary potential of the project; (2) managing time and financial resources effectively; and (3) navigating disciplinary risks through planning of research outputs and career trajectories.

5.1 Balancing Pragmatism and Harnessing Interdisciplinary Potential

Pragmatism in the context of interdisciplinary projects is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, pragmatic decisions are essential to avoid becoming entangled in epistemological, conceptual, and methodological debates. On the other hand, relying too heavily on pragmatic solutions can limit the realization of a project's full interdisciplinary potential. Our experience shows that while pragmatic approaches can facilitate the rapid establishment of common ground, they can also limit deeper integration across disciplines. In our case, pragmatic decisions supported procedural collaboration, but the insights generated within the different disciplinary and methodological components were ultimately less complementary and mutually informative than initially hoped for. This became particularly evident in the revision of our research question.

Originally, we aimed to investigate “how do crises trigger restrictive changes in law and policy and affect (im)migrant mobile migrant workers” (Crettaz et al. 2021). However, considering decisions taken regarding the group under study, available data, and chosen methodological approaches, we eventually refined this overarching question into three disciplinary sub-questions. Accordingly, legal researchers examined how crises induce changes in migration laws and policies; sociologists using quantitative methods investigated how crises affect the precarious working conditions of migrant workers; and qualitative scholars explored how migrant workers experience and cope with these changing realities (see intermediate scientific poster, nccr-on the move 2025a).

Our initial ambition to study and understand the precarious living and working conditions of migrant workers in times of crises through an interdisciplinary lens ultimately evolved into a “political-social-legal study” (nccr-on the move 2025a). Thus, we pursued related research aims in parallel, without challenging or transcending our respective disciplinary boundaries. This aligns more closely with the definition of a multidisciplinary project rather than an interdisciplinary one (Choi and Pak 2006; Gibson et al. 2019). Hence, this experience reflects a broader challenge in interdisciplinary research. As Hesse-Biber (2016) argues, without an explicit commitment to interdisciplinary integration, teams risk reverting to multidisciplinary. In such cases, researchers merely “add and stir” disciplinary insights without truly integrating them (Hesse-Biber 2016, 652). So, what would we do differently next time to maintain the interdisciplinary character of a research project?

First, we would follow the recommendation of Burgers et al. (2019) by starting with a systematic literature review on precarity in the context of labour migration. The findings from this review should be analysed to answer key questions, such as: How is “precarity” understood across different disciplines? How is it operationalized and analysed? What differences and similarities emerge? Engaging with these questions collectively would foster interdisciplinary dialogue and help establish a shared language and conceptual framework. This integral conceptual exchange should also include

a discussion of available data, with the aim of identifying or collecting additional information to enhance complementarity among project components and to produce new and innovative knowledge (Borkert 2018; Choi and Pak 2006; Hesse-Biber 2016).

Second, and in parallel with these conceptual and methodological discussions, we would dedicate time to clarify individual, thematic, and disciplinary expectations and needs. For example, the three postdoctoral researchers involved in the project brought distinct individual research interests and methodological expertise, which shaped the direction of each project component. While it is important for early-career researchers to build on their strengths to advance their academic careers, an open exchange about individual goals, disciplinary orientations and standards (e.g., related to academic identities and publication processes) could have facilitated better alignment across the research components. Such alignment would have enabled more intentional use of overlapping interests in the refinement of the research question, data analysis, and publication strategy – thus better fulfilling the interdisciplinary aims of the project.

5.2 Balancing Time and Financial Resources

These in-depth exchanges, collective decision-making processes, and the implementation of resulting decisions within the project require significant time resources. Moreover, creating a framework in which different epistemological understandings as well as methodological approaches can be discussed constructively, and where individual preferences and needs (e.g., those related to academic career development) can be openly communicated, also demands time. In addition to these team-level dynamics, substantial individual working time is needed to prepare for collaborative meetings focused on conceptual, methodological, and thematic exchange, to familiarize oneself with new approaches, and to develop trust in them. Time, therefore, is a critical resource in interdisciplinary research. While the existing literature acknowledges that interdisciplinary projects require more time than discipline-specific ones (Brister 2016; Gibson et al. 2019; Hesse-Biber 2016; Newman 2024), it often does not sufficiently emphasize the centrality of this resource. Based on our experience, we identify two key takeaways regarding the role of time in interdisciplinary collaboration.

First, dedicated collective time for in-depth discussion is essential. In large research teams, administrative tasks can be considerable but are typically easier to resolve than epistemological disagreements. As a result, there is a risk that too little time is devoted to substantive academic exchanges. Scheduling team meetings specifically aimed at conceptual and methodological dialogue is particularly important at the outset of the project. Such meetings help create a space for mutual learning, establish a shared and informed foundation for decision-making, foster open communication about individual interests and constraints, and enable the development of a realistic project timeline that accounts for differing schedules for data collection and analysis. Given the importance of these initial meetings, face-to-face encounters are preferable. However, online meetings can serve as a suitable alternative for shorter sessions in which administrative matters are addressed. Regarding the frequency of these meetings, we have concluded that four meetings per year are insufficient. For interdisciplinary projects of this scale, we recommend scheduling shorter monthly meetings, in which updates are shared and administrative issues clarified, combined with four thematically or methodologically dedicated workshops per year. The frequency of the workshops can be reduced

during the data collection phase, as interdisciplinary exchange is particularly necessary at the beginning – during project conceptualization and preparation for data collection – and later, when results are discussed and integrated to generate new insights.

Second, the need for adequate time resources must be reflected in the project's institutional and staffing structures. Our research project spanned three years and employed three postdoctoral researchers: one at 70% for legal analysis and two at 40% for the quantitative and qualitative sociological components, respectively. This staffing model proved insufficient to embrace and fully engage with the interdisciplinary nature of the project. The situation was further complicated by two postdoctoral staff changes during the project's relatively short duration, which required new team members to quickly familiarize themselves with the complex specifics of the research. Improved working conditions – such as more stable employment contracts and higher workloads that allow for deeper and longer-term engagement – could help prevent such disruptions and mitigate their impact. While sufficient time does not guarantee the production of innovative interdisciplinary knowledge, without adequate time, the deficiency of interdisciplinary endeavours is almost certain. Therefore, when allocating financial and staff resources, we recommend limiting the number of researchers working on the project if financial resources are constrained. This approach allows (post-)doctoral researchers to be employed for longer periods of time and at higher percentages, motivating personnel continuity and providing the additional time required for interdisciplinary dialogue and learning.

5.3 Balancing Disciplinary Risks: Outputs Planning and Career Paths

Dissimilar epistemological perspectives, the use of distinct concepts and methodologies, and limited time resources for developing mutual understanding across disciplines eventually impedes the production of joint outputs. Even when such collaborative outputs emerge, the disciplines involved are often unevenly positioned. In many cases, legal scholars or social scientists are relegated to supportive or ancillary roles rather than being treated as equal partners in the research process and the creation of outputs. For instance, legal insights frequently serve to situate research within broader political and institutional contexts (e.g. Mey and Kurt 2024) or are treated as objects of analysis, such as through the examination of legal texts or case law, as demonstrated in previous socio-legal research (e.g. Borrelli et al. 2021). In these cases, sociology, or social sciences more broadly, have typically taken the lead, while legal scholars were asked to contribute by providing supplementary information or by highlighting specific analytical dimensions.

One way to address this imbalance is to jointly develop – at a more advanced stage of the in-depth conceptual and methodological discussion – planning for interdisciplinary research outputs. This would enable clear and transparent communication of the disciplinary limits of the project and of the individual researchers involved. It would also facilitate a more equitable distribution of roles and leadership responsibilities across outputs (Willock 1974), ensuring that one discipline is not constantly assigned a secondary role.

As part of this joint planning, it is crucial to include outputs intended for disciplinary outlets. This is especially important for early-career researchers, who have to demonstrate their disciplinary expertise and academic excellence through publications and participation in journals and conferences relevant

to their field, in order to secure or sustain a career in academia. Indeed, interdisciplinary work is often hindered by entrenched academic habitus and institutional expectations (see e.g. the guide by Woollen 2019). The risks posed to the academic identities and career trajectories of researchers engaging in interdisciplinary projects must therefore be acknowledged and actively addressed throughout both the research process and the planning of its outputs (Gibson et al. 2019; Newman 2024). This is particularly vital when collaboration occurs between disciplines with distinct professional identities and training – such as law and sociology, as in our case (see also Willock 1974).

This challenge also presents an opportunity for learning and institutional development across the scientific and academic community. If interdisciplinarity is increasingly seen as essential for addressing contemporary challenges (Borkert 2018; Bose 2012; Brister 2016; Gibson et al. 2019; Newman 2024), this has to be reflected at a structural level. Integration into interdisciplinary research projects would be greatly facilitated if undergraduate and master's programs not only encouraged exchange between disciplines but also supported their integration, and if interdisciplinarity were taught explicitly as a research design. Such initiatives could also foster new career trajectories for scholars who are trained within and identify with interdisciplinary research fields.

The targeted promotion of interdisciplinary research, along with the recognition of its expertise and outputs, could also pave the way for the creation of new journals or the reorientation of existing ones that do not treat disciplines such as law and the social sciences on an equal footing. This would enhance the visibility and value of interdisciplinary publications, as well as expand the pool of reviewers who could comment on interdisciplinary papers.

In sum, the joint planning of both interdisciplinary and disciplinary outputs is crucial to ensuring that all involved disciplines in a research project are given equal weight and that researchers are able to position themselves effectively within their respective fields. At the same time, broader institutional efforts are needed to ensure that students and researchers acquire the foundational skills required to engage with the complex challenges of our time, and that pursuing an interdisciplinary academic path no longer entails disproportionate risks.

6 Conclusion

This paper has outlined the characteristics of interdisciplinary research and reflected on our own research process within the project that was designed to integrate sociological and legal approaches. Our experience has shown that without an initial, shared understanding of key concepts and disciplinary perspectives, as well as without sufficient time resources and forward-looking planning, collaboration across disciplines risks fragmenting into parallel disciplinary work, so more likely conducting multidisciplinary research without strengthening interdisciplinarity (Välikangas 2024).

Despite this critical reflection on our own collaboration, we still think that interdisciplinary knowledge and research are essential for advancing scientific inquiry and addressing complex societal challenges. Creativity often emerges at the intersection of disciplines, enabling novel insights and solutions. Interdisciplinarity also reinforces the ideal of a unified body of knowledge and offers

researchers greater flexibility and intellectual diversity. It enables scholars to explore new epistemic terrains and fosters communication across fragmented academic domains. Ultimately, interdisciplinary work not only enhances intellectual innovation but also supports academic freedom and contributes to socially responsive and just knowledge production (Nissani 1997).

Both lawyers and sociologists can benefit from interdisciplinary endeavours. Legal scholars – particularly those working in comparative immigration law – find acquiring and applying social science methods useful but challenging (Cope 2023; Husa 2015). At the same time, social scientists engaging with laws may lack the requisite understanding of legal systems and their doctrinal intricacies. Thus, Cope (2023) advocated for even more interdisciplinary collaboration, suggesting that such partnerships may be the most effective means of bridging these disciplinary divides.

Upon three years of our collaboration, we maintain that sociologists and lawyers can “get on with” each other (Willock 1974, 3). In this paper, we shared guidelines for facilitating and improving collaborations between legal and social studies that were based on both academic literature and our own experiences. By acknowledging our omissions and misapprehensions, we would like to encourage researchers wanting to or already engaging in interdisciplinary research to apply our lessons learned. While interdisciplinarity is demanding – as was also proven to us once again while writing this paper – it is a journey worth taking but only if equipped with mutual understanding, generous timeframes and adequate planning.

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