



**The Mental Health and Justice Project
The MHJ 'Model' of Advanced Interdisciplinary Working**

**Summary
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Summary

The MHJ was a 5-year interdisciplinary research project that was funded by the Wellcome Trust in the UK. The project addressed a cluster of public policy challenges arising at the complex interface where mental health and mental healthcare interact with principles of human rights. Its principal aim was to develop clinical, legal and public policy strategies for jointly satisfying two fundamental imperatives: to protect people in contexts where they can be vulnerable, and secondly to respect their agency and autonomy.

This was a complex multidisciplinary project offering an integrated and multi-faceted approach to researching how to support people to have choice over decisions in their lives as well as to understand better the abilities that underpin decision making. It not only addressed these issues for individuals with mental health issues but also their supporters, communities, clinicians and those in legal practice. The scope of the work makes a unique contribution to the field of mental health and justice and can be reviewed in a short film produced for wider professional and public consumption.¹

The project worked across many academic disciplines including law, psychiatry, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology and cognitive neuroscience. It achieved its success and impact by confronting and synthesising these differences in approach, largely avoided by more discipline specific studies, and by seeking to have an impact not only through academic dissemination of its findings but also on legislation, Government policy and legal and clinical training and practice. Above all it sought to have a direct impact on the experiences of individuals, their families and supporters who live with day-to-day decisions around mental health and justice.

It is my view that by acknowledging, respecting and often painfully working through these disciplinary differences MHJ has brought about richer, more impactful change than could have been achieved with a less multidisciplinary approach. I have no doubt that the work of the project will live on, leading to even more positive change in this field.

This project offers a "model", while deliberately avoiding a naïve prescription, for interdisciplinary working². A more detailed analysis is available in the full narrative report³ which describes my experience working alongside this project as an organisation development consultant for most of its duration. This summary highlights my view about the collaborative elements that need to be acknowledged and engaged with for successful interdisciplinary projects, working with the realities of 'what is' rather than with an idealised picture of 'what should be'. Such collaborative attention requires a focus on the social dynamics of working together, over and above (but not excluding) the

¹ Mental Health and Justice: a case study in interdisciplinarity
[-https://vimeo.com/705748662/35c1e77716](https://vimeo.com/705748662/35c1e77716)

² This report focusses on interdisciplinary working in the academic/research world in order to pull out 'lessons from the MHJ experience' that should be relevant for future research projects of this nature. However, in my experience, there are many parallels with cross functional/cross organisational working in other fields and I draw on my learning from these in this analysis

³ The Advancement of Interdisciplinary Working - My journey working alongside the Mental Health & Justice (MHJ) Project - Insights & Recommendations - Laura Heath -June 2022

nuts and bolts of project management and formal organisational structures, resources and processes.

Health Warning: This interdisciplinary model and approach is not for everyone – it can be a ‘sledgehammer to crack a nut’

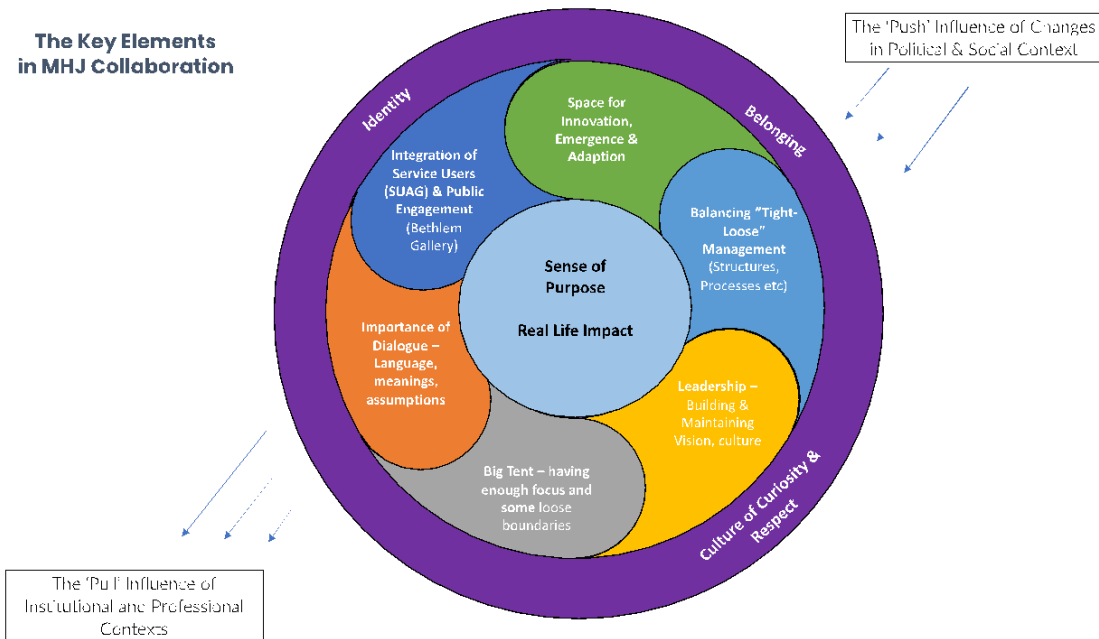
As in the commercial world there is currently an emphasis on the importance, in terms of management time and attention, of separating out ‘Technical’ from ‘Adaptive’ challenges. In his seminal work in this area Ronald Heifetz⁴ separates out ‘technical’ issues which are inherently defined and capable of solution from ‘adaptive’ ones, that are much more ambiguous, involve multiple stakeholders and require novel, co-created solutions. Many of the ideas and practices of what he calls ‘adaptive leadership’ can be applied in this field of multidisciplinary research – with its emphasis on:

- Harnessing collective intelligence (through valuing differing approaches and perspectives)
- Readiness to move out of ‘comfort zones’ and try new things that may not work
- Awareness of one’s basic assumptions and preferences of how the world is seen
- Recognising the importance of reflective practice and learning together through action
- Willingness and ability to stay long enough with the discomfort of disagreement and of ‘not knowing’ in order to reach new insights
- An ability to stand back, ‘get on the balcony’ and see systemic ‘bigger picture’ connections
- Resisting the ‘pull’ towards structured, centrally controlled, unilateral ‘from A to B’ type approaches

Because of the above, leaders of any multidisciplinary research project need to embrace from the start how time consuming and demanding leading and organising this type of work is – and avoid the temptation to disappear ‘adaptive’ ambiguity in favour of ‘technical’ clarity. This requires a rigorous appraisal of the extent to which the project really is addressing a “wicked” problem i.e. one that straddles established and often non-commensurable areas of knowledge and practice, and what level of complexity and interdisciplinarity are required to realise important benefits over and above those that can be achieved by any one discipline. Interdisciplinary approaches can bring rich benefits to what are otherwise seen as intractable challenges, but they bring many tensions and demands in such areas as cross-institutional, cross-departmental systems and politics, and in behavioural terms in establishing the right culture and identity for productive work. It is not for the faint hearted!

⁴ The Practice of Adaptive Leadership – Ronald E Heifetz, Martin Linsky et al Sept 2014

The “MHJ model” of interdisciplinary work



1. Don’t create the boundaries around the project too rigidly or too early

In line with ‘emergent’ approaches used in the commercial world, the ability to shift focus and adapt both to context and to ‘learning through action’ is seen to be a key strength in complex long-term work of this nature.






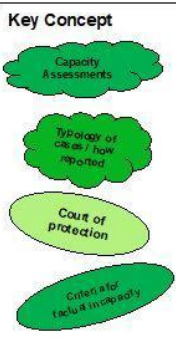
One of the important early successes of the MHJ project was the way in which it worked in an emergent way to find the core ‘wicked’ problems it wanted to address – these emerged initially in the pre award workshop (for more detail see full report referred to in footnote 2) which brought together a network of interested parties who were working in the field. This later became described as the ‘Big Tent’ in which the initial focus was broad and importantly allowed some areas to ebb/flow in response to both the learning from the work itself and to significant changes in the context e.g. the demands and opportunities that arose with the UK Government’s Mental Health Act review and the impact of COVID not only on the type of work that could and could not be done, but also on the general context of mental health and inequalities.

As the project lead describes it: *“We were co-working on problems over 5 years where giving definition to the work was part of the work itself”*.

2. Build interdisciplinarity into the formal and informal structure of the work and how it is organised

Interdisciplinarity cannot be a 'bolt on afterwards' or a binary process where just 2 disciplines work together or in parallel. It needs to be deeply rooted in the work. This requires a constant process of inquiry where different views, approaches and methods are discussed as an inherent and expected part of 'the work'.

The MHJ project was made up of six work workstreams that were essentially established in the pre-award workshop and were designed specifically to embed an interdisciplinary approach (see tables below). This meant very different perspectives were present at the core of each workstream, ensuring the day-to-day experience of working with difference was shared within each part of the project – rather than being an experience that happened only when the different disciplines and workstreams came together for set piece events. At the same time as having interdisciplinary difference embedded within each workstream, cross-workstream collaboration was actively encouraged through informal connections and more formally through the Academic Management Group (made up of the workstream leads/co leads), workshops, colloquia and Policy labs.

<p>WS1 - Legal Capacity Respecting and protecting people with disabilities</p> <p>Key Concept</p>  <p>Primary Disciplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law • Legal Philosophy • Ethics • Psychology • Social Science <p>Primary Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics & legal analysis • Systematic reviews • Surveys • Qualitative interviews 	<p>WS2 – Community Participation Meanings of independence, role of community support across socio/cultural contexts, rights to live independently</p> <p>Key Concept</p>  <p>Primary Disciplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anthropology • Law • Social Philosophy <p>Primary Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnography • Participatory action research • Socio-legal analysis • Philosophical analysis 	<p>WS3 – Advance Directives Self binding directives, Bipolar, Advance decision making in mental health</p> <p>Key Concept</p>  <p>Primary Disciplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychiatry • Law • Philosophy • Service User Research <p>Primary Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic reviews • Legal analysis • Philosophical & clinical analysis • Surveys • Qualitative focus groups & interviews
<p>WS4 - Insight Guidance on the use of impaired insight in legal proceedings, use as a clinical concept</p> <p>Key Concept</p>  <p>Primary Disciplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philosophy • Human rights law <p>Primary Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal analysis • Philosophical analysis • Ward observations and qualitative fieldwork 	<p>WS5 – Metacognition Using cognitive neuroscience to answer questions about metacognition. Applying neuroscience to an ethical dilemma- how can mental capacity be measured?</p> <p>Key Concept</p>  <p>Primary Disciplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive neuroscience • Empirical ethics • Dementia research • Autism research <p>Primary Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimental psychology • Meta-analysis • Psychometrics • Clinical research • Surveys • Qualitative interviews 	<p>WS6 – Contested Assessment Understanding hard capacity assessment in court and clinical settings and developing guidelines</p> <p>Key Concept</p>  <p>Primary Disciplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law • Ethics • Psychiatry <p>Primary Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal analysis • Ethics analysis • Content analysis of Court judgements • Qualitative interviews • Guideline development

At an informal level the group of Early Career Researchers (ECR) – in which young researchers from across all workstreams and disciplines met and reviewed their work together – became an important source of noticing and connecting some key concepts across the whole project, providing a bottom-up, organic process which informed the thinking of the hierarchical

leadership of each workstream. This network of cross-workstream connections was mapped by the group and can be seen as an appendix in the full report⁵.

3. Develop and build a shared sense of intent and meaning with a real-world connection

A shared, co-created and co-owned sense of intent within a project provides important 'glue' which helps support cohesion through periods of challenge or inevitable bumps in the road. Such sense of purpose is also an increasingly important career element for younger generations for whom the meaning of their work is a key motivator – more than for previous generations⁶. There are many benefits to this shared sense of endeavour and commitment to results, at a practical level it means that when disciplinary or institutional differences arise they can be explored and worked through with reference to the over-arching intent - which has heartfelt meaning to all those involved.

In the MHJ project, right from its early days, I noticed how much this shared sense of purpose motivated and energised all the Academic Management Group (AMG) members through their strong sense of “wanting to make a difference in the real world” and not simply deliver to the requirements of professional publication and practice. This was also a key motivational element in the ECR researchers, drawn to the idea of working across the traditional academic boundaries to achieve real change in the lives of people impacted by issues of mental health and justice.

During periods of disagreement about methods and ways forward there was generally a sense of 'keeping the end in mind' and a shared sense of 'why this matters'. This helped people refocus during those moments when the pull of traditional professional and academic disciplines became unhelpful, with people asking themselves what it was they could achieve together in this work that they couldn't do if they stayed within the boundaries of their home discipline.

4. Ensure there are formal and informal mechanisms (and resources) that support cross disciplinary working

An important view in organisational theory, and organisation development, is to see an organisation as a social construct in which it is the self-organising patterns of thinking and relating together that are paramount⁷. The role of dialogue, inquiry, co-creation and meaning making are key aspects of this and any interdisciplinary model needs to be based around the need for creating the space and opportunity for these to occur⁸.

Part of this is having the ability and resources to reflect 'in' action (i.e. noticing and addressing what is happening in the moment) and 'on' action (i.e. after the event)⁹. This involves real-time (in action) reflection and being given/finding the space to step back from the hurly-burly of the day-to-day for deeper reflection and learning (on action).

MHJ was successful in creating shared opportunities for inquiry, dialogue and shared meaning making. The annual colloquium moved from being a somewhat formal, showcasing of work and evolved over time into a more dialogic model using more participative and

⁵ Full Report Appendix B - ECR analysis of overlapping concepts across workstreams

⁶ The Deloitte Global 2022 Survey of Millennials and Gen Z

⁷ Ralph Stacey – What is an organisation really? Future Considerations 2017

⁸ Reason & Hawkins - 'Human Inquiry in Action' 1988

⁹ Donald E Schön – The Reflective Practitioner

inquiry-based techniques – this evolution also embraced the new realities imposed by the COVID pandemic and its restrictions on traditional social interaction. By starting with the familiar people were, in my judgement, more willing to then push the boundaries of what they were willing to try – in the case of the MHJ project this included engaging with techniques such as appreciative inquiry (used in an adapted form to generate what people valued /liked in the work they were hearing about ...before moving into the more familiar ‘critique and questioning mode’), ‘democratic’ polled responses to sessions and open space/world café¹⁰ sessions (which I introduced to encourage broader engagement and participation).

The Policy labs, which were run by the King’s Policy Institute also used generative dialogue-based approaches to enable rich conversations on critical issues such as the ‘positive right to health’, ‘insight’, and ‘advanced choice’ which had all emerged as critical concepts holding very different meanings across different disciplinary traditions and fields of practice.

Other more informal workshops and gatherings also occurred in a more emergent way, driven by interests or lines of inquiry such as ‘what are we meaning by our central theme of “justice”’, which were very well received and generated important conversations.

As is the case in many projects of this scale and intensity, trying to build in space/ time for more reflection felt somewhat like trying to crowbar this activity into the ‘real work’ and I feel the project could have extracted more value and impetus from having more time/resource for this kind of learning i.e. stepping back for reflections ‘on’ rather than ‘in’ action. The importance of this standing back and the “emotional labour” of interdisciplinary work is strongly emphasised in other work in this area¹¹.

5. Establish and lead a culture of respect and curiosity

Successful complex projects tend to develop strong cultures and identity. A noteworthy feature of the MHJ culture was how open the senior academics were to others’ ideas and disciplines and how ‘lightly’ they held their own extensive expertise. This respect for each other and the value of what each brought was an essential quality of MHJ working.

There was genuine curiosity about each other’s frames, methods, assumptions, fears etc and these were surfaced in an early workshop¹². This curious and respectful culture permeated into the workstreams. Some noteworthy practical examples include:

- The quality of the ‘listening’ to each other and the thoughtful responses that emerged
- The balance they achieved between advocacy (having a view) and inquiry (curiosity)
- The willingness to hold what felt like polarised views but with respect for the others view intact however heated or drawn out the discussion became
- Genuine interest in each other’s methods, both qualitative and quantitative, and interest in experimentation around adopting these in new contexts
- Generosity of spirit – for example both of the workstreams heads of the ‘outliers’ in terms of core approach (neuroscience and participatory action/ethnographic research) offered workshops to build understanding of their approaches and their application in the MHJ context

¹⁰ theworldcafe.com

¹¹ Felicity Callard and Des Fitzgerald’s work on “Rethinking interdisciplinarity across the social sciences and neurosciences”.

¹² See Full Report Appendix A - Making disciplinary differences and connections explicit

- Strong service user involvement in the design and giving of feedback on critical aspects of the research

6. Find a balance between central control and 'distributed' leadership

In the world of business there is a huge, and in my view disproportionate, attention given to project management as a discipline. MHJ achieved an interesting balance between some core monitoring and governance structures together with a looser structure allowing for autonomy and emergence in the workstreams.

This "tight/loose" model of management in which leaders flex their approach, seems to be an appropriate model for this kind of work balancing the provision of 'enough' co-ordinating control alongside allowing the development of sufficient financial, professional and creative autonomy in the workstreams.

The selection and duration of the MHJ project administrator was a key enabler in this project and any project lead of this kind of work needs to select this person wisely and resource this role with considerable attention. The role goes far beyond traditional university administration, playing a key role in establishing ways of working and relating and thereby being a telling influence on the day-to-day culture of the project (see full report for more details).

7. Embed outward facing elements - service user and public engagement are not bolt-ons or nice to haves

A key part of the MHJ award and mentality was to not only focus on the internal scholarship demands of the research but to 'integrate' elements of service user involvement and public engagement as an integral part of all the workstreams from the start. This was achieved through putting in place a range of partnerships with external and arms-length bodies. This included with the McPin foundation who established a Service User Advisory Group (SUAG) who met regularly and brought lived experience to bear; the Bethlem gallery¹³ through which a service user artist was linked with each workstream and the King's College Policy Institute who supported strong links with policy engagement.

The MHJ's approach demonstrates how these kinds of different perspectives can be brought in and have powerful and relevant influences on the work and impact of the research, of particular note being how the SUAG challenged the relevance of some of the theoretical concepts and became active participants in co-designing appropriate data gathering processes. Also of note was the way in which Academic researchers were challenged by artists who approached the work in a highly divergent, non-verbal way (see full report for more details of how this interdisciplinarity worked in practice).

A key learning from this is that it not only requires structures and time to be in place for innovative collaborations but also a 'culture' (habits of mind) in which there is curiosity, respect and a willingness to suspend traditional ways of thinking.

¹³ A separate report will be issued by the Bethlem gallery – working title "The art of the impossible question - artist-led engagement in MHJ"

Some final thoughts....

There is always the demand to distil and synthesise insights from complex initiatives such as the MHJ project. Whilst I have highlighted the areas above, I would encourage anyone embarking on leading or participating in this kind of collaborative venture to bear in mind:

- *First steps are fateful* – how a project starts sets the groundwork and establishes social patterns and habits that are very hard to change
- *Recognise you are not starting with a 'blank sheet'* - complex, multi-disciplinary teams come together with a variety of personal and institutional histories which cannot be disappeared – and at the same time existing and new power/relationship dynamics will emerge
- *There's an institutional politics in play in many institutions which does not favour inter-disciplinarity* - it can be seen to complicate areas such as resource allocation and measurement of impact by threatening the more comfortable predictability of a single discipline focus. This needs careful handling to sustain a collaborative spirit.
- *You cannot impose an inquiry/collaborative research process onto a multi-disciplinary project* – finding a research process that allows for discipline specific *and* novel cross-disciplinary ways of working is part of the work of the project
- *You have to build in time for reflective practice* – finding ways to focus on 'HOW' we are working as part of the 'real' work of the project needs conscious attention. You will need to ring fence this space and think carefully about how you create the right culture, space and context for reflective learning
- *Diverse meanings and understanding around 'taken for granted' terms exist and will emerge* – finding ways for people to share both disciplinary and inter-disciplinary assumptions needs to be done early-on in a project¹⁴
- *You cannot impose a desire to work together and be curious about each other's work* – one of the roles of leaders in such a project is to maintain a sense of optimism and a collective sense of identity and purpose that no one discipline, or sub-group, can create on its own
- *How people share insights is both something spontaneous and something that can be engineered* – there is a role for formal sharing mechanisms, from websites to colloquia, and informal, spontaneous ones that people generate for themselves (and do not need to be legitimised formally)
- *Project members will pay attention to the project and to professional priorities outside of the project* – the value of inter-disciplinary work in part depends on the discipline specific standing of its members, who need to remain visible to their discipline homes
- *Projects exist in an evolving social context*. Shifts in generational attitudes and expectations around, for example, diversity and inclusion, bring an added degree of complexity to projects, which have historically often been able to work within a more unchallenged set of assumptions. These often present leaders with a whole new range of sensitivities to pay attention to that they will not be familiar with
- *Pay attention to and recognise the importance of a 'good ending'* – it is easy to let the main focus be on the start of such projects, but the real success very often depends on how things are ended 'well' thus allowing the full 'legacy' to emerge as things are taken forward in new fields

It is my hope and aspiration that this learning will be relevant and can support future researchers and leaders to create the energy, excitement and focus that this intense, fascinating project has enjoyed.

¹⁴ See Full Report Appendix A -Making disciplinary differences and connections explicit