

Near Co-Laborations. The VERSUS Project as Relational Epistemic Practice to Analyse the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The contribution discusses the formation and collaboration in the VERSUS project (*Versorgung und Unterstützung in Zeiten von Corona*/Provisioning and support in times of Corona) as a relational epistemic practice. VERSUS formed as research project to investigate how provisioning reconfigured during the pandemic in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The researchers involved come from different yet 'near' scholarly backgrounds: anthropology, sociology, and political theory. Such 'near' interdisciplinarity poses specific challenges and frictions for a co-laborative project. In analysing our own forms of working on working together, we aim to contribute to an emergent literature that focuses on co-laboration in projects of such 'near' disciplines used to take their differences serious. We discuss VERSUS through the notions of a) co-laboration, working with a shared epistemic orientation (*tertium*) for creating knowledge for specific fields, and b) collaboration as the everyday practice of working together during the unfolding pandemic. The collaborative software Slack enabled quick and less formal interaction, yet the instantness of the platform created challenging situations that we then discuss as important and generative moments in the project.

Keywords: co-laboration, comparison, interdisciplinarity, COVID-19, collaboration

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Introduction: Co-Laborative Devices Like This One

One year before we write these lines, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Germany, and we started conducting research on its consequences. What started as haphazard interviews formed into

a research project that now publishes results. Our situated practices of thinking and working together might in many ways not differ from other research projects, or at least this is not the claim of our chapter. Rather, writing the chapter gives us the possibility to reflect on the very practice of doing research as a team of five researchers from ‘neighbouring’ social and cultural science disciplines.

We situate our reflection in two strands of cultural anthropological/STS scholarship that foreground the practices of constituting scientific knowledge. The first focused mostly on the work of research scientists in laboratories and analysed the production of scientific knowledge as an often messy, disputed and incidental practical accomplishment. Karin Knorr Cetina coined the term “laboratory pragmatism” (1984: 107ff.) for how (lab) research is rendered rational, smooth, and uni-directional to make the respective research processes appear legitimate and to enhance the academic authority of the produced knowledge. We think that such reflection is fruitful to open conversations about the actual “doing” of research (Niewöhner & Scheffer 2010) and the translation work necessary in interdisciplinary projects (Callon 1986; Freeman 2009) by problematising polished narratives that smooth over frictions and frustrations. Interestingly, such STS research on doing research has only recently focused on the doing of social science research (Niewöhner & Scheffer 2010; Deville, Guggenheim & Hrdličková 2016; Kuznetsov 2019), an emerging literature to which we aim to contribute.

Secondly, scholars in STS and cultural anthropology turned their interest towards various forms of collaboration and co-laboration (Niewöhner 2016). The literature builds on scholarship on the co-creation of knowledge by ethnographers and research participants, specifically where participants are experts (Marcus 2018; Bieler et al. 2021). Jörg Niewöhner coined the term “co-laboration” (2016) to describe a form of co-constituting knowledge by and for disparate fields that we will specifically discuss throughout the paper. Yet instead of focusing on co-laboration between researchers and participants, we turn the focus on us as a research co-laboration itself. Such reflexive practice (Niewöhner 2021) adds to the aim of analysing social science as relational epistemic practices and to understanding some of the specificities of co-constituting knowledge together.

To ground our analysis, we will focus on concrete practice in the formation and ongoing research of the VERSUS-Corona project (*Versorgung und Unterstützung in Zeiten von Corona*/Provisioning and support in times of Corona) at the Institute for Social Research and Goethe University Frankfurt, conducted by the authors of this chapter. Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez Criado recently, in a volume on experimental collaborations, termed the co-produced publications or other products of creating knowledge with research participants “fieldwork devices” (Estalella & Criado 2018: 2). We borrow from this term in our attempt to apply concepts about co-laborations on VERSUS and will focus specifically on co-laborative devices – like this chapter.

Constituting the VERSUS Project

What later became VERSUS began in March 2020 when the number of COVID-19 infections in Germany reached almost 7.000 new cases per day. Anna and Andreas discussed whether to research the spread of the Coronavirus, its consequences for households, and the burgeoning uncertainty about contagion, contact, and politics. Soon, Almut joined these conversations in which stories about our concernedness, fears for the future, and ambivalent interest

in the unfolding of the pandemic merged. The three researchers come from different disciplinary backgrounds and follow other thematic interests in their work: Anna is a sociologist with a focus on practice theory doing research on age(ing), Andreas is an economic and political anthropologist researching socio-economic reconfigurations, while Almut is a political theorist, sociologist and urban anthropologist studying social movements. This constellation makes our initial research team a specific interdisciplinary collaboration. As experienced by us, our respective research fields are highly transdisciplinary themselves, as are our own academic biographies. Yet as PhD and Post-Doc researchers, we feel geared towards contributing to 'our' disciplines to increase chances to get jobs in highly competitive labour markets.

In this stage of thinking together about the pandemic, these presumed differences did not impact our collaboration much. We channelled our interest in the pandemic into an interview guide for some exploratory interviews, after which we wanted to further reflect on whether to do more research and where it should be going. In the unfolding of the pandemic, daily updates on political measures to contain the contagion, and the drastic consequences of, e.g., contact restrictions for households, speed seemed crucial. It made us want to gather data even more quickly. We settled on recruiting interviewees through our contacts, mailing lists, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. Meanwhile, we felt the need to somehow appear as more of an 'actual' research group rather than as what it had felt like in that moment: a gathering of three young researchers/friends interested in similar topics.

A crucial step in forming what we were doing was the transformation of our loose, interest-based group into a 'project'. Sandra Calkins (2016: 5) discusses pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in her work about uncertainty and future orientations and argues that a 'form', understood as a semantic device, compartmentalises and signifies action to address uncertainty. In an extension of the argument, addressing our knowledge practices as a co-laborative project meant forming what we were doing as a relatively stable entity in uncertain conditions instead of as a loose assembly of three junior researchers. Our 'form' is not particular to this research and formulating it as a project is akin to other projects that develop a joint plan and attempt to fund their endeavours. Yet in several ways, that appearance glanced over that we were still a somewhat loose assembly, with all researchers employed or funded elsewhere and, for most of us, no designated working hours of scientific contracts for our collaboration. The semantic strategy we chose to compartmentalise and formulate our research collaboration as legitimate in neoliberal higher education and research was to provide form to our epistemic relationality by a project title and acronym: VERSUS-Corona. 'We' became VERSUS, and the young researchers turned into project leaders.

The project required additional labour to constitute itself as form: short texts, an argument and research design, and listings as e.g., in databases such as the World Pandemic Research Network. Also, VERSUS-as-project made it seem legitimate to attempt accessing funding, participation, and other support. Hence, the semantic strategy led to the increasing labour on what a project is and does, and soon from our constitution and legitimacy to interest and support from institutes with which we were affiliated.

At the end of March 2020, VERSUS received support from the Institute for Social Research Frankfurt am Main (IfS), the Research and Training Group Doing Transitions, and the Vienna Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology. The funders enabled us to engage in further studies by financing running costs, staff for transcribing interviews, and supporting the project with junior researchers Carolin and Georg who joined VERSUS. The project team had hence grown from three to five persons in just a couple of weeks.

In April 2020, VERSUS' team members conducted exploratory interviews. Based on the first findings, we developed a quantitative online survey that more than 1.000 households filled in, from which we chose a sample and conducted more than 40 in-depth interviews. We aimed to reconstruct those reconfigurations in which people were provisioning themselves with necessary goods and services.¹

As the project team gathered more data and tried to contextualise their results with findings from other COVID-related studies, we came across an increasing number of projects by colleagues from our departments and university. To join forces with those projects and increase the visibility of social and cultural research on the topic, we initiated a research cluster 'SoKu Corona (*Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaftliche Forschung über COVID-19 an der Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main/Social and Cultural Research about COVID-19 at Goethe University Frankfurt*)'.

Through the consequent collaborations, we started working on a funding proposal for the German Research Foundation (DFG) with Sarah Speck and Franziska Vaessen, sociologists at Goethe University. They had researched the gendered reorganisation of private life during the first wave of COVID-19 in Germany. Our cooperations lead to a research training project (*Ethnographien des pandemischen Alltags/Ethnographies of the Pandemic Everyday*) to teach ethnographic methodologies in/of the pandemic, carried out with three student tutors.

Retelling the story of the constitution of a funded research project with around ten researchers, provides the background for our further discussion of VERSUS as a relational epistemic practice (Niewöhner & Scheffer 2010: 9). Specifically, as we were researchers from 'neighbouring' disciplines in which similar topics are researched with more or less disparate methodologies and concepts. This setting is crucial to the way we worked on working together in VERSUS. This assemblage of backgrounds and orientations differs from the collaborations focused on in the literature, where co-laborations of 'distant' disciplines and clearly 'divided' fields of knowledge are brought together. While the main challenge for those epistemically 'strange' presumably is how to be able to co-laborate at all, our co-laboration challenged us to work with probably minor but meaningful differences.

We will explore how we worked together by discussing what we will distinguish as modes of co-laboration and collaboration. The former will focus on our relational epistemic practices through co-laborative devices such as writing articles, the latter more on the socio-material aspects of working together virtually during the pandemic, through such software tools as Slack.

Collaboration and Co-Laboration: Epistemic Knowledge Practices Across Disciplinary Variety

Stefan Beck (2008), writing about collaborations between social and natural sciences, pointed to the necessity to de-mystify affirmative notions of interdisciplinary collaboration. He criticises common conceptions of joint research practices in two ways: 1) as wrought with internal epistemic hierarchies and non-understandings, and 2) as frequently coated over by a semantics of interdisciplinarity that makes collaboration appear smoother than it actually is (Beck 2008: 187). Instead, Beck states that working together does not require creating a non-

¹ From the closing of Kindergartens and schools to bottlenecks in market provisioning with, e.g. hygiene products or toilet paper, to the increase in neighbourhood initiatives and challenges for intergenerational care.

disputed shared understanding of the subject matter and argues that research benefits from critically reflecting implicit assumptions, divergent interpretations of evidence and validity, preferences for sorts of theory and methodologies. Jörg Niewöhner coined a term for such forms of working together while reaffirming differences: co-laboration (2016), which proves explicitly interesting for analysing interdisciplinarity between researchers from anthropology, sociology, and political theory.

Niewöhner stresses the importance of creating joint research problems that work both as a shared orientation of individual researchers and are timely for scholarship in the respective research fields. Instead of aspiring to mask or hide differences among researchers and their approaches, the concept of co-laboration starts from the generativity of these differences. It provides orientation as to how to deal with them productively. As a description of and orientation for our research team, a closer look at co-laboration is key for our own sense-making about working together. We attempted to balance our ongoing sense of both excitement and failure that has accompanied the research process by thinking about where our research orientations clashed. In that regard, it was crucial that we were not from 'strange' or 'distant' disciplines or fields of knowledge. Instead, we come from 'near' disciplines, being socialised to frame our work as young scholars in disciplinary terms, often by stereotyping what makes disciplinary others more 'other' than they might be. Hence, our frictions came less from approximation from fields imagined as distant but from embracing that our habits of disciplinary distancing needed to be challenged.

Understanding frictions as potentially fruitful served as an accompanying Leitmotif for the VERSUS project. It became apparent in several epistemic practices that we discuss in the next section before introducing some of the collaborative means we used for working together while being apart during the pandemic.

Co-Laboration in the VERSUS Project

In her chapter 'Making a Comparative Object', Kati Hannken-Illjes (2010) discusses a comparative ethnographic project she was part of. The research group consisted of four researchers, brought together as their thematic scholarship seemed to fit well to jointly analyse criminal proceedings. Hannken-Illjes describes several phases of frustration, making her turn to the question

"How is it at all possible for four researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, communication, rhetoric, anthropology and law), with their data from four different countries and two different legal systems to compare this data?" (Hannken-Illjes 2010: 181)

The challenge of working with different theoretical backgrounds and epistemological orientations on a joint paper let the research team decide that they would not agree on any concept or theory from one of the respective fields. Instead, they introduced a *tertium comparationis*. The epistemic trick of the *tertium* is to introduce a broadly shared orientation from differing research interests (Hannken-Illjes 2010: 184). In our case, that *tertium* did the opposite, allowing us to engage with different orientations with shared research interests.

The speed and context of research in the developing first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic backgrounded what might otherwise have been a phase of intense conceptualisation that would have brought up the differences in epistemic conventions earlier. In the first phase of

the project, it seemed as if we talked about similar issues when grouping our research interests. Yet in two ways, co-laboration among significant others proved challenging: 1) in the overall orientation of the project and 2) in writing for disciplinary audiences.

The necessity to develop some common orientation or perspective came with the formalisation of our haphazard interest. To provide a framework that would work as a common orientation, we decided to settle on a perspective developed in Andreas's research on the socio-economic transformations in the Greek economic crisis called "reconfigurations of provisioning" (Streinzer 2019). This allowed us to connect the individual orientations – sociology of ageing, economic anthropology, and urban anthropology – with our common interest in how relational practices in/of age, care, and space transformed during the pandemic. With 'provisioning', as formulation of relational practices of providing support, we had found such *tertium* that allowed us to follow our orientations while getting to know us better as 'near others' when it comes to our disciplinary socialisation into academia.

Developed initially in the writing-up phase of Andreas's PhD thesis in economic anthropology, the perspective on reconfigurations of provisioning provided a not-yet thoroughly described research program. Andreas worked on the manuscript for his book, formulating the framework further while VERSUS unfolded. His attempts at translating developing thoughts into a possible *tertium* resulted in a back-and-forth movement between team members looking for a common orientation and the team needing to formulate their version of what 'reconfigurations of provisioning' might mean. This was a particularly tricky task as both the terms 'reconfigurations' and 'provisioning' exist in all the involved disciplines, but with a slightly different meaning: Whereas, for example, Anna stressed that reconfigurations should be analysed as processes of social practices, Carolin raised the question how 'provisioning' as a concept would differ from reproductive care work, while Almut tried to integrate the concept on common approaches in the field of urban studies and neighbourhoods. This negotiation was generative in refining our *tertium* and creating a new and shared orientation retrofitted to the material gathered in the exploratory phase of the project.

For such co-laborative devices as project descriptions, presentations, or reports, the shared orientation 'made sense' as it provided a somewhat flexible framework that conveyed a sense of direction while leaving each one of us enough space to work for and in our more specific fields of literature. These back-and-forth movements of trying to make sense of 'provisioning' from various perspectives helped refine the concept for multiple orientations of us as researchers. However, this loose *tertium* that allowed everyone to formulate their own version of the main concept we were all working with somewhat masked a challenge that would emerge later in the process: that we were not only working *with* provisioning as a concept but also *about* provisioning as a process. This challenge surfaced when working together with co-laborative devices. When presenting research or writing publications, a specific fragility of that overall orientation and relative neglect of the differences became visible. Writing for particular audiences meant that our co-laborative assemblage needed to orient itself towards more specific questions and literatures than what the overall orientation required. We will illustrate such a process by showing how we used a collaborative technique (the lead model) to structure how we could co-laborate and write together while writing for specific audiences and literatures that not all of us were familiar and/or at ease with. The differing conceptual uses of reconfiguration and provisioning impacted the way we analysed provisioning as process for these specific audiences. We will exemplify that lead model by describing the writing of a joint article called 'Familial intimacies' for a rapid turnaround issue of the journal *Anthropology in Action*: In the spring of 2020, several calls for papers

were issued by journals that quickly wanted to publish results from preliminary research projects on the pandemic.

Using the collaborative platform Slack (discussed further below), each team member proposed calls and ways to respond to them with arguments developed in our joint analysis. In an article for the journal *Anthropology in Action* (Streinzer et al. 2020), the team developed an argument around a ‘cuddle curtain’ produced to allow family members from risk groups to meet, touch, and care for one another while reducing the probability of contagion of the virus. We wanted to reflect on what provisioning might mean beyond the obvious shopping, caring, or acquiring income by writing the paper.

We started with a broad and lightheaded brainstorming, leading to an argument drawn from relational and post-relational approaches in anthropology, with which not all team members were equally familiar. Due to time pressure, the team settled on one lead member from anthropology to formulate the argument and draft of the piece. In a series of calls, we discussed the lead’s proposal of an argument. Then, each team member formulated passages of the article and contributed with their analysis of specific aspects, which the lead would later ‘sew together’ into the joint argument. That ‘lead model’ meant proceeding again in a back-and-forth manner, with phases of individual work, compilation and coming up of revised drafts by the lead, discussions about the revised argumentation, and then again phases of individual work on the snippets.

The lead model brought a heightened pressure on the lead, supposedly the nearest to the audience we were writing for, to understand the individual orientations and formulate them into a joint argument. Not always did this work well. Fears mounted that the outcome could become a failure in all collaborating disciplines: too schematic for the anthropologists, too messy for the sociologists, and too inconsistent for the political philosophers. Drawing on Hannken-Iljes (2010) formulation of ‘failure’ above, it is exactly this struggle that would become generative: the necessity to choose from disciplinary conventions to ‘lead’ through the seemingly deficient argumentation. The writing was a translation of co-laboration into a common writing process through another *tertium*, this time an artefact to be described and analysed, a means by which knowledge is generated by a diverse team grouped around a common orientation, yet producing knowledge for specific thematic fields or subfields of disciplines: For example, in Andreas’ field, it meant taking seriously the necessity to think economic relatedness as a combination of attachments and detachments, as a way to contrast the often implicit communitaristic bias on attachments in economic anthropology. For Anna’s field of the sociology of ageing, it facilitated the decentring of the focus on older adults to the involvement of different actors, as well as the possibility to bring theories of ageing in a dialogue with critical gender studies (Carolin’s area of expertise), and discuss the question what that dialogue could provide for the study of people living in nursing homes during the pandemic. All involved researchers would have approached those phenomena from slightly different angles. By structuring the co-laborative process through choosing a lead, specialised in the field for which the team wrote, the co-laboration was directed towards primary aims (contributions to that field) and secondary ones (new perspectives for other fields). Since, the team has used the model in further writing processes, e.g., about spatial inequalities.

Collaboration at a Distance: Slack and the Instant-Ness of Virtual Technology

As Niewöhner notes (2021: 111), knowledge is not only created in relational practices between researchers, but also in socio-technical assemblages. The shared epistemic work above, as exemplified through what we called co-laborative devices, was done in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and contact restrictions. In practical terms, the whole research team of VERSUS had never met in person between March and October 2020. We created a virtual working infrastructure of shared folders and messaging boards to facilitate communication. We used various forms of video-conferencing, from Skype to Zoom, and eventually Senfcall – a free and crowd-funded video tool more trustworthy in data security than Zoom.

In hindsight, what had the most influence on collaboration was the use of Slack, an app-based instant-messaging board designed for start-up projects, working with discussion threads. In such threads, we organised calls for papers, publications, the practical management of interviews and transcripts, and our observations about the research project. Although Slack, at the beginning of our use, just seemed a more elaborate tool to bring together scattered conversations that could have also been telephone calls or emails, it turned out to develop a life of its own as a collaborative means.

Meeting through Slack and Senfcall altered the atmosphere of us coming together as a team, e.g., as reflected in Caro's or Georg's experiences as junior researchers who joined VERSUS after its formation. Instead of meeting the (then established as such) project leaders of a research project in departmental meetings or through email, they met through Slack. With nicknames and profile pictures, the social media feel of the platform allowed a different way of dealing with hierarchies and experiential differences than in the usual conventions in German academia. Instead of the negotiation of how to address project leaders through conventions of politeness (e.g., 'Sehr geehrte Frau Dr.in Wanka' or 'Liebe Frau Dr.in Wanka'), communication felt more direct and approachable as 'Dr.in Wanka' was 'Anna' on the platform. The social media messaging with emojis and memes allowed a more informal communication between team members yet requiring them to actively and explicitly deal with issues arising from differences in experience, different positions in German academia and its hierarchies.

Besides the necessity to establish shared conventions of how to use Slack to negotiate different roles and divisions of labour, communication through the platform made collaboration seem more instant. That instantness produced a series of possibilities and frictions, which we want to illustrate by way of two examples: one being when we came across a close deadline for a conference; the other being the finalisation of the Anthropology in Action article. Although project work and publication pressure in academia generally led to increased pressure to produce, the start-up tools designed to facilitate fast collaboration had specific challenges for thinking and writing together.

The junior researchers worked three days a week, giving some temporal orientation about 'when' the project was working. However, the functionality, perhaps even governmentality (Wiedemann 2016: 77ff.), of Slack quickly blurred these lines when communication went on during the whole week in work-intensive phases. Slack's focus on chatting in threads facilitated over-work, as messages can be read instantly, an overstatement of the spontaneous availability of others. Sometimes, in weekly meetings, it was restated that important communication or decisions should be made on working days when all would have the chance to be present and informed. Occasions such as the following proved key moments to discuss

and establish informal rules on how to reconcile the speed and fun of brainstorming and serious play that Slack allowed with a caring attitude towards one another, including safeguarding researchers from overworking.

The first situation developed one Friday evening at the beginning of July 2020. One team member reminded via Slack of a close deadline for a call for participation at the conference of the Association of Social Anthropology in the UK and the Commonwealth. At the time, other team members were working at home, sitting on the tram, at home with friends, or hiking. Not everyone answered the urgent call; thus, only two of the researchers started brainstorming an abstract. When sending the draft abstract with the note that those two would be willing to present, the situation laid bare several challenges of such working sprints: two team members very active on Slack decided to go ahead with the abstract, at a time when not all members could answer or join. The abstract eventually did not make it to the conference, but the process led to a discussion about working hours and 'when' the team 'is available' for decision making.

Also, it gave rise to discussions about the different positions of the team's researchers, with some not being paid for their work in the project but in the scramble for publications, a few months before contracts expired, while others were paid and sucked into the speed of 'producing' publications or conference papers. The conversations about the collaborative tool quickly turned into discussions about how to organise enthusiasm, precarity, and the need to publish and working hours in a project that we wanted to be both structured in terms of responsibilities and division of labour in a collaborative and caring manner.

The second situation was when that instant-ness made time seem more compressed, allowing to set deadlines at a fast pace. Such was the case with the initial ideas the team came up with for the Anthropology in Action article. The call for papers was posted, and some team members started brainstorming in an atmosphere of serious play and conceptual silliness, mixing jokes with literature discussions. The quick and intense coming together on Slack eventually led to the formulation of an abstract that was successful, followed by a peer-reviewed publication (Streinzer et al. 2020).

Such pace, facilitated by Slack's interface – to group around a theme, discuss, decide, and go ahead – proved highly effective but led to a kind of normalisation that instant quickness was possible and indeed normal. The challenges became apparent as we finished the final version of that article: the last two days were highly punctuated with deadlines of researcher's contributions for the piece, and a language check and proof-reading at the end, due an hour before the journal's deadline for the article. The instantness allowed us to schedule the working process in a fast succession of steps yet left little temporal room for manoeuvre when the editing process brought up way more questions than anticipated by the two researchers responsible for sending the article to the journal. The questions brought up, comments in the text, and re-formulations of the text were well thought through, yet the stress the deadline put us under made it impossible to consider all of them for the two researchers responsible for handing in the final version. The situation might well have come up in other projects, yet in our collaboration, it was further facilitated by the instant-ness co-produced by Slack's communication rationale.

These two situations highlight some key moments that led us to re-think and explicitly discuss our use of instant communication tools and the attempt to amplify their beneficial effects while handling the problematic aspects and the stress engendered by them for the individual researchers involved in the process.

Conclusions and Outlook

We discussed VERSUS, first as an emergent epistemic practice of five young researchers to make sense of the evolving pandemic, then as form-ed research project involving more than ten researchers, to critically reflect on the potentialities and challenges of such experimental collaboration. We proposed to explicitly discuss some of the frictions that arose in the project – whether through the different disciplinary backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, and political theory, or through the time pressure and unusual forms of communication. As we write this chapter in April 2021, the team still works mainly and at times only through the collaborative tool Slack and video-conferencing.

In our discussion, we distinguished between VERSUS as co-laboration in the sense of Jörg Niewöhner and as collaboration, meaning the actual everyday means of working together. In co-laboration, thinking together meant an at times quick back-and-forth between enthusiasm and frustration, as the different perspectives sparked new ways of thinking through issues. At the same time, it proved onerous in finding a common language, constantly reflecting on our own disciplinary conventions and the frictions raised by them for others. The necessity to balance this enthusiasm and frustration proved crucial for VERSUS. We illustrated our attempts to lessen frustration, e.g., in the lead model we used when writing an article for an anthropological journal. Further, we discussed the framework ‘reconfigurations of provisioning’ as a common orientation that anchored discussions and research while raising interesting questions in the specific research fields in which the involved researchers are doing research (sociology of ageing, urban anthropology, economic anthropology, cultural anthropology, political theory).

Our discussion of collaboration centred on the use of Slack. This collaborative online messaging app made the coming together as a team feel different than under usual circumstances of German academia. Instead of meeting in formal settings in which hierarchies could appear more pronounced, some of us met through the app, similar as in a social media environment with profiles, pictures, nicknames, and memes. The platform allowed the researchers to engage more directly and immediately with one another, both conducive and raising frictions about how one ought to use the platform and communicate on it. The crucial moments we discussed were when the instant-ness of the platform problematised working hours or led to decisions that not all team members were equally informed about. Finally, we discussed the simultaneity of allowing quick and playful epistemic work, which led to a publication in an international journal, and the compression of time in ways that lead to peaks in workload and stress to be avoided.

Both practices of and frictions created through co-laboration and collaboration proved, in our experience, not only frustrating but also fruitful. In this, practices of co-laboration and collaboration can be compared to practices of translation as formulated in Science and Technology Studies (Callon 1986). Such practices cannot be reduced to a passive act of mere transfer; instead, they are highly generative: they constitute communities of, and among researchers, they construct the research topic (problem or question) by contesting and re-shaping the disciplinary assumptions initially associated with it; they create reflexive innovation; and finally, they reconstruct the involved researchers themselves by subjectivising them into specific roles and positions (Freeman 2009).

Several factors might have increased the visibility of frictions in co-laboration in the VERSUS project, including the rapid development of both the research topic and the size of the

project in terms of people, money, tasks and technologies involved, and the disciplinary variety of the involved researchers. However, we want to argue that even though co-laborative frictions might become more visible in such circumstances, they apply to nearly every research project. These frictions, we argue, should not be repressed and hidden but instead explicitly taken up, reflected upon, and talked about as a matter of care in epistemic relations – specifically between near disciplines.

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