

2nd Basel Summer School in African Studies: Basic and applied research, conceptual and practical problems, reflexivity, translation (Basel, 29.08.-05.09.2015)

■ JAMES MERRON

The second Basel Summer School in African Studies was attended by 7 doctoral students from the Centre for African Studies Basel and 12 external participants mostly from Africa. It started with an introductory session on Saturday including the presentation of posters, followed by work in groups over the Sunday (coupled with social activities), so that when the program started in earnest on Monday morning the group had bonded and had already developed a great discussion culture resulting in an animated exchange from the onset. Each day (Monday to Friday) would start with a keynote address by a senior scholar (Ulf Engel, Jeremy Gould, Daniel Künzler, Elísio Macamo, Brigit Obrist), which would reflect the overarching theme:

- Research design: Conceptual problems vs. practical problems
- Policy design: How solutions work in the real world
- Analytical design: Formulating problems
- Practical design: Formulating solutions
- Evaluation design: Checking the relevance of research

In the afternoon the respective themes would be discussed further in workshops organized by the groups of students. The last day was devoted to Advanced Study Skills. Originally these were supposed to introduce into negotiating and carrying out consultancy mandates but had to be changed to poster design.

The Basel Summer School had a balanced mix of participants from Switzerland and Africa. (Image: James Merron 2015).

The Basel Summer School stimulated a new perspective on African Studies through addressing the prevalent demand that knowledge produced on Africa should be practically based, solution-oriented, and relevant for development. Scholarship is committed to ways of knowing, however research on Africa is granted by institutions committed to the idea that proper research ought to be policy relevant. There is no doubt that research in general ought to be relevant to 'what is going on in the world' by addressing the problems afflicting countries and peoples. However, an enduring problem in knowledge production about Africa has been the question concerning the purposes which should be served by such knowledge. It has generally been agreed that knowledge produced on Africa has been shaped, on the one hand, by the unequal nature of relations between Africa and the West and, on the other hand, by critical reactions that have created room for African voices to question the legitimacy of this knowledge.

Within this historiography there is the general assumption that 'Africa is a problem to be solved', a feature of the Enlightenment view which assumes that one can uncover and produce knowledge about the world, part of which can improve human wellbeing. Consequently research done in Africa is about solving a problem – a problem that is

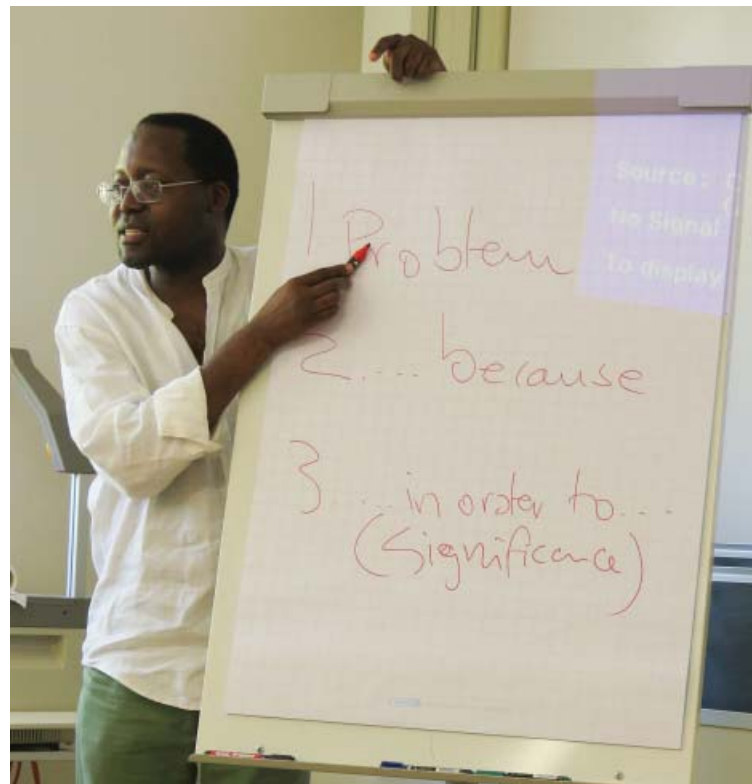


often formulated prior to the research project having been carried out. The nature of the problem is therefore known. Of course, research cannot be accomplished without a clear understanding of a problem in the world that needs to be addressed. The challenge however is in recognizing the distinction between conceptual problems and practical problems. Blurring these distinctions has led in practice to placing demands on research which cannot be met, often where the research was conceived to address conceptual problems. Emerging from these discussions were distinctions in the levels of research that are theoretically, conceptually and methodologically relevant to a critical reflection on the challenge of “area studies” in formulating its object of knowledge and its contribution to general scholarship.

Generally put, practical problems refer to the challenge of finding a solution to a known problem that needs to be addressed, whereas conceptual problems refer to what we need to know in order to understand a problem. Correlates to this are found in the distinction between basic and applied research in that the former calls for understanding whereas the latter calls for solutions. Policy recommendations can easily flow from research that addresses practical problems, although it is less clear how they can be derived from conceptual problems. Where basic research finds its relevance to policy makers is through its application to debates in society, which is an issue of translation, i.e. rendering something intelligible for other people. The significance of basic research is therefore in identifying the general in the particular and then translating from emergent properties of research done in particular areas. This step is in no way unproblematic and not everyone speaks the same disciplinary language. Knowledge has to be framed in a way that is understandable to all participating disciplines at one level, and to the public on another.

Prof. Elsiso Macamo, director of the Basel Summer School in African Studies, fighting the assumption that 'Africa is a problem to be solved' and directing the participants' attention to the importance of formulating a problem. (Image: James Merron 2015).

Rendering the world intelligible is done by applying theoretical and conceptual tools. How do we make sense out of the world by applying the theoretical and conceptual tools available to us? In terms of translation this is problematic in so far as the dominant



ways of knowing the world emerged in specific historical, sociological, and cultural contexts. Thus there is no basis to assume that concepts developed in South-West Germany will, for instance, apply to Sierra Leone, or that the cause for conflict in the Central African Republic are the same as in Eritrea or the Balkans. Dealing with this requires an 'epistemologically radical social science' that calls for understanding the nature of one's knowledge and the conclusions one draws from that, which may or may not be policy relevant. Reflexivity is an epistemic space where we come to think about our thinking. It is a space that accepts not knowing as a fundamental aspect of humanity. In this sense, knowledge production is about knowing ourselves and knowing how we come to know something, an enterprise that focuses on subjectivity as deeply implicated in producing knowledge.

In this sense there is the call to build bridges across academies to account for the complexities in our world and the scientific worldview that make that world up. Also, it is about bringing in non-scientific stakeholders. This means looking at the knowledge of ordinary people and those who are dealing practically with the problems that we address, doing this both to enlarge our understanding and to find out what 'reality' is going on out there in the 'real world'. What kinds of knowledges do we need? Which kinds of knowledges can we access? This kind of joint knowledge production has methodological implications. There are organizations that propose their 'logical models' for this (i.e. The Kellogg foundation), many of these focus on changing people's behaviors. However this is not a logical model about what people think about health. Research should not be dominated by a paradigm. There are thought communities out there. Socially constructed knowledge comes out of social interaction. To reflect on that is the central idea of co-production.

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The Summer School was held at the premises of the Centre for African Studies Basel, which offered a quaint and relaxed setting. (Image: James Merron, 2015).

Programme: Basel Summer School in African Studies 2015

Centre for African Studies Basel
Petersgraben 11, Room 205

29 August to 5 September 2015

Funded by

Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)

Swiss University Conference (SUC)

University of Basel, Career Advancement

The Summer School will start on Saturday with an introductory day including a poster session and group work. Sunday sees a combination of a social event and the continuation of the work in the groups. Each of the thematic days (Monday to Friday) starts with a keynote address by a senior scholar which reflects the overarching theme. In the afternoon the respective themes will be discussed further in workshops organised by the groups of students. The last day is reserved for the Advanced Study Skills and Career Planning session and a final discussion.

Poster session

Participants have the opportunity to introduce themselves and their work to each other (5 minutes). They do so from the perspective of the tension between practical and conceptual problems. They prepare small posters (A2) that shortly present their background and their PhD projects. The posters will remain on display during the Summer School.

For the presentation of yourself and your project we would like you to prepare a small poster. Please bring your own hard copy (A2, 420mm x 594mm) **or** send us a PDF file by **Tuesday, 25 August**.

Group work/preparation of workshops

The afternoon sessions on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are structured around the individual work of the participants. You are invited to indicate two themes that you are particularly interested in. On the first day we will confirm the groups, each of which is responsible for one of the workshops, and provide further instructions. The senior scholars addressing that particular theme (on that day) will be asked to comment the work of the participants.

Research design: Conceptual problems vs. practical problems

This unit introduces participants to fundamental epistemological issues bearing on the production of social scientific knowledge by making a distinction between basic research (conceptual problems) and applied research (practical problems). Elísio Macamo will draw the attention of the participants to the specific nature

of the questions and answers which are elicited by research according to whether it is basic or applied. He will further argue that African Studies face a fundamental challenge that hinges precisely on this distinction against the background of increasingly louder calls for policy relevance in research on Africa.

Preparatory reading: Mosse, David. *Cultivating Development : An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. Anthropology, Culture and Society. London: Pluto Press, 2005 (Introduction, pp.1-31).

Policy design: How solutions work in the real world

The focus of this unit is on the political, economic and social conditions which must be met for a solution to be effective. Ulf Engel will give an insight into the creation and implementation of the African Peace and Security architecture (APSA) and the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS). A particular focus will be on the design of the CEWS and the underlying methodological questions. We will discuss some critical issues for the consultant such as the institutional framework, intellectual credibility or moral integrity.

Preparatory reading: Wane, El-Ghassim, Charles Mwaura, Shewit Hailu, Simon Kopfmüller, Doug Bond, Ulf Engel, and João Gomes Porto. "The Continental Early Warning System: Methodology and Approach." In *Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture*. Farnham. Ashgate Publishing Limited, edited by Ulf Engel and João Gomes Porto, 91–110. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.

Analytical design: Formulating problems

This unit elaborates on the nature of basic research. The rapid and aggressive incursion of technological research aids (from internet search engines, digital recorders and cameras to software for the management and analysis of 'big' data and other textual artefacts) may cultivate the impression that knowledge production in the social sciences and the humanities is finally coming of age – approaching levels of certainty generally associated with the so-called exact sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). These developments, which resonate with myriad calls for the formalization of empirical fieldwork methodologies, suggest that epistemic certainty is a universal scientific virtue. Against this ideal, Jeremy Gould argues that the humanities and the social sciences cannot and should not aspire to certainty; rather, the quality of social scientific analysis can only be judged on how well various parties to an act of knowledge production (researchers, collaborators, informants, audiences) are able to assess the validity of the epistemic processes by which sensory experience becomes, in turn, research data and analytical outcomes. Engaging with this challenge can be facilitated by revisiting deliberations about the 'crisis of representation' associated with the postmodern turn in social analysis, epitomized by debates around the collection *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986), and by an effort to revitalize (or reassess) the methodological tool of 'reflexivity.'

Preparatory reading: Marcus, George E. "The Contemporary Desire for Ethnography and Its Implication for Anthropology." In *Transforming Ethnographic Knowledge*, edited by Rebecca Hardin and Kamari Maxine Clarke, 73–89. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012.

Practical design: Formulating solutions

This unit introduces approaches in transdisciplinary research with a strong focus on problem solving. Growing out of sustainability research, they share a concern about societal problems which are complex and embedded in particular contexts of uncertainty. While they do not necessarily agree on definitions, proponents of these approaches argue for innovative ways of co-producing knowledge by engaging researchers from different disciplines and actors from civil society, the private sector, and/or the state to jointly produce knowledge that leads to adequate solutions. By "co-producing knowledge" they refer to the process of jointly analyzing a situation, negotiating goals, and developing problem-solving measures. We shall have a closer look at some principles suggested for designing transdisciplinary sustainability research, scrutinize case studies and critically reflect on these approaches based on our own research experiences.

Preparatory reading: Pohl, Christian, Stephan Rist, Anne Zimmermann, Patricia Fry, Ghana S. Gurung, Flurina Schneider, Chinwe Ifejika Speranza, et al. "Researchers' Roles in Knowledge Co-Production: Experience from Sustainability Research in Kenya, Switzerland, Bolivia and Nepal." *Science and Public Policy* 37, no. 4 (May 1, 2010): 267–81.

Evaluation design: Checking the relevance of research

This unit introduces participants to the important task of drawing up criteria to ascertain the extent to which the implementation of research results can be used to improve research design. First, Daniel Künzler will address the evaluation of research results with a focus on basic research. In a second keynote address, Elísio Macamo will discuss some issues pertaining to how evaluation inheres into research by drawing attention to the practical work that is accomplished by knowledge production.

Preparatory reading: Mosse, David. *Cultivating Development : An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. Anthropology, Culture and Society. London: Pluto Press, 2005 (Introduction, pp.31-37); Fraser, Mark W. *Intervention Research : Developing Social Programs*. Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Workshop: Basic and applied research in African Studies

The workshop on Friday afternoon will summarize the issues around the main theme of the Summer School, namely the relationship between applied and basic research in African Studies. It will consist of exercises centering on the individual projects and how they bear on the distinction.

Advanced Study Skills and Career Planning

The participants will discuss how they can valorize their competences as researchers and make their expertise relevant for policy makers, development organisations and private entrepreneurship.

Schedule

	Saturday, 29 Aug	Sunday, 30 Aug	Monday, 31 Aug	Tuesday, 1 Sept
	Introduction		Research design: Conceptual problems vs. practical problems	Policy design: How solutions work in the real world
9.15- 10.15			Elísio Macamo on practical problems and conceptual problems	Ulf Engel on working with the African Union: Peace and Security Policy
10.15- 10.45	Welcome and organisational issues		<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>
10.45- 12.15	Poster session	Brunch at BAB	Discussion based on expert's input and preparatory reading	Discussion based on expert's input and preparatory reading
12.15- 14.00	<i>Lunch</i>		<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>
14.00- 15.30	Cont'd	Visiting Usakos exhibition; exchange with the students from Namibia and Switzerland who designed the exhibition	Workshop (Group A)	Workshop (Group B)
15.30- 16.00	<i>Break</i>		<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>
16.00- 17.30	Preparation of workshops	(Preparation of workshops)	Cont'd	Cont'd

Wednesday, 2 Sept	Thursday, 3 Sept	Friday, 4 Sept	Saturday, 5 Sept	
Analytical design: Formulating problems	Practical design: Formulating solutions	Evaluation design: Checking the relevance of research	Advanced Study Skills and Career Planning	
Jeremy Gould on ethnographic reflexivity and the (re-)quest for epistemologically radical social science	Brigit Obrist on transdisciplinary research approaches	Daniel Künzler on the evaluation of the quality of research	Becoming an expert: How to make expertise relevant and add value to research competences	9.15- 10.15
<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>	10.15- 10.45
Discussion based on expert's input and preparatory reading	Discussion based on expert's input and preparatory reading	Elísio Macamo on the the polysemy of the notion of 'evaluation'	Discussion	10.45- 12.15
<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	12.15- 14.00
Workshop and discussion (Group C)	Workshop and discussion (Group D)	Workshop: Basic and applied research in African Studies (Elísio Macamo)	Wrap up and final discussion	14.00- 15.30
<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>	<i>Break</i>	15.30- 16.00
Cont'd	Cont'd	Cont'd		16.00- 17.30

Experts

Ulf Engel is Professor of African Politics at the Institute of African Studies, University of Leipzig (Germany), with part-time secondment to the Global and European Studies Institute as well as the Graduate Centre Humanities and Social Sciences of the Research Academy Leipzig of the University of Leipzig. He has published widely on Africa's international relations and is an advisor amongst others to the African Union, to the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and to the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (Berlin). His current research focuses on new spatialities of power on Africa.

Jeremy Gould is Professor and Programme Coordinator Development and International Cooperation at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä (Finland). He has a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Helsinki. He has conducted research, and led project planning and evaluation missions in Zambia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. He has provided expert services to the Foreign Ministries of Finland, Norway and Sweden; the United National Development Programme and the World Bank Institute. His research interests revolve around the socio-legal dynamics of post-colonial state formation.

Daniel Künzler is Lecturer in Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Fribourg and coordinates the doctoral programme PROWEL. After receiving his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Zurich he has taught at the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin) and several Swiss Universities. His major research interests are social security, the politics of social policy, education and popular culture in West and East Africa where he regularly conducts fieldwork. As co-president of the Swiss Society for African Studies he works with representatives of other Area Studies on the question of quality and performance in Area Studies.

Elísio Macamo is Associate Professor of African Studies at the University of Basel. Previously, he taught development sociology at the University of Bayreuth, where he was a founding member of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies. He regularly offers methodological workshops to Portuguese speaking African doctoral students on behalf of CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa). His major research interests are the sociology of religion, technology, knowledge, politics and risk. His current research projects focus on the politics of the rule of law and comparative studies of development (Africa, Latin America and Asia).

Brigit Obrist is Professor of Anthropology at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Basel, Switzerland (since 2007). As a leading expert in medical anthropology she also holds a position as senior scientist at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (since 1998) and leads an interdisciplinary Medical Anthropology Research Group (MARG). She has conducted basic research in Papua New Guinea, Switzerland, Indonesia, and Tanzania and directed various applied projects such as „Staying Healthy in Migration “ (Federal Office of Health) and „Social Vulnerability and Resilience“ (NCCR North-South). As technical advisor, she has guided the social science component of various public health projects including KINET (Swiss Development Corporation) and ACCESS (Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development).

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