

Conference on Applied Interculturality Research (cAIR10)

Transcript of panel discussion, University of Graz, 10 April 2010

Transcribed by Martin Winter, May 2010; revised by Richard Parncutt, June 2010, finalized July 2010

The first Conference on Applied Interculturality Research (cAIR10) was held in Graz, Austria from 7 to 10 April 2010. The aim of cAIR10 was to promote intercultural communication and understanding, and reduce the prevalence and impact of racism and xenophobia, by facilitating interactions between practice and research in all areas of interculturality. On the last day of the conference, the keynote speakers discussed the aims and content of the conference in a panel discussion that lasted for one hour. This document presents a transcription of their comments. Our transcription is not literal - we have removed small-talk and repetitions, and polished up the grammar to improve legibility, in much the same way that a journalist would do before publishing an interview. Before publication in the internet, this document, contributors we asked to check that we had faithfully reproduced their intentions. Some of them revised details, but no new content was added. Ideas that might be interesting for organizers of future conferences are marked yellow.

Panel:

Ulrike Bechmann (Department of Religious Studies, University of Graz, Austria)

Wolfgang Benedek (European Training Centre for Human Rights, Graz, Austria)

Christiane Hartnack (Center for Intercultural Studies, Danube University, Krems, Austria)

Manju Jaidka (Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India)

Ulrich Kattmann (Dept of Biology, University of Oldenburg, Germany)

Ursula Hemetek (Department of Folk Music and Ethnomusicology, Vienna, Austria)

Richard Stanton (MigrationWork CIC, London, UK)

Unable to attend: Waldemar Martyniuk (European Centre for Modern Languages, Graz)

Moderator: Dieter Halwachs (Department of Linguistics, University of Graz)

Halwachs: The aim of the panel discussion is to discuss the aims, methods and results of the conference, the issues raised in the workshops, and the question of what next. I think the best would be if every keynote speaker would speak for three to five minutes about these topics and then we try to get into a discussion with the audience.

Hartnack: What I learned and what I liked a lot during this conference was the structure. It was the first time that I experienced that mix of format: democratically built up small groups on topics that the participants wanted to elaborate and exchange, and then the thematic sessions, poster sessions and the thematic panel and the keynotes. I think that was for me really a take-home point and I would like to apply this in other contexts. Also the coffee breaks and the possibility for informal conversation, it is so often, that it is important what one hears during the conference or discusses formally, but the informal exchange afterwards with a coffee or whatever was for me extremely important and I think that this is a style of a conference that to me is also a transcultural style. It is authoritarian in terms of keynotes, it is democratic in terms of building up your own topics, so in this range between authoritarian and democratic exchange we had the whole range and I think that this is really transcultural. Nowadays in the world I think we have to realize that there is still authority, therefore we have keynotes where others have to listen for forty minutes, but we also have in the world today democratic structures, so participants who are interested can have a voice and express it. I think that was for me the highlight of the conference, one of several highlights, and I just wanted to start with this.

Kattmann: I agree strongly. The timetable was excellent and it was an opportunity to talk together, that was the main thing on this conference. When I was invited, I thought by myself 'oh it's an adventure, I do not know how they will accept me as an biologist'. This is a field which biologists

are not familiar with, but I am not only biologist as you know, I am also a teacher. I thank you very much, **you didn't treat me as an outsider.**

Jaidka: I would agree with the other two speakers, and what I enjoyed most was the fact that **this conference was not impersonal.** A lot of conferences in the West that I attended were very impersonal, in the sense that you do not interact with the other participants. You go for your sessions where you present your paper and you may only have four or five people in the audience. So it wasn't like that here. The family feeling, the oneness, made it feel more like one big community, even though delegates have come from different parts of the world. The ruthless punctuality is something I appreciate very much. There has been a lot of discussion on research and practice, but we can connect the two through theory. You know, whether we want to do research or to practice, we begin with certain ideas, with a certain theory. Even if a theory is not clearly formulated, it emerges either in practical application or is expressed through the teaching that you do. So you can't really separate the two, I think it was a really good mix of practice and research and I would like to see cAIR moving forward from year to year. My own perspective is from literature, and in the beginning I thought I would not fit into the conference. But then once you start to think about the subject, there are doors which open, there are avenues which come up before you and you realize even though you are an academic, even though you are teaching literature you are still doing something which has an intercultural aspect, which you can build on. Thank you very much for this!

Bechmann: Well, I appreciate the same things. What attracted me when I was invited, was the combination of practice and research, because it is in my biography and I never thought that I will come to the university because of my practice time ten years out of university, and that this would not be accepted at universities at all. It was difficult of course. But now within the universities there is a process starting to combine both and it is what I appreciate. Therefore I was really looking forward to see what happens. So the only thing that I am asking myself is: what I am doing with this diversity? **Maybe the next conference should focus on a certain topic, but on the other hand it is good to look at things from the point of view of different academic disciplines.** I was two weeks ago at a conference I wouldn't go to anymore, so thanks for this kind of conference, I appreciate it.

Stanton: I also felt as I would come as an outsider, but I am glad I came. I share points that have been made. I have been to so many conferences, which I wished I had not gone to. Also many conferences where the only good thing is the coffee break. I think this had something remarkable and I really want to congratulate Richard Parncutt and the team for what they achieved. The thing now is to take it forward in the ways people have been suggesting. **We or you will need a concrete task and it might be a very big task, but it needs to be some task or change to be achieved and then I think this interaction between research and practice can really happen.** I have not tried this sort of engagement, this kind of contribution for a long time, the conferences I have been to for years were really about practice, about policy, responding to policy. But it is clearly from the discussion here: Yes theory, even certainly research, empirical research, but also theoretical development can be made to inform policy. All it needs is a bit of a focus, I think, to get people along to that. And one other thing I think of is, we had a lot of students here, whilst the engagement of the people at the attendance has been quite an exception. **I wonder if we could make it possible for our student colleagues to contribute more.** I mean that idea of the open sessions was fantastic. I have been to so many conferences where you are going from an official job in a big organisation, and they were glad to see you and if you are lucky you got two minutes or one minute to make a comment, there is no initiative from the participants at all. So I suppose I am saying we can take it further probably we could draw on the knowledge and the ideas of also students, people who've gone less far in their career but have important ideas to feed in.

Hemetek: I did not feel like an outsider when I got the invitation, because I was invited by a musicologist. But finally I found out, as has been said after my presentation, people don't take music seriously. And usually in musicology conferences I always stress the other side, it is not only the music it is also the social and economic context that is important. But here I found that music is somehow really underrepresented, so I then started always mentioning music in my comments to the papers, which I did not expect actually. So it turned out the other way round and I think really it is important that people who are not musicologists should always also think of the power of music, because music is a really powerful thing. I had my problems beforehand with the interdisciplinarity, but I could solve them to a certain extent in the terminology discussions and I am more relaxed about the terms now, if we really make clear what concepts are behind the terms and this started with the invitation. But now that's solved to certain extent for me personally and this is an achievement of this conference. About the structure I find it very unusual and had to get used to that: on the one hand the strict timing, and on the other hand these very open sessions. But I think it worked very well. I want to say what I did not like, is this sense of ranking and competition with the evaluations. I appreciate evaluation, I think it is very necessary, but not a ranking, to say who is the best. I couldn't say which was the best of the posters, who am I to judge which is the best? This is so diverse, there are so many disciplines here which I am not an expert in. Maybe that's the only thing I didn't like. But I am grateful that I was invited.

Benedek: First of all I would like say that it is my feeling that this was one of the best prepared conferences I have seen so far and my congratulations Richard and all his team which has worked so hard to make this conference a success. I am the local here, this is my lecture hall this is my faculty, so I am here more or less regularly. That makes it also more difficult for me to be fully involved, because I didn't come for the conference and I have to attend to other obligations. That raises the problem of the locals who have not been as involved as some would have expected. It is also the time where we don't have lectures at the moment, so that is a typical problem. With regards to the topics, I would have liked maybe to see more focus which will allow us more bridge-building. I thought it was maybe too much happening in parallel obviously in the working groups that was then brought together, but in order to have an academic outcome it is good to be either more problem oriented or to have more cohesion in the topics otherwise certainly you enrich yourself and this is what strongly happened here, but it is also more difficult to bring yourself into the debate. With regard to the contribution from practice I think, we had such contribution, you see in the posters outside and like this morning I saw Fred Ohenhen was on the program, he is certainly a practitioner and this is the way to do it. If you involve them and give them a role, they will come and perform. One possibility could be to have panels of two, an academic and a practitioner. That could be an interesting tension. That is not necessarily a keynote, which is the best approach, it is also not good to have these panels where everybody speaks too short and with no time for discussion as I know from other conferences, but something in between. I am not yet clear if a publication is planned, so I would be happy to be informed. I would also hope that this approach would continue, that others would take it up. I am a bit afraid that the level has been so high of this first conference that it will be difficult for others to say we organize the next one.

Halwachs: Are there any questions or comments from the audience?

Irena Wolf (University of Konstanz, Germany): Thank you very much for this conference, I think it was one of the best decisions recently for me to come Graz, to participate in this conference. It was a step forward in my professional career and personal life. As we received the program with the topics just few days before the conference and I went through, I thought, well none of the topics of the talks are related to my PhD dissertation and I will probably not get the answers of my questions. But actually I have already a list of people I have to meet when I am go home. Instead of answers for my PhD dissertation, I expanded my community. I believe I have to meet the class teacher of my son and suggest what we could do with children who produce tension in the class, which exist for

quite some time. I think I have to talk about this experience in the university with the international office. After the presentation of Ms. Bechmann I have to talk to the pastor of the church, what we can do to change the world.

Halwachs: What exactly is meant by interculturality? What is the relationship between interculturality and interdisciplinarity? What is the role of interculturality in solving social problems?

Hartnack: I was fascinated by the many academic disciplines that are presented here at the conference. Most practitioners also come from a discipline or its thinking at least, since most practitioners have studied at a university a particular subject. I mean here alone on the panel we have biology, sociology, literature, music, psychology, law and in the audience we have medicine and so on. It's an amazing wealth of different methods, approaches, perspectives and so on. **For me it was amazing that a person from medicine and a person from social science can come to the same conclusion or the same view on transculturality, for example.** And it was new experience for me to interact with people from so many different academic backgrounds. I saw that as a very positive as an asset of this conference. Of course when you bring in such a wide angles and aspects, depths of some discussions might suffer from it. I mean if we had focused on one topic we had gone deeper and deeper into it. So that way we played around with many different concepts and had this association with this or this perspective but I still think that this synergies that came up at least potentially were for me very enriching. And one topic is the reflection on transculturality. I saw the importance of being more specific of what we are talking about, yet again from different perspectives and not just throw around these labels.

Kattmann: I see there no alternative between social problems and intercultural problems, they are interconnected. Thinking about the proposal from Richard Stanton, we should place tasks in the center of conference. I have maybe two proposals: in several German universities, Gender Studies are not one field, but are introduced in all fields. **Universities could also require all fields to consider intercultural aspects.** A second one is about practice: a friend of mine, worked with mentally handicapped people. When he retired, he proposed to his community that there should be an ombudsman for mentally handicapped people, and the community did it. So what about an ombudsman for socially handicapped people with migration background? These are two ideas only, and we may have other ideas to have a point a task which lies behind research and practice.

Benedek: On this second proposal: I would say it is all an issue of empowerment. How you can get these people empowered, make them aware of their rights and then the skills also to make use of them and not creating an institution who should act on their behalf. Because they are well able to act on their own.

Kattmann: Not a parliament which acts, you must be familiar with the institution of ombudsman or ombudswoman, then you will see that it is a very good institution, instituted by the community parliament.

Benedek: I am very much aware of ombudsinstitution. That's my job. But there are ombudsman for children, for handicapped – you see, you put people in such a category and that is not what they need. On the other hand there is an ombudsman for people in general who have problems with authorities, etc. that is for all the same. I have a certain indication here, I think we should focus on integration.

Kattmann: The ombudsman is one way. So if there is a ombudsman for a group of people, acting for these people, especially for those, not for the whole population. That is what I intend, there is a category that is not invented by us, but by the society.

Jaidka: Let me come back to the specific issues we covered in this conference. My presentation was on transculturality through literature. I think all of us actually live plural lives. Each of us is not just a researcher, a person in music, a biologist or whatever; even if you are a teacher you are still a practitioner, you are still a researcher, you are the one who takes on the role of an ombudsman at one time or the other. So there are things that we together can work out. I think if we wish to take this event into the future, we have to gather all the people, particularly the youngsters. **Because we have a duty towards our younger scholars also.** They may be from different disciplines, but there are other conferences where we can encourage them to hand in papers. Offering awards and prizes is a good idea: **Prizes are good to encourage people to come in the field of research; they are a good incentive.**

Thomas Schmidinger (University of Vienna): **I want to come back to the question of whether too many things are called 'cultural'. Should we instead focus on class, gender, and social differences?** It is easier to get funding for 'intercultural' or 'multicultural' research than for research on poverty, richness, or social differences. I see a danger that we call too many things 'culture'. Even in this conference, there was a poster where different Christian denominations in Poland were called 'cultures'. In German, the term 'culture' has been used for many different things, and I perhaps this discussion about culture is itself part of the problem.

Bechmann: If you see the gender issue, it changed from feminist to gender. I think you can call it culture, but the moment you have to deal with facts on the ground, that's not only culture. To call things 'culture' shortens the description, but the moment you come to a certain question, you have to be more precise. A second thing I wanted to share is, but it is too early to present, at our Faculty of Catholic Theology we have a social partnership with the 'Frauenwohnhaus', a retreat for women and their children, waiting until they know if they can stay or not. And that is one attempt to take responsibility as a faculty. We put it up two years ago, so it is a bit early to say what will come out of it. So we try to connect practice and research in a concrete way, but can't yet say if that will work or not. That is just one practical experience. If you do things like that, you can call it culture or whatever, but there you have to deal with the women, and it will come to the concrete facts on the ground.

Bernd Brabec (University of Graz): I do think that terminology is an important issue and I do also think that the term interculturality and related terms are overestimated sometimes. I remember that in Ulrich Kattmann's keynote we learned, or I hope that all of us knew it before, not to use the term 'race' anymore. But now you have to look what is now substituting the term 'race' in public opinion. Obviously for example religion. In certain discourses today Muslims are treated as today's 'niggers'. But also among politicians, very often the term culture is used in a way like the German word 'Kulturkreis', to say it is a different culture, that means outsiders. If we treat a group of people who come from a certain place or have a certain religion or whatever, and put them into categories, we always run into kind of a danger using terms that are used in other discourses in a very dubious way. So I was very happy to hear today a word from Richard Stanton called conviviality. **And I think conviviality is a very good word to focus upon - about how we live together.** I think it is very important to reflect on it. You have to deal with cases, with people – individuals.

Halwachs: Interculturality and cultural differences are often used to refuse people equal opportunities and human rights. Is it a problem to use this term interculturality?

Benedek: My colleague Bechmann mentioned the efforts of faculties, that is very impressive. To say that actually we have some good practices at our university, where we try to reach also outsiders, to emphasize the social function of the university. **One of it could be our masters degree in Global Studies, which is starting in autumn. In this concept, NGOs play a major role.** Another example: I

am running a so called refugee law clinic. We have a lot of people of practice come explaining what is really going on there. The students appreciate this a lot. So we really understand the issues that the law has to respond to, as well as the limits of the law in this respect. And next week we have this 'Multikultiball' and the day before we the 'Multikulti-Akademie', which this time will be devoted to the problem of child soldiers.

Stanton: I am not sure if I quite understood your question. I think you are asking if some people are maybe afraid that interculturality is used to displace the real social challenges. I should say that in the UK the term interculturality has not been used much until recently, and it has a rather bad name. A lot of people in the UK would not take this seriously, they would say why am I coming to Graz, oh it is a nice place but... Partly for very bad reasons and weaknesses in English political culture and general public thinking. There is also a reason: In the UK something like a preventive intercultural policy has been used a lot in the last few years promoted government, which is called community cohesion. A lot of people now would say that this community cohesion which is mostly the simple idea of contact has been a substitute for really addressing the reasons for division and conflict. There was a lot of emphasis on printing leaflets, and just bring people together, give them leaflets, talking about migrants, saying they are nice people, really. And that for itself is not going to solve cultural tensions, and deal with the underlying problems and structural challenges. Some of us would use the term 'race' to say race is being ignored or ethnicity is being ignored, for instance, still. And the problem of housing, a big reason for a lot of the tension, you can cover up a lot of these things by talking about just dialogue. Which is the reason why I have been looking for, and asking you about things getting more focused. So that is that problem. But I am confident we hopefully find a task, there is a task where interculturality is relevant. Actually the hardest social problems, discrimination in employment, conflict between people about housing, you always can help there because people are often discriminated against. Changes are coming through our imagination, solutions have to pass through the cultural spheres, how people imagine what is possible. I think a possible task would be address this whole question of values and identity which right across the rich world has been made a key threshold, a barrier or gateway to entrance. The question is: What are values? What is our identity? That whole area is "culture", and we have to criticize the way the word "culture" is used.

Halwachs: What should happen after this conference?

Hartnack: I would like to pick up this idea of cross-sectional academic activity, what we have been doing here for the last four days. Because the academic world is not really in line with technical developments, things are moving fast, the world is globalizing. We permanently interact with people from different backgrounds, background, languages, and so on. Our academic disciplines are basically restricted to the specific perspective of each discipline and are not coming across and relating to real-life challenges. I think it would be important to modernize universities in this respect: cross-sectional, interdisciplinary, real-life approaches with an outreach perspective that will benefit the traditional academic structure.

Benedek: I just wanted to mention that there is space in a university for interdisciplinarity. I mentioned Global Studies, and there are other things like we are having a doctor-program on human rights which will start in October and which will bring together all the six faculties of our university. So there is the space, and there are students who make use of that more or less regularly.

Halwachs: To sum up: The Conference was a meeting of outsiders brought together by interdisciplinarity. The conference was a good mix between formal and informal, between "military" and "democratic" structures. And it was also that this conference on interculturality is an important concept, but we have to bring it down to what really happens. I think and hope that a new network will be created and there will be another conference.