# Transcultural Disciplines?

An Introduction

The term ‘transcultural’ probably constitutes one of the most important and widely discussed conceptual keywords in the humanities and social sciences of recent years. The aim of this journal section is to analyse and evaluate the relationship between the transcultural paradigm and various more or less ‘established’ disciplines.

The initial objective was to explain how different disciplines could profit from applying the transcultural paradigm (method and fields of investigation). In this way, the section was supposed to introduce colleagues as well as students of a given discipline to the transcultural dimensions of their respective field of study, to promote awareness of these transcultural dimensions among specialists in the field and to increase mutual understanding among proponents of the transcultural approach. Generally working in a multidisciplinary environment, the latter often face the challenge of having to communicate differently with their transcultural peers than with their peers in their respective discipline of origin—a regular source of misunderstandings.

The contributors to this journal section have all worked in the context of an interdisciplinary research institution dedicated to developing and advancing the transcultural approach in the humanities and social sciences. Many have also taught in a Master’s programme on Transcultural Studies, a new and exciting transdisciplinary study programme introducing students from various disciplinary backgrounds to the transcultural paradigm and its associated methods and fields of investigation with the aim of pursuing disciplinarily grounded thinking and research within a transcultural framework.

In addition, the individual contributions were supposed to provide younger scholars working and teaching within institutional frames transcending the disciplinary boundaries with the possibility of proving their capability of circumscribing a traditionally defined discipline while at the same time pointing to the merits of engaging with the transcultural paradigm within their respective discipline.

## Defining the Transcultural Approach: Many Disciplines – Many Definitions

In the course of discussions, however, it became more and more obvious that this initial objective was closely linked to the much more complex question, not only of how to explain the transcultural approach, but also of how to define an academic discipline as such. This twofold problem of definition arises from the fact that the transcultural paradigm has been successively adopted by different disciplines in the past eight decades and was consequently described in manifold ways to suit the requirements of each disciplinary approach.

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The application of the transcultural paradigm to these and other fields of research in the social sciences and the humanities has given rise to different understandings and a multiplicity of interpretations that are closely related to the exigencies and requirements of the respective field of research. Given the increasing flood of publications on the subject, it is thus hardly surprising that various definitions of ‘transculturality’, the term ‘transcultural’ and other variations of this term have appeared[[1]](#footnote-1), including some early efforts at summarizing its research history and the current state of the art.[[2]](#footnote-2) Defined over and over again, the term ‘transcultural’ does not only lack a standardized definition, but—considering the discrepancies between the applied and the theoretical sciences as sketched out above—is also used in ways that differ considerably from each other.

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As sketched out above, this comparatively large variety of fundamental definitions also results from the fact that the transcultural paradigm has been applied to different fields of research where it needed to fulfil different exigencies and requirements. In sum, it must be acknowledged that the application of the transcultural paradigm serves different needs in different fields of research. Applied sciences such as transcultural nursing, transcultural management, transcultural psychology etc. employ the paradigm to overcome cultural boundaries that represent a professional obstacle because they inhibit communication between caretakers and patients or between different professional agents. The purely academic sciences, in turn, mainly employ the transcultural paradigm to focus on specific facets of human interaction and, additionally, to explore new fields of research that serve the aim of deconstructing cherished paradigms.

## Applying the Transcultural Approach: Questioning the Boundaries of Academic Disciplines

In view of the fact that different definitions of the transcultural paradigm arose in different fields of research because of different disciplinary requirements, it seems necessary to elaborate on the complex relationship between the former and the latter with a focus on the (theoretical, rather than applied) social sciences and humanities.

One important characteristic of studies using the transcultural approach as described in the preceding definitions (especially definitions III and IV) is that they are mostly situated either at the margins or between traditional academic disciplines. This is primarily due to the thematic focus of the transcultural approach that favours questions and topics tending to transcend ethnic, regional, national, linguistic, religious, and, in the widest sense, cultural boundaries. Many, but certainly not all established academic disciplines have adopted these boundaries in one form or the other, if only for the reason that every academic discipline needs to specify and limit the scope of its field of research. Thus, there exists a considerable tension between the demands of the transcultural approach and the traditional definition of academic disciplines […].

It is against this backdrop that the collection of articles at hand seeks to elaborate on the relationship between the transcultural approach on the one hand and the “traditional” discipline on the other hand. This relationship has rarely been addressed so far and, if so, with an eye to challenges of interdisciplinary cooperation rather than the formation and education of transcultural scholars from an early stage onwards.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The problem of cross-disciplinary cooperation constitutes an important challenge to all aforementioned disciplines as well as to transcultural studies as such: as already sketched out above, the diversity of interpretations associated with the transcultural paradigm also results from the fact that each scholar using the paradigm reacts to a very specific set and range of ideas, tenets, and discussions that are characteristic of each academic discipline pertaining to the various fields of social studies and the humanities, i.e. anthropologists, archaeologists, ethnologists, historians, philologists, political scientists, and specialists of certain regions, religious traditions and textual corpora.

Taking a closer look at each academic discipline reveals that probably no academic discipline lacks a transcultural component: in the history of humankind, no language, territory, religious or legal system etc. has been impervious to what we may term ‘external’ influences in this context. This is also reflected in the engagement of a given discipline with its respective subject-matter. Given the long history of intellectual engagement with these subjects, it would thus be incorrect to assume that academics have only recently begun to investigate phenomena that could be classified as transcultural according to the definitions given above: the field of European history, for example, firmly established as an academic discipline at latest since the nineteenth century, has never been completely dominated by ethnicist, racist or nationalist ideas. Historians of religion, of philosophy, of the sciences etc. have always transcended the frameworks set by more specialized, and occasionally also more narrow-minded historical approaches, thus creating alternative categorizations, epochal boundaries and subfields of research. In the same way, the academic discipline of religious studies, slowly emerging within the shadow of departments of theology in the nineteenth century, programmatically looked beyond the confines of specific religious systems. Its aim was not always to compare, but to understand processes transcending the boundaries of specific religious traditions such as rationalisation or secularisation. From a European perspective, the academic disciplines dealing with regions outside Europe such as Arabic and Islamic studies, Indology, Sinology, Japanology, all have a transcultural history of their own.

Analysing the transcultural component of any given discipline inevitably leads the investigating scholar into the discipline’s history. It is important to note in this context that academic disciplines are ‘of different age’ and thus look back on a longer or shorter history of disciplinary evolution. The latter has not come to an end, but continues due to the fact that particular societal constellations, technological developments and changing institutional structures etc. call for different forms of knowledge thus giving impetus to the creation of new academic fields and subfields, the field of ‘transcultural studies’ only being one among many new paradigms receiving an institutional framework.

Some of the academic disciplines dealt with in this journal issue have a very long academic history: law, for example, was already part of the curriculum in the earliest European universities founded in the high Middle Ages[[4]](#footnote-4); the typically ‘Western’ form of Islamic studies as well as the early comparative study of religion mainly concerned with non-Western religions, in turn, were only institutionalized in early modern universities.[[5]](#footnote-5) Other fields of research defined as disciplines in this publication, however, do not yet feature an established institutional framework: Central Asian Studies, for example, are represented by a number of chairs and journals worldwide, but do not pertain to the basic set of academic disciplines offered by every academic institution, Western or non-Western.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although an ever-growing subdiscipline of Sinology, Chinese intellectual history features no institutional framework comparable to that of traditional established disciplines, and, because of the linguistic requirements associated, is mainly imaginable as a field of specialization among sinologists, rather than among philosophers or specialists of literary studies lacking the necessary linguistic knowledge.[[7]](#footnote-7) In recent years, the increasing impact of information technology led to the emergence of the field of Digital Humanities, a new disciplinary field situated between theoretical and applied sciences that cannot look back on a centuries-old history. The field of transcultural studies itself cannot boast of a well-established institutional framework. Although many scholars worldwide contribute to this field, and several academic journals bear the epithet ‘transcultural’ in their titles,[[8]](#footnote-8) only few universities so far offer degrees in this ‘discipline’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The question of how to define a particular discipline is not only problematic because the different fields of academic investigation represented in this publication dispose of longer or shorter history of institutionalization in a context that may be labelled ‘European’ or ‘Western’. It also arises because different scholars differ considerably with regards to this definition. The definition of law as endorsed by law students, practicing lawyers and all scholars moving within the field of jurisprudence does not correspond to the much wider definition as current among anthropologists, ethnologists, historians and the representatives of area and cultural studies, all of whom deal with legal frameworks and the role of law in society, without sharing the objective of applying legal norms to concrete case studies.[[10]](#footnote-10) The definitions of Islamic studies or Japanology, to provide another example, turned out to be problematic, because both disciplines have been defined within a context that we may label ‘Western’, but are concerned with specific societies, which we may classify as ‘non-Western’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Scholars working in these disciplines are confronted with the fact that members of the societies under investigation often contest the opinions formulated by academia not pertaining to these societies. The respective disciplinary history is thus characterized by tensions resulting from a debate about the question who has the right to analyse and evaluate the cultural heritage of a particular society, a question intrinsically tied to the so-called Orientalist debate.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The effort to answer the question which role the transcultural paradigm can play if it is applied to various academic disciplines thus raised problems that had not been imagined at the outset of this project. However, engaging with these problems furnished two important results: deconstructionist from a methodological point of view, the transcultural paradigm tends to question the relevance of boundaries, not only in a cultural sense. If applied to any given discipline, it will ultimately stretch or even question the hitherto defined boundaries of the discipline itself. A legal expert focussing on transcultural phenomena has to deal with legal issues that transcend the boundaries of national law; a scholar working in the field of Islamic studies cannot avoid becoming immersed in the Orientalist debate; a specialist of Central Asian Studies is confronted with the challenge of simultaneously acknowledging the multiple heritages characteristic of this region, a research history marked by the Cold War as well as more recent nationalist claims. The specialist in Chinese intellectual history, in turn, has to raise the question, if this particular field of study can really be taught and studied outside an institutional framework that ensures the transmission of thorough philological knowledge of the varieties of what non-specialists generally and insouciantly summarize under the label ‘Chinese’.

Applying the transcultural paradigm to various disciplines is thus fraught with tension, a tension that ultimately seems rather productive, however: it opens up new perspectives by directly confronting the engaged scholar with the methodological, ideological and institutional challenges inherent in every field of investigation. The effort of coping with these challenges simultaneously may initially produce a feeling of disorientation. Ultimately, however, it will productively result in an explicit acknowledgement and a critical evaluation of our contemporary forms of knowledge production and their adequacy, and will open up new lines of enquiry.

1. E.g. Wolfgang Welsch, Transculturality—the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today, in: Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash (eds), Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World (London: Sage, 1999), p. 194-213; Monica Juneja, Kultur, Kulturtransfer und Grenzüberschreitungen. Joachim Eibach und Claudia Opitz im Gespräch mit Monica Juneja, in: *zeitenblicke* 11/1 (2012), http://www.zeitenblicke.de/2012/1/Interview/ index\_ html (31.05.2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jutta Ernst, Florian Freitag, Transkulturelle Dynamiken – Entwicklungen und Perspektiven eines Konzepts, in: Jutta Ernst, Florian Freitag (eds), *Transkulturelle Dynamiken. Aktanten, Prozesse, Theorien* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), p. 7-30;also see Wolfram Drews, Christian Scholl, Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse in der Vormoderne. Zur Einleitung, in: Wolfram Drews, Christian Scholl (eds), *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse in der Vormoderne*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016, p. VII-XXIII. Ulrike Freitag, Achim von Oppen, Translocality: An Approach to Connection and Transfer in Area Studies, in: Ulrike Freitag, Achim von Oppen (eds) *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 1-21; Andreas Langenohl, Ralph Poole, Manfred Weinberg (eds), *Transkulturalität: Klassische Texte* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paula Krüger (ed.), *Transcultural Studies. Interdisziplinarität trifft Transkulturalität* (Bremen: Universitätsdruckerei, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the contribution by XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the contributions by XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the contribution by XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the contribution by XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. E.g. the journal “Transcultural Studies”, founded 2005 and published with Brill, see: http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/23751606 (accessed 29.08.2016)¸as well as the “Journal of Transcultural Medieval Studies, founded 2014 and published with de Gruyter, see: http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/jtms (accessed 29.08.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. E.g. Heidelberg University (“Transcultural Studies”, see http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/studies/ma-transcultural-studies.html, accessed 29.08.2016), Warwick University (“Translation and Transcultural Studies”, see http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/applying/postgraduate/masters/tts/, accessed 29.08.2016), Meiji Gakuin University (“Department of Global and Transcultural Studies, see http://www.meijigakuin.ac.jp/en/academics/faculty/international/global\_and\_transcultural\_studies.html, accessed 29.08.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the contribution by XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the contributions by XXX and XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the contribution by XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)