

“I Don’t Want to Be for Ever in the Laboratory”

How symposia encourage transdisciplinarity – an interview with Carlos Acevedo-Rocha



Carlos Acevedo-Rocha

Scientists and artists came together at the end of 2009 at Administrative Headquarters and at the MPI for Biochemistry for a symposium on the theme of tackling “New boundaries in science.” Mexican-born IMPRS grantee Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha, a doctoral student at the MPI for Biochemistry and principal organizer of the symposium, explained the background to the event.

MAXPLANCK RESEARCH: *How did you come up with the idea of organizing the symposium?*

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: It stemmed from three previous meetings that I attended: The 2005 DAAD summer academy “New Frontiers in Science” in Munich, the 2006 meeting of Nobel Prize winners in Lindau and the Max Planck Phdnet event entitled “The Art of Science - The Science of Art” in 2008, which I helped to organize. These events inspired me to combine art and science and encourage a dialog between scientists researching in different fields. At the Nobel Prize winners’ meeting, a selected group of guests were invited to listen to presentations by the principal scientists. And so all three events merged into the concept for the symposium.

Why did you invest so much time and effort in an event like this?

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: I wanted to learn how to organize such a thing. Besides, a lot of colleagues have supported me. My Ph.D. supervisor Nediljko Budisa allows me the freedom to devote time to projects like this alongside my doctoral studies. I am very grateful for that.

How did the scientists react to your inquiry?

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: Many of them thought it was a very good idea, although some were skeptical that the symposium might be lacking in scientific depth. But Nobel Prize winner Richard Ernst was fully behind the concept. I think that his agreement convinced a lot of those who were doubtful at first.

The first part of the “Art and Science” symposium was attended by just a small group at Administrative Headquarters, while, the second part that was open to all was held at the MPI for Biochemistry. Why did you choose two different venues?

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: For the first day I looked around for a central, easily accessible location in Munich. The idea occurred to me at the Max Planck Forum that Headquarters would be ideal. And Dr. Bludau immediately offered to invite the guests who were attending. On the second day, however, with visitors from all over Germany, the auditorium at the MPI for Biochemistry offered more room.

One of the topics discussed at the symposium was the responsibility that scientists bear towards the environment and society. Is that something you learn about as a student or doctoral candidate?

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: As a student I attended a lecture on ethics, but that was not connected with my scientific studies. Otherwise, I am aware of very few events on the subject, and even those are often not intended for junior scientists. Although Max Planck Phdnet does have something to offer.

Would you like to organize more interdisciplinary events in the future?

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: Oh yes! I would like to encourage the exchange of ideas, because science and art are just different ways of looking at reality, not a contradiction. Transdisciplinarity is becoming more and more important because science is increasingly specialized and split up into individual disciplines. If we are to meet the challenges of the future, we need experts in different disciplines to be working together. Might it not be a good idea to set up an MPI for Transdisciplinarity?

How do you see your professional future?

Carlos G. Acevedo-Rocha: I enjoy research, but I don’t want to be for ever in the laboratory. I would like to make children and young people more familiar with subjects such as science and environmentalism. And I am interested in what science could do to help communities that live in poverty.

An Example of Tolerance and Openness

Max Planck Institutes take part in commemorating the destruction of Magdeburg and Dresden

Staff at the MPI for the Dynamics of Complex Technical Systems in Magdeburg and the MPI for Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden have joined in setting an example of tolerance and openness. In both locations they took part in events to commemorate the cities' destruction in World War II.

Under the banner of "science is international," a number of scientific organizations joined together in Magdeburg on January 16 to demonstrate that international exchanges are essential to excellent science. It was on this day 65 years ago that the capital of Saxony-Anhalt suffered heavy bombing in which 90 percent of the old heart of the city was destroyed. There were occasions in the past when the day of remembrance was subverted by neo-Nazis for their own purposes, but since 2009, a broad "Alliance Against the Far Right" has campaigned against this. Besides the Max Planck Institute for the Dynamics

of Complex Technical Systems, the Otto von Guericke University, the Magdeburg-Stendal University and the Leibniz Institute for Neurobiology also took part in the "2nd Democracy Mile" of colorful stands and stages that stretched through Magdeburg's inner city. The event proved once again that xenophobia and right-wing extremism have no place in Magdeburg.

Less than a month later it was time for many members of staff at the Max Planck Institute for Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden to show their commitment – around half the institute's workforce are drawn from 45 foreign countries. Following the murder of Marwa el-Sherbini, whose husband is a doctoral student at the institute, the issue of xenophobia took on new weight and new urgency. Last year, the Mayor of Dresden Helma Orosz visited the institute personally to hear what the staff from overseas had to say, how they are faring, what

concerns them and what needs to change. One of the requests to emerge from this discussion was that on the anniversary of the bombing of Dresden on February 13, a clear distinction should be drawn in favor of peaceful, considerate and humble remembrance and against abuse of such acts of commemoration by neo-Nazis.

A clear signal has now indeed been given. The human chain initiated by Mayor von Orosz was an overwhelming success as around 15,000 people clasped hands, among them many of the institute's employees. Marino Zerial, Managing Director at the MPI in Dresden, sees this as an encouraging message: "We believe the city and its inhabitants deserve great credit for their commitment and for the clear and decisive way they have addressed this problem. It is essential for a strong and watchful democracy to stand up against violence, xenophobia and far-right radicalism."



Bus ride to the "Mile of Democracy": The Max Planck Institutes in Magdeburg and Dresden were among those to set an example of tolerance and openness as staff took part in events to mark the anniversary of the destruction of their two cities in World War II.

More Experiments, More Diversity, More Women!

Impressions of the forward-looking conference “Between Science and Fiction – Society and Gender 2030”



Attentive listener: Barbara Bludau (far right), Secretary General of the MPS and initiator of the conference.

By 2030, almost a third of Germany's declining population will be over the age of 65. How are businesses and organizations going to operate in the future with fewer and fewer qualified young people entering the scientific labor market? One option is to provide targeted support for women. The conference hosted by the Max Planck Society (MPS) and the European Academy for Women in Politics and Business (EAF) in December at the Harnack-Haus focused on just how to develop long-term prospects for female members of staff.

“What will our daily lives be like in 2030? What is the outlook for the future, and what role will women have to play?” These were the questions posed by Max Planck Society Secretary General Barbara Bludau as she opened the conference entitled “Between Science and Fiction – Society and Gender 2030” and called upon the 80 or so guests to “think the unheard-of and the unthinkable.” On the other hand, as Founding President of the EAF Barbara Schaeffer-Hegel emphasized, it is imperative not to overlook social con-

ditions. True to its watchwords, “Committed to change,” the EAF has been advising the business, political and scientific communities on equal opportunities since 1996, as well as running its own career development programs for women.

The fact that women are still a rarity in senior positions was confirmed by Linda Basch, President of the National Council for Research on Women in New York. Another US speaker to turn her attention to gender issues in science was Londa Schiebinger (Stan-

ford University and formerly a guest at the MPI for the History of Science), who outlined problems that have so far barely been touched on, such as gender-specific road safety precautions. Swedish car maker Volvo, for example, has recently begun using a “pregnant”-formed dummy called “Linda” to test a new seat belt.

The ensuing discussion concluded that there should be “more scope in the world of work.” And the second set of presenters were unanimous that the world of work will become more flexible, will require people with better qualifications, and be more strenuous – and more feminine. More and more people will need to organize and mutually coordinate their steadily increasing professional and private mobility. Employers in turn must create structures that can accommodate these changes.

The changing pressures on private life are currently borne mostly by women who are traditionally responsible for family organization. Could this be why women plan their careers less strategically than men, and consequently hold substantially fewer senior positions in later professional life? The stage following a doctorate is evidently an important scientific career threshold. Barbara

Bludau summed up the central point at issue here: “Why are so many women lost to us simply because they cease their scientific careers after taking a doctorate?”

Not only are the still predominantly male-oriented organizational structures of the working world to blame, in which women – who tend to think along more social lines – are easily lost. There is also the fact that women often have a different definition of scientific problems. A demand for “more experiments” was voiced by Lorraine Daston, Director at the MPI for the History of Science. “Max Planck Institutes with their less rigid structures are an ideal environment in which to experiment with new ways of scientific working.”

However, examples of how to overcome barriers and break the mold can also be drawn from very different fields. Elisabeth Schweeger, exhibition curator and director of the Herrenhausen Festival, urged her audience to take an unconventional approach and look for scientific working models in the world of art. Conversely, by the end of the conference it was clear that women in the world of art are discovering models in science. A display of photographs by



Lorraine Daston, Director at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science

Bettina Flitner from her project “Frauen, die forschen” (Women in science) presented an unconventional view of a series of leading female scientists.

The conference showed that, despite the ground that still remains to be made up, science seems to offer more ideas and ways of working to encourage a more women-friendly environment than are available in the business world. Thinking outside the box is second-nature in science. The challenge for the future will be to recognize diversity and differences as a source of enrichment and exploit these to maximum advantage – whether in exploring new areas of research or in recruiting female talent.

Groups for Young Researchers Get New Names

The panels of the Max Planck Society were discussing the matter for some time, but eventually clarity was achieved. At the end of 2009, the “Independent Junior Research Groups” acquired a new name and are now known as “Max Planck Research Groups.”

The scientific researchers heading such groups are called “Max Planck Research Group Leaders.” Research groups at the universities have to include the university at which they are located in their name. The name change

was prompted by the English term “Independent Junior Research Group.” “We felt that the “Junior”, in particular, was not appropriate on an international level,” says Valentin Stein, spokesman for the Research Groups in the Biology and Medicine Section. Further terms that should be used officially are “Minerva Research Groups” of the W2 Minerva Programme and “Otto Hahn Research Groups,” which are headed by the designated winners of the centrally awarded Otto Hahn Medals.

A Poster to Remember

Taking a hammer to a computer hard disk is not the most sophisticated way to access the data it holds. The reality is that data theft is a far more subtle affair. The data protection officers at Germany's research institutes are committed to stopping the thieves in their tracks. To mark this year's European Data Protection Day, they began a joint awareness campaign with slogans such as "Research not espionage" and "Science needs privacy."

Data Protection Day was first initiated in 2006 by the Council of Europe, and takes place each year on January 28 to mark the signing on this day in 1981 of the European Data Protection Convention. The focus of this year's national campaign in Germany was on medical data. The provocative title "Risks and side-effects for the patient's right to privacy" was designed to draw attention to the imperative need to treat personal data with all due care if science is to improve its perception in the public eye. This is the only way to persuade people to voluntarily participate in scientific studies.

The Max Planck Society, too, in its capacity as an employer, is under obligation not to process data on its employees on any

other than employment-related grounds, explained Rainer Gerling, who is the central Data Protection Officer at Max Planck

weather, the poster took pride of place outside the institute entrance where no one could miss it.



Fighting data piracy: German research institutions marked European Data Protection Day with a joint campaign entitled "Science needs privacy."

headquarters. Part of his job is to make MPS employees aware of the issue of data protection. He works to ensure compliance with the law and is always available as a point of contact. Together with colleagues at the Helmholtz Association, the Leibniz Association, the Fraunhofer Gesellschaft and the German Research Foundation, Rainer Gerling is also a member of a working party that has initiated a poster campaign specifically for the research community.

To give the staff at Max Planck Institutes an added interest in the importance of data security, the team headed by Rainer Gerling came up with a competition: Employees who hang up a poster at an eye-catching location in their institute buildings and send in a photo to prove it are rewarded with a prize. The MPI for Ethnological Research in Halle took up the challenge, and won a copy of the book "Die Google-Falle" (The Google trap) by Gerald Reischl. Another winner was the MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, where, despite the inclement winter

Admission to Doctoral Program with a Bachelor's Degree

The Max Planck Society is not permitted to use its public funds for the support of international students who apply for admission to an International Max Planck Research School (IMPRS) on the basis of a bachelor's and not a master's degree. Since the end of 2009, this gap in funding has been

bridged by the Max Planck Foundation (MPF) providing private grants in the annual amount of 700,000 euros for 70 doctoral students. Such funds can be used either for participation in a combined master's/PhD course or in an orientation phase at an IMPRS.