

# The Revenge of Practical Relevance

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The analysis of knowledge production at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees centered on a notion of governmental knowledge: What is it what the state wants to know, how is knowledge produced and what are its core features? As a discussion of relevant theoretical contributions demonstrated, governmental knowledge is somewhat elusive: Governmental knowledge is usually either conceptualized as single pieces of information, or a grand narrative of rationality, discipline or control.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to this, this study focused on carving out the intermediary zones between these two extreme levels of analysis.

If there is a single most important finding of this thesis, then it is the (not overly surprising) fact that the relationship between science and politics has to be carefully scrutinized and evaluated. Specifically, the idea of treating science and politics like two independent spheres seems misleading in the case of the BAMF Research Group and its mission to produce politically relevant knowledge.

What does that mean for the study of governmental knowledge production? In the history of governmental research, some effects and variants of the interconnectedness between politics and science have been described, following broadly four phases of migration research in Germany (Refugee research, “Guest Worker” research, “Lost Decade” and integration and migration research, respectively). In the analysis, empiric evidence was used to draw a differentiated picture which highlights the various interconnections between governance and knowledge production as well as the numerous contradictions, cracks and shifts within and across governmental organizations. As a result, the developments in knowledge production can be linked to according shifts in the governmental logic behind them. Refugee and Ethnic German

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1 Cp. Walters 2015, p. 5

migration research and policy-making was characterized by elements of biopolitics to enhance the productive forces of the population, coupled with an according strategy of reporting and knowledge production most closely resembling the instrumentalist approach to knowledge utilization. In contrast to this, “Guest Worker” research and policy-making can be characterized like a technocratic policy complex, which was governed by macro-economic data and according administrative measures. This policy style stands in connection to according principles in the Ministry for Labor and Social affairs, the central coordinating actor in migration policy-making in this era. The competition for influence with the Ministry of the Interior increased especially during the “Lost Decade” in the 1980s and 1990s: After retaining the coordinating role in migration policy-making from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior developed return-oriented policy principles according to the “no country of immigration” dogma; according knowledge production centered on images of deficit and risk and a strategy of denial of adversary knowledge, the latter particularly arising from a growing academic interest in migration during the 1980s. During that time, two large political camps were established, which each cultivated their own styles of knowledge production: The Ministry of the Interior, large parts of the CDU and CSU conservative parties, on the one hand; the Ministry of Labor and Social affairs, the Commissioner for Foreigners, Worker Unions, churches, the Social-Democratic and Green parties as well as a minority of the conservative CDU on the other.<sup>2</sup> In short, the history of governmental migration research displays a wide array of different political constellations, policy aims and according knowledge production. This confirms the governmentality hypothesis of interconnected processes of knowledge production and political decision-making.

Besides providing historical background as well as examples for different knowledge-power complexes, the history of governmental migration research is important in explaining the so called “paradigm shift”. Around the turn of the millennium, legal and administrative reforms which ultimately led to the foundation of the Research Group were triggered by an expert commission on policy reform, the Independent Commission Integration. Its reform proposals seem like a counter-draft to the history of migration research and policy-making, especially the so-called “Lost Decade”: Policy-making and research in that era have been portrayed as increasingly antagonistic, where “irrational” policy-makers repeatedly failed to recognize “objective” scientific facts and

2 Gusy and Müller 2012, 4 ff., Herbert 2000, p. 278

act accordingly. In contrast to this, future migration policy-making was to be governed by scientific experts, which decide upon immigration quotas using scientific standards.

These reform proposals were met with considerable resistance, most importantly from the Ministry of the Interior which was keen to retain its central position in migration policy making. As a result, most elements of independent research as well as systematic feedback of knowledge into the political process were removed from the Residence Act. This process is also illustrative for the relationship between knowledge production and policy-making in general: First, the antagonistic picture of “objective science vs. “irrational” politics is misleading, since political claims of any era and of any kind are always founded on arguments and knowledge. What has been called later on the dogma of German migration policy – Germany was not a country of immigration – has been defended against empirical reality by many knowledge producers inside and outside the state bureaucracy. Second, the oft-lamented lack of political influence of scientists is in this example not just a result of systematic differences, bureaucratic sluggishness, or the result of translation costs. Rather, it is the result of an according political strategy, against direct recommendations from a government commission.

Taken together, the history of governmental migration research shows that certain types of knowledge do in fact exercise political influence, while other forms of knowledge are actively and consciously locked out of the political process. For the production of governmental knowledge, this process had some important implications which resulted in a very specific, if not unique, arrangement: First, research was incorporated into a bureaucratic agency, which meant that the researchers were considered for a time as “foreign bodies”. This was especially important since the office in question, the BAMF, represented like no other the “Germany is not a Country of Immigration dogma”<sup>3</sup>; its staff and working principles were for at least the first couple of years somewhat overstretched with the new responsibilities resulting from the reform. At the time of foundation of the Research Group, the BAMF was considered an “institutional backwater”<sup>4</sup> which offered little career perspectives for its employees.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Castles 1985

4 Boswell 2009b, p. 163

5 Field notes, October 2013

Second, despite the principle of hierarchical control, the actual research mandate was unclear from the onset. This was the result of an unspecific legal expression, which led to a process of carving out an area of responsibility for the Research Group: What topics should be analyzed, for what purpose and for whom? As the result of a learning process, the Research Group adopted a quite successful strategy of mimicking departmental research: Research topics are established in a working group involving the ministerial bureaucracy and the BAMF. The *Ausländerzentralregister*, a data base exclusively available to the Research Group, is used extensively as a unique selling point for the BAMF's knowledge production. As a result, staff and financial resources of the Research Group continually expanded, rising to about 25 staff and 400,000 Euros research budget per year in 2013.<sup>6</sup> With this, the BAMF currently plays in the same league like the top tier of migration research institutions in Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Third, as a result of this pragmatic integration into the administration, a specific understanding of governmental research is formulated. Again in the words of a BAMF researcher which have been quoted in the text above:

"We work flexibly with what serves best. [If] we have a concrete question, we look which methods we can use to answer the question posed to us. In this we are not overly committed to a specific theoretical concept. If we refer to definitions [e.g. in the National Migration Report], these relate to statistical data, and the statistical data depends on legal regulations."<sup>8</sup>

In other words, governmental research is characterized by BAMF researchers as practical (in contrast to theory-oriented abstraction), flexible (instead of methodological rigor) and pragmatic (instead of foundational criticism).

To be clear, at least on the surface, this knowledge is no less "scientific" or "rational" than classic academic knowledge production: Empiric data is collected with scientific methods, analysis and at least in part theory references

6 Email Memo from the Research Group, February 2014

7 Schimany and Schock 2012

8 "Wir arbeiten flexibel mit dem was da ist. [...] Wir haben eine konkrete Frage, wir schauen uns an mit welchen Methoden wir die konkrete Frage die uns gestellt wird beantworten können. Und sind nicht übertrieben eng hinter [...] einem Theoriekonzept her. Wenn wir Definitionen benutzen [zB. im Migrationsbericht] richtet sich bei uns nach den statistischen Erhebungen, die statistischen Erhebungen wiederum richten sich nach dem was in unseren Gesetzen drin steht." (Interview with a BAMF researcher, 2015)

follow established academic principles. Publications are structured and referenced according to academic standards as well; a growing list of academic publications and conference invitations testifies to the fact that the Research Group's knowledge production is acknowledged in the academic world. There is, however, a grave difference between the Research Group and academia when it comes to criteria what counts as good and useful knowledge: the most important quality criterion for governmental knowledge is political relevance. This touches on a theory discussion about the relationship between policy-making and knowledge production. The Research Group's claim of providing politically relevant knowledge refers to a mainstream theory of instrumental knowledge use, which states that research is primarily valued for its informational content. However, in theoretical contributions as well as in the empirical literature, little evidence for instrumental knowledge use is found, which is why this thesis centers on the question what exactly practical relevance signifies, and how it is produced. The hypothesis was that political relevance in the academic literature is usually conceptualized as either a direct and measurable influence of research on political decisions, or as structural features of the research-policy system that ensure the systematic feedback of expert knowledge on political decisions.<sup>9</sup> Since this does not mirror the understanding of policy relevance by the involved actors, a practice-oriented understanding of political relevance has been developed. In chapter 3.3, the institutional process has been described which is characterized by a constant learning process on the side of the researchers and a long-term strategy of acquiring study commissions from state actors. Based on this, an alternative understanding of political relevance was developed which gives credit to the fact that the Research Group has successfully adapted its research output to demand by other state actors.

In this understanding, practical relevance is not an abstract quality criterion, but depends on the concrete political practice of the respective contractor, the research topic, and current political measures in the field. In the analysis, several practices have been outlined, such as the provision of legibility, depoliticization, calming of the public debate, and legitimization. In this sense, not only the direct influence of a political decision is analyzed, but also strategies which might have failed, or might have been altered in the meantime in answer to political changes in the field. For example, political relevance in integration research is subject to shifts in the governmental logic behind

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9 Cp. Scholten et al. 2015a

the knowledge: While initial demand for integration research resulted in an Esser-inspired theory of assimilation and deficit-orientation, this approach was altered in the course of increased legislative activities to recruit qualified workers from third countries since 2012. Integration of these migrants is oriented towards enabling migration termed as “Welcome Culture”.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, despite the external limitations, the Research Group has systematically created and defended an area of competence and influence both vis-a-vis peer knowledge producers and the political-administrative system and does in fact provide politically relevant knowledge. In this context, the widespread hypothesis of a systematic gap between research and bureaucracy has to be reevaluated: The initial isolation of the Research Group, expressed in the fact that research tasks were misunderstood, as well as a feeling of estrangement vis-a-vis government officials has successfully been overcome. This was not caused by systematic differences but by the specific situation of institutional change and a rather blurry legal mandate of the Research Group.<sup>11</sup>

This pragmatic understanding of the production of politically relevant knowledge comes however at a cost. The general strategy of integration into the state bureaucracy signifies on the one hand the agency of researchers which successfully navigate in the administrative structure of the BAMF and seek strategic opportunities for the provision of politically relevant knowledge. On the other hand, practical relevance makes research vulnerable to political manipulation, since politically relevant research questions are often formulated in a partisan way to support specific ex-ante policy preferences. This vulnerability is augmented by the rather precarious institutional status of the Research Group as an in-house unit of an administrative authority: research agenda setting and publication are subject to hierarchical supervision, so that the Research Group depends on the good will of the Ministry of the Interior as one interlocutor remarked;<sup>12</sup> this is at the same time the key difference to other departmental research institutes, which enjoy more institutional independence. This means that usually, research is conducted within narrowly defined borders which cannot be questioned: Integration, for example, is understood as the participation of migrants in various integration policy instruments, not as an onni-societal process of transformation. In gen-

10 Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2013d, Heckmann 2012

11 Kraler and Perchinig 2017, p. 85

12 Interview with a BAMF researcher, 2016

eral, political and legal concepts are being operationalized, differentiated and diversified by the BAMF research; they are however never revised as such or evaluated critically. This becomes most clearly apparent in the defensive strategy of avoiding negative feedback, which is tactically employed in politically heated research topics, such as Muslims, naturalization, and the like. Quite ironically, as a consequence, the idealistic role of experts as portrayed by the Independent Commission Immigration is the weakest exactly in cases where scientific recommendations are needed most to overcome ideologically fueled political deadlock. By and large, the knowledge produced at the BAMF buys its political relevance through uncontroversiality, affirmation and discursive legitimization of political and administration decisions.<sup>13</sup>

This “revenge of practical relevance” is of course not unique to the Research Group since all knowledge producers face the same basic dilemma: How to produce knowledge which is both politically relevant and objective?<sup>14</sup> The four knowledge-power complexes discussed here offer distinct case examples in this regard, all of which answer this question differently: Administrative knowledge is reduced to statistical reporting and legislative definitions, which are used as a basis for the establishment of Migrant Groups as a new statistical concept. With the increasing focus on selected target groups, the Migration Reports form a specific perspective of governmentality, supporting the image that migration is an orderly social process under the control of the government. Knowledge on Muslims and other politically controversial topics is geared towards calming public debate by retreating to apolitical, technical positions and therefore produce a standard of objectivity.<sup>15</sup> In the example of integration research, initial knowledge production can be characterized rather theory-driven by implementing a hegemonic approach adopted from Hartmut Esser’s assimilation theory. Migration potential is developed from a prognosis instrument to a self-referential legitimization strategy. Again, all these knowledge-power complexes demonstrate that the Research Group did in fact deliver politically relevant knowledge: This is especially true for some widely disseminated studies such as the Migration Reports, Muslim Life in Germany or the Integration Panel. Theoretical concepts, such as the assimilationist approach to integration or migration potential have gained widespread acceptance also thanks to the BAMF’s research work. This success in political

13 Cp. Hetfleisch 2013

14 Cp. Amir-Moazami 2018b, p. 111. See also Boswell and D’Amato 2012, p. 16

15 Amir-Moazami 2018b, p. 104

relevance, however, is paid for with institutional dependency: Irrespective of the success or failure of the individual research strategies, the analysis of governmental knowledge made the fact clearly visible that none of the knowledge under scrutiny here can be called objective by any standard. While this finding is not overly surprising in the face of the above-mentioned dilemma, it does however stand at odds with the self-proclaimed image of provision of neutral expert knowledge. This follows by and large a defensive rationale of calming the general public: The higher the degree of politicization of a given topic, the more governmental research retreats to a technical, apolitical point of view. This in turn offers additional possibilities for politicization since research results can be used to support *any* political claim.<sup>16</sup>

To deconstruct the claim of neutrality, the context-specific governmental perspective has been described both in contemporary BAMF research fields and in historic migration research. This perspective is shaped by institutional constellations, competition between state actors, material restraints and theoretical ideas which are specific for each of the knowledge-power complexes analyzed here. Connected to this, the claim of political usefulness can be likewise deconstructed if extrapolating from a given study its perceived political applicability. Concerning the latter, the analysis revealed that political usefulness cannot be regarded a uniform feature of knowledge, or a yardstick of epistemic quality, as sometimes suggested.<sup>17</sup> Rather, there are different potential political uses to which the BAMF's knowledge can be applied; some of which have been described here.

While the analysis has demonstrated how the individual strategies have been carved out, and have sometimes been successful in reaching their aims, it seems clear that policy relevance also puts a strain on the epistemic quality of the knowledge produced. In the case of the migration potential as well as integration research, the requirement of political relevance can be connected to specific bias sources in the knowledge structure: The relatively one-sided analysis through a neoclassic push-pull framework renders a coherent legitimization for current EU migration policy. However, it also impedes the systematic generation and testing of hypotheses about future migration movements and therefore, a systematic approach to enhance the quality of the knowledge in the long term. In fact, by standards of systematic analysis,

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16 Heckmann and Wiest 2015, 198f.

17 Mayr et al. 2011



the prediction potential of the analysis framework of migration potential has decreased over time.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in the field of integration research, the construction of a coherent integration theory contributed to a depoliticizing of the formerly most contested policy field in the area, and secured valuable areas of competence for the BAMF. However, this success came at the cost of representing integration as unilateral individual effort of the migrant which systematically disregards structural barriers to access to social and economic resources. At the same time, the more recent differentiated analysis frameworks for privileged migrant groups introduce incoherencies into the hitherto uniform knowledge order of integration. By selectively applying this model to “problematic” immigrant groups, such as Muslims, Integration Course participants, or immigrated spouses, knowledge production shapes a particular image of integration which disregards structural factors of exclusion and places the responsibility for integration solely at the hands of the immigrants. In fact, in the first years of the Research Group’s existence, there have been no publications dedicated to discrimination or racism, neither in-house nor externally. This complete neglect can be regarded at the same time the largest difference as compared to academic integration research, in which discrimination and racism feature among the most important research topics in migration research.<sup>19</sup> By contrast to this, immigrant groups which are perceived useful such as university graduates, high-skilled or self-employed migrants, structural barriers to integration (for example, excess bureaucracy, discrimination, etc.) are part of the framework of analysis.

Another useful example here is the governmentality discourse created in the Migration Reports: the politically useful image of migration as a steered, orderly process can only be created if the single most important migration form is excluded from analysis. Also, in this case, epistemic quality is sacrificed for a less contradictory, more coherent and thus more politically useful narrative. In the context of migration potential, a similar selective application of theory can be discerned: While studies on the potential of migration from Africa and Eastern Europe conclude that migration is a harmful, uncontrollable danger, the same processes are evaluated quite positively in the context of intra-EU migration. This different conclusion is based to a large degree on a selective application of theory and according data which confirm the ex-

18 Tetlock 2005, 47ff.

19 Leibnitz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften 2010, 12f.

ante assumption. Here, knowledge is useful since it supports the general EU migration strategy: While intra-EU migration is supported, migration from outside the EU is considered harmful and has to be curbed as much as possible. The respective migration potential studies deliver a well-suited scientific foundation for this arrangement which make the political choice seem like a scientifically grounded decision.

All of these problematic developments can be connected to one common root cause: the lack of proper theoretical discussion and theory development. As already mentioned, theory discussion is regarded as art for art's sake in governmental research; the lack of theory development and pragmatic selection of useful concepts is regarded as one core pillar to the provision of practical relevance, as stated by the BAMF.<sup>20</sup> As a result, governmental knowledge perpetuates uncontroversial mainstream theory (which can be outdated), reads theory too narrowly (as in the case of integration concepts), and develops blind spots and taboos (as in the case of discrimination). The result is common-sensical knowledge which reveals its inherent inconsistencies if new immigrant groups challenge to uniform picture, such as the different integration paradigm for economically attractive migrants versus those which are considered problematic, or the different migration potential discussion of African and intra-European migration.

All in all, the Research Group contributes with its knowledge to an image of the state as a keeper of the common good: The state keeps an overview, it demands integration and provides support to it, it provides objective information for heated political topics and it protects the borders from threats.

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20 Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2015a, p. 22