

# Interview With Young International Researcher

The International Students Subcommittee together with the Interview Subcommittee introduces a new feature in this edition of the SPR Student Newsletter. The interview with a young international researcher presents scientist at the end of their postdoc who worked abroad for their research, typically at two different international labs in countries other than their home country and possibly also within a different language/culture. With a focus of the interview on the international experience and doing research abroad, we hope to encourage international exchange and collaborations between psychophysiology labs.

Our first interviewee is Tatjana Aue, a junior scientist at the University of Geneva. Tatjana studied psychology at the University of Marburg in Germany, where she completed her diploma under the supervision of Gerhard Stemmler. Tatjana then went on to complete a PhD at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, mentored by Klaus Scherer. She recently completed a two-year post-doctoral fellowship with the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago, where she worked with John Cacioppo and Howard Nusbaum. With such an impressive record of mentorship in psychophysiology, we look forward to her responses and advice on having a productive and international research experience as a student and post-doc.

## INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

**Tatjana, your career has already taken you to a number of different countries; what has motivated you to take your career in this direction? In which ways has this been a good experience? In which ways have there been some caveats?**

First of all, it was curiosity that motivated me to go to different countries. I have always been eager to find out new ways of thinking and living. Facing the challenge of living in a different country with a different language and a different culture means personal growth. Furthermore, the possibility to go to another country enabled me to get experience with different university systems including their respective advantages and disadvantages. In this context I also figured that there are surprisingly little differences in the ways psychological research is conducted in different countries.

Of course there were also a number of caveats that needed to be dealt with. These concerned especially the transition phases, when everything was new and unfamiliar. Administrative adaptations often took longer than I had wished and in the process I was getting impatient to get started with research. But although every new start in another country meant losing time I could have otherwise devoted to my research, the overall experiences were very rewarding and I can only encourage students to participate in international exchanges.

One of the biggest advantages of changing the research lab is the possibility to increase one's own theoretical horizon and mental flexibility. And, of course, one builds up a professional network, which becomes increasingly important with the years. I also figured that my international background made me eligible for some grants and stipends other researchers could not apply for. The recent Ambizione grant I was awarded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, for instance, requires the applicants to have spent at least one year abroad.

**With your career, thus far, having led you from Germany to Switzerland, to the U.S., and back to Switzerland, what advice do you have for people facing similar transnational experiences?**

My advice would be the following. First, one should be prepared and accept to lose time in the short-term. Peers who do not change the research lab will be able to advance more rapidly with their experiments and publications. One therefore should keep the long-term advantages of transnational experiences in mind (e.g., building up the important professional network). Second, one should not be shy to ask for help. Other

people in a new host lab most certainly have faced the same types of administrative and adaptation problems and can be very helpful in suggesting solutions. Another good strategy is to talk to people who have previously joined and left this lab and who are of a similar background. Finally, several websites inform about practical steps to be taken when moving to another country (e.g., the Swiss National Science Foundation website).<sup>3</sup>

**What would you say are the ups and downs of doing research in each of those countries? Are there differences in the way research in general is done?**

I dare say that the ups and downs of doing research are more a matter of which lab one is going to join and that it is less dependent on the country. Differences to be found between the countries are more strongly linked to the academic structures. Let's take the example of a PhD candidate. In Switzerland, the PhD students need to develop their own projects and start from scratch. Each student collects, preprocesses, and analyzes the data alone. A high degree of independence is required. In addition, the PhD candidate may be required to teach. In contrast, in Germany, the PhD student is very often hired through a large grant and works on the same project with other PhD students as well as Masters students. The overall frame is given from the start and data collection is frequently done by Masters students. Finally, the U.S. system is more akin to a school system that provides courses and workshops, strongly supporting the acquisition of research skills. All of them obviously have their advantages and disadvantages and young researchers should choose the system that best fits their personal needs. However, I have the impression that with the changes following the Bologna Process, differences across the systems have been considerably reduced.

**As far as international psychophysiology is concerned, have you noticed any differences between schools of thought in the different countries in which you have worked?**

Again, I would say that the same degree of variation can be found within a specific country as across different countries.

## **TRANSITIONING**

**What is it like to be a German PhD student in Switzerland? What are the prerequisites of going to Switzerland (e.g., contacts, funding)?**

It is no different to be a German PhD student in Switzerland than being a domestic PhD student. I did not have the impression that it is harder to get a PhD position as a foreign person than a Swiss person. Given Switzerland's multi-language and Geneva's highly international background, this is not surprising. Swiss people are constantly confronted with accents and other nationalities.

I did not need particular prerequisites to start my PhD project in Switzerland. I simply applied to the position that was posted on the departmental website and advertised in emails. Then I went to Geneva for a job interview and was subsequently hired. The only additional country-specific criterion I needed to meet, due to the teaching load, was speaking French. This actually proved to be the hardest part. In the beginning, I needed to prepare teaching intensely and well in advance, but students here have always been nice and considerate.

**How was your experience in the international transition from PhD student to postdoc? Were there difficulties or unexpected benefits (e.g., freedoms)?**

Going as a fresh European PhD graduate to the U.S., probably takes away some of the freedom one has enjoyed before. At least this was the overall agreement of "us" European postdocs at the University of Chicago. However, this is not to say that this is necessarily a disadvantage. The American system is very structured, which can foster productivity immensely. Certainly, one of the particularly valuable unexpected benefits of my postdoc in Chicago was that I had frequent regular project meetings with John Cacioppo and

he was readily available at other times, too. We had many fruitful discussions on theory and methods, thus helping me to advance on many levels.

**What is it like to be a European postdoc in a U.S. lab? Are there any differences between U.S. and non-U.S. postdocs?**

I am not aware of a difference between the U.S. and the non-U.S. postdocs. The only formal thing that differs is that sometimes, given your nationality, you cannot apply for the same types of grants and stipends as U.S. postdocs.

## **FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES**

**Can you recommend some things to students interested in international study, such as how they should go about making contact and getting funding for doing research abroad?**

One way to make contact is by going to conferences, listening to talks, and looking at posters. This provides the opportunity to talk about common research interests and to check out whether there is a possibility to join a specific research lab. Another way is to send an email signaling interest in the target lab. Still another way for the students to make contact is to talk to their research advisors, because they may be able to directly recommend them to the target labs.

As for funding, there are national (also European) student exchange programs as well as public and private national foundations that encourage research and training in a foreign country. A list specifying details for these programs can be found on University websites or obtained from the student counsel. In general, professors have a good idea of what programs are suited for their students as well.

**We know you have been successful in receiving grant funding as a junior researcher; where did you look for funding and how has the process been?**

When planning my postdoc, for example, I first checked on the University of Geneva's website which options would apply to my specific profile. Since I was a German PhD student in Switzerland, I was eligible for several German as well as Swiss funding opportunities, which I thoroughly inspected on the corresponding National Science Foundation websites. This gave me a good first overview. Furthermore, I consulted my mentors Gerhard Stemmler and Klaus Scherer and listened to their suggestions concerning my career. By learning more about the criteria by which they personally choose their collaborators, I got a good idea of which points in my CV I should particularly focus on. I then decided to apply for a fellowship for prospective researchers and submitted a project proposal finally leading me to Chicago. Importantly, I did this more than a year before I finished my PhD to have sufficient time to prepare for other options in case my application would fail.

**Having successfully applied for fellowships and grants, what is your take on what makes for a successful application?**

The most successful application is the one that is convincing. In order to convince the reviewers of my applications I described my personal background, my strong commitment to research, and my future plans. I linked my earlier experience to the future challenges and lined out how the grant in question would help to advance my already existing skills. I further described the proposed research projects in sufficient detail to demonstrate that they are ambitious but still realistic. If these points are well interlinked, the reviewers get a good impression that the choices of labs and projects are a logical continuation of the applicant's earlier work.

## **FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

**How do you manage your network of contacts? For example, do you still maintain work-collaboration with places you have previously worked at? How well can you integrate such projects within your current work?**

I currently maintain work-collaborations with John Cacioppo. I had done so with Gerhard Stemmler in the past and we are now planning to start another common research project. The fact of returning to Geneva, of course, ensures that I also keep close contact and collaborations with Klaus Scherer and several of his associates. Skype and e-mails are very good means to manage a network of contacts.

The research I am conducting with all of these collaborators can be well integrated into my work profile and my current research at the University of Geneva. It is important for me that I am able to link different aspects of a new project to my previous research.

**What are your career perspectives and research goals for the next five to ten years?**

First of all, I would like to further pursue my own research program and become a renowned expert in my area. This includes the establishment and maintenance of promising work collaborations and the publication of the results obtained from these studies. I also would like to enlarge my own research team. And, in the long run, I aim for a full professorship.

A good start for all of this has been offered to me by the Swiss Ambizione grant. This grant enables an ideal transition from a postdoc to a professorship because it provides the possibility to conduct independent research within an own mini-team, which in turn is integrated into a bigger already existing lab (Neurology & Imaging of Cognition Lab; Patrik Vuilleumier & Sophie Schwartz) and the Swiss Center for Affective Sciences.

**In an ideal world with abundant research funds, in which other countries would you wish yet to do research?**

Having already experience with Germany, Switzerland, and the U.S., my interests extend to the U.K. and the Netherlands. But since the last workplace change only happened 3 months ago, the establishment and continuation of my own stream of research currently have priority. Therefore, I would prefer work collaborations with - rather than accepting a position in - these countries. Moving to another country would again mean the loss of precious time I now need to devote to ongoing research projects and thus act counter productivity.

*Tatjana, thank you so much for doing this interview and good luck with the continuation of your research!*