

Interview with Thomas Ritz

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Thomas, you received the Early Career Award of the Society for Psychophysiological Research in 2003 and have just recently been appointed a professorship in the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. Program of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. How did you become a professional psychophysiologicalist in the first place?

I was always interested in the mind-body relationship and psychosomatic medicine, in particular the autonomic nervous system and emotion. With introductory teaching in biological psychology often focused on the absolute basics of neural activity, central nervous system processes, sensory and motor processes, and cognition, it took me a while to find out that there is a field in psychology dedicated to the issues I was mostly interested in. During my undergraduate time in Germany I devoured the writings of psychoanalysis, and quickly discovered Wilhelm Reich, a strong advocate for a biological basis in psychoanalytic thinking. I admired his ideas of a bodily manifestation of defense mechanisms in chronic muscle tension and its consequences for ANS function and disease. Luck had it that I would end up at the University of Hamburg, where Bernd Dahme and his team offered graduate courses in psychophysiology. When they looked for a student for a diploma thesis on a strange hypothesis linking facial muscle tension and airway activity, they had found the right candidate... While going through the finals I was filled with ideas on how to continue this research on muscle tension, emotion, the airways, and asthma in various directions, and with the right funding from the German Research Society I got my first job as a psychophysiologicalist at the Psychology Department in Hamburg.

You have experienced research and academia on both sides of the Atlantic: You worked on your PhD in Germany (Respiratory Psychophysiology Laboratory, University of Hamburg), spent your PostDoc-time both in the UK (Psychobiology Group, University of London) and the US (Laboratory of Clinical Psychopharmacology and Psychophysiology, Stanford University), and then you were a Visiting Professor at the University of Kiel in Germany. With the ups and downs of each nation's research situation and academic system, how did you decide on a professorship in the US?

My decision was triggered by a number of private and professional factors. On the professional side, the underfunding of German universities was among the main problems. Whereas German universities have to cut down where they can, departments in the US continue to grow. SMU, where I am now, may be an extreme example, with the psychology department projected to double its faculty within the next few years, but the general direction is growth, thanks also to an elaborate system of private sponsorship and student tuition. Another factor in my decision was the current direction in clinical psychology in Germany, which seems to be skewed towards the practitioner, with a great deal of energy getting absorbed in integrating and supervising ambulatory psychotherapy into the department. Biological psychology on the other hand has a strong and often exclusive focus on central nervous system research and imaging techniques. In the US, both subdisciplines seem to be conceptualized much broader currently, and integrate fields such as behavioral or psychosomatic medicine and health psychology with great success.

Applying for a position always requires a match between the applicant and the institution: How have you gone about your search process, i.e., what characteristics of a particular department attracted you most? And, on the other hand, from

your experience, what are psychology departments generally looking for in job applicants?

Clearly, the potential of a department to offer an excellent start for an independent research program and the opportunities to collaborate within and outside my discipline was the strongest argument. High on my list were departments with a potential for a vibrant research atmosphere, with national and international collaborations, enthusiasm, and interaction between laboratories. Having been on search committees myself I doubt that there are predictable aspects beyond the most generic ones, such as evidence or potential for a strong research program, ability to communicate your research well, and good collegial interaction. Beyond that, most depends on very idiosyncratic aspects of the individual candidate search, such as a very specific profile the department is looking for.

With all the obligations that a faculty position and your presidency of the International Society for the Advancement of Respiratory Psychophysiology bring along, how do you find time to do research and write publications?

There are always administrative parts of my work that I would like to be less time consuming, but in general I feel that I am in a very good position that still allows sufficient time for research. Of course, there are always data sets and papers I would prefer to work on and which get delayed. But I learned that this is part of any research activity at any stage of a career: There's always so much more you want to look into than you actually manage to. My current position strongly encourages research and the administration at SMU tries to facilitate it where possible. Graduate students within the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program hold scholarships to assist in individual faculty laboratories for up to 4 years, and that helps our research tremendously, while providing the students with a unique research experience. By the way, the ISARP presidency is always limited to one year, and the real tough job (as in SPR) is probably the one of the secretary/treasurer and the program chair...

Your research projects document a number of international collaborations with several institutions in Europe (University of Hamburg and University of Münster, Germany; University of Basel, Switzerland; University of London, UK) and the United States (Stanford University). Do you have recommendations on how to set up international research collaborations? Could you also please comment on the benefits and drawbacks of those relationships?

I had a very positive experience with international collaborations, and I can really recommend it for everyone in research. For me, communicating regularly with colleagues on international conferences and afterwards, and facilitation by supervisors and advisors were the main keys in establishing collaborations. And of course, research ideas that can excite both sides. What also helped in my case was that I had a clear research agenda from the beginning, and ideas for how it could be advanced by the experience in a laboratory abroad. And it was beneficial to bring my own funding from the German Research Society (DFG) or German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to get my research started in the new laboratory. One of the downsides is that the process of moving back and forth (especially across the Atlantic) can disrupt your life and research routine, sometimes with months of waiting for your equipment, office, and household to be shipped. And of course, in the end the folder with the literature or data you would need right now is always in a box somewhere else...mostly in an attic back home...

What are your long-term professional goals, dreams, and hopes?

Spending my days in a lively and creative research environment buzzing with ideas and having all the time in the world to do my research. And, working with enthusiastic students, exchanging inspiring ideas with them, and helping them build their own research program.

What has been the highlight of your academic career thus far?

Looking back I feel that I have had so many highlights, so many really exciting experiences. Arriving in London, Palo Alto, or Dallas for a new start...meeting interesting colleagues on conferences...being able to learn from great supervisors and advisors throughout my doctoral and post-doc time. What probably stood out most was being honored with the Early Career Award of SPR. Also, organizing the ISARP Meeting 2002 in Washington DC and my subsequent presidency in this society were highlights. And of course, meeting my wife, Alicia Meuret, and sharing research interests with her. The fact that we now work in the same department and were able to initiate our research program on Stress Anxiety and Chronic Disease together is really a major highlight both personally and professionally.

When you think about your graduate student and academic career, is there anything you would do differently if you could?

I have difficulty thinking of anything. Every step helped me to learn another thing, even if it may have looked like a diversion initially. For example, taking on briefly a part-time position as R&D research officer in Lewisham University Hospital in London led to an exciting and still ongoing collaboration on asthma management in primary care, adding another applied side to my psychophysiology research. What held it together was an overall theme I was passionate about, on respiration, emotion, and chronic disease. This is not to say that I would recommend the type of career path I took to others. In Germany, the academic career path is much less structured and predictable than in the US. This uncertainty requires a lot of passion and dedication for your research, and years of personal and financial compromises. Technically, I had close to eight years of "post-doc" experience in different departments in varying positions and with varying funding arrangements, often just for a few months, most of it through grant funding. It has worked out great for me, but it depends so much on the individual whether this type of unpredictability is a

help or hindrance.

Who/what has been your greatest source of information, support, etc. in your application and interviewing process for your current position as well as your general research career?

I was fortunate to have very good advisors and supervisors throughout these years, who understood that I would not profit from ideas or topics imposed upon me, but from a stimulating environment in which I could develop my own ideas. Another very important source, in particular for application processes, was other academic colleagues, peers who helped me with advice from their own recent experience.

What are the top 3 challenges facing young psychophysiologicalists today?

(1) Think outside the box. Well-trodden paths may lead to short-term success, but how much do they really add to our current understanding of the psycho-physiological interaction? There are so many terrains uncharted in psychophysiology. Entering them may be risky and unpredictable, and may not produce posters or presentations that draw big crowds. For example, who has recently worked on noninvasive measures of intestinal peristalsis and studied its interaction with psychological function? Who has cared to quantify the rhythmic behavior that breathing imposes on other autonomic functions beyond the cardiovascular system, and study its significance for psychological processes?

(2) Think inclusive: interdisciplinary, translational, and daily-life oriented. The integration of electro- or mechanopsychophysiology with immunology, endocrinology, neuroscience, and/or genetics is the key to a future with thousands of exciting research ideas. Basic and applied sides of psychophysiological research can inform each other for mutual benefit. And, there's so much out there in daily life that goes beyond the traditional experimental paradigms and provides

perfect opportunities to explore psycho-physiological interactions with the right equipment.

(3) Continue to think about the physiological bases of your work. Equipment and software development are much more advanced than 20 or 30 years ago, and offer comfortable solutions for data reduction, scoring of biosignals, etc. Continue to question the physiology behind your measures and indices, and think about new ways of tapping interesting physiological processes.

What advice do you have for young psychophysicologists?

Find the research agenda you are really passionate about and for which you would also make sacrifices if necessary. Find your home in a scientific society and visit their meetings every year if possible. Stay in contact with your peers, help each other and exchange your ideas and experiences freely as much as possible. Listen to and think about your colleagues' and peers' research, even if the area seems to be far away from yours.

In the age of brain imaging, what do you think the future holds for the field of psychophysiology?

I would subsume both areas under biological psychology. The future of this field has begun where both areas are brought together (see 10). Psychophysiology as we know it will profit from it, as will neuroscience and brain imaging research.

*On behalf of the entire SPR Student Member body,
thank you very much for the interview!*