

Interview with Andreas Keil

2007

Dear Dr. Keil,

The interview committee unanimously decided that you would be a great candidate for the interview section of the fall newsletter. There are many reasons why you would be a great candidate, but one of the things students are interested in is your recent move to a new [University](#). Several of the questions will center around that life change. In addition, several of the members on the interview committee were interested in how you handled [family issues](#) related to moving, so there are some questions on that, as well. In addition, you ran the SPR meeting in 2005, which is a big undertaking, so several students wanted to know your thoughts about taking something like that on. Thank you again for being willing to do this! Let's begin...

Moving to a New University

When and how did you decide that moving to a new university would be a good career move? What were the motivating factors?

I tend to think that the place where you were a post-doc and/or assistant professor is not always a terrific option to stay for several reasons. In our field there are just too many exciting things to learn and such an incredibly broad range of approaches and methods. Staying too long at one place during early career might thus not always be the first choice. For me, the option of staying did not arise however: In Germany, where I spent pretty much all of my academic life, it is a guideline for universities that junior scientists cannot be tenured at the same place where they were post-docs or non-tenured assistant professors. Obviously, there are many other benefits related to moving to a new place: getting involved with new methods available at the new place, collaborating with new people, improving one's situation e.g., by moving to a tenured or tenure-track position etc.

In moving to a new University, what are the best moves to make in first year? What should new faculty concentrate on?

I find it important to make sure that you get to know the new colleagues, and learn about potential collaborators, common interests etc. It is one of the privileges related to being a scientist (and a lot of fun) that one is able to discuss new and exciting topics from different perspectives, learn about new ideas, share and discuss interesting findings (see above... and below...). However, all these things are often dropped first thing when daily routine strikes... beginning a new job at a new place is a good start to establish a regime that actually helps you to set aside time for interacting with other researchers and learn new stuff. Psychophysiology is a great field in that respect, because it has such a tremendously wide range of methods and theories - young scientists in our discipline are therefore ideally suited for collaborating and dealing with new and interesting topics. Obviously, it is just as important to learn about funding mechanisms at your new place - grant money will be a great help to make your department happy and for you follow your own line of research. Typically, it is good to know a little bit about the people who are involved in the administration and the paperwork. So good question may be: Who are these people? Is there specific support for new faculty in terms of preparing and submitting grants? Are there rules and/or guidelines to follow? It seems useful to explore these things at the time of the interview. Finally, in the first year, it is VERY helpful to have some teaching relief and you probably want to point out that reducing your teaching duties (if any) will greatly help you to get started with research, grant writing, and - high-quality teaching.

Applying for a position always requires a match between the applicant and the institution: How did you go about your search?, i.e., what characteristics of a particular department attracted you most?

This is really just emphasizing the implication of your question, which is a great one: Yes, it is important to check whether you really want to be at a given institution in terms of what equipment there is, how they feel about your research, how supportive they are with young scientists, with new faculty etc., but also how their allocation of resources such as rooms and personnel works. Most of the time you will find out at the interview, but it is good to ask questions about all these things and in addition talk to friends or colleagues who are there. Personally, I also want to know whether or not I like the people I am supposed to work with.

And, on the other hand, from your experience, what are psychology departments generally looking for in job applicants?

From my limited experience, this funnily depends on the academic culture of the country you are applying. Criteria here in the US seemed pretty clear: publications, grants, whether you are interesting to collaborate with, whether you will make a decent colleague. US and UK Departments to me seemed to be less interested in recruiting someone filling a very narrow, specific niche in research and teaching but seemed more open to individual interests that applicants have.

You are currently working in a large research group (Peter Lang's lab). Since I work in a smaller laboratory (4 grad students) I think the differences would be large and important for someone to know. When you are looking for a post-doc/research position, what are the benefits and drawbacks of each?

I am not so sure if the differences are large. I was an assistant professor in the huge group of Brigitte Rockstroh and Thomas Elbert in Konstanz, Germany, a group who had about 20 grad students at times. What often happens in big groups is that smaller groups form more or less in a self-organizing manner. In any event, there is always a danger of being lost in a big group and ending up spending a lot of time finding a person who feels responsible to introduce new people (that is: you) to lab routines and stuff that you actually wanted to learn there. It is a good idea to look around if there is a clear idea for you as a post-doc who such a person is going to be; also are there meetings/classes/events during which things are discussed and you can talk about issues and concerns? Is the senior person accessible and caring? Probably these things are better predictors than group size, and again it is a good idea to talk to people who are there already.

Research in Psychophysiology

What direction do you feel the field of EEG/ERP is going? Do you see any particular method being popular that students should know and learn about?

I expect that people will more and more really rely on the rich time information that is inherent in the EEG. The relationship between ongoing dynamic processes (before a task and a stimulus) and evoked responses such as the ERP are also interesting and promising for the future. More and more people are starting to use algorithms suitable to look into the information flow across electrodes or modeled sources. For instance, time-by-frequency analyses of EEG segments can be followed by coherence measures, phase synchrony analyses, causality analyses etc... Often, psychological research questions are about timing, so we probably should not throw away time information. There are always new developments and it is worth checking out methods papers appearing in Psychophysiology and other journals in the field. To be able to try new approaches, it greatly helps to learn a programming language; in his ERP book, Steve Luck recommends MATLAB and I agree that this is a good one, which will enable people to implement the analyses they want to do.

You ran the SPR meeting in 2005, which is a huge undertaking. What benefits are there to this undertaking? When in the academic career would you suggest trying for this?

That is a difficult one - I tend to think that program chairs learn quite a bit about organizing a big event with many different people involved, having sometimes very different aims and ideas how the result should

look. Another benefit is that you really quickly and sometimes painfully get an overview over a huge amount of work represented in the abstracts. I found it particularly rewarding to see how everybody interacted to the benefit of the meeting and to make it a place where researchers could actually learn from each other. You also get to know many people in the field and in the society under sometimes slightly demanding circumstances, which means that you get to know people really well :). The amount of support and kindness that the other SPR folks involved in the conference gave me was another major pro. Probably all this is the reason that presidents typically ask a relatively young scientist to be program chair. Of course it is useful to meet many people in the field and get in touch with a wide range of approaches to psychophysiology when you are starting or developing a career.

Information for Students

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

I would have loved to stay for a longer amount of time in the labs I briefly visited with when I was a grad student and post-doc. Rather than going to a lab abroad for just a week, I would have loved to work with some of these people for a longer time. This being said, in hindsight being a grad student seems like the greatest thing on earth, but I am not sure I appreciated this at the time...

What are the major "chapters" in your career and what have been his biggest influences in terms of decisions you have made? Where do you see your career going? What are your career goals?

There are really not many chapters there, but of course getting a first invitation to give a talk, getting the first invitation to review a paper are very special events in a career and it is very rapidly that these things are seen as an intrusion into what you are doing; I therefore recommend to enjoy and celebrate them extensively when they first turn up. Being asked to be on the editorial board of a journal is very special too and it made me look very differently at the published literature, seeing it more as a joint effort of everybody's to document their work so other people can build on it. Career goals... I would love to be able to just keep working with small groups of colleagues and students, addressing the questions that are of interest to the group; learning new things; advising other people and do teaching, but a scale where you can relate to individual students; work in a country, where students have a future in academia, when they decide to try a career in research. I guess the goal is to continue doing what I am very lucky to do right now. Whatever future position is helping to achieve this goal would be consistent with this career planning.

Family Issues

Did you find that some Universities were more family friendly? In looking for a new position, what is reasonable to expect from the University in terms of helping your family get adjusted (looking into schools, housing options, work for your spouse)

Again, there is a lot of variability across different countries. To me, departments in the UK and US seemed very supportive of everything that was related to life outside the job proper. I do think that it is worth to clearly spell out the needs that you have at the interview; it is hardly seen as a bad thing if you make clear that you are in a family/relationship, which brings about the need to coordinate things. I have often been surprised to hear how positive universities have responded to ideas of coupled careers, both in the UK and US.

By the way, thanks much for asking me all these questions - it is good to remember these things from time to time!

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

