

Interview with Dr. Brigitte S. Rockstroh

August 2002

Section 1)

How did you become a psychophysiologicalist ?

By chance I started working in Niels Birbaumer's laboratory because I was reluctant to start right away as psychotherapist after my Diploma. Professor Birbaumer was looking for an experimenter who would work together with Werner Lutzenberger and Thomas Elbert. They were supposed to introduce me in the projects running in the lab. Well, afterwards I just stayed there. Before that time I had did not know anything about psychophysiology, but Lutzenberger & Elbert gave me a thorough introduction.

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

I am not sure if would study psychology again - at least not the kind of psychology that can be studied at German universities.

Section 2)

What are the top 3 challenges facing young psychophysiologicalists today ?

First, the lack of academic positions for psychophysiologicalists. There are still (at least in Germany) no chairs of psychophysiology or clinical psychophysiology (only the combination of Biological & Clinical Psychology at some universities).

Second, there is a tough competition among psychophysiologicalists. Young/junior scientists have to be excellent and have to publish regularly in top journals to have a chance in the job market.

Third, psychophysiological research is expected to produce results for clinical application. Psychophysiology shouldn't be considered as a pure basic research. For example, we always think about insights into brain mechanisms from the perspective of application to clinical psychology or neuropsychology.

What advice do you have for young psychophysiologicalists (e.g., regarding training, job preparation, publication, etc.) ?

First, get training in other laboratories, preferentially abroad in the USA, work in distinguished laboratories and find promoters.

Second, become involved as soon as possible in the research of your Department and collaborate in publications.

What are psychology departments generally looking for in new job applicants ?

My own expectations would be that a young applicant expresses motivation and enthusiasm to learn about psychophysiological methods and topics of psychophysiology and cognitive neuroscience.

Which departments or other organizations outside of psychology per se are looking for psychophysiologicalists ?

Such organizations are rare in Germany - to my knowledge.

Inside psychology there are institutions like the Max Planck Society or similar research institutions (which are, however, rare). Outside psychology, departments of biology, neurology or medicine might have and should have an interest in psychophysicists. But as I pointed out, I see little interdisciplinary interests in Germany until now.

Section 3)

Today women in science are still underrepresented. Which obstacles are especially responsible for that situation ?

Last year I would have answered that the main challenge is adequate financial support, day-care etc. Now I think the main challenge is the way of thinking - on both sides (female and male). I still think that there are higher expectations for women scientists - on both sides - and women have to achieve more in order to be accepted by colleagues. There is a substantial decline from the number of female graduate students (more than 50%) to the number of women in PhD programs (less than 25%) and women in higher academic positions (maximum 10%) despite special grants for women and better day-care facilities and despite obligatory programs at German universities to promote women. Therefore I think that the small percentage of women in science is due more to social attitudes than to material reasons.

What kind of problems have you encountered or do you still encounter as a woman in your science career ?

I haven't had any problems and still have no special problems as a woman scientist.

What advice do you have for women who want to do a science career ?

In principle I would have the same advice for women as for men. I might emphasize that women should not give in to the higher expectations and worries about failure that I mentioned before. I suppose that women have a lot of prejudices and expectations themselves ! They think that they have to manage both family and career. Often they feel overcharged. They think that they haven't the courage to start a career.

What changes would be necessary in order to have more women in science ?

More women finishing their PH.D.s and more women in post-doc positions. More female colleagues! If more women were on the job market the prejudices you can find in job committees wouldn't be effective anymore.

Section 4)

What are the top challenges currently facing the field of psychophysiology ?

I only can talk about German psychophysiology. It faces a quite unfortunate tendency of other disciplines in psychology to believe that psychophysiology is not necessary for general, cognitive, clinical psychology or other. So psychophysiology has to fight for the position as a basic discipline. For instance, the trend in clinical psychology to distinguish basic research (including psychophysiology and cognitive neuroscience) from psychotherapy delays the recognition and implementation of new effective therapeutic strategies developed on the basis of neuroscientific & psychophysiological evidence. For example knowledge about neuronal plasticity or about emotional processing in the brain has to be - and can by now be - considered for diagnoses and therapy. I think the main challenge is to fight the trends to ignore this.

Thank you very much for the interview.

The interview was conducted in Konstanz, Germany in August 2002.