

Young International Researcher Interview

The interview subcommittee interviewed Carien van Reekum for the spring newsletter. Carien recently started a faculty position at the University of Reading, UK. She obtained her PhD with Klaus Scherer at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and spent a postdoc with Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We invited Carien to share her experience on research in international settings.

JOB MARKET

Carien, you've recently started a position as lecturer at the University of Reading in the UK. How was your experience on the job market?

Well, it all went rather quickly so I wasn't on the jobmarket for too long. As I am one half of a dual-career academic couple, we were offered a great opportunity at the University of Reading, which helped in opting to go to Reading. Generally, any job-search is made a little easier if people know you, or know about you, so to get the foot in the door within the UK - a country with which I had no real academic links - or elsewhere, establishing an international network can never hurt. I didn't visit the UK or knew many UK-based researchers in my field personally prior to applying for jobs here, which likely meant that at some universities that I applied to as well, my application wasn't duly considered.

Did you specifically apply for positions in the UK or did you apply internationally? If you also applied internationally, did you notice any particular differences between nations? Or did differences rather depend on the type of institutions?

The jobsearch covered the UK and a few other countries in the EU, specifically the Netherlands. But as I said, it went so quickly that I think I only sent one application letter to the Netherlands for a position for which I wasn't particularly suited. Countries do differ in the type of things they'd like to see in an application letter and e.g. in length of the cover letter, research statement etc. In the US, the materials are all rather wordy, which is not common practice in EU countries that I am aware of. For the UK applications, I asked a colleague who had recently obtained a position in the UK for his application materials to model mine on. In my experience, if you are in the position to obtain any input or feedback on the application materials that you are about to send out, do so.

Did you face any kinds of bureaucratic (e.g., work visas) and/or cultural (e.g., language, pace of life) obstacles when ever you moved to a new position? How did you deal with these?

Oh yes, I can write a lengthy list on my experiences - past and present - with settling in different countries. Over the years, I have learned that it takes about a year to have a bit of a clue as to what is going on in the new place, and 2 years to feel somewhat settled, both in the professional and personal realm. I think in academia we have a bit of an easier time with visas compared to non-academics, as a lot of countries have special student/research visas. Having said that, the issues surrounding student visas have changed tremendously in recent years, and likely will continue to do so. Do be patient and inform yourself as well, double-check the information you obtain from an international office, as mistakes are easily made which may end up costing you a lot of time and hassle. In general, each country has their habits and structures which will be different from what you are used to. You can like them or dislike them, but the most important thing is to stay open-minded and embrace the new culture you're finding yourself in. If not, you'll have a hard time socially and it won't help professionally either. That may sound obvious, but I have seen some international research visits go somewhat awry on this point.

What made this specific position at the University of Reading interesting for you?

The University of Reading was in the process of deciding to invest into a research-dedicated Neuroscience Centre. Being part of getting this Centre off the ground is a nice challenge, which attracted me to the position. The Centre is now up and running and I do feel spoilt having such a Centre right at my doorstep.

Receiving a job offer not only requires the interest of the candidate, but also the interest of the university in the candidate. Would you have any recommendations on what kind of qualities hiring committees are looking for?

Usually, the job advert already signals whether a Department is interested in filling the position with someone with a specific profile or whether the job-search is open to researchers with any background. The first big hurdle is to get invited to interview for the position, and there your CV is the driving force. Of course, ensure that you know what the interests of the different faculty members are and make links between your research interests and those of some of the faculty members and/or the mission of the Dept clear in the cover letter (or letter of motivation). But first and foremost, a list of grants and publications will get you noticed. Psychology Departments generally do like to have a colleague on board with skills in psychophysiology or neuroscience for collaborative research so that is often a plus to members of SPR. But our research can also be expensive. So find a balance in that. Once at the interview stage, they are looking for someone who can teach, whose research fits the interests of the Department, who can bring in funding, and who is also a nice colleague. Ensure that you cover not what you have done, but also what you plan to do with your research and teaching, both in the letter but especially during the interview stage, and have some concrete examples of grant proposals you would like to submit in mind.

INTERNATIONAL

You've worked in the Netherlands, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the US, and now in the UK. What differences exist in the research 'climate' between Europe and the U.S.A.? Do you have any recommendations for researchers who might have experience in only one of these contexts?

Well, for me personally, the international experience has been a true adventure and an eye-opener that I thrive on, but one that comes with its problems as well (re-establishing a social network, acclimatizing to all things new which takes a lot of extra time and effort). But whatever you do, and whatever level you're at, it is not that hard to find funding to take a short-term leave abroad, and you learn a lot professionally and personally, so do consider an international visit at some point in your career. The research climates are quite different, already within the EU different countries still are based more or less on a philosophy of science. The empiricist approach is more prominent in English-speaking academia, and is one I feel at home in. Countries differ as well with the approach of hierarchy within academia which may well influence your experience as a PhD student or post-doc. I do find it a shame that there still is quite a bit of region-centricity within the different parts of the world, favoring "your own" vs "the other" which trickles through in so many aspects of the work, be it reviewing, interest in the research, drawing up a list of speakers for a symposium, etc etc, and often people are unaware of it - I am pretty certain that I do it myself! Especially now that the world has grown smaller with the internet, it would be really nice to be more integrative. SPR is already doing a fair bit in that domain, for instance with the travel grants helping researchers from developing countries, but I think more can and should be done. In general, I hope to contribute to further internationalise academia and strike up collaborations with researchers from all over the world. Easier said than done, I know.

You've also worked with a number of distinguished emotion theorists and researchers. We've researched that you did your undergraduate training with Nico Frijda, your PhD with Klaus Scherer, and your postdoc with Richard Davidson. How did you go about in choosing your positions for your education? Did the prospect of transferring yet to another country ever keep you from applying for or accepting a new position?

Yes, I have been incredibly fortunate I think, all three distinguished researchers have impacted my work tremendously, and in very complementary ways. As an undergraduate, I remember that I opted for Nico Frijda's course as the description of the course promised the discussion of a theory that would explain emotional behaviour. I simply didn't believe that such a theory could 1) be formulated, 2) be any good. As you pointed out, I have been interested in affective processes since, and after my undergraduate research project on odour and emotion (which also brought me to Paris - quite fun too), I was determined to pursue the topic of emotion for a PhD. Right at that time, I saw an advert from Klaus Scherer seeking PhD candidates. Of course, I knew about Klaus' work on emotion. And it all went from there. Transferring *per se* has not stopped me from accepting new positions, in fact the transfers were all about accepting new positions, but I do think it has slowed down career progression in a way; I see that people who have not moved away from their home soil have often advanced through the track more quickly than I have. But then again, I have enriched my life in so many ways with the path that I have chosen, that I feel I am a better researcher now than I would have been had I not moved around to work with these amazing people.

PERSONAL

A look at the past SPR conference program told us that you were a panelist at the WISE luncheon. What kind of advice can you give on how to navigate academia as a dual-career academic couple?

Yes that was an interesting luncheon where I heard quite a few different views on how to go about it, and it is a question that I get asked a lot. Honestly, I never gave it that much thought and just followed what felt best to both of us. Thankfully, we have always been on a very similar line with respect to career progression and it has worked out so far quite nicely. A lot of it I think is being flexible, and daring to take risks. Sometimes, you may find yourself in a position where one has funding, but the other not (yet). Then it is a matter of going to a place where the other also has options, so a bigger city or close to one helps for instance, restricting the search space to areas with various universities or other institutions of potential interest within commutable distance. In the USA and likely other places, spousal hiring is quite commonplace. Not so much in the EU. Since we made up our minds to move back to Europe, we told ourselves that if one finds a position and the other does not, as long as the other is behind the choice, and there are options for the other to pursue, we'll go and take it from there, live on one salary if need be (good work can still be done with access to a university but without a salaried position, there are always plenty of data to analyse, papers to write, grant proposals to submit and if lucky some jobs to apply for). We were lucky to be in a position to be able to afford such risks and of course, not everyone is.

How have you found being a young female researcher in a field that is still predominantly male (psychophysiology)? Do you have any advice for aspiring female researchers?

Interestingly, academia is still predominantly male in most places the higher up you get, and only when I started to get more senior did I notice that being female brings a set of challenges along, motherhood and how that impacts career progression being a big one still these days I think. As frustrating as it sometimes may be to be confronted with what you think is sexism or any other gender-related challenges, I keep on saying the same thing: Go after what you believe works for you, and try not to have these sorts of issues distract from what really matters to you. I sometimes struggle with sticking to my own mantra but you simply have to. Every person in every life situation has their own set of challenges to overcome, these can be gender-based or not. By the way, I should add that I personally haven't experienced issues within SPR of being a woman, and that I think it is great that SPR is home to initiatives such as WISE.

BASIC AND CLINICAL RESEARCH

Your research investigates both basic emotion and clinical research. How close/far do you think we are from generating research with direct implications for the wellbeing of people with mood and psychological disorders? (e.g., that could inform treatment, be used for prevention, etc...)

Yes I have been moving more towards clinically relevant research these days, although I still don't consider myself a clinical researcher. I have been pleasantly surprised by the interest my work generates within the clinical world and as such, been exposed to how some "basic research" emotion-related question (take that of the mechanisms underlying implicit and explicit appraisal or reappraisal) can be directly pertinent to clinical issues. I hope that our work will contribute at some stage to the (re)formulation or specification of treatment and who knows policy making (in particular my more recent work to better understand emotion in aging). But I realize that doing this nitpicky work of trying to understand the mechanisms underlying eliciting and altering an emotional experience takes a long time, doesn't it. I think that the study of the brain in this endeavour will help us understand better what ultimately does or does not change habits, attitudes, behaviours, and for whom, but we're still quite a few years away from that in my view.

What has influenced your decision to simultaneously pursue these two lines of research (basic and clinical) in emotion? Is there a downside to pursuing both at once?

Up until I went to UW-Madison to work with Richie Davidson, I never considered the study of individual differences as something that would help me address my research aims - that of understanding the mechanisms underlying the elicitation and alteration of emotion. That is a Richie influence on me indeed. The eye opener for me was that I can learn more about mechanisms, taking into account the large variability across individuals, especially within emotional responding.

What motivates you most about what you do?

People! Understanding them, and who knows, in my way even make a contribution, however small, towards helping them obtain a fuller, better life.

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