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# Triandis Award: A Logbook on the Journey to Studying Cross-Cultural Psychology and Morality

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**B**orn in a multicultural family and with a father who used to be a sailor and told great stories about his voyages to different cultures, I was fascinated by cultural differences from a very early age. However, it should take several tacks into different directions and some critical events until I eventually ended up with a PhD on culture and morality.



## Log 1

*Date:* August 1988

*Location:* a small town in Brazil

*Crew:* my mother (from Brazil), my father (from Germany), my brother and I

*Current weather:* very cloudy

We have flown over from my home country, Germany, to Brazil to spend the whole summer vacation with my mother's family in a small town, somewhere between the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais.

My brother and I are sitting at the back of the car while dad is driving and mum is giving directions. We are heading to the local supermarket. Sure enough, it does not take long until they are starting to have a little argument that goes somewhat like this:

*Dad:* left or right?

*Mum:* hmm... yeah... take a turn at the corner over there...

*Dad:* which corner? Left or right?

*Mum:* just drive in the direction where Zezinho lives...

*Dad:* I have no idea where we are! Just tell me, whether I should turn left or right!

*Mum:* Oh Lord! That you always have to know everything so precisely – just turn around that corner and then we'll see where we get. And don't be so angry – you're far too nervous!

*Dad:* I just asked you a simple question...

*Mum:* Well, if you don't stop it now, I'll get out of the car, right here!

This is a standard example of the kind of arguments my parents had, and still have, as a matter of fact. When I was little, I thought that my parents

just could not agree on certain things. When I was getting older, I thought they had very different personalities. Both of these things are certainly true to some extent, but it is only later, with my studies in cross-cultural psychology, that I understood that some of these arguments may also have their source in cultural differences. I could observe that my whole family in Brazil had the tendency to be much more tolerant to ambiguities than my family in Germany. Ambiguities were even embedded in common linguistic expressions, such as *mais ou menos*, meaning “more or less,” which was used constantly as a reply to virtually any question.

We spent our vacation in Brazil every three or four years, and these trips left a profound impression on my brother and me. We were exposed to many things that we did not encounter in Germany. I learned to appreciate Germany as a predictable, organized, clean and safe country, and I began to no longer take it for granted. I could see that not only culture and religion, but also poverty and inequality had an impact on some of my relatives’ values and lifestyle in Brazil. I had lots of discussions with my Brazilian cousins about topics like dating or what we wanted to do professionally one day. I felt free to do whatever I wanted and I preached this kind of “individualism.” My cousins, on the other hand, countered with family obligations, reputation, general duties and financial constraints. For instance, getting married was, for them, a means to an end of becoming more independent from their parents. We were baffled about each others’ point of view, and it was interesting to see how one and the same issue could be looked at from so different perspectives...

## Log 2

*Date:* September 2001

*Location:* A sleep lab in Guildford (UK)

*Crew:* some imprisoned research participants, my internship supervisor and me

*Current weather:* don’t know – it’s night

I am taking a blood sample through an intravenous line from one of the research participants. I feel nauseous and I can tell that the research participant does not feel much better about it. I am a research intern at the University of Guildford (UK), and I am helping at running a sleep experiment on the effects of melatonin on the



**Before the storm** Enjoying an alternative lifestyle before the big PhD “adventure.”

circadian rhythm. Participants stay for two weeks in a big-brother like home in which they are videotaped around the clock. My task is to help my supervisor run the experiment and to analyze some of the data. My experience as a technical assistant in a sleep lab in Germany, in which I worked during my undergraduate studies in psychology, comes in very handy. I know how to fix electrodes and to interpret a polysomnography, but back home I usually monitor people’s snoring and regulate a machine that presses some air through their nostrils. This internship is so much more exciting than my usual sleep lab job! Yet, something is missing...

Up to now, I had been flirting with the idea of becoming a clinical psychologist. However, I slowly realize that it is not so much the clinical research that I find really exciting. Regarding the sleep experiment, I am just thinking: How interesting would it be to study the social dynamics when locking up strangers for two weeks?! The internship meant a turning point for me: I throw

my aspirations about clinical psychology overboard. Since I meet a lot of foreign PhD students in the UK, I realize for the first time that a PhD in another country than Germany could be an exciting option for me.

### Log 3

*Date:* May 2002

*Location:* University of Regensburg (Germany)

*Crew:* just me

*Current weather:* sunny

I am studying Psychology for four years now at the University of Regensburg and I have to decide which topic to choose for my Master's thesis. I am attending a course called International Competence and also a number of seminars in social and intercultural psychology led by Prof. Alexander Thomas.

I read about the big names in the field of cross-cultural psychology, first of all Hofstede and Triandis. I am thrilled as I am learning lots of things that help me make sense of my experiences in Brazil. I eventually decide to do my masters thesis in intercultural psychology. I use Prof. Alexander Thomas' critical incident technique to identify the main cultural differences in the value orientations between Germans and Brazilians in the workplace. The research project envisages data collection with German expatriates living and working in Brazil. So, I decide to spend a trimester in São Paulo—the biggest German industrial city worldwide—and to conduct interviews with German expatriates there. A good friend of mine is hooked on the idea, too, and we decide to join efforts and not only to identify the cultural differences, but also to write an intercultural sensitizer based on our findings. We 'set the sails' and off we go to São Paulo for 8 months.

### Log 4

*Date:* September 2002

*Location:* São Paulo (Brazil)

*Crew:* my friend Susanna and me

*Current weather:* very sunny and hot

I am sitting in an office somewhere in the 20 million population city of São Paulo talking to a German expatriate. I am conducting a semi-structured interview and ask about critical incidents, i.e. unexpected behaviours that can be problematic, confusing, or even amusing, which my interviewee may have experienced when working with Brazilians. The interview was scheduled to last for about one or two hours, but I am now sitting in his office for a full four hours, and my interview partner does not seem to have exhausted his account. Moreover, he does not allow me to record the interview because of some of the sensitive issues he is talking about.



**Triandis Award Crew** Two of the runners up for the 2012 Triandis Award pose with Melanie: Diana Boer (far left) and Katja Hanke (far right). Deputy Secretary-General Márta Fülöp, chair of the award selection committee, poses with the crew. All the runners up in this photo were students of Ron Fischer; Katja Hanke was also a student of James Liu. Ron is off-camera to the left, computing a Procrustes factor rotation.

Analyzing the qualitative data was a painful, but also very insightful, process. This research taught me about the power of social expectations, how they help us make sense of our social inter-

actions, and how violating these expectations can lead to upsetting experiences. I found myself at times in-between the two cultures, understanding all so well why a particular behaviour had turned into critical incident from a German *and* Brazilian point of view. In the end, we identified seven cultural value orientations that describe the Brazilian working culture from a German point of view, among others, of course a *tolerance for ambiguity*...

We also attended some courses at the University of São Paulo (USP) in psychology and anthropology. I will never forget the atmosphere at the University: the air was politically charged; students and teachers were on strike and camping in their tents. Everything seemed very 'alternative' and easy-going—even the teaching style. I remember a young anthropology professor lecturing about the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Bronislaw Malinowski while sitting cross-legged on the desk... I found myself in the situation to prepare a presentation on the taboos of certain foods in different religions—a topic that was not taught at all in my psychology classes in Germany. Why was it wrong to eat shrimp in one culture, but alright in another? Was this just a social convention or a moral issue? – A fundamental question that should haunt me again during my PhD.

At the University, I met a very special person from France who should eventually become my husband. From then on my life would take new and unexpected turns...

## Log 5

*Date:* December 2004

*Location:* a small fishermen's village in the south of France

*Crew:* my husband and me

*Current weather:* cold and rainy

I have just been riding a tiny, small-wheel bike for ten kilometers against strong winds. I am climbing through the window of a first floor flat. I hurry up, since I do not want anyone in the streets to see me and call the police. I boot up the laptop and check my email. Thank God—Ron Fischer had instantly replied to my email! And he is interested in me becoming his PhD student. This is great news and I am thrilled. It turns out

that Ron would be extremely supportive and helpful for the next couple of months in terms of developing a PhD plan at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

This way of checking my email would become part of my daily routine for the next few months. How did I get there? To cut the story short, after I graduated with a master's degree in psychology in Germany, I decided to live in France with my partner who had just changed his career from oceanographer to skipper (yes—it sounded like a déjà-vu to me, too!). We were living on a very tight budget, and since Fabrice had been living on a sailing boat for several years, I just "moved in." Moreover, we could just start the engine if we wanted to move to another place; and this is what we did. I developed a love-hate relationship to this kind of lifestyle. On the one hand, I loved it because we were part of a great community of sailors and people living on houseboats. There was a very strong sense of belonging within the community and a lot of social support that is difficult to find in a "normal" neighbourhood.

On the other hand, the boat was very basic (I couldn't even stand upright in it!), and the winter months seemed endlessly long. I spent my time learning French, publishing the Intercultural Sensitizer for Brazil with my friend Susanna, winning a prize for my Master's thesis, and researching possibilities for doing a doctorate in cross-cultural psychology. Since we had no internet connection on the boat, a friend was kind enough to let me use his internet at home while he was at work; the only catch was that he had only one pair of keys and no place to hide them. This is how I ended up sneaking into someone else's flat on a regular basis...

I had also contacted Harry Triandis about possibilities of doing a PhD with him, but never expected to receive a reply from someone as famous as him, who was certainly too busy to respond to a somewhat random inquiry from a student he had never met before. I have to admit that at this point, I had no idea how old Harry Triandis actually was. I did receive a very nice email from him explaining that he was already retired, but that I should contact his former colleagues. I was amazed that he replied instantly and how he dealt with my inquiry. I never would have guessed that many years afterwards



I should receive the Triandis Award for my work. Unfortunately, I have never met Harry Triandis personally, but I have a very positive and inspiring picture of him in my mind and it somehow seems to me that so many years later I have come full circle.

Melanie Vauchair



**In Brazil** Melanie (first from the left) hanging out with some members of her big family sometime in the 1980s.

### Log 6

*Date:* February 2006

*Location:* Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand)

*Crew:* lab mates from the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research (CACR) and me

*Current weather:* strong winds

I am leaning/half sitting on a desk in the classroom giving my very first tutorial to 3<sup>rd</sup> year students at the University of Wellington in New Zealand. I still feel kind of jetlagged from the 40 hour flight two weeks earlier, and I am nervous about teaching students I have never seen before and whose Kiwi accent I find hard to understand. On top of this, it turns out that I am committing a terrible faux-pas! A Maori girl later complained that I was sitting on the desk and that this is taboo in Maori culture. The image of my anthropology teacher from Brazil who was sitting cross-legged on the desk pops into my mind. So, here you go: the moral power of social conventions!

Other than that, I settled in very quickly. We were a whole bunch of international PhD students who started at the same time. We became very good friends and supported each other all throughout our PhDs. I am convinced that the

CACR crew had a significant impact on my success in completing my PhD done well. There were times when I needed emotional support, e.g., when I felt lost and could not see any land on the horizon, and times when I needed instrumental support, e.g., for torturing my data with the right instruments, such as Generalized Procrustes Analysis. We were not only colleagues, but also very good friends. The CACR crew broadened my horizon in regard to other interesting topics from a cross-cultural perspective, be it music preferences, forgiveness, Hindutva, acculturation, critical thinking or discrimination...

### Log 7

*Date:* some time in 2007

*Location:* traffic lights at an intersection in Wellington

*Crew:* a Kiwi bloke and me

*Current weather:* mixed

I am standing at the traffic lights completely lost in thought about my PhD when suddenly a guy standing next to me asks:

Guy: you're alright, mate?

Me: yeah, why?

Guy: oh, you just look so sad and depressed.

Me: oh, OK, thanks...

I still do not know whether this was just a pickup line, but I somehow have the feeling I did look very depressed indeed. My PhD felt like a rollercoaster: sometimes I thought I had it all figured out and then I questioned again everything, even the topic, morality and culture, that I had chosen.

Given my qualitative background in the identification of cultural values, I took a somewhat critical stance on how cultural values were usually measured in the cross-cultural literature. What I wondered was, is it really an assessment of culture if we ask people what they find personally important in their lives and then aggregate the responses at the culture level? It seemed to me that this kind of measurement lacked something very important, namely culture as a psychological phenomenon. Culture comes with a package of prescriptions, norms and expectations and so any measurement of cultural values should

include this form of “cultural press.” I thought that assessing prescriptive values should provide an important insight into what is desirable in a culture, which is not necessarily the same as what is personally desired (or important)—a distinction that had already been pointed out by Kluckhohn and Hofstede, but had not been picked up in contemporary values research à la Schwartz.

So, my general research plan was to first scrutinize Schwartz’ cultural values and then to develop an alternative way of assessing culture that should be much better than the Schwartz approach. To my despair it turned out that Schwartz’ cultural values did not perform that badly: I could replicate Schwartz’ culture-level value structure with a cross-cultural meta-analysis on a “different, but similar” (if that makes sense) value measure (for more elaborated details, see Vauclair, Hanke, Fischer, & Fontaine, 2011). Using data from the World Value Survey, I also found that Schwartz’ cultural value higher order dimension, autonomy vs. embeddedness, predicted people’s moral attitudes in regard to personal rights and choices (e.g., abortion, divorce, and homosexuality). Luckily, I did find something entirely new in both studies. During the replication study, I found a new value type that the CACR crew baptized as the “hippie” or “tree-hugger” values. These values were all about happiness and belongingness and were endorsed more strongly in postmaterialist countries. It did make a lot of sense to me when I thought of the subculture I experienced when living on the sailing boat in a community in which people consciously derive their happiness from social relationships and not from material possessions. Another contribution was that I found evidence for both moral universalism and relativism in

my study on moral attitudes (see also Vauclair & Fischer, 2011). It seemed all too plausible to me that, from an evolutionary perspective, there is a universal code of social cooperation that makes us all condemn dishonest and unfair behaviours. My multilevel analyses revealed, indeed, that there was very little variance between countries in regard to issues that concern breaches of social cooperation and that these small differences could not be explained with any of Schwartz’ cultural values or other socio-economic predictors.

Nevertheless, I felt like I was on a sinking ship with my criticism about the limitations of Schwartz’ cultural values. My salvation came in the form of the following quote: “It is hard to assume that a change in cultural values causes a change in individual values if the change in cultural values is operationally defined as the sum of individual changes” (Roe & Ester, 1999, p. 4). Although it sounded like a brainteaser, it also seemed to make a lot of sense to me. What I needed was a measure of culture that was operationalized differently from personal values. I decided to measure prescriptive and moral values and to assess how they perform as a measure of culture. I used both quantitative and qualitative<sup>1</sup> methods and found that asking people from different cultures to rate values according to their moral relevance yielded the same moral value hierarchy as asking laypeople to freelist what they associated with a moral person. Moreover, I found that values rated as societal expectations produced greater differences between cultures and predicted individuals’ moral attitudes towards personal rights and choices (just as in my previous morality study), but only at the aggregated culture level, not at the individual level. It seemed that I had found, at last, a way of measuring culture that (1) was different from measuring personal values (and therefore avoided the problem of causal inconsistency, see quote above), (2) incorporated the “cultural press” in its measurement and (3) “worked” only as a macro-level variable.

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<sup>1</sup>I was able to collect data in eight countries thanks to the help of Prof. Allan Bernardo, Prof. Maria Cristina Ferreira, Dr. Valeschka Guerra, Prof. Klaus Helkama, Dr. Ulrich Hößler, Prof. Serdar Karabati, Prof. Astrid Podsiadlowski, Prof. Juliana Porto, Prof. Melissa Lopez Reyes, Jennie Rytönen, Prof. Moises Kirk de Carvalho Silva, and Prof. Erika Spieß.

After completing my PhD, I realized that I had embarked on an incredible journey in which I learned not only a lot of useful statistical methods, but also about the value of a supportive and collegial working environment. I owe a lot to the captain of the crew, Ron Fischer, who inspired and challenged me whenever necessary. Thanks for all your support from the very beginning (when I had to climb through a window in order to read your emails) to the very end! Thanks also to my second supervisor, Marc Wilson, who was always ready to hand over a motivational safety buoy when I felt I was drowning in work.

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## Harry and Pola Triandis Doctoral Thesis Award

### Description

The purpose of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology is to promote and facilitate research in the areas of culture and psychology. The IACCP believes that it is important to encourage high quality intercultural research at the predoctoral level. The Harry and Pola Triandis Doctoral Thesis Award is intended to honor and reward good research and to advance the early careers of dedicated researchers. Support for the award is provided by the Harry and Pola Triandis Fund that was established in 1997 (see *Bulletin*, June, 1997). The first award was given in Pultusk, Poland in 2000 and at all subsequent Congresses.

### Submission and Deadlines

Your doctoral thesis (dissertation) must be relevant to the study of cross-cultural/cultural psychology, with particular emphasis on important and emerging trends in the field; scholarly excellence; innovation and implications for theory and research; and methodological appropriateness. Doctoral theses eligible for an award must have been completed (as defined by your university) during the two calendar years ending on December 31 of the year prior to the Congress year (i.e, between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2013). Submissions must be received by the IACCP Deputy Secretary/General by October 31 of the year before the Congress year (i.e., October 31, 2013).

### Prize

US\$500, one year membership in IACCP, free registration at the next IACCP biennial Congress, and partial airfare to the Congress. The winner will be asked to give a presentation of his or her research at the Congress and to write a short summary for the *Bulletin*.

### Application Procedure

Details of the application procedure are available online at [iaccp.org](http://iaccp.org).

**Deadline:** October 31, 2013

Send your application and inquiries to:  
Dr. David Sam, Deputy Secretary-General  
**David.Sam@psysp.uib.no**